

RICHARD BRAUTIGAN AND THE
PASTORAL ROMANCE

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ABSTRACT

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Three of Richard Brautigan's novels extensively employ the American pastoral motif in a predominantly romance form. All contrast the urban American present with a simpler, idealized pastoral setting. Working within each book is the "return to nature" mystique or impulse, treated comically or ironically. In A Confederate General from Big Sur, the "return to nature" impulse is comically linked to an extended metaphor of the Civil War. The combination denigrates the pastoral time away, creating a comic burlesque. In Watermelon Sugar "returns to nature" in a fantasy, post-industrial Eden. Far from depicting the successful attainment of the yearned-for simplicity in a second Eden, Brautigan critically and ironically renders the perfect pastoral paradise. In Trout Fishing in America, the narrator searches for the pastoral ideal in urban America. A viable pastoral retreat is attained through the power of the imagination that reconciles contemporary industrialized America to its pastoral past.

To my husband

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The Pastoral Romance: Notes Toward a Definition

Richard Brautigan is a significant young American writer of the Sixties who has made important and distinctive use of the pastoral romance tradition in his work. In three of his romances, A Confederate General from Big Sur, In Watermelon Sugar, and Trout Fishing in America, Brautigan employs the pastoral romance motif to explore some contemporary American themes. He does this in such a way as to distinctively embellish the tradition. This study will stress several features of the pastoral romance tradition in light of how Brautigan handles them, and also explore Brautigan's contributions to the tradition. The pastoral romance tradition provides a valuable way of examining and understanding A Confederate General from Big Sur, In Watermelon Sugar, and Trout Fishing in America.

From its earliest history, the word pastoral has signified both a literary form and a specific informing ideal occurring in other genres. This study is not concerned with pastoral as a literary form; as such, this became defunct in the eighteenth century. Rather, pastoral here encompasses a particular authorial or narrative point of view expressed in literature as a mode or motif that assumes the idealization of rural life and contrasts that ideal with the "real world."

The root impulse of pastoral depends upon the con-

trast, explicit or implied, between the simple or natural and the complex or cultivated.¹ Although the word implies a country setting, pastoral concerns itself primarily not with nature as such, but with the natural world as a backdrop for the close examination of and judgment upon the world beyond the idealized rural setting.² Thus, one of the broadest implications of the idyllic element of pastoral in the paradisiacal setting is a "perspective by incongruity,"³ which allows the reader to use the pastoral place as a touchstone or norm against which to contrast a more sophisticated life. This contrast results in the devaluation of the more complex society or point of view.⁴

Yet pastoral in its most serious form rarely results in the total condemnation or devaluation of the more complex society. It tends rather to play the complex relationship of city and country against one another, "exploiting the tension between their respective values, elaborating the ambiguity of feeling which results, and

¹
Frank Kermode, ed., English Pastoral Poetry (Freeport: Books for Libraries, 1952), p. 19. See also W. W. Greg, Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama (London, 1906), pp. 4-5.

²
John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), p. 20.

³
Harold Toliver, Pastoral Forms and Attitudes (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1971), p. 1.

⁴
Larry E. Taylor, Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ., 1971), p. 19.

drawing attention to the resemblance beneath their obvious differences."⁵ For such a tension to be exploited, pastoral is thus never the product of a completely rural society. Pastoral flourishes at a particular phase of a society's development, according to Frank Kermode, "in which the relationship of metropolis and country is evident, and there are no children (as there are now), who have never seen a cow" (p. 14). We need not agree fully with the last part of Kermode's assertion; indeed, there seems to be some evidence that the further a society (especially in this case American society) moves "from the earth," the more it finds a greater need for at least a temporary pastoral retreat.⁶ Certainly we can assert that the pastoral writer must be of necessity a person of "sophistication writing for a sophisticated audience, for to yearn for the rustic life, one must know the great world from which it offers an escape."⁷

Critical to understanding the concept of pastoral is comprehending its particular point of view toward nature. John Lynen writes that pastoral comes to life whenever the artist is able to adopt its distinctive point of view--that is, when he or a narrator "casts himself in

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Lynen, p. 10.

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Taylor, p. 18.

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Lynen, p. 13.

the role of a country dweller and writes about life in terms of the contrast between the rural world with its rustic scenery and naive, humble folk, and the great outer world of the powerful, the wealthy, and the sophisticated" (p. 9). For William Empson, the "essential trick" of the old pastoral was "to make simple persons express strong feelings . . . in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best possible way)."⁸ The author or narrator combines the best of both worlds. The pastoral point of view thus has a paradoxical method because, in emphasizing the differences between the country and the city, it portrays at the same time universal experience and reveals basic realities common to both worlds, Lynen states (p. 20). The pastoral process essentially, therefore, distills the "complex into the simple."⁹

Kermode states that the pastoral point of view assumes that the "quiet wildness of the country is better than the cultivated and complex life of the hurrying court" (p. 17). In the rural world, life retains its purity, and the country dweller, being closer to nature, is "purer and less vicious" than his cultivated city counterpart" (p. 19). The ruling motif of the shepherd withdrawing from the

⁸
Some Versions of Pastoral (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 11-12.

⁹
 Empson, p. 13.

world to an unspoiled green landscape in order to redeem himself from "the curse of work and the lot of the peasant"¹⁰ is an attempt to recapture a Golden Age or an Edenic place, divorced from time and death. The idealization of the natural man living in simplicity and harmony in the rural world thus tends to merge in pastoral literature with the myths of the Golden Age or Eden. "The idea that the world has been a better place and that men have degenerated is remarkably widespread, and a regular feature of pastoral poetry. . . .Something better [than man's present condition and struggle] must have existed, and for some folly or sin, we can easily recognize in ourselves we have been turned out of the garden and can only hope to return."¹¹

The pastoral vision of life is not about nature, per se, therefore, but concentrates on a "special society" that exists in the rural setting.¹² The society's structure is noncompetitive or else "converts a limited competition into such games and ceremonies as the friendly exchanges of rival singers."¹³ The idyllic,

¹⁰
Renato Poggioli, "The Oaten Flute," Harvard Library Bulletin, 11(1957), 152.

¹¹
Kermode, p. 14.

¹²
Taylor, p. 9.

¹³
Toliver, p. 4.

static nature of the pastoral vision moves the idealized rural setting out of the geographical region and into an imaginative, symbolic zone. Myth and metaphor figure importantly in the mode. Idealizing the pastoral landscape transforms it into a symbolic setting against which fundamental facts of existence are measured.¹⁴

Although it rarely portrays a pure vision of bucolic bliss, pastoral does emphasize the superiority of the idealized rural world over the "real world." When, as Larry Taylor states, "the artist shows that life and myth-- that is, the myth and tradition concerning the return to nature theme--to be lost, absurd, untenable or false . . . then he works in the tradition of the anti-pastoral" (p. 10). Taylor makes a strong distinction between the pastoral and anti-pastoral modes. Since both proceed, however, out of basic shared attitudes concerning the idealization of the rural world, anti-pastoral will be considered here in light of those attitudes and not as a separate mode or tradition.

Harold Toliver finds the pastoral's basic, characteristically tensive structure to be the exploitation of a potential or expressed contrast between a pastoral, "golden" world and the everyday world (p. 5). Constantly evolving, the enduring pastoral tradition has been a part of the fairy tale, the domestic tale of tribulation, and the

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Taylor, p. 10; and Lynen, pp. 10-11.

romance journey. Contrasts between naturalness and artifice, or those resulting from the incongruity of intruders into the pastoral place, or the collision of social attitudes are among the common tensions found in the tradition (p. vii).

The clash between civilization and an Edenic wilderness, symbolized in the virgin American landscape, is the root conflict in much traditional American pastoral, whether it is expressed in poetry or prose. The movement away from civilization offers hope--a "chance of a temporary return to first things," Leo Marx states.¹⁵ Under the Romantics' influence, pastoral becomes divided. One branch explores the implications of the idealizing imagination and leads in the twentieth century to the work of Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens. The second branch takes up social themes and treats the concept of a pastoral place as a perspective on small towns or urban life. This branch is represented

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The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (London: Oxford Univ., 1964), p. 69. Marx points out that a fully articulated pastoral ideal began appearing in the United States at the end of the eighteenth century (p. 73). Larry Taylor, along with Marx, suggests that the clash between the Puritan ethic to subdue and civilize the American wilderness and the budding transcendental viewpoint that identified the wilderness with a return to pre-lapsarian Eden provides the predominant tone for the anti-pastoral and pastoral modes of the national literature. New English Canaan, Taylor asserts, is one of America's first pastorals. He suggests the main current in the historical pattern is a stream of thinking which identifies a return to nature with a "return to pre-lapsarian Eden, innocence and sensuality, as opposed to the strict intellectuality and spirituality of Puritanism" (p. 25).

in the novels of William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, and Ken Kesey.¹⁶ Ihab Hassan in Radical Innocence, indirectly discusses the basic conflict in American pastoral when he talks about the admittedly abstract "American dialectic," which is a "running debate between . . . the active will moving ever forward in time and space, unburdened by the memory of guilt, and the reflective or passional conscience moving toward the past in hope of knowledge or atonement." In the fictional imagination "America remains, in dwindling measure, a persistent escape toward freedom which the American conscience perpetually qualifies."¹⁷

Thus, several critics see the crucial conflict of American pastoral from the Romantics on to lie in the increasing split between a complex society and the relatively uncomplicated past which that society has irrevocably left behind. The wilderness "inculcates a natural virtue in the modern pastoral motif; it bespeaks a benevolent influence that makes its ruin a desecration."¹⁸ Leo Marx feels that the presence of his metaphorical machine in the garden and its ever-increasing power over the American imagination has ultimately stripped of meaning the old pastoral dream of a simple agrarian retreat. The hero of the American pastoral,

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Toliver, p. 17.

¹⁷

Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary Novel (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1961), p. 37.

¹⁸

Toliver, p. 229.

Marx finds, is "either dead or totally alienated from society by the story's end." The homage paid to the landscape is very often "ironic and bitter" (pp. 362-64). Taylor (who would most probably term Marx's pastoral analysis anti-pastoral) believes that "in a sense it would be safe to say twentieth century American life as a whole is anti-pastoral"--that is, incompatible with agrarian closeness to nature (p. 18). Where pastoral elements exist in twentieth century American fiction, they "exist in some relation to a 'return to nature' motif, or a 'nature myth,' or an 'agrarian mystique,' Taylor states (p. 9). The "profound rift" in twentieth century pastoral, Toliver asserts, is based in modern culture's "contradictory desire both to appropriate and to preserve natural resources, to maintain innocence and spiritual communion with nature while progressing deeper and deeper into industrialism" (pp. 235-36).

