

David Vichnar, PhD
SUPERVISOR'S REPORT:
re "*Experiment in Richard Brautigan's Work*"
by Alina Sokolova
(BA dissertation, 2019)

Ms Sokolova's BA thesis surveys the work of Richard Brautigan, a literary wonder-turned-outcast, and aims to "identify the key elements of Brautigan's style that may have contributed to his marginalization, trace them to the specific traditions, and rethink Brautigan's contribution [...within] a more fitting context in which to evaluate his particular approach to writing" (6).

These key elements of Brautigan's style are itemised in the thesis as Brautigan's a) idiosyncratic medley—dare one say remix—of traditions (from Hemingway to Greek anthologies to Haiku and Zen); b) original approach to figurative language (innovative use of such ancient tropes as mixed metaphors or conceits); and finally c) deployment of (post)modern narrative techniques (metafiction, plurality of narrative levels, etc.).

The chief contribution of this thesis lies in Ms Sokolova's acute close readings of the Brautigan literary output, and more generally in her contextualisation of this output within the several traditions it could be said to fit – without ever becoming reducible to any single one.

Although a single-author study, Ms Sokolova's thesis is broad in both its primary texts—covering the Brautigan canon from such hits as *Trout Fishing* and *In Watermelon Sugar* to some of his lesser-known texts (*Sombrero Fallout*, *Willard and His Bowling Trophies*)—and its contextual engagement: from evaluating Brautigan's modernist heritage in his reuse of Hemingway to examining his postmodernist credentials (most relevantly through Lyotard and Jameson).

Ms Sokolova's close readings are always sensitive, complex and true-to-text, apt at synthesising concepts from widely divergent theoretical discourses. Her fascination with Brautigan's style is evident throughout, though nowhere does it blunt her critical edge. Her argument is clearly structured and her language up-to-par.

Although (or maybe since) a labour of love, the production of the thesis was a lengthy process of search and discovery, for both the student and her supervisor. The supervisor is happy to state that most of his misgivings and criticisms levied during the process Ms Sokolova took to heart and addressed them in the final product.

Still, three points deserve expanding upon and addressing at the defence.

1) The issue of the “canon” and “marginality”: to what extent can Brautigan be turned into a paradigm / study case of literary “marginality”? I take Ms Sokolova’s early point regarding how out of 15 anthologies of US fiction, only four feature Brautigan, but there surely are quite a few far more obscure experimentalists of the 60s/70s US fiction scene that would make a better example than Brautigan (Walter Abish, Harry Mathews, Ishmael Reed come immediately to mind). *Trout Fishing in America*, though perhaps less popular now than 40 years ago, is quite safely canonical. So, is this thesis less a study of literary obscurity than an examination of the coming and going of critical fashions? If so, what does Brautigan’s particular case tell us in general?

2) Connected to this is the historical context of Brautigan’s critical reception – could (should) more be said of how Brautigan’s fall from critical grace went hand in hand with the 1980s reaction against so-perceived “metafictional excesses” of postmodernism, and its own turn toward “committed” or “responsible” writing? What role did Brautigan’s status of a cult hippie writer play in this? Was he really not more than the “baby thrown out with the bath water,” as Thomas McGuane wrote, or was there more agency on his part (resistance toward the mainstream, “making it new” with old means, commitment to craft rather than political message, etc.)?

3) Departing from that, how do we explain Brautigan’s divided European-American reception? The B.A. thesis deals solely with his waning reputation in the U.S. – which is understandable, although it still doesn’t quite explain why Brautigan should appear “wilfully naïve” to Americans as Ferlinghetti described him, given the lengths to which the thesis goes in demonstrating the social-critical side of his writing. But in Europe and Japan (which he visited several times), Brautigan’s writing has remained popular. Indeed, this might be a more or less random coincidence, but since this is a thesis examining the issues of literary critical taste, it is still something to take into account?

Having raised these minor misgivings, I am still positive that Ms Sokolova’s B.A. thesis presents a well-researched work of illuminating exegesis on an underrated and very complex writer, and a compelling case study in a general literary type. As such, it vastly exceeds the usual scope and depth of a regular BA thesis.

Therefore, I have no qualms in recommending it for the defence and propose a grade of either *excellent* – *výborně* or *very good* – *velmi dobře*, depending on the candidate’s performance at the defence. *Práci doporučuji k obhajobě.*

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David Vichnar, PhD
Prague, 3 June, 2019