

**“WHAT’D I SAY?”:
BEAUTIFUL LOSERS
ALLEGORY OF TRANSLATION**

**“WHAT’D I SAY?”:
BEAUTIFUL LOSERS
ALLEGORY OF TRANSLATION**

By
JEREMY SHARP, B.A.

A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts

McMaster University

© Copyright by Jeremy Sharp, August 1997

MASTER OF ARTS (1997)
(English)

McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: "What'd I Say?": *Beautiful Losers* ' Allegory of Translation

AUTHOR: Jeremy Sharp, B.A. (York University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. A. Savage

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 105

ABSTRACT

This study examines Leonard Cohen's novel *Beautiful Losers* through the lenses of allegorical and authorial theories to appreciate how the novel uses allegorical techniques to code into symbolic terms an exploration of the polysemous nature of the word "translation." The first chapter studies the stylistic and conceptual dimensions of allegory as a literary genre— as critics like Northrop Frye, Angus Fletcher, and Maureen Quilligan help to define it— while arguing that Cohen's novel is consciously allegorical, challenging readers to interpret what it "means," or may mean. The second chapter performs an intensive re-reading of *Beautiful Losers*, examining how the novel uses complex systems of verbal play (particularly puns) to coordinate a reunification of various dichotomies— historical "reality"/imaginative myth, secularity/spirituality, enslavement/sanctification, among others— employed throughout the text. The thesis concludes that the novel is perpetually playing with various types of translation (spiritual, linguistic, physical, and so forth), affirming the need for emotionally-charged, devotional forms of expression (like song and prayer) over more clinical attempts to reorder or recreate the world and its inhabitants. Ultimately, this discussion argues that an understanding of the allegorical dimensions of *Beautiful Losers* may illuminate how Cohen's other works (particularly his songs) may be studied as attempts to associate word with voice, to emphasize the process of expression (translation) rather than just the finished product.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank a number of people for their insight, encouragement, and unending tolerance. I would like to thank Dr. Anne Savage for her help throughout the year, and for trusting in my judgment and abilities. I also thank my other readers on my committee, Dr. Lorraine York and Dr. Roger Hyman, for their comments and criticisms. Mrs. Antoinette Somo and Mrs. Clover Nixon have had to endure innumerable questions from me, and their inexorable kindness has saved me from my own mental clumsiness. Throughout the year, I have been able to torture colleagues— Mr. Glen Gill, Mr. Michael Happy, and Dr. Jeffery Donaldson especially— with my endless ramblings about *Beautiful Losers*, and I thank them for their advice and patience. Even more thanks must go to those who have supported me through more than just this year, particularly my parents and (especially) my girlfriend Catherine Jankowski, whose patience has been inestimable through two theses; she is owed more thanks than I can begin to articulate. And, lastly, my greatest debt is to Leonard Cohen for providing me with a text that could still make me laugh in those long, dark nights of the soul when this was written. In F.'s words, “[c]an you imagine how I envied you, whose suffering was so traditional?” (191). And if there is anyone I have not acknowledged but should have, please take my thanks as I offer them now.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
I: The Context for Allegorical Criticism	15
II: Re-Reading <i>Beautiful Losers</i>	
<i>History and the Storyteller</i>	32
<i>Sainthood and Servitude</i>	47
<i>Eros and Apocalypse</i>	58
<i>Ray Charles and the Hiro-Koué</i>	72
Conclusion	85
Works Consulted and Cited	98

**“What’d I Say?”:
Beautiful Losers’ Allegory of Translation**

My former speeches have but hit your thoughts,
Which can interpret farther: only I say
Things have been strangely borne.

— Lennox, *Macbeth*, 3.6.1-3

There was a veil between them
composed of good thread
not carelessly woven

— Leonard Cohen, “A Veil,” from *The Energy
Of Slaves*

Tell me, I want to know right now,
Tell me, what’d I say.

— Ray Charles singing “What’d I Say?”

Introduction

Leonard Cohen’s place within the Canadian literary canon is a contentious one. His career is often figured as a literary version of *On The Waterfront*, with the poet of promise abandoning his craft for a career in popular music. Had he not made his foray into music, some critics suggest, Cohen “could have been a contender” to be one of Canada’s finer poets.¹ Stephen Scobie, however, argues that Cohen “seems to be securely placed in the modernist canon. His position in literary history, as a major writer of the 1960s, is unchallenged” (Scobie, “Leonard Cohen and Phyllis Webb...” 58). Scobie’s assessment correctly notes that Cohen’s canonization is due to his work of the 1960s, particularly the

¹George Woodcock, for example, argues that Cohen’s music career “deleteriously effected” his poetic craft (Woodcock 93). In a poem offered to commemorate Cohen’s sixtieth birthday in the volume *Take This Waltz: A Celebration of Leonard Cohen*, Woodcock offers the following ribbing lines: “I heard the silent ripple / of words / and the drip drop drip under ferns / a thought kept its pool filled. // And waited for the fish of vision / that never came” (Woodcock, “Weary Day on Parnassus,” *Take This Waltz...* 188).

novels *The Favourite Game* (1963) and *Beautiful Losers* (1966), the volumes of poetry *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961) and *Flowers for Hitler* (1964), and the compilation *Selected Poems of Leonard Cohen: 1956-1968* (1968), for which Cohen won (but refused) the Governor-General's Award for Poetry. Cohen's popular resurgence in the late 1980s and early 1990s is an interesting phenomenon: although his recognition was tied to a celebration of his lyrics, it occurred in the wake of two highly successful Cohen albums (*I'm Your Man* [1988] and *The Future* [1992]) and was commemorated with a new compilation of verse tellingly titled *Stranger Music* (1993).² Cohen's public and academic acceptance seems to move in ebbs and tides more typical of the pop-singer than the poet: at one point, he is figured as Canada's lyric laureate; at another, he is little more than a poet who wandered off course.

The uncertainty of Cohen's canonicity is, in part, the result of the relative dearth of academic study of his works. Delivering the keynote address to the first Canadian conference on his work in 1993, Stephen Scobie notes that "Canadian critics in the past decade have simply ignored" Cohen, partially because his work "does not fit easily into the categories of the post-modern or the post-colonial,"³ and because of a general "academic snobbery" that

²Surprisingly, even Cohen's vocal "abilities" were celebrated, with Cohen winning the 1992 Juno Award for Best Male Vocalist for the song "Closing Time." Cohen's response was less surprising: "Only in a country like this with a voice like mine could I receive such an award" (Nadel, *Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen* 262).

³Although Cohen as an author is seldom figured as a "postmodernist" writer, *Beautiful Losers* is often, and rather blithely, subsumed into the category of postmodernist fiction. Linda Hutcheon refers *Beautiful Losers* as perhaps the first Canadian "postmodern novel" (Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 14, 26-44), as does George Bowering in his *Craft Slices* (Bowering 136-7). Sylvia Söderlind, in her *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Québécois Fiction*, is unqualified in her assessment that the novel is "without doubt the quintessential postmodern novel" (Söderlind 41), and her reading of it, as her title suggests, is essentially post-colonial in nature. But, as Clint Burnham argues in his discussion of the postmodernity of Cohen's *Flowers for Hitler*, "the very facility with which the postmodern label has been applied to *Beautiful Losers* should warn off any critic" (Burnham 65).

has “a great deal of trouble of dealing with Leonard Cohen as the writer and performer of popular songs” (Scobie, “The Counterfeiter Begs Forgiveness...” 11). Although Cohen’s work has attracted studies from the likes of Michael Ondaatje, Desmond Pacey, Eli Mandel, and Stan Dragland, most of the recent studies have been spearheaded by Scobie, Linda Hutcheon and Winfried Siemerling. Their research accounts for the *plupart* of recent Cohen criticism.

Most of this criticism focuses on *Beautiful Losers*,⁴ the novel often regarded as the seminal work of Cohen’s literary career. Dennis Lee’s description of the novel is apt: “it is funny, dirty, lyrical, trendy, self-indulgent, often incomprehensible” (Lee 63). The novel’s “incomprehensibility” causes problems for Cohen’s critics, even those who praise the text. Michael Ondaatje, for example, acknowledges that his appreciation of the novel came only after a second reading revealed “how wrong [his] first reaction to the style and technique of the book was” (Ondaatje 45). Stan Dragland had a similar reaction, describing the novel as “the first weird book I’d read,” admitting that “at first, [it] didn’t go down so easily” (Dragland 13). Like *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake*, *Beautiful Losers* is a novel that taunts readers with its thematic complexity and stylistic schizophrenia, wandering from deeply spiritual deliberations, like the famous “God is Alive” mantra (*BL* 197-8), to debatably obscene depictions of sex: “Slof tlif, sounded the geysers of his semen as they hit the

⁴All references to *Beautiful Losers* will be cited parenthetically using the abbreviation *BL* followed by the page number.

dashboard (surely the sound of upstream salmon smashing their skulls on underwater cliffs)” (118).

As both Ondaatje and Dragland realize, *Beautiful Losers* relies greatly upon reading and re-reading, for, as Linda Hutcheon notes, “readers must accept responsibility for participating in the constructing of the fictive worlds through words as we read” (Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 27). Just as the narrator of “The History of the Them All,” the first of the novel’s three books, must piece together the history of Catherine Tekakwitha, so too must readers piece together the story of the unnamed narrator of Book One, his wife Edith, and the flamboyant hedonist F., whose long letter comprises the second book (with the third book misleadingly sub-titled “An Epilogue In The Third Person”). Despite F.’s anti-Forsterian⁵ instruction (or Eliotic allusion)⁶ to “[c]onnect nothing” (*BL* 20), the novel depends upon the willingness of its readership to reconstruct meaning from the scattered remains of style and symbology that comprise the text. As Douglas Barbour argues, “not to make them is... to abdicate one’s responsibility as a reader” (Barbour 136).

⁵Forster’s famous epigraph to *Howard’s End* is “Only... connect.” The meaning of this instruction becomes most apparent in Helen Schlegel’s solution to save her husband Henry Wilcox: “She would only point out the salvation ~~the salvation~~ that was latent in his own soul, and in the soul of every man. Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. *Only connect the prose and the passion*, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die” (Forster 148; emphasis added). Douglas Barbour believes that F.’s “Connect nothing” “represents an all-out attack upon the middle of the road (way) of liberalism” (Barbour 136). The fallacy of F.’s instruction becomes more apparent later in this discussion, in “Ray Charles and Hiro-Koué.” *Beautiful Losers* works its way “back” to Forster, re-connecting “the prose and passion.”

⁶See Eliot’s “The Fire Sermon” in *The Waste Land*: “I can connect / Nothing with nothing. / The broken fingernails of dirty hands. / My humble people who expect / Nothing” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 74).

Cohen's critics, consequently, tend to read the novel thematically, trying to determine what the book is "about" and what it "says." D.G. Jones describes it as "a satirical fantasy which cries out against a desire for perfection that reduces the whole of life to a system" (Jones 78). Norman Ravvin argues that it functions as "an examination of the role of the holocaust in contemporary culture, and as a call to heed the lessons from the Nazi victimization of Jews" (Ravvin 22); he concludes that the novel argues that "any eroticized interest in victimization and the abuse of power must inevitably bring about total demoralization and spiritual death" (30). Patricia Morley claims that the novel's message is philosophical, that "[t]o live is to fail... Life is a beautiful failure, an ironic success" (Morely 95). Glenn Deer, in his study of rhetoric and authority in postmodern Canadian fiction, echoes Morely's thesis, arguing that the novel depicts the "self-destructive impulse of a decadent counter-culture that had begun to struggle in order not to triumph" (Deer 60). Dennis Lee, however, sees the novel as a "psychomacheia" [sic] in which the "fundamental action... is the governing consciousness to imagine an escape from the ontological condition of the world" (Lee 102). And Margaret Atwood sees the novel as further evidence of the recurring motif of victimization in Canadian literature, arguing that in it "everything is a victim, even the water that is being drunk by animals" (Atwood 102). Evidently, *Beautiful Losers* may be interpreted in a number of different ways, and, to some extent, each of these interpretations is valid depending upon where one chooses to locate what Ravvin, invoking Frygian terminology, calls the novel's "ethical centre" (Ravvin 30).

In "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen," Desmond Pacey notes that, structurally, the novel "resembles a symbolic poem: it is divided into the traditional three parts, and its parts are woven together by recurrent thematic motifs and thematic images or symbols" (Pacey 92). Pacey rimes off a litany of symbolic interpretations, of which the following is only a small part:

Among the motifs are references to "T"'s [the unnamed narrator's] constipation (a symbol of the self locked in upon itself), to his masturbation (a symbol of his lonely self-absorption and self-indulgence), to games (symbols of life as free choice), to radio music and radio serials (symbols of attempts to reach contact with some outside force or message), to baptism (symbol of purification and the entry into a new life), and above all to movies, film, cinemas and film stars (symbols... of contemporary magic and escape from this world). (92)

Pacey's reading may seem to prove Linda Hutcheon's argument that Cohen "wants to lure the reader into the act of text-making" (Hutcheon, "Leonard Cohen," *CWTW Fiction Series* 51), because the novel lures Pacey into the making of the text by reading meaning into its recurrent motifs. But while Hutcheon associates Cohen's technique with that of the postmodern metafictionalist, Pacey's reading associates it with that of the writer of symbolic narrative, examples of whom might include Orwell (*Animal Farm*), Spenser (*The Faerie Queene*) and Langland (*Piers Plowman*).⁷

Cohen's critics are, however, reticent to use the word "allegory" in relation to *Beautiful Losers*. Hutcheon and Sylvia Söderlind each note that certain *parts* of the novel

⁷The term "symbolic narrative" is applied to Cohen's works rather comfortably; A.J.M. Smith, in anthologizing a section of the less-consciously symbolic *The Favourite Game*, categorizes the excerpt under the sub-title "Towards A Symbolic Narrative" (Smith 595).

may be allegorical, but they step back from calling the text “an allegory” *per se*; Söderlind’s *Margin/Alias*, indeed, demonstrates a great deal of work with scholarship on allegory, particularly with Maureen Quilligan’s *The Language of Allegory*. Dennis Lee’s reading of *Beautiful Losers* is essentially allegorical, but Stephen Scobie is right to suggest that to read Cohen’s novel as an “allegory of Canadian society” is to simplify it too greatly (Scobie, *Leonard Cohen* 113). Moreover, to invoke the word “allegory” is to conjure with it a series of critical and cultural assumptions about allegory— that it is didactic, that it is merely a system of ideas coded into symbolic terms, that it is, in Coleridge’s words,

but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction of objects from the senses; the phantom being more worthless than its phantom proxy, both alike and unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot.⁸ (Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual* 437)

The contemporary critical hesitation to call any literary work an allegory may be rooted in the fear of reducing a text to a single system of meaning that assumes the stance of determining what the author “means to say.” Northrop Frye, for example, assumes that authorial intent is lurking somewhere beneath the literal dimensions of the text, determining how it might be interpreted:

[w]e have actual allegory when a poet explicitly indicates the relationship of his images to examples and precepts, *so tries to indicate how a commentary*

⁸Yeats is equally dismissive of allegory. In his critique of Spenser in “The Symbolism of Poetry,” Yeats argues that the allegory of *The Faerie Queene* “disappoints and interrupts our preoccupation with the beautiful and sensuous life he has called up before our eyes... One cannot think that he should have occupied himself with moral and religious questions at all” (Yeats, “Symbolism of Poetry” 110). Yeats, too, subscribes to a Coleridgean view of the primacy of symbol over allegory: “Allegory, and, *to a much greater degree*, symbolism are a natural language by which the soul when entranced, or even in ordinary sleep, communes with God and with angels. They can speak of things which cannot be spoken of in any other language” (109; emphasis added).

on him should proceed [emphasis added]. A writer is being allegorical whenever it is clear that he is saying “by this I *also* (*allos*) mean that.” (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 90)

This is not to dismiss Frye’s definition because it is, in essence, correct. As Angus Fletcher puts it, “in the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another” (Fletcher 2). But the post-Coleridgean assumption is that to regard any text as *allegoria qua allegoria* is to risk suggesting that a literary work is little more than discursive writing disguised in the images of a “picture-language.”

In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye tries to distinguish between “naive allegory” and other types of allegory. Those texts which are little more than “disguised discursive writing” (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 90) are figured as naive, not because of the ideas contained in them, but because they are “so anxious to make [their] own allegorical points that [they have] no real literary or hypothetical centre” (91), because

any allegory which resists a primary analysis of imagery— that is, an allegory which is simply discursive writing with an illustrative image or two stuck into it— will have to be treated less as literature than as a document in the history of ideas.⁹ (91)

Frye simultaneously concedes that some allegories are little more than disguised discourse— and, ergo, are more valuable ideologically than literarily— while others, those which are especially concerned with their literary form, remain valuable literary accomplishments. (This is, of course, an argument with which radical post-structuralists might take issue because of the subjective nature of Frye’s criteria.) When he defines allegory as “a contrapuntal

⁹ It is also worth noting that the *Anatomy* was originally supposed to be a study of Spenser, and then a study of the theory of allegory (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* vii).

technique, like canonical imitation in music” (90), he is not dismissing the technique as a whole; rather, he is noting the extent to which allegory functions as a referential device, a way of using images to point to specific ideas; and in the context of longer narratives, the extent to which allegory is a mode for coding ideas into extended metaphor.

Since the publication of Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957, several critics have taken upon themselves the task of re-examining the dimensions of allegory, both as a mode of writing (i.e., a technique of, literally, “speaking other”) and as a genre (i.e., a genre of writing in which texts use narrative form to construct an extended or continuous metaphor). Critics like Edwin Honig, Angus Fletcher, Gay Clifford, and Maureen Quilligan have done a great deal to illuminate how allegory works and, in the process, to recover the word allegory from the Coleridgean junk-heap. Allegory, they argue, is not so much a picture-language, but an extended *aenigma*, a literary riddle that calls upon readers to pay close attention to the literal surface, asking them to examine closely its words, images, and symbols. The word “literal,” as Maureen Quilligan notes, means more than just “real,” but “of the letter.” In this context,

[w]hen a reader is reading the ‘literal level’ (in traditional parlance), he is actually reading the ‘metaphorical’ level—that is, he watches the imaginary action in his mind’s eye. (Quilligan 67)

Allegories are necessarily concerned with language, for in the process of speaking other, not only do a series of generic conventions come into play (e.g., personifications, unreal landscapes, etc.), so does language itself. Quilligan argues that “allegorical narrative unfolds as a series of punning commentaries, related to one another on the most literal of verbal

levels—the sounds of words” (22). If allegory is generally concerned with “saying” several things at the same time, the use of puns and other forms of wordplay allows for language to emphasize its own alteriority, its own potential for “polysemous meaning,” to invoke a term coined by Dante, and picked up by Frye, Fletcher, Quilligan, and others (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 72; Fletcher 313; Quilligan 26).

Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* has yet to be studied through the lens of allegorical theory, though it seems to demand such a reading. To explore the cosmology of the novel, as Dennis Lee does, or to determine the ethical centre of the novel, as Norman Ravvin does explicitly, requires more than a subjective selection of which sections of the novel seem to be the most “important,” or the most polemically informative. As Gay Clifford notes, “readers have come to expect accessibility from imaginative literature. In consequence the comparative inaccessibility of allegory poses special problems both for readers and critics” (Clifford 3). As with all allegories, the literal level of *Beautiful Losers* must be examined closely. The novel’s critics need to understand how the novel deals with its own status as a written text, and how its minute verbal games (i.e., its puns, allusions, and so forth) coordinate the text’s systems of meaning. As Deborah L. Madsen claims, “together style and content... produce the discourse in terms of which a generic mark is identified and the text’s generic practice defined” (Madsen, *Rereading Allegory* 26). The “incomprehensibility” of *Beautiful Losers*—to reinvok Lee’s word—is one of its “generic marks.” The text effectively identifies itself as an allegory by using style “problematically” (i.e., discordantly, evasively, even schizophrenically) to complicate the reading process. The reader, if confused, must then re-

read the text with a cautious attention to its stylistic devices (like puns, for example) that might help to make sense of the muddle, that might resolve the text's stylistic and/or thematic inconsistencies. That is, the reader, when engaged in the reading of allegory, must realize the extent to which language may be polysemous, simultaneously contradicting and cohering its through a number of implicative or explicative possibilities.

