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ALIENATION AND AESTHETICISM  
IN THE ART OF  
LEONARD COHEN

by  
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## Abstract

The art of Leonard Cohen has been the subject of several recent literary studies and numerous short reviews. Often superficial features of his work distract those studying him and lead them to conclusions which do not account for a number of more important qualities which lie at the center of his art. Cohen's point of view, as it is manifested in his art, is frequently given only cursory attention and this leads to a misinterpretation of his work. The critical approach used in this thesis is designed to illuminate Cohen's position in relation to his art and account for the various apparently contradictory features noticed in his work.

This study consists of an examination of Leonard Cohen's prose and poetry from a critical perspective centering on Cohen's "willed self-alienated" point of view. The self-alienated center of consciousness from which Cohen's work originates is delineated and its adequacy as a source of aesthetic and philosophical values discussed. The method of inquiry is mainly interpretive, but Cohen's art is also discussed in relation to several of the main themes and conventions of modern literature from an historical point of view.

The basic conclusion of this study is that Cohen's "willed self-alienated" point of view is the source of what are called dynamic aesthetic values. Willed self-alienation

may briefly be defined as a chosen mode of existence in which the individual maintains a continuous process of negation of virtually all forms, systems, beliefs, and habits which are in themselves "static" and therefore contrary to life. This process results in a capacity to be self-creative because the individual feels no allegiance to a particular self-conception. Cohen uses this point of view in his art in a way that allows him to exhibit a variety of apparently contradictory traits. This fragmentation of the consciousness at the center of the art must be grasped if Cohen's work is to be fully appreciated.

The basic impulse of the willfully self-alienated individual is to "become" other than he is at any particular point in time. The temporal emphasis for such a mode of existence is, therefore, the present moment. An aesthetic perspective emerges directly out of this situation. The main temporal focus of aesthetic concerns is the present and, in the arts, "moments" of perfection. Cohen's willed self-alienation does not permit him to dwell in single perfect moments like Breavman in The Favorite Game. Cohen is concerned with the eternal or expanded moment of consciousness in which the individual is aware of his life and creative ability. The values which emerge from Cohen's art are directly related to a fusion of his willed self-alienated point of view and dynamic aestheticism.

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Alienation and Aestheticism  
in the Art of  
Leonard Cohen

Leonard Cohen's art exhibits a point of view which is best described as alienated. For a man to write interesting poetry or prose it is essential for him to develop a point of view which will allow extensive imaginative freedom and at the same time offer a meaningful or at least communicable perspective. Thus, it is important to grasp the significance of Cohen's relation to his world. Keats had his "negative capability," Byron had his "heroic exile," and Leonard Cohen has his "willed alienation."

The theme of alienation has been traced in the work of many of our contemporary poets and important insights into both literature and our era have been developed as a result of this study. The poetry and prose of Leonard Cohen has an unusual quality which may be explained only by reference to the concept of alienation. However, it would be wrong to assume that Cohen is merely flogging a popular pegasus. There is something new in Cohen's vision not found in most other modern poets.

Alienation is commonly experienced and consciousness of it has been sharpened by the amount of contemporary literature on the subject. Indeed, neo-Marxists and social scientists have successfully enveloped the term in such clouds of economic and socio-psychological verbiage that its usefulness is rapidly deteriorating. Basic discussions, however, usually end by describing alienation as an imposed condition in which the afflicted find themselves separated from something thought to be necessary to their identity as human beings. I propose to use the concept of alienation rather differently in my discussion of Cohen's work as the usual negative associations do not always apply. Alienation which is classically described as "imposed" is increasingly "chosen" as a desirable state of existence. In Kenneth Kenniston's, The Uncommitted, several types of alienation are studied with emphasis on chosen alienation.<sup>1</sup> Kenniston's work is devoted to examining the classic forms of alienation in which the "self" is acted upon by external agents and to the examination of a new form of alienation in which the "self" is the agent of alienation. This distinction is particularly relevant to the study of modern poetry because the new self-alienation has become widespread only during the past few decades. The importance of recognizing Cohen's willed self-alienation is that it explains a number of qualities peculiar to his poetry.

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Kenniston, The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society (New York: Delta, 1965).

To state that Cohen presents a self-alienated point of view is not to say that all aspects of his art are the result of chosen alienation. It is probable that Cohen, like many others, is alienated by pressures outside himself. Neither does the point I wish to make exclude the significance of his conformity to the preconceptions of the public as to the unusual life style and manners expected of a modern poet. To some extent my argument rests on the observation that there is a great element of willful alienation at the center of Cohen's perspective which is peculiar to his position as an individual and an artist.

Other critics have recognized Cohen's fascination with alienation. In her article, "Leonard Cohen: Black Romantic," Sandra Djwa notes Cohen's "concern with alienation, eroticism and madness."<sup>2</sup> She correctly points out that Cohen uses alienation as subject matter, but she does not seem to notice that Cohen's point of view as author is self-alienated. Thus, she notes that Breavman, the central character in The Favorite Game, is alienated. She traces the theme of alienation in Cohen's other works as well, but without studying the work itself as springing from the "chosen" self-alienated point of view implicit in Cohen's art.

Cohen has consciously chosen to alienate himself from certain aspects of the conventional world view. He has rejected the concept of a single personal identity; the idea

<sup>2</sup>Sandra Djwa, "Leonard Cohen: Black Romantic," Canadian Literature, 34 (1967), p.41.



of an inviolable ego, and has thereby removed himself from the traditional concept of reality. When a person is alienated from himself, it is usually desirable that a new and acceptable self-conception or identity replace the old one. When there is a separation between a person's self-conception and his sentient consciousness, it will likely result in a modification of behavior if the condition continues. When an individual chooses self-alienation as a mode of existence, the motive for the choice is important in determining how the alienation will be expressed. Each of these considerations is important to an appreciation of the self-alienated point of view exhibited in Cohen's art.

Self-conceptions are only partial, even in the most self-conscious individuals, and are subject to a kind of psychic rigor mortis which is maintained by habit. Most people become rather attached to their self-conception and tend to protect and reinforce it. This disposition is perhaps one of the most basic impulses of men in our society. It stems largely from traditional static notions of psychology and is reflected in such common phrases as "being somebody," "identity crisis," "a man must be himself," and "I want to be me." Running directly counter to this view are the less traditional perspectives of such writers as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Nietzsche is often quoted as saying: "being" is a fiction invented by those who suffer from "becoming." Kierkegaard never tired of making a similar distinction between "being" and "becoming." For such writers

identity and stasis are negative and contrary to life. Ego is a process of life; it is always "coming to pass" never "being," never "coming to be" because that would end the process and result in the death of a man's spirit or the end of life itself. Cohen is self-alienated and has actively rejected the value of a rigid identity for himself. In doing so, he has given up some of the acquired answers, values, tastes, and prejudices which had become part of his vision of self. To a certain extent this is a rejection of conditioned responses and habits which do so much to maintain the fiction of static identity. Cohen's rejection is willful, conscious, and selective. His self-alienation, therefore, takes on an aspect of role playing. It is perhaps for this reason that he is able to present convincing and highly perceptive portraits of alienated characters such as Breavman in The Favorite Game and F. and the narrator in Beautiful Losers.

The role playing aspect of Cohen's self presentation, as well as his use of masks and poses, must be distinguished from willed self-alienation which is created and maintained by a continuing process of negation. Several critics have referred to Cohen's role or pose and, as a result, missed a comprehensive understanding of his work. Michael Ondaatje comes closest to appreciating it when he writes: "He has put on and taken off his mask (in order to laugh at his pose) so often that the mask has become a part of him."<sup>3</sup> This

<sup>3</sup>Michael Ondaatje, Leonard Cohen (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p.61.

statement, which summarizes Ondaatje's assessment of Cohen's perspective, is good as far as it goes. However, the condition which causes one to adopt a mask is best described as alienation. A mask is something worn to hide our natural expression of feelings. The mask functions to protect us and to create certain responses in an observer. Our behavior may be consistent with the expression of the mask or at variance with it. Thus, a mask is superficial and does not necessarily involve any attempt by the man behind it to identify with the face he presents. Masks are useful for creating certain effects such as generating an air of ambiguity which veils intentions and undermines the expectations of a viewer. In The Favorite Game Cohen presents Breavman using a mask when he first addresses Shell in the cafeteria. Despite his agitation, Breavman maintains an exterior calm while expressing himself in a peculiar manner. The ambiguity of his behavior makes a forceful impression on Shell.<sup>4</sup> Breavman's apparent calm and his robot-like movements conflict with the novelty of his address vacillating as it does between the automaton repetition of "excuse me" and the personal and human "You're beautiful, I think."

A "pose," as Ondaatje distinguishes it, is the next step in complexity above the mask. We see Breavman and Krantz pose as they hunt Communist women. They wore "dark suits, vests which buttoned high on their shirts, gloves and

<sup>4</sup>Leonard Cohen, The Favorite Game (New York: Bantam, 1963) p. 163 and 173.

umbrellas."<sup>5</sup> They allow their pose to degenerate into comedy at a Communist meeting. There is, in any pose, a suggestion of parody. A pose is the superficial adoption of a set of mannerisms designed to create an effect which is usually comic or satiric, but occasionally a pose is used to veil intentions. If an individual takes his pose seriously, and people see through it, he becomes the object of scorn. If a person is conscious of his pose, and is using it, he may allow people to see through it in order to laugh at their scorn. It is one of the errors of our way of judging others that leads us to think the discovery of imposture raises us above the pretender. This is not always so, for in practice a pose may be used in such a way that the person calling attention to the imposture is apt to become the object of scorn himself as was the case with the Communist chairman who ousted Breavman and Krantz from the meeting. It is worth noting that Cohen has had many occasions to laugh at his critics for this very reason.

Beyond mere posing, we find the art of role-playing. The term has recently been taken over by sociologists, but the idea has not yet lost its significance. Banton, a noted social theorist, defines a role as "a system of rights and obligations, that is, as an abstraction to which the behavior of people will conform in varying degree."<sup>6</sup> In this sense

<sup>5</sup>Cohen, The Favorite Game, p.81.

<sup>6</sup>Michael Banton, Roles (London: Tavistock, 1968), p.21.

of the word Breavman is playing the role of a poet in The Favorite Game.

He read his sketches for small societies, large college groups, enlightened church meetings. He slept with as many pretty chairwomen as he could. He gave up conversation. He merely quoted himself. . . . The world was being hoaxed by a disciplined melancholy. . . . All that was necessary to be loved widely was to publish one's anxieties. The whole enterprise of art was a calculated display of suffering.<sup>7</sup>

Cohen often appears to play this same role in his own public life. In a more artful and theatrical way Breavman plays the role of Shell's lover. The important difference is that Breavman creates the "robot" lover, whereas the role of poet was already available for him to take over.<sup>8</sup> The business of creating a role and then playing it is peculiar to a self-alienated perspective.

The concept of willed alienation I am presenting here is the source of the desire to wear masks, strike poses, and adopt or create roles, both real and imaginary. Thus, Breavman's central position as an artist is his alienation. It might be excessive to suggest that The Favorite Game is strictly autobiographical, but at the same time, Cohen's position in relation to his work is similar to Breavman's relationship to his art. It is significant that the poems attributed to Breavman are taken from The Spice Box of Earth.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Cohen, The Favorite Game, pp.110-112.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp.181-187.

<sup>9</sup>Leonard Cohen, The Spice Box of Earth (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), p.57. See pages 180-184 in The Favorite Game.

It is also important to note the way Breavman turns himself and his women into art.

Cohen seems to turn a part of himself into art just as Breavman does. Ondaatje has mentioned that the "mask" is a part of him. Perhaps a more profitable way of examining this would be to point out that Cohen has created an entire personality which is at once himself and his finest work of art. There is nothing superficial or mask-like about this personality because it is an actual condition of being willfully created by the continual rejection of certain standards and values of the culture in which he finds himself. The superficial element one distinguishes in Cohen seems to be reserved for his public appearances as in the movie "Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen" in which he "puts us on." In other words, he wears our expectations like a robe the better to conceal himself. There is also a superficial or pose-like quality which lies behind the images of "Saint Leonard" and "the prince who needs a shave." These qualities find their way into his work where they tend to function as red herrings for the critic by disguising the individuality that created them. Thus, Cohen is apparently attempting to be a multi-dimensional man in the sense that he is a "different person" for those studying him depending on the motives, attitudes, and values they bring to bear in judging him. Cohen manipulates the responses of his critics by presenting a new mask or altering his pose each time they claim to have discovered him. A good example of this is the comment Cohen

wrote on William Kloman's article about him: "This is pure fantasy. Never heard of the man mentioned here. All good things, Leonard."<sup>10</sup> Cohen is all the faces he presents with equal sincerity regardless of our impressions as viewers. This is echoed in the lyric of "The Stranger Song," "I told you when I came I was a stranger."<sup>11</sup> He remains himself though he is someone else; he is somewhat vaguely referred to as Leonard Cohen, but no one knows who that is except perhaps Cohen, and even he may consider himself a stranger. The "who am I?" of identity seekers is blasphemy for the self-alienated because it tends to reinforce the fiction of "being" at the expense of "becoming." Thus, in Cohen's song, "Stories of the Street," we find:

And if by chance I wake at night  
And I ask you who I am  
O, take me to the slaughter house  
I will wait there with the lamb.<sup>12</sup>

In Cohen's work we find ourselves confronted by a writer who uses a variety of modes of existence ranging from mask adopting to self-creation and must resolve for ourselves the philosophical implications of this spectacle.

To some extent this fragmentation of Cohen is a problem for anyone studying his work, but it is essential to grasp this aspect of his point of view if we are to understand his

<sup>10</sup>William Kloman, "Leonard Cohen," Songs of Leonard Cohen, eds. Harvey Vinson and Ira Frielander, (New York: Collier, 1969), p.4.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.76.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p.45.

work. The reason for Cohen's choice of a self-alienated mode of existence seems to lie in his need to live his art and develop an art of living. It is probably in recognition of this tendency that many critics have described Cohen as a mere descendant of the decadent writers. Indeed, we are reminded of the famous quotation André Gide attributed to Oscar Wilde: "I put all my genius into my life: I put only my talent into my works."<sup>13</sup> It would be too simple, however, to drop Cohen in the black bag reserved for decadents and thereby dismiss him. Cohen's self-alienation prevents him from taking the fin de siècle ethics of the decadents seriously although he may often "pose" like a latter day Wilde. The self-alienated individual will reject the temptation to end his self-creation by adopting a particular set of static values or a consistent philosophical perspective. In contrast with this mode of existence, most people who become alienated tend to readjust in conformity with their ideal self-conception and the philosophical values they regard as indispensable, or they react aimlessly and despairingly when a comfortable adjustment cannot be made. Cohen apparently found alienation useful and augmented it.

