

2017

Leonard Cohen's New Jews: a Consideration of Western Mysticisms in Beautiful Losers

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Recommended Citation

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Claremont McKenna College

Leonard Cohen's New Jews: a consideration of Western mysticisms in *Beautiful Losers*

submitted to
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and
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by
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for
Senior Thesis
2016-2017
24 April 2017

Abstract

This study examines the influence of various Western mystical traditions on Leonard Cohen's second novel, *Beautiful Losers*. It begins with a discussion of Cohen's public remarks concerning religion and mysticism followed by an assessment of twentieth century Canadian criticism on *Beautiful Losers*. Three thematic chapters comprise the majority of the study, each concerning a different mystical tradition—Kabbalism, Gnosticism, and Christian mysticism, respectively. The author considers *Beautiful Losers* in relation to these systems, concluding that the novel effectively depicts the pursuit of God, or knowledge, through mystic practice and doctrine. This study will interest scholars seeking a careful exploration of Cohen's use of religious themes in his work.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Leonard Norman Cohen.

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The real, by which I mean God, continues to remain unfathomable.
Czeslaw Milosz

1. “Nourished on the Almighty”

Is Leonard Cohen a mystic? Such speculation initiated the present study and exerts a guiding influence on its form and content; as with most questions worth asking, there are two answers: the evident and the ambivalent. Leonard Cohen the Artist is unequivocally a mystic—a seeker of intimate communion with God; this assertion will be borne out in the subsequent analysis of *Beautiful Losers*. But what of Leonard Cohen the Man? May any assumptions concerning his transcendent inclinations be defensibly put forth? Is his persona fulfilled in his person?

Cohen’s life has been chronicled elsewhere; no such historical attempt will be made here. His interviews and public addresses, however, have not received adequate readings. In a 1964 lecture at the Jewish Public Library of Montréal, Cohen speaks about the confluence of Jewish and Canadian identity and what it means to be a seeker of God, charging the audience to discard empty definitions of God and to embrace the nourishment of His actuality. On the subject of Canadian Jewish spirituality, he is firm:

When I speak of myself, I speak of the writer, and the remarks I’m going to follow with I apply to the men who articulate the feelings of our community. Judaism is a secretion...with which an eastern tribe surrounded a divine irritation—a direct confrontation with the absolute. That happened once in history, and we still feel the warmth of that confrontation divorced as we are from the terms of it. That happened a long time ago. Today we covet the pearl, but we are unwilling to support the irritation, the burning nucleus, and our spiritual life today has the exact consistency of an unclean oyster. And it stinks to heaven. (“On being a Jewish writer” 00:09:19-00:10:22)

Cohen identifies what he perceives as a serious threat to the essence of devotion: complacency. The Jewish people, he argues, have lost touch with the ineffable core of their religion; they have let ritual replace mystery. A demand for comprehensible answers coupled with an aversion to

irrational experience has severed the connection between Canadian Jews and “the burning nucleus” of their spiritual heritage. As Cohen declares, “The absence of God in our midst is a deep, rotten cavity that has killed the nerve of the people” (00:13:35-00:13:44).

Whither goes God? Can Jews—and humans in general—return Him to the world? Cohen maintains such an action is a perpetual preoccupation:

Each generation of men must continue the ancient and holy dialogue between the material, secular, artificial, ethno-centric on the one hand, and on the other, the spiritual, Hasidic, natural, experiential (00:14:45-00:15:01).

Comprehension of God is not passive knowledge; it is dynamic and mutable, contingent on each person’s personal conception of what it is to be a human in relation to the absolute. In keeping with Hebraic tradition, Cohen understands this duty prophetically. He concludes his address with an appeal:

Let us declare a moratorium on all religious services until someone reports a vision, or breaks his mind on the infinite. Jews without God are lilies that fester. Let us discard the mentality of the minion; the danger which it was meant to shield us from, lonely self-annihilation in the spirit, is unfortunately no longer a danger. Let us make it a danger. Let us see Jewish monasteries—our families are strong enough to support the dialectic. We need our dirty saints and our monstrous hermits. Let us create a tradition for them, for they light the world (00:15:39-00:16:24).

These comments precede the publication of *Beautiful Losers* by two years and in many respects prefigure the novel. “Dirty saints and monstrous hermits” populate the work, each one experiencing some variation of a vision or the violence of the infinite in the pursuit of self-dissolution within God. Cohen is not just championing those who seek the extremes of spirituality; he is advocating for the general adoption of their methods.

In an interview with Michael Harris three years after *Beautiful Losers* appears, Cohen tempers his stance. Asked if he considers himself either religious or mystical, the poet responds,

I think I went through a saintly phase where I was consciously trying to model myself on what I thought a saint was. I made a lot of people unhappy and I made myself very unhappy. (*Leonard Cohen* [1976] 53)

He later offers an oblique justification for this phase, claiming,

I find that my work, on a personal level, for me, is prophetic... For instance when I wrote *Beautiful Losers* I thought I was completely broken, and on the edge of redemption. I thought I just can't feel any worse. But the actual fact was, the state of mind laid out in *Beautiful Losers* actually came to pass. A year or two later I felt myself in exactly that kind of situation. So I read my own work as personal prophecy. Like my dreams. (*LC* [1976] 55)

Such an attitude is mystical. To be “broken, and on the edge of redemption” is to feel the proximity of some greater power, some deep mystery. The association between human fragmentation and divine salvation is a fundamental aspect of many mystical traditions, including Gnosticism, Christian mysticism, and, to a lesser extent, Kabbalah.

