

Donald Barthelme's Visual Approach in the Short Story "At the Tolstoy Museum"

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Abstract

Donald Barthelme's short story "At the Tolstoy Museum" belongs to his "Picture Texts" and "Art Gallery" that pastes common objects obtained from the world in unexpected proximity on the picture plane and overturns their predictability as artistic symbols. The paper reaches the conclusion that Donald Barthelme's visual approach in the short story "At the Tolstoy Museum" is similar to René Magritte's process of "resemblance". A composition's "resemblance" to the world deceives the viewer into thinking that he can successfully categorize among and interpret his perceptual experience, while the vague relationships among the graphic and verbal fragments, varied and repeated, counter his ordering activity with disorientation.

Keywords: Donald Barthelme, picture texts, René Magritte, resemblance

1. Introduction

Structures of Donald Barthelme's picture-texts illuminate rhythmic patterns common to much of his short fiction. Composed of both verbal and graphic fragments, these collages belong to an historical gallery of "speaking pictures". The graphic configurations include images of classical structures, "photographs" of characters, illustrations from science and technical manuals, perspective drawings, and engravings of weeping heroines, from the turn of the century novels. These pictures often converse with texts in familiar formats. (Barbara L. Roe 1991:50).

In the short story "At the Tolstoy Museum" Barthelme collages in nonverbal elements to break up his words and yet still advance in his narrative. First published in 1970 in Donald Barthelme's third collection of fictions entitled *City Life*, "At the Tolstoy Museum" belongs to this "speaking pictures". By blurring together fact and fiction, Barthelme creates a uniquely surrealistic ambience. In addition, the collagist tendencies of the story make visual commentary on Barthelme's text. According to Couturier and Durand (1982: 60), two of the remaining images are derived "from a treatise by Brunelleschi or Ucello" The pictures in question are fifteenth century studies in perspective, and are combined with cuttings and pastes of nineteenth century engravings similar to those employed elsewhere in the story. For example, in the final image on page of the text, a negative image of Leo Tolstoy's portrait is pasted directly on top of the point of infinity where the multiple lines of the perspective study meet. (Kajander K. 2009:11)

2. Methodology

The paper is based on the analytical method. The analytical study of the function and the role of the picture texts in of the short story "At the Tolstoy Museum" is conducted based on specific visual approach of the author. The objective of the analyses is to point out that Barthelme's approach is similar to René Magritte's process of "resemblance". Such an approach is misleading creating the illusion for the viewer that he is able to interpret his perceptual experience, while the loose connections among the graphic and verbal fragments, and oppose his activity with confusion.

3. The Text and the Images

The text of "At the Tolstoy Museum" is interspersed with nine pictures of various size and shape. A number of pictures are reproductions of nineteenth-century engravings; the captions for several of them suggest that the images portray Leo Tolstoy at various stages of his life; as a youth, at Starogladkovskaya, at a tiger hunt, and so forth (Barthelme 1975: 44-

46). The majority of the text is arranged on the page according to the normal conventions of literary fiction. The story also includes brief fragments of text which are arranged out of sequence with the rest of the words; these snippets serve as captions for pictorial material that is also featured in the story.

The story begins with a full-page engraving of the supposed museum's subject, the Count himself in all his mystic glory. Turning the page reveals how Barthelme is undertaking a narrative with his piece of graphics, for an initial glance suggests that the same picture is being repeated. But one small element has been added: a one-and-a-quarter-inch cutout of a tiny Napoleon in profile, staring up from the lower left margin to contemplate Tolstoy's awesome visage (all the more imposing as it stands five inches tall, from the crowd to beard, up and down the page. (Klinkowitz J. 1991:63)

Finally on page three the text begins, recounting a visit to this museum that holds and displays thirty thousand pictures of the great man. In his own third paragraph, the narrator creates a verbal museum by counting off some random but curious facts:

Tolstoy means "fat" in Russian. His grandfather sent his linen to Holland to be washed. His mother did not know any bad words. As a youth he shaved off his eyebrows, hoping they would grow back bushier. He first contracted gonorrhoea in 1847. He was once bitten on the face by a bear. He became a vegetarian in 1885. To make himself interesting, he occasionally bowed backward. (cl, p.43)

Exceptional as these facts are, they can probably be found in any biography of Leo Tolstoy. There, however, they would be couched within a narrative of so many conventional items, that their special nature might not be appreciated—surely not in the way that they strike the reader here, cut off as they are, in Beckettian fashion, from any consequential, didactic, or even conceptual order. It is as close as one might come to Burroughs's cut-up method without fully abandoning a sense of focus. And focus there surely is, as across the page the collagist's little Napoleon gazes up at that imposing face that in turn regards us so penetratingly as we skim these details from his life. (Klinkowitz J. 1991: 63).

Barthelme's method, both with graphics and with words, has served to isolate these elements all the better from appreciating their new sense of compositional play. As other sentences and graphic "combines" take their place on subsequent pages, the reader is able to place Tolstoy in perspective (the story ends with a negative image of his face located at the point of infinity in an early draftsman's experiment with perspective).

The final effect is conventional enough, that of sharing Tolstoy's art; and even though Barthelme's method has tempered that respect with humor, both in collages and in outright jokes (vast quantities of handkerchiefs fro weeping an architectural sense that the building is about to fall on you as an impression of Tolstoy's moral authority), the result is as full an appreciation as might be achieved in the most traditional stories, yet without relying on tradition for that effect. (Klinkowitz J. 1991: 63).

