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Richard Brautigan's Frustrated Pastoral

On the cover of the 1967 Delta edition of Richard Brautigan's Trout Fishing in America one of the customary critical notices strikes a note slightly out of tune with the usual unrestrained enthusiasm of the others. Preceded by a headline reading "Incidental Intelligence" and signed collectively, "the Viking Press", the notice reads, "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." ¹ Even if not altogether correct, this description of Brautigan's first well-known novel certainly points to a major fact about it. The book is less an account of actual fishing for trout than a story of fishing understood in the broadest sense - that of search and exploration.

Of the equivocal nature of the title phrase of the book its puzzled reader becomes very quickly aware. Brautigan instantly exposes him to "his customary acts of verbal magic which show how language can exist purely in itself with no reference at all to content"; ² Trout Fishing in America enters the book as an actual character existing on the same plane and not in the least different in his nature from the nameless narrator of the story. He has an evil, also human, counterpart called Trout Fishing in America Shorty. A hotel in the story bears the name of Trout Fishing in America Hotel; Trout Fishing in America terrorists take over a schoolyard and demonstrators for Trout Fishing in America Peace march in the streets of San Francisco handing out Trout Fishing in America Peace Tracts to people riding cablecars. Trout Fishing in America, finally, this time understood literally as the actual experience of the narrator who travels up and down the American West in search of good trout streams, provides the structural axis for the novel around which all of these

characters and events revolve.

If anything like a core meaning common to all those uses of the phrase could at all be arrived at, it would most probably be dissidence, nonconformity or strangeness in general.³ The book tells a story estrangement from the dominant American standards and of nonconformity which expresses itself in trying out a life style alternative to those standards. The model of the alternative is taken from the pastoral tradition and in this sense fishing, while an actual activity, becomes at the same time a symbol of a more profound search: an attempt to establish whether a regenerative escape from the city into the outdoors may at all be considered a possibility in the contemporary world.⁴

Typical of most pastoral tales is that temporary escapes into rural retirements are found to be recuperative and that they are usually only prologues to returns.⁵ In Brautigan's novel the situation is curiously reversed. The retreat, the trout fishing in America as an experience, turns out to be a failure. But it is not followed by a return. The protagonist and his family remain living deep in California bush miles from the civilized world - which is not to say, however, outside civilization - and their life there is emphatically not a part of their previous experiment labeled "trout fishing in America".

Brautigan's argument concerning the course of his narrator's experience is not stated directly. Brautigan is not a realist; his method is to thoroughly blend glimpses of reality with the imaginary and fantastic, which results in most unusual collages whose possible messages have to be extracted by juxtaposing of episodes, searching for recurrent images, identifying references and allusions and guessing the meaning of his strange parables. One of the most striking discoveries this kind of procedure leads to is a realization of a fact almost inevitably overlooked at the first reading of this beguilingly transparent, charming and funny novel. Brautigan's story of his protagonist's venture to enact his pastoral dream is preoccupied, almost obsessed, with death and decay. Among the almost fifty episodes comprising the novel, it would, in fact, be hard to find more than a couple of them which would not either directly tell a story of death - be it physical, mental or emotional - or revolve

around it through their selection of metaphors or locales of the action. Death constantly accompanies Brautigan's fisherman; it looms at the outskirts of even the most serene and most idyllic episodes, if only sensed, only suggested but always present.⁷

Thus, in one of the quietest episodes of the novel the carefully constructed peacefulness of the mood is suddenly shattered when the narrator comes across a shepherd whom he describes as looking, "like a young skinny Adolf Hitler, but friendly".⁸ No other mention of Hitler is made, no comment provided, but the comparison, jarring and out of place in the context /despite the consolatory "but friendly"/, immediately links this episode with several others more explicitly haunted by death. A memorable example is one of the scenes of love making in Trout Fishing in America, a scene literally steeped in death.⁹ The protagonist and his wife making love in a hot spring find themselves surrounded by dozens of dead fish, "who made the mistake of going too far up the stream". The fish float around them, entwine themselves around their bodies; the couple watch them and can feel them, but noticeably do not seem to be particularly bothered or disturbed by the circumstances. The fact is typical of Brautigan's protagonists on the whole and very important here. The sight of death never fills them with horror or disgust. Likewise, they never perceive it as something that might become a direct threat to themselves. Whether it is brought about by natural causes - as in the case of the fish - or speeded up by unnatural human intervention in life processes, most of them remain completely insensitive to its presence, if they do not actually have their own share in small-scale acts of mindless violence. For them death - and particularly disturbingly, man-imposed death as well - is one of the natural components of the surrounding world, an inherent quality of it, and as such it is frequently overlooked in the same manner as the greenness of grass remains unnoticed.

