

Travel Writing and Memoir Assignment by Don Wallace, Nonstop Spring 2009.

Dr. Ben Reitman's character, Nelson, declares:

"To hell with such a society,""We must, somehow, destroy it, if we have to be thieves, crooks, weaklings and slaves just to exist! Who can remain quiet and peace-loving and be content just to vote. Even now in these deadly days of depression, all we have out of the chaos is the rich growing richer and more powerful and more arrogant and the bulk of the poor growing more submissive and adapting themselves by force to a lower scale of living! The only hope I see left is the refusal of the transient type to take what is given them. You and your kind are the only ones left with a real sense of freedom in America."

Reitman's Nelson is speaking to Boxcar Bertha. His meaning is unambiguous. The "real sense of freedom in America" of "you and your kind" is a general reference to a lifestyle of a hobo, a lifestyle from which Bertha is about to depart.

No less than Orwell, Reitman, through his book, describes a series of occupations and personal conditions to which to which he thinks we are enslaved— "we have to be thieves, crooks, weaklings and slaves just to exist ."

But there is a significant difference between the perceptions of Orwell and Reitman. Orwell's "plongeurs" are described as slaves who seem able to escape their condition voluntarily while Reitman's hoboes who "have to be thieves, crooks, weaklings and slaves just to exist" are encouraged to remain as they are by refusing "to take what is given them." This begs the question: Are Reitman's hoboes, any more than Orwell's *plongeurs* really enslaved?

I think not. Reitman's *plongeurs* can walk away from their work. Reitman's central character, Boxcar Bertha, progresses over 15 years from an innocent hobo to a very sexually experienced, mature adult who at times seems enslaved but in the end escapes enslavement by accepting the advice of Reitman's Nelson:

"Go back to New York ...settle down and let your daughter bring you up."

Reitman sees the hobo, "you and your kind," as "the only ones left with a real sense of freedom in America." This hardly seems a form of enslavement, particularly if it represents a lifestyle for which hoboes and others in what he describes as "transient types" may want to fight to keep. He is advising that they have a choice.

There is a subtle similarity between Orwell's *plongeur* and Reitman's hobo as an example of a transient class. Are not both maturing young adults?

This maturation process is more explicitly described in Reitman's narrative of the hobo career of Boxcar Bertha. Reitman's narrative describes 15 years of Boxcar Bertha's life, 15 years during which she changed from an innocent hobo into a very worldly, mature adult possibly ready to leave her life as a hobo. Hers was a lifestyle that changes and within which change is permitted, and encouraged but not restricted. Is this not a maturation process most of us experience in one way or another, a process dictated by our desires, needs and our experiences?

To relate this to the present, and maybe this moment in Yellow Springs, aren't the opportunities that pass as a collegiate experience somewhat similar? During this collegiate experience, don't many of us explore ways to separate ourselves from the social environment in which we grew up. For me, I was told, it did happen.

I was a child fortunate to have experienced the direct observation and intensive study beginning 6 months before I was born under the guidance of a psychiatrist (Dr. Sontag, the founder and Director of the Fels Institute and the Antioch College Physician). It was Dr. Sontag who interpreted institutional observations and who, after 17 years, encouraged me to attend Antioch if I wanted to study pre-medicine and go to medical school. It was he in front of whom I changed from observed subject to advisee. In one of those meetings, he told me that during the five years in Yellow Springs, 15 miles from the farm on which I was born and raised, I became the only one of five siblings to ever leave home emotionally.

Were my 5 years at Antioch similar to the 15 years of Boxcar Bertha's life captured by Reitman? I went entered college from a farm, struggled with academics and choosing a direction for professional development and experience a variety of work experiences. Clearly, I matured during those 5 years. College can be likened to a Hobo Camp or even Reitman's Hobo College? Some of us even travelled to and from college from our jobs and homes, a time during which we are maturing emotionally. I had a roommate who hitch-hiked back and forth to Montana and bumming rides was a regularity for most of us.

If Dr. Sontag was telling me I had left home, wasn't that a subtle hint that I could someday return home? I did. After nearly 50 years away from home, my wife and I were able to buy the farm on which I was born and raised. I did return home. If Reitman's Schroeder gave Boxcar Bertha the Pullman by which she could return to her daughter, did not my career serve as the Pullman that let me return to the farm on which I was born and raised?

Schroeder stood by Boxcar Bertha. In my own life, there was a Schroeder. Dr. Sontag, the psychiatrist, and my parents stood by me just as did Schroeder stand by Reitman's character, Boxcar Bertha. Dr. Sontag and my parents were my Schroeder even though they had passed on long before I came home. They stood by me and gave me all the resource I ever needed to experience Antioch, a place that might be considered the equivalent of a Hobo Camp and College. Reitman's narrative reminds me of this time in my life a long time ago.

Long live the Nonstop Antioch Liberal Arts Institute, surely a Hobo Camp and College for its students today as Antioch was for me a long time ago.

* Bibliography

Orwell, George; DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON; Harcourt, Inc.; Orlando, 1961.

Reitman, Ben; SISTER OF THE ROAD, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BOXCAR BERTHA; AK Press, Nabat; 2002.