

Clearing Being:

Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* and the Thought of Martin Heidegger

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Donald Barthelme, one of the foremost writers of postmodern fiction in the mid-to-later twentieth century, was continually engaged in the project of breaking down conventions of all kinds and especially of cutting through the accretion of conventional uses of language. With his 1965 novel *Snow White*, he turned to the ancient genre of the fairy tale to accomplish this goal. While many commentators on the novel claim that Barthelme's treatment of the Snow White tale is merely parodic and negative, I maintain that the novel is actually quite positive in breaking through an objectified and rigid version of human Being in the character of Snow to a much more open horizon of possible Being. To make this point, I draw on central aspects of the thought of Martin Heidegger, who, perhaps more than that of any other philosopher, helped to create the *zeitgeist* through which postmodern American fiction emerges in the last half of the twentieth century. Specifically, Heidegger collapses the subject-object dualism of Descartes into the wholeness of Being itself and conceives for language the role not of simply re-presenting the world to human beings but rather of discovering, or "clearing," Being itself.

Barthelme chose wisely when he turned to fairy tale to explore new approaches to individual development and to the role of the individual in society. Evolving over centuries of oral, and later written, narratives, fairy tales serve as a "prism of the self," reminding us of who we were and who we have the potential to become (Kolbenschlag 3). And they also persist in our cultural memory, "interpret[ing] crises of the human condition" and reflecting the "collective as well as individual experience" (3–4). Reaching back for centuries and spanning continents and cultures, fairy tales have been made famous by the familiar names of Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Anderson, the Brothers Grimm, and, of course, Walt Disney. We know these stories: from the opening line of "Once upon a time" to the closing words of "And they lived happily ever after," virtually everyone in Western society has read or had read to her repeatedly the words of a fairy tale and believes that she knows precisely what to expect from one line to the next. Settled in plot and form, they use language in a formalized and predictable way. Indeed, as Swiss folklore scholar Max Lüthi has noted, "The pleasure of fairy tales resides in their form" (qtd. in Akins).

Moreover, they possess the "spatial and temporal indeterminacy" that allows them to be "a forum for timeless ethical imperatives" (Pizer 336) while offering a simplistic and idealized representation of reality. Yet they are also always rhetorically situated in time and place, often reifying moral and nationalistic norms (336n5). While potentially comforting during any historical

era, such a form may appeal especially to persons in contemporary technological societies who may see it, if only temporarily, as “a way out of the burden of various different sorts of information forming one’s value system” (Kusnir 32) and for whom it may provide “a stability and order” that can replace “chaos and disorientation” (33).

These fairy tale features—including the tradition of moral instruction, the aptness of the characters to symbolic interpretation, the settled and even rigidified status of the tale in traditional Western and contemporary popular culture, and the view of the world as idealized and so falsely accommodating to human beings—offer a highly structured and defined background from which to explore the world of mid-twentieth century America. As such, a number of the first generation of American postmodernists were inspired to adapt existing fairy tale motifs and conventions for their own rhetorical purposes. Along with Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme can be seen as the postmodern writer who most energetically embraced the genre, particularly in his 1965 novel *Snow White*.

The tale of Snow White, with its beautiful young girl, a malicious older woman, and a combination of magic, evil, love, and transformation, has been called “one our most powerful cultural stories” (Tatar, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* 243) and Snow White herself “the best known fairy-tale character in this country” (Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 70). Part of the classification type ATU 709 in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther system (Ashliman), it is widely believed that, in the European tradition, Snow White’s story has its roots in the Italian fabulist Giambattista Basile’s tale, “The Young Slave,” which is part of his 1634 framed collection entitled *Il Pentamerone*. While aspects of other tales—most notably Sleeping Beauty and Beauty and the Beast—can be discerned in this Basile story as well, the familiar Snow White elements are certainly there: a beautiful but bewitched girl, a jealous other, an absent male, and the triumph of justice and love.

A second significant moment in the development of the tale comes several hundred years later in the form of another Italian version, “The Crystal Casket” (*SurLalune Fairy Tales*). Although this time the villain takes the form of Snow White’s teacher and the poison of choice is a hair comb rather than a dress, the storyline focuses more specifically on that which we have come to know as particularly Snow White’s.

