

# LEONARD COHEN

## *Black Romantic*

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WRITING ON “The Problem of a Canadian Literature”, E. K. Brown pokes fun at the genteel conservatism that characterizes Canadian writing:

Imagination boggles at the vista of a Canadian Whitman or a Canadian Dos Passos. The prevailing literary standards demand a high degree of moral and social orthodoxy; and popular writers accept these standards without even . . . rueful complaint.<sup>1</sup>

If Brown considers a Whitman or a Dos Passos improbable, a Canadian Gênet, a Canadian Burroughs, or a Günter Grass is clearly beyond expectation. Yet it is in precisely this tradition, that of the contemporary Black Romantics as we might call them, that Leonard Cohen appears to belong.

Cohen’s poetry reads like an index to the history of European romanticism; from the epigraph to *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956) through *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961) to the “lady” of “garbage flowers” in *Flowers for Hitler* (1964), his progress is from Keats and Lawrence through Baudelaire to Gênet. In brief, this is a movement from a qualified acceptance of the romantic ideal as it is embodied in art (“For ever wilt thou love and she be fair”) to the decadent romanticism of a *fin de siècle* æsthetic in which the ugly replaces the beautiful as the inspiration for art.

Reading through Cohen’s work we become aware of an unsatisfied search for an absolute. In his world there are no fixed values, spiritual or sensual, that stand

beyond the transitory moment, and the moment itself, experience made myth, blends imperceptibly with other moments and other mythologies, so that in the shifting the values change, leaving only the value of experience made art:

Those days were just the twilight  
 And soon the poems and the songs  
 Were only associations  
 Edged with bitterness  
 Focussed into pain  
 By paintings in a minor key  
 Remembered on warm nights  
 When he made love to strangers  
 And he would struggle through old words  
 Unable to forget he once created new ones  
 And fumble at their breasts with broken hands.

Cohen's dominant theme, the relationship between experience and art, and more specifically the suggestion that the value of experience is to be found in the art or "beauty" distilled from it, is a familiar motif of the late romantics. It first appears in Cohen's work as an epigraph to *Mythologies* taken from "The Bear" by William Faulkner:

'She cannot fade though thou hast not had thy bliss',  
 McCaslin said: 'For ever wilt thou love and she be fair'.  
 'He's talking about a girl', he said.  
 'He had to talk about something', McCaslin said.

This preface to a poet's first book suggests an amused recognition of a certain attitude to experience; the rationale is that of love for art's sake. But if this attitude is familiar, the irrational neo-gothic world from which the poet takes this stance is not at all familiar, at least in Canadian poetry. Particularly in his two later books, *Flowers for Hitler* and *Beautiful Losers* (1966) Cohen would seem to be closest to the European tradition of Baudelaire, Sartre and Gênet, and to their American affiliates Henry Miller and William Burroughs.

In contrast to the later European tradition from Baudelaire to Gênet, Canadian writers have not wandered very far from first generation romanticism. Strongly influenced by Wordsworthian natural piety and reinforced by the Calvinist urge towards moral uplift, the native line in English Canadian poetry might be characterized by the straightforward statement and explicit morality of a D. C. Scott, an E. J. Pratt, or an Earle Birney. Despite Lampman's flirtation with the Sym-

bolists and Marjorie Pickthall's coy apprenticeship to Swinburne, imagistic technique was not fully recognized as such in Canadian poetry until the thirties, and the Decadent sensibility with its attendant themes of masochistic death, self-flagellation and religious inversion, is reflected only faintly in Carman's work of the nineties, recurs briefly in the thirties with Leo Kennedy's *The Shrouding*, and does not appear again until just recently in the late fifties. Notably, this Decadent sensibility is most explicit in the works of the younger writers Leonard Cohen, Daryl Hine, and Mordecai Richler, all of whom have come into contact with the European tradition.

Consequently Cohen does have some grounds for asserting, as he does on the back cover of *Flowers for Hitler*, that his "sounds" are new in Canada and possibly subject to critical misinterpretation. Admittedly, he does stress the same religious, sexual and social protest as do Klein, Layton and Dudek, and he does take the same missionary delight in the poetic vocation of the Montreal Group *pour épater le bourgeois*. But Cohen's technique is considerably more complex than that of Layton or Dudek, and the vision and sensibility which he expresses are sufficiently different from those of Klein to suggest that he has moved into a different tradition. In this connection we might compare the world view of Klein's *Hitleriad* (1944) with that of Cohen's *Flowers for Hitler* (1964). Along with the structure and style of Pope's *Dunciad*, Klein's *Hitleriad* is invoking the rational Neo-Classical world where human folly can be effectively chastised by the wit of a righteous indignation:

Let anger take me in its grasp; let hate,  
Hatred of evil prompt me, and dictate.

