DAMAGED PERSPECTIVES: TOWARDS A VISUAL READING OF DONALD BARTHELME'S PICTURE STORIES

by

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DEDICATION PAGE

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who has taken time to correct me, to teach me, and to save me from my own worst impulses. I love you all.

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ABSTRACT

America's literary scene in the 1960s and 70s was a site of formal experimentation. Authors became discontented with the rational linearity of the written text and began to look for ways to disrupt it. Donald Bathelme is one of many authors of this time to incorporate images into his works, particularly during the composition of *City Life* (1970), *Sadness* (1972), and *Guilty Pleasures* (1974). My thesis focuses on three stories— "Brain Damage," "At the Tolstoy Museum," and "The Flight of the Pigeons from the Palace"—from this period of Barthleme's work that incorporate images. I argue that these stories constitute visual-textual collages that operate under the same principles as those undertaken by modernist visual artists, and that they should be interpreted using the same framework. Moreover, an analysis of Barthelme's visual semiotics demonstrates that these stories share the epistemological and aesthetic concerns of the modernist movement in the visual arts.

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This thesis was composed at various locations in the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq and the Beothuk people. We all share in a colonial history that can not be bracketed or ignored. We are all Treaty people.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Images and texts have been playing together for a long time. Whether one cites William Blake, Laurence Sterne, xylographica, or medieval illuminated manuscripts, images have accompanied texts in a variety of capacities throughout the history of western print media. The typographical page is a relatively new development in book history—a development which, according to Jeffery T. Schnapp and Adam Michaels, resulted in the "subordination of image to text, and a cognitive linearity that it both produced and enforced" (32). While various writers—most notably Sterne and his plot diagrams in *Tristram Shandy* (111)—have pointed to the absurdity of forcing lived experience into a linear, textual narrative, it is not until the 1960s that concerns about the primacy of text begin to enter mainstream consciousness. Artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Schapp and Michaels argue, became discontented with textual or visual modes of expression, and the goal in avant-garde circles became "to form a new verbal-visual vernacular" wholly different from the text-centred practices that theorists such as Marshall McLuhan saw as dominating the contemporary consciousness (32). The results of these attempts can be seen in the Cambrian explosion of literary forms during this period as authors experimented not only with the typographical and narratological innovations that we have come to associate with postmodernism, but also with new games that images and text can play together.

Donald Barthelme is unique among his contemporary literary innovators in his approach to the visual aspects of his stories. Rather than bringing images and texts together in surreal or avant-garde juxtapositions, many of Barthelme's stories

demonstrate an understanding of the historical and artistic context that images and text inhabit. Critics Maurice Couturier and Regis Durand note in their early study of Barthelme's fiction that "the ability to create or reflect new images" is a required skill to read Barthelme's prose (52). This imaginative requirement is due to the unique ways Barthelme engages with images and discourses. Rather than taking the standard literary route of evoking stock imagery to create original discourse, Barthelme uses stock discourses to create original images. One of the goals of this paper is to suggest that many of Barthelme's works are best understood through a visual arts lens rather than a literary lens. I contend that the works produced by Donald Barthelme in the late 1960s through to the early 1970s would not only survive a resituation into a visual arts framework, but that such a resituation would allow them to be critically unpacked in a way that critics thus far—using the tools of literary analysis—have been unwilling to attempt. The reason Barthelme's picture stories—particularly "Brain Damage" and "At the Tolstoy Museum" from *City Life* and "The Flight of the Pigeons from the Palace" from *Sadness*[1]—have been criminally understudied is that critics have no tools with which to open them for interpretation. Further, I hope to show how Barthelme's works are heavily influenced by the early cubist collages. There is reason to believe that a relationship between Barthelme's prose and modernist painting is intentional—and something that Barthelme struggled to achieve throughout the early portion of his writing career. Though prominent Barthelme critics like Larry McCaffery have compared Barthelme's prose to Burrough's cut-up methods, such comparisons only serve to paper over the intentionality of Barthelme's visual-textual collage work (13). Rather, I argue,

Barthelme's collages are operating under visual principles he borrows from artists like Pablo Picasso and Juan Gris.

Barthelme is upfront about the influence of modernist visual arts on his works. In an interview with Jo Brans, Barthelme states that he "was trying to do something else" during his early works, that he "was trying to make fiction that was like certain kinds of modern painting" (*Not-Knowing* 298). In an interview with McCaffery, Barthelme is more explicit about the works in question. During the composition of works that would later appear in *City Life* (1970), *Sadness* (1972), and *Guilty Pleasures* (1974), Barthelme states that he "was trying to be a painter, in some small way. Probably a yearning for something not properly in the domain of writers" (*Not-Knowing*, 268). Notably, these three collections contain the majority of Barthelme's experimentation with visual collage. Barthelme explains the draw of the visual arts in his fiction as "an ambition toward something that maybe fiction can't do, an immediate impact—a beautifully realized whole that can be taken in at a glance and yet still studied for a long time" (*Not-Knowing*, 268). Despite Barthelme's background in the visual arts as the director of Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum and his insistence on using visual art analogies[2] to describe his writing, critics have ignored the visual aspects of Barthelme's fiction. Stanley Trachtenberg, for instance, concludes that "the graphics call attention to the physicality of the written medium" (233). Similarly, Jerome Klinkowitz claims that Barthelme uses "graphic collage to make certain linguistic points more clear" (37). Barbara L. Roe calls Barthelme's images "Speaking pictures" with an intention similar to Klinkowitz's and Trachtenberg's: to make the images subservient to the stories's text (49). Alan Wilde also

follows in this line when he states that Barthelme's use of images functions "to call attention to the fact of writing" (106). These claims reflect the then-popular critical trend of emphasizing self-referentiality in postmodern texts and do little other than argue for the primacy of text over images.

These critics are in the minority in their willingness to discuss Barthelme's picture stories whatsoever. Despite the suggestion by Klinkowitz and Roe that Barthelme's stories should be taken as art objects in their own right (Patterson 15), there has been little critical work that explores Barthelme's visuals. Even Roe and Klinkowitz seem to abandon the art object train of thought shortly after boarding, with Roe stating that "Any connection between pictures and text [in Barthelme] registers suspicion" (50). In general, it seems that labelling the works "art objects" acts as a dismissal rather than an interpretive suggestion, and precludes an investigation of the elements which comprise the works. Unlike Mabel Dodge's critically generative suggestion that Gertrude Stein's texts are "doing with words what Picasso is doing with paint" (98), comparisons between Barthelme's work and the visual arts have found little traction. Nearly every sustained treatment of Barthelme's work has mentioned the influence of visual arts on Barthelme's narrative style (Patterson 7), yet few have taken the visual arts route as a mode of investigation. Surya Bowyer similarly states that "almost no attention has been paid to the formal intricacies of Barthelme's fragments, nor why their visible aspects might be significant" (4).

There have been a few exceptions in this critical trend. Mary Robertson's look at "Brain Damage" is a worthy engagement with the story. Robertson falls short, however,

in ignoring any cohesion between the images and narrative in the story. One of the keys to understanding Barthelme, Robertson argues, is “not to be fooled into grasping for possible symbolic meanings of the many incongruous images” (126). The pictures in Barthelme’s stories ultimately “fail to clarify anything” for Robertson (135). More recently Daniel Punday suggested that Barthelme subverts the tradition of images’ subservience to text and experiments in the “mixture of narrative and page space” (118). Punday, however, draws the questionable conclusion that Barthelme’s exercises are “important as a model for the computer screen” (119). Bowyer’s own investigation of the “visual aspect” of Barthelme’s stories argues that Barthelme’s use of typographical elements makes “readers consider texts visually” (3). Bowyer’s and Punday’s criticism signal a move away from understanding Barthelme’s stories as primarily textual objects and suggest a trend toward more visual interpretations.

