Poetry

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Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 109

Michelle Lee
Project Editor

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" In *Interpreting Blake,* edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism.* Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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Leonard Cohen
1934-

Canadian poet, novelist, and songwriter.

INTRODUCTION

A popular poet and performer whose career has spanned more than fifty years, Cohen is known for pessimistic, gloomy lyrics that deal with religion, sexuality, and unhappy relationships. Known more for his music than his poetry, critics have often commented on the impossibility of separating the two facets of Cohen's career, and he himself has noted that the process he employs for writing poetry is identical to the one he uses to compose lyrics.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Cohen was born September 21, 1934, in Montreal, Quebec, into a middle-class Jewish family. His parents were Marsha Klinitsky Cohen, a nurse, and Nathan B. Cohen, the owner of a clothing store. His father died when Cohen was only nine years old, but he provided his son with a trust fund that, although modest, enabled Cohen as a young adult to pursue his literary and artistic ambitions. In his teen years, Cohen played piano, clarinet, and guitar and was part of a country-folk band known as the Buckskin Boys. He attended Herzliah High School and McGill University in Montreal, where he studied poetry. He graduated in 1955, spent one term in law school at McGill, followed by a year of study at Columbia University in 1956-57. During the early 1960s, Cohen spent most of his time on the Greek island of Hydra, although when he needed money, he would return to Canada to give poetry readings and musical performances. In 1965, the National Film Board of Canada produced a documentary on his life, increasing his visibility and provoking interest in his work in both Canada and the United States. Gaining recognition for his music as well as his poetry, Cohen began touring with his band and released his first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen,* in 1968. He became notorious within the New York folk-rock community for self-destructive behavior involving alcohol and drugs, and for his reputation as a womanizer. His poetry began to suffer and in the late 1970s, Cohen suffered a nervous collapse. He did not recover professionally until the late 1980s with the release of his album *I'm Your Man.* In 1993, he entered a California Buddhist monastery where he remained for five years, apparently healthier both physically and emotionally when he emerged. He has continued to produce poetry and music and is today considered a pop icon, particularly in the world of music. In 2009, at the age of seventy-five, Cohen embarked on an extensive world tour.

MAJOR WORKS

Cohen published his first poetry collection, *Let Us Compare Mythologies,* in 1956 while still an undergraduate at McGill. It was followed by *The Spice-Box of Earth* in 1961. Both deal with the poet's thoughts on mythology and religion—both Christianity and Judaism—and their relationship to sexuality. His work became more political with the publication of *Flowers for Hitler* in 1964. Four years later, Cohen produced the highly acclaimed collection of his music, *Songs of Leonard Cohen.* Another book of poetry, *The Energy of Slaves* (1972), written during the time he was performing as a folk-rock musician, received very poor reviews, which precipitated the poet's emotional decline in the late 1970s. In 1978, he published *Death of a Lady's Man,* which features a dialogue between opposing points of view, described by Bruce Meyer and Brian O'Riordan as "a semi-climax in Cohen's poetic career, a moot-court where the inner tensions of the poet's persona are finally put to rest." Most of Cohen's energies from that point on were channeled into the production of music, and he published several collections of song lyrics over the next several years. The primary exception was the 1984 poetry volume *Book of Mercy,* an apparent attempt to reconcile Jewish and Christian mythologies. In 2006, Cohen published *Book of Longing,* containing poems based on his experience in the Buddhist retreat, and a year later collaborated with composer Philip Glass to set the lyrics of the book to music—also under the title *Book of Longing.*

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Cohen has been lauded for the diversity of his artistic endeavors and is today considered by many to be an iconic figure, particularly as a songwriter and musician. Over the course of his lengthy career—beginning with the publication of his first book in 1956 leading up to his current performance tour—he has attracted what

many critics consider a cult following. Brian D. Johnson refers to Cohen as the Canadian answer to Bob Dylan, "a prophetic troubadour with an unlikely voice and a self-made persona." According to Johnson, "like Dylan, Cohen has found a new authority as a sage staring down the white tunnel." Stephen Scobie suggests that this "image of the romantic Leonard Cohen, brooding over his tortured soul with a succession of blonde young women on his arm" has now become inseparable from Cohen's work. Michael Q. Abraham considers Cohen "an enigmatic figure" based on the diversity exhibited in his work, as he moves "determinedly from poetry to prose to music," and achieves "national prominence in all three . . . allowing him to weave various and changing personae around himself."

