

“Who is the Lord of the World?”

Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* and the Total Vision

Here is my big book. I hope you don’t think it’s too big. I want it to be the very opposite of a slim volume. I hope I’ve made some contribution to the study of the totalitarian spirit and I needed a lot of space and forms to make my try.

—Leonard Cohen, in a letter to Miss Claire Pratt of McClelland & Stewart about *Flowers for Hitler*, 1964¹

When Leonard Cohen wrote to his publisher in 1964 about the size of his book of poetry, *Flowers for Hitler*, he described an almost inevitable formal identification of the “big book” with its subject, “the totalitarian spirit.” With customary humility, Cohen suggests that the work is big not because it is authoritative but rather because it is tentative. An artist must be an uneasy kind of world-maker and certainly an uneasy kind of experimentalist where his writing engages totalitarian themes. Totalitarianism itself has often been explored for its analogy to art; Walter Benjamin viewed totalitarianism as the aestheticization of politics² and Hannah Arendt explored, similarly, its perverse idealism.³ Further, Arendt’s influential critique of totalitarianism, which I will draw on centrally, emphasizes its essential unworldliness and foregrounds its novelty, dubbing it “a novel form of government” (*Origins* 593). An unworldly creativity animates Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* (1966), a book that is bigger and more wildly inclusive than its predecessor. This novel touches on totalitarian themes, themes that readers might find uncomfortably reflected in Cohen’s own apparent search for a total vision. Important to the novel’s aesthetic is the notion of the self-perfected body, with its ready analogy to the totalitarian self-perfected body politic. Total selves, total works,

perfect bodies, and spectacular human unities animate the work. Cohen demonstrates, meanwhile, that to give up on the total vision for fear of its negative totalitarian valences is also to give up on the sacral notion of a revealed world, a world that is fundamentally conceivable as one creation.

Cohen remarked in a 1964 speech that the source of all our ideas is an “absolute and ruthless longing for the presence of the divine” (“Loneliness and History” n. pag.). For the characters in *Beautiful Losers*—the morose historian and his self-sacrificing wife, the hedonistic guru and the ecstatic saint—creativity is circumscribed by loneliness and by a sacral sense of vocation. The historical condition (wherein we are partial, contingent, imperfect, and changing), seeks heroic resolution, in Cohen’s novel, in a timeless, apocalyptic moment of total, universal identity. Notwithstanding its putative status, in 1966, as “the most revolting book ever published in Canada” (Fulford n. pag.), *Beautiful Losers* is controversial for the twenty-first-century reader mainly because of its mixing of discourses in aid of a vision of totality. Cohen’s projection of history to metaphorical-theological ends is the source of the novel’s enduring risk. Cohen assigns to art the “absolute” and “ruthless” qualities of the search for evidence of holiness, which are easily transferred to other kinds of absolutism and ruthlessness. The multivalence of those terms underlines the risk, for Cohen, of perfect creativity: to be the perfect artist, one must turn oneself into a person who could imagine anything.

In discussing Cohen’s 1992 album, *The Future*, Ira Nadel locates in the title song “the ironic wish to return to the totalitarian views of the past” (142). Nadel asserts that this wish is “undercut” by the album’s pervasive sense of “waiting for a miracle” (142). What *Beautiful Losers* shows, though, is that the religious attitude in Cohen’s work, especially insofar as it anticipates apocalypse, complements more than it countervails those frames of mind that gave rise to cataclysmic politics. Both implicitly seek total representations. Cohen’s characters are always *in extremis*, nurturing radical selves that are alive to the message of the universe. If they submit to a “voluntary loss of self” (Pacey 18) for the sake of revelation, it is for the sake of accommodating and understanding everything, which is conceptually indistinct in the novel from ways in which the self may be monstrously enlarged.

The charismatic heart of *Beautiful Losers* is Kateri Tekakwitha, the seventeenth-century Iroquois Virgin. Tekakwitha’s loneliness, suffering, and mortification of her body, are matters of scholarly interest and psycho-sexual fixation for the novel’s first narrator, a scholar, I.⁴ Tekakwitha’s

spiritual practice entails attuning herself to the voice of a God who has been revealed to her through the perfect refinement of her own terror, for the Jesuit Black Robes of New France have inspired religious devotion through frightening images of hell. Thus, as a self-disciplined, self-perfected figure, Kateri exemplifies the novel's own paradox: that terror is on one hand the prerequisite for creative awareness, and on the other hand the instrument of internal self-regulation by which total states (analogous, perhaps, to the colonial, homogenizing project of religious conversion) are achieved.

