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RICHARD BRAUTIGAN: A MAN IN SEARCH OF AMERICA

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April 15, 1986

Avant-garde writing tends to be an "iffy" thing these days, more a matter of cocktail chatter than execution. The resources for experiments seem used up, or as John Barth put it, "exhausted" (Pinsker 75). Things and words increase in quantity but diminish in value and meaning, making the contemporary writer more and more unwilling to follow the old ways of arranging them. Though this is not a new predicament for an aspiring writer, it is one that seems threatening in an age of self-conscious art. Writers must look for new grammars and new semantics. Some writers turn this quest for new patternings into an aesthetic principle. Such was the case with Richard Brautigan. Brautigan was an innovative writer who pursued his style of writing in this manner: "What if I?... (a) break out of linear print altogether (b) replace order with chapters that can be reshuffled to suit each reader (c) write the damn thing on a roll of toilet paper" (75). This rather care-free attitude seems appropriate for a man who was viewed by many as the representative of the hippie social revolution. Brautigan appeared on the literary scene in the mid-1960s, and with his long blond hair and Hashbury-type clothes, he certainly looked the part. His eccentric works of the American imagination were seen by some as the literary equivalents of such countercultural symbols as acid rock, love beads and long hair.

Yet, as Brautigan's audience changed with time, his books seemed very dated to new generations--they were no longer "revolutionary." They were something to be retrieved periodically

from the past, like old Jimi Hendrix records or psychedelic posters from the Fillmore West (Foster 6). Brautigan's real value was overlooked, and his books were seen as reminders of the way things were and would never be again. His literature is more than an example of nostalgia, however. His obsession with the individual's place in the modern world extends far beyond the cultural alienation characteristic of the hipsters. His works prove that Brautigan was a man of experience and insight, and much more than just a literary 'flower child.' Brautigan, to me, seems to be much more akin to the metafictionists of the 70s than to the naive flower-children of the 60s. He has been placed on the margins of 'metafiction' and 'postmodernism,' yet he has not been given full admission into either club, or as John Barth said, "clubbed into admission" (Chenetier 19). Brautigan exhibits some of the characteristics of metafiction by his concern with the process of the construction of the novel or his intent to parody a specific work; and also displays characteristics of postmodernism, by his awareness of the linguistic reality of the text itself and the existence of mutually exclusive realities. For this reason, Brautigan has been placed on the margins of both literary worlds.

Brautigan's work has been praised for its 'gentle' and 'zany' qualities (Chenetier 15) and condemned for its trendiness and naivete (Chenetier 15). Called an image leader of the Woodstock generation by his early critics, Brautigan sometimes was locked

into that category reserved for minor writers who have caught a mood of an era. He was a highly experimental writer given to elusive subject matter and whimsical first person narrators. Brautigan himself stared from book covers in the guise of a John Lennon idol. A 1969 Newsweek book review had Brautigan "combining the surface finality of Hemingway, the straightforwardness of Sherwood Anderson and the synesthetic guile of Baudelaire...his stories are as open as the Pacific Northwest and as meticulous as a water bug on Salt Creek" (Norman 54). Brautigan has been called a complete angler, a fisherman who drops his lines into a clear pool of consciousness and reels in some very strange fish (Norman 54).

And his work is strange. Often playgrounds of the imagination, his novels generate a sense of unease that is sometimes difficult for the reader to put his finger on. It is rare to find any statements that define the real world. This is because Brautigan does not assert the value of what is real; he instead speculates on the nature of what is real. To Brautigan, 'reality' gives way to movies, to dreams or to whatever else that may happen along. Like the metafiction of the 70s, Brautigan's work found a place beyond society and exempted itself from all usual modes and conventions. The notion of reality is often replaced with fabricated dreams in Brautigan's work, but this concept will be examined further later.

Brautigan's withdrawal from conventions did not remove him from the eye of the literary critic. To some critics, the opportunity to review a Brautigan book meant open season on the hippies. Thus some criticism of his work seems to have more to do with social and political, rather than with strictly literary, considerations. A reviewer for the New Republic sarcastically announced that Brautigan was "the literary embodiment of Woodstock, his little novels and poems being right in the let's-get-back-to-nature-and-get-it-all-together groove" (Yardley 24). Rock critic Robert Christgau said that Brautigan would "survive as the literary representative of ...the Hippies," that his "chief competition in the realm of hippie art comes from the Grateful Dead." (4). This is one example of Brautigan being locked into the generation of the 1960s.

Perhaps one of the most widely read grumblings against Brautigan was John Clayton's "Richard Brautigan: The Politics of Woodstock," published in the New American Review in 1971. Clayton respected Trout Fishing in America as a literary piece but was worried about its potential political influence. He liked the "imaginative space" explored in Trout Fishing in America, but to live there, he said, would be to desert the social revolution in which he and other Americans firmly believed. He was suspicious about Brautigan and his ideas. "I wonder," he wrote, "is it possible to have both Brautigan's revolution and Che's?" (Clayton 67). Yet no revolutions could ever be fought within the pages of Trout Fishing; the

narrator is too passive. Not because he agrees with America as he finds it, but because he does not feel that there are social revolutions worth fighting. Moreover, one can not ignore the aesthetic revolution taking place within the novel. Clayton makes a distinction between a "social" and an "esthetic" revolution, which in itself divides Brautigan's revolution from Che's.

Some critics reflected more of an understanding of Brautigan's work. Some even thought he might have something worth saying. In The New York Times, Anatole Broyard stated that "At his best, [he] is one of those odd-looking guys with long hair and granny glasses who sees, hears, feels, and thinks things that makes some of us feel he's found a better answer to being alive here and now than we have" (39). This statement can also be seen as an example of critics' locking Brautigan into the hippie category, for by saying he "sees, hears and feels things...", Broyard depicts Brautigan as a hippie-spirit, not as a talented novelist who rises above the perhaps naive, certainly dated "peace and love" aura of the 60s.

Brautigan should be studied for much more than just "social intrigue," however. His literature, more specifically his style of writing, holds as much importance as any social or political notions. Tony Tanner wrote in The Times that Brautigan's language was "refreshingly new, unhysterical, unegotistical, often magical" (5). John Ciardi also was drawn to Brautigan's use of the language: "Brautigan manages effects the English novel has never produced

before" (quoted on the back of Trout Fishing). Robert Adams agreed with Ciardi's assessment. He said that the books were so unlike anything that had ever been written that one could not "call them novels or even fictions--they may well go down in literary history as Brautigans" (24). The inward motion of his narrative energy transposes the task of just storytelling into new and exciting keys. Brautigan had a way of creating artistic worlds-within-worlds that linked the creative art with the artistic product. There is a strong element of fragmentation with his writing which often leads to an impressionistic result. Habitually, though, Brautigan works in several styles and parodies of styles simultaneously. Barthelme once said that "fragments are the only forms I trust," asserting that "It's my hope that these... souvenirs... will someday merge, blur--cohere is the word, maybe--into something meaningful. A grand word meaningful. What do I look for? A work of art, I'll not accept anything less" (Hicks 12). This is Brautigan's hallmark as a writer also.

Within the pages of his early writings (he called his novels "writings",) Brautigan small-talks, writes letters, concocts recipes, makes love and even catches trout. These arbitrary-looking exercises, however, serve a distinct purpose. They aid in the artist's quest for the ideal America, which the narrator in Trout Fishing in America reveals is "often only a place in the mind." Brautigan's writing conveys a poignant sense of loss, of desolation and death. This reflects his attitude towards the

ideal America: it has vanished and been replaced by mechanization, crime, death, garbage and various other kinds of poison and violence. Given the sheer quantity of contemporary U.S. imagery in his work, it's no wonder so many critics have quickly concluded that Brautigan's main concern is with the decay of American society (thus explaining the ostensible element of social commentary in his work.)

Perhaps the real question is which "America" does Brautigan seek: the social realist's or the literary traditionalist's? Brautigan does not interchange the term America for the red, white and blue, apple-pieish ideals of the modern man. America, in the visions of Brautigan, is a metaphor for the positive characters of the past: The Lewises and Clarks of the Frontier...the general of the Big Sur, the Hemingways of literature. The visions of these protagonists are associated with the good side of the dream, as opposed to the American nightmare: the waterfalls that are really flights of white wooden stairs, bookstores that are parking lots for used graveyards, all of the John Dillinger clones of Mooresville, Indiana. Thus, America represents the duality of the American imagination--the struggle between the Cleveland Wrecking Yards and the narrator's dreams of utter freedom. Our redemption, the redemption of America, lies in recovering this freedom (Tanner 410).

At least in Brautigan's early works. In his poetry (he began as a poet), Trout Fishing in America and A Confederate General from

Big Sur, the narrators express a willingness to seek out the natural world around them. The narrators lead us to the core of Brautigan's vision--to the materials that have to be dealt with--to the images of violence which develop the theme of life versus anti-life. In his writing, the experiences of the narrator lead his own infected imagination to wreak violence on the natural world. This reveals one of my major points: that despite shifts in subject matter throughout his novels, there is this constant concern in Brautigan's work with the destructive potential of human imagination.

In his later work, Brautigan shifts from this focus on the American dream and its dreamers, often shifting completely away from American settings in the process. In The Tokyo-Montana Express, there's a "You've got Montana or Tokyo--I'll take Tokyo" attitude throughout. He flees from the image bank of American dreams and nightmares which frequent his earlier works, a flight which seems so desperate, it's almost as if something in the writer, not in the world, was changing. In his last novel, So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away, Brautigan is lost in the labyrinth of memory. The narrator of So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away brings his past forward to see how it had shaped the present, a present which looks pretty wasted at that. The narrator is terrified that if his memories are forgotten, if the wind blows them away, then it's as if the experiences recorded in memory had never existed. Unlike Trout Fishing, there is no glimpse of hope

at the end. In fact, at the end, the narrator wishes himself out of existence. Although there is still something quintessentially "Brautiganesque" about his writing, something that smells so strongly of a Brautigan book, there is nevertheless a shift in attitude toward the same topics from work to work. For example, there is still an abiding concern with the destructive potential of the imagination in So the Wind, it is simply that the concern has taken on a more solipsistic nature.