While most versions of the story prior to the nineteenth century were written for adults, beginning in 1812, the Grimm Brothers brought their tale of “Little Snow White” first to adults and later to children as well. Their version also solidifies the presence of Snow White’s housemates—who, prior to the Grimms’ re-telling, had appeared in variants as robbers, miners, and even as fairies (Ashliman)—by establishing their gender as male and their physical form as dwarves. While dwarves were a familiar type in Germanic tales, Snow White’s unnamed companions were also quite bawdy. Tidy in the extreme, they had no need of Snow’s domestic services; nonetheless, they urged her to stay, promising to “give you everything you need” (Tatar,

CFT 84). And, of course, Walt Disney established the tale in the American consciousness with his 1937 classic cartoon, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Throughout the twentieth century, as Katalin Horn has described, there are at least four symbolic interpretations of the Snow White character that came to be seen as conventional. First, Snow White represents an initiate going through the “puberty rites” (275) from childhood to adulthood. Second, the story recapitulates “sexual phantasies, sexual problems and Oedipal conflict,” with the dwarves representing the “reduced but at least multiplied” “paternal penis” (275). Third, Bruno Bettelheim also interprets the tale as an Oedipal conflict, one in which the mother figure, the Queen, and the daughter, Snow White, come into inevitable conflict over jealousy of each other’s attractiveness to the father (203–4). And fourth, the story represents the “process of individuation,” in which the stepmother is both a “negative image of the mother” and also a part of Snow White as her “untrue femininity” (275).

Interest in the Snow White tale and the re-affirmation or subverting of convention and standard interpretations of it have certainly not abated since Disney. Rather, to the extent that fairy tales are a form of popular culture and that “popular culture has become a ‘commodified product of late capitalist production’” (Jamison qtd. in Kusnir 32), the tale of Snow White too has morphed into visual images and products that have taken on a life of their own. This fact has only been amplified with the permeation of mass media into all aspects of daily human existence; for example, the popular ABC television show *Once Upon a Time*, which features Snow White as its lead character, garners almost seven million viewers each week (*Once Upon a Fan*). Moreover, it can be argued, as Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola does, that Barthelme’s novel follows popular cultural adaptations of the tale more than the older literary sources (7). And, in that context, L. L. Lee points out that the novel maintains “the sentimentality and falseness” of Walt Disney’s cartoon version precisely to “use” it as the “clichéd subject as well as target for attack” (181).

Indeed, commentary about Barthelme’s use of the fairy tale covers a wide range of views: for example, that the novel “incorporates almost all ... fairy tale elements [as outlined by Max Lüthi]” (Halden 147) and “fulfill[s] in its own special way the basic situation of the fairy tale” (Gilman 30); that the novel “involves fantastications which bring the fairy-tale world into the modern one” (Flowers 33); that the novel is “not quite a fairy tale” (Lee 180) but that Barthelme “force[s] [fairy tale] structures upon the modern world, so that these structures are ‘real’, reflecting our world, and at the same moment ‘unreal’, lies about our world” (181); that the novel “uses “familiar characters and motifs in unfamiliar ways [...] to achieve a parodic effect” (Herrero-Olaizola 7); that the novel “is a negative counterpart to Snow White as a fairy-tale, an antitype [...]. A real negation or a reversion of the original *Märchen*” (Horn 273); and that the novel is an anti-fairy tale because it “suggest[s] the very impossibility” of the “unmediated moral stance” of the fairy tale form (Pizer 336). All of these views share the sense, however, that the traditional tale serves as a starting point for Barthelme to perform his particular parodic magic on the tale, or, as Montresor puts it, that it

provides “a basic narrative framework on which to construct his deconstruction of contemporary America” (75).

Much of the commentary about the novel sees Barthelme as being essentially negative, as seen in Horn’s view that the novel, “inverts the royal and magic surroundings [of the traditional fairy tale] into a desolate everyday scene of modern New York” (273). By undercutting the meaning expressed either literally or symbolically by the events of the traditional fairy tale plot, by creating characters who do not fulfill traditional fairy tale roles, and by structuring the novel in short, discrete units and using a dissociative narratorial voice, Barthelme is thus viewed by many readers as also undercutting meaning, purpose, and structure in human life.

