

Flesh and Spirit in the Writings of Leonard Cohen

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by

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Let my beloved come to his garden,
and eat its choicest fruits.

My beloved put his hand to the latch,
and my heart was thrilled within
me.

I arose to open to my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with liquid myrrh,
upon the handles of the bolt.

Song of Solomon

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List of Abbreviated Titles and Editions
Used in References

(Since the original editions of The Favourite Game and Beautiful Losers are no longer in print, I have used reprints of these two volumes.)

- CM ----- Let Us Compare Mythologies. McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1966.
- SB ----- The Spice-Box of Earth. McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1968.
- FG ----- The Favorite Game. Avon Books, New York, 1967.
- FH ----- Flowers for Hitler. McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1966.
- BL ----- Beautiful Losers. The Viking Press, Inc., New York, 1966.
- PH ----- Parasites of Heaven. McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1966.
- SP ----- Selected Poems 1956-1968. McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1968.

An Abstract of
Flesh and Spirit in the Writings of Leonard Cohen

by Richard J. Knelsen

Leonard Cohen grew up in the Jewish tradition and derived from it many of his images which provide an atmosphere of spiritual seriousness throughout his works and permeate the persistent quest for the fulfilment of both the spirit and the flesh that his works embody.

Contrary to many reviewers and promoters of his work I shall maintain, in this thesis, that Cohen is a serious artist and not merely seeking to "con" his audience with sensational exploitation of religion and sex.

In Let Us Compare Mythologies Cohen explores and weighs various mythologies and generally finds them wanting, except for a few seeds which mature in the later works. The most prominent of these seeds lies in the image of the Baal Shem, taken from eighteenth century Jewish Hasidism, appearing in Cohen's work in both The Spice-Box of Earth and The Favourite Game. A comparison of basic Hasidic concepts with Cohen's reveals many similar emphases, particularly the love of life and the hallowing of the everyday. The incipient cynicism of the first collection of poetry, Let Us Compare Mythologies, is superseded in the next two books by new positive values.

In Flowers for Hitler this cynicism again emerges, but not with sufficient strength to strangle the values affirmed in The Spice-Box of Earth and The Favourite Game. There is still evidence of the "energy of love" to connect people in a liberating and hallowing manner.

This "energy of love" becomes of central concern in Beautiful Losers, Parasites of Heaven, the later poetry of Selected Poems and the two long play recordings. In these works Cohen reveals a "sainthood" consisting of total submission of the total being to a consciousness that overflows the "reducing valve of brain," in Aldous Huxley's terms; a sainthood that renders life here and now of such exquisite meaning that the saint need search no further for the meaning of life. Life is its own meaning.

Chapter I

Introduction

During the past thirteen years, from the publication of his first volume of poetry in 1956 to the recent appearance of his second recording, Leonard Cohen has become an internationally known poet, novelist, song writer and singer. His works offer the reader an affirmative passion for life while at the same time recognizing and appreciating human suffering.

Alongside the enthusiastic reception of his work, particularly by the younger generation, some disgusted reviewers are convinced that there is nothing in Cohen but an appeal to the reader's delight in sensationalism. Although most reviewers agree that there are excellent poems, lines and images in the various volumes, few see any substantial unifying force that holds the body of his work together. Of course there are exceptions to this general view, including Professor Wynne Francis and Dean Desmond Pacey. In naming Leonard Cohen a "phenomenon," Dr. Pacey claims that he is "motivated by the quantity, quality and variety of [Cohen's] achievement."¹ He continues, in the same essay, to delineate what he sees as the unity of the body of Cohen's work culminating in

¹ "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen," Canadian Literature, XXXIV (Autumn, 1967), 5.

Beautiful Losers. Miss Francis alludes to her view of this unity in a review of Parasites of Heaven: "I remain convinced on the whole that he is engaged in a deeply serious spiritual search."²

Cohen himself claims not to be hurt by the adverse reviews his books have received. When interviewed by Michael Harris for the June, 1969, issue of Saturday Night he stated the reason for his calm acceptance of reviews as follows:

Interviewer: What did you think of the various reviews of it [BL] ? Does it upset you when somebody says something badly against you?

Cohen: No.

Interviewer: It doesn't matter?

Cohen: No, in all honesty, I don't think I've ever been hurt by a review.

Interviewer: Why not?

Cohen: Up to the past year or two I never received a good review.

Interviewer: Really? Not even for The Favorite Game?

Cohen: Oh no, on a certain level they were all right,³ but nobody ever came out and said it was great.³

Whatever the precise reason for his apparent unconcern with reviews, the attitude also applies to such critical

² Tamarack Review, XLIII (Spring, 1967), 86.

³ Vol. LXXXIV, 29.

works as master's theses:

Interviewer: I find it's sort of funny and sort of desecrating, and in a way delicate, nice, that there are people who are going to do masters on you, they're going to do their theses on you and probably take you apart. How do you feel about that?

Cohen: I understand the phenomenon of masters theses and particularly the place I have now somehow in the cultural life of my country. I'm not very close to that, I don't think about that very often. In fact, this is probably the first time I've thought about it in some time, when you put the question to me.

This is not to say that Cohen does not take his work seriously, that he is nonchalant about what he publishes, or necessarily attempting to "con" his reading audience. He does warn the viewers of the National Film Board film, Ladies and Gentlemen: Mr. Leonard Cohen, with the phrase "caveat emptor"--let the purchaser beware. Because of the public image portrayed in the film, the warning is clearly directed at viewers of the film rather than at readers of Cohen's poems and novels. Personal, intimate involvement with his work is evident throughout his poetry, novels and songs when they are taken as a whole body or as parts in the context of that whole. In this NFB film Cohen also states that "poetry is not an occupation but a verdict." The meaning of this statement is readily felt in a reading of his poetry. As implied by Cohen's

⁴ Saturday Night, LXXXIV (June, 1969), 28.

comment in the interview with William Kloman in New York Times, his poetry exists in such close relation to his experience of life that to think of himself as a writer is already creating too great a distance: "Everybody I meet wipes me out. Here are all these people plugging away at their roles. Being producers and policemen and bishops. It knocks me out, and all I can do is get down on my knees. I don't even think of myself as a writer, singer, or whatever. The occupation of being a man is so much more. In spite of all the philosophical encouragement about hanging loose and all that Sunday school stuff, I admit I'm confused. I can't begin to locate my head. It has a life of its own."⁵

Politically Cohen's life manifests the search for a cause pure enough to claim the commitment of his entire being, and the inability to find such a cause in the political realm. He went to Cuba in 1961 intending to fight for Castro; the "Bay of Pigs" happened while he was there. He returned after trying "very hard to participate in the defense of Havana,"⁶ but finding the cause too impure for his undivided attention. As William Kloman points out in the New York Times interview, Cohen has a

⁵ "I've Been on the Outlaw Scene Since 15!" New York Times (January 28, 1968), sec. 2, p. 21.

⁶ Paul Grescoe, "Cohen: Poet, Writer, Singer, Lover," The Canadian Magazine (February 10, 1968), p. 11.

revolutionary temperament, "but, like Camus, he is starkly aware of the paradoxes of rebellion."⁷ Unable to shake his fear of the militant organizers of protest movements, he expresses his political concern in terms that are more religious than political. He analyses the need of the political situation as a need to "rediscover law" and "rediscover the crucifixion": "The crucifixion will again be understood as a universal symbol, not as just an experiment in sadism or masochism or arrogance. It will have to be rediscovered because that's where man is at. On the cross."⁸ Cohen's Flowers for Hitler can be characterized generally as an expression of this sort of religio-political concern.

This tendency to speak of all aspects of life in a religious language relates to what Wynne Francis has called "the occupation of being a man," quoted above on page 4. I have discovered only one statement on the subject of religion in which Cohen explicitly uses the term "religion," and it corroborates what I had already sensed as his attitude both in his work and his interviews. This statement appears in the Saturday Night interview referred to earlier, and is important enough to warrant a rather lengthy reproduction:

⁷ New York Times (January 28, 1968), sec. 2, p. 21.

⁸ Ibid.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself either religious or mystical?

Cohen: I think I went through a saintly phase where I was consciously trying to model myself on what I thought a saint was. I made a lot of people very unhappy and I made myself very unhappy.

Interviewer: How about religion?

Cohen: As I see religion, it's a technique for strength and for making the universe hospitable. I think there really is a power to tune in on. It's easy for me to call that power God. Some people find it difficult. You mention the word God to them and they go through a lot of difficult reactions, they just don't like it. I mean that there's certainly no doubt about it, that the name has fallen on evil days. But it doesn't have those evil associations or those organizational associations for me. It's easier for me to say God than "some unnameable mysterious power that motivates all living things". The word God for me is very simple and useable. And even to use the masculine pronouns He and Him, it doesn't offend me as it offends many; so that I can say "to become close to Him is to feel His grace" because I have felt it.

But, you know, my training as a writer, just in the craft, I know that I'm not going to lay too much of that sound on people because it'll just be pointless. Unless I can find a song to place that information in; there's no point in me just writing out some religious tract.

One frequently hears that "song" when reading Cohen's poetry, not in an obviously obtruding manner, but by the allusion to traditional religious images and by the implications resident in those allusions.

But Cohen's work is not to be construed as being a simple verbal expression of a spiritual quest he may be

engaged in at any particular time, a tractarian message. A more appropriate metaphor linking his work and life is the one Franz Kafka used of his own writings. His work is a prayer offered up to God while the writer himself searches for spiritual reality. The religious question simply cannot be avoided in the writings of a man as deeply concerned as Cohen is about the reality of life and the "occupation of being a man."

Spiritual searching as a theme finds an appropriate introduction in "Elegy," the opening poem in Cohen's first volume of poetry, Let Us Compare Mythologies:

Do not look for him
 In brittle mountain streams:
 They are too cold for any god;
 And do not examine the angry rivers
 For shreds of his soft body
 Or turn the shore stones for his blood;
 But in the warm salt ocean
 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.¹⁰

This theme is pursued relentlessly along diverse paths in that and the following volumes, and remains of vital concern throughout Cohen's work including the final para-

¹⁰ Leonard Cohen, Let Us Compare Mythologies (McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1966), p. 13. All subsequent quotations from the published works of Leonard Cohen will be from the editions identified in the list of abbreviated titles on page ii and will be acknowledged parenthetically.

graph of Beautiful Losers, where the apotheosized narrator prays:

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

(BL p. 243)

The search follows the desire to find a meaningful re-
lation between the flesh and the spirit. Both of these
terms, "flesh" and "spirit," evoke a host of Biblical
connotations. Painfully aware of these connotations,
Cohen seeks, and finds the relationship of flesh and
spirit to be one of balance and submission, not an
arrogant elevation of one above the other.

Cohen does not delineate this search in any logical,
sequential manner, like that of a religious tract. He
does not tell us what the search "means" to him. Any
meaning that the reader can derive arises out of the
tension between traditional religious images and images
of everyday life.¹¹ "City Christ" represents the general

¹¹ This idea of the origin of meaning is based on the
discussion of the "means to meaning" in Archibald MacLeish's
book Poetry and Experience (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

mood evoked by this tension in Let Us Compare Mythologies:

He has returned from countless wars,
Blinded and hopelessly lame.
He endures the morning streetcars
And counts ages in a Peel Street room.

He is kept in his place like a court jew,
To consult on plagues or hurricanes,
And he never walks with them on the sea
Or joins their lonely sidewalk games.

(CM p. 25)

Here is an image of an enduring, suffering Christ against whom society has fortified itself. He does not "walk" with people or "join" in their activity. He is used only as a computer-like instrument to consult in emergencies, and as a thing, is kept at a distance. By the same token the people who keep him "in his place" do not relate to each other as members of a community either. Their sidewalk games are "lonely." Although there is at least a concerned searcher in "Elegy," his quest is doomed to seeing the object of the search descend, in his "fluttering winding-sheet," into the "warm salt ocean." Later, in Parasites of Heaven, the searcher has learned that it is possible to "trust him / because he touched your perfect body / with his mind."¹² This possibility is achieved through contact with the "energy of love," and the contact again receives meaning in the tension between or interaction of traditional religious

¹² "Suzanne takes you down," PH, p. 70.

images and images of ordinary human experience.

With Let Us Compare Mythologies Cohen, in the sensuous, mesmeric rhythms that are to become characteristic of his best work, introduces his reading audience to images and themes that he will expand in later books. In addition to the theme of the religious quest, this first book also contains an incipient theme of search for sexual fulfillment, which in later works assumes a central position alongside the search for spiritual reality and sainthood. The images used to evoke these themes and the themes themselves are of primary concern to this thesis. If I do not discuss fully the wit, humor and other aspects of Cohen's writings, it is not that I consider them unimportant. His wit and humor become evident in Let Us Compare Mythologies and form an invigorating stream that flows-throughout the world of his work. I have chosen to forego a thorough discussion of such other aspects of Cohen's poetry in favor of exploring the relation between the sexual and spiritual quests, between the flesh and the spirit, and the imagery in which these themes find expression.