The goal of this study is to illuminate one of the systems at work in it, specifically the extent to which *Beautiful Losers* functions as an allegory of translation(s). Translations appear throughout the novel as the narrator sometimes feels compelled, if for no other reason than translation's sake in itself, to say the same thing twice, but in two different languages. The death of the priest Edouard Lecompte, for example, is noted in an apparently superfluous translation: "December 20, 1929, le 20 décembre 1929" (*BL* 85). At other points in the novel, key words are broken down etymologically to provide a translation— as the narrator does with the words "Iroquois" and "apocalypse" (9, 125-6) — that may inform one's reading of the text, particularly (but not necessarily) if that reading is exegetically-oriented. According to F., "[p]rayer is translation. A man translates himself into a child asking for all there is in a language he has barely mastered" (71). In these two sentences, the polysemous nature of the word "translation" is accentuated, as if to remind readers of how the word is being played with in the text: translation as prayer; translation as physical transformation; translation as the figural ascent into heaven; translation as the metamorphosis of ideas from one language to another; and translation as the mode by which a message is expressed or communicated. In her discussion of *Beautiful Losers*, Linda Hutcheon argues that

[t]he text-reader circuit and the text-author circuit are the only positive [systems] allowed. Creating, nonnaming, *translating*— all these activities become allegories of the acts of writing and reading the text itself. (Hutcheon, “Leonard Cohen,” *CWTW Fiction Series* 50; emphasis added)

There are, literally, translations throughout the text, as if, in alternately explicit and circumlocutory fashion, the novel keeps drawing readers back to the single word that seems, in its polysemy, to encompass many of the novel’s main themes. In effect, the word “translation” is the novel’s *formal* centre, the word that is played with, punned with, and perpetually manipulated, directly and indirectly.

In *Beautiful Losers*, *how* one translates is as crucial as simply performing the act.

F. and the narrator seem to translate the same basic concept (*rei carol*, perhaps) to two radically different extremes— F. to the form of Charles Axis, body-builder, the narrator to a film of Ray Charles, soul musician. F. admits the error of his translation prior to relating the tale of his and Edith’s experiments in Argentina:

I didn’t suspect the pettiness of my dream. I believed that I had conceived the vastest dream of my generation: I wanted to be a magician. That was my idea of glory. Here is a plea based on my whole experience: do not be a magician, be magic. (207)

Within the context of *Beautiful Losers*, to transform people on the physical or mental levels as F. does (with his “Pygmalion tampering” of himself and Edith [231] and his teaching of the narrator) is inadequate. One’s translations, it seems, must be rooted not in spiritual affirmation, in an attempt “to subvert the beguiling intellect with the noise of true emotion” (9). The magician is the artificer; magic is the artifice itself; and to be the artifice is to make one’s self part of the project, to find one’s “life in art” (Cohen, *Stranger Music* 284), as

Cohen puts it in *Death of a Lady's Man*, while simultaneously annihilating that self by rendering it into the creative process. Ultimately, this emphasis on process suggests that art, or magic, is alive, kept alive by its own evolution. Indeed, an allegorical reading of *Beautiful Losers* may help critics to understand not only the novel, but many of Cohen's subsequent (and previous) works, while suggesting that Cohen's entry into the world of popular music is not a defection from literature, but a vitalization of the *epos*¹⁰ genre that the novel prophesies.

Much of the analysis offered in this study runs concomitant with that which Sylvia Söderlind offers in her *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Québécois Fiction*. Her study and this one necessarily focus on the same central issues of wordplay and thematic suggestion, and many of the issues central to this study — puns, definitions of words, figurations of apocalypse, schemes of translation, *et cetera*— are explored in her chapter on *Beautiful Losers*. But while Söderlind's study examines the novel through the lenses of the postcolonial and the postmodern (in many ways following in the footsteps of Linda Hutcheon, as she acknowledges [Söderlind 41]), this study examines the novel through the lenses of the allegorical and authorial (i.e., the central thematic and stylistic concerns evident throughout an author's career). The novel's formal and thematic concerns are linked to an obsession with expression, with the desire to find new (and perhaps more effective) ways of communication and with the author's (or the vocalist's) translations.

¹⁰See Frye's definition of *epos* in *Anatomy of Criticism*: "The literary genre in which the radical of presentation is the author or minstrel as oral reciter, with a listening audience in front of him" (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 365).

Ultimately, translations offer unification(s), ways of bringing together the individual with the community, the self with God and wor(l)d, though these unifications may seem alternately honorific (as in the unification of the slaves of the world with sanctified Catherine Tekakwitha) or blasphemous (as in F.'s association of Christ and Hitler). In *Beautiful Losers*, translations are not just a linguistic process— they are a method of *finding* unity among ontological and etymological fragments. Although the world exists in its disordered paratactic form, translation offers, on the individual level at least, a way to connect the diamonds and the shit and render them indistinguishable from one another, finding not order *per se* but a “kind of balance that is [its] glory” (BL 121). *Beautiful Losers* is, at least at one level, an allegory of translation. It takes the word “translation” as its ethical and formal centre to demonstrate (through allegory) the sanctifying capacity of translation when one, as a reader of the text and of the world, reads with a visionary imagination, with what F. calls “that part of your mind that you delegate to watching out for blackflies and mosquitoes” (237).

I: The Context for Allegorical Criticism

It is necessary to distinguish between allegory as a mode of speaking and allegory as a genre of literature, although defining the word in either circumstance is difficult and problematic. Angus Fletcher, in his groundbreaking *Allegory: The Theory of A Symbolic Mode* (1964), studies allegory primarily as a mode of discourse, as “a fundamental process of encoding our speech” (Fletcher 3). His study, in one sense, is oriented towards establishing not that allegory is simply coded speech, but a mode of speaking (or writing) in which language is enriched by invoking ulterior possibilities of meaning. Allegorical language presents “a literal surface,” which “suggests a peculiar doubleness of intention, and while it can, as it were, get along without interpretation, it becomes much richer and more interesting if given interpretation” (7). What is manifest in allegory is a series of (verbal) structural devices that suggest dimensions of meaning that may be latent within it. *Animal Farm*, for example, is literally “about” an animal revolt on a farm, but its characters are drawn to parallel the political players in the Bolshevik Revolution: Old Major, like Karl Marx, provides the ideological impetus for revolt; Mr. Jones and Czar Nicholas are the oppressors revolted against; and Napoleon and Lenin are the leaders of the revolution under whose auspices the new “worlds” are created. In *Animal Farm*, Orwell’s technique is essentially analogical: historical personae are transfigured into animal form just as abstract concepts are transfigured

into human form in the pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins in Langland's *Piers Plowman*. An allegory implies that its literal dimensions are just that, literal— a systematic representation of ideas (or concepts, events or people) within a new verbal (and imaginative) context.

In *The Great Code* (1983), Northrop Frye claims that allegory is “a special form of analogy, a technique of paralleling metaphoric with conceptual language in which the latter has primary authority” (Frye, *The Great Code* 10). Although Frye is correct to note a relationship between allegory and analogy (as the *Animal Farm* example illustrates), one might be misled by his definition of allegory as a “form” of analogy: texts like *The Scarlet Letter* are commonly called “allegories,” although there may not be a specific system of analogical correspondences underwriting them. Frye is, however, correct to note a potentially analogous relationship between metaphorical and conceptual language in allegory, and it is this relationship which emerges as that “peculiar doubleness of intention” which Fletcher describes (above; Fletcher 7). Allegory, subsequently, is seen as a kind of extended metaphor that, in the words of Rosemond Tuve, “exhibits the normal relation of concretion to abstraction found in metaphor, in the shape of a series of particulars with further meanings” (Tuve 105-6). As Frye argues, “[a]ll formal allegories have, *ipso facto*, a strong thematic interest” (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 53), as the manifest “literal” (i.e., verbal) dimensions of a text are necessarily underwritten by latent abstraction(s) which render significance.

Allegory is not, however, a linguistic code which, with enough effort and reading, might be broken. Just as allegory may be a gesture of transforming an idea into a verbal form, it may also be seen as a gesture of investing a number of possible meanings into a figural

chrysalis. Even a symbol whose meaning is apparently codified within the framework of a text can be expanded, reshaped, and challenged, as Hester Prynne's "A" from *The Scarlet Letter*¹¹ or the image of the pearl from *Pearl*¹² are. The allegorist may (and often does) play with his own words and symbols, accentuating (and often exploring) their polysemy. Although one might argue that this abolishes the possibility for "pure" or "actual" allegory—if one were to follow a Derridean analysis in which words are necessarily informed by absent or unspoken contextual details—one may, more fortuitously, see the allegorical process as a gesture of verbal richening, of getting as much out of one's words as possible. Angus Fletcher observes that personifications, one of the staples of allegory, may provide "a narrowing, a constriction, a compartmentalization of meaning" (Fletcher 33). Perhaps more accurately, the transfiguration of ideas into words, images, and symbols may be a gesture of crystallization, of encapsulating a polysemy of meaning(s) into literary form.

Ultimately, the challenge posed by allegory is metalinguistic. In normal discourse, ideas are more or less explicated, laid out in a systematic way to communicate them clearly and effectively. Allegory, however, teases its readers. Ideas may be "coded," but they can be coded symbolically rather than analogically; that is, the words that "stand for" ideas can

¹¹The narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* emphasizes the problems posed by the determination of the meaning of Hester Prynne's A: "Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one. She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy; or, we may rather say, the world's heavy hand had so ordained her, when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result. The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her— so much power to do, and power to sympathise—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (Hawthorne 156).

¹²A. C. Spearing correctly notes that the pearl is "pregnant with symbolism" (Spearing 100), because it "is not static but dynamic: it develops meaning as the poem extends itself in time" (101).

supplant them, assuming a kind of semiotic multifacetedness that allows the text to be interpreted in a number of different ways. Rather than directing readers to a specific set of social, historical, or intellectual analogues, an allegory can evade exegetical closure, apparently trapping the reader in the realm of words. As Deborah Madsen argues, modern allegory “is conceived as a way of registering the fact of crisis” (Madsen, *Rereading Allegory* 119), a crisis that is simultaneously perceptual and linguistic. Or, put another way, the allegorist uses riddling techniques to translate ideas into words, hoping to taunt readers to solve the riddles by re-translating words back into ideas. As Maureen Quilligan asserts:

All true narrative allegory has its source in a culture’s attitude toward language, and in that attitude, as embodied in the language itself, allegory finds the limits of possibility. It is a genre beginning in, focused on, and ending with “words, words.” (Quilligan 15)

Allegory is inevitably conscious of its status as a verbal construct. Because one of its functions is to explore the suggestive possibilities of language, allegory calls attention to itself and to the words it uses, as if to compel readers to wonder: *how literally* (i.e., seriously) *does one take the literal* (i.e., the verbal) *level of the text?*

Michael Ondaatje rightly notes that “that the essential drama of the novel [is] in the styles Cohen uses” (Ondaatje 47). Although Ondaatje argues that the novel’s styles are used to “characterize and juxtapose F. and the Narrator” (46), one might also see the novel’s styles as part of an attempt, in the words of Angus Fletcher, “to communicate allegorical intent” (Fletcher 172). Fletcher identifies the following as components of an “allegorical style” (171), although he acknowledges that not all allegories use the same style:

the emblematic, isolated, mosaic imagery; the paratactic order;...¹³ the lack of the perspective which would create a mimetic world; the microcosmic character of imagery, where 'every single word must contain in itself the entire concept' (171).¹⁴

It is worthwhile to consider each of these stylistic components (as Fletcher defines them) because it illuminates the extent to which *Beautiful Losers* calls out for allegorical reading. Moreover, these stylistic components seem to complement each other within the novel's framework, and it is primarily through a study of the novel's stylistic dimensions that readers might better be able to appreciate how the novel's "ending" is itself a concluding riddle, one that needs to be puzzled out for the remainder of the novel to be internally consistent. There is a logic to *Beautiful Losers*; the reader, however, has to work through the novel's riddles to find it, or, at the very least, to determine what that logic *might* be.

The imagery of the novel is, in many ways, so commanding that many of its episodes are identified with an imagistic comparison— the Telephone Dance, the Danish Vibrator scene, the Ottawa Drive, the Charles Axis episode, and so forth— such that the novel seems like a compilation of surreal symbolic fragments. Fletcher's notes on allegory's use of imagery may seem custom-made to a study of *Beautiful Losers*:

When... surreal imagery is rendered in poetry, the poet takes the same liberties with perspective [as a surrealist artist]; he makes his poem temporarily discontinuous; he makes the spatial relationships discontinuous. A riddle,

¹³Fletcher also identifies what he calls "the ritual that accompanies ritual observance" (Fletcher 171). This study will inevitably address the issues of ritual and ritual observance, but for organizational purposes it makes greater sense to deal with during Chapter 2 in the more text-focused discussion of the novel itself.

¹⁴See Fletcher's declamation that "I am not suggesting that a whole story must be encoded in this manner, but that such techniques cue the reader to think in terms of riddles. The technique is formal; the content is not especially enigmatic in itself" (Fletcher 174).

after all, is a verbalized surrealistic collage, with a hidden meaning that draws the parts together ‘under the surface.’ (101)

In Joycean fashion, the narrative is told in fragments, in vignettes and reflections. Readers are told at the beginning what happens to its characters— the deaths of F. and Edith, the sanctification of the Iroquois virgin Catherine Tekakwitha— but the narrative moves in regressions, in enlargements upon the past. Edith’s suicide, especially, appears and reappears; early in the novel, Edith’s suicide is set against the narrator’s writing of a paper on lemmings (*BL* 8), but is later set against the revelation of the injection of water from Tekakwitha’s Spring into F.’s and Edith’s bodies (139). As Ondaatje observes, it is “as if Cohen were constantly throwing the same four stones onto the floor and recording the new shapes and relationships each throw created” (Ondaatje 49).

The novel’s component vignettes revolve around depicting a central image which might, in some way, be meaningful within the novel’s invisible grand scheme, but these moments all seem to return to a play on language that might provide a witty turn of phrase. Consider, for example, F.’s “plaster reproduction of the Akropolis which, for some reason, he had coated with red nail polish” (11-2). F.’s decoration of the Akropolis may, superficially, seem like little more than a set-up for a joke: “He chose a colour named Tibetan Desire, which amused him since it was, he claimed, such a contradiction in terms” (12). The painting of the Akropolis is emblematic at several levels— a demonstration of F.’s extravagant flights of fancy, for example— but it has little apparent purpose with the movement of the narrative unless the reader is willing to make interpretive leaps, as Sylvia

Söderlind does.¹⁵ As such, the image of the Akropolis rose is tropological, becoming “both a part of the referential discourse and a sign of it; the image is made to become a part of the ‘timeless,’ the unrepresentable, and is a sign of eternity” (Madsen, *Rereading Allegory* 126). In one sense, this is imagery for imagery’s sake, a kind of absurd ornamentalism included to engage readers. In another sense, this is what the book is all about: a laying out of images and scenarios against the canvas of the page, with words constructing the scene. The episode, it seems, affirms the value of words, reveling in the precious “contradiction of terms” which is the novel’s form; the novel is not only made of words, but *about* words.

At other times, the novel compounds a number of different images, layering them on top of one another in a kind of imagistic litany that foregrounds the extent to which the text is “visionary,” an attempt to capture perceptions in verbal form. F., especially, with his prophetic pretensions, assaults the narrator with images, as if to remind readers that his vision is not immediately comprehensible or unified, but merely perceivable in fragments:

I saw a king without dominion. I saw a gun bleeding. I saw the prince of Paradise Forgotten. I saw a pimpled movie star. I saw a racing hearse. I saw the New Jew. I saw popular lame storm troopers. I wanted you to bring pain to heaven. I saw fire curing headaches. I saw the triumph of election over discipline. I wanted your confusion to be a butterfly net for magic. I saw ecstasy without fun and vice versa. I saw all things change their nature by mere intensification of their properties... I saw wounds pulling oars without becoming muscles. (*BL* 202)

¹⁵Sylvia Söderlind makes a great deal of this scene, arguing that it “reflects the convergence of the sacred, the Greek temple, and the profane, its cheap commercialization. The metamorphosis exemplifies the frequently parodic sacralization of popular culture which here turns into a true union” (Söderlind 55).

Such is the style of F.'s prophecy, and Cohen's allegory: these are, in the words of T.S. Eliot, the "fragments I have shored against my ruins" (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 79). The narrator, too, is given to forsaking a linear (or progressive) narrative in favour of a recitation of images:

O God, Your Morning Is Perfect. People Are Alive In Your World. I Can Hear The Little Children In The Elevator. The Airplane Is Flying Through The Original Blue Air. Mouths Are Eating Breakfast. The Radio Is Filled With Electricity. The Trees Are Excellent. You Are Listening To The Voices Of The Faithless Who Tarry On The Bridges of Spikes. I Have Let Your Spirit Into The Kitchen. (*BL* 67)

Both the narrator and F. are given to such digressions, and for neither of them is the overall narrative all that important: the narrator's history of Catherine Tekakwitha is fragmented, interrupted by his own visions, rants and reflections; and F.'s long letter is typical of its form— given to following a stream of consciousness, given even to noting the delays in one's own recording, as he does with his "[n]ever mind" self-erasure in planning to tell the narrator about "the bars in [his] soap collection" (207). *Beautiful Losers* is a novel made of its own imagery, apparently discarding linear narrative; rather, it constructs a collage, as if to construct as text that "connects nothing" and resembles "a necklace of incomparable beauty and unmeaning" (21).

F.'s instruction to "connect nothing" must be understood within a certain context: rather than resisting connections *per se* (F. and Edith do, after all, perform the act of connection in the telephone dance [37-42]), to "connect nothing" is to resist assigning hierarchical values of better and worse and to make categorical or descriptive judgments that distinguish between things, like, for example, the self and the other. As F. orders the narrator,

“[p]lace things side by side on your arborite table, if you must, but connect nothing!” (21).

Early in the narrator’s account, he recalls asking F.: “do you think I can learn to perceive the diamonds of good amongst all the shit?” F.’s response is unsurprising: “It is all diamond” (10). F.’s response parallels that of the novel’s style and structure: rather than ordain matters in a system of “importance” or value, the fragments are scattered, side by side, emulating the paratactic order which Fletcher claims is typical of allegory.

Both F. and the narrator try to communicate paratactically to escape the thematic and syntactic traps of subordination. Just as the events of the novel are scattered, with no particular event (except possibly the narrator’s transformation at the close of Book Three and the Danish Vibrator scene) given eminence over the others, both characters try to write in paratactic form, to keep their words on the level of a mantra. Consider, for example, the narrator’s declaration of what he wanted:

I always wanted to be loved by the Communist Party and the Mother Church. I wanted to live in a folk song like Joe Hill. I wanted to weep for the innocent people my bomb would have to maim. I wanted to wear my sleeve pinned in half, people smiling while I salute with the wrong hand. I wanted to be against the rich, even though some of them knew Dante; just before his destruction one of them would learn that I knew Dante, too. (24-5)¹⁶

Consider, too, F.’s famous “God is alive” speech which he claims is “the sweet burden of [his] argument” (197):

¹⁶The allusion to Dante is problematic. One may wonder whether the novel is referring to the author of *The Commedia* or to Joyce’s Dante from *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man*. One might lead towards the former, but it is worth remembering that Cohen’s *The Favourite Game* is generally regarded as a Canadian take on *Portrait* (and the *kunstlerroman* genre), and that Cohen, during his studies at Columbia, worked with Joyce scholar William York Tindall. See, for example, Ira Nadel’s account of Cohen’s work with Tindall (Nadel, *Various Positions* 52).

God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is afoot. Magic is alive. Alive is afoot. Magic never died. God never sickened. Many poor men lied. Many sick men lied. Magic never weakened. Magic never hid... Though his shrouds were hoisted the naked God did live. This I mean to whisper in my mind. This I mean my mind to serve until service is but Magic moving through the world, and mind itself is magic coursing through the flesh, and flesh itself is Magic dancing on a clock, and time itself the Magic Length of God. (197-8, 199)

These passages— among others in the both F.'s and the narrators monologues— imitate the paratactic order which it prescribes, at least in F.'s terms. What both passages illustrate, however, is the inevitable tendency towards hypotaxis, towards the assignation of greater worth: F. claims that "I tortured [the narrator] but only to draw [his] attention to *this*" (197; emphasis added), and in doing so, he assigns a greater value to one of his own sermons. But, in emulation of the paratactic order, all things— even sermons— fall apart, for meaning is difficult and unmeaning more readily available; meaning must be construed and defined, and then is threatened by one's own questions of its accuracy or completeness. After this sermon, F. proclaims "I do not understand the mystery, after all. I am an old man with one hand on a letter and one hand up a juicy cunt, and I understand nothing" (199). Just when the text threatens to find an argument, to resolve the problems that it poses with an affirmation of God's existence, it subverts itself in an act of thematic Luddism that returns everything to essentially equal fragments. It is as if Piers Plowman has torn the pardon all over again and the quest to compile meaning must begin anew.

