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*Depoliticization from Within:  
Not Taking a Fall with  
Richard Brautigan*

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We think by feeling. What is there to know?  
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
Of those so close beside me, which are you?  
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,  
And learn by going where I have to go.

—Theodore Roethke<sup>1</sup>

Bell-bottoms are back, and so is Richard Brautigan. His novels achieved something of a cult following in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of the most admired authors of the hippie generation, Brautigan gave expression to a boredom and discontent with things as they are, a wish to dream of new and different possibilities. His books have been the subject of scholarly writing, but it is fair to say that he has received far more popular than critical attention. Most of Brautigan's novels remain in print, and today they are attracting renewed interest. One reason for this continuing appeal may be that his work satisfies the desire for a kind of fantasy that has been gaining strength for some time. It is an imagination that devalues real life, if by "life" is meant regimentation to the dictates of an ex-

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Roethke, "The Waking," *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 104.

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hausted, workaday world. The alternative provided by Brautigan is a flight of fancy, an imaginary celebrity in dreamland, where self and world work out just the way we want them.

The same imaginative trend, but in academic circles, may account for a resurgent interest in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the figure who more than any other inspired the modern dream to set aside the tensions of daily life to make room for reverie. The dream of a personal unity duplicated in social space has been the imaginative fixation, the fantasy, of most philosophers since Plato. The resistant nature of political life, its inherent plurality and tension, has inspired these same visionaries to set the real and the ideal in abstract opposition: a metaphysical split between perfection and imperfection, repose and exertion. Whether in ancient or modern form, what is imagined as perfect is a depoliticization of that real life which in its present, historical form must be viewed as deficient, immoral, irrational, too vulgar for lofty thought. Brautigan's novel *Dreaming of Babylon* provides an opportunity to analyze this habit of world-jumping up close in its personal psychodynamic. The final irony of this novel is that the real world from which its protagonist seeks escape bears features of that very Leviathan which the rationalist philosophers have sought to impose. Brautigan would have us ask, again, which world is real?

The status of reality in Brautigan's novels and stories is always such that we cannot take them straightforwardly; rather than asserting the value of the real, these texts take their specific and unmistakable quality from a persistent speculation on the very nature of the real, as well as [of] textual activity itself.<sup>2</sup>

*Personal  
and public  
escapism  
mutually  
reinforcing.*

In its half-hearted and finally abortive search for reality, Brautigan's art is suffused with a saving virtue; he is tragically funny! And so is the choice we are asked to make, in this book and elsewhere—between the abstractions of the fantastic self and a fanatically imposed world order, between a personal and a public escapism that are equally inhumane because they are mutually reinforcing.

"On the Brooklyn Bridge, a naked man running down the east-bound lane yelling, 'It's a beautiful morning. It's a great day!,' was struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marc Chénétier, *Richard Brautigan* (London: Methuen, 1983), 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Spy*, July-August 1993, 8.

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### *Making Yourself Up*

Richard Brautigan's novel *Dreaming of Babylon* is in outward form a hard-boiled detective story, cut in the mold of dime paperbacks like those by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. The protagonist is a private eye, but he is no Marlowe or Sam Spade. The novel ends with this bungler wrapping up yet another case unsatisfactorily. Mr. C. Card is the name of the sleuth, in real life. But he has another life too. That life takes place at the same time but not in San Francisco, the setting for the novel. Throughout the novel, whenever he can be, C. Card is in Babylon. There he goes by the name Smith Smith, private eye extraordinaire.

Coming up with that name took some doing. C. Card had already made for himself a series of adventures in Babylon, with suitable identities for each. He had been the street-wise detective, Ace Stag, and the Babylonian baseball slugger, Samson Ruth. He had enjoyed himself just as much as a famous cowboy, a suave nightclub host, and a decorated general. Now his greatest adventure is in the works, and he will need the perfect name for it. "I like the name Smith. I don't know why but I've always liked that name. Some people consider it ordinary. I don't." (85)<sup>4</sup> From the perspective of the reader, Card's life in Babylon is an entertaining diversion, and an intimate portrait of a life squandered. But from the perspective of Card himself, each escapade in dreamland is transformative. Babylon turns a nobody into a somebody.

Card finds the demands of everyday life too monotonous and grinding. In Babylon, Card can see himself at the center of intense dramas, each one set to redress his near anonymity in the realworld he must share. In dreamland he can have the world just the way he wants it—perfect, at least perfect for himself and for a little while. He desires escape. And so do we, when, on occasion, we take up a novel like this one to try on roles and exploits more grandiose than the usual, a vacation in imagination. The mundane tasks of workaday life are surpassed in favor of satisfactions that seem extraordinary. But then, this reaping of merely daydreamed compensations is pretty ordinary, all too ordinary. We all do it.

At the exact midpoint of the novel the character comes to a stirring discovery, a kind of epiphany. He realizes that the first name for his hero could also be Smith! Before arriving at this *prise de con-*

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Brautigan, *Dreaming of Babylon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991 reprint, [1977]). Page references in the text are to this edition.

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*science*, C. Card expends what seems a considerable portion of his psychic energy ruminating his way through lists of possibility. In a perfect world the first name for his detective must be as perfect as the last.

Some of the names were good but so far I hadn't come up with the one that was perfect and I wouldn't settle for less than a perfect Smith.

Why should I? (86)

*Refusal to  
take a fall.*

The otherwise passive Card will not settle for less than what he imagines as the perfect turn of events, anonymity turned celebrity. Card insists on turning his life around the easy way, by dreaming himself up. He refuses to take a fall into the nagging circumstances of life, its hard requirements. The realworld is viewed as way too tight, uncomfortable, to be worthy of his serious concentration. We all know what that feeling is like, but then it's back to work. Not so for Card. Babylon is indeed an interlude—at first. As that interlude becomes by increments a substitute for active life, Card experiences the realworld, not the dreamworld, as interruption. Yet Card's every transfiguration in dreamland is effected in terms borrowed from that seemingly intrusive, external world. Each of his celebrated imaginary selves disengages from the shared world, yet each imitates all that confers status there—only on terms more comfortable for Card. In Babylon he can find himself so much better situated from the start. There every social setting conforms to his immediate desire. All of Babylon eagerly awaits his next appearance. Once there he can luxuriate in those postures already deemed most enviable by the realworld he flees. And he can do so without all its troubles. Whether through the instantaneous workings of the daydream, or the imagining of a far-off and improbable windfall in real life, Card's every turn in identity is worked out in meticulous detail—rather like the marvelous plans we might make while holding a lottery ticket, plans doomed yet loaded with possibility.

Mr. Card's psychic disengagement from the realworld is not complete. He remains conscious of the difference between desires unrealized, except as fantasy, and those enacted in the difficult world. "Only for the psychotic do fantasies represent accomplishment as well as wish, thus eliminating confrontation with the obstacles of the real world."<sup>5</sup> Card disparages the world of action and

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<sup>5</sup> Lester G. Crocker, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Quest (1712-1758)* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1968), 150.

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interchange precisely because he knows it is a world too hard to change by simply changing your mind. What would it be but madness to see things and people forever working themselves out just the way you imagined? Perhaps a warning is implicit in the lines that close *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*:

“Watch out, Billy, or you might end up like the little boy who got everything he ever wanted.”

“What happened to him?”

“He lived happily ever after.”

