

THE PHENOMENON OF LEONARD COHEN

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IN NAMING LEONARD COHEN a phenomenon, I am motivated by the quantity, quality and variety of his achievement. Still only thirty-three, Cohen has published four books of verse and two novels, and has made a national if not an international reputation by his poetry reading, folk-singing, and skill with the guitar. The best of his poems have lyrical grace and verbal inevitability; his two novels are as perceptive in content and as sophisticated in technique as any that have appeared in English since the Second World War; and his voice has a magic incantatory quality which hypnotizes his audiences, and especially teenage audiences, into a state of bliss if not of grace.

In this paper I intend to place the major emphasis on his second novel, *Beautiful Losers* (1966), his most impressive single achievement, and in my opinion the most intricate, erudite, and fascinating Canadian novel ever written. But since *Beautiful Losers* is not an isolated achievement, but the culmination of Cohen's career to date, I shall begin by seeing how his other books lead up to and enrich our understanding of it.

The title of Cohen's first book of verse, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956), might have applied almost equally well to his latest novel, which among other things is an exercise in comparative mythology. From the first Cohen has been interested in mythology and magic, in the imaginative means which men at all times and in all places have devised to give interest, order, meaning and direction to their world. In *Let Us Compare Mythologies* he was chiefly concerned with the

similarities and differences between the Hebrew mythology of his family and the Christian mythology of his environment, but by the time he wrote *Beautiful Losers* he had become much more ecumenical.

The first poem in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, "Elegy", exhibits a number of characteristics which recur throughout his work: his almost magical control and modulation of verbal melody, his sensuous particularity, the empathetic reach of his imagination, and his fascination with situations which mingle violence and tenderness to heighten the effect of both. We also see emerge for the first time the theme of the quest — here as usually in Cohen the quest for a lost or unknown God, mysterious, elusive, but compelling. Cohen, like his racial ancestor Spinoza (to whom he frequently alludes), is a man drunk with God.

Almost as prominent in *Let Us Compare Mythologies* as the religious theme is that of sex. Indeed, in Cohen's work, as in more ancient mythologies, religion and sex are closely associated: this association reaches its culmination in *Beautiful Losers*, but it is embryonically present in this first book of verse.

These twin quests for God and for sexual fulfillment are motivated by the recognition of the individual's vulnerability, by an agonized sense of loneliness. Loneliness and the means of escaping it — sometimes tragic, sometimes pathetic, sometimes at least temporarily successful — form one of the basic and recurrent themes in *Beautiful Losers*. It is present in this first book of verse in "Summer Night".

And the girl in my arms
broke suddenly away, and shouted for us all,
Help! Help! I am alone. But then all subtlety was gone
and it was stupid to be obvious before the field and sky,
experts in simplicity. So we fled on the highways,
in our armoured cars, back to air-conditioned homes.

But thus to emphasize the serious and tragic aspects of *Let Us Compare Mythologies* is to ignore the wit and humour which here as in all of Cohen's work add variety and contrast to his vision. *Beautiful Losers* is, in one sense, a comic novel, a modern version of picaresque, and among the early poems are several examples of Cohen's comic gift, perhaps best of all, "The Fly".

In his black armour
the house-fly marched the field
of Freia's sleeping thighs,
undisturbed by the soft hand
which vaguely moved
to end his exercise.

And it ruined my day —
 this fly which never planned
 to charm her or to please
 should walk boldly on that ground
 I tried so hard
 to lay my trembling knees.

The Spice-Box of Earth (1961) reinforces the themes of religious and sexual affirmation and their frequent identification in Cohen's work. The love play celebrated with such hypnotic tenderness in "You Have the Lovers" is compared to a ritual, and the loss of self-consciousness in the sexual union become a paradigm of a mystical epiphany. For Cohen, the state of sexual fulfillment is virtually synonymous with the state of grace: the fulfilled lover feels himself to be a part of a universal harmony. As he puts it in "Owning Everything":

Because you are close,
 everything that men make, observe
 or plant is close, is mine:
 the gulls slowly writhing, slowly singing
 on the spears of wind;
 the iron gate above the river;
 the bridge holding between stone fingers
 her cold bright necklace of pearls.

...

With your body and your speaking
 you have spoken for everything,
 robbed me of my strangerhood,
 made me one
 with the root and gull and stone, . . .

(Incidentally, the image of the necklace, in line 8 above, becomes one of the thematic symbols of *Beautiful Losers*.)

The identification of religion and sex is also seen in "The Priest Says Goodbye", where the priest is the lover and lust is said to "burn like fire in a holy tree," but its most conspicuous occasion is the poem "Celebration", where the act of fellatio becomes a "ceremony" and is likened to the phallus worship of the ancient Romans, and where the man's semen becomes a "blessing." The clearly affirmative tone of this poem surely gives the lie to those critics of *Beautiful Losers* who profess to find satire and disgust in the sexual scenes. An affirmation of all forms of sexual activity, however "perverse" in conventional terms, provided that they

do not involve outright cruelty or murder, is surely an organic part of Cohen's philosophy.