Before Cohen's willed self-alienation can be seen clearly in the context of our culture, a number of historical and philosophical considerations must be dealt with. During the nineteenth century many cherished beliefs began to suffer

<sup>13</sup> André Gide, The Journals of André Gide, Vol. I: 1889-1924, trans. and editor, Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1956), p.169.



the erosion which befalls virtually everything that remains fixed for very long. In the realm of social philosophy Marx and Emile Durkheim developed a pair of theories which have become fused and confused in our present era. Marx was concerned with the alienation of the individual by forces within the social structure and devoted his energy to pointing the way to a new order in which human beings could supposedly realize their potential. In retrospect it seems the Marxist solution was somewhat romantic and optimistic. However, Marx did much to stimulate the study of those aspects of our society which tend to make life miserable. Emile Durkheim developed the idea of "anomie" which is a state of normlessness or lawlessness. Anomie is conceived to be a condition in which the individual cannot become integrated into a group due to the weakening of social norms and values. This leads to feelings of anxiety about what is expected of the individual by others in the group. As the action tends to be reciprocal, neither the individual or the other members of the group are comfortable. A person suffering from anomie experiences feelings of disorientation which often culminate in the loss of feelings of personal worth and suicide. These concepts, alienation and anomie, have become united by a curious process of simplification and both theories are subsumed under the single term "alienation." Attempts to avoid confusion make it necessary to differentiate between social alienation, which is imposed on the individual by the social order, and a personal alienation, which is imposed on an

individual as a result of his inability to successfully relate to other persons in a social group when the rules or norms are not clearly delineated. Both concepts are negative and critical of the relation between men and society. Modern social philosophy seems to have remained at this point of development and the practitioners of social science are apparently satisfied to collect statistical data to support their minor variations of the theory. Progress in this area has been made largely in the field of literature during this century.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century a number of literary artists began to deal with the problems of alienation in their works. This came about for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was a growing awareness of the complexity of human experience and a desire to portray this complexity in literature. At this same time artists began questioning the traditional forms of literature and became critical of what had once passed for "realistic" fiction. Basic to the social and personal concerns of authors at the turn of the century were a number of problems connected with the nature of the individual's relation to himself, to others, to the world, and to his experience of it. Dostoevsky's work foreshadowed the modern literary interest in the individual's strange relation to himself. Notes from Underground remains one of the most powerful expressions of this concern in modern literature. Kafka originated another line of thought which has influenced the writing of following

generations of artists. Both Dostoevsky and Kafka are examples of writers who portrayed the dilemma of the individual consciousness splitting under the pressure of life in modern society. The underground man in his despairing state of anomie scorns himself and the world. Kafka's characters are alienated from their humanity by dimly sketched forces unknown or not understood by the tormented themselves. Notably the style of both writers broke rather dramatically with the conventional literature of the period thereby reinforcing the idea that a new form of expression was necessary to describe a new vision of reality.

More recently the problems of self-conception and the individual's role in society have emerged into literature carrying with them a considerable amount of psychological and social sophistication. One of the classic works dealing with the individual's relation to his own life experiences, his art, other people, and society itself, is André Gide's Les Faux-Monnayeurs. Gide portrays the subtle interplay between the forces of tradition, family life, peer group pressure, education, religion, and social position in the counterfeiting of human instincts. The form of the novel itself is an attack on the conventional "realistic" novel of the period which provided readers with the illusion of gaining insight into life at the expense of genuine understanding. There are some interesting parallels between Gide's novel and Cohen's, The Favorite Game. Some of the expressions of alienation and the insight into alienated character in

Les Faux-Monnayeurs could be placed in the mouth of Breavman without alteration.

Nothing could be more different from me than myself. . . . I am constantly getting outside myself, and as I watch myself act I cannot understand how a person who acts is the same as the person who is watching him act, and who wonders in astonishment and doubt how he can be actor and watcher at the same moment.<sup>14</sup>

Such observation can be profitably compared to Breavman's experience with his "robot lover." There are other parallels between the novels which are also noteworthy. Les Faux-Monnayeurs is a novel about a novelist's experience of writing a novel entitled Les Faux-Monnayeurs. The author in the novel is named Edouard and, although he is not Gide himself, he expresses many of Gide's ideas and makes use of Gide's past experience to such an extent that the character has often been confused with Gide. In The Favorite Game Cohen presents Breavman as the main character in a novel which gives the impression of being a veiled autobiography. The novel is supposedly narrated by Breavman but as Cohen is the author the implication is that the author is the character. Like Gide, Cohen uses his style and form as a comment on itself and on popular literary practice. Thus, Cohen's novel is flagrantly derivative and yet original in a way that tends to confound the standard methods of literary evaluation which are based on certain tastes and principles Cohen apparently rejects. Such parallels do not in themselves indicate a

<sup>14</sup> André Gide, The Counterfeiters with Journal of "The Counterfeiters," trans. Dorothy Bussy and Justin O'Brien (New York: Modern Library, 1955), pp.70-71.

direct link between Cohen and Gide, but are an indication of the continuing interest of writers in the individual's relation to himself and concern for how this relation is best portrayed through the use of literary techniques.

Gide was writing partially in response to the nineteenth century values of "character and good breeding" which tended to support Novalis' comment: "Character is fate." The values Gide held up in opposition to notions of "character" and sophistication were the ideals of genuine or authentic expression of individual life. Initially these ideals were useful, especially when the cult of "character" was threatening to drown the individual in stagnant ponds of tradition and respectability. However, the public was not interested in Gide's philosophy. The popularization of modern personality theory gave rise to a new problem: the notion of possessing a "flexible personality," that particularly objectionable state which makes virtues of mediocrity and compromise, replaced "character," which had made virtues of stagnation and heredity. Recently the "flexible personality" has become less popular and "identity" has arrived to save us from perishing in schizophrenic despair, or at least this is what we are asked to believe. It is not surprising that the modern concept of identity should be associated with the term "authenticity" as though it guaranteed a solution to the problems of personal worth and meaning. As is too often the case with an interesting idea, the concept of identity has been popularized. The original meaning of identity,

being a genuine and authentic expression of individual experience and feeling, has been undermined by simplistic explanations of "how to" achieve identity. The reduction of intuitive self-creation to a facile social technique, which properly used is said to guarantee respect, love, and money, is one of the peculiar activities of our culture which Cohen parodies in both his poetry and prose. This is especially noticeable in Beautiful Losers where F. reduces the process of becoming a Saint to fifteen minute exercises every day. Too often identity comes to mean identification with others who exhibit a style or manner which impresses the viewer. The individual identifies with the style strongly and convinces himself that such an "identity" must be the "real" him; the genuine and absolutely authentic expression of his being. Such psychic choreography is justified by the strong "feelings" the individual has about the new identity. The fiction of "being" remains, only the semantics have changed. Even where "becoming" is expressed as an ideal it is usually seen as a finite process ending in "fulfillment;" as though men were so many plastic cups to be filled with the instant coffee of life, or crystal decanters to be filled with the essence of life; it all depends on one's sympathies. Beneath the veil of new terminology we recognize the same problem that existed a century ago when men sought to improve their character by adopting the manners and style of a respectable gentleman. All that has changed is the individual's right to switch from one identity to another in

order to find his "real" self, rather like a neurotic actor looking for the perfect role. Self-conceptions remain static and imposed alienation becomes more widespread.

Cohen rejects the philosophy of static identity which he inherited from the past and in his work he addresses the problem of redefining the nature of man's relation to the world. Cohen's relation to himself and the world is particularly interesting as it takes social existence into consideration as well as the nature of reality itself. Alienation is not always lamented by Cohen. It is seen as a natural condition, perhaps even a desirable one once we get used to it. We must note, for example, that Breavman's alienation presents him with problems in The Favorite Game, but it is also the source of his greatest triumphs. Much of the novel portrays Breavman learning to use his alienation in order to create art. His alienation makes his art formalistic and lacking in the freedom characteristic of a liberated imagination, but this same alienation is what allows him to discover the intimation of a secret of art and life in Liza's favorite game. Because of his alienation Breavman is not able to love others and, as a result, he experiences suffering and loneliness, yet alienation itself is not condemned. At the end of the novel we read that Breavman will one day experience guilt when he recognizes his responsibility for the suffering of Martin and Shell.<sup>15</sup> Connected with this

<sup>15</sup>Cohen, The Favorite Game, p.248.

we also see, in Liza's favorite game, an embryonic image of what his art will be in the future. Breavman will eventually realize that he must reject certain aspects of his ego for the sake of art and humanity, thereby becoming willfully self-alienated. Thus, the negative aspects of Breavman's alienation, his use of women as objects, his callous and inconsiderate mystification of Martin Stark and others, as well as his use of himself as a foil for his own ego, are all related to his inability to allow his alienation to increase to the point where he transcends being a mere aesthetic desperado. Throughout the novel Breavman is unable to willfully create himself through the process of a continuing negation of his limiting qualities. He is not able to surrender to the necessity of "becoming" which would make him more accessible to others and, simultaneously, make it possible for him to understand the "reality" of others as human beings, rather than as mere objects to be reworked into art.

Cohen has transcended Breavman's state of alienation. Breavman has only reached the stage of being able to "create" a role and then play it rather than merely adopt existing roles. Cohen has recognized the moral and ethical problems inherent in this process by affirming the responsibility of the self-alienated for what he becomes and how this affects those he comes in contact with. Lest there be some doubt as to whether Cohen has in fact gone beyond Breavman's situation, an examination of Cohen's use of a willed self-alienated perspective is in order.



The best example of Cohen's use of his point of view is found in The Favorite Game. Breavman has created a lover for Shell and he watches his creation with envy.

He was a professional, he knew how to build a lover to court her . . . . He had no contempt for the robot lover who made every night a celebration and any meal he took a feast. He was a skillful product, riveted with care, whom Breavman wouldn't have minded being himself. He approved of the lover's tenderness, was even envious of some of the things the lover said, as though he were a wit Breavman had invited for dinner.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, however, he is the lover.

Breavman became his deputy. He returned to his watch tower an hour every few days to fill in his journal. He wrote quickly and blindly, disbelieving what he was doing, like a thrice-failed suicide looking for razor blades.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately for Breavman, his artistic obsession is too great for him to overcome. He is unable to become the lover completely and begins to feel alienated by the role he created for himself. He imagines writing to Shell:

My darling Shell there is someone lost in me whom I drowned stupidly in risky games a while ago--I would like to bring him to you . . . . But as I say he is drowned, or crumpled in cowardly sleep, heavily medicated, dreamless, his ears jammed with seaweed or cotton--I don't even know the location of the body, except that sometimes he stirs like a starving foetus in my heart when I remember you dressing or at work in the kitchen. That's all I can write . . . . I would have liked to bring him to you--not this page, not this regret.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Cohen, The Favorite Game, p.181.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., P.190.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp.190-191.

Thus, Breavman has not achieved willed self-alienation because he fails to recognize the limitation of his obsession and willfully reject it. We, as readers, are aware of Cohen who, as author, is at once Breavman and the created lover because he created both of them from his own experience and imagination. It is obvious from this, and the conclusion of the novel, that Cohen has transcended the limitations of Breavman's condition. Thus, Cohen's willed self-alienation reveals itself in the presentation of the novel.

Ondaatje points out that the novel is written in the third person as an autobiography from Breavman's point of view.<sup>19</sup> This is implicit rather than explicit in the book's presentation, and there is an ambiguity involved. This ambiguity consists of a tension which is built into the creation of the art. If we admit the possibility that Cohen was Breavman while he wrote the book, the incredible insight into Breavman's character is explained. If at the same time Cohen was being himself, the conscious art and precision of the work is explained. The tension which is created by the dual consciousness at the center of the work gives rise to the ambiguous tone which informs the novel. This tone consists of a mixed sympathy for and a detachment from, the character, Breavman. In other words, the novel works as well as it does because Breavman is an actual manifestation of Cohen's self and because Cohen is able to separate

<sup>19</sup>Ondaatje, Leonard Cohen, p.24.

himself from this personality at will. Thus, Cohen's relation to his art is similar, but not identical, to Breavman's relation to his created "robot lover." Cohen can either manipulate Breavman or sympathize with him at will, just as Breavman can envy and eventually destroy his created lover. In both cases the artist is altering himself. However, Breavman is not able to overcome his limiting aesthetic obsession and this reinforces his ego-centrism. In contrast to Breavman, Cohen's willful manipulation of the ego at the center of the art is evidence of a type of activity peculiar to a willed self-alienated point of view. The presentation of the novel as an autobiography from Breavman's point of view supports the observation made earlier that Breavman eventually develops self-alienation to the stage where it is identical to Cohen's point of view. This is rather like saying Breavman eventually "becomes" Cohen; which again supports the notion that Cohen is both Breavman and himself at the same time.

Willed self-alienation is radically opposed to conventional perspectives which place the static ego at the center of reality. Cohen's particular form of alienation represents a liberation from the tyranny of a traditional point of view. His perspective undermines the foundations of traditional reality by modifying the ego and therefore the source of value in reality. Thus, alienation is necessarily a relative and moral term which I use here without negative intention, but rather out of the necessity of delineating a

perspective which is unfamiliar to most people. The main focus of Cohen's willed self-alienation seems to be directed toward an attempt to see the world through the eyes of another who is simultaneously himself. This is the ideal of the artist who wishes to experience more than one personal reality. Before beginning an exploration of the attitude toward reality displayed in Cohen's work, it is important to note the relation of alienation to reality and how it affects social consciousness.

In modern society "identity" is almost a function of the appearance of people's clothing. What a man feels, the flux of his ideas, and the darkness of his dreams, has no existence as far as others are concerned unless he can reveal them. As it is technically impossible to communicate perfectly and exactly, an element of illusion enters between men which encourages them to infer what others feel and think. In any society the relation of one person to another is likely to be a function of the illusion each responds to. Once this is realized, public "identity" is likely to be based on expedience and comfort rather than genuine experience and expression. In our society men have long shaped themselves to fit the patterns prescribed by tradition and have sought to ensure that others did the same. However, there are always times when the social order is questioned and men seek to break out of the prescriptions of society. Usually this has led to revolutions of various kinds which attack basic concepts of the conventional vision of the

world and man. Frequently the result is the formulation of a philosophy that professes either to guarantee individual rights or to guard the rights of the people. Doctrines of individualism and fellowship are alike inadequate. Both fail to grasp the essence of human existence in its broadest sense. Cohen ascribes to neither of these doctrines and yet is concerned about how both the individual and society are affected by the tyranny of illusion. Implicit in his work are a number of ideas which taken together seem to represent Cohen's ideas on reality and the individual.