Each of the novel's characters radicalizes his or her disposition, just as the saint does, for the sake of perceiving, representing, or embodying a totality. The enlightenment of I. is the ostensible subject of Part One (Lee 91); I.'s late wife Edith and his friend and lover F. are his tutors in radical selfhood. F. works a drastic spiritual training on I. through a series of humiliating revelations disclosed in a posthumously delivered letter. F. promises to complete the story of Tekakwitha for the sake of I.'s personal and historical "ecstasy" (i.e., orgasm and apocalypse). However, the letter also requires I., as part of this training, to confront certain devastating facts: that F. had an affair with Edith and carried out eugenic experiments in order to manufacture her beauty; that the Jesuit "system" that produced the saintliness of Catherine Tekakwitha is spiritually arbitrary and inherently terrorist; and that history is a catastrophe open to instantaneous renovation. F. and Edith are purists, radicals. Their mutual pursuit of the "perfect body" is a metaphor for the novel's own orientation towards totality.⁵ F.'s all-embracing appetites, sexual and other, support his effort to make his body an incorporative machine: "Who am I to refuse the universe?" (6). In her self-annihilation, Edith is equally extreme. She commits a magnanimous suicide meant to relieve I. of his martyr-worship. For Edith, as for F., the body is its own form of total representation. Michael Ondaatje asserts, indeed, that "*all understanding comes from Edith's death*" (8, emphasis added).

Edith's radical will is, for Norman Ravvin, crucial to Cohen's articulation of the novel's "ethical centre" (24). Ravvin follows Lee in commenting upon Edith's unlimited ability to love her oppressors. (As an adolescent, Edith forgives the men who gang-rape her, even holding the youngest of them to her chest in an unexpected *Pietà*.) Ravvin explores Edith's involvement with F. in a sexual episode in an Argentine hotel room with a waiter who is a pop-incarnation of Hitler. To cure Edith's acne, F. obtains from the Hitler-waiter some soap made of human flesh, manufactured from the bodies of Holocaust victims. Edith, using it, says, "I'll try anything" (qtd. in Ravvin 27). This, for

Ravvin, represents the acknowledgment that anyone is capable of anything—even Edith, the original sister of mercy. The condition in which “all things can be done” is the moral limit of human freedom, as revealed in Cohen’s poem “It Uses Us!”:

Kiss me with your teeth
All things can be done
Whisper museum ovens of
A war that Freedom won.
(*Stranger Music* 53)

Freedom uses us as much as we use freedom; the novel dwells at this limit.

In the episode of the Hitler-waiter, Cohen blurs totalitarian politics with beatific suggestions of apocalypse. The novel frequently uses the metaphor of a hypodermic needle by which I. becomes a junkie of history.⁶ Stephen Scobie suggests that Cohen’s customary association of history with drugs points to the addictiveness of systems of control (52). History is the record of those patterns of domination that we have deemed we “need to keep” (*BL* 201). In Cohen’s sustained metaphor, we take history into our incorporative bodies (I.’s constipated body, similarly, is incorporative and sinister: the “museum of [his] appetite” [42]), and we become history in the flesh. F. and Edith, during their Argentinian dalliance, replace the drug of history with the drug of miracle, injecting themselves, with water from Tekakwitha’s Spring, mail-ordered from the “Revelation Club” in New York (115). This gesture to Revelation presents the injection as an apocalyptic moment in the novel’s usual sense: it creates an identification of the self with the universal body: the perfect body. For Northrop Frye, water is usually associated with dissolution, chaos, and death (for, archetypally, “the soul crosses water or sinks into it at death” [146]). The dead waters of the world are reanimated by the living waters of the Garden of Eden at the end of history and then transformatively internalized: “Revelation says that in the apocalypse there is no more sea. Apocalyptically, therefore, water circulates in the universal body like the blood in the individual body” (146).⁷ The Argentinian scene makes use of such living and dead waters in its juxtaposition of the injectable tonic of Tekakwitha’s Spring, and the immersive, genocidal substance of the bath. When F. first tells Edith that the Hitler-waiter has a “treat” for them, Edith’s reply, with its overtone of “shooting up,” invokes the language of the hypodermic needle of history. “Shoot,” she answers, proposing to internalize and embody the Hitler-waiter’s vision, just as she shares his bath (194). As such, Cohen elides the “pure” apocalyptic notion of universal identity with the totalitarian ideal of One Man.

