

COHEN AND THE CANADIAN CULTURAL FIELD

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BY

Tony Guindon, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Tony Guindon

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### Abstract

Drawing upon Bourdieu's notion of the field of cultural production, this thesis charts the evolution of critical reception of Leonard Cohen's works over the previous forty years, with a particular emphasis upon the question of the literary canon. Early critical examinations of Cohen's works, heavily influenced by New Criticism, reveal a mixed evaluation of Cohen's works; although his two novels are included in McClelland & Stewart's New Canadian Library (a series whose advent Robert Lecker paints as instrumental to the constitution of a Canadian literary canon), and are thus arguably "canonical," Cohen has remained "peripheral" in academic discussions. Among the reasons posited by some scholars for this exclusion from academic discussion is Cohen's transition from "literary" to "popular" production. Recent shifts within the Canadian field to poststructural examinations of literature in general, and Cohen in particular, have led to many re-considerations of his contributions to Canadian postmodern culture, and a concomitant increase in scholarly writing about Cohen. Although the evaluative imperative is tacit, if not completely absent, from most poststructural examinations of Cohen's works, this quantitative -- and at times qualitative -- increase in academic research on Cohen can be read as a favorable assessment of Cohen's works. This thesis concludes not by arguing for or against a canonical status for Cohen's works in the Canadian canon; rather, the object is the shift in critical apparatuses within the Canadian field, and the ways in which shifts within the field of cultural production, at the critical and theoretical level, are instrumental to the contingent consecration of a work within the field itself.

## Introduction

*"I understand the phenomenon of master 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 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" (Harris 28).*

Assessing the status of the work of Leonard Cohen in the Canadian field is a difficult task, one not least complicated by the inherent instability of the object of study; at once a novelist, poet, lyricist and popular musician, Cohen has donned many mantles during the course of his career. Given Cohen's continuing presence in the Canadian popular imagination, and the recognition twice granted Cohen for his contributions to Canadian culture in the form of the Governor General's Award, one would assume that his works, both literary and musical, occupy a position of prominence in the literary and cultural life of this country; however, as Ira B. Nadel (Cohen's "authorised"<sup>1</sup> biographer) recounts, in Cohen's words, "I never said I was a great poet; never once did I suggest I was anything more than a minor poet and a songster and whatever it is. Let some other people make the designations" (3). That Cohen has secured a lasting space for himself within the Canadian literary canon seems to be beyond dispute, but it is the nature

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<sup>1</sup> ". . . the publisher insisted I ask: could this be called an authorized biography? Cohen paused and then thoughtfully said, "tolerated," adding an instant later, 'benignly tolerated'" (Nadel 1).

and prominence of this position which are still sources of contention within current academic debate. While selections of his work are included in many major collections of Canadian verse, and despite his inclusion in McLelland & Stewart's New Canadian Library Series, recent curricular research of Canadian universities suggests that Cohen's work constitutes little more than a footnote of the *avant-garde*, or the freakish literary experiments of the 1960's (e.g. *Beautiful Losers*)<sup>2</sup>.

This perplexing "disregard" for Cohen's work, if we can refer to it in such terms, is further reflected in the relatively scant scholarly writing on Cohen, at least in Canada, in recent years. This sentiment was expressed by Stephen Scobie during the course of a 1992 colloquium on Cohen's work held at Red Deer College:

Cohen's work has suffered from a scandalous lack of serious attention over the past decade or so. . . . What are the causes of this recent neglect? Answering that question in detail might in itself produce a fascinating study of Canadian culture in the past decade; put very briefly, I would suggest two major reasons. Firstly, Cohen's work has increasingly (though I think mistakenly) been seen as outside the mainstream of "Canadian literature" in this period. He does not fit easily into the categories of the post-modern or the post-colonial; his obstinate Romanticism is seen as reactionary; and his treatment of women has been a persistent embarrassment, or outright offence, to feminist critics. . . . A second reason for Cohen's neglect is, more straightforwardly, academic snobbery. Many critics still have a great deal of trouble dealing with Leonard Cohen as the writer and performer of popular songs. The medium is seen as beneath the dignity of criticism; you're supposed to study poetry, not sing along with it (Scobie 7, 11).

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Lecker's Survey of Inclusion Rates for Authors in Anthologies of Canadian Literature Containing Fiction, 1922-1992, published in *Making it Real* reveals that Cohen's works have been included in four out of sixty-five anthologies published between 1970 and 1992.

While any Cohen aficionado may be tempted to unquestioningly share in Scobie's surprise and apparent outrage at Cohen's exile from academic discussion, there are a number of circumstances which may account for Cohen's exclusion from recent academic discussion, which, while they are connected to Scobie's summary conclusions, provide us with alternative perspectives<sup>3</sup>. One factor to be considered in examining the reasons for the decline in Cohen research is his relative productivity (or lack thereof), and the nature of that productivity (since the publication of his first volume of poetry in 1954, Cohen has published eight books of poetry and two novels, and has actualised thirteen albums). Considering the span of his productive career (forty-seven years), Cohen failed to actualise an overly large corpus of "literary" works; thus the lack of current criticism may simply be a reflection of Cohen's own publishing record.

Scobie's suggestion that "academic snobbery" remains a stumbling block to Cohen's cultural legitimisation finds its origin in the long-standing debate (not limited to the Canadian field) concerning the hierarchy of the arts, processes of cultural legitimisation and the relations of "high-brow" or *avant-garde* art to mass, popular culture. Cohen does indeed find himself (has placed himself) at the intersection of the often ambiguous border which separates the distinguished from the

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<sup>3</sup> Scobie's statements at this conference may be considered outdated; among the more significant recent publications on Cohen is the Winter, 1999 *ECW* special issue. Nevertheless, a single volume of critical writing does not constitute an all-out reversal of the trend noted by Scobie here.

vulgar, and so Scobie's comments do find some justification. Although Cohen's work has never achieved the kind of success (at least in terms of sales) accorded other major Canadian pop figures, his influence in Canada and abroad, particularly among other recording artists, remains strong. This is nowhere more evident than in the tribute albums and covers performed by other artists of Cohen's work: a considerable number of musicians have produced covers of his work, and three tribute albums (*I'm Your Fan*, *Famous Blue Raincoat*, *'Tower of Song': Songs of Leonard Cohen*) have appeared in recent years.

Cohen's influence, if not acceptance, is also acknowledged by producers within the Canadian literary field proper. Michael Ondaatje's (admittedly slim) critical volume *Leonard Cohen* is perhaps among the more encompassing critical examinations written by a fellow producer within the Canadian field. We can also look to one of the most noteworthy recent (1994) publications on Cohen, *Take This Waltz: A Celebration of Leonard Cohen*, which contains critical essays and tributes from figures as diverse as Bill Bissett and Al Purdy.

Scobie's comments, nevertheless, are accurate: although other producers of cultural goods, both within the Canadian field and abroad consider Cohen's work to be "worthy" of commentary, if not praise, Canadian academics do not, as a general rule, consider Cohen's artistic contributions to be sufficiently noteworthy to deserve much commentary. Furthermore, there is little doubt that one of the main reasons for this disregard is the fact that Cohen has, over the past twenty-five years, tended



to focus more on song-writing, recording and performing than on the production of more "literary" texts. Even when academics do deign to comment upon Cohen's musical lyrics -- a rare enough phenomenon -- it is commonly under the guise of apology rather than analysis<sup>4</sup>.

One of the main questions that Scobie's commentary leaves unasked, however, concerns the position and function of the academic/critic in relation to the artist. It is not enough, I would suggest, when interrogating a theoretical area so contentious as the canon, to simply bemoan the lack of critical attention afforded an author, nor is it safe to ascribe such a lack of attention to something so simple and unambiguous (tempting, and at times justified though it may seem) as "academic snobbery." Such assessments mask at least two broad underlying assumptions: 1) that Cohen's work *deserves* such treatment, and; 2) that "popular artists" require critical attention from academics. In brief, why does Cohen, as a producer of cultural goods both "avant-garde" and "popular," require critical attention both within the academy and in the press (instances of the latter are far more frequent and abundant), and what is gained through such scholarly investment? Scobie does note in his keynote address that a study of the critical reception of Cohen over the past twenty years would provide an

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Davey begins his article "Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan: Poetry and the Popular Song" by suggesting that "[t]he close relationship between poetry and music scarcely needs to be argued;" however, the bulk of the article is devoted to an exploration of the parallels between the popular song and the historical development and structure of popular verse (Gnarowski 111).

interesting study of Canadian culture over the past twenty years, but without at once interrogating the changing stakes of power and legitimacy within the canonical debate in Canada, little insight will be gained both with respect to changing academic mores and theoretical practices, and the changing status of the figure of the artist within Canadian culture (in this particular case, national-ist symbol, black romantic, Keats of the North, ironic prophet) in various fields of power will be little clarified. Scobie, of course, openly acknowledges the changes which have been effected within the Canadian field in the previous two decades, particularly at the level of critical theory. What is lacking in Scobie's assessment of the state of Cohen criticism is an interrogation of his own assumptions with regards to Cohen's argued position within the Canadian literary field.

All of this having been said, the present study cannot (for pragmatic reasons) hope to provide a direct response to all of the concerns raised above; in fact, a detailed examination of the entire corpus of critical writing on Leonard Cohen lies beyond the scope of this thesis. As such, what follows must be limited to a narrow range of texts, and must address a far more specific set of questions. Principally, then, I have chosen to limit the following study to the initial reception (reviews both popular and academic) and subsequent examinations of a few representative scholars and critics to Cohen's works in general, be they "literary" or "popular".

This examination is not to be confused with a simple

study in reception history; in fact, I am far more concerned with what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the "stakes" of the struggle in the cultural field than with the changing fortunes of Cohen's work in Canadian academic and cultural circles. By the "stakes" of criticism, Bourdieu understands the right and power to define the writer or artist in a given social milieu<sup>5</sup>. Cohen provides us with a particularly interesting example of a writer/artist whose status and reputation lie close to the centre of the long-standing debate between popular and avant-garde critics; and I can think of no more appropriate and illuminating theoretical framework than that developed by Bourdieu for examining the social spaces in which cultural works are legitimated as works of "art," or are conversely consigned to the dustbin of the vulgar. Bourdieu's insight is particularly relevant to me here insofar as his method can be seen as "metacritical," much in the sense developed by Frederic Jameson in his essay "Metacommentary"<sup>6</sup>: in

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<sup>5</sup> "The struggle in the field of cultural production over the imposition of the legitimate mode of cultural production is inseparable from the struggle within the dominant class (with the opposition between 'artists' and 'bourgeois') to impose the dominant principle of domination (that is to say -- ultimately -- the definition of human accomplishment). . . . The preliminary reflections on the definitions of the object and the boundaries of the population, which studies of writers, artists and, especially, intellectuals, often indulge in so as to give themselves an air of scientificity, ignore the fact, which is more than scientifically attested, that the definition of the writer (or artist, etc.) is an issue at stake in struggles in every literary (or artistic, etc.) field" (Bourdieu 41-42).

<sup>6</sup> "The starting point for any genuinely profitable discussion of interpretation therefore must be not the nature of interpretation, but the need for it in the first place. What initially needs explanation is, in other words, not how we go about interpreting a text properly, but rather why we should even have to do so. All thinking about interpretation must sink itself in the strangeness, the unnaturalness, of the hermeneutic situation; or to put it another way, every individual interpretation must include an interpretation of its own existence, must show its own credentials

interrogating the complexity of the aesthetic object as such, his work just as readily examines the critical, theoretical and social contexts which inform such discussions. In brief, Bourdieu's conception of the "field of cultural production" (about which I will say more later) is pivotal to this study as it helps to open a space in which not only the "aesthetic" object can be examined relationally, but in which the cultural assumptions and mechanisms which underlie our tastes and aesthetic inclinations are fully implicated. The object of this study is not Cohen (or Cohen's works) as such; nor is the object a particular scholarly debate or series of discussions. Rather, I am interested in examining the critical (read "academic") culture which dominates a certain niche of the Canadian cultural field. However, although my object is academic criticism, or more properly Canadian academic/literary culture, it is impossible, particularly in the case of Cohen, to ignore more popular venues; as Bourdieu notes,

[t]he science of the literary field is a form of *analysis situs* which establishes that each position -- e.g. the one which corresponds to a genre such as the novel or, within this, to a sub-category such as the 'society novel' [*roman mondain*] or the 'popular' novel -- is subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions; that every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field; and that the structure of the field, i.e. of the space of positions, is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field (Bourdieu 30).

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and justify itself: every commentary must be at the same time a metacommentary as well" (Jameson 5).

The same holds for literary criticism in all of its varieties; the dominant, more legitimate position-takings, far from being pure or self-sustaining, exist upon a relational plane. Thus, in order to explore even a minuscule region of the field of Canadian academic criticism, reference must be made to other position-takings within this field, if only to gain a better insight into some of the complexities of the field itself.

If criticism related to Cohen's two novels is being considered in greater detail here, it is because of the ambidexterity of the genre: less elitist a pursuit than verse, more refined than popular music, the novel constitutes a genre in which the variety of position-takings is virtually limitless<sup>7</sup>. As Cohen's novels were both written relatively early on in his career (his first novel was his second-book length publication) there is a critical chronology which may be established: at the time of the publication of *The Favourite Game*, Cohen's literary career promised to be brilliant, and while critical and popular reception of the novel itself were mixed, there was a general impression in the Canadian cultural establishment that Cohen was to become a major figure in Canadian literary circles. With his transition to popular music in the 1960's, he was painted not so

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<sup>7</sup> In "The Field of Cultural Production," Bourdieu locates the novel at the intersection between the heteronomous (drama) and autonomous (poetry) poles in the hierarchy of the arts within the field of cultural production: "[the novel] can secure big profits (in the case of some naturalist novels), and sometimes very big profits (some 'popular' novels), for a relatively large number of producers, from an audience which may extend far beyond the audience made up of the writers themselves, as in the case of poetry, and beyond the bourgeois audience, as in the case of theatre, into the *petite bourgeoisie* or even, especially through municipal libraries, into the 'labour aristocracy'" (Bourdieu 48).

much as a rising literary figure, but as a "phenomenon"<sup>8</sup>. Achieving iconic status, Cohen undoubtedly muddled the dividing line between poet laureate and pop star, and it can be argued that this defiance of convention has had negative implications for his reception in more established literary circles. Although this aspect of Cohen's reception will be considered, the main concern of this study will be the evolution of critical approaches to Cohen's works, and the ways in which this criticism reflects the theoretical upheavals of the past three decades; furthermore, a central concern will be the ways in which many of these theoretical characterisations of Cohen's works ("Is *Beautiful Losers* a post-modern/post-colonial novel?") have served to legitimate (or undermine) not only Cohen's literary oeuvre, but also the shape of his career as a whole.