In our society people feel estranged from one another. A feeling of alienation from others is largely a result of doubting their "reality." As this doubt is well founded, for no two realities are alike, this particular aspect of the problem is not to be solved and a moment's reflection reveals that it would not enrich human experience if it were. The feeling of isolation, however, is a problem. It is best dealt with by avoiding "formality." When large numbers of people respond to a set of social "forms" they easily delude themselves into believing they are a part of some genuinely human enterprise. On the other hand, complete informality, the shattering of appearance, and giving free rein to personal inclinations is not a solution either. People need social forms in order to gain a knowledge of themselves even if they must eventually reject the very forms that shaped them. It is not possible to exist in a social vacuum.

Humans are social animals, but they are also separate manifestations of life. When people place more value on the fictions of "social order," and even speak of the "social organism," the individual life suffers. Unfortunately the reverse is also true. In situations where individualism, with its attendant ego orientation, is given too much value, those members of society not strong enough to assert their interests suffer. Ultimately, it is the individual life, our own, that we are closest to and we owe our efforts to the maintenance of that life. The personality we acquire with all its attendant biases, prejudices and illusions must, when necessary, be modified to permit life to manifest itself through the "forms" of personality in a way that will give it value for others. For if a man is merely a personality, simply a collection of principles, values, and verbal formulas; if he is only a few dollars worth of chemicals and some water; if he is just an animal, then he is a biological automaton and not a sentient being. A man must be conscious of his own sensation of living in such a way that others value his life, and as they recognize its worth to themselves, both society and meaning come into existence. Without this relation of one to another we would be predatory carnivores in some wilderness. Man is conscious of his own life. He is aware that others have this consciousness only because they may reveal it through their actions toward himself. This is the reciprocal situation which must lie at the center of human society. The various theories of

reciprocity that have emerged from Plato to Marx have all been variations on this theme, but too often the individual life has been sacrificed to the social order, even though it was concern for the individual which prompted the creation of the order in the first place. Our modern society generates extra problems which contribute to the estrangement of its members from one another.

The mass and class personality of totalitarianism, or the collective and group personality of democracy, are both annihilations of life which is exclusively individual. Life only exists in single individuals; regardless of social organization, each life is separate and distinct. To unite people in personality, in ideals, or in principles, is to create the illusion of unity and this is the most disastrous form illusion can take. It is this mass sameness of form which causes each individual life to be valued less by its possessor and by others.

Consciousness of the separation between self and others may be the blessing of our age if it leads to an effort to generate a sense of the life possessed by the individual. The moment we succumb to a fiction of collective purpose and absolute meaning we are lost in illusion. Paradoxically, the moment we despair of generating meaning or distinguishing purpose we are lost in confusion. In order to make the fundamental differences between personal realities unimportant in social relations, each person must be self-creative so that others will value the individual more for the life

he manifests through the forms of personality than for the form itself.

Life is not understood, but its existence is indisputable. The form we create for it is "real" only if it illuminates our sense of possessing life; that is all we can possess. This is echoed in Cohen's poetry. For example, in "The Flowers that I left in the Ground" he asks, "Who owns anything he has not made?"<sup>20</sup> The willful modification of personal "form" represents an attempt to create an impression on the viewer which will reveal the life and consciousness that creates new forms. Thus, Cohen's interest in living his art, or developing an art of living, is related to several of the major moral and social concerns of our time.

The stress on "will" in Cohen's work is important because it is central to his willed self-alienated point of view. In Cohen, will operates primarily through a process of negation. This might be referred to as "affirmation through negation." For example, Cohen's rejection of the idea of a single personal identity affirms other possible modes of personal existence whether they are explicitly formulated or not. Because Cohen's mode of personal existence is in constant flux, it is not possible to reduce it to a simple formulation. However, it may be presented implicitly in his art where it gives life to the form. This process of negation and its connection with willful self-alienation is best illustrated in Beautiful Losers.

<sup>20</sup>Cohen, Spice Box of Earth, p.5.



Auden once remarked that a poet is not someone who has something to say, but someone who enjoys throwing words in the air and seeing what emerges. Indeed, the delight in finding a way out of conventional semantic mazes is equal to discovering new frontiers. Because "reality" is largely structured by language, the poet must break down existing patterns to introduce the dimensions of other possible realities. Cohen seems to throw himself up in pieces and enjoy the kaleidoscopic visions and experiences resulting from the process. It will be noted that self-conceptions are largely a function of what might be called "interior monologues" and Cohen's mode of existence therefore resembles the creation of poetry. The importance of recognizing this tendency in Cohen, to collapse his self-conception into fragments and then to recreate himself in a different form, is especially important in appreciating Beautiful Losers. The novel centers in the narrator who is rejecting his old vision of reality and alienating himself from his static self-conception. In order to do this he has to learn to overcome both his tendency to rationalize and his faith in logic. He must learn to stop using his mind like a needle that "sews the world together."<sup>21</sup> He must try over and over again to understand the supra-rational logic of F.'s existence which reduces rationality to absurdity. F. points to the singularity of things and insists that it is

<sup>21</sup> Leonard Cohen, Beautiful Losers (New York: Bantam, 1967), pp. 20-24.

not logical to connect impressions into some kind of patchwork reality. He denies the tendency of a rational mind to join and connect things in terms of inferred causality. He warns the narrator: "Connect nothing. Place things side by side on your arborite table, if you must, but connect nothing!"<sup>22</sup> In the end, the narrator achieves a new vision. He becomes someone else, but still has the capacity to see with the eyes of his old self through memory of past experience. Like Catherine's uncle he understands the prayer:

I change  
I am the same  
I change  
I am the same<sup>23</sup>

The key to his transformation was his willful rejection of the rational tendency which he had been conditioned to accept. Once he learned that life would not end with the loss of a concrete identity supported by mental habit, he was freed from the tyranny of self. Motivated by a desire to understand the reality of F. and Edith, he willed his transformation. His rational mind had failed him and his understanding of himself, F., and Edith is complete only when he succeeds in willfully alienating himself. Thus, he has changed and is the same. It is notable that the narrator eventually achieves his new vision of reality by a surrender of rationality which takes on the characteristics of a leap of faith. He achieves "grace," a balance in the chaos of his existence, only by

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p.21.

<sup>23</sup>Cohen, Beautiful Losers, pp.165-167.

willfully rejecting the rationalism which defended his static identity with its attendant values.

As in The Favorite Game, we as readers are conscious of Cohen, who created the narrator, F., and Edith. As the author, he can be the narrator or any of the other characters with a freedom which is lacking in any but a willfully self-alienated point of view. He is not trapped by the tyranny of a static ego which is identical to a single self-conception. As a result, Cohen can manipulate his ego without suffering a loss of identity or a conflict of perspective. The ego manipulation changes the form of his identity but does not eliminate it. He is the character he portrays and is not, like most authors, merely playing the roles of his characters. By making characters out of different aspects of his alienated self, he is avoiding a simple analytical stance and is constantly collapsing and synthesizing from one identity to another. Yet, though he changes, he remains the same. This accounts for the singular unity of Beautiful Losers.

Cohen's perspective is detached and sympathetic rather than committed and critical. There is no conflict of perspective in Cohen's work because perspectives are reduced to the imaginative development of various qualities inherent in a single individual. Viewed this way perspectives can never be conflicting any more than the dimension of time conflicts with space. Conflicts are only apparent when persons are "committed" to a perspective and are unable or unwilling to change or "become" other than they are. This is fundamental

to the problems of personal reality and value. Implicit in Cohen's work is the recognition that the irrational leap of imagination which permits an individual to create a new vision of reality will not destroy the individual consciousness at the center of the creation. This contrasts with static conceptions of reality which lead people to believe that such an experience would undermine all values and end in mere delusions. Cohen is able to alter himself at will and yet remain the same: the consciousness of life at the center of personal form is fluid, only the form changes. Even if the manifestation of consciousness is absurd or delusional, the integrity of the life at its center is not in doubt. Thus, Cohen's creation is not based on the values of fixed personal visions, but rather, because of his willed self-alienated point of view he becomes his creation thereby giving life to a created form which reveals its value in reality through the response of a viewer. In a surreal context this is what F./narrator, the character made up of a fusion of F. and the narrator, does in Beautiful Losers when he transforms himself into a Ray Charles movie; he has become what he experienced because his identity is totally fluid. It is the form he gives his life which causes riots on the Main and heralds the final revolution.<sup>24</sup>

Cohen's willed self-alienation is an extremely dynamic mode of existence. It makes it possible for him to remain detached from the objects of his interest and yet be extremely

<sup>24</sup>Cohen, Beautiful Losers, pp.300-306.

sympathetic. In his work Cohen deals with many of our contemporary problems in a way which permits the reader to experience the dynamic aspect of human existence in relation to traditional static visions of reality and their accompanying values. Cohen's work also exhibits a scheme of values which is consistent with his willed self-alienation. These values are primarily aesthetic.

## II

Cohen's aestheticism emerges from his willed self-alienated perspective. His aesthetic values involve a temporal quality which is related to the rejection of conventional reality. In his study of alienation, Kenneth Kenniston gives the following description of aestheticism.

By "aesthetic" I do not necessarily mean specifically artistic (though many alienated subjects do aspire "somehow to express all, or some of what I feel about life"), but rather those goals and values whose main temporal focus is in the present, whose primary source is the self, and whose chief aim is the development of sentience, awareness, expression, and feeling. So defined, aesthetic values are those which do not require a distant future for their attainment: they can be cultivated and enjoyed in the present; they require no psychic savings account with interest payable after many years; they involve activities which can be enjoyed for their own sake and not because they lead to some desirable future. Aesthetic values contrast sharply with instrumental values that is, with values which stress cultivation of present sacrifice and control for the sake of the future.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Kenniston, The Uncommitted, pp.71-72.

It is my contention that Cohen has rejected "instrumental values" and has developed an aesthetic perspective. There is a direct connection between aesthetic values with their emphasis on the present and an alienated outlook. For example, the notion of "being" naturally gives rise to preoccupation with "static" single moments whereas the idea of "becoming" is consistent with the concept of the more dynamic "expanded moment" or "eternal moment" in which all life is coming to pass in the continuing moment of consciousness.

Despite similarities of basic values, aestheticism is not identical to the modern existentialist vision. The existentialist is likely to concern himself initially with a sense of the universe being God forsaken. His loss of faith in any absolute meaning and purpose sends him on a search for new absolutes or on a tirade against the absurdity of life. In spite of the association of such terms as "becoming" and "authenticity" with existential philosophy, the basic existential vision is almost exclusively negative. On the other hand, aestheticism may be distinguished from simple hedonism which is primarily concerned with physical gratification and pleasure. The aesthetic perspective may be seen as a positive frame of reference despite the fact that aestheticism in our culture requires an active rejection of dominant social values. Certainly, there are many indications in Cohen's work of his sympathy with the existential vision. At the same time, however, Cohen's aestheticism saves him from a morbid negative vision of the kind long faced apostles

of anxiety and psychic torment peddle to the public as existential despair. The aesthetic values underlying Cohen's work represent an attempt to cope with a meaningless world in a way that will either generate a new basis for meaning or make meaninglessness unimportant. Unlike the existentialist who considers freedom a burden and meaninglessness as cause for despair, Cohen accepts both freedom and meaninglessness as natural states which are no more alarming than the facts of time and space. Concentration on the moment and things that can be achieved and enjoyed in the present always presents the threat of falling into an easy hedonism. The meaningless confusion of the world always presents a temptation to despair. In the face of these dangers Cohen balances his existence.

Cohen is unlike those who have merely rejected the relevance of the past and future in order to live in the present. Certainly, the twentieth century and especially the last two decades have revealed that the present is a popular place to live. This seems to be the result of a growing disenchantment with the nineteenth century values that have permeated the basic structure of western culture. The new knowledge of social science, the penetrating insights into psychology, and the experience of modern living have exposed the foundations of social structure and they have been judged as illusory, relative, and, at best, tentative. This has created a certain amount of anxiety among those who value permanency, stability, and absolutes. This anxiety is

augmented by the decline of the fiction of progress which traditionally made history the saviour of humanity. Veneration of the past has turned into errant romanticism and planning has become part of the utopian schemes of those who have not given up faith in historiosophy. Though the future always arrives to destroy old hopes and the past is seen as a pageant of waste and failure, the conventional view of the desirability of planning for the future and venerating the past has persisted. The persistence of this view is centered in the static psychology of the people supporting it; they see society as an extendible Jacob's ladder firmly anchored in the past to which we need only add a few more rungs to reach heaven. The conventional attitude which emphasizes present sacrifice for the sake of the future is based on the assumption that the people making the sacrifices and plans now will be the same people in the future. History conspires against this; everyone changes. Cohen, like many people in these times, recognizes the futility of the conventional view, especially its reliance on time worn concepts of social stability and personal consistency. He knows that he will change even though he remains the same. He also knows that despite the plans of men, society changes even though it remains a society. Cohen is self-alienated to the extent that he is conscious of his disinterest in the future as a repository for the someday projects of frustration and to the extent that he shapes his changing self from moment-to-moment within the eternal present of consciousness and life. Most of



those who reject "instrumental values" become victims of history, and are modified by external necessity. They become alienated by forces outside themselves. Cohen is aware of this trap and has avoided it by being willfully self-alienated. He will escape being history's pawn by constantly transforming himself, not into what necessity demands, but rather, into a personality that uses necessity as a tool to achieve experience and art. The deterministic implications of this statement are not to be overlooked because they bear directly on the values inherent in Cohen's art. The aesthete who lives in the present and says that experience and necessity have determined his vision of the world, claims he is not responsible for the world as he finds it and, in any event, is not free to change anything. Cohen's response is to turn the proposition on its head. He does not deny necessity or change, and his work, especially The Favorite Game, reveals his understanding of personal determinism. Choice and responsibility are not denied by Cohen because he views necessity and determinism as facts which can be used by the individual in changing himself and the world. Thus, as gravity makes flight possible, in Liza's favorite game gravity is necessary for the creation of beauty.

