

THE COLOURS OF WAR

Matt Cohen's Ironic Parable

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EDGAR Z. FRIEDENBERG, in his controversial study of the Canadian political psyche, *Deference to Authority: The Case of Canada*, attempts to document the claim that “the Canadian system affords” an “enormous potential for oppression.”¹ His most prominent example is Prime Minister Trudeau’s invocation of the War Measures Act during the October Crisis of 1970. He also argues that this sort of issue is rarely dealt with in the arts in English Canada, whose “inability . . . to express itself adequately on the relationship of man to authority” stems from the fact that “The habit of deference is too ingrained in Canada.”² Friedenberg’s discussion of the arts is necessarily brief and incomplete, but it raises some interesting questions for students of literature. Can our writers be as intimidated as he claims? Or is he simply wrong in suggesting that their silence on this issue is a bad sign?

Three years before *Deference to Authority* appeared, Matt Cohen published *The Colours of War*, a novel which I think is the first serious attempt in our fiction to explore the political pathology that Friedenberg describes. Cohen’s narrator, Theodore Beam, witnesses “the Canadian system” in action at the moment when its “enormous potential for oppression” has finally begun to realize itself on a large scale. Beam is faced with a series of crucial choices, all of which in some way involve his sense of self in relation to the political reality which most Canadians, according to Friedenberg, prefer to ignore whenever possible. Perhaps the fact that a Canadian has written such a book can be used in refutation of what Friedenberg has to say about the timidity of English Canadian artists.

But the book’s critical reception supports Friedenberg’s theory about the general unwillingness of Canadians to recognize the political implications of any given situation. The reviewers seemed not to grasp what Cohen was doing; as a result, *The Colours of War* seems to have passed into critical oblivion. David Jackel typifies the response of reviewers when he virtually ignores the issue of the nature and accuracy of the novel’s political statement in order to concentrate on purely aesthetic matters. Matt Cohen, he concludes, “is not yet sufficiently in control of his art.”³ Five years later Jon Kertzer, in his brief overview of Cohen’s work, calls *The Colours of War* “good in parts but weak as a whole”; as if to clinch the case, he reports that “Cohen has admitted dissatisfaction” with it.⁴

(Cohen's dissatisfaction may well have been caused by the uncomprehending critical reaction.)

George Woodcock is alone in defending the novel, arguing that it should be read as a parable, specifically as a contemporary version of *Candide*.⁵ But not even Woodcock comments directly on the book's relation to specific Canadian political events, or on the possibility that it has something to say about specifically Canadian attitudes. Friedenbergs study suggests another context for interpreting the novel: as almost the only serious English Canadian work of literature to have been inspired by the October Crisis, our counterpart to *Les Ordres*, the Québécois film about the arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of hundreds of people at that time. As such, it deserves more careful attention than it has yet been given.

I will begin with a minor but significant example of carelessness. All three of the critics just quoted assert that *The Colours of War* is set in the "near future," but a cursory glance at the novel's chronology reveals that this could not be so. Jacob Beam, the narrator's father, is fifty-six at the time of its action,⁶ yet he has fought in the Spanish Civil War; surely he could not have been born much after 1920. Further, there is evidence that Theodore Beam was born during the Second World War; an excerpt from a wartime letter from Jacob to his wife asks if the child has been born yet — and Theodore is an only child. Theodore turns twenty-seven near the beginning of the book, a fact which makes it possible that the year is 1970 itself. The birthday is in October. Cohen could hardly be more explicit. *The Colours of War* is not a vision of a hypothetical near future, but rather of an alternate recent past. But the critics, as if subject to Friedenbergs theories about the Canadian mentality, have decided to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the questions Cohen is raising. Cohen's implicit statement — "This is what we're really like" — is thereby softened into "This is what, in the worst possible case, we might *become*." What if, Cohen seems to be asking, the October Crisis were not unique to Quebec? What if the whole country were somehow implicated? What might have happened, and what would it have revealed about us as a people?

