

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 260

Volume 260

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Leonard Cohen

1934-

Canadian poet, novelist, and songwriter.

The following entry provides an overview of Cohen's career through 2008. For additional information on Cohen's life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 3, 38.

INTRODUCTION

Cohen is best known for deeply introspective poems and songs documenting feelings of loss, suffering, and emptiness. Throughout his life, Cohen has charted his psychological turmoil—as well as the wide swings in his popularity and personal fortunes—in autobiographical writings that present his audience with a self-portrait as a literate but decadent romantic sidetracked in his quest for spiritual salvation by women, alcohol, and drugs. Known to many fans as the “Godfather of Gloom,” Cohen currently enjoys widespread recognition. Recent critical retrospectives tend to emphasize his talents as a songwriter, but his lyrics and his poems are almost always discussed interchangeably. Now past the age of seventy, with his famous baritone made gravelly by age, Cohen continues to garner popular support. Furthermore, admiring colleagues and lifelong devotees who made Cohen the most successful Canadian poet and songwriter of the 1960s continue to attend concerts and tributes in his honor in record numbers. In 2003 Cohen was appointed a Companion to the Order of Canada, and on March 10, 2008, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Cohen was born into a middle-class Jewish family in Montreal, Canada. His father, who operated a successful men's clothing store, died when Cohen was only nine years old, and his mother, from whom biographers speculate he inherited his temperament, was plagued by bouts of depression. As an adolescent, Cohen played the piano and clarinet, as well as guitar in a country-folk band. Inspired by the musical messages of Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and other folk singers, Cohen embarked upon a formal study of poetry at McGill University in Montreal. In 1956, while still an undergraduate, Cohen's debut collection of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, was published as the first

book in the McGill Poetry Series. This work was followed in 1961 by a second collection of poetry, *The Spice-Box of Earth*, and in 1963 by the first of his two novels, *The Favourite Game*. Cohen worked and lived throughout much of the early 1960s on the Greek island of Hydra, returning periodically to Canada to earn money by reciting poetry and performing music. Mounting interest in Cohen's poetry, along with a 1965 documentary about his life by the National Film Board of Canada, provided Cohen enough visibility to gain access to a variety of musical venues in the United States. In 1966, when Cohen's friend Judy Collins released her own version of his song “Suzanne”—one of many Cohen songs about unlucky love affairs—Cohen earned almost instant stardom and widespread fame. In 1968, he released his first music album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, for Columbia Records, and also began touring with his band. Increasingly identified with the New York folk-rock scene, Cohen also became notorious as a womanizer, an image fueled by his late-night partying as well as by such songs as “Chelsea Hotel,” which describes his romantic entanglement with Janis Joplin.

Poor reviews of the poetry collection *The Energy of Slaves* (1972), combined with what Cohen described as a “catastrophic” collaboration with record producer Phil Spector for the 1977 album *Death of a Ladies' Man*, resulted in an emotional and artistic decline that culminated in a nervous breakdown. In 1988 Cohen's career rebounded, with the release of the album *I'm Your Man*, which retooled his image into the grand old man of folk, a worldly yet dreamy cynic lamenting the loss of his youth. Still seeking to make order out of the chaos in his life, in 1993 Cohen entered a Buddhist retreat in Mount Baldy, California. He emerged five years later, by all accounts healthier emotionally and less prone to destructive behavior. Cohen's experiences at the monastery are described in poems included in the 2006 collection *Book of Longing*, his first book of new poetry in twenty-two years, much of which has been set to music. Also in 2006, Cohen won a very public lawsuit against his former manager of seventeen years, Kelly Lynch, whom the Los Angeles Superior Court found had stripped him of more than five million dollars, nearly all of his savings. Despite the setback, Cohen's songs exist in renditions by over 1,000 artists, among them Bob Dylan, R.E.M., Nick Cave, Rufus Wainwright, and Bono; his

work has been used in numerous television programs and films, including *West Wing* and *Shrek*; he is the subject of an award-winning 2005 film showcasing a Sydney Opera House tribute in his honor, *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man*; his *Book of Longing* has been well received by critics; and in the spring of 2008, he embarked on a worldwide concert tour.

