BEAUTIFUL LOSERS

All the Polarities

Linda Hutcheon

BEAUTIFUL LOSERS has been called everything from obscene and revolting to gorgeous and brave. For a Canadian work it has received considerable international attention, yet few literary critics have dared take it seriously. Along with *The Energy of Slaves*, which shares its themes and imagery, this novel stands as a culminating point in Cohen's development. It may also be the most challenging and perceptive novel about Canada and her people yet written.

Cohen plays with the novel structure but the essential unity of the work lies outside the temporal and spatial confines of plot and character, in the integrity of the images. The first book, "The History of Them All," is the tortured confession of a nameless historian-narrator whose prose is as diarrhetic as his body is constipated. "A Long Letter from F.," written from an asylum for the criminally insane by the brilliant, erratic revolutionary-tyrant, presents us with the narrator's teacher and his "system," seen from the perspective of failure. The final fantasy of F.'s escape leads into "Beautiful Losers: an epilogue in the third person". In formal novelistic terms this is the most traditional part, yet even here characters and temporal sequences merge and we are finally addressed by yet another narrative voice.

Whatever plot there is here, its interest is minimal. If the characters enlist our attention at all it is due to their articulate natures. There is little doubt that, if not obscene — whatever that word might mean — the language of this novel is sexual and sensual. Michael Ondaatje claims: "To write *Beautiful Losers* in a safe formal style would have been to castrate its powerful ideas and its vulgar sanctity."[1] "There are no dirty words — ever,"[2] adds Cohen. Yet there does

seem to be a specific thematic reason for using the language of often vulgar sexuality in the way in which Cohen does. As in his entire *œuvre*, it is as if he is trying to force the reader to face his sexuality: "Undress, undress, I want to cry out, let's look at each other. Let's have education." The language may well be a deliberately constructed obstacle to be dealt with before the seriousness of the novel can be perceived. At the separatist rally, for instance, the narrator rivets our attention on the female hand caressing his genitals, while the crucial theme of the English domination of French Canada is being presented in the background in the words of the speaker.

This theory does not, however, account for the pop music and comic book talk: "Smack! Wham! Pow!" Nor does it explain the disintegration of language that takes place in Book One. No doubt part of this is deliberate "con," for Cohen admits he is never totally devoid of that. Yet, as a novel dealing ironically with identity in its private and public dimensions, it also presents the modern vision of alienation in the nameless narrator, the character who most painfully suffers from disintegrating verbal structures. Neither his ideas nor his language ever takes shape firmly, despite his academic roots in the past.

As a folklorist he can draw his imagery from many mythologies — Amerindian, Egyptian, Greek. Mostly he tends to systematize a modern mythos gleaned from comics, radio and movies. His temple is the System Theatre and Gavin Gate rules: "You are the king of some slum block and you have handed down Laws." Despite its being steeped in "Canadiana", the novel, like the rest of Cohen's work, is also biblical in its imagery and structure. Like the Bible, *Beautiful Losers* is both social and individual in scope. However, as in most modern ironic literature, the poles are no longer moral ones of good and evil, but existential ones of identity and alienation. Both works are epics of a people and a man, and despite their historical skeletons, the essential unity of each is organic rather than linear.

Indeed the novel often seems an ironic or demonic parody of the Bible. Faith is replaced by magic. The continuous creation — the "begats" — loses out to an entire cast of orphans. The Bride and Bridegroom, presented traditionally in Kateri and Christ, are parodied in Edith and the Danish Vibrator (the D.V.!). The temporal dimension of the Bible is essentially a present — it happens as it is being read; F. insists that he will show the narrator "how it is happening" in his letter. In the novel the apocalyptic imagery of the Eucharist becomes real cannibalism, among other things, in a demonic tale of torture and mutilation. The redemptive sacrifice of the body and blood, the bread and wine, is presented

in Catherine, the "lily out of the soil watered by the Gardener with blood of martyrs." This white/red imagery is picked up ironically in the basic conflict of the novel — between White Man and Red Man. Catherine even converts to the white race after her death. The Indian Edith wants to be someone else too, so plans an unappreciated surprise for her husband, who tells us: "she was waiting for me all covered in red grease and I was thinking of my white shirt." Not long after this she is a bloody corpse at the bottom of an elevator shaft.

