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# Fatigue, Indolence And The *There Is*, Or, The Temporal Logic Of Collage In Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*

Zuzanna Ładyga

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## Abstract

The essay examines Donald Barthelme's *Snow White's* from the perspective of the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Drawing on a reciprocity between Barthelme's collage principle and Levinas's notion of the *there is*, the paper applies the concept in the analysis of *Snow White's* referential and affect construction strategies. The novel is proven to textualize the ethical dimension of Barthelme's referential uses of language, while the figure of Snow White is

demonstrated to be the trope of the referentiality-performativity conflict that lies at the core of a literary collage. The tension between referentiality and performativity is further developed in Barthelme's novel via the figures of Bill and Paul, who, in the context of Levinas's concepts of *fatigue* and *indolence* respectively, are interpreted as the tropological markers of the temporal mechanism of *Snow White's* collage. Accordingly, Bill's constant weariness is interpreted as a trope of referentiality, and Paul's inertia as narrating the mechanism of language performatives. Since the suspension between the two tropes propels the text's constant self-questioning, a process mirroring Levinas's idea of how ethical subjectivity hypostatically emerges in language as a questioning of its ontological stability, it is argued that the mechanism of subject construction strategy in *Snow White* follows a similar logic.

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## Index terms

### Keywords :

[affect](#), [affectivity \(ethical\)](#), [collage](#), [ethical there is](#), [fatigue](#), [hypostasis \(ethical\)](#), [indolence](#), [performativity \(temporal structure of\)](#), [political](#), [referentiality \(temporal structure of\)](#), [resistance](#), [subjectivity](#)

### Cited Names :

[Donald Barthelme](#), [Gilles Deleuze](#), [Martin Heidegger](#), [Jerome Klinkowitz](#), [Emmanuel Levinas](#), [Paul Maltby](#), [Larry McCaffery](#), [Richard Ohmann](#), [Harold Rosenberg](#)

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## Outline

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## Full text

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1 "I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear," says Snow White in the opening pages of Barthelme's first novel (*Snow White* 6). One of the words she has every right to be tired of is "collage," the critics'

all-time favorite among labels for Barthelme's literary method. Once legitimized by Barthelme himself in his famous proclamation that collage is the central principle of art in the twentieth century, the term began a long career of the most precise and self-explanatory critical shortcut to D. B.'s fiction. In the criticism of the 1970s and 1980s collage is mostly associated with fragmentation and self-referentiality. In the ideological criticism of the 1990s, the fragmentation becomes "cultural" and "political" rather than linguistic, but still, nobody seems to care about the intricate mechanism of referentiality in Barthelme's collage method or about its complex affective dynamics. That the referential and affective dimension of collage is deeply problematic becomes clear if one returns to Barthelme's first presentation of his collage principle, which dates back to an epistolary interview with Jerome Klinkowitz between the fall of 1971 and the summer of 1972. In the interview, when Klinkowitz asks Barthelme to expand on the rule, the latter dismisses the possibility that he, in a typically post-*modernist* fashion, would think of collage as an abstract aesthetic category. That would probably be "wrong or too general" (Roe 98). Instead, Barthelme explains:

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New York City is or can be regarded as a collage, as opposed to, say, a tribal village in which all of the huts (or yurts, or whatever) are the same hut duplicated. The point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality. This new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and may be also much else. It is an *itself*, if it's successful: Harold Rosenberg's "anxious object," which does not know whether it's a work of art or a pile of junk. (Maybe I should have said that anxiety is the central principle of all art in the etc., etc.?). (Roe 98)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Collage is, therefore, not just a pile of "verbal trash" (Dickstein 62), an "overtly metafictional" collection of fragments (McCaffery 153), but an instance of referential bidirectionality, of spatio-temporal confusion in which a new reality is being created as the collage's future, but this new reality simultaneously "comments on," i.e. explains and responds to another reality that is its past. What Barthelme suggests is that the referential potential of such illocutionary and perlocutionary acts as collage is governed by a specific temporal logic. And as Richard Ohmann, one of the most insightful students of performativity explains, this temporal logic is the reverse of the immediately perceived. Although mimetic effect seems to emulate the work of memory in its constant reference back to the memory's past in the real event, the actual time vector of recollection is opposite; it is a future-oriented, reality-building performative that anachronously constructs the memory it refers to. The two-directionness also works the other way round; the synchrony and creative power of perlocutionary acts are an illusion because their causative potential relies on their anachronous iterability.

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3 But this is only a part of Barthelme's definition. For it is one thing to say that collage works due to the spatio-temporal confusion within the referential faculty of language, and quite another to liken this spatio-temporal confusion to anxiety.<sup>2</sup> At this point of his definition, Barthelme is not simply parroting Rosenberg, or humorously evoking the Heideggerian *Angst*. Rather, he presents anxiety as an affective condition of oscillation between the disorderly state of being (junk, in a pile) and the orderly state of being (a piece of art, as a work), that is, as a condition from beyond the limits of epistemological inquiry (the anxious object "does not know"). It is, in short, an anxiety caused by an overabundance of reality rather than by its instability or uncertain ontological status.

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4 What are the poetic consequences of this definition? How does the vision of anxiety as the motor of referentiality influence Barthelme's literary subjects? One way of pursuing the implications of the collage principle is prompted by a philosophical concept of the *there is* authored by the ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, a concept which denotes the experience of a terror caused not by the lack of being/reality but by its excess and inescapability. According to Levinas, this inescapable, and utterly impersonal, horrific overabundance of being provides an environment for subjective development, i.e. for the traumatic encounter with the Other in exposure to his/her presence, even though it never partakes of the process and in fact must be left behind in its course, if the subject is to emerge at all. Levinas calls the experience "the first emergence of the self," of being which in its eruption starts "the construction of a subject, who, from out of the neuter, will affirm and posit himself" (Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?* 212). Crucially, by saying that the self emerges out of the *there is* in an attempt to escape the horror of its abundant impersonality, the affect that Levinas situates at the basis of the subject's affective development is none other than anxiety, which Barthelme associates with the performance of collage,<sup>3</sup> anxiety over the terrifying presence of "beings and things that collapse into their 'materiality'" (*Existence and Existents* 54).<sup>4</sup> Because Levinas's notion of the *there is* narrates the subjective process as a sequence of anxiety-driven eruptions and collapses of realist abundance into the materiality of *there is*, it might serve as a useful lens for discussing the way in which "anxious" elements of Barthelme's collage interchangeably establish and collapse the referential scaffolding of his texts' literary subjectivities.

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5 What follows is therefore an attempt to pursue the conceptual correspondence between collage and the *there is* and to examine Donald Barthelme's first and most collage-like novel, *Snow White*, from the perspective of Levinas's ethical philosophy. For if we investigate the phenomenological implications of Barthelme's definition of collage, then clearly there is much more to say about

*Snow White*'s referential method and the subjectivity constructed by its discourses than the book's commentators have been willing to acknowledge. Levinas, a thinker famous for his relentless preoccupation with how the real impinges on an essentially language-based subjectivity seems to be a good ally in a search for those "different words" that *Snow White* wishes for so much.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. *Snow White's Collage as the There Is*

6 Let me begin with a hypothesis that the temporal and affective structure of the *there is* reflects the dynamics of the collage method of constructing literary subjectivity in Barthelme's first novel. This reciprocity operates on all narrative levels, so that whether we focus on the book's characterization, its intertextual allusions, its autobiographical aspect, or its rapport with the reader, *Snow White's* subjectivity appears to replicate the pulsating rhythm of ontological and epistemological withdrawals and escapes that Levinas associates with the experience of anxiety towards the rustling *there is*. For Levinas, the temporality of the experience of *there is* is complicated by its componential events of *fatigue* and *indolence*, which involve the same temporal movement of anticipation and refusal as does the affect of anxiety, and which just like the anxiety from Barthelme's definition of collage have an impossible-to-pinpoint relation to the present. The murmuring diachrony of the *there is* gives way to existents only through a directionless "time-lag," occasioned by the hypostasis of fatigue and indolence, a temporal gap that is inevitable just as it is unbearable (*EE* 25). Accordingly, the time-lag that characterizes the experience of the *there is* is responsible for the jerky and "disturbing" narrative line of *Snow White* as well as for its method of referential and performative uses of language.