The body itself might be considered a "work" in the context of this novel, especially as it becomes the vehicle for experiments in totality and perfection. The phenomenon of selves moving towards forms of self-perfection is mirrored in the suggestion of the way textual works are, or in are in the course of becoming, total works. *Beautiful Losers* cites *La Système d'Exposition du Monde*, a seventeenth-century tome contemporary with the life of the historical Kateri Tekakwitha. This expository magnum opus is reflected in *Beautiful Losers*' abundance of total representations, from I's History of Them All, to F's "long letter" that fulfills his promise to "tell [I.] everything, the complete gift" (116), to the individual lists and litanies that pepper the novel. Art forms, in *Beautiful Losers*, implicitly orient themselves to totality; Cohen compares the projection beam in the novel's final section to an archetypal albino snake "offering our female memory the taste of—everything!" (236). The drive towards total representation propels this novel, whose working title, *Plastic Birchbark*, was followed by its own insistently omnivorous subtitle: *A Treatment of the World* (Cohen, "Working Papers" n. pag.).

An acknowledgment of the novel's Enlightenment-inflected totalizing drive seems implicit in the arguments of those who have seen the novel as arguably modernist (Dragland 264) or poised at a moment of modernist critique (Glover 14-15); it inheres in the arguments of those who see the text as in some way "socially revolutionary" (Leahy 38) or in pursuit of a cumulative, historical moment, even a release from history. Critics have wanted to suggest that *Beautiful Losers* contains ethical warnings about the way in which the total representation overmasters the real: it appropriates others' victimhoods (Wilkins 36) and, flaunting that, makes possible the casual adoption of a fascist aesthetic (Ravvin 30). But the critic of the novel must not attempt too unequivocally to show that Cohen is critical of or ironic about total documents, perfect bodies, and radical selves. The reader must be attentive to the way totality still manages to function, in *Beautiful Losers*, as a kind of spiritual imperative and an ideal for a helpless art. Cohen cannot be altogether ironic about literary totality while reserving for his novel the function and mood of a sacred text, which, by Philippe Sollers' definition, "delivers and delimits everything" (78).

Beautiful Losers' aspiration to visionary totality is cued by its emphasis on apocalypse. In an apocryphal story, Tekakwitha, dining with the Jesuit brethren and other colonists, spills a glass of wine. It stains the table, and then adds its pigment to the guests, the landscape, the sky, and the moon. The reddened world projects the image of the "universal bloodshed" central

to apocalyptic thought. In seeing the horror of the dinner guests, Tekakwitha says, equivocally, “I guess I owe you all an apology” (104). This is nothing short of a promise of return: *Beautiful Losers*’ surreal epilogue is Tekakwitha’s apology in the way it too collapses observable distinctions in the world. The novel is apocalyptic in the sense that everything becomes “potentially identical with everything else, as though it were all inside a single infinite body” (Frye 136): the perfect body.

Lacking a traditional plot, the novel derives its energy and its argument from its central comic pair, I. and F. Cohen’s comedy of ego pits I.’s befuddlement against F.’s delirious self-certainty, but the novel shows that both ego-extremes are avenues to the beauty and danger of the “total” vision. Although the novel characterizes absolute loneliness—like Tekakwitha’s—as a precondition for witnessing divinity and a gateway, then, to the perception of totality, Arendt observes that a loneliness like I.’s is, as a disposition, “common ground for terror” (*Origins* 612) and potentially a dehumanizing impediment to labour and to the production of artistic and scholarly work, denying one’s integrity as *homo faber* (*Origins* 612). Loneliness gives one “the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man” (*Origins* 612). Cohen’s art is *made* of radical and desperate experiences—indeed, he suggests that “[w]hat is most original in man’s nature is often that which is most desperate” (*BL* 58)—but Arendt suggests that a desperate loneliness gives one a dangerous sense of the superfluousness of oneself and, perhaps, the human being in general. In Arendt’s view, long social deprivation makes a person so unable to trust himself as “the partner of his thoughts” (*Origins* 614) that he loses, utterly, his standards of thought and action. I., a consummate hermit, resurrects such an untrustworthy partner in F., by now five years dead. The imaginary/recollected F. is an intimate antagonist,⁸ one who helps to ensure that I.’s work is ever more sprawling.