The paucity of critics that have successfully engaged with Barthelme’s picture stories suggests that they are engaging with the stories incorrectly. Reading these stories visually through the principles of modernist collage as elucidated by the writings of Theodor Adorno, Clement Greenberg, Erwin Panofsky, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty demonstrates not only the critical importance of Barthelme’s often-neglected picture stories, but showcases the complex ways images and text interact within them. Barthelme’s use of collage—particularly his unique choice to incorporate perspective studies in his collages—draws attention to the ontological flatness of the work and comments on the growing disconnection between the renaissance discourses of rational objectivity and the reader’s subjective reality. An analysis of Barthelme’s visual

semiotics brings this disconnection into sharper contrast, and this contrast makes visible the ways Barthelme explores, complicates, and ultimately attempts to undermine the linear rationalist discourses that have been perpetuated by the primacy of text.

The rationalist and humanist discourses that Barthelme engages with in these stories are difficult to separate from one another. This difficulty is partly due to Barthelme's particular methods, as he depends on visual signs inherited from renaissance humanism to critique their associated rationalist discourses. In the picture stories discussed here, for instance, I will argue that Barthelme uses ideas of linear perspective to question its correlative claims to spatial objectivity and rationalist epistemology. Nonetheless, understanding how the stories' images relate to these discourses is essential to understanding the stories' targets. In an attempt to limit the scope of the discourses discussed in this paper, I have opted to focus on the most salient and related renaissance and rationalist discourses in each story. Particularly, by focusing on the visual elements of Barthelme's picture stories I will show how "Brain Damage" complicates rationalist notions of perspective and epistemology, how "At the Tolstoy Museum" engages with similar ideas of objectivity and truth, and how "The Flight of the Pigeons from the Palace" questions renaissance ideas of anatomy and presentation. Though these stories all use perspective drawings as part of their collage elements to focus on the artificiality of rationalist objectivity and renaissance mimesis, attention to each stories' visual semantic field is essential to understanding exactly which aspects of rationalist discourse the story is engaging.

Chapter 2: Damaged Perspectives

Of Barthelme's picture stories only "Brain Damage" has received sustained critical treatment. On its surface the story shares many of the concerns that critics have previously noted in the much-analyzed *Snow White*. Both narratives, for instance, reflect what Rachele Dini calls Barthelme's "broader preoccupation with waste and aesthetic re-use" (2). The novel's commentary on language and the claim that its characters are "at the leading edge of this trash phenomenon" (97-98) has led critics[3] to conclude that Barthelme sees "trash" as society's primary mode of discourse. While *Snow White* and "Brain Damage" may share Barthelme's broader concerns about language, they approach these themes from distinct directions and using very different tools. *Snow White* places emphasis on the "trash" in language; "Brain Damage" targets a much broader category of cultural discourses in its exploration of rationalist, objective principles. If *Snow White* is understood to be a commentary on "those aspects of language that may be seen as a model of the trash phenomenon" (McCaffery 117), "Brain Damage" should be best understood as Barthelme's attempt to reconsider these aspects *spatially* or visually. "Brain Damage," in other words, engages with perspective and space in much the same way *Snow White* engages with language.

Lois Gordon suggests that *Snow White* exists in a closed system—a linguistic stasis which only contains those words which are always heard (63)—the ten discursive fragments that make up "Brain Damage," conversely, constitute a spatial exploration of the cultural "garbage dump" where dead discourses, objects, and root-books are continually disposed and thereby introduced (*CL*, 143). "In the garbage dump," the first

line of “Brain Damage,” is the initial hint that the story should be read spatially (*CL*, 143). The line situates the narrative in a particular space and suggests by later emphasising that the garbage dump is “the first”—presumably of many—that the narrative’s progression is to be metered by these dumps. While no other dumps are mentioned, Robertson points out that the story is made of “ten narrative fragments,” each of which operates in its own discursive field separate from the root-book of the first fragment (128). Since “Brain Damage” provides no temporal continuity or narrative arc, the idea of these successive “dumps,” or spatial spreads of language, becomes the structural underpinning that allows the narrative to progress from one discursive fragment to another. Many of the discursive fragments draw attention to the importance of visual space. In the fragment mirroring humanistic discourse, for instance, one of the narrators notes that “The blue of the flowers is extremely handsome against the gray of that area” (*CL*, 144), and in the final discourse on “brain damage,” a narrator spatializes the phenomena by stating that there’s “brain damage in the east, and brain damage in the west . . . This is the country of brain damage, this is the map of brain damage” (*CL,* 155-156). Further, as Nicole Sierra suggests, the inclusion of pictures and collages in “Brain Damage” is another way “Barthelme amplifies the spatiality of his prose” (154).

Robertson’s dismissal of the story’s images hinges on her argument that “All of the visual components of ‘Brain Damage’ deny us perspective by which to interpret them,”as the images are “nondescriptive, mechanical, utterly conventionalized, flat, and simplistic” (136). These qualities, however, should be seen and interpreted as intentional features of Barthelme’s images. The first image is a collage in which the theatrical masks,

a Doric column, a wheeled trunk, and a cane are added to a study in linear perspective (*CL*, 145). While it is possible that the cane and the trunk were part of the original image, the masks and column do not cast shadows comparable to the other objects, nor are they lit by the same lighting source as the geometric objects they sit on. While all collages constitute a failure of perspective (Gordon 28), Barthelme draws the viewer's attention to this failure by undermining what would otherwise be an unassuming study of abstract geometric objects in linear space. Since the goal of such studies is to mathematically replicate human perspective the inclusion of collage elements that do not participate in the same principles as the underlying study invariably results in the failure of perspective.

The failure of perspective in the first image does more than merely place emphasis on the spatiality of "Brain Damage"—it also provides additional commentary on how the ten discursive fragments of the story are to be understood. The image showcases the ways signs gain different meanings depending on the discourses in which they participate—and in this bears a resemblance to *Snow White*'s universes of discourses (*SW*, 46). The juxtaposition of the two tragic theatrical masks in the top right of the image with the Doric column calls to mind the ways intense emotions are theaticized in traditional forms of art such as ancient Greek theatre, whereas a similar mask isolated in the foreground is stripped of any of those synchronic associations and seems to instead represent an individual experience of emotion decontextualized from the theatrical cultural touchstone. The collage is also in dialogue with the surrounding text, contextualizing the struggle of "the individual attempting to know his own identity and to separate it from the collective" forces which shape identities (Stengel 32) and which

results in the first person dissolving into a chorus of "CROWD NOISES / MURMURING" during the course of the story (145). The most interesting element of the first image, however, is its juxtaposition with the fragmented humanistic discourse on the facing page.

Studies in linear perspective and humanistic discourse first gained popularity during the European Renaissance, a period responsible for the rediscovery of classical works (such as the ancient Greek plays from which Barthelme draws his masks), the development of linear perspective in painting, and the ideation of the rational individual. While the artistic and scientific developments associated with humanism touch on a variety of different discourses and fields of study, they are connected by their underlying emphasis on the rationality of the individual human. The rationalist discourse surrounding renaissance humanism is, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "based on a clear distinction between space and the physical world," in which space is a "uniform medium in which things are arranged in three dimensions and in which they remain the same regardless of the position they occupy" (*World*, 38). The autonomy and individuality of these objects regardless of their spatial position is essential to understanding the deep connection between mathematical linear drawings and renaissance notions of individuality. Further, as Erwin Panofsky suggests, linear perspective results in "a fully rational—that is, infinite, unchanging and homogenous—space" that assumes the objectivity of the human eye (28-29). Barthelme's inclusion of perspective drawings in his picture stories relies on the understanding that such images, as Panofsky puts it, are responsible for "transform[ing] psychophysiological

space into mathematical space" (31). Linear perspective drawings—essential to renaissance art—present the perceived world as a rationalized, mathematical model filled with rationalist, autonomous individuals.