MAJOR WORKS

Cohen's first two books, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* and *The Spice-Box of Earth*, display the themes and language for which Cohen has come to be best known as a poet. Introspective, sensual, and brooding, these lyric poems explore Judaism, Christianity, and mythology, as well as relationships between religion and sexuality and love and loss. Beginning with the poetry of *Flowers for Hitler* (1964), Cohen's writing became edgier and more confessional, and his psychological torment is here expressed through greater sarcasm and a deep sense of exile. He also began to explore more overtly political themes, such as war, authority, and social justice, and increasingly experimented with form. While his first novel, *The Favourite Game*, was a *bildungsroman* about a Jewish boy from Montreal who discovers the twin pursuits of poetry and sex, his second novel, *Beautiful Losers* (1966), has been described as postmodernist because of its intersecting narratives, distortions of time, use of verse, elements of mysticism, and self-reflexivity. Divided into three sections, *Beautiful Losers* reflects on the relationship among three people: the protagonist, "I," an aging anthropologist obsessed by the massacres of native tribes; his wife, Edith, who has recently committed suicide; and "F," presumably a French separatist, who had been the lover of both "I" and Edith. Although initial critics of the novel considered it excessively profane, later reviewers have judged it in terms of its political themes and formal experimentation. Like *Beautiful Losers*, Cohen's poetry collection *Energy of Slaves* was initially considered deliberately offensive, nihilistic, and antiromantic. With the collections *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978) and *Book of Mercy* (1984), Cohen's poetry returned to a more sensitive depiction of his continuing struggles with love, faith, and alienation.

Cohen's later work as a poet, included in *Book of Longing*, is almost always discussed in conjunction with his musical career, not only because many of the poems have been set to music but also because Cohen has become a subject of adulation in musical circles. Similarly, many commentators share the opinion of reviewer Cynthia Webb, who noted that, in assessing Cohen's musical career, "It is still hard to decide

whether to call him a poet or a singer." The themes of his poetry and lyrics have always overlapped: guilt versus sexual freedom; violence versus beauty; sensuality versus spirituality; discipline and security versus imagination and independence. As evidenced by *Book of Longing*, Cohen remains preoccupied with describing the effects of aging on his love life as well as on his poetic muse. Yet he now appears better equipped to cope with the loss of his youth, describing his obsessive behavior of the past in typically self-deprecating fashion, but with greater openness and humor.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Recent critical assessments of Cohen reflect the difficulty of differentiating between his current work as a poet and his musical career. In a 2006 interview with Terry Gross, Cohen explained that he follows identical composition processes for lyrics and poetry, and critics emphasize the interchangeability of the two. They also note the impossibility of viewing Cohen apart from his status in music: an avuncular poet of pessimism lamenting the excesses of his youth but affirming the persistence of desire and longing, a pillar of folk music adapting to an electronic age with themes that have spoken to generations of new artists. It is as a musician that Cohen is principally known today, owing in part to what Harold Heft has described as the "cult of personality that has formed around him." Cohen's public persona as an aging icon of detached "cool" remains intact: in the film *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man*, he performs his "Tower of Song" in a New York nightclub with the band U2. Furthermore, there has been a spate of attention devoted to his recordings. As Guy Blackman reported in 2005, "His . . . body of work, consisting of just 11 studio albums recorded over five decades, has become the subject of more serious analysis and feverish discussion than virtually anyone bar Bob Dylan." In a review of *Book of Longing*, Barbara Carey summarized the sources of Cohen's continuing appeal: "His new *Book of Longing* is something of a guide to the Tao of Leonard himself, as soulful ladies' man, spiritual seeker and gloomy prophet in a troubled world. . . . There's no denying that Cohen is a star, in part because he's shown an uncanny knack for expressing the changing Zeitgeist."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Let Us Compare Mythologies (poetry) 1956
The Spice-Box of Earth (poetry) 1961
The Favourite Game (novel) 1963