Many factors may account for this shift in attitude. By the time in 1984 when Brautigan allegedly shot himself in the head, it was known among his family and friends that he was both an alcoholic and a manic-depressive. According to an article in Rolling Stone magazine, Brautigan was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic in early childhood (Wright 29). His progression as a writer certainly was shaped by these physical and psychological conditions, and although it is always difficult to draw any firm conclusions about casual relationships between the private life of a writer and his fictions, nevertheless, I suspect that knowledge about Richard Brautigan the man may help to explain idiosyncracies in his work.

Early life

There's always been some mystery surrounding Brautigan's life, especially his childhood. Brautigan, as he told the story, was abandoned by his mother in a Great Falls, Montana, hotel

room. He was forced to take care of his four-year-old sister, Barbara. In the mornings, he would go down to the restaurant where his stepfather, Mr. Porterfield, was a fry cook. He thought Porterfield was his real father, until his mother returned and told him his real name was Brautigan so it would be right on his high school diploma. His mother moved them back to Tacoma, Washington, and then to Eugene, Oregon.

Brautigan claimed to have returned to Tacoma to discover who his father really was. His birth certificate said his father was Bernard Brautigan, a common laborer. He claimed that he met his real father on the street, and the man gave him five dollars, saying, "That's all you'll ever get from me." That claim was never substantiated, however.

He wrote during high school, his sister said in an interview after his death. She said that their parents never listened to what he was writing. "They didn't understand his writing was important to him. I know they asked him to get out of the house several times" (Wright 36).

Brautigan developed his first crush on a girl at twenty. He got the nerve to show her his work, and she shattered him with criticism. Because he didn't know where else to go, he turned himself into the police. But since he had done nothing wrong, they couldn't do anything for him. So he walked outside and threw a rock through the police station window. After spending a week

in jail, he was committed to the Oregon State Hospital and was then diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic.

His sister said that she didn't know he was there until after they let him out. "I know he did have shock therapy. After that, he seemed real quiet. The only thing he told me about it was that he learned to dance in there. But he would never open up to me again" (Wright 59).

After that, Brautigan moved to San Francisco where the Beat movement had become a popular phenomenon. He hung out in coffeehouses and became friendly with Beats. He began to write poetry, "true underground poetry," he called it, one such work being Please Plant this Book, a collection of eight packets of real seeds, each printed with a poem and planting instructions. Eventually he produced more serious pieces of literature.

The man and his work

A longitudinal study may be conducted between the man and his work, and the skeleton of such a study is inherent in the Brautigan canon, since it covers a 30-year period of creativity. What a reader may disregard as sheer eccentricity at one point of a novel may resurface in a different work. Certain images and particular places recur in his novels, yet they do not always carry the same psychological implications. It is possible to associate these recurring images with various emotional stages of

Brautigan's life. Using this method of biographical connections, one may view the writing of Brautigan as the attempt of a man trying to come to terms with his own hopes, fears and frustrations.

Just as contemporary writing is by nature multidirectional and elusive, so is Brautigan. He never gave a single long interview on his craft or his ideas; in fact, Brautigan has mocked his own endeavors, refusing to take them as seriously as serious writers are expected to do. Some called him the image leader of the Woodstock generation, and in fact he was known as a man "who had a queer sense of humor and a benign feeling toward humanity that was quite out of fashion with the indignant Beats" (Wright 29). It is crucial to distinguish between the hippies and the Beats, although many critics have tended to yoke the two together. In 1964, the average Beat was 45 years old. The Beat generation flourished in the 1950s, and their trademark was trying to imagine an alternative to society. The hippies of the 60s were "less Beat," they tried to celebrate that alternative. The Beats were more outspoken ("what the establishment is doing is evil and corrupt"), the Hippies more laid-back ("you do your thing, I'll do mine.") Brautigan bridges the gap between the two groups. In an interview at a coffee shop in North Beach in 1969, Brautigan was asked why he went to San Francisco to begin with. He said he went to San Francisco just to go to San Francisco. He said that he had no ambitions to be a Beat writer. "No ambitions at all," he said, "just got to know some of the people around town for

awhile, that was all...my involvement with that was only on the very edge and only after the Beat thing had died down" (Cook 207). The vision he adopts, however, is congruent with both the Beats and the hippies; at times he appears to float between the two. Nevertheless, both auras were present when Brautigan was writing his fiction. In fact, his interest in one may go dormant and then suddenly reappear in a later work. It all is contained in the "idiosyncracies" which frequent his works.

Because of these idiosyncracies, neither his friends nor the critics could agree whether he was a genius or insane. He was known for collecting ex-wives, girlfriends, and alcoholic idealists like spare change. His passions were basketball, the Civil War, Frank Lloyd Wright, Southern women writers, the National Enquirer, chicken-fried steak and talking on the telephone (Wright 36). Born in Tacoma, Washington, in 1935, Brautigan appeared on the literary scene in the mid-1960s. When in his early twenties, he lurked in the background of the North Beach, California coffeehouses, frequented by poets such as Robert Creeley, Michael McClure, Philip Whelan, Gary Snyder and Robert Duncan. As the story goes, Brautigan was too shy to even read his own poetry. Allen Ginsberg, author of Howl, called him Bunthorne, an allusion to the poet of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta Patience who believed that

You must lie upon the daisies and
discourse in novel phrases of your
complicated state of mind,
The meaning doesn't matter if
it's only idle chatter of a

transcendental kind (Wright 29).

Brautigan and his friend Ron Loewinsohn (one of the men to whom he dedicated Trout Fishing in America) were both broke during these days. Brautigan had a job delivering telegrams for Western Union, and on cold days he and Loewinsohn would meet in a laundromat to talk. One day a brown-haired girl named Ginny Alder walked in. The product of their meeting was a daughter, Ianthe. Alder and Brautigan married; she even accompanied him to the Snake River country of Idaho when he composed Trout Fishing, but as she told Rolling Stone, "Richard was impossible to live with" (Wright 36).

She left after a couple of years, and friends reported that he developed fussy bachelor habits and often neglected to bathe. He paid for his promiscuity with divorce and all the usual diseases. He "drank harder than Dylan Thomas; in fact an ordinary day was two fifths of George Dickel or Calvados or tequila or aquavit or whatever" (Wright 36). This was after he had established himself as a poet, however.

The Poetry Man

Brautigan's first literary ambition was to write poetry. Basically, he has remained a poet whose novels are structures of images of the world, very clear and precise images, which, and this is the point, never aspire to be arguments, explanations or even coherent stories of how the world works. There is nothing

very unusual in these considerations when applied to poetry.

Brautigan believed in the 20th century definition: "What else is a poem than a pattern, a structure of images, loosely connected, of glimpses of nature, movements, gestures, flashes of insight, snatches of conversation, juxtaposed, not to furnish an argument, an explanation, not even a description of the world, but as metaphors for a mood, an intuition of another human being's inner world" (Esslin, The Peopled Wound, 37).

Critics of Brautigan's poetry claimed that he lacked the depth of a Wallace Stevens and the focus of a William Carlos Williams. "His poems are too casual, like an untucked shirt," one Newsweek reviewer wrote (Norman 54). Like Williams, however, Brautigan does not raise questions to be answered: many times his poetry acts as a metaphor of the world, showing that life itself consists of a succession of questions that cannot, or will not, be capable of an answer. Instead, Brautigan presents a situation, or a pattern of interlocking situations, designed to coalesce into a structure of moods. Much of the story behind the poem is left very much in the dark, obscured by brilliant detail, by an explosion of different obsessions at different times. Occasionally there is a very distinct reluctance (a reluctance familiar to, say, a John Hawkes reader) to tell a story directly. "As in a Faulkner and Conrad, we have the effect of a solitary flashlight playing back and forth over a dark and cluttered room" (Guerard ix).

This dark and cluttered room, so to speak, is but one of the many masks of his poetry. Brautigan, who once claimed that he was a Zen Buddhist, at times leads in his poetry toward deeply mystical beliefs. Brautigan has said that he came to Buddhism by accident. When he moved to San Francisco, he met, and was deeply influenced by, people who made a serious study of Zen. He said that he learned about Buddhism not by studying it objectively or abstractly but by seeing its effect on others. Zen had a large effect on the Beat generation, especially through the writing and personal influence of Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen (who has since become a Zen monk) and Jack Kerouac's novel The Dharma Bums.

The Zen Buddhist considers the state beyond rational comprehension of all that is experienced. What we find through our senses, according to the Zen masters, is illusion. Ultimate meaning lies in a great void, which is the source of all things. This void is also the source of the very illusion by which it is obscured. By its nature, this void cannot be circumscribed in language; it contains or generates language, and language, therefore, cannot contain it: it is beyond description. The things that can be described are transitory. As beautiful as these things may appear to our senses, they are impermanent. As Gary Snyder said, they are "flowers for the void" (Foster 22).

A mystical philosophy like Zen Buddhism is very different from standard thinking in its approach to the notion of conceptual thought:

The denying of reality is the asserting of it,
And the asserting of emptiness is the denying of it (Esslin
315).

This statement springs from the recognition that the language and logic of cognitive thought cannot do justice to the ultimate nature of reality. Brautigan pursued this interest in Zen during his trips to the Western countries, when he developed a preoccupation with ultimate realities and recognized that they are not approachable through conceptual thought alone. In fact, the teaching methods of the Zen master, their use of kicks and blows in reply to questions about the nature of enlightenment and their setting of nonsense problems, closely resemble some of the prose gambits in Brautigan's work.

As the mystics resorted to poetic images, so does Brautigan. Yet at the same time, Brautigan expresses his skepticism about the absurdity of the human race.

Brautigan often tries to diagnose the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs. The anguish about the absurdity of the human condition is, broadly speaking, one of Brautigan's characteristic attitudes. In his works, Brautigan's protagonists don't seem to expect values to last, and Brautigan seems bent on throwing all the pre-1960 American values into question by showing how passe they are in contemporary America. I will develop this idea more fully later.