What makes Trout Fishing in America's narrator different from his fellows is that he has a keen eye for discerning death in his surroundings. Faced with sights of violence, he occasionally makes gestures of feeble protest or ironically declares his noninvolvement /or helplessness/, but what is most important here is that, unlike others in Brautigan's stories, he notices it at all. It is owing to this sensitivity that he is capable of making a discovery essential

for his pastoral search. He gradually comes to a realization that the world in which his pastoral longings could be realized is no longer physically existent. It may still exist on another plane and in a different manner but physically the outdoors he is looking for, the uncorrupted retreat territory, is defunct. Evidences of this are the signs of human aggressiveness and destructive control he invariably encounters on his trips in the shape of, for instance, cyanide capsules laid out along a creek for coyotes even in an apparently desolate and not only God- but also people-forgotten corner of California. Symbolic of that extinction of the world are old pioneer households, dozens of which haunt the pages of Brautigan's fiction. They acquire their symbolic dimension as his narrator implicitly identifies the pastoral paradise he longs for with the remote pioneer part. Then they were centers of the life he desires, they shattered people for whom, in his own phrase, the sky was "no more than a few feet away"; now they stand abandoned, devastated and falling into ruin.¹⁰

Brautigan does not specify when, he thinks, the outdoors ceased to exist. Though he is usually extremely meticulous about dates and numbers, they hardly ever really mean much.¹¹ Trout Fishing in America, whom the reader is repeatedly invited to identify with the spirit of the outdoors, dies in the novel several times: once along with George Lord Byron, on another occasion in 1952, but the general suggestion is only that an unspecified historical point has been passed and that beyond this point no human attempt to go back to nature can be successful because there is nowhere to go to. One of the episodes in the novel arguing to this effect tells a story of an old time pioneer, Hayman, whose death mysteriously coincided with the trout abandoning the stream he used to fish in. Since then, all attempts to stock the stream by dumping into it cans full of trout have always ended with the fish being instantaneously and symbolically rejected. "No sooner had the trout touched the water than they turned their white bellies up and floated dead down the creek."¹²

By associating the old pioneer's death with the departure of the world in which he, or by extension other human beings, could live independent of civilization, self-reliant and in harmony with their surroundings, Brautigan takes up another aspect of his protagonist's search. Hayman not only occupied a certain space - notably

a territory by no means attractive, "a worthless hill in a country that not many wanted to live in because it was poor and ugly and horrible",¹³ he also represented a specific state of mind, an attitude which made it possible for him to live there. In a classic American pastoral style he was a loner by instinct, associating with the society only when the society needed him, and himself never dependent. Wifeless, childless and bondless - also intellectually as he never learned to write and, perhaps more important here, to read - he was the sole master of his life and Brautigan pays tribute to this by making him decide himself even upon the moment when he wants to die. In Hayman the novel acknowledges that success in the pastoral experiment of the narrator will depend on at least two elements: on whether he will be able to find space in which to carry out his projects and, more important of the two, on the character of the attitudes and yearnings he ventures forth with. Space is soon found to be no longer existent. Disengaging from the society nowadays is impossible and this is what all of Brautigan's novels - probing diverse models of escape - persistently illustrate.¹⁴ Once this discovery is made, Trout Fishing in America proceeds with dissecting the other constituent of the pastoral venture, the concept of it, the dream that launched the protagonist on his trip and the yearnings that motivate the restless army of his understandably undesirable companions on the fishing trail.

The narrator remains unique in the novel in his awareness that all of them look for what is only "a place in the mind." His fellow fishermen still cherish a hope they will find a place somewhere where life will be less complex and less oppressive and where most of their nightmares will be dispelled. This for a surgeon appearing briefly in the book means a place where there is no threat of socialized medicine; for a Mr. Norris, a place where he can finally remember the names of his children. With the outdoors becoming this kind of "personal garbage can" filled with the most fantastic dreams, it is understandable that Brautigan's characters are exposed to so much disappointment and disillusionment.