7 Barthelme's poetics emulates the rhythm of the *there is*, its withdrawals and hypostases, so as to organize the ethical time structure of the novel's collage subject construct. And it does so vigorously already on the first page which features the first of the novel's emphatic withdrawals:

She is a tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots: one above the breast, one above the belly, one above the knee, one above the ankle, one above the buttocks, one on the back of the neck. All of these are on the left side, more or less in a row, as you go up and down:

The hair is black as ebony, the skin white as snow. (SW3)

8 This perfect illustration of the idea of de-centering presents Snow White as a line of beauty spots on an invisible map of fragmented body parts. At first glance, both the etymology of the beauty spot (a landmark) and the layout of the novel's first page foreground the spatial character of Snow White's identity. Barthelme's parody of the blazon form and of the traditional trope of a woman as an unknown, fetishization-prone landscape which in turn immediately discloses *Snow White's* explicit commentary on itself as a printed text whose physical form constitutes its entire content and is just about all the reader can be certain of.

9 Yet, at the second glance, a glance that resists the automatism of reading practices usually applied to postmodern fiction, one notes that despite the whiteness of her body parts, Snow White is a "dark beauty," as if the darkness of her beauty spots were the only available things to define her. And furthermore, that although the spots are said to be located on the three-dimensional map of a body, they form a landscape that only has two dimensions. Both color and two-dimensionality bring the description of Snow White close to what Levinas defines as the "first ontological experience" the *there is* (*Is it Righteous to Be?* 212). She is a nocturnal discursive landscape which may host the ethical subjectivity, for the description offers the novel's first commentary on its yet undifferentiated stage and the yet undifferentiated status of its characters, all of whom seem immersed in the anonymity of the impersonal space of the *there is* of the novel's discourse.

10 The notion of the limitless topography of the *there is* justifies Snow White's being a line of bullets whose ordering counters the horizontal organization of other printed symbols on the page. As Levinas explains, "the points of nocturnal space [of the *there is*] do not refer to each other as in illuminated space" (*EE* 53). Instead, "there is no perspective, they are not situated. There is a swarming of points" (*EE* 53). Read in the context of Levinas's words, Barthelme's description of Snow White introduces her not as a character of any kind but as the nocturnal landscape of the novel's pre-subjective discursive abundance in which a consciousness of being, and with it, the possibility of the subject, has not yet emerged.

11 That such an interpretative conclusion with regard to Snow White is actually quite feasible finds support in Barthelme's 1974 stage adaptation of *Snow White*, in which the book's opening description of vertically distributed bullet-marks is substituted with the image of Snow White's black hair hanging from the window, being "immensely long, falling almost all the way to the stage" (*Snow White* [1974])

299). Just like the bullets in the printed text, the oppressive abundance of the hair distorts the perspective of the otherwise realist surroundings of the following events. Of special relevance for the role of Snow White in Barthelme's novel is Levinas's word "swarming," whose implication of dense plurality will frequently resonate on the level of plot in the image of the dwarves' communal cohabitation and the image of numberless waves of women street protesters. Similarly, it will resound on the level of narrative organization in the density of the "we" narrative position which Barthelme calls "floating" ("Pacifica Radio Interview" 252), as well as in the profusion and indistinguishability of the book's numerous individual narrators. Finally, the swarming of points on the first page anticipates the revolutionary subversiveness of both the characters and the narrative structure as such, because via the connection to collectivity the image brings to the fore the social aspect of the *there is* and the intimate relation between the impersonal space-time of the latter and the genealogy of collective freedom and justice. Most importantly, however, it accentuates the position of Snow White as an undifferentiated, two-dimensional, self-sufficient pre-subjectivity.

12 So adequately thematized by Barthelme in Snow White's description, the effacement of perspective is soon revealed to be the key architectural principle of the novel's universe and the first evidence for the non-ontological structure of its subjectivity. Even the purely visual elements such as the image of feminist protesters, viewed through the window as flat, topographic symbols ("the plum colored head the center of the target, the wavy navy skirt the bold circumference. The white or black legs flopping out in front" (SW 8)), or the image of typewriter girls hiding Olivettis under their skirts take their oneiric and/or absurd quality from a reductive compression of viewpoints announced at the novel's onset, in the two-dimensional portrait of Snow White. Of course, such compressions of visual perspectives as the above are only the most obvious ones; however, the conflation of different levels of reference are much more complex. Adamant in their thematic focus on Barthelme's referential technique, these are, for example: the episode of Snow White's writing poetry by means of rearranging the apartment (SW 37), the scene of her watering the blooming flowers of the Maoist revolution (SW 16), or the event of Hogo hiding his plan to get rid of Paul in the "humidor" to keep it "fresh and exciting" (SW 153).

13 Although a canonical postmodern reading would tend to classify these perspective-less images as typical instances of "playing" with language and its dysfunctional uses (McCaffery 160; 162), a reading inspired by Levinas's conception of the perspective-less *there is* prompts another explanation. In its light, the removal of perspective is not a sign of dysfunction. Instead, it makes perfect sense as regards the sustention of the basis for the construction of an ethical literary subjectivity, because Barthelme's radical rejection of perspective, this Renaissance-born consolidator of totalizing ontological models of the subject, indicates that the subjectivity of *Snow White* aims to emerge otherwise, and that its construction will focus on avoiding the totalizing conceptualizations.

14 It is in this context that we should perhaps interpret the fact that the directory of Snow White's body parts listed in the opening description does not include her head. Barthelme's gesture of centering the narrative around a figure who lacks the center of cognitive powers is to lay bare the absence of any consciousness and self-reflexivity, and consequently, to question the possibility of conceiving literary subjects in purely ontological or epistemological terms. The absence of consciousness in the description of Snow White's all-encompassing presence confirms our initial speculations about Snow White's role in the book; representing the dimensionless *there is*, her discursive presence in the novel serves to prepare the ground for the emergence of affective non-indifference and finally, the subjectivity. Barthelme himself confirms this view in one of his interview comments: "I think it would be wrong to try and locate, say, the character of Snow White. She is a pretext for being able to write, to use certain kinds of language" ("Pacifica Radio Interview" 255). His comment displays remarkable proximity to the definition of the impersonal *there is*, because it similarly insists on the total absence of any traces of personhood in his literary "pretext." In other words, the language construct known as Snow White turns out to be sublimely compatible with the structure of the *there is*.

