THE LINGUISTIC SENSIBILITY OF RICHARD BRAUTIGAN: A READING OF *THE ABORTION* AND *SOMBRERO FALLOUT*

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PREFACE

The reading of a piece of post-modern fiction requires an understanding of its author's attitudes toward the written and spoken word. Many writers today question the ability of words to represent the phenomenal world and use words to create a fictive world independent or far removed from ordinary experience. Without this understanding, much contemporary fiction makes little sense. This study attempts to give a brief definition of the linguistic sensibility of post-modern fiction and to show how that sensibility elucidates what I consider to be the two best novels of Richard Brautigan.

I wish to express my appreciation to my major adviser, Dr. Mary Rohrberger, who contributed greatly to my abilities as a teacher and scholar and introduced me to post-modern fiction. I also wish to thank Dr. Clinton Keeler, who encouraged me throughout my graduate course of study, and Dr. Gordon Weaver, who provided helpful comments.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Many readers assume that prose, unlike poetry, is read solely for the subject matter and not for its unique verbal texture. The assumption that one must make, of course, is that prose fiction is about life, that its language refers to the phenomenal world, and that attention drawn to the language *qua* language detracts from its ability to depict and give meaning to that world. While many critics continue to share this assumption, much fiction of the 1960's and 70's has tended to disregard in varying degrees the representational function of language and to abandon social reality as subject matter for various forms of dream fantasy or linguistic "games." For the post-modern writer, literary language and language itself become subject matter for fiction, and this situation leads to the inevitable conclusion that words are just as real as the phenomenal world--perhaps even more real.

Several critics have observed and commented upon the separation of language from its referent. Some suggest that many post-modernist writers abandoned the world as subject matter simply because it was perceived as absurd and not worth describing. Jerome Klinkowitz writes: "If the world

is absurd, if what passes for reality is distressingly unreal, why spend time representing it? Physical, social, and political conditions may be a mess, and to view them from one perspective, imposing a rational order, is an aesthetic mess."[1] Klinkowitz suggests that the post-modernist stance is one of alienation from a world which provides the writer with data that is not worth ordering. Other critics go beyond this formulation to suggest that the writer is often alienated not only from the world but also from the medium of his art. The French poet Jochen Gerz states that "insofar as the medium [of language] comes to represent the external world to the point of replacing it, the individual becomes dependent on it and is forced to abandon his rights to the world."[2] Tony Tanner states that if the writer "wants to write in any communicable form he must traffic in a language that may at every turn be limiting, directing and perhaps controlling his responses and formulations."[3] Gerz and Tanner point toward the paradoxical realization that language, while it organizes and makes meaningful the direct apprehension of the world, also limits the possible ways of perceiving reality because of the arbitrariness of its categories. Language then does not derive its meaning from the phenomenal world. Meaning does not pre-exist language; language creates meaning. In the words of Raymond Federman: "To write, then, is to <u>produce</u> meaning, and not <u>reproduce</u> a pre-existing meaning. To write is to <u>progress</u>, and not remain subjected (by habit or reflexes) to the

meaning that supposedly precedes the words. As such, fiction can no longer be reality, or a representation of reality, or an imitation, or even a recreation of reality; it can only be A REALITY. . . ."[4] According to Gerz, Tanner, and Federman, the language of post-modern fiction distracts the reader from the apprehension of the phenomenal world; it at the same time points toward the arbitrary categories with which the writer and his characters must deal, and it creates a fictive world independent of social reality.

NOTES

[1]Jerome Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions: The Makings of a Post-contemporary American Fiction (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 32.

[2]Jochen Gerz, "Toward a Language of Doing," in Surfiction, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), p. 279.

[3]Tony Tanner, City of Words (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 16.

[4]Raymond Federman, Surfiction, p. 8.

