

Beautiful Unrest : Fetler's "Impossible Appetites"

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ジェイムズ・フェットラーの短編 「貪婪なまでの欲望」の分析

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<要 約>

9編の短編から成る James Fetler の小説 Impossible Appetites 貪婪なまでの欲望は、1980年にアイオワ大学文芸学部により短編賞を受賞し、その年にアイオワ大学出版局から公刊されたものである。彼は、既に Jackson and Atlantic Monthly 賞を受賞していたが、この Impossible Appetites に代表される作品群は、著者が49歳にして迎えた大きな転換を象徴する作品だと言ってよい。本稿では、Joseph Quail 4部作として知られ、書名ともなっている Impossible Appetites に特に焦点を当てて論じることにはしたい。

Impossible Appetites, a collection of nine short stories, by James Fetler won the Iowa School of Letters Award for Short Fiction in 1980 and was published that year by the University of Iowa Press. This represented a major breakthrough for the forty-nine year old author, who had won the Jackson and Atlantic Monthly awards for his fiction. This study will concentrate on the title story, "Impossible Appetites," the first of the Joseph Quail quartet in this volume.

James Fetler's **Impossible Appetites** consists of nine stories, four connected by common characters and all connected by a common major theme. In their own ways, all the main characters in these nine stories have "impossible appetites." All demand more from other individuals and the social order (not always unfairly) than they and it are willing to give. Yet behind their "impossible appetites" there exists a greater power, like the infected gum beneath the aching tooth. The next to the last story, "The Afterglow of Decay," could as easily have been the title story, for all the stories, perhaps with the exception of "The Dust of Yuri Serofimovich," are about lives falling apart. First marriages, second marriages and love relationships collapse. Women are either unfaithful or suffocatingly dependent. Men are drunkards, adulterers, failures. Kurt, the confused religious hero of "Afterglow of Decay" lives in a house that stands on an eroding sea cliff in Santa Monica, California. No matter how hard Joseph Quail tries to fix his daughter's rabbit hutch in "Impossible

Appetites” the neighborhood cats always manage to get at the baby rabbits. Things fall apart, the center can’t hold no matter how hard you try. Trying, in fact, only speeds up the decaying process. Albert Keinfogel’s final nervous breakdown comes when his friends spring a surprise birthday party on him to help him out of his depression (“Kleinfogel in San Francisco.”)

Were I asked to find a subtitle for this collection I would suggest “The Consumer’s Tragedy.” But I refer to consumption in the spiritual or experiential rather than material sense. To reasonably explicate this, I must delve into recent history.

The stories are infused with the mental atmosphere of the late 1960’s and early to mid 1970’s, a time of great prosperity and social and political freedom in America. It was also a time of great social upheaval; but that was a beautiful unrest. Protest was exorcizing the ghost of Joe McCarthy and discrediting political witch hunts, breaking down old social and racial prejudices, and fighting the Warfare State. Most of these stories take place around the San Francisco Bay area, mostly in San Francisco and Palo Alto, an area noted for its physical beauty and tradition of tolerance. In those days it was the center of the so-called counter-culture, an informal alliance of anti-war protesters, ecology conscious communal dropouts, non-traditional religious and intellectuals and artists, which was creating its own political, social and sexual morality, fashions, arts and lifestyles, according to Theodore Rozak who coined the term in **Making of a Counterculture**. The Bay Area was (and is) also one of the richest parts of America’s richest state. Yet, at that time, because of low rents, much of its best parts — those not yet made fashionable by the rich — were accessible to anyone with a moderate income. The era was wonderful if you weren’t abjectly poor or sent to fight in Vietnam.

The majority of people we meet in Fetler’s stories are unhappy. Why? It is not because they are overly concerned with money. It is fascinating how materially ungreedy Fetler’s people are. Yet they are greedy for “fulfillment” and “actualization” which, as Joe Quaille in “The Indians Don’t Need Me Anymore” admits “seemed easy enough to wrap and take home when I had Abraham Maslow on the lectern before me” but actually is not.