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15 Speaking of anonymity and impersonality of the *there is* in the context of Barthelme's eponymous character, it is impossible not to mention the nameless third person narrator of the initial description. Especially since, for Levinas, the linguistic event of the third person in general is one of the best empirical illustrations for the anonymity of the *there is*, which is not to be understood as uncertain authorship but as no authorship (*EE* 52). What is interesting about this narrator is that his intrusive, voyeuristic gaze at Snow White's physicality clashes with the dispassionate, mechanical tone of his listing of her body parts. From the perspective of radical ethics, this clash embodies the paradox of what Levinas calls the "impersonal vigilance" of the *there is*, a simultaneous participation and immersion in, as well as a detachment from, the *there is* (*EE* 55). In the plot of Barthelme's novel the paradox is exhibited in the attitude towards Snow White that prevails among the dwarves. On the one hand, they wish for a life without her, but on the other, they cannot imagine that sort of existence. For example, when Snow White complains that her "uninteresting" life has been the result of insufficient imagination, the dwarves understand her complaint as a "powerful statement of [their] essential mutuality, which can never be sundered or thorn, or broken apart, dissipated, diluted, corrupted, or finally severed, not even by art in its manifold and dreadful guises" (*SW* 59). Because this passage comes from the dwarves' conversation with Snow White conducted at the time when she is struggling creatively with her "dirty great poem," its manner of elaborating the idea of a Levinasian rapport-without-egress seems to mark the moment when the novel's subjectivity is unsuccessfully struggling for the emergence out of the *there is*. Just like Snow White's imagination, the language of the novel is at the same time barren but "stirring," vigilantly withdrawn but ready to participate in the

pre-subjective preparation, which is nevertheless still delayed. The preparatory character of the poem episode is confirmed by Snow White's choice of its first words "bandaged and wounded... Run together" —which she claims to be a metaphor for the self's defensive reaction towards the Other (SW 59). Snow White's explanation of the metaphor, the reversed chronology of bandaging and wounding, and finally, the fact that the expression "bandaged and wounded" does not actually run together, testifies to the novel's inability to transgress the immobilizing and totalizing regime of its language and allow for any, most notably the reader's, otherness to participate in the radicalization of the book's semantic structures for the purpose of the emergence of the text's counter-solipsistic subjectivity, in the form of the Saying.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, counter to those readings of Snow White which emphasize her rebelliousness and place her at the pantheon of the most radically feminist literary characters, we might conclude that despite all the efforts at creative playing with the discourse of the novel, she is a much more domesticated figure and a much less subversive narrative element than she at first appears. This is perhaps why John Leland talks about *Snow White* in terms of "ontological despair" (806), an implosive impasse that transpires in a monotonous, almost "mechanical" manner of poetic randomization and fragmentation occasioned by Snow White's appearance in the novel (Dickstein 62).

16 Using ethical terminology, one might carry this argument further and think of Snow White as a textual construct whose experimental, subversive potential remains constrained by the mechanic monotony of the Said. Although her presence in Barthelme's novel as the epitome of the pre-subjective "murmur of discourse" indicates that she is also the embodiment of the subjectivity-founding urge to escape this murmur, the fact that her rebelliousness is predictable, her experiments never truly experimental, and thus never implosive with regard to the ontological structure of the book's subjectivity, suggests rather that Snow White represents the discursive barrier to the emergence of the ethical subjectivity. This is visible both on the level of plot and in the type of linguistic experimentation that characterizes Snow White's utterances.

17 As far as *Snow White's* plot is concerned, the title character appears, on the one hand, to be the symbol of rebelliousness against the conventions of the dwarves' world she does not "like" (SW 68) and from which she wants to escape (SW 102) since she feels there as if she were "in a wrong time" (SW 131). Her disgust with the surrounding reality, because "what is, is insufficient" (SW 135) states the ethical desire for something more than the *there is*. On the other hand, however, Snow White's tendency to search for ways of rebelling in the already existing and standardized body of literature from Sartre to Mao indicates that her revolutionary potential, her creative and ethical capacity is in fact quite limited.

18 The superficiality of Snow White's subversiveness is particularly apparent in the attempts at linguistic experimentation that accompany her appearance in the novel. For example, even though she is the one to interrupt the narrative stability

by speaking in a mixture of stream of consciousness and cut-ups, these are frequently the most comprehensible and the least surprising and undecipherable elements of the story. Consider a sample sequence of the first cut-up, whose bits cohere so easily that the effect of any radical writerly-ness their fragmented form initially promised is totally lost:

Those men hulking hulk in closets and outside gestures eventuating  
against a white screen difficulties intelligence I only wanted one plain  
hero of incredible size and soft, flexible manners parts thought  
disassembling limb add up the thumbprints on my shoulders Seven is  
too moves too much and is absent partly different levels of calculated  
emotional release calculated paroxysms... Edward never extra density  
of the blanched product rolling tongue child straight ahead broken  
exterior facing natural gas To experience a definition placed neatly  
where you can't reach it and higher up Daytime experiences cholera  
film bliss. (SW31)

19 Read from the perspective of the passage in which Snow White says that not to find real men “would be a disappointment” because she would have to satisfy herself “with the subtle falsity of color films of unhappy love affairs, made in France, with a Mozart score” (42), this apparently experimental fragment reveals itself to be a dispassionate, realistic description of Snow White’s stereotyped perception of her lover’s hulking and paroxysmal body movements during sexual intercourse. The fragment owes its mimetic precision to the random jumps of her thought from past colorful wishes (“I wanted a hero”) to a series of film poses, as if taken from French melodramas, as well as to musically rhythmical jerks of Snow White’s perspective on her lover’s body from “disassembling” to “straight ahead,” from the view of the “limb” to “parts of faces” to “tongue.” As the most experimental of poetic techniques creates the opposite effect to the expected, the equation between the category of postmodern subject and the notion of syntactic disassemblage (so often emphasized in metafictional criticism) loses its validity. In this fragment and other similar ones, there is no implosion of meaning and no questioning of the ontological dimension of the book’s subject construction. Instead, the subjective process is paralyzed by the endless profusion of its possible references. Although the desire for an emergence out of this linguistic abundance is somehow there in the effort to experiment, no actual utterance betrays traces of the an-archic ethical encounter with alterity, i.e. no actual utterance mobilizes an unleashing of semantic and tonal vertigoes that would effectuate the shattering of the conventions of the Said.

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20 A similar regularity is observable in *Snow White*’s capitalized insertions. Given that the ethical subjectivity occurs as a rupture of language, one might rush to classify these “narrative breakers” as the dialogically disruptive, ideal candidates for the role of the subjectivity-producing Sayings. Yet, the mechanical

interruptiveness of the insertions as regards narrative cohesion does not yet make them ethically radical. Sometimes, they echo Snow White's memories, "WHAT SNOW WHITE REMEMBERS: THE HUNTSMAN/THE FOREST/THE STEAMING KNIFE" (SW 39), or her fears, "IN THE AREA OF FEARS SHE FEARS MIRRORS/APPLES/POISONED COMBS (SW 17). Sometimes, like real bits of a visual collage, they reproduce the newspaper headlines such as "ROME. ANOTHER DEFEAT...THE ITALIAN POSTAL SERVICE ABIDES NO RINGERS IN ITS RANKS" (SW 115). And sometimes, they parrot academic discourse, especially the bizarrely referential collocations of literary criticism, for example, "THE SECOND GENERATION OF ENGLISH ROMANTICS INHERITED THE PROBLEMS OF THE FIRST" (SW 24), or "PUSHKIN DISPLAYED VERBAL FACILITY...AS A STYLIST DOSTOYEVSKI HAD MANY SHORTCOMINGS" (SW 143). Yet, whatever they refer to, and however intrusive they appear, the insertions never manage to unsettle the ontological or epistemological stability of the Barthelme text. In fact, they strengthen it. The allusion to the Romantics quoted above coincides with and explains Paul's speech about his identity problems and Henry's confession of his personal weaknesses. The coincidence creates the effect of a natural continuity between the Romantic escape and the sense of being socially besieged, as compared with Paul's penchant for the retractive poetics of palinodes, and Henry's definition of his misery as the "*Inmitten*-ness of the *Lumpwelt*" (SW 29). Provided that we understand subjectivity in Levinasian terms as a non-totalizable, anti-ontological structure of substitution-for-the-Other, the "narrative breakers" do not seem interpretable as ruptures of the text's Said because their violation of literary conventions is only illusive. However, as in the case of Snow White's fragmented visions, they do mark the moments of struggle with/within the ontological *there is*.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. From the *There Is* To The Hypostatic Event of Subjectivity

