

國立中興大學外國語文學系

碩士學位論文

唐納德·巴塞爾姆的語言奇境：

後現代語言遊戲與理解的意義

Donald Barthelme's Linguistic Wonderland:

Postmodernist Verbal Play and the

National Chung Hsing University

Meaning of Understanding

指導教授：周廷戎 Ronald Shane Judy

研究生：吳佳樺 Jia-Hua Wu

中華民國一〇六年七月

Donald Barthelme's Linguistic Wonderland:
Postmodernist Verbal Play and the
Meaning of Understanding

Jia-Hua Wu

Advisor: Dr. Ronald Shane Judy

國立中興大學 
A thesis submitted to

The Department of Foreign Languages
and Literatures

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Art

National Chung Hsing University

July 2017

國立中興大學外國語文學系研究所

碩士學位論文

題目： Donald Barthelme's Linguistic Wonderland: Postmodernist

Verbal Play and the Meaning of Understanding

姓名： 吳佳樺

學號： 7100012004

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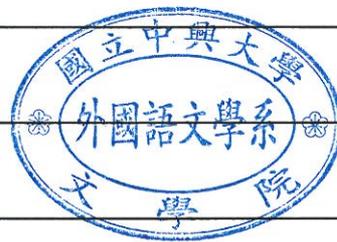
論文指導教授

周延戎 Ron S. Judy

論文考試委員

朱孝義 Chy-yi Chen

蔡佳瑾 Chia-chin Tsai



中華民國 106 年 7 月 19 日

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Professor Ronald Shane Judy, for his encouraging guidance and generous assistance. I am grateful to Professor Chong-Yi Chu and Professor Jia-Chin Tsai in offering constructive advices during my oral defense. Thanks for the encouragement and support from Professor Hannes Bergthaller, Professor Jiann-Guang Lin, and Professor Shu-Chuan Zhou. I would like to express special thanks to Professor Shu-Hui Tsai for the edification to my affection toward literary theories. Many thanks to teaching assistances Yi-Feng Chen, Xiao-Wen Chen, Ciou-Yang Hong, and Shin-Yu Wu in Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures in NCHU.

In addition, I am much indebted to my friends who offer kindness and generous support during my graduate study, especially Chin-Wen Chang, Peggy Pin-Han Chen, Janet Jia-Huan Wu, Chen-Chi Chiu, Stuart Yan-Wei Chang, Brian Day, Sophia Tang, Ian Yu-Sheng Xiao, and Peter Sheng-Hong Huang. Particularly, I want to thank Shu-Chuan Lin, Karen Yi-Jun Chen, and R. Christofur for their encouragement and support when I was depressed.

Finally, I want to thank my family, especially my sister Morgan Jia-Wen Wu and my daughter Yumi En-Yu Lin for their understanding and spiritual supports. Last but not least, I am grateful to DELL and NCHU for providing a great abundance of resources for research and the completion of this thesis.

中文摘要

唐納德·巴塞爾姆(Donald Barthelme)為美國後現代主義小說作家，創作許多短篇小說，其作品敘述特色為超現實以及片段式描寫，一般小說中的完整、傳統敘述並不多。小說結構具顛覆性，創造出文本詮釋不確定性與開放性。本論文將從語言理解及應用的角度，以巴塞爾姆於《巴塞爾姆的 60 個故事》(Sixty Stories)中的短篇小說〈遊戲〉(Game)、〈無：初步的解釋〉(Nothing: A Preliminary Account)和短篇散文〈無所知〉(Not-Knowing)作為研究文本，探討其後現代主義風格敘述所展現出的語言遊戲。

本論文分為三部分。第一章以漢斯-格奧爾格·伽達默爾《真理與方法》中「戲」(play)的概念探討巴塞爾姆〈遊戲〉中文字符號與接收者之間的互動關係。第二章從馬丁·海德格《關於科技的問題》中用於探尋真理的方法，以及雅克·德希達〈人文科學論述中的結構、符號與遊戲〉中語言意義產生自延異的遊戲(play)概念探討巴塞爾姆〈無：初步的解釋〉中意義詮釋的無限延續性。第三章則藉由閱讀路德維希·維根斯坦《哲學研究》中論及語言意義的理解即其應用概念，討論巴塞爾姆於短篇散文〈無所知〉中所傳達作者應用寫作方式，使讀者閱讀時對已知/未知事物產生關注，並且在閱讀過程中以新的方式思考和理解。應用伽達默爾理論閱讀巴塞爾姆的寫作，能看到讀者藉由閱讀文本參與了語言遊戲，同時讀者依據自身生活經驗與認知而展演個人的文本詮釋；而在德希達的解構主義觀點下閱讀，則彰顯作者於文本中運用文字結構的遊戲性創造出不同的敘述、詮釋關係。最後由伽達默爾和維根斯坦理論觀點討論意義詮釋與語境關係，點出巴塞爾姆筆下語言遊戲的應用與理解所展現的文本詮釋開放性。文學與藝術作為連結個人與生活的媒介，呈現作者對已知/未知事物的理解，同時作品本身也將影響他人對已知/未知事物的理解。

關鍵字詞：唐納德·巴塞爾姆，語言遊戲，後現代主義，作者-讀者關係

English Abstract

Donald Barthelme as an American Postmodernist writer wrote a great many concise short fictions in a surreal and fragmentary narrative. His writing style makes the uncertainty and openness of textual interpretation, and he created a new form of fiction which breaks with traditional narrative by its incompleteness and openness to play. This thesis aims to discuss the postmodernist play of understanding in Barthelme's postmodern writings specifically in his two short fictions (collected in *Sixty Stories*) "Game," "Nothing: A Preliminary Account," and his creative essay "Not-Knowing."

My thesis is divided into three parts. The first chapter tries to discuss the interrelationship between signs and the receiver of signs in Barthelme's "Game" through Hans-Georg Gadamer's idea of play in *Truth and Method*. In Chapter Two, the limitless continuity in the interpretation of signs in "Nothing: A Preliminary Account" will be discussed by my readings of Martin Heidegger's arguments concerned with the way to look for the essence of truth in "The Question Concerning Technology" and Jacques Derrida's idea of play in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Chapter Three tries to discuss the writer's writing as the application of verbal play has great effect upon readers, and it makes readers notice something "not-knowing" and bring a new way of understanding while reading.

Reading Barthelme's writing by the application of Gadamer's theory surely reveals the position that readers participate in the story's "horizons" by reading and developing readers' own explanation of text. However, reading Barthelme's works are also read from Derrida's deconstructive perspective, it shows Barthelme's manipulation of words and structure to create different form of narrative and word-meaning relationship. The play of signs is the way how the writer presents the game to the readers through writing. However, what the writer writes are things s/he encounters in the world, the knowledge obtained from life experiences through various "play." When readers read the text, they join the play in the

writer's work. After all, through the application of words, do people play in signs, or they are actually "played"? Through Gadamer's and Wittgenstein's ideas emphasis on the relationship between the meaning of words and the social context, the openness of textual interpretation demonstrated by the writer-reader relationship between the understanding and the application of language in Barthelme's narrative is discussed. Literature and art as the mediation between one and one's life, presents the author's understanding of things already known or unknown, and it also have great effect on other people's understanding of things known/unknown.

Keywords: Donald Barthelme, linguistic play, Postmodernism, writer-reader relationship.



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Introduction

Donald Barthelme (1931-89), the renowned American postmodernist author of playful, surreal short stories and novels, is known mainly for his concise, imaginative writing style. His short stories are collected in *Sixty Stories* (1981), *Forty Stories* (1987), and *Flying to America* (2007, posthumous) while he also produced four novels: *Snow White* (1967), *The Dead Father* (1975), *Paradise* (1986), and *The King* (1990, posthumous). Barthelme also writes other works collected in *The Teachings of Don B.: Satires, Parodies, Fables, Illustrated Stories, and Plays of Donald Barthelme* (1992, posthumous), and *Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews* (1997, posthumous). It's hard to see traditional plot and structures in his writings, but his play with the meanings of words instead. His writing devices includes puns, nonsense, slapstick, the transformation or fabrication of words, and he also uses repetition, improvisation, and variations on a syntactic structure. Barthelme's manipulation of words displays new ways of expressions, and also invites readers' new ways of comprehension different from conventional responses while reading.

Barthelme and Postmodernist Literature

There are many constructions of postmodernism. According to Brian McHale, he claims that "postmodernism should not be defined so liberally that it covers all modes of contemporary writing, for then it would be of no use in drawing distinctions, but neither should it be defined too narrowly" in *Postmodernist Fiction* (4). McHale announces that "Postmodernism is not post modern, whatever that might mean, but post modernism; it does not come after the present (a solecism), but after the modernist movement" (5). One superior construction of postmodernism is that it "produces new insights, new or richer connections, coherence of a different degree or kind, ultimately more discourse, in the form of follow-up

research, new interpretations, criticisms and refinements of the construct itself, counter-proposals, refutations, polemics” (McHale 4-5). So, what is clearly new in post-modernist fiction? Maurice Couturier explains in *Donald Barthelme*, “the novel’s language is no longer used to simulate a plausible discourse” (13). The postmodernist assertion of knowledge and truth, which are regarded as products of social, historical or political discourses or interpretations; therefore, knowledge and truth are basically contextual or socially constructed.

McHale’s main argument is that “the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*,” and he believes typical postmodernist questions “bear either on the ontology¹ of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects” (10). The postmodernist writing devices “includes not only the mixing of text and pictures but also the listing of questions,” which “makes it impossible for the reader to decide what the story is about, simply because no single speaker can be identified” (Couturier 17). As McHale notes: “Postmodernist fiction draws upon a number of strategies for constructing/deconstructing space, among them juxtaposition, interpolation, superimposition, and misattribution” (45). Those devices surprise readers’ imagination, mystify their intelligence, and invite readers’ exploration of private interpretation, regardless how extreme or unreasonable the interpretation may be (Couturier 17).

One of characteristics of postmodernist fiction is that “postmodernist narratives,” for McHale, “are wholly or partly allegorical” (140). The fictional world constructed out of an allegorical narrative; therefore, it is a world within a trope (McHale 141). According to Couturier, he notes:

¹ Ontology is the philosophical study about the nature of being, becoming, existence or reality.

The post-modernist text resolves nothing, and denies self-sufficiency and autonomy. It presents antithetical meanings or postures, presents and explores the range of the antithesis, of the distance itself (the distance between signifier and referent, description and image, subject and self), and leaves the reader (the reading), as Roland Barthes puts it, 'suspended'. Suspension is a favourite strategy of post-modernist forms of expression, and its playful nature, especially in the essentially comic fiction of Donald Barthelme, should not obscure the fact that at stake is a radical questioning of the symbolic process itself. (38)

“The essential trope of fiction,” from the point of postmodernist novelist Ron Sukenick’s view, “is hypothesis, provisional supposition, a technique that requires suspension of belief as well as of disbelief” (McHale 33). In view of this suspension between belief and disbelief, it is neither true nor false, or rather, it produces the fictional text which irresolutely stuck with the condition of being in-between. Postmodernist writing is not trying to make the distinction between true or false, good or bad, truth or untruth in the world, but to emphasize the “hesitation” among explanations. The sense of “hesitation” makes the uncertainty of standpoints, and it brings the potentiality of interpretation in writing/reading. The Russian literary theorist, Mixail Baxtin, considers that what postmodernist fiction literalizes or realizes is merely the metaphor of “worlds” of discourse. The discourses in the novel “discern the ideological position or world-view which animates it and from which it emanates: Every language in the novel is a point of view, a socio-ideological conceptual system of real social groups and their embodied representatives,” as Baxtin notes, the narrative in postmodernist writing presents the discourse with the language related to the society in reality, which provides the multiplicity on interpretation from different perspectives, and furthermore, “any point of view on the world fundamental to the novel must be a concrete, socially embodied point of view, not an abstract, purely semantic position; it must, consequently, have its own language with which it is organically united. A novel is constructed not on abstract

differences in meaning nor on merely narrative collisions, but on concrete social speech diversity” (McHale 165). Similar to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea of “form of life,” the meaning in the application of language shows the way how people use languages in certain situation or custom. “Actual social life and historical becoming create within an abstractly unitary national language a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems,” Baxtin says, postmodernist writing as “the metaphor of the worlds of discourse” makes the multiple voices come into view to have striking attention within the diversity of social ideologies (McHale 166).

Nevertheless, why is Barthelme a postmodernist writer? His writing techniques in the narratives surely include puns, nonsense, the transformation or fabrication of words, and he also uses repetition, and variations on a syntactic structure. On the basis of Brian McHale’s assertion, “we, along with Barthelme’s protagonist, are literally precipitated into a different world. And this other world in which we find ourselves is characterized by a different mode or genre of discourse; it is, in effect, this other mode of discourse, and the shift we have undergone is a shift between different discursive orders, different worlds of discourse” (164). Readers get access to Barthelme’s fictional worlds in his writing and they generally are surprised or shocked by the narrative, as if they enter a different world where people use language differently, and they encounter something confusing but perceive something new after reading. Readers know something different from they used to know, or they try to understand things in different ways. One of postmodernist ironists, Alan Wilde, writes that Barthelme, like the pop artists, “puts aside the central modernist preoccupation with the epistemology, and it may well be the absence of questions about how we know that has operated most strongly to ‘defamiliarize’ his (and their) work. Barthelme’s concerns are, rather, ontological in their acceptance of a world that is, willy-nilly, a given of experience” (quoted in McHale 26). Worlds that follow a different discursive paradigm have their own language. Barthelme’s writing provides his readers opportunities to have new understanding

of things which are different from what they think they know because his manipulation of words and the playfulness of structure of his works “estrangle” them from traditional modes of understanding and meaning. For Maurice Couturier, he says:

Whereas traditional fiction tried to study the functionings of human discourse and to evolve intellectual statements about the products of intuition, perception and imagination, this kind of fiction strives to reverse the trend: its appealing nonsense, which flouts all our learned discourses, cannot be reduced to tame structures. We need a new, enlarged form of intelligence to appreciate it, an intelligence that will tap the resources of the senses and the imagination we must discipline ourselves into considering literary works as basically non-discursive (as Derrida already invited us to do in *De la grammatologie*), in order fully to appreciate their iconicity. (23)

Barthelme’s postmodernist writings not only stimulate readers’ intelligence of the perception of things, but also encourage their imagination to enjoy the fictional world constructed by the discourse in different languages while reading. Therefore, Couturier concludes that “[w]hat Nabokov [Vladimir Nabokov] and Barthelme are probably both inviting us to do is to change our outlook altogether, to take possession of their texts boldly and without inhibitions – in other words, to read them creatively” (17).

The Relation of Barthelme’s Narrative to Modernism and Surrealism

In addition to Romanticist approach² to emphasize the effect on the spectator that Barthelme also brings attention to in his writing, some of Modernism and Surrealism techniques are introduced into Barthelme’s writings as well. According to Brian McHale,

² Romanticism is partly a reaction to the Industrial Revolution. Romanticist works emphasize the emotions as horror and terror, and it provoke an authentic aesthetic experience.

“Postmodernism is not post modern, whatever that might mean, but post modernism,” that Postmodernism is a movement come after the modernist movement (5). Some of Barthelme’s writing techniques like self-reference and irony exists since modernism. Modernism as the reactions to horrors of World War I is a philosophical movement that includes self-consciousness and irony concerning literary and social traditions. The modernist claim for anti-realism is presented by the experiments with the form and the application of techniques such as self-consciousness (for instance, fiction constituted by “stream-of-consciousness” narrative) or self-reference attract readers to the processes and materials employed in the creation of literature and arts. Barthelme’s narrative shows his play of structure in his writing; however, Barthelme’s way of anti-realism is not modernist self-consciousness narrative, but in surrealist style which presents irrationality and digression in his writing. In the early 1920s, the cultural movement, Surrealism, begins a huge shift in visual artworks and writings. Surrealist techniques present the expression of the unconscious, and the illustration of surprise, unexpected juxtapositions in works. Therefore, in Barthelme’s works, readers can recognize his employment of modernist narrative techniques such as self-reference and irony, and also surrealist techniques like the irrationality and digression in his narrative, as his inherited technique from Modernism and Surrealism in his works.

Barthelme’s writing devices make his narrative controversial as well because some critics view his style of narrative as nonsensical, disorderly, confused, and illogical. Lee Upton in “Failed Artists in Donald Barthelme’s *Sixty Stories*” asserts that “[i]n Barthelme’s art, failure is a working principle. To be haunted by a vision of greater possibilities, to fail to meet the demands of such a vision means, among other things, to have been blessed by the capacity of experiencing one’s imagination fully” (17). From my perspective, I disagree with what Upton calls “failure” in Barthelme’s way of narrative. Despite Barthelme leaves reader speculations and suspensions when they join the play (as game) through reading, he does not explain the context of the narrator and Shotwell clearly in “Game.” Barthelme gives no

precise definition of “nothing” in “Nothing: A Preliminary Account,” and he explains “not-knowing” is something as-yet unspoken in his essay “Not-Knowing.” I don’t regard those unsolved questions as failure. Barthelme presents the ambiguity, uncertainty, and suspension in his writing for, Couturier clarifies, “[s]uspension is a favourite strategy of post-modernist forms of expression, and its playful nature, especially in the essentially comic fiction of Donald Barthelme, should not obscure the fact that at stake is a radical questioning of the symbolic process itself” (38). Jerome Klinkowitz also claims Barthelme’s stories are “not conventional arguments in the dialectics of form, but imaginative volcanoes, radial stopgap measures to save experiences which might otherwise be eroded with our loss of traditional standards” (Upton17).

In this thesis, I analyze Donald Barthelme’s two short stories “Game” and “Nothing: A Preliminary Account” from *Sixty Stories*, and his essay “Not-Knowing” from *Not Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme* by reading them with my comprehension of Hans Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida’s theories of “play,” and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s thoughts about language games in *Philosophical Investigation*. In Chapter One, “‘Play’ and Game, Play the Game,” it shows how I investigate Barthelme’s short story “Game” through Gadamer’s idea of “play” in *Truth and Method*. The protagonist in this story is a soldier who watches a nuclear missile silo underground with his partner Shotwell. This first-person narrative story is full of sense of alienation because the interaction between the narrator and Shotwell is cold and detached. The narration from the narrator’s perspective implies him skeptical and possibly insane. Through Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutics and Stanley Fish’s “affective stylistics” which is one of Reader-response theories, I think Barthelme’s “Game” reveals the play of language game related to the readers’ (spectators’) participation. Gadamer and Fish claim that readers make their own works and interpretations on the basis of their experiences and emotions while participating in the work. By the writer’s writing and the

reader's reading, the reader is also a participant in the reading of the text, so the play becomes a "play," and the reader is a part of the fearful play involved in this language game as well, because what the narrator and his partner do in this story could even destroy the entire world if they lose control of themselves (or lose control of each other).

