THE POET AS NOVELIST

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In 1965 NORTHROP FRYE WROTE: "A striking fact about Canadian poetry is the number of poets who have turned to narrative forms (including closet drama) rather than lyrical ones."[1] It is indeed true that we possess a rather rich tradition of narrative poetry in this country, and, as Frye has also pointed out,[2] much of our poetry that is lyrical in form is not at all lyrical in spirit. Yet it is also a fact that at least two of our decidedly lyric poets have turned to narrative, but narrative in prose: Leonard Cohen and Margaret Atwood. They have not totally rejected what Frye calls "the more manipulated comic and romantic formulas of prose fiction" but they do seem to have used narrative for its natural affinities with ironic tones and themes.[3] Unlike Pratt's tragic and impersonal narrative poems, the novels of Cohen and Atwood in particular are both ironic and personal — that is, lyrical and not autobiographical.

These novels are lyrical or poetic in yet another way, one that seems to set them apart from the creations of Canadian novelists proper. This difference would seem to lie in the particular *structural* use made of imagery and symbolism within the novels. It is not that the poet/novelists use *more* of these devices, but that they use them in a different manner: they appear to be willing to trust the reader with the image. Poets, after all, have no choice; in their poetry, they have to. Novelists, on the other hand, have a different set of rhetorical tools at their command: among these, plot and character exposition and narrative explanation.

Margaret Laurence — through her heroine — *tells* the reader quite explicitly that Hagar is the stone angel of the title of her novel. Robertson Davies thrice explains what the "fifth business" means. On the other hand, despite the title, *The Edible Woman*, Atwood refrains from explicating the theme of her novel — the threatened consuming of Marion — to the reader. Instead she implicitly structures her novel around the title image: most scene locations, jobs, and personal problems are oriented around food. Here the narrative structure seems to be hung on the scaffolding of imagery, rather than vice versa. In Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, this structure hangs there tenuously, actually slipping off completely at times, leaving the reader with only the scaffold. He is then asked to relate directly to the image — without the explanatory intervention of character or narrator. The question is: does this matter of trust arise at all from the fact that Cohen and Atwood are poets as well?

It is not at all surprising that they would manifest similar themes in their verse and in their fiction. This has always been the case: one thinks of Emily Brontë, Meredith, D. H. Lawrence. It is also not odd that there are similar poetic images or even similar poetic structures in their prose as in their verse. Very few writers seem to switch definitively from one form to another, as did Hardy, and certainly Cohen and Atwood seem to be continuing to write both poetry and prose fiction. But poets who write novels do perhaps have a different "hermeneutic" relationship to both their readers and their narrative structures than do novelists. This phenomenon would not be peculiarly Canadian — witness Dickey and Plath — although the irony that dominates the narrative of the two Canadians' works (but not that of the two Americans) might tend to support a version of Frye's notion that there is something in our cultural heritage that is attracted to the ironic mode within the narrative genre — be it in verse or in "poetically" patterned prose.

TWO CANADIAN NOVELS SUGGEST THEMSELVES for consideration in this light, since they share, not one, but two thematic patterns: a tracing of the relationship between the mysteries of magic and those of religion, and an attempt to convince the reader of the need to reconcile the human dualities, to unite the opposites of flesh and spirit in order to achieve some human ideal of wholeness and identity. These two novels are *Beautiful Losers*, by the poet, Leonard Cohen, and *Fifth Business*, by the satirist-dramatist, Robertson Davies. On the surface, despite thematic similarities, two novels could not appear more diverse. The bizarre experimental form of the one is juxtaposed with the more traditionally realistic form (fictional autobiography) of the other. Cohen's often wildly obscene, rhapsodic prose ("I paddle versions of Word"), whose verbal structures often tend toward disintegration, contrasts sharply with the elegantly controlled style of Davies' narrative. Yet, though in different fashions, the narrators of each are equally articulate and it is what they choose to *tell* rather than *show* the reader, that should prove interesting from our point of view.