Most of Fetler’s main characters are artists, would-be artists or in some way involved with creativity. Joseph Quaille teaches literature and is a diarist (“Impossible Appetites,” “The Indians Don’t Need Me Anymore,” “All Terminations Begin in the Mind,” “The Afterglow of Decay”) and his brother Kurt (“Afterglow”) is a novelist. Andrew Pelzner (“The Blum Invitation”) is also a novelist, while Stan and Al in “Kleinvogel in San Francisco” are commercial writers and Al enters “serious” writing by beginning a book about his family. Julie (“Appetites”) is involved in architectural design and Constanza (“Terminations”) is a would-be photographer. Khoslov (“Mutability and the Meat Loaf”) is a concert musician. Wachtmann (“Wachtmann’s Cubes”) is a failed pianist and his boss and friend, Finely, is an aspiring stage set designer. (Finely’s wife is an aspiring social worker; she has humanistic

if not artistic aspirations.) Though Kolodny ("The Dust of Yuri Serafimovich") has no creative urges, he is a bookseller, which makes him an aspect of the creative world. That Fetler concentrates on creative people may expose his own rarified artistic existence (he would not be alone in this century); nevertheless he captures, unconsciously I think, an important aspect of the American working class psyche which understands that art — be it the art of the music halls or poetry — is one of the few and fastest vehicles working people have for social mobility — to escape to freedom from the dehumanized routine of monopoly capitalism, be it in the field, the factory or the office.

The "impossible appetites" of Fetler's people is created by the America Dream, which either, like Cleopatra, creates hungers where it most satisfies, or, simply doesn't deliver the goods it promises. Watching them drinking too much, fornicating with each others wives, demanding affection when alone and autonomy when they are not, one could be tempted to dismiss them as so many spoiled brats railing against a universe that will not indulge them; to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw. But it would be superficial to do so. The title story and the collection are essentially about what happens when people become creatively frustrated: the dangers of growing up absurd, as Paul Goodman put it.

Impossible Appetites is also a psychic picture of a nation at war.

In the perpetually lovely environment that is virtually present in each story, a monster lives which is creating it and at the same time sucking it dry: the American military machine and the Vietnam war. The Vietnam war is a source of discontent, whether one opposes it like Joseph, is indifferent to it like his second wife, Julie, or stupidly supports it like Julie's father, The Commander. Yet the malaise wrought by the Vietnam war is, in Fetler's world, essentially intellectual. No one is sent off to the war to die in **Impossible Appetites**. We see no broken veterans on crutches hobble along the tree lined streets of Palo Alto. The gore cannot be said to be happening off stage but in another theater. Vietnam, nevertheless, serves as a counterpoint to the unhappiness of the people who do not understand why they are unhappy.

Impossible Appetites begins with "Impossible Appetites," which is written in diary form. The first entry, dated April 21, 1969-June 14, 1969 sets the tone:

Monday. We got back to her apartment after dark and I spotted the note in the mailbox but kept my mouth shut. She drew the drapes and unbuckled my belt. I was reaching for her when she turned and went into the bathroom. The tub started splashing. She said soak and unwind for a while, and went out to the kitchen. I said Julie, there's nothing to unwind.

Joe lives in Palo Alto and Julie in Berkeley, a distance of only about 45 miles or about an hour's drive across the bay. Their mental distance is far greater; we are introduced to

two people who have stopped communicating honestly with each other. Each lives in a secret world. Julie is apparently in contact with a former lover, Tad, with whom she may or may not be sleeping. Joe, we later discover, is nostalgic about his recently ended marriage to Claire. Their communication has become a matter of signals which often get crossed. Joe thinks Julie's unbuckling his belt is an invitation to love making, whereas Julie means, "Take a bath, a long bath," which could actually mean, "Leave me alone for a while ; I need a respite from you." Rather than saying, "I want to make love to you," or "You're sending out wrong signals," Joe offers a clever remark : "Julie there's nothing to unwind." We will find that both of them are good at reeling clever off-hand rejoinders when their vulnerable selves are in danger of being exposed, though Julie is better adept than Joe. As it turns out Joe has a lot to unwind. After making love to Julie he finds himself grateful to her "and my gratitude angered me." He is jealous. "I found the note in her jacket pocket in the middle of the night and checked the number against the Berkeley directory and crawled back into bed."

Their conversation, however, had been amusing small talk. The only time they seem capable of being direct is when are fighting long distance on the phone. Yet, this leads only in circles. Joe drinks, drives to Berkeley in the middle of the night, drives to work half-asleep.

If hell is the ultimate estrangement, then Joe, at least, is residing in the closest thing to it, for he seems unable to communicate his agony to anyone.

During lunch today Sparrow said Joey, you'll burn yourself out on the Nimitz Freeway if you keep up this pace, I've never seen you as driven as this. I said mind your own business and leave me alone.

And Julie continues to spurn his passionate advances because she says "she can't help backing off whenever anyone grovels or leans." Joe wants to know if she is still seeing Thad. "She said I'm not accountable to you."

When Joe and Julie go camping at Mt. Shasta, they take their mental garbage with them. Julie hassles Joe about leaving a wife and two children and sleeping with his students. He tells her to "leave it alone." Julie talks about her former lover. "The first months with Thad had been carefree and light — he clowned around like you wouldn't believe and they laughed all the time, it was great. But then Thad started changing, the same as the others, he became more demanding and moody and snapped and grew sullen and stayed out very late, often drinking with friends or driving around by himself aimlessly, and finally it got into yelling and physical blows." They drink brandy and sleep alone.

