

# MAGIC, NOT MAGICIANS

“*Beautiful Losers*” and “*Story of O*”

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O UR CULTURE is one which sets a great value on individuality, the preservation of the unique personality. This idea is one of the bases of democracy, of capitalism, and of the Protestant religious ethic, all of which systems are of course inter-related. The precepts of the “new morality” proceed from the assumption that no general, inflexible rules can be laid down which cover all possible situations; instead, each case has to be evaluated on its individual merits. Not only morality, but our whole romantic conception of love and sex, derived from sources as diverse as Provençal poetry and lipstick advertising, is centred on the sanctity of the individual personality and its uniqueness. This value finds its fullest expression in literature, which we look to for the artist’s personal vision of the world. At least since the Romantics, we have valued not only the writer’s own “originality” (a process aided by copyright laws), but also the differentiating individuality of fictional heroes and anti-heroes.

It is against the background of these generalizations that I wish to make a few remarks about two novels, which have at least this in common: that both describe, and perhaps endorse, a principle directly counter to those outlined above, namely, the deliberate attempt to destroy one’s own individuality. Part of the profoundly disturbing impact of both books is due to the fact that they do strike at such basic preconceptions of our cultural orientation; and the books are even more disturbing in that they treat the theme directly in connection with what is still the uneasiest of our social taboos, sex.

The two books are Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*, and *Story of O*, published (Paris, 1954) by an unknown author, whose pseudonym “Pauline Réage” has never been penetrated. Both novels (but especially Cohen’s) are rich and complex works, and this article does in one sense distort them by isolating one thread from their varied tapestries: that of the central figure’s steady progression

towards loss of self, an apocalypse of utter impersonality, and of the function of the secondary characters in teaching and preparing the way for them.

A brief summary of the action of *Story of O* may be necessary at this point. The novel tells of a young woman, O, who voluntarily becomes the sexual slave of her lover, René, and of the man, Sir Stephen, to whom he gives her. The form is that of a pornographic novel, complete with isolated chateaus, dissolute aristocrats, and a large variety of whips, riding-crops, branding-irons, etc. O progressively loses all trace of any identity save that of a sexual object; she is grotesquely marked with the insignia of Sir Stephen's ownership, and in the climactic scene she is publicly displayed wearing an owl mask, so little recognizable as a human being "that no-one thought of questioning her, which would have been the most natural thing to do, as though she were a real owl, deaf to human language, and dumb." In a suppressed final chapter, she requests her own death.

It is not the purpose of this article to suggest that *Story of O* exerted a discernible influence on Cohen (though it would not be surprising if he had read it), but rather to point out certain thematic patterns which the two books have in common. In *Canadian Literature* 34, Desmond Pacey writes of *Beautiful Losers* that its main theme is "voluntary loss of self for some higher cause", while Sandra Djwa comments (somewhat disparagingly) that "I", in his final metamorphosis, "escapes from . . . the human predicament." Both of these comments seem slightly to miss the point. Pacey's is true of the secondary characters, but for "I" himself there is no "higher" cause for which the self is lost: the cause is the loss of self, which may be viewed as an answer to, rather than an escape from, the human predicament.

The inversion of values is apparent in the titles of both books: Cohen's heroes, however beautiful, are still losers, and O stands for negation, the denial of personality, the unimpeded movement towards death. This involves the characters in a degree of genuine misery. O, for instance, is not a physical masochist: she enjoys the *idea* of submitting herself to the men and becoming nothing more than their object, but she never enjoys the actual whippings and other physical tortures which she undergoes. One of the characteristics of the individual in any situation, sexual or otherwise, is the retention of power, power over the disposition of one's own body, power over other people's feelings, etc. O's major technique in what Susan Sontag calls her "project for completely transcending personality"<sup>1</sup> is to surrender completely all vestiges of this power.

Power is also one of the major themes of *Beautiful Losers*. As Cohen writes

in the commentary on Gavin Gate and the Goddesses, "Oh God! All states of love give power!" F. wields not only personal power over "I" and Edith, but also economic and political power; conversely, the history of Edith's tribe, the A---s, "is characterized by incessant defeat." Catherine Tekakwitha has the power of a saint, through her intercession with God, through the miracles performed in her name, and through the influence her example exerts over the faithful (including "I".) The greatest power of all is Magic, celebrated in the famous "God is alive. Magic is afoot" section. It is towards this power that "I" is being led; F. writes to him, "Here is a plea based on my whole experience: do not be a magician, be magic."

The equivalent force in *Story of O* is sex, and O "progresses simultaneously toward her own extinction as a human being and her fulfilment as a sexual being." Sex is impersonal; O rejoices that Sir Stephen's satisfaction of his desires bears no relation whatever to her as a person, and F. talks of the "nourishing anonymity of the climax." The image of O's dehumanization in the owl mask has, as its rough equivalent in Cohen's novel, the image, simultaneously comic and sublime, of the Danish Vibrator.