Although the two novels indeed do share the dual thematic structure outlined above, the variants within the form are potentially revealing. In *Fifth Business*, Dunstan Ramsay comes to realize that religion and magic share the same appeal: they both present mysterious worlds of wonders which all men find a psychological necessity. The hero's sense of satisfaction in the magic of Magnus Eisengrim follows — in plot chronology — his realization of the psychological reality of faith, through those worshipping at the shrine of the Virgin of Guadaloupe. He asks himself: "Why do people all over the world, and at all times, want marvels that defy all verifiable fact?" Of course, he himself had always intuitively sensed the inter-relationships between magic and religion; as a boy his two favourite discoveries amid the library's rejected volumes were a book of magic tricks and one

of the lives of the saints. He reads both to Paul (later the magician), son of Mary (later Dunstan's fool-saint).

Cohen, too, perceives the similarities in these wonder-working identities, but rejects that of the magician, the *controller* of wonders. His character F. writes: "I believed that I had conceived the vastest dream of my generation: I wanted to be a magician. That was my idea of glory. Here is a plea based on my whole experience: do not be a magician, be magic." One must not try to control as a magician, but rather one must seek "balance in the chaos of existence," and one who does so fulfils Cohen's definition of the real, if unorthodox, saint. The other wonder-working magicians and orthodox saints — F. and Catherine Tekakwitha — are revealed as defeated victims of their particular beliefs. Cohen does not spell this out for his reader, but rather leaves him, as we shall see, to connect image clusters, to make meaning on his own, *if he so chooses.*

This same difference is seen in the treatment of the second shared theme in the two novels: the need to unite flesh and spirit, body and soul.[4] These are two of the elements that the narrator seeks to balance in *Beautiful Losers.* Either, on its own, develops into a tyrannical and victimizing system. In *Fifth Business,* Dunstan, too, learns to balance the devil of the flesh and the saint of the spirit in his own life. Alone, the devil and the saint are equally self destructive. Davies, however, seems to employ a Jungian foundation on which to build his imagery: in particular, the dualism of ego and anima (the bisexual Liesl is, we recall, the devil figure). This psychological core suggests that Dunstan's balancing is a private one, albeit one for which all men might strive. In *Beautiful Losers,* on the other hand, the narrator's every utterance turns out to be doubly resonant: he is condemned to speak on a private and public level at once, much to his chagrin: "O Tongue of the Nation! Why don't you speak for yourself?"

One might argue that the title metaphor of Davies' novel points to a public role Dunstan is to play in the lives of others. Yet the weight of the novel is on the hero's personal and private development and not at all on the public dimension which presumably Davies intends to have (but, as we shall see, does not succeed in having) dovetail with the private one at the end of the novel. The key to this difference in resonance in the treatment of the same themes in these two novels may well stem from the different uses of imagery *and* from the differing degrees of trust in the reader displayed by the two writers.

In lieu of traditional narrative structures, Cohen relies on mythic and imagistic patterns to balance out the chaos of *Beautiful Losers.* Frye[5] pointed out twenty years ago that Cohen's interests have been mythopoeic from the start. His usual Jewish, Christian, and Hellenic paradigms are supplemented here, by the folklorist narrator, with Amerindian and Egyptian ones, and with a modern *mythos* gleaned from movies, radio, and comics. The narrator addresses the pop singer, Gavin Gate: "You are the king of some slum block and you have handed down

Laws." Cohen's reasons for this wide mythic range are mainly structural, for his novel is both private and public in its scope.

In this double dimension, it is most like one particular work — the Bible. Both are epics of a man and a people, but Cohen's demonic parody replaces the moral framework of good and evil with an existential one of identity and alienation. Faith is in turn replaced by magic. Both works have a recognizable historical skeleton, yet their unity is an organic and not a linear one: instead of the biblical story of the growth of Israel's freedom from bondage, we have an ironic tale of increasing bondage and victimization at the hands of public and private conquerors. The Top Ten are elevated to the "Lost Tribes."

In the Bible, both the public hero, Moses, and the private one, Jesus, are saved from slaughter in their early years. Similarly, Catherine Tekakwitha is saved from the Jesuits by the narrator's lust and love, and the old man of the epilogue is in turn rescued from the "Catholic posse" by the half-naked, moccasin-wearing blonde. Just as Moses crossed the Red Sea, and Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, Catherine (and later F. and Edith, too) is refreshed by the waters of Tekakwitha's spring, and the narrator is baptized by "fire, shit, history, love and loss." As Moses strives for the Promised Land, and Jesus enters Heaven after death, so in our novel, Catherine enters "the eternal machinery of the sky," and the old man becomes a Ray Charles movie projected against the sky.