CHAPTER II

THE ABORTION

These characteristics of fictive language need to be taken into consideration when one reads a book like Richard Brautigan's The Abortion. Most critics, however, have not given Brautigan much credit as an artist, and his work has received little serious critical attention. Many assume that his primary goal is to tell a love story with an incidental abortion, and one reviewer regrets that the novel is unfortunately "of little consequence."[1] Those critics who do examine Brautigan's style emphasize his simplicity and "charm." Jonathan Yardley of The New Republic dismisses his style as "wholly vogue,"[2] while Joseph Butwin of The Saturday Review sees Brautigan as "an exemplar of simplicity in a complex age."[3] Finally John Skow in a Time review entitled "Cookie Baking in America" states that "if [Brautigan] does not seem to work very hard at his writing, well [his readers] repealed the Protestant ethic after all and insouciance is one of his major attractions."[4] A more careful reading does show that Brautigan works at his writing, and The Abortion merits a more intensive examination in light of the post-modern tradition. The literal level of the love story may be of little consequence, but that is the whole point of the novel--

the essential absurdity and mindlessness of human activity. In counterpoint to this absurdist theme, Brautigan places various forms of startling figurative language, most notably simile and metaphor, language which draws the reader's attention away from the narrative and establishes itself as significant utterance in counterpoint to the action of the novel. Brautigan demonstrates in this novel how literary language gives meaning to essentially mindless activity and at the same time shows how language limits man's possibilities. Brautigan's ultimate resolution to this contrapuntal theme is that the fullest understanding of human actions is possible not through the medium of language but beyond language in silence, when activity by its very rhythm, pattern, and harmony becomes significant. This theme can be elucidated if we examine briefly the simple episodic structure of the plot line and indicate how figurative language juxtaposed to that plot line functions to make the activities of the characters significant.

The plot has been said to be of little consequence, and to a degree every reader must concur. In its apparent simplicity and because of the naiveté of the narrator, the plot is sparse. A nameless narrator-librarian leads a monotonous existence within the confines of his library, an institution which accepts and registers manuscripts brought in by a sundry group of misfits. Into this monotonous world comes Vida, who embodies miraculous powers and various contradictions, and who falls in love with the librarian, becomes pregnant, and

requires an abortion. The librarian, with the aid of his T-shirted friend Foster, secures an abortion in Tijuana. The librarian and Vida journey to Mexico leaving Foster in charge of the library. Vida has her abortion, and upon their return, Vida and the librarian, to her amusement and to his chagrin, find themselves and Foster ousted from their former domain by a most formidable woman. At the end, the three are displaced to Vida's apartment, and they pursue careers of topless dancing, steel work, and campus heroism.

This is perhaps barely enough plot to keep alive the traditional short story and certainly not enough to make a whole novel. The plot is wanting in various ways. The reader is never told about the origins or purpose of the fabulous library, and the first part of the book may seem like fantasy for fantasy's sake; in addition, too many of the minor details about Vida's and Foster's past are missing. But Brautigan is obviously not writing a traditional novel, and if he seems to sacrifice intricacy of plot for lyric and fantastic effect, he joins the host of American novelists who have been artistically successful while abandoning the traditional plot line. Plot is in many ways a secondary consideration for Brautigan since it seems not to embody the real subject matter of his novel; instead the plot is a means to an end--it is a sparse frame ready to assume life once it is infused with the bold and always surprising figures of speech which are the trademark and real concern of Brautigan's fiction. With qualifications one would have to

agree with Robert Adams who suggests that Brautigan does not really care as much about people as he does about "the language and vision that are his special gift."[5] Language and what it can do to make mundane existence significant is the real subject of Brautigan's art.

An understanding of how Brautigan separates language as subject from language as delineating plot is essential to the reading of this novel. Tanner has noted that much of the best American fiction exhibits a great amount of foregrounded language, i.e., language which draws attention to itself as language for its own sake.[6] Essentially the similes and metaphors of The Abortion have an initial diversionary effect on the reader. Take for instance the following passage where the narrator attempts to convince Vida that she is not grotesque:

> "I don't know what to say," I said. "I'm just a librarian. I can't pretend that you are not beautiful. That would be like pretending that you are someplace else in the world, say China or Africa, or that you are some other kind of matter, a plant or a tire or some frozen peas or a bus transfer. Do you understand?"[7]