Barthelme's use of collage in "Brain Damage," as well as in his other picture stories, is an attempt to complicate and undermine such rationalist discourses. The loss of an individual voice among a chorus of subjectivities, the failure of perspective, and the inability to connect with classical modes of art all coalesce in the first image of "Brain Damage" to suggest the failure and resulting damage of the Renaissance's lasting emphasis on individuality, objectivity, and beauty. These images are not "torn from some unspecifiable discursive contexts," as Robertson argues (136), but rather refer to specific discourses and semiotic frameworks presented in what Sierra calls "reverse ekphrasis" in an attempt to complicate and frame the verbal discourses in the story (154). The "indeterminate spatiality" of collage, according to Sierra, or the intentional failure "to portray 'real space' in two-dimensional work," which results in a flat picture plane (154), constitutes a radical departure from the artistic mimesis of the renaissance and its associated ideas. By presenting itself as a heterogeneous, two-dimensional object through this flat plane, collage operates in direct contradistinction to Panofsky's conception of renaissance perspective, which negates the artwork's materiality and is "instead reinterpreted as mere 'picture plane'" (27). Barthelme's rejection of linear perspective through the use of collage, consequently, is equally a rejection of the same field of renaissance discourse, which he depicts as part of the story's "brain damage." When the narrator(s) talk of "brain damage on the horizon," they suggest the horizon line of

fixed-perspective paintings. When they talk of the universities "being the very seat and soul of brain damage," they suggest the search for meaning and rationalist objectivity. When they talk of the "Brain damage caused by art," they suggest beliefs in the possibility of artistic mimesis and linearity (*CL*, 156).

These failures of perspective are redoubled in the story's second collage. Robertson reads this image as a sexualized image of "the cane laid before a monster woman's head, over the casket" (134). What Robertson identifies as a "monster woman's head," however, is more likely another dramatic mask. The mask's eyes stare outward, as if blind. The second image is connected to the first through the shared use of canes and dramatic masks, which act as a through line between the images rather than as part of a critique of humanist endeavours. The stairs in the image also call to mind the rational geometry of the story's first image. Like the geometric shapes that act as universes of discourse in the first image, the recontextualization of the dramatic mask in the second image demonstrates how signs change their meanings depending on their discursive participation. The cane in the second image is no longer contextualized by the wheeled trunk and Doric column that suggest it is a theatrical prop; instead, it is contextualized by the blind mask. The cane becomes an instrument used to navigate the dark space of the image. The Edenic vegetation on the edges of the image's frame further suggests that the mask-character is blind to the world's natural bounty—most likely a satirical stab at the discourse preceding the image, in which a character is instructed to "look down" to a penny in a "gutter full of water" and then asked, "don't you want to pick it up?" (*CL*, 147). The mask's blindness is situated in response to a demonstration of questionable

cultural values and suggests the individual is blindly navigating a world where the absurd and the meaningful are intermixed—as if cultural values were also a collage. As Wayne B. Stengel argues, “Social obligations and confusions are so great in the distorted world depicted in ‘Brain Damage’ that the narrator . . . has difficulty knowing what, if anything, is a meaningful reaction” (34). The individual’s blind navigation suggests a conflict, not unlike that in the first image, between their individual system of values and that of the collective, and this conflict is further explored in the following discursive fragment in which a narrator admits to various sins against a rationalist ontology while reporting for the newspaper, such as having “no respect for the truth” (148). Far from being a disruptive element, the second collage in “Brain Damage” operates with the first to connect the various discursive fragments to one another (135).

The image of the Promethean sculpture, the woman weeping, and the girls playing blindman’s bluff are variations of the themes Barthelme presents in the first two collages. The sculpture of Prometheus and the ocean nymphs (149), which follows a narrator’s admission of ontological guilt, repeats this sense of disconnection from classical modes of knowing. Like the mask in the first image, the boy sitting in front of the Prometheus statue deals with life’s mundanities (a splinter) and has no recourse in the melodrama of the Prometheus myth. Like with the first image, Barthelme also calls attention to the flatness of the collage—and the disparity between its subjects—by juxtaposing images with different light sources. Again, the failure of a single perspective constitutes an intentional undermining of traditional humanistic aesthetic (mimetic) values, and the collage’s form—especially when one considers the mundanity of a printed representation

of a sculpture—reflects the dismissive attitude of the boy with the splinter. This variation of the first image's themes makes apparent that the individuals dismissing the discursive constructions of the Renaissance are simultaneously defined by them. The boy's own status as a mimetic Renaissance sculpture complicates the narrative of the first image and asks whether humans, after all, can survive without humanism. Compared to the first image, the Promethean image places particular emphasis through its use of light and space on the Promethean sculpture, which acts as a sign for the rational humanist project.

Neither the woman weeping (150) nor the children playing blindman's bluff (152) are collages in the strict sense, yet both images operate in juxtaposition with their larger textual environment as collage elements. The woman weeping is sandwiched between the discussion of truncated sexual activity prior to it and the headline of "SEXUAL ACTIVITY / CONSUMPTION OF FOOD" appearing on the facing page (151). The image's figure is a woman in upper-middle-class Victorian dress, and the clear indications of her socioeconomic status positions her as a representative of the bourgeoisie, whose naive belief in the previously stated humanistic principles, undermined in the Victorian era by the same concerns of sexual activity and purity, have again come under question by the modernist and postmodernist aesthetic movements.[4] The opposition to rationalist objectivity seen in the previous images is again, and perhaps most sharply, present in the satirical depiction of the "Wapituil," which precedes the weeping woman.

The Wapituils exist in a idealized rationalist epistemology as they assume that one object or experience can stand in for all others of the same kind, and so they only have

"one of each thing," including days of the week and instances of sexual congress (150). The narrator states that the "Wapituil are like us to an extraordinary degree," suggesting that the satirical bite of this fragment is to find purchase in the rationalist discourses of the academy and sciences just as much as against historical rationalists (150). In the words of Merleau-Ponty, a student of the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, whom Barthelme studied at length (*Not-Knowing*, 208; Helen Barthelme, *Donald Barthelme* 46), Barthelme's satirical attack on the rationalist's limited idea of objective knowledge attempts to do "justice to each of the variety of elements in human experience" (*World*, 36). Richard F. Patterson seems to point to this phenomenological tilt in Barthelme's use of discursive fragments when he quotes Richard Schickel, stating, "We perceive in fragments, live in fragments, are no doubt dying by fragments; should we not, then, write in fragments, emphasizing thereby the strange disjunctions, the even stranger juxtapositions" (7). Patterson sees "Brain Damage" as presenting a phenomenological experience, but he stops short of investigating the story's visuals. Barthelme's satirical treatment of rationalism in "Brain Damage" closes with the image of the young girls playing blindman's bluff. Like the mask in the second image and the Wapituil, the girl wearing the blindfold is unable to navigate the world with her limited perception. Robertson notes that one of the problems in interpreting the text is that it reduces "so many rich discourses" to a "homogenous positivism"[5] (131). This, it seems, is due to her refusal to engage with the text's images. The "flat positivism" of pluralistic discourses that Robertson sees as "confus[ing] the important with the trivial" (131) are flat insofar as they participate in the same formal constructions as the visual collages which inform and

enrich Barthelme's satirical exploration of the "damage" western culture has sustained in its adherence to outdated notions of individuality, objectivity, and beauty.

"Brain Damage" not only operates on a flat picture plane in which visual collages disrupt any sense of perspective, the lightning-fast juxtaposition of Barthelme's discursive styles, according to Stengel, should also be thought of as a type of verbal collage (Stengel 29, 33). This distinction between verbal and visual collage is essential to understanding Barthelme's works. While "Brain Damage" incorporates both verbal and visual collages to further its thematic flattening of discourses, Barthelme clearly thinks of the two techniques as distinct. In his introduction to a Robert Rauschenberg exhibition, Barthelme refers to the artist's work as "physical collage[s]," to make a distinction between visual and literary modalities (*Not-Knowing*, 185). One of the most important differences between the two modes seems to be how visual collages call attention to the flatness of their surface. This flatness, according to Clement Greenberg, is inherent to modernist painting. "Because flatness was the only condition shared with no other art," Greenberg states, "Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness" (qtd. in Florman 64). Greenberg's study of the development of collage techniques in modernist painting presents collage as originating from painting's need "to spell out, rather than pretend to deny, the physical fact that it was flat" while still being representational (71).

