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**And They Died Happily Ever After:
The Dystopian Constructions of Language
and Death in Richard Brautigan's Novel
*In Watermelon Sugar***

ABSTRACT

The novel by the American writer Richard Brautigan, *In Watermelon Sugar*, published in 1968, has a rich history of criticism behind it, one that fails, however, to agree on the membership of the novel to the utopian family or, on the contrary, to the dystopian one; and, consequently, one that shows significant variation when it comes to establishing the relationship between utopian and dystopian elements. The present paper aims to demonstrate that certain functions of language and its ways of meta-textual usage, as well as the representation of death in Brautigan's novel are strategic elements belonging to the profound textual logic, by virtue of which, what may at first appear as utopia (indeed what *is* one to a certain extent), turns into dystopia. From a perspective that belongs both to the literary studies and to that of death studies, we investigate the utopian occurrences of death (the good death, the tamed death, the denied death) and of the various representations of suicide. Apparently, suicide is only a form of disposal of the non-utopian element, but, in fact, it explodes the entire utopian semantics, contributing, in close conjunction with the function of language, to the settlement of Brautigan's novel to full dystopia.

KEYWORDS

Utopia; Dystopia; Richard Brautigan; *In Watermelon Sugar*; Language; Death; Suicide.

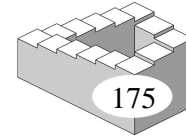
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**Double Introduction. The Approach
of the Study and Some Considerations
about the Cultural Taste
of Watermelon Sugar**

The third novel by the American writer Richard Brautigan, *In Watermelon Sugar*, appears for the first time in 1968, as part of the Western anti-cultural effervescence of the time, being, generally and superficially often seen as a utopia, as a parable of free-living in a perfect community, which both accepts and transcends its past, just as it accepts natural death as a phenomenon that raises no problems.

The novel can be summarized as follows: the literary presentation of a populated territory composed almost entirely of sugar melon, in an undetermined time, in which everything seems to work perfectly, as logic of functioning and with some exceptions. All the 375 inhabitants seem to be happy, living in a good communion around a building called iDeath, true "temple of banality"¹, in perfect equality with each other, working with joy and having neither shortages, nor curiosities. The ancient danger, the supra-rational tigers and users of human language, the ones who would eat people, was broken, these being completely exterminated, persisting only in the cult of their remembrance. In the very place where

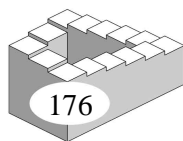


the last tiger was burned, just next to iDEATH, the authorities built a trout hatchery. Death is naturalized up to the ultimate trivialization, provoking no regrets to those who lost their loved ones and being followed, at a ritualistic level, by dances. The perfection of such a world is called into question by inBOIL's gang of rebellious souls. inBOIL stands withdrawn in Forgotten Works, together with approximately 20 individuals dissatisfied with the life around iDEATH, a life which they regard as artificial and stupid. They look for the forgotten books that once filled the surroundings (and which were used by those in iDEATH as fuel) and they make whiskey from other objects which in the meanwhile became useless. It is of inBOIL that Margaret will fall in love with, a girl who still retains the curiosity of the past and who will commit suicide after the violent death, resulting from inBOIL's gang demonstrative suicide.

In 1999, in the *Encyclopedia of American Literature*, Newton Smith characterizes Brautigan's novel as "a parable for survival in the 20th century"² and notes that in it one can detect the concerns for the Eastern religions and their pronounced metafictional structure. Smith's viewpoint on the novel is not the singular, on the contrary. He places himself in the fairly old tradition of interpreting the novel as a utopia, a tradition that extends up to the present. In a 2001 study, Kathryn Hume brings into question the neutrality of the narrator (an aspect often ignored by critics, in her view) and places it under the sign of the Zen philosophy, under that of stoicism and under that of psychomachia (or psychomachy)³. If we are to accept Hume's approach, Brautigan's book is a utopia because, although it depicts inBOIL's rebellion, this representation of the revolt is correlated with a rather negative signification: strong emotions cause the eruption of violence in the surrounding world, the incoming of death which nobody can cope with.

