

“IN MEMORY ONLY...”: ALLUSIONS TO T.S. ELIOT’S
POETRY IN DONALD BARTHELME’S *GREAT DAYS*

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In memory only, reconsidered passion.
(T.S. Eliot, “Gerontion”)

Donald Barthelme probes the uses of memory in remarkable ways. Particularly in his “dialogue-stories” memory seems to point up as well as blot out the speakers’ present rather tantalizingly. To cite one example from *Great Days*, we have “Rotten Julia” (Barthelme 1979: 158) who exists only in the speakers’ memory. She comes and goes, prompting as in the Wastelanders, “Memory and desire” (Eliot 1934: 29). The gossip of the women in *Great Days* fattens mostly on such memories which make and unmake their present — in this case, Julia’s absence *in* their presence. The exercise leaves behind for them another “ghost”:

- Think Julia’s getting it on with Bally.
- Yeah I heard about that he’s got a big mouth.
- ...
- My best ghost (Barthelme 1979: 159).

In what follows, I hope to show how Barthelme probes the uses of his readers’ memory as well, and further, how he fashions his allusive strategies accordingly. Writing for a large audience like *The New Yorker’s*, no writer can afford the luxury of being densely and scholarly allusive as a Joyce or a Beckett. To Jo Brans, Barthelme admitted that he had always been thoughtful of his readers while settling for suggestive references in his work:

And then students indirectly help with the problem of allusion, because you have to stop if you make an allusion to something and say, Will people remember this, or will they get it?... So, I try to use more allusions than perhaps every reader will get,

so that there will be things that if he doesn't remember *this*, he will get *that* (Brans 1988: 100).

As Barthelme makes it clear, his allusiveness is a carefully selected, graded, and planned exercise involving levels and tones. The writer's advantage here is that he could be fairly sure that no discerning reader will come a cropper in recognizing at least some crucial messages relayed by his allusions.

I shall use *Great Days* now to examine Barthelme's allusions to Eliot's poetry and show how he varies his strategies to prompt our memory from time to time. I borrow John Hollander's terms in *The Figure of Echo* for these allusive modes in order to comment on their uses in *Great Days*. "Quotation", for Hollander, denotes "the literal presence of a body of text" in another text, while "allusion" is a "fragmentary and periphrastic" recall of one text in another. "Echo" stands farthest from "quotation", but is closer to the medial "allusion" which it serves somewhat by proxy (Hollander 1981: 64).

Let us begin with the echoes. In the passage quoted above from *Great Days*, the gossip echoes Eliot's Sweeney "Fragments" and certain sections of *The Waste Land*. The talk about Julia's waning sex-appeal is particularly reminiscent of Eliot's pub scene in "A Game of Chess". Here is Barthelme's passage:

- Got to make the effort, scratch where it itches, plans, schemes, directives, guidelines.
- Well I mean who doesn't like frisky knees?
- Yes she's lost her glow. Gone utterly.
- The strains of the city working upon an essentially non-urban sensibility (Barthelme 1979: 159).

This "story" is not unlike that of Lil who "ought to be ashamed", according to the nameless gossip of the London pub, "to look so antique" at thirty-one (Eliot 1934: 35). This motif of premature ageing returns a page or two later in *Great Days* as the women settle down for a drink:

- Growing older and with age, less beautiful.
- Yeah I've noticed that. Losing your glow (Barthelme 1979: 161).

If one finds these echoes rather faint, or far too distant for immediate recall, Barthelme seems to help us further by way of allusion. His adaptations of certain passages from Eliot function as mnemonic pointers to their respective sources. The women in *Great Days*, for example, recall among themselves certain fragmentary details from past scenes of youthful love:

- He told me terrible things in the evening of that day as we sat side by side waiting for the rain to wash the watercolors from his watercolor paper. Waiting for the rain to wash the paper clean, quite clear.
- Took me by the hand and led me through all the rooms. Many rooms.
- The kitchen is especially splendid.
- Quite so.

- A dozen Filipinos with trays.
- Close to that figure.
- Trays with edibles. Wearables. Readables. Collectibles.
- Ah, you're a fool. A damned fool.
- Goodbye, madame. (Barthelme 1979: 163)¹

Although Barthelme's pastiche seems to disperse fragments from Eliot, we have little trouble recognizing their sources. If the Hyacinth garden or the Thames daughters may yet be no more than echoes here,² the repetition of "waiting for the rain" alludes to another *Waste Land* scene which carries the line, "...the limp leaves/Waited for rain..." (Eliot 1934: 45). "Ah, you're a fool. A damned fool" alludes, once again, to the pub scene and the cockney woman's "You *are* a proper fool, I said" (Eliot 1934: 35). Close on the heels of this comes the "Goodbye, madame" of Barthelme's woman, reminiscent at once of the "Goonight's of Bill and Lou and May with which "A Game of Chess" closes.