Such transformations in Cohen's cultural status further demonstrate Bourdieu's contention that position-takings within the cultural field are far from fixed. In highlighting the progression of the critical works of a limited number of scholars, I hope, finally, to examine the ways in which scholars, as much as artists, are involved in a power struggle for the right to define cultural legitimacy within the Canadian field.

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<sup>8</sup> I intend here to distinguish between the literary persona as such and the pop icon.

**Chapter 1:**  
**The Canadian Field of Cultural Production:**  
**An Overview**

Bourdieu's 1983 essay "The Field of Cultural Production" is, not surprisingly, subtitled "The Economic World Reversed." Concerning this strange inversion, Randal Johnson, the editor of a volume of collected essays written by Bourdieu, and published under the same name, notes that

Bourdieu . . . analyses the field of cultural production as an 'economic world reversed' based on a 'winner loses' logic, since economic success (in literary terms, for example, writing a best seller) may well signal a barrier to specific consecration and symbolic power (Bourdieu 8).

As this study is centred upon Bourdieu's notion of structured fields, wherein power struggles (over the right to define cultural legitimacy) are continually modifying the relations of agents or 'players,' it is important to grasp the inverse relations which characterise these struggles. In what follows, I will provide a brief summary of some of the basic concepts which structure Bourdieu's work on cultural production. As Bourdieu's work on this topic focuses most specifically upon the French field, however, it will be necessary to contextualise his method and theory within the Canadian field. It may be objected that such a transposition of specific findings from a particular milieu, such as France, to a field so vastly different (and ambiguous) as Canada is inappropriate, even irresponsible; however, as Bourdieu himself noted during the course of an unpublished interview with Cheleen Mahar,

I would like to stress that in every different case, you must study how the situation works. So my ideas are not a general theory but a method. For instance, if I went to

your country, I think that I might understand many things beforehand, because I am sure these are very general mechanisms which I might understand immediately. However, I must carefully observe the situation to weigh the different aspects of my method. So, what I would like readers to understand is that it's a very general manner of thinking while at the same time it obliges one to study each case (Mahar 36).

There are any number of considerations that inform any application of Bourdieu's method to the Canadian<sup>9</sup> field; to name a few (which will be considered in this chapter) there are the ever-present anxieties over American cultural domination, the British heritage, the colonial experience, and multiculturalism.

Bourdieu, as we have seen, puts a strong emphasis upon the fact that his "ideas are not a general theory but a method:

[t]he main thing is that they are not to be conceptualised so much as ideas, on that level, but as a method. The core of my work lies in the method and a way of thinking. To be more precise, my method is a manner of asking questions rather than just ideas. This, I think is a critical point. (Mahar 33).

This method has been termed by Bourdieu "generative structuralism;" the method itself is centred upon the two key concepts of habitus and field. Habitus refers to

lasting, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively "regulated" and "regular" without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organising action of a conductor (Bourdieu 5).

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<sup>9</sup> I am not wholly without reservation in employing the problematic term "Canadian," particularly as it applies to literature. For the purposes of this study, the term "Canadian" will refer to literature published in Canada in the English language. Such a designation is doubtless problematic, as Cohen, although an English language writer, hails from Quebec.



Put more crudely, Bourdieu understands the individual's habitus as the internalisation of social structures which generate the individual. The concept of field is equally complex, and can lead to some confusion in its translation to the English, as Bourdieu himself notes:

[i]n English it's an ambiguous word because it is often understood as a 'domain'. The closest conceptualisation that this has in English is Kurt Lewin's field theory, although I think that the way I use 'field' is still very different. To give you an idea, one can imagine society as a sort of system of fields, so you must think in terms of a system and relationships. This system of fields (within the social space) can almost be imagined, for simplicity, as a planetary system, because the social space is really an integral field. Each field has its own structure and field of forces, and is set within a larger field which also has its own forces, structures and so on. As it develops, it is weaving a larger field (Mahar 36).

It is in the mediation between habitus and field that the individual is structured; hence Bourdieu's terming of his practice as generative structuralism.

According to many critics, the novelty of Bourdieu's thought lies in his arguable success in transcending the debate between proponents of the autonomous, Enlightenment subject versus more objectivist, structuralist accounts of subjectivity. As Randall Johnson notes, "Bourdieu sought to develop a concept of agent free from the voluntarism and idealism of subjectivist accounts and a concept of social space free from the deterministic and mechanistic causality inherent in many objectivist approaches" (Bourdieu 4). We could thus surmise that Bourdieu's 'method,' and the logic of questioning that this method entails, is concerned with a mediation between the individual social agent and the overarching power structures

which shape this individual, and that provide the individual with the possible "position taking" available to the individual.

As I have already noted, Bourdieu's model of cultural production is premised upon the reversal of the economic order that structures most fields. That is to say, if we consider cultural production as a game, the stakes involved are not necessarily measured in terms of (economic) capital gain, but rather in terms of the accumulation of (symbolic) capital. In this field, "real" (monetary) economic success can be an indication of "failure," at least in reference to the structured poles of the field. The field of cultural production is unique insofar as the traditional rules concerning the measurement of success are inoperative; however, it is but one among many fields which are themselves part of an overarching social structure. As Randall Johnson explains,

[t]he formulation of the notion of field also represented an attempt to apply what Bourdieu, borrowing from Cassirer, calls a *relational* mode of thought to cultural production. . . . In any given field, agents occupying the diverse available positions (or in some cases creating new positions) engage in competition for control of the interests or resources which are specific to the field in question. . . . But the interests and resources at stake in fields are not always material, and competition among agents -- which Bourdieu sees as one universal invariant property of fields -- is not always based on conscious calculation. In the cultural (e.g.) literary field, competition often concerns the authority inherent in recognition, consecration and prestige (Bourdieu 7).

The field of cultural production, like all other fields, is not autonomous, despite appearances; according to Bourdieu, "the literary and artistic field . . . is contained within the field of power . . . , while possessing a relative autonomy with respect

to it, especially as regards its economic and political principles of hierarchization" (38). The field of cultural production is further subdivided by Bourdieu into two major poles, directly associated with the question of the field's relation to the overarching power structure of the social space; on the one hand, Bourdieu posits the pole dominated by the "autonomous principle of hierarchization," which seeks to assert its autonomy from the field of power; the other pole is dominated by the "heteronomous principle of hierarchization," which measures success or consecrates authors according to traditional economic measures of success. The pole of the field which is governed by the autonomous principle of hierarchization includes more élitist genres as poetry, classical music and fine art, to name but a few, while the pole governed by the heteronomous principle includes more populist genres, such as the popular novel and drama. There is no strict dividing line that separates these two poles: the novel is an example of a more indeterminate medium.

The autonomous principle of hierarchization is so called because of its pretences to exist and operate outside of the sphere of influence of the economic in the final instance; it is equally referred to by Bourdieu as the field of "restricted production" and of "producers for producers" (Bourdieu 39, 54). These latter two titles derive their names from the limited profits secured, and thus the limited print runs of works governed by the autonomous principle of hierarchization:

[t]hus, at least in the most perfectly autonomous sector of

the field of cultural production, where the only audience aimed at is other producers (as with Symbolist poetry), the economy of practices is based, as in a generalised game of 'loser wins', on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies: that of business (it excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort of correspondence between investments and monetary gains), that of power (it condemns honours and temporal greatness), and even that of institutionalised cultural authority (the absence of any academic training or consecration may be considered a virtue) (Bourdieu 39).

Poetry is a particularly apt example of a genre governed by the autonomous principle: small print runs (in most cases), minimal profits or self-financed works, and the consumption of the works themselves most often limited to other players or producers within the field mark the poetic genre as the one which most readily seeks to assert its autonomy from most (if not all) determinations beyond the aesthetic. Any appeal which works within the sub-field of restricted secure beyond the immediate sphere of other producers (examples of this are admittedly rare in the case of poetry in particular) -- accompanied by the concrete material gains which a greater audience can secure -- often engenders suspicion among other producers and those most immediately invested in the field of limited production. The recalcitrant producer is threatened by the prospect of expulsion from the consecrated cultural domain, a symbolic defrocking and exile from the field of the pure aesthetic. The work, according to this logic, becomes tainted by the lure of mass appeal or the promise of financial gain.

"[T]hose who enter [the subfield of restricted production] have an interest in disinterestedness" (40).

"Consecrated" authors (authors whose works have been legitimated

or accepted as "great" within the field of producers for producers) find themselves in a dominated position within the dominant faction of society:

[t]he struggle in the field of cultural production over the imposition of the legitimate mode of cultural production is inseparable from the struggle within the dominant class (with the opposition between 'artists' and 'bourgeois') to impose the dominant principle of domination (that is to say -- ultimately -- the definition of human accomplishment). In this struggle, the artists and writers who are richest in specific capital and most concerned for their autonomy are considerably weakened by the fact that some of their competitors identify their interests with the dominant principles of hierarchization and seek to impose them even within the field, with the support of the temporal powers (41).

In spite of its pretences to autonomy, the field of small scale production remains subject to the overarching field of power from which it can never achieve full independence. This is particularly seen in the struggle between the two poles of this field.

The field of large-scale production, governed by the heteronomous principle, is largely a mirror of the economic field proper, responding to demand (if not creating or propagating that demand of its own right):

[h]eteronomy arises from *demand*, which may take the form of personal *commission* (formulated by a 'patron' in Haskell's sense of a protector or client) or of the sanction of an autonomous *market*, which may be *anticipated* or *ignored*. Within this logic, the *relationship to the audience* and, more exactly, economic or political interest in the sense of interest in success and in the related economic or political profit, constitute one of the bases for evaluating the producers and their products. Thus, strict application of the autonomous principle of hierarchization means that producers and products will be distinguished according to their degree of success with the audience, which, it tends to be assumed, is evidence of their interest in the economic and political profits secured by success (45-46).

The popular novel, produced for large scale production and "dominated by the quest for investment profitability," secures substantial material profits for both producer and publisher (at least in relation to other genres in the literary field); the subsequent proliferation of the producer's name within the popular imagination is read in this sub-field as a *de facto* consecration by the public, in spite of the criticisms and dismissals levelled at these works by more "literary" or consecrated circles (126).

Bourdieu's method hinges upon non-fixed relations; while certain works may be ranked within the subfield governed by the autonomous principle, a change within the field may alter the works' relative positions substantially. Such changes within the field may be the result of political, cultural or theoretical shifts either within the field or outside of the field, in the broader social context. Changes within the field itself are most often the result of the ageing of a particular school of art, with the accompanying introduction or consecration of a new avant-garde; such evolutions are particularly frequent within the French field, according to Bourdieu:

[t]he history of the field arises from the struggle between the established figures and the young challengers. The ageing of authors, schools and works is far from being the product of a mechanical, chronological, slide into the past; it results from the struggle between those who have made their mark (*fait date* -- 'made an epoch') and who are fighting to persist, and those who cannot make their own mark without pushing into the past those who have an interest in stopping the clock, eternalising the present stage of things. 'Making one's mark,' initiating a new epoch, means winning recognition, in both senses, of one's difference from other producers, especially the most consecrated of them; it means, by the same token, creating

a new position, ahead of the positions already occupied, in the vanguard (60).

New producers seeking to make their mark within the autonomous field thus most frequently assume 'avant garde' positions, often finding their political or social sympathies aligned with the proletariat, while established producers within the field have a stake in orthodoxy and conservatism; this constructed opposition is dramatised in the distinction between the Parisian "left" and "right" banks respectively. However, Bourdieu cautions us that "the priority accorded to 'youth' and to the associated values of change and originality cannot be understood solely in terms of the relationship between 'artists' and 'bourgeois'" (105).

At the heart of the struggle between the two poles of the field of cultural production lies the authority to provide the legitimate definition of reality, of taste, and of distinction. This struggle is by no means limited to artists or producers of cultural goods proper: publishers, curators, critics, academics and educators are all equally implicated in this struggle, and all have vested interests in the different valences of cultural production. As Bourdieu notes, "[j]ust as in the case of the system of reproduction, in particular the educational system, so the field of production and diffusion can only be fully understood if one treats it as a field of competition for the monopoly of the legitimate exercise of symbolic violence" (121).

As was noted at the beginning of this chapter, there are any number of factors that have contributed to the formation of the peculiar landscape of the Canadian cultural field. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the Canadian attempt to

construct and defend a national literature and enshrine a Canadian canon. While it may be fallacious to posit a naively mimetic relationship between cultural experience and fictional representation, such a relationship seems to have structured the relation between politics and the cultural life of the country. The historical problems associated with, and often read as instrumental to the creation of the Canadian state are equally active in the nation's cultural life. I have made reference to a number of factors that have shaped Canada's cultural development (colonialism, American neo-imperialism, multiculturalism); in the interests of brevity, these factors could be grouped under the heading of 'Canadianness;' that is, the driving force behind our obsession with constituting a national culture is the need not only to define, but to concretise and perpetuate the core of the essentially esoteric label 'Canadian' in the face of perceived threats to national autonomy. As John Metcalf notes in his controversial book *What is a Canadian Literature*, "'Canadian-ness' rather than quality has always been the Canadian concern. (Metcalf 9)."

This need to define and promote Canadian culture derives its impetus in part from the fact that, as Sam Solecki writes, "[t]he only basis on which a group of books could . . . be classified as English or Canadian or Australian would be political or geographical. (Obviously the argument would take a different form if we were dealing with a literature like Czech or French that is defined *a priori* by a unique language) (8)." There is no homogenous population stretching from coast to coast in



Canada, let alone an uniform, national language. That the Canadian government has a particularly large stake in Canadian culture is an understatement: governmental support for the arts in Canada assumes various forms, such as humanities departments within universities, as well as national institutions such as the C.B.C., the N.F.B. and the C.R.T.C. The prerogative of Canadian culture (whatever its definition) is enshrined in Canadian law and policy, and may at times take a shape both dramatic and aggressive, as in the case of Bill C-55 in April of 1999. Joel Smith goes so far as to suggest that "[i]n setting policy, Canadian governments always take into account the fact that there is a politically contrived country with a relatively small bilingual and bicultural population that occupies a large territory in the shadow of the United States" (Smith 7).