Of the earlier interpretations that see Brautigan's novel as a utopia, the one from 1974, belonging to Harvey's Leavitt (who believes that what is put in the representation is a reconquest of the paradise) distinguishes itself. iDEATH is a new Eden, a peaceful one this time, one from which of the temptation of knowledge is permanently driven away with the killing of the tigers. The narrator is Adam II, as Leavitt calls him, and he originates not from the dust, but from the crimes of the tigers and from rationality. The author of the study interprets the linguistic structure of iDEATH as being a triple allusion: to the death of the subconscious (desires are fulfilled), to the death of the super-ego (tigers are dead) and to the *idea of death*, an idea that now the inhabitants of this community no longer perceive as a consequence of a sin. Irrespective of the nuances of doubt or of the lack of consensus among such critics and logic/ethic of the world described by Brautigan, the prevailing conception is that the author's intent is to achieve a literary utopia.

Yet, construal of Richard Brautigan's novel as a utopia is countered by another line of interpretation, one according to which *In Watermelon Sugar* there is actually a dystopia at work, a sign that Brautigan's watermelon sugar is not necessarily sweet and needs to be tasted in a cultural, dynamic, way. Unlike Kathryn Hume, for instance, Carolyn Blakely interprets the author's silence on the interpretation of his work as self-evident: it is a silence of the pastoral parody and by no means a mark of the author's consensus with the depicted world. Distortion, the author believes, is as unattractive as the world, profit-seeking, inhumane and decadent, to which it applies⁴: "Life in the new utopian society is a farce and does not represent a satisfactory escape for man from his tainted, modern world"⁵. Recently, Cosmin Perța shows in a study



that Brautigan's writing is not a utopia in the classic sense, but nor can it be said to be a dystopia, or, in other words, it is both utopia and dystopia at the same time⁶. The author motivates this ambivalence by what is happening in the current era with the fantastic: it regresses structurally, but it evolves qualitatively. In this way it acquires a versatile and parasitic existence which complicates even the appearances.

The present enquiry does not aim at an exhaustive approach of the literary and cultural meanings of Brautigan's work, nor will it have the ambition to untangle its complex narrative strategies or to elucidate its utopian valences (dystopian, respectively). Rather it will focus on the representation of death and on the themes of language, as fundamental anti-utopian constructs of the writing. In other words, our goal is to show that both the way in which death is depicted in the novel and the correlations that can be established between its representations and other elements of the narrative, as well as the surface and the depth functions performed by language within the novel, make it impossible to consider the novel only in terms of utopia. Moreover, based on these two elements, death and language, we shall see that utopia (can) exist (only) to the extent that anti-utopia is present as well, that the bewildered timelessness of utopia drags in the trail of her crawling the dying as a necessarily human activity, so it is arguable that the anti-utopia is at least just as specific for this novel as is the utopia.

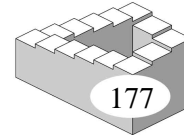
The Desired, the Fable and the Convenient Language

The poetic quality of Brautigan's language from *In Watermelon Sugar* is unquestionable. If Jaroslav Kušnir called the novel *a linguistic fantasy*⁷, Ryan Britt sees in it "a collection of poetry, rather than the short novel"⁸. The poeticity comes from two sources: from the bizarre referentiality, immersed in a fantastic of the sugar melon, fully accepted as the only normal state, but also from the structure of the narratorial speech – simple, alert, almost *child-like*, according to Britt.

The language in Brautigan's novel seems, at first sight, a utopian language, in tune with the utopian world which produces it and, reciprocally, to whose realization and confirmation it contributes. First, the language is one of desire; theoretically, of the expressed desire, because, as mentioned above, in an interpretation like that of Leavitt, the sub-conscious is dead. On the other hand, the super-ego is also dead, so the desire surfaces and becomes visible and it denies the possibility of any abyssal instance (a profound ego).

There are about 300 occurrences of the verb *want*, be it in the active voice or as participle, but more often is the first case. There is a sort of childhood of language ("Whatever baby wants, baby gets"), but only in a paradoxical way, as it requires an applied desire that emerges in the realm of a strongly rationalized psyche, this at the level of the characters, and at the level of the logic of the novel, the language of desire implies staging, literary figuration of the act of fulfillment, because, in fact, the desire cannot stay but before the utopia (conditioning it causally), and within it, it is rather a form of re-storing (remembering) the desire.