But while *Beautiful Losers* imitates the paratactic order of allegory, it does not try to imitate "reality." As Fletcher notes, allegory is often characterized by a bizarre sense of

scene, as if to disconnect readers from any impression that the text is mimetic. Instead, the visionary dimensions of the text are foregrounded, perhaps to remind readers that the “world” figured in the text is a metaphorical one and should be appreciated as such. As Paul Piehler notes of medieval visionary allegory in *The Visionary Landscape*:

The *potentia animae* is represented as existing not in the void one might at first consider appropriate for an interior *imago*, but almost invariably in a setting which, like the *potentiae* themselves, is composed of images taken from the external world and transfigured by spiritual vision. The external images selected for this function are manifold— forests, cities, gardens, temples, prisons. The setting inevitably constitutes an essential dimension of the meaning of the figure, whether by way of reinforcement, or more rarely, contrast.¹⁷ (Piehler 13)

Although Piehler’s analysis focuses on medieval allegories, one might note how more recent allegorists have followed a similar principle of transfiguration: the setting (or, to use Piehler’s term, the *locus animae* [13]) of the farm allows, for example, a series of possible commentaries to inform one’s reading of *Animal Farm*— humans as cattle being milked by the dominant powers, the primal dimensions of the political power struggle, and so forth. If the *loci* of an allegory seem odd or unreal, they usually are so to compel readers to question *why* such scenes are used— that is, to determine the thematic implications of their inclusion (and often detailed description).

The narrator begins in his sub-basement apartment, with easy access to the bottom of the elevator shaft in which his wife Edith killed herself; as the narrator recalls, “[w]e were the

¹⁷See Piehler’s definitions of his own terms in his introduction to *The Visionary Landscape*. Figures with (or that act as) “active influential powers” are defined by Piehler as *potentia animae*, “[w]hich preserves a necessary ambiguity as to the origin of the *potentia*— as to whether the power controls the mind from within or without” (Piehler 12, 13).

only ones who lived in the sub-basement, we were the only ones who commanded the little elevator into those depths” (*BL* 8). The *locus* is, of course, thematically important: in the cloistered depth of the apartment— comparable to the single room Hell figured in Sartre’s *Huis Clos*— not only is the narrator submerged and isolated, but he is kept inescapably close to the scene of his wife’s suicide (committed, of course, while the narrator was preparing a paper on lemmings). Just as appropriately, the narrator is a researcher, a folklorist who has “*tunneled* through libraries after news about victims” and who wakes up every morning wondering if “the *old machine* [his body] has turned the food brown” (7; emphases added).

There is great deal of such play with the *loci* of the novel, and subsequent studies might make a great deal of Cohen’s figuration of them. By this token, the narrator’s relocation to F.’s tree-house can be interpreted as a figural ascent, or, more convincingly, as an attempted exodus from the site of his torture.¹⁸ Other *loci* are equally important: F.’s room in Occupational Therapy, the System Theatre, the hotel room in Argentina, and so forth, may have mimetic roots, but they are figured in such patently outrageous ways as to be anti-mimetic (F.’s stay in O.T. is certainly unlike any “real” stay in hospital). But if the novel seems to avoid imbuing its transfigurations with “spiritual vision” in Piehler’s terms, it imbues them with visionary twists that foreground their essential *un*-reality, and, by extension,

¹⁸Fletcher would note the extent to which this “figural ascent” is atypical of contemporary allegories: “The katagoric, regressive character of modern allegories comes out not only in their imagery, which is increasingly low and ironical, but in their very forms, where the hero moves gradually into a more restricted range of action, into an imprisoning hole or cave” (Fletcher 159). The narrator’s movement is essentially progressive, moving away from his apartment, to the treehouse that he inherits from F., and then the concluding return to Montreal and the System Theatre.

reminding readers that these scenes have been constructed for a literary (vis à vis allegorical) purpose.

But the *real* loci of the novel are verbal: the novel begins with a written “history” of its characters; the second book is a long letter from F.; and the final section is identified as an epilogue. If, in Piehler’s terms, the *potentia animae* are to be found, they will be found in a setting which “constitutes an essential dimension of the meaning of the figure” (Piehler 13). The narrator of Book One charts all of his digressions, all of his personal torments into a form that, supposedly, is to be a history of “them all,” but ultimately focuses on himself. The narrator of Book One even introduces himself to his audience, with the subject of his work placed under a kind of Derridean erasure: “I am a well-known folklorist, an authority on the A—s, a tribe I have no intention of disgracing by my interest” (*BL* 5). His writing is his work, and his living, literally (in both senses of the word). Consider, for example, the metafictional absurdity of the following passage which begins in an attempt to write but dissolves into what Ondaatje describes as kind of “beast language” comparable to that of Michael McClure (Ondaatje 48):

Steady, old scholar! I’ll turn off the light and write in the dark a résumé of tomorrow’s Indian chapter that I must get to work on. Discipline. Click! “Triompher du mal par le bien.” St. Paul. That will begin the chapter. I feel better already. Foreign languages are a good corset. Get your hand off yourself. Edith Edith Edith long things forever. (*BL* 81)

His words, in every sense, become a transfiguration of this thoughts and actions, though one might wonder how the text is “being written” at this point. One might read this as little more than verbal jest, but consider it in light of F.’s concerns in his letter: “I am going to show you

everything *happening*. That is as far as I can take you. I cannot bring you into the middle of the action” (207; Cohen’s emphasis). Later in his letter, F. reminds the narrator, and the novel’s readers, that language is the essence of communication and demonstration: “Watch the words, watch *how it happens*” (235; Cohen’s emphasis).

F.’s instruction to watch his words points to a crucial issue of the novel: although it is certainly not mimetic in its attempt to create or to depict a recognizable version of the “real world,” it is culturally mimetic. Comic books, songs, films, advertisements—they are all to be found within the text, whether in reproduction (as with the advertisements for improving one’s legs and ordering rosaries containing water from the fountain of Lourdes [138-9]) or description, as with the narrator’s frame-by-frame description of the cartoon advertisement for Charles Axis’ body-building course (87-89). And, rather than art imitating reality, art seems to intrude into reality, walking into the landscape of the novel’s characters *as if* to blur the lines between “fiction” and the “real” world. In describing the various things that have been placed into Edith’s navel, the narrator recounts the story behind Man’s Tears: “A complete stranger in a blue bathing suit threw himself on her stomach, weeping” (45). The stranger in this “curious incident” (45) resembles the comic book weakling Joe from the bodybuilding advertisement (except this anonymous figure is wearing a blue bathing suit instead of a red one). Both seem to have been harassed by the bully of the beach, who, F. later informs the narrator, is Charles Axis himself (93). Even more strangely, Charles Axis appears mysteriously at the end of the Danish Vibrator episode, clad in his white bathing suit, scratching his head as he watched the D.V.’s escape into the world (227). The novel’s

mimetic sense is synthetic in nature, pulling together the fictional and the real into a vision that F. prophecies at the System Theatre and the narrator must realize (i.e., *make real*), as must the novel:

I let the newsreel escape, invited it to walk right into plot, and they merged in awful originality, just as trees and plastic synthesize in those districts of the highway devoted to motels... Here is my message... Here is what I saw: here is what I learned:

Sophia Loren Strips For A Flood Victim
THE FLOOD IS REAL AT LAST (283)

This is the stylistic sensibility of Cohen's allegory: paratactic components not so much connected together but melted together to form a crystalline synthesis, a style figured throughout the novel, most menacingly as the "[h]uman soap" that F. buys from Hitler in Argentina (207), and most awfully as the merging of the newsreel and the feature.

Everything in *Beautiful Losers* is a "miasmal mixture" (282) of sorts. In the epilogue of the novel, the narrator and F. are indistinguishable from one another, for both the reader and the Montreal crowd, with the two men, in effect, synthesized into one figure that Stephen Scobie calls IF (Scobie, *Leonard Cohen* 97). Similarly, the women in the novel— Edith, Catherine Tekakwitha, and even F.'s nurse Mary Voolnd— are often interpreted as different manifestations of Isis, the Egyptian goddess of truth whose cult extended to Greece (Barbour 141-3; Lee 70-77). All, as F. would say, is diamond; flesh becomes soap; the newsreel and the feature form together to form a new mimesis in which disconnected fragments are homogenized. *Beautiful Losers* is an allegorical meltdown, a containment of fiction and reality soldered together to become inseparable, or, at the very least, indistinguishable. Such

is the “microcosmic character,” to return to Fletcher’s terms, of the novel’s imagery, as everything, it seems, is translated into another form. Although all fiction might be seen as some sort of fusion of the “real” and the imaginative, Cohen’s novel demands that readers adjust the perceptual presumptions to recognize the potential homogeneity, such that everything in the novel, from the narrator’s constipation to F.’s prophecies, is part of a myth in the making, or remaking, the reading of which should not be cursory or superficial, but intensive and even visionary.

It is this microcosmic nature of allegory that dominates, and typifies, the genre. This assessment, however, is not limited to imagery (where every image seems to “mean” something), or to the petrie-dish environment typical of many allegories (like the farm in *Animal Farm*, or the island in *Lord of the Flies*). Words seem to form the centrosphere of allegorical narrative, as words necessarily try to return to a central concept. In *The Language of Allegory*, Quilligan argues that

[a] sensitivity to the polysemy of words is the basic component of the genre of allegory . This sensitivity is structural, for out of a focus on the word as word, allegory generates narrative action. The plots of all allegorical narratives therefore unfold as investigations into the literal truth inherent in individual words, considered in the context of their whole histories as words. (Quilligan 33)

Quilligan’s theory that allegories are premised on punning and other systems of verbal play is, in one sense, Jakobsonian: by locating the central puns of an allegory, the reader finds its “dominant,” its controlling force.¹⁹ But it is simultaneously Bakhtinian, as language enters

¹⁹See Jakobson’s definition of “the dominant” as “the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It... guarantees the integrity of the structure” (Jakobson 41)

into a kind of polylogic discourse with itself, as loaded words, the “compositional unities” of the text, are exposed for their polysemy.²⁰ According to Quilligan, “all allegorical narrative unfolds as action designed to comment on the verbal implications of the words used to describe the imaginary action” (53). Although Fletcher argues that the microcosmic character of allegorical imagery is predicated on the notion that “every single word must contain in itself the entire concept” (171), Quilligan’s theory inverts the focus back onto the word: every image, every scene, must contain in itself the word, in one form or another. That word in *Beautiful Losers* is “translation.”

²⁰See, for example, Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*: “Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speeches of characters are merely compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social values and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)” (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 279). One might argue that allegory brings verbal values into discourse with one another. See also Bakhtin’s “Discourse in Dostoevsky” chapter in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 181-269.

II: Re-Reading *Beautiful Losers*

History and the Storyteller

Early in “The History of Them All,” the narrator explains that he is a “folklorist” (*BL* 5), and this identification is crucial to a consideration of the novel. Not quite a historian, not quite an anthropologist (though he uses the terms freely), he is ready to take down any tidbit of information, legendary or otherwise, so long as it may inform his own folkloric account of Catherine Tekakwitha. His project at the outset of his history is not to document the life of Catherine Tekakwitha, but to “rescue [her] from the Jesuits,” although he admits that he has no idea “what they are saying about [her] because [his] Latin is almost defunct” (5). His career focuses on telling the stories of history’s losers. He admits, “I’m far too willing to shoulder the alleged humiliations of harmless peoples, as evidenced by my life work with the A—s” (7), a tribe whose history, he describes, “is characterized by incessant defeat”(5). His obsession with the Iroquois virgin is less that of a historian than that of a demented, perverse fan, stalking her beyond the grave: “I’ve come after you, Catherine Tekakwitha. I want to know what goes on under that rosy blanket” (3). But the “history” of Catherine Tekakwitha allows him a chance to retreat from his life of dusty books, bad memories, and constipation, and escape into the world of folklore where facts do not so much matter as the surviving

myths. Mourning the loss of his wife and his (tor)mentor-friend F., the narrator sees Tekakwitha as a figure on the other side of a painting, a “Technicolor postcard” into which he might climb (4). Myths and images are central to *Beautiful Losers*, and more important than any of the narrator’s pretensions towards an academic “history.” As F. exclaims to him after relating the tale of the Telephone Dance, “[h]ow anxious you are to be deceived!” (44).

Both Dennis Lee and Douglas Barbour argue that *Beautiful Losers* is about the destruction or undoing of Canadian history. According to Lee, F. “identified Catherine Tekakwitha as the instigator of Canadian history, and the narrator as its terminal case. Exorcising history would be a matter of integrating world and earth in these two people” (Lee 67).²¹ More precisely, Barbour argues that “[h]istory, and our awareness of Historical Time, boxes us in, like ‘I’ in his basement, and keeps us from living in the Eternal Present” (Barbour 137). What Lee and Barbour miss is the extent to which history is not so much attacked as it is translated into myth: linear history is restricting, problematic, confining, at least within the context of the novel. As Söderlind notes, the “temporal and narrative perspectives here become preposterous, in the true sense of the word” (Söderlind 42). F. claims that it is his “intention to relieve [the narrator] of [his] final burden: the useless history under which [he] suffers in such confusion” (*BL* 237). It is he, and not the narrator, who provides the

²¹Cohen’s “review” of Lee’s discussion is a perfect example of the Cohen-con: “It’s certainly better than anything I could do. His approach is so comprehensive and brilliant. Only once every couple of years do I get that brilliant.” While this may sound superficially like praise, Cohen’s subtle criticism comes in his declamation that “[i]f an argument is put forward forcefully enough, I’ll go along with it. In fact, I’m even starting to buy critics’ versions of my work” (Cohen in Twigg 42).

concluding history of Tekakwitha, in the vignettes that comprise most of the last section of his letter.

But for all of F.'s dismissals of history, he "let history back," not because of some redemption it might provide, but because F. "was lonely" (206). There is, apparently, some void that history fills, perhaps because history has lessons to teach. On buying the factory which the narrator eventually inherits, F. explains that "History has shown us how men love to muse and loaf and make love in places formerly the scene of much violent activity" (53). History, for F., has its uses— but it colonizes, and it consoles at the weakest and least spiritual levels:

A huge jukebox played a sleepy tune... The tune was called History and we loved it. Nazis, Jews, everybody. We loved it because we made it up, because, like Thucydides, we knew whatever happened to us was the most important thing in the world. History made us feel good so we played it over and over, deep into the night. We smiled as our uncles went to bed, and we were glad to get rid of them, because they didn't know how to do the H. in spite of all their boasts and old newspaper clippings. Good night, old frauds. (205)

F. seems to see history in much the same way that Blake sees reason,²² as an attempt to establish a system of meaning: "What is most original in man's nature is often that which is most desperate. Thus new systems are forced on the world by men who simply cannot bear the pain of living with what is" (69). Christ, Hitler— for F., they are creators with similar projects, to provide such systems, and history, too, is a system, a way of itemizing events and connecting them chronologically, rationally. History, and the telling of it, ordains a kind of

²²Douglas Barbour argues that "*Beautiful Losers* is a very Blakean book... because of its incredible, living, often terrifyingly intense, ENERGY" (Barbour 146).

power, and F. welcomes back history because of the power it affords, just as he lusts for the power held in the soap made of six million Jews: "If History rule, let me be Mr. History," he declares (206). F. believes that "[l]ife chose [him] to be a man of facts" (237) and he assumes the burden of supplying the history of Catherine Tekakwitha in an attempt to relieve the narrator of the burden of history. "You mustn't meddle any longer in this shit" (237), he writes.

His subsequent history of Catherine Tekakwitha is fascinating, but whether or not it qualifies as "scholarly" history is another matter. Before beginning his history, F. writes two invocations *to* history, in the "old" and "middle" styles (237-8), both written in poetic form. The "old" style invocation is highly Romantic, reading like a parody of both Shelleys (Mary and Percy Bysshe), with the final lines imitating Percy's "Ozymandias" and alluding to Mary's *Frankenstein*: "Bred close to the ovens, he's burnt inside. / Light wind, cold, dark— / they use him like a bride!" (238).²³ The "middle" style invocation is only four lines long, but perhaps in parody of the narrator's scholarship, it is glossed with explanatory footnotes, as well as secondary footnotes that help to explain the footnotes. (These footnotes may also be a take on the extreme allusiveness of Pound and Eliot, parodying the sort of elaborate

²³In *Frankenstein*, the doctor repeats his monster's words: "*I shall be with you on your wedding-night*" (Shelley 170). Nicole Markotic, in her discussion of *Beautiful Losers*, links these words to the Danish Vibrator's having "learned to feed itself" (BL 225; Markotic 37). There are numerous references to *Frankenstein* throughout the text, most notably in F.'s description of himself as "Dr. Frankenstein with a deadline" (221). It is interesting to note Cohen's other use of the Frankenstein motif in "Disguises," from *Flowers for Hitler*. In it, the narrator of the poem says "Goodbye articulate monsters / Abbott and Costello have met Frankenstein" (Cohen, "Disguises," *Stranger Music* 71), a phrase that seems to describe the burlesque of *Frankenstein* in *Beautiful Losers*. One should also note the possible allusion to Percy Shelley's "Ozymandias" in F.'s letter: "It was a lonely ride the Queen and Prince Philip took through the armored streets of Quebec that day in 1964... The feet of Ozymandias had more company in the sandstorm of '89" (BL 234).

notes offered in *The Waste Land*, for example). The history that follows, however, may be part history and part myth, but its function is not so much to inform as it is to complete things, to complete the novel's introduction of Catherine, and to take her history away from the narrator. Catherine's induction into Christianity is glossed over with the following commentary from F.:

She went down to the cross beside the river and built a fire. Then she spent several hours caressing her pathetic legs with hot coals, just as the Iroquois did to their slaves. She had seen it done and she always wanted to know what it felt like. Thus she branded herself a slave of Jesus. *I refuse to make this interesting*, old friend, it wouldn't be good for you, and all my training might be for nothing. *This is not an entertainment. This is play.* Besides, you know what pain looks like, that kind of pain, you've been inside newsreel Belsen. (245-6; emphases added)

This passage is indicative of F.'s vision of history: it is not meant to inform but to play with, to twist and distort to meet one's individual needs, as F. does in using Catherine's story to transform the narrator into the figure he wanted to be.

But F.'s history is more formal than historical, concerned less with content than with style. At one point, he positions his narrative in relation to literary figures: "Shakespeare is 64 years dead. Andrew Marvell is 2 years dead. John Milton is 6 years dead. We are now in the heart of our pain. We are now in the heart of our evidence" (258). What is most intriguing about F.'s use of history is the way that he *frames* it—literally, he frames it as a writer frames a story, as a film maker shoots a feature (or a newsreel). His audience is taken into the scene, brought into the action as much as possible, if only within the mind's eye. Just as he does in moving "into" the story of Catherine's suffering so too are readers taken into

the world of F.'s vision: "We are now *in* the heart of the System Theatre. We are *in* the dark jockeying for elbow dominion on the wooden armrests" (279; emphases added). F.'s style is cinematic, depicting the scene in such ways as to imply "being there," seeing things first-hand.

In F.'s vision, everything is translatable into another form, and all forms are receptive to another. His letter is so filmic as to suggest that it is imitating film, but it is also a method of capturing one style in another style, merging them in "aweful originality" (283). Reality, history, legend, art, they can all be collapsed into one if the reader— particularly the narrator—dares to do so. F. digresses during his narrative to speak to Brigitte Bardot:

Hello, famous blonde naked, a ghost is speaking to your suntan as they unshovel you... Even after the lights came up, the Cinerama screen continued to bleed. I quiet the crowd with a raised scarlet finger. On the white screen your erotic auto accident continues to bleed... We stumble on the truth: we could have made each other happy. Eva Peron! Edith! Mary Voolnd! Hedy Lamarr! Madame Bovary! Lauren Bacall was Marlene Dietrich! B.B., it is F., ghost from green daisies, from the stone pit of his orgasm, from the obscure mental factory of English Montreal. Lie down on my paper, little movie flesh. Let your towel preserve impressions of your bosom. (259-60)

As Stan Dragland argues, "the text is using filmic analogies for what has been happening all through *Beautiful Losers*, a veritable Bible of miasmal mixture or generic instability" (Dragland 19). Caught at the centre of this formal cocktail is F. himself, at once director and star, author and subject; more than making Hitchcockian cameos, he dominates his work like Orson Welles.