The need to create and sustain a national culture and consciousness has remained a central imperative of the Canadian state since its inception. Smith notes that

[i]n order to promote a sense of national identity, national cultural development and protection are Canadian government priorities. In large part, Canadian media and cultural policies are shaped for this purpose. They are driven by concern that American popular culture may distort or replace the national culture and that this will weaken the country's capacity for independent action (Smith 8).

While the threat (or reality) of American cultural domination may not be the only imperative that has driven Canada's cultural industry, it remains nevertheless one of the most immanent and pressing concerns. Consequently, the nationalist imperative has been all the more palpable within the Canadian cultural field.

While Canada has never possessed an ethnically homogenous

population, recent demographic developments have forced Canadian cultural and political institutions to reconfigure their visions of Canadian culture: the emphasis has recently changed from bi-culturalism to multi-culturalism. Smith observes that "[t]he Canadian government [now] espouses multiculturalism to accommodate the country's burgeoning ethnic groups, and to implement it funds various programs intended to serve other goals as well" (10). Multiculturalism has particularly far-reaching implications for Canadian canonical debate: recent developments in post-colonial and post-modern theory have called attention to the need to re-evaluate exclusionary assumptions concerning aboriginal culture, and the ever-changing ethnic landscape of Canada seriously undermines attempts to create and perpetuate the myth of Canadian-ness.

John Metcalf, in *What Is A Canadian Literature?* takes issue with what he sees as xenophobic tendencies that have contributed to the definition of Canadianness:

[m]ost of the theories about our literature are both comic and distasteful. It is not an elevating spectacle to see the wagons drawn into a circle with the guns blazing inwards. The only thing most of our critics have in common is the desire to exclude. Theories about Canadian literature tend to reflect the larger social attitudes and nearly all the visions of our literature are nationalistic, chauvinistic, smug, and amazingly *white*. . . . Imagine the advent of a new writer as hugely gifted as Alice Munro. But now imagine that this writer is of Chinese origins or West or East Indian and that his or her writing reflects not only immigrant experience in Canada but Vietnam or India or Trinidad. . . . Imagine now the emergence of *five* such writers. What would *this* do to our sense of Canadian writing, to our tradition? (14)

Above all, Metcalf's contention is that, even when 'non-birthright' Canadians are granted a canonical status, they remain

peripheral because their writing does not conform to the traditional conventions of Canadianness. Robert Lecker concurs. In his book *Making It Real*, he argues that the Canadian canon exalts works which conform to the social-realist genre, that this form is elevated because of a naive belief in the mimetic relation between world and text, and that, consequently, works that reflect not only the physical Canadian landscape, but also the values which have been forcibly associated with Canadianness, are granted priority:

a preoccupation with history and historical placement; an interest in topicality, mimesis, verisimilitude, and documentary presentation; a bias in favour of the native over the cosmopolitan; a pressure toward formalism; a concern with traditional over innovative forms; a pursuit of the created before the uncreated, the named before the unnamed; an expression of national self-consciousness; a valorisation of the cautious, democratic, moral imagination before the liberal, inventive one; a hegemonic identification with texts that are ordered, orderable. . . . (Lecker 26).

Such values are obviously consonant with a nationalist-conservative prerogative, and such is the characterisation of the Canadian cultural literary establishment. It comes as no surprise, then, that Lecker nominates F. R. Leavis as the prototype of Canadian literary critics:

[t]radition tells us that literary taste is best created and maintained by an elite; in Canada today, as in Leavis's time, this elite is comprised of those who run the institution. . . . Most members of the Canadian literary institution eventually pay direct or indirect homage to Leavis (41).

If there remains any debate today over the reality of a Canadian literary canon, it could in part be attributed to the fact that the canon, if it exists, is a relatively recent creation. Lecker points to three pivotal moments as instrumental

to the creation of the Canadian canon: the advent of McLelland & Stewart's New Canadian Library series in 1957, the first edition (1965) of *The Literary History of Canada*, and a conference on the Canadian novel held in 1978 at the University of Calgary, which resulted in

the publication of a list of the 100 'most important' Canadian novels, . . . the result of a ballot 'distributed to Canadian 'teachers and critics,' who were invited to choose 1) the most 'important' one hundred works of fiction (List A); 2) the most important ten novels (List B); and 3) the most important ten works of various genres (List C). (27)

These three events by no means constitute conclusive grounds for proving the existence of an unitary Canadian literary canon; however, they demonstrate, according to Lecker, a great degree of uniformity in opinion among academics and critics concerning the "great works" of Canadian literature. These events further the conception of a shared belief among mainstream cultural producers and critics in a certain notion of Canadianness. All of these events are, as we have seen, relatively recent, and indicate that if a canon exists it is indicative of a value set closely linked to dominant notions concerning the Canadian character.

All of this contrasts with Bourdieu's analyses of French culture. According to Bourdieu, the French literary field, while not fixed, is established within well defined parameters. Generalisations can be made, such as that of the ageing of an avant-garde from an epoch, and its eventual decline and replacement by a new avant-garde. Generally speaking, however, the history of literature in France, particularly since the mid-nineteenth century, has had a central place in French cultural

life, and one more concerned with struggles for dominance and legitimacy within the field, particularly with regards to matters of form and style, than with struggles over nationalism and the definition not of the aesthetic object as such, but with the definition of the "national," as has been the case in Canada. Both the French and Canadian states have vested interests in the promotion and funding of culture; however, in France, institutions such as the Académie Française enjoy far more autonomy from the state than do Canadian cultural and educational institutions. Furthermore, the intellectual climate of the two countries varies greatly; one need only make a summary examination of the content of the popular presses of both countries to note vast differences in cultural and intellectual life. While there is a struggle in the French field between the autonomous principle of hierarchization and the heteronomous, both poles of the field are clearly discernible; while both poles are apparent within the Canadian literary field, avant-garde or experimental works rarely receive the degree of critical attention and consecration granted to such works in the French field.

In the French field, the struggle between the autonomous and the heteronomous factions of the field is impassioned and at times fierce; in Canada, to the contrary, rigorous disputes concerning the legitimisation and consecration of literary works is far more muted. As Lecker laments,

[a]s in most discussions about Canadian literature, there is no sense of debate [regarding the canon], by which I mean a focused and disruptive exchange of ideas on a topic

considered worthy of dispute. Even the most pointed challenges to what has been called the Canadian canon have been met with indifference rather than hostility. (I think here, in particular, of works by John Metcalf and Lorraine Weir (Lecker 50).

This is not to suggest that there does not exist, both within the Canadian literary institutions, and among writers and journalists themselves, a struggle over the right to consecration; however, the parameters of the debate within Canada have historically been structured quite differently than in France.

In France, according to Bourdieu, the pole governed by the autonomous principle of hierarchization is continually in the process of revolutionising itself, through the introduction of a new avant-garde. The avant-garde has historically assumed any number of guises, from the Symbolists to the Theatre of the Absurd; however, one of the structuring principles guiding the avant-garde aesthetic is the desire for revolution, the overturning of accepted aesthetics: in short, experimentation. In Canada, to the contrary, experimental and avant-garde writing does exist, but it seldom obtains the recognition and consecration granted to such works within the French field.

Mainstream acceptance of avant-garde works can, of course, be considered a hindrance to specific consecration, according to Bourdieu. Such works do not receive praise overnight: recognition of "classics" is a lengthy process, and one not initially sought after by any avant-garde; as Bourdieu explains,

[a]t every moment, in whichever field (the field of class struggles, the field of the dominant class, the field of cultural production), the agents and institutions involved in the game are at once contemporaries and out of phase. .

. . . Each position is moved down one rung in the chronological hierarchy which is at the same time a social hierarchy. The avant-garde is at every moment separated by an artistic generation (the gap between two modes of artistic production) from the consecrated avant-garde, which is itself separated by another artistic generation from the avant-garde that was already consecrated at the moment it entered the field. This is why, in the space of the artistic field as in social space, distances between styles or lifestyles are never better measured than in terms of time (108).

The generational, temporal distance implied here finds its existence in the continual stakes of revaluation and redefinition of the aesthetic within the field: the avant-garde is such because of its opposition to and rejection of contemporaneous aesthetic views. As such, it opposes itself to the dominant, the popular, and, in the end, the profitable. In short, immediate consecration is impossible, as instant recognition would by definition appear to be indicative of a complicity and concurrence with mainstream tastes.

Consecration is, however, eventually achieved by the avant-garde in France, constituting an antithesis in the ongoing dialectic between the consecrated and the avant-garde. The same, it would seem, cannot be said to hold entirely true of the Canadian field. Lecker references the introduction of David Stouck's *Major Canadian Authors: A Critical Introduction* as exemplary of nationalist-canonical opinions with regards to experimental writing:

Stouck recognises that . . . "experimental writers" have received "little critical or popular recognition." Yet he makes no effort to rectify the situation. The exclusion of the writers is, for him, apparently part of God's plan. Stouck's explanation for his neglect of these writers supports the arguments I have advanced: "The reason for this is partly nationalistic, because experimental writers have found their models and sources of inspiration outside

the country." With these words Stouck identifies the crucial principle of exclusion that governs the creation of the Canadian canon: works that are inspired by non-Canadian models are not "major" and are not worthy of study. They are excluded because they are somehow treasonous in their alignment with things foreign. And they are excluded because, in being "experimental," they are antirealist, anticonservative, anti-Canadian (43-44).

The picture of France which Bourdieu constructs is one in which periodisation is made possible by the continual fluxes within the field, which is in large part dependant upon the avant-garde for its continual progression. In contrast, periodisation in the Canadian field is not achieved principally through experimental or avant-garde writing; to the contrary, specific consecration rarely stems from a work's introduction of innovative narrative techniques. It is the reflection and re-instatement of a certain set of values associated with Canadianness, ostensibly embodied in the social-realist form, which appears to have been the most immediate condition of consecration within the Canadian field, at least in most cases. However, whether in such issues as public broadcasting, theatre or the literary canon, the issue of the definition, and the rights to orchestrate that definition, is fast becoming contentious.

Bourdieu has observed that material or popular success may be read as an obstacle to specific consecration by experimental or avant-garde producers; for the avant-garde or experimental producers within the Canadian field, there seems to be a correspondence with the French field. An incident from Leonard Cohen's life serves as an illustration. Ira B. Nadel recounts, in *Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen* how,

[i]n April 1969, Cohen received the Governor General's



Award for Poetry for his *Selected Poems, 1956-1968*. . . . When Cohen learned that he had received the award, he sent a telegram from Europe: "May I respectfully request that my name be withdrawn from the list of recipients of the Governor General's Award for 1968. I do sincerely thank all those concerned for their generous intention. Much in me strives for this honour but the poems themselves forbid it absolutely." No one in English Canada had ever before turned down Canada's most prestigious literary award (and the accompanying twenty-five-hundred-dollar prize money), although the previous month Quebecois writer Hubert Aquin had rejected the award because accepting it "would not conform to [his] political beliefs. . . . Cohen believed that it wasn't necessary to "get behind Canada then." In 1969 the country did not seem, as it does today, an entity that needed such support, he later explained. And he felt that receiving an award from the federal government at a time when the separatists were crying for recognition was, for someone from Quebec, not quite timely. He had friends in the separatist movement, and he couldn't divorce himself from it so easily (Nadel 173-74).

In recounting the above incident, I do not mean to reduce Cohen, nor his choices, to a predictable prototype of the avant-garde artist, who denies him or herself the right to, or privileges inherent in, recognition. Such a characterisation is further problematised by the fact that, by 1968, as Nadel notes, "over two hundred thousand copies [of Cohen's *Selected Poems, 1956-68*] were sold in the United States" alone; Cohen was by no means a little known experimental writer at this time (172). Nevertheless, it is telling that an artist who has been described as a "*poet maudit* whose gloomy anthems helped define a lingering literary adolescence" sought to avoid specific consecration (2).

My argument is not, then, that experimental writing is non-existent in Canada, or that there is no struggle between various factions within the Canadian field; rather, I am suggesting, in keeping with many critics of Canadian literature, that the types of debates that have shaped both literary

production and criticism within the Canadian field have been structured around a set of questions more closely aligned to nationalist/political concerns than aesthetic or stylistic imperatives. The constitution of the literary canon within Canada has remained largely the prerogative of a small minority of scholars, critics and publishers in Canada throughout its brief history. If cultural production in France is structured through the dialectic of the autonomous (avant-garde) and heteronomous (populist/commercial) poles of the field of cultural production, we could arguably characterise the Canadian field (if any univalent, discernible field exists as such within Canada) as being structured between the conservative/nationalist pole, and the heterogeneous pole. Such a dichotomy perhaps simplifies the complexities of the Canadian field -- and it should be noted here that this division does not refer to concrete and contending realities in Canadian culture. Rather, it is intended to develop a framework within which to discuss the overarching tendencies which have shaped the development of criticism, literature and, more broadly, culture within the Canadian field.

The conservative/nationalist pole, if I will be permitted to characterise it in such terms, refers to the milieu which holds Canadianness to be the guiding imperative and mark of success for a nationally contrived aesthetic. Works which are consecrated within this field attain this status through an overarching conformity (in hindsight) to a certain set of values (community, tradition, etc.) which find their most direct expression in the social-realist form. As Lecker notes, "[i]n

Canada, the need is to create a world that is as convincing as possible -- a realistic world. The more tradition is asserted (the more the realistic fiction unfolds), the more obvious becomes the asserter's desire to formulate a linear, coherent, framed, and named world at any cost" (40). It comes as no surprise that most works which have achieved the status of "classics" within Canada conform to the social-realist form. This pole remains the dominant sector of the field of cultural production in Canada: it has historically held, in Bourdieu's words, "the monopoly of the legitimate exercise of symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 121). In France, as in Canada, this monopoly is never fully fixed, nor does it function as the specific tool of a clearly discernible institution: rather, this monopoly is the expression of a dynamic relationship between competing factions and individuals over the rights to cultural ascendancy. Bourdieu notes that "agents of consecration . . . may be organisations which are not fully institutionalised: literary circles, critical circles, salons, and small groups surrounding a famous author or associating with a publisher, a review or a literary or artistic magazine" (121). In Canada, the conservative "establishment" which has historically held the overarching rights to consecration includes the academic community, a small segment of the publishing industry and journalists. Lecker notes that the construction of the Canadian canon has been the work of "a full-blown industry -- a powerful, government-supported network comprised of academics and publishers involved in the teaching, study, and promotion of Canadian literature and

literature criticism" (Lecker 3). He goes so far as to identify the Canadian canon with this ephemeral institution: "[t]he power of the canon and the power of its members are inseparable: the institution is the canon; its members are the texts" (27). Such an identification of the dominant pole of the Canadian field with the canonical institution has the novelty of reinforcing the characterisation assigned to it here: conservative. The attempt to erect a canon is in itself (by definition) a *conservative* strategy; however, such an identification runs the risk of structuring our notions of the Canadian field as fixed and immune to the forces which structure the cultural field in other countries. The conservative-nationalist pole of the Canadian field can thus be seen as the historically contingent and presently dominant pole of the Canadian field: the struggle to delegitimize, or at the very least contest this authority is fast becoming more marked.