This undercutting is perceived in a number of ways. First, Barthelme is seen as denying the possibility of significant meaning of any kind. For example, the dwarves do not, as in the Disney film, “whistle while they work”; rather, as discussed by Lee, their work is “a series of empty gestures” (183). In fact, Lee claims that the novel as a whole “suggest[s] meaning” but finally “lack[s] content” (186). Pizer says bluntly that the novel “undermines all attempts to find a unified, coherent meaning within its narrative” (331). Second, Barthelme is seen as denying even a modicum of stability or clear purpose in the human psyche. Flowers, for instance, says that the characters engage merely in “psychological introspection” or “know thy neurosis” (35). And Halden finds that the prince-figure, Paul, evidences “a neurotic reluctance to accept a challenge” (148); that each dwarf “suffers individually” from “mental maladies and misunderstandings” (149); and that heroic action is replaced by “the ramblings of disturbed minds” (150). Third, Barthelme is seen to recapitulate this sense of rambling or dissociative thinking in the structure and the narratorial voice of the novel. Structurally, the novel is comprised of short units, usually of only one or two pages in length, that move one to another with little or no transition from the previous unit. Narratorially, most of these units present events or issues through the seeming point of view of one particular, yet unnamed and indistinguishable, character who, by the context, is presumably one of the dwarves and who speaks in either the first person singular, “I,” or the first person plural, “we.” Some other of these units are expressed by a third-person narrator who makes what are seemingly objective pronouncements that are nonetheless based on subjective judgment, such as “IT WAS NOT UNTIL THE 19TH CENTURY THAT RUSSIA PRODUCED A LITERATURE WORTHY OF THE WORLD’S CULTURAL HERITAGE” (Barthelme 149). Moreover, this same narrator can at times be seen as problematical in terms of the accuracy or reasonableness of the events narrated. In fact, Flowers goes so far as to state that “the omniscient narrator cannot be trusted” because of the “absurdity” of his narration of events (38).

At the same time, however, most observers do acknowledge positive aspects of the novel to some degree. Halden, for instance, says that Barthelme “reinvigorates” the fairy tale, making it “real” for a contemporary audience (153). And virtually all commentators concede the comic quality of the novel, although often in qualified, off-key terms and phrases, such as “ironic” (Pizer

337), “an amusingly refurbished fairy-tale novel of the absurd” (“Come Back, Brothers Grimm”), or “Essentially, there’s just one joke to grin at” (Adams BR4). In this more positive direction, a few readers even recognize the novel’s ability as parody to produce enhanced perspective. For example, using Linda Hutcheon’s views on parody—specifically, that parody “teaches us how the text we are reading is constructed” (7)—Herrero-Olaizola allows that the novel “invites a wider reading of Snow White’s story [and] this opens the possibility of a wider discursive spectrum” (7). And Kusnir, also citing Hutcheon on parody, specifically her point that postmodern parody is not “mocking” but “neutral” and has the intent of “showing a difference between [...] past and contemporary representations of reality” (36), grants that the novel “emphasizes the plurality of discourses, worlds, and understandings of reality” (38). Such views that stress openness come closer to what I believe is actually the effect of Barthelme’s *Snow White*, that is, while negating or undercutting conventional or simplistic meaning, purpose, and structure in art or in human life, the novel also promotes the discovery of new meaning through its use of language.

