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Richard Brautigan: Youth Fishing in America

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We have no *Ars Bene Moriendi*. And when did you last see the black armband, the purple wreath? Formal mourning is out of style. This, with the dissipation of Christianity, also in my lifetime, has profoundly affected poetry. One may come to the consequence sparsely as in this epitaph for oneself:

*When I shall be without regret
And shall mortality forget,
When I shall die who lived for
this,
I shall not miss the things I miss.
And you who notice where I lie
As not my name. It is not I.*

One may come to it through the traditional eloquence of blank verse, as in this modern consolation, "Consolatio Nova," on the death of my friend and publisher Alan Swallow:

*To speak of death is to deny it, is
To give unpredicated substance
phrase
And being. So the discontinuous,
The present instant absent finally
Without future or past, is yet in
time
For we are time, monads of purposes*

Richard Brautigan: Youth Fishing in America

Richard Brautigan is an epiphenomenon in American literature. He seems to represent some

*Beyond ourselves that are not
purposes,
A causeless all of momentary
somes.
And in such fiction we can think
of death.*

One may come to it through the casualness of syllabic meter, as in "Think":

*Let us forget praise and blame,
Speak only of quietness
And survival. Mad toadstools
Grow in the dampness, englobed
Enormities, inherited
Treachery of all our pasts.
Forget. What was day is night.
In curtained sufficiency
Rest in the living silence,
Rest in arrogant sleep. Think
What houseflies have died in
time**

But one must come to it somehow. Technology has not yet repealed death, and, if it did, who could live with the horror of immortality.

—J. V. CUNNINGHAM

* Read at Seton Hall University April 16, 1970.

sort of insubstantial alternative. While the academy of letters reads Beckett, Borges, and Nabokov,

the kids read Brautigan. Three of his books have sold over 100,000 copies. His appeal consists primarily in an irrepressible optimism (probably the brand of a woodsy Pacific Northwest background), a style flashing with artifice, and a total disregard for effete university culture. Mr. Brautigan is not himself the product of American higher education or of much formal training of any kind. Furthermore, his fund of simplicity and optimism is a relief for some from the profound despair of writers like Beckett. To complete the picture, I need only add that his flashy technique, in reality concealing a great deal of carelessness, on first reading must strike some readers as more exciting than the whittled style and carefully constructed works of Borges.

Thus he has risen almost by accident to a prominence far beyond his expectations or desserts. He emerged conveniently at a time when surface display is applauded by many readers, weary with education and its sacred fund of difficult literary exercises. The convenience extends to his natural bent toward living close to the earth which coincided happily with a burgeoning interest in ecology and the retreat from the cities to a more rural existence. There is no doubt that Mr. Brautigan has become a kind of cult figure. The extent of his glamor may be gauged by anyone who reads the feature

article by John Stickney called "Gentle Poet of the Young" which appeared in the August 14, 1970 edition of *Life*. Mr. Stickney accords him the unmistakable stature of a folk hero.

However, it is not fair to limit the appeal of Mr. Brautigan to the young. An enormous number of reviews have appeared in a wide range of journals which indicate that many members of the older generation have fallen under his spell as well. To quote but a single example, I offer the following portion of Josephine Hendin's review of *Revenge of the Lawn*, from the January 16, 1972 issue of *The New York Times Book Review*, where she says:

Some of these stories are serene accounts of misery, others are shallow nothings, still others show people in the throes of learning that living can be nothing but losing. But every one of them is an encounter with an imagination so radical, so powerful, it can fade the very experience of anguish into a sweet mirage.

I have read this kind of review again and again. The reviewer says some true things: some of these stories are shallow nothings. Here is a writer who can fade the very experience of anguish into a mirage. But the conclusion reached is not at all what one would expect. Instead of telling us to put the book away and forget it, Miss Hendin says that Richard Brautigan's imagination is so radical, so

powerful that we must come to terms with it. Reading the reviews of Mr. Brautigan's books would make one suspect that many of his admirers are unable to sum up their own experience. They dot their reviews with adjectives like quirky, sentimental, and shallow but somehow manage to find the whole experience "absorbing, irritating, and terribly amusing" as Thomas Parkinson said in *The San Francisco Chronicle*.