Cohen, on the other hand, insists upon the relativity of evil; Hitler is "ordinary", Eichmann, "medium". In this perspective, irrational evil is accepted as a normal part of the human make-up which can even come to have a certain attractiveness:

It happens to everyone. For those with eyes who know in their hearts that terror is mutual, then this hard community has a beauty of its own.

This reference to the strange "beauty" which can spring from a community of evil and suffering invokes Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*. And it is Baudelaire's flowers of evil grafted with those of Gênet which Cohen uses to provide the structural myth of *Flowers for Hitler*. In this book, the moments of beauty which the poet attempts to create, like those of his protagonist Kerensky, "when poems grew like butterflies on the garbage of his life", are moments which cannot come into

being unless evil is first admitted. Like his mentor, the T. S. Eliot of *The Waste Land*, and for that matter like Klein also, Cohen wants to bring a guilty world into recognition of itself: "I wait/for each one of you to confess." But unlike Klein, and again following Eliot, the confession that Cohen demands is one which accepts personal responsibility for evil as the natural corollary of being human. Having accepted this awareness of evil as does the protagonist of "The New Leader", the individual is then released from the negative virtue of "threading history's crushing daisy-chain with beauty after beauty" and face to face with the ugliness of self:

Drunk at last, he hugged himself, his stomach clean, cold and drunk, the sky clean but only for him, free to shiver, free to hate, free to begin.

This would seem to be a basically post World War II position: the romantic voyaging "I", bereft of religious belief and Hegel's cosmic rationalism ("the sky clean") sets out to discover his world. And as in Sartre's *Nausea* or Heller's *Catch-22*, this involves the attempt to come to terms with existence itself. Faced with a world which he sees as irrational, evil and grotesque, an evil and an ugliness which he shares because he is human, with only a momentary hope of vision and that perhaps delusive, the modern anti-hero accepts evil as part of existence and immerses himself within it, both in terms of the external world and through the journey into self.

**T**HIS IMMERSION in destruction, often accomplished through a combination of alcohol, drugs and sex, would seem to be meta-physical in nature in that it is an attempt to find a new answer to the human predicament by going down instead of up. In this sense it might be considered the modern romantic myth. Where Wordsworth and Coleridge attempt the transcendental leap, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Huysmans, and the modern Gênet, Sartre and Burroughs all spend a season in hell. Experience is the distinguishing mode of the Byronic hero, the later Victorian Decadents and their twentieth-century descendants, the Black Romantics. For the past twenty years, the subject of the modern romantic has been increasingly the fascination of evil and its relationship to the process of destructive metamorphosis. Cyril Connolly, in a recent attempt to define "modernism" finds its essence in this quatrain by Baudelaire:

Only when we drink poison are we well —  
 We want, this fire so burns our brain tissue,  
 To drown in the abyss — heaven or hell  
 Who cares? Through the unknown we'll find the new.<sup>2</sup>

As this excerpt makes clear, the value of the abyss is not only the pleasure of new sensation but the possibility of a new revelation beyond the experience itself. The danger inherent in this credo would seem to be the temptation it offers to mistake catalogued sensation for new revelation.

In Cohen's work, this possibility of a new revelation is specifically associated with the myth of descent culminating in the creation of art. In his first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, the structural myth is that of the death of the poet-god Orpheus and the possibility of his resurrection in art. Like Eliot's *Waste Land* the book moves through cycles of winter death followed by spring re-birth, and the poet-victim as a part of this cycle moves between the extremes of innocent and destructive love. In terms of the controlling Orpheus myth, the figure of the beloved woman suggests Eurydice while the madwoman evokes the Bacchanals. In the poem "Letter", the poet-victim, aware of his impending death, addresses the madwoman directly: "How you murdered your family/ means nothing to me/ as your mouth moves across my body". The poems of this cycle would seem to make a strong case for submission to a destructive love which, unlike the romantic escapism of such poems as "On Certain Incredible Nights", can lead to a new beauty and a new order. Consequently the poet embraces the "real", sacrifice goes on ("Hallowe'en Poem") and the poet's brain exposed, "the final clever thrill of summer lads all dead with love", becomes a "drum" to be "scratched with poetry by Kafka's machine". The rationale for this disintegrative experience is explicit in the poem "Story". Only by allowing the madwoman full sway is it possible for the poet as victim to find his place in art: "to understand one's part in a legend".