In making this point, I want to focus specifically on selected elements in the thought of Martin Heidegger. More than any other philosopher since Descartes, Heidegger succeeded in offering an alternative to the Cartesian dilemma, the fateful division of Being into the subjective and objective, that forced humans from their natural home on the earth and among others and into their own subjectivity as the only epistemological perspective possible. Descartes’s goal was to locate a foundation for science and ultimately for an understanding about the essence of human being itself. By locating this ground in the intellect—“cogito, ergo sum”—Descartes believed that he avoided the vagaries of the senses and of ordinary experience. However, the price of his locating this ground in the human intellect was to create a new dualism between the mind and the body, between the subjective and the objective, between “the world of intellectual intuition” and “the world of phenomenal experience” (Fell 4–5). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines “the entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being...by the term ‘Dasein’” (27), or “Being-there” (27n1), “there” referring to Being-in-the-world. One of the “existentials,” or ways that Dasein is aware of itself as existing, is state-of-mind, which Heidegger defines as “our mood, our Being-attuned” to the world and to our past in it (172). One of the major characteristics of state-of-mind is “*thrownness*,” our “*facticity*,” the “that it is and has to be” of Dasein (174; emphasis in text), the things that we are physically, socially, and historically over which we have no control. In its thrownness, Dasein is already in the world. In terms of the question of a first cause or a ground to human being, then, Heidegger asserts the “impossibility of the metaphysical quest for a transcendental, nonrelative ground; the quest contradicts itself by being always already grounded in the experience of the absence of a final ground [...] [T]he true and always-prior ground is the clearing, Dasein’s own Being-in-its-world” (Fell 58). In other words, the “primordially given ‘I’ or self is always and already part of the world; and indeed, a

world in which other persons are likewise given [...] [T]he highly abstract and purely rational ‘ego’ of the Cartesian metaphysics is a fiction” (Gelven 70–71).

The connection of Heidegger’s thought, then, to Barthelme’s novel is profound. For the major issue explored in *Snow White* is precisely the relationship in art and language and in human life of the subjective to the objective. First, the most obvious case of this issue is the objectification of the character of Snow White herself. In the fairy tale, the character is objectified through the color white as a symbol of innocence, virginity, and purity, but also, as Tatar points out, through the identification of the medium of snow with coldness and remoteness (*The Annotated Brothers Grimm* 240). In addition, when she is in the coffin, the anesthetized Snow White combines these symbolic aspects of purity and remoteness with passivity and etherealness. Furthermore, as discussed, interpretatively, Snow White has been seen as symbolic of social/sexual rites of passage, the maturation/individuation process, and various psychological states, in particular, versions of the Oedipal drama. In Barthelme’s novel, this objectification goes even further. As Jeffrey Nealon has discussed, the novel enacts “a critique based on the violence of the masculinist appropriative gaze that masquerades as mere appreciation” (128). From the very first page of the novel, on which her beauty marks are described and displayed graphically as black bullets vertically aligned on the page, Snow White is portrayed by the ostensibly male narratorial voice as a sexual object. As shown by the focus on these beauty marks, the character of Snow White is seen as “nothing more than a collection of fetishized zones” (129). When Dan addresses the other dwarves about their mutual concern about Snow White’s threatened discontent with their unusual sexual arrangement, he takes this objectification to a comically logical, if insultingly crass and sexist, extreme:

what do we apprehend when we apprehend Snow White? [...] first, two three-quarter scale breasts floating toward us wrapped, typically, in a red towel. Or, [...] we apprehend a beautiful snow-white arse floating away from us wrapped in a red towel. [...] what, in these two quite distinct apprehensions, is the constant?... Why, quite simply, the red towel. [...] we can easily dispense with [...] Snow White, and cleave instead to the towel. (Barthelme 106–07)

Similarly, Paul, the prince-figure, has an objectifying reaction to Snow White as he stares through her window looking “at her bare breasts” (154) like, in his own term, a “voyeur” (155): “God Almighty [...]. She is just like one of those dancers one sees from time to time on Bourbon Street in New Orleans” (154), that is, an exotic dancer. In going beyond Cartesian dualism, Heidegger warns against this tendency to see human beings—others and even the bodily aspects of the self—in objective terms. In fact, it would be reasonable to say that the thrust of Heidegger’s project in *Being and Time* may be characterized as his attempt to define and separate the ontological, that

which has to do with being itself, from the ontic, that which has to do with beings as entities. As Gelven explains, “the greatest barrier in [making explicit our own existence] [...] is the natural tendency of mind [...] to render the self as an object. For the question we are asking is a question of the process or activity of existing, not *what* it is that exists. [...] not what kind of thing a being is, but what it means to be at all” (23–24; emphasis in text).