What aggravates their situation is the fact that, unlike Hayman, they are all emphatically literate/or, like the narrator, avowed movie goers/. Even if the media do not altogether generate their pastoral yearnings, they undeniably process them, mould and distort

them, not infrequently for commercial reasons, thus further widening the gap between expectations and that which actually can be found. In the novel, an obstreperous spokesman for trout fishing in America is a legless drunk named Trout Fishing in America Shorty, with all emphasis put upon his shortness and incompleteness. It is he, who authentically short of any understanding or feeling of the genuine urge lying dormant at the bottom of other fishermen's escapes, sets out on the road in a grim parody of their attempts rattling in his magnificent, chrome-plated wheelchair down the freeway. Yet it is he and not anybody else whom the movies discover to milk the idea which he supposedly embodies "for all its worth - and make cream and butter from a pair of empty pant legs and a low budget".¹⁶ Summing up the fate of ideas once they become a movie property, Brautigan adds, "Later on, probably, a different voice will be dubbed in. It will be a noble and eloquent voice, announcing man's inhumanity to man in no uncertain terms."¹⁷ In a similar parody of exploitation, this time literary, to which ideas may be subjected, Brautigan lists a mock-bibliography of trout fishing. Some of the items included are: "The Treatise of Fyeshynge With an Angler" in the Book of St. Albans, Till Fish Do Us Part, The Flyfisher and the Trout's Point of View, Old Flies in New Dresses, Even Women Can Fish, etc.¹⁸ The mockery here is directed, on the one hand, against the tendency to add splendour to ideas and actions by creating an air of learned interest around them; and on the other hand, against the mercantile determination to capitalize on whatever can be capitalized upon.

Commercial engineering and exploitation of human pastoral dreams is what receives most stress from Brautigan. Trout Fishing in America is overcrowded with individuals who feel cheated. All of them while buying their monstrously redundant equipment of too expensive and too fanciful sleeping bags with eiderdown fillings, Coleman stores and vector-and-mildew-resistant-dry-finish-ameroflex-poppin tents, implicitly purchase at the same time admittance into their movie-styled pastoral fantasies. The discrepancy between these and the reality of camping sites so overcrowded that to put up his tent one of Brautigan's characters has to wait until another one dies of heart attack, is so great that most of them simply refuse to acknowledge where the problem lies. They only feel misdirected or misinformed and they continue to frantically move from one guidebook mecca to

another urged by the belief that a physical place ideally corresponding to the images they hold in their minds can finally be reached. In what is frequently considered to be one of the most telling fantasies in the whole of Trout Fishing in America, Brautigan envisages the outdoors, both the place and the dream, actually traded at a Cleveland Wrecking Yard. In that gigantic store all accessories of the pastoral attitude can be bought. These include used trout streams sold by length, animals, insects, waterfalls and weather, eg. "a cloudy day and seagulls circling overhead".¹⁹ And it is this bizarre store that becomes in Trout Fishing in America the ultimate symbol of the uses the pastoral dream has been put to.

Brautigan's narrator becomes thus increasingly aware of all the limitations, prejudices and conditioning that render both him and his companions alike incapable of re-living the lives of the old time pioneers, of entering a non-civilized world /if any would be still left/ on the same terms as they did. He in effect peels the pastoral dream of the multiple coats of false notions about life and experience that it promises. This simultaneously means growing in the understanding of the nature and the essence of that remote, obscure and ideal experience they all long for and around which the dream has grown. That the novel's narrator does come close to comprehending it is suggested in one of the climactic scenes of the book, the one in which he and Trout Fishing in America, the personified essence of the original unspoiled experience, meet and talk.

The meeting takes place at a riverside, a couple of miles away from Ketchum - the town of Hemingway's death - and only a few days after the writer had killed himself there. Such a choice of locale for the episode is not accidental. Hemingway is referred to here primarily as the author of "Big Two-Hearted River", the teller of the story of Nick Adams' successful search for Trout Fishing in America, and a major promoter of the pastoral dream in twentieth century literature.²⁰ The story itself, though never named directly, is repeatedly referred to. Its memorable sentence, "the river was there," is echoed by Brautigan several times.²¹ Hemingway's death in the background serves to bring out only more clearly the death that is the subject of the episode. Talking to Trout Fishing in America, the narrator finally and ultimately rejects the dream that launched him on his fishing trip.

There are two voices heard in the episode: one is Trout Fishing in America's who argues that the river is still there, meaning that a regenerative, fulfilling return to nature - not to be mistaken with the pseudo escapes into reality peddled at the Cleveland Wrecking Yard - is still possible. The other voice, the narrator's suggests that the river will always look to the fugitives "like a Deana Durbin movie", a third rate sentimental movie about a chorus girl who wanted to go to college, the message being that human response to pastoral experience has been permanently and irreversibly warped. As the pastoral dream has been put to caricatured uses, the demands it imposes on the experience now render all attempts futile. What makes the conversation even more melancholic is that the more optimistic voice of the two, Trout Fishing in America's, evidently contradicts himself in the manner of someone in whose mind a strong wish is battling with a sad awareness of the end. After all, in an earlier episode he himself wrote a letter announcing his determination to leave America for good and to escape to Alaska./Ecolgically still pure and in this sense not a part of America./ And in the conversation with the narrator, though he persistently repeats that the river is there, he talks about it referring exclusively to events and people from the distant past like Lewis and Clark and their discovery of the Missouri Falls. "But that was June 13, 1805," remarks the narrator.²²