Perhaps the most important use of this imagery comes at the French dinner party at which Catherine spills her wine. The red stain spreads over the white table cloth, the guests, and even "drifts of spring snow darkened into shades of spilled wine, and the moon itself absorbed the imperial hue." The narrator begins the next section with: "It is my impression that the above is apocalyptic," perhaps referring to Revelation 6:12 where the full moon becomes like blood. He then explains the Greek origins of "apocalyptic." A hundred pages later this is picked up in the final word of Edith's Isis speech: *'αηεκαλυΨεν* —apekalypsen. These two passages and women are again linked by the narrator's definition of the apocalyptic: it "describes that which is revealed when a woman's veil is lifted."[3] "What have I done," moans the narrator, "what have I not done, to lift your veil, to get under your blanket, Kateri Tekakwitha?"

The final scenes of the novel seem to be a deliberately literal parody of the biblical apocalyptic vision. In Revelation 22:14: "Blessed are those who wash their robes that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates." The filthy old man descends from the treehouse and, between the naked legs of a woman, enters Montréal. Echoing Revelation 1:7 ("Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him"), the man transforms into a movie in the sky, a movie of a blind negro singer in sunglasses: "his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire" (Revelation 1:14).

This process of ironic reversal of images is constant throughout the novel. Just as the tongues of fire drive the disciples out of their room to teach Christ's message, so the firecrackers drive the narrator out of his apartment to the treehouse to become F.'s teachings incarnate. In the Bible the sea leviathan is the enemy of the Messiah, destined to be destroyed by Him. Fallen man is born, lives and dies *within* his belly. The Danish Vibrator is also a source of social sterility, but in the pansexuality of the novel it satisfies the frustrated Edith, working over the entire *surface* of her body, before crashing through the window and crawling back to the sea.

THIS NOVEL OF IDENTITY also presents a frightening picture of the possible tragedies of alienation facing Canada and the isolated hero. Like the Bible, it associates the fate of the individual with that of the nation. "You've turned Canada into a vast analyst's couch from which we dream and redream nightmares of identity," the narrator accuses F. As he delves into his own consciousness, the nameless man stumbles upon the truth about Canada. This truth is closely linked with his taste for victims, for, like the novel, Canada's past is coloured by the blood of her defeated peoples.

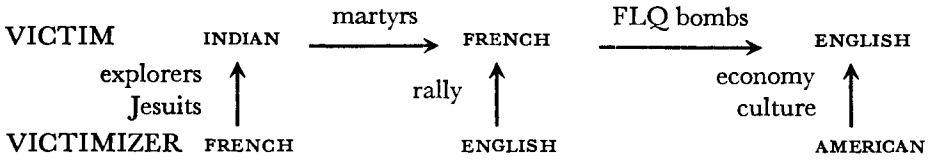
The epigraph of the novel begins: "Somebody said lift that bale," introducing the victim/victimizer theme which is then underlined by the continuation which identifies the lines as Ray Charles singing "Ol' Man River". Although there is no logical sense in mentioning who is singing these written words, the link with the final vision of the novel would suggest that to become a Ray Charles movie is not liberation for the narrator, but perhaps a symbolic capitulation to the victimizing forces.

In "The Genius," Cohen writes:

> For you
> I will be a Dachau jew
> and lie down in lime
> with twisted limbs
> and bloated pain
> no mind can understand.

This vision of Nazi torture also pervades *Beautiful Losers*: meat-eating humans are "dietary Nazis" with their Dachau farmyards. The novel is laced with incidental but constant references to the Jews, often concerning their role as a victimized race. F. says that each generation must thank its Jews and its Indians for making progress possible — by their victimization. Canadian literature is full of images of a lonely, desolate wilderness, indifferent to human values. Here we are in an increasingly urban society where man is progressively brutalized by the city, becoming, himself, indifferent to human values. The identity of the nation is thus inextricably bound to that of the man. The narrator unwillingly is forced to speak for Canada: "O Tongue of the Nation! Why don't you speak for yourself?"