Vida does not understand, and neither does the reader. While the figure might emphasize how absolutely beautiful Vida is, the bizarre nature of the simile causes the reader to forget or at least minimize the import of the conversation while he reflects on and gets lost in the figure of speech itself. The narrator consistently uses overblown similes to describe his world. The library, he states, is "carried like a dreaming child into the darkness of these pages" (p. 11). He

writes that Chuck looks "as if he had been struck by a tornado of freckles" (p. 24). Vida's face he sees as "a perfect labyrinth that led me momentarily away from a very disturbing thing" (p. 40). Vida's coffeemaking is as if it "were a ballet and she were a ballerina pirouetting between the spoon, the cups, the jar, and the pan full of boiling water" (p. 51). These similes, which sometimes approach the mock epic, delight the reader in their ability to startle, amuse, or baffle. In many ways the narrator's similes are evidence of his naiveté; they are the utterances of a child and as such constitute an alternative to the kind of analytical commentary a reader might normally expect from the narrator. It seems that Brautigan prefers the simile over causal analysis as a device of narrative commentary since the simile cannot be proven true or false in relation to the narrative but instead is consistent within its own linguistic boundaries. The simile, like other figures which Brautigan employs, is an imaginative transformation of the phenomenal world.

Some of the most absorbing figurative language occurs in the three chapters concerned with the love making. The action is clichéd, and the seduction scene has been rendered by many authors before. Brautigan, however, gives the cliché new life. Both Vida and the librarian feel alienated from their bodies--Vida looks at hers from the top of a mountain, and the librarian's body cowers in embarrassment at being naked before a stranger. Vida's eyes are "blue airplanes" (p. 55), and when she cries, rain falls on their "blue

wings." Everything is prescient and leads them toward Tijuana--her blue airplane eyes looking at him like he was an airfield (p. 57), his muscles stretching "like phantoms toward the future," and the sight of her "tropical face" (p. 56). The narrator's stomach feels strange because it stands on a stepladder to reach Vida's breasts, but the stepladder begins to swirl (pp. 57-58). Taking Vida's clothes off is compared to the spoils of many battles, but finally amidst the ever-present blue bat-lightning, "the deed is done" (pp. 60-61). Again the reader's attention is engaged by the miraculous transformation of the mundane by figures of speech.

At other times the narrator's language becomes a riddle, especially in his use of cryptic chapter headings. "The AD Standoff" chapter is curiously titled, and a possible explanation for the title does not occur until the end of the chapter when Foster says, "Jesus Christ and old Foster wore out their welcome at the same time. I only survive on my good looks these days" (p. 80). The relationship between Foster, Jesus Christ, and AD (anno domini) is stretching word association a bit far, but nevertheless it works--even if it does not mean much, it is a display of genius. Brautigan draws attention to other phrases in the same manner. The "Blank like Snow" chapter ends with the title phrase referring to the blank pages of the deranged woman's manuscript (p. 90). The chapter entitled "Johnny Cash" (p. 93) deals with the

couple's preparations for Tijuana, and Johnny Cash happens to be one of the many singers represented in a by-the-way catalogue of Vida's record collection. Later on the trip to Tijuana, a spot like a coffee stain on the wing of the airplane (p. 120) and hot water at two different airports become emblematic of the narrator's state of mind. He writes in the "Hot Water" chapter: "We had gathered hundreds of miles effortlessly, as if guided by lyrical poetry" (p. 124). In a sense, what the narrator says of the trip is true of the whole novel. Brautigan allows lyrical poetry to guide the progression of the story, and as such, the work is a joy to read. The reader may wish Vida and the librarian well but most probably is too engrossed in the language and looks forward to the next bit of verbal trickery.

While the narrative commentary is highly lyrical, the dialogue, the language most clearly delineating the plot, often seems parodied from other literary forms or popular culture. When Vida describes her fatal beauty, she uses the language of melodrama or the afternoon soap opera:

> A man came driving by in his car. He slowed down and was gawking at me. I tried to ignore him but he was persistent. He forgot all about where he was and what he was doing and drove his car right into a train.
>
> I ran over and he was still alive. He died in my arms, still staring at me. It was horrible. There was blood all over both of us and he wouldn't take his eyes off me. Part of the bone was sticking out of his arm. His back felt funny. When he died, he said, 'You're beautiful.' That's just what I needed to make me feel perfect forever (p. 46).