In the Bible, we find certain spiritual textual authorities — Moses' Ten Commandments and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In Cohen's ironic version, the reader might note that we find Jesuit sermons and reports, and F.'s cryptic sayings that are handed down through time, across the barrier of death. The Serpent of Brass is visually echoed by Christ on the cross, just as the image of Brébeuf at the stake is structurally repeated in that of Cohen's old man tormented in the treehouse. Edith puts semen, rainwater, tears, and urine in her navel in a parody, perhaps, of the Song of Songs: "Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine." There are also extended image patterns throughout *Beautiful Losers* of the biblical symbols connected with the eucharist, the leviathan, and the apocalypse,[6] but at no time does Cohen explain, underline, or explicate. It is up to the reader to make order — or balance.

Perhaps with Isaiah 59:15 in mind ("He that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey"), Cohen has partly based both the historical and personal plot structures on the pattern of victimizer turning victim. Just as F. tormented the narrator, he too is tormented, a victim of an English plot — and of his own system of belief. Each successive conquering race of Canada's history has become the prey both of its own victims and of the next historical conqueror. Brébeuf is tortured by the Indians, just as the Indians' culture fell to that of the French explorers and missionaries, who in turn faced defeat at the hands of the English. Today, Cohen suggests, these same English are threatened by both French terrorist bombs and

America's overwhelming technology and culture. No character or narrator explicitly states this in the novel; the reader must look for patterns to find meaning — as he does in reading a poem, of course.

The other related structure that Cohen seems to employ centres on two opposite systems of unity, both "arrogant and warlike" because they pretend to put the world in order: the system of the flesh, with its victim and magician controller, F.; and the system of the spirit, with its victim and saint, Catherine. To unify is to control and to do so is to exert the power "to change" and "to hurt," and, as the hero of Cohen's first novel (*The Favorite Game*) suggests, to leave one's brand. Both unifying systems demand a loss of personal identity, in favour of a symbolic sainthood that the mechanical imagery attached to it in the novel suggests is destructive.

The narrator loves the victims of both systems and in merging their identities (Edith's and Catherine's; F.'s and the uncle's), he becomes a "balancing monster of love." Or so the reader might choose to interpret that constantly confusing blurring of edges that are usually so carefully delineated in fiction: those of characters' personalities and identities. Cohen is never even as explicit in the novel as he is in, for instance, the poem "The priest says goodbye," in which "Abelard proved how bright could be / the bed between the hermitage and nunnery." Abelard, too, is a beautiful loser, precariously balancing the flesh and spirit. The true balancing saint does not control like the magician; he himself is the act of magic: "*mind* itself is Magic coursing through *flesh*" (italics mine).

In the light of the ambiguity of the final image of a Ray Charles movie and the failure of the revolution of the second chancers, the possibility arises that balance is merely another word for ambivalence. The reader is not allowed to order, to create his own victimizing system of interpretation; instead, like the other beautiful losers, he must find and then balance the dualities which the imagery and symbolism of the novel suggest on both the private and public levels of the narrative — which is, after all, about a set of very Canadian orphans, Indian, French, and English.

IN CONTRAST TO COHEN'S STRUCTURING METHOD of patterns of allusion, symbolism, and image that — as in verse — leaves the actual hermeneutic work up to the reader (the lazy one will not bother finishing the novel), Robertson Davies uses more traditional novelistic techniques both to structure his novel and to expose its themes. The plot consists of an impressively balanced series of events and set of characters. Each of the six sections is carefully linked by parallel incident with its neighbours and with its counterpart (1 and 4; 2 and 5; 3 and 6).[7] Each character has his opposite number: Leola/Denyse, Blazon/

Leadbeater, Mrs. Ramsay/Mrs. Dempster, and so on. Perhaps there is not a little of the satirist's classical order in Davies' formal balance.

Often characters are asked to be carriers of specific thematic weight, in the way that images are in Cohen's novel. For Boy Staunton "the reality of life lay in external things," while Mary Dempster explicitly lives "by a light that arose from within." Of course, the reader's perceptions of these characters and what they stand for is conditioned by the roles they play in the private life of the narrator, Dunstan Ramsay, whose autobiographical narrative he is reading. This is not completely true, of course, since it is the author, not the narrator, who chooses to give his three "twice-born" their symbolic names: Magnus Eisengrim, Boy Staunton, and Dunstan Ramsay. One is made to choose a superlative and a wolf's name; another is revealingly left a boy forever; the third is made to reject Dunstable, his mother's maiden name, and take on that of a saint who is described as having been "mad about learning, terribly stiff and stern and scowly, and an absolute wizard at withstanding temptation."