Flowers for Hitler (poetry) 1964
Beautiful Losers (novel) 1966
Parasites of Heaven (poetry) 1966
Songs of Leonard Cohen (songs) 1968
Selected Poems, 1956-1968 (poetry) 1969
Songs from a Room (songs) 1969
The Energy of Slaves (poetry) 1972
Songs of Love and Hate (songs) 1973
New Skins for the Old Ceremony (songs) 1974
Death of a Ladies' Man (songs) 1977
Death of a Lady's Man (poetry) 1978
Recent Songs (songs) 1979
Book of Mercy (poetry) 1984
Various Positions (songs) 1984
I'm Your Man (songs) 1988
The Future (songs) 1992
Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Essays (poetry, prose, and songs) 1993
Ten New Songs (songs) 2001
Dear Heather (songs) 2004
Book of Longing (poetry, prose, and sketches) 2006
Book of Longing [with Philip Glass] (songs) 2007

CRITICISM

Frank Davey (essay date winter 1999)

SOURCE: Davey, Frank. "Beautiful Losers: Leonard Cohen's Postcolonial Novel." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, no. 69 (winter 1999): 12-23.

[In the essay below, Davey studies *Beautiful Losers* within the context of the Quebec nationalism movement of the 1960s.]

It is not merely because I am French. . . .

—*Beautiful Losers* (186)

Interpreters of *Beautiful Losers* have offered little comment about its Quebec setting or the cultural context of its characterizations. They have focused on the novel's critiques of history and material ambition and on the apparent transcending of time, cultural specificity, and identity that occurs in its closing pages. What is transcended has, in these interpretations, remained largely generic—"history" rather than particular histories, "style" rather than particular styles, "systems" rather than the instances—Catholicism, commerce, the nation-state—offered by the novel. *Beautiful Losers* encourages such readings through its telescoping of specificities, such as its blurring of Catherine Tekakwitha, Edith, and Mary Voolnd, and

the blonde housewife who drives the Oldsmobile in Book Three, into transcendent woman or Isis (183, 235), or its blurring of charismatic sexual abstinence and obsessive sexual excess into a general figure of self-martyrdom. It encourages them as well through its obscuring of the histories of its characters, giving the reader a single "History of Them All" rather than individual, teleological histories. Thus, it offers two male characters who have become known to Cohen criticism only as F. and I., and whose identities bleed into each other in the novel's third section, and female characters whose most significant attributes may indeed be those they share with a Roman goddess. It also offers, as Douglas Barbour has noted (139), vague and somewhat inconsistent chronologies that make it difficult to sort out the ages of characters during specific events, their ages at their deaths, or even their ages relative to each other.

Yet despite the various thematic elements that emphasize generality, diffusion, and transcendence, *Beautiful Losers* is also closely tied to history—specifically located in time and place, in terms of both its writing and publishing history and its setting. It is very much an English-language novel of the 1960s, locatable in that decade's Anglo-American economy of mysticism within which the financial successes of Timothy Leary's and Carlos Castaneda's writings, the Mystic Arts Book Club, the Beatles' album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and the Broadway musical *Hair* also occurred. Michael Ondaatje, reading *Beautiful Losers* in the late 1960s, could approvingly locate it within a number of 1960s discourses: Norman O. Brown's sexual mysticism, Michael McClure's "beast" language, and the repetitive narratives of Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. The critical history of the novel has also been tied closely to the 1960s and 1970s—being composed substantially of chapters in Ondaatje's 1970 monograph *Leonard Cohen*, Patricia Morley's 1972 study *The Immoral Moralists*, Stephen Scobie's 1978 monograph, and Linda Hutcheon's 1980 monograph and of reviews and articles in Michael Gnarowski's 1976 collection *Leonard Cohen: The Artist and His Critics*.

As well, *Beautiful Losers* is unambiguously tied to francophone Montreal of the 1960s—the Montreal of rival francophone nationalist groups and of bomb attacks on mailboxes and statues and other symbols of Canadian federalism, the Montreal that in 1966, the year of the novel's publication, saw bomber Paul Joseph Chartier travel to Ottawa and accidentally blow himself up in a parliamentary washroom and in 1968 saw a separatist cell kidnap and murder Quebec labour minister Pierre Laporte. "Tonight I will blow that symbol [a statue of Queen Victoria] to smithereens—

and myself with it," F. declares (135). However, apart from *New York Times* reviewer Lawrence M. Bensky, who identified F. as "a French separatist politician" and I. as a Jewish scholar (27), few critics have defied the novel's devaluing of individual identity to inquire into the language and ethnicity of F., I., or Edith, or defied its disregard for the conventions of realism to ask what it implies about 1960s francophone Montreal culture, or even asked in what language or languages F. and I. converse.