Many critics have explored the themes related to religion and mythology that run throughout Cohen's poetry and prose. Meyer and O'Riordan contend that his poetry and novels exhibit a "transcendent quality," which Cohen achieves by "[relying] heavily on the tone and language of Judaeo-Christian mythology." Desmond Pacey reports that in Cohen's first volume of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies,* "the quest for a lost or unknown God, mysterious, elusive, but compelling" appears, and it is a theme that repeats in most of Cohen's work. Abraham suggests that "Cohen's enigmatic inheritance" is "an almost genetic attachment to religion coupled with the grim knowledge that recent events [the Holocaust] have crippled its reliability." It is perhaps for this reason that Sandra Djwa finds that Cohen's poetry often concerns itself with a "descent into evil" that is apparently both frightening and exhilarating, but which will result in the creation of art. Djwa, however, contends that Cohen's poetry is "often too derivative to be impressive" and that "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." Cohen has been heavily influenced by Baudelaire, as well as Rimbaud, according to Scobie, and Abraham reports that another critic has associated Cohen with such diverse influences as James Joyce and Mickey Spillane. Abraham, however, has studied the influence of A. M. Klein and Irving Layton on Cohen's work, and makes a case for both, concluding that "it is in Cohen's agonized struggle to fuse the influences of two of his literary mentors [Klein and Layton] that the impetus for much of his early poetry can be found." Norman Ravvin, however, suggests that the direct line of influence from Klein to Layton to Cohen, while popular among critics, "is not borne out by the facts."

The single volume of poetry that has received the most critical attention is *Flowers for Hitler,* considered by most critics to be Cohen's departure from the concerns of his earlier work. Pacey claims that its significance "lies in its strenuous effort to broaden and deepen and objectify its author's interests and sympathies." Meyer and O'Riordan point out that *Flowers for Hitler* also represents a departure from literary and mythological sources and is much more heavily influenced by pop culture references. Sandra Wynands also notes that "in its stance against conventional aesthetics, *Flowers for Hitler* takes a stand against formally 'good' poems," and she contends that the "lack of form" is effective in driving home the point that Cohen is trying to make. His point, according to Wynands, is "that as a poet he can do nothing to make the ugly reality more bearable or digestible. All he can do is make the facts speak for themselves in a language exceedingly sparse." Laurenz Volkmann has also written about *Flowers for Hitler,* commenting on Cohen's use of black humor, which the critic acknowledges creates poems that "are always positioned on a thin line between the tasteless or inadequate and the shocking and unsettling." Volkmann, however, contends that Cohen's representation of the Holocaust succeeds: "Revelling in the fantastic, macabre, and grotesque, the poems are interlaced with traces of the Holocaust as the ultimate proof of the ubiquity of evil."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Let Us Compare Mythologies 1956
The Spice-Box of Earth 1961
Flowers for Hitler 1964
Parasites of Heaven 1966
Songs of Leonard Cohen (songs) 1968
Selected Poems, 1956-1968 1969
Songs from a Room (songs) 1969
The Energy of Slaves 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 1978
Recent Songs (songs) 1979
Book of Mercy 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
Dance Me to the End of Love [with Henrí Matisse] (poetry and art) 2006

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Book of Longing [with Philip Glass] (songs) 2007
The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen 2009

Other Major Works

The Favourite Game (novel) 1963
Beautiful Losers (novel) 1966

CRITICISM

Desmond Pacey (essay date autumn 1967)

SOURCE: Pacey, Desmond. "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen." *Canadian Literature* 34 (autumn 1967): 5-23.

[*In the following essay, Pacey demonstrates how careful attention to the themes developed in Cohen's first three volumes of poetry, as well as in the novel* The Favorite Game, *leads to a greater understanding of and appreciation for Cohen's second novel,* Beautiful Loser, *which Pacey believes is Cohen's most impressive single achievement.*]

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 empnasis 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 explo-

sion" 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 windowsill and watches the sun ignite the Hudson. It is no longer the garbage river, catchall 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 piggyback." 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 derivativeness has been levelled at *Beautiful Losers,* and that it has been compared (very vaguely, as is the safe way) to the writing of Sartre, Gênet, 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 purgation 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 burnst 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

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