In the broader social scope of the novel, Canadian history is patterned on the process of victimizer turned victim:



The Indian world here is not just the pastoral one of Pauline Johnson; it is also the massacre and agony of "Brébeuf and his Brethren." What remains of the former is destroyed by the French explorers and the Jesuits: "the old people gathered at the priest's hem shivered with a new kind of loneliness. They could not hear the raspberries breaking into domes." To destroy the link with nature is to deny the source of mythology. After his defeat in the shadow wrestling with the priest, Catherine's uncle laments: "Our heaven is dying. From every hill, a spirit cries out in pain, for it is being forgotten." The French even give the Iroquois their name. The Hodenosaunee (the People of the Long House) are redefined in terms of a phatic expression (*hiro* — like I said) plus a cry of joy or distress (*koué*), befitting their new victim role (*hiro-koué* — Iroquois). This same pattern is repeated:

INDIAN	Hodenosaunee	Uncle's shadow	Kateri in camp	Edith
	↑	↑	↑	↑
FRENCH	Iroquois	Lamberville	Catherine in fort	French rape

Catherine's uncle loses his fight for her, but wisely refuses "life-giving" baptism for himself. Indeed, one week after Edith injects water from Lourdes and Tekakwitha's Spring into her veins, she is found under the elevator, a "suicide." As a child she is raped by the French townsmen who ironically call her an Indian "heathen" as she prays to Mary and Kateri. The narrator feels he should rescue Catherine at least from the French Jesuits, from the "Sinister Church." When, at her death, Catherine's skin turns white, the Jesuit interpretation is that "Dieu favorisait les sauvages pour leur faire goûter la foi." This racist chauvinism disgusts F.: "Let the mundane Church serve the White race with a change of colour."

However, it is not long before the victimizing French fall prey to the English. F. realizes that the modern French must not make the mistake the Indians made. The separatist rally speaker says: "The English have stolen our History! . . . History decreed that in the battle for a continent the Indian should lose to the Frenchman. In 1760 History decreed that the Frenchman should lose to the

Englishman! . . . In 1964 History decrees, no, History commands that the English surrender this land which they have loved so imperfectly, surrender it to us!" Yet, can the direction of the cycle be so easily reversed? F. is the main Québecois voice; echoing the speaker's rhetoric, he longs for thick national boundaries because "without independence we will be nothing but a Louisiana of the north, a few good restaurants and a Latin Quarter the only relics of our blood."

The conquering English, however, are in turn being made the victims of their American neighbours: it is 1776 revisited. As a Frenchman, F. claims "the English did to us what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us." Today's attack is far more insidious, though: it is economic[4] and cultural. In the novel the TV ads are from Madison Avenue, the comics are American, as is Charles Axis. Hollywood provides modern saints. When the narrator unpacked the firecrackers from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, he said: "I wept for the American boyhood I never had, for my invisible New England parents, for a long green lawn and an iron deer, for college romance with Zelda." The modern American dream is to be an immigrant sailing into New York armed with obsolete machine guns to astound and conquer the Indians; it is to be "Jesuit in the cities of the Iroquois".

This same victimization theme is present in the histories of the individual characters in the novel. The story of Catherine is full of personal torture and Sault St. Louis looks like a "Nazi medical experiment". In his own agony the narrator perceives their common bond of pain: "F. Suffered Horribly In His Last Days. Catherine Was Mangled Every Hour In Mysterious Machinery. Edith Cried Out In Pain." He has a taste for victims, be they fictional or real, likely because *he* is the chief victim figure of the novel. F. envies him this status, yet it is he who tortures the narrator as a boy, slicing off his wart amid screams of sadistic approval from the other orphans. Later the narrator's hands are burned by F.'s firecrackers. No doubt we are meant to recall F.'s lost thumb and Jogue's thumb-torture by the Iroquois.

OF THE THREE MAIN CHARACTERS in the present (or recent past) of the novel, one is an A—, one a French Canadian, Roman Catholic, M.P. and revolutionary, and one is a nameless English Canadian, raised in a Montréal Jesuit orphanage. Although these three, plus Catherine, are the main foci of attention as individuals, we are never allowed to forget their background

and the symbolic weight they bear. Desmond Pacey sees the novel as the testimony of a "voluntary loss of self for some higher cause."[5] But just what is this higher cause? The loss of self in the novel is indeed voluntary — although in an ironic way — but it certainly gives way to nothing positive on a private or public level. Pacey seems to miss the ironic tone of the novel and neglects the message of failure in F.'s letter. Each character lives an isolated existence that ends in some form of destruction. Sex is not even a meeting of bodies: F. excludes the eager narrator, only to be, in turn, excluded by Edith in Argentina. The major sex scenes in the novel are either oral or masturbatory.