That this profound rift is not likely to be cured is obvious, but pastoral persists as a viable literary motif, appearing in many serious contemporary works. What finally enables the reader to take a successful "return to nature" seriously lies either in the retreat's temporary quality or through the technique of reconciling the extremes

through the power of the imagination.¹⁹ Raymond Olderman, contends that, not suprisingly, contemporary American pastoral "does not fill the reader with a newly confirmed awareness that man has the power of universally significant moral action." Instead, the pastoral of the Sixties affirms that "life is simply better than death."²⁰

The modern pastoral hero is always an alien because he is, as Toliver states, "lost in the wilderness of the desert, condemned to perpetual adventure. No power may absolve whatever guilt he may have accumulated, because there are no wise elders . . . to unlock the riddles of the universe and apply them to the normative world" (p. 326). The hero is Hassan's anti-hero who defies time, history, and death itself: "a deep dreamer, a martyr and anarch . . . a clown too, a juggler whose game is to keep Eden and Utopia [desire and the will] in airy balance" (p. 328). He is also Northrop Frye's eiron, the self-deprecating hero who maintains, Hassan adds, "the dialectic between how things are and how they could be."²¹

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Marx, p. 69; Taylor, p. 27; and Toliver, p. 14, all discuss this point. Toliver says, "The modern versions of pastoral often suggest that the distance between fictional idylls and the daily world precludes any genuine transformation of reality except an imagined one."

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Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel of the Sixties (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1971), p. 22.

21

Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1957), p. 40. Hassan, p. 178, expands the eiron to include the function of mediation.

A dreamlike quality pervades much modern pastoral, even as it primarily employs the technique of irony. Pastoral's "harbored bowers" are difficult to reconcile with increasingly industrialized life, Toliver states (p. 13). The concept of an Arcadian retreat from the world then comes full circle, suggesting that when the concept of a pastoral retreat remains in an imaginative, timeless zone, it is a viable fictional ideal; when placed into the "real world," it becomes an anachronistic, barren impossibility. Modern pastoral, Toliver states, "has not discovered a way to reconcile pastoral landscapes, golden innocence, and other imaginative fictions with the experience of social complexities, the factory, the slum, or the despoiling of nature, nor can we expect that any period ever will" (p. 236).

According to Northrop Frye in Anatomy of Criticism, romance has an essentially dialectical form: "everything is focussed on a conflict between the hero and his enemy, and all the reader's values are bound up with the hero." Active exploits and adventurous travels are emphasized in the romance, "a naturally sequential, processional form" with a quest or adventure as its central plot element (pp. 186-87). Frye further defines romance in terms of its hero's capabilities.

If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvelous, but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended; prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established (p. 33).

The hero is a larger-than-life figure who moves through a legendary land where ordinary laws of nature are suspended and the extraordinary event is the rule of the day.

In American literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne is a central figure for the development of the "postulates" of romance. In the preface to The House of the Seven Gables, Hawthorne claims "a certain latitude in fashion and material . . . managing the atmospherical medium to bring out the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture rather than aiming, as the novel does, at a very minute fidelity to the possible and probable and

ordinary course of experience."²² F. O. Matthiessen claims Hawthorne is the foundation for American romance "laws" because he establishes the "multiple symbolizing of spiritual meanings," reflecting the main concern of romance, which is to convey the "life within the life."²³

Richard Chase in The American Novel and its Tradition calls romance "a kind of 'border' fiction whether the field of action is in the neutral territory between civilization and the wilderness or . . . is conceived not so much as a place as a state of mind--the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary mingle" (p. 13). Joel Porte in The Romance in America states that the romancer is "committed to a fictional world that is stylized and exaggerated, a world where human action and events are heightened--for the sake of . . . the representation of interior or ulterior significance."²⁴

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The House of the Seven Gables (London: Walter Scott, 1890), III, iii. Among the differences between the novel and the romance discussed by Richard Chase in The American Novel and Its Tradition, pp. 11-12, are the romance's tendency to emphasize action or plot rather than characterization; a tendency to render reality in less volume or detail; and the use of probably two-dimensional characters who are often not complexly related to each other, to society or to the past, shown in ideal relation with each other. The highly colored plots often feature astonishing events which have meaning in a symbolic or ideological rather than a realistic sense.

23

American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York: Oxford Univ., 1966), p. 271. (Originally published 1941.)

24

The Romance in America (Middleton: Wesleyan Univ., 1969), p. 96.

Richard Poirier in A World Elsewhere regrets what he feels is an unfortunate emphasis on the "baggy" concepts of the romance and the novel to describe the composition of an American style. Still, he too discusses the American obsession with "inventing environments that permit unhampered freedom of consciousness."²⁵ Many of his examples come from the romance tradition, and indeed, his assertion that the American style is one "filled with an agitated desire to make a world in which tensions and polarities are fully developed and then resolved" (p. x) is reminiscent of the aims and methods of romance.

Thus, critics seem to concur that the romancer's fictional world, though most probably not the "real world," concerns itself with the essence of that world portrayed as an imaginary middle ground situated between civilization and the wilderness, or as a state of mind where the actual and imaginary meet. In this middle ground, John Caldwell Stubbs states, nineteenth century romancers "discussed and used, without actually codifying, three interrelated balances: verisimilitude and ideality; the natural and the marvelous; and history and fiction." The play between these opposites provides the tension in much

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A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature (New York: Oxford Univ., 1966), p. 8.

fiction of the period.²⁶

One way romance examines and resolves the tensions which are central to the American ethos has been through the pastoral idyl.²⁷ Joel Porte states that from the beginning of American literature, the fictional quest for knowledge of the wilderness has been synonymous with the American's desire and need to explore the self.

"What began with a literal and ended with a metaphoric need to peer into and pierce through the wilderness constitutes the true burden of romance in America."²⁸

Thus, the essential defining element of pastoral romance--the hero's movement out of the civilized world--holds a unique meaning for the American, the "hero of a new adventure: an individual . . . happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources."²⁹

In the American pastoral romance, the pastoral element

²⁶

The Pursuit of Form: A Study of Hawthorne and the Romance (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois, 1970), p. 7.

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Chase, p. 1. The other way has been through the melodrama.

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Porte, p. 229.

²⁹

R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1955), p. 5.

becomes a retreat or withdrawal, a vantage point from which, Toliver states, social criticism is possible, combined with a "profound regret that somehow the best of everything cannot be worked out" (p. 369). The combination of pastoral and romance may result in "a meaningful reciprocity if the pastoral sojourn of the romance wayfarer helps define his goals and if the pastoral place calls upon all its resources to influence him," Toliver says (p. 361).

Yet the pastoral idyl in American romance does not necessarily bring harmony or spiritual health to the seeking individual, Chase contends. Instead, the American impulse for a pastoral withdrawal springs from the desire to escape society or the complexities of one's own being. "Pastoral feeling in Cooper, Melville, Mark Twain, and Faulkner is elegiac; the pastoral experience is elusive, momentary, always receding into the past. When it is momentarily recaptured--in the forest with Natty Bumppo, in Typee, on the raft with Huck Finn, in the Mississippi hunting camp with Ike McCaslin--it is restorative, it recruits the benign emotions, it may even bring about a moral regeneration" (pp. 183-84).

In contemporary American pastoral romance the quality and very nature of the pastoral retreat takes on new dimensions. Because of the ubiquity of industrialism, fictional physical retreat into the wilderness is often

no longer meaningful. Toliver cites transformations of the imagination, spells of magic, and unmaskings of obscure divine and demonic forces as recurrent features of traditional pastoral romance (p. 9). These find new expression in the contemporary American romancer's conscious manipulation of words and images, and in the force of the narrator's imagination as he transforms the urban landscape into a mental pastoral place apart.

Toliver believes one of the main lines in the pastoral's evolution comes from the contemporary pastoralist's tendency to take a "skeptical view of the pastoral tradition and use it primarily as a device for gaining perspective on the imagination itself" (p. 14).

Neil Schmitz discusses the fiction of Richard Brautigan in light of this observation. In "Richard Brautigan and the Modern Pastoral," Schmitz points out that Brautigan is an ironist who uses the pastoral landscape to examine critically "the myths and language of the pastoral sensibility that reappeared in the sixties."³⁰ In Brautigan's pastoral romances, where physical retreat is still possible, the perfect pastoral landscape does not yield peace, but reveals "stasis--blindness and silence"

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"Richard Brautigan and the Modern Pastoral," Modern Fiction Studies, 19(Spring, 1973), 125.

(p. 112). When it focuses on the imagination's power, the pastoral setting is "irrevocably the city it seeks to deny" (p. 125).

In general, critics of the contemporary novel agree that writers have increasingly shown an awareness of and sensitivity to an almost tangible reality created by words and the imagination itself. Olderman discusses a "regained joy in storytelling and in the pleasures of manipulated form"; Tanner talks about the "general self-consciousness about the strange relationship between the provinces of words and things and the problematical position of man, who participates in both"; and Poirier points out the presence of "a world elsewhere," the American style of creating environments.³¹

Although these comments are not specifically directed to pastoral romance, they do indicate trends which most probably pertain to and affect it. We may expect, therefore, that the contemporary pastoral romance has built on the past; that is, it incorporates many of the tradition's features and changes others to remain a relevant part of our literature. Its basic dialectical form stresses the exploits of a larger-than-life, yet essentially two-dimensional character who moves out of the civilized world on his adventures. The pastoral element

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Olderman, p. 24; City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 21; Poirier, p. 6.

may be the beneficial journey itself or an interlude within the hero's larger journey-quest. Within the romance's heightened atmosphere, improbable and extraordinary events may occur, yet these are still true to the "life within the life" which the author seeks to portray. Pastoral romance exploits polarities such as verisimilitude and ideality, the natural and the marvelous, or history and fiction within the historical American context. The result moves the pastoral setting out of a specific geographical region and into a symbolic, timeless zone. The tensions of the contemporary American pastoral romance find a successful resolution, whether partially or completely, largely through the power of the hero's imagination.

Three of Richard Brautigan's novels illustrate several features of the pastoral romance tradition. Although their tone and subject differ, all employ the basic pastoral motif. Brautigan's heroes journey away from a complex society to a beneficent, more "natural" time or place. In A Confederate General from Big Sur, the woods of Big Sur provide the setting for a pastoral comic burlesque. In In Watermelon Sugar, the pastoral place becomes a symbolic "world elsewhere"--a pastoral vantage point from which to examine some aspects of modern life. Unlike the former two, Trout Fishing in America mainly deals with the transforming power of the

imagination as it effects a reconciliation between the present industrial American society and the idealized pastoral American past. While solidly based in the American pastoral romance tradition, Brautigan's three works also reflect some contemporary literary trends, such as the extensive use of irony, and the creation of an almost palpable reality by the manipulation of words and images.

A Confederate General from Big Sur: Comic Pastoral

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life--no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball.

--Ralph Waldo Emerson--

As in any pastoral romance, the plot of A Confederate General from Big Sur¹ is defined by the hero's-- or in this case, heroes'--hopeful departure from a complex society into a pastoral Eden. The woods of Big Sur in California become the imaginative pastoral retreat in Confederate General, and the adventures and exploits of the heroes in that pastoral place apart constitute the plot of the work. Brautigan's pastoral romance employs several of the tradition's motifs and inverts them to create a comic burlesque. The heroes embark on a series of mock-heroic adventures in a less-than-ideal pastoral retreat. Events in the book are related by a first person narrator who assumes the role of country dweller and who functions as both hero and narrator. The book finds its shape through the device of a sustained military metaphor of the War Between the States. This metaphor works

1

Richard Brautigan, A Confederate General from Big Sur (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 160 pp. Subsequent references to this work will be Confederate General.

as an implicit contrast to the para-military "maneuvers" of the Big Sur confederacy, serves to deflate through humor the "confederate general," Lee Mellon, and comments ironically on the possibility of a viable, regenerative pastoral retreat.