F.'s narrative practically ends with a linguistic description of a film of a radio message announcing his escape from the hospital, an escape that F. claims is only about to begin.

Again, F. is the film's subject, even when he is not its star:

(DOLLY IN TO CLOSE-UP OF THE RADIO ASSUMING THE FORM OF PRINT)

— This is the radio speaking. Good evening. The radio easily interrupts this book to bring you a recorded historical news flash: TERRORIST LEADER AT LARGE...

(CLOSE-UP OF RADIO EXHIBITING A MOTION PICTURE OF ITSELF)

— This is the radio speaking. Eeeek! Tee hee! This is the ah ha ha, this is the tee hee hee, this is the radio speaking. Ha ha ha ha ha ha, oh ho ho ho, ha ha ha ha ha ha, it tickles, it tickles! (SOUND EFFECT: ECHO CHAMBER) This is the radio speaking. Drop your weapons! This is the Revenge of the Radio. (285-6)

Text, radio, film, telephones— all media come together in a surreal soldering of genres and forms, and in such a way as to make “ordinary eternal machinery”(41) part of the “miasmal mixture” of things, thus imbuing it with a kind of omniscience that transcends the logistics of linear time. Chronology and sensibility are not as important as the story and its form. F. asks, “[i]s it happening, Mary?” (285), and, of course it is: the text has everything under control, whether or not the author does. The reader is being shown everything as it happens. The radio “easily interrupts this *book*” (284; emphasis added), not just F.'s letter. Call it a choral ending, or call it the intercession of, literally, a *deus ex machina*; all forms are one, interlaced, and, to some extent, sentient. But this is not the end of F.'s letter— he is, at least, allowed to say goodbye and plead for the narrator to “be what I want to be” (286).

The storyteller has benefits to claim because of his vision(s). F.'s words and his libido feed each other in a kind of symbiosis, as evidenced by his justification for the lengthy paragraph describing his relationship with the narrator:

Mary Voolnd has finally admitted my left hand into the creases of her uniform. She watched me compose the above paragraph, so I let it run on rather extravagantly. Women love excess in a man because it separates him from his fellows and makes him lonely. All that women know of the male world has been revealed to them by lonely, excessive refugees from it. Raging fairies they cannot resist because of their highly specialized intelligence.
— Keep writing, she hisses. (194-5)

Similarly, in the Argentina episode, as F. tries to cure Edith of her inability to reach orgasm, he appeals to her libido not with physical foreplay, but with oral foreplay: "I cleared my famous throat. I chose a swollen book, frankly written, which describes various Auto-Erotic practices" (212). Both become aroused by the reading, with F.'s "throat burning with the hunger of it" because "the texts had got to" him (213). This leads to a recitation of the story of Brébeuf and Lalement in an earnest attempt to fulfil F.'s dream of the pan-orgasmic body (216-9).²⁴

Language and sexuality, for F., function as devices for conquest—for the colonization of mind and body, whether in terms of reinventing Edith in his own image, or teaching his student (remembering, of course, that many of the narrator's lessons were post-coital). That F. was a separatist Member of Parliament is significant, because it identifies the basic dimensions of his power(s). Not only does it infer political power, it also brings together the

²⁴As Ondaatje remarks parenthetically, "[p]oor E. J. Pratt would turn in his epic grave" (Ondaatje 50).

things for which F. is most recognized— his penis (with the play on the word “member”) and his speech (noting the etymology of “parliament”). The two concepts come together in what may be the ultimate example of phallogocentrism. The phallus emerges as one of his representative symbols, even in death:

F. died in a padded cell, his brain rotted from too much dirty sex. His face turned black, this I saw with my own eyes, and they say there wasn't much left of his prick. A nurse told me it looked like the inside of a worm. (4)

Such phallic associations pervade the reader's perception of F. Even F.'s system, his method for trying to remedy “the spectacle of misery” that he saw in Edith and the narrator, is figured in relation to his own penis: “I was free to try anything. I can't answer for my own erection. I have no explanation for my own vile ambitions” (221).

F. confesses near the beginning of his letter that “I followed women anywhere. I followed women into Parliament because I knew they love power” (184). Later in his letter, he mourns his lost power and the perks it brought him: “I cherished the fucks under the monument. I had cream in National Library. Too impure for empty future, I wept old jackpots” (206). Through language and sex, F. can penetrate the consciousness of his subjects. Ondaatje argues that “F. uses language like a sword, illogically, excessively, and unrealistically” (Ondaatje 46). His lessons, ultimately, are, as Dennis Lee puts it, “mindfuck[s]... meant to boggle the narrator into illumination” (Lee 69). F. claims that “Hysteria is my classroom!” (*BL* 70), and the narrator is, quite literally, the student unable to keep up: “I couldn't hope to write down half the things he said. He raved like a lunatic, spit flying with every second word” (15).

The first book of *Beautiful Losers* is, ultimately, the result of the narrator's historical re-education in the hysterical classroom. Ondaatje describes the narrator's book as "the most tortured piece of writing imaginable" (Ondaatje 47), which is precisely the point: Book One functions as an act of self-flagellation for the narrator, in the senses of both masturbation and self-torture. While F.'s history—when he gets to it—is more or less logically organized, the narrator's is tumultuous, fragmented, and frustrated. Although F. is willing to digress for the sake of amusing his female readers—as he does with drawing lines because the "nurses like to see me use my ruler" (BL 185)—his digressions are logical, sexually-motivated. The narrator, as Ondaatje notes (Ondaatje 47), merely collects fragments without joining them together. His image of himself as a historian/folklorist is constantly corroding, and his attempts at history constantly devolve into introspection, into the whinge of a lonely man:

I tried to be a man in a padded locker room telling a beautiful smutty story to eternity. I tried to be an emcee in tuxedo arousing a lodge of honeymooners, my bed full of golf widows. I forgot that I was desperate. I forgot that I began this research in desperation. My briefcase fooled me. My tidy notes led me astray. I thought I was doing a job. The old books on Catherine Tekakwitha by P. Cholenec, the manuscripts of M. Remy, *Miracles faits en sa paroisse par l'intercession de la B. Cath. Tekakwith, 1696*, from the archives of Collège Sainte-Marie—the evidence tricked me into mastery. (BL 47)

Moreover, even his attempts to recount the history of Catherine Tekakwitha are borrowed from other sources—not just historical sources, but F. and Edith. The "apocalyptic" tale of Catherine's spilling of the wine that caused "a total chromatic metamorphosis" (125), it turns out, was told to him by Edith (133). His history resists the constraints of linear organization, and wanders, apparently aimlessly, from the Indian saint to his own life to memories of his

past. His history is a solipsistic myth, dislodged from the rational framework of a progressive history. Facts, clippings, and memories are thrown into the narrative as if the component elements are ingredients in an Irish stew: “Why must I dissect F.’s old tongue? The Indians invented the steam bath. That is just a tidbit” (162). For the narrator, logic is unreachable, and the result is a hodgepodge of “tidbits” randomly assembled, of which perhaps his faulty syllogism mid-way through his history is the most emblematic: “The King of France was a man. I was a man. Therefore I was the King of France. F.! I’m sinking again” (99).

But within the framework of F.’s system, the narrator might (or might as well) be the King of France. F. is, after all, the same man who tries to convince the narrator that he used to be a girl. Everything in F.’s world, it seems, is an elaborate fiction, or a potential fiction, made up like history to dance to as the night passes:

— ...I went to school as a girl in a blue tunic, with a little embroidered crest on the front of it.

— F., you’re not talking to one of your shoeshine boys. I happen to know you very well. We lived on the same street, we went to school together, we were in the same class, I saw you a million times in the shower after gym. You were a boy when you went to school. We played doctor in the woods. What’s the point of all this?

— Thus do the starving refuse sustenance. (23)

F. is, in a sense, offering up a myth, but the narrator does not bite; it is, however, this sort of “sustaining” myth-making that underscores F.’s narrative. The narrator calls these myths “cheap koans” (147), blurring the line between fiction and reality to render them indistinguishable from one another. Delivering the koans is, as Winfried Siemerling puts it, “an elusive self that... mocks us from outside established or representable meaning, leaving

us with the kind of unsolvable riddle that is meant to lead the student of Zen to enlightenment” (Siemerling, “Interior Landscapes” 89). F. is a trickster teacher, constantly changing faces and positions, waiting to pose the question “[d]id I trick you again?” (*BL* 186), before inviting his student to return to the game: “Play with me old, friend... Take my spirit hand” (187).

F.’s koans, though, are not just a game, for as Eli Mandel notes of Cohen’s poetry, they demonstrate “the fakery that is involved in being really authentic” (Mandel cited in Ondaatje 55). His koans are a kind of (Mind-)Fuck-Cure that will lead to the sort of perceptual re-awakening experienced by Catherine Tekakwitha’s uncle during the Andacwandet: “It was a dance of masks and every mask was perfect because every mask was a real face and every face was a real mask so there was no mask and there was no face for there was but one dance” (167).²⁵ As the narrator continues with his writing, his sense of “history”— his grasp on a rational, linear reality— vanishes, and he is ready to discard everything. “I’m tired of facts, I’m tired of speculations, I want to be consumed by unreason. I want to be swept along” (58).

Swept along, as in a movie, a song, or a work of fiction, perhaps, if one recalls his wish “to live in a folk song like Joe Hill” (24). His writing necessarily assumes an apostrophic

²⁵This motif recurs throughout Cohen’s work. In a review of *The Energy of Slaves*, Phyllis Webb comments on Cohen’s assumption of the slave position. “[S]omething prevents me from taking [his] role as slave altogether seriously. It is his commitment to so many other roles. His energy is on alternating current: I am beautiful, I am ugly, the poems go. I am saint, I am victim; I am hero, loser; redeemer, slave; lover, dwarf. No, I am not a dwarf. I am the singer and the song. I can’t sing. I hate my music. After years of reading Cohen and admiring him,... I am not so easily disarmed by the now-you-see-me-now-you-don’t peakaboo game he is playing” (Webb 103).

stance, because he is not simply writing for the sake of some vague readership, but for Catherine herself, who may or may not be “at work on [him] already” (6). F., in death, is still trying to sweep the narrator along. The narrator discovers a note from F. telling him to turn on the radio, after which readers are given a script rendition of Gavin Gate and the Goddesses singing a pop song which is laden with stage directions and descriptive glosses:

GAVIN GATE: *I never desert you*
 GODDESSES: *hurt me too*

THEY FADE, THE ELECTRIC OPERATORS, GAVIN, THE GODDESSES, THEIR BACKS BLEEDING, THEIR GENITALIA RED AND SORE. THE GREAT STORY HAS BEEN TOLD, IN THE DICTATORSHIP OF TIME. A COME HAS RENT THE FLAG, TROOPS ARE MASTURBATING WITH 1948 PIN-UPS IN THEIR TEARS, A PROMISE HAS BEEN RENEWED. (98)

Who authors these words, however, is far from certain. F. is, after all, dead, and that he uses a letter to tell the narrator to turn on the radio emphasizes how impossible this incident is. Explaining this scene becomes an exercise in stretching logic— is F. controlling the radio metaphysically, is the radio writing, is the narrator imagining things, and so forth. But one has to wonder: is it even the radio making this sound? Earlier in this account, the narrator claims that “F. has got into my ear like a trapped fly, incessantly buzzing. His style is colonizing me” (51). That the instruction from F. to turn on the radio was written on a telegraph form (93) suggests that perhaps some metaphysical communication is taking place, reminiscent of the Telephone Dance in which F. and Edith stuck their fingers in each other’s ears. F. claims that “I *became* a telephone. Edith was the electrical conversation that went through me” (41). Or perhaps this is “The Revenge of the Radio” (285) all over again, earlier

in the text but later in time. During the telephone dance, the telephone “was the agent of some benign deity” (39). So is the novel, it seems: not only does it transmit, it receives.

Transmission and the desire for that transmission to be received— these are two of the key dimensions of *Beautiful Losers*. Much of the novel is told in apostrophic address, and both F. and the narrator keep asking if their message is being received. F. is more confident: “Somewhere you are listening to my voice. So many are listening. There is an ear on every star” (259). The narrator, however, longs for some sort of sign: “O God, please terrify me,” he pleads (58). Even the narrator’s constipation is linked to a desire to receive:

Please make me empty, if I’m empty then I can receive, if I can receive it means it comes from somewhere outside of me, if it comes from outside of me I’m not alone! I cannot bear this loneliness. Above all it is a loneliness. I don’t want to be a star, merely dying. Please let me be hungry, then I am not the dead center. (49)

The novel’s characters seem to try persistently to communicate, to send messages across metaphysical chasms, and the result, as Sylvia Söderlind notes, is

a *mise en abyme* of the situation of communication, in which I and You are reciprocal and interdependent, specularly related positions reflecting the reciprocity necessary for any sense of identity, while the third person occupies a position outside the instance of discourse; he/she is the one talked about... From a diagetic intratextual communication with the I and You positions filled by characters on whom the reader eavesdrops, the text opens up into the real situation of reading, as what seems to be the real author addresses the real reader in a typically postmodern appeal for reader participation. (Söderlind 43)

The narrator has a great deal of questions to transmit: “Are the stars tiny, after all? Who will put us to sleep? Should I save my fingernails? Is matter holy?” (*BL* 6).

In the final paragraph of the novel, the supposedly “third person” narrator speaks in the grammar of inclusion, welcoming “you who read me today” (307). *Beautiful Losers* constantly reminds readers that they are, in Linda Hutcheon’s words, “being manipulated by its author(s)” (Hutcheon, “Leonard Cohen,” *CWTW Fiction Series* 47). But these manipulations are not just that of the trickster; sometimes they are a reminder that pain also lurks behind the text:

O Reader, do you know that a man is writing this? A man like you who longed for a hero’s heart. In arctic isolation a man is writing this, a man who hates his memory and remembers everything, who was once as proud as you, who loved society as only an orphan can, who loved it as a spy in the milk and honey? (*BL* 130)

The storyteller is always at work, constructing a myth, a sometimes pained one, and translating it into the vocabulary of his readers. Such is the nature of the “Novel Dance.” The text is the current moving between author(s) and reader(s).

Sainthood and Servitude

Early in his history, the narrator acknowledges his own position as a slave to his subjects: “I’m far too willing to *shoulder* the alleged humiliations of harmless peoples, as evidence by my life work with the A—s” (7; emphasis added). The use of the verb “shoulder” that the narrator is a slave to everything—his desires, his memories, his work, even his body, which refuses to process food. “I am so human,” he moans, “as to suffer from constipation, the rewards of a sedentary life” (4). Everyone in the novel, however, is a slave or a servant, at least in some capacity. F. explains to the narrator that “[g]reat love needs a servant, but you don’t know how to use your servants” (31). F. and Edith are servants to the narrator, preparing him for his ultimate journey. F.’s instruction becomes more infected with the notion of enslavement as he instructs the narrator to get Edith to perform fellatio on him “with whips, with imperial commands, with a leap into her mouth and a lesson in choking” (31).

Edith’s sexual enslavement is especially emphasized, not only by her sacrifice of her body of F.’s experiments, but also by her brutal gang rape in an American quarry. Her rape, however, ends not in intercourse, but in Edith urinating in fear. Her attackers “could not bear to learn that Edith was no longer Other, but that she was indeed, Sister” (77), so they assault

her with phallic substitutes: “index fingers, pipe stems, ballpoint pens, and twigs” (77).

Söderlind argues, that this

rape scene encompasses the paradoxical and self-defeating nature of the colonizing project which in the end produces nothing but losers; the desire to turn the Other into the same must fail since its success would ensure that she can no longer be subjected. (Söderlind 45)

But Edith can, however, be further subjected, as she eventually is by the Danish Vibrator—not once, but twice (*BL* 223, 226). “Thank God it’s off me... It made me do oral intimacy” (223) she explains to F, who is also assaulted by it. Humans, it seems, are servants even to machines.

But is the D.V. just a machine? Desmond Pacey asks “if it is too fanciful to suggest that in referring to the sex machine by its initials, D.V., Cohen is suggesting that the surrender to it is not so very different from the surrender to God’s will [*deo volente*]” (Pacey 92). Pacey’s suggestion is not fanciful at all. Indeed, one might also consider the extent to which the D.V. is the *deo venerare*, the God worshiped by F. and, apparently, Edith, by those who commit themselves to the pursuit of sexual pleasure and to the glorification of the body. The D.V. is a *deus ex machina* (another one), or perhaps more appropriately, the *deus in machina*, demonstrating to Edith and F. “what will happen” (*BL* 228) as a result of their experiments. In *The Favourite Game*, Breavman shouts “Fuck GOD” (Cohen, *The Favourite Game* 14) to “[invoke] the spirit of Bertha” (13), the woman who he feels might save him

from “the bedrooms of easy women” (13). In *Beautiful Losers*, it appears that God fucks back in a comic reminder that humans are inevitably slaves to some form of Other, whether that other is human or deific, as F. realizes after Edith identifies herself as Isis: “You’re not joking? Then I’m only fit to suck your toes” (*BL* 231). Catherine Tekakwitha’s abdication of possession of her body further implies that the body is a colonial property. “With a desperate slingshot thought she hurled her cunt forever into the night. It was not hers to offer” (64), the narrator explains.

In *Beautiful Losers*, the world is little more than a daisy chain of masters and slaves. Wiping F.’s and Edith’s body parts after their baptism with the flesh of six million Jews, Hitler says (“without a trace of nostalgia”) that “I had millions of these at disposal” (230). But even Hitler, former master of millions, is a servant; he is, after all, identified as an Argentinian “waiter” (209). As F. writes, “[t]he English did to us what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us. I demanded revenge for everyone” (236). This is a lesson that the narrator takes half of his book to learn: “I see it so clearly now!... When eating beside a man of mourning the Master never ate his fill. Uncles! uncles! how dare any of us eat?” (78). But even eating is associated with enslavement, as the narrator realizes in a moment of hyperbolic insight: “Humans, the dietary Nazis. Death at the center of nourishment!... Think of the death camps in the basement of a hotel” (49).

To be a slave, however, is not something to deny, but to celebrate. Just as F. demands revenge for all of the subjugated, so too does the narrator want to speak up on behalf of the victimized:

What about us with asthma? What about us failures? What about us who can't shit properly? What about us who have no orgies and excessive fucking to become detached about? What about us who are broken when our friends fuck our wives? What about us such as me? (158)

His work with the A—s is one way of speaking up for the losers of the world. The A—s, the narrator explains, are so closely identified with loss that the name of the tribe “is the word for corpse in the language of all the neighbouring tribes” and “the songs and legends of its enemies are virtually nothing but a sustained howl of triumph” (5). According to F., to be black “is the best feeling a man can have in this century” (150); to be black, in F.’s mind, is to have only a collective identity— because “*all* flowers look alike, like Negroes and Chinamen” (51) — that represents slavery. It is worth remembering the narrator’s recollection of the time he came home to discover that Edith had painted herself “deep red greasy stuff” from “some theatrical supply store” (18). The narrator describes her appearance in relation to the imitation of a black man— “her breasts dark as eggplants, her face resembling Al Jolson” (18). As Söderlind argues, “[i]n a situation of alterity, becoming other is paradoxically synonymous with transcending otherness, so that losing yourself equals finding yourself” (Söderlind 55). Edith’s suggestion to “be other people” (*BL* 18) can be seen as an attempt to imitate the slave, to experience the “best feeling a man can have this century” through physical anamorphosis. As Ondaatje writes, F. becomes the spokesman for the oppressed, “the Moses of the downtrodden— from homosexuals to the F.L.Q. to the mentally ill” (Ondaatje 53). But if F. is the “representative” (53) for the losers of the world, the narrator is the great loser, the victim whose “Brain Feels Like It Has Been Whipped” (*BL* 69).