Indeed, I.’s writing of an unfinishable history (with Tekakwitha at the centre) is a gesture of self-denial, for he cannot bear to consummate his authority by ending his work. Yet, paradoxically, as the history encompasses more and more material, (for it is a total vision in conception even if it can never be one in practice), I.’s becomes increasingly a god’s eye perspective. He thinks of himself as a *non*-authority, but creates himself as a *total* authority, albeit without a world in which to exercise it.

I.’s is a failed discipline. His inability to finish his document and thus to separate himself from it reflects his inability to overcome his erotic

attachment to Tekakwitha's pain, with its uncomfortable reflection in Edith's own suffering. I's diffuse will produces the formal repleteness of both his historical project and his lonely narration, while also troubling the limits of his humanity. I. suffers from the desire to know everything, and from the desire to *be* everything. He constructs a "total self" by identifying, meaninglessly, with every position on the ideological spectrum:

I always wanted to be loved by the Communist Party and the Mother Church. I wanted to live in a folk song like Joe Hill. I wanted to weep for the innocent people my bomb would have to maim. I wanted to thank the peasant father who fed us on the run. I wanted to wear my sleeve pinned in half, people smiling while I salute with the wrong hand . . . (21)

Whereas most people assume that it is a totalitarian principle to be absolute in one's convictions, Arendt writes that "the aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any" (*Origins* 603). I. is unable to respond personally even to the story of the sexual violence visited upon his wife in her childhood. He impassively editorializes upon the "collective will" that determined that Edith be raped: "Who can trace the subtle mechanics of the collective will to which we all contribute?" (63). Unable to organize the world according to his own personhood, "I" searches for the unitary idea, instead, in God's omniscience:

. . . I Cannot Think of Anything Which Is Not Yours. The Hospitals Have Drawers of Cancer Which They Do Not Own. The Mesozoic Waters Abounded With Marine Reptiles Which Seemed Eternal. You Know the Details Of The Kangaroo. Place Ville Marie Grows And Falls In The Gobi Desert. Nausea Is An Earthquake In Your Eye. Even the World Has A Body. (57)

This passage describes I's desire for a total vision, as modelled in God's command of everything. When I. adds, "I Do Not Think It Behooves Me To Describe Your World," he undermines the authority he is nonetheless always covertly assuming. He makes of his own nothingness an all-encompassing idea, an undeclared godhead.

I's hermitism, moral preoccupation, and accumulative craft suggest the apocalyptic moment described by Tekakwitha's Uncle in a traditional story. Uncle narrates from his own moment of historical despair ("*There would be no harvest! . . . the world was unfinished!*" [93]) and projects a vision of a world that is, in more than one sense, "finished":

. . . Uncle told himself the story he had heard as a little boy, how Kuloscap had abandoned the world because of the evil in it. He made a great feast to say good-by, then he paddled off in his great canoe. Now he lives in a splendid long house, making arrows. When the cabin is filled with them he will make war on all mankind. (95)

I. retreats from the world (after a feast of chicken on the night of Edith's death) and dwells in moral preoccupation; meanwhile, his alter-ego F. plants weapons in Quebec. I. exists in precisely the attitude of loneliness and reactivity that "nourishes revolutionary ideologies" (Goodheart 129), while F. attempts a universal emancipation. I. and F. are collectively like Kuloscap, their extreme egos and totalizing, universal projects infused with warlike potential.

F., in contrast with I., considers that his own selfhood in a given instant contains all of the danger and beauty and crisis and possibility of mankind. Mad, syphilitic, disgraced in Parliament, and disintegrating in a nuthouse, F. hardly seems to be a paragon of self-control. But if I.'s is a "discipline of self-restraint" then F.'s is, in Gary Snyder's phrase, a "discipline of following desires" (qtd. in Tytell 10). This philosophy originates in St. Augustine's maxim that "if you but love [God], you may do as you incline" (James 79), which, as William James notes, carries a significant "passport beyond the bounds of conventional morality" (79), only demanding that happiness be strenuous. F. is a happy universal revolutionary; he smuggles arms and promises "revenge for *everyone*" (BL 119, emphasis added). In another version of the total vision, F. promotes the idea that he has a complete command of everything that *has* happened ("I took you to a *complete movie* of the second world war" [186]) and can see, with clarity, every element of the past realized in the present. He repeatedly tells I. that his aim is to show I. "*how it happens*" (or "*everything happening*") (179, 194, 198, 199, 200, 219), binding everything into the totalizing purview of his own joy.