At the other extreme of the field of cultural production within the Canadian field would be that governed by the heterogeneous principle of consecration: this pole includes works which run counter to the conservative-nationalist imperatives which dominate the other extreme of the pole, and include experimental works, works written by marginalised or "peripheral" peoples and groups (aboriginal, gay/lesbian/transsexual, immigrant, etc.), and works expressive of more regionalist concerns<sup>10</sup>. These works are by no means wholly separated

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<sup>10</sup> "Regionalism" here refers to the reality or imagined reality of cultural domination by a Toronto elite. Frank Davey, in *Canadian Literary Power*, writes: "I would argue that there is very

stylistically from works consecrated by the other camp: that is to say, this division of the field into two poles is highly artificial with regards to the individual producers. Neither do works within this pole of the field necessarily adopt an oppositional stance with regards to the "canonical" works: in fact, works within this pole of the field may not even recognise an established canon as such. It is intended to reflect different standards of evaluation and consecration with regard to academics, critics and the public. Thus, if the dominant faction of the Canadian field holds certain nationalistic and conservative values to be the standards through which works are consecrated, the opposite end would hold more open-ended, heteronomous, and at times aesthetic standards to distinguish "truly great" works. Furthermore, it should be noted that works considered anti-thetical to conservative-nationalist concerns have been included within the Canadian canon, and have achieved a consecrated status within the conservative pole of the field.

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little 'national' power left in Canadian literature, and that one symptom of this is the extent to which Toronto literary institutions, like the Harbourfront reading series, or Coach House Press in its recent publication of Marguerite Duras and Marco Denevi, or the media's excitement over Michael Ondaatje's Booker Prize, have increasingly turned to the international literary scene for values and recognition" (Preface). The regionalist sentiment is couched in a much more hostile and confrontational tone by George Bowering: ". . . AS a Canadian, let us say, it bothers me that the pieces of literature generally picked up by those National socialist literati and championed as the Canadian Tradition are almost without exception 12th-rate writing, amateur grundle, imitative of some inferior English dribble of a previous time. . . . As a westerner, too, of course, I am colonised by the dinks who identify the Canadian Tradition with some inferior writing done in Ontario and Quebec and maybe New Brunswick. If we [and here Bowering means writers in BC], responding to our own situation, do not write like a snowfearing Anglo-hick, we are accused of being something foreign" (Metcalf 18).

Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* serves as an excellent example of a work which, although experimental, and in spite of its counter-nationalist narrative, has achieved the status of an "important" Canadian work.

The above dichotomy would seem to suggest that there are two clearly defined poles of the Canadian field, and that either end is expressive of fairly uncomplicated, narrowly defined interests. Nothing could be further from the truth. Whether we wish to speak of cultural producers proper (i.e. Canadian writers, poets or dramatists) or of critics (academics, journalists), there is no univalent, monolithic institution that holds the complete monopoly on the symbolic violence of cultural domination. Perhaps the Canadian state provides us with the most dramatic and marked model for Canada's cultural paranoia: after half a century of attempting to reconcile regional concerns with an overarching national program, federalism seems to be as fragile today as at the height of the F.L.Q. crisis<sup>11</sup>. This political crisis finds its cultural corollary in the debates concerning Canadian cultural institutions: neo-liberal fiscal austerity typically mandates cutbacks in most sectors, particularly in such "superfluous" sectors as culture and heritage. Canadian cultural institutions themselves have displayed a remarkable willingness to address the changing

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<sup>11</sup> The failure of the Meech Lake Accord, and the subsequent popularisation of constitutional debate with regards to questions ranging from Aboriginal sovereignty to the state of the Senate, as well as the rise of the regionalist parties in Parliament such as the Bloc Quebecois and the Reform Party, further underscores the ongoing crisis in federalist assertions of the imperative of national unity.

demographics of the Canadian population: in less than ten years, Canadians have witnessed a shift in cultural emphasis (from the bi-cultural to the multi-cultural) on the part of the federal government. Thus, it would be fallacious to imply a one-to-one identification of the conservative-nationalist pole of the Canadian field with the Canadian state. At the same time, however, it would be equally fallacious to identify the pole concerned with difference and inclusion with the Canadian state: the state maintains a commitment to fostering a national character, literature and culture.

I have noted above that canons are conservative by definition; this is not to suggest that the canon can only consecrate works deemed expressive of "conservative" values. Rather, at least in Canada, works which do not fit into the social-realist style of narrative, or which are centred upon or located within spaces not Canadian and yet gain consecration through achieving a canonical status remain, as has already been mentioned, "peripheral." While not necessarily constituting "anomalies," these works seem to be exceptional in their consecration. There are a number of factors to be considered when assessing a work's relative situation within the literary field, including curricular status, the inclusion rate of selected works within major collections and anthologies, and popular recognition.

Such considerations mark the complexity of the very notion of the canon. Canonical texts are not necessarily curricular, as Lecker, following Virgil Nemoianu, notes:

[the] model of the distinction between canon and curriculum is both conventional and controversial -- conventional because it makes assumptions about consensus, transcendence, and durability that have been undermined by recent historicist thought; controversial because it asserts that canonical works are informed by communal democratic values" (Lecker 54).

Curricular works, according to Nemoianu "are chosen for utilitarian reasons, to satisfy some needs -- political, ethical, practical -- and to create bridges of compatibility between an essentially recalcitrant phenomenon and the needs or preferences of structured societies with their ideological expressions" (54). In brief, not all curricular texts are canonical, nor are all canonical texts curricular. Decisions concerning curricula are made more regionally, and, in the case of Canadian universities, remain the province of individual instructors. This is not to suggest that there is no consensus or uniformity of opinion among academics concerning the "great" Canadian works: however, there is no final arbiter to ensure a direct relationship between the canonical and the curricular.

Decisions regarding the assignment of canonical status within Canada have been remarkably "undemocratic," if we choose to assign a particular selection of texts, such as those in McClelland and Stewart's New Canadian Library, authoritatively canonical status. These works were selected by a small editorial board, comprising a limited number of scholars and editors. Thus, while considerations such as mass appeal may have informed the inclusion of certain texts in the series, such appeal was far from constituting an exclusive factor in deciding upon the status



of texts<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, academic "attention," which includes institutional colloquia and conferences devoted to consecrated authors, scholarly writing published in academic journals and periodicals, and critical studies published through the academic presses are all factors indicative of a given producer's position within the field of consecrated works. Some works which have assumed a canonical status have historically received less scholarly attention than others: and while such attention is not, again, a sole determining factor in deciding which works have achieved canonical status, it remains indicative of a work's relative position and degree of consecration within the field.

My argument here, then, is that while such considerations as popular recognition, curricular status and academic attention may not individually (or at times even collectively) constitute evaluative criteria within the Canadian field, such considerations do serve as indicators of a work or producer's relative position within the Canadian field. Certain works may be considered canonical, while failing to garner support in one or all of the above areas.

I would like to conclude by returning to my contention at the beginning of this chapter, that Bourdieu's method is particularly relevant to any analysis of the Canadian field. This contention may, in retrospect, appear to have been undermined

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<sup>12</sup> This reality further underlines the complexities of the Canadian field: Bourdieu's scission of the French field into the two dominant poles of avant-garde and popular does not translate well to the Canadian field.

throughout the course of this chapter. The gulf that divides French and Canadian cultural life is particularly vast, and the shape that the literary history of both countries has taken differs greatly. I would stress, however, following Bourdieu, that his ideas constitute a method of interrogation, and not a static model. It is in the fact that Bourdieu's method is so elastic, and insists upon a relational mode of thinking, that the true importance of his method, and its suitability to the Canadian field, lies. The history of the institutionalisation of Canadian literature is so brief that one may be tempted to suggest that it is too early to evaluate its progression, and that institutions have not had the time to solidify, making such analyses seem arbitrary and contingent: however, I think that it is in very "greenness" of the field itself that makes Bourdieu's method all the more appropriate to us here. Rather than conceptualising canonical institutions as monolithic, conservative and univalent, it may be more useful to conceive of such institutions as dynamic and subject to the continual fluxes which perpetually modify the field of cultural production. "Canadianness" may well have served as the overarching criterion in selecting the great works of Canadian literature; but it is in the definition (or in the rights to assert such a definition) of this elusive label that the importance of relational thinking with regards to the Canadian field finds its truest expression.

Chapter 2:  
Cohen and the Canon

"Don't worry about me becoming  
an expatriate. I could never  
stay away from Montreal. I am a  
Citizen of Mountain Street"  
(Leonard Cohen, quoted from  
*Various Positions: A Life of  
Leonard Cohen*, 56).

Lecker cites McLelland & Stewart's New Canadian Library series as an event instrumental to the constitution of the Canadian canon; that is, works contained in the library have been included because, in the opinion of the editors of the series, they have assumed an important status in the history of Canadian letters, and can be regarded as classics within the field. If we choose to identify this series with the canon itself, then the inclusion of Cohen's *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers* marks these texts as canonical. Such an evaluation of these works may seem somewhat premature, as the series itself appeared in 1957, and *The Favourite Game*, first published in 1963 (by, one cannot help but note, McClelland & Stewart), was inducted into the New Canadian Library series in 1970<sup>1</sup>. It is somewhat

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest the decision to include Cohen's novels in the N.C.L. was not contentious, particularly in the case of *Beautiful Losers*. Lecker describes the controversy sparked by the proposed inclusion of *Beautiful Losers* in the N.C.L. in his essay "The New Canadian Library: A Classic Deal:"

[o]f all the correspondence I saw concerning the development of the series (approximately 200 letters and internal McClelland and Stewart memos), only five items discuss the actual literary merits of specific titles in any detail. Three of these are devoted to one title -- Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966). Ross's objections to the inclusion of this title emphasize his conservative leanings, but they also demonstrate that he did not want to be associated with art that he could not condone. In a letter to McClelland dated 18 September 1968, he wrote:

I am sure it "represents" something in the culture of the moment.

surprising that a work should attain canonical status in less than seven years, and the reasons for the inclusion of both works seems to be highly ambiguous. Cohen was, of course, a major figure of the 1960's, not just in Canadian literary circles, but also on the popular cultural scene at home and abroad. However, the often cautious, if not ambivalent, reception of Cohen's early works by many critics, not to mention the many hostile criticisms levelled at *Beautiful Losers*, suggests that Cohen's work, while widely considered "canonical," nevertheless occupies a place of peripheral importance.

The results of the ballot held at the Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel in 1978 furthers my contention that Cohen's two novels are widely viewed as canonical: both *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers* were voted among the one hundred most

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I am not surprised that Cohen has his following. And the problem raised by this consideration is indeed fascinating. I think that the book -- and its vogue -- is a visible sign of the cancer which is eating away at the marrow of our life in our time. The artist in our time must leave himself open to the phenomenon which Cohen perceives. But the artist if he is the artist must have a certain attitude of his own. He cannot avoid or deny the dirt of our life in a time of disintegration. But it just doesn't do to take a bath in a dirty tub! Cohen wallows in the stinking wreckage of the West. Because there is despair in his eye and in his voice. There is despair in the whole post-civilized posture which this book exemplifies. There is only debasement in this wallowing of Cohen's because Cohen has neither the desire nor the spiritual muscle to lift himself up from his dirt tub. Not really.

My objection to the book is at once aesthetic, moral, philosophical and theological. It is also visceral. The book turns my stomach. Quite literally, Jack!

Ross concluded that "I simply cannot put my name on that book." Yet, as he confesses in his letter, Ross had not really read Cohen's novel carefully when it was first suggested for inclusion in the series: "I had thumbed through the book months before but without giving it serious attention. . . . This is merely to explain how I slid into an indefensible editorial blunder. I certainly should not have agreed without more time for a careful reading (*Deal* 205-206).

important works of Canadian fiction.

Assuming that "Canadianness" is the standard by which cultural producers are evaluated within the Canadian cultural field, it may not be surprising to suggest that Cohen's work could be considered "peripheral," at least in the sense that his rights to the title may be contested. Following the completion of his Bachelor's degree from McGill and his publication of *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, Cohen departed to begin studies at Columbia University in 1956, spending less than a year there and returning to Montreal by 1957. Nadel notes that

[o]n October 29, 1959, Cohen was issued his first passport. It is a well-used document, with stamps that record his wanderings over the following decade: Greece, France, Britain, the United States, Morocco, Cuba, and Norway (Nadel 70).

His first extended spell of expatriotism was made possible by way of a grant from the Canada Council, when Cohen left for England to begin the writing of *The Favourite Game*. In 1960, Cohen acquired a house on the Greek island of Hydra, which facilitated the rewriting of *The Favourite Game*: he spent much of his life in the '60's at this house. He currently resides principally at the Mount Baldy Zen Centre, in California. Much, if not most, of Cohen's adult life has been spent outside of Canada, although Cohen has never renounced his Canadian citizenship. This nascent wanderlust and expatriotism may not constitute a negative judgement of Canada, but they do provide fodder to those who would see Cohen's travels and foreign exploits as such. Nevertheless, as critics and fans anxious to prove Cohen's ongoing affiliation with Canada are quick to point out, he

frequently returns to Montreal.

Although there has been critical attention within Canada to Cohen's work, there is arguably as much critical attention to Cohen's work outside of Canada, particularly in Europe. As Scobie notes, "[a] search of the CD-ROM MLA listings for Cohen since 1980 reveals more articles on his [Cohen's] work published abroad (in Sweden or in Yugoslavia) than in Canada" (Scobie 11). Cohen, or at least his music, is arguably more popular abroad than it is in Canada, beyond the restricted scope of academic criticism.