The glory of enslavement is what comes of it: servitude. To work or live in devotion or labor to another is to live in the “midst of pain” (255), but it is a gesture of humility, an abdication of the self to a controlling other. Moreover, servitude constructs yet another chain of communication between the sender and the receiver, with the slave receiving the orders (or messages) sent by the master. The narrator, in writing his history, suffers in service in ways similar to Catherine’s excessive self-flagellations (252) and her torturous sleep in the blanket of thorns (255). His book addresses anyone who might listen to him— Catherine, F., Edith, God. His written prayers are simultaneously absurd and poignant:

I Am Frightened Because Death Is Your Idea... The Bathroom Door Is Opening By Itself And I Am Shivering With So Much Fear. O God, I Believe Your Morning Is Perfect. Nothing Will Happen Incompletely... I Am A Creation In Your Morning Writing A Lot Of Words With Beginning With Capital Letters. Seven-Thirty In The Ruin Of My Prayer... We Are All Of Us Tormented With Your Glory. You Have Caused Us To Live On The Crust Of A Star... Be With Me As I Lose The Crumbs Of My Grace. (68-9)

The slave is alone but he is desperately trying to make some sort of contact, and the narrator’s prayers (and history as a whole) are reaching out to God, to F., and, most especially, to Catherine Tekakwitha. F. claims that sexual experiences lead one to “nourishing anonymity of the climax” (41), but arousal of the pan-orgasmic body allows “wind and conversation, and a beautiful pair of gloves, fingers blushing” (41). The self can be lost in its receptions, in its contact with an ineffable, or intangible, other.

This issue of contact is crucial to the novel because it establishes the context by which a slave might transform into a saint. In “The History of Them All,” the narrator explains what a saint is, and his explanation is worth citing at length:

A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did, the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that a saint dissolves the chaos even for himself, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory. He rides the drifts like an escaped ski. His course is a caress of the hill. His track is a drawing of the snow in a moment of its particular arrangement with wind and rock. Something in him so loves the world that he gives himself to the laws of gravity and chance. Far from flying with the angels, he traces with the fidelity of a seismograph needle the state of the solid bloody landscape. His house is dangerous and finite, but he is at home in the world. He can love the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart. It is good to have among us such balancing monsters of love. It makes me think that the numbers in the bag actually correspond to the numbers on the raffles we have bought so dearly, and so the prize is not an illusion. (121-22; emphases added)

The narrator's association of sainthood with a "contact with the energy of love" is fundamental to understanding the translation of the servant/slave into the saint. The saint is not disconnected from the world; instead, he is directly associated with it— with its faults, its sufferings, its miseries, its "laws of gravity and chance."

Catherine Tekakwitha, within the framework of the novel, is a saint not simply because she becomes a Christian and works miracles, but because she makes some sort of contact with God, becoming not so much a bride of Christ, but "a slave of Jesus" (245). She tortures her body with coals "just as the Iroquois did to their slaves" (245), aligning her physical sacrifice to the pain inflicted upon slaves. Her body is, after all, not her own, and her gestures of self-torture may be attempts, in Shakespeare's terms, to shuffle off her mortal coil. As she dies after lying in the blanket of thorns (literally, her death-bed), Catherine

becomes a slave for “the staring crowd” who “wanted to be remembered in [her] prayers” (263). As F. recounts, the people of the village “filed by her mat with their burdens” (263), unloading them upon her in the hope of redemption or forgiveness:

- I stepped on a beetle. Pray for me.
- I injured the waterfall with urine. Pray for me.
- I fell on my sister. Pray for me.
- I dreamed I was white. Pray for me. (263)

Catherine, in hearing these burdens, effectively becomes the spokesperson for the other “losers” of the village. Beseeching her prayers, they are essentially asking her to carry the bale (recalling the novel’s epigraph) of their existential anxieties.

Catherine’s “contact” with God, it seems, comes not from the deeply-rooted faith in God’s existence, but from spiritual emptiness.²⁶ According to F., “[s]he did not know why she prayed and fasted. These mortifications she performed in a poverty of spirit” (246). She, like the narrator, seems to believe that “if I’m empty then I can receive” (49). “Unlock me!” (48), the narrator pleads in desperation to be cured of his constipation. Catherine’s plea is more desperate: “O God, show me that the Ceremony belongs to Thee. Reveal to your servant a fissure in the Ritual. Change Thy World with the jawbone of a broken idea. O my Lord, play with me” (261).

Catherine’s plea for God to “play with” her is echoed in F.’s forequoted instruction that his history of Catherine is “not an entertainment. This is play” (246). F.’s play is an attempt to teach the narrator how to eradicate himself, to become a transmitter that might

²⁶In a variation on this theme, Cohen, in his song “Anthem,” sings “Every heart / to love will come / but like a refugee” (Cohen, “Anthem,” *The Future, Stranger Music* 374)

receive the (spiritual) transmissions of others. F., after realizing that the D.V. had learned to feed itself, confesses to his own cynicism, and to his own inability to escape the material world of facts, memories, and bodies:

(O Father, Nameless and Free of Description, lead me from the Desert of the Possible. Too long have I dealt with Events. Too long have I labored to become an Angel. I chased Miracles with a bag of Power to salt their wild Tails. I tried to dominate Insanity so I could steal its Information. I tried to program the Computers with Insanity. I tried to create Grace to prove that Grace existed. Do not punish Charles Axis. We could not see the Evidence so we stretched our Memories. Dear Father, accept this confession: we did not train ourselves to Receive because we believed there wasn't Anything to Receive and we could not endure with this Belief). (225)

F. sums up his own failure this way: "I suffer from the Virgo disease: nothing I did was pure enough. I was never sure whether I wanted disciples or partisans. I was never sure whether I wanted Parliament or a hermitage" (205). It is only before his death that F. moves towards achieving any sort of humility through suffering, but even then he wants to cling to what he has in his room at O.T. with Mary Voolnd:

— ...I think I could be happy here. I think I could acquire the desolation I coveted so fiercely in my disciple.
 — That's just it, F. Too easy.
 — *I want to stay*, Mary.
 — I'm afraid that's impossible, F. (284; emphasis added)

To "be happy" would be tantamount to dissolving the chaos, which the saint, according to the narrator's definition, does not do even for himself. What F. "wants" is irrelevant; to "lose everything" (285), the trials of the would-be saint are not chosen by the sufferer, but by the master (i.e., God).

The narrator reaches out to Catherine because he has nothing left. His loves are dead, his work is disintegrating, his body is locked from the inside. Section 51, the penultimate entry in his history, reads like a C.B. transmission: “calling you, calling you, calling you, testing 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 my poor unelectric head calling you loud and torn 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 lost in needles of pine” (172-3). His history ends with an apparent dissolution into madness as he “beseech[es] the virgin everywhere” (174), particularly in strange, imagined encounters with her in the most mundane scenarios— at the tobacconist’s shop, at the post office, and so forth (174-9). He becomes so desperate that he even accepts F.’s English-Greek dictionary as a prayer-book, enacting F.’s instruction to translate one’s self into a child by praying in a foreign language. “I did not know,” he mutters, “in my coldest terror, I did not know how much I needed” (180). Losing everything, the narrator moves towards a spiritual and physical implosion comparable to the death of a star into a nova:

The vaguest mist of pain like lemon squeezed from a distant table caused him to squint his eyes: he scraped his memory for an incident out of his past with which to mythologize the change of season, some honeymoon, or walk, or triumph, that he could let the spring renew, and his pain was finding none. His memory represented no incident, it was all one incident, and it flowed too fast, like the contents of a spittoon in recess jokes. (291)

To achieve total humility is to achieve a replete emptiness which F. associates with that second before orgasm; “Did you sense the emptiness? Did you get the freedom?” (120), he asks after the Ottawa Drive. This emptiness eventually engenders translucence. In the System Theatre, the narrator “relaxed totally,” such that the usher’s “flashlight beam went

through him” (298). He, literally, escapes his body, becoming a hologram (or a film) of himself.

That the narrator and F. are synthesized in the epilogue is crucial: they are indistinguishable from one another like “Negroes and Chinamen” (51), to re-invoke F.’s analogy. Their synthesis is the fruition of F.’s dream that the two of them might become the New Jew:

The New Jew loses his mind gracefully. He applies finance to abstraction resulting in successful messianic politics, colorful showers of meteorites and other symbolic weather. He has induced amnesia by a repetitious study of history, his very forgetfulness caressed by facts which he accepts with visible enthusiasm. He changes for a thousand years the value of stigma, causing men of all nations to pursue it as superior sexual talisman. The New Jew is the founder of Magic Canada, Magic French Quebec, and Magic America. He demonstrates that yearning brings surprises. He uses regret as a bulwark of originality... He confirms tradition through amnesia, tempting the whole world with rebirth. He dissolves history and ritual by accepting unconditionally the complete heritage... Sometimes he is Jewish but always he is American, and now and then Québécois. (203)

F. is the messianic politician (he is referred to as “ANCIENT PATRIOT / FIRST FATHER PRESIDENT” [284] by those trying to free him) whose words shape the “symbolic weather” of the text. The narrator’s research leads him to the state of “induced amnesia” that paves the way for accepting the “complete heritage,” his history born as much of “yearning” as it is of facts. Both are Québécois Jews (doubling up the ways in which they are colonial and historical victims), and the narrator’s final transformation into a film of Ray Charles represents the final synthesis, the inclusion of the black American (although the implications of invoking Ray Charles specifically are numerous, as the last section of this chapter will elucidate). This

is the changing of the “value of stigma,” in which the saints of the modern era are society’s beautiful losers.

It is, of course, the narrator and not F. who becomes the New Jew, but the narrator must lose even his own physical identity (and assume F.’s) to be the New Jew. His faces are those of others, whether they belong to F. or Ray Charles, and the narrator becomes a kind of human koan, literalizing the words of Catherine’s uncle’s prayer:

I change
I am the same
I change
I am the same. (167)

As Söderlind points out, in *Beautiful Losers* prayer “is the opposite of mastery; it is the willing transportation into another realm” (Söderlind 62). In the narrator’s final paragraph, he can hear himself “asking for everything in every sound [he makes]” (179-80). Those most desperate to be taken to another realm are “losers,” slaves seeking escape from oppression; those most committed to God and to prayer are those who need the most, and whose work never ends. The world’s slaves are its saints, linked metaphorically by the famous Christian invocation (a combination of God’s identification of his people in Genesis 1:28 with the mustard seed metaphors related in Matthew 13:31, Mark 4:31, and Luke 3:19), delivered in the novel by an unnamed seventeenth century priest:

You are a grain of mustard seed, that shall rise and grow till its branches overshadow the earth. You are few, but your work is the work of God. His smile is on you, and your children shall fill the land. (159)

Eros and Apocalypse

For many readers, *Beautiful Losers* is a grossly pornographic text, rolling around, swine-like, in the muck of sex. Sex, indeed, is everywhere in the novel, from descriptions of masturbation (the Ottawa Drive), autoeroticism (ignited by the apparently heretical reading of the story of Brébeuf and Lalement), homosexuality (throughout), and strange sexual scenarios with machines (The Danish Vibrator) and historical monsters (the bath with Hitler).

As Stan Dragland remarks:

Not all readers in the free love sixties and early seventies could stand the kinky sex in *Beautiful Losers*, and I doubt that those few among the shocked who hung around long enough to realize what the sex was doing in the novel ("Hard cock alone leads to Thee") would have been reassured. (Dragland 13)

According to Linda Hutcheon, early reviewers of the novel in Canada "sat on the fence: the content was considered distasteful and sordid, while the form was deemed a compelling aesthetic triumph" (Hutcheon, "Leonard Cohen," *CWTW Fiction Series* 30). Critical response to Cohen's use of sex in his work is generally circumspect, tying the novel's sex to other issues: Sylvia Söderlind, for example, associates the novel's "use of pornography" to an attempt to accentuate "the sado-masochistic relationship, where the submission to the master is an act of will" (Söderlind 43); Sandra Djwa, similarly, associates it with the tradition of Black Romanticism which explores "the darker side of human consciousness" (Djwa

104).²⁷ More concretely, however, the novel uses the language of sex to play out its association of the physical and the spiritual. Sex in *Beautiful Losers* is associated with the issues of slavery and mastership (remembering that Edith and F. are ordered by Hitler to “kiss the whip” [BL 229]) and personal expression (remembering the erotic stimulation that F.’s reading of Brebeuf brings). Most explicitly, however, sex is, as Dragland notes above, associated with apocalypse, with the induction and anointment of the messianic figures in the text.

The critical reaction to the novel’s use of sex is, oddly, discriminatory in this sense: the novel finds sex not simply in dirty words or genital service, but in the everyday, in the (w)hole(s) of the human physical enterprise. This is F.’s exegesis of the story of the Telephone Dance:

All parts of the body are erotogenic. Assholes can be trained with whips and kisses, that’s elementary. Pricks and cunts have become monstrous! Down with genital imperialism! All flesh can come! Don’t you see what we have lost? Why have we abdicated so much pleasure to that which lives in our underwear? Orgasms in the shoulder! Knees going off like firecrackers! Hair in motion! (40-1)

Indeed, almost everything within the novel has some sort of sexual connotation, from the way the narrator watches F.’s “tiny brush which he wielded so happily” (12) in painting the Akropolis, to F.’s “needle going so madly” (221) in his visionary attempt to stitch the bodies of the world back together again. The narrator “fell in love with a religious picture” (3) of

²⁷Among those authors that Djwa identifies as Black Romantics are William Burroughs, Henry Miller, Baudelaire, Sartre, and Jean G  net (Djwa 95). The connection between Cohen and Baudelaire is most explicit in the title of his third volume of poetry, *Flowers for Hitler*, echoing Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs Du Mal*.

Catherine Tekakwitha, and through this picture he seems to want her to make physical contact, preferably with him, but not necessarily: "Two birds in the left foreground would be delighted if you tickled their white throats" (3). The motif of tickling emerges later in F.'s letter as the radio is being mysteriously tickled (286).

"Listen," F. tells the narrator, "the elevators, the buzzers, the fan: the world is waking up in the heads of a few million" (35): everything it seems, even radios, can stimulate and be stimulated. If "all flesh can come," the physical spasms induced by tickling may be tantamount to orgasm, whether or not the experiencer is human or mechanical. The bleeding of Catherine's back in F.'s story of her self-flagellation suggests that even the Iroquois virgin needs physical stimulation: "Harder! Harder! What's the matter with you, Marie Thérèse?" (252). Edith, F. tells the narrator, "had very tight ears, nearly virgin" (35), in a truly bizarre fetishizing of ionic symbology. Even the telephones are figured in erotic tones. "They hung there like carved masks, black, gleaming, smooth as the toes of kissed stone R.C. saints" (37), foreshadowing the kissing of Catherine Tekakwitha's feet by Jacques de Lamberville (109-11) and F.'s own realization that he's not fit to suck Edith's toes. "Wiggle," the feet of both Catherine and Edith say (111, 231), uniting the two women as separate incarnations of Isis.

Within the scope of the novel, the apocalypse is associated with the lifting of a woman's veil, and the discovery of what lies beneath. "Jealousy," F. says to the narrator, "is the education you have chosen" (41), and his education is driven by his claim over "that most ignoble form of real estate, the possessive occupation and tyranny over two square inches of human flesh, the wife's cunt" (16). The narrator's education, or moment of enlightenment,

must be completed not with knowledge, but an apocalypse which will render meaning to “history,” or that which has transpired in the novel. The narrator notes that

[t]he word apocalyptic has interesting origins. It comes from the Greek *apokalupsis*, which means revelation. This derives from the Greek *apokaluptein*, meaning uncover or disclose. *Apo* is a Greek prefix meaning from, derived from. *Kaluptein* means to cover. This is cognate with *kalube* which is cabin, and *kalumma* which means woman’s veil. Therefore apocalyptic describes that which is revealed when the woman’s veil is lifted. What have I done, what have I not done, to lift your veil, to get under your blanket, Kateri Tekakwitha? (125-6)

Suddenly, the narrator’s desire to learn “what goes on under that rosy blanket” (5) of Catherine Tekakwitha’s makes sense, even if the narrator is not aware of it, or does not see the connection between the erotic and the apocalyptic. His perversions, however, are leading him there: “Undress, undress, I want to cry out, let’s look at each other. Let’s have education!” (17).

In the novel this association is “joked through” (Dragland 14) by means of verbal play, with the moment of spiritual disclosure achieved by the de-clothing women (most of whom are associated with Isis). This is, of course, mentioned explicitly in relation to Catherine Tekakwitha in the first paragraph of the novel, but it is alluded to in a number of other ways. When F. wonders who “will test the sweet smell in the tomb of Marilyn Monroe” (BL 259), he echoes one of the narrator’s questions at the beginning of his history: “Lady Marilyn just died a few years ago. May I say that some old scholar four hundred years from now, maybe of my own blood, will come after her in the way I come after you?” (4). The allusions to Marilyn Monroe are not coincidental; perhaps her most famous film moment is the scene from

The Seven-Year Itch in which, while walking over a subway grate with Tom Ewell, a gust of wind lifts her skirt, with Monroe trying to keep the frontsection of her panties from being exposed to the world (and perhaps, like Catherine, she is a saint for resisting the accidental lifting of her veil). F., in hospital, revels in the lifting of Mary Voolnd's sexual veil:

Like angels on the head of a pin, my fingers dance on the rubber button [of her garter]. Which way shall I leap? Toward the outside thigh, hard, warm as the shell of a beached tropical turtle? Or toward the swampy mess in the middle? Or fasten like a bat on the huge soft overhanging boulder of her right buttock? It is very humid up her white starched skirt. It is like one of those airplane hangars wherein clouds form and it actually rains indoors. Mary is bouncing her bum like a piggy bank which is withholding a gold coin. The inundations are about to begin. I choose the middle. (196)

The novel even describes how a female friend of F.'s would do vaginal impressions of "Eastern sages" (like Kahlil Gibran, perhaps) (157). There is still more play in one of the narrator's prayers with capitals: "May I Suck Cunts For My Gift? May I Love The Forms of Girls Instead Of Licking Labels?" (114). The narrator's questions pose a kind of punning play with the word "labia(e)," and although he desires "real" ones, he is left with only envelope labels (again reinforcing the extent to which the narrator is left only with books and papers).²⁸ This is one of many examples of the novel's cunning linguistic play that make *Beautiful Losers* as "lighthearted as Eastern sages whose jokes may be doors to wisdom" (Dragland 19).

²⁸Cohen returns to this motif of cunnilingus in his "Light as the Breeze": "So I knelt there at the delta / at the alpha and the omega / at the cradle of the river / and the seas / And like a blessing come from heaven, / for something like a second, / I was healed, and my heart / was at ease" (Cohen, "Light as the Breeze," *The Future; Stranger Music* 375).

The significance of lifting the veil stands on two pillars. The first is F.'s instruction for the narrator to "[f]uck a saint" (*BL* 15). The second is the identification of Isis. F.'s notion of mating with a saint is not in itself apocalyptic, but it becomes so when it is discovered that Edith and Catherine Tekakwitha are manifestations of Isis, the goddess whose veil no mortal has lifted.

F.'s instruction to fuck a saint is his remedy to the narrator's inability to imagine the hypothetical. After studying how the sun illuminates the akropolis rose, F. throws a ranting koan at the narrator:

do you know how to see the akropolis like the Indians who never even had one? Fuck a saint, that's how, find a little saint and fuck her over and over in some pleasant part of heaven, get her right into her plastic altar, dwell in her silver medal, fuck her until she tinkles like a souvenir music box, until the memorial lights go on for free, find a saintly little fucker like Teresa or Catherine Tekakwitha or Lesbia, whom prick never knew but who lay around all day in a chocolate poem, find one of the quaint impossible cunts and fuck her for your life, coming all over the sky... help! help! it's my time, my second, my splinter of the shit glory tree, police, firemen! look at the traffic of happiness and crime, it's burning in the crayon like the akropolis rose! (15)

F.'s suggestion is, of course, ridiculous, as the narrator realizes: "How do I get close to a dead saint? The pursuit seems like such nonsense" (122-3). Although the narrator claims to be in love with Catherine, his attraction to her is not physical: "Catherine Tekakwitha is not pretty!... I don't want to fuck a pig. Can I yearn after pimples and pock marks?" (28).

