

Writing Around the Holocaust: Uncovering the Ethical Centre of Beautiful Losers

by Norman Ravvin

Leonard Cohen's novel *Beautiful Losers* has attracted comment as an exemplary vision of the drug inspired pop culture of the 'sixties; as a metafictional experiment in which the author self-consciously comments on "the acts of writing and reading the text itself" (Hutcheon 26); and as an example of the "New Western," a genre bent on exploring the myths of native culture while ridding the Americas of the exhausted legacy of Christianity and Enlightenment thought (Fiedler, 165,175,185). By insisting on the novel's status as either a postmodern comment on the nature of authorship or a psychedelic tract on sexual and spiritual self-realization, the critics have ignored its most incendiary and trenchant critique. A common characteristic among the interpretations that have guided our reading of *Beautiful Losers* is their slight interest in the section portraying a rather sordid encounter with Hitler. I will argue in this essay that, after placing this section at the centre of our consideration of *Beautiful Losers*, Cohen's novel can be seen as an examination of the role of the Holocaust in contemporary culture, and as a call to heed the lessons learned from the Nazi victimization of the Jews.

This demand that we read *Beautiful Losers* as a book about Jewishness may seem perverse in light of the novel's exclusion of virtually all images and themes related to traditional Jewish culture and history. In 1965, when Cohen went to the island of Hydra on a Canada Council Grant and with a history of Catherine Tekakwitha, the work that developed as a result of this self-imposed exile proved to be a departure from the poetry and fiction he had published to date. Gone, in *Beautiful Losers*, is Cohen's masterful and lyrical use of biblical and Chassidic legends, which constitute much of the allusive material in his early poems. Gone as well are the issues so central to *The Favourite Game*: the heritage of a European background; the predicament of growing up Jewish in

Montreal; the influential (and oppressive) presence of uncles who "presided over most of the institutions" of Jewish Montreal and who would have their heir become a garment man and not a vagabond poet (*FG* 11). Gone, in fact, except for one stray satiric reference at the end of *Beautiful Losers*, is the milieu of Jewish Montreal, to be replaced by the ethos of Québécois nationalism and a fascination with a kind of Nietzschean self-realization. And although suffering — in both personal and communal terms — is a central concern in the novel, it is figured not through the prism of Jewish history, but through the dismal history of the A——s, a Mohawk tribe so lacking in good fortune that their name was "the word for corpse in the language of all the neighboring tribes" (5). And yet, near the end of *Beautiful Losers*, Cohen makes a more prolonged and startling use of the Holocaust than any appearing in his other writings. We must ask then, why, in a book devoid of any explicit probing of Jewish history and thought, which is said to be a paean to the exalted but ultimately failed yearnings of the 1960s, does there appear the most blatant instance of the Holocaust in the writer's work?

Hitler makes his startling cameo appearance near the novel's conclusion, when Edith, the narrator's wife, and her mentor F. journey to Argentina for what F. ominously calls "a little sun and experiments" (175). In the guise of a hotel waiter, Hitler enters their room with a passkey, and maintains a masterly position as he administers to F.'s and Edith's sexual yearning by way of certain unmentionable "sordid exciting commands" (194). F. admits that he and Edith remained suppliant before their visitor, even when he "made" them "kiss the whip" (194). Hitler concludes this bizarre scene by drying their "parts" and pronouncing, with brutal deadpan irony: "I had millions of these at my disposal" (194).

Critics circle this outrageous bedroom scene by referring to details in the ensuing action without making Hitler's entrance an important part of their analysis. Linda Hutcheon, in her overview, *Leonard Cohen and His Works*, notes a number of scattered references related to the Holocaust. Prominent among these is F.'s description of Catherine's acts of self-mortification: "you know what pain looks like, that kind of pain, you've been inside newsreel Belsen" (Cohen 207). This idiosyncratic analogy represents, for Hutcheon, F.'s veneration of the movie palace as a source of "vicarious experience" offering "the possibility of understanding things one cannot know personally" (19). She quotes as well from the dejected confession F. makes before he describes the encounter he and Edith have with Hitler, but as with the allusion to Belsen, she does not pursue the question of why this death camp imagery

suddenly irrupts into Cohen's narrative (29).

