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*The Writing Process of Donald Barthelme*

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of the Graduate English Program  
at the City College of New York

In (Partial) Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Masters of Literature

By  
John Milteer  
March 2011

Donald Barthelme, author of a number of popular short stories and books, revised and edited throughout his career, depending on the particular needs of the specific work under review. Despite the variations, a consistent theme emerges when examining the course of his career in fiction. Donald Barthelme had a sustaining, internal drive to continuously revise his work. At times, he needed to revise his work for editors for publication. Barthelme also had a desire to change his writing to improve it without any pressure from editors. Evidence of his revision process can be found at the very beginning of Barthelme's fiction writing and throughout his extensive career. I will examine in particular his story called "The Sergeant."

Contemporaries and critics have often dismissed Barthelme's writings as unapproachable. In 1972, Joyce Carol Oates, an author and critic in *The New York Times Book Review*, wrote that the writings of Barthelme were "random, antiseptic, unemotional, disengaged from the world, and ultimately irresponsible."<sup>1</sup> Other prominent writers and critics have written similar attacks on his writing.

In an essay published in Kim Herzinger's collection of essays and interviews titled "Not-Knowing," Barthelme responded to the attacks:

The criticisms run roughly as follows: that this kind of writing has turned its back on the world, is in some sense not about the world but about its own processes, that it is masturbatory, certainly chilly, that it excludes the reader by design, speaks only to the already tenured, or that it does not speak at all, but instead, like Frost's *Secret*, sits in the center of a ring and Knows.<sup>2</sup>

Barthelme added, "I would ardently contest each of these propositions, but it's

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, *New York Times Review of Books* (New York, NY), June 4, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Barthelme, "Not-Knowing," in *Not-Knowing*, ed. Kim Herzinger (New York: Random House, 1997), 15.

rather easy to see what gives rise to them.”<sup>3</sup> Possibly, these attacks refer to academic allusions peppered throughout a Barthelme story. In the short story, “The Sergeant,” the protagonist screams “Andromache!”<sup>4</sup> (or “Penelope!”<sup>5</sup> or “Father,”<sup>6</sup> depending on the version of the story) to end the story. He leaves it to the reader to seek out Euripides (or Homer) in search of meaning. Or, these attacks refer to the collage-like structure of his stories and the seemingly unconnected and unrelated language and/or images. His structure would paste seemingly unrelated images next to one another or set sentences that also seem unrelated next to each other. The reader’s connections between the pieces of the collage in part create the story’s emotional impact. Barthelme’s reliance on these connections, which depend on the participation of the reader, alienated many of them and garnered fierce criticism. In the same essay Barthelme wrote, “However much the writer might long to be, in his work, simple, honest, and straightforward, these virtues are no longer available to him. He discovers that in being simple, honest, and straightforward, nothing much happens.”<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it was Barthelme’s style that attracted many followers. Ironically, as his detractors surfaced, so did his admirers. Many realized the emotional effect of the story when they took the time to delve a little deeper. Some of his admirers incorporated particular aspects of Barthelme’s work into their own writing, causing a new wave of writing students attempting to impersonate his style. In an interview

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Barthelme, *Amateurs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Donald Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 303.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Barthelme, “The Sergeant,” *Fiction*, 1975, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Herzinger, *Not-Knowing*, 15.

with *The New Yorker*, the author Chris Adrian said, “Barthelme’s work was entirely different from anything I’d ever encountered in high school curriculum, Hawthorne and Melville.”<sup>8</sup> Adrian continues that in his own response to Barthelme he discovered that “good fiction made you feel things. It wasn’t just about what the author was feeling when they wrote it, [it was about] what the reader got when they read it.”<sup>9</sup> He also explained that he “keep[s] trying to emulate – badly -- Barthelme’s ability to connect the sadness and pain of worldwide atrocities to the narrators’ internal struggles.”<sup>10</sup> In another taped interview with *The New Yorker*, author Donald Antrim discussed his admiration for Donald Barthelme through his ability to make a fantastic idea appear and feel very normal.<sup>11</sup> The interviewer, Deborah Treisman, connected this aspect of Barthelme’s writing to Antrim’s work in that both usually begin with a “deliberate, fantastic” premise.<sup>12</sup> Other popular authors, like Dave Eggers and George Saunders, have recently come forward to cite Barthelme as an important influence on their work.

A number of academics and writers didn’t understand Barthelme’s work and dismissed it in frustration. Others, like Deborah Treisman, the current fiction editor at *The New Yorker*, have found the work at the same time “daunting and a snap.”<sup>13</sup> Chris Adrian, in the *New Yorker’s* “20 Under 40” series remembered:

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<sup>8</sup> Deborah Treisman, *Chris Adrian Reads Donald Barthelme*, podcast audio, New Yorker: Fiction, MP3, accessed Aug. 13, 2010, iTunes.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Treisman, *Donald Antrim Reads Donald Barthelme*, podcast audio, New Yorker: Fiction, MP3, accessed July 8, 2007, iTunes.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Treisman, *Chris Adrian Reads Donald Barthelme*, iTunes.

When I first read [his stories] I really didn't make much sense of it at all. But I knew that I liked it. It was hard in the sense that I had no idea what was going on and easy in the sense that it was emotionally engaging in a way that was qualitatively different than anything I'd had before.<sup>14</sup>

The emotional connection of Barthelme's organized fragments inspired writers like Adrian to bridge their own gaps to their readers. In his discussion about Barthelme's writing as something "qualitatively different"<sup>15</sup> than anything up to that point, Adrian said, "[It] made me a lot more excited about my own writing."<sup>16</sup>

A number of admirers, like the author Thomas Pynchon and critics John Domini and Lisa Zeidner, have written short pieces on Donald Barthelme. These pieces include mostly anecdotal stories about the author as a friend or teacher. In 2001 his second wife, Helen Moore Barthelme, wrote a book about Barthelme's life that primarily focused on the time they spent together. The book details his letters to a friend, Joe Maranto, while in the army and his revision style while the two lived in Houston and New York. Also, in 2009 a student of Barthelme's from the University of Houston, Tracy Daugherty, wrote a comprehensive biography called *Hiding Man* about Barthelme's life. The book provides an excellent timeline and important details about Barthelme's time in the military, his revision process as an editor and writer and interviews with former students about his teaching style. Daugherty's book also provides key insight into the story, "The Sergeant." Daugherty unravels a few possible motives for Barthelme's revision of the story.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Donald Barthelme was born on April 7, 1931 in Philadelphia. His parents both went to the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>17</sup> His father studied architecture and his mother settled on teaching after studying writing and art. Donald was born first. His sister Joan soon followed. Donald's mother soon decided to stay home with the children. Years later the family moved to Houston when Donald's father acquired a position teaching at the University of Houston. He also designed a number of noteworthy buildings in the Houston area.<sup>18</sup> In his book, Daugherty quotes Peter Barthelme, Donald's younger brother, as saying his father was "a verbal bully," and that Donald, being the oldest, bore the brunt of the attacks.<sup>19</sup> Upon completion of high school, Donald decided to tour with his band for the summer. His father did not approve. And when he was accepted to the University of Houston, his father was disappointed it was not the Ivy League. At the university Barthelme began to write for the school paper. He later left school to write for the *Houston Post*. It was while writing for the *Post* that he was drafted.<sup>20</sup>

In the summer of 1952, while living in Houston and working at the *Houston Post*, Donald Barthelme was drafted by the United States Army. He married Marilyn Marrs, a college sweetheart, a few months later. In *Hiding Man*, Daugherty described the sadness Barthelme felt in the days leading up to his departure. He wrote, "Don cleaned out his desk at the *Post*, probably in the sad light of dawn after one of his nightly shifts. Naked of his things, the desktop showed its scars, the ones Don had

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<sup>17</sup> Jessamyn West, "Personal Information," *Donald Barthelme*, last modified February 2, 2010, <http://www.jessamyn.com/barth/barthbio.html#PersonalInformation>.