Robbe-Grillet, a Frenchman who stems from the same social milieu as Camus, has much in common with Brautigan. Both members

of the post-World War II "new novel" generation, the two authors devoted much of their writings to explaining man's troublesome relationship with the world. This excerpt from his 1958 collection of essays "Nature, Humanism, " updates the "new novelists'" attitude toward existentialism. On the realistic separation of man from the world, he writes:

To reject our so-called "nature" and the vocabulary which perpetuates its myth, to propose objects as purely external and superficial, is not--as has been claimed--to deny man; but it is to reject the "pananthropic" notion contained in traditional humanism, and probably in all humanism. It is no more in the last analysis than to lay claim, quite logically, to my freedom. ...Albert Camus, as we know, has named absurdity the impassable gulf which exists between man and the world, between the aspirations of the human mind and the world's inability to satisfy them. Absurdity is in neither man nor things, but in the impossibility of establishing between them any relation other than strangeness (Robbe-Grillet, "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy").

This "strangeness" grows from man's need to project himself onto the world, to play a game which man ultimately will lose. Brautigan's narrators characteristically project themselves upon the world. This brings us to the major question: does life have meaning? What is it? What is man's place on earth? "We see at once why the Balzacian objects were so reassuring: they belonged to a world in which man was the master; such objects were chattels, properties, which was merely a question of possessing, or retaining, or acquiring. There was a constant identity between these objects and their owner...Man was the reason for all things, the key to the universe..." (Robbe-Grillet, "New Novel, New Man").

This notion of the senselessness of life, of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity and purpose is congruent with the tone of much of Brautigan's work. He expresses this senselessness of the human condition by developing bold metaphors and off-the-wall observations. Some of his observations, however, are rather simple. Brautigan proposes that most people believe in a world where man believes he is the very center of being. Brautigan sizes up man's real (as opposed to imagined) importance thusly in his collection of poems, The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster:

Man
With his hat on
he's about five inches taller
than a taxicab.

Ultimately, Brautigan's work is equivalent to the new novelist program in their shared intent to liberate the world from the tyranny of human preconceptions. Man has always been free to invent any relationship he wants with the world; in Brautigan's vision, however, there is no inherent relationship. In fact, the relationships Brautigan proposes always seem so remarkably provisional. Man can not impose himself on the world, because when it comes down to it, man, when he's wearing a hat, is only five inches taller than a taxicab. The assumed definition of man is outmoded, Brautigan believes, so he must come up with a method designed to shake the readers' preconceived notions about man and how he relates to the world. He must unsettle the readers' faith in and dissuade them from applying their experiences to his prose. This is another source of the widespread critical

misunderstanding of Brautigan's achievements. Many feel that his unique sense of experience and sense of language cloud any statement he is trying to make.

It is this language which is sometimes the statement in itself. Brautigan learned through his experiences in writing poetry to make his own pattern, to flout all usual prescriptions for writing. Much of the time, some critics claim, all that his poetic form seems to do is draw attention to the language itself. Donald Barthelme turned the suspicion of conventional patternings into an aesthetic principle. Brautigan, too, follows this principle. Though not known as a great poet, Brautigan's poetry deserves attention as being the training ground on which he learned to build the metaphors and sentences of his major fiction.

Just as in his fiction, Brautigan's poetry pretends to add up to a recognizable structure which is really not there when you come to look for it, thus becoming a parody of the world. Although the subject may seem eccentric, the prose is relatively undemanding and follows a style that is open, direct and colloquial. His poems look "spoken" and sound it to the ear. Syntactically, the line division seems whimsical. Brautigan gets his best effects from his brief, spontaneous bits of word play in which a single idea is twisted into the shape of a poem, almost like a haiku. For instance, "A Candle Lion Poem":

For Michael

Turn a candle inside out
and you've got the smallest
portion of a lion standing

there at the edge of the
shadows.

Brautigan clearly doesn't depend on punctuation stops to mark the ends of the lines of his poetry. Bruce Cook, in The Beat Generation, admired this poem for its simplicity, called "Critical Can Opener":

There is something wrong
with this poem. Can you
find it?

Cook said that "anyone who can put the New Critics in their collective place in just three lines surely deserves to be called a poet" (207). Sometimes it seems as if Brautigan simply recorded thoughts down on paper as quickly as possible. Indeed, Brautigan's account of his working technique seems reminiscent of Jack Kerouac's old "Spontaneous Prose" approach. As revealed in a 1970 interview: "I get it down as fast as possible, and on an electric typewriter, 100 words per minute. I can't spend time on character delineation and situation. I just let it come out. And when it doesn't come, I don't sit around and stare at the typewriter or anything. I just go down and see about two or three movies--the worse they are the better. And for some reason that loosens me up and gets things going again. That's what I do when I'm stuck" (Cook 208). Brautigan went on to say, however, that he spent a considerable amount of time thinking about or dealing with the things he wrote before actually doing the writing.

More often than not, though, Brautigan's poems sizzle with spontaneity. In The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster is this poem, titled simply "In a Cafe":

I watched a man in a cafe fold a slice of bread
as if he were folding a birth certificate or looking
at the photograph of a dead lover.

This "poem" defies any recipe ever recorded for writing poetry. The observations are intense--the image conjured by the concluding simile is shocking--yet one gets the feeling Brautigan wrote this on a napkin and stuffed it into his pocket. His sentences continually turn off into unexpectedness in ways which, as Tony Tanner writes, "pleasantly dissolve our habitual semantic expectations" (411). At the same time, though, there is enough coherence for the readers to experience the poem as a form of communication, and enough sport for Brautigan to show off his own freedom from control.

Those who prefer the qualities of precision and complexity in a poem feel that Brautigan is too simple, too easy. Jonathan Williams, in a review of a different collection of poems, Rommel Drives on Deep into Egypt (out of print), said of his poetry: "There is less here than meets the eye," and Brautigan "writes for kids who eat macrobiotic food and [don't] know where it is ...you'd starve to death on these no-cal poems" (100). Some are even offended by his poetry. Brautigan encompasses everything from the act of making love to body functions. People wonder if something like "The Beautiful Poem" can be classified as poetry:

I go to bed in Los Angeles thinking
about you.

Pissing a few moments ago
I looked down at my penis
affectionately.

Knowing it has been inside
you twice today makes me
feel beautiful.

3 a.m., January 15, 1967

This is the sort of poetic style that is associated with poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Ted Berrigan, Robert Creeley and Frank O'Hara. It is poetry to be heard, not deciphered. It can immediately affect the man who hears it rather than send him scurrying off to the library to study it (Foster 20). Plainness and immediacy are the desired effects. This type of poetry fits well with Kerouac's spontaneous compositional technique (which had much to do with certain developments of the type) because the overall feeling is that the author composed the poem within a few minutes, but the effect of the poem lasts much longer than that. This whole approach towards poetry avoids the complexities that the so-called "university wits," poets like Richard Wilbur, cultivated in the 1940s and 1950s (Foster 20).

If a Brautigan poem works, it does so because of its language. Brautigan unleashes some powerful metaphors in his poetry. In fact, his work is most striking when he advances his subject metaphorically, not narratively. His metaphors make unique statements about experience, even though it is often the incongruity of the metaphor that is its most striking feature. Brautigan's metaphors juxtapose unexpected and bizarre images, images that

sketch an America which we always knew yet never knew quite so well. His trick is that he always splices images--this technique he employed when writing prose also. In "The Nature Poem," he provides such a spliced-metaphor that is both unexpected and unconventional:

The moon
is Hamlet
on a motorcycle
coming down
a dark road.
He is wearing
a black leather
jacket and
boots.
I have
nowhere
to go.
I will ride
all night.

Brautigan begins by comparing the moon with Hamlet, at night, riding a motorcycle. Like many other poems, though, there is more to it. The motorcycle, like the man, is always in motion--yet Brautigan attributes no particular destination to the rider. The metaphor paints an image of a world in perpetual motion. Critic Edward Foster compares this metaphor to the motorcycle and rider that appear in Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. (1974). Foster writes that "The Nature Poem" embodies the Zen vision of a world in perpetual transition--but transition that is without logical purpose (24). The night, the motorcycle, the boots and the leather jacket suggest violence--but the motorcyclist is in this image of violence paradoxically at rest with

the world. Brautigan, like Pirsig, reflects no tension between the two objects in motion. Employing the metaphor revealed in the poem to the surrounding world, those who understand the principle of the continual change also understand that they have "nowhere to go." One critic concluded: "In 'The Nature Poem,' the Zen perspective is realized in a metaphor that, like the motorcyclist, will vanish eventually, leaving behind only the perspective that made it (and his act) possible in the first place" (Foster 24).

Brautigan's metaphors will be discussed in greater detail as his novels appear, but his poetry (and components thereof) are important because Brautigan "practiced" his desired style with his poetry. After he accomplished the particular sense of language and experience he wanted, he moved on to fiction. In an interview with Bruce Cook, Brautigan revealed that between 1965 and 1968, his writings earned him less than \$7,000. In 1966, he was appointed poet-in-residence at the California Institute of Technology. Brautigan said that he didn't know why they chose him, perhaps because he was a literary fad (Cook 208). One of his poems written in 1967 while still the poet-in-residence reflects his attitude:

At the California Institute of Technology

I don't care how God-damn smart
these guys are: I'm bored

It's been raining like hell all day long
and there's nothing to do.

January 24, 1967

Fiction : A Confederate General from Big Sur

Although Trout Fishing In America was written before A Confederate General from Big Sur, the latter was published first and is both easier to read and easier to understand. Jack Hicks said that A Confederate General was one of Brautigan's "few pivots of realistic fiction" (157). His text reaches into the course of history for some background and character: Brautigan plays solid images from the American past (namely from the Civil War) against the latter-day skirmishings of his contemporary 'confederate general,' Lee Mellon. It is said that Brautigan battles "hippie irony against ideology and system" in A Confederate General (Tanner 406).

This novel displays Brautigan's effort to use experimental fictional forms to reach towards and recover a spirit of America. Published in 1964, the work was written when Brautigan had particular concerns about the world and was willing to use his fiction to express these views: his concern with the powers at work in the modern world, the impact of the war and the coming of an era of "nothingness." Like other writers of the 1960s, Brautigan presented this victimization, of sorts, with his own explanatory structure: language. Brautigan dismantled the form and structure of his novel--as seen by the series of fragmentary chapters depicting

episodes in the life of the narrator and his friend Lee Mellon. He also generates new imaginative fusions in A Confederate General with his bizarre metaphors and attempts to re-invent the form of the novel.

