

**KRISTINA YORDANOVA ABOUT *THE BREATHING HILL* BY BETTI FAYON  
A BOOK OF BEGINNING, A BOOK WITHOUT ENDING**

*The Breathing Hill* by Betti Fayon greets the reader playfully. Bonbon-child sky? Does the book cover convey this? Yes and no – it is too associative, aesthetic, it gives space to the imagination and is therefore multidimensional. In fact, the cover imitates the text inside – allows us to see it, see the world however we want. The cover has captured a suitable metaphor – the adhesion (sometimes so adhesive) between characters and words in the book.

A text, written as we breathe – naturally, closely – the language flows spontaneously over experiences, thoughts, observations, dizziness from images (erotic, collage-made, sensed by the senses), gasping, stumbling... The air in the book is the space of daydreaming. Betti Fayon seems to write with a head in the clouds – maybe innocence, maybe escape. What does the text capture then – an aesthetic float in the world (in this case too idiosyncratic for the heroine), or escape from reality? As early as the book cover, before we leaf it, we are provoked: “these days I am not embarrassed to look at men’s trouser bulges, and I can even guess their character by the way they hide them or show them...”. This provocation, later in the book, will leave the erotic frame, and will turn into a Betti Fayon frame, then into a Wim Wenders frame, then a quotation, then a wittiness, then an exploration of the other, the man, the different, but actually the double, of the self. The text wanders, never stays in one place, it is itself with head in the clouds, the collage was born of playful confusions. Hence:

*The Breathing Hill* may be described in many ways, none of them absolutely accurate and comprehensive:

A book about a fictional woman (child) and a fictional man.

A book about wandering thought, about confusion, about coming back.

A book about always starting from the beginning, about the unfinished plots, and so a text about life, which is never contained between the capital letter and the full-stop.

A book which uses infantilisation – who speaks inside? A woman, a man, a child? – different voices blending in the common space of experience, focused on the child’s feeling of the world.

A book of doubles and collages.

*A book of crisis.*

When Marie, the book's heroine, wants to say 'I', she actually speaks of Mr. A. Her fictional man. But is it Marie who actually speaks? Sometimes the text says 'I', pushing away from the heroine, or, more precisely, from the way she describes herself through Mr. A., and fills with new voices and self-experiences of the speaking self, sinking in observations of nature, breaking away from the world. At such times the narrative is full of interludes – observations of landscapes, houses. Then the story, as if hesitantly, breaks away from Marie and Mr. A., leaves them in the background, or becomes itself an interlude, a sketch which cracks into earnestness. Sometimes when the text wants to say 'I, Marie', it says 'she, Marie' instead, but they are never equal, so Marie herself, as invented as Mr. A., becomes a mask, a fiction. A child's costume, put on over the multiplication of personalities in the text.

As the idea of a person turns into a puzzle, so the logic of the text itself, the cause-and-effect relationships turn into a puzzle and a collage. The stories interfere in the same way images in them are layered. This technique is described in the book itself (page 61), during one of the daydreams focused on the observation of pine branches:

*They all move their branches differently, and behind the blue sky they look (speech unclear), and the smaller branches sticking out between the low dark-green ones and the sky look like jumping figures. As branches are constantly moving in the wind, these figures jump and seem to move forwards, or sideways, or touch one another, or talk, and they look like episodes of films I have seen, different every time. (...) Anyway, along with the wind blowing, two or three frames change and seem to lay on top of each other, complicating each other's picture.*

Texts in *The Breathing Hill* live on a constant invention of stories – invention is a mode of story-telling. The text may be unaware of many things working and sinking in it, but it is clearly aware of the continuous blending of real and imaginary. This not only breaks and fragments reality, but also turns it into an supplementary element, subject to the need to fantasize. This blending of unreal and real provokes the secondary blending inside the book – between narrative subject and object, between history, i.e. real experience and fiction, between self and other, between masculine and feminine, infantile and mature. The book seems to lack pure oppositions. They exist only to change places, to be doubled – oppositions produce doubles, fascinating doubles, festively and solemnly invited into the world of the book. The body of Mr. A., described in detail in the text, is simultaneously masculine and feminine (“*how strange, his body has the curves of a woman*”). Marie herself enters a rather masculine role by seducing Mr.

