

Dead, but Still with Us: Citation, Repetition, and the Afterlife of Paternal Authority in Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*

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Abstract—Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975) opens with a paradox that the novel never fully resolves. Its giant father is dead, yet he talks, commands, boasts, and sulks his way across the countryside toward his own grave. Critics have read him as an image of patriarchy, of totalizing meaning, of the Lacanian law, and of postmodern play with language. These readings are valuable, but they mostly explain what the father stands for. They say less about how his power keeps working once his body has failed. This paper argues that Barthelme presents paternal authority as a discursive structure that survives through repetition and citation. Drawing on Judith Butler's idea of citationality, Michel Foucault's account of productive power, and Jacques Derrida's concept of iterability, it reads the father's speech, the embedded "A Manual for Sons," and the final burial as stages of a single process. The effort to bury the father, it concludes, repeats his discourse even as it lays his body to rest.

Index Terms—Donald Barthelme; *The Dead Father*; Paternal Authority; Citationality; Iterability; Postmodern American Fiction

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Barthelme in American Postmodern Fiction

Donald Barthelme (1931–1989) is usually counted among the central figures of American postmodern fiction. His stories and novels break up plot, mix high and low registers, and use clichés, lists, and borrowed phrases as building material. Beneath the comedy lies a serious interest in authority: who gets to speak, and why people keep obeying voices they no longer

believe. *The Dead Father* (1975), his second novel, gives that interest its fullest form.

The plot can be told quickly. *The Dead Father* is enormous and officially deceased, yet he is hauled across the land on a cable by a team of men led by his son Thomas. Together with Julie and Emma, Thomas drags him toward a place the old man believes will give him the Golden Fleece, the prize that is meant to restore his youth. The reader slowly learns that the real destination is a grave. On the way the travellers quarrel, tell stories, and pass among the Wends, a people with their own strange relation to fathers. Late in the book the narrative pauses for a text within the text, "A Manual for Sons," which gives sons advice about the fathers they cannot escape. By the end, Thomas has taken the father's belt buckle, his sword, and his keys, and the old man lies down in the hole dug for him. On the surface, this is a story about laying authority to rest. Yet burial in this novel never quite means disappearance.

How does a dead man go on giving orders? The question sounds like the start of a ghost story. In Barthelme's novel, it is closer to a description of ordinary family life. The Father is far from quiet. He complains, he demands attention, he praises his own past, and now and then he flies into a murderous rage. The narrator sums up his condition in a line that is both comic and sad: "Dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead" (Barthelme 3). The sentence turns back on itself, as if it cannot find a place to stop. That small loop, I want to suggest, is the shape of the whole book.

1.2 Research Problem

The criticism on the novel is rich. Critics have read the Dead Father as a real parent and a wider structure of fatherhood (Klinkowitz), as a figure of the hunger for total meaning (Malmgren), as the Lacanian law (Juan-Navarro; Davis), as a play of chiasmic reversals (Asztalos), and as a site of stumbling, slippery language (Olsen).

What has received less attention is the mechanism by which the father's power outlives his strength. Scholars have asked, many times, what the Dead Father represents. This paper asks how his authority continues to work after his body has been weakened, stripped, and finally buried. My answer is that it survives in language, through repetition. I argue that The Dead Father reimagines paternal authority as a discursive structure kept alive by citation rather than as a power owned by one man. The novel's project of burying the father therefore turns paradoxical. Each attempt to reject paternal authority borrows its vocabulary, and so keeps it breathing. In Barthelme's hands, the death of authority is less an ending than a change of form.

1.3 Objectives

This study has four aims. First, it examines how the novel separates paternal authority from the father's physical body. Second, it analyzes "A Manual for Sons" as the point where paternal power becomes a repeatable discourse. Third, it studies Thomas's journey toward the grave as a form of inheritance rather than escape. Fourth, it reads Barthelme's fragmented style as a channel through which authority survives, and not only as a sign of its collapse.

1.4 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following four questions:

1. How does The Dead Father represent paternal authority as a discourse that survives the death and displacement of the Father?
2. How do repetition, citation, and linguistic inheritance keep that authority in circulation?
3. What role does "A Manual for Sons" play in turning the Father's voice into instruction?
4. Does the attempt to bury the father reproduce the authority it seeks to dismantle?

The paper first reviews the major critical debates and sets out a framework drawn from Butler, Foucault, and Derrida. Three analytical chapters then follow the

Father from his speaking body, to the Manual, to the grave. A conclusion gathers the argument and points toward further research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarship on The Dead Father falls, broadly, into three conversations. Each has shaped this study, and each leaves a question open.