But if tenderness and affirmation are present in *The Spice-Box of Earth*, so also are the darker themes of human vulnerability and loneliness and of violence and cruelty. Cohen is a romantic, but he is not the type of romantic optimist who ignores or denies the existence of evil.

Bitterness at the indignities and false guises imposed upon the Jews dominates "The Genius", and the bitterness of a betrayed lover "The Cuckold's Song." This latter poem is a good illustration of Cohen's versatility of both matter and manner. It begins in anger and modulates into wit and self-mockery; in style it substitutes, for Cohen's usual melodic grace, harsh colloquial diction and angry speech rhythms.

If this looks like a poem
 I might as well warn you at the beginning
 that it's not meant to be one.
 I don't want to turn anything into poetry.
 I know all about her part in it
 but I'm not concerned with that right now.
 This is between you and me.
 Personally I don't give a damn who led who on:
 in fact I wonder if I give a damn at all.
 But a man's got to say something.
 Anyhow you fed her 5 MacKewan Ales,
 took her to your room, put the right records on,
 and in an hour or two it was done.

. . .

What really makes me sick
 is that everything goes on as it went before:
 I'm still a sort of friend,
 I'm still a sort of lover.
 But not for long:
 that's why I'm telling this to the two of you.
 The fact is I'm turning to gold, turning to gold.
 It's a long process, they say,
 it happens in stages.
 This is to inform you that I've already turned to clay.

A particular premonition of *Beautiful Losers* found in *The Spice-Box of Earth* is the mechanical mistress in "The Girl Toy", which points forward to the Danish Vibrator of the novel. This poem is also one of the first indications of Cohen's

fascination with machinery, which becomes a thematic motif in both his novels. In the poem, as in the novels, Cohen's attitude towards the machine is ambivalent: it is at once frightening and alluring. "The Girl Toy", in its allusions to Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" ("famous golden birds", "hammered figures"), is also premonitory of the strong Yeatsian influences present in *Beautiful Losers*.

SUCH PREMONITIONS in the early poetry, however, fade into relative insignificance when we examine Cohen's first novel, *The Favourite Game* (1963). It positively bristles with allusions, images and thematic motifs which were to be more fully developed in the second novel. *The Favourite Game*, which at first reading one is apt to dismiss as just another if somewhat superior version of the autobiographical novel of the young artist growing to maturity, in fact becomes a much more richly resonant novel when it is re-read after *Beautiful Losers*. For example, the statement that Martin Stark, the "holy idiot" of *The Favourite Game*, "stuck his index fingers in his ears for no apparent reason, squinting as if he were expecting some drum-splitting explosion" is apt to be passed over on first reading as a mere omen of disaster; in the light of the discussion of the Telephone Dance in *Beautiful Losers* it becomes a powerful symbolic allusion to man's perpetual attempts to find connection with the cosmic rhythms. When we read that Wanda's face "blurred into the face of little Lisa . . . that one dissolved into the face of Bertha" we think of the transposition not merely in terms of nostalgia for Breavman's lost loves, but also in terms of the eternal principle of femininity which in *Beautiful Losers* sees Isis, Catherine, Edith, Mary Voolnd, the Virgin Mary, Marilyn Monroe and the blonde housewife in the car blend into one essential Woman or Universal Mother. A seemingly casual statement that "We all want to be Chinese mystics living in thatched huts, but getting laid frequently" becomes much more meaningful when read in the light of the "go down on a saint" motif in *Beautiful Losers*, and that novel's more fully articulated notion of the desirability of combining spiritual vision with physical ecstasy.

The quest motif, which we have seen adumbrated in the early poems, is more fully developed in *The Favourite Game*, but still remains embryonic in contrast with the much more intricate version that occurs in *Beautiful Losers*. Breavman's prayerful invocation of God in his journal entry (see p. 199) is a first sketch for the narrator's prayers in the second novel, and Breavman's wavering between that

quest and greed for secular wealth and success is premonitory of the recurrent pattern of aspiration and rebellion through which the narrator of *Beautiful Losers* passes. Breavman also has a vision of the ultimate unity of all things which prefigures the narrator's visions of cosmic unity in the later novel:

Mozart came loud over the PA, sewing together everything that Breavman observed. It wove, it married the two figures bending over the records, whatever the music touched, child trapped in London Bridge, mountain-top dissolving in mist, empty swing rocking like a pendulum, the row of glistening red canoes, the players clustered underneath the basket, leaping for the ball like a stroboscopic photo of a splashing drop of water — whatever it touched was frozen in an immense tapestry. He was in it, a figure by a railing.