Cohen's willed self-alienation and aesthetic perspective are almost categorically opposed to the dominant conventional concept of static identity and instrumental values. In relation to the literary and philosophical thought of the last century, Cohen's views are not so strikingly unique.

However, there are significant features in his work which set him apart from his literary predecessors and most of his contemporaries. There have been many attempts to distinguish the unusual qualities of Cohen's work but few have been particularly successful. One of the most perceptive of Cohen's critics is Sandra Djwa who has noticed some of the peculiarities of Cohen's aesthetic vision and writes:

Reading through Cohen's work we become aware of an unsatisfied search for an absolute. In his world there are no fixed values, spiritual or sensual, that stand beyond the transitory moment, and the moment itself, experience made myth, blends imperceptibly with other moments and other mythologies, so that in the shifting the values change, leaving only the value of experience made art.<sup>26</sup>

Others have recognized this in Cohen as well, but the motive force behind the aesthetic perspective has been viewed either as a pose (Ondaatje), or as part of a literary tradition stemming from the decadent romantics and Baudelaire (Djwa). The difference between Cohen and the decadents, however, is that he has willfully alienated himself; he has control. He is more like the marquis deSade than one of the decadents. They, in their condition, were the victims of a social order that alienated them and imposed their condition upon them. They became victims of history. The decadents lacked the modern psychological perspective and the vocabulary which could externalize the experience of alienation and enable them to analyse it. Their tendency was to rationalize or romanticize rather than analyze, and they most often ended

<sup>26</sup>Djwa, "Leonard Cohen: Black Romantic," Canadian Literature, 34, p.22.

in merely reacting against the forces that seemed to cause their problems and discomfort. Cohen has the advantage of a century of literature, philosophy, and science behind him which makes it unlikely that he would make the same errors as the decadents. The cult of art for art's sake bred a number of limitations that writers were well aware of shortly after the turn of the century. Cohen, in both his alienation and aestheticism, is not merely continuing a weak literary tradition; he is responding to the present time in a way that makes use of inevitable alienation and the general disposition of people in our society to rely on appearances and outward forms. Thus, Cohen's aestheticism is rather different than that of the decadents.

Cohen is very conscious of his condition and its source. This is revealed clearly in his writing. We see a limited portrayal of the aesthetic perspective in The Favorite Game. Breavman's aestheticism begins to emerge early in his childhood and is clearly related to his awakening sexuality. This is amusingly portrayed near the beginning of The Favorite Game. In the midst of the wartime game of Germans, torture, and red string whips, Breavman suddenly finds himself aware of the delight in perfect form which his mother "sought in mirrors and windows and hub-caps."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cohen, The Favorite Game, p.3.

Breavman watched the naked form of Liza,

. . . and the cot disappeared from under her and she floated in the autumnal gloom of the garage, two feet above the stone floor.

Oh my, my, my.

Breavman didn't take his turn at whipping. There were white flowers growing out of all her pores.<sup>28</sup>

Breavman's friend, Krantz, is also affected by the scene but refuses to admit it. Breavman insists that Liza is "perfect"; Krantz plugs his ears and runs away.

Breavman's interest in perfect forms of beauty leads him to a preoccupation with fixed moments which is recognized as a limitation early in the book.

Here is a movie filled with the bodies of his family. . . . His mother steps back. . . . She thinks she is out of focus.

Breavman stops the film to study her and her face is eaten by a spreading orange-rimmed stain as the film melts. . . .

Breavman is mutilating the film in his efforts at history. . . .

The movie runs night and day. Be careful, blood, be careful.<sup>29</sup>

Breavman is always trying to stop the movie which runs in his mind; he mutilates life in his efforts at art. He enjoys the stillness of paintings.

Breavman loves the pictures of Henri Rousseau, the way he stops time.

<sup>28</sup>Cohen, The Favorite Game, p.14.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp.5-6.

Always is the word that must be used. The lion will always be sniffing the robes of the gypsy, there will be no attack, no guts on the sand.<sup>30</sup>

We see a more developed phase of Breavman's aestheticism in the description of his thoughts during one of the midnight car rides with Krantz.

Now, Breavman, here is the proposition: Let us suppose that you could spend the rest of your life exactly as you are at this very minute, in this car hurtling toward brush country, at this precise spot on the road beside a row of white guide posts, always going past these posts at eighty, this jukebox song of rejection pumping, this particular sky and clouds and stars, your mind including this immediate cross-section of memory--which would you choose? Fifty more years of this car ride, or fifty more of achievement and failure?

And Breavman never hesitated in his choice.

Let it go on as it is right now.<sup>31</sup>

It must be stressed that this is a limited expression of Breavman's aesthetic perspective. He eventually moves beyond this point. It is important to note the word "choice" in this passage. It is one of the early indications of Breavman's responsibility for his position. He could have conformed to the instrumental values of achievement and failure as Krantz eventually did. Breavman, however, "chose" not to conform; he is self-alienated.

Despite his self-alienation, Breavman's aestheticism remains limited because of his insistence on maintaining his ego at the expense of necessity. His combination of

<sup>30</sup>Cohen, The Favorite Game, p.61.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p.104.

alienation from conventional views and his artistic obsession with beauty make his vision romantic. He believes he can change the world with poetry. When his romantic veil is threatened by reality he must move on.

Some say that no one ever leaves Montreal, for that city, like Canada itself, is designed to preserve the past, a past that happened somewhere else.

This past is not preserved in the buildings or monuments, which fall easily to profit, but in the minds of her citizens. The clothes they wear, the jobs they perform are only the disguises of fashion. Each man speaks his father's tongue. . . .

So the streets change swiftly, the skyscrapers climb into silhouettes against the St. Lawrence, but it is somehow unreal and no one believes it, because in Montreal there is no present tense, there is only the past claiming victories.

Breavman fled the city.<sup>32</sup>

He also fled his family. The city refused to accept the glory and mystery he had tried to impose on it. Montreal refused to remain still; the past kept turning the present into another form of itself and the people, his family, chose to live in the past behind walls of tradition, fashion, and respectability.

Breavman condemns his uncles who do not share his romantic vision. They did not realize that "their nobility was insecure because it rested on inheritance and not moment-to-moment creation in the face of annihilation."<sup>33</sup> This same condemnation, however, reveals that Breavman's aesthetic vision is becoming a more realistic point of view. Breavman

<sup>32</sup>Cohen, The Favorite Game, p.104.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p.130.

recognizes in the beauty of religious ritual a living art form which must be maintained from moment-to-moment if it is not to dissolve in chaos. This recognition is not extended by Breavman to the point where he understands the relation of art to life outside the synagogue. Toward the end of the novel, however, his attitude has changed in ways that lead him toward a glimpse of the aesthetic truth.

Breavman's affair with Shell represents the turning point in his history. Initially Breavman wanted Shell because he desired comfort. He needed Shell to confirm his romantic vision and she was as happy to be his heroine as he was to be her hero. Eventually, Breavman realizes that the comfort and satisfaction provided by Shell are leading him to a living death. He finds he would rather live in expectation and this is why he writes:

Dearest Shell, if you let me I'd always keep you four hundred miles away and write you pretty poems and letters. That's true. I'm afraid to live any place but in expectation. I'm no life-risk.<sup>34</sup>

He has discovered an absolute in change. Everything changes and all experience is the varied sensation of change; change is necessary if we are to have experience. Breavman wishes to live in the expanded moment; the moment between the past with its beautiful memories and the future we face with expectation. We are always conscious in that single moment which contains our life and power to create. Satiation means comfort and comfort means stasis. It is a form of

<sup>34</sup>Cohen, The Favorite Game, p.239.

stagnation wherein the individual stops creating himself and falls victim to time and habit. Breavman leaves Shell because she offered him comfort; she acknowledged him as her prince and flattered his ego. He knew, however, that it could not last; that he would eventually become disillusioned. At four hundred miles distance he can always love and she can remain forever fair in his memory, while at the same time, they both shall change. The parallel to "The Grecian Urn" and "The Statue and the Bust" cannot be overlooked, but the difference in the attitude toward change is important. Breavman tells Shell in the letter, "something wants to begin in me."<sup>35</sup> He does not know what it is but knows he will change. If "instrumental values" involve "present sacrifice for the sake of the future," Breavman's aesthetic values caused him to sacrifice Shell for the sake of the moment. Implicit in Breavman's desire to live in expectation, rather than possession, is the dynamic element which raises him slightly above simple aestheticism. From this stage on Breavman will no longer find static and perfect moments rewarding. He is not happy with Patricia, he can no longer enjoy the simple satisfactions of being a voyeur poet.<sup>36</sup> He must find a new way of dealing with the world and the people in it.

Breavman's sudden memory of Liza's favorite game is the key that eventually will help free him from his self-

<sup>35</sup>Cohen, The Favorite Game, p.240.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., pp.242-244.



alienated condition with its attendant egocentrism. When Bertha, who represents the force at the center of life, threw the other children, they necessarily had to fall into the snow. The object of the game was to control the fall in a way that altered the experience; that created the most pleasing impression. Breavman is at the point where he will learn to surrender to the "necessity" of change by willfully modifying himself. He will learn to change and create himself from moment-to-moment in a way that will control the impression he makes on others and the world. Thus, his alienation and aestheticism are about to become focused in a new perspective when the novel comes to a close. It is only at the end of the story that we see him approaching an understanding of his art. It is also at this point that Breavman enters a new plane of awareness as his newly developing perspective of combined aestheticism and willed self-alienation bring him an understanding of his responsibility for the suffering he caused others.

Cohen's presentation of Breavman is only a limited portrayal of his point of view. Cohen has moved far beyond Breavman in his fusion of willed self-alienation and the aesthetic perspective. It is important to bear in mind that alienation leads to the aesthetic perspective, and that self-creation, as a control of the necessity of change, is used to expand the moment. The culmination of this aesthetic perspective is presented in Beautiful Losers.

The basic temporal focus of any aesthetic perspective is the present. The present, however, is largely an imaginative concept. The past is as factual as yesterday's breakfast and the future is both as uncertain as life in a plane crash and as certain as the next date on a calendar. The present exists only in relation to memory of the past and expectation of the future. The memory of the past may be extended to include the habits and values which we carry with us from the past as we meet the future. The nature of what we conceive to be reality is determined by the values we acquire as we move from the past into the future. Our expectations of the future will either be realized or frustrated depending on whether or not we have acquired values which make our understanding of life and its relation to time consistent with the inevitability of the future arriving to change what already exists. The usual limitation connected with simple aestheticism is a preoccupation with single moments at the expense of the dynamic aspects of life. This view is basically romantic because it places a premium on the feelings of the moment in a way that tries to deny time for the sake of personal visions of reality, meaning, and value. The romantic, for this reason, cannot bear to face the inevitability of time and the possibility that the future may not support his precarious self-centered vision.

Cohen removes some of the romantic element from his aesthetic vision. He apparently recognizes the necessity of time. His main temporal focus is the present moment, but

he is aware that it is the imaginative present moment of consciousness where all men must live. This is revealed most clearly in Cohen's portrait of the fused characters, F./narrator, in Beautiful Losers.

His presence was like the shape of an hourglass, strongest where it was smallest. And that point where he was most absent, that's when the gasps started, because the future streams through that point, going both ways. That is the beautiful waist of the hourglass! That is the point of clear light! Let it change forever what we do not know! For a lovely briefness all the sand is compressed in the stem between the two flasks! Ah, this is not a second chance. For all the time it takes to launch a sigh he allowed the spectators a vision of All Chances At Once!<sup>37</sup>

This vision of the character becoming the expanded moment of consciousness seems to be the essence of Cohen's aesthetic perspective. In this image of the hourglass we see the dynamic aspect of Cohen's aestheticism. The flasks of the hourglass represent the past and the future but, the future streams through the waist of the hourglass "going both ways." Implicit in this vision is the understanding that the past will continue to exist in the future; the future "becomes" the past. In other words, the past modifies the "chances" the future makes possible and the future can be modified by altering the present streaming moment in a way that will change the future as it is "becoming" past so that the possibilities or choices of the future will be consistent with the life and will. Thus, in the "lovely briefness" of the present when the nature of both past and future are comprehended as

<sup>37</sup> Cohen, Beautiful Losers, p.305.

"necessary," the individual life, devoid of its past acquisition of personality and values, becomes the center of "All Chances At Once." It is at this point that we see how Cohen's willed self-alienation combines with dynamic aestheticism in a new vision of reality. The willful destruction of self in the moment of consciousness makes it possible to become whatever form necessity demands. Thus, Cohen is not like the aesthetic who is victimized by time and necessity, nor is he trapped by a fixed identity which is maintained by past habits and traditional static values. Cohen transcends the static moment and the past, to flow with time and necessity. In the vision of his hourglass we see that the present moment is always the future of the last moment. All moments are the same but all are different. The texture of time remains constant like the fabric of a cosmic ribbon passing through the mind both ways, waiting to be embroidered with visions. Consciousness, imagination, is at the center of the ever changing, but always the same, expanded moment, but it is the place where self and identity are "most absent." They cannot exist in the expanded moment because they are by nature, static and the moment is always moving like a band-saw blade between the table of static visions and the wheels of necessity. That which remains still will be sliced and destroyed by the flashing moment as time passes through it.

Cohen has invented a new cosmic game to play in the face of necessity. It is like Liza's favorite game. The name of the game might be, defeat destiny by changing.

"I change/I am the same" is the almost mystic expression of a realization symbolized by the hourglass. Though the individual changes, he remains in the same moment of consciousness as long as he lives. The center of Cohen's vision of reality is the consciousness that informs the moment. By willfully choosing to become a personality which can make use of that consciousness and the necessity of change in time, Cohen has opened an avenue to a new way of conceiving of reality.