Richard Brautigan's first published romance (1964) met with widely mixed critical reviews. New York Times Book Review critic, Martin Levin, dismissed it as "Sur-realistic . . . whimsey," that depended on non sequiturs for humor "with a touch here and there of painful artiness."² William Hogan in Saturday Review called the work a "comedy of disaffiliation . . . a quaint, if unnecessary contribution to the California Beat literature," focusing on "a place of unwashed Peter Pans and the beautiful nihilism around them."³ Harry Gilroy of the New York Times said Confederate General was about "two young men who renounce the world of daily labor for swindles, liquor, make-do, sex, literate absurdities and dope."⁴ The most positive comment appeared in Book Week. Confederate General was "good, whimsical reading" written with an unexpectedly

2

Martin Levin, "A Reader's Report," rev. of A Confederate General from Big Sur, New York Times Book Review, 24 Jan. 1965, p. 42.

3

William Hogan, "Rebels in the War with Life," rev. of A Confederate General from Big Sur, Saturday Review, 13 Feb. 1965, p. 49.

4

Harry Gilroy, "End Papers," rev. of A Confederate General from Big Sur, New York Times, 24 Feb. 1965, Section L, p. 39.

delicate tone, although it failed to develop the tension between the society at Big Sur and the real world.⁵ Until 1971, Book Week's review remained the only one to touch on the pastoral romance motif in Confederate General, when after the publication of two other Brautigan romances at least two articles in scholarly journals begin to discuss the work in terms of that motif.⁶

And, indeed, Richard Brautigan's unique metaphorical technique, which in a way is surreal, does tend to obscure the underlying pastoral romance motif. Philip Stevick, in an essay on experimental American fiction in TriQuarterly, discusses the Brautigan form in which "images and events accumulate and sometimes gather great force but do not arrange themselves so as to demonstrate a theme, or so as to gradually gratify the expectations and resolve the tensions generated in the beginning of the work."⁷

Brautigan's method, to which the reader is introduced in Confederate General, is to employ various image clusters

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Arthur Gold, "Fun in Section Eight," rev. of A Confederate General from Big Sur, Book Week, 14 Feb. 1965, p. 13.

6

Gerald Locklin and Charles Stetler, "Some Observations on A Confederate General from Big Sur," Critique, 13, No. 2 (1971), 72-82; Neil Schmitz, "Richard Brautigan and the Modern Pastoral."

7

Philip Stevick, "Scheherazade Runs Out of Plots, Goes On Talking; The King, Puzzled, Listens: An Essay on New Fiction," TriQuarterly, 26 (Winter 1973), p. 348.

repetitively and poetically in a non-rational, at times almost random fashion. This method serves to enrich the context of each separate metaphor and to set up a sustained, implicit contrast within the work as a whole. In Confederate General, the image cluster is the "War Between the States," ironically termed by the narrator Jesse "the last good time this country ever had" (p. 148).

Confederate General also introduces the reader to "the Brautigan narrator"--described by Terence Malley as a "shy, retiring, lonely, gentle spirit, observant but not at home in the world."⁸ The narrator, Malley continues, nostalgically looks back on his own childhood or the American past as "a simpler time, a simpler world, when it was (or seemed to be) easier to control the terms of one's life, to find a 'good world'" (p. 186). All of Brautigan's pastoral romances use a first person narrator--a sensitive, self-conscious, but strangely self-unaware observer of and participant in the book's events.

The plot of Confederate General is fairly straightforward. Jesse, the narrator, meets a flamboyant character, Lee Mellon, whose trademarks are a constantly varying number of teeth and an alleged ancestral connection to a Confederate general, Augustus Mellon. In flight from

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Writers for the Seventies: Richard Brautigan (New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1972), p. 116. To date, Mr. Malley's book is the only full-length critical treatment of Brautigan.

conventional American society, Lee Mellon survives by any means possible short of a regular job. He obtains, by slightly dishonest means, a paradisiacal Big Sur retreat to which Jesse also goes. In Jesse's case, the purpose of the retreat is to help heal wounds inflicted by an unhappy love affair. The pair live in poverty and pick up two girls--Elaine, a college drop-out, and Elizabeth, a Big Sur resident and mother of four who works part of the year in Los Angeles as a highly paid call girl--to share their Eden. The confederacy's brief idyl is interrupted by the appearance of the insane, self-made businessman, Johnston Wade. Wade is in flight from his family who are also slightly mad. The pastoral confederacy get stoned on the beach, and the book concludes with five possible endings that become "186,000 endings per second."

Jesse's and Lee's retreat to the country represents an example of the "back to nature" or "back to agrarian society" myths which are, according to Larry E. Taylor, the impulse for the contemporary American pastoral withdrawal.⁹ Big Sur in California is a spectacular, wild setting of redwoods on high cliffs that plunge directly down to the Pacific Ocean. It is a country which hardly needs further idealization. The Big Sur retreat in

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Taylor, p. 9.

Confederate General, without electricity or clocks, is full of rabbits, deer and misty days--an almost stereotypical depiction of an idealized pastoral retreat away from the complexities of civilization.

Toliver has pointed out that an important conflict in contemporary American pastoral lies in the increasing split between a complex industrial society and the relatively uncomplicated past that society has left behind.¹⁰ Brautigan exploits this tension through the entire imaginative framework of the romance. The framework--the Confederate War motif--is a product of the narrator's imagination. Jesse's sense of imaginative distortion connects Lee Mellon's great-grandfather with Lee himself--who is something of a secessionist, rebel, and outlaw--and leaps to the vision of Big Sur as 12th member of the Confederate States of America (pp. 17-20). Thus, the language employed to describe the supposedly peaceful, regenerative Big Sur retreat is ironically and comically couched in military allusions and comparisons.

The comparisons form much of the book's humor. Part Two is "Campaigning with Lee Mellon at Big Sur," and his 5'1" ceilinged hole in the cliff, his "inevitable Wilderness" (p. 109), is the group's headquarters. Their Battle

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Toliver, p. 229.

of the Wilderness--that is, their pastoral place--is a comic parallel to the italicized inter-chapter depictions of the real Battle of the Wilderness in the Civil War. Before Elaine and the groceries arrive, the two soldiers subsist largely on a combination of jack mackerel and Lee Mellon's "bread" for dessert, tagged by Jesse "a perfect gastronomical Hiroshima" (p. 69).

When employed to describe Lee Mellon, the military allusions serve as humorous means to deflate his image of a man in charge of his life. "A Daring Attack on PG&E" relates the victory Mellon sustains in Oakland over the Pacific Gas and Electric Company when he illegally taps gas, escaping with only singed eyebrows. "To Gettysburg! To Gettysburg!" describes Mellon's losing battle against "spiritus frumenti" as he winds up covered by a cardboard box under a San Francisco bar; and "Lee Mellon, Roll Away! You Rolling River!" evokes the stirring Civil War song to contrast with Mellon's grand gesture of rolling joints to get everybody high.

The italicized inter-chapter vignettes which appear in the last third of the romance also function to deflate Mellon's image. The paragraphs are Jesse's imaginative re-creation of the "real" Battle of the Wilderness and the "real" Augustus Mellon, who becomes in Jesse's imagination a deserting private, running for his life. The contrast between the Civil War and the playing at war on

established society in the "battleground" at Big Sur and the depiction of Augustus Mellon as a deserting private living on the edge of survival both serve to display Lee Mellon as a "Confederate General in ruins" (p. 20).

Pastoral romance focuses not on nature itself but on the special society in the idealized pastoral retreat. It portrays a non-competitive society freed from daily work and assumes that the country dweller, being closer to nature, is purer and less vicious than his city counterpart. Since this is a comic pastoral romance, we may expect these features to be inverted, and indeed, they are. The concepts of non-competition and freedom from daily labor are transposed into laziness and the reliance on con games for existence. The Big Sur confederacy, which includes Jesse and girlfriend Elaine, Lee Mellon and Elizabeth, and briefly, Johnston Wade, have no special purity imparted from their Big Sur stay. They are essentially "city people" with city values. Only Elizabeth seems noticeably affected by her Big Sur residence. During nine months of the year, she lives a gentle, vegetarian life of "physical and spiritual contemplation" at Big Sur with her four small children. For the other three months, she goes to Los Angeles and transforms herself into a call girl specializing in "weird action" (p. 86).

As stated above, Jesse functions as both narrator and hero in Confederate General. This double function poses some difficulties for critic Terence Malley, who believes that Brautigan flaws Confederate General by changing Jesse from chronicler of Mellon's exploits into the book's central character by the end (pp. 106-07). Gerald Locklin and Charles Stetler, however, do not attribute Confederate General's flaws to Jesse's emergence as the central character. Their 1971 Critique article likens Jesse to Nick Carroway, the first person peripheral narrator in The Great Gatsby. The subject of Jesse's narration is "a flamboyant, 'romantic' character who, like Gatsby, reflects the materialistic values in the countryAt the end of each novel, the most prominent character is the narrator and each has witnessed the end of a dream" (p. 72).

Perhaps another way of looking at the relationship of Jesse and Lee Mellon that joins Jesse's two roles is through Northrop Frye's pairing of the eiron and the alazon in old comedy. The eiron is a self-deprecating character who tends to understate his own position, and who maintains the dialectic between how things are and how they could be. He functions as comic foil for the alazon, who is a deceiving or self-deceived character. Normally, the alazon is an object of ridicule or satire in comedy, but often, like

Hamlet, he is the hero of a tragedy.¹¹ Jesse's language-- the military metaphors and the vignettes--both serve to deflate Lee Mellon's stature as he becomes an object of satire. As eiron, Jesse cannot directly confront the reader with his own opinion of Mellon. Thus, the technique of indirectly judging Mellon through the military comparisons and the vignettes accomplish that same function and are consistent with Jesse's role. Jesse's double function of storyteller and character becomes a consistent whole if Frye's pairing technique is employed to explain his relationship to the comic hero-villain Lee Mellon.¹²

The Blithedale Romance, an anti-pastoral in the romance tradition, parallels Confederate General in this respect. John Caldwell Stubbs comments that the ironic tone and artifice or structure of The Blithedale Romance filters through a "comic, powerless. . . .disengaged narrator" who misses the significance of what he tells the reader.¹³ The structure of Confederate General comes to the reader through Jesse's narration, which similarly reveals Jesse to be a comic, powerless and largely disengaged narrator and observer. Only Jesse's language and imagination judge

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Frye, pp. 39-40, 365. Ihab Hassan, p. 178, discusses the modern version of the eiron who juggles the dialectics of reality and ideality.

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Jesse can also be seen as a modern version of the "boon companion," the sidekick who often appears in American pastoral novels.

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Stubbs, pp. xv, 160.

Lee Mellon; consciously, he does not allow himself to see Mellon with any objectivity. An early, characteristic instance of Jesse's blind loyalty to Mellon comes in the San Francisco library where the pair go to look up Lee Mellon's Confederate ancestor. But Augustus Mellon is not in the book. Jesse says, "They probably just overlooked him. A mistake was made. Some records were burned or something happened. There was a lot of confusion. That's probably it." Mellon begs Jesse to promise that he will always believe there was a Confederate general in Mellon's family. "I promise," Jesse says, "and it was a promise that I kept" (pp. 33-34).