It is this myth of art which seems to provide the basic structure in Cohen's work. In his first book the myth of descent is presented primarily as the desolation of Eliot's *Waste Land*. In *The Spice-Box of Earth* this longing for the old lost ideals is re-worked in terms of a neo-Hassidic myth. No longer able to accept a despotic God, the poet as priest is forced beyond Genesis into a desolation which is "unheroic, unbiblical". Lawrence Breavman, the poet as lover, finds himself in the same position in Cohen's next book, *The Favourite Game*. Breavman's alienation grows throughout the novel until he is finally stricken with panic and loneliness; it is then that he realizes that a new experience awaits:

He stumbled and collapsed, tasting the ground. He lay very still while his clothes soaked. Something very important was going to happen in this arena. He was very sure of that. Not in gold, not in light, but in this mud something necessary and inevitable would take place. He had to stay to watch it unfold.

The experience that waits for Breavman is a recognition of the evil and irrationality symbolized by Baudelaire's mud-flowers. In *Flowers for Hitler* this recognition is presented as a disintegrative experience which is both frightening and pleasurable. This descent into evil is savoured in much the same way as the young Breavman enjoys his adolescent satanism ("Fuck God"), yet the very process of daring the abyss is a propulsion into an irrational, frightening world. Similarly, the narrator-historian of *Beautiful Losers* is forced through the motions of Sartre's nausea in a grimy sub-basement room that gradually fills up with his own excrement.

In Cohen, as with Baudelaire and Sartre, the value of this disintegrative process is given as the creation of art. "Elegy", the first poem in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, expresses this myth of descent in the death of the poet-god Orpheus:

He is descending through cliffs  
Of slow green water  
And the hovering coloured fish  
Kiss his snow-bruised body  
And build their secret nests  
In his fluttering winding sheet.

From the disintegrating body of the dead god comes art; the "secret nests" of "hovering" fish. In a later poem "These Heroics", the poet explains that it is because he cannot be "fish" or "bird" that he makes dreams and poetry from love. The association of poet and bird is common to Horace, Baudelaire and Rilke, and in each case the bird symbolizes the poet's aspiration. Cohen's addition of a "fish" to this complex with primary associations of disintegration, points up his belief that the creative process is one which moves between aspiration and disintegration. Associated with the poetic, sexual and religious aspiration which forms one pole of Cohen's system is the dove, the beloved and Catherine Tekakwitha; clustered about the other pole, the process of disintegration, is the fish, the Black Mass, the Bacchanals, "F" and Edith. Through art — the "nests" of "Elegy", the "kite" of *Spice-Box*, the "butterflies" of *Flowers for Hitler* — the poet attempts to reconcile the two. For example, the exiled poet-priest of *Spice-Box* finds that neither religious belief nor physical love can fill up the void be-

tween “a ruined house of bondage and a holy promised land”. This reconciliation of the spirit and the flesh is only to be found in the fairy-tale land of art:

Out of the land of heaven  
Down comes the warm Sabbath sun  
Into the spice-box of earth

or in the artifact itself; the spice-box, one of the symbols of the Jewish Havdallah service marking the Sabbath’s end, becomes a metaphor for the human form divine.

A similar conclusion is reached in Cohen’s later books; Breavman learns that although love is a “creation”, the favourite game is not love alone but the flesh made art:

When everyone had been flung . . . into the fresh snow, the beautiful part of the game began. You stood up carefully, taking great care 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 field of blossom-like shapes with footprint stems.

In *Flowers for Hitler*, Cohen takes the blackness of the human capacity for evil and from it attempts to extract the flowers of art. In this perspective, the poet emerges as recorder: “neither/ father nor child/ but one who spins/ on an eternal unimportant loom/ patterns of war and grass/ which do not last the night”. Similarly, all the four main characters of *Beautiful Losers* find themselves to be both artist and pattern. Through the experience of failure, the narrator, his Indian wife Edith, his guide and lover “F” (cf. Pyncheon’s “V”) and the Iroquois saint, Catherine Tekakwitha, are each precipitated on a journey into self which results in the recreation of existence:

Not the pioneer is the American dream. . . . The dream is to be immigrant sailing into the misty aerials of New York, the dream is to be Jesuit in the cities of the Iriquois, for we do not wish to destroy the past and its baggy failures, we only wish the miracles to demonstrate that the past was joyously prophetic, and that possibility occurs to us most plainly on this cargo deck of wide lapels, our kerchief sacks filled with obsolete machine guns from the last war but which will astound and conquer the Indians.

