

**(RE)CREATING THE SELF: DELAYED IDENTITY CRISIS IN TONI MORRISON'S  
JAZZ AND DONALD BARTHELME'S PARADISE**

**Alexandra-Lavinia ISTRATE MACAROV, PhD Candidate and Alina LEONTE, PhD  
Candidate, "Ovidius" University of Constanța**

*Abstract: In this article, we argue that Donald Barthelme's novel Paradise (1986) and Toni Morrison's novel Jazz (1992) are similar in terms of the development of the characters' subjectivities. Thus, Simon and Joe Trace seem to experience a late-life identity crisis. Both characters try to redefine themselves by coming to terms with their pasts. In this article we will attempt to demonstrate that both characters somehow manage to skip Erikson's fifth stage of psychological development, only to reach role confusion late in their adulthood. The characters struggle to negotiate a consensus between their roles in society and the meanings and definitions held by the society for those roles. Furthermore, Simon and Joe experience similar stages in their struggle: sexual relationships with younger women, the fear of abandonment, haunting memories and presences and the trap of objectifying others.*

*Keywords: identity crisis, psychological development, role confusion, community, redefinition*

In Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, Violet and Joe Trace reach a moment in life in which their identity is in crisis and their love and marriage seem to fall apart. But Violet's and Joe's identity crisis is somewhat unconventional, since it appears later in life, instead of having appeared in their adolescence. Therefore, they somehow manage to skip Erik Homburger Erikson's fifth stage of psychological development, namely the identity cohesion versus role Confusion stage (Erikson). Nevertheless, this stage becomes an issue in their middle adulthood. While they both have their skeletons in the closet, their attachment to each other seems to deter or at least delay their confrontation with the unresolved things of the past. Nevertheless, the past issues left unresolved eventually surface when Joe kills his teenage lover, Dorcas, and Violet attacks her dead body with a knife at her funeral. Ironically, in order for the couple to find their balance and love for each other, they first need to go to death and deal with the powerful death drive. The novel *Jazz* deals with the negotiation of a complete, empowered self without which couple love is not possible. At the same time, the empowerment of the self can only be achieved if the characters deal with their 'ghosts', first by accepting them and their power over them and then by destroying them.

Although both Violet and Joe suffer from displacement, its manifestations are different. Violet suffers from double consciousness (Jones 1997: 486): she is both *this* Violet and *that* Violet, the one called Violent. She is both the subject of her life and an observer, when *that* Violet takes charge and she is unable to reunite the two parts. She is driven by the death principle and she will eventually have to murder one of the parts so that her self can survive. Violet is suspended, she cannot evolve so she develops another 'me' that does what the 'me' is unable to or even perplexed at acknowledging the acts of the other 'me' (Hardack 458). Richard Hardack points out that Violet has a disruptive ability to be multiple by identifying with other people, such as Dorcas, her mother, her virtual, unborn child etc. This ability nevertheless, in her case, is accompanied by "an internalized alienation from her body;

the perpetual inversion of expectations and identity; and a violent hysteria centered around her disruptive ability to create and identify with another human being” (Hardack 456). On the other side, there is Joe, who had suffered in his life seven changes of the self he is aware of. His identity is fluid and ever changing, Joe being unable to find stability.

According to Carolyn M. Jones, Violet’s and Joe’s problems converge in a common solution: choosing to love (Jones 1997: 486), as Alice advises Violet: “You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it. [...] Nobody’s asking you to take it. I’m sayin make it, make it!” (Jazz 88) This is one of Joe’s reasons for engaging in a relationship with Dorcas: he chose Dorcas, while he had not chosen Violet. Violet chose him. Derek Alwes sees in this need to choose that characterizes the Traces the reminiscence of their childhood, in which they were both deprived of the nurturance of their mothers. Not having a natural bond from the beginning, they need to go out and make one by choosing so (Alwes 354). Violet considers Joe “mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold on to” (Jazz 75). And Joe chooses Dorcas:

I *chose* you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that’s the one for you. I picked you out. Wrong time, yep, and doing wrong by my wife. But the picking out, the choosing. Don’t ever think I fell for you, or fell over you. I didn’t fall in love, I rose in it. I saw you and made up my mind. My mind. (Jazz 102)

Joe also finds in Dorcas the embodiment of his freedom of choice. He confounds the love for his wife with contextual necessity, since Violet is the one who pursued him, who made him marry her and who made him come to town, when he clearly was a hunter, a man of the woods. He considers the love for his wife as “falling in love” and the love for Dorcas as “raising in love”:

“Dorcas girl, your first time and mine, I *chose* you. Nobody gave you to me. [...] I didn’t fall in love, I rose in it.” (Jazz 102)

Joe evaluates the cost of opportunity produced by his marriage to Violet and his separation from his former life as a hunter and sees in Dorcas the pursuit and the decisions he was never able to make. This complex architecture that allows for the disregard of Dorcas as victim, also allows for the reader not to be appalled by Joe and Violet and their behavior. Both Violet and Joe undergo a series of transformations in the development of the self. The one who acknowledges these transformations is Joe, who does not blame Violet for their decaying relationships and realizes that his changing self might be accountable for that. Joe acknowledges seven stages in his emergent self: “Before I met her I’d changed into new seven times.” (Jazz 93) and blames this changes for his failed relationship: “This wasn’t Violet’s fault. All of it’s mine. All of it. [...] Made myself new one time too many. You could say I’ve been a new Negro all my life.” (Jazz 98) He regrets his betrayal of Violet and further compares himself to the snakes that “go blind for a while before they shed skin for the last time” (Jazz 98). The seven stages in Joe’s development might represent the seven stages he has undergone, in Erikson’s terms (Trust vs. Mistrust, Autonomy vs. Shame, Initiative vs. Guilt, Industry vs. Inferiority, Intimacy vs. Isolation, Generativity vs. Stagnation, Ego

integrity vs. Dispair) (Erikson). Joe, therefore, needs to undergo the fifth stage, the one he had skipped, in order to achieve a balanced self.

In the end, Joe realizes that he had mistaken the love for his wife with constraint. At the same time, Violet exorcises herself through love, through learning how to love Dorcas and how to offer Joe his freedom of choice. Joe also exorcises himself by acknowledging love. Their mutual acceptance takes in the end the form of dance on jazz music, which, even if scorned and unaccepted, seemed to reflect vivacity and love:

The music bends, falls to its knees to embrace them all, encourage them all to live a little, why don't you? since this is the it you've been looking for. (Jazz 136)

Individual freedom is essential for both Violet and Joe and for them love is a matter of choice. Joe's problem is that he had not chosen to love Violet. In order to love, he needed to choose something different than the choice that had been made for him, hence Dorcas. This is why it is easy for him to subsequently go back to loving Violet: because this time it is his choice. Similarly, the loss of choice for Violet is some kind of death (Alwes 354), which she eventually thinks that explains her mother's suicide:

Mama. Mama? Is this where you got to and couldn't do it no more? The place of shade without trees where you know you are not and never again will be loved by anybody who can choose to do it? (Jazz 86)

Elizabeth M. Cannon analyzes the psychological complexities of the characters in terms of desire. In her analysis, desire is the perpetrator of objectification, which kills both Violet's and Dorcas' subjectivities before the shooting and Joe's subjectivity after the shooting (Cannon 240). Cannon further observes that desire does allow for a limited subjectivity only to be able to re-inscribe the character as an object: the women desire as subjects to become objects of desire. Violet desires to be desired by Joe and so does Dorcas, who forces Joe into an extreme act of jealousy only to feel that she was an object of desire. Violet too goes to extreme lengths to feel desired: she tries to mould herself into becoming Dorcas, whom she believes to be the embodiment of Joe's ideal, desired woman. Furthermore, Joe is killed as a subject too because by killing Dorcas, he has no object to relate to as a subject in the dynamics of desire (Cannon 241). Cannon reaches the conclusion that female subjectivity is also a result of desire, but of a desire that is not inscribed in patriarchal authority and that in order to surface, it is necessary to perform an act of violence, such as Violet's, who self-excises *that* Violet – by killing her (Cannon 242). Violet finally chooses to be “the woman [her] mother didn't stay around long enough to see” (Jazz 150). We are left to wonder how Violet managed to kill *that* Violet and where she found the strength to do it. Joe too manages to regain his subjectivity, by understanding the objectifying and destructive power of patriarchal desire on female subjectivity (Cannon 245). In recognizing women as subjects, he understands that they “ain't prey” (Jazz 129).