The all-inclusive instant constitutes, for F., a culmination and universalizing of history.⁹ Walter Benjamin remarks that

Now-time, . . . as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation . . . [The historical materialist] recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest or happening, . . . a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history. (396)

Thus, it is not enough for F. to experience time explosively himself, he must *impart* this model of time to the historian, I., in order to give him the sign, show him the revolutionary chance, and relieve him of "the useless History under which [he] suffer[s] in such confusion" (200). Peter Wilkins has identified the "risk" of totalitarianism in F.'s uninhibited reformative zeal (26), but F. is all the more totalitarian in his aestheticization of history and politics, a tendency that bears upon the novel as a whole. F. relates a

nightmare vision to I. that suggests Benjamin's "tremendous [historical] abbreviation," Karl Marx's "nightmare of history," or Franz Kafka's modern "train accident" (Griffin 91):

I seemed to wake up in the middle of . . . [an] accident, limbs strewn everywhere, detached voices screaming for comfort, severed fingers pointing homeward, all the debris withering. . . . [A]ll I had in the wrecked world was a needle and thread, so I got down on my knees, I pulled pieces out of the mess and I started to stitch them together . . . my needle going so madly, sometimes I found I'd run the thread right through my own flesh . . . and I knew that I was also truly part of the disaster. (*BL* 186)

F. would perfect the *universal* body just as he would perfect Edith's (by his machinations in the Argentinian hotel) or his own (by subscribing to the bodybuilding system of Charles Atlas, parodically renamed Charles Axis). F.'s narration of his nightmare vision evokes Benjamin's discussion of Paul Klee's iconic "Angelus Novus." Benjamin recounts the way the "angel of history" confronts the "wreckage of the past." The angel has the impulse to make whole the human disaster, but is blown by the storm of progress helplessly into the future (392). F., who by his own account, "labored to become an Angel" (190), has the same impulse to perfect the world's body; because time has collapsed in his dream-vision and he is unimpeded by the contingencies of progress, he, unlike Klee's angel, is able to do it.

In this passage, F.'s ethically dubious human creativity dangerously mimics the apocalyptic ideal of universal identity; it also suggests, uncomfortably, the self-perfecting body politic of the totalitarian state. Cohen implies that if history is unorganized in its very nature—an accident in which everything is simultaneously possible—then history also invites powerful and charismatic personages to intervene and *make* order. A notion of ultimate selfhood, for Cohen, is so intimately linked to this frenetic world-creation that the "universal vision" is madly inscribed into the creator's very flesh, inseparable from his person. F. cannot help reconstituting the human being according to his own ideal, and he cannot create them as entities altogether separate from himself. Although F. is a Member of the Parliament of Canada and thus potentially a worker of historical change, his occult machinations seem to exemplify instead the "false, worldless politics" that Arendt regards as the very foundation of totalitarianism (qtd. in Aschheim 125).

F.'s emphasis on the "rush" of revolution continually substitutes drive for action. He celebrates his first day as a parliamentarian with a victorious drive to Ottawa, accelerating so fast that I., beside him, is afraid for his life. F., typically eroticizing the danger, initiates a shared masturbation session

that culminates with the car tearing through an illusory brick wall, painted on a scrim of silk. The wall's hymeneal "Rrrriiiipppp" (99) represents the piercing of the veil of truth and is designed to be the moment at which I. ejaculates. But I., horrified, is mysteriously unable to find sexual gratification in the glorious "death" that F. and Edith have engineered in a rented parking lot. "Button up," says F., disappointed, "it's a long cold drive to Parliament" (100). Cohen juxtaposes "the long cold drive" that will end in F.'s role as an actual policy maker with the mad flight through the scrim (98) in which he expresses himself as the messenger of truth. It is a totalitarian principle that "all action aims at the acceleration of the movement of nature or history," particularly when the totalitarian ruler usurps Nature or History in dealing arbitrary death sentences (Arendt 602). Although the "death" that F. has contrived for I. has proven to be an illusion, F. nonetheless illustrates Arendt's larger point, which is that, "[if] terror can be completely relied upon to keep the movement in constant motion, no principle of action separate from its essence would be needed at all" (602). F.'s role in Parliament is completely superfluous; his domain is not action, but motion: acceleration into terror-producing ecstasy.