<sup>18</sup> Tracy Daugherty, *Hiding Man* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 56.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

left...”<sup>21</sup> In April of 1953 Barthelme took a bus to Camp Polk in Louisiana to begin basic training. Only months after boarding the bus he wrote to his friend, Joe Maranto, wishing he were home. Barthelme’s letters to Maranto illustrate the misery he felt during his years in the service. Barthelme documented the difficult times in his letters. The weekend dinner parties and nights listening to jazz with friends in Houston were in the past. His future consisted of matching uniforms, stringent military codes and the mindless routine that accompanied military life.<sup>22</sup>

According to the *Farmer’s Almanac*, it was a humid, cloudy April morning in Leesville, Louisiana when Donald Barthelme arrived for basic training in 1953.<sup>23</sup> Recruits were given identification numbers and herded into medical offices for examinations. Each was fitted for a uniform and distributed equipment and supplies for training. “After his initial round of medical tests,” Daugherty wrote, “Don and his fellow recruits shuffled into a dark room for the first of several film screenings – a grim parody of Don’s civilian movie going: short films on administering first aid, removing wounded soldiers from a battle zone and treating frostbite.”<sup>24</sup> According to Daugherty, weeks before basic training Barthelme was researching New French Wave cinema and reviewing films directed by Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut for the *Houston Post*. The Army’s films, however, were not concerned with camera angles or acting. The purpose of the films were to

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<sup>21</sup> Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 85-89.

<sup>23</sup> “Weather History Results for Leesville, LA April 1953,” *Farmer’s Almanac*, accessed August 16, 2010, <http://www.farmersalmanac.com/weather-history/search-results/>.

<sup>24</sup> Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 90.



prepare young soldiers for their new lives. It was a reminder that they did not have control anymore.<sup>25</sup>

In the army, Barthelme needed to be on the front lawn outside the barracks by 5:30 in the morning. This meant he was out of bed before five. The early time was a transition for him because he had grown accustomed to sleeping later after long nights at the paper. It was still dark by the time his sleep-filled stroll ended on the freshly cut grass outside the barracks. Their lodgings were cold and drafty, so Barthelme and the other recruits welcomed the warmth and sunlight outside. The boys learned to march in unison. They were also taught to hoist and swing their guns around their bodies -- to grow accustomed to the weight and dimensions of the weapon. Mornings were dedicated to practice. In the late afternoons and early evenings, according to Daugherty, many of the men got their "first taste of domesticity."<sup>26</sup> Barthelme peeled potatoes, sliced vegetables and washed dishes in preparation for meals. He saw hours of his day wasted in these kinds of tasks.<sup>27</sup>

There was no break in the monotony of the everyday routine during basic training. Daugherty described a usual day at Camp Polk:

The men lined up for roll call in front of the barracks, breakfasted at 6:15 (cereal, a half-pint bottle of milk): 250 soldiers in a vast room, 10 to a table, none talking. Afterward came calisthenics, then close-order marching in formation; 120 steps per minute while gripping the rifle. Extended order drill followed the march: learning to "drop," hitting the rifle butt on the ground, then your knees, then your left side. Roll over, and you're ready to shoot. On some days, the officers required that the enlisted men take a five-mile hike. Lunch, called 'dinner,' was at 12:30, then more films.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 82, 90.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Bayonet practice followed the training films. At 5:23 P.M., the camp colors were lowered and the men would retreat in formation to their barracks. They would shower and shave, then meet for supper.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout his time at boot camp and later when stationed Korea Barthelme continued to write letters to friend Joe Maranto. The letters Barthelme wrote to Joe provide significant insight into his experiences at Camp Polk and overseas.<sup>29</sup>

In an early letter he outlined his plans to return to Houston for Easter. However, according to Barthelme, a “lieutenant [or] some other higher animal inspected the barracks and said everything was filthy you could have eaten off the floor actually had you anything to eat but he wore some special glasses with built-in dirt and the whole outfit was restricted...”<sup>30</sup> He was angry that another person could restrict him from seeing his friends and family – a trip he was excited to make. Someone else was controlling his life. Instead of the traditions of Easter Sunday, he could be made to do push-ups in the rain or weed the entire compound.

In another letter to Maranto he wrote about a mutual friend, Pat Goeters. Goeters wrote to Barthelme about feelings of frustration and “disgust”<sup>31</sup> concerning architecture school. “I maintain I could teach [Goeters] a few things about disgust,”<sup>32</sup> he wrote to Maranto. Barthelme was miserable. He would obviously liked to wake up each morning next to a woman and take classes at the university like Pat Goeters. Instead he was learning how to be a soldier. In the same letter he wrote:

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<sup>28</sup> Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Helen Moore Barthelme, *Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 22.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Two guys from this company are awol right now and if they don't start feeding me and letting me have a little sleep say fifteen minutes every other day I might very well join them except for the fact that after this couple of years is up I'll never join anything again...<sup>33</sup>

As the days and weeks rolled by, the army began to train recruits for actual combat. These experiences were just as aggravating as push-ups and peeling potatoes. On some of the training exercises he had to sit quietly for extended periods in the wilderness and fight off the insects and boredom. On other occasions he learned how to move around in the dark constructing tents and cooking meals without being detected by the enemy. He was trained to lie in a flat position at the sight and sound of a flare gun.<sup>34</sup>

In the evening, when there was time and he wasn't too tired, Barthelme wrote in his bed.<sup>35</sup> The darkness and noise from transistor radios would have made writing a difficult task. For a young writer, perhaps it was a therapeutic way of processing his emotions during a difficult period. Did he think about fiction during these late evening hours? Barthelme was able to turn the strict monotony into a creative process.

He completed basic training in June of 1953. After basic training he went home to Houston. In Houston he awaited his new orders. His wife collected reading material that he would bring with him to Tacoma, Washington and then, Korea.<sup>36</sup>

When he arrived in Korea the treaty to end the war was signed, but he still had to stay. The army wanted to make him a baker. Barthelme decided his writing

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 91-92.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

experience in Houston would be useful at the *Indianhead*, the Army newspaper where he was stationed. He was persistent and the army assigned him to the paper. It was intellectually stimulating in ways peeling potatoes or baking bread was not. Yet, he was still unhappy. In a letter to Joe Maranto he wrote he was still “not, of course, deliriously happy.”<sup>37</sup> The job at the paper didn’t provide the opportunity to stretch his legs as a writer. The Army closely monitored the paper and it became a tool for controlling soldiers. He wrote to Maranto:

Despite sunny pictures being painted in Stateside publications, morale is lousy. In indoctrination classes they’re asking us to report anybody who bitches about the army or expresses a desire to go home.... Remember [Orwell’s] 1984.<sup>38</sup>

The morale was “lousy” due to leftover landmines, boredom that caused car wrecks, which led to stupid injuries and disease was being spread through an infestation of insects. Most of all, the young soldiers were worried that the truce would end and fighting would start up.<sup>39</sup>

In the winter came the cold. The air was so heavy it was difficult to breathe. It hung around the face and burrowed inside the clothes. The soldiers were caught off guard. Temperatures reached sixty below zero. The men urinated down the barrels of their guns to liquidate the ice. “Don slept in his uniform, keeping handy his web belt and canteen. Beside his bunk, an oil stove reeked poisonously, but it kept him relatively warm at night.”<sup>40</sup> The days consisted of trying to forget about the cold and fighting the boredom. They shaved several times a day. Some played

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<sup>37</sup> Helen Barthelme, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Daugherty, 96-97.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 97.

cards. Others tried to read. There was too much free time and nearly everyone killed it by sleeping, waiting and eating. The menu, however, did not live up to all the waiting. “[The men had to] hunch over lukewarm suppers of lima beans and chewy ham.”<sup>41</sup> The food provided sustenance but lacked any pleasure. By early afternoon the darkness covered everything. Barthelme and the other soldiers would retreat to their bunks and wait for the next day.<sup>42</sup>

Barthelme made few lasting friendships in Korea. He did grow fond of a Thai soldier named Sutchai Thangpew. The two traveled during their free time together in Japan. Thangpew soon married and they lost touch. During another trip to Tokyo he found companionship in a Japanese girl. They experienced an earthquake while lying together in bed. The lack of friendship caused him to often think of home. His wife worked on her degree in French literature. Joe Maranto was still at the paper. Pat Goeters was practicing to be an architect. Everyone else was busy with the lives. Donald read to fill the void. In each letter to his wife he asked her to send material.<sup>43</sup>

Springtime was a welcomed refuge from the cold, but it brought new problems for the soldiers. It rained all the time. Mud was everywhere; an inch and a half of it on nearly every surface. Walking was difficult. The mud problem was mild compared to the return of the insects. The warmth and increased temperature brought back the annoying, disease-infested bugs of the region.<sup>44</sup> “As the weather warmed, [insects] gathered around mess kits and piss tubes. As the men sat reading

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 99, 103-104.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 100-101.