All of this is not to suggest that Cohen is anti-Canadian, or that his work in itself expresses anti-nationalist sentiments: if anything, and if we understand politics or nationalism within a very limited scope, Cohen could be characterised as a-political. Nevertheless, Cohen could, according to a certain logic, be accused of exporting Leonard Cohen, rather than Canadian culture.

Perhaps the strongest argument in favour of an interpretation of Cohen as being soft on the national front finds its source in his work, not so much in terms of its content as in its style: I have already noted how some critics have argued that "experimental" writing has been conceived of, at least in certain circles, as not being "Canadian;" and Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* certainly qualifies as an experimental work, often cited as one of the first "post-modern" novels to be published in Canada. Furthermore, Cohen's transition from poetry and novel writing to popular music, coupled with his broad appeal, exposes Cohen to the charge of being too closely affiliated with certain forms of

American popular culture. If we thus choose to agree with Stephen Scobie's statement, that the apparent lack of academic attention granted to Cohen stems from "academic snobbery," then perhaps we could hypothesise that this "snobbery" is rooted more in nationalism than in adherence to a certain literary conservatism. That is to say, popular culture as such is conceived of as distasteful in Canadian academic circles because of its implicitly American connotations. In order to substantiate such a claim, however, it is necessary to summarise the critical reception of Cohen from his early poetic and novelistic endeavours into the period of his transition to popular music.

One of the best critical resources for the period of Cohen's career spanning from 1957 to 1975 is Michael Gnarowski's *Leonard Cohen: The Artist and His Critics*. I have chosen this text for examination here because it is a fairly early (1976) account of criticism on Cohen, and, more importantly, because it reflects a significantly broad range of opinions, or "position-takings" with respect to Cohen's works, including articles from both the popular press and academic journals. The volume is divided into three chapters, each representing a different mode of Cohen criticism, from the academic review press, to the popular press, to what Gnarowski refers to as "middle-ground" pieces, which reflect academic attempts to examine Cohen as a "literary phenomenon."

Gnarowski, in his introduction to his critical collection, grapples with many of the *problématiques* which many other Canadian critics have attempted to face: Cohen's transition

from "literature" to "pop culture."

Generally speaking, Cohen's review press -- as a writer, that is -- has been cautious and mixed. Even his literary reputation owes a good deal to the friendliness of feature writers, to his newsworthiness, which sent pithy and quotable briefs and paragraphs across the wire services, and to his genuine ability and willingness to try his hand at related forms of self-expression which kept his name in the fore of the "entertainments" sections of the metropolitan dailies and on the interview circuit. . . . Literary critics, however, have tended to be more modest and restrained in their responses to Cohen's work. There may be something to the fact that these critics have usually been academics or have had academic connections. With the academic tribe, Cohen's supporters and promoters have waged a "we-stick-our-tongues-out-at-you-because-our-man-is-popular" kind of contest (Gnarowski 7-8).

For Gnarowski (as well as many others of his era), there is a demarcation between the "literary" and the "popular." Put crassly, there are two (if not more) Cohens: the "writer," whose work deserves, or "needs" "serious and extended appraisal"; and the "pop icon," the "runner-up to Bob Dylan in popularity" whose supporters are so fanatical that their insights and opinions, expressed in " 'entertainments' sections of the metropolitan dailies and on the interview circuit," account for little more than "a-literate" ramblings (7-8). None of the above is to suggest that there is not a distinction between different venues and media within the field of cultural production, or that Gnarowski is being unfair to either side of the debate concerning the status of Cohen's work; however, and this is my main argument here, such concerns are characteristic of a dialogue that began in the late 1950's, and lasted well into the eighties, concerning the need for a clear demarcation between high and popular culture. Although Cohen is not alone in providing commentators



with a locus around which to construct this debate, he is particularly interesting insofar as his reputation was, if not established, at least first rumoured within the literary field. That is to say, because of the fact that he was first received as a writer, we can chart the complications that arise when a figure operates creatively within a variety of media, distinguished among themselves in terms of their traditional audiences.

Representative pieces of criticism which treat with Cohen as "writer" comprise the first chapter of Gnarowski's book, and do indeed reveal a tendency towards caution and reserve; for example, Allon Donaldson's review of *Let us Compare Mythologies* laments the preponderance of sex and violence in the collection while noting that Cohen's "virtues are his own, and they are considerable" (11-12). David Bromage's review of *Spice Box of the Earth* is similarly mixed: at the end of the review, which evaluates the successes of Cohen's collection, characterised as a book "on various aspects of sexual love," Bromage notes that Cohen's "afflictions . . . are curable, and once Cohen has freed his sensibility from what West called 'the thick glove of words' he will be able to sing as few of his contemporaries can" (16, 18). *The Favourite Game* receives a relatively negative review from Ed Kleiman for its repetitiveness, although Cohen "displays an imaginative power which makes one puzzle all the more at the novel's weakness" (19). *Flowers for Hitler* is depicted by Milton Wilson as a collection that will please those familiar with Cohen's other work: "anyone familiar with the latter [*The Spice Box of the Earth*] in all its range of style and substance (that

is, not just its lush surfaces and sounds) will like *Flowers for Hitler* even better" (21). Three reviews of *Beautiful Losers* are included in the collection, two expressing a cautious appreciation ("[a]s it stands, it is a novel definitely to be read, but only once"), and one, by Lawrence M. Bensky, which expresses disdain, bordering on disgust:

Mr. Cohen is much too intelligent to keep up the game very long; what he relishes, one concludes from their quality, are the bursts of expository eloquence which erupt on occasion, but too infrequently. The rest of the time we're learning about Cosmic Issues through the excretory and sex habits of a dead Indian girl; an old scholar; and a boring French-Canadian politician (28).

George Bowering, in his favourable review of *Parasites of Heaven*, "Inside Leonard Cohen," congratulates Cohen on his introspective use of the first person narrator in much of his poetry, encouraging Cohen to "[k]eep looking at that belly-button, Leonard Cohen. It got angel dust in it" (34). By contrast, a review of Cohen's *Selected Poems 1956-1968* complains that Cohen's "Lyrics are well-meant but thin. Undergraduates get drunk on songs like 'Suzanne Takes You Down,'" but the same sort of thing has already been done better. More concentration needed" (35). Two other reviews of Cohen's *Selected Poems* are included: "Black Romanticism," and an excerpt from "Canadian Books" by Douglas Barbour. These final two comment upon Cohen's "popular success" as a musician, and on the market success of the volume itself. Barbour reviews the volume favourably, noting that the volume "is brilliant and shows what Cohen can still do. *Selected Poems* is an absolute must for anyone who is interested in contemporary Canadian poetry and does not own any earlier Cohen books. The

Cohen fan will already have it" (39).

What is most revealing in this collection of reviews and articles is the perceptible shift in focus and reception, from Cohen's earlier works to his 1968 publication. The early criticism reflects the evaluative, analytical approach to writing characteristic of New Criticism; we can recall here Lecker's comments concerning the omnipresent influence of Leavis on many Canadian critics. Cohen is painted as a talented figure, full of promise. While there is no uniformity of praise among early critics of Cohen's work, there is a general recognition of the promise of the young poet. However, with the publication of *Beautiful Losers* in 1966, arguably the most experimental of Cohen's work, there is something of a marked shift in reception. Cohen is acknowledged as a talented artist, but the work is at best noted as a work to be read because of Cohen's reputation, rather than because of the work's merits. By 1968, the shift in reception is even more marked. This is, not surprisingly, the year that Cohen's first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, appeared. The general popularity of Cohen is acknowledged, even in favourable reviews of Cohen's 1968 collection. At the opening of the review "Black Romanticism," we read that "Montreal's Leonard Cohen appears to be drifting toward the vortex of popular success" (36). The closing words to Barbour's review, already cited above, that "[t]he Cohen fan will already have it [*Selected Poems: 1957-1968*]" further concretises the changing perception of Cohen and his works. He has been transformed from an enigmatic, dark romantic poet to a pop icon. His "admirers" have been

transformed into "fans."

Not surprisingly, it is at this point that Gnarowski's volume begins to focus upon popular pieces devoted to the figure of Cohen, and his place in the popular imagination; as the title to the chapter so aptly indicates, what is being considered here is "Cohen as Pop Artist." Gnarowski divides, as I have noted, Cohen's audience into two camps: scholars and the literati, and a younger, mass audience. Cohen's "literary" works appeal, relatively speaking of course, to the former, whereas Cohen's musical, popular work appeals, in Gnarowski's words, to the "sand-box of pop culture" (6). There is no question, it would seem, that "academics" would find any redeeming characteristics in Cohen's music; and as for Cohen's younger audience, it is sheerly accidental, or a by-product of Cohen's fame, that they should read his books. It is in such terms that Gnarowski explains (or more correctly, puzzles over) Cohen's market success at the end of the 1960's. The surprising market success of Cohen's *Selected Poems: 1956-1968* (over 200 000 copies of the book were sold in the United States) is attributed by Gnarowski, perhaps not unjustifiably, to his iconic status:

[i]t is a curious and disconcerting fact that Leonard Cohen, in the fulsomeness of his reputation, is a figure of the middle nineteen-sixties. Curious, because one suspects that his readership was essentially "a-literate," by which one means little concerned with the true meaning of words and the clear message which they are intended to convey; disconcerting, because the reputation was made in the sand-box of pop culture, aided and abetted by a young audience which chose to idolise a hero in his thirties who was, to all intents and purposes, a generation removed. The publishers responded by making available a writer whose books appealed as a matter of ritual, and the reality of whose statement relied on an enigmatic and touching lyrical

banality (6).

One would be tempted here to recall Bourdieu's analysis of the French field, where popularity is construed as an obstacle to specific consecration within the autonomous field; however, it is not so much Cohen's market success as the proposed reasons for this success that Gnarowski finds so "disconcerting."

Cohen is earmarked by Gnarowski as a creature of his time, an era when "[t]he vocabulary of the youth . . . had more than the usual share of concocted terms, a process coupled with an ardent attempt at being mystical, righteous, special and somehow underground" (6-7). Due to his adherence to and propagation of a certain mould (underground mystique, moody despair, liberated sexuality, etc. . .) Cohen attained a certain iconic status and, according to Gnarowski, in any serious attempt at "assessing" the value of Cohen's work, one must assume an iconoclastic stance. "How," Gnarowski wonders, "to evaluate the response of a large audience indulging in an essentially non-literary 'affair' with a writer whose stage presence remained a dominant reality?" (7) The first step in analysing Cohen is, according to Gnarowski, to ignore

the articles and survey pieces, generous and frequently uncritical, [which] were in *Maclean's Magazine* and *Look* and *The Sunday New York Times* and in *Saturday Night* and in countless weekend supplements which were delivered with the evening paper (7).

Such venues are earmarked by Gnarowski as "uncritical" and "generous," implying that mass support or popularity provide us with no grounds for validating the work, at least within the literary field, of a given producer's value.

It is true that a disproportionate number of critical pieces on Cohen appeared in more popular magazines and journals: *Saturday Night* alone provides us with an amazingly extensive corpus of articles written about Cohen, spanning his entire career. In fact, the period of which Gnarowski speaks could be seen, in a sense, as a high-water mark for Cohen in terms of iconic status. We can consider, for example, the June 1969 issue of *Saturday Night* as representative of the "uncritical" and "generous" venues of which Gnarowski speaks. On the cover we encounter Cohen's face staring back at us with the faintest hint of a leering smirk, the headline reading LEONARD COHEN: the poet as hero. The issue contains three pieces devoted to Cohen, occupying nine pages in total: the first, "Leonard Cohen: The Poet as Hero," a popular (and exultant) examination of Cohen's career and his impact upon the popular culture of the day; the second piece, an interview with the man himself (which is included in the Gnarowski volume), and the third piece, a reflective piece by Don Owen, a fellow poet. All three pieces are consistent, insofar as they do not "critically" engage Cohen's material: they are more concerned with what has been referred to as "the phenomenon" of Leonard Cohen, meaning his peculiarly iconic status<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Desmond Pacey, in "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen," which first appeared in *Canadian Literature* (No. 34, Autumn 1967), states that "[i]n naming Leonard Cohen a phenomenon, I am motivated by the quantity, quality, and variety of his achievements." This piece is also included in the Gnarowski volume, interestingly in the chapter subtitled "Cohen as Literary Phenomenon." What is interesting not only about the inclusion of this critical piece with the slightly misleading title, but also the bizarre subtitle of the chapter, is the strange convergence of terminology from both the more

Particularly noteworthy in the first article in the feature is an anecdotal account by a young woman,

Alice Freeman [who] first met Leonard Cohen in a room at the Four Seasons Motel in Toronto one morning around eight o'clock. The meeting happened six years ago when Alice was eighteen and at university; she was just as pretty then and as fiercely intelligent as she is now, but she also had a dreamy, romantic streak that she prefers to deny today. Like a lot of other right young girls, who make up the largest part of Cohen's pop audience, she got to him simply by phoning him, and when he said (as he invariably does) sure, come around and talk, she found herself knocking on his motel-room door and feeling very comfortable about it (24).

Such anecdotes pepper not only this article, but a good number of the articles in the popular press, and are indicative of an attempt to simultaneously destroy and construct the "Cohen mystique;" here, we find Cohen painted as remote yet accessible, the pop icon who is no further away than the nearest telephone. Such articles partake of the cult of personality which accompanied the rise of pop icons (and which continues today)<sup>15</sup>. Overexposure, rather than any more evaluative criterion, provides

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established "literary" lexicon and the verbiage of popular culture.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Dyer, in *Stars*, notes that . . . . [t]he paradox of the extravagant life-style and success of the stars being perceived as ordinary may be explained in several ways:

- i) stars can be seen as ordinary people who live more expensively than the rest of us but are not essentially transformed by this.
  - ii) the wealth and success of the stars can be seen as serving to isolate certain human qualities (the qualities they stand for), without the representation of those qualities being muddled by material considerations or problems.
- Both (i) and (ii) fit with notions that human attributes exist independently of material circumstances. Stars may serve to legitimate such notions.
- iii) stars represent what are taken to be people typical of this society; yet the types of people we assume characterise our society may nevertheless be singularly absent from our actual day-to-day experience of society; the specialness of stars may be then that they are the only ones around who are ordinary! (Dyer 49-50)

its own justification, and if the figure has captured the "popular imagination," then the roots must lie, not necessarily in the work produced, but in the character of the celebrity. The game then becomes one of charting the mythic "biography" -- constructed not simply by interaction with the individual and those close to him or her, but also by means of any number of anecdotes and rumours -- of the icon.