Joe and Violet Trace got married at a crossroad in life, in which both had experiences rejection, humiliation and the negation of their identity standard (Jones 1997: 487). Their

level of self-esteem was very low and they found in each other someone to keep them from falling. But instead of evolving as subjects and getting over their losses, they cope through denial and substitution, moving away from their authentic subjectivity. The only way to unblock their subjectivities is for them to accept and embrace their losses (O'Reilly 1996: 369).

Unlike *Beloved*, where Sethe and Denver are haunted by a presence that accounts for an absence, Joe and Violet are haunted by an absence that accounts for a presence. While in *Beloved* the presence of the ghost explains and fills the emptiness created by the absence of Sethe's little girl, in *Jazz* the absence of Joe's and Violet's mothers can only be filled with love for each other. Joe's ghost is Wild, his mother, whom he saw once but who gave him no sign of recognition. This lack of recognition from her haunts him all his life and makes him want to pursue her again, like a prey. He also immerses in her cave in order to find her.

Violet's struggle for acceptance is embodied in the person of Golden Gray, whom she never actually met, but who remained in her memory from her grandmother's stories. Golden Gray represents the ideal of beauty, the strife for white skin and acceptance. He is "a present taken from whitefolks, given to [her] when [she] was too young to say No thank you." (*Jazz* 152)

Golden was the protagonist of Violet's childhood stories that showed a perfect life: luxury and care, which Violet never had. He was also a white-black man. Identifying with him meant to create an image of herself in which she is young, beautiful and white, which for her meant happy (O'Reilly 1996: 368). Her 'haunting' results in a passion for beautiful hair, materialized in her practicing hairdressing. At the same time, Golden was the reason why True Belle was taken away from her family and could not nurture her own daughter, Rose Dear. And Rose Dear's lack of nurturance was subsequently reflected in Violet's. Thus, Andrea O'Reilly argues that "the tricky blond kid living inside Mrs. Trace's head" (*Jazz* 152) is not the immediate cause of Violet's displacement, but a substitute of her lost mother (O'Reilly 1996: 369). According to O'Reilly, Violet is driven by the need to find a surrogate mother and her search only leads to a series of substitutions in her life, aimed at filling the empty space left by her mother: Golden Gray, Joe Trace, the parrot, her mother hunger and Dorcas are all squeezed in to fill her loss.

Moreover, feeling that she lacks her mother's nurturance and thus a very important aspect of a fully developed subjectivity, Violet rejects becoming a mother: "The important thing, the biggest thing Violet got out of that was to never never have children. Whatever happened, no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama?" (*Jazz* 80) This accounts for Violet's perception of her miscarriages as "more inconvenience than loss" (*Jazz* 84). At the same time, her mother hunger is so poignant that she 'mothers' birds and she tries to steal a baby. She actually comes to see in Dorcas the daughter she never had. In her strife not to be like her mother, she denies herself the gift of motherhood, which negates her identity standard as a complete woman. Having been denied daughterhood, she denies motherhood to herself.