The narrator loses his "self" through attempting to avoid acknowledging that his salvation can only be found in solitude and from within. Instead he looks to F., Edith, and finally Catherine. In his constipation he prays to his bowels to make him empty so he can receive, without realizing that one's identity is not *received*. "I am the sealed, dead, impervious museum of my appetite," he whines. This imprisonment imagery is connected to his physical environment, a totally "introverted", windowless basement apartment. It resembles, however, the "dark tunnel" where Catherine watches the sexual embraces of others and finds her virginal identity. At one point in his cellar torment, the narrator seems to reach some epiphanic realization of *his* identity: "I care more about my red watery throbbing thumb than your whole foul universe of orphans. I salute my monsterhood." Yet he stops short of total self-acceptance and escapes the place of descent into the self, entering the "cold ordinary world" to call the Early Morning Record Gal. It is F.'s final trick to prevent the narrator's full realization of his separate identity: the teacher still needs him for his own second chance.

In the person of F., Cohen also presents an ironic version of the isolated tragic hero. He is the vulgar, mad revolutionary, the saint of perversity, the Moses who leads his friend to the Promised Land, but cannot enter himself. He is a John the Baptist, yearning to be Christ — teaching in parables and enigmatic saws, reversing conventional meanings in a parody of Christ's own reversals (Love thine enemies). The narrator is his faithful disciple who will carry on his essence in a rather startling literal manner. However, we must keep in mind that F. does sing "The Great Pretender."

He is constantly conscious of being the narrator's teacher. Sometimes the student deliberately wishes to emulate the master, but at other times he has no choice. "His style is colonizing me," he cries, "do I have to be your monument?" He senses that he has been trained for something, but is not sure just what. A born teacher, F. manages to extend his instruction over the wide gulf of death,

planning the firecracker ordeal. At his death he passes the torch to his student, demanding a further effort: "interpret me, go beyond me. . . . Go forth, teach the world what I meant to be." He freely admits his ultimate failure with both Edith and her husband.

He perceives the cause of this breakdown as lying in his "system," in the limitations of his created, ordered vision of unity. "New systems are forced on the world by men who simply cannot bear the pain of living with what is," realizes the narrator. "Creators care nothing for their systems except that they be unique. . . . Jesus probably designed his system so that it would fail in the hands of other men." It is F. who creates Edith's beauty with his system. Like Breavman in *The Favourite Game*, he wants to be a magician. However, he admits: "I did not suspect the pettiness of my dream. 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." He would like to renounce the power for the essence of creation.

Yet the narrator has not learned from F.'s errors: he too seeks a system, an ordered vision. His mind is a needle that sews the world together into "a beautiful knowledge of unity". F. tries to warn him to "connect nothing," but the student follows his practice rather than his words. The narrator sees everything as "part of a necklace of incomparable beauty and unmeaning". The same bonding image reappears in the Telephone Dance, in which Edith's long red fingernails connect her to F., who then tunes in to "ordinary eternal machinery". The Jesuit forces the old Indians to unplug their ears by painting a picture of a demon twisting corkscrews of fire into one woman's ears. In the first use of the image, the metaphor allows a connection with the mechanical universe; in the second, the link with nature is severed forever. Ultimately destruction results from both connections.

IN THE NOVEL two opposite systems are presented: the religions of the spirit and of the flesh. In their extreme forms both demand a denial of individual identity, in favour of some vaster, more inhuman, but not higher purpose. F. wants to free the body from genital tyranny. His star pupil, Edith, agrees that all body parts are erotogenic — until none of hers co-operates, forcing her to resort to mechanical means of satisfaction. The final undercutting of the religion of the flesh is the post-Vibrator entry of Hitler and his sadistic victimiza-

tion of F. and Edith. On the other hand we have Catherine Tekakwitha, the Iroquois virgin. As a child she instinctively rejects her marriage and her asexuality is sanctified after her conversion. When confronted by her second intended, she realizes that she has a woman's body, but declaims ownership of her flesh, giving it to Christ. Five times in this scene a symbolic fish hovers "in a halo of blond mist, a fish that longed for nets and capture and many eaters at the feast, a smiling luminous fish."