Secondly, the utopian language of the novel is a language of weakness. That is,



both a language of the ontological weakening, in a post-human sense, post-existential, and a language belonging to the convention of the new world. In utopia, everything is decided; everything pertains to a smooth normality, a luminous normality. Compared to the previous reality of the utopia, the language is inferior – it no longer contains the same variation (the negative feelings are abolished, disapprovals of the social sense and of the sense of community and so on and so forth) – and derivative – only a part of the links utopian language – non-utopian reality are still preserved, because the reality itself is changing, through utopian postulate and through the crystallizations in structures of reality of the new language (the power of the language to generate reality). Convenience appears as an effect of the adaptation of language to the utopian reality and, vice versa, of her challenge by the language, being a logical figure, but also a symbolic one, of repetition, seen as a typically utopian mechanism, of the qualitative equality of time, of the re-confirmation. The language of weakening cannot be included in the paradigm of Gianni Vattimo's concept of *weak thought*. It involved the divorce from the metaphysical thinking and from the claim of the unique truth, while the weakening of language in Brautigan's novel relates solely to the relationship with the pre-utopian or non-utopian reality.

In defiance of this weakness, inside the community surrounding iDEATH, a strong reality is born, a self-confident one, within which truths shine like the corpses clad in garments of sugar melon that glows from their glassy tomb. The dead which rot in coffins of glass, framed by the light, become a metaphor for the sense of the utopian existence and for the mechanisms by which the language rarefies vertically – it becomes irrelevant in depth – and grabs color horizontally – it becomes surprising to some extent, it gains flavor. Death is no longer a

mystery, but an exhibit, just as the word is no longer only denotative, but also demonstrative.

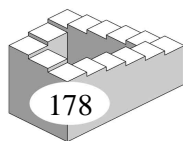
The Anti-utopian Meaning of Language

Utopian language is blown from its very inside by the anti-utopian language of the character inBOIL, and from an inside which approaches rapidly the edges of the book as a fiction, by the language of the narrator himself. First, in what concerns inBOIL – whose name refers to the idea of outbreak, of reaching a point where changes occur (the process of boiling involves the transition from liquid to gas) – takes place a defiance of the rules concerning the use of words, and later of things. inBOIL begins by proclaiming the death of iDEATH (“To hell with iDEATH”⁹) and then by completely removing himself from the small happy community, scavenging through the old stuff and making whiskey from them:

He became very removed from people and then his speech would be strange, slurred and his movements became jerky and his temper bad, and he spent a lot of time at night in the trout hatchery and sometimes he would laugh out loud and you could hear this enormous laugh that had now become his, echoing through the rooms and halls, and into the very changing of iDEATH: the indescribable way it changes that we like so much, that suits us¹⁰.

The contesting of the utopian reality is pursued also by this perversion of language into the de-structured word, into laughter.

InBOIL's deeds, as well as the words that accompany them, are meant to show that the language from iDEATH does not mean what he wants them to mean, that the



relationship between the reality the he produces and which, in its turn, sustains him, is precarious and arbitrary, and by no means cohesive and evident. Ryan Britt observes, regarding the language from Brautigan's novel that "watermelons might not mean watermelon, and tigers might be a different creature all together"¹¹. This non-coincidence between what the utopian language claims to stage and the way in which the utopian reality activates meanings and interpretations active in the reader's mind is explained through inBOIL's role in the general economy of the novel. The non-utopian ingredient of the utopian language activates the function of falsification of reality (function related to epistemology, and which emphasizes the quality of construct of the utopia).

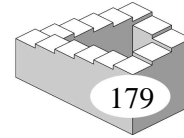
Therefore watermelon sugar may not refer to watermelon sugar, but to a different substance, to another type of novel-structure, to another cluster of significations than the immediately (and possibly false) detectable ones. From this perspective, one can say that the truth is no longer self-evident and that what intervenes is the necessity of assuming the decision-taking capacity for one truth or another, and, at a meta-textual level, for utopia or for anti-utopia. InBOIL's words will prove themselves all the more able to denounce a hidden reality inside the utopian reality, as they will be followed by the staged suicidal action as a show meant (designed) to effectively change the reality of iDEATH.