Other pieces in Gnarowski's volume which treat Cohen as "pop icon" are Burr Snider's "Leonard Cohen: Zooey Glass in Europe" (a piece which reflects upon the experience of a Cohen concert) and Susan Lumsden's journalistic chronicle, "Leonard Cohen Wants The Unconditional Leadership of The World." Much like *Saturday Night's* "The Poet as Hero," both of these pieces reflect upon Cohen's iconic status without critically engaging any of Cohen's work ("literary" or "popular"). There is, however, one piece in this chapter of Gnarowski's volume which does verge upon a critical engagement with Cohen's music: Juan Rodriguez's "Poet's Progress -- To Sainthood and Back." In this piece, Rodriguez (writing for an audience unfamiliar with Cohen's "literary" work) charts the progression of Cohen's career, from *Let us Compare Mythologies* to *Songs from a Room*. Rodriguez's central argument is that

Cohen is one of the new breed of artists who seem to be reluctant to the thought of enclosing themselves within boundaries. Thus, they remain intransient [sic] and formless, always on the lookout for new methods of expressing themselves. The story of Cohen's career, then, is one of a search for identity (63).

One surprising aspect of Rodriguez's retrospective piece is the



fact that its conclusions are remarkably similar to those of early critics of Cohen's poetry and novels: the impression is one of reserved appreciation. Rodriguez, for example, notes that "because Cohen is so often unsure of artistic form, some of his outpourings -- particularly those more recent -- can only be described as being self-conscious and impotent" (63). The inclusion of this article in Gnarowski's volume is important, as it illustrates the fact that, even in pieces in the popular press, the evaluative process by which certain works or artists are elevated while others are denigrated is not wholly absent. Rather, the register between the popular and the "literary" may be different, but evaluative criticism exists in both fields.

The final section of Gnarowski's volume is devoted to critics considered to occupy the "middle-ground" in their attempts to reconcile mass appeal with a more properly "academic" tradition. What is notable in these pieces is the shift from evaluative concerns to thematic ones. The "middle-ground" pieces which comprise the third chapter of the volume do make attempts to consider not only the literary works, but also Cohen's more populist endeavours; however, the focus is upon "close readings" and explications.

The chapter opens with Pacey's "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen," an article that attempts to chart Cohen's progression from *Let Us Compare Mythologies* to *Beautiful Losers*, which Pacey argues is Cohen's "most impressive single achievement, and in my opinion the most intricate, erudite, and fascinating Canadian novel ever written" (74). According to Pacey, pursuing a somewhat naively teleological reading of Cohen's career, *Beautiful Losers* is the culmination of all of Cohen's work to date -- that is, in

1967. Among the many reasons for Pacey's appreciation of the novel, the foremost seems to be the fact that the "novel [is] more intricately interwoven than any Canadian novel of my experience" (93). Although Pacey focuses primarily upon Cohen's literary accomplishments, he finds great value in his musical work, and is thus led to name Cohen, as has been mentioned, a "phenomenon."

Cohen is placed, by Sandra Djwa, in her article "Leonard Cohen: Black Romantic," directly in the tradition of the "Black Romantic:" "it is precisely in this tradition [the tradition of Genet, Burroughs or Gunter Grass], that of the contemporary Black Romantics as we might call them, that Leonard Cohen appears to belong" (94). Djwa notes the strangeness of finding such a figure in Canada, which is, as she notes, characterised by a "genteel conservatism" (94). She notes further that "I suspect that Leonard Cohen is more important in Canadian writing for the contemporary moment which he represents than for the intrinsic merit of his work to date. . . . [I]f Cohen does have a future as a serious writer -- if he wants one -- it is back in the writing of *The Favourite Game* before Cohen, persona, solidified" (104). Djwa's assessment of Cohen is strangely close to the earlier comments concerning Cohen, at least in its moderation: put succinctly, Djwa sees Cohen as important to his era, in his involvement in and adherence to certain fundamental shifts in literary norms, but it is only if he continues writing that he will retain a position of serious prominence in the cultural life of the country. In locating Cohen within the broader, North American social context of his time, Djwa is close to Pacey, and this proximity seems to justify the inclusion of her piece within

this chapter of Gnarowski's volume. However, her cautious tone connects her with earlier critics of Cohen's works.

Two other articles included in this chapter worth noting here are Stephen Scobie's "Magic, Not Magicians: *Beautiful Losers* and *Story of O*" and Douglas Barbour's "Down With History: Some Notes Towards an Understanding of *Beautiful Losers*." Scobie, in his article, provides a comparative analysis of both *Beautiful Losers* and *Story of O*, arguing that the attempts at self negation in both tales run directly counter to the moral tenets of "[o]ur culture . . . which sets a great value on individuality, the preservation of the unique personality" (106). Barbour, in his article, curiously constructed as a series of unconnected paragraphs related to different themes in *Beautiful Losers*, attempts to decipher certain aspects of this bewildering novel, all geared, as the title suggests, "towards an understanding of *Beautiful Losers*." Barbour does not attempt "to figure out the time sequence of *Beautiful Losers*," but rather provides analyses of some of the dominant themes of the novel. Particularly noteworthy in this article is Barbour's statement that, "even if he never writes another word, he [Cohen] has created one undeniable major work: that saintly apocalypse for all New Jews: *Beautiful Losers*" (148).

All of the pieces contained in Gnarowski's volume, from the early reviews, to the more recent analyses of Cohen's, assume some sort of evaluative stance: the critical reviews most often, as Gnarowski notes, paint Cohen as a figure who shows talent and promise; the popular pieces construct Cohen as a pop icon, worthy of the adulation showered upon him by his adoring fans; the more extended considerations in the final chapter, although

predominantly concerned with explications of Cohen's works, nevertheless render favourable judgements upon Cohen's work, and upon his status within the Canadian cultural field. One of the more pressing questions which I raised at the outset of this chapter is related to Cohen's transition from literature to music, and whether or not this change in fields had a perceptible impact upon his critics. Undoubtedly, such a question is, in a sense, unjustified, for at least two reasons. First, literary critics, in the late 1960's, could not have been expected to comment critically upon Cohen's musical work: popular music, and reviews of popular music, are (or at least were, in the late 1960's) the domain of critics of popular music, and not literary critics. Second, there is a notable lapse in time between the publication of Cohen's first works (1957 and 1963) and his transition to popular music. A negative review by a critic on one of Cohen's works could just as easily be a result of a decline in the "quality" of Cohen's literary works during the 1960's (*The Spice-Box of the Earth*, *Flowers for Hitler*) as much as a reflection of Cohen's growing popularity at that point in his career. Nevertheless, it is still possible to maintain that there is a shift in reception around 1968, the year in which Cohen's *Selected Works* appeared. One piece which deserves some further consideration here, a part of which was cited earlier, is remarkable for its candour in denigrating Cohen's more populist pursuits:

. . . Leonard Cohen -- who in other incarnations is a lyricist for some of the more trendy lady folksingers, a novelist famous for the *Danish Vibrator* and other fetching creations in *Beautiful Losers*, and a vocalist of dubious attainments -- is lavishly treated by his British

publishers to what must be the classiest presentation for a youngish poet in recent years. The lyrics are well-meant but thin. Undergraduates get drunk on songs like "Suzanne Takes You Down," but the same sort of thing has already been done better. More concentration needed (35).

Although the pieces which appear at the end of Gnarowski's volume do not fail to evaluate Cohen's work (most often favourably), they do stand apart from the pieces contained within other chapters in their attempts at more sustained readings of Cohen's works, not only his literary works, but also, at times, his popular music. Considered in conjunction with the other varied responses to Cohen included in Gnarowski's collection, one would be tempted to consider Cohen's place in the history of Canadian letters to be secure. How, then, can I argue, following Scobie's contention with which I opened this examination, that Cohen has become a "peripheral" figure in Canadian literature?

Among any number of considerations which arise when one attempts to consider the relative position of a particular figure in the history of Canadian literature is the volume and type of criticism produced concerning the figure. Scobie's comments in particular refer to the relative lack of scholarly discussions of Cohen within the Canadian field. Is it in fact fair to come to the conclusion that Cohen's work is less popular within the academy than it is outside of it, in more popular circles? In response to this question, we need not look much further than Gnarowski's volume. The total number of pieces contained in the volume is twenty-four, of which twelve are critical reviews, five are pieces selected from the popular press, and seven are pieces

originally published in academic journals. The selected bibliography at the end of the volume contains references to fifteen "selected articles and reviews not contained in this collection": eight articles selected from the popular press, two book length studies (one of which is largely devoted to the works of Hugh MacLellan), and three pieces from collected works on various authors. A more recent bibliography repeats the above pattern: the ECW Major Canadian Authors series (published in 1981) shows similar trends. A disproportionate number of the works listed were published in the popular press, with a not too generous selection of works published in more academic venues. Relative to other major Canadian authors, Cohen's works have produced few book length studies: among the few are Ondaatje's *Leonard Cohen* and Stephen Scobie's *Leonard Cohen*. All of this suggests that, while there is consonance in the opinions of most Cohen critics that he occupies a major place in the cultural history of Canada, and while many of his works (particularly *Beautiful Losers*) may be considered canonical, his works nevertheless do not solicit the magnitude of discussions other major figures in Canadian literature do. If there is a critical arena in which Cohen has managed to occupy a considerable role, then it is the popular press.

All things considered, it is difficult not to side with Gnarowski's scarcely muted disdain for popular accounts of Cohen (and not Cohen's work): such accounts do little to clarify the complexities of the works produced. We can, nevertheless, credit Gnarowski with having included any number and variety of articles

within his volume, from the more those more "academic" in tone, to the popular, anecdotal and frequently trivial tributes, to the "middle ground of Cohen criticism [which] includes serious attempts to understand the renewed intimacy between literature and the spoken word" (8). The question which remains, for such a volume, is with whom does cultural/critical authority reside?

At first glance, the response appears to be quite simple, considering the tone of Gnarowski's introduction: while the pieces which deal with Cohen pop status may be interesting as indicative of a particular period of the history of popular culture, they have little evaluative or critical value. It is the academically minded pieces, as well as those which occupy the "middle ground," that appear to possess the legitimate "monopoly of symbolic violence." However, does the inclusion of the articles from more popular venues constitutes little more than a token salute to Cohen's pop status? Or could we argue that these pieces, coupled with Cohen's own ironic self-transformation, from "minor" poet to pop icon, constitutes a serious rupture in the history of literature in Canada? This is not to overvalue Cohen's place in either the cultural or popular life of Canadian history; however, can we not argue that the interaction of Cohen with the popular scene marks a shift in the history of mainstream Canadian literature?

One way of approaching this question is to examine it in terms of some of the later Cohen criticism, from the late 1980's and early 1990's, which witnessed the introduction of "European theory" into (sections of) Canadian academic life, particularly

in literature departments. Linda Hutcheon and Stephen Scobie, among many others, have made the question of Cohen's relation to postmodernity a key focal point in much of their research on Cohen. A representative piece of such scholarship is Clint Burnham's "How post-modern is Cohen's poetry?" In this essay, Burnham suggests that "[w]hile Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* is widely seen as Canada's first post-modern novel . . . the post-modern qualities of Cohen's poetry, and specifically *Flowers for Hitler*, have yet to be recognised" (Burnham 65). Burnham follows Frederic Jameson in defining the post-modern in terms of certain thematics, including "the notion of the death of the subject, the prevalence of pastiche, space as a thematico-formal concern, and the dialectic of high and mass culture" (65). We could arguably push Burnham's claim one step further, and propose a "post-modern" status for Cohen's musical lyrics as well. Such a claim can be substantiated in at least two ways: 1) nowhere is the "dialectic of high and mass culture" more evident in Cohen's career than in his dalliance with the pop scene, and; 2) Cohen does not seem to distinguish between the printed word and the musical lyric<sup>16</sup>. Of course, one need not look to post-modern examinations of Cohen's lyrics in order to posit a close relationship between his poetry and his musical lyrics. Gnarowski's volume alone contains an article by Frank Davey entitled "Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan: Poetry and the Popular Song," in which Davey situates Cohen (as well as Dylan) directly

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<sup>16</sup> We can consider, for example, the inclusion of many of Cohen's songs in his 1993 volume *Stranger Music*.



in the English lyrical tradition: "[t]he distance between the *gleomannes gyd* in *Beowulf* or "Sumer is Icumen In" and the songs of Leonard Cohen or Bob Dylan may seem great, but is one of time rather than aesthetics" (Gnarowski 111). The article attempts to treat Cohen's lyrics as poetry, referring to both Dylan and Cohen as "poets" who attempt to restore significance and integrity of vision to the popular song. . ." (112). What is missing in Davey's article, however, is an in-depth analysis of the implications of mass culture upon the construction of the figure of the popular poet. This question, and its relation to Cohen's argued post-modernity, will be discussed during the course of the next chapter.

### Chapter 3: Cohen and Poststructuralism

Stephen Scobie, in his keynote address to the 1992 Red Deer conference on Leonard Cohen ("The Counter Begs Forgiveness: *Leonard Cohen* and *Leonard Cohen*"), commenting upon his 1978 publication, *Leonard Cohen*, introduces the Derridean notion of the supplement:

[i]t is in this sense, then, that this essay should be seen as a "supplement" to the 1978 *Leonard Cohen*. On the one hand, it recognises that the earlier book is complete in itself: that it stands, for better or for worse, as an expression of the kind of critical attitude towards Leonard Cohen that was possible in the mid-1970's. Reading that book now, and noting especially its relentlessly thematic nature, its devoted tracing of image-patterns, and its fastidious concern for evaluation (ticking off the good poems and the bad poems, the successes and the failures), I can see it as a cultural document of its time. Canadian criticism, circa 1974: after Atwood, before Davey; after New Criticism, before Deconstruction. . . . I see all kinds of gaps in it: things it did not say (or, to be fair, *could* not say, at that date), which I now wish to add to it. The very fact that it never questions its own critical procedures, that it simply takes for granted certain ideological stances (everything from the value of close reading of texts through to its vaguely defined liberal humanism): that fact in itself opens up the gap in the book's own discourse which a later, more theoretically informed scepticism would fill with awkward and impolite questions (Scobie 9-10).