The idea that many forms of popular culture, and especially the hit tunes of the juke-box and the radio, are pathetic but not contemptible versions of this longing for union, this quest for harmony, is also sketched in *The Favourite Game* (see, for example, pp. 222-3), and then much more fully worked out in such sections as "Gavin Gate and the Goddesses" in *Beautiful Losers*.

A rather similar link between the two novels is their mutual concern with magic and miracles, and their joint acceptance of the movie as a contemporary form of magic. The most pervasive thematic motif in *The Favourite Game* is Breavman's conception of himself as a sort of magician, miracle-worker, or hypnotist. After Bertha, Breavman's childhood girl-friend, falls from the tree, he says:

"Krantz, there's something special about my voice."

"No, there isn't."

"There is so. I can make things happen."

And after his father's death, he performs a magic rite:

The day after the funeral Breavman split open one of his father's formal bow ties and sewed in a message. He buried it in the garden, under the snow beside the fence where in summer the neighbour's lilies-of-the-valley infiltrate.

He also declares that "His father's death gave him a touch of mystery, contact with the unknown. He could speak with extra authority on God and Hell." He studies everything he can about hypnotism, and in one of the funniest scenes in the novel hypnotizes his mother's maid and causes her to make love to him. Breavman sounds very much like F. in *Beautiful Losers* when he tells the girl, Tamara, "I want to touch people like a magician, to change them or hurt them, leave my brand, make them beautiful." Again reminding us of F., and even more of the

narrator of *Beautiful Losers*, Breavman longs for a miraculous transfiguration of himself:

In his room in the World Student House, Breavman leans elbows on the window-sill and watches the sun ignite the Hudson. It is no longer the garbage river, catch-all for safes, excrement, industrial poison, the route of strings of ponderous barges.

Can something do that to his body?

There must be something written on the fiery water. An affidavit from God. A detailed destiny chart. The address of his perfect wife. A message choosing him for glory or martyrdom.

When he is enjoying the love-affair with Shell, and writing the love poetry which appeared in *The Spice-Box of Earth*, Breavman feels that he is creative because he is "attached to magic." At the boys' camp, he longs to be "calm and magical," to be "the gentle hero the folk come to love, the man who talks to animals, the Baal Shem Tov who carried children piggy-back." But the closest approximation in *The Favourite Game* to the great thematic passage about magic in *Beautiful Losers* comes when Breavman watches the firefly and thinks that it is dying:

He had given himself to the firefly's crisis. The intervals became longer and longer between the small cold flashes. It was Tinker Bell. Everybody had to believe in magic. Nobody believed in magic. He didn't believe in magic. Magic didn't believe in magic. Please don't die.

It didn't. It flashed long after Wanda left. It flashed when Krantz came to borrow Ed's *Time* magazine. It flashed as he tried to sleep. It flashed as he scribbled his journal in the dark.

The firefly there is obviously a symbol of an ultimate light, a pulsing signal from the eternal rhythm, and its continued life, as time (*Time*) is carried away, bespeaks the persistence of Light. This symbolic method of writing, which only occasionally overrides the literal method in *The Favourite Game*, becomes continuous in *Beautiful Losers*, which is a powerful symbolist novel from beginning to end.

A special form of the magical theme is the emphasis Cohen places on the movies as the chief contemporary expression of the magical process. References to movies occur on almost every page of *Beautiful Losers*, but the emphasis first becomes apparent in *The Favourite Game*. Near the beginning of that first novel, Breavman watches a movie of his family in the course of which "A gardener is led shy and grateful into the sunlight to be preserved with his betters." Here, obviously the

magical quality of movies is their capacity to confer a sort of immortality. Later on, Breavman imagines himself and the girl Norma as they would appear in the camera eye:

The camera takes them from faraway, moves through the forest, catches the glint of a raccoon's eyes, examines the water, reeds, closed water-flowers, involves itself with mist and rocks.

"Lie beside me," Norma's voice, maybe Breavman's.

Sudden close-up of her body part by part, lingering over the mounds of her thighs, which are presented immense and shadowed, the blue denim tight on the flesh. The fan of creases between her thighs. Camera searches her jacket for the shape of breasts. She exhumes a pack of cigarettes. Activity is studied closely. Her fingers move like tentacles. Manipulation of cigarette skilled and suggestive. Fingers are slow, violent, capable of holding anything.

Here what fascinates Cohen, as it will again in *Beautiful Losers*, is the magical capacity of the camera to transfigure reality, to intensify experience, and to suggest symbolic overtones by its searching examination of the details of fact. One source of Breavman's magical insight is that a "slow-motion movie" is "always running somewhere in his mind."