While in Chapter Two, "Know Nothing: The Truth is "Not" What You Think," the focus of this chapter is on the limitation and active interpretations in language. Through Barthelme's negational narrative,³ the narrator makes a list of what "noting" is not, and the description of the list which shows what is not "nothing" also constitutes the whole story. I think Barthelme's narrative in this story reveals the limitation to define "nothing" in language. The reading of Martin Heidegger's philosophical idea in "The Question Concerning Technology" and "The Origin of the Work of Art" which examines the essence of truth helps me with my analysis of Barthelme's "Nothing: A Preliminary Account." We are not certain about the truth we know is always true inasmuch as we do not know if there are things we actually mistaken for the truth. As Barthelme defines "nothing" by the list of things which are not "nothing," Heidegger also suggests that we always try to discover "truth" from concealment through the discovery of its unconcealment. The definition of "nothing" defined by the antonyms of "nothing" and these antonyms' synonyms represent the endless supplement of signifiers. Likewise, in his conception of deconstruction in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", Derrida proposes that the fixed and decidable present meaning in any instance of speech or writing never exists. Derrida argues that the play of signifiers is an uncompleted process along with limitless trace caused by differing and deferring; therefore, there cannot be a center which provides definitions of

³ "Negational narrative" is the way to describe things with denial, to define things through negation. "Negational narrative" is also employed in Barthelme's story "Paraguay." Barthelme writes, "This Paraguay is not the Paraguay that exists on our maps. It is not to be found on the continent, South America; it is not a political subdivision of that continent, with a population of 2,161,000 and a capital named Asunción," and "This Paraguay" he continues, "exists elsewhere" (McHale 48-9).

signifiers that never change. In consequence, there are different interpretations coming from different perspectives, and things can be defined by different ways of explanation. Even though both Gadamer and Derrida designate the idea of “play,” their ideas of “play” are not the same. Gadamer’s “play” puts emphasis on the understanding of language, while Derrida’s “play” focuses on the signifying process without ending in language. Furthermore, Gadamer claims a dialectical concept of “fusion of horizons” in hermeneutics, which implies the process of interpretation involves a “fusion of horizons” so the prejudices or bias arose from particular culture context are modulated, and it reaches the “common sense” as the fulfillment of mutual understanding. In disagreement with Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons,” rather, Derrida emphasizes the deferring of signifiers. In other words, Gadamer tries to point out the openness of interpretation represented in the play through readers’ participation of reading, and Derrida focuses on the deconstructive way of understanding by the play of language from the author. Reading Barthelme’s stories through their different concepts of “play” help me with the understanding of language in Barthelme’s manipulation of words and his play of structures which evoke readers’ participation and interpretation while reading. In Couturier’s words, he thinks “Barthelme deliberately tries to do away with rhetoric and challenges us to produce our own interpretations, our own images” (59). Readers who read Barthelme’s stories can feel free to develop any interpretation they like, because “there is no built-in logic (such as a chronology) to account for the various parts and elements” in his writings (Couturier 69).

To further my conception of play in negational narratives, Wittgenstein’s idea of language related to the “form of life” in his *Philosophical Investigation* is introduced in Chapter Three, “‘Not-Knowing’: Known Play or Known Played.” Barthelme’s essay “Not-Knowing” talks about the meaning of writing and art, the power of language, and the relationship between literary works and the world. In “Donald Barthelme on the Art of Not-Knowing and the Essential Not-Knowing of Art,” Maria Popova considers Barthelme’s “Not-

Knowing” “explor[ing] an essential aspect of writing (and, for that matter, of all creative work), the uncomfortable but necessary skill that [John] Keats famously termed ‘negative capability’⁴—the capacity to rest in the unknown and the unresolved, using it as raw material for creative work.” Barthelme explains that “writing is a process of dealing with not-knowing, a forcing of what and how,” and he also points out that postmodernist writing is not really difficult that people mistake it as unintelligible as the work of avant-garde (“Not-Knowing” 12). Couturier thinks Barthelme not only portrays a changing world, but also “helps to change it in his own way by assaulting it with multiple words and unheard-of phrases” (22). Barthelme’s postmodernist writing gives readers the impression that “reality has lost its power to force words upon him and his characters, that language is at last free from it and constitutes a private world where everything is possible at any moment” (Couturier 22). In addition, Couturier indicates that “[e]very language is historical: it does not become poorer or disintegrate; it only changes with the culture. Barthelme’s language is intimately bound up with contemporary American culture, and with the crises and changes that shape it” (28). Similar to Wittgenstein’s assertion that the meaning of word depends on the application of the word, Barthelme also believes that the meaning of word changes along with historical context. The way people make use of language is in connection with the form of life. As McHale notes in his discussion of postmodernist writing:

[T]hose elements of language, especially pronouns and other deictics, which have no determinate meaning outside of a particular instance of discourse, their meaning changing (shifting) as the discourse passes from participant to participant. Anyone can say *I* or *you*, and each person who says them means a different *I* (the present speaker) and a different *you* (the present addressee), depending upon the situation. (212)

⁴ The “Negative Capability” refers to the willingness to embrace uncertainty, live with mystery, and make peace with ambiguity.

Postmodernist writing responds to Gadamer's emphasis on the participation of play. For Wittgenstein, he believes that people use language differently in accordance with different customs. As for Gadamer, he claims that people have different comprehension of language because of different life experiences and literary competence they have. However, inspired by Aristotle's concept of "phronesis,"⁵ Gadamer puts great emphasis on this kind of practical wisdom, which refers to a capacity to judge and to take the right reaction to occurrences on the basis of different situations. The development of this practical wisdom needs the accumulation of experiences: to learn from each experience, and to choose the best way of reaction which is appropriate for the situation. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, McHale announces that "Barthelme is telling us here in effect that displacement is the nature of language, not only synchronically and superficially (along the surfaces and encounters of everyday life), but also in depth, diachronically" (202). Together with the change of times, there are changes in the use/interpretation of language at the same time. In addition to the meaning of language which changes with historical context, the interpretation of art also varied with its contemporaneity. Barthelme believes postmodernist literature and art is constructed out of "a complex series of interdependences," and he mentions Robert Rauschenberg's "Monogram" in "Not-Knowing" for instance. I think it shows that the interpretation of postmodernist literature and art are full of references, and that is why people condemn postmodernist literature and art as a "difficult" matter for understanding. The play and intertextuality of its works display the complexity of postmodernist literary arts; however, people cannot understand the meaning of the work unless they know how to use the knowledge related to the reference acquired from experience. They have to know the meaning of the reference first in order to build up experiences, and then they can recognize

⁵ Gadamer regards hermeneutics both theoretical and practical task, and hermeneutics is basic of phronesis (an idea from Aristotle). Phronesis is a practical wisdom which refers to a capacity for distinguishing, judging, and choosing. Phronesis enables someone to have rational reflection on what is useful for s/he, and this competence helps her/him make a right choice from the linguistic competence constructed by one's experience. Heidegger also explains that phronesis is a mode of comportment in and toward the world, way of being concerned with one's life, which displays a capacity for performing meaningful actions, the appropriation of meaningful actions according to its situation. People know how to comprehend and interpret things in accordance with different situations, and learn from every experience to have capacity for making proper judgments and making appropriate decisions.

and realize the meaning of the reference encountered in other places again. The understanding of things depends on what we receive in our life. People know how to use language in communication through their life experiences, and that is what Wittgenstein discloses the connection between language and the form of life. Therefore, reading “Not-Knowing” through my understanding of Gadamer’s and Wittgenstein’s ideas, Barthelme tries to make the connection between words and the world. Writing can deal with everything in our life. It’s not merely the voices which speak out loudly in order to disclose something as-yet unspeakable, but also the force in changes of the world, in other words, writing has the power to make the world different.

To sum up, the intention of this thesis is to contemplate the agility of interpretation in Barthelme’s play of language. Reading Barthelme’s works through the examination into the understanding of language by Gadamer’s hermeneutics and Derrida’s deconstruction, I think the interpretation of language is infinite and finite at the same time. The interpretation is restricted within the interpreters’ literary competence and life experience for Gadamer, but the interpretation is freed from the deconstruction which makes the differing and deferring. Reading Barthelme’s works through Gadamer’s assertion that “play” needs readers’ participation while reading which constructs the interaction between the text and the reader, and Wittgenstein’s idea that the relation of language and the “form of life,” it helps me connect the application of words to the world. Writing is not merely a play between the author and the reader, but a play between the text and the reader, a play between the words and the world since the death of the author.⁶

⁶ In “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes concludes that “we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148).

Chapter One

“Game” and Play, Play the Game

It is precisely facts that do not exist, only *interpretations*...

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachlass*

In Donald Barthelme’s writing, it’s common for readers to see monologues, fragments, signs, illustrations interweaved in the narratives. His postmodern writing style provides readers a joyful reading experience within one’s multiple interpretation and imagination based on different life experiences and literary competence. Readers create their own works by author’s words while reading the text. There is no standardized interpretation of the text. On the contrary, the openness of textual interpretation is represented.

Barthelme’s story “Game” is about two men called Shotwell and the narrator “I” watch a nuclear missile silo underground, they are both waiting for a certain event to happen and then they are responsible for making the “bird” fly. The “bird” stands for the missile which can cause great damage or even deaths. The Air Force gives them orders to shoot their partner if he fails to act “normally.” Since the narrator’s request for joining Shotwell’s jacks game is turned down, the narrator starts his own game by writing things in natural form on the wall. He keeps considering that Shotwell’s behavior is weird and “Shotwell is not himself.” However, the narrator also mentions that he himself feels abnormal in “I am not well.” Basically, the task which their commanders assign them as the “game” they are playing is deadly serious as long as they do not get along with each other, they might cause war. They both are also being “played with” by the Air Force commanders who left them underground. They do not know when they can leave the place, and they neither know when their lives underground will be terminated. They can only keep waiting for further commands, or, waiting for the moment that one of them has a nervous breakdown and shoot his partner.

This story “Game” is set in the Cold War, the political and military tension after World War II. The narrator is alienated by his comrade Shotwell, and the relationship among them is like America and the Soviet Union. They mistrust each other and find it hard to get along with each other. What they are responsible for is the missile, which stands for the nuclear weapon both America and the Soviet Union possess, and the capacity for great destruction. The ending of this story does not show what happen in the end; inversely, Barthelme provides an open ending for readers to keep speculating that what would happen if “Shotwell is not himself,” “I am not well,” or Barthelme’s writings bring readers’ imagination and interpretations in readers’ minds. If readers join the games in his “Game,” readers’ multiple interpretations of this short story and the enjoyment of language games are invited.

In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the caterpillar tells Alice to “Explain yourself!” and Alice answers, “I can’t explain *myself*, I’m afraid, sir. . . because I’m not myself, you see?” (39). Alice feels confused about her identity with the different sizes of her body in one day. Nevertheless, it’s a story about creativity and fantasy: this story becomes a fascinating story because of the author and the reader’s imagination interact together while reading. Alice just changes different sizes of her body in her dream, her fantasy wonderland, and she is confused with her own imagination. From this perspective, Shotwell perhaps not really becomes “not himself,” but merely the narrator’s illusion. The narrator becomes a person who has mental disorder, and he imagines an abnormal and dangerous event is going to happen.

Relativists believe that there is no absolute truth, which responds to Friedrich Nietzsche’s claim “there are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths” in *Human, All Too Human: a Book for Free Spirits* (13). Postmodernist works work with reader’s participation from the activity of reading. In *Truth and Method*, the process the readers read the fragments and define the meaning in mind at the same time is a never ending language game which Hans-Georg Gadamer calls “play.” This story “Game” presents lots of games for

readers to join in, and readers are capable of understanding Gadamer's idea of play worked within words as examples in this story. In this chapter, I'll show how Gadamer's idea of play is helpful in understanding how Barthelme's writing becomes a presentation of the language game in his short story "Game" from *Sixty Stories*. Let's play a game!

Whenever people see a sign (or a word), the play of sign system begins. How could a text become meaningful? A type of Reader-response theory, Affective stylistics, is developed by Stanley Fish who considers that text can only come into existence as it is read. The reader completes the meaning of work through interpretation, that is to say, s/he creates one's own work while reading. Literature is viewed as performing art. In *Is There a Text in This Class?* Fish argues that reading is "no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of the reader" (25). As an interpreter, each reader comes from a different background (gender, place, academic background, culture, history, language, etc.) and has different inner reflections while reading; therefore, the reader's life experience or literary competence decides his/her comprehension of the work.⁷ The reader infers the meaning of a text and makes one's individual interpretation, which might be influenced by the reader's personal emotions while reading as well. Like Fish, in *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer talks about a similar idea of reader's participation in reading, and he also puts emphasis on the sense of experience.

Gadamer, a German philosopher who made a great contribution to hermeneutics, claims that life experience is full of different prejudices, assumptions, and beliefs that are constructed in tradition. Tradition is a part of life, people have a sense of history through their understanding of life experience, and the meaning of history according to human comprehension and interpretation also affect history. The meaning of history comes from

⁷ Compare with Stanley Fish's reader response theory which asserts that readers have different literary competence and life experiences come up with different interpretations while reading, Roland Barthes thinks "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation," what Barthes focuses on is the text which is "always already written" because writing is merely imitation from others whose life experience and literary competence constitute his/her ability to comprehend and his/her skill to write ("Death" 148). For Barthes, "[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing ("Death" 147).

human comprehension and interpretation varied in different ages. Gadamer asserts that “the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it” (102). What people see and feel makes experience, and they have life experience and knowledge which makes the sense of history come into being. When people encounter something different from what they know before, Gadamer believes that their concepts or prejudices in mind will be gradually modulated and reached the “fusion of horizon,” accumulating new ideas and experiences in common sense.

While people are doing something, they receive messages from sensory organs and manage those messages which are transmitted to their brains at the same time. The brain collects, recognizes, and organizes those messages and further reorganizes those perceptions into information, and it becomes experience and memory. The process of human brain collects messages and reorganizes it into information is the process of thinking. People think through language, as Gadamer thinks that “[l]anguage has performed in advance the abstraction that is, as such, the task of conceptual analysis. Now thinking need only make use of this advance achievement,” so the use of language allows people to represent what they think, but the meaning of words are defined by gradually learned and memorized sign system people understand as languages (103).

Furthermore, “[t]he classical discipline concerned with the art of understanding texts is hermeneutics,” Gadamer asserts, hermeneutics structured in language (164). People read and interpret books or paintings through language. While reading or looking with admiration of art works, one encounters the language from the author, and s/he becomes particularly aware of oneself. Because the idea and presentation coming from other people brings affections, it is an alien “foreign” language to oneself which draws one’s awareness of oneself. The understanding of world is presented by language which helps the understanding of self as well. When new ideas appear and affect original cognition which is formed, it makes adjustment or new concepts and brings forth knowledge. If it gradually forms a standard operating procedure while dealing with particular events, it becomes tradition. The

meaning of literary works is conceptualized and redefined through the interaction between the reader and the text. When we read, we bring ourselves into contact with these other ideologies and viewpoints, and that experience⁸ changes us. The process of reading which communicates with different contemporary ideologies simultaneously makes the text a recognizable consistency of the time.

What is “Play”?

Gadamer defines “play” as the experience of art and “the mode of being of the work of art itself” in *Truth and Method* (101). “Play” is serious, sacred recreation. The use of words is the play of words, especially in metaphorical usages of presentation. Play has its own order, a to-and-fro motion (the interaction between the text and the reader), and this allows the text to continually renew itself. Gadamer thinks that “[t]he movement of playing is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition” (103). The process of the reader’s participation in the text means reading is a self-creating art (Gadamer 105). Not all readers’ interpretations are the same, and the interpretation one comes up with is never completed because the reader’s different life experience and different knowledge affects the way the text exists in his/her mind. As Stanley Fish says, “there is no direct relationship between the meaning of a sentence (paragraph, novel, poem) and what its words mean,” the definition of word is an endless explanation defined by other words, which shows the characteristics of play (32).

The true nature of play is self-presentation, which is represented by the participation of the reader, for as Fish emphasizes, “[i]n an experiential analysis, the sharp distinction between sense and nonsense, with the attendant value judgments and the talk about truth content, is blurred, because the place where sense is made or not made is the reader’s mind rather than the printed page or the space between the covers of a book” (36). As a result, texts

⁸ See the footnote no.5 for explanation of “Phronesis.”

need the reader's participation, for as Gadamer also emphasizes, drama is "a kind of playing that, by its nature, calls for an audience," which means play (also show and drama) needs the participation of spectator (also called audience) (109). In consequence, for Gadamer and Fish, "play" needs spectators'/readers' participation when it becomes a "play."

What is a "Game"?

What is a "game" for Gadamer? He remarks that one cannot have a game by oneself, since it should have the action of move and countermove (Gadamer 105). In Barthelme's "Game," Shotwell's behavior of playing with jacks and the rubber ball draws the narrator's desire to join his jacks game. However the rubber ball already responds to play, by the flexible texture and its mobility in different direction, Shotwell prefers to play the jacks and rubber ball alone because the ball already provides its countermove in this game.

Game has its rules, regulations, task, aim or purposive behavior. The purpose of the game is not really to solve the task, but to order and shape the movement of the game itself; in other words, the focus of the game is the process of playing the game (Gadamer 107). The task of the game, we can also regard it as self-presentation of game, is the player's achieving by playing the game. In Barthelme's "Game," Shotwell keeps playing his jacks game without the narrator's participation. Shotwell rejects the narrator's participation in the game, but his jacks game can still maintain without a partner because the rubber ball provides its countermove in the jacks game. Unlike play (also show and drama, all of them demands the spectator, which we recognized as audience), "[g]ames are not represented for anyone—i.e., they are not aimed at an audience. Children play for themselves, even when they represent" (Gadamer 109). In consequence, game is not aimed at an audience even though both of game and play need participation from the player.

Although there are differences between game and play, Gadamer still reminds us that "[e]ven a play remains a game," because play "has the structure of a game" because the

structure of play is like a closed world (109). Both game and play have regulations and its limitations within them. Players are only roles-playing in games, as Gadamer thinks “[t]he players play their roles as in any game, and thus the play is represented, but the play itself is the whole, comprising players and spectators,” they only represent in the play, not subject of play (109); in the meantime, the freedom of decision in game is the risk for the player, the subject of game is actually the game itself. While play becomes a play, player as player and spectator who participate in the play, the roles of player and spectator are here superseded (Gadamer 110). Accordingly, the player is at times the spectator of the play as well.

Reading Barthelme’s story is similar to reading detective stories. Readers investigate and follow the clues which the author provided, and then make readers’ own speculations. Barthelme’s “Game” presents several different games in this short story. Games such as jacks game, description game, definition game, role acting game, reading game, and even watching the console regarded as a kind of game reveal different and claims of game. Life is just like a game, and there are different missions and challenges from birth to death. People play different games every day. In following contents, those games in “Game” which show the “play” of lives will be explained.