Early in the novel, Theodore tells us about his life in Vancouver, and about the strange "war" being carried on across North America:

But this war was supposed to be different. There were no sides and no armies, or so the papers said. Just illegal underground groups that had been collecting weapons and now seemed to be systematically wrecking whatever was left of the cities in the South. Every day it seemed there were new declarations of emergencies and martial law. Not exactly a new war: things being the same as always but carried one step further.

It is as though the Weather Underground were far more powerful than it ever actually became. In Canada, there are food shortages, and social strife involving unions, farmers, and the armed forces. Theodore is apolitical but uneasy. After

his apartment has been ransacked by a pair of Kafkaesque police detectives looking for drugs, he decides to return to his hometown, Salem, Ontario. Most of the novel describes his journey by train, during which he becomes involved with a nebulous revolutionary cadre using the train to distribute weapons to its confederates in various places across the country. This group is led by Christopher Perestrello, a mysterious Che Guevara-like figure whose ambition is to unite "the people" against the forces of the government. On the train, Beam falls in love with a woman named Lise, who is a true believer in Perestrello's cause. After a time, he is himself almost converted. When the train reaches North Bay, the revolutionaries are attacked by government forces. Although Perestrello is killed, Theodore and Lise escape to Salem, where Theodore is reunited with his parents after ten years' estrangement. But the political crisis has by this point penetrated even to a backwater like Salem, and government troops occupy the town. At one point Theodore kills a soldier who is attempting to murder his father. By the end of the novel, Theodore and Lise have abandoned the cause of revolution and committed themselves to living near Salem. The government has evidently stamped out all overt resistance, but the larger political issues have not been resolved.

George Woodcock interprets the novel's action in this way:

Theodore must be seen as a kind of latter-day Candide, set to wander as an innocent through the man-made jungles of the present, and to find that all the promises of the future are illusory in comparison with the rediscovery of roots and of Matt Cohen's wry equivalent of Voltaire's cultivation of one's garden.⁷

But this account is too kind to Theodore, whose understanding of his own experience is extremely limited, a fact pointed out by Jackel; it is not so much a matter of Theodore's innocence as of his lack of intelligence. He is, Jackel says, "someone only intermittently capable of understanding the issues involved and seldom able to describe these issues effectively when he does understand them."⁸ But Jackel regards these shortcomings of Theodore as constituting a major *aesthetic* flaw. He does not consider the possibility that Cohen has deliberately made Beam "an inadequately-equipped narrator"⁹ because Beam's inadequacies contribute something essential to the novel's meaning.

Cultivating one's garden is truly a quixotic enterprise if your garden may at any moment be overrun by armed soldiers demanding to see your identity card; but this is Theodore Beam's position at the end of *The Colours of War*. To suggest that Cohen endorses Theodore's gesture is to imply that he shares the naivete that his own novel effectively satirizes. At one point, Lise says that "History catches up to people," to which Theodore responds, "Bullshit." In saying this, he is affirming one of the most deeply cherished of Canadian myths: that we have somehow been exempt from the responsibility of making history, and that

we can continue to opt out without paying a price. Al Purdy's poem about the October Crisis, "The Peaceable Kingdom," makes precisely this point:

we join
 the mainstream of history
 with detention camps and the smell of blood
 and valid reasons for writing great novels
 in the future the past closing around
 and leaving us where I never wanted to be
 in a different country from the one
 where I grew up¹⁰

Purdy laments the loss of political innocence that the October Crisis implies. Cohen's point is that political innocence dies a lot harder than Purdy suspects, although the two would agree that it is a luxury we can no longer afford.

How is it that Theodore Beam, a representative Canadian, can so complacently reject the notion that history affects individuals? This question has an answer complex enough that it takes most of the book to deliver, but its kernel is to be found in his retrospective account of his situation at the beginning of the novel:

I didn't know myself very well then: I hadn't learned to see myself in other people, or how to betray, or to kill, or even to love. I only felt vague stirrings beneath the surface, a half-knowledge that the policeman's careless gesture had tapped me into life again.