Mystic or not, Cohen is undoubtedly a Jew, and his sense of God is informed by this identity. His conception of religion proceeds from his assessment of God:

As I see religion, it's a technique for strength and for making the universe hospitable. I think there really is a power to tune in on. It's easy for me to call that power God. Some people find it difficult. (*LC* [1976] 53)

The belief that God bestows strength on those who search for Him flows through all of Cohen's work and is the pulsating core of *Beautiful Losers*. Regardless of the book's worldly aims—political, sexual, or otherwise—it is above all a prayer. It is a prayer directed at God with the

force of an atom bomb, and like its petitioner—the New Jew—it will not be ignored. Happy for us, then, who chase to the end.

2. An assessment of twentieth century Canadian criticism on *Beautiful Losers*

2.1

McClelland & Stewart first published *Beautiful Losers* in 1966. Leonard Cohen's preceding work—the volume of poetry *Flowers for Hitler*—had appeared two years prior to ambivalent reviews. One critic described it as “the after-dinner talk of ‘a good conversationalist who had to say something’” (*LC* [1976] 102-03). Cohen's second novel, *Beautiful Losers* caused further consternation among sympathetic and hostile critics alike.

The novel is divided into three books. The first—“The History of Them All”—is narrated by an anonymous man, stylized as *I* in this study. *I*'s history describes the death of his wife, Edith, the progressive insanity and ambiguous death/exile of his friend F., and his obsession with the Mohawk saint, Catherine Tekakwitha. *I* is an exceedingly unreliable narrator, constantly interrupting his recreation of Tekakwitha's life with details from his own life and vice versa. “A Long Letter from F.” follows *I*'s narration and serves as both a counterpoint and complement to the preceding section. Though F. also digresses mightily, he offers a lucid albeit sententious explanation of his relationships with *I* and Edith, including an explicit account of an adulterous affair in Argentina with the latter. The book concludes with F's apparent escape from a mental hospital. The novel ends with “Beautiful Losers: an Epilogue in the third person.” This short section relates the journey of an old man from a remote treehouse to Rue Ste. Catherine in downtown Montréal. Here the old man, referred to as IF by previous scholars due to his obvious affiliations with both *I* and F., discards his corporeal form and achieves an uncertain assumption.

Deviating from both the studied brilliance of his first two volumes of poetry—*Let Us Compare Mythologies* and *The Spice-Box of Earth*—and the structural coherence of his earlier novel *The Favourite Game*, *Beautiful Losers* combines the sober fervor of religious asceticism

with a sense of social decency borrowed from a Berlin sex club. As poet and scholar Stephen Scobie astutely assesses, the work is perhaps best summarized by the blurb on the first edition dust jacket:

Beautiful Losers is a love story, a psalm, a Black Mass, a monument, a satire, a prayer, a shriek, a road map through the wilderness, a joke, a tasteless affront, an hallucination, a bore, an irrelevant display of diseased virtuosity, a Jesuitical tract, an Orange sneer, a scatological Lutheran extravagance—in short a disagreeable religious epic of incomparable beauty. (*Leonard Cohen* [1978] 96)

A mass of seeming contradictions, the novel is, to borrow a term from postmodern studies, overdetermined. Focus too long on one aspect and fifty others silently sail past, ceaselessly mutating as they contact the incestuous core of sex and religion from which the work originates.

Whatever *Beautiful Losers* itself may be, the above quote appears to be a challenge. “Look,” it seems to exclaim, “you may think you understand what you are reading; you do not. You may have fit it to your preferred system; that system will fail. You cannot account for this book because this book accounts for all things. You are still welcome to try.” Cohen—or his publisher—is mocking the established artifice of literary criticism, daring reviewers to interpret a work actively resisting such efforts. Naturally, critics contend with *Beautiful Losers* more often than any other written work of Cohen’s. Though essentially all writers who approach the novel identify the same basic themes—the union of the sacred and the profane, the rejection of purely rational modes of thought, a fundamental social dis-ease—there remains deep disagreement concerning the themes’ manifestation and relative importance. Major analytical gaps also exist, an issue that will be addressed cursorily here and at greater length in later chapters of this thesis. At present, it is sufficient to acknowledge the general successes of Cohen’s previous critics while also working towards ameliorating their specific errors.

2.2

Critics who note a disconnect between theological expectation and mundane actuality in *Beautiful Losers* tend to attribute it to a rather crude melding of holiness and sacrilege. These contrary states are broadly represented by sainthood or the pursuit of it, and sensuality—especially in relation to sainthood. The paradox inherent to these definitions informs any reading of the novel. How can one achieve sainthood through indulging in activity ostensibly opposed to the desired state of grace? Can sex, particularly the peculiar sort described by Cohen, ever be considered a vehicle of devotion? These questions consistently trouble reviewers of *Beautiful Losers*, reliably appearing in various forms throughout studies focused on the book. Analysis of such works reveals the existence of two critical camps: those who attempt to resolve the paradox, and those who argue for the fundamental separation of its elements.