When people talk about games, it is easily referred to as games or toys children play with, or any competitions in life. The first and most obvious game in this short story I am talking about is Shotwell’s jacks game. This story begins with the narrator’s descriptions of “Shotwell keeps the jacks and the rubber ball in his attaché case and will not allow me to play with them,” and the narrator “I” is trying to persuade Shotwell that it will bring more enjoyment if they play the game together (Barthelme 56). Every game has its rules, and those games are represented by playing the game. The rules of game make the game limited, though the player who has the right to make choice in a game seems to have freedom in game. In this short story “Game” as Barthelme’s play, the narrator and his comrades in arms Shotwell are the players of this play. Readers’ behavior of reading as events which make the readers’ world connect with the world constructed by author’s narratives. The play works

through the process of reading. However, Shotwell and the narrator's choices are not free but actually limited by the author's narration and arrangement of the plot. The game Shotwell and the narrator are playing is the author's device of language game. Shotwell insists on playing alone without the other's participation in his jacks game because the jacks and the rubber balls already responds to his move with a countermove in the game. Since he chooses to play alone, the game is limited in his own playing field he sets. The methods for playing jacks game varied, and there are different rules of different ways to play the game.

Shotwell decides to play his jacks game and rubber ball by himself, so the narrator "I" finds something else to do for having fun with. The narrator uses a diamond to scratch and write down descriptions of natural forms on the walls. Like the classifications in a dictionary, he writes things of natural forms such as "a shell, a leaf, a stone, animals, a baseball bat..." (Barthelme 59). He especially points out that "a baseball bat" is actually not a natural form which the narrator has noticed. However, the narrator keeps describing the baseball bat by "[t]he baseball bat," as the narrator considers, "is typically made of wood. It is typically one meter in length or a little longer, fat at one end, tapering to afford a comfortable grip at the other. The end with the handhold typically offers a slight rim or lip, at the nether extremity, to prevent slippage," which shows the language game works with endless explanation by words and the openness of describing things with its full possibilities (Barthelme 59). He provides a typical description of the baseball bat with common sense based on basic understanding of it.

Reading is also a game. Based on grammar rules and the relation between words and its meanings, reading has its own rules and its limitations. Readers' personal experience and literary competence affect what s/he reads. The narrator is like readers who read Barthelme's story and become creators after receiving words or signs from the text. Because Shotwell does not allow the narrator to join his jacks game, the narrator begins his own "description game" instead. The narrator writes descriptions of things in natural forms on the wall with his solitaire. The rules of this description game just like the interaction between the author and

the text. The process of writing is also Barthelme's "description game." The author makes one's own interpretation of the story while writing the descriptions in the text. In this story, the narrator writes down the descriptions of baseball bat in his own words; therefore, he makes his own interpretation of baseball bat and represents this play. The game to present the natural forms by words becomes a representation of things. Everything presented by words is actually representation, and the description of things will never come to an end, like the vocabulary in a dictionary. It is merely a typical baseball bat, but its descriptions can be varied with different styles in describing things by different people. The diamond which the narrator uses to write with is a two and one-half carat solitaire. It is interesting that "solitaire" can refer to a gem which is set alone, but it also means card games played by one person. It seems ironic that the narrator uses the solitaire diamond to scratch descriptions by himself on the walls to satirize Shotwell's jacks game after being turned down to participate the game together.

Watching the console is Shotwell and the narrator's game. The rules of this game are the regulations of "The Agreement," and they observe for certain events. Barthelme writes:

Shotwell and I watch the console. Shotwell and I live under the ground and watch the console. If certain events take place upon the console, we are to insert our keys in the appropriate locks and turn our keys. Shotwell has a key and I have a key. If we turn our keys simultaneously the bird flies, certain switches are activated and the bird flies. But the bird never flies. In one hundred thirty-three days the bird has not flown. Meanwhile Shotwell and I watch each other. We each wear a .45 and if Shotwell behaves strangely I am supposed to shoot him. If I behave strangely Shotwell is supposed to shoot me. We watch the console and think about shooting each other and think about the bird. (56)

Both of them have to watch each other in order to see if the other behaves strangely, and they are responsible for shooting the other when the one behaves strangely. They both take charge of keys and equipped with guns for the mission of watching the console.

The spectator of this play might be the reader or the narrator's assumption of "they." In the narrator's depiction, "perhaps they are observing our behavior in some way, sensors of some kind, perhaps our behavior determines the number of days. It may be that they are pleased with us, with our behavior, not in every detail but in sum. Perhaps the whole thing is very successful, perhaps the whole thing is an experiment and the experiment is very successful," the narrator thinks that they might under their observation of those who become the spectator of this play (Barthelme 58). In fact, Shotwell and the narrator are also the spectators of this play because they watch the console and watch each other as well; therefore, it shows what Gadamer means sometimes the position of players and spectators are superseded in a play (110).

Shotwell and the narrator watch the console and watch each other at the same time to see if there is any weird behavior among them. However, the narrator does not know what is called "behave strangely". Is Shotwell playing jacks and rubber ball equal to "behave strangely?" Or, the narrator writes description of natural forms on the wall is "behave strangely?" There is no standard definition of "behave strangely" and nobody told him what behavior is strange that he should pay attention to. Both of Shotwell and the narrator try using their arms outstretch in order to reach both locks, and the purpose of this behavior is not clearly presented for readers. Is that strange behavior? Perhaps they both try to end the long-term waiting for the sign which they see some certain events happened upon the console and then they can use their keys to make "bird" flies. What would happen after the bird flies is not mentioned. Barthelme leaves readers a suspicion. If the "bird flies" means a missile fired at the enemy, it might not the end of their mission but a beginning of war. The game will not really come to an end; however, it might cause another game to begin.

However, is the narrator's behavior of writing on the wall stranger or Shotwell's jacks game stranger? Both the narrator and Shotwell do things they ought not to do while they are on their duties actually. Perhaps doing those things helps them release the pressure and tension or just spend time dealing with the boredom. The narrator thinks that "I am aware that Shotwell regards my writing-behavior as a little strange. Yet it is no stranger than his jacks-behavior" (Barthelme 59). The narrator might try to behave normally for fear of making Shotwell suspect and shoot him, but how should a person need to "try to behave normally" if one is actually normal? Maybe the narrator himself also mistrusts his own mentality. No matter whose behavior is stranger or who is the person mentally ill, Barthelme ends with the uncertainty in the story, and he also leaves readers opportunities to have their own speculations; the whole story "Game" is a game readers are playing with the author and the text.

The narrator and Shotwell set new regulations while they are on duty. At first both of them behave "normally," the narrator depicts that their behavior is "painfully normal." They both try to behave normally in politeness, consideration, speech, and personal habits. However, their restrictions and observation on each other make them nervous and uncomfortable. Therefore, they both make new rules called "The Agreement," and the definition of normality are redrawn. They take turns to watch the console, have meals when feeling hungry, and sleep while feeling tired. The new regulations look like more relaxing but the narrator's mental status seems to become weird gradually. The narrator starts to state that "he is not well," and "Shotwell is not himself." They take turns to watch the console and the narrator thinks that "our system involves a delay of perhaps twelve seconds but I do not care because I am not well, and Shotwell does not care because he is not himself" (Barthelme 57). Readers might begin to consider what "he is not himself" means? Or, what is the true being of "himself"? The definition of "himself" should be recognized as Shotwell's personality, but what personality can really be regarded as Shotwell's identity? From the narrator's perspective, readers can only know that Shotwell is considered as a selfish bastard whose

character is flawed or who might have a twisted childhood (Barthelme 56). The narrator thinks that Shotwell has lost his sense of identity. However, the narrator does not really know Shotwell's past, so those suspicions are only his own opinions about Shotwell.

The narrator keeps thinking that "Shotwell is not himself, but I do not know it, he presents a calm aspect and reads *Introduction to Marketing* and makes his exemplary notes with a blue ballpoint pen, meanwhile controlling the .38 in my attaché case with one-third of his attention. I am not well" (Barthelme 58). He considers Shotwell's reading behavior is artificially calm because he wants to avoid being suspected of behaving strangely. The descriptions of Shotwell is only the narrator's hypothesis, and he also states "I am not well" as a warning to have a problematic mental state. He supposes Shotwell has some certain purpose to do with their keys and the locks which might cause trouble or something unknown to happen. The narrator also begins to regard Shotwell as a person who should have the same affection like himself by their situation underground for a long time, otherwise Shotwell will be a strange person. The narrator admits his mind set is really affected by their surroundings, and he does emphasize that "I am not well."

The narrator even does not know which city the missile is targeted. He only knows that Shotwell watches the console with him, they need to use keys to turn the switches in order to fire the missile while "certain events" take place upon the console. After one hundred thirty-three days waiting for certain events taken place, the narrator seldom feels interaction with Shotwell and begins to fantasize Shotwell's abnormal behaviors. He keeps thinking "Shotwell is not himself." If reader follows the narrator's perspective to observe Shotwell as a person who is not himself, it's like participating the narrator's game to define Shotwell as an enemy-like partner who prepare to accomplish one's conspiracy. The narrator tries to get Shotwell's jacks when Shotwell is sleeping, but he does not success yet. He mentions that Shotwell also tries to get his .38 from his attaché case but he never success. However, readers cannot really make sure if it is truth or it is only the narrator's illusion.

The narrator also compares his own behavior (writing descriptions of things in natural forms with solitaire diamond ring on the wall) with Shotwell's jacks game, and he still considers Shotwell's behavior is stranger than his. However, they are not really making each other shot the other one because someone behaves strangely. The narrator keeps being suspicious of Shotwell's behavior, and he also considers the task they do in the console is under surveillance. There is not only Shotwell and the narrator's rules of working regulations, but also the standard made from people who supervise them. He thinks that "[w]e have been here one hundred thirty-three days owing to an oversight. Although now we are not sure what is oversight, what is plan" (Barthelme 58). "Oversight" means omission or supervision. Perhaps they are on their duty at other place before the mission to watch the console. He continues notes:

Perhaps the plan is for us to stay here permanently, or if not permanently at least for a year, for three hundred sixty-five days. Or if not for a year for some number of days known to them and not known to us, such as two hundred days. Or perhaps they are observing our behavior in some way, sensors of some kind, perhaps our behavior determines the number of days. It may be that they are pleased with us, with our behavior, not in every detail but in sum. Perhaps the whole thing is very successful, perhaps the whole thing is an experiment and the experiment is very successful. I do not know. (Barthelme 58)

He keeps thinking "perhaps ..." and speculating about their condition which is under the security of "they." Some people seem to keep sight of Shotwell and the narrator, or it is all about the narrator's fantasy. Because they both appear eager to end the repetitive daily, scheduled mission and the boredom of times underground, so they try to suspect that if one of them can stretch out one's arms to reach both locks. Their action of testifying the direction of both locks is actually weird, and it might need more caution about their behavior, for a speculation about the possibility that one of them might shot the other and uses the keys to

fire the missile without authorization. They expect the ending of this mission, but they do not cooperate with each other. They just keep their distance between each other like cold war.

Barthelme uses repetition to present the narrator's unstable status of mind and his anxiety. The narrator is skeptical about Shotwell's intrigue in mind, which has something to do with the keys and the locks. However, he becomes too nervous that every normal action Shotwell does (like preparing food for eating) would be suspected and amplified by him. As Barthelme writes:

He says nothing. But he has made certain overtures, certain overtures have been made. I am not sure that I understand them. They have something to do with the keys, with the locks. Shotwell has something in mind. Stolidly he shucks the shiny silver paper from the frozen enchiladas, stolidly he stuffs them into the electric oven. But he has something in mind. But there must be a quid pro quo. I insist on a quid pro quo. I have something in mind. (60)

There are three sentences begin with "but," and the narrator insists on believing that Shotwell has something in mind. It presents the narrator's panic and nearly paranoid mentality that he even suspects Shotwell's revenge upon him; moreover, he also has something in mind. The narrator not only repetitively begins a sentence with "but" but also give expression to several repetitions like "Shotwell is not himself," "I am not well," and "we have been here one hundred thirty-three days owing to an oversight." Furthermore, each sentence has been repeated by the narrator for four times in the whole story of "Game." Gadamer thinks that "Inescapably, the presentation has the character of a repetition of the same. Here 'repetition' does not mean that something is literally repeated—i.e., can be reduced to something original. Rather, every repetition is as original as the work itself" (122). Every time the narrator repeats the sentences he has said before, the implication for his mental anxiety is deepening. Reader as spectator of this play focuses on his abnormal behavior as each time he regards himself as a person under great depression and repetitive states that "I am not well." The narrative brings readers oppressive and skeptical feeling while reading. Barthelme depicts the

narrator's irrationality with surrealist techniques, to develop the narrator's expression of the unconscious in his language. The narrator's madness is displayed in his repetition of sentences and his suspicion of his partner.

In this story, the narrator states that "Shotwell is not himself" four times, and he also declares "I am not well" four times. The repetition of those sentences makes the reader pay attention to the narrator's frame of mind, and his descriptions of Shotwell's performance of his duty are really called into question. The narrator is possibly delusional or serious paranoid because he mentions "Sometimes when Shotwell cradles me in his arms and rocks me to sleep, singing Brahms 'Guten abend, gute Nacht,' or I cradle Shotwell in my arms and rock him to sleep, singing, I understand what it is Shotwell wishes me to do. At such moments we are very close" (Barthelme 60). Perhaps the narrator is only fancying, because he has desire for interaction with Shotwell and he is eager to participate in his jacks game. Moreover, they are childish, whose obstinately selfishness with toys might cause the difficulty of their cooperation. He needs connections with Shotwell as a partner but in fact his wish to get along with Shotwell is excluded. He probably desires to be Shotwell who really own the jacks and the rubber ball. The name of Shotwell can be divided into "shot" and "well," which means "I'm not well" implies that the narrator is not Shotwell and he does not feel good in mind. He also declares that "[b]ut only if he give me the jacks. That is fair. There is something he wants me to do with my key, while he does something with his key. But only if he will give me my turn. That is fair. I am not well" (Barthelme 60). The narrator wants to be equal and wishes Shotwell could give him chances to play the jacks, and then he will think that it is fair to both of them. He nonetheless expects his requirement of participation from Shotwell in their mission while certain events take place, or he will be full of frustration in mind. The two sentences begin with "but" connected with the three "but" appeared at one single paragraph discussed in the last paragraph shows the narrator's persistent repetition of one syllable, word, or phrase. That is to say, the symptom of aphasia appeared on him. The narrator is under great anxiety and depression, as what he says, he is not well.

Gadamer emphasizes that “[i]mitation and representation are not merely a repetition, a copy, but knowledge of the essence. Because they are not merely repetition, but a ‘bring forth,’ they imply a spectator as well” (114-15). Shotwell and the narrator’s duty on watching the console can also refer to a role-playing game. The imitation and representation in role playing are capable of turning up the role’s true being. The identity of the player in the play becomes the disguised one for the time being, which no longer exists while the play is played. Martin Heidegger mentions the concept of “bringing forth” as well in his “The Question Concerning Technology.” He regards the way to reveal a truth as “bringing-forth,” which he defines as bringing-forth out of concealment into unconcealment/revelation. The repetitions in the narrator’s depiction that “Shotwell is not himself” and “I’m not well” represent Gadamer’s idea of “the transformation into structure.” The notion of “the transformation into structure” proposes that the essences remain and displayed now are lasting and true. The repetitions of sentences put great emphasis on the narrator’s transformation in his personal peculiarities after “The Agreement.” Gadamer also states that one has to leave out and to heighten the essences while imitating, because the particularities should be exaggerated in order to represent something which is able to be recognized when the player represents the play (115).

In Martin Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology,” he defines “Technology” as “a means to an end,” “a human activity,” in particular, it is “The manufacture and utilization of equipment, tools, and machines, the manufactured and used things themselves, and the needs and ends that they serve, all belong to what technology is ... Technology itself is a contrivance—in Latin, an *instrumentum*” (288). The “bird” as the euphemism for nuclear missile which would cause great damage and death of human beings is invented by humans. This man-made nuclear weapon brings human beings great danger, which shows “The destining of revealing is as such, in every one of its modes, and therefore necessarily, *danger*” (Heidegger, “Question” 307). In pursuit of knowledge, people know more and make convenience in life. Progression of medical care helps people live longer.

However, the exploitation of natural resource on Earth endangers human life. The scientific developments bring humans better lives but also great danger, especially the invention of nuclear weapon. Shotwell and the narrator are responsible for the missile, which represents human playing with big guns and the danger in technique.

The narrator's narration of Shotwell shows the narrator himself is not only the player but also the spectator in the play as well. As Gadamer defines that "[f]or the players this means that they do not simply fulfill their roles as in any game—rather, they play their roles, they represent them for the audience ... A complete change takes place when play as such becomes a play. It puts the spectator in the place of the player" (109-10). The narrator plays his role in the game as a player and he also observes Shotwell's behavior as a spectator who joins the play. The position of the player and the spectator is sometimes replaceable. The narrator repetitively states that "Shotwell is not himself," which shows that he has his own standard of defining the characteristics of Shotwell, that is to say, he knows what "Shotwell is himself" is according to his understanding and recognition through his observation on Shotwell. The definition of "Shotwell" for the narrator is different from the definition of Shotwell's role after "The Agreement." However, in "Shotwell is not himself, but I do not know it ... I am not well," the narrator himself does not even know whether Shotwell is really not himself or not, because the narrator himself is not well neither (Barthelme 58). The narrator thinks that "Shotwell is not himself" and he can hardly define himself because he is not well, which reveals the narrator as a spectator whose words are actually not that reliable. Readers are hard to tell if Shotwell is really not himself or the narrator is the only person who is really not himself or not well according the narrations from the narrator.

Conclusion: the Work of the Reader

To discuss the reader's behavior of reading of this story, the process of reading is already a game. As the reader participates while reading, s/he observes the events and descriptions in the story. Reading as an event connects the reader's world and the narrator's world by the author's words. Gadamer asserts that "[t]his contemporaneity and presentness of aesthetic being is generally called its timelessness" (121). In other words, time is suspended at that moment during the period of reading time, so spectator is able to examine the character's situation in the story and even suspect the character's state of mind. The author's world reflected through his/her words and further related to the readers' world. "Contemporaneity" does not mean "existing at the same time" for Kierkegaard, but refers to "the task that confronts the believer: to bring together two moments that are not concurrent" (Gadamer 127). Those plots in a story as "certain events" like Shotwell's reading, the narrator writes descriptions on the wall, or Shotwell plays his jacks and rubber ball...etc., seem to take place at the moment while reading. The meaning of words bring forth different interpretations by readers with different life experience in different trends of thought at every generation represents the sense of "contemporaneity" which connects the text with the reader at different age.

To relate Gadamer's idea of play and the Reader-response theory, Gadamer and Fish both put great emphasis on reader's participation. From Gadamer's notion of spectator (or audience), while the story as the play is playing, readers as audience who participate in this play, and the whole story as presentation makes readers (spectators) examine the true being of Shotwell and the narrator "I." Gadamer supposes that to participate means "totally involved in and carried away by what one sees" (125). Readers as spectators focus on what one reads and reflects, and this is how readers participate in the play of game. The interpretation seems limitless; nevertheless, Gadamer reminds that "the openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play, the audience only completes what the play as such is," which responds to the limitation of play (109).