This in turn suggests another way in which *The Favourite Game* illuminates one of the themes of *Beautiful Losers*. In the later novel, F. tells the narrator (and since most of the narrative is in the first person, I shall hereafter speak of the narrator as "I") that "We've got to learn to stop bravely at the surface. We've got to learn to love appearances." On other occasions he directs "I" never to overlook the obvious, to "aim yourself at the tinkly present", and to "Connect nothing . . . Place things side by side on your arborite table, if you must, but connect nothing." Subsequently, in a passage which out of context is rather obscure, he says:

Of all the laws which bind us to the past, the names of things are the most severe. . . . Names preserve the dignity of Appearance. . . . Science begins in coarse naming, a willingness to disregard the particular shape and destiny of each red life, and call them all Rose. To a more brutal, more active eye, *all* flowers look alike, like Negroes and Chinamen.

What the slow-motion camera does is to reveal the individuality of things, the sensuous particularity of being. Cohen's belief is that the truly magical view is not attained by looking at the world through a haze of generality, or through the still

frames of scientific categories, but by examining as closely as possible the particular streaks on the particular tulip. In this he resembles Wordsworth, who sought by close examination of the familiar to discover the element of wonder in it. (If the juxtaposition of Cohen and Wordsworth seems odd, it might be useful to recall that at least once in *Beautiful Losers* there is an obvious echo of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" — "Five years with the length of five years.") Hence it is that we get such passages as the following in *The Favourite Game*, passages in which the search for sensuous exactitude has been developed into a fine art:

How many leaves have to scrape together to record the rustle of the wind? He tried to distinguish the sound of acacia from the sound of maple.

"If you tape their [birds'] whistles, Shell, and slow them down, you can hear the most extraordinary things. What the naked ear hears as one note is often in reality two or three notes sung simultaneously. A bird can sing three notes at the same time."

There is another way in which the use of movies in *The Favourite Game* points forward to *Beautiful Losers*. Breavman says to his friend Krantz "we're walking into a European movie", and proceeds to imagine himself as an old army officer in such a film. This exemplifies another magical power of the cinema: its capacity to enlarge our experience, to provide us with vicarious living. To this F. alludes in *Beautiful Losers* when he writes to "I", "You know what pain looks like, that kind of pain, you've been inside newsreel Belsen."

Closely related to magic, and serving as a further link between *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers*, are the games which figure so prominently in both novels. The game is a kind of ritual which imposes order and pleasure on the minutiae of daily living, and is thus in itself a kind of micro-myth or semi-sacred rite. In *Beautiful Losers*, F. says, "Games are nature's most beautiful creation. All animals play games, and the truly Messianic vision of the brotherhood of creatures must be based on the idea of the game . . ." When F. buys the factory, he does not exploit it for commercial success, but turns it into a playground. Games play a very large part in *The Favourite Game*, as the title suggests: Breavman plays a game with Bertha which leads to her fall from the apple-tree, he plays "The Soldier and the Whore" with Lisa and wrestles with her in the snow, he visualizes Krantz as "first figure of a follow-the-leader game through the woods", he watches a baseball game at the boys' camp where he works for the summer, and at the very end of the novel he remembers "the favourite game" of his childhood:

Jesus! I just remembered what Lisa's favourite game was. After a heavy snow we would go into a back yard with a few of our friends. The expanse of snow would be white and unbroken. Bertha was the spinner. You held her hands while she turned on her heels, you circled her until your feet left the ground. Then she let go and you flew over the snow. You remained still in whatever position you landed. When everyone had been flung in this fashion into the fresh snow, the beautiful part of the game began. You stood up carefully, taking great pains not to disturb the impression you had made. Now the comparisons. Of course you would have done your best to land in some crazy position, arms and legs sticking out. Then we walked away, leaving a lovely white field of blossom-like shapes with footprint stems.

The dust-jacket of *The Favourite Game* declares that "the favourite game itself is love". This seems to me a serious misreading of the novel. As I read it, and especially the final paragraph, the favourite game is to leave an impression on the snow, to leave behind one an interesting design, and by extension I take this to include the novel itself, which is Cohen's design of his own early life, and by further extension of all artistic creation. The game is beautiful for Cohen because it is associated with the innocence of childhood and because it is a successful attempt of the human imagination to impose order upon reality. Two of F.'s ideas in *Beautiful Losers* are relevant here. At one point he declares "Prayer is translation. A man translates himself into a child asking for all there is in a language he has barely mastered." At another, we are told that F.'s "allegiance is to the notion that he is not bound to the world as given, that he can escape from the painful arrangement of things as they are." "Escapism", so long a derogatory term in twentieth-century literary circles, is for Cohen a desirable thing: movies, games, radio hit tunes, art and prayer are desirable things because they lift us out of the ruck of routine and above the rubble of time.