Later Vida explains to Foster why she needs the abortion:

> Yes. . . . We're too immature right now to have a child. It would only confuse us and this confusion would not be good for a child. It's hard enough being born into this world without having immature and confused parents. Yes, I want the abortion (p. 81).

The language here and elsewhere lacks sincerity. It is reminiscent of the sort of cant which is heard every day. After a few pages of reading, the reader becomes so good at predicting what the characters might say next that he is ready for the "Library Briefing" chapter. The narrator no longer feels compelled to recount his and Vida's words. Instead he indicates their words by ellipses which the reader can easily replace with the most likely phrases. Foster himself is no more original:

> "How would you like to visit my rabbit trap someday?" Foster said.
> "And be your Bunny girl?" Vida said.
> "I guess you've heard that one," Foster said.
> "I've heard them all." (p. 103)

There is a curious counterpoint between the clichés and parodies of dialogue and the lyrical language of the narrative commentary. Brautigan makes the ordinary palatable through the narrator's "lyrical poetry." Klinkowitz has suggested that perhaps "Brautigan added a new aesthetic for the novel: not just the reporting of the world, but the imaginative transformation of it."[8] Brautigan does imaginatively transform the world, but he goes beyond word games to suggest that beyond language there is a silent world of activities which is directly apprehensible and beautiful in itself. At

the exact center of the book, when his trip to Tijuana becomes imminent, the narrator states: "I think we have the power to transform our lives into brand-new instantaneous rituals that we calmly act out when something hard comes up that we must do" (p. 96). This is a pivotal statement in the novel, and it helps to explain the abrupt change in style of the last two books of the novel, as well as the function of the abortion itself.

The novel has two main settings: the library and the doctor's office in Tijuana. The two are related symbolically by the narrator in that they both have types of bells. Both places are alike in that they are the settings of activities which are repeated in the same manner day after day. The librarian is always ready to receive a book; "rich or poor . . . the service is the same and could never be any different" (p. 13). The doctor's office is the site of "the ancient ritual of fire and water" (p. 161).

The two places differ, however, in their stylistic treatment. The library is a place of words; the doctor's office, a place of silence. On the literal level the library is the depository of books; it is also the only source of real contact and communication that the narrator has with the world outside. The books seem almost alive as the librarian receives sustenance and comfort from the various texts on tricycles, sado-masochism, religion and stereophonic music, literary criticism, as well as bogus plagiarized treatises on the "quick forest." On a metaphoric

level the library represents a life lived secondarily without direct experience with the larger world. The doctor's office is different though. Its quality of ritual seems more spontaneous. The surgical procedures, unlike the methods of the library, are not rationalized, in fact, barely verbalized. Everything that happens--the rhythmic movements from room to room, the sterilization of instruments by fire, the flushing of the fetuses--all actions seem somehow beautiful and harmonious in their economy. The silence of the place seems paradoxically almost religious.

This section of the novel is characterized by the conspicuous absence of words. The florid style of the library section is gone and is replaced by a style more economical and subdued. The various patients do not communicate with each other, and the doctor is silent except for periodic incantations of "no pain." The entire episode of three abortions (a ritual number) is characterized by silence and calm. The metaphoric boldness of the narrator is muted in this episode to such a degree that when Vida comes from the operating room, he asserts upon touching her cheek that "it felt as if it had just come unconscious from an operating room" (p. 155). While the abortion episode is veiled in silence, this part of the book is also the most pathetic, and this juxtaposition of silence and emotion happens not by accident but by the author's design.

Brautigan seems to make here a strong statement about the absurdity of human activity, language, and silence. The ritual

of fire and water symbolically is life giving, but here, as in The Wasteland, water becomes an absurd death by drowning. Language cannot give this activity meaning. Instead it must be dealt with in a primitive ritualistic way which defies linguistic categories. It is ironic that a novel which is notable for its bold use of figurative language should come to its climax in a subdued manner, but The Abortion is characteristic of much contemporary fiction. Charles Russell has written that "authenticity of experience for much of contemporary writing is felt to lie beyond language in silence. Language points toward both a silent world of phenomena, uncaptured by words, and toward a prelinguistic form of consciousness."[9] Brautigan takes language to its limits in the recognition that it must ultimately be abandoned in favor of silence, a more complete response to the world.