Trout Fishing in America (1967) was Mr. Brautigan's first major success although he had published several books previous to this one. It is a collage of scraps about life in California, about the Pacific Northwest, about various experiences trout fishing, all of which the author seems to want to coalesce into some kind of statement about America itself, often as he says "only a place in the mind." Unfortunately, Mr. Brautigan's mind does not seem to be able to concentrate on anything long enough or hard enough to discover its meaning, to unlock its mystery, to do much more than make a few stray notes about the logistics of experience.

The logistics of experience are precisely what Mr. Brautigan seems to be interested in. His characters are hardly characters at all but they do interact. Thus gesture replaces psychology, travel replaces self-exploration, and accidental disappointments replace existential despair. Mr. Brauti-

gan's characters are not alienated and the America he describes in *Trout Fishing* is sometimes unjust but never hostile. Unanalyzably present and mutely assertive, America becomes a mere extension of his ego like the various women who appear and disappear throughout his work.

The source of interest in this world comes from Brautigan's liberal use of tricks, puns, wild images, and surprising juxtapositions. Take the beginning of "Sea, Sea Rider," for instance.

The man who owned the bookstore was not magic, he was not a three-legged crow on the dandelion side of the mountain.

He was, of course, a Jew, a retired merchant seaman who had been torpedoed in the North Atlantic and floated there day after day until death did not want him. He had a young wife, a heart attack, a Volkswagen, and a home in Marin County. He liked the words of George Orwell, Richard Aldington, and Edmund Wilson. He learned about life at sixteen, first from Dostoevsky and then from the whores of New Orleans. (*Trout Fishing in America*)

In spite of the fact that we seem to be told a great deal about this man, we are actually told very little. Brautigan adopts the declarative tone, only to present us with a list of clichés: a heart attack, a Volkswagen, a home in Marin County. We might be tempted to believe that he intends an ironic effect were it not for the fact that he goes on to indicate such an un-

complicated sympathy for this figure. The picture presented in this paragraph aims at sharp, declarative strokes. However, those elements of the description which are not actual clichés sound as if they could be. The picture is blurred by the linkage of Orwell, Aldington, and Wilson who do not together produce any very clear idea of this man's reading tastes. Finally, one is forced to conclude that the surprising juxtapositions—the heart attack and the Volkswagen, the whores of New Orleans and Dostoevsky—are introduced for effect rather than for any reason germane to the story.

Brautigan proceeds in the next paragraph to describe the bookstore as "a parking lot for used graveyards." It is this kind of image which Brautigan uses to furnish dramatic éclat to his works. On quick reading one can see what he is getting at. "Thousands of graveyards were parked in rows like cars." The books are old (dead) and they are put together in rows like graves in a graveyard or cars in a parking lot. However, Brautigan has jumbled both of these ideas up together so that the image becomes totally unvisualizable and one must stop to sort out its meanings. Typically, in these books, the images call attention to themselves, transferring the emphasis from the object to its supposedly related counterpart. They are,

moreover, imprecise. One feels Brautigan's inaccurate sense of his own lyricism fluttering behind them. The beginning of "The Gathering of a Californian" is one such example where Brautigan is careless to an almost ludicrous degree while attempting to be poetic.