* * *

Prayer is translation.

—*Beautiful Losers* (56)

Because *Beautiful Losers* is written in English, and almost all of its conversations are rendered in English, it is very easy—but perhaps not wise—to forget that its major characters—F., Edith, and perhaps even I.—are likely not native English speakers. The English language of *Beautiful Losers* is in many passages merely a convention for representing speech in another language. Catherine Tekakwitha and the priest P. Jacques de Lamberville, for example, would likely have spoken an Aboriginal language to each other, and possibly some French, but in Book One, section 37, their conversation is presented in English. Catherine's aunts in Book One, section 16, would have spoken in their Aboriginal language, but again their speech is represented in English. At the separatist rally in Parc Lafontaine in Book One, section 47, the young filmmaker who addresses the crowd is undoubtedly speaking in French even though the novel represents his speech in English while rendering many of the crowd's responses in French ("Bravo! Mon pays malheureux! Québec Libre!") (119). This disguising of languages and the quick movement from one to the other in the novel's narrative discourse might make a reader wary of assuming that any character is anglophone merely because he or she appears to be speaking in English or that a passage is to be understood as having been written by a character in English merely because it appears in that language in the novel.

"A Long Letter from F.," for example, part 2 of the novel, is readable as a French text, one that is presented to the reader in English through the same novelistic convention that presents the Aboriginal speech of Catherine's aunts as English. There is overwhelming evidence in the novel that F. is francophone. He identifies himself in this letter as Québécois: "It is not merely because I am French that I long for an independent Quebec. . . . [T]he English did to us what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us" (186). The separatists at the rally recognize F. not only as one of

them but also as one of their heroes—as a "patriot" because of his opposition to conscription while serving as a Member of Parliament in 1944. This epithet links him to Québécois history by associating him with Louis-Joseph Papineau and his supporters of the 1837 rebellion. It links him as well with the folk history of francophone Quebec, in which the image of a *patriote* with his musket would become the logo for the FLQ's communiqués in 1970, and the green, white, and red flag of the *patriotes* would become the cover of Léandre Bergeron's 1971 *Petit manuel d'histoire du Québec*. F. further characterizes himself as ethnically Québécois and politically separatist when he announces his plans to destroy by means of a suicide bomb a bronze statue of Queen Victoria: "The Revolution needs a little blood. . . . [The queen's] advisors in London must be made to understand that our dignity is fed with the same food as anyone's . . ." (134).

In addition, there is strong evidence in the novel that F. and I. grew up together in the same linguistic environment. I. notes that he and F. "lived on the same street, . . . went to school together, . . . were in the same class" (19). In section 29, he recalls them at age thirteen being in an orphanage together, where they began their intermittent homosexual dalliance. The orphanage appears to have been operated in downtown Montreal by Jesuit priests: "Homage to my teachers in the orphanage of downtown Montréal who smelled of semen and incense" (99-100). F. and I. undoubtedly share a background in Roman Catholicism. In a passage that echoes Zola's "J'accuse" defence of Dreyfus, I. accuses the Catholic Church of various offences against both him and others:

I accuse the Roman Catholic Church of Québec of ruining my sex life and of shoving my member up a relic box meant for a finger, I accuse the R.C.C. of Q. of making me commit queer horrible acts with F., another victim of the system, I accuse the Church of killing Indians, I accuse the Church of refusing to let Edith go down on me properly, I accuse the Church of covering Edith in red grease and of depriving Catherine Tekakwitha of red grease, I accuse the Church of haunting automobiles and causing pimples, I accuse the Church of building green masturbation toilets, I accuse the Church of squashing Mohawk dances and of not collecting folk songs, I accuse the Church of stealing my sun tan and of promoting dandruff. . . .

(47)

I. certainly seems to be obsessed here and elsewhere with the Catholic Church. If I. is the "Jewish scholar" that Bensky thought him to be (and I can find no evidence that he is), then he seems unlikely to be more than an ethnic Jew, brought up in the Catholic faith, and educated in French. He makes no similar comments about the Jewish faith (it is F. who recommends being a "New Jew" [161]), but he has made an

emotional preoccupation with the Mohawk Christian mystic Catherine Tekakwitha, who would be beatified by the Church in 1970, into a consuming "scholarly" interest.