Lee Mellon's name suggests the comic conjunction of opposites inherent in the character. Robert E. Lee, general of the Army of Northern Virginia, is associated with true Southern gallantry and fair play, honorably fighting for a lost cause. Lee Mellon's last name suggests the ruthless robber barons of the late nineteenth century. The combination joins two separate, dominant strains of American hero. Locklin and Stetler call Lee Mellon sadistic and totally self-absorbed, "a one-dimensional Dostoevskian hero, an underground man devoid of a complicating ideals. . . .He survives by exploitation" (p. 75). This evaluation seems a bit heavy-handed for the book's tone; in truth, Mellon is selfish and irresponsible. He is a comic visionary fighting for his own lost cause--

his survival. Perhaps, given the predominantly comic tone of the romance, it is wiser to take him as Jesse describes him: "the end product of American spirit, pride and the old know-how" (p. 94).

As tentatively as Brautigan allows it, Mellon functions as an informal symbol of the valueless, modern materialistic man. His comment, "Man is the dominant creature on this shit pile" (p. 98) reoccurs three times during the work and is an important theme in the sense that dominance implies "controlling or coping with one's own life."¹⁴ Whatever darkness there is in Mellon's character dissipates with the comic treatment Brautigan gives him. Terence Malley points out that Brautigan uses Lee Mellon to burlesque various American myths such as the "man of action," the "romantic outlaw," or the "self-reliant jack-of-all-trades" (pp. 97-98).¹⁵

He is a modern explorer, "a kind of weird Balboa" (p. 107) who searches the ocean highway for discarded cigarette butts. In the context of his life, his motto becomes comically ironic. His great adventures amount to singeing his eyebrows as he pilfers gas from the Pacific Gas & Electric Company; engaging in various unsuccessful

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Malley, pp. 102-03.

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In his next three novels, Brautigan tends toward parody of genre: The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966; The Hawklime Monster: A Gothic Western; and Williard and His Bowling Trophies: A Perverse Mystery.

confrontations with frightened rabbits and deer; bullying two unarmed teenagers who try to steal some of his gasoline; and stunningly defeating a pondful of noisy frogs. Mellon builds a handsome rathole in the Big Sur cliff with 5'1" ceilings and subsists on war-time rations of canned jack mackerel that even the resident cats won't touch.

Jesse is Lee Mellon's opposite. Ironically, Jesse's name suggests a famous American outlaw, but in the context of the book, this association is a comic one. Jesse has, unlike Mellon, little of the outlaw about him. Mellon can't be bothered with love; one wonders whether he has a compassionate bone in his body. Jesse identifies with losers. At the book's beginning, Jesse is a boarder on Leavenworth Street, suggesting, Malley says, "his imprisonment in loneliness" (p. 104). The comic exchange of "Letters of Reply/Arrival" illustrate their differing sense of priorities. Jesse, in retreat from a traumatic love affair, appeals to the general for information regarding his camp. Mellon brushes off Jesse's practical inquiries about food and shelter. "Bring something to drink. Whiskey!" he writes (p. 54).

Lee has evolved an ethic for survival; Jesse does not know where to begin. One evidence of this comes in "The Rivets of Ecclesiastes." At Big Sur, Jesse reads *The Book of Ecclesiastes* by lanternlight. The scope of

Ecclesiastes is an "inquiry into the chief good of man" and broadly deals with the rules of conduct for a happy life.¹⁶ Yet Jesse does not read Ecclesiastes for its meaning; instead, he carefully counts the punctuation marks. Malley contends that Jesse's counting of the marks maintains his stability. He likens the act to Hemingway's Nick in "Big Two-Hearted River" as Nick heals his shattered mind and spirit by mechanical, menial camp rituals (pp. 107-08). This is certainly true, for the marks represent permanent and unchanging facts in Jesse's somewhat precarious world. Yet the episode also demonstrates Jesse's futile attempt to extract any meaning for his own life from traditional sources of such power by a failure to see and understand what lies in the pages before him.

Just as Jesse refuses to confront the reality of the meaning of his "reading," he is also constantly submerging his feelings about Mellon or avoiding judging the events at Big Sur. Jesse carefully avoids judging Mellon's actions, except indirectly through his language and his imagination, as discussed. He lies for Mellon and he indulges Mellon's mock hold-up. Although he admires Mellon's confidence, he cannot live as Mellon does. Jesse

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Smith's Bible Dictionary, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1974), pp. 459-60.

echoes "man is the dominant creature on this shit pile" twice during the course of the book--once when he uses it to gain enough courage to investigate a "chopping sound" in the woods late one night (p. 118), and again, questioningly at the end when he unsuccessfully tries to make love to Elaine. "Who said we were the dominant creature on this shit pile?" (p. 157).

Dominance--that is, coping with or controlling one's life--implies a strong sense of knowing what is real. And, in fact, the problem of discerning reality from fantasy is another theme of the work, central to understanding Jesse's character. As eiron, Jesse functions to juggle the dialectic between the reality of things and events and their ideality--that is, how they could or should be. His imaginative language shields him and mediates for him throughout most of the book, allowing him to defer any mental confusion.

Through his imagination, he is able to find a framework that makes sense out of Lee Mellon and all the insane (in the sense of occurring with no apparent meaning or link) things that happen to the Big Sur confederacy. "This life, how strange it is. Last night those two boys were crawling in front of Lee Mellon's empty rifle, little realizing as they begged for their imaginary lives, that they were going to finance all of this: I with a girl to the bed, Lee Mellon under a saloon covered with cardboard" (p. 93). As juggler, Jesse is very aware of and sensitive

to the surrealism and the madness of everyday life.

The group at Big Sur create their own reality and play at their own version of madness, also deferring any need to confront each other. They speak a nonsensical private language. "'I think I'm going to sit here and read frogs. What's wrong, don't you like frogs?'" Lee Mellon farted. 'That's what I said. Where's your spirit of patriotism? After all, there's a frog on the American flag'" (p. 72). Dialogue in "The Pork Chop Alligator" provides more examples. The confederacy is gathering for breakfast.

"What's for breakfast?" Elaine asked.

"A museum," Lee Mellon answered.

"I've never seen any alligators down here before," Elizabeth said. "They're cute. What are they good for?"

"Frog baths," Elaine said.

"Companionship," Lee Mellon said. "I'm lonely. Our alligators could make beautiful music together."

His alligator said, "GROWL!--opp/opp/opp/opp/opp/opp/opp/opp!"

"Your alligator looks like a harp," Elizabeth said, as if she really meant it: with strings coming off her words.

"Your alligator looks like a handbag filled with harmonicas," Lee Mellon said, lying like a dog with dog whistles coming off his words.

"Up your alligator!" I said. "Is there any coffee?"

(p. 111)

These games that play at madness work for Jesse until the intrusion of real madness in the person of Johnston Wade. Malley believes that Wade is Brautigan's

burlesque on the self-made big-shot within society who has been "driven to madness by the contrast between the illusion of success and its realities" (p. 99). Wade is on one of his chronic flights from his family and asks his "amigo," Lee Mellon, to hide him out for a few days. Lee Mellon dubs him "Roy Earle," the Bogart outlaw of High Sierra, but in the face of his bizarre behavior, Jesse finds it impossible to play Mellon's game. "We were stunned," Jesse comments after Lee Mellon leads the shattered Wade away. Elaine, also shaken, offers coffee, "trying to make reality out of what we had to deal with." Jesse comments, "I wanted reality to be there. What we had wasn't worth it. Reality would be better." (pp. 126-27).

From this point in the book, Jesse's juggling act begins to break down. Lee Mellon's psychiatric philosophy-- "The only way you can treat him is like a nut. He responds to it because he is a nut" (p. 127)--repels Jesse, and he openly criticizes Mellon's harsh treatment of Wade (p. 137). It is the first time in the book that Jesse openly confronts Lee Mellon with any difference of opinion. When Lee Mellon later assures Jesse, "Don't worry about it. Everything's under control now," Jesse agrees half-heartedly, "feeling a sudden wave of vacancy go over me, like a hotel being abandoned by its guests for an obvious reason (p. 149). Johnston Wade's departure back into the business world doesn't help. "I didn't feel very good at all," Jesse

thinks. "More rooms were being vacated. The elevator was jammed with suitcases" (p. 151). The temporary idyl at Big Sur, divorced from reality, is over for Jesse; like a guest who has been staying at a hotel, he too, must go home.

Richard Chase has commented that American romance does not depend on the harmonies and reconciliations that the pastoral idyl may bring into life or in the future spiritual health it may bring. Instead, he says, the impulse for pastoral withdrawal springs from the desire to "escape from society and the complexities of one's own being."¹⁷ Certainly the two heroes of Confederate General illustrate this point. By retreating to Big Sur, Lee Mellon escapes society and its restrictions and responsibilities; Jesse tries to flee the complexities and conflicts within himself.

The action and tone of Confederate General are filtered through Jesse. The changing tone of the novel at Johnston Wade's appearance reflects the disturbing effect Wade has made on him. Tony Tanner points out that by the end of the book "a mood of great desolation and sadness has settled on the group at Big Sur."¹⁸ Perhaps the desolation is mostly Jesse's: Elaine, Wade, Elizabeth, and Mellon seem to be largely unaffected. Only Jesse is

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Chase, pp. 183-84.

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Tanner, p. 407.

unable to face his confused feelings.

In reviewing Revenge of the Lawn, a collection of Brautigan's short stories, Josephine Hendin discusses this point. "Brautigan's people always submerge their feelings, always retreat from turmoil into a child-like innocence or a coldness so total that no passion, not even love can intrude."¹⁹ And this is exactly what happens to Jesse. Unable to face the conflicts within himself, he retreats into an emotional coldness and child-like innocence from which even the physical love Elaine offers cannot stir him. So while Locklin and Stetler believe Jesse's attempts to evolve an ethic are the cause of his psychological impotence at the end of the work (pp. 72-73), perhaps Jesse's refusal to face himself lies at the root of that impotence. Brautigan makes "cutting your heart out the only way to endure, the most beautiful way to protest the fact that life can be an endless down," Hendin comments (p. 22). Jesse--depressed by Johnston Wade, disillusioned about his leader, Lee Mellon, stripped of his protective games, increasingly fascinated by the inaccessible Elizabeth (pp. 154, 155, 156)--handles these feelings by retreating into the self, his own "inevitable Wilderness."

Toliver suggests that a combination of pastoral with romance may result in "a meaningful reciprocity if the

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"A Review of Revenge of the Lawn," New York Times Book Review, 16 Jan. 1972, p. 7.

pastoral sojourn of the romance wayfarer helps define his goals, and if the pastoral place calls upon all its resources to influence him" (p. 361). In Confederate General this is not the case. As a comic burlesque, the book inverts the regenerative pastoral romance's vision. The pastoral journey leads to no salvation, no vision of a healing reprieve in the woods. Confederate General ends with the disintegration of the order the narrator has imposed on the pastoral experience. The pastoral wayfarers are untouched by the wilderness. The pastoral time away does not define Lee Mellon's goals; it merely provides another setting for the continual battles in his war for self-survival. Jesse, insecure and full of conflicts, is unable to allow the pastoral place to call upon its resources to influence him. The stoned confederates, at their last battle on the beach, face the ocean with nowhere else to retreat. Jesse stares at them, "high on their earthly presence and my relationship to the presence. I felt very strange and confused inside. . . .A little bit too much life had been thrown at me, and I couldn't put it all together" (p. 154-55). That confusion is reflected in the five alternate endings offered that become "186,000 endings per second" (p. 159). Locklin and Stetler call the endings stylistic variations that produce a "deliquescent effect, a Tempest-like dissolution but without the harmony of Shakespeare's play" (p. 81).