Like us, Card must return, however reluctantly, to regular work whenever pragmatic demands intrude. Babylon appears most enticing when things are going particularly well, or badly. Card’s biggest payoff, both monetary and psychological, settles on him after being run over by a car. He lands in the hospital with both legs broken:

They didn’t know how comfortable the hospital was, just to lie there and have all my wants taken care of, with practically nothing to do except dream of Babylon.

The second I went out the front door of that hospital on my crutches everything started downhill. (93)

When back, Card scoots through his social surroundings as an almost nameless figure. Two explanations can be gathered for Card’s anonymity, and these are related. He would prefer not to associate with others, and he owes money to virtually everyone he knows (not least his mother). When he *is* singled out for attention it is invariably in the manner of his mother’s repeated address: “Are you still being that private detective, chasing people with bad shadows? When are you going to pay the money you owe me? You bastard!” (218)

With the bare exception of two old acquaintances, no one pays him much regard, at least not by name (“See Card”). Police Sgt. Rink knew him best in the old days; so did Sam Herschberger. Rink and Card had applied together for admittance to the police academy. Herschberger fought in the Spanish Civil War, and Card had been there too, already quite disengaged. But in the old days he had not yet become a part-time private investigator or a full-time daydreamer. Perhaps Card had not yet become a missing person because, in those days, he still retained some sense of potential for exercising himself in life. Now hope only takes the form of daydreaming. But is this hope at all? It might rather be said that Card now despairs of life, painting it all in shadow. That painting is

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a comfort of sorts. Since the realworld around him is so very dismal, Card is relieved of the obligation to conduct himself well. Since the world is just rotten, I need not, I cannot, be fruitful.

*Finished!*

In Babylon, Card acts out his own internal detective serial, *Smith Versus the Shadow Robots*. This imaginary world is broadcast with ever greater color and coherence as it progresses. Brautigan's novel, likewise, insinuates the reader ever more deeply into Card's imagining of both his realworld and his dreamland. Card's life of everyday difficulties is divested of import. His realworld is portrayed as relentlessly rotten, tiresome, stagnant. But his dreamworld keeps moving, both in image and emotion. More than with other arresting novels, we move through this one with an increasing investment in worlds that do not exist. The reader's critical discernment follows hard on the heels of an imaginative participation that is made possible by disbelief suspended.

*The relational tensions of historicity.*

Every discernment of the real is tensional. This is particularly the case within that enhancement of reality that is worked by the exquisite artifice that we call great fiction. The Brautigan novel is instead a work of not so subtle pacification. In sporadic jumps between worlds—the parallels between them more synchronous than diachronic—his writing intoxicates by divesting narrative experience of its more resistant features: of plot and character development, of complex and subtle experience, the relational tensions of historicity now heightened to aesthetic form. By moving against the imaginary flow our acquiescence in Card's easy world-jumping can be rendered critical. Let us start with the ending.

Card and his mother are walking together out of a cemetery. His mother has made her regular Friday visit, to place flowers on the gravesite of Mr. Card, Sr. The son had come there too, to receive a big payoff—for stealing a prostitute's body from the county morgue—money that he now knows will never materialize. Walking with his mother over the cemetery lawn, broke and broken as ever, C. Card finds another quick opportunity to dream about his more accommodating life back in Babylon. And the novel ends:

We didn't say anything as we walked along.

That was good.

It gave me some time to think about Babylon. I picked up where I left off in my serial *Smith Versus the Shadow Robots*. After I'd

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finished talking to the good Dr. Francis, I gave my secretary a passionate kiss on the mouth.

"What's that for?" she said, a little breathless afterward.

"Good luck," I said.

"Whatever happened to the good old rabbit's foot?" she said.

I took a long lustful look at her delicious mouth.

"Are you kidding?" I said.

"I guess not," she said. "If that's replaced rabbits' feet for luck, I want some more."

"Sorry, babe," I said. "But I've got work to do. Somebody has invented mercury crystals."

"Oh, no," she said, the expression on her face changing to apprehension.

I put my sword shoulder holster on underneath my toga.

"Watch out, son!" my mother said as I almost walked straight into an open, freshly-dug grave. Her voice jerked me back from Babylon like pulling a tooth out of my mouth without any Novocaine.

I avoided the grave.

"Be careful," she said. "Or I'll have to visit both of you out here. That would make Friday a very crowded day for me."

"OK, Mom, I'll watch my step."

I had to, seeing that I was right back where I started, the only difference being that when I woke up this morning, I didn't have a dead body in my refrigerator. (219-20)

All through this novel Card is jumping between worlds. But, in spite of this imaginary exertion, the world that he really makes for himself is never made different for that imaginary effort. Day-dreaming does not pay, except in sham compensations to the ego. The reader begins to ask whether these rewards are worth all the trouble for Card or for the reader. Even Brautigan seems to see in Card's dreamscape something prodigal, naming it Babylon.

### *World-Jumping*

Gadamer has argued that "Wishing is defined by the way it remains innocent of mediation with what is to be done . . . wishing is not willing; it is not practice." The distinction is valid, but Gadamer is less attentive than Nietzsche, the later Croce, and especially Babbitt, to just how willful that wishing can be.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 81. For an in-depth discussion of Babbitt and Croce and how willing underlies wishful imagination, see Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason* (Chicago and Washington, D.C.: Regnery Books, 1986), esp. Ch. 9.

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*The willfulness of wishfulness.*

C. Card is generally aware of the distinction between doing and dreaming. When jumping between the two he feels the abruptness of the change. So does the reader. The experience is commonplace. Card happens on Herschberger:

"Excuse me, C. Card, is that you?"

I looked up, totally returned to the so-called real world. . . .

"You seemed a million miles away," he said, now years later in San Francisco.

"I was daydreaming," I said.

"Just like the good old days," he said. "I think half the time I knew you in Spain you weren't even there."

I decided to change the subject. (66)

*Retreat from internal and external strenuousness.*

Perhaps we daydream of distant and unlikely possibilities more frequently than we notice. For Card this wishfulness has been invested with a dignity outweighing anything offered by real life. Card will not get a hold on himself; he lets go of the world of common sociability. These enervations of self and world—the retreat from internal and external strenuousness—are intimate and complementary aspects of the same self-evasion. Card must watch his step most closely when the demands of the shared world intrude. Still, he does so only when necessary.

Got to keep looking at the bright side.

Can't let it get to me.

If it really gets to me I start thinking about Babylon and then it only gets worse because I'd sooner think about Babylon than anything else and when I start thinking about Babylon I can't do anything but think about Babylon and my whole life falls to pieces.

Anyway, that's what it's been doing for the last eight years, ever since 1934, which was when I started thinking about Babylon. (30)

Mistiming the jump between everyday reality and daydream can be costly. When dreaming of Babylon, the detective repeatedly walks or drives past his destinations. And the consequences are not so amenable to immediate revision as are events in the dreamworld. When he needs to hold Babylon back, to keep his feet firmly on the ground, Card fixes his attention on his shoes.

I slammed on the brakes.