The importance of Hutcheon's reading of *Beautiful Losers* for other critics can be seen in Sylvia Söderlind's approach to the novel in *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Québécois Fiction* (1991). Söderlind begins her chapter on Cohen by admitting her indebtedness to Hutcheon's regard for *Beautiful Losers* as "the quintessential Canadian postmodern novel" (Söderlind 41). Söderlind points to the book's "insistent use of pornography" and its focus on a bizarre blend of cruelty and sexuality (43), yet she does so without mentioning the curious combination of sex and violence suggested by the fantasy F. and Edith share of Hitler:

- Stand up, F. Get your mouth off me. I'm pretending that you are someone else.
- Who?
- The waiter.
- Which one? I demanded.
- With the mustache and the raincoat.
- I thought so, I thought so.
- You noticed him, too, didn't you, F.?
- Yes. (177)

Söderlind transcribes Edith's well known utterance at the close of the scene with Hitler, which reads, when translated from Greek, "I am Isis, born of all things, both what is and what shall be, and no mortal has ever lifted my robe" (Söderlind 66). Edith's sudden transformation into a figure embodying both Isis and Catherine Tekakwitha is often seen as the novel's climactic sign that magic is afoot, that an alternate ontology is in the process of being affirmed. But Söderlind neglects to mention that Edith's claim of sacred transcendent power is made immediately after the orgy F. and Edith take part in with Hitler, which is followed by a bath using soap "derived from melted human flesh" (Cohen 194).

Margaret Atwood's early but influential *Survival* may well have set the stage for this apparent avoidance of the repercussions of the novel's portrayal of Hitler. Atwood's thematic criticism generalizes, and, I would say, trivializes Cohen's intentions by arguing that "*Beautiful Losers* depicts not only the sufferings of the victim, but the mentality of the Canadian onlooker who needs to identify with victims" (100). Stephen Scobie echoes this notion in his study, *Leonard Cohen*, though he admits to a certain discomfort with reading "the whole of *Beautiful Losers* as . . . an allegory of Canadian society" (113). For Scobie, the encounter

with Hitler represents "the novel's most extreme sexual scene" (107) and "an outrageous parody of all the conventions of 'the orgy' " (109). Michael Ondaatje's overview of Cohen's work leaves a similar impression, letting Hitler's "guest appearance as an Argentinean waiter [who] baptises F. and Edith with human soap" stand as one of the many depictions in *Beautiful Losers* of a "wild new cult" (53).

Just as they seem to avoid any extended consideration of the encounter with Hitler, critics tend to be in agreement that *Beautiful Losers* is a novel that portrays the urge to transcend the suffering of secular existence by way of a rather contradictory mixture of sexual excess, self-denial, and a taboo-bending recreation of religious experience through rites both sacred and profane. Söderlind points to the characters' pursuit of the "pan-orgasmic body" as being part of the need to

escape from a language of reason, history, and science into one of desire, magic, and the body, by means of which "we are part of a necklace of incomparable beauty and unmeaning," tending toward the dissolution of identity and the fusion of bodies. (51)

Hutcheon is less emphatic about this process being the novel's guiding theme, but she does argue that the characters "are all reborn, transformed, merged together" under the guise of a "new, modern religion" of sexuality whose sacred texts are comic books, popular songs, and movies (18-19). Dennis Lee goes even further in *Savage Fields*, suggesting that these pop icons furnish "an arcane system of guidance" (68-69) that leads the narrator toward "psychological liberation, a religious conversion, and a reconstruction of our civilisation's way of being human" (80).

F. — the novel's embodiment of that unlikeliest of personas, the Canadian *übermensch* — is the maestro behind all this "mystical shit," as the narrator dubs it in a fit of jealous anger (8). F. is a kind of puppetmaster, a guide and lover who uses both lies and brutally honest confrontation to force Edith and the narrator closer to an understanding of the nature of being — or what F. calls "ordinary eternal machinery" (35). F.'s desire for clarity and power takes him to Ottawa where he sits as a member of Parliament and dreams of bringing to fruition "the vastest dream of [his] generation . . . to be a magician" (175).

As the novel progresses, F. falls more and more into the role of a philosopher-king who knows all too well that his vision has been

proven a corrupt failure. As he looks back over his efforts at teaching Edith and the narrator to "embody the best" of his "longings," he admits, "I didn't suspect the pettiness of my dream" (164, 175). It is the weight of this self-knowledge, and the ironic outlook his failure imposes on him, that leads F. to toss off irresponsible bon-mots under the guise of high seriousness. Of his time in Parliament, he admits that he "loved the red chairs" and "cherished the fucks under the monument" (174). And, in an outburst reminiscent of the Futurists and their celebration of power and violence, he intones, "History has shown us how men love to muse and loaf and make love in places formerly the scene of much violent activity" (45).

The failure of F.'s pursuit of spiritual and sexual release is made most explicit in his "Long Letter" describing his "Argentine vacation hotel week-end shack-up with Edith" (175). Here, he addresses the narrator as his "Dear Friend" (170) and promises, "I am going to set you straight on everything . . ." (173).