And of course by the end of the novel Theodore has learned to see himself in his father, has betrayed the revolutionaries, has killed his father's assailant, has come to love Lise. *The Colours of War* provides ample evidence that Theodore has come to "know himself" (simplistically) in terms of the individualism implied by the quoted passage. That is to say, he *does* the things that he has not previously done, but there is no indication that he understands what has happened to him. He can quote Nietzsche, but he has no consistent philosophical position to help him interpret and evaluate his experience. As a result, he is at the mercy of his instincts, which are right only some of the time. And his education and environment have done nothing to prepare him to "know himself" as a political being; his instinct is to deny, insofar as circumstances permit, that his world *has* a political dimension. At the end of the novel, he and Lise are living in an abandoned church, a retreat from Salem, even as Salem itself was once a retreat from the outside world. Reality is to be defined exclusively in terms of self-realization, and allegiance to those individuals who happen to become important to oneself. Allegiance to principle or to community are notions equally foreign to Theodore.

But he is permitted to retain his illusion of freedom. In the world of the novel, the government does not demand the loyalty of the hearts of the people; it requires only that they act obediently. Government and the individual engage in

a tacit conspiracy to deny that the life of the individual *has* any significant political element. Theodore, through his contact with the revolutionaries, is drawn away from this position, but has returned to it by the end of the book. Cohen, I think, suggests that we imitate Theodore at our peril.

AT THE BEGINNING of the novel, Theodore's life is virtually defined by absence of commitment. He has no plans, no goals — "At this strange time in my life," he tells us, "it seemed as if past and present hardly existed." Like many of his generation, he has drifted to the West Coast. His outlook is epitomized by his fantasy about a hedonistic equivalent to Black Holes: "Soft Holes: places in the universe where stars have disappeared into ecstasy and anyone that comes into them has a billion-year orgasm." It is not particularly remarkable that Theodore should indulge in such day-dreams, but there is nothing in his imagination to counterbalance it. It is as though the Soft Hole provides the archetype for the kind of life he seeks outside his fantasies as well. Consistently he denies significance to experience that is not subjective and not set apart from the world of quotidian reality. We can see this pattern in his interaction with the three other important characters in the novel, Perestrello, Lise, and his father, Jacob.

Perestrello, whose goal is to *transform* the world of quotidian reality, is not a particularly attractive figure for Theodore. At only one point does he feel any sympathy for the revolutionary cause — when a farmer at a meeting in Regina throws in his lot with it. The farmer reminds Theodore of those he has known in Salem, and the joining of forces, he reports, "moved something in me." But this sense of solidarity is undercut almost immediately when he learns that the only dissident farmer at the meeting has been murdered: "I felt some part of me had died."

Apart from this one moment, Theodore withholds emotional commitment from the revolutionary cause. He is undoubtedly right to do so, for Cohen's irony is directed not only at Theodore but also at Perestrello and what he represents. Perestrello is an embodiment of the sentimental radicalism of the Sixties, so popular among Beam's generation. The vague rhetoric about "a people's government" is enough to enlist the support of dupes like Lise. (Lise is, significantly, an American; it is easier for her than for Theodore to have faith in Perestrello's revolutionary aspirations.) Her allegiance to him is unquestioning and, despite her intelligence, entirely stupid, her main article of faith being that " 'Perestrello cares about people. He believes in them'."

But Theodore's rejection of Perestrello is ironic because it too is based on intuition rather than ratiocination. Theodore cannot articulate the grounds for

his rejection, although his unconscious can deliver the message clearly enough. His intuitions about Perestrello are quite different from Lise's. Born in Spain, Perestrello grew up in Latin America. His reading of history is profoundly un-Canadian, not because he is a Marxist (his politics are never clearly defined) but because of his theoretical (as opposed to *de facto*) emphasis on "pure force" as the basis of political reality and because of the utopian idealism that underlies his vision:

"I still have hope," Perestrello said. "Somewhere inside us there's a place that has never been touched and is still innocent, waiting to be discovered. When we've suffered, when the violence is over and the false governments have fallen, when we're simple men and women again, standing on the face of the earth, there'll be something we can reach for, something noble inside us."