– letters, manuals, Mickey Spillane novels – they swatted at their ears.”<sup>45</sup> In Barthelme’s biography Daugherty wrote about a few photos taken of Donald around this time. He wrote that Barthelme appears to be “comfortable with himself in spite of his unhappiness.”<sup>46</sup> “His letters make it clear, though, that he was impatient,” Daugherty continued, “biding his time until he could get back home.”<sup>47</sup>

It was during his time in Korea that Barthelme made his first attempt at writing a novel. In a letter to Joe Maranto he told his friend that he had started one. By the time he wrote the letter he had completed two chapters and the third was nearly done. The letter also announced his opinion of the writing as “terribly bad.”<sup>48</sup> In a follow-up letter some time later he revealed the completion of chapter five with plans for a sixth. By the end of April it was finished. Barthelme wrote to Maranto about his plans for revision:

When the sixth is done I will go back and make drastic revisions on it and the preceding chapters, which will comprise the first half of the book and run to about 36,000 words. It’s a very peculiar book to date; it keeps changing its form.<sup>49</sup>

He explained that he “[is] not satisfied with [the novel], not by a couple of miles” and that he had “fear it is a terribly bad novel but hope to do a rewrite that will correct the most glaring faults.”<sup>50</sup> His first attempt to revise his work came from little confidence in the writing’s quality. He also wanted to finish the novel before going

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Helen Barthelme, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 26.

back to revise. "The thing has a million rough edges," he wrote, "I will never get all of them smoothed out..."<sup>51</sup>

Barthelme wrote to Maranto about the revision process:

[The] current novel is better than anything I've ever done but not finished and I can't get a typewriter after hours to nurse it on here and so will have to wait until I get home. I don't think I'll want to publish it when it's finished, but I do want to finish it and see how it comes out. It's been tremendously good exercise and has taught me much.<sup>52</sup>

Barthelme looked forward to editing the book more successfully when he returned home to a less restrictive environment.<sup>53</sup> The author had no plans to publish the work, perhaps it was a lack of confidence in the quality of the novel. It seems that the central purpose of its construction was to function as a rehearsal for future work.

"I haven't tried to write the thing paragraph by polished paragraph," he wrote to Maranto, "mak[ing] each paragraph a jewel as I tried to do with the pieces for the *Post*. I would never have gotten more than a few gilded pages on paper if I had."<sup>54</sup> This process appeared to work for him at the time, but he seemed more excited about the rewrites than the story. When he completed the first draft in April of 1954 he wrote:

...I have launched a radical campaign of revision. It is a new attack which could conceivably [sic] erase the major difficulties. It will in any case likely go into a third draft. Right now it's just under 50,000 words, and that's kind of slight for what I want.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>53</sup> Daugherty, 107.

<sup>54</sup> Helen Barthelme, 26.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 27.

Even during the first rewrite Barthelme was already thinking about a second “campaign” of editing. It appeared that as his first “campaign” of revision took him from the beginning of the novel to the end, his second attempt at revision would do the same. It is important to note that at some point the author discards the first two chapters of the book.<sup>56</sup> His insecurity is visible in at least one letter as he writes, “I’m desperately conscious of my inadequacies.”<sup>57</sup>

As he worked Barthelme’s mind drifted to plans after his tour in Korea. He looked forward to going home and seeing friends and family once again. Barthelme also discovered his joy in writing and looked forward to continuing it in a more comfortable environment. Writing on his knees using longhand while struggling to see and concentrate was not the most conducive writing atmosphere. He also experimented with different styles and structures. Nearing the end to his company’s tour in Korea the paper gave its reporters the opportunity to write creatively on military life. Barthelme seized the chance and wrote a piece about comradery and the war’s end using quick, concise sentences and short paragraphs. He also pulled rank on the editor and changed the issue’s format to include reduced margins and unorthodox pictorial placement. He was done with orders. He wanted to stretch his legs as a writer. In one of his final letters to Maranto before being discharged from the Army he wrote about his plans. First he wanted to finish school at the University of Houston while continuing work at the *Post*. After some time in Houston he and Marilynn would move to San Francisco for a Master’s Degree and a job at the *San Francisco Examiner*. He also wrote about working at a paper in Boston

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<sup>56</sup> Daugherty, 108.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.



and getting a degree in drama from Yale. Finally, or so the plan went, he would have the experience to be ready for New York.<sup>58</sup> It is clear that Barthelme thought excitedly about his future plans as the end of his service approached.

Barthelme would be home by Christmas of 1954. When he returned to Houston there weren't any bugles at five in the morning, early morning sit-ups and lunges, peeling potatoes, bursting red flares painted against the colorless midnight sky, food almost too difficult to keep down, momentary weekend trips home, paste-like mud, freezing temperatures, torturous bugs, blaring radios and incessant orders. He had been gone for nearly a year and a half. In excitement he wrote letters to family and friends before leaving Korea. Barthelme also worried about his return though. He wasn't sure how his friends and family would react to him and he was unsure about his own feelings towards seeing them again. He wrote about his concerns in another letter to Maranto. "Whatever you can say about the army you can't say that it doesn't take something away from you..." he said, "It will take me six months to get back in shape at least. Maybe something is permanently gone. I don't know. I'm afraid to look."<sup>59</sup> Barthelme worried how much the Army changed him from the man who boarded that bus to Louisiana more than a year earlier.

In the restrictive environment of the military, Barthelme had found creativity and his own sense of order. His experience in the military would continue to impact his writing and spotlight his short story, "The Sergeant."

Many years after his service in the military, in 1975, when he was a teacher at the City College of New York, he wrote a short story, "The Sergeant," which he

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>59</sup> Helen Barthelme, 33.

published in *Fiction*, a magazine that he had helped found. (Barthelme, Mark Mirsky, Max Frisch and Jane DeLynn founded *Fiction* in 1972.) Barthelme did the layout and paste-up for many of the early issues. Mirsky writes that “[Barthelme] left the magazine after a disagreement with me about the contents of Volume 1, Number 4.”<sup>60</sup> Barthelme remained a contributor and mentor to the staff at *Fiction*. Mirsky recounts that, “...his generosity and oversight continued,”<sup>61</sup> as the magazine moved forward. Barthelme contributed a piece to the very next issue of *Fiction*, even after he left the magazine. According to Mark Mirsky, “any issue with a Barthelme story was an instant classic.”<sup>62</sup> The story is about an army sergeant who finds himself back in the service after many years of civilian life. The nameless main character desperately tries to explain to a number of military officials that he completed his service years earlier. They refuse to listen either due to their own selfish motives or because the paperwork on the sergeant appears current. The main character interacts with a number of different military personnel: a doctor, another sergeant, a young recruit, a colonel, a chaplain and a captain who orders him to shoot an unarmed civilian wearing a red tie. All of the characters refuse to listen or help the sergeant with his problem.<sup>63</sup>

The end of the story was important to Barthelme who revised it two more times as it was republished. When the captain orders the main character to shoot a civilian, he refuses. The captain then issues an ultimatum; he can either shoot the civilian or spend the rest of his service stuffing onions into the olives designated for

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<sup>60</sup> Mark Mirsky, e-mail to John Milteer, February 15, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Donald Barthelme, “The Sergeant,” 24-25.

the general's martinis. Stuffing onions into the general's olives seems to parallel Barthelme's experience of peeling potatoes and slicing vegetables.<sup>64</sup> The menial, head numbing tasks that fuel the everyday monotony of the army, he sarcastically compares to shooting an unarmed man in the story.