The reviewers who have slighted this book fault it for its lack of consequence. At the end of the journey to Tijuana, things are not much better for the characters than before. Vida is a topless dancer, and the librarian (still nameless) is really not the hero he proclaims himself to be. Yet this lack of development is part of the contrapuntal theme of the novel. At the end, narrator, Vida, Foster, and a new friend find themselves at a new beginning. The narrator's task of ornamenting mundane existence with linguistic gems begins anew as the novel and the word beings fade into the silence of the reader's consciousness.

NOTES

[1]Steven Kroll, rev. of The Abortion, by Richard Brautigan, Book World, 28 March 1971, p. 3.

[2]Jonathan Yardley, rev. of The Abortion, by Richard Brautigan, The New Republic, 20 March 1971, p. 24.

[3]Joseph Butwin, rev. of The Abortion, by Richard Brautigan, The Saturday Review, 12 June 1971, p. 67.

[4]John Scow, "Cookie Baking in America," rev. of The Abortion, by Richard Brautigan, Time, 5 April 1971, p. 94.

[5]Robert Adams, "Brautigan Was Here," rev. of The Abortion, by Richard Brautigan, New York Review of Books, 22 April 1971, p. 26.

[6]Tony Tanner, City of Words (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 20.

[7]p. 47; the edition of the novel used is The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966 (New York: Pocket Books, 1972). Subsequent references to this novel will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[8]Jerome Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions: The Makings of a Post-contemporary American Fiction (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 32.

[9]Charles Russell, "The Vault of Language: Self-Reflective Artifice in Contemporary American Fiction," MFS 20 (1975), 351.

CHAPTER III

SOMBRERO FALLOUT

The contrapuntal theme of The Abortion is even more evident in Brautigan's latest novel, Sombrero Fallout. While the end of The Abortion leads the reader back to the task set out at the beginning--that of ornamenting mundane existence with linguistic gems, Sombrero Fallout alternates between episodes of noise and confusion and moments of silent tranquility. Through this process of alternation, the novel ultimately arrives at a more dreamlike silence than that of The Abortion. The noisy story is one attempted by a nameless American humorist. It is about a sombrero (an ice-cold sombrero) which falls from the sky, causes a disagreement between a mayor attempting to make a speech, his cousin, and an unemployed man. The humorist, however, abandons the story at this point, tears up what he has written, and throws the scraps of paper into a wastepaper basket. The story, though, is alive; it writes itself. By the end of the novel the words have escalated themselves into a full-fledged riot, war, and international incident. Alternating periodically with the story of violence are chapters delineating the silent suffering of the American humorist who has lost his Japanese lover, a black-haired woman named Yukiko who merely dreams the time away. In

Sombrero Fallout, a noisy, meaningless world of words and a silent world of metaphor are repeatedly juxtaposed to effect an even more poignant contrast than the progression from figurative language to silence in The Abortion.

This recent novel has understandably elicited no published critical commentary up to this point, but several reviewers have briefly commented upon it. Thomas R. Edwards was disappointed: "The parable about mindless public violence is too harmlessly droll, the love story too sentimental, the portrait of the artist too routinely self-loathing."[1] Edwards, like so many readers of Brautigan, misses the point entirely. Violence and love are not the subjects of the novel, and the whole point seems to be that these subjects have been written about too much and trivialized by the American writer. Ferdinand Mount uses the same epithet for Brautigan that William Gass used for Donald Barthelme, "that he 'has the art to make a treasure out of trash.'" Mount states that in Brautigan's "junk world, reality is conferred on objects human and otherwise, only by the touch of the free-floating ego."[2] It is sometimes difficult to know what a reviewer means by such a remark, but Mount seems to understand that Brautigan is a post-modernist writer who does not recreate the world but that he instead imaginatively transforms it by infusing meaningless entities with unspeakable significance and truth. Words cannot explain the significance of a sombrero falling from the sky or the truth contained in a lock of Japanese hair. Harold Beaver has written that in