Whether I. was born a francophone, however, is ambiguous. At the separatist political rally, he is able to pass as a francophone until he becomes hysterically anxious about his unconsummated sexual encounter with a woman in the crowd. It appears to be his behaviour, not his language, that suddenly marks him as different. Some of the francophones in the crowd are perplexed by him and suggest identities that might explain him: "He looks English." "He looks Jewish." "This man is a sex pervert" (122). If a reader assumes that I. is capable here of passing as a Québécois francophone, then the crowd's speculations become a caricature of 1960s Québécois nationalists as comical but dangerous bigots who are unable to associate deviance with one of their own. If the behaviour of I. is aberrant, then apparently he cannot be, in the crowd's eyes, anything but an ethnic other, Jewish or English, whatever his French accent. Then F. appears and convinces the gathering that I. has the appropriate "pedigree" (123)—a word that adds to the passage's satirical and historicizing potential.

On the other hand, when planning to begin a chapter on Quebec Indians by turning off the light and writing "Triompher du mal par le bien," I. appears to characterize himself as nonfrancophone. "St. Paul," he comments. "That will begin the chapter. I feel better already. Foreign languages are a good corset" (64). Here it appears that for I. French is a foreign language and that he does his own writing in English. In the novel's third section, however, where I. and F. ostensibly blur together into a single "old man," their language may be French. As at Parc Lafontaine, the drama and diction of the shouts and exchanges at the Main Shooting and Game Alley indicate the scene's language to be mostly French and its politics to be *indépendantiste* versus federalist: "Isn't he the Terrorist Leader that escaped tonight? . . . He stays! He's a Patriot! . . . He's very nearly the President of our country" (239).

Edith, the wife of I., also an orphan (59), is almost certainly both Catholic—as the "J'accuse" passage suggests—and francophone. She spent her childhood in a French-speaking Quebec mining town on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. At age thirteen, according to I., she was raped by four Québécois men: "These men had watched her for years. French-Canadian schoolbooks do not encourage respect for the Indians. Some part of the Canadian Catholic mind is not certain of the Church's victory over the Medicine Man" (58). In his characterization of these

men, I. implicates both their ethnicity and their religion in the crime: "the Canadian Catholic mind." Later he suggests that the crime occurred because news of Edith's difference—her "freakishly long nipples"—"had inflamed the root of the whole town" (59), had made "every single person . . . secretly obsessed with this nipple information. The Mass is undermined with nipple dream": "I believe that in some way the village delegated these four men to pursue Edith into the forest. Get Edith! commanded the Collective Will. Get her magic nipples off Our Mind!" (60). Her cries for help, rendered by the novel in English, are plausibly uttered in French and are openly Catholic in character: "—Help me, Mother Mary!" (60), and "—Help me, Saint Kateri!" (61).

* * *

I guess I owe you all an apology.

—*Beautiful Losers* (98)

Some of the most historicizing aspects of this novel that have often been read as attempts to discredit history are the particular qualities of F.'s Quebec nationalism—its affinities both with *indépendantiste* thought of the 1960s and with postcolonial theory of the 1960s and 1970s. Both echoes of Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and premonitions of Pierre Vallières's *Nègres blancs de l'Amérique* (1968) and Michele Lalonde's "Speak White" (1968) can be heard in pronouncements by F. such as that the crowd of *indépendantistes* is "beautiful" "Because they think they are Negroes, and that is the best feeling a man can have in this century" (118). F.'s use of the Negro figure of abjection, however, is sharply different from its use by Vallières and Lalonde, and its general use in *indépendantiste* discourse, and constitutes an unmistakable criticism of them. For Vallières and Lalonde, "Negro" is a means of stirring up indignation and is implicitly racist, as in "How dare anyone treat a white population as mere blacks?" For F., as for Cohen's novel generally, race is one more category to be transcended, along with genital sexuality, bourgeois family structure, and the nation-state.

As racially marked Aboriginal women, both Catherine and Edith are linked by the novel to the Negro figure and arguably constitute its symbolic blacks. Like the Negro, and like the protesting Québécois, they are both subjected and abjected, victims in a daisy chain of imperialist oppression. F. writes that

The English did to us what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us. I demanded revenge for everyone. I saw cities burning, I saw movies falling into blackness, I saw the maize on fire. I saw the Jesuits punished. I saw the trees taking back the long-house roofs. I saw the shy

deer murdering to get their dresses back. I saw the Indians punished. I saw chaos eat the gold roof of Parliament. . . .