Writer's free invention is actually conditioned by given values/binding, which means that the writer's work is the "presentation of a common truth" (Gadamer 133). As Gadamer asserts that "[t]he artist addresses people whose minds are prepared and chooses what promises to have an effect on them," writer's writing as experience and knowledge in one's own world to inspire and encourage the readers, thus "[h]e himself stands in the same tradition as the public that he is addressing and which he gathers around him" (133). The text as the work of art becomes the link which invites the continuity and connection between the work and the writer, spectator, reader, player, and the artist's worlds through the interpretation of the work by the spectator/audience who are ready for the play.

The interpretation of the play should follow the rules of the play, that is to say, the sense of text is still based on the text and the reader's understanding and one's experience which are also limited, not merely the interpretation comes from "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, recollected in tranquility," as William Wordsworth emphasizes in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, "it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (251). Barthelme's "Game" as the presentation of the story, the characteristics of Shotwell and the narrator are observed and recognized through reader's reading and comprehension. Readers make their own works and interpretations according to their experiences and emotions while reading because reading is an event which needs reader's participation (Fish 25). The play as game and show which represents itself interacts with its audience (also the player). The language game is played because the game is participated. The play becomes a play.

Chapter Two

Know Nothing: The Truth is “Not” What You Think

The essence of truth, that is, of unconcealedness, is dominated throughout by a denial.

—Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*

In the previous chapter, we saw that Donald Barthelme’s narrative shows the story presented by an unreliable narrator, and it also provides readers an estranged aura among characters. In addition to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s idea of play, which displays the play of readers/spectator and game, the openness of interpretation in hermeneutics was discussed as well. Stanley Fish’s emphasis on the importance of readers’ life experiences and literary competence showed how background influences what they comprehend and interpret. Both Gadamer and Fish focus on the participation involved in reading. In this chapter, I will discuss what “nothing” is and is not in Barthelme’s another short story “Nothing: A Preliminary Account” through my reading of Derrida’s idea of “play.”

What is “Nothing”?

How can we define “nothing”? What does “nothing” mean? In Donald Barthelme’s “Nothing: A Preliminary Account,” a short story about nothing with a special narrative technique, the narrator tries to make an uncompleteable list about what “nothing” is not. The list begins with “[i]t’s not the yellow curtains. Nor curtain rings...” and other things which are not equal to “nothing” (Barthelme 239). Barthelme makes use of many sentences like “[h]urry. There is not much time, and we must complete, or at least attempt to complete, the list” to show an urgent situation that something must be revealed before the time is up (239). He repeatedly tells readers “hurry,” “there is not much time,” and emphasizes “[i]t’s not the

yellow curtains.” The list seems endless so readers keep learning what “nothing” is not. Thus, by means of negation, the narrator begins an endless explanation of what “nothing” is not. The narrator commences with mentioning his list of what nothing is not as a concept of noun, and then discusses “what does nothing *do*?” as a verb (Barthelme 241). Furthermore, the narrator mentions Martin Heidegger’s idea of “Nothing (s.) nothings (v.)” and reveals that this task of defining nothing by the list is a mission which cannot be finished. Therefore, the list is actually writing of nonsense because it is merely endless playing of signifier. For the narrator, nothing is the thing we cannot reach or define by language; even death is not “nothing.”

From the subtitle of this story, “a preliminary account,” it apparently emphasizes the limit of definition through language. “Preliminary” means some steps before a complete account and is offered as preparatory or introductory measure. It shows the significance of making the list of things that are not “nothing” as the narrator commences to discuss what is “nothing,” and it also emphasizes the rules of language should be followed if one tries to use language to define things. The “pre” stands for “before,” and the adjective “liminal” refers to “threshold.” “Threshold” means the beginning or the thing on the ground for differentiating between rooms. I think “preliminary” becomes a preview of this story because the method of defining “nothing” for the narrator is to make a list in order to clarify things which are not “nothing,” and it connects with Heidegger’s way to reveal the essence of truth from concealment through the discovery of unconcealment. “Account” stands for an arrangement with bank to keep money, or a written or spoken description of an event. In this story, “account” symbolizes the narrator’s depiction of the list, and the things on the list like money saved in a bank are collected materials for definition of “nothing” through language. Barthelme is playing on the significations of “nothing” which is represented by the play of the structure within language. So “nothing” has never been presented even as the story comes to the end, even as the narrator points out a lot of things are not “nothing” on the list. The list will still remain even the person who makes the list is included in the list. For readers,

“nothing” is still not-knowing since there is no standard definition for explaining it through language. Things on the list of not “nothing” can be anything, but “nothing” is still something else which is still absent on the endless list.

In this chapter, first I intend to elaborate what Barthelme’s “nothing” means through Martin Heidegger’s notion of truth in his “The Origin of the Work of Art” and “The Question Concerning Technology,” and then discuss the limitation of language based on Jacques Derrida’s ideas of play and structure in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences.” According to Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art,” what Barthelme thinks “nothing” is is truth, or we can also call it “facts.” We clarify truth to our knowledge, and we recognize things from classification and their differences. We think through language and try to make a list of what “nothing” is not, through the negation of what “nothing” is, the revealing process of truth is moving on. Like Barthelme writes in the beginning of his story, “It’s not the yellow curtains. Nor curtain ring. Nor is it bran in a bucket, not bran, nor is it the large, reddish farm animal eating the bran from the bucket, the man who placed the bran in the bucket, his wife, or the raisin-faced banker who’s about to foreclose on the farm,” none of these stuffs like curtain, curtain ring, bran, man, or the man’s wife are nothing (239). The way to define what nothing is just like the way one tries to find the essence of truth, and in consequence the concealment of truth helps with making the certainty of what truth is not. This story shows the narrator’s use of denial to define what “nothing” is, in search of the truth of nothingness through negative approach in language.

Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher and also a seminal thinker of philosophical hermeneutics, asserts that there is always a process of concealment when we try to find the essence of truth. According to Heidegger’s concept, the concealment is the denial of truth which always remains in truth. Through the process of revealing, truth is gradually and partially revealed as unconcealment. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” he explains that “[t]his denial, in the form of a double concealment, belongs to the essence of truth as unconcealedness. Truth, in its essence, is un-truth” (Heidegger, 176). Heidegger thinks “the

essence of truth is un-truth” but does not regard truth as falsehood but considering truth as also its opposite⁹ (Heidegger, “Origin” 176). In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger points out that truth includes concealment and unconcealment. The unconcealment brings out truth; however, there is no absolute truth, there are only opinions or fact of every description made from different perspectives. The thing we call “truth” is merely the correctness of representation that goes along with possibilities of concealment (Heidegger, “Question” 294). Similar to the narrative Barthelme constructs, he uses the negational narrative to define the meaning of “nothing” in language, the list of what nothing is not can be regarded as the “unconcealment” of “nothing” which identifies what is not equal to nothing by way of denials.

Heidegger says, “[t]he essence of truth, that is, of unconcealedness, is dominated throughout by a denial... This denial, in the form of a double concealment, belongs to the essence of truth as unconcealedness,” which reinforces Barthelme’s performance of truth through negation (“Origin” 176). The “unconcealedness” is gradually revealed by “denial”; therefore, Heidegger thinks that “Truth, in its essence, is un-truth” (“Origin” 176). For example, sometimes people use irony to express the opposite of what they mean or to show their thoughts indirectly. However, Heidegger explains that “[t]he proposition ‘the essence of truth is un-truth’ is not, however, intended to state that truth is at bottom falsehood. Nor does it mean that truth is never itself but, viewed dialectically, is also its opposite,” and this can help explain why Barthelme tries to make a list of what “nothing” is not—he defines what “something” (nothing) is by what “nothing” is not; that is to say, he reveals what nothing’s truth is by defining its un-truth (Heidegger, “Origin” 176). In this story, therefore, the narrator says “[q]uickly, quickly. Heidegger suggests that ‘Nothing (s.) nothings (v.)’ ... (What Heidegger thinks about nothing is not nothing),” showing that Heidegger thinks “nothing” is not what he means by nothing, and what Heidegger thinks is that “not

⁹ I don’t think Heidegger is a dualist because he considers that truth includes concealment and unconcealment, the unconcealment is on the inside of the essence of truth.

nothing” equals “nothing” (Barthelme 241). Therefore, nothing can be everything (which is not nothing)!

Heidegger also talks about the process of negation revealing truth in “The Question Concerning Technology” and he notes, “[e]nframing, as a challenging-forth into ordering, sends into a way of revealing. Enframing is an ordaining of destining, as is every way of revealing. Bringing-forth, *poiesis* (“making”),¹⁰ is also a destining in this sense” (“Question” 306). He believes that “enframing” not only “conceals a former way of revealing, bringing-forth” but also “conceals revealing itself and with it that wherein unconcealment, i.e., truth, comes to pass,” so “enframing” will lead to an unstable truth (Heidegger, “Question” 309). In consequence, the essence of technology as the destining of revealing, is viewed as extreme danger for Heidegger. We cannot make sure the truth we know so far is always real, since we also cannot make sure if there are things we misunderstand as concealment inside knowledge.

From my reading of Heidegger’s writing, his idea of “enframing, as a challenging-forth into ordering, sends into a way of revealing” means enframing as an approach to the unconcealment of truth must be compelled with an order. The order leads to a mode of logical thinking, like grammar rules in language, framing are restrictions necessary for communication. Heidegger supposes that the process of revealing a truth, enframing it, is a destining, and he claims that “As a destining, it banishes man into that kind of revealing that is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing,” so the process of revealing a truth is a never-ending journey (Heidegger, “Question” 309). In the process of clarifying a truth within language, it must follow the rules of language, so people can discuss or comprehend the unconcealment or revelation of truth. Compared with Jacques Derrida’s concept of Structure, things that make sense or are comprehensible must be presented with particular rules at first. “Enframing” things is to make the concealed come to form in a particular structure and then achieve unconcealment. Like writing as a technology or an ability to represent things, it must follow the rules of writing and be formed in appropriate language structures while expressing the meaning of

¹⁰ In Philosophy, *poiesis* means “make,” “produce,” or “create,” as the activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before.

words, or it might cause misunderstanding and difficulty of comprehension. Writing as a kind of inscription produces the trace which enables Derrida's notion of "différance" among signs. "Différance" talks about the relationship between text and meaning, and this relationship means "difference and deferral of meaning" because the meaning of a sign is constituted by other different signs, which include its synonyms and antonyms. The binary opposition between synonyms and antonyms here is reinforced, for to differ and to defer, a sign always refers to other signs which are different from the original sign itself; therefore, it contains a trace of what it is not, and the meaning of the sign is forever postponed.

However, for Heidegger, "enframing is an ordaining of destining," and it shows the limits of the destining which holds sway the process of revealing the truth through ordaining the order among the structure of language. The "ordaining of destining" seems to totalize and make a certain stable language structure, while Derrida, by contrast, believes that *différance* among signs makes the play of language ceaseless and polysemic! Derrida proclaims that "a central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute. The substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it" (353). Derrida believes that the meaning of a sign has no "central presence" which provides a direct certainty in the meaning of sign because there are always substitutions (other words, signs) that can mark its meanings. He thinks:

[T]here is something missing from it [the field of *play*]: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions ... that this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*. One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence—this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*.¹¹ (Derrida 365)

¹¹ Speaking of Derrida's concept of totalization, he explains that "[t]otalization, therefore, is sometimes defined as *useless*, and sometimes as *impossible*" ("Sign" 365). The definition of nothing by means of giving an explanation in language will never completely be finished because "language and a finite language excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite" (Derrida 365). On account of every sign relates to other signs (substitutions), there is never immobility in the signifying chain. The signifier will not absolutely correspond to one signified.

The center does not exist because there is always a surplus meaning which can replace the sign as supplement, or it can also be said that the center is replaced by other signs as a supplement itself. Therefore, he demonstrates his assertion that “it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play” (Derrida 353-54). In consequence, the sign system works with the endless supplement of the signified, the signifier can never refer to only one fixed signified, so Derrida’s notion of “différance” shows the sign system works with the relation and differences between the signifier and the signified. The definition of a word is constituted by other words which differ from the word, as the explanation of the word, or it can be the synonyms (sign-substitutions) and antonyms of the word. The signifier itself is the supplement of other signifiers, and that is the reason why the meaning of signs can be active interpretation.

While reading “Nothing: A Preliminary Account,” readers only receive endless substitutes of what nothing is not. Because the explanations of “what is not nothing” are only supplements which are composed of different signs in a language game, Barthelme’s narrative in this story presents lots of things like digressions and things which also do not belong to “nothing” apparently. For instance, “it’s not the ice cubes disappearing in the warmth of our whiskey nor is it the town in Scotland where the whiskey is manufactured nor is it the workers who, while reading the Bible and the local newspaper and Rilke, are sentimentally sipping the product through eighteen-foot-long, almost invisible nylon straws” (240). Those things which are not “nothing” on the list demonstrate that they are only interrelated substitutions, and be organized like stream-of-consciousness writing style. The narrator repeatedly points out that “nothing” is not the yellow curtains, and states:

It’s not the yellow curtains, we have determined that, and it’s not what is behind the yellow curtains which we cannot mention out of respect for the King’s rage and the Queen’s reputation. *Hurry*. Not much time. Nothing is not a telephone

number or any number whatsoever including zero. It's not science and in particular it's not black-hole physics, which is not nothing but physics.

(Barthelme 240)

The “yellow curtains” seems to present things hidden in concealment or things which conceal other details of things. The narrator in this story keeps mentioning “nothing is not ...” in this story, so the narrative only discloses what is not “nothing”; therefore, readers cannot find the best answer to what nothing is. This ambiguous situation helps with the narrator's play of signifiers in this language game, for as Derrida points out “[t]he movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified” (Derrida 365-66). Those things like yellow curtains, curtain rings, bran, bran in a bucket, the man who placed the bucket, his wife, or the banker are not “nothing,” they are only floating signifiers in Barthelme's narrative for presenting an endless definition of “nothing.” There is always surplus meaning while explaining words. The communicative function of language among people demonstrates the exchange of signs, and the different arrangement of signs based on the rules of language displays the possibilities in sign explanations. Whenever readers read or reread/interpret, they add surplus meaning to the texts.

Derrida mentions that “one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure,” and it reveals the limitation of language from the rules in the structure of language (352). The organizing principle of the structure in language will be the limitation; nevertheless, the rules of language are necessary for logical communication as an organized sign system which should be accessible for all humans. The process of finding the truth through language is like the way a bricoleur finds the solution to problems. Derrida refers to Lévi-Strauss's words and mentions that the bricoleur is someone “who uses ‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which

are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them” (360). In Barthelme’s writing, he mentions other writers/artists and other works a lot as postmodernist narrative. Postmodern writers often operate as literary bricoleurs, who manipulate parodying forms and styles related with modernist writers and other writers/artists. Accordingly, we can only explain things based on what we already know and understand the meaning of in language; that is to say, we will never all of a sudden say something we have never ever heard of before.

People communicate mainly by languages, and languages are constructed from words, words that name things; therefore, people can use language to express their feelings or thoughts in communication. For instance, if I cannot read German, I would not know what the meaning of “gute” is unless there are definitions of “gute” in the language I can understand. However, a word is defined by other words. The meaning of a word always also refers to its synonyms or antonyms in other words in order to explain it clearly. When readers check the meaning of vocabulary in a dictionary, it shows the explanations of the word by other words in its definition. While in this story, the narrator defines “nothing” by telling what “nothing” is not. Like the definition which shows the antonyms of a word in dictionary, the narrator says nothing is not “a nightshirt or a ninnyhammer, ninety-two, or Nineveh,” and he continues with “[i]t is not a small jungle in which, near a river, a stone table has been covered with fruit. It is not the handsome Indian woman standing next to the stone table holding the blond, kidnapped child” (Barthelme 239). The narrative of this whole story is constructed mainly by “nothing is not ...,” “it’s not ... nor ...” or “... is not nothing, it’s ...” Those added details of things which are not “nothing” are the surplus meaning Barthelme plays with. In consequence, there is a break or rupture in this structure. Names as signifiers are not directly referring to its primary signified, since there are always other signifieds appearing for (or instead of) the signifier. Since the relation between signifier and signified is not stable, “even if you tell us ‘There is nothing under the bed’ and we think, *At last! Finally!*

Pinned to the specimen board! still you are only informing us of a local, only temporarily stable situation, you have not delivered nothing itself. Only the list can present us with nothing itself, pinned, finally, at last, let us press on” (Barthelme 240-41). So the definition of a thing is an endless process when we try to explain words by other words, for although the speaker says “there is nothing under the bed,” it still cannot show what “nothing” is under the bed (Barthelme 240). The list of “what nothing is not” in this story can only show what is not “nothing” by the things on the list, and there are always other things which are not included on the list yet. To make a list of “what is not nothing” is an endless task, especially everything can be included in this list because things people come up with are always not “nothing.” It’s quite ridiculous that the effort in defining “nothing” by what is not “nothing” through language will be in vain if readers are looking forward to finding out an answer in the end, since readers still find nothing is “nothing” even at the end of this story.

In “[h]urry on. We are persuaded that nothing is not the yellow panties,” Barthelme uses “persuaded” to show that we are told and convinced to believe what we know through language—the unchangeable logic to define knowledge in language (239). Our understanding of knowledge is constituted by what is already determined: language rules things by words and it determines the meaning of things by the process of naming. Similarly in Barthelme’s suggestion that “if we were able, with much labor, to exhaust the possibilities, get it all *inscribed*, name everything nothing is not, down to the last rogue atom, the one that rolled behind the door, and had thoughtfully included ourselves, the makers of the list, on the list—the list itself would remain” (Barthelme 241). What Barthelme means by “inscribed” is things which are already named or given fixed meanings. People learn to use signs in order to communicate with others by language. Children are educated (or being told) to know the names of things, so they know how to talk or express themselves. Every name is a sign, and the signifier relating to its signifieds makes the process of thinking possible. Linguistic thoughts require rules with logic while communicating. Even thoughts in Mathematics, the

rules in logical deduction (like the use of algebra) are also required in mathematical formula that shows the regulations in sign systems.

The process of making the list by writing down things which are not “nothing” is the way to inscribe those signs/names which are already learned for the person who uses language. Those signs/names are internalized knowledge through learning. The narrator thinks that “[i]t’s not the yellow curtains, we have determined that,” which shows that language has already set up its rules to reign over the things (Barthelme, “Nothing” 240). In addition, Derrida claims that “[f]or signification ‘sign’ has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified” (354-55). Because we can distinguish the difference among words, we have ability to define a word through other words as its explanation, and that is how deferral of sign works.