Secondly, the anti-utopian language is introduced through the instance of the character-narrator. It extends the desire, as reason for utopian world, at the level of the reader and, ultimately, at the level of the lecturer, and it gives him as object of desirability, the narrative strategic wool-ball (the heart of the writing) or even the narrator, thing which causes a circularity

parallel to the one formed by the elements utopian language – utopian world, which counterbalances it as functionality of the utopian elements. The narrator's name is not pre-determined, but, as a language-phenomenon it varies, according to all the rules of the postmodern textualism, in accordance with the reader's interpretation:

My name depends on you. Just call me whatever is in your mind. If you are thinking about something that happened a long time ago: Somebody asked you a question and you did not know the answer. That is my name. Perhaps it was raining very hard. That is my name. Or somebody wanted you to do something. You did it. Then they told you what you did was wrong – 'Sorry for the mistake,' – and you had to do something else. That is my name. Perhaps it was a game that you played when you were a child or something that came idly into your mind when you were old and sitting in a chair near the window. That is my name. Or you walked someplace. There were flowers all around. That is my name.¹²

The dependence of the narrator on the reader signifies the dependence of the language of the book – in an instrumental and extended sense, on the text –, on the language which comes from the outside of the utopian world, an added language and with a role of interpretation and of trigger of the prime language. Consequently, to say that there exists such a dependence between the narrator and the reader means to say that there is a connection between the desire from the text (utopia) and the desire for the text (the interpretation of the utopia from the perspective of the reality) and it actually means that the reality of the utopia is threatened by its very form of fictional constitution. Through this linguistic configuration



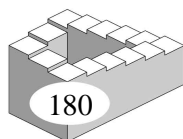
of the couple narrator-reader, the utopia opens through the inclusion of the freedom of decision and interpretation towards the anguishing and ambivalent reality (“dark and the moon seemed to rise from every plan”¹³).

The Good, the Tamed and Denied Death

As we noted in the second section of the present paper, death is fully visible. In the iDEATH community there appears to be fulfilled the theoretical and anthropological desideratum of the studies on death from the ’70s-’90s, to reinstate the reign of familiar death together with the popularization of some researchers of the death phenomenon, from a historic and anthropological point of view, among which the most well-known are, even in the present, Philippe Ariès¹⁴ and Ernest Becker¹⁵. Ariès underlined the major mutation that occurred in the contemporary epoch of relating the human being to death. Instead of accepting the presence of death as inherent to the human being, the Occident chases death outside its current preoccupations, thus becoming incapable to confront itself appropriately with dying, as a natural process. For the French historian, death transforms itself from *tamed* into *forbidden*. In his turn, Becker draws attention to the negative psychological side of the contemporary habit of negating death. As death is, in his opinion, a reality of which the human individual is instinctively afraid (in this way defining him as being) the contemporary repression of death becomes psychologically dangerous and ontologically invalidating. Through repression it is understood not just the normal evasion from the direct confrontation with death – the negation that gave birth to the culture¹⁶, but the attempt to minimalize, in a pathological manner, the reality of death, to extract it from the world.

Despite this, in *In Watermelon Sugar*, death appears to be re-integrated into daily