I.'s personal dissolution and lack of certainty was identifiable in the catalogic quality of his narration. Alternately, F.'s total authority is also visible in his complete command of particulars. "We are now in the heart of our pain," writes F. enthusiastically, finishing the story of Tekakwitha's martyrdom for I., "we are now in the heart of our evidence" (218). The equation of pain with evidence is everywhere, making the relisher of evidence the fetishizer of pain. One of the best ironies in the novel is Cohen's citation at this moment of the *Exposition du Système du Monde* (89), a total document proffered to the world even as Tekakwitha is tearing the flesh from her bones. Tekakwitha's inordinate pain and terror are, to the Jesuits, to I., and to F., the *real* explanation of the world's total system. No amount of objective world-description can testify to the principle of cosmic organization like one Iroquois girl's voluntary self-destruction in the name of God.

One aesthetic means by which fascism "provides the illusion of collective experience" is the mass rally, whose message is, first and foremost, its own status as a spectacle (Morrison 6-7). F.'s own charismatic public display at a *Québec Libre* demonstration is essentially aesthetic. The crowd is as uniform as a "quicksand" into which I. sinks (126). Someone recognizes F. as a Patriot and hoists him to the podium, where he begins a radical speech demanding that Blood reclaim Blood (129). But only the speaker who has

come *before* F. imbues F's cosmic demand with the specific implication that the *French* reclaim their blood from the *English* in a revolution. F's utterly nonspecific demand for blood sounds, instead, like the apocalyptic call for total bloodshed: the red moon of Tekakwitha's Feast, "*revenge for everyone*" (110, emphasis added). The total anonymity of the crowd means that their subscription to revolutionary partisan lawlessness cannot be challenged by any of them. The speaker, from whom "F" seamlessly takes over, declares, importantly, that "History cares nothing for cases!" (126). A concept of justice that *cares nothing for cases*, evading an acknowledgment of the individual, is totalitarian. Arendt says of totalitarian thought that, "each concrete individual case with its unrepeatable set of circumstances somehow escapes it" (*Origins* 595). F's totalizing view of history seeks to unite everyone into a single identity that eliminates all human difference.

Despite his career, F. is no politician, but rather an aesthete of totality; he is, in fact, the pure theorist of totalitarianism. F. speaks of universal violence and speaks no further. Arendt writes that terror "makes the plurality of men disappear into One Man of gigantic dimensions" (*Origins* 600). F's revolutionary speech does not advance a *cause*, it simply creates this Man. Terror operates by figuratively "pressing men against each other" so that they have no room to determine their individuality (*Origins* 600), just as the crowd literally presses in towards F. Thus, the recognition of F. as a Patriot in Part One will be accurately echoed in the recognition of I./F. as the Terrorist Leader in Part Three. And the inclusion of I. in this identity is appropriate because of his willingness to replace his own reasoning with F's, just as he surrenders himself to the mob while F. speaks in the park. This is what Arendt describes as the "two-sided preparation" of the totalitarian subject which fits everyone equally well for the roles of executioner and victim (*Origins* 602).

The limits of F's vision are finally exposed in his own inability to subscribe to it. His long letter becomes momentarily mournful and, against its own philosophy, reflective. The ultimate limitation of F's thinking is that, in his unrestrained power to create and reveal, he has barred himself from wonder, and become incapable of standing in revelation: "I was jealous of the terrors I constructed for you but could not tremble before myself" (163). Then, true to his intention to tell I. *everything*, F. reveals what could only have become apparent to him with the relaxation of the urgency and obsession that have driven his creativity thus far: "God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is alive. Magic is afoot" (168). And, with that, the novel inclines itself towards

the sacral or apocalyptic totality that has, throughout the novel, always been inextricable from the totalitarian one.

Arendt speaks of the “necessary insecurity of philosophy” as an antidote to the violence that comes from forcing men into (or submitting oneself to) conviction (*Origins* 470). She argues that no idea is sufficient to explain everything, not even the idea of God. This is why God must be understood as the *revelation* of a palpable reality, and not as an idea that exists behind and before everything: “A theology which is not based on revelation as a given reality but treats God as an idea would be as mad as a zoology which is no longer sure of the physical, tangible existence of animals” (*Origins* 604). A theology of revelation ensures that the principle of God is never held in a single, unitary idea. The political corollary is that nothing is deducible “from a single premise” (*Origins* 604); there is no satisfactory total system or explanation. Accordingly, in F’s beautiful speech, neither God nor Magic is anywhere in the world; rather, they are both everywhere: alive, afoot, in service, and in command.