(187)

The stain that spreads from the glass of wine that Catherine spills at the intendant's banquet, and at which she looks "frozen with shame" (97), is a double symbol: both the stain of imperialism unveiled—"the imperial hue" (98)—and the stain of race, of negritude, which the imperial glass has been unable to contain. Her baptism—itsself a breach of an arbitrary boundary between "white" and "coloured"—has led to her invitation to the banquet, where her mishap with the wine at once reveals the totalizing force of the imperial project and announces her irreducible racial difference. "A beautiful lady gave out a cry of pain as her fine hand turned purple. A total chromatic metamorphosis took place in a matter of minutes. Wails and oaths resounded through the purple hall as faces, clothes, tapestries, and furniture displayed the same deep shade" (98). At another extreme, Edith and her "A—" tribe are the most abjected of North American Native people, the tribe that never wins a battle, whose women can never achieve orgasm, whose numbers always decline. The novel's juxtaposition of these two women with the imperialist founders of New France and their *indépendantiste* successors strongly undercuts the latter's claims of abjection and negritude. Concurrently, F.'s celebration of abjection as a means of transcending difference and category operates to condemn Quebec nationalism as merely a way of reinstating oppression in the form of different oppressors—oppressions dramatized by the novel in Edith's rape and in the *indépendantistes*' threats at Parc Lafontaine to assault I. because he may be a Jew.

* * *

Down with genital imperialism.

—*Beautiful Losers* (32)

The kind of Quebec nationalism espoused by F. and by the novel thus has much more in common with the psychological theories popularized in the 1960s by Wilhelm Reich and Norman O. Brown than it does with the programs of francophone nationalists who demonstrated in Parc Lafontaine in this period, and curiously it has a great deal in common with the post-colonial psychology of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari of the following decade. The political theories of Cohen's F., like those of Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipe* (1972) and *Mille Plateaux* (1980), are constructed on a critique of genitally restricted sexuality and of capitalist exploitation of desire. The most significant politics of the Parc Lafontaine rally for Cohen's novel reside not in the speaker's xenophobic

exhortations but in the crowd's sense of shared and anonymous sexual excitement. The novel's deterritorialization of the body, through the assumption that "All parts of the body are erotogenic" (27-28), that "All flesh can come" (32), leads ultimately to the deterritorialization of the nation-state and the would-be nation-state. The tribe of "New Jews" that F. dreams of joining, along with I. and Edith, "dissolves history and ritual by accepting unconditionally the complete package. . . . [The New Jew] travels without passports. . . ." (161). Similarly, the erotics of Catherine Tekakwitha's conversion sweep aside, as in the tide of red wine that she spills, the categorizing pretensions and condescensions of imperial France. F.'s desire to "slip out of history" (163), with its wars, rebellions, massacres, memories, vendettas, and triumphs, is, like most of his desires, a wish to slip out of categories that deprive the subject of everything they exclude and to gain access to what the merged old man of the novel's conclusion promises, "a vision of All Chances at Once" (242).

* * *

How can I begin anything new with all of yesterday in me?

—*Beautiful Losers* (38)

What I am suggesting, then, is that *Beautiful Losers* can be read as a strong response to francophone Quebec nationalism of the 1960s, especially to its "je me souviens" appeals to history, from the defeat on the Plains of Abraham to the crushing of the patriots' revolt in 1837. Its portrait of F. is of a political thinker who evolves from a narrowly nationalist and anticonscription position when he is elected to Parliament in the 1940s to a position that envisions deterritorialization of both the body and politics—a position in which he can understand and sympathize with the sovereignist rhetoric of the Parc Lafontaine speaker but can imagine a world without its boundaries or sovereignties. In part 3 of *Beautiful Losers*, where the "connect nothing" dictum of F. appears to be achieved (16), there can be no stable ethnic or cultural identities.