2.1 Fatherhood and Patriarchy

The first conversation treats the novel as a reflection on fathers and on the patriarchal order they embody. Klinkowitz sees the Dead Father as at once a particular father and an image of fatherhood in general, including the odd way that sons seem to need the domination they resent. Michael Zeitlin places the book among Barthelme's "post-Freudian allegories," in which the wish to murder the father is bound up with the wish to rescue him. Asztalos develops a related point through the figure of chiasmus, showing how quest and anti-quest, murder and rescue, life and death keep trading places in the narrative. Juan-Navarro's Lacanian reading, as its title announces, dwells on the pointlessness of patricide: the death of the real father does not remove the symbolic one. Robert Con Davis, working in a similar Lacanian frame, approaches the Dead Father through the paternal function, the place a father holds in the symbolic order rather than in the flesh. Together these studies make fatherhood the novel's central theme. Their main concern, however, is what fatherhood means. The present study moves the focus to how fatherhood goes on operating.

2.2 Authority and Totalization

A second group of critics reads the Father as a figure of total, organizing authority. Malmgren connects him with the large systems that claim to order experience, such as God, the king, reason, and history, and with the human desire for coherent meaning. He also notes that readers fall into a kind of paternal logic whenever they try to master the text, and that resistance to the Father must be rehearsed again and again rather than won once. Richard Walsh, as his title suggests, examines how the novel's innovative form carries eternal themes, among them the quest and the passing of the father. These critics show that the Father is more than a man; he is an image of authority itself. Malmgren's remark about repeated rehearsal comes closest to the argument offered here. Yet his interest

lies mainly with interpretation and the reader. The question here is different. How does such authority reproduce itself inside the fiction, when the Father himself is weak, mocked, or absent?

2.3 Language, Fragmentation, and Wordplay

A third conversation concerns Barthelme's language. Olsen's essay on Barthelme's "linguistic pratfalls" shows how his sentences trip over their own clichés and jargon, so that meaning keeps slipping away. Jeanette McVicker reads the "girls talk" passages, in which Julie and Emma speak in loose, drifting exchanges, as a displacement of the logos, the commanding word on which the Father's rule depends. Takayoshi Ishiwari, approaching the novel as parody, observes that the dead literary tradition it mocks remains strangely productive. The shared lesson of this work is that language in Barthelme unsettles authority. This paper accepts that lesson but adds a further question. Can the same language that unsettles authority also preserve it?

Existing criticism tends to approach paternal authority, psychoanalytic inheritance, and linguistic play through separate vocabularies. Psychoanalytic critics speak of the law and the name of the father. Formal critics speak of fragments, collage, and verbal games. Thematic critics speak of patriarchy. What remains insufficiently joined is the relation between linguistic repetition and the survival of authority. The claim here is not that nobody has noticed repetition in Barthelme. It is, more modestly, that the novel's recurring commands, manuals, formulas, and borrowed phrases can be read as the very means by which authority survives its own supposed destruction. Seen in this light, the fragmentation that critics have admired is more than a sign of authority breaking down. It is also the channel through which authority is handed on.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Judith Butler: Performativity and Citation

Judith Butler's work on performativity provides the main lens for this study. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler describes performativity "not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (2). The important words are "reiterative" and "citational." A performative utterance, such as a vow, a verdict, or a command,

does not take its force from the private will of the person who speaks it. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler explains that when such speech succeeds, it does so because the action "echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices" (51). Authority, on this account, is always borrowed. Every command quote older commands. A judge's sentence carries weight because many sentences have been passed before it in the same form. This idea matters for Barthelme because it loosens the tie between authority and the body. If paternal power were only the strength of one man, it would fade as he faded and end when he died. But if paternal power is a set of repeatable forms, such as the order, the prohibition, the lecture, and the boast, then it can outlast any single speaker. Whoever repeats those forms can make the authority work again. That includes a son who says he hates it.

3.2 Michel Foucault: Productive Power

Michel Foucault helps move the argument from the father as a person to fatherhood as a web of relations. For Foucault, power is not only repressive. What makes it hold, he says, is that "it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Power/Knowledge 119). Power makes subjects as much as it restrains them. In "The Subject and Power," Foucault notes that the word subject has two senses: "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (781). A son is a subject in both senses. He is placed beneath the father, and he learns to recognize himself as a son in the father's terms. Foucault also describes power as "a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions" (789). Power, then, shapes what others are able to do. It does not need to own them.

3.3 Jacques Derrida: Iterability

Jacques Derrida supplies the final element, iterability. In "Signature Event Context," he insists that a written communication "must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the receiver" (7), and the same holds for the absence of the one who wrote it. Every sign, he adds, "can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a

manner which is absolutely illimitable” (12). For this study, the point is simple but far-reaching. A father’s words do not need the father’s body. They can be quoted, parodied, and moved into new settings, and in each new setting they keep a trace of their first force. This is what the present paper calls the afterlife of authority.