There is a pervasive sense of loss and desolation in the novel, which adds to Brautigan's formulation of his attitude towards contemporary America. The first word of the novel is 'attrition,' and the book combines memories of the obvious attritions of the Civil War with the less obvious attritions of life in the United States (especially as it is lived on the California coast) today. Tony Tanner writes that one would be missing the whole point of the novel if one were to pinpoint a specific moral to it (406). The narrator and his friend Lee Mellon lead rather vagrant existences in San Francisco and in Big Sur, mostly in the company of two girls. Many times the narrator Jesse and his friend escape from the madness of the world, the torture of love and the grips of poverty by drinking themselves into oblivion. Eventually they escape to Big Sur, a place the narrator said he "didn't know ... was part of the defunct Confederate States of America." The surroundings of Big Sur do not provide electricity, adequate lodging or peace and quiet (the frogs chirp too loudly until Lee Mellon turns alligators on them), but Big Sur does allow the narrator's poetic imagination to wander. Brautigan shows the power of old images (especially from the Civil War) and the attempts of the imagination to disarm them. Lee Mellon claims

his great-grandfather Augustus Mellon was a Confederate general, but when they go to look up his name in Generals in Gray, Ezra J. Warner's book that gives the biographies of the 425 Confederate generals, his name does not appear. There was the biography of Samuel Bell Maxey on the left flank of the book, and Hugh Weedon Mercer on the right, but no Augustus Mellon in between (Brautigan reprints these biographies in full which actually do appear on pages 29 and 30 of Generals in Gray.) Lee Mellon, who had based his identity on the greatness of his courageous great-grandfather, the Lion of the Battlefield in the Battle of the Wilderness, was crushed. "It can't be, it just can't be," he said.

The rest of the novel depicts Lee Mellon as a rather brutal scavenger. Brautigan, at the end of the following chapters, sets off a series of imaginary glimpses from the past suggesting that Augustus Mellon was just another private, a scavenger finding his way across fields full of corpses during what Brautigan refers to as "the last good time this country ever had." The narrator writes that the Confederate States of America were "a country that went out of style like an idea or a lampshade or some kind of food that people don't cook anymore, once the favorite dish in thousands of homes...." When writing of the Civil War, the tone of the novel relays a feeling of sadness, of an America long ago that used to fight for its ideals instead of only existing in modern society like a robot. One of Jesse's and Lee Mellon's visitors is from this type of conformist America, a businessman

in flight from his family, a man who is so insane that he buries his suitcase filled with money and screams when he loses a ten cent pomegranate. The man calls himself both Roy Earle and Johnston Wade, head cheese of the Johnston Wade Insurance Company. The narrator said that he looked like Humphrey Bogart in "High Sierra."

This Humphrey Bogart look-alike, however, has been reduced to an inhuman, babbling idiot by the horrors of his way of life. He tells the four Big Sur inhabitants that his family wants to put him in a nuthouse because he bought a sports car. He dwells on the fact that he bought a pomegranate for a dime. "The best dime I ever spent in my life. That cunt in Mills College learning arithmetic and modern dance and how to screw her dear old dad out of everything he earned, she won't get that dime...." The casualness of Jesse and Lee Mellon, with their sometimes erotic moments and odd humor, are obviously preferable to the existence of a typical American conformist.

The very first words of A Confederate General, the heading called "Attrition's Old Sweet Song," relate to Johnston Wade's role in the novel. Brautigan begins the book with a tabulation of the 126 Confederate generals who were not in rank at the end of the Civil War. The causes range from "killed in action or died from wounds" (of which there were 77) down to "committed suicide" (1), "dropped" (1), or "reverted to rank of colonel" (1). Wade is a kind of captain of the business world whose "attrition" has been caused by the pressures and disillusionments

of American life after the War between the States. The next chapter heading at the beginning of the novel is "I Mean, What Do You Do Besides Being A Confederate General?" Brautigan listed 55 generals under the classification "Businessmen--including bankers, manufacturers and merchants." Of the many endings that Brautigan provides for the book, and which I will discuss later, one has Wade searching for his pomegranate, and another other has Wade, Lee and Elizabeth flinging hundred-dollar bills into the Pacific Ocean. One implies a sane resumption of his life as a businessman, and the other an insane repudiation of his business life. But the reader never knows for sure, because these are just two of the possible 186,000 endings per second that Brautigan offers.

Yet all of the casualness portrayed in the novel--all the sex, Jack Daniels and Whitman poems portrayed as both alive and fantastic--also is maintained on the edge of a great emptiness. After Lee Mellon discovers that his great-grandfather wasn't who he believed he was, a mood of desolation and sadness settles on the group at Big Sur. At one point the narrator describes how he feels "a sudden wave of vacancy go over me." The narrator alleviates this feeling by indulging in his preoccupation with words and his habit of fantasizing. Jesse passes the long hours of the evenings by reading Ecclesiastes at night. He reads it over and over until eventually he counts the punctuation marks within the chapters. He marked it down in a notebook called "The Punctuation Marks in Ecclesiastes." It was kind of a study in engineering, he said.

Certainly before they build a ship they know how many rivets it takes to hold the ship together and the various sizes of those rivets. I was curious about the number of rivets and the sizes of those rivets in Ecclesiastes, a dark and beautiful ship sailing on our waters.

The reader begins to see Jesse as a man maintaining a very precarious balance, a man "pretending very hard that [he] was a human being." His ritual of counting punctuation marks is his means of maintaining his stability by performing a mechanical task. Terence Malley, in Richard Brautigan, compares "The Rivets of Ecclesiastes" with Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River." Brautigan, a lover of Hemingway, parodied the character of Nick, a man shattered in mind and spirit who tries to regain his hold on the world by basic tasks-setting up camp, preparing a meal, etc. (108). Although the tasks are meaningless, they have the same therapeutic effect on both characters.

Big Sur and the American Dream

Brautigan is not the first American writer to locate his Paradise Regained in Big Sur. Two other books have influenced A Confederate General: Henry Miller's Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch (1957) and Jack Kerouac's Big Sur (1962).

Kerouac's Big Sur is a place of both boredom and terror; Dulouz, the main character, is fleeing from status and prestige. Although Kerouac's dark setting is unlike Brautigan's wild but pleasant Big Sur, the novels do have a point in common.

Both Brautigan and Kerouac make specific references to Henry Miller. At one point in Big Sur, Dulouz mentions that he was supposed to drop in on Miller. Instead he telephones him around 10 p.m., only to discover that he's preparing for bed. In A Confederate General, Jesse points out Miller's old Cadillac to Elaine on their trip from Monterey. There's no question of calling up "poor old Henry." Elaine reacts with no reaction: "Oh." The point is that Brautigan's characters belong in their Big Sur, while Dulouz mentions Miller as if to show off his own importance.

Henry Miller's figure is further entrenched in Brautigan's book. In some ways, both the Big Sur's are alike: beautiful, private and free. And for the most part, Jesse and Lee act on the advice that Miller gives his readers in the first section of his book: "Stay put and watch the world go round" (Malley 96).

Jesse's "campaign biography" of Lee Mellon has deep roots in American myth. Mellon's role in Brautigan's burlesque of American destinies (and thus America's destiny) is that of the self-reliant jack-of-all-trades, conqueror of the wilderness. Lee is a burlesque of the resourceful American: he tunnels into a gas line of Pacific Gas and Electricity and eventually loses his eyebrows to the six-foot flame that comes out every time he turns the gas on. Lee builds his own cabin at Big Sur, but as a result of gin and impatience, it only has a five-foot-five-one-inch ceiling. The list goes on. When Lee Mellon wants a cigarette,

he walks the highway overlooking the Pacific. Jesse imagines Lee walking all the way north to Seattle, then east to New York, and not finding a single butt: "Not a damn one, and the end of an American dream." There are a lot of "ends" in the novel. When Jesse comes to retrieve Lee from under a piece of cardboard box he concealed him with after Lee passed out, Jesse calls him "the end product of American spirit, pride and the old know-how."

By portraying Lee Mellon as the secessionist, the man using his skills outside of American society, Brautigan stresses a theme used by Henry Miller in his Biq Sur: "For the man who wants to lead the good life, which is a way of saving his own life, there is always a spot where he can dig and take root" (Malley 112). In his image of Lee Mellon wandering the highway and Johnston Wade careening through life, Brautigan asks the same question that is expressed in Allen Ginsberg's "After Dead Souls,"

Where O America are you/going...? (Malley 112).

In A Confederate General, Brautigan is concerned with controlling or coping with one's life. A recurrent statement made by Lee is: "Man is the dominant creature on this shit pile." Lee says this after the alligators have freed him from the croaking of 7,452 frogs, and Jesse says this to himself when he ventures into the dark woods to investigate a mysterious chopping noise. At the end of the book, while bombarded by flies when trying to make love (unsuccessfully) to Elaine, Jesse bitterly turns the statement around: "Who said we were the dominant creatures on this shit pile?"

Brautigan describes a world in which man floats between dominant creature and helpless bug. After banging his head on the low ceiling, Jesse watches some insects burning on a log he's put on the fire. Within a two page span, Jesse says four times, "The bugs were standing there on the log looking out at us through the fire." The image of helpless insects on a burning log parallels the inability, embodied most overtly in the figure of Wade, of man to control his life in the midst of destructive surroundings.

By the end of the book, great desolation overcomes the Big Sur group. Things begin to slip away from them, especially Jesse. After getting high on marijuana, Jesse describes how he feels a "sudden wave of vacancy go over me, like a hotel being abandoned by its guests for an obvious reason." After Jesse is unable to get an erection for Elaine, he describes his impotence and mental vacancy: "A little bit too much of life had been thrown at me, and I couldn't put it all together...It had been such a long hard week. I felt things slipping in my mind."

Brautigan stresses Jesse's inability to cope with life in his five alternate endings. The alternate endings begin with Elaine's attempt to cheer up Jesse, and whirls away to "more endings, faster and faster until this book is having 186,000 endings per second." Lee, Elizabeth and Elaine are relatively unaffected by the endings, but Jesse and Johnston Wade assume different roles in the endings. Even the most insubstantial of worlds is being consumed into an immense vacancy.