The endings imply varying symbolic values. All include a seagull, representative, Schmitz says, of "swift, purposive freedom" (p. 112), beyond Jesse's grasp. In one ending, Johnston Wade reappears, and the party futilely searches for his lost pomegranate, a Biblical refreshment in the wilderness and symbol of fertility. In another, Wade helps Mellon and Elizabeth throw his money into the sea. (This is hardly a realistic ending, judging from Mellon's character.) Malley points out that the endings "suggest Jesse's uncertainty and his inability to cope with his life" (p. 109). Reminiscent of several American pastoral romances, the endings in Confederate General leave the impression of a feeling of disappointment, or a loss of ideals. Jesse's own Battle of the Wilderness--the internal wilderness--has ended in defeat. The endings represent a kind of good-bye wave as the narrator lights out for his own mental territories, renouncing all responsibilities. To borrow from Emerson, the transparent eyeball has glazed over.

The endings in Confederate General whirl away, in the absence of the narrator's ethical constant, toward a scientific constant, all chaotically and simultaneously occurring outside the narrator's control. The reader is left with no sense of order and no hope of discerning truth, or sanity, from fantasy. The comic vision of a pastoral romance ordered by a Civil War motif has dissolved into an

infinite number of possible endings. The conclusion of Confederate General recalls Larry Taylor's discussion of the transcendental legacy to the American pastoral tradition. "The transcendental dream of salvation by purely human means is doomed to failure," Taylor states. "The dream becomes recklessly dangerous when applied to real life and confused with reality . . . a kind of pride--in Christian theology--the deadliest of all the sins" (p. 32). Like Hawthorne, and perhaps Twain, Brautigan "does not write within the pastoral mode as an advocate of its vision" but instead subtly turns the myths of the tradition "to reveal the confinement of their discourse," Schmitz says (p. 110).

Since this is a comic pastoral romance, however, much of the darker side of Brautigan's vision is underplayed. Until the work's end, the narrator's disorder provides the distorted, yet sound metaphorical framework for the romance as well as much of its madcap humor. The narrative technique at the same time illustrates the contemporary American pastoral romancer's conscious manipulation of words and images and his commitment to the reality created by words and the imagination. Jesse belongs outside the ethical standards of Lee Mellon and those of the "real" world as illustrated by Johnston Wade. As eiron, he juggles the two worlds in the role of pastoral narrator, who for the most part disinterestedly relates the events at

Big Sur. In terms of the pastoral romance, his function helps illuminate for the reader the pastoral viewpoint of a "perspective by incongruity"--that is, the examination of the great world beyond the pastoral retreat.

Brautigan's comments on contemporary American life are clothed in comic garb; nevertheless, beneath the comedy lies the conviction that the pastoral journey does not necessarily reconcile conflicts within the self or heal the sickness of contemporary America.

In Watermelon Sugar: What Price Eden?

If I am overflowing with life, am rich in experience for which I lack expression, then nature will be my language full of poetry,--all nature will fable, and every natural phenomenon be a myth.

--Henry David Thoreau--

The jump from the California wilderness of Big Sur to the place-less paradise of iDEATH may seem a large one, but actually it is not. However comically, the heroes in A Confederate General from Big Sur attempt to go back to a simpler time, to become "closer to nature." The community of iDEATH in In Watermelon Sugar¹ achieves this dream, not by going back in time but forward to a future post-holocaust world that represents a fresh start for mankind. In Watermelon Sugar depicts a world where the paradise of an Edenic place is regained. The idyllic, static nature of the pastoral place of iDEATH and the fantastic, unfamiliar or miraculous events that are part of its daily existence move the setting out of the geographical region and into a timeless, symbolic zone. Despite the gentle lives of the iDEATH community in the perfect paradise iDEATH represents, In Watermelon Sugar does not emphasize the superiority of an idealized pastoral commu-

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Richard Brautigan, In Watermelon Sugar (New York: Dell, 1968), 167 pp.

nity. The pastoral "perspective by incongruity" reveals a curious dichotomy between the praise the book seems to be giving to the pastoral retreat and the tone in which the praise is expressed, resulting in an ironic pastoral romance that denies even while it extols the perfect pastoral scene In Watermelon Sugar renders.

In Watermelon Sugar is written in three sections, all related from the viewpoint of a nameless first person narrator. The time sequence in the romance flows from the present to the distant past before the death of the tigers and back, through the recent past in a flashback dream to the three days of the book's present events. The plot moves through time rather fluidly and is thus sometimes difficult to follow. The inhabitants of IDEATH live an idyllic, post-holocaust life in which they have created an efficient, closed, ceremonially-based community without the aid of the previous industrialized civilization's advanced technology, books, or even electricity. The community's gentle lives in IDEATH have a "delicate balance" (p. 1), always changing and yet always remaining the same, since they are bound in custom and ceremony.

Still, the focus of the book's three sections is not the community's harmony or their gentle lives. Instead, the book is organized around the classic pastoral themes of the collision of social attitudes and the incongruity of intruders into Arcadia's idyllic setting. Each of the sections

centers around deaths which occur within the pastoral Eden. In Book 1, the narrator's parents are killed and eaten by talking tigers who dispassionately devour them while chatting with the narrator. In Book 2, the narrator dreams a history of the recent suicides of the outcasts inBOIL and his gang who live outside iDEATH's boundaries in the Forgotten Works. In Book 3, the narrator's rejected girlfriend Margaret, who is also suspected of betraying iDEATH to inBOIL, hangs herself from an apple tree. The nameless narrator is indirectly involved in each of these deaths. Although he is not an outsider to the pastoral community in the same way Miles Coverdale is in The Blithedale Romance or a moral outsider to the world as is Huck Finn, the narrator is nevertheless a marginal figure in the iDEATH community. He spends most of his time in his shack, does not take many meals at the iDEATH commune, does not share in any of the community's work, and does not even enjoy the favorite recreative task of statue building.

He is one of those who do not have a "regular" name, but rather various names that the reader chooses. "Just call me whatever is on your mind," the narrator says (p. 4). The narrator then suggests several possible names that imply feelings like indefiniteness, accidental recollection, or lack of knowledge, and suggest things like a hard rain, flowers, or an echo (pp. 4-5). Terence Malley believes the narrator's changing name "does not imply . . . the

absence of any identity so much as a shifting identity or a restlessness."² Certainly the narrator exhibits a restlessness with his insomnia and penchant for solitary, late-night walks. Yet he never essentially changes during the book. Like another Utopian narrator, Miles Coverdale, he is blind to the moral implications of the disturbing deaths that occur within the community even as he is implicated in them. Thus, just as naming implies limiting and centering an object or person--that is, identifying its function or associating a person with a cluster of personality traits or ideas--the lack of a name for a person suggests the absence of a center or a lack of self-awareness, of the knowledge of one's own identity. This view is supported by the narrator's total inability to appraise himself or his own actions. His point of view never goes beyond mere reportage devoid of emotion.

In Watermelon Sugar departs from the usual American pastoral romance pattern in two important ways. Most often, the hero's journey out of the world into a pristine, primitive pastoral retreat is temporary. After experiencing a series of new and insightful adventures, the hero usually returns to the world, renewed. Finding a suitable permanent Utopia is rare.³ In Watermelon Sugar takes place

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Malley, p. 117.

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Toliver, p. 365.

within the boundaries of the Edenic community of iDEATH. The narrator-hero, though a marginal figure within the iDEATH society, is a member of the community and is stationary within its boundaries. Also, In Watermelon Sugar departs from the usual pastoral pattern by inverting the nostalgia felt for a lost, simpler, more perfect time in the past into an anticipation of a simpler, more innocent time to come in the future, perhaps after a nuclear holocaust.

Despite these two variations, In Watermelon Sugar, as Neil Schmitz points out, employs many classic pastoral devices, such as "the shack in the hills, solitary strolling figures, a slumbering rural village . . ." and "felicitious divisions of labor."⁴ Nature's function is more ceremonial than economic; although iDEATH has two main industries, the community stresses and celebrates the symbolic or miraculous aspects of planting, cultivation, and harvest much more than it does the economic ones. As in the Golden Age, the community integrates the economic with the ceremonial. The shacks and their windows, the many bridges, and a multitude of other things are fashioned from the community's main economic crop of watermelons; yet the watermelons function more importantly as a symbol. "Our lives we have carefully constructed from watermelon sugar . . ." (p. 1).

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Schmitz, p. 117.

The watermelons, integrally related to the lives of the inhabitants, miraculously change colors, reflecting the seven different shades of sunlight that shine down on iDEATH (pp. 44-45) and the community's integration with nature.

iDEATH, the book's setting, also serves as one of the major symbols within the work. The small case i suggests the subordination of the individual's aggressive ego. The inhabitants are freed from "driving egoistic needs," status, rank, or wealth, Malley suggests (p. 126). Material possessions are nil; the narrator, for example, has "nine things, more or less" (p. 65). If the i in iDEATH is pronounced with a long e sound, its similarity to Eden is striking, extending and enlarging the community's idyllic pastoral associations. The lower case i also indicates the subordination of the individual to the concept of community identity. No one is in charge at iDEATH. Emphasis within the community is placed on cooperation enforced by custom and ostracism rather than by overt authority or the fear of physical punishment. This suggests the community's non-hierarchical, almost tribal organization.

iDEATH also suggests the death-of-idea, "in the sense of the death of abstract ideas, theories, ideologies or concepts," Malley observes (p. 126). This is illustrated in the community's severely limited vocabulary which centers around food, pleasantries, or daily tasks. The Forgotten

Works, graveyard of all the debris of the pre-holocaust industrial world, provides nameless souvenirs and oddities which the iDEATH community do not and cannot name. Books, repositories of ideals, theories, and ideologies, are not read but used as fuel. The narrator is working on a history of iDEATH, the first book written within the community in 35 years. The narrator's friend Charley suggests the task as a last resort to occupy him. "You don't seem to like making statues or doing anything else. Why don't you write a book?" (p. 11). Conversations never go beyond a dull, monotonous level of pleasantness. A typical example finds the narrator and his new girlfriend Pauline sitting together after dinner, talking. Fred, a friend, joins them.

"Thanks for doing the dishes," Pauline said.

"My pleasure," Fred said. "I'm sorry to bother you people, but I just thought I would come up and remind you about meeting me down at the plank press tomorrow morning. There's something I want to show you down there."

"I haven't forgotten," I said. "What's it about?"

"I'll show you tomorrow."

"Good."

"That's all I wanted to say. I know you people have a lot to talk about, so I'll go now. That certainly was a good dinner, Pauline."

"Do you still have that thing you showed me today?" I said. "I'd like Pauline to see it."

"What thing?" Pauline said.

"Something Fred found in the woods today."

"What is it?" Pauline said.

"We don't know what it is," I said.

(pp. 24-25)

Fred reminds the narrator about his appointment, Pauline thanks him again for doing the dishes, and Fred leaves.

Despite the banal conversation, the fantastic--often an element in pastoral romance--is the order of the day at iDEATH. In this peaceful world, the inhabitants carve large statues of vegetables or whatever else pleases them; sealed tombs of the dead are lighted and placed in the bottoms of the countless trout streams; and if one empties his mind to the Statue of Mirrors, it becomes possible to see all things that are occurring at that instant in iDEATH.