Yet it is Dunstan, the narrator, to whom the various thematic messages of unity are directly addressed by other characters. Father Blazon preaches to him that when Christ comes again, "it will be to declare the unity of the life of the flesh and the life of the spirit. And then perhaps we shall make some sense of this life of marvels, cruel circumstances, obscenities, and commonplaces." He warns Dunstan to forgive himself for being human and to accept that the wisdom of the spirit must be linked to that of the body. Enter Magnus Eisengrim with his sacred and profane "Vision of Dr. Faustus," and more importantly, Liesl, the devil herself, who accuses him — explicitly and at length — of trying to be a saint at the expense of the repressed devil in himself. These overt statements of theme are, of course, directed at the reader as well, since it is to him (and the Headmaster) that Davies (and Dunstan) choose to relate the tale. Declaration replaces the allusion of Cohen's text.

This is not to say that Davies does not use imagery to structure his narrative. As mentioned earlier, the Jungian ego-anima duality appears in an image chain that begins in Dunstan's academic interest in Wilgefortis, a hermaphroditic saint, whose legend grew from the image at Lucca of a long-haired, bearded figure hanging from a cross. This saviour symbolism is recalled in the saving role in Dunstan's life played by the bisexual, very masculine woman, Liesl, who Dunstan meets through Paul. Not surprisingly, he had previously met Paul once before while indulging his academic interests in viewing a bearded lady in a small European circus. This hermaphroditic union of male and female does suggest the ego-anima division of "that fantastical duke of dark corners," as Dunstan explicitly calls Jung. Indeed the novel's plot seems structured on Dunstan's private, psychological, personal coming to terms with himself. If this is so, the novel's title — which might be pointing the reader to its major image — is problematic.

The idea of the fifth business, carefully defined by Davies in the epigraph, and by Liesl within the novel, relates to a public role which Dunstan is to play in the lives of Paul and, especially, Boy. While this novel does not have the historical or national scope of Cohen's, it would appear to lay claim to a more public dimension; it is presumably meant to be more than a chronicle of Dunstan's personal maturation. But, is it? It has been suggested that the public role of the fifth business corresponds to that of the Jungian shadow,[8] and that when Dunstan has his coronary at the words of Liesl's Brazen Head, he is accepting his public responsibility, in an analogous act to his earlier acceptance of his private one, again at Liesl's hands. But is it not true that Dunstan's narrative has used Paul, Boy, and Mrs. Dempster (those directly and indirectly involved in his public role as the fifth) as functions and indices of the hero's *personal* development, and not vice versa? It is a novel about the private growth of Dunstan, not about the peripheral role he plays in the lives of public figures such as Boy and Paul.

More recently David Monaghan has suggested that, although Davies seems to want the public and private themes to intertwine, they do not do so.[9] The fifth business then becomes a misused metaphor, a subsidiary and not controlling image in the novel. He offers an alternative controlling metaphor — that of the concept of the "boy" (as literal youth; as false adult; and as authentic man), and his argument is convincing, although this is mainly so because, once again, the narrator is so very explicit about it himself. Early in the novel, he tells us that a boy "is a man in miniature, and though he may sometimes exhibit notable virtue . . . he is also schemer, self-seeker, traitor, Judas, crook, and villain — in short, a man." Later, as a schoolteacher, he tells his reader: "I have been a boy myself, and I know what a boy is, which is to say, either a fool or an imprisoned man striving to get out." Dunstan, as a young man, rejects being anyone's "wee laddie" and in doing so rejects, too, all involving human relations, remaining the cold and detached intellectual, until Liesl confronts him with the knowledge that in emotional terms, he is still a boy. As a result of his battle with his devil and with the truth, Dunstan is able to break down his protective walls and grows emotionally and humanly. Boy Staunton, as his name suggests, reaches no such maturity and dies a boy, punished for a boy's crime. Dunstan himself makes this very clear: "As a boy he had been something of a bully, a boaster, and certainly a bad loser. . . . But now Boy Staunton had reached a point in life where he no longer tried to conceal his naked wish to dominate everybody and was angry and ugly when things went against him." Boy later tries to absolve himself of responsibility in Mrs. Dempster's fate: "you know what boys are. Brutes, because they don't know any better." His next words are ironic: "But they grow up to be men." Boy dies a boy, but at the hands — in moral if not physical terms — of a man who is supposed to have advanced beyond the machinations of a detached and moralistic saint.