The Hasidic image of the Baal Shem Tov assumes essential importance in the quest outlined above. In "After The Sabbath Prayers" (SB p. 2), the poet associates himself with the Baal Shem, the founder of mid-eighteenth century Jewish Hasidism. The Baal Shem interpreted the

Jewish faith as a "hallowing of the everyday." The service of God consisted in redeeming the "divine sparks" imprisoned in the shells of a shattered creation. The image appears again in The Favourite Game where Breavman sees himself in the Baal Shem's role. With this association in mind it seems likely that the "sainthood" of Beautiful Losers coincides more nearly with the Hasidic concept of redemption of evil, than with an ascetic Christian redemption from evil. The Hasidic concept of hallowing the "evil urge," the passions and desires of the flesh, by giving that "evil urge" direction toward God becomes expanded to include the submission that constitutes Cohen's "sainthood." Ordinary acts become sacred as they are hallowed by man. As presented in Beautiful Losers, the sexual act becomes a "sacrifice" by which contact is made with another human being, with the "energy of love," and consequently with God.

The religious "meaning" of Cohen's work arises out of the interaction of images. The tension exists not only in the interaction of religious and profane images, but also in the interaction of a religious image with another religious image, or of a profane image with another profane image. Beautiful Losers, many poems in Parasites of Heaven, and the recordings indicate a culmination of the religious search. That culmination finds expression as a qualified extension of basic Hasidic teachings. It

is a union of flesh and spirit in total submission
that constitutes sainthood.

Chapter II

Disintegration: Conventional Cohesive Values

In Let Us Compare Mythologies the poet explores various religious images and the attitudes that have given rise to them. The explorations become painful as conventional institutions and value systems begin to crumble. The poet's immediate reaction is disillusionment. However, implicit in several poems lies the possibility of affirming some position or value that will lend balance to the general chaos of existence, like the position of the saint in Beautiful Losers: "A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that a saint dissolves the chaos even for himself, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory" (BL p. 95). Although most of the poems in this volume are worthy of considered attention, I have chosen a few that are representative of both the disillusionment and the seeds of affirmation. Regretably this means excluding many exciting poems.

"For Wilf and His House" (CM pp. 14-15) sets a pattern for the serious game of analysing and discovering relevance in various mythologies. Severe tension exists between the Judaism received in the poet's home

and the Christianity adhered to by his society. To complicate this situation, the inevitable "generation gap" divides adherents to the same religion. The child saw Jesus pinned "like a lovely butterfly against the wood," but with growing maturity "the meadow of running flesh turned sour," leaving the youth in a quandary. The last two stanzas throw open the gates, or more accurately, reveal the shattered wall through which the young wanderer emerges into the world:

Among the young and turning-great
of the large nations, innocent
of the spiked wish and the bright crusade,
there I could sing my heathen tears
between the summersaults and chestnut battles,
love the distant saint
who fed his arm to flies,
mourn the crushed ant
and despise the reason of the heel.

Raging and weeping are left on the early road.
Now each in his holy hill
the glittering and hurting days are almost done.
Then let us compare mythologies.
I have learned my elaborate lie
of soaring crosses and poisoned thorns
and how my fathers nailed him
like a bat against a barn
to greet the autumn and late hungry ravens
as a hollow yellow sign.

(CM pp. 14-15)

The childhood picture of Jesus pinned "like a lovely butterfly" has become the ugly image of him nailed "like a bat against a barn"; the "velvet wounds / and delicate twisted feet" have become an object "to greet the autumn and late hungry ravens / as a hollow yellow sign." How-

ever, amid this general desolation the youthful poet is "in his holy hill," aware of his condition, (the awareness is one reason among others for the "holiness" of the hill), and willing to search and "compare mythologies." He commences to do exactly that in the following poems.

"Saint Catherine Street" (CM pp. 44-45) smolders with a dark passionate look at Christianity expressed in images that William Blake might have used. The initial impact of the poem is created with a devastating view of that pure, virtuous woman, the nun:

Towering black nuns frighten us
 as they come lumbering down the tramway aisle
 amulets and talismans caught in careful fingers
 promising plagues for an imprudent glance
 So we bow our places away
 the price of an indulgence
 (CM p. 44)

If the "towering black nuns" promise plagues for "an imprudent glance," then the question becomes: "How may we be saints"? The question is asked on behalf of those who feel the passion, the urge to "love and pray." There does not seem to be available any "ordeal," "torture," or "murder" suitable to the process of making one a saint. The narrator and the "we" for whom he speaks "would bathe in a free river," they would "love and pray," but what they have to offer, their bodies, the Church will not accept as material for sainthood:

Will no one carve from our bodies a white cross
 for a wind-torn mountain
 or was that forsaken man's pain
 enough to end all passion

Are those dry faces and hands we see
 all the flesh there is of nuns
 Are they really clever non-excreting tapestries
 prepared by skillful eunuchs
 for our trembling friends

(CM p. 45)

The problem of what it means to become a saint is not merely a relevant issue in Cohen's work. Throughout the poetry and particularly in Beautiful Losers it is a central theme. At this point there appear to be no answers for the multiple queries. The problem is set up as being a tension between the holiness of sainthood--of spirit--and the passion of sex--of flesh. The extreme ascetic Christian view proposes a deliberately denied flesh. "Those dry faces and hands" actually should be "all the flesh there is of nuns." But this is unacceptable to the narrator because he feels passion that has not been eradicated by "that forsaken man's pain." The plea is for some way of bringing together the body and the cross: "Will no one carve from our bodies a white cross." Physical and spiritual reality, the flesh and the spirit, must become unified. But this appears to be an impossibility. The frightened young narrator bows his place away to the black nuns.

Judaism does not offer any more substantial hope of

finding spiritual fulfilment. "Saviours" (CM pp. 64-65), in which the "Roman sport of crucifixion / . . . has grown into all the graves" transforming Moses, Job and David into ancient crucified "saviours," ends with an ironic imperative to see the newly revealed saviour. The irony resides in the portrayal of the "negative," human, or fleshly characteristics of the Old Testament heroes. After all, they are men even though tradition had raised them to the level of demi-gods.

By introducing the "old heavy shadow" of the crucifixion, these

dead heroes are raised on wood
above their discovered tombs
to rehearse their ancient arguments.
(CM p. 64)

The "ancient arguments" prove these saintly heroes to be fallible human beings, a fact often forgotten by the teachers of traditional values:

Nailed high on a mountain
Moses stares beyond the Jordan
beyond the giants and crumbling walls
and sighs an Egyptian curse

Job hangs in a burnt field
unable to frighten the crows
his friends still talking at his feet
and no whirlwind disturbs the quiet desolation

David swings from his roof
and the people say that in his mind
he and his warriors build a great temple
(CM pp. 64-65)

Moses was not allowed beyond the Jordan into the Promised Land because, in a fit of anger directed toward the Israelite people, for whom he wished to obtain water, he struck a rock with his staff instead of speaking to it calmly as God had commanded. He gave way to a human impulse and was denied entrance into Canaan. Job is seen hanging as an ineffective scarecrow, no whirlwind, a device often used by God to speak to his people, to disturb "the quiet desolation." David's "crucifixion" hangs him from the "roof," the place from which he first saw Bathsheba. He took her as his mistress, had her husband Uriah killed in battle, and then married her. Since David now had the blood of Uriah on his hands, God did not allow him to build a temple for His worship.

These heroes have simply been "exhumed to die again in the wilderness." If sainthood means a denial of passions that characterize a being as human, then a resurrection of these ancient heroes will only reveal their humanity and consequently their "death" as saints. The apparent hope offered in the concluding stanzas is thus undercut:

See whom they bring us today
 bearing him triumphantly through the traffic
 singing before his death
 O he will love us O he will approve of us

See how the temple girls scent their skins
 and prepare the forest beds
 how the priests have cut their bodies with whips

how the bulls are led glistening like pools of oil
between the rows of worshippers.

(CM p. 65)

The implication is that the line of "saviours," whether Hebrew or Pagan, will continue to lengthen, but someday they, like their predecessors, will all "die again in the wilderness."

Disillusionment with the traditional cohesive value system, as has been implied in the preceding analysis, constitutes the prevalent mood in this collection of poetry. Not only does this mood register strongly in the images related specifically to a spiritual or sexual quest, but also, as in "The Sparrows" (CM pp. 22-23), in images related to apparently trivial topics. The subject of "The Sparrows" is childhood games that involve migratory birds and the problems created when these birds leave and only the "dullest brown sparrows" remain. The images sparkle with particularity:

Their wings are made of glass and gold
And we are fortunate
not to hear them splintering
against the sun.

(CM p. 22)

Yet suddenly in the final stanza the "hollow nests" left by the summer birds explode with allusions to something more ominous than the simple absence of certain birds. A playmate's question about the brown sparrows that have

remained prompts the narrator's speculation:

But what shall I tell you of migrations
 when in this empty sky
 the precise ghosts of departed summer birds
 still trace old signs;
 or of desperate flights
 when the dimmest flutter of a coloured wing
 excites all our favourite streets
 to delight in imaginary spring.

(CM p. 23)

How can one answer someone who still sees hope in an "empty sky," in "old signs," and "desperate flights"? The "emptiness" of the sky receives a devastating articulation in the poem, but the narrator reveals himself to be at a loss when an answer to the emptiness is required: "What shall I tell you"?

In this volume the poem with the most intense concentration on images of lostness is "Twilight" (CM p. 53). Not only has the man, the third person subject of the poem, spent his life searching, through poetry, songs and love-making, but in the end he regrets his very search because of its futility:

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

When finally he did become very old
 And nights were cold because
 No one was a stranger
 And there was little to do
 But sift the years through his yellow fingers
 Then like fire-twisted shadows of dancers
 Alternatives would array themselves
 Around his wicker chair
 And he regretted everything

(CM p. 53)

The alternatives that array themselves "like fire-twisted shadows of dancers" are reminiscent of Kafka's twisted mirror images of the reality outside of man's cave-prison. In fact the entire situation seems to be controlled by "Kafka's machine," as in the poem called "Jingle" (CM p. 59). Although Cohen's poetry generally cannot be described as Kafkaesque, he does share, particularly in Let Us Compare Mythologies and Flowers for Hitler, this feeling of bewilderment at the experience of an apparently insane world.

However, in several poems there appears an incipient affirmation of something beyond or perhaps within the disillusioning chaos. The precise nature of this "something" is at this point undefined, but in retrospect from his later poems and novels one can see a direction of movement emerging. In "On Certain Incredible Nights" (CM p. 58), the most beautiful and touching love lyric in this volume, there emerges a definite indication of what this direction will be:

On certain incredible nights,
 When your flesh is drenched with moon
 And the windows are wide open:
 Your breasts are sculptured
 From the soft inside of darkness
 And your belly a fragment of a great bright flask.
 Thank-God a peninsula of sheet across your waist
 Imprisons you upon my bed.
 O not toward the glory
 Of the beautifully infested outside skies,
 Where girls of light are floating up from every room,
 Would I a moment turn my head,
 As other men have innocently done!

Other men have innocently turned from the particular manifestation of glory in the girl imprisoned on the bed to some sort of generalized glory "of the beautifully infested outside skies," the kind of glory that the man in the "wicker chair" tried to capture. The night remains incredible so long as the lover realizes that the glory emanates from within the room, from the "sculptured" beauty upon the bed. "Glory" is, of course, an English term for the Hebrew "Shekinah," the manifestation of God on earth. Whether or not the "glory" of this poem refers specifically to Shekinah or not (surely there is at least an allusion to it), does not change the quality of the narrator's refusal to turn. Among other things, the implication is that God's glory can be found in the flesh "drenched with moon," not in a denial of the flesh.

Since the volume concludes with a poem, "Beside the Shepherd" (CM p. 70), which expresses the relationship between the flesh and God's glory more explicitly than

"On Certain Incredible Nights," one is led to believe that the "new direction," as I have called it earlier, is really quite consciously taken. The poem, a brief four-stanza lyric, combines the Messianic promised city with the enjoyment of sensual pleasure:

Beside the shepherd dreams the beast
Of laying down with lions.
The youth puts away his singing reed
And strokes the consecrated flesh.

Glory, Glory, shouts the grass,
Shouts the brick, as from the cliff
The gorgeous fallen sun
Rolls slowly on the promised city.

Naked running through the mansion
The boy with news of the Messiah
Forgets the message for his father,
Enjoying the marble against his feet.

Well finally it has happened,
Imagines someone in another house,
Staring one more minute out his window
Before waking up his wife.

(CM p. 70)

Clearly the central image is that of the millennial kingdom to be established by the promised Messiah. The first two stanzas express generally accepted elements of this "promised city." However, the image of the third stanza introduces a new and important contribution to the meaning of the poem. The boy who runs to his father with news of the Messiah suddenly finds himself so pleasurably conscious of his sensual impressions that he forgets the message. He does and he does not forget the message.

The fact that he does not convey the verbal message to his father does not nullify the essential happening. In fact, the message is the lad's capacity for total enjoyment of his total being, physical pleasure included. The news of the Messiah does not radically alter the human situation, but it does provide a new perspective in which the "glory" of ordinary objects like grass, brick and marble becomes visible and appreciated.

Like the narrator of "Incredible Nights" the boy has learned that the "Glory" resides in the immediate particular experience. The philosophical or systematic religious structure, of which the boy's message is a part, loses importance in proportion as the being of the human person gains importance. As the following chapter will explain, this new reality is similar in many ways to Jewish Hasidism and particularly to Martin Buber's interpretation of it.