Because it is Cohen’s thesis that the experience of failure is indispensable for the creation of art, the book becomes a case study of the *fleur du mal* “beauty” of such losers. Through a pop-art catalogue of sensation, the narrator proceeds to

the superior “magic” represented by Catherine Tekakwitha (1656-1680). Tekakwitha functions primarily as an artist of religion, her name is defined as meaning “she who, advancing, arranges the shadows neatly”. As the narrator further explains, a saint is associated with the “energy” of love: “contact with this energy results in a kind of balance in the chaos of existence”. Through her influence as it is manifested directly and through the other two characters, the narrator-historian passes through nausea (like his prototype, Sartre’s Roquentin) to the point that it is suggested that the novel is produced from his experience.

**D**ESPITE THE CONTRIVANCE of Cohen’s central myth, *Spice-Box* and *The Favourite Game* are impressive well-written early books, and perhaps largely because of the glimpses they offer of realized experience. *Flowers for Hitler* and *Beautiful Losers* are less rewarding, not only because they are more dominantly written to formula, but also because of the increasingly self-conscious attitude of the poet as persona in relation to the codification of his central myth. What I miss in Cohen’s later books is the sense that the writer is attempting a subjective re-interpretation of evil or failure as the case might be. Instead, Cohen’s successive books offer variations on a theme within other men’s myths. This technique has the advantage of structural neatness and there are few Canadian readers who have not expressed delight at Cohen’s technical virtuosity, but it also has the serious disadvantage of sacrificing organic growth and original discovery to a pre-determined formula. Little can happen in *Flowers for Hitler* or *Beautiful Losers* because Cohen has already determined what will happen even before the experience takes place. Furthermore, because he is committed to a view of life and art which is essentially that of religious aspiration followed by sexual inversion, Cohen is further limited in his presentation of experience and his delineation of character. Experience and characters can only come from the Yellow Books of the 1880’s and 90’s. The case study of the young hero and his *saison en enfer*, the division of the romantic *femme fatale* into her opposite but complementary aspects of innocent and destroyer (cf. Catherine and Edith) are familiar features of Decadent literature as is the presentation of the satanic, often homosexual, friend and alter-ego (“F”).

The limitations of this vision would seem to be the limitations of Decadent literature in general; it substitutes a narrowed, bizarre area of human experience at the expense of the ordinary human average, and it negates the dignity of ordinary human encounter to a hierarchy of art. Because this vision, although limited,



is of primary importance to the author, his characters are subordinated to it. As types, they depend on increasing doses of sensationalism to be effective. In this connection it is possible to trace the increasing sensationalism associated with the figure of the friend as he is presented from *The Favourite Game* to *Beautiful Losers*. Like the mentor of Oscar Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray*, "F" is memorable for his epigrams rather than for a sense of character in depth. Part of the difficulty involved in Cohen's perception of character would seem to be related to the fact that his characters are conceived as part of an internal myth. Cohen, for example, is both poet-writer and persona and the two often merge. This can sometimes be effective as in the poem "You Have The Lovers" from *Spice-Box* where the poet-lover and poet-spectator are universalized but more often the trio of two lovers and a spectator leads to sensationalism or the plain voyeurism of the sun-bathing sequence in *Beautiful Losers*.

The sensibility which reports the sensationalism of the disintegrative experience is quite different in kind from that which we usually associate with Canadian poetry. Faced with an absurd world, Cohen is no longer able to call on Klein's humane rationalism for the redress of evil. Instead, there is some attempt to exorcise evil by filtering it through the comic mode. This Black Humour is apparent in Cohen's description of Nazi concentration camp atrocities:

Peekaboo Miss Human Soap  
Pretend it never happened

. . . .

I say let sleeping ashes lie.

Here the brutal is introduced as a witty aside and the particular *frisson nouveau* of the poem seems to arise from the juxtaposition of the erotic, infantile world of Bathing Beauties, "peekaboo" and "let's pretend", with the horror of real concentration camps where soap is made from human fat and ashes. At first glance, Cohen appears to be having a nasty laugh at the expense of Jewish suffering. Alfred Purdy, in fact, describes the subject of *Flowers for Hitler* as little more than the after-dinner talk of "a good conversationalist who had to say something".<sup>3</sup> But on closer inspection it might be suggested that this is an attempt to come to terms with a painful experience. Through the medium of Black Humour it is possible to see the selection of a Miss Human Soap as the fun and games of an absurd world. And because Cohen has presented horror as an absurdity, there is a possibility of moving on to a new affirmation in a way that is not open to Klein in his *Hitleriad*. But at the same time (and it is this which makes Purdy's

comments relevant) the dichotomy between the epigraph to *Flowers for Hitler*, which is an excerpt from Primo Levi warning against the disintegration of personality, and the sensationalism of the book itself, leads us to question the integrity of Cohen's vision — a question which does not arise in connection with the Black Humour of Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* or Grass's *The Tin Drum*.

