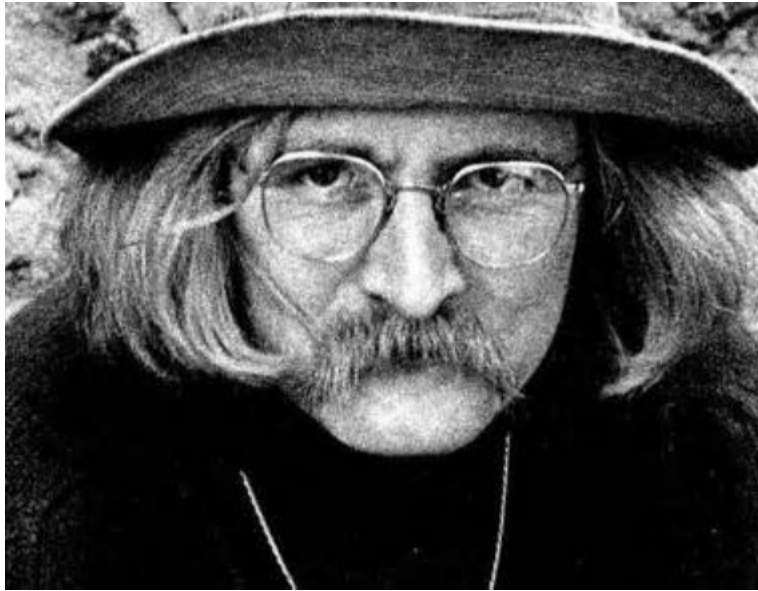


ANALYSIS

Trout Fishing in America (1967)



Richard Brautigan

(1935-1984)

“Trout Fishing in America (1967)...[is] one of the most original and pleasing books to appear during the decade. If there is any narrative line in the book it concerns the author’s recollections of his various attempts to find good trout fishing. But *Trout Fishing in America* becomes a person, a place, an hotel, a cripple, a pen nib, and of course a book. Protean and amorphous, it is a dream to be pursued, a sense of something lost, a quality of life, a spirit that is present or absent in many forms.... Certainly the book is full of death. There are endless references to graveyards, mortuaries, cemeteries, wreaths, memorials....various reminders of the decline and passing of things.... Releasing his sperm in the water he watches it instantly become a stringy mess into which a dead fish floats. The feeling of fertility gone sour, of a once beautiful land given over to deadness, hangs over the book.... An America grown ugly constantly receding away from its early innocence. A shepherd who looks like Adolph Hitler, ‘but friendly,’ offers perhaps an oblique comment on the conformist sheep of contemporary society....

More savage is the portrait of ‘The Mayor of the Twentieth Century.’ No one sees him except his victims. He dresses in a costume of trout fishing in America.... His weapons are a razor, a knife, and a ukulele... This comes very close to being a frontal attack on an America which uses its original beauty only as a disguise to cover its murderous violence. Out fishing one day, the narrator’s thoughts turn to the gas chamber at San Quentin. The narrator’s quest for *Trout Fishing in America* is a series of disappointments... The narrator’s quest brings him finally to the Cleveland Wrecking Yard, another version of that terminal dump of waste and used things [like Fitzgerald’s valley of ashes in *Gatsby* and Pynchon’s “Low-Lands” and the ending of *V*] which for so many writers seems to loom up as a possible end to the American dream. The Wrecking Yard is offering a used trout stream for sale....

One could call Brautigan’s book an idyll, a satire, a quest, an exercise in nostalgia, a lament for America, or a joke—but it is a book, which floats effortlessly free of all categories, and it is just this experience of floating free which is communicated while one is reading the book. There is certainly a feeling for a pastoral America which has vanished or been despoiled by mechanization, crime,

accumulating garbage, and various kinds of poison and violence. In addition there is a sense that the original reality of America has been replaced by fabricated dreams of which them movies are the clearest example.... The reproach that reality is giving way to movie is one with which we are familiar by now.... Brautigan...has found himself a place beyond society and has exempted himself from all the usual modes and conventions [an anarchist like Thoreau]....

