

CHARLES MOLESWORTH

Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Saved from Drowning

Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1982. Pp. 89. \$8.00.

The works of Donald Barthelme, suggests Charles Molesworth, take their power from the reconciliation of opposites. Molesworth finds in Barthelme "a fictional voice that is both coy and disaffected, naively desirous and dispassionately suave" (p. 10). Molesworth characterizes Barthelme as "first and last a comic writer. But . . . he never allows himself to surrender that distinct note of melancholy" (p. 4).

Molesworth directly addresses the question of the importance of Barthelme's work. First, he quotes a statement by Robert Towers that Barthelme's fictions are "like the blowing of dandelion fluff: an inconsequential but not unpleasant way of passing time" (p. 2). Next, Molesworth cites Denis Donoghue, who sees Barthelme's stories as having what approaches a moral purpose: ". . . to detach us from things, possessions, conventional urgencies" (p. 2). Throughout *Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Saved from Drowning*, Molesworth makes a meaningful synthesis from polemic statements and seeming paradoxes in Barthelme's fiction and criticism. The reason some critics consider Barthelme "pleasant" but "inconsequential," Molesworth postulates, is that he is a collagist whose materials are the refuse of society—both material and verbal refuse. Molesworth's most successful discussion of Barthelme's collagist technique is his dealing with the short story entitled "The President" from *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*. Molesworth deals with one particularly rich paragraph from this short story, pointing out the effects Barthelme achieves through "recycling" "numberless clichés" and commonplace objects of modern American life. (pp. 37-38) The proliferation of modern-day American objects in Barthelme's fiction—a collage of Tab, Fab, pop-top cans, cool Carta Blanca, Mr. Bubble Bubble Bath—Molesworth attributes to Barthelme's being "partly an archivist" (p. 20) who enshrines the commonplace and trivial in the manner of Pop Art.

Barthelme's characters are living temples of the "new" as Molesworth describes them: "In Barthelme the narrator or main character has always read the current best-seller, has always just finished a course in self-im-

provement (or has promised himself he will begin soon), has always learned the value of appearances" (p. 24). Molesworth asserts that Barthelme's myopic but self-conscious characters reflect our "inability to 'know' characters in any consistent way . . . they are models of disruption . . . in all its manifold force. Barthelme's characters . . . know too much, or rather, the way they know themselves keeps them from any true or effective self-knowledge" (p. 54).

Molesworth cites an interview with Joe David Bellamy in which Barthelme discusses the ambivalent nature of collage. To Barthelme: "The point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality. This new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and may also be much else. It is an *itself*, if it is successful: Harold Rosenberg's 'anxious object,' which doesn't know whether it is a work of art or a piece of junk" (p. 57). I agree with Molesworth that this is the very core of Barthelme's modernist "angst": "The collage . . . becomes the way the ironist saves himself from drowning. The welter of cultural bits . . . signals a despair in the face of . . . discontinuity" (p. 60; see my article "Mythological, Biblical, and Literary Allusions in Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*," *IFR*, 6, No. 1 [1979], 40-48). Molesworth asserts that the following line from T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* is an appropriate motto for Barthelme: "These fragments I have shored against my ruin." Barthelme's overriding point is, of course, the fragmentation and utter disruption of modern life, which he emphasizes by clinging to assorted fragments.

After offering what he terms a "tentative typology of Barthelme's fiction" in the penultimate section of the book, Molesworth gives a highly subjective concluding section, in which he discusses the merits of various collections of Barthelme's short stories. Molesworth concludes that Barthelme "has not 'grown' from book to book . . . his technique of collage and parody have rather expanded in their application than deepened in their profundity" (p. 80).

Addressing again the question of Barthelme's range and importance as a writer, Molesworth asks several telling questions: Does Barthelme, like Joyce, believe in the "transcendent, universalizing power of art"? Does Barthelme, like Doris Lessing, have a "meliorist if not utopian view of civilization"? Does Barthelme suffer from a "sense of the evil of banality," which some readers find in Beckett? Does Barthelme address

the "problem of ethnic destiny" which Philip Roth continues to address? (p. 82). After admitting that in each case the implicit answer is "No," Molesworth asserts that it is Barthelme's lack of these concerns that makes him "less than a major writer for many readers" (p. 83). But for Molesworth, and for me, paradoxically, "it is this very absence of a central philosophical, historical, or metaphysical given that makes Barthelme an important if not a major writer" (p. 83). Barthelme is holding up a mirror to modern life; some people just dislike seeing assorted fragments reflected in the mirror.