<sup>21</sup>The identity of Snow White's observer whose words begin the novel does not remain undisclosed for too long. It is soon revealed by the floating "we" narrator of the second segment announcing: "Bill is tired of Snow White" (SW 4). The revelation not only anachronously identifies Bill, the dwarves' leader, as the impersonally attentive voyeur, but also dispels any doubt as to the kind of affective motivation Bill might have had for his peeping. His attitude towards Snow White is that of total weariness. What is more, his tiredness, we are told, is coupled with a refusal to be touched. Faced with such a condition of their leader, the dwarves resort to philosophical speculations as to whether Bill's rejection of physical contact is a symptom of withdrawal understood in a Heideggerian manner as "a mode of dealing with anxiety," or as a sign of withdrawal understood in the vein of Merleau-Ponty's idea of "a physical manifestation of a metaphysical condition that is not anxiety" (SW 4).

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22 Of course, at this point one might focus the interpretation on the political aspect of Barthelme's poetics, from whose perspective Bill's dissidence is nothing more than an alarming signal of passive resistance, whereas Bill's tiredness and refusal to be touched are straightforward thematizations of Barthelme's withdrawal of narratorial authority, which performed so early in the story, releases the text's politically subversive potential.<sup>8</sup> However, without denying the legitimacy of this interpretative possibility, it may also be argued that Barthelme's juxtaposition of Bill's weariness and untouchability with the viewpoints of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty encapsulated in the dwarves' speculations about Bill's relational withdrawal is much more significant for the structure of the novel's subjectivity than it may appear at first.

23 Even though Bill's attitude does not mean he negates the tangibility of the surrounding world, it certainly means that he distances himself from Merleau-Ponty's viewpoint, that unmediated access to an external reality is a real possibility. In this way, Bill's attitude comes to express Barthelme's principle of referentiality, his poetic strategy, which from the opening episode onwards will exploit the connections between representation possibilities and the affect of weariness on the one hand, and the affective mechanism of refusal on the other. That such a strategy involves the problematics of the ethical becomes apparent if we bear in mind that the notions of weariness and refusal play a crucial role in shaping the affective geography of the Levinasian *there is*.

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24 As Levinas writes in *Existence and Existents*, the *there is* itself is the excess of being in being from which there are no exits for beings, i.e. existents. An existent's relation to the *there is* manifests itself in the interrelated mental or affective phenomena of *fatigue* and *indolence* and their temporal relation to the present.<sup>9</sup> In his discussion of the former, Levinas discovers that the sense of weariness that makes us realize we exist is not tied to people or tasks we get tired of, but concerns existence itself. It is the impossibility of escaping existence, an impossible refusal to the commitment to exist (*EE* 12). We might say that fatigue is fatigue as a result of the exhausting "hesitation of a refusal" that cannot be effected because existence is inescapable. A similar suspension of refusal is characteristic of indolence, another feeling by means of which the existent establishes his/her relationship with existence. Having nothing to do with either relaxation or inactivity, indolence resembles fatigue in that it involves

an attitude with regard to action. [It] is not a simple indecisiveness, a being overwhelmed by the choices to be made [...] it is also not a material impossibility of performing an action that is beyond our strength, or the consciousness of that impossibility, [or] a fear of pain [...] Indolence is essentially tied up with the beginning of an action.

[It] concerns beginning, as if existence were not there right off, but preexisted the beginning in an inhibition. There is more here than a span of duration, flowing imperceptibly between two moments. Or perhaps the inhibition involved in indolence is also the revealing of the beginning which each instant effects in being an instant. (*EE* 13)

25 It follows that indolence is the reverse side of fatigue. Its future-oriented suspension of refusal is, in a sense, the opposite of the past-oriented suspension of refusal in weariness. But it is not different from fatigue in occasioning the momentary, temporal excess in which the necessarily mediated awareness of the existence (the *there is*) emerges on the part of the existent. Note that Levinas does not really use time as a transparent category to describe what it means to be tired or inactive. Rather, he constructs his own understanding of time. He defines time by its relation to the *there is*, which is either that of fatigue or that of indolence. Therefore, the present moment is defined by Levinas as occurring in the interval created by the temporal delay of fatigue: the “almost self-contradictory moment of the present that carries behind itself could not be anything but fatigue. Fatigue does not accompany it, it effects it; fatigue is this time-lag” (*EE* 25). And it is precisely this time-lag, this moment of suspension that Levinas associates with the birth of the consciousness of the pre-ethical Same.

Fatigue is to be sure not a cancellation of one’s contract with being. The delay it involves is nonetheless an inscription in existence, but what is peculiar to this inscription, its sort of hesitation, enables us to surprise it, to catch sight of the operation of assuming which the existence that is taken up always already involves. (*EE* 25)

26 To make his point crystal clear, Levinas describes the “emergence” of consciousness, the beginning of the awareness that it is impossible to escape being entirely, as a hypostasis (*EE* 25-6), a performative event of self-reification which triggers a desire for the Other and thus paves the way for an (ethical) subjectivity. Because of the very nature of hypostasis, which apart from substantiation is also, as Jeffrey Nealon notes, a logical error, the desire for alterity and the impossible escapement may actually be accomplished in language even if it is by nature an instrument of permanent ontologization. This is how the performative hypostasis comes to signify “the birth of subjectivity” out from the *there is*, as a Saying (*Alterity Politics* 59); the subject is born from *a collision of the past-oriented fatigue and future-oriented indolence*.

27 It is precisely this sort of colliding rhetoric that informs the subject construction in Barthelme’s first novel. The novel’s pre-subjective drecky murmur of the *there is*, represented by Snow White, becomes mediated through the tropes of fatigue and indolence. Their interaction, in turn, creates opportunities for the hypostatic disruptions within the text that occasion the emergence of the novel’s subject construct. Consequently, since the path to subjectivity leads through such an event of substantiation that starts in fatigue and indolence and ends in

the Saying, and since in *Snow White* the problematics of these affects are introduced via the character of Bill, the dwarf leader, then our scrutiny of the novel's literary subjectivity must begin with an examination of Bill's weariness and indolence and the way in which the tropes develop.

28 Let us begin with fatigue. One of the first telling instances when fatigue reveals its tropological significance and hence its role in the construction of the novel's subjectivity is the scene when Bill "develops a shamble" (SW 62). Initially diagnosed as "a *sign* of a lost mind," his "shamble" is then quickly re-appraised as a "refreshing" mode of striding "across something that is not true" (SW 62). Probing further into the nature of this sign's and mode's mysterious reference, we might find it revealing that the moment when we learn about Bill's awkward gait a movement emulating the decelerating energy of feeling weary towards the *there is* directly coincides with his speech about the genealogy of his fellow dwarves: "We were all born in National Parks," he says, "Clem has his memories of Yosemite, inspiring gorges. Kevin remembers the Great Smokies. Henry has his Acadian songs and dances" (SW 62). Bill continues the list only to end with the assertion of the tremendous regional diversity of their origin; however, his seemingly pointless proclamation of the dwarves' non-fictional roots in real national parks of America loses its innocence in the context of the second meaning of the word "shamble," since apart from signifying an awkward gait, "shamble" also stands for "a scene of carnage" (*OED*). The sense of brutality and massive murderousness inherent in the word opens the whole scene to an interpretation in which Bill's shamble relates to the violent aspect of the novel's referential use of language. By pointing to the brutal nature of poetic acts, of using "old realities" to create new ones, the fragment about Bill's "shamble" sheds some light on Barthelme's definition of collage as an *anxious* object. Bill's speech is resonant with the memory of mimetic carnage that gave rise to Clem's, Kevin's and Henry's fictional identities, a memory underpinned with the horrible murmur of the unceasing *there is*. It thus textualizes the anxiety of a literary collage, a kind of fearful wonder at the delayed recognition of the literary work's immersion in the solitary landscape of the *there is* (in the novel represented by *Snow White*), coupled with the momentary realization of a desire to transgress the *there is* in order to enter a non-murderous relationship with the reader.