The nature of reality is inextricably interwoven with the individual's way of perceiving the temporal aspect of the values he accepts. In our society the appearance and forms of things are regarded as real without reference to their relation to the dynamic aspects of life. Our world was structured by others long before we arrived to suffer and enjoy it; it will be changed only by exercising our imagination and will in the fleeting moment between the past and future. Ultimately freedom will be found, as it has always been, in the rejection of existing cosmographies. Whenever we reject a vision of life, categories of reality, stock responses, meanings, and purposes, we are asserting our freedom. Appearance is not reality; it merely partakes of reality. The degree to which appearances and forms are real is directly related to the perceiving individual's capacity to sense the extent to which he, himself, is real. The sane, rational, and normal man is usually so secure and comfortable in his world he often misses a comprehension of

the degree to which he is unreal. The solution to the problem of being "realistic" is not a matter of taking some middle course between a schizoid vision and a behaviorist program. Nor is the problem resolved by postulating an ideal reality or appealing to some vague argument based on "practical purposes." In our society reality exists in much the same way money exists or is real. As long as it is exchanged, is current, it has value and this value constitutes the meaning it has for us. As long as a vision of the world remains current and is exchanged among people, it has a positive value because it generates meaning as it is passed from one person to another carrying with it the vitality of mutual understanding that makes society possible. Eventually, however, all visions of reality suffer the fate of the currency of nations which have lost their names and borders in the course of wars and history; a reality becomes non-negotiable when its world no longer exists. Thus, what seems real has a precarious existence in the face of time, and subscription to current visions is apt to leave one with psychic vaults filled with counterfeit bills of some cosmic fraud. Indeed, a counterfeit reality may remain current in society for a long time before it is discovered. When what is accepted as being real begins to conflict with the experience of men they begin to falsify themselves in order to conform or they reject the "reality" of the society. Freedom only exists in the willful and continuing rejection of any static vision of reality. In Beautiful Losers, Cohen portrays this activity

in the narrator's education.

In Beautiful Losers reality exists on an imaginative or surreal plane. This is because it is easier to demonstrate the weaknesses of any realistic point of view when all the power of the imagination and its capacity for invention make everything possible. The narrator is locked into a conventional vision of the world and has a terrible, hysterical yearning to comprehend F., Edith, and Catherine Tekakwitha, the long dead Indian saint. He is reaching out for a vision of reality. F. has no respect for traditional ideas of what makes reality; he understands the fictional quality of all great visions of the world. F. is happily eclectic; always borrowing ideas and inverting them. He creates fictions. The narrator seeks facts in order to arrive at truth and understanding. F. is at home with useful illusions. The narrator takes the illusions of facts, meaning, and purpose seriously and he fails to see that any view of the world is fictional and that regardless of whether or not it is logically or empirically true and factual it can still be of use. He is not happy in a world of fiction and illusion. He wants to be real, he wants his "self" to be real, and he wants his vision of the world to be consistent with the mythical "reality" he tries to perceive. He wants meaning and purpose in a world where absolute knowledge is possible. There is no such world and he must learn that life alone is real and that no one knows what it is. He must learn to live in a fictional universe where virtually anything is possible;

he must give up his quest for the comfort and security of a predictable safe existence.

F. teaches the narrator the operation of the will and brings him to a state of living dynamically in the moment of consciousness by inducing hysteria. The narrator finds himself disintegrating in the midst of his hysteria and anxiety. He wants to retreat to his sedentary life of scholarship and comfort, but F. has effectively raised so many questions about the validity of his past that he is no longer comfortable "being" a dusty historian. His self-conception is shattered along with his vision of the world. The "interior monologue" of self-conception and the grammatical rationality of his vision degenerate into hysteria and ravings. As his verbal stability breaks down and the semantic formulas which support his values disintegrate, his life expresses itself in lust and incoherence. The narrator learns from F.'s perversity and finally faces his own. "Hitler the Brain Mole" looks out from his eyes. He allows his perversity to manifest itself in fantasy and then allows it to emerge into action which recoils upon himself. The narrator's "self," his identity, is destroyed. His reason has already been undermined by his hysteria and he is only able to ask questions. He no longer uses his mind as a needle to sew the world together. He no longer imposes himself on the world in order to make it fit his rationalized vision of reality. As his rationality is suspended and his perversity annihilates itself in the stagnation of satiation and exhaustion,



all that remains is purged consciousness and will. He becomes beautiful only because he lost his static identity; the loss of static form reveals the beauty of underlying life. The vision of the hourglass is mystical, religious, and pure. It is a vision where self is non-existent; where the point of existence is smallest. It is a vision of consciousness without self, of a unity of time and will; of the expanded moment which is the flowing life of consciousness. The action of the future becoming past in that moving, changing moment is the life which is consciousness. All else becomes imperfection and illusion. The expanded moment alone is real.

The narrator in Beautiful Losers moves from a perspective based on instrumental values and static self-conception to a mode of existence based on dynamic aesthetic values and willed self-alienation. Within the surreal context of the novel, the final merging of the narrator and F. into a single character represents the fact that the narrator has absorbed F.'s lesson completely. The transformation of F./narrator is a portrayal of the process of willfully creating a form for life which is "real"; it is a form which illuminates the sense of having life. This form is achieved through a continual process of willed negation of all other forms which do not take the facts of time and necessity into consideration. Thus, the hourglass is the surreal representation of the form man must create for his life if he is to convey his value to others; value is a function of the degree to which

the individual reveals his conscious possession of life. The values implicit in the figure of the hourglass are aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual. Aesthetic values exist in terms of the beauty and intensity of the vision. Ethical considerations emerge from the fact that F./narrator has become an exemplar; one who points the way to freedom, choice, and "All Chances At Once." The spiritual element of the vision lies in the complete willful annihilation of "self" in the experience of the expanded or eternal moment of life. Thus, the fusion of aestheticism and alienation in Cohen's point of view provides a shift of the basic modes of conceiving of reality, but this does not destroy the basis of human values. On the contrary, the values that emerge from Cohen's perspective tend to harmonize with the facts of human experience in time and to introduce vitality into values that would otherwise die like the meaning of a ritual when worshippers lose faith.

There is a strange religious theme which runs throughout Beautiful Losers. It takes the form of an inverted hysterical Calvinism presented in a style which is almost a parody of Carlyle's rhetorical flights. Cohen's position as author is willfully self-alienated and he writes from within the framework of the expanded moment. Thus, he is the characters he presents and his art is the expression of riding the expanded moment. Cohen seems to be living his own definition of a saint. In Beautiful Losers he writes:

A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that a saint dissolves the chaos even for himself, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory. He rides the drifts like an escaped ski. His course is a caress of the hill. His track is a drawing of the snow in a moment of its particular arrangement with wind and rock. Something in him so loves the world that he gives himself to the laws of gravity and chance. Far from flying with the angels, he traces with the fidelity of a seismograph needle the state of the solid bloody landscape. His house is dangerous and finite, but he is at home in the world. He can love the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart. It is good to have among us such men, such balancing monsters of love.<sup>38</sup>

Within this description of the saint, especially taken together with the final vision of the hourglass, is found a key to the book which unlocks some of its ambiguity.

Almost the entire book is written in language which is designed to bring about a form of satiation with the perverse. The constant flow of obscenity and explicit description of sensual activities eventually lead to a form of boredom. Underlying the extremism of the language is a strange process of redemption and an emerging revelation. The reader is forced to go on a pilgrimage during which he must confront: madness, hysteria, perversion, fear, lust, hatred, pain, illusion, grief, and the absurd before seeing a fanciful New Jerusalem arise in the form of the hourglass transformation

<sup>38</sup>Cohen, Beautiful Losers, pp.121-122.

of F./narrator, the perverse saint, now purged by the exhaustion of his secular appetites. Cohen has shown transcendence is possible even from total depravity.

The aestheticism inherent in the work places the emphasis on the present and takes on the aspect of being the means of redeeming time. Time is redeemed in the vision of the hourglass; it is no longer the enemy of man when he has achieved grace. Grace is achieved when man surrenders to the "laws of gravity and chance"; when he willfully alienates himself from the stasis of conventional order. This will is the "energy of love" which leads to the balancing grace of the saint. Thus, the saint loves the world enough to surrender to it, an act which paradoxically involves a willed rejection of conventional social order and visions of the world. This surrender makes the saint's balance precarious; "His house is dangerous and finite, but he is at home in the world." The saint lives in the expanded moment in balanced harmony with time and life; he is "free to fall" or to use his energy to ride the exhilarating flow of time. The saint is truly free because he uses the necessity of time like a surfboard and as he rides the face of the potentially annihilating wave, he uses its energy to sustain his balancing ballet and acrobatics at the tip of the board. On the crest of the wave he may be annihilated at any moment yet he will not be, for he has no concrete identity which can be destroyed. He is the essence of life in an envelope of skin; he is magic and not a mere magician. Hence F.'s ode to magic:

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.  
 Magic always ruled. God is afoot. God never  
 died. . . . But magic is no instrument. Magic  
 is the end. Many men drove Magic but Magic  
 stayed behind. Many men lied. They only passed  
 through Magic and out the other side. . . .  
 Though mountains danced before them they said  
 that God was dead. Though his shrouds were  
 hoisted the naked God did live. This I mean to  
 whisper in my mind. This I mean to laugh with  
 in my mind. This I mean my mind will serve till  
 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.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the mystery of religion is the magic continuity of  
 flesh, mind, and time. The saint creates himself in a form  
 which communicates this magic to the world. He makes his  
 life into art for the sake of life. He practises the art of  
 living in harmony with the necessity of time. Cohen's art  
 lies in demonstrating and recording this process of living  
 and its perils. The process consists of willed self-  
 alienation and the exercise of an aesthetic approach to life.

Cohen's prose works, The Favorite Game and Beautiful Losers, reveal that his point of view as an artist is highly  
 sophisticated and not to be easily dismissed by references  
 to romanticism, decadence, or simple aestheticism. The com-  
 plexity of his vision enhances the range of human experience,  
 both personal and social. His perspective is curiously moral  
 and ethical at the same time as it is capable of being  
 humorous and, occasionally, vicious. Cohen's mode of

<sup>39</sup>Cohen, Beautiful Losers, pp.197-199, see also p.207.

existence, as it is revealed in his work, affirms a belief in the freedom of will even though willed self-alienation operates only through continuing negation. His aestheticism is a positive frame of reference; though oriented toward the present, it does not deny the fact of time and is a source of meaning and value despite its contradiction of conventional perspectives. Thus, Cohen is one of the more interesting figures on the Canadian literary scene. His perspective is unique in many ways and, in combination with his talent, generates art which is filled with a sense of life and a consciousness of its value.

### III

Cohen's poetry exhibits the same point of view which is found in his prose. Willed self-alienation and a dynamic aestheticism inform much of his best poetry. However, Cohen's point of view seems to have developed over a period of time as he produced his work. This change in his perspective may be seen by tracing various themes which recur in his poetry.

Cohen's first volume of poetry, Let us Compare Mythologies, contains many poems which reveal a developing self-alienation and an aesthetic perspective. Some of the poems in this volume, written when Cohen was between the ages of fifteen and twenty, remind us of Breavman's point of view in The Favorite Game; even the situations in some of the poems are reminiscent of Breavman's youth. In a short poem

entitled "Rites," Cohen sketches his reaction to his father's death in terms that can be seen reproduced in The Favorite Game. His father was dying,

And it seemed so obvious, the smell so present,  
quite so necessary,  
but my uncles prophesied wildly,  
promising life like frantic oracles;  
and they only stopped in the morning,  
after he had died  
and I had begun to shout.<sup>40</sup>

Within this poem is also a recognition of the "necessity" and inevitability of the destruction of flesh in time and a willingness to accept it. He "began to shout" after his father died just as Breavman became irritated with the formality of his father's funeral. He is alienated from the proceedings; not able to join in the business of "promising life."

Several of the poems are written on the relation of the poet to his women in language which foreshadows Breavman's desires to touch people, in order to leave his mark on them, and turn his women into art. In "Song" the poet dreams of entering the mind of his abandoned lover so completely that he becomes the center of her world.

And may my bronze name  
touch always her thousand fingers  
grow brighter with her weeping  
until I am fixed like a galaxy  
and memorized  
in her secret and fragile skies.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Leonard Cohen, "Rites", Let Us Compare Mythologies (1956; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p.19.

<sup>41</sup> Cohen, Let Us Compare Mythologies, p.31.

The situation of the abandoned lover is virtually identical with Shell's after Breavman leaves her. The same limiting egocentrism informs this poem as it does Breavman's character; it is the desire to make another live for oneself. In "Had We Nothing To Prove" the situation of the lovers is identical to that in The Favorite Game and the point of view from which the poem is presented is the same as Breavman's when he was having his affair with Tamara.

Had we nothing to prove but love  
 we might have leaned all night at that window,  
 merely beside each other, . . .  
     but there were obligations, the formalities  
 of passion; so we sealed the shutters  
 and were expedient in the brevity of night;  
 reading with empty sockets moonlight in dull hair,  
 softness of chafed thighs;  
     both of us anxious and shaking the night,  
 with all my arm, she with fingers and gentle;  
 no hope for silver leaves in the morning.<sup>42</sup>

The act of sex is reduced to a "formality" connected to some "obligation" to prove love. This is an example of the estrangement brought about by reliance on social forms. It is no longer enough to be near one another; people must go through the formal activities of proving that some connection exists with others. In the process, however, real connection vanishes beneath the form, and genuine concern for another is possible only in spite of the formalities of society. "On Certain Incredible Nights" is a poem that might easily have been written by Breavman as he stayed up through the night writing poems inspired by the vision of Shell's body.

<sup>42</sup>Cohen, Let Us Compare Mythologies, p.50.



On certain incredible nights,  
 When your flesh is drenched with moon  
 And the windows are wide open:  
 Your breasts are sculptured  
 From the soft side of darkness  
 And your belly a fragment of a great bright flask.<sup>43</sup>

This poem reveals the romantic nature of simple aestheticism when combined with estrangement from the lover as a person; the poet treats the woman like an object to be romantically captured in art.

There are several poems in Let Us Compare Mythologies which embody themes Cohen later deals with in Flowers For Hitler and Beautiful Losers. In the poem, "Lovers," Cohen presents a vision of mixed horror and sensuality; a theme he takes up later in Flowers For Hitler.

During the first pogrom they  
 Met behind the ruins of their homes--  
 Sweet merchants trading: her love  
 For a history full of poems.

And at the hot ovens they  
 Cunningly managed a brief  
 Kiss before the soldier came  
 To knock out her golden teeth.

. . . . .

Later he often wondered:  
 Was their barter completed?  
 While men around him plundered  
 And knew he had been cheated.<sup>44</sup>

The grotesque element in this poem emerges as the result of a fusion of aestheticism, represented in the lover's pre-occupation with his desire, and alienation, which is implicit in the presentation of the poem in a disinterested tone.

<sup>43</sup>Cohen, Let Us Compare Mythologies, p.58.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p.33.

Both the aestheticism of the lover and the tone of the poem are undercut by the final stanza. Cohen develops this technique in his later works within an ethical framework which gives it more value than when it is presented in isolation. Similarly, in "Ballad," Cohen brings together aestheticism and alienation in a larger social context which undercuts itself in the final jingling rhymes.

We buried her in Spring-time.  
     The sparrows in the air  
 Wept that we should hide with earth  
     the face of one so fair.