Joe's defining moment, that produced the imbalance of his life and that would throw him in the continuous process of self-redefinition, is also connected to his mother: the moment when he internalized his mother's rejection. Like Milkman in *Song of Solomon*,

when he partly developed his subjectivity, went in search of his past, embodied by his mother. The only thing he expected from his demented mother was recognition, if not acceptance:

All she had to do was give him a sign, a hand thrust through the leaves, the white flowers, would be enough to say that she knew him to be the one, the son she had fourteen years ago, and ran away from, but not too far. (Jazz 35)

His displacement at not having been acknowledged by his mother would lead to a series of redefinitions of himself and to a split of his consciousness: “Mr. Trace looks at you. He has double eyes. Each one a different color” (Jazz 149). Hardack considers Joe marked by double-consciousness, like Violet. He observes himself do things he did not command: “I don’t know to this day what made me speak to her on the way out the door. [...] I couldn’t talk to anybody but Dorcas and I told her things I hadn’t told myself.” (Jazz 93) According to Hardack, Golden Gray is Joe’s double in the novel (Hardack 454). While Golden faces his father in order to be acknowledged and to patch up what he considered to be a severed limb, Joe wants to be acknowledged by, and reconnected to, his mother, Wild.

Both Violet and Joe are haunted by Dorcas, who, for Violet, is a combination of the mother who abandoned her, the daughter she never had and her rival. As a rival, Dorcas is both the embodiment of the ideal objectified Violet and Violet’s mirror, as the object of Joe’s desire. For Joe, Dorcas represents his mother, who never wanted him (Jones 1997: 487). Dorcas is the single answer to two opposite questions. While she ends Violet’s numbness, she also ends Joe’s perpetual change (Jones 1997: 485) or at least provokes these changes.

Violet finally manages to bury her mother’s ghost by realizing that she is the person her mother would have been proud of had she lived. She also buries Golden’s ghost by acknowledging her physicality and by stopping to try to change herself in order to accommodate what she believed he wanted. Therefore, Violet manages to confirm her identity as an empowered woman, even if she had not had a mother to relate to and to confirm her identity. Violet manages to mother herself by being true to her feelings and renouncing her artificial, self-imposed transformation and by accepting her need to be a mother. Joe only manages to snap out of his suspended state when he realizes Violet’s change and her subjectivity. He chooses her, which means that his male agency is confirmed and with it his identity standard. Their ghosts have been reasons for introspection and a means of negotiating their double consciousness.

In Barthelme’s novel *Paradise*, Simon, a middle-aged, Philadelphia architect, seems to suffer from the same anomaly, namely having skipped the fifth stage of psychological development. Simon, while on sabbatical, encounters Anne, Dore, and Veronica in a carnivalesque setting - they are modeling lingerie in a New York bar – and, impressed by their imposing facades and anxious to play the hero, he invites the hapless trio to move into the cavernous apartment he has sublet for the year. Barthelme’s parody of a male sexual fantasy is in essence, a display of the distinction between male and female language. The voices of the women empower them in a fashion that their bodies cannot do; their voices make Simon self-consciously uncomfortable about his body, and he has several, nervous dreams in which clothes do not correctly cover it.

Part of the topsy-turvy quality of the public life of the women and Simon is that clothing does not appear to be very significant to the women as a mode of disguise or self-expression, whilst Simon gets frantically focused on costume. Anne, Dore, and Veronica only masquerade as a paid performance. Aside from the fashion show in the bar, the only other time that any one of the women is referred to as intentionally provocative takes place when Dore, in a white lace peignoir, asks Simon for \$200.00 for her delinquent brother. Otherwise, they are usually referred to as casually but not provocatively dressed in unisex jeans, t-shirts, and sweat clothes. But clothing really is not fundamental to their modeling, either. When they model, their bodies are not used to display clothing; clothing is used to display their bodies. Costumes uncover more than they conceal, and the women find such exposure for pay degrading, a kind of prostitution. Their response to an offer to work the National Sprinkler Convention shows the point:

“What if they gave us raincoats?”  
 “It’s not raincoats they want to see.”  
 “What if I said transparent plastic raincoats?” ...  
 “Raincoats and body stockings.”  
 “No thrill in body stockings “  
 “Let them use their vile imaginations.”  
 “I just feel like a body.” (*Paradise* 142)