Contrasted with iDEATH and the perfect pastoral peace and serenity it seems to represent are several symbolic elements. One is the Forgotten Works, a huge wasteland lying beyond the boundaries of iDEATH where no trees or plants grow. It is as sterile as iDEATH is fertile, and it holds all those elements of the industrial, pre-Edenic society which the iDEATH community has left behind or "forgotten." Almost all the iDEATH residents avoid the Forgotten Works. A sign above the works' gate warns, "THIS IS THE ENTRANCE/TO THE FORGOTTEN WORKS/BE CAREFUL/YOU MIGHT GET LOST" (p. 83).

Another element contrasted with iDEATH is the talking tigers who at one time roamed the countryside, randomly attacking and killing iDEATH residents. The last of the tigers was killed some twenty years before the story takes place, and the hunters have built a trout hatchery on the spot where the tiger's body was burned, (p. 37) transforming a spot of destruction into a place of renewal. Malley

suggests that the tigers are representative of "self-destructive aggression that generally comes with adulthood," and that their killing represents "a necessary but painful purging of aggressive instincts from men themselves as an elimination of the tiger-ness that comes with maturity" (p. 125). The tigers, however, were not all bad. They were beautiful (p. 9) and had beautiful voices (p. 22). When the last one was killed and burned, the iDEATH residents cried because it was the last of the tigers (p. 37). One of the narrator's friends, Charley, even theorizes that the iDEATH residents were themselves tigers at one time and then changed (p. 36).

The third major element opposed to iDEATH is inBOIL and his gang. The name inBOIL suggests inner turmoil and conflict, something which the iDEATH residents no longer have. inBOIL, a native member of the community, "turned bad" (p. 71), and eventually left iDEATH to live in the Forgotten Works, staying drunk and selling forgotten things to live. Several other men from the community--perhaps the ex-hunters?--become restless and join him. inBOIL believes iDEATH is a mockery of what it should be (p. 106) and vows to bring back its true meaning. He asserts, "The tigers should have never been killed. The tigers were the true meaning of iDEATH, and you killed the tigers and so iDEATH went away, and you've lived here like a bunch of clucks ever since" (p. 111). At the trout hatchery in front of all the community members, inBOIL and his gang drunkenly

cut off their thumbs, ears, and noses and bleed to death (pp. 111-14).

Taken together, the three major elements opposed to iDEATH--the Forgotten WORKS, the tigers, and inBOIL--all represent conflicting aspects that threaten the serenity and peace the community stands for. Fear of mentally "getting lost" in the Forgotten Works--that is, removing oneself mentally from the idea-less iDEATH--looms as large a fear as physically losing one's way in that wasteland. Margaret's alienation from the narrator and the community stems from her growing, innocent fascination with the Forgotten Works that leads eventually to the community's associating her with inBOIL (p. 20). She becomes tainted by her association with forgotten things, and the community is unable to understand her curiosity or her fascination with the objects. Similarly, the tigers are destructive. Yet they are also beautiful. Joined, perhaps the concepts symbolize the sometimes terrible, unpredictable beauty of creative thought. Again, this concept--containing within it a seeming paradox--is beyond the capacity of the iDEATH community to understand. inBOIL, boiling with strong emotions and inner conflict, is incomprehensible to the community.

All three elements represent the recognition and management of conflicting or inexplicable elements within the self which the iDEATH residents do not recognize or

understand. In IDEATH, strong emotions have no place. The subordination or loss of the I--the individual ego--also implies therefore a loss of a sense of the emotional self. The IDEATH members register few emotional responses that go beyond the common level of civility reflected in their conversation and in their responses to the events in their lives.

Love, a strong emotion, is non-existent in or incompatible with IDEATH. A description of the lovemaking between Pauline and the narrator provides an example. "I liked Pauline's body and she said she liked mine, too, and we couldn't think of anything to say" (p. 35). Although the narrator and Pauline like one another, their emotional capacity does not extend beyond superficial satisfaction of bodily needs.⁵ The narrator does not understand or care about Margaret's feelings after he breaks up with her, even though, according to the book, they have been childhood friends and "steadies" for nine years. He does not react when one of his friends tells him she is "pining away" for him (p. 55) or when he sees her kill herself in the Statue of Mirrors (p. 135). Pastoral versions of love--idyllic and unrequited--thus both have their place In Watermelon Sugar but in a somewhat new sense. Due to the shallow emotional capacity of the IDEATH community, idyllic pastoral love becomes satisfaction only on a physical level. If a

⁵ Patricia Hernlund, "Author's Intent: In Watermelon Sugar," Critique, 16:1, p. 14.

deeper, more complex level of love is experienced, as in Margaret's case, it is by an exile to the community. It must be unrequited, for love as a strong, deep emotion as known in the "real world" has no place in or meaning for the iDEATH community. It, too, is part of the Forgotten Works.

The iDEATH members' lack of emotions is also reflected in their reaction to the deaths within the community. In each case, there is a lack of response or a response different from what the reader might expect. The tigers kill the narrator's parents, devouring their limbs while the narrator continues eating his breakfast. Then he asks the tigers to help him with his arithmetic (p. 39). Witnessing the deaths of inBOIL and his gang, the iDEATH members do not react with horror or even pity at the gory self-mutilation but either stand watching with no emotion or get angry as Pauline and Fred do (pp. 112-13). Margaret's death is reported in a matter-of-fact fashion and even her brother, after a brief pause, says, "It's for the best. Nobody's to blame. She had a broken heart" (p. 142). Pauline cries briefly, and after the funeral, a dance will begin (p. 164).

Juxtaposed to the community's lack of emotional response to the deaths is the language used to describe them. In all three, the language promotes a feeling of disgust or discomfort in the reader that is denied by the

reaction the event provokes in the iDEATH community. The contrast between the reaction and the horror of the deaths makes the deaths seem more horrible and serves to highlight the lack of emotional depth in the community. The narrator eats breakfast and chats with the tigers while the tigers devour his parents; the gory self-mutilation of inBOIL and his followers meets with indifference or anger; and Margaret's death causes hardly a ripple.

Although loss or submergence of emotion is hardly a new theme in American pastoral romance,⁶ Brautigan gives it a new twist in In Watermelon Sugar which has few, if any, literary precedents within the pastoral tradition. Brautigan seems to be implying not so much a temporary loss, submergence, or insensitivity to emotions by the iDEATH residents as a social or evolutionary development to come in the future. Daniel Hoffman indirectly touches on this point in his discussion of the "humanness" depicted in American literature. "Man's capacity for dialectic, rather than unity of being, is what distinguishes him from the rest of the universe; even the dreamer of unity is prepossessed by the chaos his senses reveal."⁷ The capacity for dialectic --for the conflicting or inexplicable emotion--is an integral

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Chase, p. 84, contends this is the general theme of The Blithedale Romance.

7

Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 15.

part of the pastoral romance tradition. Significantly, then, inBOIL and his gang first cut off their opposing thumbs, then ears and nose, destroying those senses. One member even accidentally blinds himself. Patricia Hernlund contends this symbolic act protests that fact that the IDEATH community has "cut themselves off from every reality of the senses, except taste to avoid being bothered by life" (p. 12). The opposing thumb is, of course, a distinguishing human attribute.

In the new Garden of Eden of IDEATH, there is little place for the dialectic Hoffman discusses--for strong emotions or an inordinate curiosity that caused the expulsion of the first residents of Paradise. As Harvey Leavitt points out, "Emotion is mostly absent from IDEATH, and thus the built-in failure for the original Adam and Eve, which finally made them challengers for power, is eliminated in IDEATH."⁸

The pastoral idyl in In Watermelon Sugar can thus be read as a visionary solution to the problems posited in American culture which form the sources of tension present in our pastoral literature. Conflicts between nature and civilization, between a pre-lapsarian Eden and the spoila-

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"The Regained Paradise of Brautigan's In Watermelon Sugar," Critique, 16:1, p. 23. Leavitt discusses the many parallels that exist between In Watermelon Sugar and the Biblical Garden of Eden story.

tion of Paradise, and between the desire to maintain innocence and spiritual communion with nature in an increasingly industrial society find their resolution in a fantasy portrayal of a fresh new start for mankind. The iDEATH residents are freed of the "flaws" that bequeathed them the Forgotten Works. The remnants of the industrialism of a former, less Edenic time are left unwanted and unused in the Forgotten Works. Maintaining innocence has required outgrowing and forgetting the old concepts of man against nature and ambitious egos pitted against one another. Instead, a delicate balance has been established in the community and the self. The human race is once again united with nature in an innocent state.

Yet In Watermelon Sugar does not praise the perfected world of iDEATH. As Neil Schmitz says, "Brautigan gives to the pastoral myth all its objectives in fiction: the denial of history, its passion for loveliness . . . its desire to represent the normative life, the 'natural' way. And yet it is somehow wrong, this perfected world. The balance that suits them [the iDEATH community] also stylizes them and the result is a disfiguring of their humanity" (p. 120). Far from giving us "a pastoral vision which can water our spirits as we struggle" as John Clayton suggests,⁹ Brautigan denies the Eden he has created.

9

"Richard Brautigan: The Politics of Woodstock," New American Review, No. 11, 1971, 67-68.

Brautigan demonstrates in In Watermelon Sugar that a return to Paradise, though perhaps possible in the future, is not desirable. Brautigan's pastoral touchstone contrasts the seemingly gentle lives of the iDEATH residents with the normative world as represented by the reader and his reaction to the events at iDEATH. Purged of strong feelings, the community remains in its emotionally insulated Paradise. But even while they have rid themselves of the destructive drives of the former society, they are also largely without the other, more benign side of those drives, such as enthusiasm, compassion, curiosity, or love.

Brautigan's portrayal of the pastoral touchstone is thus negative. The narrator's statement, "Wherever you are we must do the best that we can" (p. 1) that Malley terms the book's "thematic center" (p. 142) is thus ironic. "Wherever" iDEATH stands, it is not enough. To remain fully human implies living with all emotions, however conflicting or upsetting they may be to one's peace. In In Watermelon Sugar, unlike A Confederate General from Big Sur, the ideal world finds its peaceful resolution. Yet the iDEATH paradise is finally as untenable as its Big Sur counterpart. Because of their emotional conflicts and "failings" the pastoral Big Sur community could not realize their Paradise. The iDEATH community finds theirs at the price of their humanity.

Trout Fishing in America:
Fishing for the American Dream

To lose sensibility, to see what one sees,
As if sight had not its own miraculous thrift,
To hear only what one hears, one meaning alone,
As if the paradise of meaning ceased
To be paradise, it is this to be destitute.

--Wallace Stevens--

The clash between civilization and an Edenic wilderness that provides the root impulse for many traditional American pastorals finds contemporary treatment in Richard Brautigan's Trout Fishing in America.¹ Essentially a romance journey, Trout Fishing in America contrasts an idealized vision of an unspoiled, rural America with the reality of urban twentieth century America. By the metaphorical device of the title phrase, which takes on multiple meanings in the work, and by the technique of juxtaposing pairs of concepts or images, Brautigan exploits the tension between the values of an idealized past and the present. The resulting "perspective by incongruity" allows the reader to use the pastoral era of United States history as a touchstone or norm against which to contrast our more sophisticated life. The tensions between a com-

¹
Richard Brautigan, Trout Fishing in America (New York: Dell, 1967), 182 pp.

plex society and the rural past it has left behind forever find ultimate resolution in the transforming power of the narrator's imagination.