life, re-naturalized, in a manner which would satisfy the nostalgic Ariès, who regretted the “technologization” and the “medicalization” of the modern era which have determined the wilding of death. Death in iDEATH has three chief characteristics, among which the first two make of it a desirable death to the specialists in Death Studies who criticize the attitudes of the contemporaneity in the face of death. It is good, tamed and denied. Death is good only because as it is defined by Ariès, it has a place at home, most often, among the people we know, lacking any violence, but rather because it happens as a natural consequence of living one’s life. It is the last stage of the consumption of life, which occurs not from an existential nothingness (Sartre), from a semantic and conceptual void (Jankélévitch), but in the logic of a natural process. Practically, death in iDEATH is, for the characters, the continuation of the utopian living from the time of life, the consuming of the same watermelon sugar, at the material level as well as at the physical, attitudinal level and at that of the representation of death. The graves buried in the river and not in the ground are also composed themselves of watermelon sugar and of rot and spread around light – and have five or six noctuid moths flying above them. The graves function as monuments of the future rather than forms of remembrance of the deceased persons: “we bury them all in glass coffins at the bottoms of rivers and put foxfire in the tombs, so they glow at night and we can appreciate what comes next”¹⁷. We also have a clear occurrence of the good death in the customs of the community which dances as a ritual for the celebration of someone’s death: “It is a custom here to hold a dance in the trout hatchery after a funeral. Everybody comes and there’s a good band and much dancing goes on. We all like to waltz”¹⁸. It is a custom which will be put into practice at the end of



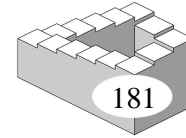
the book too after i-BOIL's and Margaret's suicide, only that then, we will see that the ritual will tend to transform itself in rituality, it will devoid itself partially by its real affective content. Pauline asks herself, after Margaret's suicide *why* and she experiences feelings of guilt which she seems to surpass towards the end, but which produce, nevertheless, a rupture in the perfect world of the iDEATH.

Nevertheless, death is also tamed because, although very present, it does not create anxieties, but forms the lucidity of the characters in respect with what follows. It is visible in the recounting of the narrator of the story of the death of his parents who were eaten by tigers that death in iDEATH is not a savage death. When the narrator was nine years old a few tigers came to the family's breakfast to eat them both. The parents are quickly killed without even having time to articulate a word. While they feasted on the parents the tigers strive to calm the child down, tell him stories and apologize. Pragmatically, he refuses the story, but requests and accepts their help with the arithmetic.

"Don't be afraid," one of the tigers said. "We're not going to hurt you. We don't hurt children, just sit there where you are and we'll tell you a story." One of the tigers started eating my mother. He bit her arm off and started chewing on it. "What kind of story would you like to hear? I know a good story about a rabbit." "I don't want to hear a story," I said. "OK," the tiger said, and he took a bite out of my father. I sat there for a long time with the spoon in my hand, and then I put it down. "Those were my folks," I said, finally. "We're sorry," one of the tigers said. "We really are." "Yeah," the other tiger said. "We wouldn't do this if we didn't have to, if

we weren't absolutely forced to. But this is the only way we can keep alive." "We're just like you," the other tiger said. "We speak the same language you do. We think the same thoughts, but we're tigers." "You could help me with my arithmetic," I said.¹⁹

The death of the parents is tamed because the crime is justified: the tigers kill in order to survive. It is not a matter of hate, but one of need. In the world of iDEATH, they are, practically already tamed. Despite their intelligence the tigers cannot evade their role within the food chain, and they know this very well. The child does not show himself affected by the death of a significant other such as his parents. He discreetly reprehends the tigers, but then he thinks how to benefit of their solicitude and regret. Neither death as fear of death, nor death as loss of the Other do not pass the line of a non-problematic tolerance of the characters. Dying changes things in the life of the characters, but not to the extent of feeling the need of a meta-discourse, a reflexive discourse on reality, be it composed on the way of the religious or on that of the philosophic. Ultimately, a meta-discourse generated by death is a cultural discourse as the sociologist Patrick Baudry affirmed²⁰. It is certain that both the good death and the tamed death work together in order to give birth to the negated death. Due to the fact that death does not structurally invalidate the way of the world – the tombs continue to shine in the dark being twofold submerged in a transparent medium (in the glass casket and in the water of the river) – and that it does not rise too much the average level of fear (that if there exists fear in iDEATH) we can conclude that death is negated. The absence of the active character of denial must not surprise. Generally speaking, the socio-cultural negation of death is not so much a matter of conscious



individuality, but it has at its basis complex social processes, which are most often insufficiently realized.