This religion is also undercut in the novel, for it too represents an extreme system: "Even The World Has A Body." Catherine's mangled body manages to satisfy the sadistic voyeurism of the two Jesuits. Refusing marriage a third time, she looks at the beauty of nature and laments: "O Master of Life, must our bodies depend on these things?" Her new religion has destroyed her link with nature and with her heritage — she has already broken her vow to her uncle. The first step towards her colour change has been taken, paving the way to her reduction to a technicolour postcard and a plastic dashboard ornament. At the end of the novel (rented to the Jesuits) she even falls victim to the political power plays of Church and State.

However, just as he was once caught between two loves, the narrator is caught between these two systems. He is nameless because he is the archetypal Canadian, the beautiful loser: "O Reader, do you know that a man is writing this? A man like you who longed for a hero's heart." He tries to deny the spirit, his Jesuit orphanage heritage. He would like to deny the flesh too and be Plastic Man. The result? F. tells him: "what a hunchback History and the Past have made of your body." Instead of sexual fulfilment, he gets voyeuristic thrills from history and Edith's drawers. Instead of spiritual assistance, he gets F.'s cryptic letter and the fireworks ordeal. The low point of his life (which, paradoxically, is a potentially positive height) is his descent into the basement apartment and into his consciousness. Here he is baptized by "fire, shit, history, love, and loss," but evades the threatening freedom that the descent offers, escaping to the alienating heights of the solitary treehouse. At the end of the novel he is empty, no longer obsessed by time and his body. An orphan, he comes from nowhere and returns to nowhere, dissolving into a movie image.

He is aware, as is F., that "there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory." He had seen Catherine victimized by a totally spiritual system, mechanized by the Jesuits into their political and plastic pawn. Edith has fallen prey to the totality of the flesh and she too can only be satisfied by mechanical means. The

narrator transfers his lust to Catherine after his wife's death. He sees, thanks to F., that the key to balance is "to fuck a saint." In order to imaginatively bring about his "fuck cure," the narrator begins to merge the identities of his two women: they are both Indian orphans who die at twenty-four; both refuse food; both once had bad complexions until a system magically transformed them; and both are uncanonized saints of their respective religions. F. played the narrator's connecting game once too, sucking Edith's toes just as the priest had sucked Catherine's, and ultimately ruining her just as the Jesuits destroyed Kateri.

This metamorphosis is completed by the addition of a beautiful blond girl in a car in Book Three. Like Catherine she refuses the concept of marriage. Earlier when the dead Kateri appeared in a vision, the lower half of her body was invisible in a dazzling glow, and F. had asked the narrator: "Had she lent her other parts to you?" Here such would indeed seem to be the case, since the girl is naked below the armrest. Yet she is also a sexual Edith figure: she too claims: Ισις εγω. She wears moccasins, although she is white. It is as if the transfigured saint and Edith had merged the two extreme systems so that the old man-narrator could achieve some sort of balance. When one of the priests was not granted any visions of the dead saint, F. asked: "Where were his movies? . . . It is he whom I most resemble." Indeed it is the narrator, not F., who enters the realm of movies, the Promised Land.

F. is the tyrant controller and magician. He knows his power and writes to his student: "Somewhere you are dressed in hideous rags and wondering who I was." His fantasy escape is to the forests beyond Montréal, to the treehouse hermitage of the narrator. The student has learned his lessons well. When he warns the little boy to keep his thigh muscles always engaged, there is a direct verbal echo of F.'s earlier advice to him. However, as a result, the narrator has become "a thing without a name which changed and changed itself over and over." When he appears at the Main Shooting and Game Alley, there is some confusion as to his identity. Everyone looks at his hand:

— It's all burnt!
— He's got no thumb.
— Isn't he the Terrorist Leader that escaped tonight?
— Looks more like the pervert they showed on T.V. they're combing the country for.
— Get him out!
— He stays! He's a Patriot.

The confused temporal sequence further accentuates the merging identities.

When the boy calls the old man "Uncle," yet another triad of characters is formed. Catherine's uncle dies defeated but unbaptized, loyal to his race. F. dies imprisoned by the English, but still wanting to be President of the Republic of French Canada. The narrator's fate is similarly equivocal.