Coming to terms with this view of experience is as tricky as the attempt to decide whether or not pop-art is a contradiction in terms. Yet it can be said that the qualities which make Cohen's work fairly easy to describe — myth as literary structure, central persona, a consistent view of life and art — are also those qualities which mitigate against further development in his later work. In general I find Cohen's poetry often too derivative to be impressive, and the mythic technique, once the key has been supplied, too simple to be suggestive in the largest sense. Cohen does play the game very well; his mythologies are clever, often witty, sometimes very moving, yet even at its best, Cohen's favourite game is still Eliot's or Baudelaire's or Sartre's. But Cohen is attempting to write of contemporary themes in a contemporary way. His concern with alienation, eroticism and madness, together with the experimental techniques of *Flowers for Hitler* and *Beautiful Losers*, unlike the dominantly early nineteenth-century romanticism of the Montreal Group, are the concerns of post World War Two writing. For Cohen, as for Heller, Burroughs, Grass and Selby, the old rules of religious rationality and romantic idealism exist to be questioned. The last twenty years has seen the codification of a new group of writers whose focus is on the disintegrative vision and it is in their footsteps that Cohen is following. Because this new vision, like that of the Decadents, is an inversion of traditional romantic "myth" and morality, and because it is often presented with the irreverent wit of the new Black Humourists, we might be justified in calling this attitude to experience, Black Romantic.

WITHIN THE WORLD of the contemporary Black Romantic, the disintegrative experience is presented not only through the journey into self but also through the form of the work. Both, in turn, are microcosms of the reductionist cycle of the larger world. The form of *Beautiful Losers* with its disjointed inner monologues interspersed with snippets of history and clippings from comic books is substantially the "cut-up" technique of William Burroughs alternating with one of the stylistic tricks from Sartre's *Nausea* which might be distinguished by the fact that Every Word Begins With A Capital. Both techniques suggest

the merging of values which cannot occur without a breakdown in the structure of the world which they represent. In *Beautiful Losers*, as in Céline's *Journey To The End Of Night*, it is the universe itself which is breaking down, proceeding gradually but inevitably through the process of entropy. Cohen illustrates this process and then attempts to reverse it when the once glorious "F" disintegrates into a smelly old man but then escapes from the novel page (and, incidentally, the human predicament) by metamorphosing himself into a movie of Ray Charles. This is a flippant example, but it is another reminder that the Black Romantic justifies his presentation of disintegration by insisting that the breakdown of the old "false" categories leaves the way open for both reader and author to create new order. In Cohen's work, this justification is more impressive in theory than in practice. Techniques such as Cohen's "pure list" or Burrough's "cut-up" are successful only when there is some direction suggested for the movement beyond recorded disintegration, and it is this larger revelation which is most absent from extended passages of *Beautiful Losers*.

For these reasons, I suspect that Leonard Cohen is more important in Canadian writing for the contemporary movement which he represents than for the intrinsic merit of his work to date. The world of the Black Romantic may not be a particularly pleasant one, but its awareness of the darker side of human consciousness is a helpful counterbalance to a literary tradition that professes an ignorance of the human animal as complete as any of the Pollyanna Glad Books. As early as 1928 we can find A. J. M. Smith insisting: "the Canadian writer must put up a fight for freedom in the choice and treatment of his subject". Suggesting that desperate conditions require desperate remedies, he concludes: "our condition will not improve until we have been thoroughly shocked by the appearance in our midst of a work of art that is both successful and obscene."<sup>4</sup> *Beautiful Losers*, as successful pop-art, may just provide the function Smith has in mind. At the same time, I am sorry to see Cohen join Layton in the role of public educator, because if he does have a future as a serious writer — if he wants one — it is back in the writing of *The Favourite Game* before Cohen, persona, solidified.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> E. K. Brown, "The Problem of A Canadian Poetry," *Masks of Fiction*. Toronto, 1961.
- <sup>2</sup> Cyril Connolly, *The Modern Movement*. London, 1966.
- <sup>3</sup> Alfred Purdy, "Leonard Cohen: A Personal Look," *Canadian Literature* 23 (Winter 1965).
- <sup>4</sup> A. J. M. Smith, "Wanted, Canadian Criticism," *Canadian Forum* 91 (April 1928).