Speaking like a decadent and world-weary cynic, F. admits that action and honest engagement before political violence have always been beyond him:

I will confess that I never saw the Québec Revolution clearly, even at the time of my parliamentary disgrace. I simply refused to support the War, not because I was French, or a pacifist (which of course I'm not), but because I was tired. I knew what they were doing to the Gypsies, I had a whiff of Zyklon B, but I was very, very tired. Do you remember the world at that time? . . . In perfect sleep we took the soap and waited for the showers. (173-74)

Here the spectre of the Holocaust intrudes on F.'s claims for self-assertion and experimentation, laying them waste. He views his own commitment to politics and social transformation as a fraud, and, as a kind of Representative Man, he speaks for a generation of beaten victims, ready to accept the most hideous and demeaning of deaths.

F. and Edith travel to the Argentine in a last ditch effort to complete (or undo) the effects of F.'s spiritual and sexual training — what F. calls his "Pygmalion tampering" (195). In the course of pursuing the "pan-orgasmic body," an "erogenous zone over the whole fleshy envelope" (178), Edith has found herself cursed with a body in "trouble . . . it kept changing sizes, she even feared that it

might be dying" (175). Looking back on her experimentation with excess, Edith accuses her mentor: "You've meddled, F. You've gone against God You wanted me to go all the way. Now I'm no good to anyone and I'll try anything" (176-77).

One might argue that these words — "I'll try anything" — are the most meaningful utterance in the course of the novel's conclusion, rather than Edith's more commonly cited vatic impersonation of Isis; for the former remark is prescient of the ultimate threat of self-abnegation and spiritual defeat that lurks for F. and Edith behind the soon-to-be-heard "professional knock" on the hotel room's "blond door" (193). Behind the door — which seems itself to be complicit in some aryan vision — stands the Hitler of pornographic movies and trash novels, both of which draw on the Nazi ethos as a paradigm for images of domination and enslavement. Dressed as a kind of sadistic flasher, Hitler wears "the old raincoat and mustache, but underneath he was perfectly nude. We turned toward him" (193). This attitude of supplication, even veneration, is F.'s and Edith's automatic response to their visitor. Even more startling is F.'s nonchalant acknowledgment that

What followed was old hat. I have no intention of adding to any pain which might be remaindered to you, by a minute description of the excesses we performed with him. Lest you should worry for us, let me say that we had, indeed, been well prepared, and we hardly cared to resist his sordid exciting commands, even when he made us kiss the whip. (193-94)

This combination of sexual release and violence is reminiscent of an earlier scene in which F. tries to cure Edith's bodily trouble through a description of the extravagantly brutal methods used by the Iroquois to torture their Jesuit captives. This "cure" brings Edith close to the "blind realm . . . of pleasure beyond pleasure." Referring only ambiguously to the significance of finding such images of violence arousing, F. remarks, "Of course, the implications of her pleasure are enormous" (191).

F.'s account of the orgy with Hitler seems to offer an acknowledgment that Nazi processes of degradation and enslavement have become acceptable — even exciting — to the popular imagination. With all pieties about the deeper goodness of humanity dismissed, and with, the insistence that victimization has become "old hat," even exciting, Cohen presents a moral predicament that touches us all. Self-denial and self-mortification — so central to Catherine's, Edith's and the narrator's spiritual

progress — are seen to be part of larger projects of dehumanization that are imposed from above. F. and Edith demean themselves before the man in "the old raincoat" (193), just as Catherine sacrifices herself before the faith of the "Robes-Noires" (84). Catherine's "use" as a martyr following her death is not unrelated to the "usefulness" of humans who are melted down to produce soap.¹

In both cases a system — be it a religious orthodoxy or an ideological tyranny — turns humans into the vital *material* by which that system justifies its own existence.

There is certainly reason to challenge this kind of reading as one that tends to relativize historical events of suffering and their particular implications. Dennis Lee notices the similarities — calling them patterns of coincidence — between "Catherine's assault on her own body" and the sado-masochistic acts that F. and Edith partake of in their hotel room:

Indeed, with its welter of flagellants the Indian village looked like "a Nazi medical experiment," while the workout with the Vibrator left Edith and F. "well prepared" to bathe in human soap. Traditional asceticism and the cult of ecstatic sex are alike in the sinister appetites they release. (88)

In this free-associative chain of historical reference, the Holocaust exists not as a particular event to be limned, but simply as a handy metaphor that stands in for numerous other kinds of extremity and human suffering. There is a risk that such figurative use of the Holocaust tells us nothing about the particular event, but instead, obscures and diminishes the character of the victimization visited on the Jews of Europe by the Nazis. There can be no doubt that Cohen leaves himself open to this kind of criticism by choosing to allude to the Holocaust almost casually, using a tone that is routinely off-handed and ennui-ridden.