29 This anxiety should be distinguished from the traumatizing fear of the ethical encounter with reality, along the lines of the distinction between the violence of linguistic incursions on reality described in Bill's speech and the violence of the ethical event that I earlier referred to as the rupture of the Saying. Referentiality is in itself always a modality of the counter-subjective totalizing murderous efforts and thus it cannot instantiate the subjective moment in the text. In contrast, the shattering and undermining of all, especially the referential standards in a literary text might be construed as ethical violence, as the traumatizing textual rupture out of which a literary subject may arise. In this context, Bill's speech seems to comment on *Snow White's* entanglement with referentiality and perhaps even to mark Barthelme's recognition of the latter's ethical dimension.

30 What happens to the notion of violence inherent in referentiality as Bill's story progresses? The next significant manifestation of weariness takes place in the episode describing his reaction to Snow White's hair hanging from the window. Bill finds Snow White's act, the "significance of this act" and "the sexual meaning of the hair itself" utterly "distasteful," because, as he explains, the situation confronts him with "multiple meanings" about which he does not know what to do (SW 92-93). Such an aversion to Snow White's act on Bill's part may be best understood in the light of the earlier argument about the hair serving as a metonymic representation of contact and creativity. In this context, Bill's negative reaction to the hair bespeaks of his strong refusal to both form a relation with Snow White and use it creatively. Furthermore, given that Snow White's hair might stand as a transitional object for the dreck of popular culture, Bill's unwillingness to have anything to do with the "hair-project" reinforces the message conveyed through the image of the "referential shamble." Like the hair, the dreck of pop-cultural allusions is overabundant, but at the same time, some individuals, like Snow White for example, mistake it for the exit which Bill, parodying Heidegger, calls the "not-with" (SW 92). Bill's allusion to the German philosopher gives clues about the true object of his own disgust, which seems to be Snow White's pressing desire for authenticity<sup>10</sup> and for abandoning the inauthentic state of being-in-the-world, being-with-others. Such an aversion to the category of authentic being on Bill's part indicates that the map of his affective responses overlaps, in fact, not with that of Heidegger's *Dasein* but more readily with Levinas's counter-Heideggerian idea of necessary evasion of the "authentic" *there is*. Explaining to himself Snow White's performance, Bill says:

It [the performance] means that she is nothing else but a goddamn degenerate! is one way of looking at it, at this complex difficult question. It means that the 'not-with' is experienced as more pressing, more real, than the 'being with'. It means she seeks a new lover. *Quelle tragédie!* But the essential loneliness of the person must also be considered.  
(SW 92)

31 Although Bill is trying to understand Snow White's motives, his verdict is that her performance is wrong, degenerate, and tragic in its blind faith in the search for authenticity. Moreover, the dwarf leader senses that the attempts to transgress being are even "more real" in their attachment to being than the latter's affirmations. They reestablish one back in the *there is*. Consequently, Bill's reaction to the hair seems to occasion the novel's second commentary on the conundrums of its referential strategy. Importantly, this time the commentary is more direct as it draws the connection between the error of referentiality and the error of desperately seeking counter-subjective authenticity by reverting to consciousness and the *there is*. Bill's reaction implies that just as he cannot avoid reacting to the hair in one way or another, even if his reaction is that of disgust,

Barthelme's text cannot avoid some sort of a referential relation to its cultural material, even if it knows this relation to be brutally usurpatory. Although the referential motion cannot be stopped, the recognition of its link to a separated Sameness and its illusion of subjective authenticity constitutes the literary subject's hypostatic "awakening" into the ethicity of language's referential gestures, the beyond of ontological authenticity.

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32 In this context, it is hardly surprising that the significance of the discussed episode for the novel's subject construction is verified by its prominent position in *Snow White's* 1974 stage adaptation, which locates the scene of the hair hanging down from the window *together with* Bill's reaction to it at the very beginning of the first act. Moreover, in the play the scene neighbors on the odd, apparently autobiographical conversation about writing, whereas in the novel there is no adjacency or connection between the two episodes. In what sounds like a confession of a writer who lost his inspiration Bill addresses a "you" (in the play, the "you" is Kevin) with a confession that he has always "hoped to make a powerful statement, coupled with a moving plea," "wanted to provide a definitive account [...] to substantiate an unsubstantial report, [to launch] a three-pronged attack" (SW 51-52), but he never managed to succeed, whereas his audience always either laughed or was disinterested. The passage marks another of Bill's recourses to the issue of brutality inherent in creative endeavors. Just as in the episode about his shamble, here too, Bill refuses to execute the violence he indolently anticipated and because of which he is now disarmed and weary. In the play Kevin summarizes this state with an utterance that is not present in the novel: "You've lost your... ability to deal creatively with the many-faceted problems of existence!" (303). Thus, the fact that *Snow White's* stage adaptation amplifies the ethical dimension of the referential fabric of its subject construct suggests the writer's growing awareness of the ethical dimension of his semantic experiments, an awareness whose exemplary case is the 1975 *The Dead Father*.[11](#)

33 Reading Bill's fatigue as a trope of the relation between the aesthetic uses of language and the reality to which they refer, either by trying to reflect it or by avoiding any representation, allows us to explain why Bill's presence in the narrative is always marked by his radical refusal to be creative and to participate in any enterprise of his fellow dwarves or Snow White. Crucially, his constant repudiations occasion the affective overlapping of fatigue and indolence. Whether Bill says no to tending the vats, reacting to Snow White's hair, or composing "powerful statements," Bill enacts the consciousness of a need to escape the state of being forever immersed in the chain of references (the Levinasian *there is*), and a recognition that such a flight is an impossible possibility that cannot be realized in language other than by a denunciation of consciousness itself, a denunciation observable only through hindsight. What Bill's fatigue signifies is therefore the delay of Barthelme's text's momentary renunciation of the ontological structure of its subjectivity as consciousness, i.e. its momentary self-questioning and

exposure to the reader that the latter registers *post factum* as a creative impulse to make sense of the text. The ethical moment of the reader's participation is fleeting because, as Bill's story has allegorically shown us, by *miming* Bill's attitude of refusal to participate in referentiality the reader's creative impulse becomes inhibited, delays its performativity, and becomes its own past. Thus, it ends up participating in the self-impeding performance of collage that shapes *Snow White's* referential structure.

34 Not just because of its lagging referentiality, but also because of its self-annulling tendency inherent in its causative structure, the collage of *Snow White* is pervaded by anxiety which stems from two sources. From the perspective of Levinas's ethics, the future-directed self-hindering performativity characteristic of collage is dubbed indolence in order to emphasize that the possibility of a subjective emergence inherent in the time-lag of its relation to being/language paradoxically rests in radical passivity. Whereas fatigue is the past-directed trope of referentiality that narrates the ethical problem of violence and sacrifice inherent in the relation between the literary subjectivity and the referential status of language, indolence is the trope of performativity whose future-directed structure narrates the text's passive and traumatic exposure to alterity. In other words, heralding the trauma of the passive exposure, indolence is indispensable to make complete the process of subjective becoming. In *Snow White* the work of indolence is best observable in the episodes featuring Bill's double, the lethargic prince-figure Paul.