Writings contemporary to the development of the collage technique by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso discuss collage as developing from "the need for renewed contact with 'reality' in the face of the growing abstractness" of contemporary painting through a reconnection with the physical materials that make up the artwork (Greenberg

70). Barthelme's use of collage is perhaps best viewed as an extension of this theoretical framework. Through visual collage Barthelme draws attention to the flatness of the surface, but also to the disconnection between the text's abstracted discourses and the reader's lived experience. Whether this disconnection is achievable through discourse alone is a moot question in the face of the "immediate impact" Barthelme argues textual works lack (*Not-Knowing*, 268). Much like the collages of Braque, Picasso, and Juan Gris, which achieve flatness through "every part and plane of the picture . . . changing place in relative depth with every other part and plane," resulting in "the only stable relation left among the different parts of the picture [being] the ambivalent and ambiguous one that each has with the surface" (Greenberg 76), "Brain Damages"'s constant shifting of discourses is only stabilized by the images that punctuate them and draw attention to the story's physical and textual surface.

The comparison between Barthelme's works and the collages of Gris and Picasso is not accidental. Lisa Florman notes how these earlier artists abandoned sculptural shading and investigated the possibility that "the physical surface could be displaced and re-created out of shapes that were unimpeachably flat" (74). Perhaps the most interesting element of these early synthetic cubist works, however, is the way that they incorporate text. "Picasso employed newspaper," Florman writes, "but in such a way as to negate its most pernicious effects. The fragments within his collages are made to embody precisely 'those precious aesthetic possibilities that . . . were the exclusive prerogative of the book'" (80). In effect, the early collages by Picasso and Gris are attempting to explore the same middle ground between images and text which Barthelme explores in his picture

stories such as “Brain Damage,” albeit with a heavier emphasis on visuals. Where the early collagists call attention to the canvas’s flatness by incorporating pieces of text from newspapers and block lettering (Florman 67), Barthelme draws form the history of collage to call attention to the flat, typographic nature of text by including flattened images and typographical variation such as the bolded headlines in “Brain Damage.” The multiplicity and placement of the headlines in the story do not “establish a hierarchy of significance,” as headlines in their normal context are supposed to, but merely exist in their borrowed state (Robertson 135).

The failure of hierarchy is related to Barthelme’s undermining of single, linear perspective, but the headlines’ most significant feature is their borrowed context. Michael Heitkemper-Yates’s comparison between Barthelme’s “readymade writing” and the use of “found” materials by the modernist movement helps to connect the newspaper clippings used by Gris and Picasso and the text which accompanies the images in “Brain Damage” (319). In his 1914 *Still Life*, for instance, Gris combines textual and typographical elements found in newspapers with visual elements in similar juxtapositions. While these newspaper clippings are not self-referential as discourse, as Barthelme’s texts often are, the collage techniques used by the artist results in them being seen as such. In this regard both the compositional elements and the resulting effects of the two media—the modernist visual collages and Barthelme’s picture stories—are undeniably similar. Both Barthelme and the early collagists use pieces of “found” discourse in juxtaposition with images to flatten the picture plane in an attempt to complicate traditional renaissance ideas of perspective and aesthetics.

"Brain Damage," then, is best understood through its spatial relations. The text relies on its use of visual collages to connect its disparate discursive fragments, and the story's form traces its lineage back to the early collages of modernist painters. Further, a visual analysis of the ways the elements of this visual-textual collage interrelate demonstrates that the primary discourses the story is attempting to unravel concern the idea of an objective truth or single perspective as proposed by the rationalist, humanistic methodologies of the Renaissance. Just as the narrator(s) suggest that their "brain damage [is] caused by art," the difficulty of parsing a world that is pluralistic in its subjective discourses, yet still demands to be perceived objectively, results in the story's fragmented phenomenological experience. As Merleau-Ponty states in his discussion of the modernist movement, "modern thought is difficult and runs counter to common sense . . . because it is concerned with truth" (*World*, 37). "Common sense" here is a stand-in for the traditional rationalist position, which Merleau-Ponty, like Barthelme, sees as an inadequate approximation for experience (*World*, 34-35). Elsewhere Merleau-Ponty criticizes the "unquestioning faith in perception" held by science and rationalist philosophy, specifically the idea that perception "is directed, quasi-teleologically, towards a truth in itself in which the reason underlying all appearances is to be found" (*Phenomenology,* 62). The distance between the phenomenological experience of the world and the rationalist framing is what Robertson articulates when she states that the plurality of discourses in "Brain Damage" exhibits "the loss of a secure, coherent, hegemonic discourse in which to perceive and talk about things" (Robertson 134). Like

brain damage, Barthelme suggests, the plurality of rationalist discourses restricts one's capacity to interpret and to perceive the world.

Barthelme's collages are capable of calling attention to these issues through their presentation as flat objects that trouble perspective. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty notes that "In the work of Cézanne, Juan Gris, Braque and Picasso, in different ways, we encounter objects [...] that do not pass quickly over our eyes in the guise of objects we 'know well' but, on the contrary, hold our gaze, ask questions of it, convey to it in a bizarre fashion the very secret of their substance" (*World*, 69). The transformation of banal objects into "bizarre" objects functions the same way in Barthelme's texts as in modernist art. This presentation and transformation of banal objects seems also to be the hidden foundation of Stengel's claim that the structural framework of many of Barthelme's stories hinge on the presentation of "unlikely objects of contemplation" (2-4).[6] Barthelme attempts to revitalize textual and visual discourses by using the flattened lens of the collagist and visual-verbal juxtapositions to situate these discourses in bizarre and refreshing contexts. As Patterson notes, "Not all of Barthelme's stories employ the collage method, but those that do defamiliarize routine words and objects, giving them new life (15). The transition from banality to originality is an essential part of Barthelme's aesthetic. Fiction, Barthelme writes, is "encountered in the same way as other objects in the world . . . something that is there, like a rock or a refrigerator," two objects which only take on aesthetic qualities if we are prompted to investigate them due to a change in their context (*Not-Knowing* 4). But Barthelme's collages do not only attempt to revitalize the discourses they incorporate. The very act of decontextualization that makes these verbal

and visual collages possible constitutes a dismantling and questioning of the discourses from which they are removed.

Chapter 3: Dismantling Tolstoy's Truths

Barthelme's treatment of historicized discourse and visual collage in "At the Tolstoy Museum" best demonstrates his thinking about the aesthetic relationship between discourse, collage, decontextualization, and the visual arts. The story, which appears before "Brain Damage" in *City Life*, also relies heavily on visual and textual collages. The collage elements present in "Tolstoy Museum" operate on the same principles and in the same historical context as those in "Brain Damage" and the early modernist collages, but are situated within different textual discourses and therefore have different targets.

The most telling connection between the flattening collage techniques used in "Brain Damage" and the use of collage in "Tolstoy Museum" is in how both stories use collage to undermine studies in linear perspective. Gordon notes the "Figures and lines superimposed diagramming fixed, Renaissance perspective, as though to indicate centrality of plot, character, and meaning" in her brief treatment of "Tolstoy Museum" (109). As with the perspective studies in "Brain Damage," the emphasis Barthelme places on the scaffolding of linear perspective in "Tolstoy Museum" acts to draw attention to the study's artificiality. The first perspective study (*CL*, 52) is the most explicit example of this artificiality. Like the first image in "Brain Damage," the dancing figures superimposed on the perspective drawing sabotage any attempt at depth or mimetic perspective. The underlying line drawing, instead, appears only as the collection of lines that constitute it. Perspective, the image argues, is unstable and is only achievable in the rational abstract. Similarly, the second perspective image features a black and white negative of Tolstoy's head situated at the back of a study of abstracted space (*CL*, 54).

Roe sees the images as reflective of "the restrictive policies of the perspective artist who attempts to stabilize the world in a network of lines" and "Pythagorean laws" (52). In the use of these abstract lines, the two collages in "Tolstoy Museum" which feature perspective studies share similarities with Picasso's 1913 *Guitar*. Both Barthelme and Picasso position their subjects in front of what appear to be mathematical studies of linear perspective in order to complicate rationalist conceptions of objective space. The clean, mathematical presentation of the underlying image, especially juxtaposed with the dancers in the midst of an emotional moment, demonstrates another failure of rationalist pursuits for truth when faced with subjective human experience.