Theodore is right to be suspicious of the notion that innocence can be restored by force, but it is only through his unconscious that he can express the ideological congruence of Perestrello and the government. An entire chapter is devoted to a description of a dream in which Theodore is being interrogated and tortured by Felipa (Perestrello's sinister wife) and by the two Vancouver detectives who invade his apartment in the first chapter. At some level, Theodore knows that the "pure force" of each side is equivalent in its amorality, the only difference being that one side has power and the other does not. In his waking life, he tries to be apolitical — "I hate politics," he says when Lise raises the issue for the first time — and constantly tries to reassure himself that the cataclysmic events unfolding around him are not real:

Despite Lise's wound, the boxcars full of weapons, the radio in Perestrello's compartment blasting out news of war and revolution, some part of me still believed that the old order would continue, that peace and comfort would reassert themselves like a small town shrugging off a scandal, and that when we got off the train the world would be cured, safe again: familiar and untouched.

Finally, however, events force Beam to make a conscious decision based on the knowledge that what is happening is real. When the train is attacked by soldiers in northern Ontario, he acts decisively to prevent Lise from joining the battle: "Finally knowing what had to be saved — and what had to be betrayed." But it is only in the heat of this moment that Theodore realizes what he is going to do. He does not attempt to explain, either during or after, what causes him to put Lise and his relationship with her above the interests of the revolution. Again Cohen's irony cuts both ways. On the one hand, Theodore is right not to be taken in by Perestrello, as Lise is; Perestrello's strategy is to mystify his disciples, to remain a leader whose ideas and methods are not subject to rational scrutiny, just as the government — remote, monolithic, impregnable — is perceived only through its lies and its acts of violence. On the other hand, Theodore is not articulate about *why* Perestrello is not worth supporting. He tells Lise that the

revolutionaries are outnumbered, so it would be foolish to fight. But that avoids the larger issue. What he is choosing to do is to put the demands of “personal” reality above those of the “political” dimension, which at once seems more dangerous and less real to him. (In the same way most Canadians at the time of the October Crisis were content to allow the government arbitrary powers in order to remove the threat that political reality might impinge upon their lives; they wanted to continue cultivating their gardens.) Theodore is not seriously interested in social justice — he wishes to pursue the Soft Hole and its more respectable equivalents: romantic love, family, peace in a rural community. If pure force must rule, he would prefer to forget about this fact.

The affirmation that he is making in choosing Lise is an affirmation of romantic love. Like the movie heroes to whom Theodore sometimes ironically compares himself — “In the movies there is always the romantic moment. Bathed in broad sunlight the hero lies on the roof, preferably with a revolver in each hand, and fights off the villains” — he risks his own life to prevent Lise from risking hers. (She threatens him with her weapon.) Yet the novel also satirizes romantic love. Theodore’s relationship with Lise is a cliché, one of the “great romantic escapes” he discusses with her in their first conversation, but he also has a sense that there is a “gap” between them that, as the action progresses, “seemed to be growing wider.” The attraction between them is often described in language redolent of the escapism of the Soft Hole: as they plan their journey to Salem, he feels “a strange sense of recognition, as if we had been sitting here always, planning how to survive, as if our previous lives had been unreal and could now be forgotten.” When they make love for the first time, “We *were* the edge of the world, poised on the edge of the world, waiting to fall off.” Later on, “Lise and I seemed to enter an oasis of perfection: sex.” The language of these passages and others like them suggests that perhaps the Soft Hole is real, *is* the place of innocence that Perestrello has talked about.

But the lovers cannot remain in this world forever because it excludes too much. In Lise’s case, it excludes her attachment to Perestrello’s cause. But at times Theodore too feels “divided,” one part of himself committed to the relationship while the other part remains “skeptical.” His feelings become more complicated: “they were growing in two opposite directions — love and detachment.” By the end of the novel, the emphasis is no longer on the mutually-experienced “oasis of perfection” but on Theodore and Lise as two solitudes and their relationship as compromise:

And she moved away from me again, as if her words could only tell me that in her mind lived her own private thoughts, with their own private lives; and though they might cross with me now and again, their direction would always remain unknown to me.