In the final line of the *Fiction* version the sergeant shouts, "Father!"<sup>65</sup> In the footnotes of his biography, Daugherty speculated as to the meaning of the final exclamation from the sergeant. It could be that the sergeant is referencing his own father. But throughout the story the main character's father is never mentioned. The critical reading makes sense though. Daugherty writes that Barthelme's father "was headstrong and stubborn."<sup>66</sup> He goes on to write that he was "emotionally guarded and furiously protective of the things that mattered to him..."<sup>67</sup> Success and intellect were part of Barthelme's father's power. "...Inevitably the sons would take [their father's books] and put them down," Daugherty writes, "always aware of their capacity for betrayal."<sup>68</sup> Daugherty also writes about a dream that Barthelme relayed to one of his students about his father. In the dream Barthelme is standing next to his father as they look at bookshelf filled with volumes of Donald's writing. His father looked at one of the volumes, walked toward his son, and smacks him over the head with the book. Barthelme's father then says, "Why don't you get a real job, Don?"<sup>69</sup> Barthelme respected his father, but he remained a shadowy figure of authority and disapproval throughout Don's life. When the main character calls out

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Daugherty, 53.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

“Father!” at the end of “The Sergeant,” the authority of the military is equivalent to his father’s domineering personality. Mark Jay Mirsky remarked in a personal interview that he believes the main character’s problem with military authority coincides with Donald’s relationship with his father and his authoritative presence.<sup>70</sup> It could also be a religious plea because “father” is a term used to describe God.<sup>71</sup> Barthelme wasn’t through with “The Sergeant” in 1975 because something bothered him enough to revise the story two additional times.

A year later, in 1976, Barthelme published the story again in a collection called *Amateurs*. This time he changed the final exclamation from “Father!” to “Andromache!”<sup>72</sup> Barthelme also changed the general’s outfit from seersucker trousers to a seersucker skirt. The change is consistent with the final exclamation from “Father” to “Andromache;” the gender switches from male to female. According to Greek myth, Andromache was the wife of Hector – who is killed by Achilles in the Trojan War. In the Euripides’ play set after the war, she is taken as a concubine and her son is thrown from the city walls and killed. She eventually survives the ordeal and becomes a queen who later dies of old age.<sup>73</sup> The final line of play reads, “Many a thing... [comes] to pass contrary to our expectations. [That] which we thought would be is not accomplished.”<sup>74</sup> Daugherty writes in his footnotes that this line is consistent with Barthelme’s theme. It speaks of disappointment. The sergeant’s repetition is “contrary” to his “expectations.” He is

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<sup>70</sup> Mark Mirsky, interview with John Milteer, February 10, 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 507-508.

<sup>72</sup> Donald Barthelme, “The Sergeant,” 24-25.

<sup>73</sup> Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 507-508.

<sup>74</sup> Euripides, *Andromache*, ed. Henry Clarke (London: W. B. Clive, University Correspondence College Press, 1944), 31.

similar to Andromache in that both are forced to deal with unthinkable situations. She, however, handles her pain with more grace than the sergeant and that is why he calls to her at the conclusion of the story.<sup>75</sup>

Barthelme did not end his work on the story in the 1976 collection. Again he revised and rewrote the story for another collection called *Sixty Stories*, which was published in 1981. This time he changed the final quote from “Andromache!” to “Penelope!”<sup>76</sup> As Andromache was a model wife who tried to persuade Hector not to battle Achilles, Penelope waits twenty years for the return of her husband, Odysseus. She is synonymous with fidelity. She fends off suitors long after she expected her husband not to return home to her and their child. Daugherty writes in his footnotes that Penelope is more widely recognized in Greek myth than Andromache, which could be one reason for the revision. Also, she is a less “woeful”<sup>77</sup> figure and is thought of as more of a symbol of strength and dedication than Andromache. It takes more fortitude to wait for Odysseus because she doesn’t know of his fate. The sergeant likely calls to her because she encapsulates the qualities he would like to see in himself.<sup>78</sup>

The inspiration for the premise of “The Sergeant” came from a recurring nightmare Barthelme suffered long after he was discharged from the military. In the dream, he too inexplicably finds himself back in service years later. The frightening part of the dream comes with realization that Barthelme knows he doesn’t belong there anymore. In Kim Herzinger’s book of essays and interviews titled *Not-*

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<sup>75</sup> Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 507-508.

<sup>76</sup> Donald Barthelme, “The Sergeant,” 24-25.

<sup>77</sup> Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 507-508.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

*Knowing*, he is asked about his writing influences by Charles Ruas in 1975.

Barthelme says:

I think the military references obviously stem from the fact that I was in the army for a couple of years. Luckily I got to Korea just as they signed the truce, so I didn't have to do any fighting, for which I'm profoundly grateful. But I did spend sixteen months there on the side of a hill and still have – as many people have – this dream where I'm back in the army again, and I keep saying to the people, "Look, I've already done this, I don't have to do this again." But I'm still back in the army.<sup>79</sup>

In the interview Barthelme tells Ruas about this story exploring the dream. He says, "...But it didn't prevent the dream from coming back. It's not one of your pleasanter dreams."<sup>80</sup> Did Barthelme believe that by writing a story based on the dream's premise he could explore the emotions connected to his past military experiences and end the recurring nature of the nightmare? Most likely, when the first attempt didn't fix the problem and end the nightmare, he wrote it again. Barthelme probably revised and rewrote the story twice because he was unsuccessful in ending the dream. It is likely that all the pain, trauma and loneliness he suffered in the army stayed with him as he grew older. Even in his attempt to mirror the dream in fiction and examine his unbridled emotions in a number of revisions, he was probably unable to conquer the traumatic ordeal the military left with him and the dream continued to return.

Oddly enough, in later years Barthelme looked back on his experience in the army with pride and nostalgia. Perhaps he felt that the experience made him a stronger person and his service was something he survived in spite of its difficulty. His former student, Padgett Powell, insists in a 2010 email that based on studying

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<sup>79</sup> Herzinger, *Not-Knowing*, 209.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

stories like “Indian Uprising” and his time spent with Barthelme, that “his time in the Army left in him a fondness for [all] things and terms military.”<sup>81</sup> Powell also recalls that the cover from *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* reminded Barthelme of flying into Korea.<sup>82</sup> The cover looks like the aerial view of a city from an airplane. Small buildings are lit up at night from a great distance.

Barthelme’s revisions of “The Sergeant” are important because they show his passion for perfection through revision. He returned to his work often for a variety of reasons, not all of which involved recurring nightmares about a traumatic past. Barthelme had an inherent need to revise due to a belief that his work could be improved. Like most other writers, he revised because he was not satisfied. While revising his first novel, Barthelme waited until the story was complete before returning to it. The method differed from his second wife Helen’s account of his working habits in which he revised each sentence several times before moving on.<sup>83</sup> While writing for *The New Yorker* he revised his work based on input from his editor, Roger Angell, because he had to play by their rules to get his work published. Even as a professor of writing at a number of different schools, Barthelme taught his students to edit their work harshly so that every word in the piece was powerful. After being asked about Donald Barthelme’s revision process in a 2010 email, Tracy Daugherty wrote:

[Donald Barthelme’s] drafts are generally remarkably clean, suggesting to me that he had confidence in his “ear” – he usually let the language guide him (rather than any plot, story, or character) and typically he was pleased with the language from his very earliest drafts. Revisions tended not to include

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<sup>81</sup> Padgett Powell, e-mail message to John Milteer, July 14, 2010.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Daugherty, 159.

many cuts, but instead it involved rearranging material that was already there – pasting and re-pasting paragraphs as if they were collage materials – and adding things.<sup>84</sup>