Got to be careful. Can't let Babylon get me. I had too many things going for me. Later for Babylon. So I rearranged my thought patterns to concentrate on something else and the thing I chose to think about was my shoes. I needed a new pair. The ones I was wearing were worn out. (107)

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With the prospect of his first client in months, and far behind in the rent, Card had struggled to put on all the appearances of respectability. "I made sure that I had two socks on. They of course didn't match but they were close enough, not unless you were a world renowned expert on socks." (98) Out in public Card's struggle is constant. He must deliberately take on that drabness which he imagines all about him, in his realworld.

I walked two blocks beyond my stop the other way, past the street that I lived on, thinking about having the name Smith for a private eye in Babylon, so I had to turn around and walk back again and felt like a fool because I couldn't afford to do things like that when I was just a few hours away from my first client in months.

Thinking about Babylon can be a dangerous thing for me.

I had to watch my ass.

I walked back down Sacramento Street *very* carefully not thinking about Babylon. As I walked along, I pretended that I had a prefrontal lobotomy. (87)

*Reality as  
prefrontal  
lobotomy.*

Card's fixes on his feet, a grounding principle second in hardness for him only to cash, and his perception of the concrete world as insubstantial, a shadowland, are repeated in the daydream serial featured late in the novel. Smith Smith's diabolical opponent is the famous, and seemingly humanitarian, Dr. Abdul Forsythe. In the laboratory beneath his clinic for the poor, the not-so-good doctor has been busily transforming patients into "shadow robots." Thousands have been subjugated to Forsythe's fiendish will. They are neatly folded and stacked in the cellar. When the doctor acquires just one last ingredient—mercury crystals—the shadow robots will be released upon an ever unsuspecting world. But the reader is privy to the processing of only one shadow, a sandal-maker. Card's shoes are his last tangible link with the realworld and sanity. The episode suggests that even this last link is being dissolved, as if by a force exterior to himself. Already the people encountered out there in his realworld seem to Card well on their way to becoming shadow robots. When he stops at a bar, the bartender "was so ordinary looking that he was almost invisible." (75)

### ***Babylonian Epiphanies***

Moving through the novel backward we come to central episodes wherein Card experiences a kind of heightened consciousness or recollects earlier moments of epiphany. Each illumination brings

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a reconfiguration of Card's identity, drawn from dreams of instant celebrity status.

On the way to meeting his client at a radio station, Card thinks up the perfect first name for his perfect detective. "I was a block away . . . *busy thinking about my shoes*, when the name Smith Smith flashed into my mind and I blurted out, 'Great!'" (108; emphasis added) The scene is a prelude to one in which Card meets with a rich blonde client (his ticket back to respectability). Then he blurts out, "Smith." The perfect title for the internal serial had just popped into his head, *Smith Smith Versus the Shadow Robots*. "I was almost beside myself with joy . . . 'Smith—' I said, stopping the rest of the words by sitting a mental elephant down on my tongue." (118) Card anticipates that, if he goes on blurting, he will be out one rich client and be roughed up by one tough chauffeur, "the neck." In both scenes Card is relieved that no one catches on. But he regrets as well that he cannot go ahead and communicate his single creative production, the daydream. Fully conscious of the hazards, Card has begun nonetheless to spout out his dreamlife in bits, even as he strains to hold all this back from further notice.

Too bad I didn't have anybody to share my accomplishment with but I knew if I told anybody about Smith Smith it would be cause for an involuntary trip to the nuthouse, which was where I wasn't interested in going.

I'd keep Smith Smith to myself.

I went back to thinking about my shoes. (108-109)

*Fear of  
tensional  
engagement.*

Card fears the consequences of bringing his imaginings down to earth. He must fear more the tensional engagement that such expression would elicit. Perhaps the greatest threat to his reverie would run something like this: An attentive listener hears Card out, his complete works in Babylon, and replies, "Big deal."

*Life as  
creative self-  
reformation.*

Expression of the daydream might make plain what Card really needs, some willful engagement in the difficulty of making his creativity concrete, a self-reformation. That struggle is the direction in which sanity resides, no matter what its cost to his merely imaginary esteem. Instead, Card has insisted on moving ever further from the struggles of active life—all for the sham freedom of spinning around in a whirlpool of self-enclosure, the false security of a chronic insanity.

Card's imaginings do not count for anything in the real world. He knows that, but remains unwilling to make of his creativity

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something actual, engaged, and concretely transformative. This character will not recast the spectral but seemingly boundless freedom of insularity into the moderated but incarnate freedom of realworld engagement. Part of the rationale behind Card's passivity is implied in the scene that comes between the two blurting episodes.

Having fixed his attention enough to make himself respectable, two socks on, and keeping watch on his shoes, the character arrives at the radio station on time. Card will present himself as a reliable hire, very down to earth. "I wanted to be on time to show that I was a responsible private detective who had better things to do than think about Babylon all the time." (110) While waiting for the client, having nothing better to do, he envisions again some of the prodigal possibilities that now appeal to his fancy.

If it was a woman I hoped that she would be very rich and beautiful and she would fall madly in love with me and want me to retire from the private-eye business and live a life of luxury, and I'd spend half my time fucking her, the other half dreaming of Babylon.

It would be a good life.

I could hardly wait to get started. (110-111)

As the blurting episodes suggest, Card harbors incompatible desires. He would like to have his dream world communicated. But daydreaming is incommensurate with the very terms of human interchange, the *pathos* of communication and mutual participation. Card will not have his imaginings mediated through the tensions of empathic consideration, the very condition of sharing anything with another, different human being. He wants to purchase a perfect world, but only on the cheap; he would have a world subjugated to himself alone. An insubstantial, detensional shadowland is put in the place of that other shadowland—in the distance, all about him. The reader might ask with and against Brautigan, which shadowland is really preferable?

*Competing  
shadowlands.*

### *Doing Great Things (Almost)*

Early in life, C. Card had attempted to make of his dreams some kind of reality. Through a series of disappointments Card found himself at the "Front Door" to Babylon. That door first opened to him during a tryout for a semi-pro baseball team. A more than fair high-school ballplayer, but nothing sensational, Card imagines that he will soon be replacing Lou Gehrig at first base for the Yankees—

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not an uncommon fantasy for one of his age and circumstance, young and restless. But the shattering of the dream is more traumatic than usual. On the very first pitch the adolescent Card gets beamed at the plate. He is dragged from the ballpark and dumped unceremoniously on a sidewalk. While he is out, Card dreams he is the Lou Gehrig times ten of Babylonian baseball. "The walls of my dressing room were covered with tapestries of my baseball feats woven in gold and covered with precious stones. There was a tapestry of me beheading a pitcher with a line drive." (53) In the pre-game warm-up Samson receives the sexual ministrations of his perfect concubine, the first of many such interludes.

I just couldn't get enough of Nana-dirat.

She was always waiting for me in Babylon.

She of the long black hair and lissome body and breasts that were made to addle my senses. Just think: I never would have met her if I hadn't been hit in the head with a baseball. (58)

In every realworld undertaking Card seems to run through the same cycle: extravagant expectation falls flat, but the lessons of the hard school are not faced, do not take. There is no editing of his ambitions or his actual skills. There is no concrete development. Card refuses to take a fall and then dust himself off. Instead, he turns continually to yet another abundant then flattened field of dreams. And each realworld failure becomes the stimulus for another imaginary overcompensation. Deflated aspirations are redressed through retreat into a Babylonian replay. There the original, grandiose desire can be fully preserved and further burgeoned. With each change of roles there is a renewed expectation that now, finally, he will translate fantasy into realworld acclaim. With each frenetic shift some aspect of the existing social stratification is highlighted (as with so many of the political philosophers). Yet Card remains unwilling to modify himself in the concrete, rather like Rousseau in his *Reveries*.