Beautiful Losers’ surreal epilogue is both a “happening in Montreal history” (256-57) and an epiphanic spiritual event. The crowd is disparate: mothers, doctors, “androgynous hashish smokers,” “karate masters, adult stamp collectors, Humanists,” and others (257). Almost a census, in the manner of a Hieronymus Bosch painting or a doomsday book, the epilogue enumerates the people who anticipate their historical “Revolution” (257) or their apocalyptic “second chance” (257). It describes a binding event that is so potentially inclusive, and potentially so expressive of the culmination of history, as to appeal to Nazis and Jehovah’s Witnesses alike (257).

The bizarre ending illustrates the novel’s visionary but reckless valuation of creativity. An old man in a treehouse (who has qualities of both F. and I.) makes lustful comments to an insolent boy. He hitchhikes into the city, performing a sexual favour for the blond housewife who picks him up (and who has features of Tekakwitha, Edith, and Isis, the mother of truth). He ventures into the Shooting and Game gallery on the Main where the crowd recognizes him as an escaped Terrorist Leader and a notorious sex pervert. As the crowd closes in on him, I./F’s body dematerializes and becomes transfigured into an open-air movie of Ray Charles. Finally, the Jesuits’ petition for the beatification of Tekakwitha and the now third-person narrator formally closes the work.

Linda Hutcheon, among others, addresses *Beautiful Losers*’ apocalyptic closure, showing that the Epilogue’s motifs correspond to those of the Book

of Revelation. She contends that this ending projects the (apocalyptic) possibility of total "identity alienation" for the nation at large (45). One might equally choose to emphasize in the apocalyptic elements of the novel's closure not identity alienation but its opposite: total identity. Even structurally the chapter moves from scattered similes to total metaphor: a version of the attainment of the perfect (conceptual) body. It opens with a string of extravagant figures, all similes:

. . . In Montreal spring is *like an autopsy*. Everyone wants to see the inside of the frozen mammoth. Girls rip off their sleeves and the flesh is sweet and white, *like wood under bark*. From the streets a sexual manifesto rises *like an inflating tire*, "The winter has not killed us again!" Spring comes into Quebec from Japan, *and like a prewar Crackerjack prize* it breaks the first day because we play too hard with it. Spring comes into Montreal *like an American movie of Riviera Romance*, and everyone has to sleep with a foreigner . . . (246, emphases added)

In an apocalyptic condition, the animal is completely identifiable with the mineral, the vegetable, the human, and the divine. When Cohen describes the joy of "closing in on [one's] object" (256), he is talking about the crowd's seizure of I./F., but the idea more broadly applies to the totality of subject/object identity in the Clear Light.

I./F.'s very memory is all-incorporative and "represented no incident, [for] it was all one incident" (246); likewise he less a person than a style of unlimited being. He comes ready to work an epiphany, which for Frye is the meeting point of the mimetic and apocalyptic modes. I./F. sees the potential for his miracle—a total human unison—in the cinema, where he notices that "[s]ometimes, when all the eyes contained exactly the same image, like all the windows of a huge slot machine repeating bells, they made a noise in unison": laughter (252). "I./F." is determined to create a human unison and performs his own transfiguration in service of the first principle of universality he perceives.

Frye insists that it is the work of culture to translate our dark impulses into imaginative *imitations* of those impulses; the epilogue is a playful reconception of some of the novel's most serious themes. Earlier in the novel, F. describes exactly this kind of imaginative "taming" when he originates the Telephone Dance (where lovers stick their fingers into one another's ears to appreciate the inner "hum" of the other). F. says, very much in the spirit of Frye, "I suppose that certain primitive bird and snake dances began the same way, a need to imitate the fearful and beautiful, yes, an imitative procedure to acquire some of the qualities of the adored awesome beast" (33). By this reading, Beauty may be the remnant or the trace of Terror.

In the eccentricity of the epilogue, Cohen creates a world that is aesthetically inviolable. No element can fail to “fit”; thus, Cohen affirms his complete creative power, his own total vision. The ending welcomes the reader (259) while yet flaunting the authority of the writer. When the Jesuits petition for the beatification of Tekakwitha, Cohen is implicitly asking the reader to appreciate, simultaneously, the miraculous work of the novel. If Kateri Tekakwitha’s name means “she, who advancing, arranges the shadows neatly” (47) and the old man’s transfiguration is cinematic, then Tekakwitha must be the supernatural projectionist who squeezes him through the “strait gate” of time to become pure image. To assume that Tekakwitha is this invisible presence working strange magic in the novel is to identify her fully with Leonard Cohen himself. In creating Tekakwitha as the worker of the novel’s own magic, Cohen creates himself simultaneously as the perfect artist. As Elizabeth Kaspar Aldrich explains, “The charismatic force of the genius is the result not of his identity with God, but of his perfect identity with his own inspiration (or ego) and hence with his own works” (10). “Leonard Cohen,” in this instance is the perhaps uneasy answer to what theologians describe as the one true apocalyptic question: “who is the Lord of the world?” (Fiorenza qtd. in Callahan 461).