IV. THE SPEAKING CORPSE: AUTHORITY AFTER THE BODY

The novel’s first pages describe the Dead Father as if he were a landscape. His size is mountainous, and his features are listed like the sights of a country. Then comes the line that sets the terms for everything after it: “Dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead” (Barthelme 3). Asztalos rightly identifies chiasmus as the master figure of the book, and this sentence is its purest example. The words cross over and return. But the crossing does more than produce a comic paradox. It quietly separates two things that we usually keep together, physical life and social presence. The Father has lost the first. He keeps the second.

The narrative makes this split plain at once. A few lines later we read, “He controls the hussars” (4), and the list of his powers goes on to reach the market and even the thoughts in Thomas’s head. The verb is in the present tense. No one in the opening pages pauses to ask how a corpse can command cavalry. His authority is simply stated, the way a law is stated, and its force comes from the statement rather than from any muscle behind it. The Father can be tied to a cable and dragged through mud. In language, he still sits on a throne.

His own speech confirms this. When he speaks, he usually speaks in the grammar of command, claim, and complaint. He insists that “all lines” belong to him (19), as if the very sentences of the book were his property. In one of his boasts he lists the things he once fathered, among them “the poker chip” and “the cash register” (36). The joke is that he claims paternity over the whole made world, including objects no one could father. The deeper point is that fatherhood here works as a claim. To be the father is to keep saying so.

Yet the novel does not let us see only a tyrant. In an early scene the Dead Father slaughters a grove full of musicians, a burst of violence that is terrible and absurd at once (10–12). Close to this rage sits a much smaller sentence: “A bit left out, said the Dead Father” (10). It is hard not to feel something here. The giant

who commands armies also wants to be included, like an old man at the edge of a family meal. That small hurt is important for the argument. It shows that his authority depends on others. A command needs someone to hear it, and a boast needs someone to answer it.

Butler’s theory explains why this dependence does not weaken him as much as we might expect. If authority comes from repetition, the Father does not need to be strong. He needs to be repeated. And the people around him keep doing exactly that. Thomas argues with him, refuses him, and humours him. Julie teases him. The men on the cable keep pulling. Each response, even a hostile one, keeps his language in circulation. His voice becomes the centre that all the other voices orbit. In this way the performance of fatherhood passes out of his mouth and into the conversation of the whole party.

So, the Father’s death does not end paternal authority in the novel, because that authority has already moved from his body into discourse. He is dying from the first page, yet his words do not die with him. They have found other carriers.

V. “A MANUAL FOR SONS”: THE FATHER’S VOICE AS INSTRUCTION

If the first chapters show authority leaving the body, “A Manual for Sons” shows it settling into a new home. The Manual is a book within the book, a short guide that interrupts the journey and speaks directly to the reader as “you.” Its short sections move from one aspect of fathers to another, from their habits and moods to their deaths. What matters most is the change of register. Fatherhood is no longer one man on a cable. It becomes a subject of instruction, a set of rules about what fathers are and what sons should do with them.

The Manual’s images are telling. “Fathers are like blocks of marble giant cubes, highly polished, with veins and seams placed squarely in your path. They block your path” (129). The father here is not a person with a history. He is a monument, cold and heavy, a thing set in place by forces larger than himself. The pun on “block” turns the father into an obstacle built into the road of every life. No single father is described. A whole category is.

The Manual then takes a further step. “When a father dies, his fatherhood is returned to the All-Father, who

is the sum of all dead fathers taken together” (144). This may be the most important sentence in the novel for the present argument. It detaches fatherhood from any particular father. A man may die, but his fatherhood does not die with him; it goes back into a common store from which new fathers draw. Read beside Butler, the All-Father looks like a mythic picture of citationality itself. Each new father speaks with borrowed force, the gathered weight of every father before him. The sum of dead fathers is not a grave. It is an archive.

Here a paradox appears. The Manual seems to be on the side of the sons. It warns them, teases fathers, and offers ways to survive them. Yet it does all this in the voice of a father. It lectures. It classifies. It tells its reader what to fear and what to do. The rejection of paternal authority has to be spoken in the very mode it rejects. So the movement runs in a circle: the Father’s authority produces a manual, the manual argues against the Father, and the argument keeps the Father at the centre of discussion.

Foucault’s account of power clarifies what is happening. The Manual does not simply describe sons; it helps to produce them. By telling the reader who he is, what fatherhood means, and what he must resist, it makes him “subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault, “Subject” 781). The son learns his identity from the text. Even his resistance is shaped in advance, since the Manual defines the field of “possible actions” (789) within which a son may rebel. Such power does not need a living father. It needs only a reader willing to recognize himself in the word “son.”