Suicide and Cremation as Forms of De-structuring Utopia

The utopian realization of death is neither, in any way, absolute in Brautigan's novel nor is it lacking in underlying critiques. Furthermore, since we have already brought into discussion Ariès and Becker who have opened the road of the research in the area of Death Studies on the actual cultural paradigm of the denial of death, we must signal the fact that this very theoretical conception on death is rather obsolete. This is so firstly, because it is considered that the socio-cultural realities have changed and that phenomena such as the extreme mediation of death make death no longer so occult, and because there are researchers of death who contest the idea that death must be accepted and who believe that the negation of death is a normal trans-cultural form. For Patrick Baudry for example, the pathological negation is accomplished by means of mere trivialization. Thus, the researcher believes that there is a wild, untamable side to death²¹. In other words, from such a perspective, death in iDEATH is not only utopian, but also deformed from the point of view of a thanatological reality correctly filtered through the Death Studies theories. It is somehow obvious that the utopian death in the novel does not limit itself to be tamed, but it is an ultra-tamed death. Between the two staged of representation of death there is no hierarchical step, an intensive difference, but an opposition, a powerful contrast.

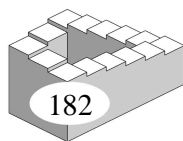
inBOIL beaks the tradition of banal death and organizes a group suicide meant to be a sort of protest against the nature of iDEATH, of the Trout hatchery, of the

Watermelon Sugar, of the entire utopian world. inBOIL never says what is it that he wants to demonstrate but in a negative manner: to demonstrate that things are NOT as they are, as they appear to be.

This place stinks. This isn't iDEATH at all. This is just a figment of your imagination. All of you guys here are just a bunch of clucks, doing ducky things at your ducky iDEATH. (...) To hell with your iDEATH. I've forgotten more iDEATH than you guys will ever know.

This is what inBOIL tells Charlie and to other people when he decides to leave to Forgotten Works, and when he comes to i-DEATH in order to kill himself together with his gang, he states that "You guys don't know anything about iDEATH. I'm going to show you something about it soon. What real iDEATH is like". In inBOIL's opinion, the only palpable thing relating to what iDEATH should be is tied to the imperative existence of the tiger. For inBOIL, the eradication of the tigers – of murder, no matter how rational, of aggressively – equals with the abandoning of the true calling of iDEATH, of the human organization of some sort or another). And the true destiny of iDEATH is the placement of the existence under the form of the utopian.

As the object of its challenge is the utopian sense, the semantic overflow, the language in which the desire met the reality and the other way around, inBOIL's actions will display the non-sense and will place it under the apparent sign of the absurd through the re-claiming of a specific clause as well as through the chosen type of death: suicide. It is known that suicide, regardless of its causes and type, has always an anti-social component. That is, it is to some extent a critique of society. Giving death to



yourself overlaps up to a point, with contesting to the society and to the culture in which you live the right to give yourself life, as well as the quality of this life²². Essentially it can be confirmed that inBOIL's suicide presupposes an attack on the tamed and utopian dearth, an effort to turn wild death and infuse it with non-sense. The collective suicide, planned by inBOIL, is atrocious and seems to want to compete with the temporal extension of the utopia. inBoil feels, most probably, that the simple violent unplumb from the life within iDEATH would be insufficient as effect and, for that reason, he does so in provide the vision a prolonged, but quantum, in stages, suicide. Being in the heart of iDEATH, in the trout hatchery, he and his comrades hack themselves starting from the fingers and ending with their ears. Violence is no longer a solitary act, but through the blood that invades the place it converts into a symbol that visibly aims at all the members of the community. In order to be able to commit the autolytic actions, inBOILS' gang uses alcohol, which is in its turn a socially demanding element, a drogue that attracts attention to the fact that the given reality is never enough.

Margaret's suicide is received with a relative calmness by the community. Even the recount of the narrator who sees her die is pretty neutral:

I saw Margaret climbing an apple tree beside her shack. She was crying and had a scarf knotted around her neck. She took the loose end of the scarf and tied it to a branch covered with young apples. She stepped off the branch and then she was standing by herself on the air²³.

But, beyond this reception, the violent interruption of the perfect life made of watermelon sugar announces that death will

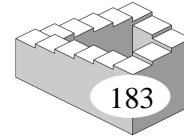
never again be "what we learn to know as death". Margaret's death brings into the foreground the anguish, the existential doubt and the negation of the utopian world's sense (it can, thus, be seen that the lesson offered by inBOIL was learned).