According to Dennis Lee, if Catherine Tekakwitha

stopped repressing her body's sacred knowledge; if she joined the Andacwandet; if she became Kateri again— then the fall she initiated would be undone. And with the unclenching of her virginity, Canadian history would also be dissolved. (Lee 68)

More accurately, to go down on a saint is to become a saint, to “achieve a remote human possibility” that “has something to do with the energy of love” (*BL* 121) by loving “the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart” (122). Lee forgets that F. does not specify *which* saint the narrator should lay; Teresa or Lesbia, for example, are mentioned as possibilities, too. It is the *gestalt* or general feeling of accomplishing something simultaneously beautiful and profane that F. prescribes. Put another way, fucking a saint is a way out of what F. calls “the Desert of the Possible” (225).

In “The History of Them All,” there is no explicit reference to Isis, although it is foreshadowed. Isis is not invoked until F. asks Edith who she is after the encounters with the Danish Vibrator and Hitler. The text prints her answer in Greek, but R. E. Witt translates her answer as “I am Isis, born of all things, both what is and what shall be, and no mortal has ever lifted by robe” (Witt cited in Söderlind 66). Without knowing it, both F. and the narrator (and Hitler) lift the veil of Isis because of their involvement with Edith. Dennis Lee claims that Isis “cherished men in their fragmented lives and drew them to redemptive union with herself” (Lee 70). Through Edith, Isis functions as a kind of forgiving, unifying figure, almost Christ-like. She is willing, it seems, to offer redemption even to Hitler, as she holds him to breast thinking he was an A— (*BL* 230-1) as she did for the man who wept into her navel at the beach (45) and, as the narrator imagines in a “daydream,” one of her rapists (77). To lift her veil is, ultimately, to ordain the lifter as immortal, as it seems to do for F. and the narrator (with the D.V. identifiable as either God, or perhaps Osiris). Söderlind argues that Edith, as Isis, “dies as she must in becoming pure presence— Is-is— as her speech becomes inscribed

as pure signifier” (Söderlind 66). The name of Isis has another possible reading. Her name is, in effect, a equivalent conjugation of God’s response to Moses’ request for God’s name: “I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3:14). This is not to argue that Isis equals the God of the Old Testament, but that they may be associated with one another in the novel, as the D.V.’s performances on Edith suggest the mating of God and Isis. She, according to F., “quite happily... became nothing but a buffet of juice, flesh, excrement, muscle to serve its appetite” (*BL* 226).

There is, however, a kind of schizophrenia to the novel’s treatment of the Isis myth. If both Edith and Catherine Tekakwitha are figurations of Isis (joined by their “Wiggle” responses to men worshiping their feet [111, 231]), their vastly divergent attitudes towards sex may appear incongruous. Edith’s embrace of almost all men suggests that she is opening up the gates of “heaven” by redeeming even Hitler. Catherine, on the other hand, remains a virgin, and her piety is by no means inclusive to those who do not become believers in a Christian god. Catherine’s affiliation with the Jesuits is antithetical to Edith’s affiliation with the beautiful losers of the novel; the Jesuits, as Catherine’s uncle notes, “guard the entrance [to heaven] so jealously” (143).

It is this contradiction which gives rise to Lee’s interpretation of Catherine Tekakwitha as the “central figure” in the fall of Canada (Lee 64). Her rejection of sex initiates “the bifurcation of planet” (65) into the sacred and the profane, until an apocalypse destroys history and brings the world back into harmony with itself. Lee’s argument, however, places too great an emphasis on Canada’s history, neglecting the ramifications of

invoking American film stars, French Jesuits, Hitler, and even Isis herself. Lee's reading, in essence, simplifies the text to a reconciliation of dichotomies. Rather, a reading of the novel has to consider the extent to which time actually is important: the apocalypse is to be enacted not in the seventeenth-century, but in the twentieth, in the age when the world is full of "second chancers" (*BL* 303). Ultimately, hysteria (a word also associated with the female body, as in "hysterectomy") overcomes history by the invocation of myth and metaphysical translations so that, in T. S. Eliot's words, there might be "Time for you and time for me, / And time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions" (Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" 14, ll. 31-33).

Söderlind suggests that the narrator's "story is the New Testament, the history of 'Them All' and particularly of the master, written by his disciple" (Söderlind 49).²⁹ Latent within her assessment is a strange but nonetheless valid typological suggestion, in one of Frye's senses of the term:

Typology is a figure of speech that moves in time: the type exists in the past and the antitype in the present, or the type exists in the present and the antitype in the future. What typology really is as a mode of thought, what it both assumes and leads to, is a theory of history, or more accurately of historical process: an assumption that there is some meaning and point to history, and that sooner or later some event or events will occur which will indicate what has happened previously. (Frye, *The Great Code* 80-1)

The novel is concerned not just with re-enacting the fall and the second coming, but with finding "some meaning or point to history." Perhaps that "point" is that even Hitler—the

²⁹Söderlind notes that "[t]he many allusions to 'Old style' and its implicit counterpart, the New style; the highly prophetic nature of many parts of the narrative; the psalms or prayers and the fact that F.'s section is written in a room in Occupational Therapy—referred to as O.T.—and before 'The History of Them All' indicate a parodic inversion of the Bible" (Söderlind 48-9).

Satanic “stink of his sulphurous flatulence” (*BL* 231) lingering behind him— may be held to the redemptive bosom of Isis at the moment of apocalypse.

F. is at once the narrator’s “daimon” (in Fletcher’s sense of the term)³⁰ and the “type” to the narrator’s “antitype.” F. describes himself as “the Moses of our little exodus” (211), but he also resembles John the Baptist, having been “baptized” with the soap of six million Jews (230), and Oscotarch the Head-Piercer (from Mohawk mythology) who removes the brains of those venturing into death; “[w]as I *your* Oscotarch?,” F. asks, adding “I pray that I was” (232). Perhaps the narrator is the antitypal Joshua,³¹ the figure who will complete the exodus of slaves; perhaps he is an archetypal Christ figure, leading the flock out of history into the continuum where “time itself [is] the Magic Length of God” (199); or, he may be an unwitting quest hero, who must undertake a journey into death like that described by Catherine Tekakwitha’s uncle (144-5). The novel’s typological dimensions correspond with the formal fusions envisioned by F. at the System Theatre: rather than “quadrating”³² either F. or the narrator against one mythological analogy (e.g. Moses/Joshua), the novel likens both characters to a myriad of literary, mythological and pop-cultural types. F., for example, is at once Dr. Frankenstein, John the Baptist, Oscotarch, and Moses, speaking the ideas of

³⁰Fletcher argues that “[t]he allegorical hero is not so much a real person as he is a generator of personalities, which are all partial aspects of himself” (Fletcher 35). According to Fletcher, “[b]y analyzing the projections, we determine what is going on in the mind of the highly imaginative projector” (35). See also the remainder of Fletcher discussion of “daemonic imagery” in *Allegory: The Theory of A Symbolic Mode*, 25-69.

³¹It is worth noting that the narrator is usually referred to as “I” and that in Greek and Latin, the letters “I” and “J” are represented with the letter “I.”

³²J. A. Burrow describes “quadratic signification” as the process by which “A stands to B on the literal level as X stands to Y in the signification” (Burrow 205).

Norman O. Brown and Allen Ginsberg in the aphoristic tongue of Oscar Wilde or William Blake; he is even part Breavman from *The Favourite Game*, with both F. and Breavman altering a woman (Edith and Tamara) “so completely that she becomes, in effect, his own creation” (Cohen, *The Favourite Game* 90).³³ *Beautiful Losers* ties its characters to a number of different types so that the characters themselves seem to represent a coming together of history, mythology, and culture, as if to further reinforce the typological/apocalyptic sensibility of the novel. All (or as many as the novel can incorporate) of the “types” that may be exegetically useful are thrown into the mix, making a kind of second coming in the dénouement of history, whether that history is actual, mythological, literary, or “literal” (i.e., of the text).

In *Postmodern Canadian Fiction and the Rhetoric of Authority*, Glenn Deer examines the rhetorical stances of the three narrators of *Beautiful Losers*— the narrator, F., and the third person narrator who takes over Book Three. He argues that

[t]he narrator of book 3 is assigned the greatest authorial power because of his omniscient perspective. This final narrator seems to me to be allied with the implied author who sympathizes with or sanctions the utterance of the other preceding narrators— the two others are simply verbal masks, or different versions of the implied author’s voice, for all the narrator’s display the poetic gifts, penchant for puns, and linguistic precocity of the avant-garde writer. (Deer 49)

Indeed, the third person narrator of book three is omniscient, but to reduce the previous narrators to little more than personae is to neglect a crucial dimension of the novel. The

³³Indeed, one might argue that F. is basically Breavman reincarnate. See, for example, Linda Hutcheon’s assessment that on the “self-conscious structural level... *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers* come together” (Hutcheon, “Leonard Cohen,” *CWTW Fiction Series* 37).

intercession of the third person narrator is yet another example of a *deus ex machina* entering the text. Here, like the radio's intercession at the close of F.'s letter, it serves to explain what happens in the *dénouement*, perhaps because F. is dead, and the narrator has more or less "regressed" to a state where memory and history (and one might say sensibility) do not exist. But this narrator is not impartial: he is given to using personal pronouns — best exemplified in his words "I do not intend to describe" (BL 304) — and he gives over the last two paragraphs of the text to the Jesuits and to an unidentified voice which seems to speak for the narrator. In one sense, the third person is necessary to round out the text, to tell the end of the story so that its resolution does not seem simply like delusionary madness. In another sense, the partiality of this narrator accentuates the inevitability subjectivity of any narrator. More accurately, however, this is the *third* voice of the text, describing events with particularity of a journalist showing, in accordance with F.'s policy, everything as it happens; perhaps this is the supposedly impartial radio "assuming the form of print" (285) as if to translate the conclusion into a news broadcast. It is worth remembering F.'s question to the narrator about who will pierce his head as he has done to the narrator:

But who could perform the operation on Oscotarch? When you understand this question, you will understand my ordeal. I had to apply to public wards in pursuit of my own operation. (232)

Who, after all, can take over for the narrator once his head has been pierced, his memory representing "no incident" (291), and F., "Mr. History" (206), dead? Instead, the narrator of Book Three is really a conflation of voices, as Deer notes in a more precise assessment

(Deer 49). The apocalypse must be recounted by *a* person who is at once no person and all persons, hedging its position on the razor blade of narrative ambiguity.

The epilogic voice describes the scene thoroughly, but its meditations on time and place accentuate the apocalyptic nature of the dénouement; the simile that “spring is like an autopsy” (*BL* 289) effectively combines the motifs of death and rebirth implicit within the Christian sense of apocalypse. At the centre of this third person narrative is the narrator of Book One, as if the novel is concluding itself *à la Citizen Kane*: the story *must* have an ending, and it is still Welles (as director) controlling the camera. The narrator of Book One is given an opportunity to tell a story— to a young boy he has assumedly molested previously— but his “exciting story” is a table of Iroquois, English and French translations of Iroquois tribes (294). After realizing that the boy has reported him to the police, the narrator hitchhikes his way to Montreal. He is picked up by a young blonde woman “used to fast cars” (295).

What follows in the car— the narrator’s performance of oral sex on the woman, re-literalizing the “auto-erotic” enterprise following the D.V. episode— appears to be one of the final steps in the ordination of the narrator. She tries to tease him into guessing her identity, but he does not care; when she identifies herself (in Greek) as Isis, his response is that of a man who has obviously forgotten F.’s letter: “Foreigners bore me, Miss” (296). Invited to go beneath the veil of Isis, the narrator has little more to say than “[y]ou ought to use one of those anti-sweat wood latter seats. Then you wouldn’t be sitting in your juices in a draft all day” (296). When she drops him in downtown Montreal, he wishes her “a magnificent crash”

(297), perhaps alluding to Jayne Mansfield's famous car accident (and signaling the pending crash of the novel). The scene also recalls F.'s vision in which he "seemed to wake up in the middle of a car accident, limbs strewn everywhere, detached voices screaming for comfort, severed fingers pointing homeward" (221). Isis, it seems, is being drawn into the car-wreck of humanity, in which she may, like F., become one of those souls "stitching themselves into the ruined heap, painfully extracting themselves" (221). The narrator, however, has performed an act of salvation, renewing the "ceremony which can exhausted as easily as it can be renewed" (296). That ceremony—the human experience, the sexual (re)marriage of the narrator and Edith/Isis, the lifting of the veil, all apparently synthesized—is renewed in a symbolic gesture which places the narrator in servitude to the woman/goddess. F., the figure who has "gone against God" (209), sets the stage for understanding the ordination; as he claims, "[w]e who cannot dwell in the Clear Light, we must deal with symbols" (234). The narrator, however, *becomes* "the point of Clear Light" (305), becoming magic rather than just the musician in the apocalyptic finale.

Ray Charles and the Hiro-Koué

In *Savage Fields*, Dennis Lee argues that “Cohen became genuinely zonked as he was trying to finish *Beautiful Losers*, capable of making blunders he would never have made earlier in the book” (Lee 94). He adds that “[i]t is finally a waste of time to read [the novel] right through, clucking in disapproval at the final seventy pages” (95), finding it “disconcerting” the novel has “a happy ending” (90). To put it in the most polite possible terms, Lee seems, in the words of a colleague, to suffer from “cranial-glutimal ensconcement.”³⁴ Stan Dragland notes that “Lee’s *Savage Fields* translates [the novel] into terms that fit an argument” (Dragland 21), and perhaps this is Lee’s problem with *Beautiful Losers*— the novel does not go where he wants it to go, thus its ending must be rejected. Lee’s dismissal of the novel’s conclusion not only exemplifies poor scholarship, it neglects the extent to which the novel’s finale— the narrator’s transformation — is foreshadowed throughout the text. Indeed, this metamorphosis “into— into a film of Ray Charles” (*BL* 305) is the culmination of the novel’s verbal play, tying together all of the formal and thematic strands that are dangled throughout the first two books.

³⁴These words are borrowed by kind permission from Glen R. Gill, a doctoral candidate at McMaster University.

The novel's critics, however, make very little of this metamorphosis. Desmond Pacey and Dennis Lee make no mention of it; Michael Ondaatje briefly associates Ray Charles with Marilyn Monroe and Alexander Trocchi as "the beautiful losers, the saints of our times" (Ondaatje 53) based on his status as a black singer who makes "beautiful harsh sounds" (55); D. G. Jones interprets "the image of Ray Charles as the authentic man, the New Testament figure who relives the parable of the loaves and the fishes" (Jones 81); and Douglas Barbour chooses to emphasize the filmic aspect of this apotheosis, to the point of neglecting the rationale for invoking the image of Ray Charles (Barbour 137). Linda Hutcheon notes that the novel anticipates the singer's appearance at the Montreal riot in F.'s description of watching the projection beam at the System Theatre: "like crystals *rioting* in a test-tube suspension, the unstable *ray* changed and changed in its *black* confinement" (BL 281; Hutcheon, "Leonard Cohen," *CWTW Fiction Series* 50; emphases added). Hutcheon also links the metamorphosis to Bakhtin's theories on the carnivalesque:

According to Bakhtin, the "unfinished" and "open" body is not even separated from the world around it by clearly defined boundaries; in fact, it blends with it and becomes "cosmic." Isis and the Ray Charles movie in the sky come to mind here, for obvious reasons. The emphasis on the carnivalesque is on process, on coming into being— hence the "incompleteness" that characterizes the grotesque. (40)

But the invocation of Ray Charles brings the novel full-circle, drawing readers back to his "singing" of the line from "Ol' Man River" in the epigraph: "Somebody said lift that bale."

Sylvia Söderlind, however, provides the most cogent analysis of the novel's play with the figure (and name) of Ray Charles:

Ol' Man River becomes the old man in the movie theatre who becomes the projector, then the *ray* of its light beam; he not only makes but becomes the connection between the creator— projector— and the creation — the image on the screen — which is magic. The vision in the sky is linked to *Charles Axis*, the body builder and 'creator' of F.; the ray finally becomes a movie of Ray Charles, bent over piano keys that are likened to fishes. This particular metamorphosis seems in fact to have been foreshadowed in the Akropolis incident when, by squinting his eyes, 'I' sees the replica 'like a fantastic jewel... sending out rays in all directions' [BL 13]. Ray and Charles are the two axes of the text; when they cross in the end 'I' attains the 'x-ray vision' [148] in order to see the 'Clear Light.' (Söderlind 57)

She surmises that "[i]t is as if *ray* has been on its/his way all this time from its/his birth in the metamorphic coming together of the sacred and the profane in the akropolis rose" (57-8).

As sharp as Söderlind's analysis is, it reveals only slightly more than the tip of the iceberg, though this assessment is predicated on the complexity of the novel's verbal play, not a failure in Söderlind's scholarship.

Söderlind describes Ray and Charles as "the two axes of the text," but her assessment needs slight refinement. "Ray Charles" and "Charles Axis" are essentially synonymous with one another because of the correlation between the words "ray" and "axis": both are lines that pass through (or transcend) something, as a ray of sunlight passes through the sky, or an axis passes through the earth pole to pole. The narrator's transformation into a film of Ray Charles and F.'s reinvention of himself into the image of Charles Axis are, essentially, self-translations, and both characters seem to be following the same "axis," reassembling themselves as if each man had translated a (metaphysically received?) phrase like *rei carol* (Carol, as in Carolingian, emphasized by the narrator's forementioned syllogism about being the King of France) in two different ways.

F. follows his translation to its depths: reforming and reshaping bodies, obsessed with the Frankensteinian power of (re)creation. His “lust for secular gray magic” (*BL* 207) — for power, sex, and beauty— leads him to follow the axis to Charles Axis, the bullying “nuisance on the beach” (93) who transforms weaklings into strongmen. F.’s translation, however, does not stop there: he follows it to its most logical conclusion— to going three in a tub with Edith and Hitler, the leader of the major *Axis* power of World War II. (It is also worth noting that F.’s speeches are not just aphoristic, but *axiomatic*, as if his nuggets of wisdom are self-evident truths.) F. becomes, as Norman Ravvin puts it, a “Canadian *übermensch*” (Ravvin 25), so in recognizing the failure of his own system, it is only appropriate that his “God is Alive” speech is a contrite rewriting of Nietzsche. As Edith tells him, “[y]ou’ve meddled, F. You’ve gone against God” (*BL* 209). Even in the System Theatre, the axis of the film (the beam that carries the image from the projector to the screen) is described in serpentine imagery that recalls the fall of Eden:

Within severe limits, like smoke in a chimney, the dusty projection beam above our hair twisted and changed... [It was] like a ghostly white snake sealed in an immense telescope. It was a serpent swimming home, lazily occupying the entire sewer which irrigated the auditorium. It was the first snake in the shadows of the original garden, the albino orchard snake offering our female memory the taste of— everything?... I studied the snake and he made me greedy for everything. (281-2)

Hitler’s reminder to F. after the bath not to “forget to inform the *Police Gazette*” (230) suggests that F. becomes a (de)creator on par (or at least complicit) with Hitler, each of them “swimming home” on a descending serpentine axis; indeed, one might suggest that “F.” stands not for a name, but for what he is— Fallen.

When F. gives the narrator the English-Greek phrase book— and delivers his instruction that “[p]rayer is translation” (71) — he makes a bizarre statement that seems typical of F.’s crashing together of systems and cultures, but which foreshadows the narrator’s transformation:

— Ah, he said blithely sniffing the night, ah, it’s soon Christmas in India. Families gathered round the Christmas curry, *carols* before the blazing Yule corpse, children waiting for the bells of Bhagavad-Santa. (71; emphasis added)

The play with “carols”— while noting also the play with Carol/Charles and Indians (Hindu and North American)— is important, especially considering its association with Christmas (i.e., the birth of a messiah) and that the word “Charles” derives from *carolus*, meaning “King” (and as such the word is synonymous with *rex* and *regis*). Prayer in the novel is likened to caroling, to the translation of one’s self through voice. “Study the book,” F. tells the narrator. “Comb it for prayers and guidance. It will teach you how to *breathe*” (71; emphasis added). The use of the word “breathe” is suggestive: not only will the book teach the narrator how to speak, but how to live; pulling these strands together is the musical dimension of caroling/praying, for learning “how to breathe” is a crucial exercise for the singer. One might also note the homophony between the words “carol” and the Latin *cáreō*, meaning to be without, be deprived of, or to want. The narrator is “asking for all there is” (71), wanting for everything— F., Edith, Catherine Tekakwitha, even a relief from constipation. Breathing, praying, singing, wanting, all of these things seem to come together

as if to answer the narrator's question "Is All The World A Prayer To Some Star?" (114). It is, and that star is Ray Charles.