This wishful or fantasy thinking, which emerges from a current sense of loss, failure, or lack, whether perceived as an opportunity or as a threat, is meant to rearrange events in the mind, imaginatively transforming potential or actual outcomes, to see things another way, the need for which arises from the inability to solve a real problem immediately or to tolerate the significance of important or affecting social events that appear not to be directly within the sphere of one's personal control.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Fred Weinstein, *History and Theory After the Fall* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 102.

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## The "Private Eye"

"You could have been a good detective, Card, if you hadn't spent so much time daydreaming. Oh, well. . . ."

He let it drop.

I'd always been a major disappointment to him.

Rink didn't know that I was living part of my life in Babylon. To him I was just a daydreaming fuckup. I let him think that. I knew that he wouldn't be able to understand Babylon if I told him about it. He just didn't have that kind of mind, so I let it pass. I was his fuckup and that was all right. Babylon was a lot better than being a cop and having to wage the war against crime on time. (181-82).

C. Card likes to see his fantasy world as more real than the actual. It is not. Babylon is optional. In the realworld Card must meet resistances, like it or not. Desires are constrained by wills other than our own, circumstances are other than we wish, things never work out quite the way we envision them. We let ourselves down, and others do too. Yet this realworld of ambiguity, interaction, and resistance is itself shaped by imagination, by desires variously enacted. At his best, Brautigan raises the specter of inverted-reality gone public. As desires of low and mean quality become socially predominant, the realworld turns unreal. In words and actions most everyone seems to be living out some kind of fantasy, and that fantasizing seems to turn more uniform—to fanaticism—during wartime.<sup>8</sup> Where there is individual integrity, ethical realism, it finds next to nothing in common with that fanatical world, its artificial unities, encircling abstractions, the moralism enforced all around—left and right and always right. "What we need are more principles!" said a Virginia politician recently.

*Fantasy and fanaticism.*

The philosophers also know something of abstraction. Outside the power-plays of scandal, increasingly staged within an exhausted social ethos, the losers daydream of perfect repose, depoliticization, and ultimately philosophical tyranny. Intellectual abstraction and administrative moralism share the same perfectionist fantasy. Designs, policies, and postures make an easy substitute for those reformations that really matter within the difficult, tensional media of concrete imperfections.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> John S. Nelson has explored the interconnections between fantasy and fanaticism in "Fantastic Dreams of Politics," American Political Science Association Workshop on Political Myth, Rhetoric, and Symbolism. Chicago: August 1992.

<sup>9</sup> See James Murray Miclot, "Powers of Abstraction," American Political Science Association, affiliated panel. Washington, D.C.: 1991.

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*Realworld  
gone unreal.*

Must the real realist camouflage himself, go undercover, in order to survive and subtly transform, even subvert, dimensions of the realworld that have gone unreal? Card is no such realist. His evasion is mere complicity. He lacks subtlety. He can't take the tensions of concrete integrity. Perhaps the cheapness of the character's internal fantasy is being implicated as a sideshow to a larger circus. Brautigan, writing in the 1970s, hints at a petty conformism that has grown to the level of fanaticism during wartime. Babylonian Card prefers instead to keep the cavalry on hand for crowd control when Samson Ruth comes to bat. "I think they were glad to be at the ball game watching me hit home runs. It certainly was a lot better than going to war." (51)

### *Fixing Reality*

You cannot give away the ending to this novel, even if you tell everything that happens. As in other Brautigan mysteries there is no build-up to denouement. The ending does not bring everything together and out into the open. When the story ends, the reader has been with Card through a series of imaginary episodes, and that's about all. Even these episodes would lose dramatic tension but for the intermittent jumps we make, with Card, back to take care of mundane business—find some socks, elude the landlady, find some bullets, elude the mother, find the client, elude the cops, steal a body, elude the thugs. Yet, by the end of the novel, no significant change has occurred in Card's actual circumstance. There is a plot, but it does not thicken. All of Brautigan's experiments with genre "are virtually devoid of dramatic action."<sup>10</sup> The novel must be sustained entirely by its psychodynamics of world-jumping, and it is, as far as that goes.

In the realworld which Mr. Card must share and in which he must act, from time to time, the prevailing tone is one of stasis. He is just scraping by, just well enough to elaborate upon what is deemed more important, namely the daydream. When he can most or least afford it Card does not hesitate to venture further into his dreamscape. The darkness of the realworld, or its occasional light, now serve equally well as a pretext for reverie. "The world wasn't such a bad place, so I started thinking about Babylon. Why not? I

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<sup>10</sup> Marc Chénétier, *Richard Brautigan* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 71.

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didn't have anything else to do for a couple of hours. It couldn't hurt." (43)

The realworld receives its minimum daily requirement of attention, and it seems to deserve no better. As far as Card is concerned, so far as the reader is led to believe, that realworld is difficult to the point of pointlessness. Brautigan plays upon our readiness to mistake imaginative disengagement from such a world for some kind of virtue—good because it disengages from shadowland. In fact, there is nothing in Card's conduct to show that his retreat engenders an integrity superior to that inculcated by the wider social ethos. He mirrors that ethos, whether in Babylon or the realworld.

*Disengagement mistaken for virtue.*

### *Cash-Nexus and Dream-Nexus*<sup>11</sup>

No reasons were ever given or needed for the kidnapping of the body. Card is simply hired for the job by a rich blonde woman. It seems that all he and the reader need to know is, "How much?" Here Brautigan parodies but also changes the preoccupation with money that is a hallmark of dime fiction.

In real life, as Raymond Chandler said, a private eye "has about as much moral structure as a stop and go sign," but in fiction, he is redeemed by a primitive moral code based on a sense of duty to his employers. He will kill if he has to, but he will never betray his employers. Money, in other words, is more important than anything else; it is at the foundation of the moral code, such as it is, shared by hard-boiled detective fiction.<sup>12</sup>

The dime detectives do indeed have a moral code. Money is important, so important that Marlowe refuses to be underpaid or *overpaid*. He often refuses to cash checks from employers who remain under his own hard scrutiny. One sometimes wonders how Marlowe pays the bills that stack up around him. We cannot imagine C. Card scrutinizing his employer, refusing overpayment, or waiting to cash a check.

Throughout Brautigan's novel, personal relationships are seen as nothing but mutual manipulations, a series of raw deals. Card hires and fires the secretary as his sexual ambitions rise and fall. He bums money or swindles it off the landlady, the tenants, old acquaintan-

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<sup>11</sup> These terms are used by Peter Viereck. See, for example, *The Unadjusted Man* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973 [1953]), 325-28.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Halsey Foster, *Richard Brautigan* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 109.

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ces, his mother, even blind beggars. When desperate, Card is reduced to selling pornography in the ever grim alleyways. When working, the job is no more savory. His last case had been a messy divorce:

A three-hundred-pound husband wanted the goods on his three-hundred-pound wife. He thought that she was fooling around and she was: with a three-hundred-pound automobile mechanic. Some case. She used to go down to his garage every Wednesday afternoon and he'd fuck her over the hood of a car. I got some terrific photographs. (25)

Card must sell pictures (Brautigan must sell books). Like every hard-boiled detective, this character must find himself and others in a shady environment, often brutal and always callous, monotonously callous. A single strain gives Card's realworld all the continuity it needs. Just one force there winds everyone up, makes them tick, talk. Even Card is wakened to action by its circulation. Brautigan credits that force with a chapter heading, "Cold Heartless Cash."