There are other ways in which *The Favourite Game* is premonitory of *Beautiful Losers* — the incidental comments on Canada, on Montreal, and on Jewish life and values; the humour; the alternation between tenderness and violence; the wavering between self-glorification and self-doubt; the hostile allusions to scientific achievement; the many ambivalent references to machinery; the stress on sexual ecstasy and especially upon the oral forms of it and upon masturbation; the contempt for conventional bourgeois behaviour and attitudes; recurrent images which give to the novel a poetic resonance; the emphasis upon loneliness and nostalgia — but rather than take time to develop them I feel I must point out how this first novel *differs* from its successor. It is a much more subjective novel, and a much more self-indulgent one. Whereas *Beautiful Losers* is about a cast

of characters none of whom bear much resemblance to Cohen himself or to members of his family and his friends, *The Favourite Game* is quite obviously autobiographical. Like Joyce's *Portrait*, it is a novel in the lyrical mode, whereas *Beautiful Losers* is much closer to the dramatic mode of *Finnegan's Wake*. Much of *The Favourite Game* is taken up with family history — the death of Breavman's father, the neurotic possessiveness and ultimate psychosis of his mother, the pathetic respectability of his uncles. These scenes, and those dealing with the author's own youthful memories, are the strongest part of the book: the author is still at the stage of recording rather than dominating and transforming reality. When, in the Shell-Gordon interlude, he tries to get into the minds of a young New England woman and her husband, most of the life and particularity go out of the style.

SINCE *The Spice-Box of Earth* was also a very personal book, Cohen seems to have felt that he must break out of the prison of self and attempt a more objective art. The significance of his third book of poems, *Flowers for Hitler* (1964), at any rate in relation to *Beautiful Losers*, lies in its strenuous effort to broaden and deepen and objectify its author's interests and sympathies. In a rather too flamboyant but still basically honest note to the publisher, which is printed on the dust-jacket, Cohen declares of *Flowers for Hitler*:

This book moves me from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dung pile of the front-line writer. I didn't plan it this way. I loved the tender notices *Spice-Box* got but they embarrassed me a little. *Hitler* won't get the same hospitality from the papers. My sounds are too new, therefore people will say: this is derivative, this is slight, his power has failed. Well, I say that there has never been a book like this, prose or poetry, written in Canada. All I ask is that you put it in the hands of my generation and it will be recognized.

I have not read carefully the reviews of *Flowers for Hitler*, so I cannot say whether Cohen's fears were justified. I do know, however, that the charge of derivative-ness has been levelled at *Beautiful Losers*, and that it has been compared (very vaguely, as is the safe way) to the writing of Sartre, G n t, Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Allen Ginsberg. One important object of my present exercise is to show that *Beautiful Losers* can best be seen as the culmination of Cohen's own artistic development, not as the imitation of someone else.

Flowers for Hitler is not quite as different from its predecessors as Cohen's dust-jacket statement might lead us to believe. As the title suggests, there is still the juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness, tenderness and violence, which we have seen to have been a feature of his work from the beginning; there are still a number of love poems which combine wit, tenderness, and passion; there are still poems of humourous self-mockery and ironic ballads of everyday life. But the new element is there, and it predominates. It takes, largely, two forms: disgust at and revulsion from the greed, hypocrisy, and cruelty of twentieth-century politics, and a newly urgent longing for a religious transfiguration which will rid the poet of his self-absorption.

In the political poems, he expresses the idea that the horrors of our age make those of previous generations seem insignificant; that Canadian political life is sordid and dull; and that History is merely an opiate:

History is a needle
for putting men asleep
anointed with the poison
of all they want to keep

(This passage, incidentally, turns up again in *Beautiful Losers*, in slightly amended form, as "F.'s Invocation to History in the Middle Style".) Canada is "a dying animal" to which he refuses (adapting a line from Yeats) to "be fastened". Everywhere he looks he sees guilt and corruption, and he feels his own involvement in it and repulsion from it.

This part of *Flowers for Hitler* points forward to F.'s political involvement in *Beautiful Losers*; F. is a French-Canadian nationalist, a Separatist, a Member of Parliament, a revolutionary leader, and his final political gesture is to blow up the statue of Queen Victoria on Sherbrooke Street. But F. himself recognizes that the sense of involvement with other men which leads to his kind of political activity is only a stage on the way to the final break-through which he hopes "I" will achieve. "I" 's final apotheosis transcends politics: it involves transfiguration, not an improvement of time but a leap into eternity.

The final answer of *Beautiful Losers*, the loss of self in the pursuit of sainthood, is also adumbrated in *Flowers for Hitler*. The process begins in confession of guilt; in the very first poem, "What I'm Doing Here," Cohen confesses that he has lied, conspired against love, tortured, and hated, and he ends by calling upon "each one of you to confess." Confession leads to humility, as in "The Hearth" where he learns that his lust "was not so rare a masterpiece", and to self-abnegation in

which he vows to forget his personal style and surrender to the mysterious silence, become a vessel for renewing grace :

I will forget my style
 Perhaps a mind will open in this world
 perhaps a heart will catch rain
 Nothing will heal and nothing will freeze
 but perhaps a heart will catch rain. . . .

He longs for purification and discipline leading to a new life :

There is a whitewashed hotel waiting for me
 somewhere, in which I will begin my fast and
 my new life.

Oh to stand in the Ganges wielding a yard of
 intestine.