While “The Sergeant” is a unique, significant story reflecting Barthelme’s personal experiences, his internal drive for revision is evident throughout the course of his writing career. Barthelme got his first opportunity as a writer reporting for the *Daily Cougar*. It was a University of Houston newspaper that focused on school issues. He wrote book reviews. Before long the editor, Joe Maranto, put Donald in charge of the paper’s section on “amusements.”<sup>85</sup> In her autobiography, Barthelme’s second wife, Helen Moore Barthelme, wrote about meeting Barthelme for the first time while the two worked together at the paper. She described his work as “thoughtful and meticulous.”<sup>86</sup> She also observed his unique style of revision. “[He] sometimes erased to make changes,” she wrote, “but he often started over on a clean sheet of newsprint.”<sup>87</sup>

Not long after returning to Houston after the army, Barthelme and Marilyn Marris, his first wife, divorced. He got a place with some new friends from the university. One of his new friends was Herman Gollob. Gollob would later edit Barthelme’s first two books. When they lived together in Houston he recalled Barthelme working on the third draft of the book he started in Korea. Gollob remembered telling him, “Maybe you’re too harsh a critic of your own work... Maybe you could have benefited from someone else’s perspective.”<sup>88</sup> In looking

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<sup>84</sup> Tracy Daugherty, e-mail to John Milteer, July 12, 2010.

<sup>85</sup> Daugherty, 64.

<sup>86</sup> Helen Barthelme, 18.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Daugherty, 116.



back he was only trying to help his friend. “I was only offering to give him an objective reaction,” he wrote in a 2010 email.<sup>89</sup> This irritated Donald. “Thanks so much,” he said. “I’ll remember that when I’m throwing this third draft into the toilet. I can see that it’s full of the same self-pitying shit that smelled up the others.”<sup>90</sup> He was determined to finish the piece however. Barthelme followed through with his plan to complete the novel once he returned to Houston. Daugherty wrote that even though he was not happy with the writing, finishing the book taught him “discipline” and “self-editing.”<sup>91</sup>

After he finished his first novel Barthelme took a job editing an interdisciplinary magazine connected to the University of Houston called *Forum*. He was passionate about editing and continued to do so in the mid 1970’s at the City College of New York (this was long after he published many of his most successful stories). He wrote that “[editors] are more like farmers...an editor attends to the spring and fall planting, looks at the sky hoping for rain and pays some slight attention to the compost heap...”<sup>92</sup> in a letter to the *New York Times* during the mid 1970’s. *Forum* magazine consisted of submissions about philosophy, sociology, psychology, language and science. At the magazine he edited a submission from Walker Percy. This was a few years before Percy would go on to win the National Book Award in 1962. Barthelme wrote to Percy after reading some of his work in the academic journals. In the letter he asked for a five thousand-word essay to run in the magazine. The piece ran in a summer edition and contemplated the

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<sup>89</sup> Herman Gollob, e-mail to John Milteer, March 8, 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Daugherty, 117.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 385.

philosophical sense of self and the language closely associated to the concept.<sup>93</sup> On October 2, he wrote a letter to Barthelme praising the editing of his piece. It appeared to be “a very good-looking job,”<sup>94</sup> Percy said. “Thanks also for your skillful editing which helped my piece not a little.”<sup>95</sup> He also pleased with the magazine’s layout. “[It has] a striking format,” he said, “I, for one, am proud to be a part of it.”<sup>96</sup>

Years later Donald contacted Walker Percy once again. This time he was expanding the reach of the magazine and looked to Percy for a submission in the form of fiction. Percy had just sold the rights to his novel to a publishing company in New York. The company wanted a rewrite from him so he sent a chapter to *Forum*. Donald cut the final twelve pages and published the rest.<sup>97</sup> Percy responded by writing, “Your reaction to the last section will probably be of great value to me.”<sup>98</sup> A year later he would publish *The Moviegoer* to critical acclaim and awards.<sup>99</sup>

In October of 1960 Donald Barthelme left his job as the editor of *Forum*. He disagreed with the board over the kind of work the magazine wanted to publish. Barthelme was free from any other obligations and used the time to fully concentrate on his own work.

Every morning he woke up very early and dressed for the day. His typewriter rested on a desk in the screened in porch of the home he shared with his new wife, Helen. She would make breakfast and the two ate together at the kitchen

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

table. He would return to the porch as she studied copy for her advertising work. She wrote that he “...revised each sentence several times, often tearing the paper from the roller and tossing it into the trash.”<sup>100</sup> His wife’s account of Barthelme’s revision process differs from what we know of the way he revised his first novel. While In Korea and working at home on his first book, it was important that he completed the work and finished his thoughts before any kind of revision. The work in the porch was more committed to writing, “paragraph by polished paragraph” and making “each paragraph a jewel.”<sup>101</sup> He also tested his audience by asking his wife for her opinion about his writing. “He’d lean back in his chair, light a cigarette, and read his words aloud,”<sup>102</sup> Daugherty wrote in his biography. “Sometimes he’d call to Helen, ‘asking her how [to] spell a certain word?’ Or he’d ask, ‘How does this phrase strike you?’<sup>103</sup> He sometimes walked though the house repeating his words out loud. This technique he modeled after Flaubert, who walked into the woods and scream his words to the trees. He also took walks around the neighborhood and thought about his work.<sup>104</sup> As a resident of the West Village years later, he walked the avenues and side streets of the city thinking before it came time make dinner.<sup>105</sup> A writing session usually ended at noon or one. The garbage was usually full of crumpled paper. There was normally just a sentence or two on each sheet. “The wastebasket bulged with paper,” Daugherty wrote, “thirty or forty sheets at a time.

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<sup>100</sup> Helen Barthelme, 90.

<sup>101</sup> Daugherty, 103.

<sup>102</sup> Helen Barthelme, 91.

<sup>103</sup> Daugherty, 159.

<sup>104</sup> Helen Barthelme, 92.

<sup>105</sup> Daugherty, 407.

Most of them contained just a sentence or two. What he kept, after a morning session, ranged from nothing at all to maybe two pages.”<sup>106</sup>

Several years later he moved to New York City to work as the editor of another magazine. It was called *Location*. His wife stayed in Houston. At a desk in the magazine’s Midtown office he revised the stories he wrote in Houston: “The Piano Player,” “For I’m the Boy Whose Only Joy Is Loving You” and “The Ohio Quadrilogy.” He also worked on a new story that would later be called “Margins.” Barthelme and his wife were not talking much so he asked his father for advice on the story instead of Helen. Barthelme sent a section of the dialogue from the story to his father with a letter outlining a new direction of his fiction. There is no record of any response. It was important, however, that he get feedback from people whose opinions he trusted.<sup>107</sup>

In January of 1963 his literary agent sent a story to *The New Yorker*, a magazine that did not have a reputation for publishing experimental work. The piece was sent to Roger Angell, a fiction editor there who told Barthelme’s agent that the magazine would consider publishing it if there was a rewrite. By the end of the month Angell again wrote to his literary agent to say, “Donald Barthelme has rewritten ‘L’Lapse’ and the magazine will buy it.”<sup>108</sup> The magazine gave the author editorial suggestions so the story better fit the magazine. Barthelme made the changes and the magazine published the short story. The process would not always be so simple.

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<sup>106</sup> Daugherty, 159.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 197, 217.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

Roger Angell was Barthelme's editor at *The New Yorker* for nearly all of his 129 stories. He trusted Angell as his editor and the two were also friends for a number of years. In Kim Herzinger's book, Barthelme was asked about why he published his stories exclusively in *The New Yorker* during an interview with Jerome Klinkowitz in 1971 and 1972. "...I trust the editors," he said, "especially Roger Angell, with whom I've worked for about ten years now, who has saved me from many a horrendous error."<sup>109</sup> The two worked closely on a great deal of Barthelme's stories.