"I want you to steal a body from the morgue."

She didn't say anything else. . . .

"Sure," I said. "If the money's interesting enough I'll have Abraham Lincoln's body on your doorstep tomorrow with the morning paper."

That was exactly what she wanted to hear. . . .

"How does a thousand dollars sound?" she said.

"For a thousand dollars," I said, "I'll bring you a whole cemetery." (121)

Still, the strongest currents of continuity and development in the novel take place in Babylon. No wonder that the dreamscape comes to seem more real than San Francisco, and not just to Card. The Babylonian adventure provides a gathering experience for the reader too. What might escape notice is that the value deemed most fundamental in Card's realworld has here dropped out. In Babylon, Card's realworld desires, money-status-sex, get trimmed to the final two. There the dream itself provides, immediately, all that money could ever buy. The intermediation of money has become superfluous, but attentions paid to his esteem retain all their currency. Card's need for regard is satisfied through a perfect, imaginary compliance with his every desire. In the realworld, that takes money; in the dreamworld, it takes only dreaming.

Fragmented, recumbent, devoid of desire to cultivate a

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realworld individuality, Card would place at the center of the universe a self without a substantial center. When dreaming of Babylon, Card makes himself a metaphysical superstar, an unmoved mover, the passive receptacle for every desire that animates his central character and supporting cast.

### *Held In Detension*

Card's depiction of the realworld represents a Brautigan ontology. Back in shadowland nothing much changes, in self or world, no matter how much people may come and go. This impression is easily sustained and strangely reassuring, yet misleading. With every hard jump back to San Francisco, the character must again deal with others bent on action. There he meets obstacles to his pristine reverie.

For someone like Card, everyday relationships and resistances must entail a more than normally difficult intermediation of the self. He must scrounge for a living like anyone else. Yet, he has evaded and divested himself, by turns, of the very imaginative resources for doing well. Making something of himself has become more and more troublesome but ever more needful. The character of Card remains interesting to the extent that his author expresses a psychodynamic he knows, in real life! The creator and the character (but not those characters dreamed up by Card) provide an intermittent consciousness that the difficulties evaded remain very real. Brautigan and Card know something of what they flee. They know that the particular and intimate disciplines of everyday habit are more fundamental than the whole sideshow of money-gathering to which the realworld has been reduced. They know that a more taxing labor has been evaded, the cultivation of some strength of will at the most ordinary level.

*Evading disciplines of everyday habit.*

I don't know how people can live the way I do. My apartment is so dirty that recently I replaced all the seventy-five-watt bulbs with twenty-five-watters, so I wouldn't have to see it. It was a luxury but I had to do it. Fortunately, the apartment didn't have any windows or I might have really been in trouble.

My apartment was so dim that it looked like the shadow of an apartment. I wonder if I always lived like this. (4)

By the light of Babylon, Card sees his realworld dim. As shadows darken, as the world turns ever more uniform, Brautigan more sharply opposes Card's exterior realworld, gloomy and static, to his ulterior dreamworld, bright and dramatic. The opposition is self-de-

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*Reality as  
tensionality.*

ceiving, and deliberately so. Both authors, Brautigan and Card, let on that they do know something of what the daydream is made to eclipse. Like them, we recognize the realworld *as such* precisely because of its inherent tensionality, its unsettling resistances and turns. The world of historicity presupposes plots, the shadows shifting in lightshafts that may be dimmed but not dodged. As Phillipos Legras writes, "Reality is that which, when you don't believe in it, doesn't go away."<sup>13</sup>

*Monotonous  
imagining.*

So, Brautigan plays upon both a realistic representation and a subtle inversion of experience. In rendering well the inversion, he accords less reality to enacted desires than to those merely dreamed. The latter are rendered as pristine as they are inchoate, but this does not make them innocent. Card's imaginings remain disembodied because they are unmediated by the tensions of expression and therefore by relationship. But there can be no real character where an obstinate negation, an imaginative evasion, is put in place of concrete relation and so of development. Card is almost nobody. Brautigan stimulates our empathy without supplying the grounds for our sympathy. Card's self-enclosure malingers on and on, unchallenged, monotonous, because that's just the way he wants it. Imagining so insular remains unalterable, merely expansive, showing off scales of mere amplitude. This is animation without the subtleties of concrete definition, a cartoon carnival. Babylon exaggerates but does not make lucid the social pecking-order that Card seeks to evacuate. Chicken-hearted, he needs the coop, but would transpose himself to the preferred corner of its chain-link fence.

Brautigan renders well the penned-in quality of this monotonous state. We can readily follow each author's fabrication—knowing just what it is like to try to fill up on empty dreams, and knowing too that the inverted vision, however luxurious or fierce it seems, however prevalent it becomes, must in time puff itself out as pettiness, sham hope, and mere bluster, or much worse.

Imagination can be no richer than the empathic reach of its experience, a tensional history of concrete acting and thinking. Intuition made to stay pristine is not moved to participate in what remains imperfect, a human society. Enacted desire is imperfect, an opportunity for refinement. By way of what we have actually made of our-

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Peter Viereck, *Archer in the Marrow* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 23.

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selves, we know what needs to be done next. The presumed innocence of Card's daydream is purchased at too high a price. As Montaigne said of the mystic philosophers, "They want to get out of themselves and escape from the human. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts; instead of raising themselves, they lower themselves."<sup>14</sup>

### *House of Cards*

When you leave the house, the  
shadow of the Hindenburg enters  
to take your place.<sup>15</sup>

Card's daydream balloons. Babylon is a glamorous facsimile of active life, an interiority that is puffed up but remains all the more inert. To keep itself pristine, untouched, his imaginative appropriation of life must in fact remain static and insular, a mute mimicry, most insistent in its vacation of and from concrete history. Card does not want to make himself known, not even to himself. That would mean trouble, a threat to the dream. Action, expression, and remembrance require comparison and relationship. These are the strenuous terms within which real individuality and knowledge, and the aesthetic sense beneath them, can be cultivated. All the trying that goes into making desire refined—proportionate and incarnate—must embrace the risks and reformations of effective action and critical self-consciousness. This exertion-in-restraint is character in the concrete.

*Inertness vs.  
strenuousness.*

A humility thus engaged does not smack of meekness. It is up to the task of imagining reality, no matter the scale of recondite forms that populate our surrounding environment, no matter that the social imagination that currently plays itself out may seem imposing indeed. "In America the movie screens were as big as the pyramids."<sup>16</sup> For desires to become refined in such a setting they must contend with many and varied resistances, self-restraint most of all. But a genuine aesthetic evocation of reality makes right action and thought desirable, the competition notwithstanding. Tensional

*To imagine  
reality.*

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*. Quoted from Harold Bloom, Introduction, *Blaise Pascal* (New York: Chelsea House, 1989), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Brautigan, "Your Departure Versus the Hindenburg," *The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), Reprint of 1968, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Simic, "Marina's Epic," *Hotel Insomnia* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 44.