Chapter III

New Connections: Hasidic Wisdom

In both The Spice-Box of Earth and The Favourite Game Cohen moves from the position of the searcher for whom everything is subject to question and doubt, the position taken in Let Us Compare Mythologies, to that of a searcher interested in a more positive and affirmative exploration of certain possibilities for a balanced relationship between flesh and spirit. The seeds of affirmative possibilities scattered throughout Let Us Compare Mythologies grow into recognizable foliage.

Cohen's first explicit reference to Hasidism occurs in the use of the Baal Shem image in The Spice-Box of Earth.¹ The same image recurs in The Favourite Game. Israel ben Eliezer (1700-1760), called the "Baal Shem Tov" by his devoted followers, was a Polish peasant who felt the need to translate the abstract mystical wisdom of the Kabbala into ordinary, everyday terms so that one need not be a thoroughly learned man to understand the way to God. The appellation "Baal Shem Tov" literally means "Master of the Good Name." The Baal Shem believed that the ordinary experience of every man was the primary source of spiritual meaning. A twentieth-century follower

¹ "After The Sabbath Prayers," SB, p. 2.

of the Baal Shem, Jiri Langer, introduced a little story about the good deeds of Reb Moyshe Leib of the Polish city of Kotsk with this observation: "Let us enjoy our lot here on earth in joy and gladness. Such is the teaching of the wisdom of the Talmud: 'Eat and drink, and make haste about it! For the world to which we shall have so soon to bid farewell is a [sic] like a wedding procession. It passes us by so quickly. So let each one hurry to seize what there is!'"² This, he continues, is not an argument in support of selfishness, but an incentive to do good, in love for one's neighbour. Another follower, Rabbi Baruch of Medziboz, puts asceticism in its place relative to the holy life: "Asceticism and austerity are essential for a spirit that is haughty and worldly by nature. A spirit inclined by nature to matters spiritual should have nothing to do with asceticism. Too often asceticism is practised in order to gain the approval of the populace, not to please our Maker on high. Asceticism tends to implant pride and hypocrisy unless we are on guard."³

Martin Buber, in what Malcolm Diamond calls his

² "The City of Wisdom," Nine Gates to the Chassidic Mysteries, trans. Stephen Jolly (New York, 1961), p. 230.

³ Louis I. Newman, Maggidim & Hasidim: Their Wisdom (New York, 1962), p. 9.

"most elegant summary of Hasidic teachings," interprets the teachings of the Baal Shem and his disciples as follows:

The Hasidic teaching is the consummation of Judaism. And this is its message to all: You yourself must begin. Existence will remain meaningless for you if you yourself do not penetrate into it with active love and if you do not in this way discover its meaning for yourself. Everything is waiting to be hallowed by you; it is waiting to be disclosed in its meaning and to be realized in it by you. For the sake of this your beginning, God created the world. He has drawn it out of Himself so that you may bring it closer to Him. Meet the world with the fulness of your being and you shall meet Him. That He Himself accepts from your hands what you have to give to the world, is His mercy. If you wish to believe, love!

Although these "Hasidic teachings" are colored by Buber's own "existential" position, as Diamond describes it in Martin Buber: Jewish Existentialism, the basic concept of the spiritual importance of the everyday life in Hasidism is also attested to by Jiri Langer in the passage quoted on page 26. Most likely it is Hasidism in its popular revived form to which Cohen alludes when he introduces the Baal Shem image into his writings.

The Spice-Box of Earth, and for that matter any other of Cohen's books, are something more than a poetic expression of Hasidism. However, since Hasidic images

⁴ "The Silent Question," At the turning: Three Addresses on Judaism, p. 44. Reprinted in Martin Buber: Jewish Existentialism (New York, 1960), p. 137.

are used, surely their connotations are relevant. An understanding of basic elements in the Hasidic attitude toward life reveals the frequent presence of a similar attitude in Cohen's poetry even though no specific traditional image appears. With the use of Hasidic imagery in The Spice-Box of Earth Cohen introduces the additional dimension of spiritual fulfilment into some of the most beautiful Canadian love lyrics ever written. As one reviewer put it, in The Spice-Box of Earth Cohen has "done much to restore beauty in poetry by shifting the emphasis from boldness and impact to more fragile but longer lasting values."⁵

Other reviewers say nothing more perceptive about The Spice-Box of Earth than is said in the schoolmarmish entry in Choice: Books for College Librarians: "The second volume of poems by a young Canadian poet. They are thematically simple (usually erotic), some in free forms and some in rather loosely formed stanzas. (Cohen is better when not restrained by the conventional patterns.) They are apparently meant to be heard rather than seen on the page, but unfortunately the rhythms are not very interesting. Still, for a few of the 60 poems, large contemporary poetry collections will prob-

⁵ Paul Gottlieb, "New Young Poet," The Gazette (Montreal, June 3, 1961).

ably want this."⁶ Louis Dudek expresses cynicism about Cohen's work. The key to Cohen's kind of poetry he says, "is in the mixture of over-heated nostalgic romanticism and realistic disillusionment that never seem to fuse or come to a resolution. . . . The sacred-oil and sewage-water mixture runs right through the poems."⁷

However, by and large the reviews are favorable. Milton Wilson observes that "aesthetically and morally these poems do more than exploit their decadence: they move beyond it and set it in order."⁸ Later in this review Wilson's perceptive analysis of the essential Cohen becomes articulately evident. For both Cohen and his "grandfather," he says, "an heirloom cannot be repudiated; it can only be relived, however inadequately. He is not a pre-Raphaelite, sucking the dry bones of a lost religion; he is making the best of a continuity that could not be broken by the blasphemies of his grandfather and cannot be broken by a poet who is unable even to blaspheme. His world is not an old curiosity shop; it is his doom."

It is not surprising, given such a world, that The Spice-Box of Earth begins and ends in prayer. The

⁶ II (November, 1965), 573.

⁷ "Three Major Canadian Poets--three major forms of archaism," Delta, XVI (November, 1961), 24.

⁸ "Letters in Canada: 1961: Poetry," University of Toronto Quarterly, XXXI (July, 1962), 432-437.

final stanza of the first poem, "A Kite is a Victim," establishes a poetic stance that is sustained throughout the volume:

A kite is a contract of glory
 that must be made with the sun,
 so you make friends with the field
 the river and the wind,
 then you pray the whole cold night before,
 under the travelling cordless moon,
 to make you worthy and lyric and pure.
 (SB p. 1)

The second line of the following poem, "After The Sabbath Prayers," contains the Baal Shem image. The other central image of the poem is the shivering poet who considers it to be a miracle both that he saw the Baal Shem's butterfly and that seeing it has not changed his physical condition. Since the poem deals with the Baal Shem image and the disintegration of the borders of conventional time between the past and present, I will quote it in its entirety:

After the Sabbath prayers
 The Baal Shem's butterfly
 Followed me down the hill.
 Now the Baal Shem is dead
 These hundreds of years
 And a butterfly ends its life
 In three flag-swept days.
 So this was a miracle,
 Dancing down all these wars and truces
 Yellow as a first-day butterfly,
 Nothing of time or massacre
 In its bright flutter.

Now the sharp stars are in the sky

And I am shivering as I did last night,
 And the wind is not warmer
 For the yellow butterfly
 Folded somewhere on a sticky leaf
 And moving like a leaf itself.
 And how truly great
 A miracle this is, that I,
 Who this morning saw the Baal Shem's butterfly
 Doing its glory in the sun,
 Should spend this night in darkness,
 Hands pocketed against the flies and cold.
 (SB p. 2)

Life and the whole process of writing is a sort of pray-
 er that produces a succession of "miraculous" insights
 into the universe, God's creation. The concluding stanzas
 of the volume petition God to sanctify the poet's priestly
 efforts in this life:

Make my body
 a pomander for worms
 and my soul
 the fragrance of cloves.

Let the spoiled Sabbath
 leave no scent.
 Keep my mouth
 from foul speech.

Lead your priest
 from grave to vineyard.
 Lay him down
 where air is sweet.

(SB p. 86)

Time, as a conventional concept involving hours
 and days, fades almost into non-existence in the in-
 teraction of the images in "After The Sabbath Prayer."
 The Baal Shem's butterfly (his soul, spirit, reincar-
 nation or simply a yellow butterfly upon which the Baal

Shem may have bestowed some kindness), follows the poet, heedless of the time lapse since the Baal Shem's life on this earth. With "nothing of time or massacre / in its bright flutter," the butterfly experiences the same cold wind in which the poet shivers and the sticky leaves move. This timeless butterfly merges with the immediate situation to confer an element of timeless grandeur upon the poet who is surprised that he himself has not experienced a sort of Kafkaesque metamorphosis and become a yellow butterfly. But the magic does not work that way. It leaves both the butterfly and the poet as they were, but conjures up a world of meaning in the relationship between the two. The result of this tension emerges as the poetry of The Spice-Box of Earth unfolds.

This disappearance of the concept of time is not restricted to this poem or even to the poems in this volume. Already in Let Us Compare Mythologies the time theme has become important. For example, in "Exodus" (CM p. 66) the "reports of unmarked stars" and "fishermen" place the first stanza in the time of Jesus' birth, while the second stanza clearly refers to Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh. In the opening lines of stanza three the two images co-exist with no reference to a time lag:

Now our Nile has turned to blood
and in the cafes the scholars jest

about a cosmic wound.

(CM p. 66)

Rosemary Eakins sees such "paradoxes of time" as one of the three major themes in The Spice-Box of Earth, the other two being love and the making of poetry. However, I cannot agree with her assertion that Cohen is weak because he lacks "a unifying vision." She elaborates on this "weakness" by saying that his own conflict is not precisely defined; he needs to define a tension of opposites to replace his "present uncertainty."⁹ I suggest that Cohen has defined that tension, not in terms of opposites, but precisely in the interaction of traditional images with those of immediate experience. It is in this unifying vision that the borders of conventional time fade out and all experience is seen in one moment.¹⁰

"After The Sabbath Prayers" apparently arises out of an experience that prompts its reappearance in the largely autobiographical novel The Favourite Game, a reappearance which enhances the significance of the poem. A hillside amphitheater at which a number of children's

⁹ "Cohen's Poems Show New Grace and Skill," The Montreal Star (June 3, 1961), Entertainments, p. 8.

¹⁰ The vision also works in the opposite direction when in "You Have The Lovers" (SB p. 29) the brief moment of ecstasy in the love act becomes expanded to include decades and ages all the way back to Eden.

camp counselors have gathered constitutes the setting for the Baal Shem image in the novel. One of the counselors has just told a story: "Breavman sat thinking that he could never do as well, never be so calm and magical. And that's what he wanted to be: the gentle hero the folk come to love, the man who talks to animals, the Baal Shem Tov who carried children piggyback" (FG p. 160). Anne, the camp director's fiancé, performs a "Hasidic dance" and then, "after the Sabbath services a butterfly seemed to follow him down the hill, disappearing as he left the wooded area for the hot campus. He felt the honor of it all through the day" (FG p. 161). Breavman clearly expresses the desire to become a miracle-working Baal Shem. That desire, although often involving a confusion of miracle and magic,¹¹ emerges as a major theme in the novel. The desire to become a Baal Shem causes the sadness of the concluding lines of "After The Sabbath Prayers."

¹¹ Martin Buber's distinction between magic and miracle ("sacrifice and prayer") analyses very well the problem Breavman confronts in his association with the women of the novel. This problem also confronts F. and the first person narrator of Book One in BL. As Buber points out, miracle and magic are not the same: "Magic desires to obtain its effects without entering into relation, and practices its tricks in the void. But sacrifice and prayer are set 'before the Face,' in the consummation of the holy primary word that means mutual action: they speak the Thou, and then they hear." I and Thou, pp. 82-83. Reprinted in To Hallow This Life, ed. Jacob Trapp (New York, 1958), p. 86.

However, this initial note of sadness does not imply a blues melody throughout the entire volume of poetry as Mr. Dudek seems to assume when he describes The Spice-Box of Earth as exhibiting a better style yet being sadder; "less exuberant, less hopeful, [and] less satisfied with recurrent pleasures" than Let Us Compare Mythologies.¹² On the contrary, there is more exuberance in The Spice-Box of Earth than in the earlier volume. Certainly there are still images of loneliness and pain, and several of disintegration in The Spice-Box of Earth, but they are far less frequent than in Let Us Compare Mythologies. In "Twilight" (CM p. 53), a poem of only twenty lines, there are at least ten words and phrases that in context imply disillusionment: "bitterness," "pain," "minor key," "old words," "unable," "fumble," "broken hands," "become very old," "yellow fingers," and "regretted everything." In contrast to this profusion of negative connotations and apparent lack of anything redemptive in "Twilight," and other poems of Let Us Compare Mythologies, we find refreshing oases of spiritual affirmation in The Spice-Box of Earth.