Richard Brautigan states that he set out "toward a vision of America" in Trout Fishing in America.² The work is created with a sensibility tuned to central American pastoral themes in the tradition of the romance. Several critics have acknowledged this. Thomas Hearnon believes "the work is firmly rooted in the American tradition of Twain and Hemingway, of works whose theme is that man's only salvation lies in escaping from the complexities of city life into the tranquility of the country."³

David L. Vanderwerken says that Trout Fishing in America explores "a very traditional theme of the gap between ideal America and real America."⁴ Kenneth Seib, who states Trout Fishing in America is "conditioned by Brautigan's concern with the bankrupt ideals of the America past," contends that the loose, episodic narrative with its emphasis on pastoral nostalgia, the unusual, and the marvel-

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Revenge of the Lawn: Stories 1962-1970, "The Lost Chapters of Trout Fishing in America" (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 37.

3

"Escape Through Imagination in Trout Fishing in America," Critique, 16, No. 1 (1975), 25.

4

"Trout Fishing in America and the American Tradition," Critique, 16, No. 1 (1975), 32.

ous places it in the romance tradition of the American novel.⁵

The narrator is a wanderer, traveling the entire country in search of perfect trout fishing, in a literal and a symbolic sense. He begins his journey in childhood, spans the coasts as a youth, and rests with his woman and child in a summer idyl. His journey for perfect trout fishing ironically ends not in a pastoral setting but in a wrecking yard where the pastoral ideal is regained through the power of the imagination. Although there is no sustained narrative line,⁶ the narrator's memories, his journey, his comments on America, and, most importantly, the power of his imagination give form and coherence to the work.

Among Brautigan's pastoral romances, Trout Fishing in America is the most explicit delineation of differences between the values that formed this country, symbolized in the "three cornered hats fishing in the dawn," (p. 5) and those found in contemporary America.⁷ The central figure for this dialectic is the statue of Benjamin

⁵ "Trout Fishing in America: Brautigan's Funky Fishing Yarn," Critique, 13, No. 2 (1971), 71.

⁶ Malley, p. 143.

⁷ Trout Fishing in America illustrates Toliver's assertion that the pastoral retreat or withdrawal is a vantage point for social criticism.

Franklin, to which Brautigan returns repeatedly in the romance. Benjamin Franklin is an example of the American rags-to-riches figure. His optimistic journey to Philadelphia as a penniless boy led him to become one of the country's Founding Fathers only by his wits and the opportunities the limitless golden land of America provided. The story is surely one of America's best-loved legends, and also shares much with R. W. B. Lewis' picture of the classic American Adam of our literature who fearlessly creates his own destiny in a benign, beckoning virgin land.⁸ The Franklin statue's inviting, outstretched arm echoes the WELCOME message etched into its base facing "the directions of this world" (p. 2). The statue promises hope and opportunity for all. Yet the inheritors of the Franklin philosophy of practical optimism and hard work rewarded are the modern poor who receive handout sandwiches at lunch. The dream of limitless opportunities is turned upside down, becoming only the possibility of a sandwich that consists of a single leaf of spinach (p. 3).

Thus, the meaning of Franklin's statue is largely ironic. John Dillinger, symbol of American violence, lurks under the statue's shadow. At one point, the statue becomes a "green light" for the narrator's daughter, drawing her away from the negative influence of Trout

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Lewis, p. 5.

Fishing in America Shorty toward the myriad possibilities of America. Yet, perhaps, like Jay Gatsby's "green light," the possibilities have become a myth, a part of the unattainable past.

The illusion of reattaining the past through the materialistic values of contemporary America, therefore, links past America and its rich virgin resources with the opportunistic philosophy of exploiting those resources for the canny entrepreneur's benefit. Brautigan implies this in "Knock on Wood (Part One)" with the pairing of the images "trout" and "steel." As a child, the narrator first learns of the reality of trout fishing in America--that is, the existence of the unspoiled paradise America once was. Trout becomes a "precious and intelligent metal" (p. 4), linked in the child's mind with steel. "Trout steel," created by the "clear snow-filled river acting as foundry and heat," is used as a natural resource "to make buildings, trains and tunnels" (p. 4). Both trout and steel become natural resources to be exploited.

The process that leads from a developing country full of daring individuals on the brink of limitless opportunities to a nation of victims who reap the consequences of a philosophy of exploitation for the entrepreneur's benefit is implied in "The Ballet for Trout Fishing in America." The "main energy" for the ballet comes from a description of the Cobra Lily. "Nature has endowed the

Cobra Lily with the means of catching its own food. The forked tongue is covered with honey glands which attract the insects upon which it feeds. Once inside the hood, downward pointing hairs prevent the insect from crawling out. The digestive liquids are found in the base of the plant"

(p. 23). The description implies that once begun on its journey the nation, attracted by the promise of material success, finds itself on a one-way trip to its own destruction. As Brautigan comments, "There are seductions that should be in the Smithsonian Institute . . ." (p. ii).

Juxtaposed with the successful Revolutionary Era figure of Franklin are the modern inheritors of the youthful, optimistic American dream. As the personae of the novel approach the present, they are increasingly portrayed as losers or victims in a society where the dream of limitless opportunities for all has turned sour. With Alonso Hagen, unsuccessful angler of the late 1800's, the dream of successful trout fishing seems lost. He goes fishing seven years running and loses every trout he hooks. "'I believe it was an interesting experiment/in total loss/ but next year somebody else/will have to go/ . . . out there'" (p. 137). The modern figures mentioned in the book are losers, if not of trout, of their own dreams. The Kool-Aid wino, in the chapter by the same name (pp. 12-15); John Talbot, one of the millions of forgotten poor (p. 30); Mr. Norris, an alcoholic who can't remember the names of his own children (p. 118); the doctor who searches for America,

which is "often only a place in the mind" (p. 116); and the inhabitants of the sleazy Hotel Trout Fishing in America (pp. 105-12) are all examples of the modern versions of the American Adam who finds less than limitless opportunities. Even the antagonist, Trout Fishing in America Shorty, is a pathetic victim of the American dream of opportunity and prosperity for all. Trout Fishing in America Shorty is a "legless, screaming, middle-aged wino" whose legs were chopped off by trout in Fort Lauderdale (p. 69). As inheritor of the Franklin dream, he should be buried beside Franklin's statue. Instead of WELCOME, Shorty's marker would announce cheap laundrymat prices forever (p. 74). The book's contemporary figures are like sheep, shepherded by a "young, skinny Adolf Hitler, but friendly" (p. 52), or led by the Mayor of the Twentieth Century. The diabolical Mayor wears "a costume of trout fishing in America . . . to hide his own appearance from the world" (p. 75). Disguised as promoters of the rural American pastoral dream, the leaders manipulate the losers and victims for their own sinister benefit.

The major metaphorical device Brautigan employs to discuss the pastoral theme of the disparity between a past, ideal American and our present complex society comes through the title phrase. Within the work the phrase functions in at least four interwoven ways, all playing upon the tension between America as lost ideal and America as reality. The

phrase trout fishing in America is, like the symbol of Moby Dick, "fluid undergoes a variety of transformations . . . remains mysterious, unknowable, capable of accruing projected associations and values," but does not reveal their "essential meanings," Vanderwerken says (pp. 34-35).

The title phrase exists as the reality of an idealized rural America with cool, clear streams in which Merriwether Lewis of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1805 was able to catch large trout (p. 148). The phrase also functions as a descriptive prefix or suffix several times in the novel. Trout Fishing in America terrorists, for example, are sixth graders who mischievously chalk "trout fishing in America" on the backs of the first graders (pp. 56-57). The phrase, like the reality of rural America, vanishes "altogether as it was destined to from its very beginning, and a kind of autumn fell over the first grade" (p. 62). The dream of an unspoiled America becomes linked in the modern popular mind with Communism, as represented in the satirical chapter "Witness for Trout Fishing in America Peace." Here trout fishing poses a threat to the "American" way. Where the phrase lives and flourishes, as in Hotel Trout Fishing in America, it lives for the losers in the society, such as the ex-hustler and the ex-medical student

who live isolated in a hotel room (p. 106).

Trout Fishing in America is the "cover" or disguise of the narrator himself, Kenneth Seib points out (p. 64). As such, he appears as the author of several letters--one to his friend, Pard (pp. 64-65) and another to "An Ardent Admirer" (pp. 123-24). Yet Trout Fishing in America is also a separate persona, an elusive presence who speaks to the narrator and plays with his baby (pp. 144-48). Whether narrator or persona, Trout Fishing in America is a gentle individualist, in flight from the city's horrors and complexities to the simplicity and beauty of the vanishing American wilderness.

Trout Fishing in America functions as symbol of the quest for the American pastoral dream as the narrator journeys throughout the country fishing for trout and searching for America. The narrator, his woman, and baby-- "three characters in search of a pastoral myth"⁹--come home from their quest to a summer pastoral retreat above San Francisco Bay in the chapter "The California Bush" (pp. 149-55). "I've come home from Trout Fishing in America. . . . It took my whole life to get here," the narrator says (p. 149). The young family along with Pard and his girlfriend, live out the urge to "return to nature" in the hills above San Francisco Bay. The sophisticated cityfolk assume

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Malley, p. 147.

a rural viewpoint as they enjoy the peace of the woods while eating such foods as hot dogs and orange rye bread and reading Krafft-Ebing. Their pastoral retreat, within sight of Mill Valley, is never far from the city or free from its influence. The rampaging buck who wakes the narrator at dawn is pursued by a neighbor's police dog, (p. 154) and the foursome leave just before they have to cope with the reality of what to do with all their garbage (pp. 162-63).

Throughout Trout Fishing in America, paired, juxtaposed images or concepts are employed. These emphasize the difference of values between Brautigan's version of the real "trout fishing in America" era and the era of Trout Fishing in America, the modern quest for that pastoral myth. The mostly ironic pairings function to exploit the tensions between past and present values and lifestyles. They employ the past as a touchstone against which to judge the more despicable elements of our complex society, such as commercialism and the effects of environmental pollution. The descriptions of the many streams and creeks provide some examples of this. Salt Creek, in which the narrator catches a "nice little Dolly Varden trout," (p. 84) ultimately becomes a place for meditation on capital punishment and the large scale cyanide poisoning of coyotes. Similarly, a good fishing experience at Owl Snuff Creek is marred by the narrator's fishing companion who follows

after him, kibitzing. The companion finally kills a trout with cheap port wine. The narrator comments, "It is against the natural order of death for a trout to die by having a drink of port wine" (p. 43). The description of lovemaking in the polluted Worsewick Hot Springs is filled with images that belie the sensual pleasure lovemaking in the water evokes. "The green slime and dead fish were all about our bodies. I remember a dead fish floated under her neck" (p. 68). In each case cited, the quest for perfect trout fishing and a healing time away from civilization is marred or denied by the reality of the presence of death caused by the effects of contemporary, industrial society.