It is worth, briefly, considering what Charles "represents" (for lack of a better word) within contemporary cultural iconography. He is at once the slave and the slave-master: a black American born in Georgia in the 1930s, he, like the nationalists of the novel, is associated with slavery by history; and yet, he rises to master his music, to become one of its contemporary popular legends; above all, however, he is a servant to his music, constantly performing songs simultaneously spiritual and secular, evidenced most plainly by titles like "Hallelujah, I Love Her So." Blues musician Big Bill Broonzy speaks of Ray Charles this way: "He's cryin', sanctified. He's mixing the blues with the spirituals. He should be singing in a church" (Broonzy cited in Szatmary 175). It is worth noting, too, how the secular and the spiritual are welded together in the man's music. "I Believe To My Soul," for example, is about being convinced of a lover's infidelity, but its title and musical delivery are rooted in the tradition of gospel music; similarly, "What'd I Say" transforms the call-and-response structure of gospel into an orgiastic, sexually-suggestive interaction of voices. Moreover, his music is generally a conflation of styles and genres, a mixture of jazz, blues, gospel, and country music. Often regarded as the father of soul music, he is revered with titles like "The High Priest" (as Van Morrison calls him in his song "In The Days Before Rock 'N' Roll") and "The Genius of Soul" (Szatmary 174). Ultimately, Ray Charles, it seems, is the only figure who can "resolve" the text: he is the singer whose existence resists the trends of history; he is the servant and the slave, singing songs of worship and desire; he is the saint and the sinner

whose devotions are hybridizations of formal styles. He is, literally, the voice of soul, especially if, as Arnold Shaw defines it, “[s]oul... is *extremely uninhibited* self-expression... It is not just feeling but conviction. Not just intensity but involvement” (Shaw cited in Szatmary 172).

“The old man,” readers are told, “commenced his remarkable *performance*” (BL 304; emphasis added); “[t]hen he enlarged the screen, degree by degree, like a documentary on the Industry” (305). By invoking a “*film* of Ray Charles,” the novel seems to invoke not only the Ray Charles of “Ol’ Man River,” but his entire career as if, in the film, the Montreal audience is watching not just the performance of one song, but a concert-feature/newsreel. Indeed, one might recall any number of Charles’ songs in relation to the text, most especially “Born to Lose”³⁵ (for obvious reasons), “Lonely Avenue” (with the narrator’s loneliness and mourning for a lost loved one emphasized by the claustrophobia of being trapped in one’s room) and even “Fool For You,” with the narrator “doin’ all his cryin’ / like he’s never cried before” as he does in the treehouse: “[m]orning after morning he rose from his mattress, frozen snot and tears in his eye-brows. Long ago, the animals fled each time he broke the air with his suffering” (BL 291-2).³⁶ This is not to suggest that these songs are “intertexts” *per se*: rather, they are staples of a blues/soul ethos to which the narrator gives himself; if Ray

³⁵It is worth noting that Cohen and Elton John perform “Born to Lose” together on John’s 1993 album *Duets*.

³⁶Ira Nadel claims that while Cohen was writing *Beautiful Losers*, he worked “up to twelve or fifteen hours a day, aided by amphetamines and a Ray Charles record, *The Genius Sings the Blues*” (Nadel, *Various Positions* 128). This may be true, but it may also be another gesture of mythologizing the writing process.

Charles' songs come to a reader's mind so often, perhaps because his songs give voice to many of the narrator's sentiments.

Early in the novel, the narrator explains the etymology of the French naming of the Iroquois:

They called themselves Hodenosaunee, which means people of the Long House. They developed a new dimension to conversation. They ended every speech with the word *hiro*, which means: like I said. Thus each man took full responsibility for intruding into the inarticulate murmur of the spheres. To *hiro* they added the word *koué*, a cry of joy or distress, according to whether it was sung or howled. Thus they essayed to pierce the mysterious curtain which hangs between all talking men: at the end of every utterance a man stepped back, so to speak, and attempted to interpret his words to the listener, attempted to subvert the beguiling intellect with the noise of true emotion. (9)

Some implications of this passage are relatively clear: the narrator, in his transformation, literalizes F.'s prophesy of him bringing "pain into heaven" (202) through the blues-inflected ethos of Ray Charles' gospel. The notion of "subvert[ing] the beguiling intellect with the noise of true emotion" represents the injection of "soul" into voice, providing the spiritual or emotional supplement (in Derridean terms)³⁷ to the text, as Ray Charles does in his music; and, within the context of the *epos* genre, Ray Charles and the Iroquois attempt to penetrate the "mysterious curtain" that hangs between the speaker and the listener, the musician and his audience. "The Great Pretender" is F.'s song; it is "an obvious song under the circumstances, but not inappropriate" (12). The narrator, however, is supposed to be more than a pretender— not a magician, but magic— so his song must be one that is "authentic," one that

³⁷See Stephen Scobie's notes on textual supplementation in Cohen's *Death of a Lady's Man* (Scobie, "The Doubled Text" 63-70).

expresses not only one's thoughts, but one's feelings "of joy or distress, according to whether it was sung or howled." The epigraph of the novel specifies that Charles is "*singing* 'Ol' Man River,'" as if to suggest that the novel begins with singing and moves its way backwards in time to figure how the novel arrived at that moment. In *The Favourite Game*, Breavman warns Pat Boone to "be more desperate, try and sound more agonized or we'll have to get a Negro to replace you" (Cohen, *The Favourite Game* 97). As Linda Hutcheon notes, in *Beautiful Losers*, he is replaced by Ray Charles (Hutcheon, "Leonard Cohen" *CWTW Fiction Series* 37).

More fascinating, however, is the narrator's translation of *hiro* as "like I said" which responds to Charles' most famous song, "What'd I Say?" In one sense, the narrator's translation of *hiro-koué* suggests a metaleptic echo in John Hollander's sense of the term,³⁸ but it also suggests the power of translation to find connections between all things, even those which, on the surface, appear to be totally unconnectable, in this case Ray Charles and the Iroquois. "Catherine Tekakwitha," the narrator pleads, "speak to me in *Hiro-Koué*" (BL 9), and in the novel's conclusion, when the narrator "*greedily* reassembled himself" (305; emphasis added), one senses that the greediness of the narrator's translation is not in assuming "the best feeling a man can have this century" (150), but in finding a way to communicate with Catherine; she may speak in *hiro-koué*, and he may speak in "What'd I Say," each of them specific modes of communicating one's joys and sufferings. This is the

³⁸According to Hollander, "poems seem to echo prior ones for the personal aural benefit of the poet, and of whichever poetic followers can overhear the reverberations. Poets also seem to echo earlier voices with full or suppressed consciousness that, and of how, they are doing so, by accident or by plan, but with the same shaping spirit that gives form to tropes of thought and feeling" (Hollander ix).

realization of the narrator's desire for "x-ray vision" (148; emphasis added), as the vision (film) of Ray Charles allows the narrator to transcend, to cross over the barrier that separates them, the chasm of time and language.³⁹

The novel's epigraph and its epilogue pull together all of the novel's thematic threads. With Ray Charles singing "Somebody said lift that bale," the theme of slavery is invoked, which the novel translates into a kind of servitude that defines both the saint and the slave. History and the story-teller are intertwined as the story-teller, delivering a song premised on historical happening (slavery in the American south, from the musical *Showboat*), foregrounds his own role as the speaker for the masses, the radio for a people's pains. In translating history, the narrator/Ray Charles seems to bring about its (apocalyptic) end (and beginning). On the page, the word "bale" may also be read as the word "veil" if one recalls, as Söderlind does, that in Greek the letter "B" is pronounced as a "V"; "thus, carried into the language of the scripture, the words 'bale' and 'veil' would be homonymous" (Söderlind 64). This is the unification, through translationary techniques, of the secular and the spiritual, a (second) coming together of sorts. The section ends with "a New Jew, laboring on the lever of the broken Strength Test" crying "Hey. Somebody's making it!" (BL 306). The words "making it" suggest not only success and transcendence, but also sexual conquest for a vague

³⁹One might also consider the extent to which the narrator's transformation is a reinvention of the self into a fluid symbol, especially considering the novel's play with floods and sexual fluids. As Lisa Ruddick argues, "[t]hroughout the century there recurs a symbolism that pictures the human mind as a solid edifice in the midst of a fluid world. The perceived universe, it is suggested, is so vast and protean, so difficult for the intellect to master, that it is like a perplexed fluid circulating about us. If we were to spend our lives passively imbibing perceptions from the tides of the world, we would 'drown' --- our minds would crack apart under the influx of teeming and confused impressions" (Ruddick 335). Indeed, one might argue that F. is as much a student of William James as he is of Norman O. Brown.

“somebody,” because, indeed, the faceless, nameless slave is telling the Montreal audience not only to lift that bale, but to lift that veil. This, it seems, is the novel’s “Grand Chorus,” the apical (and apocalyptic) moment of translation, as if in re-enactment⁴⁰ of John Dryden’s Grand Chorus to “A Song For St. Cecilia’s Day”:

*As from the power of sacred lays
The spheres began to move,
And sung the great Creator’s praise
To all the blessed above;
So, when the last and dreadful hour
This crumbling pageant shall devour
The TRUMPET shall be heard on high,
The dead shall live, the living die,
And MUSIC shall untune the sky.* (Dryden 108, ll. 55-63)

But rather than singing the great Creator’s praise, the narrator sings to the people, to those watching the voice of soul perform:

The moon occupied one lens of his sunglasses, and he laid out his piano keys across a shelf of the sky, and he leaned over him as though they were truly the row of giant fishes to feed a hungry multitude. A fleet of jet planes dragged his voice over us who were holding hands. (BL 305)

The translations are compounded here: the narrator is translating to heaven metaphysically (towards the sky) and physically (into a film), while translating a message for the enslaved (“lift that bale”) into music, into a kind of choral prayer (translation) for them. More than showing things happening as F. did, the narrator suddenly *makes* things happen, bringing the Montreal crowd into the middle of the action. The audience, however, does not want to be

⁴⁰See Quilligan’s notes on the allegorical text in relation to its pretext: “the pretext is the text that the narrative comments on by re-enacting” (Quilligan 98). It is worth remembering the general qualifications given to modern allegories: “When no pretext (biblical or other) is authoritative, we see the ascendance of ironic allegories that question not only the ways to make divine authority legible in the world but the very existence of that authority” (99).

part of this action: “Thank God it’s only a movie” (306), one of the spectators says. As F. might say, “[t]hus do the starving refuse sustenance” (23).

The novel continues, however, for two more endings. “The end of this book,” readers are told, “has been rented to the Jesuits” who “demand the official beatification of Catherine Tekakwitha” (306). The novel is to be submitted as “*a revived testimonial*” (306) to the Iroquois virgin, grounding the text with a purpose, as if to provide a *raison d’être* for it by suggesting that the narrator’s translation is one of her miracles. But, in a kind of Revenge of the Narrators, an involved voice announces that “I will plead from electrical tower. I will plead from turret of plane... Alone with my radio I lift up my hands” (307). The novel’s messiah, it seems, will continue his pleas, addressing anyone who might hear him (or them), to anyone who might read the text as it approaches its own apocalypse:

Welcome to you who read me today. Welcome to you who put my heart down. Welcome to you, darling and friend, who miss me forever in your trip to the end. (307)

This voice simultaneously signals the end of the text while enticing readers to begin it again, to read it again (and more closely). The translations, this ending suggests, are ending and beginning again, asking readers, as if they were television viewers, to tune in again to the text’s “remarkable performance” (304), which is what *Beautiful Losers* is leaning towards— towards performance, expression, towards the synthesis of text and voice.

The image of the radio, so persistent throughout the novel, takes on new meaning when one reconsiders the verbal and imagistic play with rays. At least within the context of *Beautiful Losers*, the word “radio” may— especially considering the implications of the

Danish Vibrator being referred to by its initials— be cognate with *rei deo*, the rays of God (recalling, too, F.’s definition of time as “the Magic Length of God” [198]). Ray Charles, star of radio and singer of “Somebody said lift that bale,” may be one of the *rei deo* which, it seems, are always in translation.

Conclusion

Graham Greene, in an essay on Henry James, observes:

It is possible for an author's friends to know him too well. His books are hidden behind the façade of his public life, and his friends remember his conversations when they have forgotten his characters. (Greene, "Henry James: The Religious Aspect" 34)

Cohen's critics ought to keep Greene's words in mind as they examine Cohen's work.

"Knowing" Cohen "too well," his critics tend to emphasize the personality (i.e., the celebrity) as much as the writing. Eli Mandel, for example, notes how Cohen as author plays up his role for the public in his review of *Death of a Lady's Man*. Cohen's "brilliant con games," Mandel argues, are

[a]ll part of the longest continuing performance by a writer whose major task appears to be not simply deciding how long he can maintain public interest and by what new means, but defining the latest role in the long history of the deaths and resurrections of Leonard Cohen. (Mandel, "Leonard Cohen" 207)

Phyllis Webb, in her review of *The Energy of Slaves*, reacts to the public image of Cohen as it appears on the back cover of the volume, reacting to Cohen's various public self-positionings as "a pretty desperate game" (Webb 103). Even Linda Hutcheon's study of Cohen's fiction for *Canadian Writers and Their Works* recalls the Cohen persona as it manifests itself in the film *Ladies and Gentleman... Mr. Leonard Cohen*: "The Cohen in the bath writes on the tiles, 'Caveat Lector.' Ever self-aware, Cohen is obviously never devoid of the 'con'" (Hutcheon, "Leonard Cohen," *CWTW Fiction Series* 46). Stephen Scobie, in

his 1978 study of Cohen, acknowledges the “brilliance and complexity” of *Beautiful Losers*, but argues that Cohen’s songs “offer an emotional experience which is deeper, more humane, and ultimately more worthy of our attention and respect” (Scobie, *Leonard Cohen* 14). Scobie’s study serves as a reminder of how much Cohen’s works are studied in relation to his public persona(e)— as poet, singer, song-writer, and as Canadian cultural icon. In this sense, Cohen is the same position as authors like Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Jack Kerouac, Robert Frost, and even Graham Greene— they are all, essentially, literary celebrities known as much for their public image as for their works. The critical tendency is often to interrogate texts based on how the authors are “known,” or, more specifically for Cohen, how they figure or present themselves to their audience.

Cohen’s “writing on the wall” in *Ladies and Gentlemen..., Mr. Leonard Cohen* is judicious. Both the author and the texts are tricksters, alternately koaning and conning readers such that they might react like the narrator of *Beautiful Losers* does to F.: “I’m not going to take your cowardly guru shit” (BL 31). In Cohen’s works, the Cohen persona is inescapable: in *The Favourite Game*, Breavman is credited with writing poems that Cohen published in *The Spice-Box of Earth* under his own name; *Flowers for Hitler* attempts to transform the Cohen persona from that of the “golden-boy poet” to the “front-line writer,” as proclaimed on the back cover of the volume; and, most especially in the songs, Cohen’s audience is posed with the apparently dualized positions of the poet who sings and the singer who writes poetry. These “various positions” are, to some extent, part of the “murderously

ambiguous seduction/repulsion pattern” which Eli Mandel identifies in Cohen’s work (Mandel, “Cohen’s Life As A Slave” 126).

Cohen’s transformation into a singer-songwriter can be seen as kind of vitalization of the narrator’s transformation. Returning poetry to “the people,” through the form of song, and by rendering it with a distinct human voice, is to bring it to “life,” to translate it to an audience with a kind of emotional involvement that the novel associates with the *hiro-koué*. *Hiro-koué* is a *process* of speech, rather than just the end result, in the same way that the projection beam is the process of film. Cohen’s apparent concern with *how* his words are delivered to his audiences is at one level an invocation of the *epos* genre by which words are associated with a story-teller’s voice (in, say, a Homeric sense); at another level, it is an invocation of expressive intent, reminding audiences that there is a man behind the words, even if that man’s personae are perpetually polymorphous. To sing is to translate in a devotional submission of the voice to the will of an ever-changing Other:

If it be your will
that a voice be true,
from this broken hill
I will sing to you.
From this broken hill
all your praises they shall ring
if it be your will
to let me sing. (Cohen, “If It Be Your Will,” *Various Positions*; *Stranger Music* 343)

The same voice, however, can be twisted, even demonized, as it is in songs like “First We Take Manhattan” and “The Future.” Given the novel’s association of prayer and translation, perhaps Cohen’s critics ought to consider the extent to which his subsequent works are

attempts to translate thoughts to a specific audience, from the coded anti-lyrics of *The Energy of Slaves* (coded, one might argue, like the songs of American slaves) to the more particularly devotional prayers of *The Book of Mercy*, from the poet-critic dialogue of *Death of a Lady's Man* to the singer-audience dialogue of Cohen's songs. As if in reversal of the Barthesian "death of the author," Cohen's career suggests that the author, like God, is Alive, even if "a singer must die for the lie in his voice" (Cohen, "A Singer Must Die," *New Skin For The Old Ceremony*; *Stranger Music* 208). Thus the form and the formulist are intertwined, engendering the problematic questions about the speaking/singing act, verbal coding, and authorship, such that distinguishing between Cohen and *koan* becomes more or less impossible.

Whether or not that voice is Cohen's *per se* is less relevant to an appreciation of *Beautiful Losers*, because voices are ascribed not to Cohen but to his characters, his novel's intermediary authors. The authorial voices, it seems, are simultaneously trying to draw readers into the novel's fictional realm, into a kind of "hypnotic illusion" as Frye calls it (Frye, *The Modern Century* 70), but they are occasionally pushing the reader back, breaking the spell so the hypnotic process can begin again.⁴¹ As Stan Dragland puts it, "[t]hus the hypnotised might signal the hypnotist that s/he has not completely relinquished control. Thus the colonized might warn the imperialist of a stormy rule to come" (Dragland 20). Or, perhaps more accurately, thus might the hypnotist allow the hypnotised to believe that s/he

⁴¹Frye himself identifies *Beautiful Losers* as an example of a text that "[gives] the audience a closer view of imaginative reality by chopping holes in the rhetorical façade" (Frye, *The Modern Century* 70-1).

maintains some control over the reading of the text. Thus might the colonizer allow its subjects the impression that they have some influence.

Ultimately, however, the hypnotist and the hypnotised are working together, playing what might actually be the favourite game, the co-creation of the text. It is worth remembering Frye's discussion of literary charms in this context:

The rhetoric of charm is dissociative and incantatory: it sets up a pattern of sound so complex and repetitive that the ordinary processes of response are short-circuited. Refrain, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, pun, antithesis: every repetitive device known to rhetoric is called into play. Such repetitive formulas break down and confuse the conscious will, hypnotize and compel certain courses of action. (Frye, "Charms and Riddles" 126)

The "dissociative and incantatory" nature of *Beautiful Losers* is more or less obvious, from F.'s flamboyant axioms to the narrator's capitalized prayers, from the novel's play with "Contraries" (to invoke Blake's term) to its obsession with puns; thus readers are lured into a kind of hypnotic sleep. The reader, or the perceiver, can only awaken when the story-teller's spell wears off, or if the story-teller relinquishes control, however briefly.

The story-teller, however, can offer the reader an opportunity to break the spell. Riddles, according to Frye, "represent the revolt of the intelligence against the hypnotic power of commanding words" (137); more precisely, they offer the *opportunity* to break the spell:

In the riddle a verbal trap is set, but if one can "guess," that is, point to an outside object to which the verbal construct can be related, the something outside destroys it as a charm, and we have sprung the trap without being caught in it. (137)

By recognizing the novel's play with various words— Ray, Charles, Axis, Apocalypse, Veil/Bale, and so forth— the reader may, for a rare moment, “take control,” by linking together, in some fashion, those apparently disconnected objects on the arborite table of the text. Understand how the puns work, and the reader is tempted to find a unity to the novel, a kind of hidden logic, sensibility, or order to the chaos. As F. instructs the narrator, “interpret me, go beyond me” (*BL* 199): solve the novel's verbal riddles, it seems, and one might break free of the novel's charms. Those who connect nothing, however, risk surrendering themselves to its mystifying power, especially if one recalls F.'s admission that “the texts had got to me” (213) during the recitation of the story of Brébeuf and Lalement.