Let me renew myself
 in the midst of all the things of the world
 which cannot be connected.

This idea is perhaps best expressed in “For Anyone Dressed in Marble”, in a passage which also finds its way into *Beautiful Losers* :

I see an orphan, lawless and serene,
 standing in a corner of the sky,
 body something like bodies that have been,
 but not the scar of naming in his eye.
 Bred close to the ovens, he's burnt inside.
 Light, wind, cold, dark — they use him like a bride.

The “saint” is a lawless orphan because he has detached himself from the claims of family and society; he stands in a corner of the sky because he has transcended earthly values; he has a body because he is still human, but he has overcome the human fault of missing the particular in the general by the use of “coarse names”; aware of human violence as expressed in the gas ovens of Nazi Germany, he has been purged by his closeness to it and has become a kind of empty vessel into which the eternal powers may pour themselves.

WITH ALL THIS AS BACKGROUND and context, *Beautiful Losers* (1966) becomes relatively easy to appreciate and understand. I say *relatively* easy, because it remains a difficult and sometimes baffling book.

First, the title. Beautiful Losers are those who achieve the beauty of "sainthood" (and it is necessary to put that word in quotes because Cohen uses it, as we shall see in a moment, in a special sense) by losing, or rather by voluntarily surrendering, their selves and the ordinary world. In the eyes of the world, they are "losers", for they are victims: Catherine dies in agony of slow starvation and self-torture; Edith is crushed by a descending elevator; Mary Voolnd is mauled by savage police dogs; F. dies in an asylum for the criminally insane; "I" is at the end of the novel a ragged, stinking, "freak of the woods." But *sub specie aeternitatis*, or in the eyes of God, these characters are not losers at all: Catherine deliberately surrenders herself to be the Bride of Christ, is canonized, and becomes a miraculous healer; Edith commits voluntary suicide to teach "I" a lesson which at first he ignores but which ultimately leads him to his apotheosis; Mary Voolnd surrenders herself to the sexual pleasure of F. when he is at his unattractive worst and brings him the good news of his recognition as first president of the republic; F. deliberately casts himself in the subordinate role of teacher and guide of "I" and shows him the way to the Promised Land; "I" achieves final apotheosis and in the last paragraph of the novel is seen playing the role of Mediator between God and Man, or of the Suffering Servant who has gone through agony to achieve compassion:

Poor men, poor men, such as we, they've gone and fled. I will plead from electrical tower. I will plead from turret of plane. He will uncover His face. He will not leave me alone. I will spread His name in Parliament. I will welcome His silence in pain. I have come through the fire of family and love. I smoke with my darling, I sleep with my friend. We talk of the poor men, broken and fled. Alone with my radio I lift up my hands. Welcome to you who read me today. Welcome to you who put my heart down. Welcome to you, darling and friend, who miss me forever in your trip to the end.

Voluntary loss of self for some higher cause is, then, the main theme of *Beautiful Losers*, but it is developed in great complexity and intricacy against a background of mythological ecumenicity and is supplemented by a variety of secondary themes.

At a climactic moment of the novel, Edith breaks into Greek to declare "I am Isis born, of all things, both what is and what shall be, and no mortal has ever lifted my robe." We may recall here that on the first page of the novel "I" declares that he wants to "know what goes on under that rosy blanket" of Catherine Tekakwitha: so Catherine is also Isis. Indeed all the women of the novel are essentially the same woman, or the same goddess, just as Isis gradually took over

all the other goddesses in the ancient world. The greatest significance of the Isis cult, which developed in Egypt in the seventeenth century B.C. and gradually spread throughout the whole Mediterranean world, lay in her role of Universal Mother and her agency in effecting immortality of the soul and renewal of life. She included in herself the virtues of all other goddesses, and she offered to her devotees forgiveness, purgation, communion and regeneration. Her mythological role in piecing together the fragments of her husband Osiris symbolized her miraculous healing power. Once one becomes aware of Edith's role as Isis, many of the jigsaw pieces of the novel fall into significant patterns: it is in her Isis role of Universal Mother that Edith, with her phenomenally large nipples, gives herself to "I" and F., comforts the stranger on the beach at Old Orchard, Maine, and even cradles the "famous head" of the presumably forgiven Hitler against her breasts. By her voluntary suicide in the elevator shaft, Edith effects a restoration of her husband similar to Isis's restoration of Osiris. When we read the description of Edith's coating herself with "deep red greasy stuff" and saying to "I" "Let's be other people", we recall that one of Isis's roles was that of the bringer-forth of the indwelling self, of the agent of miraculous transfiguration. "I" notes that Edith's "kisses were loose, somehow unspecific, as if her mouth couldn't choose where to stay" — and this we can relate to the concept of the mouth of Isis as full of the breath of life, issuing forth to heal the soul and regenerate the dead. We recall also that Mary Woolnd, another Isis figure, is a nurse, and that Edith is several times referred to as a nurse.