This ambivalence seems central to Cohen's concept of the saint. His poetry is full of imagery of "the twisted life of saints." In the novel it is F. who has "saintly pretensions", seeing himself as Brébeuf's successor, a martyr whose blood will water a mighty revolution. Ironically he only loses a thumb while blowing up a statue of Queen Victoria. After his body-building success he takes over the Christ role, previously assigned to Charles Axis who is "all compassion, he's our sacrifice." F. always believes in systems, his own or others': "God is Alive, Magic is Afoot."

The female characters in the novel emulate Catherine's sainthood. Edith and the blond girl claim to be Isis. Edith, like Mary Voolnd, is the "perfect nurse," healing men as did Catherine. According to Frazer, Isis is "the many-named," and here she does indeed have many identities which all merge into an ironic parody of the Universal Mother. Catherine is a virgin, Mary and the girl have no normal sexual intercourse with the two men, and Edith dies with no issue. Irony seems to be the essence of Cohen's concept of the modern saint: "Alexander Trocchi, Public Junkie, Priez pour nous." For the narrator, it is Hollywood that is the new haven for holiness.

But even this sainthood is not the glory, the ideal presented in the novel. A real saint is someone who achieves a "remote human possibility," who is paradoxically *not* systematized, but a "balancing monster of love." He does not control or order or conform to any rigid system, as Catherine, Edith, and F. do. As Cohen says in "The priest says goodbye": "Abelard proved how bright could be/the bed between the hermitage and nunnery." Because of the systems of society, such a balance is precarious, and Abelard becomes a beautiful loser. The true saint is the magic of balance itself: "*mind* itself is Magic coursing through *flesh*." For this reason the narrator must "fuck a saint" and "be magic."

THIS LOVE of "coin faces of problem" is the source of much of Cohen's irony. His characters live in the modern world of Huxley's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* where "Applied Science is a conjuror, whose bottomless hat yields impartially the softest of Angora rabbits and the most

petrifying of Medusas." F. sees that science, like a conquering race, chooses to disregard the particular, beginning with "coarse naming". The Spenglerian decline of art into technology creates its own mythology. The telephone becomes the agent of some "benign electronic deity" and the Telephone Dance is born.

F. is at home in this world of machinery and systems. His mind plays naturally with mechanical imagery, and he passes on this ability, although his student associates machines primarily with pain: "Catherine Was Mangled Every Hour In Mysterious Machinery." Their world has become tainted, willing to accept plastic birchbark, broken Photomats, and "out of order" signs: "our little planet embraces its fragile destiny, tuned in the secular mind like a dying engine." Even the body is seen as a machine, "Is my body going to work?" asks the constipated narrator. "Has the machine turned the food brown?" He learns that he must "abandon all systems" in order to humanize his body. The saints, though, remain mechanized like F. Edith has "leathery electrodes" for nipples, and Catherine sees sex as "the assault of human machinery".

The mechanized city of the novel victimizes the natural world. The narrator and F. masturbate as they did when they were boys "in what is now downtown but was once the woods." The culmination of the usurping vision of the machine is the Danish Vibrator. It transforms F. from a solicitous mentor into a lustful glutton, leaping past Edith for "those delicious electric oscillations." It finally learns to feed itself, assaulting Edith and dehumanizing her into a "buffet of juice, flesh, excrement, muscle to serve its appetite." Most of the other forms of "entertainment" in the novel are similarly mechanized. While in his basement inferno the narrator's only contact with the world outside is his radio. Ironically this is only a one-way communication medium, despite his abortive attempts to call the Early Morning Record Gal. At the end of F.'s letter, the radio assumes the form of print and takes over, as the D.V. had. The "Revenge of Radio" prefigures the final revenge of movie in Book Three.

In both *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers* the movie is seen as a means of expansion by vicarious experience: the narrator knows pain because he has been "inside newsreel Belsen." Yet the wary reader becomes suspicious, since Hollywood has its saints and movies are shown in the "severe limits" and "black confinement" of the *System* Theatre. There is also a suggestion of superficiality, as F.'s scant knowledge of Indians comes from a thousand Hollywood westerns.

Given this background, it is hard to see the final transformation of the narrator into a movie as the triumph that the critics would have it. The essence of this scene lies in its ambivalence — another word, perhaps, for balance. The narrator

initiates the revolution of all second chancers: "professional actors, all *performing artists*, including *magicians*." He enters the System Theatre but finds there is no need to enter the system now: he *is* it. He could not see the movie, for "it was automatic and so was he!" At this, he totally relaxes, giving up all remaining claim to his own identity, and disappears. He merges identities with F. and the mechanical world of system that he represents.