Snow White clearly understands that there is a particular role that she is expected to play, and that this role is objectified and sexist. To a degree, she even attempts to fulfill this role: “What does she hope for? ‘Someday my prince will come.’ By this Snow White means that she lives her own being as incomplete, pending the arrival of one who will ‘complete’ her” (Barthelme 76). Yet within this seeming acceptance of her role, she has stirrings of restlessness: “...it is terrific to be anticipating a prince [...] but it is still waiting, and waiting as a mode of existence is [...] a darksome mode. I would rather be doing a hundred other things” (83). This restlessness becomes doubt: “Is there a Paul, or have I only projected him in the shape of my longing, boredom, ennui and pain?” (108). Snow White goes on to respond to her situation with “anger at male domination of the physical world” (137) and with a sense that the fairy tale world has changed and can no longer “supply the correct ending to the story” (138). Finally, she confronts the issue of objectification head on. After disrobing and examining herself candidly, “tak[ing] stock” and finding, in sexist terms, “nothing but praise for this delicious assortment” (150), she expresses, in explicitly Cartesian terms, her awareness too of the larger difficulty with such objectification: “The curious physicality of my existence here on Earth is related to both parts of the mind-body problem, the mind part and the body part” (150). She even ponders a kind of pasting over of this dualism: “Although I secretly know that my body *is* my mind. The way it acts sometimes, spontaneously and scandalously hurling itself into the arms of bad situations, with never a care for who is watching or real values” (150–151). What she describes is actually still a priority of body and instinct over mind in the form of physical desire, rather than a Heideggerian authenticity. The Self, Heidegger says, “is [...] for the most part inauthentic, the they-self” (225). The “they-self” is an aspect of the existential of fallenness, which Heidegger defines as “an absorption of Being-with-one-another,” or “Being-lost in the publicness of the ‘they’” (220). In and of itself, fallenness into the world is not a negative quality; it is simply one mode of being. But to the degree that it becomes, in Heidegger’s term, “a constant temptation” (221) to Dasein to turn away from its own selfhood, fallenness is a potential problem for personal identity. Fallenness is in its basic aspect what Heidegger terms “inauthentic.” Inauthenticity also is not a categorically negative quality, but rather simply a part of Being in the world. Heidegger contrasts the inauthentic Self to “the *authentic Self*—that is, [...] the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way” (167; emphasis in text). One comes to authenticity through the existential of understanding, which Heidegger defines as “the phenomenological basis for seeing [possibility] as a disclosive potentiality-for-Being” (183). In these terms, Snow White is still struggling with the fallenness of following a role assigned to

her by society or the “they-self” and has not reached the point of making an authentic choice of her own future. However, the discontent, and, more specifically, the “dread” that precipitates the self’s recognition of possibility is stirring in Snow White. “Dread” is the term that Heidegger uses to describe that state of mind that makes us “aware of what *is* [...] We are thrown in a world. Dread brings us face to face with this thrownness” (Gelven 118; emphasis in text). For Heidegger, dread can be a catalyst for an individual to confront his own future cessation and therefore his ability to make choices that affect that future, that is, to be authentic. At the start of the final section, Part Three, of the novel, Snow White faces dread: “It is true that there is a future in which I shall inevitably perish” (Barthelme 142). As part of this confrontation, she reaches a new understanding of her lot, “[...] what is, is insufficient,” and begins to make choices, “From now on I deny myself to them” (141). While Snow White cannot be said to have become fully authentic because she does not take her fate completely into her own hands, she can be said to reject the previously inauthentic sexist, objectified role into which she has been cast as part of her thrownness—she originates, after all, as a fairy tale character—and thus to have begun the process of authentic being, a process which she does not quite reach within the confines of the novel and its fairy tale context but does nevertheless *aspire* to, as reflected at the end of the novel with her “apotheosis” or “ris[ing] into the sky” (187).