Barthelme takes care to ensure the backgrounds of "Tolstoy Museum" and similar stories are not misunderstood and are explicitly identified as perspective drawings. In an interview with Klinkowitz, Barthelme corrects the conception that his stories employ architectural drawings by specifying that he uses "early (1603) investigations of perspective" in his collages (Bellamy 47). Barthelme's choice of subject is also suggestive of the story's themes and his unique use of contextual signs. In "After Joyce," Barthelme situates Tolstoy as a synecdoche for the rational humanism and epistemological objectivity he responds to in "Brain Damage." "The facts of contemporary life," Barthelme argues, "are not 'real' facts, like the facts available to Tolstoi" (*Not-Knowing*, 7). The quotation marks around the word "real" imply that there is no more correlation between reality and facts in Tolstoy's world than there are in contemporary life; rather, the difference between the two types of facts derives from questioning an objective, rationalist ontological framework. Unlike the hodgepodge seen

in the collages in "The Flight of the Pigeons from the Palace" or "Brain Damage," the first perspective study in "Tolstoy Museum" suggests a sharper contrast between the elements of the collage, as if to suggest that the distance between Tolstoy's ontological world and that of the modern era has grown even larger.

In fact, the discourse created between the images and text in "Tolstoy Museum" can be seen as one primarily concerned with the struggle between the monumental and the trivial. Tolstoy himself becomes the site of both sides of the discourse, as his stature shifts according to the changing information presented. The story first emphasizes Tolstoy's monumentality through the two colossal portraits that appear before the story's text can provide the reader with context. The first context that Barthelme provides is the juxtaposition of the monumental Tolstoy to a diminutive Napoleon (*CL*, 45-46). Tolstoy and Napoleon operate in juxtaposition to convey "the ability of the epic artist Tolstoy to overshadow even the sweeping, awesome history of Napoleonic conquest he recreates" (Stengel 193). This presentation of Tolstoy is immediately undermined by the first paragraph, however, which details how the narrator claims that the pictures "were placed too high on the wall" before informing the reader that "Tolstoy means 'fat' in Russian" and that Tolstoy had "shaved off his eyebrows, hoping they would grow back bushier" (47). Barthelme's use of trivia, as Roe suggests, "diminishes" the "promises" of Tolstoy's scale as represented in the opening images (52), and ultimately works to dismantle Tolstoy's mythological status. The ever-changing status of Tolstoy's stature is also reflected in the choice to intercut the paragraph containing the diminutive trivia with an

image of "Tolstoy as a youth," which connects to the prose through the story about Tolstoy shaving his eyebrows (48).

It is not only Tolstoy that changes scale during the course of the story—the entire museum has a problem of proportion. In the introductory paragraph the narrator states that the museum's holdings "consist of some thirty thousand pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy," a claim that is immediately put into question when it is revealed that the museum has three levels: "The first level is, say, the size of a shoebox, the second level the size of a case of whiskey, and the third level the size of a box that contained a new overcoat" (49). The "say" before the narrator states the sizes of each level suggests that the measurements are not objective measures, but rather subjective ones. The immediate impulse is, perhaps, to connect the levels of the museum to the substantiality of Tolstoy's major works, and this impulse is reinforced by the implicit comparison between the third level and Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat."[7] If the museum is a stand-in for Tolstoy's works, then it provides an explanation for the overtly theoretical and abstract presentation of space in the collages with perspective drawings—space in stories can be nothing more than theoretical. While merely stating that the levels of the museum stand in for Tolstoy's major works and are best understood as textual entities rather than physical entities further complicates and displays the ways in which Barthelme thinks about the relationship between text, space, and physicality, this idea is perhaps most interesting in how it explores the way textual space expands upon the reader entering it. The "amazing cantilever of the third level," for instance, allows the readers to look down through the "glass floor" onto the streets below (49). Once inside the text of Tolstoy, in other words,

the reader begins to see things in a Tolstoyan manner—as a top-down omniscient narrator.

In addition to the Museum's spacious interior and paltry scale, the building is also shown to be structurally unsound. "The entire building," Barthelme writes, "viewed from the streets, suggests that it is about to fall on you" (49). The choice of language here is telling. In "After Joyce" Barthelme briefly discusses how the form of Burroughs's cut-up texts "suggests that a chunk of a large building may fall on you at any moment" (*Not-Knowing*, 8). While the destructive potential that Barthelme detects in Burroughs's cut-up technique is, perhaps, briefly demonstrated in the trivia paragraph of "Tolstoy Museum," the general thrust of the sentiment in both incarnations reflects Barthelme's understanding of how language is unstable when taken from its context. If the museum, as Trachtenberg claims, stands "as a expression of Tolstoy's literary as well as moral authority" (77), the concern that the structure will fall is a danger not only to the narrator who admires Tolstoy's works, but also to the literary and moral discourses which Tolstoy's works perpetuate. If, as Barthelme argues, "The facts of contemporary life are not 'real' facts, like the facts available to Tolstoi" (*Not-Knowing*, 7), we would expect that Tolstoy's facts would be fragile and prone to collapse in a contemporary context, just like the "new pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy" that arrive in "crates stencilled FRAGILE" (*CL*, 49).

"Tolstoy Museum" participates in a reevaluation of truth claims and objectivity in contemporary society, and acts to dismantle these ideas in much the same way "Brain Damage" deconstructs rationalist objectivity. Beyond the playful changes in scale and

monumentality throughout the story that threaten to undermine Tolstoy while sanctifying him, contradictions also appear in the qualitative elements of the museum. The suggestion that the building "is going to fall on you" is juxtaposed with the previous sentence about how the structure provokes a "floating" sensation to those that view it from a certain perspective (49). While these changes and contradictions emphasize the variety of subjective experiences and prioritize these subjectivities over Tolstoy's ontological facts and linear narratives, this theme is best explored by returning to Barthelme's use of historical trivia using Theodor Adorno's theories of collage.

I have already discussed the ways Barthelme intentionally uses symbols associated with rationalism and Renaissance art in order to subvert the notion of singular, objective perspectives and how the resulting flat picture/textual plane at once draws attention to the artificiality and physicality of the written text. Adorno suggests that collages have more radical implications. Visual "art's constructions and montages," Adorno argues "are at the same time de-montages, i.e., dismantlements that appropriate elements of reality by destroying them, thus freely shaping them into something else" (362). Collage—and this applies equally well to verbal collages—is not only a way that Barthelme signals that the languages he engages with are dead; rather, it is also a method of making these discourses die in the first place. Similar to Bakhtin's claim that discourses die when stripped of their relation to reality (353-54), Adorno argues that dismantlement (or decontextualization), which is a requisite precursor to reshaping discursive elements through collage, ultimately results in superceding the reality from which the discursive elements are drawn while simultaneously "concretizing [their]

relation to that superceded reality" (362). The discourses, then, are not only affirmed dead by Barthelme's decontextualization of them, but are also reaffirmed—or in Adorno's diction, concretized—in their historicity through their repetition.[8]

As suggested by his reference to the destructive capability of Burroughs's cut-up technique, Barthelme seems to be aware of the dual nature of collage as it relates to discursive elements in "Tolstoy Museum." The struggle between the monumental and the trivial, the contradictory elements of the building's structure, and the impression of the building's fragility are all side effects of the requisite decontextualization and recontextualization on which collage depends. The textual/visual collages which Barthelme includes in the story are themselves, perhaps, the elements most indicative of the phenomenon Adorno mentions. Klinkowitz points out that the historical trivia presented in the story "can probably be found in any biography of Leo Tolstoy" and are more-or-less factually accurate (63). While the facts are certainly curated—"Tolstoy," for instance, is *derived* from the Russian word for "fat," and also equally derived from the words for "stout," or "thick," and can not be said to "mean 'fat'" as the narrator suggests (*CL*, 47)—they are by no means fabrications. The trivia's presentation, however, is unaccommodated by any explanation, consequence, or sense of linear narrative order that would allow the reader to process their significance or to contextualize their truth claims. The information bears a resemblance, in this way, to the newspaper clippings incorporated into the above collages by Picasso and Gris as the written text is presented without context in a larger, mostly visual, form. This decontextualization and designification of the trivia is further accomplished through Barthelme's use of visual

collage throughout the story. An image of Tolstoy's massive coat which follows the first four pieces of trivia, for instance, showcases the absurd games Barthelme is playing with scale and as a result recontextualizes and delegitimizes the surrounding text's claims to empirical truth. Barthelme accomplishes this recontextualization of facts so well that critics such as Gordon have claimed that the story's trivia are accompanied by "satiric statements about Tolstoy" (109).