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imagination exposes cliché. It sees through and untwists the prevailing mind-set by way of images that manifest reality anew. As Yves Bonnefoy suggests, true poetic sense is cultivated by the desire *not* to daydream anymore.

*"Dreaming to stop dreaming."*

[I]t is the activity that—overflowing the confines of the impoverished illusions, freeing desire from its entrapment in stereotypical objects, refusing the constraints, the resignations that compensate, through violence, a deep frustration and anguish—keeps life in contact with the intensity one senses in it: an intensity which, when it is fully taken on and understood, could find satisfaction in the simplest things the world proposes. Is not the imaginary the trouble suffered by those who allow themselves to be prisoners of a language that is closed—of ideologies, of desires become fantastical? Dreaming, in poetry, is to stop dreaming.<sup>17</sup>

*Self as action story in need of editing.*

The self that turns critical remembers what is enduring in life, its concrete relationships, historicity. The remembered self knows itself as another imperfect story in need of further, severe editing. This self-realization is all in particular expression—by way of concrete action, articulation, and aesthetic creation. But that remembrance and refinement of how things stand, really, requires a strenuous labor and birth. Card's remembrance of why he dimmed his apartment leads him very nearly to a difficult confrontation with his actual past. He almost makes his real problem articulate, remembered, historical, but does not.

I wonder if I always lived like this. I mean, I had to have had a mother, somebody to tell me to clean up, take care of myself, change my socks. I did, too, but I guess I was kind of slow when I was a kid and didn't catch on. There had to be a reason. (4-5)

*Desire made real encounters obstacles.*

But Card will venture no further, make no embrace of his life as it really is. He turns away from understanding what he has made of himself, and why. Diverted again. The tension of memory, the comparative or self-critical imagination, appears too risky because it is. Unlike the ease of the daydream, remembrance of reality proves a difficult and painful engagement, revealing the energies inherent in desire that is acted out, thought through, and thereby refined—or at least made plain in its need for reform. By the very expression in concrete action, articulation, or art, a seemingly pristine intuition becomes incarnate. It is known by its fruits. The inchoate desire made real is also made different from everything it had expected it-

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<sup>17</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, *In the Shadow's Light*, trans. John Naughton (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 172.

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self to be. It is transfigured rather than duplicated as concrete engagement disabuses the imagination of self-flattery.

The great idea, intuition, or deed that we would actually do, must become something other and less grandiose when made particular and real. Why then do we turn ourselves to such labors at all? Because they make for something shared, for real participation, and so for a concrete individuality, perhaps even love. However partial and imperfect these efforts must be, we remember satisfactions in our engagements that are more enduring than those in our evasions. What is remembered well of concrete relationship gives us vision enough to embrace the further difficulties of the same and always different, tensional life—the only life we know to be real.

Brautigan's phenomenological inversion, his social ontology, is sustained by the misleading impression that all would change for Card, dramatically, if only he could get rich quick. Card imagines that money makes life like a dream—that the esteem he seeks, a compliance of others to his every desire, can be bought. At the level of motivation, there is no discontinuity between Card's two lives. What he embraces in dreamland is what he has made of himself in the realworld, an insular stasis, an identity on the cheap. Off in Babylon, he can have all this, alone, and have it admired, or so it seems.

The daydream demands no substantial effort on Mr. Card's part. It simply mirrors but does not revise and sophisticate his desires. Card's imaginings do not solicit real action because they do not deepen his appreciation, and therefore his desire, for potentialities in self or world that differ from what already prevails. Babylon is of little consequence for that world in which Card must live, like it or not. When all is said and done the external world is seen by Card, and shown by Brautigan, as one so dull and crass as to be unworthy of habitation. But that impression can be sustained only for those who are captivated, for the moment, by the same evasive and vain imagination.

The realworld is shadowland. Unless, of course, you hit it big. Again, it is supposed by Card (and perhaps by the late, post-famous Brautigan<sup>18</sup>) that if, somehow, you could only strike it rich, dreams could be enacted in comfort, and in real life. It is a sentiment in

*Daydreams  
mimetic, not  
transformative.*

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<sup>18</sup> Keith Abbott, *Downstream From "Trout Fishing in America"* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1989).

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widespread circulation, in our more inflated longings. "If only I had the money and the positioning up front, then I would undertake all those actions that would make me rich and famous. Then all the difficulties of life be damned!" Card turns away from a realworld in which he sees himself badly short-changed. He can imagine nothing in dreamlife other than being paid back in full, but paid in the same tender!

### *Moving Backward By Standing Still*

*Real individuality presupposes social interchange.*

In Card's fantasy world, the character is portrayed as fabulously energetic and courageous, exemplary, especially when it comes to uncovering and prosecuting evil. At the same time, we notice that the purportedly heroic Smith Smith remains eager to indulge every passing, prurient, even violent desire. In real life such a combination of epic conviction and personal unrestraint would turn out very brutal indeed. Because actual relationships are differentiated—concrete and particular—social interchange can be sustained and satisfying only in mutual regard and self-restraint. As Aristotle and now Kristeva suggest, any genuine and enduring human relationship presupposes alterity, not the duplication of an impositional self (as in Rousseau's *Pygmalion*). The relative continuity and coherence of the political animal are a consequence of enacted desire—of engagement within a world that does not conform itself to transient whims. If you do not watch your own step, and even if you do, you are bound to take some falls. In the shadow world that Card sees all around him, everyone is watching his step, and everyone else's, in ways too close for comfort. To maneuver himself into engagements that work upon this world Card would need to shorten his steps and thereby make them concrete.

*Real life as incarnated imagination.*

Critics have seen in this and other Brautigan novels a progressive fragmentation. But it might just as well be said that Card's ulterior self makes for altogether *too much* coherence. Babylon is a consolation prize, a trivial compensation for the game that has been thrown, or almost thrown. Pass or play, the game continues. What has Card desired to forfeit? The shared world, and with it himself. Rather than insular desire writ large, a monopoly, the shared world is interaction with others, a complex historical network of imagination made incarnate. We encounter both tough and subtle resistances. No doubt, imaginative distance is indispensable to negotiate

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well these differences. But Card can only oscillate between too distant extremes. He moves from trying to figure out how he will pay his rent, in one moment, to fantastic plans in the next—for the stupendous life he will enjoy once he hits it big. But Card is not the only one given to extravagant imaginings. If anything, the character's self-preoccupation distances him from some of the fears that sweep through social life. These fears impinge upon him less than do its sharper particularities.

My landlady was a bigger threat to me than the Japanese. Everybody was waiting for the Japanese to show up in San Francisco and start taking cable cars up and down the hills, but believe me I would have taken on a division of them to get my landlady off my back. (2)

### *Incomplete Empathy*

On first impression, Card's active imagination seems to set him apart from the shadowlife of near automatons. Like other hard-boiled detectives, this one has a distinctive voice. But the active creativity of Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe presupposed a concrete individuality, an experiential maturity. Being at once streetwise and decent is what held these characters together. Through the dime paperback medium a genuinely tensional reality became more articulate. The American writers raised the detective novel to a fine art by lowering it into the dirty streets.<sup>19</sup> "Rarely do we find dime detectives faced with a complicated intellectual problem, and they do most of their work with their feet or their fists. Instead, dime writers made their detective heroes exemplars of moral qualities."