35 Unlike Bill, Paul rarely worries about his past; rather, he constantly interrogates himself on "what to do next?" and "what is the next thing demanded of me by history?" (SW55). Although he does not do much, spending his days on aimless meditations "in his baff" (SW 13; 94), Paul seems to be Bill's exact opposite when it comes to contemplating the relation between one's actions, especially artistic actions, and reality. He is an abstract expressionist painter who "persists in the image alone" (SW48), who perceives himself as "more experimental than he [his father] was" though at the same time as "more withdrawn" (SW27). When he does not paint he "poses" for paintings, pretends to be a monk, and develops fantasies about perfecting the art of writing palinodes. Sometimes his reflections are direct, such as when in his "baff" he says: "retraction has a special allure for me. I would wish to retract everything, if I could, so that the whole written world would be..." (SW 13). Sometimes Paul's allusions to creative acts are more veiled, such as when in a sort of interior monologue his wish to "retract that long black hair hanging from that window" develops significantly into a sociology lecture about the abundance of trash (SW94).

36 Paul's motivations for retracting everything could be read as symptomatic of a sensibility that seeks authentication in the undoing of being, were it not for the fact that Paul knows ultimate renegeing to be in the end impossible. Although unlike Bill Paul is not terrified by the referential character of his enterprise, and for most of the time is satisfied with the minimalist poetics of creating by

retracting, his creativity is haunted by the same hopelessness as the one found in Bill's refusals. That the visions of the two characters are complementary (one might even say, interchangeable) is best expressed by Bill in one of his melodramatic confessions:

Give me the odd linguistic trip, stutter and fall, and I will be content. Actually, when you get right down to it, I should be the monk, and Paul the leader here. (SW 139)

37 Bill is not alone in thinking that Paul's attitude is more suitable for the role: Hubert's reply to the proposal is that the dwarves "have entertained the notion" of Paul's leadership (*ibid.*). Despite being inert, withdrawn, and passive, Paul nevertheless attracts other characters because his attitude carries the promise of a "new reality." Bill's, Hubert's, and even Snow White's trust in Paul's potential does not seem misguided because he is indeed creative enough to divert the plot of the fairy-tale, the most evident example of which is his sacrificial act of consuming Snow White's poisonous drink (SW 174).

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38 If we single out Paul as the carrier of the creativity-related trope of indolence, we cannot disregard how clearly the prince's artistic method of retractions and withdrawals, so radical as to include the deletion of himself, mirrors the poetic strategy of the novel's author. As Barthelme frequently admitted, his literary strategy was fashioned under the tremendous influence of the minimalist, "retractive" poetics of *Waiting for Godot*, the text which he first read in 1956, and which gave him his ultimate literary model (Moore-Barthelme 46).<sup>12</sup> The autobiographical charge of the trope of indolence becomes evident if we conceptualize it in the light of the parallelism between Levinas's ethical moment of subjective becoming in the linguistic event of the Saying and Deleuze's idea of affect understood as the formal substantiation of real emotions. While Deleuze's perspective considers affect (in general) to be an autobiographically charged element, the above Levinas-inspired reading of *Snow White* traces the autobiographical in two interrelated affects of indolence and fatigue, whose participation in the plot triggers the emergence of literary subjectivity. Bill's anxiety-driven weariness about the impossibility of fully escaping referentiality and Paul's counter-productive, retractive creativity textualize the conflicting impulses in Barthelme's novelistic method, still under construction. Sometimes, the method tends towards the more referential, while at other times it attempts to instantiate explosions of non-referential pure nonsense. This is why, in *Snow White*, the conflict is not only present in the shifting volume of linguistic experimentation. It also appears in the shifts of authority between Paul and Bill, of which the most vivid illustration is that even after Paul's act of ultimate self-retraction his voluntary death Bill's thematization of the unavoidability of referentiality (the *there is*) returns to threaten Paul's creative acts even after his death:

Bill will become one of those sub-deities who govern the calm passage of cemeteries through the sky. If the graves fall open in the mid-passage and swathed forms fall out, it will be his fault, probably. (SW 179)

39 Read autobiographically, the remark expresses the victory of Barthelme's recognition of inescapable referentiality over the dream of its creative overcoming, but at the same time, it highlights the inseparability of both trends in the constitution of his literary subjects.

40 Let me briefly recapitulate what has been said so far about the relation between the tropes of fatigue and indolence and the novel's literary subjectivity. By analyzing the temporal dynamics of Bill's affective condition and its relation to the novel's self-commentary about its literary method, I have argued that because the figure of fatigue and indolence functions in a more or less explicit connection to the themes of the past, the origin, the memory, or the process of naming, and because it is always aimed at foregrounding the violence inherent in these themes' problem of representation, *fatigue performs in Barthelme's novel the function of the trope of referentiality*. With each instance of Bill's tired behavior, the book thematizes its internal uncertainty about the violence of its referential method of manipulating elements of the surrounding cultural context of the American sixties. When it comes to the trope of indolence, and its future-directed potential to transcend referentiality, the potential which is nevertheless blocked starts playing *the role of the trope of performativity*. With each instance of Bill's weariness or Paul's exaggerated indolence, the subjectivity of *Snow White* originates in their inevitable overlap, or time-lag as Levinas calls it, in which reference exposes its performative potential whereas speech acts acquire the qualities of undisguised mimetism.

41 A similar conclusion has been formulated by Stanley Trachtenberg, who, while defining Barthelme's technique of literary collage, concludes: "Barthelme's fiction does not create recognizable speech but a reproduction of it, one which evokes not the way people speak but the way they sound" (167-168). What Trachtenberg's opinion seems to imply is that Barthelme's poetics is grounded in a paradoxical strategy of performing representation, in which performance becomes mimetic and mimetism depicts the idea of performativity, thus enacting the temporal confusion that we have associated with the hypostatic moment of subjectivity emerging out of the consciousness of the *there is*. As a result, at the most basic level, *Snow White* is virtually a story about this confusion, a tale about how the fatigue and indolence overlap. This is what makes up its collage structure that Barthelme defines as anxiously oscillating between referentiality and performance.

42 By manipulating the two tropes of fatigue and indolence *Snow White* conducts a thematization of its self-doubts and a questioning of its textual strategies. Every instance of the text's doubting and questioning of its own textual strategies, to

which the text *as text* has no alternative, is precisely the moment when a literary subjectivity, understood in Levinas's terms as a "putting into question" of ontological certainty and temporal coherence, has the chance of emerging. What is interesting here is that the emergence of ethical subjectivity does not have to coincide only with radical literary experimentation; in *Snow White* it substantiates itself in fragments which amplify the referential within the referential without resorting to self-referentiality or auto-thematization.

43 Of course, the ethical subjectivity emerges only temporarily, since the necessity of ontological closure, dictated most ostentatiously by the very physicality of the novel, causes *Snow White's* discourse to plunge back to the rhythm of the *there is*. Interestingly, the book allegorizes this process by means of a strikingly regular sequence of punishments which follow Bill's refusals. It is as if every attempt to break out of the totalizing ontological subjectivity model had to be met with a reprisal from one of the existing, totalizing philosophical or religious thought paradigms. The ideology that haunts Bill after his first refusal, namely, when he develops a shamble, is named plainly: he is being "followed by a nun" (SW71). In the second case, the totalizing frame of thought seems to be that of modernist aesthetics. When Bill "refuses to take off his pajamas" like everyone else, the narrative terminates abruptly and its perspective is uncontrollably distorted as the pajamas "in a sense" "fill the room" (SW106), so that all the semantic brutality which Bill himself was desperately trying to avoid is now mercilessly exercised upon him. Finally, Bill's various subversive actions are undercut by the economic rationale: each time he adopts a passive-resistant attitude to the communal life, by either refusing to sing chants while "washing the buildings," and "tending the vats," or just generally refusing to continue working, "the loss of equanimity" among the dwarves becomes so critical that eventually they decide to exterminate their unproductive leader (SW112). In this way, the descriptions of Bill's endeavors to challenge the murderousness of the language of the Said, to subvert the referential from within the referential, are always undercut by the narrative subservience to one totalizing idea or another.