As I already mentioned in the concept of “play” in chapter one, Derrida has his notion of “play” as well. Although both Gadamer and Derrida talk about “play,” there is still difference among their ideas of “play.” The difference of their “play” provide different ways to look at Barthelme’s stories through different aspects or perspectives. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein compares Gadamer’s “play” with Derrida’s “play” in his “Speech, Writing, and the Play in Gadamer and Derrida.” He describes Gadamer’s “play” as “a sort of ‘to-and-fro movement of play, the primacy, continuity and the communal aspect of play’”; nevertheless, Derrida emphasizes the play as “unstable disruption and discontinuity” (Bernstein 256). For Gadamer, his idea of play emphasizes the participation of the spectator/player, and there are rules in the play, the play cannot be a play without player’s participation. For Derrida, he focuses on the playfulness of linguistic language structure in the play of words.

Derrida also reveals the tension between play and presence, as he claims that “[p]lay is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play

is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence” (Derrida 369). The operation of signifying chain based on the meaning of sign which keeps referring to its definitions made of other signs. In other words, the presence of the meaning of sign only exists temporally, and it is also absence because it would keep being replaced by other made up signifiers. The play of language structure is an endless signifying game. Derrida then makes his affirmation that the world of signs “*determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center*. And it plays without security. For there is a *sure* play: that which is limited to the *substitution of given and existing, present, pieces*” (369). The meaning of sign constituted by other signs which already exist and have been learned before, like assemblages, with exchangeability and multiple functionalities, can be combined together and sometimes be divided as well in order to temporarily present something.

In this story, the narrator makes the list in order to present the presence of what “nothing” is not, and he thinks that “if we cannot finish, we can at least begin. If what exists is in each case the totality of the series of appearances which manifests it, then nothing must be characterized in terms of its non-appearances, no-shows, incorrigible tardiness. Nothing is what keeps us waiting (forever)” (Barthelme 241). It demonstrates the impossibility of clarifying what “nothing” is through language. Through the list of what nothing is not, we endeavor to “exhaust the possibilities, get it all *inscribed*, name everything nothing is not,” so “something” we want to enunciate is temporarily presented; it is never a completed process since “[n]othing is what keeps us waiting (forever)” (Barthelme 241). To make a list of what nothing is not, as “the totality of the series of appearances which manifests it,” is to use the certainty of things on the list for clarifying and manifesting the imperceptible “nothing” as an absent being. Therefore, it shows that “nothing” belongs to things which are actually absent; nothing is always absence, just like Barthelme called “non-appearance” or “no-shows.” As a matter of fact, this short story called “Nothing: A Preliminary Account” says nothing specific about “nothing,” but also something really about “nothing” because everything on the list is

not nothing, and the list constitutes the whole narrative in this story is the method and the process¹² which the narrator uses for presenting “nothing” in the meantime.

In addition to Heidegger’s claim on “Nothing nothings,” Barthelme also mentions the meaning of “nothing” for Gorgias in this story, who is a Greek sophist and rhetorician. Barthelme writes “it is not the nihilism of Gorgias, who asserts that nothing exists and even if something did exist it could not be known and even if it could be known that knowledge could not be communicated” (240). Gorgias is called “Gorgias the Nihilist,” who believed that nothing exists. In “Gorgias on Nature or That Which Is Not,” G.B. Kerfert explains Gorgias’s concept which shows that:

Nothing exists. Now Not-Being does not exist. For if Not-Being exists, it will both exist and not exist at the same time. For in as much as it is thought of as not being, it will not exist, but in as much as it is not being, it will exist again. But it is absurd that a thing should both exist and not exist at the same time. Therefore Not-Being does not exist. (14)

Gorgias believes that nothing does not exist, if it is nothing, since it should not exist; but if nothing exists, it is not nothing. He considers that words and sensations both derive from the mind, but everyone has one’s feeling and one’s way of expression. One cannot express one’s feeling with absolute preciseness; inversely, one can only express one’s feeling at relative degree according to one’s speculation, imagination, and experience through particular words learned before. Gorgias also expresses his doubt about ear which can only hear sounds, but how can anyone talk about the concept of colors by words? People communicate by words, but how to discuss “nothing”? If “nothing” exists, is it still “nothing”? If the meaning of “nothing” does not exist, how to discuss “nothing”? If the meaning of “nothing” exists, how to explain “nothing”? For Gorgias, “nothing” does not exist because it

¹² To connect this method with Gadamer’s idea of “play,” the definition of “nothing” by what is not “nothing” is a play that its task is to make a list of things not “nothing.” The purpose of this play is not to seek an unique definition of “nothing,” for Gadamer, the uncompleted process of defining “nothing” by things that are not “nothing” is.

cannot exist and does not exist at the same time; if “nothing” exists, it cannot be communicated through language. However, Barthelme’s idea of “nothing” and Gorgias’s idea of “nothing” are not the same. The narrator in this story tries to explain “nothing” through language, which is impossible for Gorgias because he thinks that the knowledge cannot be communicated even the concept of “nothing” is comprehensible. Barthelme’s “nothing” is something exist but can only be presented by its absence, because “nothing” is always something which cannot be included in the list, and there are still other things which are not “nothing” are not included in the list yet.

The narrator writes down things which are not “nothing” in details as its presence but the list also highlights the absence of “nothing” that nothing is something else not included in the list yet. In other words, Barthelme tries to present the absence of “nothing” through the presence of not “nothing” in this text. To define “nothing” by the list of what is not “nothing” is like the way to find the origin or truth of things through negation or its concealment. As Derrida notes:

Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation [...] In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to *genetic* indetermination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace. (369)

This statement as an account of Derrida’s idea proclaims that the absence of origin makes the possibility of interpretation because every chance to define “nothing”/origin/truth is only one of times to make an explanation. Even this statement itself is merely an expression combined with signifieds which losses a center or its origin. This affirmation, which submitted to the

“genetic indetermination” of signifying chain, reveals its uncertainty of the origin, and it continues extending the trace like an endless journey. Every signifier or explanation produces a trace that further constitutes several active interpretations.

Because Derrida’s notion of “différance” contains a trace of what it is not, the meaning of the sign which is forever postponed. This notion represents not only the difference and deferral of meaning which display the tension between presence and absence of the meaning through sign substitutions, but also illustrates the relationship between narrative and time, the interplay of past, present, and future. In “Différance,” Derrida suggests:

Différance is what makes the movement of the signification possible only if each element that is said to be “present,” appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified present. (288)

He gives attention to the “present” which should be presupposed comparatively as a momentary being of the meaning constituted by infinite preexisted sign supplements, and every supplement appears and becomes the past at the same time while describing the meaning of the sign. Furthermore, the substitutions which are not coming out as part of definition yet are signs in the future, and they still cannot represent the sign as a full being because “the present becomes the sign of signs, the trace of traces. It is no longer what every reference refers to in the last instance; it becomes a function in a generalized referential structure. It is a trace, and a trace of the effacement of a trace” (Derrida, “Différance” 298).

Différance makes the trace and the deferred sign substitutions; therefore, the play of language keeps working on as its function of representation.

In the story, things which are not included in the list yet are not “nothing,” while things on the list are not “nothing” either. Those things which are going to be written down on the list in the future are written down on the list as the negative note in order to present “nothing” by writing down things not “nothing.” At the moment those things are written down on the list, the present of the narrative momentarily affirms what is not “nothing,” and the narrative then becomes the past next second which shows what was not “nothing” while the passing of the times. The narrator makes his comment on “[w]e are nervous. There is not much time. Nothing is not a Gregorian chant or indeed a chant of any kind unless it be the howl of the null muted to inaudibility by the laws of language strictly construed” for explaining the definition of nothing through language is not like a chant which repeats a word or phrase continuously, and it responds to the referential structure of sign which is not always repetitive substitutions but an endless trace of difference (Barthelme 239). The “howl of the null muted to inaudibility” is a situation which is close to nothing. The howl is presumed to make audible sounds, but the sound is made vainly because it is muted to inaudibility. In other words, the howl might have caused an audible sound originally; nevertheless, the sound of the howl is muted, and it cannot be received or heard. Similar to the signification of sign, the substitutions of sign cannot completely stand for its meaning, but the meaning of sign still continues deferring ceaselessly.

Conclusion: the Play of Signifiers

Although both Derrida and Gadamer have their ideas of “play,” I choose Derrida’s concept of play to interpret Barthelme’s “Nothing: A Preliminary Account” in this chapter. Gadamer’s “play” focuses on the participation of the player. If reading is a game, the text becomes a play when the text is read. Similar to Fish’s notion which views reading as an event, Gadamer says, “[u]nderstanding must be conceived as a part of the event in which meaning occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements—those of art and all other kinds of tradition—is formed and actualized” (164-65). While Derrida’s “play” puts great emphasis on the play of signifiers as supplements in the meaning of words. I think Derrida’s idea of “play” is better to apply to my investigation on Barthelme’s language game in the definition of “nothing” by language. Furthermore, using Derrida’s “play” to discuss the substitutions of not “nothing” in this story also highlights Barthelme’s playfulness in playing with definition in negational narrative as his postmodernist writing style. Therefore, I present the application of Derrida’s deconstruction “play” to in this chapter to discuss the meaning of language in Barthelme’s writing.

Language rules things by words and it determines the meaning of things by the process of naming. People learn to use signs in order to communicate with others by language. Children are educated (or being told) to know the names of things, so they know how to talk or express themselves. Every name is a sign, the signifier relates to its signifieds makes the process of thinking possible. Readers enjoy reading through their comprehension of language. Only people who understand the meaning of words and the rules of language can use language while thinking, speaking or even reading. The explanations of words are made of other words, in consequence, the interpretations can be varied, but it should be presented with grammar rules. Barthelme presents things which are not “nothing” in this short story, and it shows the limitation and active interpretations in language.

However, this is a story about “nothing” but also talks nothing really about “nothing.” Everything readers read in this story is not “nothing,” so it is only a play of signifiers. Barthelme uses language to define “nothing,” but actually he only presents lots of supplements of not “nothing” while giving explanation of “nothing.” In the end of this story, readers still cannot figure out what “nothing” is. The only definition of “nothing” is still absent till the end of this story because the explanation of what is “nothing” is defined by what is not “nothing.” The explanation of what is not “nothing” can be ceaselessly substituted, and everything can be the substitution.

Could those negative narrations be called a “story,” though this story is collected in Barthelme’s *Sixty Stories*? Or, it is merely an essay which presents the author’s dialectic thinking in order to show the limitation of language (or language without limitation at the same time)? A story should at least have its character(s), plot, and ending. The narrator makes a list to show what is not “nothing” and there is no final answer at the end of story. If it is a story, I think it is a story with open-ending, because every reader has one’s interpretation. From my perspective, I regard “nothing” in the story as “truth.” Actually we cannot make sure the truth what we know so far is always real, since we also cannot make sure if there are things we misunderstand as concealment inside knowledge. Which genre this writing belongs to is not that important, inasmuch as this writing only displays the play of signifiers. “Nothing” is still absent because the presence of the list only tell readers “what is not.” “Nothing” should maintain its non-appearance —otherwise it is not “nothing.” In particular, the essence of “nothing” belongs to something that never shows up as a materialized “being.” The limitation of language is performed in this narrative because the narrator tries to use words to define something sensational or abstract; nevertheless, this narrative also reveals language without limitation as the explanation of abstract concept can be constructed by interminable play of signifiers. Although the rules of language as its limitation ought to be followed while using language regardless of reading or communication, I consider that everyone has one’s understanding of knowledge and one’s interpretation of

language in one's play of language game. The play of signifiers makes the active interpretation of things, along with the limitless trace caused by deferral inexhaustible in the play. Like Friedrich Nietzsche notes in *Nachlass*, "it is precisely facts that do not exist, only *interpretations*," interpretations varied through different perspectives (458). To define the meaning of "nothing", and "nothing" is still "nothing", or the meaning of "nothing" can only be endless not "nothing." "Nothing is what keeps us waiting (forever)!" (Barthelme 241).



Chapter Three

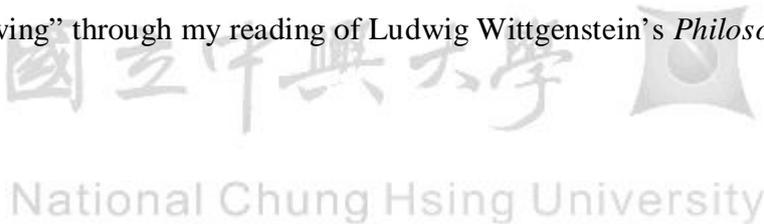
“Not-Knowing”: Play vs. Played

We ask what this identity is that presents itself so differently in the changing course of ages and circumstances. It does not disintegrate into the changing aspects of itself so that it would lose all identity, but it is there in them all. They all belong to it. They are all contemporaneous (*gleichzeitig*) with it. Thus we have the task of interpreting the work of art in terms of time (*Zeit*).

—Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

In Chapter One, I apply Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Stanley Fish theory take the participation involved in reading seriously because they believe readers' comprehension and interpretation of words are concerned with readers' life experience and literary competence. The game the author Barthelme plays, the game the narrator plays, and the game readers play are all displayed in the story of "Game" through different perspectives. Readers, as participants of the game, interpret the story differently based on their literary competence and life experience, their knowledge. Knowledge comes from what they learn from life, and this concept can be related with Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of "form of life." We already know that Gadamer and Fish emphasize the effect on the spectators while reading. Wittgenstein's ideas of language game points out the application of language, which gives words meaning, and what he thinks has great effect on the application of language is the social context, the custom. Wittgenstein's philosophical understanding helps me comprehend the relationship between language and life while reading Barthelme's essay "Not-Knowing," and I will elaborate this concept that reader's knowledge come from life (experiences) related to reader's understanding and application of language in this chapter.

In Chapter Two, we saw that the narrator in “Nothing: A Preliminary Account” tries to define “nothing” by making the list of things which are not “nothing.” Martin Heidegger’s notion of truth points out that the understanding of revealing the essence of truth through the discovery of something concealed which is regarded as un-truth, the certainty of un-truth brings forth truth. Barthelme’s negational narrative reveals what is not “nothing” and “nothing” is still something absent in the end of the story. Since Jacques Derrida’s idea of play claims that the play of structure only shows the supplements of signification, the meanings of words are only substitutions of signs. No matter what “nothing” is not in the list, it is merely Barthelme’s play of structure in the story. Everything can be something not nothing. So “nothing” has never been presented even the story comes to the end. For readers, “nothing” is still not-known since there is no standard definition for explaining it through language. In this chapter, I am going to discuss what “not-knowing” is in Barthelme’s short essay “Not-Knowing” through my reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigation*.



What is “Not-Knowing”?

Barthelme mentions the power of language and he also talks about the position of the writer in the title. His writing as digression shows the play of structure again in the narrative, but the main issue in this essay is “not-knowing.” However, what is “not-knowing”? Barthelme begins with an assumption that “someone is writing a story” (“Not-Knowing” 11). Someone is writing a story, the person as a writer of the story has a gold pocket watch. The writer arranges a thief with chastity belt who is laid under azalea bush with the gold pocket watch, and then students Jacqueline and Jemima walk nearby the azalea bush so that the thief is awoken. The writer’s story pauses here, and then Barthelme tells readers that what will happen next in the story is unknown. Barthelme then starts to talk about some details of Jacqueline and Jemima, what he knows about them are information he writes down as

announcement sentences, as a story maker, he creates those characters and inscribes their backgrounds; he can even make a legend engraved inside the pocket watch. While he mentions the rules of making the legend, he says “[w]riting is a process of dealing with not-knowing, a forcing of what and how,” which suggests that a writer’s task is to manage something unknown and to deal with his intuition, although he might feel anxious when thinking about what and how to write (“Not-Knowing” 12). Because there are rules and prohibition of writing, writer’s possible initiatives are limited frequently. The action or behavior of characters is created by the writer. In other words, the writer decides what kind of person the character is, and what events happen in the story. The writer is the person who has the ability to change the scene of the story, and then the focus is shifted from the thief Zeno to the park employee called Alphonse.

Alphonse, according to the speaker, is a literary critic in reality, and he writes a letter asking for suggestions and comments from his literary critic friend Gaston. In the letter, he talks about the death of movements, and he has one difficulty in the name of the “New Thing.” Alphonse wonders whether there should be a word of “new” in the name of the “New Thing” which has not encountered yet actually. After the narration of Alphonse’s letter, Barthelme indicates that Wittgenstein considers some of philosophers suffer from “loss of problems,” and he also mentions some alleged postmodernists like John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and himself, also a postmodernist, as well. He points out three difficulties about language: art’s own project, political and social contamination of language, and pressure on language from contemporary commercial culture. The virtues of writing are simple, honest, and straightforward; however, it makes nothing much happen. Therefore, Barthelme thinks that a writer should write something as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken (“Not-Knowing” 15).

After the discussion of language, Barthelme’s focus is on postmodernist writing and art. He regards work of art as “a complex series of interdependences” which shows the references among arts constitute the complexity in art (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 19). Robert Rauschenberg’s artwork titled “Monogram” which displays goat with tire becomes

the example to discuss the meaning of art. After the discussion of the meaning of art, the subject issue skips and begins to discuss the condition of the writer's desk suddenly, and he talks about his messy emotional life: the writer is in love with twins Hilda and Heidi. Barthelme jumps to other issues and starts to talk about his ideas of "style" in writing. Afterward the writer invites readers to suppose he is a banjulele player who is going to have a performance in a club, where the characters mentioned before are all in that club as well. Through his performance, he begins to think about the relation of art to the world and offers his thoughts about style and believes that style makes people able to speak and to imagine again (Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" 24). The manipulation of languages is one's styles of speech. Barthelme believes that style draws readers' attention to what authors try to say in the works. Style, the form/structure of language in literature and art, invites its spectators to think and imagine the world created by the author. The work makes its spectator perceive something new, or to notice something "not-knowing" ignored for long time in the world. Literature and art as the mediation of the world; therefore, the narrator concludes: the purpose of mediating about the world is to change the world in the end.

Barthelme changes the issues several times in this essay, and the description of the writer's life sometimes becomes the main issue after some digression of talking about other ideas. In this chapter, the first discussion mainly focus on what is "not-knowing" in this essay, which connects Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of language game with human forms of life in *Philosophical Investigation*, and further elaborate on Barthelme's thoughts on the meaning of art through his postmodernist writing technique. The application of word brings the writer-reader relationship forth, which represents language as the mediation that enables the writer and reader's creative imagination in the use of words. Therefore, this chapter concludes with the concept that the application of language for the writer and reader shows writer's power to manipulate signs which invites reader's creative imagination in the possibilities of interpretation.

The Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein specializes in philosophy of mathematic (logic), philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language. In *Philosophical Investigation*, he points out the concept of “language game,” and this term means “to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Wittgenstein § 23). Language is not only a technique people can use to communicate, but also the form of life. The use of language constitutes our life, and the meaning of word depends on the language games which are used as customs of a society. The idea of “language game” is applied for talking about multiplicity and mobility in the application of language. To use a language is an activity, while the technique to use language varied in different ages and different social context. What the sentence means thus depends on its context of use, for that reason; there is much openness and possibility of interpretation in the depiction of language when using language.