The image of Tolstoy's coat, however, is rather benign in its ability to invalidate truth claims compared to the story's other collages. The aforementioned image of "Tolstoy as a youth," the image of the "Tiger hunt," and that of Tolstoy "At the disaster" are all much more potent examples of the way Barthelme uses images to undermine the authority of his text. The "Tiger hunt" image (50) is perhaps the most egregious example of Barthelme's collage technique being used in this fashion. The image depicts a group of seven men—among them Tolstoy—posing in front of a dead tiger during a hunt in Siberia. Tolstoy's head stands out among the nondescript hunters in its uniqueness, its detail, and in the fact that it is the same image of Tolstoy's head that Barthelme uses for the first two pages of the story. While placing Tolstoy among the nondescript men acts as a way of individualizing him and celebrating his importance, placing Tolstoy as a member of a tiger hunt simultaneously compromises Tolstoy's individualizing beliefs in non-violence and his years of vegetarianism that are mentioned on the previous page. Further, the presentation of the same image of Tolstoy's head draws attention to the image's falsity while the caption's simple reportage attempts to legitimize the image. The simple act of pasting Tolstoy's head over the unknown hunter's decontextualizes and

destroys the story's previous discourse surrounding Tolstoy's moral claims. As Adorno suggests, Barthelme's dismantlement of and play with the Tolstoyan ideal inevitably results in the ideal's destruction. Barthelme's collage not only complicates and contradicts the historical discourse surrounding Tolstoy, but also presents false historical records and shamelessly interlaces those records with truth, thereby calling the notion of objective truth (which Tolstoy symbolizes for Barthelme) into question.

The image of Tolstoy "At the disaster" (53) is an attempt at the same intermingling of fact and fiction. The disaster is presented with only a definite article for clarification, as if it holds the weight of a historical moment that the reader is expected to recognize, and the arrow used to indicate Tolstoy again acts to undermine Tolstoy's individuality as he appears as one silhouette among many, as an individual subjectivity rather than as an objective viewer. "Tolstoy Museum" is a text that not only presents historical information without "any consequential, didactic, or even conceptual order" (Klinkowitz 63), but also questions the very epistemological framework from which truth claims originate. Using images to present false imitations of historical reality troubles the tradition of visual epistemologies that—as heard in phrases such as "seeing is believing"—stands as the foundation of western forms of knowledge acquisition. The juxtaposition of historical trivia and banal truths, such as the "640,086 pages" of the "Jubilee Edition" of Tolstoy's works (53) with blatantly falsified collages displayed in a fantastic setting impairs the reader's ability draw logical, rationalist conclusions based on the information presented. Rhetorically, Barthelme sabotages his own factual authority by presenting truth and fiction without moral hierarchy and without distinction.

This interest in factual authority is seen throughout “Tolstoy Museum,” and, as I’ve suggested, is only evident if one pays attention to Barthelme’s use of images. The first pictures in the story, in fact, which show Napoleon overshadowed by the titanic image of Tolstoy, demonstrate the complex relationship between fact and fiction which the story explores. The myths, the images argue, are more important than the events which inspired them. In much the same way, the banal historical trivia of Tolstoy’s life—though true—are not the elements which constitute the Tolstoyan myth the museum celebrates. Rather, the myth is founded on the idea of the Tolstoy who writes articles titled “Who Should Teach Whom to Write, We the Peasant Children or the Peasant Children Us?” which in Barthelme’s story causes “Many people to stand before this article, weeping” (49). The substance of the myth or its approximation to reality are of no concern to the museum goers either, as “the bare title of a Tolstoy work . . . can induce weeping” (49). The titles of Tolstoy’s works are treated in the museum as works of abstract visual art, which are to be appreciated for their emotional impact rather than their semantic sense or their claims to truth. The incorporation of banalities and the recontextualization of Tolstoy’s life and works into a contemporary museum inevitably results in the disenchantment of Tolstoy as a symbol of rationalist objectivity and a presenter of truths. The subjective and emotional experience of the narrator’s navigation of the Tolstoyan myth via their trip to the museum is given priority over the truth claims the museum presents. The narrator’s experience of “eating a sandwich,” of retelling Tolstoy’s story of a bishop on a ship, and of refusing to visit the museum because the pictures “were placed too high on the wall,” all contribute to a presentation of Tolstoy

that is aware of its own subjectivity (49, 51, 47). The myth of objectivity, and the signs associated with it, are themselves part of a larger subjective experience of the world, which is founded on myths and historical fictions rather than one's own phenomenological experience of reality.

By incorporating falsified images into the discourse surrounding Tolstoy, Barthelme is again doing what Merleau-Ponty sees as fundamental in the works of Cézanne, Gris, Braque and Picasso. Recontextualizing and falsifying is a method Barthelme uses to ensure that what he represents does not "pass quickly over our eyes in the guise of objects we 'know well'," but instead begs to be challenged and investigated for the claims that it makes (*World*, 69). The presentation of things in a "bizarre fashion" that Merleau-Ponty accredits to the modernist painters is a staple of Barthelme's mode of investigation and of his fiction-telling technique. In "Tolstoy Museum" Barthelme presents historical facts and myths in a similarly "bizarre fashion" through his juxtaposition of images and collages, which serves to question truth claims as they are presented. As Adorno argues, the very act of decontextualization that is a requisite part of these collages also constitutes a dismantlement and questioning of the discourses from which they are removed. Much like "Brain Damage," which uses rationalist discourses to demonstrate their inability to respond to the world and thereby dismantle their claims, "Tolstoy Museum" recontextualizes historical discourses and images in such a way as to demonstrate their own unique inadequacies and lack of a single linear narrative.

Chapter 4: The Perspective from the Palazzo

"Brain Damage" and "Tolstoy Museum" are not the only Barthelme stories which incorporate perspective drawings and visual collages, but they are perhaps the most representative of the effects Barthelme attempts to achieve through their use. Among Barthelme's works, the use of perspective and collage in *Sadness*'s "The Flight of the Pigeons from the Palace" bears the most similarities to the stories analyzed above. Though effects obtained in "Flight of the Pigeons" are sometimes at odds with those in *City Life*, the story is nonetheless equally receptive to a visual reading.

Like the *City Life* stories, "Flight of the Pigeons" makes ample use of perspective drawings, and includes the most perspective drawings of any of Barthelme's short stories. The first image is a study of a palazzo in linear perspective which showcases the same mathematical precision showcased in "Tolstoy Museum"'s first perspective study (*FS*, 120). Instead of undermining the use of perspective and space though collage techniques, Barthelme presents the palazzo study unadorned, and calls attention to its cleanliness by stating that the palazzo was worked on for "ten years," during which time the stones were "scoured" and "the splendid architecture was furbished and painted" (*FS*, 120). These descriptions border on absurdity when the narrators talk of dealing with the "doors and windows," which were clearly never part of the palazzo's construction (*FS*, 120), and this sense of absurdity and disconnection between image and text are furthered when one considers the narrators's labour in restoring a theoretical space. Like the studies of linear perspective in Barthelme's earlier stories, the study of "noble and empty space" of the columned palazzo—Italian for "palace"—is again a sign of Barthelme's engagement with

rationalist discourses. Though Barthelme does not disrupt the first perspective drawing through the incorporation of visual collage elements, the disconnection between the image and the text, much like that between the visual representations in "Tolstoy Museum," disrupts the perspective drawings's claim to representation. This disruption is redoubled through the image on the following page of "the amazing Numbered Man," that is in actuality an anatomical drawing of a human male with his muscles labeled "one to thirty-five" (121). The Numbered Man's act is not detailed, and is likely as simple as him appearing in public as a freak-show-like spectacle, similar to the dissections during the Renaissance that aimed to individuate the parts of the human body. As Johnathan Sawday writes, "the early-modern period sees the emergence of a new image of the human interior, together with a new means of studying that interior" (viii). Through the juxtaposition of the Numbered Man and the palazzo, Barthelme is making this connection between methods of studying interiors of architecture and of studying the human body explicit. Like the discourses discussed in the stories from *City Life*, both the Numbered Man and the linear perspective drawing that acts as his performance area share common symbolic resonance to the rational humanist discourses of the Renaissance.