[This novel] flouts all the usual prescriptions for the writing of fiction. The list of contents, the chapter divisions, the 'characters,' the narrative episodes, all mock the forms of conventional fiction by pretending to add up to a recognizable structure which is not there when you come to look for it. He retains the illusion of orthodox syntax and grammar, but the sentences are continually turning off into unexpectedness in ways which pleasantly dissolve our habitual semantic expectations.... Among other things the book is a typographical playfield. On the title-page, the words of the title are arranged to simulate a trout jumping. In the course of the text we find blocks of words from signs and monuments, signatures, recipes, a square from a map, addresses, labels, quotations, notes, words from headstones...

Each chapter is a separate fragment, unpredictable because unrelated in any of the usual ways. Each one engages us for a moment...and then fades away. The writing is like skywriting.... The evanescent quality of the writing, the elusive metamorphoses of sense and form (like clouds)...leave one in possession of something extremely haunting, evocative, and capable of making subtle solicitations to a whole range of authentic feelings.... Brautigan's work contains some of the most original and refreshing prose to appear in the 'sixties'."

Tony Tanner
City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970
(Jonathan Cape 1971) 408-12

"Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*...fantasizes an America in which every activity takes us close to trout fishing, which is its own kind of perfection. What throws Brautigan's story off balance as an American fantasy is that it is completely male, and his companion is 'his woman'—'my woman' is her name—their child 'his child.' The male possessiveness blunts the visionary quality, since the vision seems to belong to only half of the population: the other half is owned.

Trout Fishing is, nevertheless, both ingenious and evocative. The book comprises a series of brief episodes, a minimalist journey: essentially a dialogue between the narrator and a character named Trout Fishing in America. The latter is not only an activity but an embodiment, a direction, a way of American life. It is the pastoral side of the narrator's experience, first as a child, then as an adult.

Early on, Brautigan tells of when he first heard of Trout Fishing in America, from a drunk, in 1942, when the narrator was a child. The drunk described trout as if they were a precious metal; silver at first comes to mind, although it is not quite right. 'I'd like to get it right. Maybe trout steel. Steel made from trout. The clean snow-filled river acting as country and heat. Imagine Pittsburgh. A steel that comes from trout, used to make buildings, trains and tunnels. The Andrew Carnegie of Trout!'

The basic image for the book is there, trout and trout fishing as the emblem of the America that lies behind achievement, ambition, and possession (except of 'my woman'). It is the Huck Finn in all of us, but especially in the child growing into adulthood in the sixties. Trout Fishing is not only the later ego or double of the narrator, it is the double, actual and potential, of all life in America. As trout fishing becomes increasingly difficult—encroachments are everywhere—the narrator describes, late in the book, the sale of trout stream footage. 'Used Trout Stream for Sale. Must be Seen to Be Appreciated,' reads a big sign at a Family Gift Center. One can buy the stream by the foot, along with associated items like waterfalls, trees, birds, flowers, grass, ferns, and animals. Insects are given away free. Stream is \$6.50/foot, for the first 100 feet, thereafter \$5/foot; birds are, of course, additional. Animals are now rare, but flowers are still abundant and there are a few trout left in the stream. One takes one's chances. Eden is not readily recoverable.

One of the most evocative episodes occurs in a school, where the sixth graders become 'trout fishing in America terrorists.' The sixth graders use white chalk to mark 'Trout Fishing in America' on the backs of

the first graders, missing only one, who spent the period in the lavatory. Yet the sixth graders cannot escape the system so easily: trout fishing has its other side: authority, order, discipline. Their principal is a man who arranges order benevolently, not dictatorially. He calls in the perpetrators and goes 'into his famous $E=MC^2$ sixth-grade gimmick, the thing he always used in dealing with us.' He argues how order is maintained, and how each level of society depends on the good sense of the one beneath it. Would they like it, he asks, if the teachers had 'Trout Fishing in America' on their backs, if he had it on his? That won't do, they all agree, and gradually it is washed from the clothing.

The narrator takes his small son everywhere, getting him acquainted with Trout Fishing in America, but by the time he grows up, perhaps only frontage, not entire streams, will remain. Trout Fishing, however, is not only trout and fishing; it is food, ingredients, isolation, marginal life. What passes with Trout Fishing is the end of the era, the end of the Edenic myth. The sixties witnessed an attempt to recall those times, to seek out contemporary 'doubles' of those times. Trout Fishing is just that."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 70-71

Michael Hollister (2015)