

MATT COHEN'S MONOLOGUE IN MORALITY

Betty Moore Ewing

IN HIS FIRST TWO published works, Matt Cohen used the novel form as a vehicle for a searching inquiry into the moral struggle facing the individual today in a rapidly expanding technological society. Essentially, the author is attempting to discover a solution to the personal dehumanization which results first from extensive role playing and secondly from an inability to accept the responsibility involved in being an individual; that is, in differing from the norm. The problem emerges as twofold. On the one hand, accepting the inevitability of role playing leads to the corruption of personal integrity and the paralysis of emotion. On the other hand, variance from the role or norm necessitates an honest evaluation of self, which, if not impossible, is likely to be, at best, disheartening.

Early in the first novel, *Korsoniloff*, Cohen states his intentions. Korsoniloff admits that the following journal (which constitutes the book's narrative) is a "morality monologue". Korsoniloff, a Toronto philosophy professor is making a mental pilgrimage in search of a "true understanding of self". He recognizes in his own personality the split which is the product of sociological pressures to conform. Korsoniloff's opposing selves, the one active and imposing, the other passive and introspective, vie incessantly for supremacy. A third faction develops in the form of a narrator removed from the reality of the action — a spectator capable of viewing, at once, opposing personalities struggling to conquer the total individual. Korsoniloff names it the line of contiguity. If this third power were indeed a line of contiguity, it would by definition join the opposing halves in a complicated and many-faceted, but *complete* whole. This accordingly should result in an integration of selves and a liberation from the struggle for self-identification. Instead, an implacable arbitrariness results. When Korsoniloff's third self assumes the role of onlooker, all action loses meaning. The actor can no longer be held responsible for his actions since he is merely an observer. Actions, consequently, are lifted beyond morality and are neither right nor wrong. How then, if Korsoniloff can judge his separate selves only by their actions can he establish which is the better faction and accordingly allow that faction total supremacy? From this develops the circular motion of the morality monologue to what is, as Cohen calls

it, a non-existent centre. Essentially, Korsoniloff has arrived at the most fundamental of philosophical questions — what is good or evil? Because of the very nature of philosophical questioning, there can be no definite solution.

Korsoniloff himself recognizes the paradox. Out of the fear that our uncontrived personality may be unacceptable to society, we establish our roles so firmly that there remains no escape. He wonders if we see ourselves as others see us and if so, could we ever be sure of this matching perception. His final conclusion is that we simply do not really WANT to see ourselves.

In an effort to avoid confrontation with ourselves, we rely on the role created for us by our past or occupation. "One must inevitably appropriate and console oneself with one's own history." That is, one converts one's history to one's own worth without authority and seals the gaps in the present with the putty of the past. Tonker, Korsoniloff's lawyer, exemplifies the personality hidden behind the employment role. The pile of papers on his desk is "an externalized monument". Not only is it necessary for today's generation to establish a sense of self-importance through externals but to eternalize it. A house is renovated for "the first child who must begin in conquered territory". And so, false values, values today's generation has named false, are monumentalized by the individuals wishing to defy them.

The second consideration is the acceptance of responsibility. Korsoniloff states, with unusual candour, that he is "tired of responsible reality". The alternative, if not split personality, is total surrender to unreality, distinguished by irrational action. But this too is undesirable, for irrational action demands even greater responsibility. Korsoniloff meets the dilemma head on when he ventures that perhaps he is "afraid to be really insane".

IT IS IN THIS POSITION that Johnny Crackle finds himself in Cohen's second novel, *Johnny Crackle Sings*. Johnny, having lost a preliminary battle in the crusade for success, begins to withdraw with increasing regularity into the medium of chemically induced euphoria. Eventually, withdrawal gains an impetus of its own, disjoint from drugs. As Johnny escapes reality and moves into a state of (as he sees it) oneness with the universe, he is menaced with having to face the responsibility which accompanies refusal to conform and communicate as demanded by his role. Threatened in a psychiatric clinic with shock treatment, Johnny realizes that variance from the norm will bring neither escape nor peace but rather a discomfort far greater than that produced by role playing. Since his intent in withdrawing was to produce infinite peacefulness, Johnny discards the decision as having no ultimate purpose.