Catherine Dobson Farmer

KAREN LAWRENCE

The Odyssey of Style in Ulysses
Princeton: Princeton University,
1981. Pp. 229. \$18.50.

Karen Lawrence's penetrating study of narration in *Ulysses* grew out of her doctoral dissertation at Columbia. Lawrence's book builds on much recent criticism including Michael Grodon's *Ulysses in Progress*: it examines stylistic and narrational shifts across episodes in the novel and the effects of such "experiments on the reader's expectations" (p. 6). Like Grodon, Lawrence believes *Ulysses* "changes its mind as it progresses and forces a corresponding change of mind in the reader" (p. 6). While these days this isn't a radical thesis, Lawrence develops it thoroughly and well.

Most of Lawrence's book is devoted to Episode 7 and Episodes 10-18 of *Ulysses*; the first chapter of the text, however, looks at *Dubliners*. Lawrence contends that Joyce's work with free indirect style and other experiments with language in *Dubliners* were "important precursors" to his invention of narrational masks in the later episodes of *Ulysses*. An examination of *Ulysses*'s early episodes follows her discussion of *Dubliners*. When Joyce first began work on *Ulysses*, Lawrence points out, he planned to revise his aesthetic of "scrupulous meanness" of *Dubliners* and instead, to balloon the events of a single day, reporting fully and from numerous perspectives the lives of at least two Dublin citizens. No one incident stands out in the novel, and as Lawrence observes of the early episodes, narrative conventions are here firmly established: both traditional third-person and stream of consciousness.

The other chapters of Lawrence's study are devoted to examinations of separate episodes or clusters of episodes: one on "Aeolus"; another on "Wandering Rocks" and "Sirens"; another on "Cyclops," "Nausicaa," and "Oxen of the Sun"; and separate chapters on "Circe," "Eumaeus," "Ithaca," and "Penelope." In her discussion of each episode, Lawrence traces the gradual breakdown of traditional style, sometimes through parody, leading to the construction of a new novel form. Writing of "Aeolus," for instance, Lawrence examines the reader's task in confronting the narrative and "micro-narrative" of this episode. According to Lawrence, Joyce deliberately altered the text from its original published form (by introducing interruption and double writing) to anticipate "the antics of the later chapters and to give the reader early notice that the form of the novel was becoming obsolete" (p. 57). Describing the style of "Wandering Rocks" as "meticulous" (p. 83), Lawrence shows how the episode, despite its "familiar techniques of narration" (p. 83), accomplishes a decidedly unfamiliar goal: the defamiliarization of reality. In her discussion of "Sirens," Lawrence explains how earlier chapters anticipate its narrative techniques and later episodes repeat them in the creation of text as "verbal composition" (p. 91). Writing about "Cyclops," Lawrence reflects on the interruptions of the "public" narrator through whom "excess becomes the mode of writing" (p. 102). In "Nausicaa" too, she writes, Joyce creates parody through excess, this time in the indirect monologue of Gerty McDowell. And in "Oxen of the Sun" a compendium of styles, none of which is neutral enough to serve as model or moderator, present "different versions of the story" (p. 139) none of which tells the "truth."

In her chapter on "Circe," Lawrence explores the implications of having drama rather than the narrative perform the storytelling function. In "Eumaeus," she claims that Joyce returns to narration, but this time "precision is exaggerated into punctiliousness, the literate diction cedes to faded elegance and cliché" (p. 165). In this chapter, as Lawrence points out, Joyce has his narrative make errors in diction as "scrupulously" (p. 167) as earlier narrators have chosen right words. Describing the "Ithaca" as the "climax" of *Ulysses*'s move away from traditional fiction, Lawrence discusses the mask of science (one of "displacement") put on by the narrative mode of the episode. Finally, the form of the "Penelope" episode is, she writes, "a coda to the main progression of the book's styles and plots" (p. 203).