The echoes of, and allusions to, Eliot's "Gerontion" are scattered all through Barthelme's story. The lover who speaks "terrible things in the evening" (of a day? of his life?) is a figure who closely resembles Gerontion, "an old man in a dry month, /... waiting for rain" (Eliot 1934: 19). His ladylove, now well past her prime, is mortified by thoughts of ageing and the embarrassments that go with old age. She harps on her lifelong but futile preparations for what sounds rather like a sexual conquest: "—I was preparing myself. Getting ready for the great day" (Barthelme 1979: 157). "My demands", she complains, "were not met" (Barthelme 1979: 158), echoing Gerontion's utter disillusionment with history — significantly gendered by Eliot as "she" — and his senses. Again, Gerontion's "I have no ghosts" (Eliot 1934: 20) is as comforting a lie to him as the woman's Bally is to her: "My best ghost" (Barthelme 1979: 159). Gerontion's house, we recall, is "decayed", "draughty" and "rented". The woman in *Great Days* inhabits a house towards which her revulsion grows with age:

- Growing older and with age, less beautiful.
- Yeah I've noticed that. Losing your glow.
- Just gonna sit in the wrinkling house and wrinkle. Get older and worse (Barthelme 1979: 161).

Getting worse is, indeed, the larger point of Eliot's poem, suggested to us through its many references to war, disease, sensuality, urban-industrial squalor, and the eschatological foreboding of "fractured atoms" (Eliot 1934: 21). On a personal level, Gerontion's memory of deceptions, deliberations, ambitions, vanities and confusions completes the list. These concerns, and the anxieties they project, are by no means peripheral to Barthelme's women either. As one of them puts it, rather euphemistically I think, they never get tired of "Non-culminating kind

¹ Note, also, the repetition of the earlier part of this passage, with slight alteration, on Barthelme 1979: 171.

² Lois Gordon briefly mentions these two echoes from *The Waste Land* in her *Donald Barthelme*, 211. Apart from this, I know of no other recognitions of Eliot's poetry in *Great Days*.

of ultimately affectless activity" (Barthelme 1979: 159), day by day. One might take this to be a non-rhetorical complement to Gerontion's "What will the spider do, Suspend its operations, will the Weevil/Delay?" (Eliot 1934: 21).

The ambassadors of cultural senescence in Eliot's poem — Mr. Silvero, Haka-gawa, von Kulp et al. — eat, drink, hoard, and divide "Among whispers" (Eliot 1934: 20). In *Great Days*, the old woman's remembered house has "Many rooms" ("many cunning passages, contrived corridors" of Gerontion?), and her kitchen is equally well-stocked:

- A dozen Filipinos with trays.
- ...
- Trays with edibles. Wearables. Readables. Collectibles. (Barthelme 1979: 163)

The clinching evidence, however, of Barthelme's keenness to underscore the thematic affinity of his story with "Gerontion" is a line he lifts straight from the poem and uses it as though in common speech where a quote is customarily gestured by raised hands:

- Figs and kiss-me-nots. I would meet you upon this honestly. (Barthelme 1979: 163)

More parodic than citational, this reminds us instantly of Eliot's method: witness his unmarked quotations from Spenser, Shakespeare, Kyd and others in *The Waste Land*.³ Gerontion's words in the mouth of Barthelme's woman now bespeak multiple ironies involving her memory and ours, the inconsequentialities of private, enigmatic details ("Figs and kiss-me-nots") and the ring of truth or plausibility they seem to gain in literary reminiscence. At a juncture where both women in the story apparently speak alike, or rather speak *for* the other (are both of them old?), it is hard to decide whether the women, and Gerontion's statement in its altered context, speak of a universal experience. And how does this square with Gerontion's professed candour?