each chapter of the novel, "like a curator displaying a butterfly case, Brautigan moves from specimen to specimen. The drollery lies in the narration; the meaning in their intersections." Beaver looks at Brautigan's chapters as a series of movements "arrested in a breath, transformed into metaphor."[3] His comments seem, perhaps unwittingly, to place Brautigan in a tradition. By uing the curator simile, Beaver relates Brautigan to Vladimir Nabokov, another collector of butterflies, who built his novels upon a foundation of word games. Finally Beaver recognizes that after all is said, or more appropriately after all is read, the final meaningful act of synthesis takes place in the mind of the reader. The final act is a transformation of literary language into a silent world of self-reflective metaphor.

Sombrero Fallout seems to say that human activity is most significant when contemplated in silence. The plot of the novel alternates between three worlds--the worlds of adventure, romance, and dream. The world of adventure, the sombrero story, is filled with rhetoric, cant, and meaningless noise. The world of romance, the American humorist's mind, is silent; words are contemplated but nothing is ever said or written. These two worlds stand in counterpoint to each other and are resolved in the dream world of the sleeping Japanese woman, a world of perfect motion devoid of language.

The narrator's language constantly diverts the reader from the action of the novel and draws attention to itself. The book is filled with similes which are characteristic of

Brautigan's art. When the humorist can no longer write, he removes his paper by reaching "into the typewriter as if he were an undertaker zipping up the fly of a dead man in his coffin."[4] Yukiko has "a beautiful laugh which was like rain water pouring over daffodils made from silver" (p. 47). Lovemaking is characteristically shrouded in diversionary images: "She took her clothes off like a kite takes gently to a warm April wind. He fumbled his clothes off like a football game being played in November mud" (p. 66). A cat's eating is "like chewing soft diamonds in the dark" (p. 103). Some similes achieve epic proportions. The American humorist

> struggled for breath while his life like an overexposed home movie flashed from scene to scene in the front room of his mind with all of his relatives and friends and lovers watching it on a hot summer evening with glasses of ice-cold lemonade in their hands, interested when they were on the screen and bored when they weren't, except for his lovers who were all interested in whom he was going to bed with (p. 136).

In Sombrero Fallout, Brautigan, like he has done before, plays games with his reader. The similes do not substantially add to the understanding of the plot. It is quite unclear how the humorist's life is like an overexposed home movie. While the similes do not amplify the subject matter, their presence is significant; it attests to the fact that the author does not believe too much in the importance of words. He uses words like toys to divert the reader. He constantly reminds his reader that the language

itself is much more intriguing than any other element of the novel.

The first story, the sombrero story, reinforces the point that words are, for the most part, more important than the actions they represent. The actions of the sombrero story do not really happen; only the words are real. The story is the actualized potential of a few paragraphs written by the American humorist and discarded in a wastepaper basket. After he discards his story, the humorist

> was still staring at the torn pieces of paper in the wastepaper basket. He was staring very intently at them as they made friends with the abyss. They seemed to have a life of their own. It was a big decision but they decided to go on without him (p. 24).

Within the framework of the novel, the sombrero story is a diversion from the actual romance being told. The words do have a life of their own. They create their own world, their own turmoil and destruction.

The self-created sombrero story demonstrates its own superficiality. It is filled with the cant and clichés reminiscent of The Abortion. When the sombrero drops from the sky, the mayor's cousin and a jobless man each attempt to pick it up so that they might get the mayor's help in securing political office or a job. The cousin thinks that picking up the sombrero will cause the mayor to endorse his candidacy by saying, "I've been a good mayor and you've re-elected me six times but I know my cousin will be a great mayor and carry on a tradition of honesty and leadership in

our community" (p. 25). The mayor does not say these words, and neither the cousin nor the unemployed man are able to pick up the sombrero. Sensing that their future is lost, both men lose their composure and start crying. The mayor responds to the nonsensical situation with political rhetoric:

> Let us be reasonable men. . . . Let us discuss this in a manner befitting reasonable men. . . . Now I want to know why you are crying. What has driven two strong men like you to tears? Tell me, I am your mayor. I have been mayor for six terms. I can help you. Let me hear what it is. Do not spare a single detail. After you have told me everything you will feel better (p. 62).