There is no reason why the dialogue could not be treated as a dramatization of a thinking process in the mind of the narrator. He has found out much about his pastoral sensibility, about his motives, expectations and limitations; he has understood - by subtracting those from the dream - something about the nature of the experience. How he decides whether the world he lives in allows any room for it and whether he himself is strong enough to liberate himself from the crippling limitations of contemporary myth about it. If he sounds only hesitant and doubtful during the conversation and if his disbelieving, "so you say the river is still there", might be interpreted as a sign of the inconclusiveness of his mind, the episode immediately following the conversation removes all doubts. "I have come home from Trout Fishing in America,"²³ says the narrator. "It took me a life time to get here," he adds, as if to express the scope of his disappointment and regret. Thus Ketchum becomes a scene

of two weaths - that of the creator of Nick Adams and that of the Nick Adams styled persona of the narrator.

Though the tone of the conversation with Trout Fishing in America is unmistakably sad, Brautigan's narrator never makes any gesture of protest against the failure of his "life long" experiment. Led by a possibly not altogether incorrect instinct, he does not grieve or lament, unless, of course, the whole book be considered a hushed down, quiet lament. He accepts, meekly and silently, what his experience has taught him. This kind of acceptance chosen without self-congratulation at one's cleverness to outwit life but also without self-pity or bitterness, acceptance as the only possible way out is the choice most of Brautigan's characters inevitably make.²⁴ The only decision the fisherman-narrator makes in Trout Fishing in America is not to return to the city. Together with his family he rents a hut in a desolate, remote part of California to live there their unassuming, unambitious and fairly bleak existence in an attempt to make the best - however mediocre it may be - of the seedy world. Instead of trying to do what he found to be impossible and to fly from civilization, they include it in their lives, accepting their dependence on it /food/ and plagued by their civilized habits. It is true that the inclusion is made effortlessly, one is tempted to say, too effortlessly and too light-heartedly. But on the other hand, although certainly much is lost, something is also gained. The narrator and his family living in their hut achieve a sort of a median status somewhere in between the pioneer Hayman and the American camper. What makes them different from the former is their dependence on the world "out there"; at the same time they are very distant from the latter, free of the deceptive notions of spectacularly regenerative weekend communions with nature that he cherishes.

With this conclusion Trout Fishing in America makes a notable literary contribution to the discussion of the pastoral sensibility that reemerged in the United States in the late 1960'. To the wide spectrum of writings that reacted to the phenomenon, with Norman Mailer's vision of violent and mutually destructive encounters of man with nature on the one side of the spectrum²⁶ and Gary Snyder's mystical ecology on the other, Brautigan contributed a statement too often overlooked because of its beguiling simplicity. With neither the aggressive self-assertiveness of Mailer nor the priest-like

assertiveness of Snyder, in a gentle, quietly ironic book he synthesized much of the mood, taste and fate of the actual experience of the multitudes who, like his narrator, set out to fish for trout in America only to discover that reality limited myths and that too often it allowed only for half-way compromises.

Notes

- 1 Richard Brautigan, Trout Fishing in America /New York:Dell, 1967//; all future references to the book will be to this edition.
- 2 Jerome Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions /Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975/, p. 20.
- 3 For a comprehensive discussion of the meaning of the phrase see Terence Malley, Richard Brautigan /New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1972/ pp. 149-151.
- 4 A thorough discussion of Trout Fishing in America and other novels by Brautigan as pastorals is to be found in Neil Schmitz, "Richard Brautigan and the Modern Pastoral" published in Modern Fiction Studies, spring 1973, pp. 109 - 126.
- 5 Peter V. Marinelli, Pastoral / London: Methuen, 1971/, p. 12.
- 6 Some of Brautigan's books as for instance The Abortion contain several elements which allow to classify them as "realistic". Brautigan's basic realm, however, is fantasy.
- 7 Contrary to what first reviews of Brautigan's novels suggested. See eg. Thomas McQuane's review of Trout Fishing in America and In Watermelon Sugar in The New York Times Book Review, February 15, 1970, p.27 Or Thomas A. Vogler's entry on Brautigan in Contemporary Novelists /New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972/, p. 174.
- 8 Trout Fishing in America, p. 34.
- 9 Ibid. pp. 43-44.
- 10 Ibid. p. 86.
- 11 Attempts to attribute meaning to them have been made. See Terence Malley, op. cit., pp. 165-166.