Let us have at hand the lines from "Gerontion", the context of the old man's declaration:

Think at last
I have not made this show purposelessly
And it is not by any concitation
Of the backward devils.
I would meet you upon this honestly. (Eliot 1934: 21)

Gathered into context by this passage, the woman's apparent *non sequitur* now has the air of a protestation. If "the little old man" has "not made this show purposelessly", nor have the women in *Great Days*. The "backward devils" of Gerontion

³ And perhaps to the point, too, is Barthelme's parody of another *Waste Land* mannerism: the coupling of oddments from memory in clipped, staccato phrases. Cf. "Trams and dusty trees" (Eliot) and "Figs and kiss-me-nots" (Barthelme).

are Dante's false prophets and fortune-tellers who are condemned to eternal backward gaze. Eyes filled with tears, they are forbidden to see the future. Do Barthelme's women share their fate or Gerontion's? (Gerontion hasn't yet forfeited his gift of foresight.) We can't tell. Be that as it may, Barthelme's women are one with Gerontion in enacting a vulgarized passion play in retrospect. Nothing, indeed, could be more apposite to their condition than Gerontion's laconic cry: "In memory only, reconsidered passion" (Eliot 1934: 20). Recall how the women, much like the Chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral*, recur to memory as hope and refuge:

- I got ready for the great day. The great day came, several times in fact.
- Each time with memories of last time. (Barthelme 1979: 171)

While contradicting this, the other woman can no more than append other memories:

- No. These do not in fact intrude. Maybe as a slight shimmer of the over-and-done-with. Each great day is itself, with its own war machines, rattles, and green lords (Barthelme 1979: 171).

Such memories, of this day or that, abide. Upon these, at least, both Gerontion and the women in *Great Days* meet us honestly.

What, in the end, do these allusions tell us? And why, T.S. Eliot? Barthelme, to my mind, is exploring through *Great Days* how far, and how long, private and poetic memories coalesce and sustain a dialogue in fiction. Given, further, that his "story" is not entirely new, or at any rate not newer than the subverted narratives of Eliot, Barthelme adapts the poet's method of "do[ing] many voices" rather than characters. The inaugurator of this tradition of writing, we recall, was Eliot, and not Beckett or Pinter to whom readers are apt to affiliate Barthelme's genre of the "dialogue-story".⁴ For what has changed since Eliot, if at all, is the technology of violence, *not* its language of boredom and horror, its abrupt shifts and continuities of pain. In the tradition of Modernism, it was Eliot who first composed such dialogues for his lost souls in disembodied voices. This granted, the irony of *Great Days*, I think, is instructive. No matter how necessarily, or calamitously "situated" we are in Postmodern times, the early 'Twenties of an Eliot can still speak occasionally, and meaningfully, to the late 'Seventies of a Barthelme. In memory such repetitions of cultural discontent as Barthelme's afford us a "forwarding' perspective".⁵ Hence allusions, and the uses of memory they continually attest. Allusions urge us to recognize the sameness which differences enforce in

⁴ In her review of *Great Days*, Diane Johnson, for example, finds the Beckett and Pinter parallels in the dialogues plausible, but concludes that Barthelme's dialogues "are naturally different from the work..." of either of these writers. See "Possibly Parables", *The New York Times Book Review*, 84.5 (February 4, 1979): 36.

⁵ I borrow this phrase from William V. Spanos. Spanos adapts Kierkegaard's crucial distinction between Recollection and Repetition, the former backward-looking, and the latter forward-looking, in order to comment on the dialectics of memory in "Dry Salvages". See William V. Spanos, "Hermeneutics and Memory: Destroying T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*", *Genre*, 11.4 (1978): 557.

lives and texts, and perhaps even in the labels — Modernism, Postmodernism — they bring with them.⁶

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⁶ Readers of Barthelme's *Teachings of Don B* will recall that he was fond of occasionally parodying Eliot, especially *The Waste Land* and its "Notes". His "Wasteland!" of course is the most extensive and thorough of these parodic engagements in which Barthelme speaks as one Mr. Lionel Bart who composes an "exegesis of his latest musical project" (Barthelme 1992: 206-208). In "The Art of Base-ball", Barthelme shows us how "the poem is essentially about the St. Louis Browns of 1922, a team for which Eliot... briefly starred at short" (Barthelme 1992: 67-68). *The Waste Land* is recalled again and the project of Lionel Bart's musical spoken of with gaming approval in "Games are the Enemies of Beauty, Truth and Sleep, Amanda Said", a serio-comic meditation on *homo ludens*. *Teachings of Don B* also carries *The Conservatory* (Barthelme 1992: 274-298) which adapts and reuses certain passages from *Great Days*.