44 Yet among those hypostatic becomings of the novel's subjectivity, occasionally interrupting what might be called the "discursive noise" of the pre-subjective *there is* represented by *Snow White*, there is one which exemplifies the subjective event in the most striking manner. Not only does it demonstrate how fatigue and indolence signify the tracing of performative representations and referential performativity, but also points to an understanding of the relation between the ethical moment of their co-presence with the moment's political potential.

### **3. From Ethical Hypostasis to Political Resistance**

45 Answering Snow White's wish to hear words she has never heard before, Bill proposes the word "Injunctions!" (SW6). Although initially Bill's proposal might be understood through the context of his aversion to touch as a fairly straightforward formulation of a demand for solitude, its true significance is actually revealed in the novel's final scene, the scene of Bill's court hearing. As he explains to the court how and why he has hurt his childhood scoutmasters Fondue and Maeght, it becomes clear that the legal sense of the word injunction is nothing but a summary of Bill's campaign throughout the novel against any violent incursions of literary language on the real. That this rebellion is a signal of ethical subversion and of political dissidence may become clearer if we consider a fragment of the interrogation scene:

"'Bill,' to return to your entanglement of former times with Fondue and Maeght, in what relation did they stand, in those times," "They stood to me in the relation, scoutmasters." "They were your scoutmasters. Entrusted with your schoolment in certain dimensions of lore." "Yes, the duty of the scoutmasters was to reveal scoutmysteries." "And what was the nature of the latter?" "The scoutmysteries included such things as the mystique of rope, the mistake of one animal for another, and the miseries of the open air." "Yes. Now, was this matter of the great black horse included under the rubric, scoutmysteries." "No. it was in the nature of a threat, a punishment. I had infringed a rule." "What rule?" "A rule of thumb having to do with pots. You were supposed to scour the pots with mud, to clean them. I used Ajax." "That was a scoutmystery, how to scour a pot with mud?" "Indeed." "The infraction was then, resistance to scoutmysteries?" "Stated in the most general terms, that would be it." "And what was the response of Fondue and Maeght." "They told me that there was a great black horse, and that it had in mind, eating me." "They did?" "It would come by night, they said. I lay awake waiting." "Did it present itself? The horse?" "No. But I awaited it. I await it still." (SW 163-4)

46 According to Paul Maltby, such passages instantiate the politically dissident poetics of "sign-reflectiveness," that is, a poetics of "laying bare the process of signification," and therefore "permitting a degree of disengagement from the sign system" (42). As a sign-reflective episode, Bill's testimony critiques the cruelty of ideological repression and systemic coercion that perform their enslaving job dressed up as innocent (childlike/scout-like) "scoutmysteries." In the light of such an Althusserian vision, Bill's refusal to treat the horse as an empty metaphor defamiliarizes the problem of the fact that despite their imaginary origin, ideological systems have real consequences. The most visible of those, as feminist critics of *Snow White* point out, is the barring of the title character's actual concerns (probably listed in that poem we never actually hear that begins with "bandaged and wounded") from the "authorized version of reality" and her place in its social structures (Berman, 126).

47 Snow White's example once again draws attention to the actuality of the system's effect, Bill's personal tragedy is where political subversiveness uncovers its ethical source. Bill's transgression of the law that has brought him before the tribunal, as well as his testimony, disclose his conviction that no linguistic reference is innocent, and that performative acts of language such as the threat of a black horse have concrete consequences. For the threat of the horse which Bill "still awaits" turns out to have been the sole source of all his withdrawals and refusals. Furthermore, provided that the Freudian connotations of the image of the horse are too imposing to go unnoticed just as in *The Dead Father*, Barthelme lays bare his allusion to Freud's metaphor by making this animization of the unconscious dark and mute one is justified in interpreting Bill's fear as a sense of being threatened by the return of the repressed, that is, by an encapsulation of his identity within the depth model of subjectivity, where violence towards the real is a mode of existence.

48 Just like the ethical aspect of Snow White's situation was not discussed in the feminist readings, the ethical dimension of Bill's rebellion is not accounted for in Maltby's interpretative scheme. However, Maltby's idea that the poetics of sign-reflectiveness "redeems" the possibility of critical detachment makes it possible to move his political reading towards its ethical conclusions. If, from Maltby's perspective, Bill's imitation of formal, legal jargon through the invention of terms such as "schoolment" would mark political "resistance to the prevailing forms of language [...] by means of a discourse which defies assimilation to linguistic norms" (46), the perspective of Levinas's ethics expands this conclusion by accounting for the complex temporal processes of reference and performativity that partake of rebellious shattering by such words as "schoolment" (or expressions such as "dimensions of lore") of the integrity of language norms of the Said.

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49 Bill's testimony describes the details of the process. Asked about the nature of scoutmysteries, Bill remembers three which combine into a noteworthy sequence of "mystique" - "mistake" - "mystery," faithfully depicting the process of signification and thus the complex process of subjective emergence in the referential collage of Barthelme's text. Beginning with the "mystique," especially the "mystique of rope," reminiscent of the image of Snow White's hair as a metaphor of creativity and interactivity, we might associate its fascinating aura of awe and power with that moment in the evolution of the subject when, as Levinas describes it, the consciousness of one's immersion in the *there is* slowly consolidates itself in the mode of egoistic search for satisfaction and mastery over the surrounding reality. In Barthelme's definition of collage, whose structural development resembles that of Levinas's subjective coming out of the *there is*, the stage of the "mystique of rope" marks the beginning of the referential process. It corresponds to the moment of incorporation of elements of the extra-textual, "past" reality into the body of collage. The name of the next stage in the sequence

of subjective development in *Snow White* could not be defined any better than as a “mistake,” and particularly a “mistake of one animal for another,” because it is synonymous with the meaning of hypostasis as a substantiation of the subject, as a performative *substitution of one being for the Other*, and as a logical error. In the narrative of *Snow White*, particularly in such moments as Bill’s testimony, when the realist and the absurd become one, ‘mistake’ in all of those senses constitutes the central moment in the process of subjective development.<sup>13</sup> Not only does the name of this scoutmystery obey the hypostatic grammar, but it also successfully captures the logic of substitution, operating in those moments in the text where, as described earlier, the text questions and exposes itself passively to the otherness of the reader. Again, in Barthelme’s description of collage dynamics, this is the moment of the anxious temporal confusion in which referentiality and performativity give rise to a “new” reality. Such a becoming, an exposure, opens the subject to the “misery” of being hostage to the situation of ontological doubt, because it shatters its dream of ontological certainty. No wonder it is such a traumatizing and anxiety-ridden state. However, it is also the only vista leading to “the open air” of subjectivity.

50 Both political and ethical interpretations of *Snow White* view the “mystery-mistake-misery” sequence as a laying bare of the process of signification. However, whereas the political reading perceives this defamiliarization as permitting a critically detached active judgment of the sign system and its ideological implications, the ethical one interprets it as opening the possibility of the passive exposure to alterity which is the only source of a successful rebellion. After all, ethics-wise, the subject’s entry into language is not an act of self-positing by means of critical detachment but rather the act of passivity of an exposure. The words neither record nor represent or signify exposure, but rather affect it in the process of reading, so that the collage actually brings into life a new, politically dissident discursive reality.