In fact, one of Lee Mellon's few possessions is a copy of Kenneth Patchen's The Journal of Albion Moonlight, which features an ending similar to Brautigan's. Albion Moonlight ends his account of real and imaginary terror by writing in his journal:

...What am I going to do?
There is no way to end this book
No way to begin (Malley 110).

Jesse realizes after smoking dope and watching the waves of the Pacific crash on the land that he too has nowhere to go, nothing to do. Such is the vision of American life in A Confederate General from Big Sur.

Trout Fishing In America: "Mr. Brautigan submitted a book to us in 1962 called Trout Fishing in America. I gather from the reports that it was not about trout fishing." Viking Press.

Trout Fishing In America was Brautigan's most famous and most acclaimed book. Although it does not have a clearly defined narrative for the reader to hang on to, it is probably the most fun to read. It is a "dream to be pursued, a sense of something lost, a quality of life, a spirit that is present or absent in many forms...Trout Fishing in America becomes a person, an hotel, a cripple, a pen nib and of course a book" (Tanner 408). In this novel (which many say is a novel only because Brautigan says so), Brautigan continues his quest for an existence in America which is no longer there (if it ever was).

The book consists of forty-seven brief chapters or episodes, ranging from about half a page to six pages in length. Seven of these chapters deal with the North Beach section of San Francisco, and six chapters deal with the narrator's childhood. Eighteen chapters are about the narrator's fishing trips, and Chapter 43, "The Cleveland Wrecking Yard," is the book's true conclusion, even though there are four chapters that follow it. The remaining chapters which do not fall into any of these categories are often miscellaneous essays and anecdotes. Most of the chapters can be removed from the rest of the book and discussed independently, for they are related more by theme than by continuity.

Brautigan divided America into two distinct visions when he created Trout Fishing. First, there is the America of Lewis and Clark: a nation of wilderness and frontiers, of great expectations and innocence. Then there is the America of big business and Hollywood, also an America of expectations, but this time designed by people in search of a profit. This is not the America of manifest destiny but the America of, say, Deanna Durbin (to give the example used in the novel), who helped sell Hollywood during one of this nation's darkest periods. One can read the America of Lewis and Clark in a history book, yet the America of Deanna Durbin is what the narrator of Trout Fishing knew as a child (Foster 58). Both Americas are part of history, and they both continue to shape the way we think. Americans are still fishing for something, but with lowered expectations. The possibilities

of creation have thinned out. Who's going to discover the Missouri River? It's already been done. Brautigan is worried about historical entropy. The streams are polluted, and the closest the narrator can get to nature is a small and not very interesting park in San Francisco. A statue of Benjamin Franklin stands in the park, to act as a reminder of the time when America was young and men fished for fortunes. But the only fortunes sought in the park now are sought by the poor and the hungry, who run across the street from the park to get sandwiches wrapped in newspaper. They return to the park "and unwrap the newspaper and see what their sandwiches are all about. A friend of mine," the narrator tells, "unwrapped his sandwich one afternoon and looked inside to find just a leaf of spinach. That was all." This America is not the paradise of youthful optimism and ambition which characterized the lives of Lewis and Clark. In fact, through the novel the reader is introduced to an America, which, sooner or later, transforms even its finest things into salable commodities. This interpretation of American history's direction, in fact, was adopted by most of the Beat movement.

It was commonplace among the Beats to picture America as oppressive and morally weak, and to deplore those characteristics. In fact, Brautigan's narrator shows neither rage nor horror at what America has become. It is important to note, however, that neither Brautigan nor his narrator is able to offer a collective solution. He does not share the rational concern of the political

liberal or the social scientist, the rage of the Beat writer, or the practiced ironic disengagement of the hipster (Foster 61). The narrator is not a reformer: he knows what is wrong with America but does not have the means to change it or even to escape from it.

And what exactly does the narrator feel that America has become? Trout Fishing, among other things, presents a compilation of what is America. Brautigan refers to a variety of places, people and things from American history, literature, politics and culture: Richard Nixon, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Henry Miller, William S. Burroughs, John Dillinger, Ed Sullivan, Caryl Chessman, Chubby Checker, Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd, Andrew Carnegie, the Andrew sisters, Beatniks, the Zoot Suit, Mormons, Woolworth's, Nelson Algren, Metrical, Merriwether Lewis, "Sea,Sea Rider" (C.C. Rider), the Twist, and Kool-Aid. Also mentioned are: Tacoma, Salt Lake City, New York, Cleveland, Fort Lauderdale, Pittsburgh, New Orleans, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Missoula (Montana) and Mooresville, Indiana, as well as a lot of Western rivers, streams and creeks.

Most of these references to America add up to a sense of an America that is totally lost. The feeling of a once beautiful land given over to deadness hangs over the book. There are constant references to dead fish, and a man who goes camping has a human corpse leant against his tent. The narrator tells of making love to his woman in a lake coated with a green slime and

dead fish. "My sperm came out into the water, unaccustomed to the light, and instantly it became a misty, stringy kind of thing and swirled out like a falling star, and I saw a dead fish come forward and float into my sperm..." There are many reminders of the decline and passing of things: a bookshop which has become a "parking lot for used graveyards," an abandoned outdoor lavatory, a loft full of ancient stuff. Brautigan specifically writes about the famous criminals John Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd, who are part of the violence which has entered into America's destiny.

The narrator's quest for Trout Fishing in America is a series of disappointments. Loss, death and the destruction of dreams wait at every corner but at times can be held off by the imagination (Tanner 406). For example, when the narrator was a child, he said that "at a distance I saw a waterfall come pouring down off the hill. It was long and white and I could almost feel its cold spray.... The next day I would go trout fishing for the first time." But the next day, he learns that the beautiful waterfall is actually a flight of white wooden stairs.

I stood there a long time, looking up and looking down, following the stairs with my eyes, having trouble believing. Then I knocked on my creek and heard the sound of wood. I ended up being my own trout stream and eating the slice of bread myself.

In a chapter called "Trout Fishing In America Terrorists," the narrator and some of his sixth grade friends wrote "Trout Fishing

in America" in chalk on the backs of some first graders. After being reprimanded by the principal, they had to promise not to write "Trout Fishing in America" anymore. But it took a while for the outlines of the words to fade away. Some mothers simply put clean clothes on their children, but a lot of mothers just tried to wipe it off and sent their children back the next day with the same clothes on. "But after a few more days trout fishing in America disappeared altogether as it was destined to from its very beginning, and a kind of autumn fell over the first grade."

Later, when the narrator is clearing out an old loft, he finds the Trout Fishing Diary of Alonso Hagen, in which the fisherman revealed all the trout he failed to catch over the years and all the ways in which he had lost them. Hagen's conclusion for his seven-year average of 13.9 trout lost every time he went fishing was like this:

I have never even gotten my hands on a
trout.

For all its frustration,
I believe it was an interesting experiment
in total loss
but next year somebody else
will have to go trout fishing.
Somebody else will have to go
out there.

At one point, the narrator comes across a tombstone for a man named John Talbot who "had his ass shot off/in a honky-tonk." Tony Tanner in City of Words reveals that during a conversation with the author, Brautigan said that he deliberately echoed a gravestone which appears in Moby Dick (414). Brautigan's marker reads:

Sacred
To the Memory
of
John Talbot
Who at the Age of Eighteen
Had His Ass Shot Off
In a Honky-Tonk
November 1, 1936

and goes on to refer to the sister who left wilted flowers in a mayonnaise jar on the grave and is in "The Crazy Place Now." In Chapter VII of Moby Dick, Ishmael reads a^b tablet in the New Beaford chapel:

SACRED
TO THE MEMORY
OF
JOHN TALBOT
Who, at the age of eighteen, was lost overboard,
Near the Isle of Desolation, off Patagonia,
November 1st, 1836
Is erected to his memory
BY HIS SISTER.

This is only one example of how Brautigan's deceptively slight book is put together. Tanner mentions a comparison between Trout Fishing and Moby Dick: he writes that although they are different in tone and treatment (befitting the changed America), they are nevertheless both still about an American quest (414). (In fact Brautigan wrote a short poem called "The Symbol" in which he imagines Moby Dick now transformed into a truckdriver).

The differences in the two inscriptions signify something more of today's lost culture. The heroic John Talbot of the nineteenth century has been exchanged for the silly, comic Talbot of the twentieth, and the sister who, as would have been said "had lost her mind with grief," has been exchanged for one who has simply lost her mind (Foster 68). There is no room for sentiment or heroism in the twentieth century, or so it seems. In fact, there is no heroism at all portrayed in Trout Fishing. People are still being lost near the Isle of Desolation but the modes of violence and insanity have changed, even intensified (Tanner 414). Moby Dick has changed also. Brautigan has reduced him to to the trout who chomped off Trout Fishing in America Shorty's leg at Ft. Lauderdale.

The America presented in Trout Fishing is indeed an angry, crowded, violent place. The early episode "Prologue to Grider

Creek," (which seems to have nothing to do with the following "Grider Creek" chapter) first throws out this theme of violence. Set in Mooresville, Indiana, "the John Dillinger capital of America," Brautigan tells a story about a man who is bothered by rats in his basement. When his wife goes to visit relatives, the man buys a .38 revolver, goes down to the cellar and systematically begins shooting the "child-eyed rats." It didn't bother the rats at all, "they acted as if they were in a movie and started eating their dead companions for popcorn." The man's chilling extermination of the rats is scary because we get the feeling he enjoys his work too much. In "The Salt Creek Coyotes," Brautigan writes about the practice of killing coyotes by leaving out cyanide capsules. Here, he makes a comparison between the wanton killing of animal pests and the practice of capital punishment (Foster 56). He creates an image of a society that can only get rid of its nuisances by violent means--the destruction of rats and coyotes or of Dillinger and Caryl Chessman. The narrator suggests that "they" should take the head of a coyote killed by a cyanide capsule, hollow it out, dry it in the sun and make it into a crown, "with teeth running in a circle around the top of it... Then the witnesses and newspapermen and gas chamber flunkies would have to watch a king wearing a coyote crown die there in front of them, the gas rising in the chamber like a rain mist drifting down the mountain...."