The situation in "Credo" (SB pp. 25-26) has all the appearances of developing disillusionment like that of "Twilight," but the poet finds a "small oasis" worthy

¹² "Three Major Canadian Poets," Delta XVI (November, 1961), 24.

of affirmation. The "cloud of grasshoppers," appearing in the first line, evokes connotations of the Israelites' bondage in Egypt and the suffering and destruction of the Egyptians when Pharaoh acted to keep the Hebrews in slavery. The connotations are not only unpleasant, but even horrible, with their memories of drinking water turned to blood, the "wooden carts / squeaking past the blackened castles / with their sad cargo of first-born dead,"¹³ and finally death by drowning of the entire Egyptian army. In the midst of these associations "my love drew me down / to conclude what I had begun" (SB p. 25). Not only do the grasshoppers return but they bring with them the "smell that burning cities give." Love has not provided the poet with rose-colored glasses. A crisis situation arises, forcing the poet to choose between "battalions [sic] of the wretched, / wild with holy promises" fleeing from the destruction of the "grasshopper cloud," and taking his love to the city fled by these battalions. The decision is made:

That impoverished world
of boil-afflicted flesh
and rotting fields
could not tempt us from each other.
(SB p. 26)

Love's sacredness, implicit in the poet's decision

¹³ "Exodus," CM, p. 66.

to stay with his love, becomes explicit in the fusion that is at once "ordinary morning lust" and the "oasis" of a promised land:

Our ordinary morning lust
claimed my body first
and made me sane.

I must not betray
the small oasis where we lie,
though only for a time.

It is good to live between
a ruined house of bondage
and a holy promised land.

A cloud of grasshoppers
will turn another Pharaoh upside-down;
slaves will build cathedrals
for other slaves to burn.

It is good to hear
the larvae rumbling underground,
good to learn
the feet of fierce or humble priests
trample out the green.

(SB p. 26).

Here in the wilderness between the "ruined house of bondage" and the "holy promised land" love, including lust, becomes a momentary oasis. Although only momentary and unable to overcome the cycle of building and destruction in the universe, the moment of love is an affirmation. Now, with the affirmation of love in this momentary oasis, "it is good to hear / the larvae rumbling underground." The "rumbling" and "trample" are not removed, but the oasis has been recognized, and with that recognition, the "ordinary" has been hallowed. A balance in the "chaos of existence" has been found. Love, the "small oasis," lies between "a ruined house of bond-

age / and a holy promised land."

Superficially "Credo" seems to imply that since the lover decides to stay with his mistress and finds love to be an oasis amidst general chaos and destruction, therefore only by remaining together can the lovers find meaning in the chaos. But such an implication introduces another unwanted kind of bondage, a sort of Blakean "marriage hearse." There is no internal evidence for this implication, and certainly a comparison with other poems in the same context provides no substantiating evidence. Certainly the oasis in which a man and woman meet is a holy place, but it is not the only holy place for the lovers, and they ought not to be bound to it. In fact, "The Priest Says Goodbye" (SB pp. 37-38) provides substantial evidence against restrictive bonds. The oasis would soon exude the "smells / that corpses give and immortelles" (SB p. 37), if the lovers were bound. The act of love, "the absolute ballet our bodies mime," is an art form of sublime beauty that will become more sublime as the arms of the compass move farther apart, to use John Donne's image from "Valediction Forbidding Mourning."¹⁴ The two elements of the poem, the "ballet"

¹⁴ In the University of Toronto Quarterly, XXXI (July, 1962) Milton Wilson refers to this poem as a kind of overdoing of the Donne poem. Actually Cohen is "doing" something other than Donne was doing, not overdoing what Donne did, although there is much worth comparing in the two poems.

and the "song," form the two arms of the compass:

My love, the song is less than sung
 when with your lips you take it from my tongue--
 nor can you seize this from erotic grace
 and halt it tumbling into commonplace.

No one I know can set the hook
 to fix lust in a longing look
 where we can read from time to time
 the absolute ballet our bodies mime.

Harry can't, his face in Sally's crotch,
 nor Tom, who only loves when neighbours watch--
 one mistakes the ballet for the chart,
 one hopes that gossip will perform like art.

(SB p. 37)

If the song or poem becomes isolated from the act of
 love, it will tumble "into commonplace." But what about
 the act of love?

And what of art? When passion dies
 friendship hovers round our flesh like flies,
 and we name beautiful the smells
 that corpses give and immortelles.

I have studied rivers: the waters rush
 like eternal fire in Moses' bush.
 Some things live with honour. I will see
 lust burn like fire in a holy tree.

Do not come with me. When I stand alone
 my voice sings out as though I did not own
 my throat. Abelard proved how bright could be
 the bed between the hermitage and nunnery.

You are beautiful. I will sing beside
 rivers where longing Hebrews cried.
 As separate exiles we can learn
 how desert trees ignite and branches burn.

At certain crossroads we will win
 the harvest of our discipline.
 Swollen flesh, minds fed on wilderness--

O what a blaze of love our bodies press!
 (SB pp. 37-38)

In separation the lovers learn "how desert trees ignite and branches burn." They learn to see "lust burn like fire in a holy tree." In conjunction with Abelard's proof that physical love and passion are holy and worthy of suffering even if that suffering means both emasculation and separation from his beloved Eloisa, the Mosaic images interact with the commonplace, with the "crotch," to hallow the "blaze of love." In terms of "Credo" the "small oasis" becomes holy ground. "Erotic grace" becomes more than a graceful performance of the act of love; it unites eros and godliness. The term "erotic" is used discriminately. It is not the eros of "Harry" who "mistakes the ballet for the chart" or the eros of Tom who "hopes that gossip will perform like art," but an eros that exists in genuine relation between two people. "Harry" and "Tom" have variations of a sort of "I--It" relation in which they do not relate to "Sally" at all. They relate either to a part of her, or even worse, only to an abstract "neighbour." In the poem "On Certain Incredible Nights" (CM p. 58) there is the vague yet terrifying implication that if the lover turns from the "glory" of his mistress' flesh "drenched in moon" to some generalized "outside" glory, then the ecstasy of the incredible night will vanish. Tom makes a similar mistake of turning and never

sees "lust burn like fire in a holy tree" (SB p. 37).
 The separation of the lovers provides for the possibility
 of "certain crossroads" or oases in which the "absolute
 ballet" is an "erotic grace," a "blaze of love."

Such a crossroad is the poem "When I Uncovered Your
 Body" (SB p. 31). The lover thought he understood his
 love's face

because [he] had seen it painted twice
 or a hundred times, or kissed it
 when it was carved in stone.

(SB p. 31)

In such a way "Harry" understood "Sally" (SB p. 37). At
 the uncovering in this poem the lover finds that he can-
 not "bestow beauty / like a benediction," that is, impose
 external holiness. He can only meet the internal divine
 spark, "a single challenge of personal beauty":

With only a breath, a vague turning,
 you uncovered shadows
 more deftly than I had flesh,
 and the real and violent proportions of your body
 made obsolete old treaties of excellence,
 measures and poems,
 and clamoured with a single challenge of personal
 beauty,
 which cannot be interpreted or praised:
 it must be met.

(SB p. 31)

"Old treaties of excellence, / measures and poems" are
 rendered obsolete by this immediate encounter, this hal-
 lowing of the ordinary "real and violent proportions" of
 the mistress' body. Far from being mutually exclusive,

flesh and spirit are united in what is at once spiritual and sexual fulfilment.

A similar hallowing occurs in many of the other love poems in this collection, but I shall make reference to only one more. In "You Have The Lovers" (SB pp. 29-30) Cohen has caught the moment of "meeting" described in "When I Uncovered Your Body" and permitted it to expand into "a generation or two."¹⁵ He does not leave the reader with a difficult task when he says, "pretend it is a ritual." We can hardly understand it otherwise:

One day the door is opened to the lover's chamber.
 The room has become a dense garden,
 full of colours, smells, sounds you have never
 known.
 The bed is smooth as a wafer of sunlight,
 in the midst of the garden it stands alone.
 In the bed the lovers, slowly and deliberately
 and silently,
 perform the act of love.
 (SB p. 29)

The image is clearly one of pristine Eden. The bed "as a wafer of sunlight" standing alone "in the midst of the garden" is not only the Edenic Tree of Life, but also Christ himself in the "wafer." In this room the reader, or rather the viewer can see the divine ecstasy and wish to participate in it. Here, in the holy garden,

¹⁵ This expansion compares with the expansion of consciousness symbolized in the permeation of the wine, spilled at Catherine Tekakwitha's feast, into all the people and things in the banquet hall (BL, pp. 124-125).

the ordinary erogenous zones of the body have become extended "over the whole fleshly envelope," as F. puts it later in Beautiful Losers (BL p. 167), without the F.-like intervention of mechanical magic. In "You Have The Lovers" the pan-orgasmic body constitutes part of the expanded consciousness of the lover's garden room:

When he puts his mouth against her shoulder
 she is uncertain whether her shoulder
 has given or received the kiss.
 All her flesh is like a mouth.

(SB p. 30)

The Favourite Game is a highly autobiographical novel in which, as Joan Irwin has said so well, the real poetry is "Lawrence Breauman's passionate, lyrical zest for life, for the beauties of molten brass and fresh fish in ice, for the individuality of people and places, noses and dawns."¹⁶ In many instances it is impossible to distinguish Cohen from the hero of his novel. Both did undergraduate work in a Montreal university. Both grew up in a rich family and because of their sensitive, creative natures broke home ties. Both went to Columbia to do graduate work in English, but did not attend any classes. While at Columbia both were annoyed at being allowed to write critical essays on their own literary works. Both have said of poetry that

¹⁶ "A Zest for Life," Tamarack Review, XXX (Winter, 1964), 95.

"it is a verdict, not an occupation." Both felt that "in this country writers are interviewed on TV for one reason only: to give the rest of the nation a good laugh." In The Favourite Game Breavman is credited with writing poetry which Cohen published in The Spice-Box of Earth. One could go on with this list almost indefinitely, but it is the main purpose of this discussion to establish the relation of The Favourite Game to the rest of Cohen's work rather than to his life. However, the truth of the matter is that since we cannot divorce The Favourite Game from Cohen's own life, the earlier suggestion that Cohen is personally and seriously involved in his work receives substantiation. Whatever we shall say about the relation of the novel to the themes and images in the other works may be transferable to the relation of Cohen himself with his work. And whatever else The Favourite Game does, it portrays the growth of a sincere, searching and perceptive artist. Many of the attitudes formed by Breavman and the observations he makes are either explicit or implicit material for Cohen's next novel, Beautiful Losers.

The central metaphor of The Favourite Game is that of the miracle-working Baal Shem Tov.¹⁷ Breavman, as a Baal Shem, tries to work miracles through childhood games

¹⁷ See p. 34 above.

and hypnotism, yet he is frequently surprised at the uncommanded human tenderness in his mistresses. But his role as Baal Shem involves more than consecutive relationships with women. Immediately after the amphitheater scene in which the Baal Shem image appears, Breavman calls Shell in New York. The conversation involves the flesh and its desires. Following this conversation Breavman goes outside into the rain and mud where he experiences a peculiar phenomenon that relates to a necklace of ancestors, the Baal Shem and Breavman's destiny, particularly with regard to the immediate situation of the children's camp:

Then an idea crushed him--he had ancestors! His ancestors reached back and back, like daisies connected in a necklace. He completed circle after circle in the mud.

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 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. As soon as he wondered why he wasn't cold he began to shiver.

(FG p. 162)

Since the ancestors include rabbis, teachers, holy men and the Baal Shem, the responsibility conferred upon him by them is crushing.

This experience seems quite clearly to be a sort of telepathic or "prophetic" forewarning of Martin Stark's death in the mud under the tracks of a huge tractor.

Martin is the "divine idiot" who "stuck his index fingers in his ears for no apparent reason, squinting as if he were expecting some drum-splitting explosion" (FG p. 164). At this point there does not seem to be any reason for the index fingers in the ears, but in Beautiful Losers there is a scene in which F. and Edith, their fingers in each other's ears, engage in a wild telephone dance that is a ritualistic attempt to tune in to the cosmic power, to make the "cosmic wound" relative to man (BL pp. 34-42). The "Telephone Dance" joins F. and Edith in such a way that they become the telephone and the message. The message is: "Ordinary eternal machinery" (BL p. 41). Of course the sexual implications of fingers in ears cannot be mistaken; these implications are related to the "new" or restored body in which all parts are erogenous as in "You Have The Lovers" (SB p. 29). But the message seems strange to the narrator. He cannot understand it. There is much "machinery" in the novel, some of it, such as the "tiny swamp machinery" (BL p. 209), related to the pan-orgasmic body. But the conjunction of "ordinary" and "eternal" seems odd, except as related to the hallowing of the ordinary. The ordinary is not eternal, nor is the eternal ordinary, but here is machinery that is both. However, more about this in the later chapter on Beautiful Losers. Through this association with Martin Stark, Breavman, as Baal

Shem, makes connection with the divine.

Breavman concerns himself particularly with connections of various kinds. These connections form the core of the narrative. Speaking with Lisa after their first "contract" was broken up by the "Curse" and Lisa has been married, Breavman tells her, "I don't want to forget anyone I was ever connected with" (FG p. 97). Breavman has suggested to her that if she remembered about their childhood games what he remembers, then she would be in bed with him. The conversation that follows reveals much about both Breavman's spiritual and sexual quests:

He had intended by his recklessness to reach her quickly and disarm her, but he succeeded only in making the conversation fashionable.

"It's not simple for me. I'm not trying to be funny. Why do you want to sleep with me?"

"Because we once held hands."

"And that's a reason?"

"Humans are lucky to be connected in any way at all, even by the table between them."

"But you can't be connected to everyone. It wouldn't mean anything then."

"It would to me."

"But is going to bed the only way a man and woman can be connected?"

Breavman replied in terms of flirtation, not out of his real experience.

"What else is there? Conversation? I'm in the business and I have no faith in words whatever. Friendship? A friendship between a man and a woman which is not based on sex is either hypocrisy or masochism. When I see a woman's face transformed by the orgasm we have reached together, then I know we've met. Anything else is fiction. That's the vocabulary we speak in today. It's the only language left."