You may be wondering how old these two unfortunate people are. We aren't told their ages but we can make good educated guesses based on intrinsic evidence. Joe has a teen age

daughter, Laura, and a toddler son, Alex. This would put him at least into his mid-thirties. Julie's best memories of Thad are that he was at first carefree, suggesting a youthful relationship and that it seemed to have ended fairly recently suggests that she is still young. But that she lived with Thad for four years and there were "others" before him and that she remembers Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue "the way it was nine years ago before the zombies and urban guerrillas set up camp," suggests she is not all that young. Without further explanation, I put Julie in her late twenties, possibly early thirties. Their ages are important in understanding them.

Though there may be a generation gap between them, both are essentially products of the 1950's; that is, they came of age either during or in the wake of the conservative and repressive McCarthy era (which, in fact, continued after Senator McCarthy's downfall). When the social revolutions, including the so-called sexual revolution, of the 1960's rolled around (and the "sexual revolution" was rather late in blossoming) their personalities were already set. Though the sexual and social revolutions answer certain yearnings they both have for freedom they cannot really be a part of it and trying to be a part of it only makes them miserable.

Their social values are essentially conservative. That they have little use for sidewalk panhandlers, hippies, or burned-out hippies stuck on dope ("zombies") and "urban guerrillas" may seem an aspect of this conservatism but it is not, since many young radicals also considered these two violent elements of the "counterculture" as crazies. What is conservative is their amused detachment.

Honesty was equated with directness by the young rebels of '60's; in politics and personal relationships. "Be real," "don't play games," the young generation demanded of itself (and the American government). Those were the days you "let it all hang out," and would "tell it like it is." (Mario Savio, leader of the U. C. Berkeley Free Speech Movement, set the tone for public speaking; you dropped all formalities and spoke informally to masses of people as you would to your own family and friends.) You were expected to "do your own thing," but if you were giving someone a "bad trip," you had to "rap" about it and get over your "hang-ups." To the young the older generation were hypocrites: too old to be drafted, they called America's slaughter in South East Asia (aptly tagged by someone as the U. S. 's first teenage war) "fighting for freedom," they hid their true feelings from each other, coveted money and status, drank, and had their affairs in motels while putting down the young for being "unpatriotic," taking drugs, "living together" without being married. The worst thing to be in those days if you were young was a "straight." The "straights" had made the world a mess. The people who were trying to undo the damage done by the "straights" often saw themselves as "hip" (though not necessarily hippies.)

Joe and Julie want to be "hip" but are "straight," though not in the worst sense of the word. Their tragedy is that they do not know they are "straight."

This desire to be hip is brought out painfully in "The Indians Don't Need Me Anymore." One of the ways Joe desperately tries to be "hip" after leaving his wife, is to bring supplies in his boat to the members of the American Indian Movement, who are occupying Alcatraz Island in protest against the U.S. government's mistreatment of native Americans. His friends on Alcatraz, worrying about Joe's health, finally tell him to stop coming by boat and to drop the supplies off at their center in San Francisco. "It's senseless to burn yourself out. We're not hurting that bad."

"The worst "straights" in "Impossible Appetites" are the members of Julie's family, beginning with her father, Commander Bronson, a self-satisfied militaristic monster full of cheap **Readers' Digest** quasi-religious platitudes, and ending with her future brother-in-law, Kevin, whose conscience begins and ends with recreational vehicles. ("Kevin motions me into the Commander's den. We go in. He sits on the desk. He says Joe, this is just between us: in two or three years the back roads of this country will be filled with RVs, it'll be stupendous.") Compared to the Commander, who looks as cheerfully at the slaughter of innocent people in Southeast Asia as Kevin does the slaughter of nature by RVs, Joe's and Julie's struggles are noble. And at least Joe is committed to protesting the war in Vietnam and the invasion of Cambodia, much to the Commander's chagrin.

As was popular among "hip" young people at the time, Joe and Julie write their own "non-traditional" wedding ceremony and Rod Sparrow, Joe's best friend and colleague, finds a "Brazilian ex-Jesuit" who turns out to be "a psychic healer from the Church of the Internal Devine" with "massive rings on each finger and a cloth over his head" to preside.

They step directly from a hip wedding into a disastrous marriage. A frigid, jealous girlfriend, Julie becomes an equally uncongenial wife. She dislikes Joe's visits to Claire and the children on Hopkins Street. She wants her "space," she doesn't want to be touched and, finally, not looked at.