However, things should be named first and then they can be talked about. As Wittgenstein says, “naming is something like attaching a label to a thing. One can say that this is preparatory to the use of a word” (§ 27). In § 199, Wittgenstein relates “[t]o obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs*.” The form of life is full of different application of language in different fields, and there are different language games in different application of language. Furthermore, he considers that “[t]o understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique,”¹³ which means the understanding and the use of language is an ability that people use in communication.

By the understanding of the relationship between ostensive definition and its varied interpretations, Wittgenstein explains that “an ostensive definition can be variously

¹³ In Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, while talking about the borderline position of literature, he points out that “a written tradition once deciphered and read, is to such an extent pure mind that it speaks to us as if in the present. That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that frees and binds us” (163). The capacity to use language for reading and understanding the meaning of words is also regarded as a special technique.

interpreted in every case,” which shows that the meaning of a word can be different in different conditions (§ 28). Definitions of a word are only descriptions described in different aspects, so meaning is defined not by things people think of or the event happening in one’s mind; rather, the meaning of a word is decided by what people do with the word or the way they use the word. Word with different tone or manner of speaking can simply reveal different functions of a word. In a language-game, a word can refer to a thing. However, the same word can also be used to ask questions or even to give orders, and the meaning of the word depends on the language-game in which it is used. Barthelme presents lots of peculiar skills in his postmodernist writing, and reveals various new application of language through his writing. For instance, in “Game,” he does not need to say the narrator might be insane, but simply present the narrator’s mentality by the repetition of words or sentences such as “Shotwell is not himself,” and “I’m not well” as the implied symptoms of mental disorder to bring forth readers’ speculation. In “Nothing: A Preliminary Account,” Barthelme writes “Nothing nothings,” and it shows that he uses “nothing” as a noun and a verb to mean “nothing is not nothing.” The way to define “nothing” by negational narrative also displays his manipulation of supplements.

The ideas in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigation* help people for noticing the function of words that people use with different application in life, and it also brings out the freedom of interpretation from different manipulation of words. From the perspective on reader’s application of words, the meaning of word is how language is used for the reader in different situation concerned with the form of life. From the perspective on author’s application of words, Barthelme’s postmodernist writing style shows how he manipulates language to present something in a new way that invites readers to think, to imagine, and try to comprehend what he tries to say. Like Ezra Pound’s famous modernist call to “make it new,” it is the touchstone of the movements approach to find something new from the obsolete culture of the past. Brian McHale also mentions “critics have characterized postmodernism in

terms of its ontological instability or indeterminacy, the loss of a world that could be accepted, 'willy-nilly,' as a given of experience" (26). From different aspects to have different interpretation in language, postmodernist writing is not really difficult, but only displays something in a new way which is different from what people expect or what people think they know before.

However, what does Barthelme mean by "not-knowing"? In this essay, Barthelme says "writing is a process of dealing with not-knowing, a forcing of what and how," which means the explanation of "not-knowing" can be referred to "writing" ("Not-Knowing" 12). "The not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made" for Barthelme, and people must undo the knowing, which is the beginning of new understanding, or "there would be no invention" ("Not-Knowing" 12). Then, what is "writing" for Barthelme? He considers "writing" to be something not known yet, in other words, to apply the technique of writing to write something not yet spoken. The writer's power is to use the play of words to reveal something unknown and to constitute one's special way of narrative in different form. Furthermore, Barthelme thinks that "[t]he not-knowing is not simple, because it's hedged about with prohibitions, roads that may not be taken."¹⁴ The more serious the artist, the more problems he takes into account and the more considerations limit his possible initiatives," which shows the anxiety about the unknown that the writer feels great anxiety while choosing what to write and how to begin a new work¹⁵ ("Not-Knowing" 12).

Even though the writer gets lots of initiatives to start a new work, there are still rules that the writer should be concerned about which might cause the limitation of one's creativity while writing. A writer who produces the work with a bold style of writing might have a lot of creative ideas to deal with, but the writer still has to face the problem to clarify if this idea

¹⁴ The "roads that may not be taken" is an indication of Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken." The last two lines of this poem is "I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference." Barthelme quotes "roads that may not be taken" here to show that the writer's choices of what/how to write makes the whole difference of the text.

¹⁵ In Barthelme's "The Dolt," he ends this short story with "Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin" to show the difficulty for a writer in starting a writing (89).

is really “new” or there are actually other people who already cope with the same idea. The prohibition of plagiarism is mentioned in “I think so: *Drink me*, it says. No no, can’t use it, that’s Lewis Carroll’s,” which shows that this famous quote of “drink me” is from Carroll’s story *Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland* and this is not an initiative application if he uses it again in his writing (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 12). The allusion to other works as references in Barthelme’s writing displays his “pastiche” of other authors and works. Unlike parody, the purpose of pastiche is not to mock but to celebrate by imitation of other authors’ style of narrative or other characters and works. The problem of invention and experiment the writer encounters while writing is a great anxiety. By using pastiche in writing, the writer shares one’s recreation through other writers’ works with the reader, and also brings complexity in the text.

The problems a writer chooses to deal with in the text have great effect upon the readers as well, and I think the way the writer uses to solve the problems is the most significant. According to Wittgenstein, he proposes that “[t]he problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always know. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (§ 109). Like the idea we have mentioned in Chapter Two, we can only explain things based on what we already know and understand the meaning of in language, writer should solve and explain the problems through what the writer always knows and also what readers can understand, or there will only confusions stay. However, Barthelme notes, nowadays language has been overused and degraded by political and commercial languages, so postmodernist writing is accused of being degraded narcissism. Some of alleged postmodernists like John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and himself as well, their writing is often being claimed that “this kind of writing has turned its back on the world, is in some sense not about the world but about its own processes, that it is masturbatory, certainly chilly, that it excludes readers by design, speaks only to the already tenured, or that it does not speak at all, but instead, like Frost’s Secret, sits in the center of a ring and Knows” (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 15).

Postmodernist writing “speaks only to the already tenured, or that it does not speak at all,” which shows that postmodernist writing is full of reference to reference, the intertexture of works which are not something “original.” The processes of references connect with other works (like Lewis Carroll and Robert Frost’s work) as the “design” of postmodern arts might cause the difficulty or the boredom for readers to realize arts.¹⁶ For Wittgenstein, he notes that “the picture is only like an illustration to a story. From it alone it would mostly be impossible to conclude anything at all; only when one knows the story does one know the significance of the picture” (§ 663). The picture as reference in the text, and the significance of the picture as the story or the intension that encourages the artist to make the work, which is like the meaning of reference, that is to say, only people who know the story beyond the reference in postmodernist writing can understand what the writer tries to say in the text.¹⁷

Barthelme describes the difficulty for readers who cannot understand postmodernist writing by the analogy of Robert Frost’s poem “The Secret Sits”: “We dance round in a ring and suppose, / But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.” According to my interpretation of this poem, the capitalized “Secret” is something mysterious or information people want to know. People “dance round in a ring and suppose” means people who want to get access to the “Secret” and try to understand it, but the “Secret” will not reveal itself, it only “sits in the middle and knows” instead. The “Secret” is meaningful only for people who possess the know-how. Barthelme capitalizes the “Knows” in his text for showing the emphasis on the

¹⁶ Roland Barthes also talks about text which is actually “already written” because writers only write things anterior. In “The Death of the Author,” he thinks the writer can only “mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them,” the writer can never write something original, inversely, the writer tries to express oneself and only translate one’s inner thoughts into text which is, in effect, “a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely” (Barthes 146). For Barthes, every work is rewritten at the moment the work is read, because the meaning of the work remains in language itself and reader’s impression and comprehension of the work.

¹⁷ While Hans-Georg Gadamer talks about the example of the tragic in *Truth and Method*, he notes that “[t]his effect presumes not only that the spectator is still familiar with the story, but also that its language still really reaches him. Only then can the spectator’s encounter with the tragic theme and tragic work become a self-encounter” (133). Like the relationship between a play and the audience, the spectator in front of a literary art needs to have the capacity to process the language in the work, and connects the meaning of the work to the world as a self-encounter in one’s life.

ability to “understand.” The difficulty to understand postmodernist writing for readers causes the gap in reading.

In *Philosophical Investigation*, Wittgenstein also writes:

Here I should first of all like to say: your idea was that that act of meaning the order had in its own way already traversed all those steps: that when you meant it your mind as it were flew ahead and took all the steps before you physically arrived at this or that one.

Thus you were inclined to use such expressions as: “The steps are really already taken, even before I take them in writing or orally or in thought.” And it seemed as if they were in some unique way predetermined, anticipated—as only the act of meaning can anticipate reality. (§ 188)

Those expressions of an overused language reveal the fact that the meaning of word is predetermined in some unique way, the significance of words is fixed; in other words, the ossification of the understanding of word. If the meaning of words becomes fixed and unable to change, people easily feel dull in the text which cannot present something new or interesting. Postmodernist writing “speaks only to the already tenured,” the “already tenured” means people who might be intellectual and people who have ability to understand those terminologies in postmodernist writing. As Barthelme notes:

At the other end of the scale much of the most exquisite description of the world, discourse about the world, is now being carried on in mathematical languages obscure to most people—certainly to me—and the contributions the sciences once made to our common language in the form of coinages, new words and concepts, are now available only to specialists. (“Not-Knowing” 17)

The references in postmodernist writing become limitation which is difficult for most people while reading, and those new words or concepts are presented by the language only to

specialists who can understand it. The difficulty to understand the meaning of the writing causes readers' confusion and it "does not speak at all" like a wall blocks up the path of understanding. If readers cannot understand the allusions, they cannot catch the meaning of what the author tries to present in the work, and they cannot perceive the enjoyment while reading. However, if readers know the allusions, they might also treat the work as junk which is lack of creativity and bring nothing new. Those postmodernist writings are stuck in a controversial situation, because the meaning of writing is accessible only for limited persons; for people who cannot understand it, postmodernist writing is just like "Frost's secret, sits in the center of a ring and Knows."

Barthelme mentions how the virtues of writing are simple, honest, and straightforward, and how nothing happens that cannot bring attraction to readers ("Not-Knowing" 15). The writer has a right to choose what to write, which means the subject matter chosen by the writer reveals what problems the writer thinks are important. Nevertheless, Barthelme mentions the difficulties of language brought about by a commercial culture that causes the "theft of complexity from the reader, theft of the reader from the writer" ("Not-Knowing" 15). Despite the complexity of postmodernist writing becomes the obstacle in readers' understanding of the work, the virtues of writing such as simple, honest, and straightforward are no more available to the writer (to the readers as well). Is art difficult? The problem in the appreciation of arts for readers should be examined cautiously since the impoverishment of literary competence in aesthetic admiration makes people think postmodernist writing is difficult. Postmodernist writing for those readers is like elitism because they can only consume non-complex commercial writing and cannot be troubled to be smart or analytic. However, Barthelme believes "Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art" ("Not-Knowing" 15). The complexity of arts keeps readers away from mental impoverishment, but it might make arts difficult to understand as well.

In spite of Barthelme's arguments about the complexity of arts makes postmodernist writings hardly accessible for readers, what he tries to clarify for his readers is actually not

the critique of the difficulty of postmodernist writing, but instead, he tries to defend it. For Barthelme, postmodernist writing is a reaction to a situation where pop culture is the majority in the society. Writer can only speak to people in a new voice, and Barthelme considers the new ways in the play of language as an attempt to make language new again in postmodernist writing. Like Bertolt Brecht's claim, in his theoretical work "The Popular and the Realistic," Brecht asserts that "[m]ethods wear out, stimuli fail. New problems loom up and demand new techniques. Reality alters; to represent it the means of representation must alter too. Nothing arises from nothing; the new springs from the old, but that is just what makes it new" (Peter Brooker 43). Writers need to make something new for readers in order to attract them, and that is why writers manipulate various roughening forms which shock readers and make language raw again at the same time in postmodernist writings.

In this essay, Barthelme mentions the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé's device of mimesis "[b]stows new meanings upon words" and also presents "poetic intuition" ("Not-Knowing" 16). Mallarmé's poems are full of symbols and his poems display how he tries to shake "words loose from their attachments" and give them new meaning at the same time (Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" 16). Writers provide something readers unfamiliar with, and it gives readers chances to deliberate on the meaning of words in different ways of interpretation again. The title of this essay "Not-Knowing" can mean the "knowing of nothing" or the knowing of "what is not," or "ignorance" which makes readers know something new and unknown for them. While readers try to get access to something unknown or different from the ideas they think they know before, they know the way to have different application of languages and get new meanings of things. Things which are not what they think before are figured out from a new way, or it might be something new which they don't know before as well. Perhaps Barthelme is trying to tell readers that postmodernist writings are not really "difficult," but represent something complicated and confusing in a changing world which shocks and surprises them in order to make readers a new way to get access to languages, no more the boring "simple, honest, and straightforward" writings. Readers

discover the chance to bring new ways of interpretation forth, the way of undoing knowing in them, and enjoy new modes of interpreting the world as well. The idea to give the freedom of interpretation to readers which invites readers to express their thoughts freely while using language in communication shows postmodernist writings give weight to the readers.

Changes in reading/writing styles, as different applications of language, allows readers to get achieve new, different forms of reading experience. In Barthelme's essay, for example, Alphonse writes a letter to Gaston in order to talk about the death of movements. Alphonse writes the difficulty that "[w]hat shall we call the New Thing, which I haven't encountered yet but which is bound to be out there somewhere?" (Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" 14) The "New Thing" Barthelme talks about can also be "not-knowing." The "New Thing" is not something comes into existence yet, and it is still unknown to people. People expect to read something "as-yet unspeakable" and "as-yet unspoken," because those kinds of issues "[allow] the writer to surprise himself, [make] art possible, [reveal] how much Being we haven't yet encountered" (Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" 21). "Unspeakable" means something beyond description which cannot be explained through language or it can also refer to something bad or shocking to be expressed in words, like issues which are forbidden or offensive to speak of in society. But how to explain something beyond words? For instance, the postmodern writing technique which is used to seek the definition of "nothing" in Barthelme's "Nothing: a Preliminary Account," he uses the list of things which are not "nothing" to reveal the omnipresence of "nothing," that is the special way of negative narrative from his writing. But now the problem is how to write something as yet unspoken by the use of language? Barthelme uses the analogy between "not-knowing" and "writing" to explain an abstract idea of "not-knowing" in a direct way. He also explains "not-knowing" by abstract idea because he considers "not-knowing" as "the New Thing." Writing as a behavior and also a concrete existence of sign in the use of language help with the understanding of what Barthelme means by "not-knowing" in this essay. As a writer, Barthelme explains "not-knowing" through the use of language, by writing, and this concretizes the idea of "not-

knowing.” Furthermore, “not-knowing” can also be an idea, a concept, which means something new and as-yet unspoken.

Writing is the written descriptions which display the manipulation of language from the writer, and what the writer presents through language has great effect on the reader. Therefore, the discussion on the writer-reader relationship is elaborated here. We have noticed that Barthelme tries to explain the complexity in postmodernist writings is the way writer uses to speak to people in a new voice, so what can writer do in the text? For Barthelme, a writer’s power is not only the control over all subject matters in his works, but the ability to refine on complicated problems. Karl Kraus says, “[a] writer is a man who can make a riddle out of an answer,” which emphasizes on the writer’s competence to clarify problems (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 18). As the writer chooses the problems to deal with in the writing, the writer is capable of turning perplexity into epiphany. A similar concept is displayed in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigation*, and he says, “[t]he work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (§ 127). A philosopher is an intellectual person who has a great deal of speculation about philosophical problems with critical thinking. The way writers use to solve problems in the text is to provide logical hints including some witty device in the narrative that brings readers’ inquiry and comprehension for readers to get the confusion out while reading. However, in postmodernist writings, readers cannot see well-defined descriptions which give them clear explanation for what happened in the text. The term “clean” language Barthelme talks about in this essay is a technique used in psychotherapy or coaching, and it helps clients to discover and develop symbols without any content introduced by the therapist/coach. The idea of “clean” language presents the same idea to give the receiver (of language) more possibilities in the use of language, which is not restricted within the prejudices of the word and the meanings of word while reading.

At the outset of a story, the author has the authority to decide what to write, the writer just needs to write the sentence that “announce” it (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 12). Like the

idea presented in Chapter Two, Barthelme tries to assert that language rules things by words, and it determines the meaning of things by the process of naming. He considers the process of naming as writer's important preparation for writing. In the last chapter, we have already noticed the notion of "inscribed" which implies that things are already named or given fixed meanings, the meaning of words are determined. According to Barthelme, writing is dealing with something not-knowing, and what the writer knows come into being at the instant it's inscribed by words ("Not-Knowing" 12). In addition, Wittgenstein claims that "[w]e name things and then we can talk about them: can refer to them in talk.—As if what we did next were given with the mere act of naming," which means naming is the preparatory work for using the word, the writer creates things by naming as its announcement, and then makes the story by writing other descriptions in sentences like the background of characters or the setting of the story (§27). The author has authority to give characters' names in the story, describes the personality of characters, sets things in the surrounding, and even decides actions characters do in the story like someone playing toys (Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" 12). In this essay, the writer's right in the decision of the plot, the use of words, moreover, can even determine the narrator who doesn't play "Melancholy Baby" as written in the text; nevertheless, he plays something else on the same chords of "Melancholy Baby" instead. The writer can control what the characters say, as Barthelme writes, "[b]est of all, perhaps, I can permit them to speak, for they speak much as we do" ("Not-Knowing" 21). Like a playwright gives lines for characters in a play or drama, the writer holds the power to "permit" and to decide the conversation between characters. In short, the writer has the rights to choose and to decide what to present, even the employment of quotations in the text by writing, if only the writing were not plagiarism from others.

Writers try to speak to people in a new way in postmodernist writings inasmuch as the already "inscribed" or traditionally "determined" meaning of language cannot bring readers surprise or anything new while reading. Barthelme's play of structure in his writings causes confusion and also amazement for readers. The narrator does not play "Melancholy Baby" as

the writer “written,” rather the narrator plays something that is parallel and based on the chords of “Melancholy Baby. The chords of “Melancholy Baby” are like the structure of this musical composition, as a form to elaborate, and that functions as the basic horizon which limits the performer as well. In the text, the narrator thinks the horizon “bounds” his efforts, and it reminds that a constant structure without any change might cause the narrator’s effort restricted by the prohibitions in language (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 23). The narrator believes, “[i]f I perform well, no one will accuse me of not providing a true, verifiable, note-for-note reproduction of “Melancholy Baby”—it will be recognized that this was not what I was after” (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 23). Barthelme tries to say that writers speak to people in a new way through postmodernist writings, and the changes in their works can be highlighted and recognized as the dissimilarities between postmodernist writing and traditional narrative. In Chapter One, while talking about Barthelme’s short story “Game,” the narrator thinks “Shotwell is not himself” which reveals the narrator’s irrationality and madness with repetition of words and Barthelme’s surrealist style of narrative, and it makes the suspicion of Shotwell’s true identity. The definition of “himself” can be recognized as Shotwell’s personality/true being. As readers participate in the story, they recognize the narrator and Shotwell’s characteristics through their observation in the narrative, and they can tell the narrator is probably insane from what he says again and again. Gadamer’s idea of play shows the importance of recognition. He says: “[t]he ‘known’ enters into its true being and manifests itself as what it is only when it is recognized. As recognized, it is grasped in its essence, detached from its accidental aspects. This applies especially to the kind of recognition that takes place in a play” (Gadamer 114). Here in Barthelme’s “Not-Knowing,” the “note-for-note reproduction of “Melancholy Baby” means every sign on the notation of “Melancholy Baby” is strictly followed when someone performs the musical composition. If we inspect postmodernist writing by Gadamer’s idea, it can be explained that readers’ recognition of references in postmodernist writing helps with the new comprehension from different interpretation of the literary allusions in a different text or context. The “known”

reveals the true being while it is recognized, and then the difference is realized which makes the new understanding of it. Therefore, the “not-knowing” becomes “known” or something different and “new.”