In accepting this development, Theodore is, without recognizing it, taking on the

reductive pattern of life in Salem, specifically the life his father has lived there. The place of innocence is to be neither the brave new world envisaged by Perestrello, nor the realm of sexual ecstasy briefly occupied by the lovers, but rather (apparently) in what Woodcock calls "the rediscovery of roots" in the countryside near Salem.¹¹

Salem, for Theodore, is epitomized by Jacob Beam — and here, too, Cohen refuses to present an ideal which can be taken seriously as an alternative to political involvement. In his young manhood, Jacob fought the good fight, proving himself in the wars against Franco and Hitler. But in Salem, his life has been characterized by withdrawal, as Theodore recognizes: "he retreated with his letters and diaries into a small town that closed its eyes to the present, let alone the future"; unlike Icarus, Jacob "always stayed close to the ground and far from the ocean — and advised others to do the same." Nor is his life in Salem a matter of achieving ethical perfection, as he is regularly unfaithful to his wife and gradually becomes an alcoholic. As for politics, he advocates the view that "‘If everyone ignored each other the world would be a safer place.’" The passivity of the Jacob Beams of the country (all the more remarkable in that Beam publishes the local newspaper) has a clear — if unstated — relation to the increasing control of individual lives by the government. And Theodore, in retreating as his father has, is giving evidence that he has learned the lesson all too well. The individual has no part in any polity that transcends the level of the village. Salem seems "a town set apart from the rest of the world." In the best of all possible worlds, perhaps this separateness would not be an illusion. But the novel shows that to ignore political evil in the world as it is, is to risk being consumed by it.

Again the failure seems to be one of philosophy, of understanding. Neither Jacob nor Theodore is lacking in courage. Jacob defies a soldier who demands to see his identity card. Theodore risks his life to kill the soldier who is about to murder Jacob. But it is certain that this sort of *ad hoc* resistance will never be enough. Neither father nor son can connect his capacity for courageous action to a notion of political identity that will give their acts significance at a level beyond that of self-realization (or what Theodore would call "knowing oneself"). Jacob does recognize that this war, unlike those that he fought in as a young man, involves "fighting against yourself," but this seems to be the limit of his insight. In place of a mature understanding of political reality, he offers this sentimental vagueness, not generically different from Lise's belief that Perestrello "cares about people": "‘Even the worst disasters can't destroy what is good in us. And no matter what happens there will be some people, ordinary people like you and I, trying to survive, trying to love.’" The events of the novel provide no support for this belief. The individuals who "survive" do so with their freedom radically

curtailed, and they live in fear that the government may extend its power over their lives even further.

Given the Jewishness of the Beams, it is remarkable that neither comments on the parallel with Nazi Germany. Theodore makes one (entirely flippant) reference to Hitler, and Jacob says nothing. The blindness to history implied by their failure to make this connection indicates the power of their desire to stay in a world of false innocence, in which history is to be ignored or obliterated, and there is no danger of its “catching up to” the individual. The overriding fact at the end of the novel is not that “ordinary people” like Theodore and Jacob have survived, but that Salem is clearly no longer “a town set apart from the rest of the world.”

AND THIS IS THE major irony of *The Colours of War*. Theodore can ruminate with some complacency about how he has come to “know himself” as the state moves farther and farther into totalitarianism. (The introduction of compulsory identity cards towards the novel’s end is an index of this.) No matter what happens, Cohen seems to be saying, individual Canadians will go on cultivating their personal gardens.

How could they reasonably expect anything more? True, Canadian history has sometimes presented the promise of some sort of social and political redemption. For example, here is Theodore’s description of Regina, at the time when it looks as though Perestrello may be able to forge an allegiance with the farmers and unions:

... Regina, in addition to being the wheat capital of the West, had once been known as a centre of socialism; that Canada’s own socialist party and labour movement had focussed here in the midst of the Great Depression and composed a manifesto declaring all men equal. Property Evil. The Dawn of A New Age.

But the promise always reveals itself to be a mirage. Later in the same passage, we are made to recall the darker side of Regina’s Depression history, as Theodore describes the faces of the people at the meeting:

... as if the memory of the police riding through the streets and breaking up strike lines lived in each one’s imagination, recurring over and over again, every second of their lives, like a huge rock that forever shapes a river.