The novel's “riddles” are countless. The novel's puns— in essence— are riddles, just as its koans are (and perhaps recognizing that a particular riddle cannot be answered is to answer it). To some extent, even following the “plot” of the novel is to riddle it through; the Argentinian waiter, for example, is never *specifically* identified as Hitler, although most readers are likely to reach that conclusion. One might include the novel's referential dimensions as riddles, challenging readers to identify the inter-, intra-, or extra-textual relationships at work in the novel; indeed, *Beautiful Losers* cries out for hypertextual annotation as much as any novel since *Finnegan's Wake*. As Linda Hutcheon notes in her discussion of Cohen's poetry, “Cohen's particular twist in most of his work... is to force the reader to invert, to ironize, the intertexts” (Hutcheon, “Leonard Cohen,” *CWTW Poetry Series* 35). In her essay on Cohen's fiction, Hutcheon associates this twist with Bakhtin's theories on the carnivalesque: the text inverts and subordinates expectations, “making no

formal distinction between actor and spectator” (Hutcheon, “Leonard Cohen,” *CWTW Fiction Series* 40) so that readers must engage in the interpretive process by recognizing the inversions of Nietzsche, Forster, Mary Shelley and others, with Cohen’s own works thrown into the mix for good measure. So much of what the novel might “mean” has to be riddled through by considering how it brings other texts and genres into play, particularly in relation to the novel’s obvious concern with linguistic polysemy and polymorphism. In effect, these riddles posit interpretation and exegesis as potential salvations from verbal chaos. In *Beautiful Losers*, more locally, these riddles are not so much traps as they are jokes, and to get the jokes, one has to muddle one’s way through the novel’s “necklace of incomparable beauty and unmeaning” (*BL* 21).

In *Margin/Alias*, Sylvia Söderlind argues that Cohen

parodies the allegorical commonplace which invites the reader to see through the textual ‘veil’ to a hidden level of meaning in a way that will indeed give credit to Quilligan’s notion of the genre as based on intra- rather than extra-textual patterns of signification. (Söderlind 47)

Söderlind is correct to note the extent to which *Beautiful Losers* relies upon intratextual patterns, but her suggestion of parody is perhaps dismissive. Cohen is not so much asking readers to see through the textual veil as he is asking them to lift it and examine what is beneath. Only by lifting the veil can the apocalypse, the grand revelation, be made real. Although there are obviously parodic dimensions to Cohen’s use of allegory, one ought to remember the words of the narrator of Dostoevsky’s *Notes From Underground*, who, like the narrator of *Beautiful Losers*, is also a nameless anti-hero:

Gentlemen, of course I'm joking, and I know I am not doing it very successfully, but you mustn't take everything I say for a joke. I may be joking with clenched teeth. (Dostoevsky 28)

There is a deadly seriousness to *Beautiful Losers*' approach to allegory, despite its persistent comedy, as if the text has something "to say" or "to demonstrate," but it seems perpetually to sabotage asserting anything as a concrete message. Resisting a teleological reading, the novel seems to save everyone, even though the narrator is a "stinking cocksucker" (BL 302) who molests a young boy, and F. is a seemingly heretical character, baptized by Hitler, a creator in the most dubious of senses. As Stan Dragland asks, although F. admits that "God is Alive," one has to wonder if F. is even "on his side" (Dragland 24). Moreover, even the apocalyptic transformation of the narrator is undercut by the Montreal audience's reaction to it— rather than affirming its significance, they dismiss it as "only a movie," as yet another cultural arabesque.

While Maureen Quilligan associates allegory with a culture's attitudes towards language (Quilligan 15), Deborah L. Madsen associates it with "the *idea* of culture," arguing that allegory "works upon... not the political, social and economic realities, but the explanations and justifications of them that culture provides" (Madsen, *The Postmodernist Allegories...* 3). These two visions of allegory, really, are part and parcel with one another, as *Beautiful Losers* demonstrates. In another collapsing of temporal borders, the Jesuits use portraits of Hell to make the Indians "forget forever the Telephone Dance" (BL 104) and allow the words of the Jesuits into the ears of the Indians: words and culture are being used to justify the "new kind of loneliness" (104) that Christianity will bring to the Indians. Hitler,

too, had his cultural testimonials: he misses the newsreels and the parades that once extolled his virtues (229). Even *Beautiful Losers* itself, with its rented ending, is offered as a verbal testimony on behalf of Catherine Tekakwitha (306). For the novelist, the centre of his culture is language, and he uses its devices to explore how meaning can dissolve into apparent “unmeaning,” or, more accurately, polysemy. When Sylvia Söderlind distinguishes between metamorphosis and translation in her discussion of *Beautiful Losers*, she acknowledges that they are “thematically and stylistically linked” (Söderlind 58). The two words, at least in the novel, are synonymous with one another, equated most prominently in F.’s explanation that “a man translates himself into a child asking for all there is in a language he has barely mastered” (*BL* 71).

The novel’s thematic and stylistic devices cohere only by their nature *as translations*, with the emphasis placed on the multitudinous ways in which things (words, stories, events, and people) can be translated. In this sense, *Beautiful Losers* is an allegory whose concepts all seem to lead back to the central word in a kind of intra-textual affirmation of remote linguistic possibilities. Translations may appear disjunctive— i.e., separating one meaning into two different linguistic or cultural forms— but they are also cohesive, linking together the beads of unmeaning, as demonstrated by the connections between Ray Charles and Hiro-Koué, and the sexual enactment of Apocalypse. To translate one’s self into another self— recalling Edith’s invitation to “be other people” after painting her body (18) — is to escape briefly from one’s identity, but also to associate one’s self with another; although Edith’s self-translation is superficial (hence her being compared to Al Jolson), the narrator ultimately

associates himself with a voice of and for the enslaved masses, Ray Charles. The novel's forms, too, with its strange "History of Them All" and F.'s long letter, are translations of thoughts, facts and myths into verbal form. Perhaps it is within this context that readers need to understand the novel's famous line about the necklace of unmeaning:

All the disparates of the world, the different wings of the paradox, coin-faces of the problem, petal-pulling questions, scissors-shaped conscience, all the polarities, things and their images and things which cast no shadow, and just the everyday explosions on a street, this face and that, a house and a toothache, explosions which merely have different letters in their names, my greedy needle pierces it all. (21)

In F.'s vision, he saw himself in the middle of a car accident, his needle only that which he could use to stitch bodies back together: "All I heard was pain, all I saw was mutilation" (221). Like Charles Axis, he saw himself as a recreator of the weak and the damaged. The narrator's needle, however, pierces everything: rather than trying to "dissolve the chaos" (121), he "traces with the fidelity of a seismograph *needle* the state of the solid bloody landscape" (122; emphasis added). Such is the sanctifying nature of translation: rather than dissolving the chaos by rendering things into a uniform language or appearance (as F.'s system might), translation simply threads the separate beads together, as if to affirm "a beautiful knowledge of unity" (21). Or, more accurately, it offers the *semblance* of unity which is just as beautiful: "Experts with tape recorders say that what we hear as a single bird note is really ten or twelve notes with which the animal weaves many various liquid harmonies" (139).

The narrator is bird-like, too, in this sense. “The History of Them All” may be the fruition of the new style which F. prophesies in his letter— a style that is polyphonous, and given to digression and self-flagellation. Moreover, it is a style that never lets readers forget that there is a story-teller behind the story, that someone is “taking responsibility for intruding into the inarticulate murmur of the spheres” (9), even if identifying that someone is difficult or impossible because the narrator is enacting a verbal equivalent of the dance of masks. Everything, it seems, is in translation, even the face of the novel’s narrators.

That the narrator’s book ends with the reading of the English-Greek phrase book assumes new significance in this light. Not only is the narrator relegating himself to a status of the child in the world in his “prayers,” he is accepting all words— English, Greek, or, one might assume those of any language— as sacred; regardless of their “literal” meanings, words, depending on how they are spoken (or breathed), can constitute prayer, can become “carols before the blazing Yule corpse” (71). Give one’s self to prayer— as the narrator does— and one searches for the “noise of true emotion” (9) represented by Ray Charles; assume the burden of reconstructing the world, and one would have to “devote a lifetime to discovering the ideal physique” (221) as Charles Axis does. But here are the “coin faces of problem”: Christ, Ray Charles, Catherine Tekakwitha, Edith/Isis, and the narrator stand on one side of the coin, representing and bearing the suffering of the “hungry multitude” (305); on the other side, Hitler, Charles Axis, the Jesuits, and F. represent the desire to reshape humanity, to “Change! Purify! Experiment! Cauterize! Reverse! Burn! Preserve! Teach!” (221).

Therein lies the rub of the novel's allegory. The translator ought not to dissolve the chaos, but to represent it while trying to make contact with "the energy of love" (121) — in essence, to make the flood real at last by letting the rays of Heaven and Hell escape into his "dangerous and finite" home (122). Indeed, as an allegory, *Beautiful Losers* seems like an extrapolation of Cohen's critique of A.M. Klein's role as priest and prophet. In an unpublished speech from 1964 called "Loneliness and History," Cohen extols the virtue of Klein the prophet, the isolated sufferer, rather than Klein the priest, the communal figure of consolation and comfort:

[W]hen he is true to his terror, then he sings, when he begs God to keep 'the golden dome' [sic] his mind safe from disease, offering as sacrificial payment his limbs, his body's health— then he sings out of the terror which makes a man lively and comfortless... Then he is alone and I believe him. There is no room for "we" and if I want to join him, if, even, I want to greet him, I must make my own loneliness... Klein chose to be a priest though it was as a prophet that we needed him, as a prophet he needed us and he needed himself. (Cohen, "Loneliness in History," cited in Siemerling 94)

The narrator in *Beautiful Losers* must become a prophet by moving "towards an ambiguous outsiderness that disrupts the community as it is known" (Siemerling, "Interior Landscapes" 96), towards becoming a Tiresias for the modern age, for whom suffering and truth are synonymous. Indeed, the narrator's transformation into a film of Ray Charles may be the final stroke in the reconstitution of Tiresias: this is the prophet being struck blind once again, left to bear the burdens (bales) of truth, which need to be spoken, or, more appropriately, sung. The ambivalent reaction of the Montreal audience is not surprising in this context. The audience's response is comparable to that of the Chorus in *Oedipus the King*:

I can't accept him, can't deny him, don't know what to say,
I'm lost, and the wings of dark foreboding beating—
I cannot see what's come, what's still to come. (Sophocles 187, ll. 551-553)

A reader of *Beautiful Losers* may be left with the same dumbfounded impression, but the novel anticipates that reaction. Not just speaking in *hiro-koué*, emphasizing that something has been said, the novel's invocation of Ray Charles turns the responsibility for exegesis back onto the reader who must respond to the musician's question, "Tell me, what'd I say?"

WORKS CONSULTED AND CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *Survival: A Thematic Guide To Canadian Literature*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1972.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Tr. Carly Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981, rep. 1986.
- . *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. 1929. Ed. and Tr. Caryl Emerson. *Theory and History of Literature*, Volume 8. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, rep. 1989.
- Barbour, Douglas. "Down With History: Some Notes Towards an Understanding of *Beautiful Losers*." *Leonard Cohen: The Artist and His Critics*. Critical Views on Canadian Writers. Ed. Michael Gnarowski. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976. 136-149.
- Bowering, George. *Craft Slices*. Ottawa: Oberon, 1985.
- Burnham, Clint. "How Postmodern is Cohen's Poetry?" *The Proceedings of the Leonard Cohen Conference*, *Canadian Poetry* 33 (Fall/Winter 1993), 65-73.
- Burrow, J. A. "Allegory: The Literal Level." *Essays on Medieval Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. 192-212.
- Cameron, Sharon. *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981.
- Clifford, Gay. *The Transformation of Allegory*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1974.
- Cohen, Leonard. *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1956, rep. 1966.
- . *The Spice-Box of Earth*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961.

- . *The Favourite Game*. New Canadian Library No. 73. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963, rep. 1970.
 - . *Flowers for Hitler*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964.
 - . *Beautiful Losers*. New York: Bantam, 1966.
 - . *Parasites of Heaven*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966.
 - . *The Songs of Leonard Cohen*. Columbia Music, 1967.
 - . *Songs From A Room*. Columbia Music, 1968.
 - . *Selected Poems: 1956-1968*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968.
 - . *Songs of Love and Hate*. Columbia Music, 1971.
 - . *The Energy of Slaves*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972.
 - . *New Skin For The Old Ceremony*. Columbia Music: 1974.
 - . *Death of a Lady's Man*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978.
 - . *Death of a Ladies' Man*. Columbia Music, 1978.
 - . *Recent Songs*. Columbia Music, 1980.
 - . *The Book of Mercy*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983.
 - . *Various Positions*. Columbia Music, 1984.
 - . *I'm Your Man*. Columbia Music, 1988.
 - . *The Future*. Sony Music, 1992.
 - . *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*. Ed. T.M. Raysor. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936.

- Davey, Frank. "Leonard Cohen." *From There To Here: A Guide to English-Canadian Literature Since 1960*. Our Nature-Our Voices II. Erin, ON: Press Porceplic, 1974. 68-73.
- Deer, Glenn. *Postmodern Canadian Fiction and the Rhetoric of Authority*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.
- De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Dickson, L. L. *The Modern Allegories of William Golding*. Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1990.
- Diehl-Jones, Charlene. "Remembering the Love Song: Ambivalence and Cohen's 'Take This Waltz.'" *The Proceedings of the Leonard Cohen Conference, Canadian Poetry* 33 (Fall/Winter 1993), 74-86.
- Djwa, Sandra. "Leonard Cohen: Black Romantic." *Leonard Cohen: The Artist and His Critics*. Critical Views on Canadian Writers. Ed. Michael Gnarowski. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson. 94-105.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes From Underground*. 1864. *Notes From Underground and The Grand Inquisitor*. Ed. And tr. Ralph E. Matlaw. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1960. 3-115.
- Dragland, Stan. "F-ing Through Beautiful Losers." *The Bees of the Invisible: Essays in Contemporary English Canadian Writing*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1991.
- Dryden, John. "Song for St. Cecilia's Day." 1687. *Dryden: Poetry and Prose*. Ed. David Nichol Smith. Clarendon English Series. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1925, rep. 1971. 106-8.
- Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1963, rep. 1974.
- Fletcher, Angus John Stewart. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1964.
- Forster, E. M. *Howard's End*. 1910. Toronto: Penguin, 1992.
- Fournier, Michael, and Ken Norris, eds. *Take This Waltz: A Celebration of Leonard Cohen*. Ste.-Anne-de-Bellevue, Quebec: The Muses' Company, 1994.

- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957, rep. 1990.
- . *The Modern Century*. The Whidden Lectures 1967. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967, rep. 1969.
- . "Charms and Riddles." *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society*. Richmond Hill, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1976, rep. 1991. 123-147.
- . *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. Toronto: Penguin, 1983, rep. 1990.
- Greene, Graham. "Henry James: The Religious Aspect." 1933. *Collected Essays*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969, rep. 1970. 34-44.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. 1850. Toronto: Penguin, 1980.
- Hollander, John. *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press. 1981.
- Honig, Edward. *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988, esp. 26-44.
- . "Leonard Cohen." *Canadian Writers and Their Works*. Poetry Series. Volume Ten. Eds. Robert Lecker, Jack David and Ellen Quigley. Toronto: ECW Press, 1992. 21-65.
- . "Leonard Cohen." *Canadian Writers and Their Works*. Fiction Series. Volume Ten. Eds. Robert Lecker, Jack David and Ellen Quigley. Toronto: ECW Press, 1993. 25-65.
- Jakobson, Roman. *Language in Literature*. Eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Jones, D. G. *Butterfly On Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970, rep. 1976.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man*. 1916. Markham, ON: Penguin Books, 1976.

- Krieger, Murray. "Allegorical Language." *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol*. Ed. Morton W. Bloomfield. Harvard English Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981. 23-38.
- Langland, William. *The Vision of Piers Plowman*. A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17. 2nd Edition. Ed. A.V.C. Schmidt. Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1995.
- Lee, Dennis. *Savage Fields: An Essay In Literature and Cosmology*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1977.
- Madsen, Deborah L. *The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.
- . *Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach to Genre*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.
- Mandel, Eli. "Cohen's Life as a Slave." *Another Time*. Three Solitudes: Contemporary Literary Criticism in Canada 3. Erin, ON: Press Porcepic. 124-136.
- . "Leonard Cohen." *The Family Romance*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1986. 207-211.
- Markotic, Nicole. "The Telephone Dance & Mechanical Ecstasy in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*." The Proceedings of the Leonard Cohen Conference, *Canadian Poetry* 33 (Fall/Winter 1993), 32-39.
- Morley, Patricia A. *The Immoral Moralists: Hugh MacLennan and Leonard Cohen*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1972.
- Moss, John. *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974.
- Nadel, Ira. *Leonard Cohen: A Life In Art*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1994.
- . *Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen*. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1996.
- Nonnekes, Paul. "Beyond Mommy and the Machinery: Leonard Cohen's Vision of Male Desire in *Beautiful Losers*." The Proceedings of the Leonard Cohen Conference, *Canadian Poetry* 33 (Fall/Winter 1993), 40-54.

- Ondaatje, Michael. *Leonard Cohen*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968.
- Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. Markham, ON: Penguin Books, 1946, rep. 1970.
- Pacey, Desmond. "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen." *Leonard Cohen: The Artist and His Critics*. Ed. Michael Gnarowski. Critical Views on Canadian Writers. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson. 74-93.
- Piehler, Paul. *The Visionary Landscape: A Study In Medieval Allegory*. London: Edward Arnold, 1971.
- Quilligan, Maureen. *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979.
- Ravvin, Norman. "Writing Around the Holocaust: Uncovering the Ethical Centre of *Beautiful Losers*." The Proceedings of the Leonard Cohen Conference, *Canadian Poetry* 33 (Fall/Winter 1993), 22-31.
- Ruddick, Lisa. "Fluid Symbols in American Modernism: William James, Gertrude Stein, George Santayana, and Wallace Stevens." *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol*. Ed. Morton W. Bloomfield. Harvard English Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981. 335-353.
- Scobie, Stephen. *Leonard Cohen*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1978.
- . "The Doubled Text." *Signature Event Context*. Writer as Critic Series II. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1989. 63-70.
- . "Leonard Cohen, Phyllis Webb, and the End(s) of Modernism." *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value*. Ed. Robert Lecker. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. 57-70.
- . "The Counterfeiter Begs Forgiveness: Leonard Cohen and *Leonard Cohen*." The Proceedings of the Leonard Cohen Conference, *Canadian Poetry* 33 (Fall/Winter 1993), 7-21.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*. New York: Airmont Books, 1963.

- Siemerling, Winfried. "Interior Landscapes and the Public Realm: Contingent Mediations in a Speech and a Song by Leonard Cohen." *The Proceedings of the Leonard Cohen Conference, Canadian Poetry* 33 (Fall/Winter 1993), 88-99.
- . *Discoveries of the Other: Alterity in the Works of Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, Michael Ondaatje and Nicole Brossard*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.
- Smith, A. J. M., ed. *The Canadian Century: English-Canadian Writing Since Confederation. The Book of Canadian Prose Volume 2*. Canada: Gage Education Publishing Limited, 1973.
- Söderlind, Sylvia. *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Quebecois Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.
- Sophocles. *Oedipus the King*. 5th Century. *The Three Theban Plays*. Tr. Robert Fagles. Markham, ON: Penguin Books, 1982, rep. 1988. 155-251.
- Spearing, A. C. "Symbolic and Dramatic Development in *Pearl*." 1962. *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays*. Ed. Robert J. Blanch. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1966. 98-119.
- Szatmary, David P. *Rockin' In Time: A Social History of Rock-and-Roll*. 2nd Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991.
- Tuve, Rosemund. *Elizabethan & Metaphysical Imagery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947, rep. 1963.
- Twigg, Alan. "Leonard Cohen." *Strong Voices: Conversations with Fifty Canadian Authors*. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1988. 41-47.
- Webb, Phyllis. "The Energy of *Slaves*." *Talking*. Montreal: Quadrant Editions, 1982. 100-103.
- Whitman, John. *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Woodcock, George. "The Song of the Sirens: Notes on Leonard Cohen." *Odysseus Ever Returning: Essays On Canadian Writers and Writings*. New Canadian Library No. 71. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970. 92-110.