In the last scene, the narrator plays a banjulele in a club full of the characters mentioned above. Barthelme makes a clear distinction between the writer and “I” as Barthelme himself in the narrative, and it causes a sense of layers in this essay. For instance, the writer says Alphonse as a park employee but actually a literary critic in reality, as if there are different worlds in his meta-fiction-like narrative. There are different worlds in this essay, such as Barthelme’s real life, the writer’s reality (which Barthelme creates by his writing), and the writer creates those character’s reality in the story, which is also divided into a real one and a pretended one because the writer says the park employee Alphonse and the guard of museum named Gaston both are literary critics “in reality.” The digressions in the narrative sometimes even make readers feel hard to distinguish whether the narrator is the writer or Barthelme, or “the writer” is merely a pronoun Barthelme uses to manipulate a language game in the narrative to “suppose that someone is writing a story” and it is just one of contexts he makes in this essay. In addition to the sense of layers in this essay, Barthelme also displays the power of the writer to have conversation with the reader. He talks with readers in the narrative, through the direct conversation with readers in this essay, like the technique breaks the “fourth wall”¹⁸ in a play, and this kind of narrative brings readers sense of participation and interaction with the speaker while reading. For instance, Barthelme says “What happens next? Of course, I don’t know” to suspend the writer’s story here and he also makes the distinction between the writer and the narrator “I” as Barthelme himself to continue his explanation of the writer’s story in this essay (“Not-Knowing” 11). The technique of breaking the fourth wall makes the effect as if readers become audience join the

¹⁸ The fourth wall is a performance convention which is actually an invisible, imagined wall that separates actors from the audience.

play; however, it also detaches them from the text at the same time, and it reminds readers' identity as spectators to suspect what they read in the text.¹⁹

One of remarkable narrative styles in Barthelme's writing is the digressive narrative. His digressive narrative in this essay displays the writer's freedom to change the scenes at any moment, and the play of structure presents the digressions among paragraphs which cause the plot changed like thoughts in the stream-of-consciousness. Those digressions make this essay several sections, and each sections talk about different issues. Sometimes the writer talks about the story, but the issue becomes the discussion of writing or other problems writer chooses to deal with in the next section. In this essay, Barthelme changes the scenes for several times, like a play changed to different scenes. First he talks about Jemima, Jacqueline, and the thief Zeno, next he mentions the idea of writer and writing, and he takes over Alphonse's letter to discuss the death of movements after he writes "Let us change the scene" (Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" 12). Barthelme talks about postmodernism after he states "Let me begin again," ("Not-Knowing" 18) and he uses "Let us discuss the condition of my desk" (20) to start the issue about the writer's messy desk, and then turns to a scene full of characters he mentioned before this essay in a club by stating "Let us suppose that I am the toughest banjulele player in town" (22). Those sections are like building blocks constructed by the writer. Through the continuous changes in those paragraphs, Barthelme's writing distracts readers from each problem he chooses to talk about, the discontinuities in his writing remind readers not to plunge into what the writer provides in the text. In the following paragraphs of Chapter Three, the discussion shows how Barthelme talks about the manipulation of those different issues in each section combined together in this essay. Barthelme further elaborates the question about the meaning of art/literature, and explain the relationship between language and life, the convergence of arts and the world.

¹⁹ Gadamer talks the example of the tragic in *Truth and Method*, and he considers "being overcome by misery and horror involves a painful division. There is a disjunction from what is happening, a refusal to accept that rebels against the agonizing events. But the effect of the tragic catastrophe is precisely to dissolve this disjunction from what is" (131). It reveals the situation that while people become the spectator of a play or the reader read the text, people participate in the atmosphere constituted by the work, but they also detach from it in a distance which reminds them the distinction between the work and the reality.

Language and Life, Arts and the World

So far we know that a writer can decide characters' identities in the story, and make them enforce some actions by description in writing. The choice of subject matters as problems to deal with and the arrangement of characters, settings, and plot in writing are the way writer presents some ideas to readers. However, language has over-used nowadays, writer needs to say something in a new way to make language new and raw again. The French symbolist poet Mallarme uses symbol and mimesis in a way that "shakes words loose from their attachments and bestows new meanings upon them," and Charles Mauron admires the sense of alienation enforced by Barthelme's work (Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" 16). In the past, literature and art was regarded as "truthful" (or realistic) representation of the external world, while according to Mauron, Mallarme's work establishes "a new ontological status for the poem, as an object in the world rather than a representation of the world" (Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" 16). Barthelme points out that art as mediation upon external reality, and this concept also reveals the relationship between work and world. As the narrator mentions "[i]n what sense is the work 'about' the world" in "Not-Knowing," here the significance of social engagement in literature is reinforced (Barthelme 20).

The narrator invites readers to join the discussion about the condition of his desk, and he describes it is "mildly" messy, and the messiness is both "physical" and "spiritual" as he thinks. He considers coffee cups and cigarette on the desk as "physical" messiness, the unpaid bills and unwritten novels are regarded as "spiritual" messiness. The narrator provides a new way to distinguish the sense of messiness. The coffee cups and cigarette are material object classified in "physical" messiness, the unpaid bills and unwritten novels are also material object, while he puts emphasis on the sense of anxiety those objects bring to him, and that is the reason why he calls them "spiritual" messiness. The narrator continues his depiction of the messy desk with "the emotional life of the man who sits at the desk is also messy," and he describes the location of the desk which is in the apartment, the streets outside the apartment, the social organization of the country, and the world situation in

disarray, his way to render messy further displays the relation gradually connected personal life to the world in the work (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 20). The narrator also says “[t]he world enters the work as it enters our ordinary lives” (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 21).

Barthelme considers art as mediation upon external reality, and he talks about the relation of art to world. Artist represents things one gets access to in one’s life. On the basis of Husserl’s formulation, consciousness is always “consciousness of something.” The world as an object of art, and art performs the activity of mind for Barthelme, he believes that “art thinks ever of the world, cannot not think of the world, could not turn its back on the world even if it wished to” (“Not-Knowing” 23). Writer’s application of words relates the work to the world through language, and artist’s activity of mind represents one’s cognition towards the world through the work of art. Therefore, art and literature as literary art become the mediation which connects the work to the world. The relation between word and the world is also acknowledged in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigation*.

In *Philosophical Investigation*, Wittgenstein asserts that “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (§ 19). People deal with everything in life through language, which shows the importance of language in human life. A form of life is constituted by a certain application of language. A certain application of language relates with a custom for Wittgenstein, and he considers “a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom” (§ 198). The “sign-post” means the reaction or behavior after perceiving and understanding of the meaning of sign. People learn the common usage of signs and know how to react to particular signs as the action of the instruction; nevertheless, there are different customs in different places or social contexts which might cause the varied application of a same sign. In accordance with Wittgenstein, he notes that “[w]hat is happening now has significance—in these surroundings. The surroundings give it its importance” (§ 583). The meaning of word is the application of the word, while the application of the word depends on the conditions when people use the word. The meaning of word cannot exist without surrounding as a basic recognition for people to interpret and

understand. In this essay, the writer writes a plot which mentions Zeno's employment of Perry Meisel's quotation on semiotic, and he says "Semiotics is in a position to claim that no phenomenon has any ontological status outside its place in the particular information system from which it draws the meaning," and therefore "all language is finally groundless" (Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" 18). Therefore, language is contextual and language cannot be understood without its references. The writer receives a letter from a critic who asks for his permission to reprint one of his stories as an addendum, and he thinks that his story has "sprouted" which shows the expansion of text constituted by reference of references, inasmuch as the writer's story becomes the reference in the critic's addendum (Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" 18). People might not understand the piece of writing in the addendum well if they have not read the writer's previous story, or they cannot recognize the intertextuality.

Our surroundings have a great effect upon the meaning of the language we use; nevertheless, the meaning of language is restricted by its surroundings at the same time. From Gadamer's perspective, he argues that "[f]or the writer, free invention is always on one side of a mediation conditioned by values already given. He does not freely invent his plot, however much he imagines that he does. Rather, even today the mimesis theory still retains something of its old validity. The writer's free invention is the presentation of a common truth that is binding on the writer also" in *Truth and Method* (133). Gadamer also indicates "what is presented and recognized, and to participate in it is not a matter of choice" (132-33). Different from Barthelme's claim that a writer has the power to choose what to write and the ability to control over the whole text, Gadamer emphasizes the influence of surroundings on writer and artist, and he considers the writer or the artist "stands in the same tradition as the public that he is addressing and which he gathers around him."²⁰ (133) While Barthelme considers art as a "true account of the activity of mind," Gadamer asserts that "the choice of material and the forming of it still do not proceed from the free discretion of the artist and are

²⁰ In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer also claims that "[t]he player, sculptor, or viewer is never simply swept away into a strange world of magic, of intoxication, of dream; rather, it is always his own world, and he comes to belong to it more fully by recognizing himself more profoundly in it. There remains a continuity of meaning which links the work of art with the existing world and from which even the alienated consciousness of a cultured society never quite detaches itself" (134).

not the mere expression of his inner life. Rather, the artist addresses people whose minds are prepared and chooses what promises to have an effect on them” (133). Inasmuch as the work displays what the writer and the artist encounter in the world, the recognition of life, writer and artist have ability to criticize social events which has relevance with their real life. The commercial culture and the contamination of language result in impoverishment of aesthetic appreciation. At any rate, Barthelme believes that “[t]he prior history of words is one of the aspects of language the world uses to smuggle itself into the work. If words can be contaminated by the world, they can also carry with them into the work trace elements of world which can be used in a positive sense. We must allow ourselves the advantages of our disadvantages” (“Not-Knowing” 22) For instance, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* is a work written as a satire and this animal fable indirectly represents the discontentment with political event (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 16). Writer states what as-yet unspoken helps readers reconsider some events that happen in their life, and to think over ethical problems or the relationship between self and the world: “[i]f words can be contaminated by the world, they can also carry with them into the work trace elements of world which can be used in a positive sense” (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 22). Writer’s application of language can reveal something unknown and unspeakable, and it also has great influence in the culture context which is able to change the world positively²¹.

²¹ In Roland Barthes’ *Writing Degree Zero*, he challenges the notion of literature’s obligation to be socially engaged. The writer has a political and ethical responsibility for the society. Bertolt Brecht also has his claim to evoke audiences’ attention to the relationship between the play and reality. Brecht’s notion of “alienation effect” which is an important technique used in Epic theater also makes the detachment of play and the spectator. He considers that a play should provoke the spectators’ rational self-reflection and critical view of the action on the stage, and he wants the spectators to recognize the problems in life such as social injustice and exploitation through their observation from critical perspective, and further promote some movements to make effective changes in the world outside. By reminding the spectators of the play which is a representation of reality, Brecht tries to tell the spectators that reality is constructed and also changeable. While Gadamer talks about the example of the tragedy, he mentions Aristotle’s definition of tragedy which emphasizes the effect on the spectator. Gadamer notes that “[o]bviously it is the disproportionate, terrible immensity of the consequences that flow from a guilty deed that is the real claim made on the spectator. The tragic affirmation is the fulfillment of this claim,” as a result, “[t]he spectator recognizes himself and his own finiteness in the face to the power of fate” (132). In contrast to Brecht’s notion of “alienation effect,” Gadamer’s depiction of the spectator who recognizes himself and “his own finiteness in the face to the power of fate” reveal the passivity to the fate in one’s life, which imply one’s endurance to problems in reality and his submission to his destiny; it is likely to say that the spectator can only accept his own finiteness and compromise with the frustration in life.

Wittgenstein reminds us of the connection between language and the form of life, and Gadamer affirms that literary art is merely the mediation conditioned by values already given to the writer/artist from the social context. The social context has great effect on the interpretation of literary art. How about the influence of time on the interpretation of literary art, besides the effect of the social context? Barthelme remarks on the relation between art and time, and he thinks “Art cannot remain in one place. A certain amount of movement, up, down, across, even a gallop toward the past, is a necessary precondition” (“Not-Knowing” 24). The historical context also has effect on the interpretation of literary art by temporal condition. In Alphonse’s letter to Gaston, he mentions the death of movements, which he regards as a natural part of life (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 13). The death of movements can refer to the beginning of the new movements which bring new things. In common with Barthelme’s viewpoint, Wittgenstein points out that language changes along with the passing of time. He notes “[t]here are countless kind: countless different kinds of use of what we call ‘symbols,’ ‘words,’ ‘sentence.’ And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten” (Wittgenstein § 23). “Reading with understanding is always a kind of reproduction, performance, and interpretation,” Gadamer says in *Truth and Method* (160). However, he explains that “[r]econstructing the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being. What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the lost past, is not the original” (Gadamer 167). Together with the changes in the meaning and the application of language, literature and art can be interpreted differently by multiple applications of language which varied in different times. In Barthelme’s words, he believes that “[t]he fact is not challenged, but understood momentarily, in a new way. It’s our good fortune to be able to imagine alternative realities, other possibilities” (“Not-Knowing” 24). Gadamer puts emphasis on the participation and the effect on the spectator who belongs to the play. In addition, he thinks “art is never simply past but is able to overcome temporal distance by virtue of its own

meaningful presence,” so he believes the understanding of art always includes historical mediation (Gadamer 165).

Aside from the application of the word which relates to the surroundings and the temporal effect from historical context, Bartheleme talks about the question concerning the meaning of arts, and he says “[a]rt is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art” (“Not-Knowing” 15). The complexity of art appeals to spectator’s observation and interpretation. As Bartheleme cites Cioran’s note, “[w]e do not spend much time in front of a canvas whose intention are plain,” it shows that the intention of art is enforced to bring in complexity in the work (“Not-Knowing” 24). If the intention of art is plain, people easily fell in the state of being bored like reading a simple, honest, and straightforward text. The work must make impact on the spectators, by presenting something shocking, surprising, and new effects. Bartheleme mentions the idea of monogram, a motif made by overlapping or combining two or more letters or other graphemes to form one symbol, and he discusses the meaning of art in Robert Rauschenberg’s work “Monogram” (1955-59) (See Fig. 1) (“Not-Knowing” 19).



Fig. 1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Rauschenberg is an American painter and graphic artist, and his well known work is the series “Combines” of the 1950s, which is constituted by non-traditional materials and objects used in creative combinations. His most famous work “Monogram” consists of stuffed goat with its midsection passing through an automobile tire, and this work offers a

variety of interpretations. The interpretation of this artifact varies but is also full of controversy. An artwork is a masterpiece or simply a piece of junk? Calvin Tomkins tells that Rauschenberg says, “the tire seemed ‘something as unavoidable as the goat’ in *The Bride and the Bachelors* (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 19). “To see both goat and tire as ‘unavoidable’ choices, in the context of art-making,” for Tomkins, “is to illuminate just how strange the combinatorial process can be” (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 19). The subject of this artwork is the goat or the tire? Or, it should be viewed as a combined object? Someone might explain the meaning of “Monogram” that “the tire *contests* the goat, *contradicts* the goat, as a mode of being, even that the tire *reproaches* the goat, in some sense,” while other people considers the meaning of it as “unfortunate tire caught by the goat,” or goat is being *consumed* by the tire (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 20). If this work is explained from the use of word and the speaking sound of tire, Barthelme says, “the goat is *tired*” (“Not-Knowing” 20). The goat which is added with a tire is tired? So, what does he mean the goat is “tired”? What causes the goat tired? The “tired” means fatigue of the goat, or the goat is being put on the tire? Barthelme writes, “[t]he combinatorial agility of words, the exponential generation of meaning once they’re allowed to go to bed together, allows the writer to surprise himself, makes art possible, reveals how much of Being we haven’t yet encountered” (“Not-Knowing” 21). The play of words through the combinatorial agility of words enables the write to create some new effect in language. The writer’s creativity in neologism provides a new word or expression, or a new meaning for an existing word. For instance, Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem “Jabberwocky”²² in *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*; he creates some words by combination of two words, the “slithy” combined lithe with slimy, others like “chortle” is the combination of chuckle and snort, and “galumphing” is combined gallop and triumph. Carroll explains how the way in those words are formed in the preface to *The Hunting of the Snark*, and he claims that “frumious” is created when he intend to say fuming and furious while he doesn’t know which one to say first. When readers encounter a word as a combination of other words, they begin to think over or get confused with what the word means and how the words come together. While encountering Rauschenberg’s

²² “Jabberwocky” also means a writing or speech with nonsensical words.

“Monogram,” Barthelme does not feel surprised to see the goat attired, though the tire is part of the goat in this work. What draws Barthelme’s curiosity about the goat attired is not the signification of parts (the goat and the tire), but “how they come together” (“Not-Knowing” 19). From different perspectives, people have different interpretations of this artwork. No matter the interpretation of art or literature, the combinatorial agility of words draws spectators’ attention to what they see. The combinatorial agility of words provides a new form of words, and makes language new and raw for spectators again.

Barthelme argues, “[t]he competing methodologies of contemporary criticism, many of them quite rich in implications, a sort of tyranny of great expectations obtains, a rage for final explanations, a refusal to allow a work that mystery which is essential to it” (“Not-Knowing” 19). It shows a clear and distinctive meaning of art sometimes demanded; nevertheless, this tyranny and hegemonic explanation of art becomes critical imperialism, which causes the limitation of interpretation that takes away the possibilities of interpretation for spectators. For Barthelme, “Monogram” is a magical object because it invites and resists interpretation at the same time, and no interpretation can exhaust or empty it (“Not-Knowing” 20). The combination of the goat and the tire invites audiences’ various interpretations. Barthelme quotes “‘I read each word with the feeling appropriate to it,’ says Wittgenstein, “‘The word ‘but’ for example with the but-feeling”” (“Not-Knowing” 17). For Wittgenstein, he thinks if no special circumstances reverse one’s interpretation, one usually conceives the word or sign based on the occasion, and reacts correspondingly. Only if someone is demanded to manipulate a different way to interpret literary/art, does one know the other possibilities of using different way while interpreting.²³ Somehow Rauschenberg provokes spectators’ curiosity and also gets their attention to this work in a new way, by his innovative employment of assemblages.