But the novel's ultimate effect is not an equation of victimhood at the hands of the Nazis with victimhood before Jesuit-led colonization and finally, with the victimhood the spiritual adept imposes on him or herself. The Holocaust makes too shadowy and abrupt an appearance in the book to take on such thematic symmetry with Cohen's other concerns. In fact, the spectres of Hitler and Belsen are repressed as a major motif in much of *Beautiful Losers* and irrupt suddenly — in the allusions to gas chambers (188-89), to Zyklon B (173) and to Nazi medical experiments (209). The scene with Hitler, I would argue, is a real

site of rupture in the novel, at which point all the motifs of metamorphosis, sexual ecstasy, and transcendent yearning are diminished by the premonition shared by F. and Edith of their own deaths. Immediately before Hitler's entrance, the two friends bemoan the failure of their sexual and spiritual odyssey as they gaze out at a landscape that seems to resonate with this uncanny premonition:

A great sadness overtook us as we looked out over the miles of sea, an egoless sadness that we did not own or claim. Here and there the restless water kept an image of the shattered moon. We said good-by to you, old lover. (193)

F. acknowledges, as he writes to the narrator of this good-by scene, that he and Edith realized they had gone over a precipice, somehow crossed into territory from which they would not return: "We did not know when or how the parting would be completed, but it began that moment" (193). These doom-shrouded thoughts mark the brand of victimization portrayed in the meeting with Hitler as having very particular repercussions — as somehow representing the end of a journey.

In his depiction of F.'s and Edith's response to their encounter with Hitler, Cohen examines contemporary political complicity, implying that there is a tendency among even the most sensitive, socially aware people to capitulate to or even participate in the worst extremes of political violence. He locates for us, within this tendency, the perverse and irredeemable uses to which the images related to the Holocaust have been applied. Cohen's method of dealing with this material is unorthodox and provocative in the extreme, as he introduces the subject without providing any explicit polemical context by which the reader might gauge his attitude toward the Nazi genocide. He even goes so far as to present characters who have the sympathy of the reader but who are also complicit in the tendency to identify with the dynamics of victimization enacted by the Nazis.

Cohen's approach, however, is not without its basis in well-documented phenomena. Historians see Hitler's brand of totalitarian ideal as one that his followers took an active part in supporting and bringing into existence:

the "heroic" Hitler image was "as much an image created by the masses as it was imposed on them." Propaganda was above all effective where it was building upon, not

countering already existing values and mentalities.
(Kershaw, HM 4)

The fact that neither F. nor Edith is Jewish is worth noting, since this allows Cohen to investigate their yearnings for release through self-abuse without being accused of promoting the notion that Jews themselves identified with their torturers. Instead, the twosome can be seen as representative and prescient participants in the "Hitler Wave" that would irrupt in the 1970s, "indicating a macabre fascination" with the Nazi leader (Kershaw *ND* 62). While vacationing in a land notorious for honouring its hidden German war criminals, F. and Edith enact what a highly placed Nazi referred to at the Nuremberg trials as the "unlimited, almost religious veneration" that Hitler received from his associates (Kershaw, *HM* 263).

Ultimately, I would argue that Cohen's approach to these issues is scathingly honest in its effort to confront all the possible results of experimentation with excess, including a complicity with systems of dehumanization. Amid all the explosive and varied material included in *Beautiful Losers*, is an ethical centre supported by Cohen's suggestion that the outcome of any eroticized interest in victimization and the abuse of power must inevitably bring about total demoralization and spiritual death.

Notes

1. Among the many documented abuses by the Nazis of the bodies of their Jewish victims (hair for felt footwear; ash to mark pathways; gold teeth as booty pure and simple) the reported use of human fat for the production of soap is not verified by all historians. Raul Hilberg writes, in his classic study *The Destruction of the European Jews*, that the "use of human fat for soap cannot be established as a fact from available documentary evidence and eyewitness reports" (614n). He does note the prevalence of such rumours in Poland and Slovakia throughout 1942 (331, 470), as well as the testimony of a postwar mayor of Danzig who reported that at the Stutthof Camp, near Danzig, he "found a cauldron with the remains of boiled human flesh, a box of prepared human bones, and baskets of hands and feet and human skin, with the fat removed" (624n). [\[back\]](#)
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