The initials D.V. (*deo volente*) point up, as Pacey notes, the fusion of religion and sexuality which is another theme of *Beautiful Losers*. F. and Edith indeed suffer at the will of God, not at their own will, but this God is "ordinary eternal machinery", made in Denmark. To its will, their wills become utterly transparent, as the saint's is to God's, or O's to Sir Stephen's. All distinctions of personality are lost: Catherine, Edith, Mary, Isis, all become one; and the protagonist of the significantly third-person Epilogue is an indistinguishable amalgam of "I" and F. (IF, "a remote human possibility.")

The idea of pain and physical torture is an integral part of this complex: F. and Edith excite themselves by reading of the martyrdom of Brébeuf and Lalemant before submitting to the whip of a seedy, popular-mythology Hitler; Catherine tortures herself with whips and thorns to approach closer to God, and her programme of self-extinction is echoed by "I". O's very similar programme also centres upon pain; pain is, after all, one of the most apparent signs of power, and the whippings which O undergoes are evidence of mental dominance rather than physical pleasure. O, as has been said, takes no masochistic pleasure in her pain; and the book, which is told completely from her point of view, lays no stress at all upon the men's sadistic pleasure. Indeed, as *Story of O* progresses, the male figures come to seem important only as instruments for O's destruction of herself.

It would perhaps be too fanciful to suggest that Sir Stephen comes to envy O the fulfilment she is able to achieve through his agency; but this feeling is definitely present in the case of Edith and F., and is most strongly marked in their dialogue before the Argentinian orgy. It is here that F. says, in bitterness and resignation, "I was the Moses of our little exodus. I would never cross. My mountain might be very high but it rises from the desert." F. and Edith are religious acolytes, preparing elaborate rituals and initiations for another's fulfilment, sacrificing themselves to "I" as Catherine Tekakwitha sacrifices herself to her God.

Again we have arrived back at the religious metaphor. It is inescapable in *Beautiful Losers*, and it is also implicit in much of the language of *Story of O*. In a preface to "Pauline Réage's" book, the novelist André Pieyre de Mandiargues (whose *Girl Beneath The Lion* is a beautiful and lyrical treatment of a very similar theme) describes it as a mystic book rather than an erotic one. Susan Sontag, in her excellent essay "The Pornographic Imagination", comments that "Despite the virtual incomprehensibility to most educated people today of the substantive experience behind religious vocabulary, there is a continuing piety toward the grandeur of emotions that went into that vocabulary. The religious imagination survives for most people today as not just the primary but virtually the only credible instance of an imagination working in a total way."<sup>2</sup> This kind of "total" experience is analogous to what Cohen means when he defines a saint as "someone who has achieved a remote human possibility", and both religion and sexuality may be viewed in these books as metaphoric modes of achieving such a possibility.

What then is the total experience with which these novels deal? For *Story of O*, the answer is simply Death. Death is the goal towards which O inexorably advances. It is an obsessive book, in such details as its continued concentration on O's clothing, and in its unity of theme and directness of movement (though this has been overemphasized by the omission from consideration of the secondary theme of Jacqueline.) The goal is summed up in O's name: negation, eternity, or a bodily orifice. The novel is a dark realization of the Jacobean pun on "death". O denies all the values of personality which our society holds to be fundamental, and she finds her fulfilment in that denial. The ultimate value is not the self, but the willed loss of the self.

In *Beautiful Losers*, the issue is not quite so clearcut. Loss of self is again the main process, but the secondary characters (F., Edith, Catherine Tekakwitha) clearly do so for a definite further purpose. In Catherine's case, this further pur-

pose is union with God; there are also suggestions in the final paragraph of a Christlike compassion being extended to “you, darling and friend, who miss me forever in your trip to the end” (though who speaks this final paragraph — the Jesuits, Catherine, “I” metamorphosed, or Cohen himself — is very far from clear.) But for F. and Edith, the further purpose is the fulfilment of “I”, and that fulfilment can only be described as the dispersal of self, as the old man loses all human identity and merges with the magical form of reality, cinema. His eyes are blinking in synchronization with the “ordinary eternal machinery” of the movie projector, and what he sees is the blackness between the frames, nothing. He has indeed become what F. never was: not a magician, but magic itself.

Our society has assumed that any answer to “the human predicament” must start with the individual’s acceptance of the responsibility of his own individuality. The protagonists of these two novels respond by annihilating that responsibility. The artist’s response is to present these “remote human possibilities”, and to invite the reader to re-examine some of his basic presuppositions, to question the unquestionable. The reader’s response is, as always, his own affair.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination,” in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York, 1969), p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Sontag, p. 69.