Pervasively ironic allusions between text and pictures replace narrative's temporal continuity. As fourteen disconnected paragraphs catalogue "facts" about Tolstoy's life, his work, and the museum's architecture, nine "photographs" record biographical data, the content of the museum itself, (portraits, stories, personal artifacts), and architectural equivalents of the museum. In their disordered spatial arrangements, however, texts seldom confirm, in either content or tone, the story of nearby plates.

4. The Story as a Surrealist Art Gallery

It can be argued that it is actually misleading to call "At the Tolstoy Museum" a story. The text features a distinct lack of narrative cohesion that would unite the pages with one another; each text fragment is, for all intents and purposes, a self-contained narrative. In fact, as Cronquist notes (2008: 129), it is possible to consider almost every paragraph as a separate diegesis (i.e. narrative description). This radical dislocation of narrative coherence is a feature that runs through Donald Barthelme's fictions (Couturier & Durand 1982: 24). Thus, "At the Tolstoy Museum" becomes more like an art gallery than a conventional story, "each page being as it were a surrealist composition" (ibid:59).

In fact, one would not be misguided if one were to approach the story as an art object rather than a description of anything. Like a surrealist painting, Barthelme's text induces the reader to evolve private interpretations, no matter how extravagant. For this reason, Couturier and Durand compare the landscape of Barthelme's fictions to a surrealist world which has little to do with our own. (Kajander K. 2009:11)

Thematically, the fiction subverts Tolstoy's exaggerated veneration. According to the text, the shrine visitors, awed or chastised by the writer's ubiquitous "moral authority" (F.122), sob uncontrollably. Guards with buckets of handkerchiefs tend the weepers. The building's architecture, like a stack of three increasingly larger boxes, is similarly imposing. Looking down from the third level's glass floor "provides a "floating" feeling. The entire building, viewed from the street, suggests that it is about to fall on you" (F, 122).

Exposing the text's mock seriousness, though, pairs of pictures visually inflate Tolstoy's relics and contradict the

reported mourning. First, twin full-page portraits stare accusingly from the fiction's entrance. Superimposed near the second, however, is a squat Napoleonic figure, his "little man" complex shamed under Tolstoy's glare. Also, in the third figure, dry-eyed visitors study Tolstoy's coat, almost the height and breadth of the room.

But the fourth figure "Tolstoy as a Youth," humorously mimics this image. Here, a youth dressed in an oversized, loose-fitting coat or vest clutches a wine glass in his right hand and dangles an open book from his left. The pose promises that the young Tolstoy, a scholar of some worth and sophistication, is destined from the grandeur memorialized in the elder Tolstoy's greatcoat. Thus, the fourth figure paradoxically foreshadows the third. However, the third paragraph's childish trivia diminishes both pictures' promises: "As a youth he shaved off his eyebrows, hoping they would grow back bushier" (F, 119). (Barbara L. Roe 1991:52)

In other pictures, Barthelme superimposes images to flout the illusion of systematic orders. Both "The Anna-Vronsky Pavilion: and the final museum plaza sketches adapt eighteenth-century drawings to this purpose. Each sketch is grounded in the restrictive policies of the perspective artist who attempts to stabilize the world in a network of lines, to cloak its ambiguities through the imposition of the mathematical ideas of the Pythagorean laws. But the pictures are flawed. In isolation, they are cold, mechanical, static—a deceptive portrayal of the world. Barthelme exposes the lie by unexpectedly superimposing incongruous images, free of art, on the picture planes.

Upon the benign calm of his Romantic pavilion, he pastes a distressed damsel, struggling in a dark man's villainous embrace. Upon the museum plaza drawing, he pastes a reduced negative image of the Tolstoy portrait, already viewed twice at the story's entrance and, again in the reduced form, in a Siberian hunt portrait. Closing the fiction at the sketch's horizon, the negative image looms imperiously where disappearing lines of perspective converge. This last plate comically links "Tolstoy's "floating" image with the "floating" narrator who remarked about his giddiness on the museum's third floor. (Barbara L. Roe 1991:53)

5. Conclusion

Ekphrasis is a literary device in which one medium of art describes the form and content of art from another medium. For example, an accurate textual description of the features of a painting would constitute ekphrasis. In Barthelme's text, however, the relations between an image and its textual representation are deliberately disjointed. (Kajander 2009:11). However, as Couturier and Durand point out (1982: 59), Tolstoy as a youth looks "strangely like a baby-faced Napoleon, with his unruly lock of hair," and it is doubtful the bicycle pictured in the image supposedly representing Tolstoy at Starogladkovskaya existed in Russia in 1852, unlike the caption would suggest. Thus, the interplay of images and text in Barthelme's story has a mock ekphrastic effect (Cronquist 2008: 120).

In fact, Donald Barthelme's visual approach in the short story "At the Tolstoy Museum" is similar to René Magritte's process of "resemblance". Barthelme pastes common objects obtained from the world in unexpected proximity on the picture plane and overturns their predictability as artistic symbols. A composition's "resemblance" to the world deceives the viewer into thinking that he can successfully categorize among and interpret his perceptual experience, while the tenuous relationships among the graphic and verbal fragments, varied, repeated and retracted, counter his ordering activity with disorientation.

Conventionally, an imaged pose, frozen perhaps in an attitude of joy, despair, fear, or indifference, announces the presence of a character caught at some point on the plot's corresponding gridwork. But an ironic caption's flat or comic tone often undermines the significance of a Barthelme's character's pose. Barthelme's pictorial arrangements do not comply with any specific narrative order, but cohere instead through patterns of visual rhythms established by repeating and varying familiar images within the assemblage

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