The ritual-like pair of the suicide and of the death that is unwanted by the community in iDEATH appears to be the cremation. This is used, and not the burial, for the elimination of the former tigers' bodies and it is also to the fire that inBOIL's gang's maimed bodies are condemned to.

Charley Took a six-inch match and set fire to the shack that contained inBOIL and the bodies of his gang. We all stood back and the flames went up higher and higher and burned with that beautiful light that watermelon trout oil makes²⁴.

Nevertheless, the burning is not without residue, the ash being dispelled and persisting in the perfect world of iDEATH: "As the flames diminished to very little, a strong wind came out of the Forgotten Works and scattered ashes rapidly through the air"²⁵. The wind that spreads the ash will wave, a little time after, Margaret's hanged body.

Moreover, there is another way in which violent death and cremation (the means of disposing of the dead bodies still considered by many to be extreme) become de-structuring elements of the edenic community of the utopia, which is coagulated around iDEATH: the intertextuality or the presence of the motivation beyond the book. The narrator writes his book which is *just coming along*. The remembrance and the very cult of the past does not necessarily affect the efficiency of the utopian world, and whether these are exclusively preserved in their rational data and whether they are accompanied by a forgetfulness of the



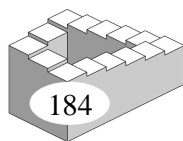
participative living. This is what happens with the tigers whose memory is crystallized in the exterior, in the statue that represents them and in some tiger bones which can still be seen on the bottom of the river. But the purpose of a book is to put in motion the very living, being always, to some extent, an ontological affair²⁶. In his way, if the utopia of the community in which death reaches the augmented degree of acceptance and of trivialization includes not only some occurrences of the violent death but also the very book that illustrates them, it means that the heart of the utopia, or better said, its sanguine, irrigating system is composed from the very matter it negates: the anti-utopia. The violence of death will not be forgotten, and it will not transform into benign signs (as the bones of the tigers did) of a past tense existence, but will remain a process which will unfold again and again with every reading of the book that the narrator writes and which, barely coincides with the very book that writes him²⁷.

This eminently postmodern status of *the book within the book* is emphasized by Jaroslav Kušnír as well, who notes that the narrator: is a writer writing an indefinite book which he never finishes but which seems to be, quite paradoxically, the book the reader has just read²⁸. Kušnír sees in this *mise en abyme* the evidence of the postmodern multi-layering of Brautigan's novel. None the less, he discusses the idyllic of the community and about inBOIL's violence as being somehow separated and presented by the author as two alternatives of a vision about the world – alternatives which are intersect too little by means of the motivation of the book. Or, there may exist an interrelation between them: the idyllic world cannot exist without the violence with which it is threatened – and, on the other side, the aggressive world that inBOIL's gang brings to life results also as an

emanation of the utopia's specific edulcoration, and can be interpreted as well as an attempt to recover the human ambivalence. The utopian repetition ("In Watermelon Sugar the deeds were done and done again") does not solely belong to the idyllic world, but to its reactionary core alike – a core of the novel itself. Besides, the Narrator dreams again inBOIL's suicide: "I had a long dream, which was again the history of inBOIL and that gang of his and the terrible things that happened just a few short months ago"²⁹.

Conclusions: The Nightmare of Living Forever in Watermelon Sugar

Death and language are subversive elements in Brautigan's utopia. Both are used, in the first place, as elements of construction of the utopian world – the language is one of fulfilled desire and of convenience, and death is tamed as it does not raise any psychological problems of acceptance or rejection, as none of the moments in which it unfolds is either unsuitable or denied as it no longer has reduced functions of coagulation and of generation of culture, but also as utopian contesting elements. Language is, less loyal to the world that it establishes when it is employed by inBOIL and by the narrator in its textualist hypostases, when it appears that there is the possibility that in its referentiality there may emerge falsity, if not the falseness itself. As for death, its banality is dashed by the suicide of inBOIL's gang, by that of Margaret's and by the cremation of the unwanted, shameful dead bodies of the suicidals, but also of the tigers. Without the dystopian content of the theme of the death and of the structuring of the language, Brautigan's novel would display a facet as excessive and as schematic of the desire to live happily ever after. The utopia produces