The second major form of objectification in the novel involves language itself. Snow White reacts to her condition of discontent through confusion about her own role but also, significantly, through the role of language in creating reality, as when she laments, “OH I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!” (12). These words that she “always hear[s]” are largely stagnant and unsatisfying in terms of her expectations not only as a conventional female fairy tale character, but also as an unconventional 1960’s American female housekeeper and shower room companion of seven men. The common factor in her dissatisfaction would seem to be, then, the sexism of both situations. And Snow White relates this sexism specifically to the function of language in her short tirade about the male power expressed in the naming of, appropriately, physical objects: “Oh if I could just get my hands on the man who dubbed those electrical connections male and female [...]. And if I could just get my hands on the man who called that piece of pipe a nipple” (137). Essentially, her point and hope are that old words produced the sexist circumstances that she finds unacceptable and that new words can change those circumstances. That she is searching for such words is implied in her own activity of writing a poem, that is, of finding, creating her own words to give her life a different orientation. Cristina Bacchilega has examined this point, following Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s particularly feminist interpretation of the mirror in the original fairy tale as embodying the male voice and its controlling power: “Confronted with the failure of the script she has been handed, Snow White self-consciously decides to write her own and [...] challenges the framing power of the mirror” (14).

Language, however, looms much larger in the novel than its effect on a single character. The status of language affects the entire society, as seen in Dan's famous disquisition on the "trash phenomenon" and its relation to language. Since the "endless" and "sludge qualities" of "ordinary language" have, like the "per-capita production of trash in this country," continued to escalate substantially and will "soon" achieve "a point where it's 100 percent." Given that fact, a society can be "blanketed" with and linguistically incapacitated by this "sludgy" language or it can "learn how to 'dig it'" (Barthelme 102–103), that is, to use it in new and positive modes. A number of commentators focus on this image of "the trash phenomenon" and this point about the power of language used aesthetically. Lee, for example, says that "Words can cover over reality, that is, create an actuality that is false, but they can also create and report the 'real' which breaks down isolation—this is the act of the artist" (183). Richard Gilman, one of the first to comment on the novel in a perceptive early review, declares that in *Snow White* "literature itself is made to expose the bankruptcy of its traditional, normative procedures, so that new literature might be formed on dead ground" (32). And Larry McCaffery famously observed that Barthelme's "process [...] 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).

In terms of my discussion, though, I want to bring in Heidegger's concept of language to explain how Barthelme's approach can be seen to be even greater than the "reporting" of the real, the exposure of the bankruptcy of old and the creation of new literature, or the "renewal" of banal language that these commentators claim. For, in fact, Barthelme's language does nothing less than actually expand being itself. That is, essentially, Barthelme's approach to language recapitulates Heidegger's emphasis on the ontological power of language. Specifically, in "On the Essence of Truth," Heidegger discusses the traditional Western concept of truth as the correspondence of, first, a statement that is made, or presented, in relation to, second, the thing about which the statement is made. This thing, then, stands apart as an object in what Heidegger calls "a field of opposedness" that "takes place within an open region" (121). Heidegger says further that whatever is in this "open region" is "not first created by the presenting but rather is only entered into and taken over as a domain of relatedness" (121). This relationship of human beings to other beings and objects, which Heidegger terms the "openness of comportment" (122), then, can be seen as the more elemental basis for truth than propositional statement, for "only through [the openness of comportment] can what is opened up [...] become the standard for the presentative correspondence" (122). Heidegger then connects truth from this openness to freedom and then to the Greek word *aletheia*, or "unconcealment" (125), to arrive at the following definition: "'Truth' is not a feature of correct propositions that are asserted of an 'object' by a human 'subject' and then are 'valid' [...]; rather, truth is disclosure of beings through which an openness essentially unfolds" (127). This unfolding, as Heidegger states in "The Origin of the Work of Art," takes place in and through language: "Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to

word and to appearance” (198). And in his famous depiction in “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger says that “Thinking accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man [...] solely as something handed over to it from Being. Such offering consists in the fact that in thinking Being comes to language. Language is the house of being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home” (217). Thus, it is through language that human beings “clear [...] Being itself” (230). It is in this sense, then, that Alan Wilde, perhaps the most perceptive of postmodern critics, includes Barthelme in his category of “generative ironists,” whose use of language performs “broadly creative functions” (157).

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