"Flight of the Pigeons" also employs similar strategies to the stories in *City Life* in sabotaging rationalist discourses. The story's third illustration is a collage of another mathematical perspective study (assumed to be the inside of the palazzo) and a cut-out of a "Sulking Lady" (*FS,* 122). Like the collages of this type previously discussed, the lack of shadows and internal congruity between the components draws attention to the text's flat surface and undermines any potential illusion of depth. This flattening effect is also

demonstrated in the story's third image, which contains a perspective study depicting the segment "called My Father Concerned About His Liver" (*FS*, 127). The "Father" image contains the most drastic demonstration of these collages's lack of coherent lighting, but is most interesting in the way it ties together the three major themes we have seen demonstrated in Barthelme's critique and exploration of rationalist epistemologies. The collage elements refuse any potential perspective the underlying image is attempting to communicate, the father's giant presence is a nod to the demythologization and changing stature seen in "Tolstoy," and the presence of the father's liver as the image's centrepiece further confirms the connection between "Flight of the Pigeons"'s shows and renaissance dissections.

It is important to remember that the dissections the Numbered Man symbolizes took place as public performances (Sawday 56). As Sawday points out, "autopsy" means "eye-witnessing; personal observation" as well as the "inspection of a dead body, so as to ascertain by actual inspection its internal structure" (6). This conflation between the two meanings of autopsy is also on display in the ways Barthelme uses the discourses. Outside of the Numbered Man, the most obvious connection that Barthelme makes between the performances in "Flight of the Pigeons" and renaissance dissections is the participations of "grave robbers," who rob famous graves "before your eyes" (*FS*, 125). Contra to Roe's argument that "the story is a fantasy for a public bored with la vie quotidienne" and depicts "Artists [that are] expected to create 'new wonders' every season" (54) or Stengel's that story "focuses on the contemporary audience forever in search of new sensations and experiences" because it is "Bored by the traditional values

and proven effects of conventional art" (190), the "wonders" the artists are enticed to create are actually just repetitions of renaissance discourses outside of their normal context. While the desire for novelty is reflected in Barthelme's playful approach to traditional forms and discourses, the stories' images depict not a "freak show filled with absurd, unrelated acts," as Stengel argues (90), but instead a show that is still deeply steeped in ideas of autopsy and rationalist pursuits of truth. That is not to say that the story does not critique the traditional artistic values it participates in. Though the Numbered Man was the first to join the show and is perhaps—along with the father—the element most closely connected with the Renaissance, the show's organizers attempt to distance themselves from those origins by auditioning an explosion and a volcano (123, 130). The inclusion of either of these two acts would symbolize not only a move away from traditional aesthetic values, but also a desire to destroy the very structure—physical and ideological—that contains the acts.

One of the major questions "Flight of the Pigeons" asks is whether it is possible to create art that is completely disconnected from the aesthetic and cultural values of the Renaissance without destroying the aesthetic experience altogether. Including an explosion or a volcano would provide entertainment, but also destroy the palazzo in which they are exhibited, thereby making the show unable to continue. Outside of these two new acts, however, the images associated with the show rely heavily on traditional cultural touchstones. The "scenes from domestic life" that are "put in the show" are represented by an engraving of Jael killing Sisera in order to deliver Israel from King Jabin(*FS*, 128), and the "fools" recruited for the show include a Greek philosopher that

resembles Aristotle (*FS*, 126). In both instances Barthelme is again pointing towards the inability of traditional aesthetic and epistemological modes to capture the immediacy of contemporary life. The "scenes from domestic life," for instance, depict a biblical episode that is a common textual reference, but one that would be exceptional if enacted in contemporary American life. Despite this tension between depiction and reality, the shows's organizers still rely on traditional narrative and cultural touchstones to draw an audience. Placing the philosopher among the fools attempts to critique previous epistemological frameworks, but this critique ultimately falls flat insofar as it is still necessary to address these same frameworks—the fools, despite their relative ignorance, are still capable of "performing miracles" (*FS*, 126). Both images only serve to reinforce and demonstrate the ways contemporary life is still dependent on the epistemological and aesthetic structures that modernists have attempted to go beyond.

The story also seems to comment on the cultural and aesthetic ramifications of these perpetuated discourses. Beyond the previous discussion of the story's rootedness in traditional aesthetic values, "Flight of the Pigeons" also questions the patriarchal hierarchy inherited from renaissance constructions of gender and patriarchal rule.[9] One of the acts has an accompanying illustration that includes "situations where men were being evil to women—dominating them and eating their food" (*FS*, 124). Opposed to the story's other acts, which are "recruited" or "hired," the situations of men mistreating women merely exist in the culture. Rather than being intentionally sought out, the men's misogynistic behaviour seems to be included in the show as a matter of course. The narrators simply state that "There were a lot of situations were men were being evil to

women" and that they "put those situations into the show" (*FS*, 124). The accompanying collage consists of two identical men placed on either side of a woman in a nun's habit. The repetition of the male figure suggests that he is either a stand-in for a patriarchal figure or that he, as one individual, is capable of dominating and restraining the female figure. In either case, the collage draws attention to the power and economic disparity between men and women through the amount of space each figure occupies and their relative modes of dress—the male wearing furs and the female a nun's habit. Though the male figures act to restrict and contain the female figure, the female's moral superiority is signaled both through her dress and the image's caption which emphasizes that the men are "being evil." Conversely, the woman's habit could also be seen as a further patriarchal restriction the woman is subjected to under the guise of morality or religion.

This kind of domination also reflects the patriarchal mentalities seen in the discourse surrounding dissection and art during the Renaissance. David Norbrook[10] states that "the vogue in the sixteenth century for the blazon, the detailed enumeration of the parts of the woman's body, can be seen as reflecting the new scientific mentality with its mastering gaze, its passion for mapping the world in order to gain power over it" (Sawday 192). The blazon, specifically, operates on principles similar to the anatomist and the collagist. In both cases the actor engages in the dissection of its subject into separate identifiable parts and presents them decontextualized from their greater whole. As the Numbered Man is only a bizarre freak show insofar as his parts are enumerated, the separate components of a collage, a blazon, or an anatomy only work through the dismantlement and destruction of their subjects.

The connection between the mapping of the human body and the operation of collage also appears to be what Barthelme is struggling with in the last segment of "Brain Damage," where a narrator presents "the map of brain damage" (*CL,* 156). Aesthetically, this raises the question of whether the collagist's response to renaissance rationalism is not merely a restatement of similar decontextualizing principles. The Wapituil from "Brain Damage" operate similarly to an anatomist in their belief that a single representation of something—say, a liver—is capable of standing in for all other examples. In the context of the larger narrative that "Flight of the Pigeons" suggests regarding the perpetuation of outdated cultural discourses, the illustration of men "being evil" acts to signal the dangers of these anatomical discourses in areas other than aesthetics. The third paragraph accompanying the fragment about the narrator and the trapeze artist only hones these dangers. Like the Numbered Man, the trapeze artist is admired for her musculature, with the (temporarily single) narrator noting "Her great muscles at which we gaze through heavy-lidded eyes" (*FS*, 125). At least one of the plurality of voices in the story is complicit in the mastering, female-directed gaze of the renaissance anatomist. The story's concerns about gender inequality and the discourses of dissection and mastery are also furthered by the later mention of "Piles of Discarded Women Rising from the Sea" which results in "The people count[ing] their sins," the juxtaposition between these sins and Jeal's killing of Sisera (*FS*, 128), and also the "Sulking Lady" who refuses the anatomist's gaze and instead insists on "show[ing] her back" to the audience (*FS*, 122). The tension between these images and the text which