In *Korsoniloff*, Matt Cohen elaborates on the theme of frozen emotion. This

results from two seemingly opposite causes. Gail is the best example of an individual who chooses to prostitute her beliefs, toss off all personal integrity and assume an easier mode of living — role playing. So completely does she give herself to the playing of roles that she becomes totally pliant, totally without a personality of her own. Morally, she is corrupt. Without hesitation she allows Tonker to make of her a gift to Korsoniloff, and a gift which is merely a replacement for the inaccessible Marie. If she has emotions, they are unidentifiable. Korsoniloff sees her as unperturbed, moving with the flow as it were, and imagines marrying and living together in Rosedale. Rosedale, apparently, for Korsoniloff represents the home of those who have successfully integrated their personalities with a very acceptable norm. But as he imagines the ease of such a situation, he can foresee the effect. Gail is a “closed system” with whom communication would be, at best, limited.

The second cause of paralyzed communication and emotion is, surprisingly, an unwillingness to conform. More exactly, when Korsoniloff as narrator begins to question the established reactions of his other two selves, as mentioned earlier, an arbitrariness results. Introspection, therefore, although intended to provide freedom from false actions, results also in stultified emotion. As Korsoniloff oversees with dread his contrived relationship with Marie, he becomes so totally removed from its actuality that he can no longer communicate at all. Unable to play the role, yet unable to discard it, he chooses the only remaining alternative — escape. But even at the final parting, he is socially handicapped. Programmed by social mores, he resents having turned back before leaving, thus losing the “upper hand”. As long as he feels that he has lost the battle, although the relationship has ended (which after all was his aim) he has not truly escaped. The disruption of Marie’s wedding represents, to Korsoniloff’s distorted vision of reality, absolute freedom.

Significantly, Korsoniloff is unwilling to admit his guilt when legally charged with the disruption of Marie’s wedding. Morally, he sees the issue as one-sided. Since the act was precipitated by a need to be free of past contrivances, to be true to his personality in opposition to the norm, then surely the act was not wrong. He perceives his innocence as necessarily so.

This theme of necessary innocence is stressed repeatedly in *Johnny Crackle Sings*. Lengthy passages of prose poetry argue on behalf of man’s innocence as the child of God. After all, should that not provide an unchallengeable escape from responsibility? Johnny faced with failure reminds himself:

Yes I was born perfect flawless . . . they can’t take that away from us and nor can we we were perfect once and always are . . . and we are still perfect and we have killed and torn apart and destroyed and we are still perfect . . .

Johnny is, in a sudden stream of religiosity (prompted by fear), attempting to establish some worth, some goodness in himself which does not rely on the opinion

of society. He seeks the promise of innate value which cannot be destroyed by failing in some socially imposed role. For Johnny, the solution lies in forfeiting, at least temporarily, a public life for a quietly secluded marriage, in which the closeness of friends and the establishment of a family (an “externalized monument”?) provide him with sufficient reminder of his own worth.

For Korsoniloff the solution is more difficult. After imagining his own suicide and the subsequent shooting of an old woman, he finally recognizes the latent guilt connected with his mother’s drowning. This realization affords Korsoniloff a sudden insight into his, and all men’s, ability to destroy. Having accepted the possibility of self, not as necessarily innocent, but as responsible for his own actions, he acknowledges his inability to stand apart and in a “morality monologue” divide finally and without exception, right from wrong.

Did I do it or didn’t I?
 I still don’t know.
 But I know I never will.

In both cases, with Johnny now living on the coast with Jenny and monument-child, and Korsoniloff assuming semi-communicative self-acceptance with Gail, we are left with a feeling of futility. This feeling persists, not because there is no total escape from the jaws of social obligation, but because the real battle was for mobility through understanding and, having perceived the predicament, we are no freer. Avoidance, as in Johnny’s case, or acceptance, as in Korsoniloff’s, bring no promise of relief from forced conformity to socially acceptable roles in order to interact effectively. The monologue has indeed been a circular one, ever moving toward a non-existent centre. Early in the novel, *Korsoniloff*, Cohen sets the tone. “The mood is spiritual poverty.” Essentially, nothing has changed.

PACIFIC SALMON

Roderick Haig-Brown

River-born fugitives, red muscled under sheathing silver,
 Alive with lights of ocean’s changing colours,
 The range of deeps and distances through wild salt years
 Has gathered the sea’s plenty into your perfection.
 Fullness is the long return from dark depths
 Rendering toll of itself to the searching nets
 Surging on to strife on brilliant gravel shallows
 That opened long ago behind the failing ice.
 In violence over the gravel, under the burn of fall,
 Fullness spends itself, thrusting forth new life
 To nurse in the stream’s flow. The old life,
 Used utterly, yields itself among the river rocks of home.