There is a quiet sadness in this. A son who opens the Manual for help escaping his father receives, instead, another father: a voice that knows him, names him, and gives him tasks. Still, the Manual has one great virtue as a vehicle of authority. It can be read, repeated, followed, mocked, or rejected, and in every case it remains on the page, ready to be picked up again. It is a script. With it, the Father has been transformed from a person into a reproducible discourse.

VI. BURYING THE FATHER, REPEATING THE FATHER

The plot of the novel seems to promise a clean line of escape: carry the Father, bury the Father, be free. The journey moves steadily toward the grave. Yet the narrative keeps circling back to him. The travellers’ talk, their jokes, and their quarrels return again and again to the old man on the cable. Even the Manual, which might have offered a way out, turns near its close to the question of killing him.

Its answer is striking. “Patricide is a bad idea, first, because it is contrary to law and custom and second because it proves, beyond a doubt, that the father’s every fluted accusation against you was correct: you are a thoroughly bad individual, a patricide!” (Barthelme 145). The murder of the father would confirm the father’s verdict. To kill him is to become exactly what he said you were. In Butler’s terms, the act would cite his accusation and give it new force. Violence offers no outside. There is a painful logic here. The son who most wants to be rid of the father is the one most tightly bound to his judgments, since even his crime would only be a reply to them.

What, then, is the son supposed to do? The Manual is clear. “Your true task, as a son, is to reproduce every one of the enormities touched upon in this manual, but in attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him” (145). This is perhaps the most honest and the most chilling advice in the book. The son’s freedom is not escape. It is repetition with less volume. The Manual even hopes that fatherhood “can be, if not conquered, at least ‘turned down’ in this generation” (145). The image is of a radio. The voice keeps playing; one simply lowers it. Derrida’s notion of iterability fits this moment closely. A repetition is never identical to its source. It changes in each new context, and yet it remains recognizable. The “paler, weaker version” is precisely such an iteration. The father is altered, softened, perhaps made kinder, but his form is carried forward. Resistance does not produce a clean break. It produces a new citation.

Thomas’s path through the novel acts out this lesson. Step by step he takes the Father’s belt buckle (47), his sword, and finally his keys (170). These are not only objects of power; they are signs of an office, and the office is changing hands. At the graveside, the son speaks in the imperative mood that once belonged to

the father: “You are to get into the hole, said Thomas” (175). The sentence is calm, almost bureaucratic. The command has outlived its first speaker and found a new mouth. None of this is shown as a triumph. Thomas does not gloat. He simply takes up the work, the way a grown child takes over a family duty that no one else will carry.

And the Father obeys. Lying in the grave, he says, “I’m in the hole now” (176–77). The line is simple and oddly tender, like a child’s report. Yet even here the dead man is still speaking, still reporting on himself. The novel’s attempt to put paternal authority under the ground shows how hard it is to escape a power whose strength lies not in a living body but in its ability to be repeated.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that *The Dead Father* separates authority from physical presence. From the opening line, the Father is “dead, but still with us” (Barthelme 3), and the novel shows that this double state is not a contradiction to be solved but a structure to be understood. His body fails, yet his statements, boasts, and commands continue to organize the people around him.

Second, “A Manual for Sons” turns paternal authority into a repeatable discourse. By returning fatherhood to the All-Father, the sum of all dead fathers, the Manual imagines paternity as an archive of borrowed force. It also produces the son it claims to describe, so that even his rebellion is spoken in a paternal voice.

Third, Thomas’s journey shows that overthrowing authority can repeat the very forms that make that authority readable. The son who takes the keys and gives the final order does not abolish the Father’s speech. He inherits it, in a paler and weaker version, exactly as the Manual advised.

Barthelme’s postmodernism, then, does not simply tear down traditional authority. It looks closely at a more unsettling possibility: that authority can survive its own destruction by becoming language. There is grief in this vision, the grief of children who learn that a parent’s voice does not end with the parent, and also a little hope, since a voice that can be repeated can also be turned down. In *The Dead Father*, the Father dies as a body, but fatherhood survives as a citation.

VIII. FURTHER RESEARCH

Three lines of inquiry could extend this study. The first is comparative. The persistence of paternal and bureaucratic power in *The Dead Father* invites a reading beside Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* and *The Castle*, where authority also works without a visible centre. The second concerns American postmodernism more widely. Larry McCaffery’s study of Robert Coover, Barthelme, and William H. Gass suggests a shared metafictional interest in inherited forms, and a broader project could ask how these writers treat authority as something passed down through language. The third and perhaps most urgent direction concerns gender. Building on McVicker’s attention to the women’s dialogues, a larger study could examine how paternal authority is redistributed between sons and daughters, especially between Thomas and Julie. Such work would move the discussion beyond a purely male line of inheritance and ask who else learns to speak in the father’s voice.

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