connects them is an essential component of understanding the serious underlying themes in an otherwise light-hearted story.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Just like the *City Life* stories, "Flight of the Pigeons" often uses its images to demonstrate an awareness of the ways decontextualization and collage act to dismantle discourses, and also of the ways decontextualization can perpetuate those same discourses through their new, piece-meal representation. As in Barthelme's other stories, the perpetuation of these discourses is not a neutral act. By presenting the rationalist, humanist discourses in the context of a show, Barthelme demonstrates the ways in which contemporary culture and art are inseparable from the renaissance discourses that structure them. Moreover, the recontextualization of the discourse's related symbols through the show offers a novel, estranged look at these elements that allows them to "hold our gaze," be asked questions, and to reveal "the very secret of their substance" (*World*, 69). Like "Brain Damage"'s use of tragic theatrical masks and statues, traditional forms of art are perpetuated while they are shown to be an inadequate response to the contemporary individual experience. As the Prometheus statue collage in the earlier story suggests, the individuals dismissing the discursive constructions of the Renaissance are also unfortunately defined by these same constructions. The addition of the discourses surrounding gender inequality and dissection to the previously mentioned rationalist demythologizations and failures of perspective makes "Flight of the Pigeons" one of Barthelme's most wide-reaching critiques of rationalist discourses. Barthelme's exploration of the cultural baggage associated with artistic creation and presentation demonstrates the necessity—but also the dangers—of moving beyond traditional forms of art. "Flight of the Pigeons" seems to ask whether the "renewed contact with 'reality'" that

the modernists attempted through their collage work is actually a reconnection with reality. Can art as we understand it exist without the damage of the Renaissance era's lasting emphasis on individuality, objectivity, and beauty? To what extent does collage's practice of dismantling art objects rely on similarly damaging renaissance discourses of dissection?

If we are looking for answers to the questions "Flight of the Pigeons" raises through its visual-textual juxtapositions, I do not believe they will be found in Barthelme's stories. The picture stories analyzed here, like most of Barthelme's works,[11] do not provide answers but instead attempt to illustrate the ways outmoded discourses are structurally embedded in the cultural and aesthetic practices of contemporary society. Furthermore, the emphasis the stories place on subjectivity over objectivity, as outlined above and as suggested by the stories all employing a plurality of narrators, implies the impossibility of a single answer. Barthelme uses visual collage to distance and estrange these earlier discourses, and thereby to draw the reader's attention to the fundamental disconnect between the "truths" the discourses presume and the lived experience of the subjective individual. Through anatomical drawings, perspective studies, traditional forms of art, and characters that represent objective truth, Barthelme reengages with rationalist discourse in novel ways. It is difficult to say whether the linear, cold logic of the rationalist textual and aesthetic frameworks can survive Barthelme's use of images and juxtapositions or whether Barthelme's use of collage allows him to evoke and critique these discourses without restating their most damaging elements. It *is* clear, however, through looking at the multifaceted connections between Barthelme's work and

those of the modernist collagists that they share the same goal of sabotaging traditional forms of rationalist aesthetic theories and placing particular emphasis on the subjective, fragmented experience of the world.

Nor is providing answers to these questions the objective of the present study. Rather, I hope to have shown that Barthelme's images do not constitute a "freeplay of signifiers," as Robertson suggests (137), or as the comparison to Burroughs's cut-up technique would imply, but that Barthelme intentionally selects images that pertain to particular discourses and uses the theoretical framework of the modernist collagists to decontextualize and estrange these discourses from their context as a way of investigating their larger cultural effects. The intentionally behind Barthelme's images make them a necessary part of the work to study. Barthelme's particular collage technique makes him unique among authors of his generation and has led poet Guy Davenport to call Barthelme the "Max Ernst of writing" (70). Rather than using stock imagery to create original discourses through his prose, Barthelme creates original images, such as that of the "amazing Numbered Man," using stock discourses. The estrangement of banal discourses and objects is not a practice limited to Barthelme's picture stories, either. While a visual arts approach would face significant hurdles in attempting to interpret Barthelme's dialogue stories, other stories, such as "The Photographs," "The Balloon," and "The Falling Dog," operate as extended ekphrases on their titular objects of study. Even though "The Photographs" is unique among these stories in that it begins with a pictorial representation of the studied object, the story's first paragraph detailing how the photographs were "made" emphasizes their artificiality and positions the photographs as

technological art objects rather than as captured moments of lived reality (*GP,* 153). Unlike the stories studied above, these ekphrastic stories are more interested in investigating art's interpretations than its effects.

Barthelme largely abandoned the use of visual-textual collage after the mid 1970s, but the influence of these early stories in the development of American postmodernism can not be understated. According to Philip Stevick, during the time Barthelme was writing the stories in *City Life*, *Sadness*, and *Guilty Pleasures*, Barthelme was "the most imitated fictionist in the United States" (*Not Knowing*, 199). Understanding how Barthelme incorporates visual-textual collage elements into his stories and how he is influenced by the visual arts will not only bring us closer to the questions and concerns that Barthelme attempts to raise in response to rationalist discourses, but also help us to better understand the shape and trajectory of postmodernist works that Barthelme's stories helped influence. Perhaps more interesting to our purposes, a visual arts engagement with textual works will allow the multifaceted, intermedial modes of American postmodernism to shine as truly as they did in the minds of the avant-garde artists that created and consumed such works in the mid 1960s and 1970s.

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Appendix A: Notes

1. "The Flight of Pigeons From the Palace" was originally collected in 1972's *Sadness*. However, due to restricted access to materials at the time of writing this article, the *Forty Stories* version will be used in its stead. It is noted that the story's layout differs slightly from the one in *Sadness*.
2. In his interview with J. D. O'Hara, for example, Barthelme refers to "Bone Bubbles" from *City Life* as an experiment in "pointillist technique" being used in fiction writing, "the sort of the thing you find in Gertrude Stein and hardly anywhere else" (*Not-Knowing*, 282). He also speaks of his attempts to replicate De Kooning's "messy" artworks in prose (*Not-Knowing*, 284).
3. I am thinking here primarily of McCaffery, Klinkowitz, and their critical followers. McCafferry, for instance, states that Barthelme's writing "can be likened to a 'recycling approach' in which the drek of familiar, banal language is charged with a renewed freshness via the mysterious sea-change of art" (121), and Klinkowitz argues that Barthelme demonstrates how "In a similar way dead language itself can be rejuvenated, clichés turned back into vibrant metaphors by shaking up the terms of tenor and vehicle" (47)
4. For the clearest demonstration of how humanistic principles and Victorian sexual discourses are connected, see the first volume of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and his discussion of the "repressive hypothesis," which he ultimately opposes. Nonetheless, as Foucault discusses, the idea of a repressive Victorian sexual discourse is enticing and intimately tied with pursuits for truth. "What sustains our eagerness to speak

of sex in terms of repression," he states, "is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights" (7).

5. While positivism is certainly one of Barthelme's targets, the broader umbrella of rationalism is safer when discussing a work of "Brain Damage"'s intellectual breadth.
6. While many of Barthelme's stories fit into this category for Stengel, the most obvious examples are "The Balloon" and "The Falling Dog," which are extended studies of their titular objects.
7. Dostoevsky is alleged to have said ""We all came out of Gogol's 'Overcoat," in reference to the story's foundational influence on later Russian literature.
8. Michel Foucault's ideas about the perpetuation of discourse is also useful here. He states that "Commentary averts the chance element of discourse by giving it its due: it gives us the opportunity to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is the text itself that is uttered, and in some ways, finalised" (221). Even commentary that is outright critical of a discourse, the use and engagement with that discourse is a finalization just as much as it is a commentary. Repetition, in other words, is perpetuation.
9. As Pamela Benson's *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman* examines in detail, rationalist ideas of individuality and identity during the Renaissance resulted in further restrictions for women, undoing the advances in gender equality of the Late Middle Ages.

10. Elizabeth Gruber similarly points out that the "investigation" of the body during this period "is a masculine pursuit conducted upon feminized objects" (394).

11. Trachtenberg rightly suggests that "Barthelme's stories seldom provide the feel of a completed statement or answered question" (76).