Simon, the celebrator of their bodies, attempts to cheer them up with an alternative view that only stresses their reification as commodities: “Look at it this way ... A body is a gift. A great body is a great gift” (*Paradise* 142). The issue is, however, to whom is the gift provided - to the self who inhabits the body or to the spectator who looks at it? For Simon to learn empathy, he must be unmasked in the Bakhtinian sense of having the mask of his “lofty pseudo intelligence” torn away through dialogic interaction with the women’s obvious shortage of intelligence. Their incomprehension of what Simon thinks significant, specifically their dismissive ignorance of history, is itself instructive. The mindless chatter of the women shows him what his history books omitted, that is, their perceptions, their emotions, their humanity. Certainly, at various points throughout the novel Simon explains his part in connection with the women as their listener - not confessor, analyst, or father figure - but merely, listener:

When he asked himself what he was doing, living in a bare elegant almost unfurnished New York apartment with three young and beautiful women, Simon had to admit that he *did not know* what he was doing. He was, he supposed, listening. (*Paradise* 59)

A relationship that begins with his god-like desire to refashion them in his image, ends with Simon being the one who is changed by them. As a result of his total immersion in female language, Simon develops from being someone who, as his wife once charged, worries

about the way women say things but not about what they mean into a sensitive, caring, and respectful listener.

But what Simon learns from the women is not the novel's most crucial lesson. That distinction belongs to the strength of community that the women produce and convey as a result of a shared language that is other than patriarchy, other than monologue, but also, it must be mentioned, other than feminist discourse. They wear the slogans of textbook feminism as awkwardly as do Snow White, Emma, and Julie. Those prescriptions for change are not enough to effect change since they are expressed in a univocal mode that displays male rather than female consciousness. It is not their radical reading that sends Anne, Veronica, and Dore through the door; rather, it is the imperative of change, spontaneity, and improvisation speaking through the very style of their speaking together that sets them, once again, in motion.

Similar to most of Barthelme's work, *Paradise* is a novel with a wild premise, in this particular case three underwear models move in with a middle-aged architect who is adrift in his own life. *Paradise* is comprised of sixty unnumbered sections, most of which are three or four pages long. While reading the novel we can outline a chronology of Simon's life, getting bits and pieces here and there, just like real life a puzzle of pieces. Taking it chronologically we should start by relating the past: Simon studied architecture at Penn with Louis Kahn, worked in Philadelphia and married Carol; they had a child together, Sarah, but the marriage fell apart and Simon relocated to New York. New York is the continuous present: Anne, Dore, and Veronica move in with him for eight months; finally, they leave, ostensibly to find jobs. As a final point, after their departure Simon remains in New York, where he is apparently seeing an analyst or someone who is asking him about his experiences. These pasts, presents, and futures are interleaved; but it's ambiguous, for example, whether the ten sections where Simon is questioned appear in the book in chronological order. While the sections set in the present seem to be in chronological order, several are obscure with reference to time; and the past is called in as required.

Coming back to the story at hand, we have Simon who has left his wife and his partnership at an architectural firm, and doesn't know what to do with himself. He rents an apartment and gets Dore, Veronica and Anne to move in. They consider that their beauty and sexual favors are enough to catapult Simon into hog heaven. Simon, however, has a more ironic cast of mind. For all the instances of titillation, he is aware his sojourn in New York isn't paradise at all. Outside, the city is full of crime. Inside, even though Simon is kept busy in bed and in conversation, his mind continues wandering back to his marriage to Carol, a lawyer who works for Philadelphia's mayor, and to the delights of architecture, an outlet for his creativity.

Barthelme's virtuosity as a writer of peculiar dialogue brings about equal elements satisfaction and intellectual dissection. Conversations in *Paradise* are brilliantly perfected interchanges interacting cliché and vibrant observations about contemporary society. Throughout, the author casts a satiric eye on such diverse subjects as liberal Catholicism, radio evangelists, the Internal Revenue Service, terrorism, food additives, socialism, electronic gadgetry, feminism, Vietnam and on and on. In Simon, Barthelme has given us a believable architect, a man who can assess a building for esthetics and usefulness. It's also easy to empathize with his concerns about aging:

Getting old, Simon. Not so limber, dear friend, time for the old bone factory? The little blue van. Your hands are covered with tiny pepperoni. Your knees predict your face. Your back stabs you, on the left side, twice a day.... The soul's shrinking to a microdot. We're ordering your rocking chair, size 42. Send the women away. They're too good for you. Also not good for you. (*Paradise* 59)

Objecting to the opinions of one of his teachers that there are no right angles in nature, he points to the sudden changes signaled in the cornstalk, the departure of friends, the telephone pole, and in political assassinations. Nature, to put it briefly, confronts humanity with losses for which it is unprepared. At one point, actually, Simon nearly crushes his hand getting a refrigerator down a set of right-angled stairs. The women, as well, he is conscious, will shortly depart. "Their movement through the world," he reflects, "required young men, a class to which he did not belong," and with whom, Simon ruefully acknowledges, they make love "in joyous disregard of history, economics, building codes" (*Paradise*, 178). Conscious of all three, Simon, in a gesture that fuses rage, bitterness, and generosity, constructs an egg out of which hatch three naked young men, each of whom, he imagines, is called Harry and so is indistinguishable from the others. Simon's action in luring his multiple Eves with an egg as opposed to an apple is enlightening in a number of ways. Firstly, it is, obviously, the punch line to a joke. A white plaster egg, eight feet tall is placed like a minimal figurine in the center of a New York apartment not to create an esthetic remedy to the uneasiness of the women who reside there but as a manifestation of the artist's stress and anxiety.

In a reversal of roles, the women do not hatch the egg; Simon shatters it with an iron-headed maul. But possibly most substantially, the egg does not precipitate the women's expulsion from Paradise; it indicates their wish to depart. The event, therefore, uncovers the dread of advancing age Simon has so far tried to refute and the reaction he believes women have to it and to men in general. Women, he acknowledges at one point, are like anthills "splendid, stinging anthills" (*Paradise*, 30). As a result he recognizes why, since all sculpture is in the end about women, even the artist Alberto Giacometti, who deals with them in wiry abstractions, bears a razor in his shoe.

A similar skepticism clouds the end result of a brief romance Simon has—he describes it as a detour—with a red-headed poet he meets at a fast-food diner. Similar to that of the models, part of the poet's allure is her childlike innocence. When he happens to visit, she meets Simon sitting on the hood of her pickup truck, consuming apple juice out of a paper cup and playfully altering the words of the nursery song to "Row Row Row your bed / Gently down the stream." Even though only ten years younger than Simon, she annoys him with the nickname "Pappy." Her opposition to enabling the affair to develop beyond playfulness appears molded by her feeling that her parents have been incapable of overcoming the personality differences in their marriage. Her mother has given her a Biedermier chair, her father an Eames chair in the shape of a potato chip. "That tell you anything?" she asks Simon (*Paradise*, 145). Her poetry conveys to him at least as much. Marked by repeated visuals of dust and burning barns, it discloses a consciousness of mortality that she, like Simon, has difficulty confronting directly. "My dust," she replies when Simon inquires her about the



images that appear in her poetry, “My excellent dust. You’re a layman, Simon, shut up about my dust” (*Paradise*, 157).

Beneath innocence, then, can be identified the deceits of mortality. Simon’s interaction with his daughter is restricted solely to telephone conversations, in one of which he discovers that she had become pregnant and spontaneously aborted. The poet, too, discloses something of the compromised situations of existence and of the trouble in coping with it. Describing her mid-western background and the naïveté often connected with it, she tells Simon of the resultant self deprecation it occasions: “If you’re not from Kansas, people in Kansas ask you: What do you think about Kansas? What do you think about our sky? What do you think about people in Kansas. Are we dumb? ... You find a high degree of sadness in Kansas” (*Paradise*, 157).