Is Dunstan's role as fifth business as false to the primary theme of the novel as this would suggest? In his attempt to use imagery as a structuring device, Davies appears to have been working at cross purposes: the plot and character development present a private theme, but the central images — the fifth and the boy — would seem to cancel each other out, were not the latter more frequent and no less explicitly explained by the narrator, so as in effect to dominate the imagery of the work. There is none of the broad scope (Biblical, Canadian, as well as personal) or deeper thematic resonance of Cohen's structural use of metaphor here. Davies uses traditional novelistic devices of plot and character, as well as overt declaration to expose his themes. The reader can note the satisfying parallel structures — but rarely before the narrator points them out to him. It is, of course, central to Davies' theme as well as form, that the reader perceive the balancing and reconciling (of flesh and spirit, of magic and faith). Perhaps for this reason he leads him by the hand.

Cohen allows his reader considerably more freedom — including that of misreading, or rather of interpreting the novel in his own manner, or even of refusing interpretation completely. The responsibility is always the reader's. Davies, as controller magician, takes this upon himself and, not unlike the satirical writers of the eighteenth century, guides his reader step by step to his, the author's, interpretation of the text. This is, of course, probably why Davies' novel is both easier to read and more of a popular success than Cohen's could ever be. It is also why the second reading of each is such a very different experience.

In *Beautiful Losers* the narrative's irony is a function as much of the act of reading as that of writing. While this cannot really be claimed for *Fifth Business*, Davies' novel also combines irony with the narrative mode in what is, if Frye is right, a particularly Canadian fashion. Perhaps it is in the different structural uses of imagery, however, that lie the distinguishing formal characteristics of the (lyric) poet and the (satiric) novelist within this national tradition. The poet does appear to have a greater degree of hermeneutic trust in his reader — even when he is writing prose fiction.

NOTES

[1] "Conclusion," *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965), pp. 842-43.

[2] "The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry," in *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 149.

[3] See Frye's "Conclusion," p. 843.

[4] Perhaps this duality is, as Davies suggests, a typically Canadian one. He claimed in a *Maclean's* interview in 1972 that his novels actually said a lot about Canada: "I see Canada as a country torn between a very northern, rather extraordinary, mystical spirit which it fears and its desire to present itself to the world as a Scotch banker." (Quoted by William H. New in Chapter 14, "Fiction" in Carl F. Klinck,

ed., *Literary History of Canada*, 2nd ed., vol. III [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976], p. 255.)

[5] 1956 "Letters in Canada," reprinted in *The Bush Garden*, p. 67.

[6] See, for a full discussion, the author's "*Beautiful Losers:* All the Polarities," *Canadian Literature*, No. 59 (Winter 1974), especially pp. 43-44.

[7] See Ellen D. Warwick, "The Transformation of Robertson Davies," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 3, No. 3 (1974), 46-51.

[8] Gordon Roper, "Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* and 'that fantastical duke of dark corners, C. G. Jung,' " *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 1, No. 1 (Winter 1972), 33-39.

[9] "Metaphors and Confusions," *Canadian Literature*, No. 67 (Winter 1976), 64-73.

THE INCREDIBLE BLUE AND LOVELY SUICIDES

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco

The incredible blue and lovely suicides
are coming to visit me. The friend, he was such a friend,
tied his neck to the ceiling, and swung for a couple of hours,
and care, something like a crutch of bones, discovered him.

How shall I name the toothpicks around the heart, and the
improbable sunlight trying out gloves. He was nothing like
his face, hanging there, and his eyes blackened beyond the
light that had been leaving them for ten years.

The bed, in the night, did not turn me over; and there were no
voices. And my 28 years did not run around the room looking
for articles of clothing.

He went, snugly, he went like a poke in the eye, he went mildly,
he went like a cloth tearing, like my insides.

And he remembered mamma? No. He heard nothing, and nothing
will I
forgive him.

I see my fingers running across the far side of the room; as they
might go
through hair. When it grows dark they will go mad and white,
and from the other corner of the room I will laugh to myself,

and remember the idiot flowers.