

41 Duration

Hubert gave Charles and Irene a nice baby for Christmas. The baby was a boy and its name was Paul. Charles and Irene who had not had a baby for many years were delighted. They stood around the crib and looked at Paul; they could not get enough of him. He was a handsome child with dark hair, dark eyes. Where did you get him Hubert? Charles and Irene asked. From the bank, Hubert said. It was a puzzling answer, Charles and Irene puzzled over it. Everyone drank mulled wine. Paul regarded them from the crib. Hubert was pleased to have been able to please Charles and Irene. They drank more wine. Eric was born.

Hubert and Irene had a clandestine affair. It was important they felt that Charles not know. To this end they bought a bed which they installed in another house, a house some distance from the house in which Charles, Irene and Paul lived. The new bed was small but comfortable enough. Paul regarded Hubert and Irene thoughtfully. The affair lasted for twelve years and was considered very successful. Hilda.

Charles watched Hilda growing from his window. To begin with, she was just a baby, then a four-year-old, then twelve years passed and she was Paul's age, sixteen. What a pretty young girl! Charles thought to himself. Paul agreed with Charles; he had already bitten the tips of Hilda's pretty breasts with his teeth.

DONALD BARTHELME "Will You Tell Me?"
Come Back, Dr Caligari (1964)

DURATION

IN SECTION 16 I discussed chronology, and its possible rearrangement, in fiction. Another aspect of fictional time is duration, as measured by comparing the time events would have taken up in reality with the time taken to read about them. This factor affects narrative tempo, the sense we have that a novel is fast-moving or slow-moving. The adventure novel moves rapidly from one crisis to another – though the rendering of the critical situations may be artificially prolonged to increase suspense. The stream-of-consciousness novel lingers over every moment, however banal. A novel like *Middlemarch* seems to approximate to the rhythm of life itself, since so much of it consists of extended scenes in which the characters speak and interact as they would have done in real time; and for the original readers of that novel, buying it in bi-monthly instalments over a whole year, the correspondence in tempo between life and art would have seemed even closer. One of the disorienting features of Donald Barthelme's story is that it skims rapidly over the surface of emotional and sexual relationships that we are accustomed to seeing treated in fiction with detailed deliberation.

Barthelme, who died in 1989, was one of the key figures in American postmodernist fiction, whose stories continually tested the limits of fictional form. It is not, of course, only duration which is being handled rather unconventionally in the opening of this story: causality, continuity, cohesion, consistency in point of view – all the attributes that bind together the ingredients of realistic fiction into a smooth, easily assimilable discourse – are also discarded or disrupted. Motivation of the kind exemplified by the passage from *Middlemarch*, discussed in the preceding section, is not on offer. Barthelme implies that people do not act on rational motives, but in response to whim, chance and unconscious drives – that life is, in a word, "absurd". In this story he reports bizarre or alarming behaviour in a matter-of-fact, *faux-naïf* style that owes something to primary-school reading books and children's "compositions" (an effect generated by the simple declarative sentences, absence of subordination, repetition of words in close proximity, and omission of quotation marks). The characters are hardly more defined than Janet and John and their parents, and sometimes seem as witless.

The first paragraph is technically a "scene", but a very laconic

account is given of it. The idea of receiving a baby as a Christmas present does not seem out of order to the recipients, and the donor's statement that he got it "from the bank" is merely "puzzling" to them. They calmly consume mulled wine without pursuing the question.

In the next, one-line paragraph it is curiously reported that "Eric was born" — we are not told, to whom, or in what temporal relationship to the arrival of Paul.

The third paragraph describes an affair between Hubert and Irene. There is a good deal of information about the couple's bed — indeed, rather more than we need — but little about their emotions, sexual pleasure, means of deceiving Charles, and all the other details that we expect of an adultery story. We don't know whether Hubert's gift of Paul preceded or followed his amorous interest in Irene. We infer that she took the infant along with her to their assignments, because "Paul regarded Hubert and Irene thoughtfully." Then we are told that "the affair lasted for twelve years and was considered very successful" — a judgment more usually applied to a marriage than an affair. The sequence of a sentence describing a particular moment in time, followed immediately by one summarizing the experience of twelve years, is highly disconcerting.

Another character, Hilda, is introduced in a one-word paragraph. From the next paragraph we infer that she is a child living nextdoor to Charles and Irene. Her growth from infancy to adolescence is summarized in a single sentence of stunning obviousness. If the adults act like children, the children seem disturbingly precocious: while Charles tritely registers that Hilda is a pretty girl, Paul has already "bitten the tips of Hilda's pretty breasts". In twenty-odd lines we have covered enough events to fill an entire novel in the hands of another writer. This kind of writing does indeed depend on the reader's familiarity with a more conventional and realistic fictional discourse to make its effect. Deviations can only be perceived against a norm.

42 Implication

"Don't you think you ought to come away from the window, darling?"

"Why?"

"You've got nothing on."

"All the better . . ." Out of respect for her delicacy I closed the window with a bang that drowned the end of my remark.

She was smiling at me. I went over and stood beside her. She looked appealing, resting on one elbow, with her dark hair sweeping over her smooth naked shoulder. I looked down on the top of her head.

Suddenly she blew.

"Wonderful Albert," she said.

I may say that my name is not Albert. It is Joe. Joe Lunn.

Myrtle looked up at me in sly inquiry.

I suppose I grinned.

After a while she paused.

"Men are lucky," she said, in a deep thoughtful tone. I said nothing: I thought it was no time for philosophical observations. I stared at the wall opposite.

Finally she stopped.

"Well?" I looked down just in time to catch her subsiding with a shocked expression on her face.

"Now," I said, "you'll have to wait again for your tea."

"Ah . . ." Myrtle gave a heavy, complacent sigh. Her eyes were closed.

In due course we had our tea.

WILLIAM COOPER *Scenes from Provincial Life* (1950)