Simon encounters that unhappiness at the death of his father, whom he recalls with fondness as a large, calm, and, at 75, still-active man “playing the market and raising hell on behalf of the ADA” (*Paradise*, 111). In spite of a prosperous business career which did not conflict with his idealistic belief in the values for which the Second World War was fought, the father appears in Simon’s dreams as both inadequate and uncaring. He is apparently without friends - besides Simon and his mother, the funeral is attended only by an elderly couple who formed part of a golfing foursome in which his father played-and even in Simon’s dreams he is indifferent to his father’s achievements until shamed into paying attention. Though he approves of and admires his father, Simon’s own beliefs are focused more concretely in the practical world he characterizes by bricks and bricklayers. Nevertheless he claims to have a “tragic sense of brick” and is conscious that “even bricklayers get things wrong” (*Paradise*, 202).

Simon’s concerns present themselves in a sequence of bad dreams which expose a sense both of inadequacy and remorse. In one of these dreams, he is obligated to serve the inmates of a leper colony and so finds himself an outcast even among outcasts. In another his wife, Carol, drives a bus full of people into the front of his office building, distracted, she clarifies, by a passenger who insisted that she change a fifty-dollar bill into nine fives. The apparent symbolism of nine to five or the worries of the common workday are here underscored by Simon’s understanding that his wife is being shortchanged. In yet another dream, Simon finds himself at once limited by a gray, pin-striped jacket, and unprepared as he battles against the clock to give a talk he is scheduled to make over television. Simon’s difficulty with time and with the duties it confronts him with prolong at the same time to the image he has of his own potency. Though he is able to satisfy all three women, one of whom boasts of the number of orgasms she is able to achieve with him, he is forced to quietly endure a conversation of his inadequacies, one of which, he later senses, may be their opinion that he is not even a father-figure but “more like a guy who’s stayed out in the rain too long” (*Paradise*, 112).

Simon’s feeling of sexual inadequacy, however, is not grounded exclusively in an oedipal idea of the family romance but in a basic certainty regarding the infidelity of women, which he ties to an apparently unimportant childhood betrayal. Asked by the models about his first sexual experience, he recalls an event in which a teacher admired his school project but subsequently discarded it when another boy submitted one she judged to be better. What is significant, of course, is Simon’s understanding of the incident as sexual. Not even women (or

perhaps women least of all) can satisfy the imaginary promise of an ideal constancy of things against which men continue unsuccessfully to measure and so define their own automatically restricted lives, thus guaranteeing their dissatisfaction with its promise.

Though Simon boasts of being usually impulsive, he acknowledges the essentially passive character of his personality and views his experience with the models as a “quiet parenthesis” in a life normally marked by the same strains and contentiousness that affects most people. The judgment recaptures his description of the affair with the poet as a detour. “I regard myself as asleep,” he admits at one point, “I go along, things happen to me, there are disturbances, one copes...” (*Paradise*, 47) Experienced primarily in passive terms (“We could sit around and watch old movies on television,” Simon suggests as an alternative to one of the models who is thinking of leaving), the incomplete Paradise does not, then, so much provide a chance for reckless self-gratification as for restricted if in the end purposeless activity. Simon balances it to the day-to-day living that marked his abroad tour of duty in the Army, a phase he describes as one of well-intentioned aimlessness. The moral concerns underlying this problem and similar concerns of human behavior are reviewed in a lengthened conversation between Simon and a doctor, identified only as Q and A, a reductive device Barthelme regularly implements to designate the speakers in his dialogue stories. Though the doctor clearly disclaims any psychiatric credentials-psychiatry is not medicine, he says disparagingly-the exchange, which begins with an endeavor to gather a medical history, soon broadens into what unmistakably resembles an encounter between patient and therapist in which the roles continue to alternate.

Simon, like Joe, is faced with identity crisis later in his life and, like Joe, he also seems touched by a doubling effect, which manifests itself in the form of the three constructed eggs from which three naked young men hatch. The fact that the three men are not differentiable from one another and that they have been engineered by Simon, might represent his urge to reemerge anew, to start again, and to psychologically evolve again. Both Joe and Simon are estranged from their wives. They both struggle to find a balanced self and they both go through unbalancing events in the process. They try to rewrite themselves in a way, risking annihilation in the process. But while Joe’s crisis is resolved through murder, Simon resolves to creation. Nevertheless, the two characters are essentially similar and they rush thorough a delayed fifth stage of psychological development, which could leave them scathed.

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