"Then it's a language which nobody understands. It's just become a babble."
 (FG p. 98)

But four days after this conversation Lisa calls him after midnight, wanting to see him. "They both sensed in that moment the mutual need to annihilate thought and speech. . . . They performed the act of love, as he had many times before, a protest against luck and circumstance" (FG p. 101). Apparently she understands the language of orgasm after all.

Relation and connection between two whole persons, complete in a union of body and soul, also constitutes the burden of much of Martin Buber's writing. He deplores the degradation of a person to an "It," a thing instead of an individual. His argument arises largely out of his studies of Hasidic teachings. Cohen concerns himself with a similar complete person. Although Buber does not refer specifically to sexual relations as being a means of achieving this connection, Cohen clearly does. We saw such a connection established in "When I Uncover Your Body" (SB p. 31). There is no reason to believe that the poet is speaking ironically in that poem. In The Favourite Game, however, the narrator's interjection in the conversation (FG p. 98) is contextually ironic. The narrator says that "Breavman replied in terms of flirtation, not out of his real ex-

perience" in the answer given to Lisa's query regarding the connection of a man and a woman. We know that Breavman's experience has included many sexual relationships, as the narrator is also careful to tell us a few pages later (FG p. 101). Exactly what the narrator's interjection means seems unimportant, but the context of the book does not allow us to interpret it as an ironic undercutting of what Breavman is saying. Breavman extends the Hasidic concept of the redemptive holiness of contact with others to include the redemption of the sexual urge through its place in the connection of people.

As the novel opens with scars left by the contact of two objects, so it concludes with the memory of Lisa's favorite game, which also involves impressions or scars left by the contact of bodies and snow. The narrator's definition of a scar leaves no doubt that he views the whole narration as something religious: "A scar is what happens when the word is made flesh" (FG p. 9). Exactly the same image is used in Christian theology to describe the connection between the divine and the human. The Word made flesh finds concrete manifestation in the Messiah. The game Breavman remembers at the end is the favorite game of Lisa with whom he had the conversation about connections. In the game the flesh leaves an impression on the snow, whereas a scar is the impression left by the word on the flesh:

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 lonely white field of blossom-like shapes with footprint stems.

(FG p. 192)

Turning back to that first night with Lisa the woman, as opposed to the child, we recognize in the parting of Breavman and Lisa an adult version of the childhood game: "He went to the window to watch her drive away. She rolled down her car window and waved at him, and suddenly they were waving harder and longer than people ever do. She was crying and pressing her palm up at him, back and forth in urgent semaphore, as if to erase out of the morning air, please, all contracts, vows, agreements, old or new. He leaned out of the window and with his signaling hand agreed to let the night go, to let her go free, because he had all he needed of her fixed in an afternoon" (FG p. 102). There has been a connection of bodies which has formed a pattern or a word that will perpetuate the connection.

Since this pattern is abstract, does not leave an

actual scar-like mark on the body, the poet can speak of it, in another poem, as the encounter of mist and the "dark green hill" in which no scar is left (SB p. 56). The encounter of lover and mistress does not leave a scar in the sense of violation of the flesh. The "scar" is spiritual and consequently will "endure / When one is gone and far" (SB p. 56).

This idea that the contact of two human beings, a contact of flesh, makes some lasting impression that survives the moment of connection is essentially similar to the Hasidic concept proposed by Reb Pinchas, a contemporary of the Baal Shem, and related by Jiri Langer in Nine Gates to the Chassidic Mysteries. Reb Pinchas speaks of an angelic being, born as a result of the contact of two persons:

Everybody has a special light burning for him in the higher world, totally different from the light of every other person. When two friends meet in this world, their lights up above unite for a moment, and out of the union of the two lights an angel is born. However the angel is only given sufficient strength to live one year. If the two friends meet again within the year they give the angel a further lease of life. But if they do not see each other for a whole year the angel wastes away and dies for lack of light. The Talmud bids us, when we see a friend whom we have not seen for a whole year, to bless God for "raising the dead". This is a strange commandment indeed, since neither of us have died. Whom then has God raised from the dead? Surely none other than the languishing angel, whose lease of life is renewed each time we meet.¹⁸

¹⁸ "The Ninth Gate," p. 218.

Considering the fact that Breavman identifies himself with the divine idiot, Martin Stark, alongside his urgent attempts to establish connections with people, evokes the feeling that all this occurs in a sort of "looney-bin." That is, if a connection can be made, at least for a brief moment, the people making the connection step out of their insanity into an affirming and hallowing embrace. The connection itself may be interpreted as insanity by conventional standards of sanity. We have already seen this image in "Credo":

Our ordinary morning lust
claimed my body first
and made me sane.

(SB p. 26)

A similar image recurs in numerous other poems including the well-known "Suzanne takes you down" in which the connection is made involuntarily:

Just when you mean to tell her
that you have no gifts¹⁹ to give her,
she gets you on her wave-length
and she lets the river answer
that you've always been her lover.

(PH p. 70)

The image of the second stanza, Jesus on his "lonely wooden tower," produces the same yielding effect on the

¹⁹ In the sung version of these lyrics, "gifts" is "love," which is more explicit in that love is always a gift, but a gift is not always love.

poet as does the mad woman. In fact, the "world" considers Jesus to be mad also:

but he himself was broken
 long before the sky would open,
 forsaken, almost human,
 he sank beneath your wisdom like a stone.
 (PH p. 70)

When in the third stanza the image is again Suzanne, she is not merely any "crazy" woman but one who now has redeeming powers, and so long as one has come into contact with her, the ordinary world begins to blaze with glory:

The sun pours down like honey
 on our lady of the harbour
 as she shows you where to look
 among the garbage and the flowers,
 there are heroes in the seaweed
 there are children in the morning,
 they are leaning out for love
 they will lean that way forever
 while Suzanne she holds the mirror.
 (PH p. 71)

Implied in these images is the idea that in the connection itself resides the hallowing power. The connection allows for consciousness of spiritual reality beyond the limitations of "sanity."

The image of the genuine connecting embrace also appears in the writings of Martin Buber. He states explicitly what the images discussed in the preceding paragraph imply: this genuine embrace and the "know-

ledge" it imparts expand into "knowledge" of the world:

This is the glorious paradox of our existence, that all comprehensibility of the world is only a footstool of its incomprehensibility. But this incomprehensibility has a new, a wonderful secret to bestow; it is like Adam's knowledge when he "knew" his wife Eve. What the most learned and ingenious combination of concepts denies, the humble and faithful beholding, grasping, knowing of any situation bestows. The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable: through the embracing of one of its beings. Each thing and being has a twofold nature: the passive, absorbable, useable, dissectible, comparable, combinable, rationalizable, and the other, the active, non-absorbable, unuseable, undissectible, incomparable, noncombinable, nonrationalizable. This is the confronting, the shaping, the bestowing in things. He who truly experiences a thing so that it springs up to meet him and embraces him of itself, has in that thing known the world.²⁰

Although the quotation ends with the true experience of a thing, the context clearly implies that the same statement could be made of a being, a person. In terms of Breavman's experience, his "embrace" of Lisa is such that she "springs up to meet him and embraces him of [herself] ," and with this confrontation Breavman receives "all he needed of her fixed in an afternoon" and he can "let her go free." This embrace is an experience that does not necessitate the ownership of the thing or being embraced in the sense of an enslaving marriage contract. There is a poem in The Spice-Box of Earth

²⁰ Pointing the Way: Collected Essays, p. 27. Reprinted in To Hallow This Life, ed. Jacob Trapp, p. 51.

called "Owning Everything" in which this idea comes poetically alive:

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,
 and because I sleep so near to you
 I cannot embrace
 or have my private love with them.

You worry that I will leave you.
 I will not leave you.
 Only strangers travel.
 Owning everything,
 I have nowhere to go.

(SB pp. 34-35)

Cohen makes extensive use of Hasidic wisdom in The Spice-Box of Earth and The Favourite Game in a search for new connections to heal the wounds caused by disillusionment and loneliness. As in Hasidism, Cohen discovers value in making connections with other people and in this horizontal connection, finding God. Contact with another person establishes a contact with the whole world and with God. As the flesh and spirit become united in this contact, consciousness becomes lib-

erated from the limitations of physical conditioning and inhibitions. Although this is an essentially mystical view of man's relation to the universe, it is at the same time deeply involved in concrete human interrelationships. Before Cohen returns to an intensive look at the theme of contact, in Beautiful Losers, he struggles with the "front-line" human situation in which any union of the fragments of man's existence is almost impossible.

Chapter IV

Fragmentation: "Front-Line" Human Experience

None of Cohen's other books have received reviews as consistently hostile as are those of Flowers for Hitler. Even more consistent is Louis Dudek's continued view of Cohen's work. He says, "Cohen makes his troubled life--what he calls his 'neurotic affiliations'--the subject of his poetry, but having done that he would have us consider it purely as poetry without examining the life. It cannot be done . . . Cohen's rudderless wit and fantasy save these poems, but even this liberated imagination is filled with reeling despair. The centre of the mind is never found, the 'heart,' as he says, is never reached."¹ Dudek at least is not disappointed as many other critics were. Desmond Pacey feels that Cohen has not mastered his new style. What is best in this new volume is what Cohen has done well before: love songs and fantasies.² Cohen himself predicted the reason for an anticipated bad reception of the volume, thus forcing reviewers to label themselves in writing their reviews. He stated that "this book

¹ The Montreal Star (October 30, 1964), p. 8.

² "Three Books of Canadian Verse," Fiddlehead, LXIV (Spring, 1965), 71-75.

moves me from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dung pile of the front-line writer. I didn't plan it that way . . . My sounds are too new, therefore people will say: this is derivative, this is slight, his power has failed. Well, I say 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."³ On the basis of "Waiting for Marianne," Harry Howith demonstrates the truth, as he sees it, of the jacket-blurb quoted in the preceding sentence.⁴ On the other hand, A. W. Purdy, in "Leonard Cohen: A Personal Outlook," maintains that the jacket-blurb is not true. He argues that Cohen does not really move off in a new direction at all.⁵ I take the view that both contentions are partially correct. This may appear to be a coward's position, but I shall maintain it none the less.

Obviously much of the subject matter and certainly the tone of the volume differ from those of the earlier books. Protest pieces such as "The Project" (FH p. 63) recur frequently in Flowers for Hitler. They are dir-

³ Canadian Author and Bookman, XL (Spring, 1965), 12-13.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Canadian Literature, XXIII (Spring, 1956), 7-16.

ected against both materialistic values and political activity. In this sense the disillusionment of Let Us Compare Mythologies has re-emerged after being superseded by the more positive values of The Spice-Box of Earth and The Favourite Game. The images in Flowers for Hitler are primarily those of immediate experience and the fantastic exaggeration of these experiences. The poetic thrust is still a search for connections, not in explicit traditional images and connotations as in the earlier volumes, but in the fragmentation of the contemporary human condition. The mind has been exploded, and in Flowers for Hitler Cohen attempts to find all the pieces and recreate a whole thing, something beautiful as a flower, out of the charred ruins of this world's gas ovens. The only thing that is sacred in this situation is the tendency to unify. Whereas in The Spice-Box of Earth the preoccupation was with the sense of balance and recreated beauty, in Flowers for Hitler it is with the ugly chaos in which the balance must be found.

As the epigraph to "The Glass Dog" (FH p. 70) indicates, the poet attempts in vain to connect things, even the inanimate "glass" and animate "dog" of the title:

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

The poet, as demonstrated in his walk over the mountain, possesses some magical power, but with his own collapse there appears to be no permanent value in his apparent miracle:

I walked over the mountain with my glass dog.
 The mushrooms trembled and balls of rain
 fell off their roofs.
 I whistled at the trees to come closer:
 they jumped at the chance:
 apples, acorns popped through the air.
 Dandelions by the million
 staggered into parachutes. A white jewelled
 wind in the shape of an immense spool of gauze
 swaddled every moving limb.
 I collapsed slowly over the water-filled pebbles.
 (PH p. 71)

Whether this is a description of a drug trip or a poetical fantasy trip is not really the important issue. The point is that this attempt at a magical expansion of consciousness or unifying of a fragmented world ends in collapse.

Jon Ruddy, in a Maclean's Magazine article including an interview with Cohen, says of him that "he prays a lot, smokes pot and takes LSD (30 'trips' so far)--and for him the praying and the taking of hallucinogens and the fasting are all part of the same thing, which is spiritual experience."⁶ He adds, however, Cohen's claim that pot and LSD do nothing more for him than provide a

⁶ Maclean's Magazine, LXXIX (October 1, 1966), 19.

review of the place he lives in all the time. The hallucinogen at best opens the way for a spiritual experience. At this point many people would register a strong caveat or outrightly deny the possibility of an association between mind-expanding drugs and the religious experience. This thesis is not designed to discuss at any great length the psychology of drugs and religion, but I do wish to register the assumptions upon which its writing is based. Some users of hallucinogens maintain that the expanded consciousness induced by hallucinogenic drugs is essentially the consciousness experienced in a visionary religious trance. Most exponents of such a view, like Timothy Leary, Colin Wilson and Ken Kesey, are generally discredited as being highly irresponsible and biased people. However, when a man like Aldous Huxley describes the religious visionary experience as a chemically induced phenomenon like that of the drug experience⁷ one would anticipate a wider acceptance of the correlation between mind-expanding drugs and the religious experience. It appears quite certain that the hallucinogenic drug can at least open the road to a religious experience, if it is not itself such an experience.