The flowers they were roses  
     and such sweet fragrance gave  
 that all my friends were lovers  
     and we danced upon her grave.<sup>45</sup>

This particular poem emphasizes the aesthetic and macabre while bringing into it a notion of social responsibility. His dead "lady" is "like one of Tennyson's girls"; she is an imaginary construction which has been destroyed by the world in which the people are "inflamed by toothpaste ads." Social reality has destroyed imaginative creation and all that is left is sensuality dancing on the imagination's grave. The form of the poem is not unique, it is quite conventional, thus underlining the death of imagination. This is one of the early examples of how Cohen uses form as a comment on itself and what it contains.

Other poems in Let Us Compare Mythologies show Cohen's ability to step outside a limited aesthetic perspective and cut through romanticism. In "Twilight," Cohen presents a

<sup>45</sup>Cohen, Let Us Compare Mythologies, p. 46-47.

simple portrait of an aging poet who was apparently dedicated to simple aestheticism and sensuality.

When finally he did become very old  
 and nights were cold because  
 No one was a stranger  
 And there was little to do  
 But sift the years through his yellow fingers  
 Then like fire-twisted shadows of dancers  
 Alternatives would array themselves  
 Around his wicker chair  
 And he regretted everything.<sup>46</sup>

Implicit in this poem is some of the understanding of the necessity of time and change which is demonstrated in Cohen's later work. The "alternatives" the aging poet finally sees, as he diminishes with age, are like the "chances" revealed in the hourglass figure in Beautiful Losers. The past is what "becomes" of the future; the aged poet had not lived in the expanded moment, merely in the static world of sensuality and simple aestheticism. His regret is ironically perfect; "he regretted everything."

Let Us Compare Mythologies provides some insight into the beginnings of Cohen's concern with alienation and aestheticism. In his second book of poems, The Spice Box of Earth, we see the development of the point of view and values that Cohen was to give Breavman in The Favorite Game. It has already been noted that Breavman's poetry, written for Shell, is derived from The Spice Box of Earth. There are some poems, however, that the character, Breavman, could not have written. They represent Cohen's awareness of the limitation of a simple aesthetic and merely self-alienated mode of

<sup>46</sup>Cohen, Let Us Compare Mythologies. p.53.

existence. For example, in the poem, "You Have The Lovers," Cohen criticizes the pure aesthetic vision even while he creates one of its most beautiful images.<sup>47</sup> When we read, "Pretend it is a ritual," we recall Breavman condemning his uncles who do not realize that a ritual must be created from "moment-to-moment" by the participants. It is also characteristic of a ritual that "it needs more people." Rituals are a human creation; they are action made into art. The lovers have become a work of art themselves. But the art form they have taken is static; they are sterile, blind, and unknowing. They have become absorbed by the form of the ritual and are merely making love like robots; mechanically going through meaningless motions. The lovers have become very much like Breavman's uncles of whom he writes:

They participated in it blindly, as if it would last forever. They did not seem to realize how important they were, not self important, but important to the incantation, the altar, the ritual. They were ignorant of the craft of devotion. They were merely devoted. They never thought how close the ceremony was to chaos. Their nobility was insecure because it rested on inheritance and not moment-to-moment creation in the face of annihilation.<sup>48</sup>

The "nobility" of the lovers rests in their mindless repetition. This is why they have reached the point where they no longer know who is kissing and who is being kissed and "it hardly matters"; their consciousness has been absorbed in the ritual. Their lack of identity does not matter, but their

<sup>47</sup> Leonard Cohen, "You Have The Lovers", The Spice Box of Earth (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), pp.29-30.

<sup>48</sup> Cohen, The Favorite Game, p.130.

inability to distinguish their contribution to the ritual is indicative of passivity and psychic stasis. The form they have taken absorbs their life; the ritual fails to generate a sense of the life of the lovers. The form is perfect but sterile. The person entering the ritual must blind himself: "You close your eyes and allow them to be sewn shut." He must also create his own "embrace and fall into it." There is no one else to love him as much as he can love himself. He must blind himself to life and reality and give himself to a love which centers in himself. In the end Cohen writes as a warning:

There is only one moment of pain or doubt  
as you wonder how many multitudes are lying beside  
your body,  
but a mouth kisses and a hand soothes the moment away.

This is a warning because it is the "moment of pain or doubt" which is central to life as Cohen believes it must be lived. It is "the moment" which is "soothed" away in the ritual. The lovers deny life and have become unreal by denying the moment of life and achieving comfort. They devote themselves to a sensation promising satiation. Comfort and satiation are enemies of life because they are non-creative. The lovers represent a kind of sterile, even though perfect, art of perpetual motion. They do not change. We are reminded of Browning's "Porphyria's Lover," where the lover tries to maintain "That Moment she was mine, mine fair,/Perfectly pure and good." Death was the lover's solution in Browning's poem; a living death is what the lovers achieve in Cohen's.

The vision offered by Cohen gives satisfaction only to the escapist who is satisfied by the repetition of ritual. It offers no solution to a Breavman who must live in expectation or to a saint who must become the expanded moment by denying anything that resembles a ritual. The passage referring to the "multitudes" that "are lying beside your body" is a reference to the human condition; humanity which tries to lose itself in routine and ritual, albeit sensual and pleasant, in an attempt to achieve comfort and freedom from pain or doubt. Thus, Cohen effectively undermines the poem's simple aesthetic appeal in the final three lines. At the same time, he points to the limitations of losing one's self to a form which does not dramatize the force of life. The lovers are like Breavman's uncles who are merely devoted: they are "ignorant of the craft of devotion." The lovers merely love; they are ignorant of the art of loving. They are like the uncles who "took for granted what was dying in their hands."<sup>49</sup>

In, "If It Were Spring," Cohen demonstrates what might be called an aesthetic madness. The persona of a mad man, who wants to commit murder for the sake of art, is an extreme example of the action of a mind committed exclusively to aestheticism which is essentially an amoral perspective. Amoral in the sense that aestheticism cut off from any values occasioned by the notions of freedom, choice, or responsibility, is not sufficient to do more than isolate a person

<sup>49</sup>Cohen, The Favorite Game, p.130.

morally from his fellows. The creed of this murderer is justification through beauty; a kind of aesthetic protestantism. We are reminded of Marvell's magnificent poetry on the death of King Charles and the many ballads about murder. In this poem, as in "You Have The Lovers," there is an attempt to savour the act; to live in it forever.

What language the city will hear  
                   because of your death,  
 anguish explain,  
 sorrow relieve.

Everywhere I see  
                   the world waiting for you,  
 the pens raised, walls prepared,  
 hands hung above the strings and keys.<sup>50</sup>

The aesthetic vision separated from any other source of value generates a justification for artistic perversity. This particular portrait of an aesthetic desperado reveals Cohen's ability to enter into a dimension of his consciousness in order to become the character he portrays.

There is a more realistic but limited solution to the aesthetic problem in The Spice Box of Earth. When alienation is combined with aestheticism in a more dynamic configuration, Cohen presents a functional, if not perfect, solution. "The Flowers that I left in the Ground" is one poem in which a Breavman-like perspective is introduced. He writes:

It is not malice that draws me away,  
 draws me to renunciation, betrayal:  
 it is weariness, I go for weariness of thee.  
 Gold, ivory, flesh, love, God, blood, moon--  
 I have become the expert of the catalogue.

. . . . .

<sup>50</sup>Cohen, The Spice Box of Earth, pp.6-7.

Who owns anything he has not made?  
 With your beauty I am as uninvolved  
 as with horses' manes and waterfalls.  
 This is my last catalogue.  
 I breathe the breathless  
*I love you, I love you--*<sup>51</sup>  
 and let you move forever.

The desire to catalogue things comes from the aesthetic concern with the moment. The objects listed recall perfect or beautiful moments and tend to represent the feelings involved. The process is essentially egocentric because the fact of the object and the recreation of the experience are almost totally dependent on his personal view and the values implicit in it. On the other hand, the alienation implicit in the point of view used in the poem; the speaker's detachment and uninvolvedness, makes the catalogue the only accurate reflection of his relation to the world. In this poem he stands outside the beauty which he transforms into art. He is alienated, as Breavman is with Shell. He can love the art he creates but not the beauty which inspires it. Thus, he can capture the moment in art by recreating it, but he must let her "move forever." He will not become like one of the robot lovers, caught in a ritual, living in their static art. He must not surrender to repetition if he is to make his life a living form of art. However, there are problems in this particular combination of alienation and aestheticism. His "uninvolvedness" in his lover's beauty extends to the rest of her. He is not sensitive to her life and value as a person. He is "weary" of her, she has become one more item in

<sup>51</sup>Cohen, The Spice Box of Earth, pp.4-5.



a catalogue. There is irony in the phrase "I love you" in this context. The intentional destruction of the relationship yields a pain of loss which makes it real. His art lies in recording the rejection process and the pain of separation. This is precisely Breavman's state when Shell is four hundred miles away. The fact that he must sever the relationship to make it real is an expression of the limitation of the view. It is not a complete fusion of the dynamic aspects of aestheticism and the willful dimension of self-alienation. In this poem the poet is still preoccupied with single, "static"; perfect moments. He exercises his will only to sever a relationship which might otherwise degenerate in time.

This same form of limiting alienation is made poignantly clear in a short poem in The Spice Box of Earth. In "Song," the alienated poet is not able to understand the feelings of his lover. He remains outside her appreciation of their relationship due to his egocentrism.

I almost went to bed  
without remembering  
the four white violets  
I put in the button-hole  
of your green sweater  
  
and how I kissed you then  
and you kissed me  
shy as though I'd  
never been your lover<sup>52</sup>

He is not touched by her shyness, but merely puzzled and surprised. He assumes that physical contact is the height of

<sup>52</sup>Cohen, The Spice Box of Earth, p.63.

intimacy, whereas the form of his gesture, bestowing some flowers, is more revealing of the intimacy of lovers. She responds to the gesture and its warmth because it brought pleasure to her alone; he has made a beautiful gesture which demonstrates affection beyond simple lust.

The poems in The Spice Box of Earth exhibit the limitations inherent in a simple aesthetic perspective and present the problems involved in an alienated point of view. Nevertheless, Cohen uses his willed self-alienated point of view and his dynamic aesthetic perspective in order to undercut the limited visions of the poems. This process is connected rather tenuously with the religious element of the book. For example, "Lines From My Grandfather's Journal" expresses the doubts and frustrations of a man who believes "with a perfect faith." His life has been taken up with learning the disciplines of religious practice and acquiring knowledge of the Law. He aches to be a saint but will never be more than a scholar. His vision is integrated with the tyranny of belief. He is not alienated and his vision is highly "instrumental." Cohen seems to be studying this religious vision sympathetically yet, in the context of the book there is an implicit criticism residing in the old man's anguish. Thus, The Spice Box of Earth contains a poetic analysis of alienated, aesthetic, and religious perspectives. Virtually all the poems are undercut in a way that suggests the poet stands outside the views presented. Cohen's willed self-alienated point of view, however, permits him to portray the

limitations of all the various points of view in the poems. His dynamic aestheticism allows him to delineate the relation between life and the limitations of the various forms imposed on it. The Spice Box of Earth deals mostly with the individual and his personal experiences. This narrows down the field of examination to the point where variations in points of view, in relation to forms of expression and value, are more easily dealt with.

Cohen's next volume of poetry, Flowers For Hitler, moves on a more social plane. The Spice Box of Earth parallels many of the ideas which were later presented in The Favorite Game. Flowers For Hitler tends to foreshadow the concerns of Beautiful Losers.

In Flowers For Hitler, Cohen is constantly examining the dangers of the medium, comfortable, normal, and ordinary conformist point of view which is seen as the source of all crimes and tyranny. In "All There Is To Know About Adolf Eichmann" we find Eichmann described as being "medium."<sup>53</sup> In a more devastating characterization of the normal and comfortable, Cohen sees it as the source of Hitler's power. In "Opium and Hitler" the individual described is one who does not have one of the "several faiths" that "bid him leap,"<sup>54</sup> Opium, or illusion, and Hitler, who represents hygienic order and tyranny, "let him sleep." In other words,

<sup>53</sup> Leonard Cohen, Flowers For Hitler (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p.66.

<sup>54</sup> Cohen, Flowers For Hitler, pp.78-79.

he does not make the leap of faith that leads to the grace and balance of a saint; he does not take the risk of using his imagination to face danger and a struggle. He succumbs to the comfort of illusion and the easy order of an efficient, if tyrannical, rule. He denies his capacity to create.

The world was wax,  
his to mould.

No! He fumbled  
for his history dose.  
The sun same loose  
his woman close.

Lost in a darkness  
their bodies would reach,  
the Leader started  
a racial speech.

History, which represents the chronicles of past success and failure, intimidates him, and he uses it to rationalize his desire for comfort and his lethargy. In the comfort of his lover's embrace lies the evil because it is "in a darkness/ their bodies would reach," that, the Leader started/ a racial speech." In other words, evil resides in the "normal" quest for pleasure and the dull glow of satiation. It is in the oblivion of conventional comfort that tyranny finds its most fertile ground. This reminds us of Primo Levi's warning which is used as the epigram of Flowers For Hitler.

If from the inside of the Lager, a message could have seeped out to free men, it would have been this:  
take care not to suffer in your own home what is  
inflicted on us here.

In the comfort of the lovers and in the ease and illusion of a conventional life lies the danger of forgetting to "take care." This message is illustrated in "The Failure Of A

Secular Life" where the vision of the conventional home is surrealistically exaggerated to the point where the viciousness of humanity is reduced to a simple matter of degree.

The pain-monger came home  
from a hard day's torture.

He came home with his tongs.  
He put down his black bag.

His wife hit him with an open nerve  
and a cry the trade never heard.

He watched her real-life Dachau,  
Knew his career was ruined.

Was there anything else to do?  
He sold his bag and tongs,

went to pieces. A man's got to be able  
to bring his wife something.<sup>55</sup>

Implicit in this poem is the observation that if men continue to play roles; work at jobs which injure others, even if they are detached and not psychologically involved, it is only a matter of time before the social reality they create comes home to them. The pain-monger is merely a man doing his job, a tradesman, he contributes to a society which sanctions pain-mongering. It is not surprising that his wife becomes the master of a family concentration camp. It is not possible to keep the world locked out of the family home; the normal household is no sanctuary after a "hard day's torture."