In contrast, the Québécois nationalist crowd in the park, and the speaker addressing it, represent the antithesis of F.'s advice to I. that he should shed his "final burden: the useless History under which you suffer in such confusion" (188). "Give us back our History!" the crowd shouts. "The English have stolen our History!" (118). "In 1964 . . . History commands that the English surrender this land" (118-19), the speaker replies, and he goes on to "burden" them with more of the weight of "yesterday": "—Yesterday it was the Turn of the English to have French maids from our villages in Gaspé. Yesterday it was the Turn of the French to have Aristotle and bad teeth" (119-20).

Interestingly, the narrator I. is positioned from the beginning of the novel both inside and outside francophone cultural consciousness. Arguably both francophone and anglophone, and thus more orphaned than F., perhaps able to pass for either, he literally becomes a conjunction by the third part of the novel—Barbour argues for the conjunction I. + F. (137)—of the francophone F. and his own ambiguous I. identity. In such an approach to the novel, one could read Edith's suicide as a transitional moment in the evolutions of F. and I.—a moment in which her body is still a site of imperialist contentions between them, as the accusations that I. makes on the evening of her death indicate: "You lousy fucker, I said, how many times [did F. sleep with Edith], five or six?" (7).¹

In such a reading, it is possible to put special emphasis on the orphanhood in which I. and F. begin their lives. Orphanhood in *Beautiful Losers* is positively portrayed and contrasts sharply with the emphasis on genealogy in Québécois culture and on the *veille souche Québécoisité* implicit in the angry comments of the crowd in Parc Lafontaine. Orphanhood disconnects the subject from both family and community history and destabilizes personal identity, adding yet another layer of uncertainty to questions such as mine here about the linguistic communities to which F. and I. belong. Orphanhood removes historical depth from an individual life and gives additional meaning to propositions such as F.'s "We've got to learn to stop bravely at the surface" (4). It offers the possibility of liberty—of the end of patriarchal lines of descent that underpin nationalism. Even as the speaker at Parc Lafontaine is invoking the old patriarchal family of blood and history—"From the earliest dawn of our race, this Blood, this shadowy stream of life, has been our nourishment and our destiny. Blood is the builder of the body, and Blood is the source of the spirit of the race. In Blood lurks our ancestral inheritance . . ." (121)—I. is glimpsing a new "family" beyond patriarchy and beyond the ethnic excitement that he amusingly, and dangerously, misreads as sexual excitement: "We began our rhythmical movements which responded to the very breathing of the mob, which was our family and the incubator of our desire. . . . [A]nd I knew that all of us, not just the girl and me, all of us were going to come together" (120-21). When the crowd suddenly dissolves, I. is again the orphan—until F. can invent a historicized identity for him, a "pedigree"—and is unconcerned about the particulars of Quebec history that still inflame the crowd.

Implicit here and throughout a novel titled *Beautiful Losers* is a sharp critique of the Québécois nationalist discourse of humiliation—the discourse that seeks redress because of past defeats and ongoing constructions of embarrassment. If—as the novel implies—

there is beauty in being a loser, or in imagining oneself a Negro, burden and constipation in remaining tied to history, and anguish in imagining oneself humiliated because one's wife has slept with a friend, then the francophone nationalists of Parc Lafontaine appear to embrace mostly constipation and anguish.

* * *

Spring comes into Quebec from Japan. . . .

—*Beautiful Losers* (245)

The final day of *Beautiful Losers*, the day on which I. descends from his treehouse and the marvellous merging of I. and F. occurs, is—according to the novel—Quebec's one day of spring, a day of deterritorialization and miscegenation, a day on which global currents pass through the province and transform it:

Spring comes into Quebec from the west. It is the warm Japanese current that brings the change of season. . . .

Spring comes into Montreal like an American movie of Riviera Romance, and suddenly everyone has to sleep with a foreigner. . . .

Spring passes through our midst like a Swedish tourist co-ed visiting an Italian restaurant for mustache experience. . . .

(229-30)

Spring, one might say, is a remote cultural possibility, like the events of its day—I. coming from his treehouse without desire or need for food and without memory, having his comical sexual encounter with the half-naked Isis/Edith/Catherine in her Oldsmobile, and creating an apocalyptic moment: "the first night of spring, the night of small religions" (241)—for the assorted *indépendantiste* and anti-*indépendantiste* at the Main Shooting and Game Alley. The movement toward this "All Chances at Once" begins in the border-transcending imagery of springtime and culminates in the avoidance of a "sordid political riot" over Quebec separatism as I. + F., the "old man," turns himself inside-out to become a sky-sized movie of Ray Charles.