Like most Californians, I come from someplace else and was gathered to the purpose of California like a metal-eating flower gathers the sunshine, the rain, and then to the freeway beckons its petals and lets the cars drive in, millions of cars into but a single flower, the scent choked with congestion and room for millions more. (*Revenge of the Lawn*)

Mr. Brautigan is sincere, or would at least like to convince the reader of his sincerity. Unfortunately, one is hardly repaid for the sentimental flaccidness of his prose by the experience of feeling that he might after all be serious. Hovering behind many of his stories, behind "The Surgeon" in *Trout Fishing* for example, is a desire to flaunt the author's moral sensitivity. In *The Abortion* it is Vida who decides to get rid of her baby but it is Mr. Brautigan who looks for the credit of her decision. This leads to a kind of sententiousness on the part of the character which hardly seems necessary in her situation.

Vida: Maybe another time, perhaps for certain another time, but not now. I love children, but this isn't the time. If you can't give them the

maximum of yourself, then it's best to wait. There are too many children in the world and not enough love. (*The Abortion*)

The sentiments are respectable enough and yet they sound maudlin because they are expressed in prose with so little originality, so little bite to it. They are the well-chewed maxims of sociology texts. The sentimental Mr. Brautigan peeps from his pages so often in moments like this that one is tempted to cultivate an acerbic irony just to freshen the air.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Brautigan for all his attempts to be part of the avant-garde often falls into the very old pit of the moral fable. In "Corporal," a story from his last book which Josephine Hendin particularly admires, a schoolboy tries to get enough papers for his school paper drive to be awarded the rank of general. However, he is easily outdone by the boys who "get to eat a hot lunch every day," and whose parents have cars to load with papers. He is able to reach only the rank of private. The story ends with these remarks:

Shortly after that, like the next day, I brought a halt to my glorious military career and entered into the disenchanted paper shadows of America where failure is a bounced check or a bad report card or a letter ending a love affair and all the words that hurt people when they read them. (*Revenge of the Lawn*)

Miss Hendin calls this "a power-

ful account of how people get to be so cool."

What Brautigan does well—the single insight about fleeting human experience—is more suited to poetry than it is to prose. In *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* he occasionally hits it. "Widow's Lament" which follows in full is nice in its minor way.

*It's not quite cold enough
to go borrow firewood
from the neighbors.*

However, such understatement is rare, and more often than not Mr. Brautigan's poetry simply illustrates his lack of understanding of the medium. His lineation is based on grammatical units rather than on any principle inherent in the poem itself. Furthermore, he does not know how to build: development of character or statement or scene is as alien to his poetry as to his prose.

Some readers have mistaken this weakness for a statement about the meaninglessness of existence, the fragmentary quality of experience, the mute surfaces of modern life. Unfortunately, Mr. Brautigan himself brings events into moral relations which his readers are so kind as to forget. In "1692 Cotton Mather Newsreel" a child's prank becomes emblematic of the New England witch hunts and the genocide of Nazi Germany. The story itself does not in the least warrant such extensions of meaning. It sounds like an incident from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, though Harper

Lee never made such grand claims as these. A couple of boys dare each other to sneak into the house of a helpless lady whom they think of as a witch. One boy completes the dare and then, frightened at himself, runs screaming away, joined by his pal outside who also begins to scream. The story ends: "We ran screaming through the streets of Tacoma, pursued by our own voices like a 1692 Cotton Mather Newsreel.

This was a month before the German Army marched into Poland."

There are, of course, other writers in America today who use the fragmented series to form a collage. William Gass' "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" and Donald Barthelme's "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" are two works of fiction which succeed brilliantly at Brautigan's game. Gass gives a more compli-

cated picture of America in his Indiana collage than Brautigan does in the whole of *Trout Fishing in America*. Furthermore, Gass like Barthelme says a great deal that is interesting about the creative process as well. Both men keep one guessing, keep one's mind awake and working even when they are relating a seemingly meaningless list of facts. Brautigan, on the other hand, is all somersault, all splash and glitter. One grows weary of this and stops paying much attention to the pages as they turn. There is no organizing consciousness behind the phenomena he presents to our view. It's only some kind of shell game with Brautigan hoping he can keep your interest distracted from the fact that there is nothing under his shiny cups after all.

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