At any rate my position tends toward recognizing

⁷ The Doors of Perception / Heaven and Hell
(Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1954, 1959).

the religious quality of the drug experience, particularly the quality of opening doors through which spiritual power can flow. This is not to say that Flowers for Hitler is a collection of the records of various drug trips. In fact, the obvious argument against considering Flowers for Hitler as such a collection seems to be substantial enough. As Huxley put it, "the mescaline taker sees no reason for doing anything in particular and finds most of the causes for which, at ordinary times, he was prepared to act and suffer, profoundly uninteresting. He can't be bothered with them, for the good reason that he has better things to think about."⁸ If anywhere, Cohen reveals himself as an activist in Flowers for Hitler. In Parasites of Heaven, perhaps, a case could be constructed for a sort of "trip-poetry," but even so its validity relative to the spiritual quest referred to in this thesis is not nullified, if we can accept Huxley's view of the correlation between hallucinogens and spiritual perception.

In Flowers for Hitler the inability to establish a cosmic connection through some magical means does not eliminate that possibility through genuine relation with another person. Although the general tenor of Flowers for Hitler rings a harsh note of "front-line"

⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

existence, there are oases like "The Rest Is Dross"

(FH p. 76) in which the lovers still find hope:

We meet at a hotel
 with many quarters for the radio
 surprised that we've survived as lovers
 not each other's
 but lovers still
 with outrageous hope and habits in the craft
 which embarrass us slightly
 as we let them be known
 the special caress the perfect inflammatory word
 the starvation we do not tell about
 We do what only lovers can
 make a gift out of necessity
 Looking at our clothes
 folded over the chair
 I see we no longer follow fashion
 and we own our own skins
 God I'm happy we've forgotten nothing
 and can love each other
 for years in the world

The relation must be genuine. To say that Cohen accepts Hasidic doctrine and Hasidism as such as a way of life is claiming too much, but he does see something embrace-able in the insane, whom he compares to Hasidim in the poem "Disguises" (FH pp. 116-118). Suddenly, finding himself alone, everyone else is away "making movies," he exclaims:

I embrace the changeless:
 the committed men in public wards
 oblivious as Hassidim
 who believe that they are someone else.
 (FH p. 118)

Among the insane, the Hasidim, Abelard, the betrayed Duchess, Napoleon and Rockefeller, who were all able to

overcome themselves for some various purposes, he finds comfort:

You comfort me
 incorrigible betrayers of the self
 as I salute fashion
 and bring my mind
 like a promiscuous air-hostess
 handing out parachutes in a nose dive
 bring my butchered mind
 to bear upon the facts.

(FH p. 118)

The point of this list of people must be their capacity for consciousness beyond the restrictions of the conditioned brain, the "reducing valve of brain," to use Huxley's phrase. They have nothing else in common. The comfort lies in the hope that when the "butchered mind," butchered by fragmented existence, is brought "to bear upon the facts," consciousness of these "facts" will expand beyond the limitations generally placed upon the mind by the brain, and that in this expanded consciousness some healing power will unite the flesh and the spirit.

The desire to be in a "state of grace," a certain balance in the chaos of the world, has clearly been an element of the poetic impulse in the earlier work. Many of the images in Flowers for Hitler, particularly the emphasis on machinery, including the telephone, are new, but they form a connecting link with Beautiful Losers and the later poetry, just as the possibility of finding a

balance or a state of grace links Beautiful Losers to the earlier poetry. Flowers for Hitler is a hard look at fragmented reality. Desmond Pacey speaks of the new element in Flowers for Hitler as taking 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."⁹ Beautiful Losers goes on from there to explore in a realistic and symbolic way the possibility of making connections, particularly through the "energy of love" and in spite of the self: connecting things and beings through an expanded consciousness. The romanticism of the earlier writing in The Spice-Box of Earth and The Favourite Game, such as it is, has been superseded in Beautiful Losers by a passionate trip through the reality and surreality of human experience. The language is poetic, powerful, dirty, beautiful, passionate and spiritual, and frequently all of these at the same time. The inside jacket-blurb on the Viking edition of Beautiful Losers calls the novel "a love story, a psalm, a Black Mass, a monument, a satire, a prayer, a shriek, a road map through the wilderness, a joke, a tasteless affront, an hallucination, a bore, an irrelevant display of diseased

⁹ "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen," Canadian Literature, XXXIV (Autumn, 1967), 16.

virtuosity, a Jesuitical tract, an Orange sneer, a scatological Lutheran extravagance--in short a disagreeable religious epic of incomparable beauty." It is all of this and more. In it contact is made with the energy of love as manifested in the "ordinary eternal machinery" of the composite Woman, and with this contact the submission required for sainthood is found.

Chapter V

Sainthood: "Submission" and "Balance"

The "sainthood" of Beautiful Losers represents a culmination of the combined quest for spiritual and fleshly fulfilment embarked upon in Cohen's earlier works. The saint, as the searcher learns, is one who finds a balance between the spirit and the flesh such that he is rendered submissive before another person, before the universe and before God. Since neither the poetry--Parasites of Heaven and the new entries in Selected Poems: 1956-1968--nor the two long play recordings--Songs of Leonard Cohen and Songs from a Room--published and recorded after the publication of Beautiful Losers, in 1966, add any substantially new direction to this culmination, but rather expand what appears in Beautiful Losers, I will focus this discussion on that novel.

Beautiful Losers has been called a symbolic novel,¹ but I suggest that although it is symbolic, it is so only in a certain sense. Traditional and contemporary symbols do appear and influence the meaning. But the novel is basically realistic in the sense of the importance of everyday experience, and surrealistic as de-

¹ Desmond Pacey, "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen," Canadian Literature, XXXIV (Autumn, 1967), 5-23.

defined by Roger Cardinal: "Surrealist art is only the more or less organized expression of a state of mind, one that accepts the existence of a special relationship between subjective consciousness and objective reality, thereby recognizing the existence of a 'surreality'."² Edith, Mary, the blonde housewife, and Catherine are all individual persons, not various manifestations of either Isis or the Virgin Mary. However, the women take on an entirely new dimension of significance by standing in relation to the mythological Isis and the Virgin Mary. Dr. Pacey's article "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen" presents a perceptive analysis of Beautiful Losers, but I cannot understand the novel to be as centrally concerned with the minute sort of symbolism that he suggests. The symbolism is there, all right, and does add something to the understanding of the novel, but I do not consider it to be of as much importance as Pacey's article implies.

Perhaps the most appropriate category to use in defining Beautiful Losers is poetic. Whatever else the novel may be, certainly it is poetic. This poetic impulse links all of Cohen's work, whether poem, novel or folk song. Like Beautiful Losers, Cohen's songs and singing voice are powerful essentially because of their

² "André Breton: The Surrealist Sensibility," Mosaic, I: 2 (January, 1968), 112.

poetic thrust. In the poetic quality of Beautiful Losers resides the novel's great evocative power.

To ascribe to Beautiful Losers one exclusive interpretation, one exclusive intensity of meaning, would be foolish. The structure, images, symbols and rhythms all militate against a single interpretation. By the same token it seems equally impossible to comprehend the complete gamut of meaning. It is more complex than it appears to be on first reading, and with each successive reading one notices new elements that serve to bind the materials of the novel together into a pattern. The various nuances of meaning evoked by associations of images interact with each other to form a multi-leveled harmony. Unfortunately some of the elements of this harmony may not be analysed fully because of their tangential relation to the present topic, or simply because of an incomplete understanding of the element.

Certainly of central concern in the novel is the question of sainthood, a problem touched upon in all of the earlier works. The narrator of the first section of the novel, whom I will refer to simply as "I" for the sake of convenience (Cohen gives him no name), is a Herzog-like scholar descending into the depths of history in order to find information about, or more accurately, to penetrate the Mohawk saint, Catherine Tekakwitha, and have her permeate him. This descent into the past

does not occur in a vacuum, unconnected with the immediate present in which "I"'s wife Edith and male friend and lover F. live. As we have seen earlier, this paradox of time fascinates Cohen and in some form appears frequently in his work. Beautiful Losers is no exception. Even Edith and F. do not exist merely in the present. In fact, at the time of writing "I" writes about them as they exist in his mind. Both have died some time ago. The narration shifts three times in point of view: from that of "I" to that of F., in a long letter given to "I" only after F.'s death; to that of a third person narrator who concludes the novel with an account of the rebirth or apotheosis of "I", who at this point appears indistinguishable from F.. With this fusion of identity and of time, (or perhaps it is rather an expanded consciousness which perceives past and present in one all-inclusive Moment), the search for sainthood achieves a depth of meaning that it could not have in either the past or present alone, or from the exclusive point of view of any one of the three narrators.

"I"'s research frequently causes him to despair in the conscious connection of events, past and present, for the purpose of finding meaning. He is continuously moving back and forth in time. On one occasion, upon studying Catherine's "remarkable spirit of willingness" to submit both to the menial labor imposed upon her by

her tribe and the restrictions imposed by the Church,
he exclaims:

O Sinister Church! F., is this what you want from me? Is this my punishment for not sliding with Edith? She was waiting for me all covered in red grease and I was thinking of my white shirt. I have since applied the tube to myself, out of curiosity, a single gleaming column, useless to me as F.'s akropolis that morning. Now I read that Catherine Tekakwitha had a great gift for embroidery and handicraft, and that she made beautiful embroidered leggings, tobacco pouches, moccasins, and wampums. Hour after hour she worked on these, roots and eelskins, shells, porcelain, quills. To be worn by anyone but her! Whom was her mind adorning? Her wampums were especially cherished. Was this the way she mocked money? Perhaps her contempt freed her to invent elaborate designs and color arrangements just as F.'s contempt for commerce enabled him to buy a factory. Or do I misread them both? I'm tired of facts, I'm tired of speculations, I want to be consumed by unreason. I want to be swept along. Right now I don't care what goes on under her blanket. I want to be covered with unspecific kisses. I want my pamphlets praised. Why is my work so lonely?
(BL pp. 45-46)

The reference to sliding with Edith refers to an earlier occasion on which Edith wanted "I" to join her in being "other people." He refused to surrender his individuality and join her (BL pp. 14-15). In contrast to his refusal, Edith submitted to "I"'s wishes totally just a week before "she was found under the elevator, a 'suicide'" (BL p. 109). But more of this later in the chapter. The point is that "I" has been attempting to connect "facts" and has begun to despair and realize the

futility of such an activity if it remains exclusively objective. He wants to be "consumed by unreason" and perhaps in this way overcome his loneliness.

A similar situation of "unreason" exists in the poem and song "Suzanne takes you down" (PH pp. 70-71). There must be a contact between body and mind, the formation of a complete person, before meaning can emerge. Again the paradox of time is superseded by this very contact, a contact that flows in all directions. Not only does the poet touch the "perfect body" of the madwoman, Suzanne, with his "mind," but Jesus touches the poet's "perfect body" with his "mind" and Suzanne touches "her perfect body with her mind." The touch inspires a mutual trust and the poet wants "to travel blind," not asking for understanding of the relationship because he can feel that it is genuine and mutual. "I" has more difficulty in achieving the touch.

F. has advised him that the whole point of his research is to "go down on a saint," advice that neither "I" nor the reader can understand at the time it is given. Both learn to understand it as the novel progresses. "I" stands bewildered in his "constipated" effort at research:

Catherine Tekakwitha, is there something sinister in your escape from the Plague? Do I have to love a mutant? Look at me, Catherine Tekakwitha, a man with a stack of contagious papers, limp in

the groin. Look at you, Catherine Tekakwitha, your face half eaten, unable to go outside in the sun because of the damage to your eyes. Shouldn't I be chasing someone earlier than you? Discipline, as F. said. This must not be easy. And if I knew where my research led, where would the danger be? I confess that I don't know the point of anything. Take one step to the side and it's all absurd. What is this fucking of a dead saint? It's impossible. We all know that. I'll publish a paper on Catherine Tekakwitha, that's all. I'll get married again. The National Museum needs me. I've been through a lot, I'll make a marvelous lecturer. I'll pass off F.'s sayings as my own, become a wit, a mystic wit.

(BL p. 35)

His constipation is both literal (he refers to that condition frequently) and symbolic of his inability to function properly and understand the process that he finds himself involved in. On one level he is quite right in asserting that his activity will result simply in the publication of a dissertation on Catherine Tekakwitha, but at this point he fails to recognize that he is also learning what sainthood means in his immediate experience rather than in the experience of a "dead saint."

Catherine Tekakwitha is a seventeenth century Indian saint, a virgin who decided that her body was not hers to give to a man and took the oath of the Virgin in the dedication of herself to the Jesuits' God. But Catherine becomes more than an historical figure in the novel. Already in the dedication of her body to God lie the seeds of the larger meaning of sainthood. In part she is the traditional symbol of the saint set into an immediately

present context with all the tensions implicit in such a setting. But she also manifests the specific particularity of "I"'s search for meaning. Her aunts bring a young brave to her in the hope that she will forget her ideas of sainthood and virginity, take a lover and rejoin the life of the tribe:

A strange fish hovered above the waters of the Mohawk River, luminous. All at once, and for the first time, Catherine Tekakwitha knew that she lived in a body, a female body! She felt the presence of her thighs and knew what they could squeeze, she felt the flower life of her nipples, she felt the sucking hollowness of her belly, the loneliness of her buttocks, the door ache of her little cunt, a cry for stretching, and she felt the existence of each cunt hair, they were not numerous and so short they did not even curl! She lived in a body, a woman's body, and it worked! She sat on juices. . . .