Scobie's comments here concerning his book's lack of theoretical insight into its own "critical procedures" ("after New Criticism, before Deconstruction") assume the form of apology, and script the introduction of European poststructural theory in Canadian institutions in the problematic terms of a progression. The paradigmatic shift towards poststructuralism which was effected in Canadian academic institutions during the late 1970's has indeed left its mark upon literary criticism within this country, especially where Leonard Cohen is concerned. This sentiment is

glowingly expressed in Birk Sproxton's conclusion to the Red Deer conference, and the subsequent publication of the conference papers in *Canadian Poetry*:

[c]ollectively, these papers touch on what is most lively in contemporary literary enterprise. Dominant is a set of deconstructive reading practices which I am tempted to describe by recalling the 1960s expression *spacing-out*. . . . Deconstruction often works by stretching out the parts of a text to reveal its constructedness. The reading is slowed down, the attention made intensive. . . . Collectively, these papers also make up a significant overview of and context for Leonard Cohen's achievement. Stephen Scobie discusses the emergence of theory since his Cohen book of the early 1970's, and illustrates the pertinence of Derrida's idea of supplementarity and the concomitant issues of presence and absence, origin and voice. Scobie announces another key theme in speaking of the death of the author -- which really means, as Roland Barthes insists, the birth of the reader (Barthes 148), a sometimes knotty issue which recurs in various forms, not least in relation to Ira Nadel's paper on biography (Sproxton 123-24).

While there is no necessarily theoretical unity in the papers included in the Red Deer collection, insofar as such an unity would be expressed through an adherence to a specific methodology or a particular text -- whether this be Deconstruction or the writings of Roland Barthes -- many are marked by reading and critical strategies developed in recent European philosophy. This does not necessarily imply that these articles constitute, as a whole, a reconfiguration of the network of criticism available on Cohen, or that the publication of a series of predominantly "poststructural" readings on Cohen signals the victory of Poststructuralism over New Criticism. Rather, as we shall see, the heterogeneous impetus which guides this volume reveals a significant alteration in the position-takings available to critics interested in exploring the "phenomenon" of Leonard

Cohen.

In the previous chapter, I suggested that much of the criticism related to Leonard Cohen, from the late 1950's until the middle of the 1970's, assumed an evaluative tone, consonant with the close readings of New Criticism. Among any number of critics to note the general shift in theoretical paradigms in Canadian literary studies, Stephen Scobie is uniquely placed to provide us with some perspective on the transformations within the Canadian cultural field over the past twenty years. The above cited text reveals a critic who has responded to changes within the field, and has adjusted or "corrected" his readings of texts to compensate for any perceived shortcomings in earlier expressed opinions. Such revisions, or *supplements* as Scobie refers to them, drawing upon Derrida, are also further indicative of the reality of the struggle for the monopoly of cultural legitimacy.

It is difficult to demarcate when "post-modern" readings of Cohen began. Among the most frequently cited works related to Cohen and post-modernity is Linda Hutcheon's 1988 publication, *The Canadian Post-modern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, in which *Beautiful Losers* is cited as Canada's first post-modern novel; other critics, such as Stephen Scobie, George Bowering and Stan Dragland concur with this characterisation of Cohen's second novel. Burnham, in his article "How post-modern is Cohen's poetry?," drawing upon Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, describes "what . . . [he sees] as some of the key features of post-modern culture: the notion of the death of the

subject, the prevalence of pastiche, space as a thematico-formal concern, and the dialectic of high and mass culture" (Burnham 65). That these features are present in *Beautiful Losers* is self evident; however, it took a number of years before these qualities were recognised or delineated as "post-modern." As Scobie notes, his book could not entertain any number of theoretical positions because certain concepts and methods of reading had not been introduced in Canada at the time in which *Leonard Cohen* was written; as Bourdieu would note, then, Scobie's critical position, or position-taking, was dictated both by his relative position in the field itself, as well as by the composition of the field at a given historical moment.

While Cohen's work may not have been coined as a "post-modern" text until well into the 1980's, many of the features associated with post-modern texts were being discussed in earlier articles, particularly in the middle of the 1970's. We can consider Pacey's "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen," written in 1967, and thus before the paradigmatic shift towards theory in Canadian institutions, as a work which recognises many of the themes and narrative techniques common to post-modern works in Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, without venturing such a qualification. Among the predominant features of post-modernism already cited are the death of the subject, pastiche, a concern with space and the mediation between high and low culture; Pacey outlines many of these characteristics in Cohen's novel:

[t]he final answer of *Beautiful Losers*, the loss of self in the pursuit of sainthood, is also adumbrated in *Flowers for Hitler*. . . . Beautiful Losers are those who achieve the

beauty of "sainthood" . . . by losing, or rather by voluntarily surrendering, their selves and the ordinary world. . . . [A]ncient mythologies are supplemented with more recent myths and magical manifestations: the magic of houdini, the mythology of the comic strips and radio programmes, the magic rituals of the Masonic order, the myth of astrology . . . the magic of firecrackers and guns and rockets. But the contemporary mythology and magic which are most stressed are those of the movies. . . . An associated feature of the technique of this novel is its clever manipulation of chronology (Pacey 88, 89, 93).

Although Pacey's examinations of dominant themes in *Beautiful Losers* are inflected by a different set of assumptions than later poststructural readings of the text (the theme of martyrdom as opposed to the death of the subject; the transformation of popular narratives into overarching mythologies, etc. . .), the object of study, *Beautiful Losers*, with its concomitant defiance of traditional narrative techniques, remains the same. Classification, then, understood in the sense of aligning a work with a particular school or pole within the field of cultural production, acts in something approximating a performative manner. Pacey, assuming one of the position-takings available at the end of the 1960's, (mistakenly?) relates Cohen's novel to Symbolism: "[i]n structure it resembles a symbolic poem. . . ." (92). A good number of the thematic, stylistic, and narratological elements of *Beautiful Losers*, which Pacey classifies as reminiscent of "symbolism" will be re-interpreted, following a major shift within the field, by a number of critics as "post-modern."

We have already seen how *Beautiful Losers* has been characterised as a post-modern work; such characterisations align both the work under consideration and the critic of the work, who

comes to occupy an executive position with regards to the classification of the text, with a certain pole in the cultural field. However, to classify a work as post-modern, and to see this classification as related to the pole in the field with which it is concerned, does not necessarily imply that the same underlying assumptions or cultural imperatives which governed, for example, New Criticism, are operative in poststructural criticism. An example from Cohen's own writing will illustrate this point.

Cohen's two novels, at least at the level of narration, differ greatly, so much so that they have been classified (not incorrectly) in vastly differing ways. Paul Quarrington, in his afterword to *The Favourite Game*, notes that the novel

falls neatly into a literary category and tradition. It is a *bildungsroman*, which is translated from the German exactly as "formation novel" or, more expressively, "education novel." The term refers to a novel which represents a person's formative years; Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* springs to mind as an example (Cohen 236).

Such a classification of *The Favourite Game* is consonant with the novel's content: Larry Breavman's life and growth as an artist are charted from early reminiscences to young adulthood, and the development of the poet constitutes the raw kernel of the novel. The narrative line runs in an essentially unambiguous chronology, although the narration is at times disrupted by ecstatic insights and bizarre anecdotes. *Beautiful Losers*, by contrast, does not follow an easily delineated chronology, and troubles the teleological and temporal assumptions evident in *The Favourite Game* in its use of truncated, frequently inconsistent deployment

of various narrative forms (historical accounts, letters, comic strips and radio plays). Also problematised is the notion of the stable, self-identical individual (the unnamed narrator "I" merges with his friend and mentor "F" near the end of the novel; his wife Edith is at times transfigured into Katherine Tekakwitha, Isis, and the Virgin Mary). However, in part because of the Master/Student-Slave dialectic developed throughout the course of the novel, and because a matter of central concern to the novel is "I's" mystical development, there is arguably a similarity between the two novels in that they chart (one chronologically, the other miscellaneously) the aesthetic development of the protagonist. The fact that I's mystical growth constitutes a central narratological element of the framework of *Beautiful Losers* by no means necessitates an association of the novel with the *bildungsroman*; however, *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers*, published within three years of each other, may not be so vastly different as the classifications "post-modern" and "bildungsroman" would lead one to believe.

What is evident is that the criteria for the classification of a work have shifted dramatically within a very short space of time; a work classified as a *bildungsroman* is dependant upon the presence of certain narrative, chronological and thematic elements perceived to inhere within the text itself, while a "post-modern" text is so classified because certain other underlying elements are present within a text. Lyotard, in delineating what he sees as the distinction between the modern and the post-modern in literature, writes that



[t]he post-modern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have to be done*. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an event; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realisation (*mise en oeuvre*) always begin too soon. *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*) (Lyotard 81).

Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, according to critics who classify the work as "post-modern," focuses upon many of the above described characteristics in reference to Cohen's second novel: a de(con)struction of chronology, the unrepresentability or misrecognition of beauty, the search for rules in a chaotic universe governed by the imperative to "connect nothing." However, many of the dominant themes in *The Favourite Game* are also present in *Beautiful Losers*. This is not to suggest that the works are so alike as to warrant a similar classification of both works as either *bildungsroman* or "post-modern;" rather, I think that, given the short space of time which separates the writing and publication of both novels, in conjunction with the dramatic shifts critical methodologies within the Canadian field, we must be aware of the way in which an adherence to a given designative category situates a critic in a certain pole, at a given

historical moment, of the field of cultural production.

While post-modern and other poststructural approaches to literature are on the ascendant in Canadian universities, at least in literature departments, it by no means occupies a position of uncontested legitimacy. To the contrary, both within Canada and abroad, "po-mo" theory has received criticism from various fields for its contestations or critiques of reason, the enlightenment and the free subject, to name but a few. It is further condemned for its frequent use of a highly complicated, heavily stylised discourse deemed incomprehensible by all but specialists within the field. To cite but a single critic within the Canadian field, to whom I have referred multiple times throughout the course of this text, Robert Lecker asks

[h]ow has the discourse of English-Canadian literary criticism changed over the past forty years? Have Canadian literary critics worked as "historical agents of change," as Jim Merod would have all critics work, or have they stood "outside the ordinary commerce of society," inhabiting a private realm that has an increasingly diminished public function?

My immediate answer to these questions is that Canadian criticism has become a private affair, removed from public access, divorced from its communal frames. This happened partly because the (late) introduction of European theory to English curricula encouraged the use of critical approaches that were foreign to the Canadian reading public. But it also happened because, after the 1950's, the study of Canadian literature became a new industry that required new levels of specialisation in order to sustain itself and grow.

[. . .]

Although the industrialisation of Canadian literature was supposed to make the subject more accessible -- more public -- the emphasis on specialisation encouraged teachers and critics to value theoretical approaches that the literate, educated reader did not understand. As these approaches became more sophisticated (and less comprehensible), the discourse of Canadian criticism was gradually removed from the public sphere. Criticism became a private function attended by a growing professional

elite. The elite grew in power, solidified the club. Inside, the language became more and more theoretical. The discussion of Canadian literature got politicised. Internal factions developed. The idea of addressing an interested community of readers -- so prominent in preindustrial Canadian criticism -- broke down (Lecker 70).

We should frame these comments within the context of his discussion of "Canadianness" and "literary conservatism" in the Canadian field. What Lecker refers to as the "industrialisation" of Canadian literature is the growth within Canadian academic institutions of the study of Canadian literature, and the attempts to construct a Canadian literary canon. This industrialisation, and the subsequent construction of the (imagined?) canon was accomplished by a small, relatively tight-knit community of scholars, critics and editors interested in promoting Canadian literature. The inevitable shortcoming of this project was the essentially élitist and non-democratic nature of the project itself; the Canadian cultural institution responsible for the canonisation of Canadian literature, according to Lecker, held a monopoly over cultural legitimacy. A similar process is in operation, according to Lecker, in literature departments today, with the introduction of European theory to the Canadian field. Rather than projecting the critical space within Canada as an open forum, or better yet, an accessible public institution, Lecker describes the development of the critical space within Canada in terms reminiscent of his comments concerning the "industrialisation" of Canadian literature.

What Scobie sees as an important progression in Canadian literary studies, particularly with regards to Cohen, is decried by Lecker as a renewed (and unacceptable) élitism. In the case of

Cohen, in reference to the criticism available (a good portion of which I have thus far examined), one wonders what would constitute the democratisation so yearned for by Lecker<sup>17</sup>. One of the more problematic aspects of Lecker's claims concerning poststructuralist (or recent European) discourse is the lack of specificity. Does reference to Lyotard or Derrida (or Foucault, or Barthes, et. al.) during the course of a critical text constitute a poststructural reading? Poststructuralism refers not only to a mode (or better yet, a multiplicity of modes) of approaching texts, but also to a style of narrative, or a method of representation. Should we consider the recently published *ECW* collection on Leonard Cohen, which includes texts whose critical apparatuses are inflected by such theorists as Derrida and De Man, as well as on-line discussions on Cohen and populist anecdotes related to Cohen, as a poststructural text itself?

Nevertheless, Scobie, among many other critics of Cohen's work, appropriate the term poststructuralist to denote a certain

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<sup>17</sup> Included in the recently published "Leonard Cohen Issue" of *Essays on Canadian Writing* (Winter 1999, Number 69) are a number of examinations of the online "fanzine" phenomenon generated by Cohen. Jarkko Arjatsalo, who runs the web-based publication *The Leonard Cohen Files*, notes that "[t]oday there are more Web sites than ever that pay homage to Cohen. Twenty to thirty sites dedicated to his work are active, and the number is growing all the time. Although some sites exist for only a brief period, a phenomenon typical to all noncommercial sites on the Internet, many national sites in various languages have been opened lately, and it appears that they will be maintained for some time" (145). Also included in this special issue is an on-line discussion "Whose the Boss? An Internet discussion on "Closing Time." The preponderance of on-line material related to Cohen, as well as the willingness of editors of such journals as *ECW* not only to acknowledge the opening of such critical spaces, but to translate the opinions expressed in electronic media into print could be considered to present us with something resembling a "democratised" critical space; that is, should editors be willing to venture into such media to collect and review information.

mode of critical inquiry. In the above cited passage, which concluded the Red Deer collection, we read that

[c]ollectively, these papers touch on what is most lively in contemporary literary enterprise. Dominant is a set of deconstructive reading practices which I am tempted to describe by recalling the 1960s expression *spacing-out*. . . . Deconstruction often works by stretching out the parts of a text to reveal its constructedness. The reading is slowed down, the attention made intensive. . . .