The men continue to cry. Meanwhile a crowd of spectators gathers. Without noticing the sombrero or the drama unfolding before them, they begin to whisper irrelevancies about the social security system and being pregnant (p. 77). As time passes, the crowd becomes steadily louder. Whispers are replaced by shouts, and the mayor, unable to deal with the situation rationally, begins to shout meaningless things such as "'AZ 1492'--the license plate number of his 1947 car" (p. 87). As the noise increases, even his irrational utterances become inaudible. The narrator states that his mouth was "moving but it was as if nothing were coming out. The roar of the crowd had turned the mayor into a mime" (p. 93). At the same time, a librarian, the wife of a trainmaster, has her ears shot off and dies. The trainmaster arrives, finds his dead wife, associates the entire riot with "the great Vietnam days," and distributes munitions while he shouts repeatedly, "Guns for killing!" (p. 132).

As the altercation grows more violent, the police arrive and theorize that the situation is the result of "creatures from outer space taking over the people's minds" (p. 140). The media, accompanied by Norman Mailer, have various other interpretations. Pravda sees it as a "FRONTIER MISUNDERSTANDING." Le Monde thinks it might be a new sport much like football. Der Spiegel sees the war as "AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY" (p. 170). The final evaluation of the event comes from the President of the United States. In a speech, compared to the Gettysburg Address, he states after the end of the war:

> We are all brave people and loyal to America. We must stop spilling American blood, for it is too precious to be wasted. Its sacred energy must be used for the good of all Americans and the glory of this proud land. . . . Let us embrace together again, American embracing American, in the sight of almighty and forgiving God. . . . We are on the edge of a great future together. Let us go hand-in-hand into that future with God's glory lighting the way like a torch and his mercy and forgiveness will be the path we walk on (pp. 170-71, 181).

This absurdist tale demonstrates Brautigan's artistic understanding of how language simultaneously creates and devalues human actions. Events have no single verbal reality. What is to one person trivial may be for another person a source of chauvinistic joy. Words cannot explain a sombrero falling from the sky, so the two men, at a complete loss, simply cry. The crowd, in its indifference, whispers trivia. In the face of violence the mayor's political rhetoric is transformed into incoherent shouts and is

replaced with the revolutionary rhetoric of the trainmaster. The media further perverts the situation, and finally the President gives the event its historical reality by calling it the prelude to a better American future. The event, whatever it might mean, has become cheapened by the careless, unthinking use of language. Ironically, throughout the entire story, the sombrero, the real symbolic source of the conflict, is entirely forgotten and left undisturbed.

In counterpoint to the noise of the sombrero story is the story of the American humorist's quiet suffering over his lost love, the Japanese Yukiko. This part of the book takes place almost totally in the humorist's mind, and, in a sense, he creates his own suffering by fabricating words in his mind. The humorist is trapped by words. Most obviously, he is a writer with a national reputation for being funny, but anyone who knows him also knows that he has no sense of humor (p. 42). In fact, "when he was writing things that later on people would praise as some of the best humor of the century, he didn't laugh when he wrote them. He didn't even smile" (p. 43). The humorist has trouble communicating himself to others. Only the people who have read books like him, and Yukiko who has read his books, eventually discovers that he is quite different from his writing. People know him not through his personality, but rather through the words he writes.

During his self-imposed suffering, he always keeps his mind occupied with words simply to pass the time. At one

moment, the narrator states that "for about thirty seconds his mind had been totally blank which was very unusual for him because he almost always kept a Fourth of July parade going on in there" (p. 108). He constantly imagines conversations to punish himself:

> "Hello," she said.
> "It's me. Can you talk?"
> "No, somebody's here with me. It's over between us. Don't call again. It irritates him when you call."
> "What?"
> "The man I'm in love with. He doesn't like it when you call. So don't call any more. OK?" (p. 35).