More violence appears in the novel. In the portrait of "The Mayor of the Twentieth Century," which is surely a reference to Jack the Ripper, the narrator points out that none of his victims sees him, so effectively disguised is he. He dressed in a costume of trout fishing in America, "deep water flowed through the lilies that were entwined about his shoelaces," and his weapons were a razor, a knife and a ukelele--the last being his own idea. "Of course, it would have to be a ukelele. Nobody else would have thought of it, pulled like a plow through the intestines." This chapter is an insight into the workings of America, revolving around the immanence of violence in that old American dream--once the surface appearance is absorbed, all that's left of the dream to be realized is the element of violence informing it all along (but not immediately aparent while the dream is still fresh).

A further insight into an America which has grown ugly may be seen in the chapter called "The Shipping of Trout Fishing in America Shorty to Nelson Algren." Trout Fishing in America Shorty was a "legless, screaming middle-aged wino." He was "the cold turning of the earth; the bad wind that blows off sugar." The kids would run away from him because they were both frightened and embarrassed to be seen wheeling the wino into a liquor store. The narrator's own daughter backs away from Shorty. Shorty "stared after her as if the space between them were a river growing larger and larger." This America, grown ugly, is constantly receding away from its early innocence.

In addition to the poison and violence which appear throughout the novel, there is also the sense that the original reality of America has been replaced by fabricated dreams. Brautigan writes that there is no working relationship between the world and man's desires--man is free to invent connections between the two--but the connections will only be invented. This does not mean, however, that the violence in that connection originates with the dreamer, but rather with what is inherent in the world out there.

Part of the appeal of Trout Fishing is the fact that the narrator offers an imaginative recreation of a hostile world. Brautigan's narrator is part-child, part-innocent who can imaginatively reconceive the world. For example, in the beginning of the novel, the narrator tells of his childhood friend who became a Kool-Aid wino as a result of a rupture. "You're supposed to add a cup of suger to every package of Kool-Aid, but he never put any sugar in his Kool-Aid because there wasn't any suger to put in it. He created his own Kool-Aid reality and was able to illuminate himself by it." This sort of imaginative game suffuses Brautigan's fiction.

Movies provide the clearest example of an America replaced by dreams. In the Chapter "The Last Time I Saw Trout Fishing in America," the narrator recalls telling Trout Fishing in America about his days in Great Falls, Montana. He remembers seeing a Deanna Durbin movie seven times and how he used to wonder if one

day the Missouri River would begin to look like a Deanna Durbin movie. Trout Fishing in America replies,

"I've been to Great Falls many times. I remember Indians and fur traders. I remember Lewis and Clark, but I don't remember ever seeing a Deanna Durbin movie in Great Falls... I don't think Lewis would have understood it if the Missouri River had suddenly begun to look like a Deanna Durbin movie.

Reality giving way to movie is a motif that appears consistently in Trout Fishing. Brautigan suggests that the spirit of commercial enterprise has succeeded in replacing that old romantic capacity to dream. The narrator's reliance of pre-fabricated dreams has diminished his capacity to imagine on a large scale. He's been raised on store-bought mayonnaise, B-grade Deanna Durbin movies and Tom and Jerry cartoons. But when Lewis and Clark went out, they found something big and natural. "It's not like that anymore," Brautigan seems to say.

The most terrifying vision of what America has become appears in "The Cleveland Wrecking Yard" chapter. The Wrecking Yard, Brautigan's major symbol for the effects of commercializing tendencies of society, is a place where Nature can be transported, cut up into lengths, measured accurately, stacked for sale. The narrator finds that trout streams are being sold by the foot; the waterfalls, animals and trees are being sold separately, while the insects are being given away with a minimum purchase of ten feet of stream. The narrator finds the trout stream stacked

up in a room also containing toilets, lumber, and an old waterfall is gathering dust. They are almost out of animals (only three deer left), but there are lots of mice and insects. It's as if the world has become, in Brautigan's vision, a dumping ground for realized and broken dreams. And yet, nowhere in the chapter does the narrator use a negative adjective to describe what he's seen. If he had \$6.50, he would buy a foot of that trout stream. The last vision of the trout stream is that it gets the bottom dollar. Although four chapters succeed the Wrecking Yard scene, it is nevertheless the books' true conclusion.

Yet in the last chapter Brautigan makes one more attempt to exercise his freedom from the world. He writes that "expressing a human need" he has always wanted to write a book that ended with the word Mayonnaise. The final chapter, "The Mayonnaise Chapter," turns out to be a letter of condolence sent to some people on the death of a Mr. Good. The letter has a P.S. which reads "Sorry I forgot to give you the mayonaise." The word mayonnaise is misspelled. Brautigan's last attempt to satisfy his need, indulge his whim, would involve a world that would cooperate with his desires. But he can't imagine the world cooperating, so he had to re-invent the world so it would cooperate, thus misspelling his "human need." And so he ends Trout Fishing in America.

Bridging the gap between Trout Fishing and The Tokyo-Montana Express

From 1964 to 1980 Brautigan continued his quest for America, "often only a place in the mind." By the time of writing In Watermelon Sugar (published 1968), Brautigan's concern with attrition had taken center stage. The menace of death and the impermanence of the physical world pervade this novel set in the community called iDEATH. In The Aborion: An Historical Romance in 1966 (published 1971), Brautigan seems more controlled and yet more serious about the wasting away of humanity. Although not acclaimed as a literary masterpiece (one English critic felt that as an exercise in creative writing, it might get a C minus), the novel nevertheless confirms Brautigan's continuing obsession with attrition. In these works, he also experiments further with the surreal.

In 1971, Brautigan also published a collection of short stories entitled Revenge of the Lawn. I believe this volume marks the beginning of the transformation that took place in his writing. The book contains sixty-two chapters which revolve around the theme of imagination, especially the imagination of children, and how it can directly reconceive and recreate the world. Innocence in this book is set against modern horror. The horror has many faces: that of Mr. Henly, the insurance man, who kept the dead separated from the living ("they were in filing cabinets"); or that of Jack, the narrator's stepfather, who is so haunted by the front lawn he cut down a pear tree and soaked it

with kerosene ("It looked strange, even for a first memory of life...to set fire to it while the fruit was still green on the branches.")

There is still the overwhelming feeling of loss and death in Revenge of the Lawn, but it seems different somehow, as if part of Brautigan is lodged within the role of the narrator. The tone is bittersweet--yearning for the ghosts and pasts of Tacoma and Portland childhoods--or nostalgic--evoking memories of dead friends, lost lovers (Hicks 157). The fiction is more tragic, more along the lines of Ernest Hemingway than anything Brautigan has done before. Take the theme of death presented in "The Old Bus," a revelation of the terror which death evokes in old people and the discomfort it arouses in the young narrator when confronted by it:

I felt terrible to remind them of their lost youth, their passage through slender years in such a cruel and unusual manner. Why were we tossed this way together as if we were nothing but a weird salad served on the seats of a God-damn bus?

I got off the bus at the next possibility. Everybody was glad to see me go and none of them were more glad than I.

I stood there and watched after the bus, its strange cargo now secure, growing distant in the journey of time until the bus was gone from sight.

Revenge of the Lawn does contain some of the humor that dots Brautigan's early work. But the fiction seems more of a means to mask pain than to provide a commentary on America--it centers around nostalgia, memory and loss. The narrator seems lost, unsure of exactly where his existence fits into the chaos of the world. For example, "Lint":

I'm haunted a little this evening by feelings that have no vocabulary and events that should be explained in dimensions of lint rather than words.

I've been examining half-scraps of my childhood.

They are pieces of distant life that have no form or meaning. They are things that just happened like lint.

The final piece in Revenge of the Lawn is "The World War I Los Angeles Airplane," in which the narrator recalls the time he told his lover that her father had died. He did a lot of thinking about what the death meant, in terms of the father's obviously unpleasant life. The father lived through wine: "He used sweet wine in place of life because he didn't have any more life to use." Brautigan concludes that "always at the end of the words somebody is dead."

Perhaps that is why Brautigan put off writing any more words for at least three years. After the publication of Revenge of the Lawn, he returned to Montana and eventually purchased a small ranch in the village of Pine Creek, just north of Yellowstone National Park. This was the beginning of an eight-year hiatus in which Brautigan delivered no lectures and granted no interviews. From 1974 to 1978, he wrote a string of rather unworthy novels: The Hawkline Monster, Sombrero Fallout, and Dreaming of Babylon. In 1980, The Tokyo-Montana Express was published, and Brautigan once again proved he was more than a passing literary fad. Although the novel received mixed reviews (one critic said it was "flat and uninteresting... perhaps a reflection of his mind" (The

Nation 272), it was generally accepted that the novel was a "state of the soul" book, more so than any of his previous writings. This means that the novel was an attempt by the author to clear his conscience and bear his soul to the world.

The Tokyo-Montana Express is a collection of vignettes that encompass Brautigan's experiences in Japan, Montana and San Francisco. He reflects on his own age and his past reputation. A New York Times Book Review reported that "Brautigan is now a long hair in his mid-40's...[in which] the telltales of an uneasy middle-aged soul peek darkly among the cute knickknacks of The Tokyo-Montana Express: dead friends, dead strangers in the papers and on the street, ghosts, regrets over wasted years, regrets over women, bad hangovers, loneliness, phone calls long after midnight" (Yourgrau 13). Indeed, the "I" in the book is clearly the voice of Richard Brautigan, he often refers to himself by name, and the revelation of 131 brief sketches ("one-frame movies" he calls them) of people in Japan and the American West. At the outset Brautigan informs the reader:

Though the Tokyo-Montana Express moves at a great speed, there are many stops along the way. This book is those brief stations: Some confident, others still searching for their identities. The "I" in this book is the voice of the stations along the tracks of the Tokyo-Montana Express.

Brautigan paints a haunting vision of an America in which no one is able to realize his dreams of success. This novel is different from Trout Fishing in America because in Tokyo-Montana, the America of Lewis and Clark never existed. The first chapter

describes a nineteenth-century Czechoslovakian immigrant, Joseph France, who ventures to California to find gold. The chapter never explains why France came to America in the first place, but rather describes a man, alone on the frontier, who finds not gold but death. The search party found him lying face down in the snow, "and he was not unhappy. In his delirium he probably thought that death was California."