Donald revised many of his *New Yorker* stories based on the editorial suggestions of Angell. It was a complicated relationship and it relied on compromise from both sides. Angell wrote an article for *The New Yorker* in 1994 where he described the editing process. "Just as there is no one way to write a story," he warned, "there is no one way to edit it for publication, or to deal with its author over an extended period of time."<sup>110</sup> Angell writes:

Fiction is special, of course, for its text must retain the whorls and brush-splashes of the author: the touch of the artist. At the same time the editor should not feel much compunction about asking the writer the same questions he would put to himself about a swatch of his own prose: Is it clear? Does it say what I want it to say? Is it too long? Does it sound right – does it carry the tone that I want the reader to pick up right here? Is it, just probably too short?<sup>111</sup>

He sits next to a hypothetical young author in the article and explains the process. The questions he raises to the young author involve recurring characters, further explanation, some word-choice and a little punctuation. To edit a hypothetical

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<sup>109</sup> Herzinger, 202.

<sup>110</sup> Roger Angell, "Storyville," *The New Yorker*, June 27, 1994: 104.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

author, Angell wrote, is much easier than sitting beside some of the most prominent literary minds in history quibbling over the light pencilings and question marks throughout the copy.<sup>112</sup>

In the article Angell also wrote that Barthelme was “the cleanest of writers, and proud.”<sup>113</sup> He “sighed and reddened”<sup>114</sup> during one instance when the word “omit” was written at the end of one paragraph. The author replied, trusting the reading of his editor, “Well, yeah, Goddamn it, if you say so.”<sup>115</sup> Angell believed that the most important aspect to their professional relationship was his ability to “get the hay out.”<sup>116</sup> Barthelme told his editor this on more than one occasion. These sessions, however, were very sporadic. In an email from Angell on March 4, 2010 he wrote, “Donald did a lot of revising but not on material that I saw. He did make revisions to a few pieces [at *The New Yorker*] following a rejection and a suggestion or two from me.” “...I don’t remember much about specific stories or passages...”<sup>117</sup> he wrote. He is downplaying his own role in the author’s revision process. More than likely, however, he did ask Barthelme important questions that focused him and forced him to rethink a story. He also passed on a number of stories without suggestions or an editing session. Still others were submitted to the magazine that didn’t need to be polished at all. In the same email he stressed, “...but for the most part his copy was remarkably clean.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Roger Angell, e-mail to John Milteer, March 4, 2010.

<sup>118</sup> Angell, 104.

The relationship described between Barthelme and Angell in Daugherty's biography appears complicated. Angell's 2010 emails were aloof and disinterested in the editing process. Barthelme's agent would submit a story and Angell would write back about how the piece made him feel. Sometimes he rejected a piece without an explanation. Other times he would accept one of Barthelme's pieces with abundant compliments and send him money against future work.<sup>119</sup>

For example, the second story Barthelme submitted to the magazine following "L'Lapse" was a parody on a Playboy interview. The magazine rejected it and Angell called the piece "vague" and "obscure."<sup>120</sup> Angell called another story "artificial" and "utterly unconvincing."<sup>121</sup> around the same time. These kinds of remarks would normally anger a young author, but Angell know how to encourage his writers. After the rejection of another piece he wrote, "I do hope that you will not be discouraged by these setbacks. Your eye and ear for parody are unblemished, and I think you should have full confidence in them.... I am quite sure, also that you need not confine yourself exclusively to parody. We will continue to look forward anxiously to anything you send us."<sup>122</sup>

This kind of back and forth went on for some time until in the summer of 1963 when Barthelme presented a rewrite to the magazine of a story called "The Piano Player." Angell loved it and wanted it published. He enjoyed the story so much that he advanced the author extra money for future submissions. Barthelme also submitted a rewrite of "Shower of Gold," a piece he wrote in Houston and

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<sup>119</sup> Daugherty, 239.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

worked on when he came to New York. They sat down together and discussed the structure of the story. Angell convinced Barthelme to change the paragraph structure to a more conventional length. The paragraphs originally were very long and detailed. Donald took the story to Herman Gollob's house in Martha's Vineyard in the spring of 1963. He rewrote the story and it was then published in the magazine. Gollob also took the story to decision-makers at his publishing company. Little, Brown offered the author a book deal and "Shower of Gold," along with a number of other stories, became *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*. The publisher also released Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*. Herman Gollob edited the novel as well. Gollob wrote in a March 2010 email about editing Barthelme's books, "the copy he delivered to me was in both instances ready for the press. He didn't require 'editorial suggestions.' A perfectionist, and master of precision and concision, his process of revision was self-inflicted." "...Certainly, if I'd thought his work could have been improved," he adds after being asked how comfortable he'd have been suggesting changes, "I'd have made suggestions."<sup>123</sup> He was asked how he thought Donald might have reacted. "How he reacted would depend on whether he thought the advice was helpful, or stupid," he writes<sup>124</sup>. Both books, however, were "ready for press"<sup>125</sup> so he never got the opportunity to sit down with the writer.<sup>126</sup>

Some of the other stories Donald sent to *The New Yorker* in 1963 were met with more harsh criticism. Angell wrote "...the events here did not seem to contribute to an area of comprehension, and all the changes and switches were

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<sup>123</sup> Gollob, e-mail, March 8, 2010.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 238-242.



often more exasperating than illuminating”<sup>127</sup> when he read “To Cleveland Then I Came.” These setbacks did not stop Barthelme from writing. Toward the end of 1963 some of the stories were again better received. The magazine published “Marie, Marie, Hold on Tight” and Roger Angell wrote that the story was “[the] best story of his we have seen.”<sup>128</sup> *The New Yorker* also bought two “casuals” around the same time. One was titled “Margins,” which was a rewrite of a story called “Carl” that Barthelme had shown his father years earlier. The other was called “Down the Line with the Annual.” In *Hiding Man*, Daugherty commented that Barthelme was learning to write the kind of stories Angell liked and thought belonged in the magazine. Angell enjoyed satires set in New York that began relatively realistic and turned into something fantastic. Angell was also beginning to understand the experimental nature of Donald’s work more fully. The author sent him two versions of a story titled “Then.”<sup>129</sup> It was rejected, but he did spend “a happy fifteen minutes arranging [the lines of the story] in my own manner and came up with another text.”<sup>130</sup>

As a fiction writer for the magazine, Barthelme constantly had to fight its publisher, William Shawn, over the presentation of a piece. He told George Plimpton in 1984 that he had a “twenty year”<sup>131</sup> war with Shawn and *The New Yorker* over commas. Shawn thought that the magazine had to uphold a reputation of integrity in each issue. Its readers expected precision and elegance from its pages. Donald

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<sup>127</sup> Daugherty, 240.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 238-242.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

thought that the magazine should be more open to experimentation. On many occasions he wrote with a “freer style of punctuation”<sup>132</sup> and expected the *New Yorker* to print stories. It started in 1963 when Angell wrote that “Shawn would be happy if you could add just a little more punctuation”<sup>133</sup> for a piece called “Marie, Marie, Hold on Tight.” After that, in August of 1964, “The Police Band” appeared in the magazine.<sup>134</sup> Angell apologized for the way a number of commas had “tiptoed”<sup>135</sup> into the story. “I don’t know how it happened,” he said, “and I’ll try to avert any such sneakiness.”<sup>136</sup>

This dispute continued into the end of 1964. The author was in Denmark with his third wife, Birgit, and working on an important piece. He wrote to his mother, “...I have thrown away a lot of bad Prose that I made myself.”<sup>137</sup> Around Christmas of 1964 he wrote to Angell from Denmark. The envelope had a Christmas card and a manuscript inside. The story was called “The Indian Uprising,” a controversial piece about love and the Vietnam War. The written communication that took place between Barthelme and the magazine was more detailed than that of any other story. Angell initially wrote to the author accepting the piece, calling the story a brilliant work of art. He went on to relay the magazine’s decision to drop its stylistic preferences even though they disagreed with the work’s experimental nature. The magazine did this because it was aware of the story’s significance. *The New Yorker* did worry about how its readers and writers would respond to the