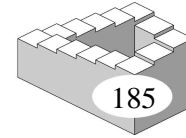


the dream of everlasting, and in a certain sense, it can really accomplish it, as it is the literary descendant of the topos of the medieval, earthly paradise³⁰, reaching the forever living in an non-ontological, figurative – at best, poetical – manner. However, in Brautigan's work, this dream, candied and luminous, the death and the language continuously constructs longer and shorter nightmares – depending on the rapidity with which inBOIL, drunk as a fiddler, finds his ear in order to cut it off, and depending on the name which the reader attributes to the narrator.

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Notes

- ¹ Cosmin Perța, “Utopie și distopie în zahăr de pepene de Richard Brautigan” [Utopia and dystopia in Richard Brautigan’s *In Watermelon Sugar*], în *Luceafărul de dimineață*, București, nr. 7, 2012.
- ² Newton Smith, “Brautigan, Richard”, in *Encyclopedia of American Literature* (Ed. Steven R. Serafin), New York, Continuum Publishing, 1999, p. 122-123.
- ³ Kathryn Hume, “Brautigan’s psychomachia”, in *Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 34.1 (Mar 2001), p. 75-92.
- ⁴ Carolyn Blakely, “Narrative Technique in Brautigan’s *In Watermelon Sugar*”, in *CLA Journal* 35 (2) December 199, p. 150-158.
- ⁵ *Ibidem*.
- ⁶ Cosmin Perța, *op. cit.*
- ⁷ Jaroslav Kušnír, “Diversity of Postmodern Fantasy: Richard Brautigan’s *In Watermelon Sugar* and Donald Barthelme’s *The Dead Father*”, presented at *PostModerne Produktionen Conference*, University of Erlangen, Germany, November 23-25, 2001.
- ⁸ Ryan Britt, “Genre in the Mainstream: Richard Brautigan’s *In Watermelon Sugar*”, in *Tor.Com.*, 14 June 2011.
- ⁹ To be noted, once again, the connection between death and language.
- ¹⁰ Richard Brautigan, *In Watermelon Sugar*, Dell Publishing, 1974.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*.
- ¹² *Ibidem*.
- ¹³ *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁴ Philippe Ariès, *L’Homme devant la mort*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1977.
- ¹⁵ Becker, Ernest, *The Denial of Death*, New York, Free Press, 1973.
- ¹⁶ Georg Simmel, *La tragédie de la culture et culture et autres essais*, traduits de l’allemand par Sabine Cornille et Philippe Ivernel, précédé d’un essai de Vladimir Jankélévitch, Paris, Rivages-Poche, 1988.
- ¹⁷ Richard Brautigan, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁹ *Ibidem*.
- ²⁰ Patrick Baudry, “Paradoxes contemporains. Nouveaux rapports anthropologiques à la mort”, in Lenoir, Frédéric Lenoir and Jean-Philippe de Tonnac (eds.), *La mort et l’immortalité. Encyclopédie des savoirs et des croyances*, Bayard, 2004, p. 894-895.
- ²¹ Patrick Baudry, *La place des morts. Enjeux et rites*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1999.
- ²² Cf. Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane, 2001 [1995].
- ²³ Richard Brautigan, *op. cit.*
- ²⁴ *Ibidem*.
- ²⁵ *Ibidem*.
- ²⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Adevăr și metodă [Truth and Method]*, traducere de Gabriel Cercel, Gabriel Kohn, Călin Petcana și Lariša Dumitru, București, Editura Teora, 2001 [*Wahrheit und Methode*, 1960].
- ²⁷ An appropriate imagistic representation would be, perhaps, *Drawing Hands* by M.C. Escher (1948).
- ²⁸ Jaroslav Kušnír, *Op. cit.*
- ²⁹ Richard Brautigan, *Op. cit.*
- ³⁰ Cf. Corin Braga, *Du paradis perdu à l’antiutopie aux XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2010.