Dime detectives, therefore, are exemplars of determination, tenacity, pluck, chivalry, and honesty. The writers usually contrived the action to demonstrate these qualities at work. Although they are by no means universally violent, dime detectives usually demonstrate their "manly" virtues through energetic action. Dime detectives are almost always private detectives.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The usual—but wrong—view is that the Americans made the detective novel vulgar and stupid. See the analysis of this assessment in Thomas J. Roberts, *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 84-85: "The tale of detection—the sort of story that Conan Doyle made famous with his tales of Sherlock Holmes—looms large in Barzun and Taylor's *Catalogue of Crime*. For them, the later 'crime novel'—the study that focuses on motivation rather than detection—is a decline from the Olympian heights of an earlier, golden age of the detective story."

<sup>20</sup> LeRoy Lad Panek, *An Introduction to the Detective Story* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 147.

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Creative  
imagination  
prefigures  
active  
engagement.

Dime PIs *work for themselves*. In his portrayal of a difficult but worthwhile integrity, Chandler makes the novel of detection a stronger art. His imaginative uncovering both breaks and recreates proportions. His expression is both more concrete and less literal than Card's one-dimensional magnification of prevailing psychic structures. Creative imagination prefigures further, deeper, engagement in life's real potentialities. It is engendered by an intensification rather than a retreat from what life is like. In ever new ways strong art prefigures and thereby renews, differently, the active life it stands up and stands up to. By contrast, Card's ballooning aesthetic remains insubstantial, puffed up, detensional. Self-enclosure floats away, bound to drop back again, deflated.

When Brautigan's genre-novels are read with the passivity of his characters we get suckered into a mere simulation of integrity, an imagining that gains in coherence the more it disengages from hard reality. From the seeming calm of this eye in the storm, all fragmentation is made to seem external. What is enervated by this form of aesthetic is genuine agency, concrete individuality, the ability to contend well with real hard circumstance. Brautigan knows this and shows it. The eye of the storm rests at its center, insulated, if only for a time. Chaos whirls around Card because he has refused the active effort needed to realize desire, willfully to engage that compendium of circumstance continually remade which is—himself. An enduring integrity cannot be acted out in desires so easy as those dreamed up by Card. If, as the character realizes, it cannot be gained by conforming to the life of extroverted automatons—shadow robots regimented by the dictates of cold, hard cash—neither does Card's ulterior life provide a worthwhile alternative, a substantial medium of encouragement.

### *Teletypes*

Individuality  
as ethical  
center.

In *Dreaming of Babylon*, the central character, like his own author, is consciously participating in a distinctive genre, the hard-boiled detective novel. We do not expect from this genre a morality of absolute good and evil, as we do, for example, from so much of horror fiction—except where the two genres combine, as in *Blade Runner* or *Neuromancer*. American classics in the dime genre explore the grey areas within social settings that have all the dangerous appearance of being perfectly clean-cut. In these works, irrepressible individuality is rendered as an ethical center that stands out against a back-

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drop of social regimentation. The hero is imperfect but adept at negotiating the risks of independent action within the murky waters that flow beneath the surface.

The genre is not used for simple parody by either Brautigan or Card. Whole new worlds are tried on for fit. Each is discarded for yet another world. This conscious venturing into new worlds is evident in each of the Brautigan novels of the 1970s. The mixed genre-type of each is often heralded in subtitles: *The Abortion: An Historical Romance* 1966 (1971), *The Hawkline Monster: A Gothic Western* (1974), *Willard and His Bowling Trophies: A Perverse Mystery* (1974), *Sombrero Fallout: A Japanese Novel* (1976), and *Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel* 1942 (1978).

*Imaginative  
self-exhaustion.*

Brautigan moved straight through the genres of the dime paperback. One critic aptly characterized this movement as a “subversion of genres.”<sup>21</sup> By the end of the decade it seemed as if Brautigan had run out of alternative worlds to explore. Not much later, he ran himself right out of life. “He used sweet wine in place of life because he didn’t have any more life to use.”<sup>22</sup> There may be an autobiographical touch to passages in his final novel.

Soon we had left his voice behind like a voice from a dream dreamt down the road, but I looked back into the dream and I could still see him yelling, but I couldn’t hear a word. He was just another kid driven crazy by poverty and his drunken father beating him up all the time and telling him that he’d never amount to anything, that he would end up just like his father, which he would.<sup>23</sup>

C. Card may also have been headed for a kind of imaginative exhaustion. His dreaming provides no resource for seeing the world differently. Every escape from prevailing structures and stratifications amplifies the same in dreamland. Card makes for himself a series of happy endings, mere episodes. These are emptied of any real encouragement for shaping desire differently. And so each Babylonian jump must end by returning the visionary to a reality as discouraging as the original motive for the jump. Card’s desire for complete repose is imperious. It takes all the creative tension out of

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<sup>21</sup> Marc Chénétier, *Richard Brautigan* (London: Methuen, 1983), 65-92. Another critic, Edward Halsey Foster, following John Barth, has seen these works as a literature of exhaustion, personal as well as social. *Brautigan*, 91-92.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Brautigan, *Revenge of the Lawn* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 30.

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action and imagination. Self-glorification turns monotonous with the exhaustion of every circumstantial or interpersonal resistance.

Sometimes I played around with the form of my adventures in Babylon. They would be done as books that I could see in my mind what I was reading, but most often they were movies, though once I did them as a play with me being a Babylonian Hamlet and Nana-dirat being both Gertrude and Ophelia. I abandoned the play halfway through the second act. Someday I must return and pick it up where I left off. It will have a different ending from the way Shakespeare ended it. My *Hamlet* will have a happy ending. (59)

### *Seek Hard*

What's madness but nobility of soul  
At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!  
I know the purity of pure despair,  
My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.<sup>24</sup>

*Grappling  
with the here  
and now.*

Brautigan seeks to portray a kind of freedom and independence that is alternative to what the routinized world offers. But what real freedom can we find except through the present, concrete conditions within which our creativity must labor, no matter how daunting these might seem? Freedom is always realized imperfectly, by way of potentialities really present, able to be fashioned differently. Such engagement takes hold by wrestling imaginatively with circumstance. The desire to grapple well presupposes an embrace of historicity, a realistic feel for how the various networks of social relationship really stand, right now. What Brautigan depicts as too harsh and brutal an externality is itself the very condition of our freedom, a participatory reality requiring more imagination than a character like C. Card can muster.

A sound individuality is the consequence of difficult labors. It means living up to strenuous particularities engaged and modified, a concentrated contending with the circumstantial self and its resistances—not the least of which is an excessive craving for repose, a discontent with imperfect life. At the level of concrete morality, Card's refusal to conform to the demands of his unsavory environment turns out, upon examination, to be an elaborate posturing. The celebrated characters who inhabit his dreamscape are in fact nothing more than a grand conformity, an embittered passivity writ

<sup>23</sup> Richard Brautigan, *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982), 110.

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large, larger than life. Placed before an heroic backdrop, with adoring audience to match, the desires enacted by Babylonian Card are no more noble than the dissipated personality from which they emanate. His magnification of deeds, his immense struggle with diabolical forces, expresses a lack of subtlety in his lived experience. In Babylon the great struggles are fought and won without all the trouble through which real individuality is built up. There is none of the frustration, hesitation, revision, and compromise of realworld development. Absent is the self-restrained exertion and the self-interrogating courage through which identity is engaged, but never finally settled, in everyday action.