The second major mythological framework of *Beautiful Losers* is that of Christianity. This is an apt juxtaposition since the cult of Isis rivalled the cult of Christ in the Mediterranean world, and sometimes blended with it. Isis herself was frequently identified with the Virgin Mary, and this identification is made anew in Cohen's novel. Catherine is the Iroquois Virgin, and models herself upon the Virgin Mary; by renouncing the ownership of her own flesh she achieves a mystic vision:

And as she thus disclaimed the ownership of her flesh she sensed a minute knowledge of his innocence, a tiny awareness of the beauty of all the faces circled round the crackling fires of the village. Ah, the pain eased, the torn flesh she finally did not own healed in its freedom, and a new description of herself, so brutally earned, forced itself into her heart: she was Virgin.

But since Edith and Catherine are obviously one person in different guises, Edith is also the Virgin Mary: although she is not physically a virgin, she plays the

role of intercessor and comforter. So also does Mary Woolnd, although her way of expressing compassionate love may seem the very antithesis of virginity.

The men also are loosely associated with Christian figures. F. refers to himself on various occasions as Moses, who has led his friends within sight of the Promised Land but cannot take them there; at other times he speaks of his role in terms which recall John the Baptist. "I", on the other hand, develops eventually into a Christ-figure. In the final paragraph, as we have seen, he becomes the compassionate mediator, pleading from his tower. (In this connection, it is worth noting that in the poem "Suzanne" Cohen speaks of Christ being on his "wooden tower", the Cross.) Previous to that, "I" has stayed for a prolonged period in a tree-house in the woods, paralleling Christ's sojourn in the wilderness. Even the body-builder Charles Axis is linked with Christ: "Charles Axis is all compassion, he's our sacrifice!", and his name suggests that he too is an axis or link between God and man.

A number of other mythologies are worked into *Beautiful Losers*, but there is space here only to glance at them. There are, as we might expect since "I" is a folk-lorist, anthropologist, and student of the North American Indians, many references to and indeed detailed descriptions of Red Indian myths and rites — rainmaking (p. 31), mythical cosmogony (p. 85), the wrestling match between the White one and the Dark one (p. 88), Klooskap (p. 89), the Oscotarach or Head-Piercer's Hut (pp. 114, 133, 184), and the Andacwandet or Fuck-Cure (pp. 128-132). Greek mythology is represented, significantly, by Icarus (p. 212) and Prometheus (p. 237), both of whom fit the novel well since they sought to unite heaven and earth, God and man. There are apt references to Oriental Indian mythology and religious rites: to the mandala (p. 214), yoga (pp. 160, 236), Asoka's Circle, and Tantric love perfectionists. The Jewish Kabala is mentioned, as is the Chinese "holy mountain" and the wisdom of Kung.

These more or less ancient mythologies are supplemented with more recent myths and magical manifestations: the magic of Houdini (p. 38), the mythology of the comic strips and radio programmes, the magic rituals of the Masonic Order (p. 145), the myth of astrology (see, for example, the reference to the Virgo disease, p. 162), the magic of firecrackers and guns and rockets. But the contemporary mythology and magic which are most stressed are those of the movies. There are several references to the goddesses of the silver screen, Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot, and a host of references to the magic powers of the film to heighten reality, preserve the past, record the present, create imaginary worlds, expand the consciousness, enlarge the awareness, arouse the conscience,

stimulate the passions, or excite the imagination. The System Theatre becomes the contemporary temple or cathedral, into which only initiates are allowed to pass after negotiating the barrier of the ticket collector in the outer courtyard or foyer.

All of these references to mythology and magic reach their culmination in the passage which announces the secondary (some might argue that it is the primary) theme of *Beautiful Losers*: that magic and religion *not* science and politics are the real powers in the world. In what F. describes as the "sweet burden of my argument," he proclaims:

God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is afoot. Magic is alive. Alive is a foot. Magic never died. God never sickened. Many poor men lied. Many sick men lied. Magic never weakened. Magic never hid. Magic always ruled. God is afoot. God never died. God was ruler though his funeral lengthened. Though his mourners thickened Magic never fled. . . . Though laws were carved in marble they could not shelter men. . . . Magic is afoot. . . . But Magic is no instrument. Magic is the end. . . . This I mean my mind to serve till service is but Magic moving through the world, and mind itself is Magic coursing through the flesh, and flesh itself is Magic dancing on a clock, and time itself the Magic Length of God.