Throughout Canadian history — later there is a gratuitous reference to the Métis — state power has crushed revolutionary energy. The prime minister’s televised speech seems a parody of Pierre Trudeau’s at the time of the War Measures Act — “‘We intend to act quickly and ruthlessly to preserve our social order.’” (Al Purdy in “The Peaceable Kingdom” quotes Trudeau: “‘All I can say is go on and bleed / it’s more important to keep law and order....’”¹²) Instead of

simply throwing the offenders in jail, Cohen's nameless prime minister announces a televised trial, "so you may see for yourself the guilt of these despicable culprits." Later we learn that one of the farmers from the Regina meeting — the one, in fact, whose commitment to Perestrello so impressed Theodore — has sold out to the government. The potential for "A New Age" has again been destroyed. In its place, there is a government which has restricted freedom to an unprecedented extent, in a country becoming increasingly militarized.

In the book's last sentence, Theodore announces that he and Lise will "go on living here," but under conditions not much different from the ones Friedenberg takes to be characteristic of those obtaining between government and governed in this country:

The practical message, and quite possibly the one the government means to convey, is: "The Government of Canada *is* the law; and don't think that because the law protects us from you, it also protects you from us. If you think you were taught that in school, you surely must have forgotten what school was really like."¹³

Theodore apparently subscribes to the naive faith of his father in the decency of ordinary people. He addresses the book to a generalized "you," a fellow citizen: "We already know each other. We've caught flashes of each other in a thousand movies. . . ." The explicit burden of his message is that it is a triumph for him to have survived and to have come to "know himself." But the ironic sub-text is that the notion of citizenship is irrelevant: political activity is intrinsically quixotic, and the best one can do is make personal commitments and ignore the possibility of constructive collective action. The Soft Hole of the personal life can allow us to forget that we have a political identity. The hard fact of government power indicates that, if we know what's good for us, we will. Again, Friedenberg makes a pertinent generalization that illuminates Cohen's text. Speaking of the differences between Canadians and Americans, he says:

The differences are sometimes subtle and occasionally gross, but they are observable in most areas of human activity whose results are likely to be affected strongly by their participants' conviction — or lack of it — that spontaneous action by themselves or others is likely to get them somewhere.¹⁴

Theodore Beam has internalized the subliminal message that his society has been sending him since birth: revolution, or even significant political reform, is impossible to achieve; it is best to pretend that human beings are not political animals.

Cohen's irony is dark indeed, and *The Colours of War* could be used as evidence to corroborate Friedenberg's theories. Although Theodore Beam is forced to make choices that the protagonists of most Canadian novels can avoid, his decisions involve the sort of wrong-headedness that Friedenberg laments at length in *Deference to Authority*. But perhaps there is consolation in the fact that Cohen

has broken the silence about the issue of "the relationship of man to authority." The novel's appearance may be a sign that Anglophone Canada is developing the critical consciousness that Friedenberg was unable to find reflected in the work of its artists.

NOTES

- ¹ Edgar Z. Friedenberg, *Deference to Authority: The Case of Canada* (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1980), p. 160.
- ² Friedenberg, pp. 28-29.
- ³ David Jackel, "An Abridged *War and Peace*," *Canadian Forum* (December-January 1977-78), p. 41.
- ⁴ Jon Kertzer, "Matt Cohen" in Jeffrey M. Heath, ed. *Profiles in Canadian Literature 4* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1982), p. 129.
- ⁵ George Woodcock, "Armies Moving in the Night: The Fiction of Matt Cohen" in his *The World of Canadian Writing* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980), p. 146.
- ⁶ *The Colours of War* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), p. 108. All other quotations from this edition.
- ⁷ Woodcock, p. 146.
- ⁸ Jackel, p. 41.
- ⁹ Jackel, p. 41.
- ¹⁰ Al Purdy, *Sex & Death* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973), pp. 105-06.
- ¹¹ Woodcock, p. 146.
- ¹² Purdy, p. 103.
- ¹³ Friedenberg, p. 61.
- ¹⁴ Friedenberg, pp. 19-20.

MAY DAY

Allan Safarik

this month passes its time
on earth, a love poem
of tiny unfurling grape leaves

summer flowers untouched by rain
grinning pyromaniacs
are the pride of the earth