The truth is, of course, that he never calls and that Yukiko is sleeping by herself. For the American humorist, the dialogues he creates in his mind are a form of entrapment and avoidance of reality. For him, words become a way of avoiding the silence around him.

While the world of the sombrero story and the American humorist are filled with language-created anxieties, the world which moves through Yukiko's mind is quiet and peaceful. She does not like to talk. Instead she nods and gestures in response to questions (p. 50). In the five years of their relationship, she never wants to talk about the humorist's writings. She has read them all and keeps them on her bookshelves, but her response is only silence (p. 23). She is capable of analytical thought and intelligent enough to think rationally about her past love, but she chooses not to verbalize her feelings. Instead she chooses another form of escape; she goes to sleep so that she can dream.

In Sombrero Fallout, dreams act as the most perfect medium for the representation of events. Dreams are silent images of life. They do not limit the mind, as does language, to arbitrary categories. Language divides reality into past, present, and future. In Yukiko's dreams, however, time does not exist. In her dreams, the past is not lost, and the present is not interpreted for the future. In a chapter entitled "Eraser," Yukiko dreams:

> She had a small dream about her childhood. It was a dream that she would not remember when she woke up in the morning nor would she ever remember it.
>
> It was gone forever.
> It was actually gone as she dreamt it.
> It erased itself as it happened (p. 18).

Dreams are transitory. They enrich experience by making it always new and immediate but do not limit it by imposing rational linguistic categories. Yukiko dreams about her dead father:

> . . . her father was an essence in the dream. He did not have a physical body. He was everything that you couldn't see in the dream. He hadn't killed himself yet, so his existence in the dream was that of being alive.
>
> That's all.
> He was alive in the dream (p. 154).

The dreams of a Japanese woman in Sombrero Fallout capture the essence of human activities. They capture permanence, beauty, and contentment and avoid accidental qualities which language distorts into sources of anxiety and disorder. In the descriptions of Yukiko's dreams, Brautigan renders, as he had in the silent ritual of The Abortion, a description of what Russell calls pre-linguistic consciousness.

NOTES

[1]Thomas R. Edwards, rev. of Sombrero Fallout, by Richard Brautigan, Harper's, Oct. 1976, p. 100.

[2]Ferdinand Mount, rev. of Sombrero Fallout, by Richard Brautigan, Encounter, June 1977, p. 52.

[3]Harold Beaver, rev. of Sombrero Fallout, by Richard Brautigan, Times Literary Supplement, 1 April 1977, p. 392.

[4]p. 12; the edition of the novel used is Sombrero Fallout: A Japanese Novel (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976). Subsequent references to this novel will be cited parenthetically in the text.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This paper is based upon the supposition that the language of post-modern fiction, including the fiction of Richard Brautigan, distracts the reader from the phenomenal world, that it constantly points toward the arbitrariness of linguistic categories, and that it creates a fictive world independent from the "real" world. More simply stated, Brautigan shares with Barthelme, Nabokov, Gass, and others a predisposition toward writing about language itself. In one sense, Brautigan writes about language because he perceives the world as absurd and not worth writing about. Yet if the world is absurd, it is only absurd because language has made it so. Brautigan reminds the reader that when discourse degenerates to clichés, cheap rhetoric, political cant, and unquestioned truisms, man's view of the world becomes inexact and perverted. The early dialogues of Vida and the librarian in The Abortion and the sombrero story in Sombrero Fallout create such a world view. Yet at the same time, Brautigan admits language's creative power to deal with the void of a meaningless universe. He uses similes and metaphors to transcend momentarily the categories imposed upon human activities through normal discourse. A

lover's eyes can be blue airplanes; a laugh, rainwater on silver daffodils. Metaphor is unarguable truth in these two novels, truth standing as an arbiter between a trivial world and a final confrontation with silence. The climax of The Abortion is the pure rhythm and motion of ritual. Sombrero Fallout confronts a silent world of dreams. It is in this contemplation of silence that language again becomes significant; after all, the writer must capture even the essence of silence in terms of words.

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