Cohen seems to swerve back to the autonomy of art in the novel’s epilogue, with its fantastical open-air spectacle. This phenomenon, though, is without true credibility; nobody expects it to have implications for the real world of action. It has no coercive power, and is understood by onlookers as a mere representation. “Thank God,” says one of them, “it’s only a movie” (259). It causes a collective sense of *something happening* but does not have the power to mobilize “the universal body” except for in the fleeting instant of its first apprehension: it is not politics or faith, though it takes on qualities of both. Arendt’s critique of totalitarianism is that it is art masquerading as a politic. The almost ludicrous esotericism of Cohen’s epilogue seems designed to insulate his art from penetrating other discourses.

Cohen demonstrates that the “total vision” represents everything human that is beautiful or dangerous, and, incredibly, he insists on Art’s right to be absolute in its aims nonetheless. The transcendent impulse that marks Cohen’s art—its heroic quest for a theologically inflected total representation—is how Cohen’s art responds to the personal and historical condition of loneliness that he claims is everyone’s. His art adopts the “absolute” and “ruthless” qualities of that longing, while coming openly to self-consciousness about those qualities. Cohen seems implicitly to want to

lift the veil of Beauty to find the Terror of the original idea beneath. In 1964, he figures History as a kind of unravelling creativity, "the description of the path of an Idea" ("Loneliness" n. pag.). He supposes there was an original generative moment where the guardians of the idea were simultaneously its priests (preserving the forms of the idea through ritual, and binding themselves to the community) and its prophets (following the mutable idea into "the regions of danger"). *Beautiful Losers'* drive towards visionary totality betrays a deep nostalgia for that original moment:

I do not know what that original idea was, whose path through the generations attended with such beauty and terror.

I want to know.

(Cohen, "Loneliness")

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Leonard Cohen for permission to quote unpublished material. I am indebted to Dr. Brian Trehearne for his supervision of this work during my doctoral research. And I thank the readers who reviewed this manuscript.
- 2 In *Modernism and Fascism*, Roger Griffin examines the complex relationship between aesthetic modernism and fascism (including Benjamin's claim about the aestheticization of politics). He explores the ways in which the radical, impersonal, and experimental qualities of modernism found political expression at mid-century. Griffin discourages a facile identifications of modernism with fascism, however, by pointing out the anti-modern strains in Nazi ideology, with its pastoral, nostalgic evocation of the "mythical German *Heimat*" (313). He cites, as well, Mussolini's veritable war on avant-garde art.
- 3 Arendt portrays Adolf Eichmann as, paradoxically, an unimaginative idealist, "a man who lived for his idea" without compassion or pity (*Eichmann* 42). Cohen's poem, "All There Is To Know About Adolf Eichmann" seems built on Arendt's suggestion of the banality of his evil.
- 4 Cohen's early critics (Pacey, Scobie, Barbour) established the convention of referring to the scholar as I., in respect of his first person narration.
- 5 Cohen's "Suzanne," of course, features the revelatory "perfect body" (95). Stan Dragland's afterword to *Beautiful Losers* describes its characters as figures with "perfect bodies and wide open minds" (266).
- 6 F's Invocations to History make this metaphor most explicit (*BL* 200-01).
- 7 It is clear that Cohen consciously adopts this trope; elsewhere, I. describes "the viscous blob of come in my palm thinning and clearing, like the end of Creation when all matter returns to water" (68).
- 8 Mark Migotti describes the Nietzschean "erotic-agonistic pedagogy" (52) by which F. urges I. to accept the priorities of the self. It might be observed that even I.'s martyr-worship illustrates Nietzsche's unique view of asceticism. For Nietzsche, the saint-venerator

admires not the saint's piety but rather the saint's strength and pleasure in self-control. The worshipper unwittingly relates to the saint, in other words, as a successful dominator (*Beyond Good and Evil* 58-59).

- 9 Christophe Lebold, in a similar vein, discusses the novel's rejection of linear history and linear time. Lebold finds emancipatory the novel's suggestion of "cyclic time" (149) and its use of a "deep structure of recurrence" (150).

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