On the opposite side of the coin, Cohen looks at the abnormal, the mad, and the anarchistic. In "Alexander Trocchi, Public Junkie, Priez Pour Nous," Cohen presents a

<sup>55</sup>Cohen, Flowers For Hitler, p.53.

figure who reminds us of F. in Beautiful Losers.<sup>56</sup> His exploits are heroic; he lives by impulse and is free of the illusion of order which belongs to those who believe in "public clocks." Alexander is a fit subject for art because he is alive; even his "hypo" can be seen as "a silver lighthouse." The act of taking a "fix" is an affront to artificial order and is seen as an affirmation of life. The affirmation lies in his action. Alexander rides the times and forges ahead of the conventional, normal population who are locked into their static systems and identities and are "apt to loaf/ in a coma of newspapers." Alexander is "changing The Law" by his way of existing, and his flight from moment-to-moment brings "a surprise every half hour." If his life appears to be chaotic and anarchistic it is because he is constantly striving to capture the chaos of reality in his existence. If he has not achieved the status of being a "balancing monster of love," at least he has not succumbed to the tyranny of a living death and a static social order. Alexander is not willfully self-alienated but he is alienated nevertheless, and his constant energy informs each moment of his existence. This combination of dynamic aestheticism and alienation is what causes Cohen's interest in the nearly mad characters who live on the fringes of ordered society.

In one of the best poems, "Disguises," Cohen contrasts the normal and the mad.<sup>57</sup> He speaks with mock sorrow of the

<sup>56</sup>Cohen, Flowers For Hitler, pp.45-47.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., pp.116-118.

fact that the rich men, the old workers, the sex and dope fiends, and the conspirators "must go." They all belong to the ordered society; they are all normal acceptable types. He says he will "embrace the changeless." This we find is characteristic of the insane who create an identity for themselves which reveals their pure imagination and life.

I embrace the changeless:  
the committed men in public wards  
oblivious as Hassidim  
who believe they are someone else.

. . . . .

Long live you chronic self-abusers!  
You monotheists!  
you familiars of the absolute  
sucking at circles!  
You are all my comfort  
as I turn to face the beehive  
as I disgrace my style  
as I coarsen my nature  
as I invent jokes  
as I pull up my garters  
as I accept responsibility.

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

He says of the "committed" men, "You are all my comfort." They comfort him because they are "betrayers of self." Here Cohen uses the word "comfort" ironically in contrast to what brings the normal man comfort. The insane represent a way of living in the moment and their alienation from themselves and the world is absolute though it is not willed. They represent the worst that can happen to him if he rejects the

conventional vision of reality. He will reject the conventional point of view, however, and live in the face of annihilation like "a promiscuous air-hostess/ handing out parachutes in a nose dive." By this we see an expression of a desire to ride the necessity of change and time, and to live in the face of danger. He will not submit to the safety and comfort of life on the ground. The poems he writes are like the "parachutes" which recreate, in slow motion, the violence of the "nose dive" through time. The parachutes are a means of balancing between the necessity of gravity and disaster. Thus, he will help others to face necessity and fact. Cohen asserts the willed self-alienated perspective and dynamic aesthetic values as alternatives to the life destroying conformist and instrumental point of view. It will be noted that the aesthetic view expressed here is much more vital than the one presented in any of his earlier works. The quality of the poetry is much better, in this particular poem, than in much of his work. Perhaps this is because Cohen has successfully brought together the notions of personal responsibility and style in relation to a larger scheme of moral and ethical values. The idea of "style" is related to Cohen's use of forms in his work. He says he will "disgrace" his style because only by undermining it can he present it so that its worth will be recognized as secondary to the "will" that disgraced it. In this connection he will "salute fashion" by producing his work in forms that will appeal to viewers just as parachutes are appreciated in a



nose dive. However, fashion will merely be the form of his work; its value will reside in its action, not its appearance. Thus, "Disguises" is an important poem in Cohen's works because it touches on what is most essential to his point of view.

In a short poem entitled "Propaganda," Cohen presents his aesthetic perspective in relation to a more conventional attitude. "Father" has made a statement:

It had to  
do with the nature of religion and  
the progress of lust in the twentieth  
century. I myself have several  
statements of a competitive  
coherence which I intend to spread  
around at no little expense. I  
love the eternal moment, for  
instance. My father used to remark,  
doffing his miniature medals, that  
there is a time that is ripe for  
everything. A little extravagant,  
Dad, I guess, judging by values.  
Oh well, he'd say, and the whole  
world might have been the address.<sup>58</sup>

In this poem we see Cohen's interest in the "eternal moment" which can be equated with the "expanded moment" that contains the flow of consciousness and life. The father's idea, that "there is a time that is ripe for everything," is part of the conventional view of time which is concerned with sacrificing the present for the future and the things that will "happen" there because the time is suddenly "ripe." This conventional view fails to take into consideration that the individual consciousness in the future will merely exist in the same present moment. Though time changes it remains the same.

<sup>58</sup>Cohen, Flowers For Hitler, p.78.

Thus, the conventional view is undercut by the comment that such a view is "a little extravagant." This is true "judging by values" because values can function to impose the past on the present in the future. Similarly, values do not simply change when the time is ripe. Values are created by the actions of people and new values are created by people acting in conflict with old values. Time is not something to be filled with waiting for things to ripen. Time must be filled with action that generates values consistent with human experience through the creation of personal forms which reveal the flow of life in the individual. The father's response to this suggestion is typical of a generation's attempt to excuse itself and its "instrumental values." Indeed, when he sighed, "Oh well," "the whole world might have been the address" because he dismisses the possibility of living in the "eternal moment" and, therefore, a way of living that will generate a world of genuinely human values.

The ideal of the alienated point of view and the aesthetic perspective is expressed in a short poem in Flowers For Hitler. In "Sky," Cohen records the alienation of "the great ones" and writes:

The great ones pass  
 they pass without touching  
 they pass without looking  
 each in his joy  
 each in his fire  
 Of one another  
 they have no need  
 they have the deepest need  
 The great ones pass

Recorded in some multiple sky  
 inlaid in some endless laughter  
 they pass  
 like stars of different seasons  
 like meteors of different centuries

Fire undiminished  
 by passing fire  
 laughter uncorroded  
 by comfort  
 they pass one another  
 without touching without looking  
 needing only to know<sup>59</sup>  
 the great ones pass.

The truly great ones pass without touching or casting a glance at the other great ones; they can be alone because they have found the joy in isolation. They are like comets that make their necessary elliptical orbits beautiful by consuming themselves in the action of passing. They become dynamic, living works of art. Through their mode of existence they take a form which reveals the beauty of life and its value. They refine their wills to the point where they need only to know that they are "passing." They are always passing and coming to pass, they are never "being." The great ones are always in the expanded moment which is constantly filled with new fire. They are always becoming what they know like F./narrator in Beautiful Losers, who becomes the expanded moment and all the chances it contains. Their laughter is "uncorroded by comfort" because they reject the stasis that breeds sorrow and therefore have no need of comfort. Their laughter is of the joy and the exhilaration of passing through the world on the crest of time like

<sup>59</sup>Cohen, Flowers For Hitler, p.58.

balancing monsters of love. They are saints.

In Flowers For Hitler, Cohen moved a step beyond The Spice Box of Earth. In this book of poetry Cohen has related his willed self-alienated point of view and dynamic aestheticism to the conventional world of society. In the earlier work he was more concerned with the limitations of an alienated and aesthetic perspective. In Parasites of Heaven, Cohen returns to the problem of the limitation of his vision and introduces a questioning of his own worth as a poet and budding visionary.

In "A cross didn't fall on me," Cohen undercuts his role and vision as a poet.

A cross didn't fall on me  
when I went for hot-dogs  
and the all-night Greek  
slave in the Silver Gameland  
didn't think I was his brother  
Love me because nothing happens

I believe the rain will not  
make me feel like a feather  
when it comes tonight after  
the streetcars have stopped  
because my size is definite  
Love me because nothing happens

. . . . .

Why should I be alone  
if what I say is true  
I confess I mean to find  
a passage or forge a passport  
or talk a new language  
Love me because nothing happens

I confess I meant to grow  
wings and lose my mind  
I confess that I've  
forgotten what for

Why wings and a lost mind  
Love me because nothing happens<sup>60</sup>

He parodies his aspiration of becoming a saint and his pretension of being a "brother" to his fellow man. In the second stanza he parodies his imaginative flights which do not change the physical facts of his nature. Toward the end of the poem he wonders why he should be alone if what he sees is the truth. Finally, he confesses that he has a desire to "find a passage/or forge a passport/or talk a new language." This is equivalent to saying he wishes to transcend the world as he finds it. To "talk a new language" is the same as inventing new verbal formulas that will capture the imagination of his readers and generate a new conception of reality. He confesses that he wanted to be an angel; "to grow wings" and lose his mind; he wanted to enter heaven; to lose his worldly vision for a more exalted one. Despite his self-satire, there is a double meaning in "Love me because nothing happens." He is not asking for comfort as the words might suggest. He can only be loved because nothing happens. If his vision was ever realized he would not be loved. Also implicit in the expression is the recognition that "nothing happens." We must make things happen; only action brings about a result. The suggestion is that he has not done anything to realize his desires.

In a short poem entitled "I am too loud when you are gone," Cohen questions the value of his poetry.

<sup>60</sup>Leonard Cohen, Parasites of Heaven (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), pp.14-15.

I am too loud when you are gone  
 I am John the Baptist, cheated by mere water  
 and merciful love, wild but over-known  
 John of honey, of time, longing not for  
 music, longing, longing to be Him  
 I am diminished, I peddle versions of Word  
 that don't survive the tablets broken stone  
 I am alone when you are gone.<sup>61</sup>

There is a slightly ambiguous kind of schizophrenia in this poem. It is not clear who has gone and left the poet alone. It seems, however, that given Cohen's willed self-alienated perspective, it is likely a part of himself which is gone. It is the divine element which would make it possible to "be Him." Without this quality he is "diminished" and his poetry degenerates into mere "versions of Word/ that don't survive the tablets broken stone." Thus, he condemns his own poetry for not containing the element of grace that would give them a long life in the world of men. Cohen seems to be questioning his competence to communicate a genuine vision. In another poem, "These notebooks, these notebooks!", he writes:

Poetry is no substitute for survival.  
 In the books beside my bed  
 I used up my will like an alphabet.

In this poem Cohen recognizes that merely writing poems is not sufficient to carry out the task of living. If his imaginative point of view is to have any value at all he must use his "will" in the world not on the page.

In a poem entitled "Created fires I cannot love," which takes the form of a prayer, Cohen asks for some confirmation

<sup>61</sup>Cohen, Parasites of Heaven, p.47.

of his vision in tones reminiscent of Blake.

Do you hate the ones who must  
turn your world all to dust  
Do you hate the ones who ask  
if Creation wears a mask?

God beyond the God I name  
if mask and fire are the same,  
repair the seam my love leaps through,  
uncreated fire to pursue.

Network of created fire,  
maim my love and my desire.  
Make me poor so I may be  
servant in the world I see,<sup>62</sup>

Implicit is a self-criticism of Cohen's tendency to beautify the world like a "vegetarian that only eats roses."<sup>63</sup> He wants to learn to love the "diamond in the rough." He cannot love the works of the past, "created fires," because he is afraid they will hamper his own attempts at art. He prays to learn how to become a servant in the existing world like a saint who loves the world and surrenders to it.

Balancing the poems of doubt and self-criticism is a long poem in which Cohen presents a vision combining his willed self-alienated point of view and his dynamic aesthetic values. In "Suzanne takes you down," Cohen presents a portrait of Christ as embodying his own poetic perspective.

Jesus was a sailor  
when he walked upon the water  
and he spent a long time watching  
from a lonely wooden tower  
and when he knew for certain  
only drowning men could see him  
he said All men will be sailors then  
until the sea shall free them,

<sup>62</sup>Cohen, Parasites of Heaven, pp.62-63.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p.11.

but he himself was broken  
 long before the sky would open,  
 forsaken, almost human,  
 he sank beneath your wisdom like a stone.<sup>64</sup>

Jesus possessed the incredible balance of the saint; he could walk upon the water. He was like a sailor because he faced the danger of the sea. Only drowning men can understand his power because only men forced to face the moment of life's intensity can appreciate the expanded moment. If "All men will be sailors" "until the sea shall free them" then all must face the dangers of the world until they drown in their illusions or die. Thus, Jesus recognized that only men desperately balancing between life and death would face the eternal moment. The rest of humanity would live in the comfort of their illusory "wisdom." Jesus was "almost human" because he had the form of humanity. His form was "broken" before any heavenly sign would announce immortality. But it was merely his "self" and his body that were forsaken and he placed no value on them anyway. His mode of existence was willfully self-alienated and he had renounced self in order to reveal the spirit. Similarly, his values were dynamically aesthetic; he knew that the form his life took at birth and the forms of personality and parable he later gave it were merely means to the end of revealing the spirit of life. Thus, there is a double meaning in the word "forsaken." Jesus had already forsaken his body and "self." On the other hand, he was forsaken by humanity who misunderstood his

<sup>64</sup>Cohen, Parasites of Heaven, pp.70-71.



message; he sank beneath their wisdom like a stone. Suzanne is the embodiment of the spirit of life in the poem. She is half crazy and "holds the mirror" which reflects the vision of life and love. Her insanity is her alienation. Suzanne is like a mirror that reflects the life of the spirit; she becomes the beloved of everyone because she shows them the beauty of life. This poem was popularized as a song in Cohen's first record album and was largely responsible for his later success as a folk-singer. Considering the context from which the poem emerges in Parasites of Heaven, the song version seems to represent a partial realization of Cohen's desire to create a vision of life and live it. Indeed, until recently, Cohen performed his songs and gave public recitals of his poetry thus informing his art with his own life.

Cohen's next volume of poetry, after Parasites of Heaven, was basically a collection of his previous works. Selected Poems 1956-1968 includes a section entitled "New Poems" which contains twenty previously unpublished poems. Most of the poems in this section merely echo themes that Cohen developed in his earlier books of verse and they offer little of interest. In "It's Good to Sit with People" Cohen sketches a relationship with a young woman who has expensive dreams. The theme of his personal alienation emerges in some lines near the end of the poem:

Only with you  
           I did not imitate myself  
 only with you  
           I asked for nothing<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Leonard Cohen, Selected Poems 1956-1968 (New York: Viking, 1968), pp.236-238.

The portrait of the young woman, Frédérique, is sympathetic yet detached, similar to some of the character drawing in The Favorite Game. In the last of the new poems entitled "He studies to Describe" Cohen warns against a Breavman-like perspective.