A. In the book he is her object, painstakingly invented by the text, fully poetic, and created by the female-child (sexual) desire. Something like the ‘fairy-tale of Little Red Riding-Hood, only turned upside down’, if we take the quote away from the context of this scene, in order to transform it into a figure of speech for the whole narrative.

Invention in the text (taking up the dichotomy real-unreal) is a need to compensate for what cannot happen. So, writing works as an escape from reality. The reality, hidden in the character of Marie – the inventor – is crisis-ridden, artless, full of gaps. It cannot be reached, concealed behind the need for celebration and aesthetics of narrative, entirely devoted to the imaginary. When a real object finds itself in the text – the above mentioned pines, a house, a city – the text invents a story about it, brings it into the plot – reality exists to be further invented, turned into a story, i.e. become unreal.

It is precisely this unreality that leads to the double perspective of characters in the text – they are detailed, coloured, carefully portrayed. Each object can unravel-weave a story around itself (the anarchist’s house, for example). However, the closer the story’s eye comes to them, the more unreal they seem. The closer we become to the object described, the further and more endless its image becomes. An example from Mr. A.’s monologue about Marie:

*She can’t accept me for what I am, although I, of course, don’t exist. It is so pleasant to be invented by Marie, that I can afford to smile at her from a distance.*

*From a distance* the characters in the book watch Marie – from their own beyond. They are volatile, disperse, provoke wonder, and can never be captured in a static frame. The narrator treats the characters like a butterfly catcher, trying to capture the colourful, the fairy, the clown-like, but can never bring the full character into the text. That’s why he tries again. Sometimes he distorts this attempt in a sketch and self-irony.

In a “funny conversation between me and Mr. A.” the text explains:

*For example, a real story always has a beginning, a middle, and an ending, and everything that happens in our story has only a beginning.*

Starting all over again has another function – it resembles erasing with a rubber, an attempt to reconstruct something which was missing in an earlier detail of the description of the same character. This is the stuttering of the text, its impossibility to reach catharsis, ending, culmination of its stories, pause without finale. The book seems to lose its middle and end – an

internal crisis of speech. So the child's language is an alter-ego of the crisis, the salvation of the fragmented world. A place where the fragmented world (could be) natural.

Furthermore, *The Breathing Hill* is a book which manages to create/reconstruct, like a shadow theatre, through the numerous fragments and collages, its idea for biographisation of the narrators. It is torn between the character of the mother – shining in the text with a force almost similar to the character of Mr. A. - and the metaphors for childhood experience, coming through language, journey, loneliness, love affair with the fictional Mr. A. This common biographised space is the parallel between the past, the present, and the fictional time – the third time, which displaces the other two from their ordinary axes. Here emerges the sense of the narrator's character as a loner, separated from the world, somehow unfit to live the mundane, colourless daily life, and constantly running from it. The text invents in order to have fun, because the narrator who tells a story needs to see something happening, which is denied by reality. That's why the events are entirely internal, they are a break from reality. The book also needs to share with the reader, who is often addressed, to establish a relationship with him, as if the listener of the shared/narrated story by the heroine is the one who must validate the fiction. Hence, the narration is a kind of liberation from the loneliness of the narrator's internal, idiosyncratic existence. The speaker is lonely – Mr. A. does not exist, the mother, the brother, the family story live in the past, somewhere in the all-day kiss with Toma, Marie's boyfriend. It is interesting to note the strong layer of reminiscence in the book. The role of the readers/listeners, always in the plural ("here Marie has to confess something before you"), is to act as an audience of the story-telling which makes the internal public and bares itself. The reader is the only real 'other', wholly external, but also wholly internal for the text, expropriated by Marie in her imagination, the mute witness, needed for the future existence of the story.

*The Breathing Hill* is an intelligent book – an escape in the world of invention. The only world where alternatives exist and where we can be with our desires and fears again. Where Marie is.

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