- 12 Trout Fishing in America, p. 28.
- 13 Ibid., p.27.
- 14 Futility of all attempts to disengage from the civilized world seems to be a major theme running through all of Brautigan's novels and stories. Jesse of Confederate General From Big Sur is systematically plagued by the symbolic sound of an ax ". The narrator of The Abortion hiding in his womb-like library is finally brutally expelled from it. In In Watermelon Sugar the doubtful success of the utopian society is achieved at the cost of dispersed humanity of its members. Several other illustrations could be provided.
- 15 Trout Fishing in America, p. 72.
- 16 Ibid., p. 63.
- 17 Ibid..
- 18 Ibid., pp. 29-30.
- 19 Ibid., pp. 102-107.
- 20 Ernest Hemingway, " Big Two-Hearted River " in In Our Time /New York: Charles Scribner's, 1970/, pp. 134-144.
- 21 Trout Fishing in America, pp. 89-91.
- 22 Ibid., p. 91.
- 23 Ibid., p. 92.
- 24 compare Thomas A. Vogler, op. cit., p.174.
- 25 See Josephine Hendlin's review of Brautigan's fiction in The New York Times Book Review, January 16, 1972, pp. 31-32.
- 26 See particularly Norman Mailer's Why Are We in Vietnam? /London: Panther, 1970/.

S T R E S Z C Z E N I E

Artykuł omawia jedną ze wczesnych powieści współczesnego pisarza amerykańskiego Richarda Brautigana zatytułowaną Point Counter Point in America. Powieść potraktowana jest jako literacki komentarz na temat odrodzenia pastoralnej wrażliwości, które nastąpiło w Stanach Zjednoczonych w połowie lat sześćdziesiątych dwudziestego wieku.

- Autorka przedstawia kolejne etapy w procesie demaskowania przez głównego bohatera powieści współczesnego mitu o możliwości ucieczki od cywilizacji w świat dających się zrealizować pastoralnych fantazji. Przytoczonymi dla których wszelkie próby tego rodzaju skazane są na niepowodzenia to według Brautigana:
- zniszczenie i zaanektowanie przez współczesną cywilizację terytoriów które pozwalałyby na realizację pastoralnych fantazji,
 - komercyjna manipulacja ludzkimi potrzebami i pragnieniami,
 - wpływ literatury, filmu i telewizji na kształt i treść takich potrzeb przez kreowanie modeli idealnych i nieosiągalnych.

Interpretując jeden z głównych epizodów powieści - scenę spotkania głównego bohatera z ucieleśnioną ideą pastoralnej ucieczki od cywilizacji - autorka postuluje, iż wtedy właśnie następuje ostateczne odrzucenie pastoralnego mitu. Jednocześnie bohater Brautigana decyduje się na obranie drogi pośredniej. Polega ona na wyizolowaniu się o centrum cywilizacji jakim jest miasto ale przy jednoczesnym zaakceptowaniu własnego zdeterminowania i zależności od niej. Według autorki powieść Brautigana wskazuje tego rodzaju wybór jako jedyny możliwy do zrealizowania we współczesnym świecie.

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Point Counter Point as a Modern Bestiary

One of the main protagonists of the novel Philip Quarles who is regarded by some critics as Huxley's mouthpiece, wrote in his notebook "One of these days... I shall have to write a modern Bestiary. Such moral lessons, /PCP, p.295/ His remark is a very significant one, since it hints at yet another interpretation of Point Counter Point, this time as a modern bestiary. Therefore this article will be an attempt to prove the above hypothesis as well as to point out departures from convention which made Huxley's bestiary a modern one.

Witold Ostrowski defines the beast epic as a collection of stories about animals, presented with a strong emphasis on allegory and satire, functioning as a mirror that reflects man's character and his moral principles. The beast epic is usually composed of beast fables, having their origin in ancient times, notably in Aesop of Greece and Phaedrus in Rome. The beast epic also includes another genre, namely a bestiary, which although similar to a fable, is much more serious in tone and moralizing whereas the latter, although it possesses didactic qualities, is written first of all for entertainment.¹

As R.L. Gordon suggests, bestiaries were probably the result of a genuine, if not very critical, interest in the facts and marvels of nature², therefore the first bestiaries were simply lessons in natural history, describing physical qualities of animals and their habits. It would seem - Gordon claims - that the allegorical applications were added much later, which is even reflected in The Bible, which possesses some features of a bestiary. In The Book of Job one can find the catalogue of various animals,