The narrator's performance on the street echoes and reverses F.'s fears of what would happen if the newsreel escaped into the feature. F. invites the newsreel into the plot; the narrator invites the feature into the street, *becoming* the newsreel, and the same feared "miasmal mixture" begins to "imperialize existence by means of its sole quality of total corrosion." We are told that "he enlarged the screen, degree by degree, like a documentary on the Industry. The moon occupied one lens of his sunglasses, and he laid out his piano keys across a shelf of the sky, and he leaned over him as though they were truly the row of giant fishes to feed a hungry multitude. A fleet of jet planes dragged his voice over us who were holding hands." This ironic transfiguration image does not come as a total surprise. In the early comic strip ad of Joe and Charles Axis: "Four thick black words appear in the sky and they radiate spears of light . . . HERO OF THE BEACH." In F.'s Invocation to History in the Old Style, we find:

> I see an Orphan, lawless and serene,
> standing in a corner of the sky,
> body something like bodies that have been,
> but not the flaw of naming in his eye.

We recall that when F. died, his face turned black. He always did feel that to think oneself a negro was "the best feeling a man can have in this century."

Has the student quite literally become what the teacher desired to be? Has he entered the Promised Land? Is the Ray Charles movie an image of the final conqueror, the American mechanical cultural victimizer of Canada, *or* is it — as the epigraph would suggest — a symbol of the ultimate victim, the black and blind American, used for entertainment value? We cannot trust the admiring judgment of the New Jew who, labouring happily on the lever of the *broken* Strength Test, "loses his mind gracefully. . . . The New Jew is the founder of Magic Canada, Magic French Québec, and Magic America. . . . He dissolves history and ritual by accepting unconditionally the complete heritage. . . . Sometimes he is Jewish but always he is American, and now and then Québecois."

The response of the New Jew to the transfiguration is contrasted to that of the crowd: "Just sit back and enjoy it, I guess. Thank God it's only a movie." Both reactions are ironic in the context of the movie imagery and the gradual alienation and brutalization of society. The reader is left to decide if the second chance does succeed, in the light of F.'s remark that "unless it is wrenched from fate, the second chance loses its vitality, and it creates not criminals but nuisances, amateur pickpockets rather than Prometheans."

The very end of the novel does not resolve this problem. It is "rented" to the Jesuits for use as a document requesting Catherine's formal recognition as a saint. Is the "noble heap" transformed into a black saint, yet another victim of yet another system? Has he become magic, or is he merely another magician-performer? The final printed paragraph is separated from the rest of the novel and the narrative voice is hard to distinguish. Is it another, perhaps authorial voice that says: "Welcome to you who read me today?" F. becomes a deity, referred to by a capitalized pronoun. Like the narrator, this persona is alone with his radio, pleading from "electrical tower". Yet the last line echoes F.'s tone and language: "Welcome to you, darling and friend, who miss me forever in your trip to the end." Is this final ambiguity the ultimate balancing that is glory in Cohen's vision? It is as if he is deliberately trying to prevent the reader from creating a system of interpretation, leaving him caught between unresolved dualities:

the serious	the con
poetry	obscenity
balance	system
identity	alienation
spirit	flesh
nature	the machine
revolutionary	tyrant
saint	sinner
victim	victimizer
magic	magician

The reader at times feels strangled by this "necklace of incomparable beauty and unmeaning," and like the New Jew, "loses his mind gracefully." Is the reader the ultimate beautiful loser?

NOTES

[1] *Leonard Cohen* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. 49.

[2] N.F.B. film "Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen."

[3] Edith's speech translated reads: "I am Isis, who gives birth to all, and no mortal has lifted my veil."

[4] Edith was raped in a stone quarry, or "someplace very mineral and hard, owned indirectly by U.S. interests." The narrator also remarks that "the Forests of Québec are mutilated and sold to America." In the Main Shooting and Game Alley, there is a DeLuxe Polar Hunt with "two bearded, quilted American explorers. The flag of their nationality is planted in a drift."

[5] "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen," *Canadian Literature*, 34 (Autumn, 1967), p. 18.