There are other references to American seekers in the novel--especially to aging and ineffective hippies--but nobody is capable of finally getting anything for his efforts. The narrator sees America as an unredeemably violent and threatening milieu. For this reason, the narrator seeks only the superficial things in life, what he calls "a little mindless fun." He enjoys good food, good movies and good sex, and for this reason he never has to experience the price of say, a Joseph France (Foster 121). The narrator acknowledges that America is only a place of solitude and silence, and in the process he renounces "the overwhelming rush of America like a self-devouring roller coaster."

As Brautigan gets older (he wrote the novel when he was 47), he realizes the changes within himself. The things he believed in during the hey-day of the late 1950s and the 1960s, are gone now. The remnants of the hippies have disappeared, and the world has almost forgotten that such people ever existed. In the chapter entitled, "Tire Chain Bridge," the narrator describes an Indian woman looking for a tire chain in the show in New

Mexico, 1969. "It's here someplace," she said, glaring with her eyes at the nearby 121,000 square miles, which is the area of New Mexico. The narrator responds:

"Good luck," I said, ten years ago in the Sixties that have become legend now like the days of King Arthur sitting at the Round Table with the Beatles, and John singing "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."

We drove down the road toward the Seventies, leaving her slowly behind, looking for a tire chain in the snow with her brother waiting patiently beside a blue pickup truck with its Age-of-Aquarius paint job starting to flake.

The narrator further displays this "days gone by" attitude when reminiscing about his childhood. The Tokyo-Montana Express is a work of "personal recovery," for Brautigan realizes that there is a thread linking the various haunting and misty spaces he has explored and contemplated and it is called age (Chenetier 91). The narrator seems both sad and afraid about the prospect of growing old. In "The Man Who Shot Jesse James," the narrator laments the fact that he used to remember the name of the man who killed Jesse James, but no longer can. He tries to remember, but can only reach this conclusion:

What I once knew and was so important to me, I can't remember now. It has been claimed and taken away by the forces of time, a Western myth gone like the buffalo with nothing to assume its place.

The narrator stumbles through more "overwhelming rushes" of the world and expresses his feeling of helplessness over the prostitution around him. He describes a scene in which old men hold up signs soliciting for women.

I wish the old men were not doing that. I wish they were doing something else and their clothes looked better. But I can't change the world. It was already changed before I got here. Sometimes when I finish writing something, perhaps even this, I feel as if I am handing out useless handbills or I am an old man standing in the rain wearing shitty clothes and holding a sign for a cabaret.

These arrests, these questions of purpose, intensify as the novel progresses. The narrator seems totally consumed when he is in America, he's totally overwhelmed by that which surrounds him. ("There's just so much room for so much here in the Twentieth Century and you have to draw the line someplace.") The narrator draws that line in Tokyo.

In America, the narrator concentrates on the grossness of the daily routine, he says that his role in history is "clouds." But in Japan, the narrator feels at home. Since Brautigan was married to a Japanese woman, Brautigan writes about the superiority of Japanese women to American women. He writes about his admiration for the Japanese novelists, for the Japanese stage, even for Japanese food. Brautigan feels that the Japanese have a clear understanding of the nature of the world--their physical and spiritual grasping of an evanescent reality. They have a different pace than Americans.

Brautigan writes of his love for Japanese haiku poetry, especially Basho and Issa. He relates the sensitivity of the Japanese poet, the way they used language concentrating on emotion, detail and image until they arrived at a form of dew-like steel (June 30th-June 30th 8).

Brautigan describes his love for Japanese paintings and scrolls, Japanese food and music. Always an ardent movie-goer, he admits that he had seen over five hundred Japanese movies (with English subtitles).

But mostly Brautigan loved Japan for its people. Although he claimed he was not a religious thinker, he was very impressed with the ordered lives of the Buddhists, and the calmness with which they accepted things that drive Americans to hysteria. His Japanese wife Akiko said in an interview that she was surprised to find a Westerner who intuitively understood things, especially death, in a Japanese way. "For him, death was so nearby always," she said. "For the oriental philosophy, life and death are the same thing. They are equal" (Wright 40).

I feel this is the main attraction that drew Brautigan to Japan. It has been said that Brautigan was obsessed with the idea of death (one story says that he convinced a friend at a bar to drive him out to the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge, so he could jump off. His friend couldn't stop the car, because there was a big truck tailgating him, and by the time they crossed the bridge, Brautigan was ready to go back for another drink.) Americans simply don't possess the capability to understand death. It's something very complicated to them. In The Tokyo-Montana Express, there is a chapter entitled "The Beacon," in which the narrator describes travelling across the Golden Gate Bridge and seeing a man in a Clark Gable "It Happened One Night" undershirt

standing on the other side of the railing. The man was pale, and the narrator said he wanted to help the guy,

but I knew that we couldn't because it would only make things worse and add to the traffic jam already in his mind... the young man was like a lonely beacon of humanity lost in stormy confusion and we were reaching out like helpless shadows of his fading light.

The narrator and his friends drove past the man, never knowing if he jumped.

In Japan, death is simple, the same as life. Americans don't understand this, of course. In the chapter "One Arm Burning Tokyo," the narrator describes the American reaction to the suicide of a young Japanese boy. The boy had been in an automobile accident and had lost his arm. Overwhelmed by the shock of losing his arm, he jumped out the window of his hospital room. The narrator's friend, who told him the story, said, "It was a big waste. Why did he have to do that? A man can learn to live with one arm." The narrator responds: "Well, he couldn't, and the end was just the same, anyway."

There is a relationship of "karma" between the Japanese and the idea of death. Brautigan desired this relationship, he wanted the peace inherent in a Japanese person. He contends, though, that most Americans can't comprehend something of this nature, we can't get past

... the rush of America like a self-devouring roller coaster and our problems of life and death and everywhere all around us, 24 hours a day, never stopping, our

friends and families, total strangers, even the President of the United States, his friends and everybody that they know.

Thus the "Give me Montana or give me Tokyo, I'll take Tokyo" attitude.

There is, however, increased maturity and control in The Tokyo-Montana Express, though certainly new doubts and longings. In Raymond M. Olderman's Beyond the Waste Land, the author talks about the possibility of a post-existentialist, post-psychological novel (15). I believe that Tokyo-Montana is what Olderman was describing. Brautigan fears not only the death of himself, but also the death of the civilization of America. "In actuality," he reflects, "what makes you older is when your bones, muscles and blood wear out, when the heart sinks into oblivion and all the houses you ever lived in are gone and people are not really certain that your civilization ever existed." So what does Brautigan do? He crams what is left of his dreams into his suitcase and takes it to Tokyo.

Tokyo was a way out for Brautigan. In America, once the peak of his hippie reputation had passed, the author weathered less than sympathetic reviews (to say the least). In fact, many thought Brautigan was falling into the Hemingway curse, for the critics liked to dislike him. Brautigan, in America, fell into almost complete anonymity. As an article in Rolling Stone magazine reveals, even girls he tried to pick up in bars had to be told he was a famous writer (Wright 36).

But Brautigan was still a star in Japan. He called Tokyo "my New York," because he found a critical acceptance he never received in his own country. In June 30th, June 30th, Brautigan said that the response to his books in Japan "was very intelligent. It inspired and gave me the courage to continue in my own lonely direction of writing like a timber wolf slipping quietly through the woods." Brautigan claimed to discover in himself an oriental cast of mind. He said to a Japanese audience that he liked Tokyo because of the neon lights. "They remind me of my childhood," he said, "when neon meant magic, excitement, romance. The neon lights of Tokyo give me back the eyes of a child" (Wright 40).

The author of Helter Skelter, Curt Gentry, tells of the time he visited Brautigan in Japan. When the two would walk through the Shinjuku district, people would stare at them. "Let's face it," Gentry said in an interview with Rolling Stone,

Richard was strange looking. He had long hair and a huge mustache; he wore the same rough clothes year in and year out and always some big hat on his head; and he was huge. It was no wonder people were staring at him. Little kids would be snickering. And then Richard would say, "See Curt, everybody in Japan knows me. They recognize me from the covers of my books" (Wright 40).

Yet there was always a feeling that he didn't exactly fit in. The collection of poems June 30th, June 30th can be read as a companion to The Tokyo-Montana Express, because both describe his feeling and emotions while Brautigan was in Japan. June 30th, June 30th was written during the same year as the novel, but delves deeper into the feelings of the man.

Something in Brautigan changed. A blatant alcoholic (much of the poetry was composed while in Japanese bars), he seems to have completely burned out on life. No more startling images or eccentric metaphors that made him famous in Trout Fishing. Publishers were turning down his books, and his agent even suggested that he not submit his latest novel, So the Wind Won't Blow it All Away. Brautigan had switched his quest to find America to a personal soul-searching adventure that led to a .44 Magnum and an empty cabin. It was as if he felt himself slipping into a sea of nothingness:

Passing to where?

Sometimes I take out my passport,
look at the photograph of myself
(not very good, etc.)
just to see if I exist

Tokyo
June 12, 1976

Brautigan was depressed and alone. When friend/actor Rip Torn went to visit him in Montana, he couldn't get him to go fishing. Brautigan claimed he gave his rods to a friend to store. After his death, they were found in his basement, wrapped in dried flowers, along with a Japanese funeral urn (Wright 40). His small handwriting began to shrink alarmingly, so that Becky Fonda, a close friend, had to use a magnifying glass to read his last letters from Japan. He wrote,

I've examined a number of options, and will soon apply action to my life. I'm waiting for a little more information, and the beautiful warm green spring of

Japan. Then...a forty-nine-year-old man rattles his bones forward into the future (Wright 59).

Brautigan's novels turned from striking vignettes to expressions of unsheltered fear. In one of the chapters ending The Tokyo-Montana Express, Brautigan writes "a fierce wind blew...through my sleep shaking the branches of my dreams all the way down to the roots of that which I call myself." In his last novel, he drops all forms of masquerades and nearly pleads for what is left of his existence not to blow away.