The omnipresence of the urban influence is also reflected in Brautigan's descriptions of the woods and streams. The effect of applying urban images to natural objects is "jarring," Neil Schmitz states, and such images suggest not only the "writer's sense of his alienation in the woods, his intrusion, but also the mutilated condition of the place . . ." (p. 124). The light behind the trees at Owl Snuff Creek is "like going into a gradual and strange department store" (p. 46), and the narrator enters the stream, catching "three trout in the lost and found department" (p. 47). Another creek is "like 12,845 telephone booths in a row with high Victorian ceilings and all the doors taken off and all the backs of the booths knocked out" (p. 86). In that stream the

energy of the caught hunchback trout is "like an ambulance siren" (p. 90). In a later chapter, trout wait "like airplane tickets" (p. 125), or become "like a harp on her way to a concert--ten minutes late--with no bus in sight and no taxi either" (p. 127). This technique has the effect of emphasizing the ubiquitousness of the city. If the effects of an industrial society are not actually seen in environmental damage to the wilderness, the narrator suggests that the imaginative orientation of the nature buff is still tuned to urban images. Thus, even in the woods, the chief referent is the city.

As Thomas Hearron points out, Brautigan's metaphorical technique suggests a "particular connection between imagination and reality" and that a particular manner of thinking about and describing reality "can alter reality itself" (p. 27). The magical transmutations of reality have implications for the pastoral romance tradition, which as Toliver has pointed out, has long been concerned with transformations of the imagination, "spells of magic, and unmaskings of obscure divine and demonic forces" (p. 9). Brautigan's basic concern in Trout Fishing in America is with the transformation of the world by the magical, imaginative means of the hero.¹⁰

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Hearron discusses the word magical to describe Brautigan's view of the imaginative faculty, "which through language can alter reality by providing a mental escape from its hardships" (pp. 29-30).

The imagination can magically transform Kool-Aid into wine in language that suggests a miraculous, almost religious transmutation (pp. 13-15). The narrator's imagination can transcend the poverty of dead paupers who lie in neglected graves near Graveyard Creek by casting the poor people's markers and flowers into the sky and watching them "float over clouds and then into the evening star" (p. 31). The imaginative faculty can transport one through space and time, as in "Trout Fishing on the Street of Eternity" (pp. 128-37), when a walk through a rural Mexican village takes the narrator to the Pacific Northwest of his childhood and the unsuccessful trout fisherman, Alonso Hagen. The Street of Eternity is, like Thoreau's "stream of eternity," closely related to the power of the imagination.

Brautigan's solution to the disparity between ideal and rural America is thus found through the transforming power of the imagination, which as Vanderwerken states, "will be an act of redemption and transcendence" (p. 39). The child's disappointment at touching what seemed to be a waterfall and finding it a wooden staircase (p. 8) becomes elation for the developed artistic imagination of the adult narrator in a similar experience at the Cleveland

Wrecking Yard (pp. 172-73).¹¹ The narrator touches scraps of stacked, used trout streams and says, "It looked like a fine stream. I put my hand in the water. It was cold and felt good" (p. 173).

In "The Cleveland Wrecking Yard," the gap between the ideal America of the past and the real America of the present finds its resolution. In a place of salvaged junk, the narrator paradoxically finds his clear stream. Even though it is sold by the foot with waterfalls and fauna sold separately (p. 168), it is a stream the narrator can own for himself. Brautigan recognizes, Neil Schmitz says, that the quest for Trout Fishing in America--that is, the pastoral myth---"does not end in the Cleveland Wrecking Yard but rather begins there . . . It is the train chewing its way through Thoreau's woods, the steamboat churning over the raft, that animates and sustains the pastoral vision" (p. 123). The narrator's imaginative faculty thus mediates and maintains the dialectic between reality and ideality, a characteristic that Ihab Hassan ascribes to the pastoral romance hero (p. 178). The imagination also reconciles that seemingly irreconcilable tensions between the yearning for a lost pastoral America and the reality of an increasingly urbanized America, where physical escape

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I am indebted to Thomas Hearn for the concept of the developing imaginative faculty of the narrator from child to adult that, as Hearn says, is reminiscent of William Wordsworth (p. 30).

into the wilderness is often no longer possible.

Brautigan continues the theme of the power of the transforming imagination in "A Half-Sunday Homage to a Whole Leonardo daVinci." The narrator dreams of daVinci "inventing a new spinning lure for trout fishing in America" (p. 175) which will be the invention of the century, "far outstripping such shallow accomplishments as Hiroshima or Mahatma Gandhi" (p. 176). Vanderwerken takes the act of daVinci's inventing a new spinning lure to be "regenerating and revitalizing," a "transparent expression of his [Brautigan's] own aim in the novel" (p. 39).

This is certainly true; yet, like the symbol of Benjamin Franklin, daVinci is not without his ironic side. The Renaissance genius has adopted the American mentality of "building a better mousetrap," applying his creativity toward a Madison Avenue advertiser's dream of success. Brautigan thus continues his subtle comment on present-day American life by implying that even a great dreamer of the world can be implicated in the American philosophy which would sell anything for a profit. Even the lure of attaining a new American vision is couched in terms of materialism.

In "Trout Fishing in America Nib" the narrator meditates on the impression pastoral America would make on paper if it could write with a gold nib. "I thought to myself

what a lovely nib trout fishing in America would make with a stroke of cool green trees along the river's shore, wild flowers and dark fins pressed against the paper" (p. 179). The reality of pastoral America, though perhaps dead like Mr. Good (p. 182), is still very much alive in the narrator's imagination. Just as the narrator expresses "a human need" by ending his book with the word Mayonnaise--however misspelled it is there--so the imagination can reconcile the poles of reality and ideality.

By choosing the imaginative faculty to reconcile ideal America and real America, "Brautigan becomes a legatee of an uncompromisingly idealistic strain of American writing that wills to redeem America through formal achievement," Vanderwerken comments (p. 32). Unlike the narrator in A Confederate General from Big Sur or In Watermelon Sugar, the narrator in Trout Fishing in America faces and copes with some of the unpleasant facts of existence in urban America, dealing with them in such a way as to make the pastoral experience a viable, positive, symbolic touchstone against which to evaluate the "real" world. The reader is able to take the pastoral experience seriously because the reattainment of the pastoral paradise comes through the transmuting spark of the imagination, however elusive or momentary it may be.

Conclusion: Richard Brautigan's Version
of the Pastoral Romance

Richard Brautigan is a significant American author whose first three published full-length works, A Confederate General from Big Sur, In Watermelon Sugar, and Trout Fishing in America, extensively employ the pastoral motif in a predominantly romance form. At work within the books is the "return to nature" mystique which is the impulse of much contemporary American pastoral. In the three romances, Brautigan comically and ironically explores the mystique and presents a multifaceted portrayal of the contemporary American pastoral attitude. As legatee of an enduring American literary tradition, Brautigan employs the basic American pastoral romance tradition in a contemporary voice to comment on the viability of a pastoral retreat in urban, industrial America.

The American pastoral romance emphasizes the contrast between an Edenic wilderness and a more complex, "civilized" world. It assumes the natural benevolence of the wilderness and portrays the hero's hopeful journey away from civilization toward the healing experience of the wilderness. The modern American version of the design has increasingly stressed the split between today's complex, industrialized society and a relatively uncomplicated rural American past, resulting in an idealization of and nostalgia for pre-industrial America. By temporarily "returning to nature"

in a secluded pastoral spot, or through the power of the imagination, the hero of the contemporary American pastoral is able to reconcile the extremes of a modern industrial society and the lost, yearned-for rural past.

The ironic tone so prevalent in contemporary American letters also plays a part in American pastoral romance. As Ihab Hassan points out, the tension between the "surface images" of an industrial society and the latent urges and dreams of an individual within that society is fertile ground for the creation of ironic fiction.¹ The growing discrepancy between the ever-present urban images and the hidden urges of people translate into a search for or retreat into a bit of greenness in an increasingly urban landscape. The discrepancy finds its fictional resolution in the hero's temporary journey to a fast disappearing wilderness, or to an imaginative retreat. That this retreat is often portrayed as unattainable or absurd is another dimension of the ironic voice found in contemporary American pastoral romance.

Richard Brautigan's three pastoral romances reflect this contemporary design. Working within each is the "return to nature" mystique, treated predominantly in a comic or ironic way. In A Confederate General from Big Sur, the "return to nature" impulse is comically linked

¹
Hassan, p. 330.

with an extended metaphor of the Civil War--the last pre-industrial war America fought. The return to nature in the pastoral retreat becomes a comic setting for the mock-military exploits of the pastoral society as it takes on the mores of conventional, urban America. Far from allowing the wilderness to exert any healing influence, the pastoral confederacy merely brings the outer world and its values to the Edenic setting. The symbolic pastoral world is repeatedly denigrated in a comic way through incident and allusion to portray the impossibility of a viable, healing retreat into the woods.

In Watermelon Sugar posits the possibility of a "return to nature" in a future society that would be a permanent way of life for an emotionally evolved population. Rather than being a temporary pastoral retreat from a more civilized society, the iDEATH commune is a post-industrial society that integrates nature with the lives of the commune's inhabitants. The complications and conflicts of today's industrial world--and by implication, its abstract thought processes--are meaningless, discarded relics. iDEATH--Eden of the future--represents a "return to nature," yet that return is ultimately as untenable as the retreat presented in A Confederate General from Big Sur. Although Brautigan seems to extol the emotionless peace iDEATH presents, the book is an ironic comment on

the possibility of such a solution to the problems of today's urban society. The simplistic IDEATH solution omits too much, and the commune's inhabitants must sacrifice much of their humanity to insure the static peace it values above all else.

In Trout Fishing in America the "return to nature" impulse becomes a search for the pre-industrial Eden that America symbolically represents. The title phrase functions as a metaphor through which Brautigan contrasts an idealized picture of the pre-industrial American past of clear streams, national optimism, and limitless opportunities for all with a more harshly presented urban America in which pollution, poverty, and a sense of hopelessness too often prevail. Yet a successful "return to nature" is possible in Trout Fishing in America. Through the power of the narrator's imagination, the uglier realities of life in the industrial world are transcended.

Thus, in Brautigan's version of the pastoral romance, a viable, renewing retreat to the wilderness exists through the power of art as reflected in the ordering imagination which reconciles the seemingly irreconcilable extremes of industrial and wilderness values. As seen in A Confederate General from Big Sur, even temporary physical retreat is not possible, for urban America has made its influence felt upon the spirit of the individual no matter where the hero may journey to escape it. Renewal is not

found in a future world which represses and "forgets" all of an industrial world's ways--bad and good--as in In Watermelon Sugar. Only through the imagination, as in Trout Fishing in America, can the extremes of an industrial society and the pre-industrial past that society has forever left behind be reconciled, however momentarily.

By exploring the American pastoral romance's traditional contrasts in a comic or ironic way that finds resolution in the transforming power of the imagination, Brautigan extends the tradition. In two of the romances--A Confederate General from Big Sur and Trout Fishing in America--Brautigan employs extended metaphors or "image clusters" that tend to set up playful, implicit contrasts within themselves. This quality of Brautigan's work, which is distinctive, reflects the contemporary American literary trend that demonstrates an increased awareness of and sensitivity to the reality created by words and the imagination.

Brautigan thus creates an affirmative method of reconciling the American pastoral dilemma. True to the methods of the traditional pastoral attitude, Brautigan does not totally condemn the sophisticated industrial society even as he recognizes its serious flaws. Instead, he exploits the traditional contrasts in contemporary comic and ironic tones. In this way, Brautigan comments on the "return to nature" impulse of modern American pastoral romance.

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