She lived in a woman's body but--it did not belong to her! It was not hers to offer! With a desperate slingshot thought she hurled her cunt forever into the night. It was not hers to offer to the handsome fellow, though his arms were strong and his own forest magic not inconsiderable. . . . Ah, the pain eased, the torn flesh she finally did not own healed in its freedom, and a new description of herself, so brutally earned, forced itself into her heart: she was Virgin.

(BL pp. 50-51)

However, this self-imposed virginity does not nullify her physical desirability nor her own excitability. Father Le P. Jacques de Lamberville finds Catherine inside her tent, alone because of a sore toe. The Father's kindness towards her grows in intensity unmistakably like the love play preceding the act of love.

As he removes her moccasin, touching and warming each toe, she keeps interjecting "Yes!", "Yes!". When he begins to kiss the toes "he was kneeling as Jesus had kneeled before a naked foot. In an orderly fashion, he inserted his tongue between each toe, four thrusts, so smooth the skin between, and white! He gave his attention to each toe, mouthing it, covering it with saliva, evaporating the saliva by blowing, biting it playfully. . . . Francis had done the same for lepers" (BL p. 87). This implicitly sexual activity is placed on the same level as spiritual fulfilment. In her ecstasy Catherine exclaims "Baptize me!" and when the priest hesitates she gives him her other foot, and says, "I have two feet." There is essentially no difference: if the priest will continue the sexual activity, she will be baptized. Sublimation acts as baptismal water. Although Catherine may think that she has overcome sexual desire by hurling it into the forest with that one "slingshot thought," the context indicates rather a sublimation of that desire, perhaps a directing of the "evil urge," to use Buber's phrase. Perhaps she has achieved what F. tells "I" the modern man has lost: "All parts of the body are erotogenic. Assholes can be trained with whips and kisses, that's elementary. Pricks and cunts have become monstrous! Down with genital imperialism! All flesh can come! Don't you see what we have lost?" (BL

p. 32).

Sexual activity, far from destroying man, is used in another context (BL pp. 128-132) as an "Andacwandet" cure by Catherine's uncle. Catherine somehow participates in the cure. The uncle has all the young maidens and their lovers brought to his cabin for an extended orgy which initiates his cure:

Uncle felt better toward midnight and got off his mat and crawled slowly down the length of the cabin, stopping here and there to rest his head on a free buttock or leave his fingers in a dripping hole, taking chances with his nose between "bouncers" for the sake of microscopic perspectives, always with an eye for the unusual or a joke for the grotesque. . . . All his girls came back to him, all his ferny intercourse, all the feathery holes and gleaming dials, and as he crawled from pair to pair, from these lovers to those lovers, from sweet position to sweet position, from pump to pump, from gobble to gobble, from embrace to embrace--he suddenly knew the meaning of the greatest prayer he had ever learned, the first prayer in which Manitou had manifested himself, the greatest and truest sacred formula.

(BL p. 130)

Uncle realizes that the essence of the prayer, a repetition of the two lines "I change / I am the same," existed in the love act. The important point is that "Catherine had lain among them and left with them unnoticed": her presence and participation hallows the whole activity. She tells the priest that "it was acceptable."

In F.'s later supplement to "I"'s account of the part Catherine performed in the Andacwandet cure, the

cure and the Christian faith are brought together. On March 25, 1679, the day Catherine formally took the "Oath of Virginity," "she made the Fathers very happy with this secular offering. The little church was filled with bright candles. She loved the candles, too. Charity! Charity for us who love the candles only, or the Love which the candles make manifest. In some great eye I believe the candles are perfect currency, just as are all the Andacwandets, the Fuck Cures" (BL p. 201). F. further supplements Catherine's story with a reference to modern screen sex goddesses: "Who will exhume Brigitte Bardot and see if her fingers bleed? Who will test the sweet smell in the tomb of Marilyn Monroe?" (BL p. 205). The bleeding fingers and sweet smell refer to an earlier discussion (BL pp. 126-127) in which these phenomena appear as confirmation of the dead person's sainthood. Thus it is among the sex goddesses that one should look to find saints.

Just what, then, is a saint? That question, of course, is never answered totally in any one place, but in Chapter 40 of Book One in Beautiful Losers "I" makes an attempt at an extensive definition. It includes ideas that Cohen himself has stated as part of his definition of a "state of grace" in an interview with Pierre Berton reproduced both in the film Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen, and in Jon Ruddy's article on Cohen.³

This evidence indicates that for Cohen at least "I" is beginning to get to the heart of sainthood in this definition:

A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that a saint dissolves the chaos even for himself, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory. He rides the drifts like an escaped ski. His course is a caress of the hill. His track is a drawing of the snow in a moment of its particular arrangement with wind and rock. Something in him so loves the world that he gives himself to the laws of gravity and chance. Far from flying with the angels, he traces with the fidelity of a seismograph needle the state of the solid bloody landscape. His house is dangerous and finite, but he is at home in the world. He can love the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart. It is good to have among us such men, such balancing monsters of love.
(BL pp. 95-96)

Again this sounds in some respects much like Martin Buber's view of Hasidism: "It would be contrary to the faith and humor of our existence (Hasidism is both faithful and humorous) to suppose that there is a level of being into which we only need to lift ourselves in order to get 'behind' the problematic. The absurd is given to me that

³ Jon Ruddy, "Is the world (or anybody) ready for Leonard Cohen?" Maclean's Magazine, LXXIX (October 1, 1966), 18-19, 33-34.

I may endure and sustain it with my life; this, the enduring and sustaining of the absurd, is the meaning which I can experience."⁴ Cohen calls the "enduring and sustaining of the absurd" a finding of "balance in the chaos of existence."

"I"'s definition differs from that of traditional Christianity in some very obvious ways, but the important differences are more subtle. Where the conventional saint learns to deny and hate the world, the saint of Beautiful Losers "is at home in the world." In part the difference may of course be semantic. Precisely what is meant by the term "world" varies according to the attitude of the group that defines it. But I believe it is safe to say that the conventional saint must suffer infinitely more than he enjoys. In fact, he should enjoy suffering. By generalizing and oversimplifying one might say that the conventional saint ought to refrain from that which gives pleasure. He ought to be in some measure ascetic. The saint that "I" describes may not always experience pleasure, but he has an affirmative attitude to the particularity of creation including pleasurable stimulation. Both views of the saint, however, involve denial of the self. The popular traditional concept speaks of self-denial in terms of denying one's desires,

⁴ The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (New York, 1960), p. 179.

particularly desire for pleasure. "I"'s concept involves denial of the self in the sense that Huxley's "reducing valve of brain" must be by-passed in order to experience an expanded consciousness. For example, "I" selfishly refuses to join Edith in the red-grease attempt to "be other people" mentioned on page 71. After refusing her, he speculates: "Perhaps she meant: Come on a new journey with me, a journey only strangers can take, and we can remember it when we are ourselves again, and therefore never be merely ourselves again. Perhaps she had some landscape in mind where she always meant to travel, just as I envisage a northern river, a night as clean and bright as river pebbles, for my supreme trip with Catherine Tekakwitha. I should have gone with Edith" (BL pp. 14-15). If "I" had been willing to deny himself, his preconditional aversion to the red grease, he might have passed through a door into new worlds of consciousness. He refused and lost, at that point, the capacity to become a saint.

This new definition of a saint emerges not out of the realm of abstract thought, but out of immediate experience. And the illustrative experience that "I" remembers is one in which the "genital imperialism" (BL p. 32) has for a moment been overcome:

I remember once slobbering over Edith's thigh.

I sucked, I kissed the long brown thing, and it was Thigh, Thigh, Thigh--Thigh softening and spreading as it flowed in a perfume of bacon to the mound of Cunt--Thigh sharpening and hardening as I followed the direction of its tiny hairs and bounced into Kneecap. I don't know what Edith did (maybe one of her magnificent lubrication squirts) or what I did (maybe one of my mysterious sprays of salivation) but all at once my face was wet and my mouth slid on skin; it wasn't Thigh or Cunt or any chalk schoolboy slogan (nor was I Fucking): it was just a shape of Edith: then it was just a humanoid shape: then it was just a shape--and for a blessed second truly I was not alone, I was part of a family. That was the first time we made love. It never happened again. Is that what you will cause me to feel, Catherine Tekakwitha?

(BL p. 96)

In all of his mechanical fumbling, this is what F. hopes to teach "I".

Rather than requiring objective knowledge about what to do and what not to do in order to walk the saintly path, this sainthood involves walking the given path of life in a way which leaves the walker open for genuine relation to others and so to God. F.'s mechanical inventions are useful in teaching the user something about sainthood, but they are not the road to sainthood. In fact F., who early in the novel already said, "who am I to refuse the universe?" (BL p. 6), must learn from the self-feeding Danish Vibrator what submission means. He prays:

O Father, Nameless and Free of Description,
lead me from the Desert of the Possible. Too
long I have dealt with Events. Too long I labored

to become an Angel. I chased Miracles with a bag of Power to salt their wild Tails. I tried to dominate Insanity so I could steal its Information. I tried to program the Computers with Insanity. I tried to create Grace to prove that Grace existed. Do not punish Charles Axis. We could not see the Evidence so we stretched our Memories. Dear Father, accept this confession: we did not train ourselves to Receive because we believed there wasn't Anything to Receive and we could not endure with this belief.

(BL p. 178)

This is what F. meant earlier when he tells "I" that "I am going to show you everything happening. That is as far as I can take you. I cannot bring you into the middle of action. My hope is that I have prepared you for this pilgrimage. I didn't suspect the pettiness of my dream. I believed that I had conceived the vastest dream of my generation: I wanted to be a magician. That was my idea of glory. Here is a plea based on my whole experience: do not be a magician, be magic" (BL p. 164). Performance of miracles was also one of the aspects of the Baal Shem that interested Breavman in The Favourite Game.⁵ Like F. he also found that his magic was not obeyed, mistresses did not heed his commands. Magic requires specific objective knowledge; it requires an ordering of the chaos. F.'s discovery corresponds closely to the essential Hasidic view of man's relation to the world and through it to God: "In its own sphere Hasidism is

⁵ However, unlike the Baal Shem, Breavman equated miracles with magic.

agnostic; it is not concerned with objective knowledge that can be formulated and schematized, but with vital knowledge, with Biblical 'knowing' in the reciprocity of the essential relation to God."⁶ That is, "knowing" the world and all of Creation in an immediate sense of involvement; being the magic instead of the detached magician.

The whole business of sainthood revolves around the problem of connections and contact. F.'s emphatic instruction to "connect nothing . . . Place things side by side on your arborite table, if you must, but connect nothing!" (BL p. 17) is carefully qualified. He continues later in the conversation with: "You're pathetic. That's why you must not try to connect anything, your connection would be pathetic. The Jews didn't let young men study the Cabala. Connections should be forbidden citizens under seventy" (BL p. 18). Connections must be made, but "I" is in no position to make them. Once "I" has learned to forget his "white shirt" he will not need to search for connections, they will become evident. All that is required of the saint is to learn to submit.

The Telephone Dance which climaxes in the "ordinary eternal machinery" statement is one of the primary examples of connection. Ironically it is first described by

⁶ Martin Buber, The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, p. 178.

"I" who at the time is far from understanding it:

Her breasts were small, somewhat muscular, fruit with fiber. Her freakish nipples make me want to tear up my desk when I remember them, which I do at this very instant, miserable paper memory while my cock soars hopelessly into her mangled coffin, and my arms wave my duties away, even you Catherine Tekakwitha, whom I court with this confession. Her wondrous nipples were dark as mud and very long when stiffened by desire, over an inch high, wrinkled with wisdom and sucking. I stuffed them into my nostrils (one at a time). I stuffed them in my ears. I believed continually that if anatomy permitted and I could have stuffed a nipple into each of my ears at the same time--shock treatment! What is the use of reviving this fantasy, impossible then as now? But I want those leathery electrodes in my head! I want to hear the mystery explained, I want to hear the conversations between those stiff wrinkled sages. There were such messages going between them that even Edith could not hear, signals, warnings, conceits. Revelations! Mathematics! I told F. about this the night of her death.

--You could have had everything you wanted.

--Why do you torment me, F.?

--You lost yourself in particulars. All parts of the body are erotogenic, or at least have the possibility of so becoming. If she had stuck her index fingers in your ears you would have got the same results.

(BL. pp. 27-28)

Of course, F. is speaking from experience; he and Edith invented the Telephone Dance which proved the erotogenic potential of all parts of the body. This is what "I" might have experienced if he had joined Edith's red grease adventure, and what he did experience the first time he made love with Edith. The problem that "I" seems to encounter is that he cannot find this balance, he slips into it unawares at times and cannot remember the conditions

under which it occurred.