Pragmatic failure and its deeper companion, a failure of ethical will, are the stimulus to Card's ulterior identity, however much this is painted over in endearing colors. A more complete empathy would know what it is like to luxuriate in such escape and also how the enticement of evasion can become more debilitating than anything coughed up by externality, however callous.

*The  
enticement  
of evasion.*

The real is not so distant, not even for someone like Card. We are what we do and do not do. Historicity, the consciousness of the interplay of relative particularities within which we find ourselves, can be set at a distance in many ways. The idolatry of repose can be fed by abstraction, moralism, mystery, beatitude, scandal, TV watching. But there is always a corresponding diminishment in the continuity and creativity, the ethical concentration and endurance, that must compose integrity. The novel also makes it clear that reality can be made distant through an incomplete empathy in the reader, an empathy that remains as passive as C. Card's. The author invites us to consider the problem of the real—vicariously, as the character, and self-consciously, as the reader.

### *Imagining Realities*

"What I desired to do in marble,  
I can poke my shadow through."<sup>25</sup>

Although Card is aware of the difference between doing and dreaming, this is not the case with all of Brautigan's cast of leading losers. For Lee Mellon, the vagrant star of *The Confederate General from Big Sur*, the distinction between worlds is intermittently

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Brautigan, unpublished short story, "The F. Scott Fitzgerald Ahhhhhhhhhhh, Pt. 2."

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blurred. It is fair to say that Mellon is deranged, off and on. Yet, he scrounges by, and more. He dreams *and does* what he wants, in real life. This quality of energetic engagement marks a difference that has been noticed between these two characters.

Sometimes the people in the later books—like C. Card in *Dreaming of Babylon*—may dream, but their dreams are ludicrous. We laugh at him and his dreams, but we would never have laughed at Lee Mellon and his dreams, no matter how emotionally or morally bankrupt.<sup>26</sup>

If Mellon is more adept at making his way than Card, at making the world the way he wants it, it is because Mellon's desires are far less conventional and therefore, less grandiose. In navigating the relentless perils set before an itinerant bum, Mellon remains courageous, resourceful, cunning. His freedom is realized in creative transformation of social resistances more daunting than anything that confronts Card. Here the commentators have missed something essential, seeing Brautigan's misfits as simply too gentle for a brutal world. In her discussion of *Vulnerable People*, Josephine Hendin depicts Brautigan's later characters as gentle archetypes of withdrawal taken directly from real life. She portrays this withdrawal as a strategy that enables the personality to retain its integrity when confronted by a threatening environment.<sup>27</sup> Edward Halsey Foster says of Brautigan's losers, "they are so gentle, so incapable of aggressive action of any sort, that they literally cannot be changed; they are immutable and, therefore, incorruptible."

They are eternally innocent, and if we do not agree with them, we never doubt their honesty. We trust them implicitly. If we find their inability to alter their lives comic and pathetic—much as the tramp in Charlie Chaplin films is comic and pathetic—we also know that, in their innocence, they will not deceive us; we doubt that they would even know what deception is.<sup>28</sup>

Either they, or we, should learn something of deception. Card does indeed look upon his dreamworld as a substitute for all that is threatening in the actual. But he chooses retreat more often when *not* threatened at all. As Foster suggests, Brautigan's losers would "withdraw from the world even if it were not threatening." In his

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<sup>24</sup> Theodore Roethke, "In a Dark Time," *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, 231.

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<sup>26</sup> Edward Halsey Foster, *Richard Brautigan* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 90.

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<sup>27</sup> Josephine Hendin, *Vulnerable People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 44-50.

<sup>28</sup> Foster, 90.

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evaluation, “what comes first may be the demands of their particular sensibility, not a desire to protect themselves—that is, a positive, rather than negative, motivation.”<sup>29</sup> Yes, Card’s own sensibility comes first and foremost. It does not follow that this motivation is positive. Rather, as in Rousseau’s several autobiographies, Card’s retreat is aggressive in its defensiveness.

*Aggressive defensiveness.*

What Card makes happen in Babylon is anything but gentle. The dreamer has nothing other than his own concrete experience of life, or its fitful inversion, to translate into that imaginary world. No matter how lavishly the substitute is portrayed, there is something tawdry about Babylon—and that dream is all that Card has actually made of himself. His aesthetic has served not as a means for editing himself but as a pretext for the dismissal of his real potential. When Card’s imagination turns to memory it refuses to go far enough, to face up to his own history of desire. Rather, memory is enlisted simply to legitimate a further flight, to amplify *for himself* the same psychic and social structures he flees, what Babbitt calls “the narcotic use of history.”<sup>30</sup>

It makes all the difference in worlds whether you engage life from out of imaginative resources that are garnered from within life’s tensional demands, or whether those resources are depleted from within a passivity-inducing, and therefore insular and detensional, mind-set. The tragedy of the author may have been put best by John Keats, “Imagination is like Adam’s dream, he woke and found it true.”

Brautigan’s tragedy, which he enacted in book after book and eventually in his own life, was that he defined everything, including himself, in terms of an ahistorical imagination. Brautigan wanted to round up life in one mercurial, moving, magic vision, but he recognized that he could produce only “paper phantoms,” his term for books.<sup>31</sup>

The most complete tragedy is not when the bad guy wins. It is when the seeming good guy does not lose and learn, and so ends up losing himself. Insulated from taking a fall, Card knows no pragmatic impetus sufficient to require an editing of himself. When what is learned from the hard school is no genuine education, but merely

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 131, n. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1991 reprint [1919]), 237.

<sup>31</sup> Keith Abbott, *Downstream From “Trout Fishing in America”* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1989), 173.

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retreat, one loses and does not know it. C. Card has turned himself into a rotten character. He refuses to face this fact; he does not try to change it. Babylon has become a self-alienation writ large. One has a sense that even Brautigan's best readers have not seen this.

*Imaginative  
retreat as  
moral  
cowardice.*

Hannah Arendt once made the rather exotic suggestion that in *Billy Budd* Melville had shown that "virtue finally interferes not to prevent the crime of evil but to punish the violence of absolute innocence."<sup>32</sup> Here she confused virtue with a prudential judgment by the ship's captain which was too unimaginative to be ethical. Pragmatic effectiveness is surely something that virtue cannot do without. But what appeared most efficacious under the circumstances was a procedurally correct and morally wrong decision. More telling for our purposes, Arendt's reading confused pragmatic (and so imaginative) incompetence with innocence. Budd's incapacity to see well and act with fortitude in the face of evil was indeed a fault; it showed immaturity in moral self-constitution, in courage. But this incapacity was not one deserving of those severe judgments handed down, not least by Arendt. Still, there remains a need for some self-judgment on the posture of a virtue which finds itself in imaginative retreat from the shared world and its concrete evils. This unwillingness to engage the always difficult and sometimes overwhelming tensions of life is a form of moral cowardice. It is not much different from our own everyday experience of retreat from what needs to be done. Perhaps it is driven by a deficiency in the personality, an obstinacy more deep-seated than what Brautigan is able to portray.

"They begin to leave who begin to love. Many there are who leave and do not know it. For their walk of departure is a stirring of the heart. And yet they depart from Babylon."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 82-85.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Psalm LXIV, 2:42-44.