This passage is remarkable in its jubilant and celebratory tone; furthermore, there seems to be a strange recuperation of certain aspects of New Criticism. Terry Eagleton, in *Literary Theory*, concerning New Criticism, notes that

'Close reading' is also a phrase worth examining. Like 'practical criticism' it meant detailed analytic interpretation, providing a valuable antidote to aestheticist chit-chat; but it also seemed to imply that every previous school of criticism had read only an average of three words per line (Eagleton 38).

While New Criticism and Deconstruction are vastly different in style, scope and method, there is nevertheless a focused attention common to both schools. Furthermore, both share a common ground insofar as they can both be periodised as "schools" or "movements" related to matters of literary concern. Finally, as Eagleton notes, New Criticism "inescapably suggests an attention to *this* text rather than to something else"; similarly, the very choice of a particular work or author for a "post-modern" inquiry implies an evaluative judgement. While such relations are elementary, somewhat reductive, and fairly limited insofar as they do little to describe these two vastly differing schools of thought from one another, it is important not only to bear in mind the evaluative process involved in the choice of a

particular work for study, but also the choices critics make with regards to modes of inquiry.

What does the critical shift to deconstruction and other poststructuralist modes of discourse imply with regards to Cohen? Postmodernism, for example, may refer equally to a mode of critical enquiry as well as a classificatory category for a given work. Recent criticism on Cohen includes examples of both. An example of the latter, which has already been mentioned, is Clint Burnham's "How post-modern is Cohen's poetry?" The article begins with the following statement: "While Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* is widely seen as Canada's first post-modern novel . . . , the post-modern qualities of Cohen's poetry, and specifically *Flowers for Hitler*, have yet to be recognised" (Burnham 65). Although Burnham qualifies his statement with regards to the problematic nature of such a classification,<sup>18</sup> he nevertheless participates in the call for increased attention to the "post-modern qualities of Cohen's poetry." Furthermore, Burnham tacitly acknowledges his alignment with a certain pole in the critical field: he sees his project in part as "claim[ing] Cohen's poetry for the post-modern side. . . ." (65)<sup>19</sup>. All of this is not to suggest that Cohen's poetry (or any of his other work) is not

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<sup>18</sup> "To label Cohen's poetry as post-modern is no doubt a problematic enterprise, for any number of reasons: for example, "postmodernism" itself is a term that is over-used and ill-defined - one might say, undefined precisely because it is used in so many ways. And, then, to claim Cohen's poetry for the post-modern side seems disingenuous: there are certainly other writers, like Victor Coleman or Phyllis Webb, who at least in terms of influence seem more evidently post-modern. Finally, the very facility with which the post-modern label has been applied to *Beautiful Losers* should warn of any critic" (Burnham 65).

<sup>19</sup> My emphasis.

post-modern; in fact, Burnham's examination of *Flowers for Hitler*, informed by Jameson's reading of postmodernity in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, is both incisive and qualified. What is of interest to me here, however, is the way in which even the classification of a work as "post-modern" is problematized insofar as it involves both an evaluative judgement of the work's relative "worth" or "importance" -- and Burnham is involved in the game of evaluation -- and the way in which the classification of the work aligns the critic with a certain pole in the field of cultural production.

Similarly, works which employ deconstructive approaches, such as Lori Emerson and Joe Hooper's collaborative article, "Miming/*Différence*: Leonard Cohen Live," while seeking to avoid the pitfall of assuming an evaluative stance, nevertheless implicate themselves in the game of critical appraisal. From the outset of their article, which is premised upon deconstruction and Derrida's notion of *différence*, Emerson and Hooper problematise the notion of the writing subject: both employ the personal pronoun "I," which empties the speaking subject's capacity for a stable reference point. They begin their effort by noting their (individual?) motivations for initiating such a project:

I wanted to explore Cohen's concerts, though I couldn't since he wasn't currently on tour, so I settled for the next best thing: videotaped performances, a dark room to watch them in, and a huge television. I, on the other hand, wanted to analyse audio recordings of Cohen's concerts through the lens of (phenomenological) studies of theatre. After much discussion, we laid our accounts of Cohen "live" side by side, and we found that each complemented the other, extending its content (Emerson 160).

Compared to any of the works cited from Gnarowski's volume which deal with Cohen in terms of a "phenomenon," with the possible exception of Davey's "Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan: Poetry and the Popular Song," we can note a shift in the critics' willingness to treat with Cohen's music in the same register as his literature. However, as I mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, Davey's article considers Cohen's music narrowly, in its relation to poetry, and not in relation to his performances or to his presence on the popular scene. In their article, Emerson and Hooper examine, among other aspects of Cohen's live performances, the personality of the individual performer in relation to the "real" individual: "when we speak of 'Cohen live,' not only are notions of presence and self rendered fluid (in that they may refer to Cohen, the audience, or both), but also strict divisions of "acting" and "being himself" simply do not exist" (161). This concern with the subject's non-fixity on stage, as well as the problem created by exploration of live performance based upon a recording (Derrida and "the metaphysics of presence") is reflected throughout the article in the interaction of its two authors.

What is perhaps most remarkable about this article, considered in reference to early critical writing on Cohen, is its willingness to treat Cohen in detail without expressing any reservations concerning his popular status; that is, the subdued tone of certain academic pieces written in the late 1960's and early 1970's, faced with the prospect of Cohen's literary defection, is absent in Emerson and Hooper's article. In fact,



the focal point of the article is the popular subject on stage. Furthermore, Emerson and Hooper's article is far from an unique phenomenon; much recent criticism, "post-modern" or otherwise, is not only comfortable with, but often takes as its subject the mediation of high and popular culture.

Among the articles published from the proceedings of the Red Deer Conference, three in particular treat Cohen's music either peripherally or in detail: Charlene Diehl-Jones' "Remembering the Love Song: Ambivalence and Cohen's 'Take This Waltz,'" Winfried Siemerling's "Interior Landscapes and the Public Realm: Contingent Mediations in a Speech and a Song by Leonard Cohen," and Fred Wah's "Cohen's Noos." Diehl-Jones notes that

[s]ong has much to teach us about reading text, because song insists, song demonstrates, that meaning doesn't inhere ultimately in text, but in the interplay of the spoken and the speaking, text and tone. Cohen re-members the love song, the love song, by performing the ambivalence of its multiple voicings, its polyphonic traces of supplementarity, by reading contingency with his body (83).

What this article demonstrates, at least in part, is the changing methods of evaluating texts and music. Diehl-Jones does, in fact, follow earlier critics of Cohen in rendering an evaluative judgement of the relative worth of his work; however, the possibilities within the field itself seem to have opened up, both in terms of permissible objects of study, as well as the method of assessing the work. In the case of Cohen's love songs, -- in particular, his interpretation of Lorca in "Take This Waltz" -- what is deemed favourable is his ability to portray "[t]he necessary ambivalence, you might say, of the lover's

stance in a textual/musical world which admits to its multiple layers of inscription" (74). Siemerling's article, much like Diehl-Jones's, examines Cohen's texts, without insisting upon the (at times) arbitrary-seeming distinction between musical lyrics and more "serious" literary endeavours; he notes overarching trends and constructs within Cohen's works as a whole, examining the problematic ways in which Cohen's works position the reader/receiver/spectator in ambiguous ways through indefinite forms of address. Fred Wah's article "Cohen's Noos" is described as "a poetic intervention that refuses the linear sentences of traditional discourse. . . ." (123). If Diehl-Jones' and Siemerling's articles both eschew the traditional distinctions between literary and musical texts, Wah's narrative further demolishes any such distinction, both through the article's form ("a poetic intervention") and in its peripheral allusions to works poetic, novelistic and musical. Much like Emerson and Jones's article, which sought to problematise the writing subject through the destabilisation of a stable referent, Wah's frenzied narrative, and its inclusion in a collection of predominantly critical works, challenges accepted notions concerning critical methodologies and permissible objects of study.

While all of the critical works examined throughout the course of this chapter are involved to some extent in the game of evaluation, like critical work preceding the introduction of poststructuralist theory into the Canadian field, they distinguish themselves insofar as the evaluative process is itself often of a secondary or unintentional nature; that is to

say, the evaluation of the works under consideration are often favourably judged only through the article's choice of object. The most notable absence in recent, particularly poststructuralist readings of Cohen's works, is the presence of a clear demarcation between Cohen's popular music and his writing. I have already noted how any number of critics treat Cohen's oeuvre or "texts" as a whole, rather than adhering to the binary of popular music and literary pursuits. Although poststructuralist readings of Cohen's texts are by no means out of keeping with current academic practices, they are revelatory not only of the shift towards interdisciplinarity in Canadian universities, but of the growing interest in popular culture. These shifts are often best seen in the course offerings in university syllabi and course requirements for degrees in specific disciplines, but they are also plainly evident in academic research. This new interdisciplinarity, in conjunction with the rise of poststructuralism within Canadian institutions, has had interesting implications for the status of Cohen's work.

## Conclusion

I would like to return here to an aspect of Canadian criticism that I examined in earlier chapters: namely, the idea of "Canadianness" as a factor in the determination of a work's relative status within the Canadian field. I suggested that, for various reasons -- including Cohen's expatriatism, his employment of experimental techniques in his poetry and novels, and his transition to popular music -- his work may have been characterised as "un-Canadian," or at times even "American." Such an evaluation of Cohen's work could well account for his marginal critical treatment in the late 1960's, 1970's and 1980's. With the paradigmatic shift in the Canadian critical field, from a predominantly New Critical approach to a more open, multidisciplinary and theoretically inflected approach to literature and culture in general, Cohen's work has come to solicit renewed academic interest. There are any number of ways of accounting for the renewed interest in Cohen's work; a major factor could in fact be the need, as in the case of Stephen Scobie's work on Cohen, to re-evaluate a certain number of assumptions which informed readings of texts prior to the introduction of theory in Canadian universities. Another, perhaps more tenuous, but more far-reaching factor in the re-evaluation of much of Cohen's work could be the fact that post-modern readings of Cohen's works are far more amenable to securing a more "legitimate" consecrated status for his work.

With regards to the problematisation of the notion of national literary canons by contemporary theory, Robert Lecker

national literary canons by contemporary theory, Robert Lecker asks

[i]f there is no canon, are we better off? Certainly the current assumption, outside Canada at least, is that a deconstruction of the canon will have beneficial effects. It will empower minority groups that have been excluded from the white male bourgeois power base; it will privilege heterogeneity over homogeneity, difference over uniformity, margin over centre, performativity over pedagogy, the post-modern over the modern. Such anitcanonical theorizing will lay to rest the myth that canons transmit traditions or transcendent historical ideals, will in fact lay to rest the myth of history itself, both as a temporal category and as the repository of transcendent values (56).

Lecker positions himself against the de(con)struction of the canon, even if that canon is an imagined construct; he notes that

[w]hile the country without a canon may be free, plural, ahistorical, and self-conscious of the material conditions that account for its contingent status, it may also be a country without moral conviction, without the means of recognizing difference, without standards against which ethical choices can be judged (57).

Among these standards which could be lost if poststructural critiques of the canon were to dominate, Lecker lists "consensus, community, social responsibility, and ultimately ethical challenge" (57). Provided that Lecker is correct in projecting the loss of such values at the national level, should the canonical project succumb to the poststructural critique, there are nevertheless a number of gains enumerated by Lecker, which are of particular interest to the question of Cohen. Through the valorisation of "heterogeneity over homogeneity, difference over uniformity, margin over centre, performativity over pedagogy, the post-modern over the modern," Cohen's work, both musical and literary, can arguably come to occupy a less marginal position.

If the idea of the canon as the main mode of literary

consecration within a society is no longer operative, then what function does the literary critic serve? To frame the question in such terms is perhaps too utilitarian to solicit a serious and direct response, but in the absence of analysis and evaluation, what is performed in the act of criticism? And what is its object? Literature? Music? Culture in general?

While it may seem counter-intuitive to claim that Cohen's work has been legitimated through the advent of poststructuralist readings and the shift to multidisciplinary, it is difficult not to see the increased and more detailed attention to his popular music in conjunction with his poetry and novels as anything but a positive evaluation of his works. The shift to multidisciplinary has further legitimated Cohen's endeavours within the field of popular music, as evidenced by the increasing willingness of critics to treat his popular productions on an equal footing with his literary works. This is not to suggest that critical works which treat Cohen as both a popular musician and a writer assume the same critical stances with respect to the object of study; rather, because of the modes of inquiry made possible by the shifts in the Canadian field, certain position-takings which were not available to critics at the beginning of Cohen's career have been made manifest. It is no longer a question of literary critics writing solely about literature, or of attempting to maintain an "objectively" critical attitude faced with the work itself. The anxiety expressed by many critics in from 1968 onward over Cohen's literary defection is absent in much, if not most recent scholarly discussion regarding Cohen:

critics are no longer required to tread lightly around the issue of Cohen's transition from the autonomous to the heteronomous poles of the field of cultural production. Rather than noting that Cohen is a potentially brilliant "writer," critics today can explore the problematics of popular iconography in its relation to high art; a live or taped performance can provide the impetus for a phenomenological examination of the "metaphysics of presence;" and the recurrence of certain themes and images in both Cohen's poetry and in his music can be considered in tandem without implying a gross inconsistency. The position-takings available to critics today has, if not elevated the status of Cohen's works, at the very least opened up the possibility of recontextualising and re-examining earlier renderings of Cohen's position within the cultural life of this country.

We must, nevertheless, heed Lecker's comments concerning the implications of a de(con)struction of the canon: if we seek to evade the exclusions and naive assumptions which form the basis of any canon construction, then is it not problematic to read the relative increase in scope of cultural studies on Cohen in terms of a progression, or of a veiled consecration of his works? While poststructural readings of Cohen's works most often evade the explicitly evaluative stances characteristic of New Criticism, to choose Cohen for a study nevertheless implies a valorisation of his works. Thus, while it may be tempting to disassociate recent criticism on Cohen from earlier evaluative treatments, the fact remains that both the choice of object, as well as critical apparatus aligns the critic with a certain pole

within the field of cultural production.



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