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## Notes

[1](#) Although he will later return to the collage principle in the 1976 “Symposium on Fiction” (“Symposium” 24) or the 1978 interview with Heide Ziegler, which brings into play the famous “Corbu, Mies, Neutra” architectural analogy to collage (Ziegler & Bigsby 52-53), it is in this 1971 conversation with his later bibliographer that Barthelme formulates his definition of collage with the greatest precision.

[2](#) Barthelme’s definition of collage writing in one gesture affirms the existence of the concrete affectively charged relation between the text and the real, and locates the core of this relation in the temporal confusion of linguistic performativity in which progressive creativity overlaps and becomes identical with regressive referentiality. However, the writer’s overt affirmation of the referential *as well as* the affective aspect of collage was consistently ignored by his critics. Even the first apparent exception to this rule, Philip Stevick’s 1981 study of Barthelme’s technique, gradually moves away from its initial assumption that the writer’s collage method “far from being pure design” serves a “classic” mimetic function, towards the conclusion about the self-referentiality of verbal junctures (*Alternative Pleasures* 23-25). It was as late as in 1991 that Jerome Klinkowitz finally acknowledged both the referential power and the implications of the temporal indeterminacy of the collage structure. In his monographic study of Barthelme’s work entitled *Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition*, Klinkowitz historicized collage as the dominant method of Barthelme’s early fiction, by juxtaposing it with another technique of combining fragments, the silk-screening, which he nominates as the governing principle of Barthelme’s work from *The Dead Father* period. In his comparative description of collage and silk-screening, Klinkowitz argues that whereas silk-screening lets all elements of the composition “perform an equally valid syntactic and referential function within the same smooth phase,” collage does not disguise its fragmentary character, leading to an instantaneous disruption of the reading experience and the creation of a new reality (*Donald Barthelme* 8). Instead of shock, which is the first impact of the collage, the effect of silk-screening seems initially acceptable to the reader’s “censors of the ridiculous,” even though in fact it is “a clever little time bomb” that soon shatters his/her understanding of the text (*ibid.*). Otherwise put, if silk-screening exploits the illusion of the mimetic optics in a more deceptive but also less disturbing manner of a delayed effect, the collage targets the core of this illusion in each of its fragments so that its temporal logic becomes impossible to reconstruct. It is hard to overestimate the clarity and accuracy of Klinkowitz’s analysis, however, the valorization of collage as inferior to silk-screening seems to miss the point of this technique’s performative potential. The shock and profound disturbance of the reader, which results from the reception of this technique, establishes the moment of the most intimate contact between the text and the reader.

[3](#) According to Levinas, the subject formation process involves three stages: the anxiety triggered by the recognition of the *there is* develops into desire and enjoyment that are symptoms of the self's affective non-indifference, which in turn give way to the subjectivity-forming ethical affect of responsibility for the Other.

[4](#) Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2003). All subsequent references are to this edition and are shortened to *EE*.

[5](#) That the project of construing *Snow White's* subjectivity through the lens of Levinasian ethics might be worth the effort is suggested by the most recent piece of criticism on Barthelme's first novel, the 2005 essay "Disastrous Aesthetics: Irony, Ethics, and Gender in Barthelme's *Snow White*" by Jeffrey T. Nealon. In the essay, Nealon observes that despite their intentions, the existing readings of *Snow White* define the book's radicalism as stemming from the strategy of distorted reproduction of traditional aesthetic ideas (125), whereas a truly postmodern subversiveness should come, as he repeats after Blanchot, from the performance of an aesthetic disaster (135). This performance carries the promise of opening literature to a response, i.e. the promise of actually reifying the postmodern polyphony; however, it always occurs at the cost of the literary work's ontological coherence. According to Nealon, *Snow White* stops short of such an ethically fertile catastrophe; however, applying Levinas in a bit different way from Nealon I would like to argue that it indeed possible to trace in *Snow White* a series of radically ethical tropes.

[6](#) "Saying" is Levinas's term for the event of language in which the ontological certainty of this language, and thus also of the subject who is constituted by this language, is totally shattered. Levinas opposes this dynamic, contestatory type of language use to the "Said," i.e. to linguistic rules, norms, and conventions that create the illusion of comprehensibility in relations with Others and perpetuate the belief in the possibility of self-expression.

[7](#) What comes to mind as an illustrative definition of the role of Barthelme's insertions, is the atmosphere of a room buzzing with bits of street conversations coming through an open window, which by the way, according to Helen Moore Barthelme and Jerome Klinkowitz, was one of Barthelme's favorite and most notorious research methods in his poetic strategy. In her biographical *The Genesis of the Cool Sound*, Barthelme recalls her husband writing his first fiction seated near the window onto a busy Houston street and fishing for conversation lines, whereas Klinkowitz in his *Keeping Literary Company* makes the point about the sounds and situations on the street of Greenwich Village becoming the undigested material of Barthelme's fiction (112-120). Such an intrusion of background sounds is of the same kind as the murmuring heard from behind the wall in Levinas's definition of the *there is* as insomnia. It also signifies that which cannot be disposed of and exited, that which remains, once the subject-to-be

discovers that his subjectivity will not be established by the relation to being but by a momentary transgression of being and its abundance in his/her exposure to the Other.

[8](#) Such is the focus of Paul Maltby's reading of *Snow White* in *Dissident Postmodernists* to which I turn at the end of this article.

[9](#) It is precisely their temporality that makes it possible to speak of fatigue and indolence as tropes.

[10](#) If Bill is right in asserting Snow White's attachment to the idea of authenticity, that is, to the ontological paradigm of subjectivity, then his judgment constitutes yet another reason for interpreting Snow White as a thematization of the Levinasian *there is*.

[11](#) Returning to Bill's confession about his artistic failure, let us note that its illocutionary effect of the second person pronoun differs dramatically from the effect of Barthelme's famous questionnaire for *Snow White*'s readers — containing questions such as “Do you like the story so far? Yes ( ) No ( )” or “Is there too much *blague* in the narration? ( )” that terminates part one of the novel (SW 82-83). Despite its interactive outlook, the questionnaire does not invite the reader's response in the way that it is done in the case of Bill's refusal to creatively *exploit* the “mystery” of language's referentiality even if it means his public's disappointed “weeping” (“SW” 303, SW 51). While Bill's speech exposes the book to the readers' creative activity, the questionnaire is a totalizing act of authorization which powerfully reinserts into *Snow White* the element of Barthelme's control — a synonym for the desire for authenticity and ontological closure — thus hindering the possibility of the reader's responsiveness to the events of parts two and three of the novel.

[12](#) While I repeat this biographical detail after the author of *The Genesis of the Cool Sound*, Barthelme's fascination with Beckett is very well known and has been acknowledged and discussed in virtually every interview as well as in most critical essays on the postmodern character of Barthelme's poetics. For a relatively recent and refreshing example of how the two writers can be brought together see Lance Olsen's “Narrative Overdrive: Postmodern Fantasy, Deconstruction, and Cultural Critique in Beckett and Barthelme,” *The Fantastic Other: An Interface of Perspectives*. Eds. Brett Cooke, George Edgar Slusser and Jaume Marti-Olivella, (Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi Press, 1998), 71-86.

[13](#) Other typically hypostatic moments are, for example, Snow White's watering the flowers to aid the “blooming” of Maoist revolution, or Hogo's allowing his plan to cool down in the specially constructed “humidor,” and many others.

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## About the author

[Zuzanna Ładyga](#)

Institute of English Studies, Warsaw University

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