As I have said, there are several subsidiary themes running through *Beautiful Losers*. Perhaps the third most important is that which announces the close association of religion and sex. One of the apparent paradoxes of this novel is that its main characters, all of whom are "heroes" in the sense that they are to some degree at least being held up to our admiration, have such divergent attitudes towards sex. Catherine renounces the flesh altogether and remains a virgin; Edith, on the other hand, is a relatively compliant wife to "I" but without compunction commits adultery with F. on six or seven occasions. F. is completely promiscuous, admits that he has chased women wherever they have led him, glories in his sexual "scores" with both sexes, and even in his dying moments has his hand up the skirt of Mary Voolnd. "I" has had homosexual relations with F., has had a rather frustrating sexual life with Edith (she is not compliant enough for him — he has rather special tastes), and spends a great deal of time in masturbation. All the sexuality in the novel, of course, comes to a climax in the orgy which F. and Edith perform with the so-called Danish Vibrator or Sex Machine. What are we to make of all this? Is Cohen upholding virginity or promiscuity, sexual abstinence or sexual orgies?

The clue to the resolution of the paradox is in Cohen's special conception of sainthood. Recalling F.'s advice to "go down on a saint", "I" speculates:

What is a saint? A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of a kind of balance in the chaos of existence.

To "go down on a saint", then, is at second-hand to make contact with the energy of love, as well as to combine physical ecstasy with spiritual vision. Catherine is a saint because she has achieved the remote human possibility of making contact with the energy of love, that is God, through the renunciation of the flesh; Edith is a saint because she has made contact through her maternal role towards all men; F. is a saint because he has made contact with divine energy through sex and because he commits himself to the remote possibility of a revolution in Quebec; "I" becomes a saint at the end of the novel because by exiling himself to the wilderness he has purged himself of pride and selfishness and made of himself an empty vessel into which divine love can pour. A saint, if you like, is an extremist. For Cohen, truth is not in the mean but in the extremes. F. declares "I was never drunk enough, never poor enough, never rich enough." Catherine in the extremity of her flagellations is closer to Edith and F. in the extremity of their orgy with the Danish Vibrator than she is to a member of the bourgeoisie leading a respectable and moderate life. Is it too fanciful to suggest that in referring to the sex machine by its initials, D.V., Cohen is suggesting that the surrender to it is not so very different from the surrender to God's will?

A closely related subsidiary theme is that of what we might call pan-orgasmic sex. F. declares that "all parts of the body are erotogenic. All flesh can come!" and he maintains that almost any contact can lead us into "the nourishing anonymity of the climax." (Here, incidentally, is another of the links between religion and sex — sex leads to anonymity, into that loss of self-consciousness which is the prerequisite of religious response.)

Rather than deal further with the minor themes of the novel, I should like now to say something about its technique. In structure it resembles a symbolic poem: it is divided into the traditional three parts, and its parts are woven together by recurrent thematic motifs and thematic images or symbols. Among the motifs are references to "I"'s constipation (a symbol of the self locked in upon itself) to his masturbation (a symbol of his lonely self-absorption and self-indulgence), to games (symbols of life as free choice), to radio music and radio serials (symbols of attempts to reach contact with some outside force or message), to baptism (symbol of purification and the entry into a new life), and above all to movies, films, cinemas and film-stars (symbols, as we have seen, of contem-

porary magic and escape from this world). Among the thematic images are the blanket or veil (symbol of mystery and the hoped-for apocalypse), birch and pine trees (symbols of natural growth, beauty, and the fragrance of natural things), rivers, springs and pools (symbols of purification and divine grace), birds (symbols of the ingression of the divine upon the human), altars and temples (symbols of worship, aspiration and sacrifice), stars (associated with Isis and symbols of divine perfection and protection), the elevator (an ambivalent symbol, suggesting both the ascent to heaven and the descent into hell), mountains (symbols of contemplation and detached wisdom), machinery (another ambivalent symbol, suggesting the "eternal machinery" of cosmic process and the destructive machinery of warfare and greed), the necklace (symbol of multiplicity in unity, the many in the one), crystals, snowflakes and the rainbow pictures seen through them (symbolic of divine order, intricacy and vision), soap and especially F.'s "soap collection" (symbols of purification through suffering), rockets, firecrackers, and "fiery journeys" (symbols of the attempt to penetrate the veil of heaven), fishes (symbols of Christ and of divine grace), candy (symbol of pleasure and perhaps of God's mercy), the factory which is converted into a playground (symbol of the transfiguration of labour into play, as in the last stanza of Yeats' "Among Schoolchildren.") Each of these motifs or images recurs frequently, and in each case the symbolic suggestion is intended: the result is a novel more intricately interwoven than any Canadian novel of my experience.

An associated feature of the technique of this novel is its clever manipulation of chronology. We move back and forth from the present to the near-past to the distant-past of Catherine Tekakwitha, the seventeenth-century Iroquois virgin, and yet the transitions, though often abrupt and frequent, are never misleading or confusing. Similarly, although we shuttle back and forth between various points of view, we never get confused between the different characters: each is consistent (if only in inconsistency), distinctive, and credible.

Beautiful Losers, the riches of which I have only touched upon, is the chief accomplishment of Leonard Cohen thus far, and the culmination of all his previous work. But it is not likely to be the end of the phenomenon of Leonard Cohen.