This spring day is undoubtedly a day when magic is afoot and when most of the desires of the novel—that I. absorb F. and his teachings, that the petty ambitions of the flesh be transcended, that distinctions between diamonds and excrement be erased—are achieved. Notably, though, what is specifically transcended in this episode is Quebec's ongoing federalist-*indépendantiste* argument, which Cohen locates again in the *indépendantiste* figure that he establishes early in the novel in the person of F. That is, the day of celebratory Montreal harmony with which *Beautiful Los-*

ers concludes begins in a near riot between federalists and francophone separatists over the identity of Cohen's old man:

Twenty men were swarming towards him, half to expel the disgusting intruder, half to restrain the expulsionists and consequently to boost the noble heap on their shoulders. . . . For the first time in their lives, twenty men experienced the delicious certainty that they were at the very center of action, no matter which side. A cry of happiness escaped from each man as he closed in on his object.

(239-40)

This is not a political ending, of course, for its action takes place outside time, in miracle, at "the point of Clear Light" where the future streams through the hourglass moment of the old man's transformation, "going both ways" (241). But it is an ending that addresses, and mocks, a specific political question, Quebec separatism, and the Frenchness and *québécoisité* of F.—particulars in which F. urges his friend early in the novel not to get "lost" (27). It is an ending that addresses, through miscegenation and through de-territorialization of the racialized body, racial and ethnic conflicts, English-French, European-Aboriginal, Canadian-American, that have been prominent throughout the novel. Perhaps by this point in the narrative, F. signifies not only a mad guru but also "*français*," even "French Canadian." Perhaps I. is any English Canadian reader. Perhaps the old man, Barbour's "IF," is a possibility beyond not only culture and time but also Quebec ethnic and racial conflict. If so, then he is also a cynical political comment on Canada's repetitive francophone Quebec question.

Note

1. Edith's death is also, of course, interpretable as a profoundly sexist moment in which the woman's death facilitates the spiritual journeys of her two lovers. However, in a novel that appears to regard death as a transcending of the ordinary boundaries of the human body and human politics, and that visibly resurrects one of its ostensibly dead characters, F., and quite possibly Edith herself in the form of part 3's blonde housewife (234), it is perhaps perverse to get exercised about the deaths of any of its characters, including Edith.

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Peter Wilkins (essay date winter 1999)

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[In this essay, Wilkins examines the political overtones of *Beautiful Losers* in terms of the conflicting responses of the characters "I." and "F." to victimization and loss.]

This essay pursues Linda Hutcheon's claim that Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* allegorizes Canada's historical-political situation:

That central bizarre triangle of symbolically orphaned characters . . . allegorically acts out . . . the history and political destiny of the Canadian nation: of its successive conquests (mirrored in the deaths of the Indian, Edith, and then of the Frenchman, F.) and perhaps also its future fate (turning into an American fiction).

("Caveat Lector" 28-29)

According to Hutcheon's logic, the two first-person narrators of the novel—an unnamed anglophone, perhaps Jewish, historian; and a Québécois revolutionary known only as F.—represent the two dominant, conflicting "national" positions in Canada, while the historian's wife, Edith, and Catherine Tekakwitha represent the First Nations people displaced by the European colonizers.¹ The Canadian situation that *Beautiful Losers* represents is one of victimization, in which the anglophone and francophone positions are double edged. As F., the Québécois narrator, puts it, "The English did to us what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us" (199). Anglophones and francophones, according to this logic, are both victims and oppressors, while the Indians are simply victims and the Americans are simply oppressors. But as the allegorical examples of the historian and F. make clear, anglophones and francophones recognize themselves only as victims and not as oppressors. Behind the apparent opposition between the historian and F., anglophone and francophone, though, lies the "truth" of *Beautiful Losers*: however different they appear, these two figures are bound by their double-edged positions as oppressors and victims and the relationship to loss that these positions entail. In response to this dilemma, *Beautiful Losers* proposes an ethical way to deal with loss that breaks out of the oppressor/victim deadlock: instead of dwelling on our own loss, we must recognize loss