We were standing in the checkout line at the Safeway yesterday when she gave me a shove. I said hey, what's with you? She said, Joe, you keep staring at me and I don't like it. I said I'm not staring at you. She hunched up her shoulders and said Christ, I can't breathe any more, you are using up my space! I threw the car keys on the checkout counter and walked home.

Instead of taking out a mortgage on a new suburban home, Joe and Julie do the "hip" thing by renting a beautiful Victorian flat on a beautiful treelined street in Palo Alto. If you do not actually read about it, Fetler at least makes you feel the sunlight filtering through the tall windows, the plum colored drapes and all the space you'd think anyone could humanly want onto the heavy dark old wooden table as the fragrance of Julie's multitude of potted flowers mingles with scent of her poached eggs and muffins. Take away the people and you

have a paradisiac vision of Palo Alto in the 60's; bring back the people and you have hell. Julie retreats to the "Fortress," her parents home in the hills above Palo Alto. Joe often stalks out of the house to drink in the local bar, or he drives or visits his ex-wife for coffee and sympathy. Together, Joe and Julie hurt each other with clever psychologically damaging remarks. Julie is better at this than Joe. Joe drinks too much and his breath smells bad.

Presently he has an affair with, Bev, the wife of a colleague of his. Bev and her husband live in a Japanese style house in Portola Valley. But neither that beautiful house, nor Bev's exuberant sensuality (which is really pent up frustration released) give him peace of mind. Bev too wants space.

Wednesdy. Found an orange card under my windshield wiper this morning, Bev's calligraphy, signs of the zodiac around the borders:

**i am i and you are you
and my space is not your
space
and your space is not
mine, etc.**

I stared at the card and began feeling cornered again.

Sparrow calls Joe a "narcissist," and says "you are steeped in negation — as long as I've known you I've never seen you affirm anything long-range or beyond your sphere, you're surrounded by ice and your hungers won't leave you in peace!" But it is Julie who has the very last word in the story:

Around 4 A. M. I got up from my cot and went to the alcove to smoke. Julie came out of the bedroom. She looked drawn. I said got back to bed. She said you keep asking for more when there isn't any more. I said I'm not asking for more, go to bed. She said Joe, you are constantly asking for more.

Beauty and horror, surfeit and hunger, realization and frustration: Palo Alto, Vietnam, Victorian flats, lonely bars, Lyndon Johnson, peace movements, ecology weeks, off-road recreation vehicles, Safeway, Beef brochettes, beautiful women in Berkeley or in Japanese style houses, cots in alcoves, flowers and plum colored curtains and foul breath from booze and tobacco: they are not simply opposites existing together in some sort of perverse yin-yang; they are one and the same: all produces of America the Evil, the great rooted blossomer with its roots drawing nourishment from the exploitation of the rest of the world. America the Evil is the ultimate "impossible appetite."

If Joe wants too much, what is it that he wants too much of? We really do not know

in the end. We do sense where he is happiest. It is not in the arms of girlfriends but in the basement building a puppet theater for his children, doing chores on Hopkins Street and saving baby rabbits from cats: in other words, engaging in the “straight” life — the unromantic, unbeautifully peaceful life — he has renounced. Julie tells Joe that “there’ll always be Hopkins Street strapped to your back — you can hardly exist without Claire and her unending chores, you’re so loaded guilt.” But is it not delight rather than guilt that pulls Joe to Hopkins Street? His children are bright and fun; Claire is infinitely understanding. It is Claire who can softly reprimand Joe, after he throws a coffee cup at a rabbit killing cat, “well, I can see your girlfriend is bringing out the best in you these days. . .” And it is Claire who can attend Joe and Julie’s wedding and kiss them and sincerely wish them good luck. Honeymooning in Canada, Julie sulks in their hotel room and Joe nostalgically thinks back to Claire: “In a setting like this, Claire would be resting her head on my chest.”

There is something bovine about Claire (Nancy in “Indians”) as there is something absurdly silly about the other happy good person in the Joseph Quail stories, Rod Sparrow, the ultimate faddist who leaps mindlessly between protests and spiritual country retreats but still maintains ultimate stability with a wife with whom he goes jogging and boys who shoot basket balls through the hoop on the garage of his suburban home (“Indians”). And there you have the ultimate absurdity: the happy are dumb, the uncreative, brilliant. The brilliant must constantly ask if they are happy, and as someone said, once you ask if you are happy you are not.

As both the title and lead story, “Impossible Appetites” forwarns us of what is to come. In “All Terminations Begin in the Mind” we find Joe divorced from Julie and involved with a “hip” young woman. Constanza takes drugs, lives on foodstamps, sleeps around, overspends when using Joe’s Master Card. She too drives him crazy and when she leaves him she too gets the last word.

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