²³ When Wittgenstein talks about way of seeing, he mentions that the experience to interpret a same thing through different perspectives is what he calls “noticing an aspect.” In *Philosophical Investigation*, he writes “[i]f you are looking at the object, you need not think of it; but if you are having the visual experience expressed by the exclamation, you are also *thinking* of what you see. Hence the flashing of an aspect on us seems half visual experience, half thought. For example, in one language-game, a word might be used to stand for (or refer to) an object, but in another the same word might be used for giving orders, or for asking questions, and so on” (Wittgenstein 197).

In addition to the writer or the artist's new way to render literary arts for the purpose of surprising oneself and the spectator, Barthelme speaks of the meliorative aspect of literature. The political and social contamination of language and the pressure on language from commercial culture have great effect upon readers. By publication of government decree announcement, or restriction on publication with certain contents, language can be used to control of societies by its function, which might cause imperialism through the hegemony of literature. Barthelme asks, "[i]f these abominations are all in some sense facilitated by, made possible by, language, to what degree is that language ruinously contaminated?" ("Not-Knowing" 16). How literature and art can reshape the world? The ethical dimension of literature speaks the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken. The value of literature and art is not evaluated by how much money the raw material cost, nor the temporal greatness regarded as antiques, nor the abstract aesthetic aura of the work, but the "meliorative function" on the work as mediation to the world, which brings interpretation in accordance with various changes in different times. In Barthelme's words, he asserts "[a]rt's project is fundamentally meliorative," therefore he says "[t]he aim of mediating about the world is finally to change the world" ("Not-Knowing" 24). The interrelationship between the work and the world, which shows writer's work have great influence on the world, while things presented in the work comes from the writer's world. The writer has capacity for changing the world by the power of language, through his writing as the revealing of something not-knowing or some ignored problems in the world. By means of unexpected way to make art possible, style surprises spectators. As regards the idea of "style," Barthelme remarks on "style" that he considers "it is both a response to constraint and a seizing of opportunity" ("Not-Knowing" 22). "Style" is the way how the writer/artist presents his/her ideas in the work, and also what they try to display in the work. Like the idea of writing as "a forcing of what and how," he also relates the notion of "style" to *how* and *what*. As the form/content of the work, styles helps spectators notice and remember the work, and it also makes spectators to imagine the world created in the work. Although style restraints the form

or the creativity to make art, style draws attentions, which enables writer/artist to speak, to be noticed, and to imagine again (Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” 24). The way how the writer manipulates words in the form to make words and sentences is the style. For instance, Barthelme’s play of structure, negational narrative, digressions, and other techniques (romanticism, modernism, surrealism, and postmodernism devices) in his works is his style. Style is like the method of a play while the play is being participated. Style tells how the play is played and what is played, and helps players think (or imagine) how to play in the play.

Conclusion: the Word and the World

Barthelme’s essay discusses writers, writing, and the meaning of art, to defend a “postmodernist” writing which is wrongly condemned as “difficult.” There are unorthodox methods provided in the narrator’s writing which distract readers’ attention while reading this essay. Barthelme discusses what “not-knowing” is in an experimental, intentionally literary manner. He explores a range of problems but he does not plan to offer definitive answers to any of them. The answers to those problems are suspended, and that is what Maurice Couturier explains the favorite strategy of postmodernist forms of narrative: suspension. Suspension makes readers hesitate between different interpretations of postmodernist writings.

For Barthelme, “[w]riting is a process of dealing with not-knowing” (“Not-Knowing” 12). He focuses on the writer’s capacity to manipulate words as his application of language, and deal with problems which are as-yet unspeakable. Barthelme points out that literature and art as the mediation of the world enable the writer/artist to display things they perceive in the world. Readers/spectators recognize problems in life while participating in the work, and they are able to take actions against the social injustice or exploitation to change the world. Consequently, Barthelme’s essay manifests the importance of literature and art. Writing as the mediation connects the work with the world, the reader-writer relationship constructed by

writing as well. In *Philosophical Investigation*, Wittgenstein considers that “to imaging a language means to imagine a form of life” (§ 19). In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer says “[t]he aesthetic myth of freely creative imagination that transforms experience into literature” (133). The surroundings have great influence on the application of language; therefore, what the writer writes in the text and what the artist presents in the work are what they experienced in the world. Gadamer considers, moreover, “all written texts share in the mode of being of literature” (162). In other words, he thinks “namely the human sciences as a whole. Moreover, all scholarly research takes the form of literature insofar as it is essentially bound to language. Literature in the broadest sense is bounded only by what can be said, for everything that can be said can be written” (Gadamer 162). Both Gadamer and Barthelme regard literature as an important mediation of the world.

Nevertheless, from Wittgenstein’s and Gadamer’s perspective, the social context in which the writer works has great importance. The influence of the values already given for the writer from the society on what the writer presents in his works are profound. The writer’s play of language draws readers’ attention to the work, but readers’ capacity for understanding the meaning of language comes from the acknowledgement in the world which is influenced by ideologies. Does the writer who manipulates words in his writing play the language, or the writer is merely the one who is played by language in the process of writing? So, does readers know the play of language that the writer manipulates while reading, or they are simply people who are “played” by language while participating? Barthelme tries to encourage his readers to make their own play of language by Barthelme’s manipulation of language which surprises and shocks readers with peculiar writing style. Readers have different interpretations of what they read, and reconsider what the work brings to them related with their lives. The experience in art is the same. “For literary art has in common with all other texts the fact that it speaks to us in terms of the significance of its contents. Our understanding is not specifically concerned with its formal achievement as a work of art but with what it says to us,” Gadamer says (163). Style surprises readers and make them think

and wonder the relationship between the text and the reader. The allusions of allusions in postmodernist literature and art is not what causes the difficulty in understanding, but rather a style which permits writers/artists to speak and to imagine again, and it is what make the indeterminacy/hesitation for spectators.

As Gadamer considers that “Hegel states a definite truth, inasmuch as the essential nature of the historical spirit consists not in the restoration of the past but in *thoughtful mediation with contemporary life*,” the temporal variations will not empty or exhaust the meaning of literary art (168-69). Bartheleme also states, “fact is not challenged, but understood, momentarily, in a new way,” for that reason, the interpretation of literary art varied in accordance with different application of language in different times (“Not-Knowing” 24). Writing is important because it makes people be aware of things happened and critical problems which are repressed and muted before in the world. Writing as a play of language game makes people different in the world, because writing can have great effect on the readers. Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation that it concerns with how people apply language according to his/her experience and knowledge to achieve understanding and interpreting in all kinds of surroundings. Receiving various information in daily lives, people gain experiences and knowledge as the passing of time, and they know how to read and write, to understand and to express. The writer-reader relationship can change the world because writing is a play between the author and the reader, and also a play between the text and the reader which makes reader concern with the world by the play of language. Through reading, people treat the text not merely a text, but something that might have happened but concealed in the world. People notice the problem and then perhaps they start to have introspection; and further, they can bring out resolution or prevent the same problem happened again. Life is a game full of different plays. People learn how to live through play, and they also have ability to make the play differently if there are players participate in the play.

Conclusion

As a postmodernist writer, Donald Barthelme manipulates his play of language in his writings. In the online resource “Donald Barthelme on the Art of Not-Knowing and the Essential Not-Knowing of Art,” Maria Popova says Barthelme’s writings display his “special sensitivity to language and an exceptional ability to articulate its magic.” The intention of my thesis is to demonstrate how Barthelme’s writing operates the creative reading and the enjoyment of imagination for readers by means of my comprehension over the understanding of language.

Through my reading of Gadamer’s hermeneutics and Fish’s reader-response theory, I realize that Barthelme’s text as a play when readers participate in the language game through the process of reading. In Chapter One, the discussion shows that reader is the player in the play, who has different life experience and literary competence that builds up different knowledge and thoughts (probably prejudices, from Gadamer’s perspective) by the varied historical context. Barthelme’s word-games in “Game” construct an unstable symbolic system in the form of displacement, irony, and repetition in the narrative, and he also depicts the narrator’s anxiety, irrationality, and depression in his narrative with surrealist writing style. This story displays the play between the text and the reader, and the interaction of the text and the reader is achieved by reading and understandings of the text. While reading, readers join the game in the text, and grant the text meaning. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer asserts that “literature and the reading of it have the maximum degree of freedom and mobility” (161). The definition of words and the interpretation of text in reader’s reading make the reading a game. Through the approach to read the text as a game, the task of the game is not to look for an absolute interpretation of the text, but to enjoy the freedom and mobility of creative reading in the process of playing the game.

Through my understanding of Heidegger's philosophical contemplation of the essence of truth and Derrida's deconstructionist reading concerned with the relationship between text and meaning, I comprehend Barthelme's writing bestows a new way of definition with the negative approach of narrative. My deliberation on Barthelme's "Nothing: A Preliminary Account" presents the limitation to define "nothing" by language in chapter two. Barthelme tries to define "nothing" by making a list of what is not "nothing," and the substitutions of those things on the list construct the whole story. From Heidegger's perspective, the essence of truth includes un-truth, and the un-truth is not what we call "falsehood," but the concealment within truth. Heidegger believes that we could be in search of the essence of truth through the discovery of un-truth, and I relate his way of looking for the essence of truth to Barthelme's definition of "nothing" through his denial of things on the list. However, the definition of "nothing" is something beyond language, so the way to define "nothing" through language is a never accomplished mission. The narrator in this story begins an endless process of making the list. According to Derrida's idea of "différance," which means difference and deferral of meaning, the things which are not "nothing" on the list are only supplements, or Barthelme's play of signifiers. The final answer to the question about what "nothing" is is not really presented, and what readers know are only things which are not "nothing." "Nothing" is always something else not included in the list, and it exists somewhere beyond, beyond description. In my opinion, I don't think Barthelme aims to provide the definition of "nothing" with great precision in language, but the play of substitutions and the extension of explanations. The limitation of language which cannot define "nothing" still presents its mobility. Barthelme's negational narrative provides a different perspective while explaining what "nothing" is (not). The ceaseless play of signifiers performs the different interpretations, which means things can be defined by different ways of explanations.

Different from Gadamer's "play" that puts emphasis on the experience, competence, and participation of the spectator, Derrida's "play" focuses on the ceaseless process of deferring and differing. Gadamer believes the process of interpretation involves a "fusion of horizons" in hermeneutics so the prejudices are modulated while encounter some different arguments, and it reaches the "common sense" as the fulfillment of mutual understanding. However, for Derrida, he supposes that "the movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin," which he calls supplements of signifiers in the play of words (365). Gadamer and Derrida have different claims on "play," for Gadamer tries to point out the openness of interpretation represented in the play through readers' participation of reading, and Derrida focuses on the deconstructive way of reading by the play of signifiers that the trace made of endless "différance." Reading Barthelme's works through the "play" of Gadamer's hermeneutics and Derrida's deconstruction, I understand that human experience and literary competence are limited, and it is the cause of the limitation of language. However, the limitation of human experience and literary competence is what makes the interpretive differences from varied perspectives. Like what Gadamer points out, "a written tradition once deciphered and read, is to such an extent pure mind that it speaks to us as if in the present. That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that frees and binds us" (163). The interpretation is restricted within the description of language. We can only explain things by language we know, but the explanation is also freed from the deconstructive reading approach which makes multiple ways of description by the differing and deferring of signifiers. From my point of view, reading is like a game, different people play and involved in the game while reading, and readers feel free to interpret the meaning of the text based on what s/he knows as long as they follow the logic rules in language. The interpretation is not absolutely free to make any explanation reader creates by oneself, but it is neither totally immobile that gives the only definition, or rather, the meaning of text not only varied from reader's different life experience, literary competence,

perspective, and way of description constituted by supplements of signifiers, but also historical context (or situation) and manipulation of words which I elaborate in my discussion on the relationship between the meaning of language and the form of life in next chapter.

In Chapter Three, the investigation of Barthelme's essay "Not-Knowing" through my reading of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigation*, connects the word to the world. Barthelme mentions the relationship between writer and writing. What can the writer do as an author of the text to create the fictional world? Barthelme says writing is the process of dealing with "not-knowing," and he asserts that writer should write something as-yet unspeakable. "The author, in short, is another tool for the exploration and exploitation of ontology. S/he functions at two theoretically distinct levels of ontological structure: as the vehicle of autobiographical fact within the projected fictional world; and as the maker of that world, visibly occupying an ontological level superior to it," Brian McHale asserts that in *Postmodernist Fiction* (202). The writer is the creator of the fictional world who can manipulate the power of writing by the use of words to have great effect upon readers.

From Gadamer's point of view, the employment of Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy makes "a decisive contribution to the problem of the aesthetic," includes its "effect on the spectator"²⁴ (130). The tragic work becomes the spectator's self-encounter, and the play as the function of purification of emotions in particular "pity" and "fear" brings with catharsis. Echoed with Gadamer's assertion of "play" that needs readers' participation while reading which constructs the interaction between the text and the readers, Barthelme also lays great stress on the effect on the reader, the spectator of text in the play of language.²⁵ The

²⁴ Aristotle's "catharsis," refers to the purification that the process of releasing strong emotional tensions (pity and fear) through particular activity or experience as art, writing, music, or theater (especially in tragedy).

²⁵ Roland Barthes also has similar view points. In "S/Z", to interpret a text for Barthes is not "to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning," inversely; one ought to appreciate what plural constitutes it (5). As a result, he argues that "the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (Barthes, "S/Z" 4). Literary works are recreated at the moment of being read. Therefore, in "The Death of the Author" Barthes concludes that "we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" ("Death" 148). The person who gives the text meaning thus is how the reader interprets the text after reading.

Romanticism movement also emphasizes intense emotion as apprehension, horror and terror, and awe in reader's psychology, also focuses on the effect on spectator. Related to the purpose of Romanticist works, Barthelme's writing style also presents this Romanticist approach²⁶, which evokes anxiety, fear, and wonder for readers. Similar to Wittgenstein's thoughts about the "form of life" that highlights the experience of the author and the reader, Gadamer believes that things the artist addresses to spectators are what he gathers around him" (133). The aesthetic myth of freely creative imagination, in Gadamer's words, transforms author's experience into literature, and the artist only addresses people "whose minds are prepared and chooses what promises to have an effect on them" (133). Therefore, reading Barthelme's works through Gadamer's belief in reader's interpretation related to the reader's life experience and literary competence, and Wittgenstein's idea that the use of language as the form of life," it helps me connect the application of words to the world, in other words, readings of a text are culturally constructed.

In "Write What You Don't Know," Will Gates thinks that Barthelme's "Not-Knowing" presents "his inspiring vision for how literature and art can reshape the worlds." The figure of speech in postmodernist writing makes language raw and new, and this style of narrative enables people to speak and to imagine again differently. Therefore, writing is not merely a play between the author and the reader, but a play between the text and the reader, a play between the words and the world. In my opinion, reading Barthelme's writing is like the complicity between reader and his work, through the reading and the understanding of the text, readers enjoy their different plays. The readers' limitation of experience brings with the limitation of interpretation, but readers are still invited to join the play and to imagine in the world. They are encouraged to read creatively, to feel free to interpret in the play, and to make changes in their thoughts and their lives.

²⁶ Romanticism's key concept of genius, which claims for artist's ability to make one's original work through the process of creation from nothingness, is called "romantic originality"; nevertheless, for Gadamer, he argues that writer's free invention is only "one side of a mediation conditioned by values already given (133).

Why “play” is important? “Play” helps people learn how to live. Children learn through play, by role-playing game, handling of toys, conversation, and other interaction with other people, they know how to use language through the manipulation of words, sentences, and pronunciation in tones. Play becomes play when it is participated in, thus people join the play while learning the operation of the play. For instance, a teacher as a player teaches students how to read, the understanding of language, the teacher shows how words refer to its meanings as the reference for students to learn from the play. Those students are also players in the play while learning how to read. When a child plays alone with toys, the toys provide the to-and-fro movements while playing (like Shotwell plays the jacks game with the rubber ball in “Game”), and the child plays the toys within his/her own rules/ways that brings with one’s own creativity. “Play” is everywhere, and there are different rules in “play.” The rules of play make the play limited, though the player who has the right to make choice in a play seems to have freedom in the play. The rules of play are just like laws in our lives. People choose what to do in our lives, but laws set up restrictions to remind them (players) the rules in the world. Life is a game full of various plays. Through different plays in life, people gain knowledge and experiences, and they know how to react to different plays.

Reading is also a play when someone is reading. Reading as an event connects the reader’s world and the narrator’s world by the writer’s words. This thesis is my play of language game, and it presents my understanding of Donald Barthelme’s writing through what I read and understand from other writings and the way I manipulate language in my writing. By participation of this play, readers who read my thesis understand what I try to say. As both writer and player in this play, I try to make my readers notice the relationship between words and the world. The understanding of language lies in the application of language, which constructed from the form of life. People enjoy reading because they realize that what they read is in connection with their lives. I like Barthelme’s writing because he provides readers chances to imagine, and he inspires them to think. The fiction is not merely a fiction, but mediation assists readers in reconsideration of the world. A writer is the person who manipulates the power of language to make literature have great effect on the reader;

therefore, I like Barthelme's contention that the power of language is what a writer can manipulate to make the world better. Barthelme thinks writer should write something "not-knowing," the as-yet unspeakable, also the problems ignored in the world. In Gadamer's words, he also asserts that "[t]he concept of literature is not unrelated to the reader" (161). In addition to the participation of "play" is important for people to learn how to live, Gadamer and Barthelme make readers to notice the importance of literature.

"Literature is a function of being intellectually preserved and handed down, and therefore brings its hidden history into every age," Gadamer says (161). For a writer, writing can be a therapy. In an online article "How the Ancient Art of Writing Therapy Can Help You Create a Brighter Future," Perry Garfinkel mentions a British author Graham Greene who points out that "[w]riting is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose, or paint can manage to escape the madness, melancholia, the panic and fear which is inherent in a human situation" in *Ways of Escape*. Like the treatment in psychoanalysis "talking cure," there is also a "writing cure" that releases the writer's repressed emotion in life. Through the process of writing, the application of language to express what the writer thinks brings the writer out of his/her depression while writing. The writer also makes the writing a voice speaks out the ignored issues in the world. As a reader, I like to study literature because it includes diversity of issues and it also helps me understand what I know and what I don't know in my life. Along with Barthelme's "Game," begin a journey underground to watch the console with someone insane, define "there is nothing under the bed" to play with signifiers in "Nothing: A Preliminary Account," and finally encounter the world by writer's writing in "Not-Knowing," it's all about the play in language from the beginning but has no an end. Therefore, I enjoy playing language games while manipulating words in reading, writing, or talking, and I like to know more about things that misunderstood, hidden, or ignored problems in the world through literature. In conclusion, literature not only helps people know the world better, but also gives a way for them to be concerned with the world, to rethink the relationship between self and the world.

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