Together F. and Edith attempt to teach "I" how to make contact with the energy of love. F. will show him what "happens" while Edith will serve to bring him into a "state of grace." Both of them, however, realize that they will not be with "I" when he fulfills the "rare whisper of love" that F. feels beginning in his heart during the Argentina hotel experience with the Danish Vibrator (BL p. 181). "They did not know when or how the parting would be completed, but it began that moment," the moment they had learned to submit and through submission go beyond themselves to find contact with the energy of love. On the night "I" realizes that F. and Edith are using only a mixture of holy water and water from Tekakwitha's Spring instead of heroin, and still achieving a drug experience, Edith performs for "I" exactly what he wants her to do. A week later she commits suicide in an effort to teach "I" that he cannot use her as a thing to satisfy himself. He must learn to submit and not cause others to submit to him. He has learned to submit finally as we see in the blonde housewife scene (BL pp. 234-235).

Only when "sin"⁷ is confessed can it be overcome. "I" must be brought to the place of confession before

⁷ "Sin" as that which prevents contact with God through contact with another person.

he can become a saint. The confession, which F. forces out of him, clearly explains the nature of the barrier "I" had to cross. The confession is also identical to the one that F. himself made: "I wanted to be a magician." "I" confesses that he wanted to be Captain Marvel, Plastic Man, Batman, and Superman who was never Clark Kent. He wanted miracles, and to "wake up suddenly with x-ray Vision" (BL pp. 115-116). Like F. "I" wanted to be the magician and form order out of chaos and direct the actions of other people. When "I" confesses, he does not yet see what his "redemption" will be like, but by the end of the winter that he spends alone in the treehouse he is prepared for apotheosis as a saint. Spring brings him out of the filthy treehouse back into the heart of the System Theatre there to become a saint. The similarity of the descriptions of what occurs when "I" is apotheosized, and what occurs when Catherine dies, indicates that like Catherine "I" has become a saint (BL pp. 213 & 241).

This whole discovery of ecstasy in submission is explicitly linked to the religious discovery that "God is alive." F. writes his whole long letter with "one hand up [the] juicy cunt" of Mary Woolnd (BL p. 158). This is the source of his ecstasy and the source of his knowledge, "the sweet burden of [his] argument": "God is alive. Magic is afoot" (BL p. 157). It is also the

source of his escape from the insane asylum to be united with "I" in his sainthood.⁸

What I have said about the meaning of sainthood and of Beautiful Losers arises out of the interaction of the characters in the novel and the mythological symbolic figures introduced. There are enough clues to connect all the women in the sort of way the faces of Breavman's mistresses fuse into one face and one woman (FG p. 165), and these connected women are then related to the Egyptian Isis and the Christian Virgin Mary.

Although the women function as individuals, as do Breavman's mistresses, they clearly fuse into one female character. Catherine Tekakwitha, the subject of "I"'s research, and Edith, the wife of "I", are both Indians of a tribe called the "A--s."⁹ Both Edith and Catherine were twenty-four years old when they died (BL pp. 27 & 210). F. tells "I" in his letter that Catherine "secretly gave up eating on Mondays and Tuesdays" after she had

⁸ The burden of the argument is not really changed if one sees F. and "I" distinctly as two individual people; however, it appears quite likely, by comparing, among others, pages 153 and 184 with 239, that F. and "I" are really two elements of one person. Another example is the relation between constipation and the use of heroin as described on page 189. F. uses heroin (we are never told that "I" does) yet it is "I" who is chronically constipated.

⁹ "I" is doing a dissertation on Catherine Tekakwitha. He calls it his "work on the A--s" (BL p. 19), and on the following page he identifies Edith as an "A--."

given up eating on most other days already. He then comments, "Try and think back. Do you remember Edith ever eating?" (BL p. 200). Similarly, after telling how the priests filled a small bag with mud from Catherine's tomb and bestowed upon it the power of a charm, he asks, "Is this familiar, dear comrade? Did Edith move between us like a package of mud?" (BL p. 217).

The other two women are also identified as "A--s" or at least as Indians. When F. escapes from the insane asylum, Mary Woolnd, as she is being torn to pieces by police dogs, cries, "Run! Run, F. Run for all of us A--s!" (BL p. 226). Mary Woolnd and Edith are also identified in that both are nurses: Mary literally in the asylum, and Edith figuratively as the nurse of F. and "I" (BL p. 148). The identification of the blonde housewife with the "A--s" is more tenuous, but we are explicitly told that although she was naked below the waist, she was wearing moccasins on her feet (BL pp. 234-235).

What makes this fusion of the women significant is their relation to Isis. During the Argentina hotel experience, the experience that taught submission to F. and Edith, Edith responds to F.'s enquiry about her identity with a Greek exclamation: "Ἴσις ἐγὼ εἰμί πάντα γεγονός καί ὄν καί ἐσόμενον καί τό ἐμόν πέπλον οὐδείς τῶν θνητῶν ἀπεκαλυψε!" (BL p. 183). "I am Isis having become, being, and about to be all things and no

mortal removed my robe!"¹⁰ Isis is the wife of Osiris, and the Egyptian goddess of femininity, receptivity, and the producing principle in nature. Together with Osiris she rules the world below. The Egyptian cult of Isis promised to lead its votaries to sanctification of life and true perception of the life divine through abstinence from food and sensual pleasures, and through expiations and purifications. Isis also heals and rejoins the fragments of Osiris' torn body. Edith is spoken of as "our perfect nurse" (BL p. 148); she is a healer. Edith is also associated with the young Abishag whom David had in his bed to comfort him during the last years of his life (BL pp. 58 & 59).

Although Catherine does not make an explicit claim to be Isis, as Edith does, she also is identified with the goddess. This identification is introduced on the first page of the novel when "I" says, "I've come far after you, Catherine Tekakwitha. I want to know what goes on under that rosy blanket." The allusion only becomes clear after Edith's statement that "no mortal removed my robe" (BL p. 183). It is also Edith who tells "I" the story of the special feast held in honor of the newly baptised Catherine Tekakwitha (BL pp. 97-104). The story follows immediately after "I"'s analysis of

¹⁰ Translation by Dr. E. D. Eagle, Head of the Classics Department at the University of Winnipeg.

sainthood and the recalling of the first time he made love with Edith. Catherine accidentally spills a glass of wine on the white tablecloth, apparently an ordinary event. But the wine stain begins to spread and permeates, with its "chromatic metamorphosis," all the objects and people in the room. "I" has the "impression" that the story is "apocalyptic." He enters upon a discussion of the meaning and derivation of the term. "Apocalyptic" recurs in Edith's Greek exclamation. The spatial position of the story in the novel connects it with the discussion on sainthood and the recalling of an orgasmic experience with Edith that did not involve the "accepted" sex organs. The expanding stain symbolizes this expansion of consciousness past the "normal" avenues of perception, past the "reducing valve of brain," perhaps to infinity and divinity. If "I" had been capable of understanding at this point, he might have understood the revelation. As it was, however, he had to wait until later when the "revelation" would be made again. When Edith says that no mortal has removed her robe, she may mean either of two things, or perhaps both simultaneously. In the light of the "submission" lesson, she may mean that no man can, by attempting to do so, remove her robe. The attempt would involve the arrogance of setting chaos in order rather than finding a balance. Consequently the robe would only be removed when the man was in the sub-

missive attitude and ready for the revelation. On the other hand it may simply refer to a chronological sequence. Up to this point no man has removed the robe, but later someone might.

The first possibility seems more significant. In the final section of the novel Spring causes the emergence of the old man, "I", from his treehouse. He is picked up by a "blonde housewife" naked below the waist except for a pair of mocassins on her feet, and is commanded to perform sexually with his mouth. Finally submissive, he is interested only in performing well and seems uninterested when she wants to identify herself. When she claims to be Isis, he simply says, "Foreigners bore me, Miss" (BL p. 235). Here is Isis, and Catherine Tekakwitha, the robe or blanket removed for "I" to know what is underneath. He has not removed the robe; it has been removed for him. As a saint it is his privilege to know. But the knowledge is not of an objective nature. It cannot be organized and filed away. It is a sort of Biblical "knowing" which involves encounter and relation.

"I" has now realized what seemed to appear vaguely in his "swooning eyes" just "after [he had] come or just before [he fell] asleep":

. . . my mind seems to go out on a path the width of a thread and of endless length, a thread that is the same color as the night. Out, out along the narrow highway sails my mind, driven by curi-

osity, luminous with acceptance, far and out, like a feathered hook whipped deep into the light above the stream by a magnificent cast. Somewhere, out of my reach, my control, the hook unbends into a spear, the spear shears itself into a needle, and the needle sews the world together. It sews skin onto the skeleton and lipstick on a lip, it sews Edith to her greasepaint, crouching (for as long as I, this book, or an eternal eye remembers) in our lightless sub-basement, it sews scarves to mountain, it goes through everything like a relentless bloodstream, and the tunnel is filled with a comforting message, a beautiful knowledge of unity. All the disparates of the world, the different wings of the paradox, coin-faces of problem, petal-pulling questions, scissors-shaped conscience, all the polarities, things and their images and things which cast no shadow, and just the everyday explosions on a street, this face and that, a house and a toothache, explosions which merely have different letters in their names, my needle pierces it all, and I myself, my greedy fantasies, everything which has existed and does exist, we are part of a necklace of incomparable beauty and unmeaning.
(BL pp. 16-17)

When the mind becomes "luminous with acceptance" it can begin to fathom its part in the "necklace of incomparable beauty and unmeaning."¹¹

"I" is now humble enough not to consider himself as a saint. His limited consciousness had barred him from achieving sainthood, but now as the "wine stain" expands he becomes a saint without a conscious or "brain" effort. He is no longer "constipated," or so completely self-cen-

¹¹ The term "luminous" appears also in the context in which Catherine Tekakwitha learns her submission to God (BL pp. 50-53). In this case it is a "fish that longed for nets and capture and many eaters at the feast, a smiling luminous fish."

tered that he will not even permit his refuse to leave him. In his final apotheosis he begins to disintegrate from the inside toward the outside. As the wine stain expands, and as Edith/Isis is about to become all things, so "I", or the crater at the center of "I", expands to include all things: "Suffice it to say that he disintegrated slowly; just as a crater extends its circumference with endless tiny landslides along the rim, he dissolved from the inside out" (BL p. 241).

The effect of "I"'s apotheosis is felt by others in the street as well: "An entire cult of Tantric love perfectionists turned exocentric in their second chance at compassion, destroying public structures of selfish love with beautiful displays of an acceptable embrace for street intercourse of genitalia" (BL p. 241).

Spring has come. The old man has found sainthood in submission. There is no arrogant ordering of chaos, but there is, for "I", an oasis-like balance in the chaos of existence. "I"'s disintegration is not a process of death and disappearance, but one of rebirth in which he meets both the universe and God:

His presence was like the shape of an hourglass, strongest where it was smallest. And that point where he was most absent, that's when the gasps started, because the future streams through that point, going both ways. That is the beautiful waist of the hourglass! That is the point of Clear Light! Let it change forever what we do not know! For a lovely briefness all the sand

is compressed in the stem between the two flasks! Ah, this is not a second chance. For all the time it takes to launch a sigh he allowed the spectators a vision of All Chances At Once! . . . The moon occupied one lens of his sunglasses, and he laid out his piano keys across a shelf of sky, and he leaned over him as though they were truly the row of giant fishes to feed a hungry multitude. A fleet of jet planes dragged his voice over us who were holding hands.

(BL pp. 241-242)

In his submission to the blonde housewife "I" submits to the universe and to God, becoming a "row of giant fishes to feed a hungry multitude." The point of "Clear Light" is the point of greatest strength; it is also the point of greatest submissiveness, the point at which consciousness is expanded to a "vision of All Chances At Once," and the point of prayer and contact with God. The spectators' vision of this point of "Clear Light" connects them with each other: as "I"'s prayer is brought back to the spectators, they are "holding hands."

Conclusion

The emphasis of this thesis has been on the serious and sincere elements of the spiritual and sexual quests in the works of Leonard Cohen. I am not saying that there is nothing of the con, the joke, in these writings. The joke is sometimes there, but within the context of the whole work, whether novel or volume of poetry, it is quite clear that the joke exists within a larger serious framework, and that the framework itself is not a joke. An exception may be made in the sense that the whole human condition is absurd; therefore any attempt to find even a balance in that absurdity is a joke. But that is an exception which would make all serious writing a joke and is therefore a useless category. The essential core of Cohen's work is an intense search into reality with the hope that somewhere the searcher will find the capacity for a fusion of flesh and spirit such that through it he will embrace the whole world. Since I have quoted extensively from Martin Buber's analysis of Hasidism in order to illuminate Cohen's work, I shall cite another of his comments as a summary of the position Cohen has achieved through the quest culminating in Beautiful Losers and the later poetry:

The reality of the experienced world is so much the more powerful, the more powerfully I experience it and realize it. Reality is no fixed

condition, but a quantity which can be heightened. Its magnitude is functionally dependent upon the intensity of our experiencing. There is an ordinary reality which suffices as a common denominator for the comparison and ordering of things. But the great reality is another. And how can I give this reality to my world except by seeing the seen with all the strength of my life, hearing the heard with all the strength of my life, tasting the tasted with all the strength of my life? Except by bending over the experienced thing with fervor and power and by melting the shell of passivity with the fire of my being until the confronting, the shaping, the bestowing side of things springs up to meet me and embraces me so that I know the world in it?¹

¹ Pointing the Way: Collected Essays, p. 28. Reprinted in To Hallow This Life, ed. Jacob Trapp (New York, 1958), p. 50.

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