So The Wind Won't Blow It All Away: A weary little dirge

So The Wind Won't Blow It All Away was described by a Publishers Weekly reviewer as a "melancholy 47-year-old man" (DLB Yearbook 167). The novel presents a look backward, as the narrator recalls the fateful year of 1947, when, as a twelve-year-old boy, he one day had to choose between a hamburger and a box of .22 shells. This decision led to the accidental killing of his friend. The narrator, like the author himself, spent his fatherless, impoverished childhood wandering with his mother from town to town in the Pacific Northwest. In the novel, he sits with his ear "pressed up against the past as if to the wall of a house that no longer exists." This led one critic to view the novel as "Brautigan's final return to his beginnings and the central traumas of his life" (DLB Yearbook 167).

Although Brautigan pursues the same mind-wandering process that was inherent in Trout Fishing In America, the writer seems lost in the labyrinth of memory and the conscious patterns of association. Brautigan is fishing for ghosts; he's bringing the past forward to see how it shaped time now, time that looks pretty wasted. Brautigan is obsessed with the shaping power of what is lost--he expresses a desperate hope to recover those incidents which create violence, death and misery. So The Wind Won't Blow It All Away is of the confessional mode, but it seems more spontaneous than his other novels. The fact that it is not subtitled like so many of his other works (The Abortion: An Historical Romance in 1966, The Hawkline Monster: A Gothic Romance, Willard and His Bowling Trophies: A Perverse Mystery--the list goes on) makes it seem less contrived, more of a 'soul search' attempt, rather than an explanation of the novel.

The only comment Brautigan made about his position as a novelist, he said between The Tokyo-Montana Express and So The Wind: "Now, at 45," he said, "I feel that I'm maturing and weathering. The weather is very nice in Montana" (DLB Yearbook 166). I would argue, however, that by the time we get to his last novel, we're dealing with a narrator who has lost the capacity to desire to feel. No longer did Brautigan rattle off his observations of America's problems, instead he wishes himself out of existence. For this reason, So the Wind seems much more personal. Sure, Brautigan still employs the writing technique that he

developed in his early poetry stages, it's simply that the narrator is more concerned with his own fate than with the fate of America.

Ever since childhood, the narrator was "very interested when other children died...this curiosity would become a personal reality and engulf and turn my life upside down and inside out like Alice in Wonderland taking place in a cemetery." From the time he was five, the narrator lived next door to a funeral parlor, and every morning when everyone else was asleep he would sneak out to the front window and watch the men carry the hearses from the building to the car. He said he got up early every morning after that. Of course there weren't funerals every day, he said, and he would go back to bed disappointed if there weren't any. The daytime funerals didn't interest him very much because he was "strictly a morning funeral child." One morning while looking out the window, the narrator saw a little coffin being brought out by the pallbearers. The coffin was so small it had to be for a child, and the thought makes the narrator very uncomfortable.

I thought some more about...the child just on its way now to the cemetery where it would stay after everybody else came back. I didn't know the full dimensions of forever, but I knew that it was longer than waiting for Christmas to come. I knew that forever was longer than 39 shopping days until Christmas.

When caught staring at funerals out the window, the narrator said he was called a "weird kid," an accusation with which the

narrator himself concurs: "I would have to agree that observation was right on the money."

This is but one of the memories contained within the pages of the novel. In fact, the book is but a string of memories mingled together in chapters that are headed by the words "Dust...American...Dust." The narrator, called Whitey because of his bleached hair, tells of getting his sneakers wet, collecting empty beer bottles from a night watchman at a sawmill and watching a gigantic man and woman set up and fish from a truckload of living-room furniture.

The narrator, however, has no peace of mind. His attempt to psychologically escape doesn't work--the novel is loaded with complete and unmanipulated recall--recall that is so powerful the narrator has a hard time making a distinction between hamburgers and bullets. He associates almost everything to that fateful day on February 17, 1948, when he chose the bullets over the burger. He wanted to shoot apples in the orchard with his friend, so he decided to buy the box of .22 shells. This led to the accidental shooting of his friend, a memory which smells like "instant rotten apple sauce" in his mind.

I have replaced that day over and over again in my mind like the editing of a movie where I am the producer, the director, the editor, scriptwriter, actors, music, and everything.

I have a gigantic motion picture studio in my mind where I have been working constantly on this movie since February 17, 1948. I have been working on the same movie for 31 years. I believe that this is a record. I don't think I will ever finish it.

...I call my picture Hamburger Cemetery.

In a large portion of the novel, the narrator imagines a set of alternatives to that day in 1948. These imagined alternatives don't work, however, for it does not divert him from the ugly truth he sees. The narrator desperately tries to recover those moments in time, hoping that by recovering them he could redeem himself. But there's another reason why he wishes to recover them.

The narrator is terrified that the events in his life will be forgotten, that the wind will blow it all away. If this happens, then it's just as if they never existed. Thus, the proposition is "As long as these moments aren't lost to conscious recall, they still exist." The narrator tries to freeze-frame these moments in time by writing it all down on paper. Brautigan writes mostly of the "life and time on earth" of older people. The narrator encounters many old people throughout the novel, especially old fishermen who eventually pass away. In one instance, the narrator reflects on the death of an old, tobacco-chewing fisherman:

Often when I looked at calendars back then, I
thought about him lost in the geography of time, but
finally not caring. Little did I know that I would end
up the same way very soon.

The twelve-year-old narrator seems to take on the voice of the 47-year-old Brautigan quite often. It is the voice of a confused and frightened Brautigan, a man who has reflected on his life and

is not quite sure what it all adds up to. The narrator imagines the fate of the couple who drove their truck to a pond and fished from their living room furniture:

First, one would die and then the other would die, and that would be the end of them, except for whatever I write down here, trying to tell a very difficult story that is probably getting more difficult because I am still searching for some meaning in it and perhaps even a partial answer to my own life, which as I grow closer and closer to death, the answer gets further and further away.

By the end of the novel, the narrator no longer searches for any meaning to his own life. He has come up against the forces of life, and has lost. At the end of the novel, he completely wishes himself out of existence. He's sitting in some grass by the pond, listening to a 250-pound man and a 250-pound woman talk. These people have gone through their living room ritual and "set up life beside the pond." The narrator describes the scene:

It looked like a fairy tale functioning happily in the post-World War II gothic of America before television crippled the imagination of America and turned people indoors and away from living out their own fantasies with dignity.

In those days people made their own imagination, like homecooking. Now our dreams are just any street in America lined with franchise restaurants. I sometimes think that even our digestion is a soundtrack recorded in Hollywood by the television networks.

The narrator listens to the couple complain about their children who have moved away, and about people who play miniature golf instead of fish. The narrator keeps getting smaller and

smaller beside the pond, more and more unnoticed until he finally disappears "into the 32 years that have passed since then, leaving me right here, right now."

And that's how Brautigan explains the passing of his life. There is a curious absence of emotion in So The Wind Won't Blow It All Away; there is an attitude of frustration, not anger. Perhaps this was the product of alcohol and complacency in the writer, or just the fact that Brautigan knew he was near the end of the line.

The Tragic End

The reviews of So The Wind Won't Blow It All Away, as was typical for a Brautigan book, were mixed. But the critics never bothered Brautigan, said Helen Brann, the agent who helped engineer the 1970 collection of books with Seymour Lawrence. "But what he couldn't bear was losing the readers. He really cared about his audience. The fact that his readership was diminishing was what was breaking his heart" (DLB Yearbook 168). Trout Fishing in America has sold over two million copies. At the time of his death in 1984, sales for So The Wind totaled approximately fifteen thousand copies. His popularity in Japan was not enough to sustain him.

Everyone knew that Brautigan had been unhappy and was drinking a lot. He returned from Japan to work on a new novel. Before he left San Francisco to go to his house in Bolinas, California, he

borrowed a .44 Smith and Wesson from a friend of his. "He told everybody he was going away on a hunting trip," Brann said. "He did disappear from time to time when he was working on a new novel, as he was at the time, so we never worried" (DLB Yearbook 167). It was the last anyone heard from him.

His body was found on October 25, 1984, in his Bolinas house. When the police found him, they weren't sure who they had found, for there was scarcely anything left after the .44 and five weeks of maggots had done their work. Death, Brautigan once wrote, was like a parked car:

You hotwire death, get in, and drive
away
like a flag made from a thousand
burning
funeral parlors.
You have stolen death because you're
bored.
There's nothing good playing at the
movies
in San Francisco.
You joyride around for a while
listening
to the radio, and then abandon death,
walk
away, and leave death for the police
to find.

Headlines of the obituaries appearing after his body was found reveal how closely he was still identified with the era in which he became famous: "Richard Brautigan, Novelist, A Literary Idol of the 1960s," (New York Times); "Richard Brautigan, 49; offbeat novelist of the '60s" (Chicago Tribune); "Brautigan, Literary Guru of the '60s, Dies" (Los Angeles Times). Yet Brautigan

was much more than simply the voice for a generation, he was an explorer of the funny, phony, violent and romantic America in which he lived (Wright 61). And through Brautigan's endless search for the lost America, he also searched for a meaning to his own life. His attempt to find decent trout fishing led to his realization of the moral decline of America. It also led to his own decline.

"He didn't have any place for the eccentricity to go," said Bobbie Louise Hawkins, an old friend and fellow novelist. "It circled back in on him like an ingrown toenail. I don't think he had the resources to be normal, especially when he got famous. You can be saved by being either excessively normal or excessively egocentric. You've got to have some internal pressure to resist the outside forces. Richard didn't have the kind of creative ego that would have left him a healthy monster" (Wright 59).

Although many turn to his works to determine if he was indeed a healthy monster, no one can dispute the fact that he had a vivid imagination and rollercoaster mind. Brautigan passed through unconventional territory and brought forth places that the human race does not venture into themselves. He had the ability to jump in and out of spaces. Not in a linear way, but in an "exciting, catalytic, random" way (Wright 61). Brautigan, although he might not have had a strong hold on his own life, certainly knew how to express his feelings. I feel that people read and loved Richard Brautigan because he knew the world, and expressed the world, in a way that had previously seemed entirely private.

In a chapter entitled "My Name," in In Watermelon Sugar, the narrator says that he does not have a regular name.

My name depends on you. Just call
me whatever is in your mind.
If you are thinking about something
that happened a long time ago:
Somebody asked you a question and
you did not know the answer.
That is my name.
Perhaps it was raining very hard.
That is my name.

The Japanese call it karma.

I call it brilliant.

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