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-240, 253.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

piece. The standards of *The New Yorker* were still important to the editors and “The Indian Uprising” could reflect badly on the magazine. Barthelme left out important commas because he intended for the tone to be “drone”<sup>138</sup> in certain sections so that the language appeared to be “pushed and uninflected.”<sup>139</sup> To create that effect he also left out some verbs and conjunctions. William Shawn, the publisher, thought that it would give the magazine a “black eye.”<sup>140</sup> Angell persisted on behalf of the magazine. He argued that the misuse of grammar in the story would create “unnecessary misdirections”<sup>141</sup> for the reader and was not necessary and should be changed. The back and forth between the two remained amicable however. The suggestions were meant to be “helpful,” Angell wrote, “not annoying” and the magazine remained quite “enthusiastic about the piece.”<sup>142</sup> Barthelme felt conflicted and relied on Angell to champion his side of the disagreement. Barthelme also didn’t want the story to be scrapped altogether on account of his stubbornness. The story was nearly dumped when Donald added unnecessary commas in other sections to generate a “fragmented, stuttering tone”<sup>143</sup> Shawn believed the commas would lead readers to believe that the magazine was careless. Both sides reluctantly gave ground. Barthelme, once again, agreed to a more conventional paragraph structure and to edit some of the story’s unnecessary commas, while Angell spent hours deleting Shawn’s added commas from the sections that were meant to appear

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 261.

“drone.” Shawn also thought that some of the imagery in the text was “too wild.”<sup>144</sup> Angell persuaded him that it should be left alone. The story ran in the March 6<sup>th</sup> issue of 1965. The compromise from both sides led to one of Barthelme’s most successful *New Yorker* stories. To properly revise the story Barthelme had to give up some of his control of the story. In turn the magazine realized that it had to be more flexible in its editing of experimental works because fiction would eventually take some new paths in the future. The magazine also began to understand the uniqueness of Barthelme’s writing and it had to accommodate the author’s unconventional nature. The relationship he had with *The New Yorker* also kept Barthelme from turning off readers who ended up loving his work. The relationship suited both parties and they both benefited from the partnership.<sup>145</sup>

Barthelme kept writing for the magazine. The magazine didn’t find everything he wrote quite as exciting as “The Indian Uprising.” Angell wrote back in consideration for a story called “The Affront,” “God knows I am not asking for a formal, well-made story, but only some sense of arrival or completion near the end, instead of this trailing off...”<sup>146</sup> Barthelme was still experimenting and the magazine liked some of the stories, but continued to have problems with others.

By the summer of 1965 Donald Barthelme was in the middle of writing his first novel called *Snow White*. Months earlier he spent some time thinking about what to write about. Writing a novel would be much more difficult than his work on shorter stories. “One difficulty in writing a novel is keeping yourself interested,” he

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 259-261, 267.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 268.

told Charles Ruas, “or keeping the critical part of your head from destroying what is there – or from despairing.”<sup>147</sup> He initially thought about expanding the short stories “The Indian Uprising” or “Shower of Gold.” Barthelme soon realized that these stories resisted becoming novels and nothing more could be done to them. A number of his attempts at writing his novel would later become short pieces. “Some of the stories are little plucked chickens from aborted novels,” he said, “they are parts of novels that did not go well.”<sup>148</sup> In the interview he also explained that while he is busy with a novel he could always complete the short works. The short stories “reinforce” him because “writing a novel is an extended effort and it consists of failing, for me, for a long time.”<sup>149</sup> In the end he decided to write a book that took a new look at the classic Disney tale. When the novel was completed he sent it to *The New Yorker*. Angell convinced the magazine to print every word of it. The story ran in its entirety in the February 18, 1967 issue, although Barthelme revised the story all the way up to the printing by rearranging some of the sections and making small changes. He was paid more than twenty-five thousand dollars for the submission from the magazine. It also paid him extra for the revisions he made to the story.<sup>150</sup>

Some revisions were made to a few short stories that followed *Snow White* in the magazine. “See the Moon” ran in the March 12, 1966 issue. The author also made changes to this story before it ran in the issue. He added a metaphor comparing looking after a baby to looking after a battleship.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Herzinger, 224.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Daugherty, 273, 283-293.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 288.

A year later he withdrew another story after the magazine had already accepted it. In response to the author's withdrawal of "Some Trouble Friends are Having" Angell wrote that he realized the story was not his best, but the magazine still liked it. They took the piece off the books.<sup>152</sup>

In "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning" Shawn tried to get Barthelme to change Robert Kennedy to a fictional character. The story was first conceived in the early sixties and Barthelme revisited it when Saul Bellow, a fiction writer and historian, wrote a profile about Kennedy. The publisher had a problem with attaching dialogue to a person that never actually said any of the words in the story. Donald refused to consider the changes.<sup>153</sup>

In the summer of 1968 he submitted a story called "The Falling Dog." Two years later he changed the text for a collection titled *City Life*. The story initially started with a list that gave the reader no context as to what was happening in the piece. The version that made it into the collection began with, "a dog jumped on me," which provided some clarity to the situation. In addition to the extra line at the beginning of the story he also switched and rearranged blocks of text and pastes it to other blocks of text. The changes further complicate the story because the relationship between some the text is mysterious.<sup>154</sup>

According to Daugherty's biography, around 1972 the relationship between Angell and Barthelme appeared to sour. He writes that Barthelme had a difficult time getting his submissions accepted by *The New Yorker*. His work was moving

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 301-302.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 319.

toward a question and answer format that the editor and the magazine didn't enjoy. It seemed that nearly everything he submitted was rejected with a note that stated, "badly strained" or "much too close to Joyce" or "familiar and overused irony."<sup>155</sup> When a book editor who wanted to reprint Barthelme's stories came to Angell for his opinion he told him that "almost everything [Barthelme] submits these days seems to be in midstage; he keeps revising even the stories we have purchased, right up to page proof, so one can't be too definite in advance about the final look of the thing."<sup>156</sup> Mark Mirsky, however, contends that Barthelme and Angell "adored each other."<sup>157</sup> He remembers that at Barthelme's memorial service in Manhattan "only two people spoke from the heart, Lynn Nesbitt [his agent] and Roger Angell. They cried for Donald and it hurt to hear them speak."<sup>158</sup> In the interview, Mirsky quoted a line from Dante about how their words "renewed the pain."<sup>159</sup> He believes that the relationship between Barthelme and Angell never soured, and that Angell respected Barthelme's continuous desire to edit his work.<sup>160</sup> Barthelme was asked in the 1975 interview with Ruas, "I see that you continuously edit, even your published works."<sup>161</sup> Barthelme responded by saying that he was always editing or constantly honing his work.<sup>162</sup>

Barthelme enjoyed submitting his stories to *The New Yorker*. He liked experimenting with writing at a magazine that rarely in its history encouraged

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 351.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Mark Mirsky, interview with John Milteer, February 10, 2011.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Herzinger, 213.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

experimentation. He wrote the kind of stories that readers probably never would have encountered in mainstream magazines. He did compromise with the magazine though and made changes to a number of pieces based on the criticisms of the publisher and his editor. It was the kind of relationship that changed the way both sides wanted to do things. Arguably, however, it made both Barthelme's work and the magazine better. But, according to Angell and many of his other friends, Barthelme's method of revision was primarily "self-inflicted." In Herzinger's collection of essays and interviews, Barthelme told Larry McCaffery in 1980 about his relationship with Angell and the editing process:

Roger [Angell] makes very few changes. If he and the magazine don't like a piece that I've written, they'll turn it down. The magazine sometimes turns down a piece I don't think should be turned down – but what else can I think? Roger is a wonderful editor, and if he objects to something in a story he's probably right. He's very sensitive about the editing process, makes it a pleasure.<sup>163</sup>

This quote remains consistent with Angell's description of the editing relationship he had with Barthelme from his 2010 email.