He studies to describe  
the lover he cannot become  
failing the widest dreams of the mind  
& settling for visions of God.

. . . . .

He does not know how  
to trade himself for your love  
Do not trust him  
unless you love him.<sup>66</sup>

In this poem Cohen is sketching the limitations of an alienated point of view when it is not balanced with a sense of life. "He studies to describe" rather than to "become." The last two lines draw attention to the peculiar relation between love and trust. He may be trusted only if he is loved; trust is dependant on feelings of love for him, not anything he does to deserve it.

There are a number of pieces in "New Poems" which seem to indicate a change in Cohen's interest in poetry. The graffiti like lines entitled "Marita" are an example of this new approach.<sup>67</sup>

MARITA  
PLEASE FIND ME  
I AM ALMOST 30

This piece is riddled with implications. It is cynical in

<sup>66</sup>Cohen, Selected Poems, p.239.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p.239.

light of popular generation rhetoric; it is poignant if love is the issue, and it is amusing in the context of a book of poems. Two short poems which reveal a similar anti-poetic stance are "It has been some time" and "A person who eats meat." In the first of these, Cohen says his previous activities meant little to him and that he is now more concerned with "suicide and money."<sup>68</sup> In "A person who eats meat," Cohen parodies polarization in argument of all kinds.

A person who eats meat  
wants to get his teeth into something  
A person who does not eat meat  
wants to get his teeth into something else  
If these thoughts interest you for even a moment  
You are lost.<sup>69</sup>

The tone of these lines is not poetic and seems designed to either challenge or amuse the reader. Such pieces do not work well in the context of "New Poems," but Cohen goes on to develop this approach in his next volume of poetry.

In Cohen's most recent book, The Energy of Slaves, he presents the culmination of his willed self-alienated point of view and dynamic aestheticism. In this volume we see Cohen transform himself and his art in order to "become" a new voice speaking a new language. In Parasites of Heaven, Cohen was questioning the value of his perspective and attempting to confront the problem of how to apply his point of view to the process of living instead of the process of writing poetry. For example, in "These notebooks, These

<sup>68</sup>Cohen, Selected Poems, p.233.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p.233.

notebooks!," he had spoken of using up his "will" in the creation of poems which were "no substitute for survival."<sup>70</sup> Similarly, other poems in Parasites of Heaven reveal his recognition of the division between the world and his aspiration to become a "saint" and communicate a new vision to the world. In The Energy of Slaves, Cohen moves out of poetry into the world, out of poetic language and form into a new language, and out of glorified theory into disciplined practice. The result is a "willed" personal form which represents his experience of life. The pieces in the book are fragmented, often schizophrenic, revealing Cohen's sense of life as it emerges into his consciousness in the expanded moment. Thus, his willed self-alienation has led him to create a form for himself which reveals his sense of life in a way that generates certain human values. The dynamic aestheticism of Cohen's perspective emerges in the presentation of the poems which reveal his "balance" as he rides the experience of the expanded moment. The poems are presented "as they are written"; we read what goes through the poet's mind as he lives in the expanded moment.

The first piece in the book, "Welcome to these lines . . .," sets the tone.

Welcome to these lines  
 There is a war on  
 but I'll try to make you comfortable  
 Don't follow my conversation  
 it's just nervousness  
 Didn't I make love to you  
 when we were students of the East

<sup>70</sup>Cohen, Parasites of Heaven, p.61.

Yes the house is different  
 the village will soon be taken  
 I've removed whatever  
 might give comfort to the enemy  
 We are alone  
 until the times change  
 and those who have been betrayed  
 come back like pilgrims to this moment  
 when we did not yield  
 and call the darkness poetry<sup>71</sup>

Cohen does not refer to the contents as "poetry." He is merely presenting "lines." He is heavily ironic when he says he will try to make the reader "comfortable." The lines are just "conversation" resulting from "nervousness." The reference to his earlier poetry and his interest in the outmoded intellectual "fashion" of mysticism is contained in a question, "Didn't I make love to you/ when we were students of the East." The "house" refers to his poetry; the "village" to all art. He has made his work empty of anything that might be claimed by the "enemy." He says he will not yield to the pressures of the darkness of the modern world view and call the result poetry. Implicit in this final statement is the observation that anything written which supports the existing situation either directly by praising it, or indirectly by being created in its midst, cannot be called poetry. Cohen is saying that the present order will not be comforted by being able to claim that men wrote poetry during its rule when they were slaves. Thus, Cohen has created himself in a form that is not poetic and is devoid of those

<sup>71</sup> Leonard Cohen, The Energy of Slaves (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), p.9.

qualities that allow tyrants to claim that culture thrives during their administration. The energy of slaves must not be used to glorify or justify their masters.

His attitude toward poetry is exhibited in a number of pieces in The Energy of Slaves. Perhaps the most direct statement is made in "The progress of my style." In this piece the form is similar to his earlier work but the language is not poetic:

I rarely think of you darling  
 Tonight I indulge myself  
 remembering the beauty you lost  
 in your thirtieth year  
 but I can't get off on it  
 I have no altar for my song

. . . . .

Thighs from my old poems  
 would help  
 None of these items can appear  
 for political reasons

Perhaps you can detect  
 that I still try for music  
 idle music for the very idle  
 you might say unemployed  
 working to reach you like a computer  
 through holes in the paper<sup>72</sup>

The first stanza states clearly that sensuality and beauty are no longer an "altar" for him; he refuses to be a priest of the religion of beauty. Ultimately, he will not present the sensuality of his earlier poetry for "political reasons." Thus, he has moved his style into the political arena in order to follow the new "fashion" of political versification, however, his attitude undermines the fashion itself because

<sup>72</sup>Cohen, The Energy of Slaves, p.52.

he is consciously "using" it. Beneath the surface of the fashion he veils the music of poetry; "music for the very idle." We are reminded of Wilde's observation that novels were merely the entertainment of the intellectually unemployed. Cohen says that poetry has reached the same state. His work will contain no such music; it will be conspicuous in its absence and reach the reader only "through holes in the page."

In a piece entitled "The form of poetry," Cohen points out that he will not use a "poetic form" any longer.

The form of poetry  
has been disgraced by many pious hands  
That's why I can't write it anymore  
I couldn't take the company.<sup>73</sup>

The "form" is disgraced because it has been used to support too many causes which make slaves of men and the "pious" poets who used it this way are not the company Cohen chooses for himself. This is why Cohen makes use of an unpoetic style for himself in this book; he must create a non-poetic form for himself if he is to reveal his life as an individual and thereby establish "real" values; those which are consistent with life and the individual. It will be noted that in this piece, as in others in The Energy of Slaves, Cohen speaks with a cynical and ironic humour. It is almost as though he finds it necessary to laugh in order to overcome a tendency to become morbid.

<sup>73</sup>Cohen, The Energy of Slaves, p.107.

In "The poems don't love us anymore," Cohen permits poetry to speak for itself.

The poems don't love us anymore  
 they don't want to love us  
 they don't want to be poems  
 Do not summon us, they say  
 We can't help you any longer

There's no more fishing  
 in the Big Hearted River  
 Leave us alone  
 We are becoming something new

They have gone back into the world  
 to be with the ones  
 who labour with their total bodies  
 who have no plans for the world  
 They never were entertainers<sup>74</sup>

Thus, Cohen says that poetry is of no use to anyone anymore; the "Big Hearted River" has been fished out or has dried up. Poetry must "become" something new if it is going to act as art which reveals life and value. The poems have joined the slaves; those "who work with their total bodies/ who have no plans for the world." Cohen is apparently going to write "something new" which will reveal the energy of slaves; their lives, and give it value.

The position of Cohen as a poet is also examined in The Energy of Slaves in connection with poetry itself and the world around him. A number of the pieces exhibit a schizoid perspective. For example, in "Poetry begun in this mood rarely succeeds," Cohen steps out of the "role" of the poet.

the poet has overeaten  
 in fact he begins this poem  
 at another cafe  
 waiting for his second dinner

<sup>74</sup> Cohen, The Energy of Slaves, p.117.



we have little hope  
                                   for his art or his evening  
 He will probably have to  
                                   buy an airplane ticket to Montreal  
 and sleep one night  
 with the mistress  
                                   he plans to abandon  
 I'll get the bill for it all  
 in the middle of winter  
 Since I have introduced myself  
 let me go on to say  
 there are perfect heart shaped leaves  
 climbing the bamboo trellis  
                                   of this small cafe<sup>75</sup>

Cohen becomes the person watching the poet who is also himself. He is in the process of "becoming" someone else. This is a vivid illustration of willed self-alienation. In another piece entitled "Your eyes are very strong," Cohen looks at the man he used to be before he became the voice in the poem.

You have mistaken your ideal  
 It is not a hero  
 but a tyrant  
 you long to become  
 Therefore weakness  
 is your most attractive quality<sup>76</sup>

A tyrant is merely a hero who has become accepted by his society thereby becoming a leader, or exemplar, with a following of slaves. Thus, Cohen renounces his old "self" and speaks with a new voice; one which will not gain a following. This is why he betrays those who follow him. In "On leaving France," he writes:

                  the blue sky  
                   makes the plane go slow

<sup>75</sup>Cohen, The Energy of Slaves, p.18.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p.29.

they say I stole their money  
which is true

let the proprietors of the revolution  
consider this:

a song the people loved  
was written by a thief<sup>77</sup>

Cohen's new voice speaks from the position of the slave, but it does not speak as a revolutionary. Indeed, all those who construct systems of any kind are condemned. In a short piece entitled "I dream of torturing you," Cohen clearly condemns revolutionaries who have merely sponsored new forms of enslavement.

I dream of torturing you  
because you are so puffed up with pride  
You stand there with a bill of rights  
or an automatic rifle  
or your new religion  
I am the angel of revenge<sup>78</sup>

Cohen also condemns those who offer "solutions," whether they are revolutionaries or not, in a poem entitled "One of these days."

One of these days  
You will be the object  
of the contempt of slaves  
Then you will not talk so easily  
about our freedom and our love  
Then you will refrain  
from offering us your solutions<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, in "Any system you contrive without us," Cohen condemns the system makers of all kinds whether they are based on "grass or bullets."

<sup>77</sup>Cohen, The Energy of Slaves, p.104.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p.53

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p.58.

Any system you contrive without us  
 will be brought down  
 We warned you before  
 and nothing that you built has stood  
 Hear it as you lean over your blue print  
 Hear it as you roll up your sleeve  
 Hear it once again  
 Any system you contrive without us  
 will be brought down<sup>80</sup>

The energy of slaves resides in their life which is not reducible to forms, solutions, and systems. These are merely the things men create to reveal their lives and meet their needs. The makers of forms and systems who do not take this into consideration and try to "impose" their interpretations of life on others, be it in malice or out of "love" for humanity, are condemned for misusing forms which must only be used to express the life and values of the individual. The energy of slaves is what any system is sustained by; if they withdraw it the system "will be brought down."

Writing from the position of the slave, Cohen manifests his energy in some "lines" which underline the death of imagination in our world. In "Portrait of a Girl," he undercuts his creation before it can turn into poetry. After describing a young woman who is unhappy that she is not like the "lucky American girls," Cohen concludes:

There is no information about this person  
 except in these lines  
 and let me make it clear  
 as far as I'm concerned  
 she has no problem whatsoever.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup>Cohen, The Energy of Slaves, p.121.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p.15.

In another piece entitled "One of the lizards," Cohen parodies the popular fad of mysticism which is merely an escape from reality.

One of the lizards  
 was blowing bubbles  
 as it did pushups on the tree trunk  
 I did pushups this morning  
 on the carpet  
 and I blew bubbles of Bazooka  
 last night in the car  
 I believe the mystics are right  
 when they say we are all One <sup>82</sup>

Cohen has stopped writing "poetry" as he used to think of it and now merely writes "lines." There is a considerable foreshortening of imagination in The Energy of Slaves. Because poetic and imaginative qualities are eliminated through a process of negation, only their absence renders their values visible. This is true of the voice in the lines; it is no longer sensual and lyrical, it is sharp and cold. Cohen has turned form and style inside out to confront the world of forms and systems that enslaves the energy of men. We are reminded, in some of Cohen's lines, of a speech made by Eugene Ionesco at Salzburg:

In all parts of the world the lunatics of power lay the yoke of slavery on the shoulders of hundreds of millions.

The freedom fanatics submit and propagate the most inexorable decrees against freedom. Apparently the longing for liberty is, in reality, only a wish to submit. In other words, under the mask of desiring freedom lurks the real desire to become enslaved.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>82</sup>Cohen, The Energy of Slaves, p.123.

<sup>83</sup>Eugene Ionesco, "We must recover the gift of wonder," The Vancouver Sun, 17 Jan. 1973, p.5, cols. 1-6.

In The Energy of Slaves, Cohen has presented us with a new approach to the problem of poetry in the world. He concluded that "poetry," as it has been traditionally conceived of, is no longer of any use in leading men to new visions. In fact, it is precisely because of the political rhetoric being brought into modern poetry, in order to lead men to new "systems," visions, and "national identities," that poetry must cease to exist. From his first poems in Let Us Compare Mythologies, Cohen has maintained the idea that poetry is supposed to be a medium for the revelation of life. The individual poem must reveal the creative force behind it in such a way that it manifests a sense of the worth of the creative force itself. This parallels Cohen's feelings about the function of personality and social order as well. Cohen has continually supported the "real" values which emerge from what he believes poetry to be because they are consistent with the essence of life as it is in the expanded moment of consciousness. In The Energy of Slaves, he has willfully generated a voice which is fractured and has surrounded it with a fragmented and dull form. The values that emerge come to us through the "holes in the page." Thus, Cohen uses the voice of the enslaved; those who are broken by other men's systems and forms and who live in a world where what is valuable is known only by its absence.

In the art of Leonard Cohen we can see a unique and vitally creative mind at work. In both his prose and his poetry he brings together a point of view and a set of values

which make his art a tribute to the individual's worth. In the face of mass culture and popular movements of all kinds, Cohen asserts that the individual must be the source of human values. In a society which is increasingly static in its view of time and human existence, Cohen points to the necessity of recognizing the dynamic aspects of human consciousness and what can emerge from it. His willed self-alienation and his dynamic aestheticism are at the center of his personal and artistic point of view. Throughout his work Cohen provides us with insights into a mind attempting to come to terms with the problems of living in a world of men and their creations. His point of view and the values which emerge from it give some meaning to existence and place the problems of life in a genuinely human perspective. It is doubtful that an artist could do more.

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