Clearly, Barthelme's editing process, from his first unpublished novel to "The Sergeant," and throughout his career at *The New Yorker*, reflects his constant drive to perfect his work. He wanted each piece to reach its greatest potential, an impossible, never-ending task. This drive is further evident in Barthelme's time as a professor of creative writing. The way he helped his students revise their work sheds light on his own revision process. He taught creative writing at four different colleges and taught his students by revealing his own editing techniques. Teaching provided a steady source of income and gave him the opportunity to mentor

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 268.



budding writers. He enjoyed the new friendships he made with faculty members and the way his students idolized him.<sup>164</sup>

The novelist John Barth was instrumental in getting Donald his first two teaching positions. Along with a number of prominent writers and artists, he accepted a position as a visiting professor at the University of Buffalo in the early 1970's. He divided his time between Buffalo and New York during that time. Barthelme flew home to New York after a day in the classroom with his student's manuscripts in his arms. Beverly Lowry was one of his students at the time and she remembers an intensive editing session with him. He "blue-penciled most of the piece."<sup>165</sup> On one page of her manuscript he put a line through all but four sentences. The author felt that those four sentences were enough to capture the meaning she took an entire page to describe. The sentences read, "I never said a word. Never asked. Never complained. I did the dishes."<sup>166</sup> He did ask, however, if she was comfortable with the revisions. When she told him she was, she recalled, he was proud of her. Years after his tenure at Buffalo, Professor Mark Mirsky, a fellow professor and writer at the City College of New York, remembered a similar editing session where Barthelme drew lines through pages of his manuscript. Mirsky recalled being "angry,"<sup>167</sup> at the time, but knew that the changes would help his work.<sup>168</sup> At the University of Buffalo Barthelme also met with a reporter at the *Milwaukee Journal*. She was curious about whether he thought writing could really

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<sup>164</sup> Daugherty, 352.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> Mirsky, interview with John Milteer, November 11, 2010.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

be taught. He told her he believed that it couldn't, but he did think writing could be "encouraged."<sup>169</sup> In the article he attempted to simplify his style:

I don't lecture. Rather than talking about the art of fiction—which I haven't yet understood myself—I read manuscripts. I take a pencil and say, 'This is good' or 'That sentences doesn't do what you want it to do.' All the while I emphasize that this is only one man's opinion—I might be wrong, but consider it. I try to bring up what the student is trying to do, because you don't want to produce little imitations of yourself. I'm fairly rough with their manuscripts, and they appreciate it.<sup>170</sup>

Barth also got him a position at Boston University as a visiting professor. Another one of his students at the time remembered how Donald once brought in a copy of a story he was working on. When he finished a member of the class remarked that at times it sounded like T. S. Eliot. Barthelme changed the story based on the criticism.<sup>171</sup>

The next position Donald Barthelme took was at the City College of New York. He was much closer to his home on 11<sup>th</sup> Street. His students at the college remembered that he had "no set reading list."<sup>172</sup> He told them to "read all of Western philosophy... then read some history, anthropology, history of science."<sup>173</sup> When a student complained that there wouldn't be enough time to sleep, he told her that sleep would have to be the first thing she'd have to give up. Pulitzer Prize winner Oscar Hijuelos recalled how nurturing and friendly Barthelme was to his students. He welcomed a number of them into his home for conversations about literature and a glass of Scotch. Barthelme threw parties for students who had even

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<sup>169</sup> Daugherty, 354-357.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

the slightest publishing success.<sup>174</sup> In class “[he] circled misspellings and stupidities in my manuscripts with severity,” Hijuelos said, “and yet, while reading my work out loud, which was his habit then with students, he always took care to pronounce the Spanish phrases I used correctly, with respect for the language.”<sup>175</sup>

Barthelme was still a member of the City College faculty when he accepted a full time position at the University of Houston. He still kept his place in New York since his fourth wife, Marion, was pregnant and she had a good position in New York as a free-lance reporter for a magazine. At the University of Houston he enjoyed a larger role than at any other school. His dedication to his students remained constant though. The most important thing he taught them, according to one student, was “[how] to edit our fiction.”<sup>176</sup> In class his students had to get up in front of the room and read their work, and they weren’t allowed to sit down until every member of the class had voiced their thoughts. On one occasion a student read his manuscript about basketball. It was a long story that appeared to have little direction. “Rick, does this get any better?” Barthelme asked. The author eventually told the boy to sit down before he finished reading the piece.<sup>177</sup>

Thomas Cobb, another student from one of his classes who ended up writing a novel that was turned into an Academy Award winning movie, remembered how instrumental his teacher was in helping to revise the piece. Cobb read the first chapter of the novel during a workshop. Donald asked him what he planned to do with the main character. When he was unhappy with the student’s response, he told

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 383, 408.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 408.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 434.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

him that he should just “pour gasoline on him and set him on fire.” “The novel’s getting nowhere,” Barthelme said.<sup>178</sup>

Barthelme proposed new ideas to students during editing sessions. He made it a point to tell all of his classes to cut out all descriptions of weather. As he did for Beverly Lowry at the University of Buffalo, he drew lines through at least a hundred pages of another student’s book. As he edited the work of Padgett Powell during a revision session, he wrote that it was substitution for William Faulkner. The two worked closely at the university.<sup>179</sup> Powell recalled that Donald’s own personal style of revision remained consistent to the process that Helen Moore Barthelme remembered from their early days in Houston. In a 2010 email Padgett Powell wrote that “...he would type a sentence varying it slightly until a whole page of versions had obtained and then discard the page. I saw such a page near his typewriter.”<sup>180</sup>

As a professor, Barthelme knew that there were aspects of writing that could be taught. He asked his students to read the work of other great writers to help develop their craft. He used his own editing techniques and taught them to the students. He read their work and commented honestly. He told Charles Ruas that his function as a teacher was to “...act as an editor in regard to their manuscripts, and we work on them and try to improve them. In other words, I don’t go in there

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> Powell, e-mail to John Milteer, July 14, 2010.

and make lengthy pronouncements about the art of writing. I function as an editor.”<sup>181</sup> He was asked what it is an editor does. He replied:

An editor takes a manuscript and reads it, and if he sees ways in which it might be improved – and most pieces of prose, especially student work, can stand quite a bit of improvement – he does his best to develop the potential of that particular piece. He might say something like, “Well, George, the phrase you have here, ‘Passionate rush of upsurging desire,’ is perhaps a little purple for the purchase of a new pocketknife.” And then the student says, “Yes, that’s right, I have got that somewhat out of proportion. I will tone it down.” Of course you do very much more complex things than that, but that’s essentially how I go about it.<sup>182</sup>

More often than not he asked his students tough questions that made them rethink their work. He wanted to know what a story was really supposed to be about.

Usually, when he asked this question, his student would realize that the answer to that question was missing from the piece. “...And then we’d go looking for what the piece is about,” he said in the interview with Ruas, “and very often find it, and he puts it back in and so on and so on and so on.”<sup>183</sup> Many people, including the reporter from the *Milwaukee Journal*, believed that writing could not be truly taught. Barthelme partially agreed. “Maybe writing can’t be taught,” he told J. D. O’Hara in a 1981 interview, “but editing can be taught – prayer, fasting and self-mutilation. Notions of the lousy can be taught. Ethics.”<sup>184</sup>

Donald Barthelme was a passionate, creative writer with tenacious editing drive. His military experience had a substantial impact on his writing. He started writing fiction in the Korean hillside while nestled in his bed suffering from the cold, winter air and isolation. Also, references to military culture are evident throughout

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<sup>181</sup> Herzinger, 247.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

much of his work. Most notably, “The Sergeant” is a short story that clearly demonstrates both how profound an impact the military had on him and his insatiable self-editing process. The revisions of the final line in the story makes one question whether or not Barthelme was able to get the story right by the final version. In an interview, Mark Mirsky asks, “Did the revisions solve Barthelme’s riddle?”<sup>185</sup> “Put this at the end of your paper,” Mirsky says, “Mark Mirsky says that he has the answer, but refused to give it in the spirit of Barthelme.”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Mark Mirsky, personal interview with John Milteer, February 10, 2011.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

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