Resolution of the sacred and the profane takes a number of forms. Desmond Pacey identifies it in the “voluntary loss of self for some higher cause,” a reference to the sainthood pursued by all the characters of *Beautiful Losers* (LC [1976] 88). A saint, Pacey argues, “is an extremist;” one “who has achieved a remote human possibility” (LC [1976] 92; *Beautiful Losers* 95). Through the actions necessary to attain this distant existence, the saint reaches God. F.’s frequent exhortations to *I* to “fuck a saint” or “go down on a saint” are understood as derivative in this context, a method of experiencing God indirectly. It is precisely this “second-hand” contact with the divine—“the energy of love”—that satisfies the paradox (LC [1976] 91). The gross physicality of mundane life must be supplemented by a taste of immanent perfection if spiritual fulfillment is to be reached.

Stephen Scobie slightly amends Pacey’s reading, contending that for *I*—arguably the protagonist of the novel, if such a thing exists—the loss of self *is* the higher cause. Scobie

positively characterizes *I*'s dissolution, designating it “an answer to, rather than an escape from, the human predicament” (*LC* [1976] 107). His optimism concerning *I*'s fate stems more from the *how* of the loss than the *what*. *I* negates himself through subjection to the will of God—a markedly antisocial process. Whether *I* is a willing participant in this transformation or an arbitrary sacrifice is irrelevant; it is his ability to “love the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart” that draws him out of humanity and beneath God (*BL* 96). Humans, Scobie implies, can only love other humans from a distance. For the characters of *Beautiful Losers*, this distance is death—a divide crossed only by magic.

In Scobie's interpretation, magic is “the stem of all religious systems—that which, within the system, is not classifiable or reducible to dogma” (*LC* [1978] 105). It is a dynamic element, equal parts abstract and earthy. The post-mortem transfiguration of Catherine Tekakwitha contains no more magic than Edith's encounter with the Danish Vibrator; both incidents suggest divine interest while rejecting rational explanation (*BL* 210; *BL* 178-79). The ability of magic to reconcile or at least arrange the disparate states of grace and deviancy speaks to its thematic importance in *Beautiful Losers*. In a bizarrely circuitous manner, magic helps fulfill what Scobie regards as the central “project” of the novel: the destruction of “the limits of event” through intimacy with the near-divine (*LC* [1978] 98-9).

Echoing Scobie's assertion, Douglas Barbour posits that *I*'s pleasuring of Catherine Tekakwitha-as-Isis near the end of *Beautiful Losers* moves him from “the banal world...to the overworld” (*LC* [1976] 141). Facilitating the mortal ingestion of the divine via corporeal means, cunnilingus assumes a sacramental role. Time—at least, any personal linear form of it—is destroyed by *I*'s action. That he finally gets “under that rosy blanket” of a saint signals a shift from the bounds of mortality towards the infinite of divinity (*BL* 3). Such a vision is necessarily

apocalyptic as it describes the cessation of an existence. Speaking of the book as a whole, Barbour claims it is “basically concerned with a religiously apocalyptic transformation of man” (LC [1976] 145). In *I*'s case, this transformation begins with the eating of Isis and ends with the fusion and subsequent banal assumption of the old man.

But what of the second set of critics, those who resist disentangling the incongruous threads of sanctity and sex? In the main, they are wary of Cohen's vision. Sandra Djwa considers *Beautiful Losers*—and Cohen's work in general—to be restrictively derivative, finding in it “variations on a theme within other men's myths” (LC [1976] 101). She identifies this theme as “religious aspiration followed by sexual inversion” and places its origin with “Black Romantics” such as Baudelaire, Henry Miller, and William Burroughs (LC [1976] 101). Her use of “followed” indicates a succession of ideas, not a conflation, and sets her opposite of the critics discussed above. Any notion of a linear or logical progression of thought throughout *Beautiful Losers* rests on tenuous ground, however, as the work quite clearly eschews standard structures of reason and time. Djwa herself obliquely makes this point when she notes,

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. (LC [1976] 94)

Her conception of thematic causality thus appears to be rather fluid. Sensuality may follow spirituality but neither value holds any intrinsic, immutable worth. Significance does not develop from divergence; rather, contingency fosters unstable meaning.

Any failure of the above writers stems not from their arguments but from their omissions. Each critic presents a sound and supported reading of a vital aspect of *Beautiful Losers*. Their

contentions, though singular, are often complementary. Scobie's belief that *I*'s slow self-destruction carries inherent transformative merit extends directly from Pacey's claim that the "voluntary loss of self for some higher cause" is the main theme of the novel (*LC* [1976] 88). Barbour goes one step further when he asserts oral intimacy with a divine figure not only annihilates the mortal individual and their temporal presence but also engenders the budding of immortality within them. Further removed from Pacey's original reading stands Djwa's separation and consequent devaluation of the sacred and profane strands of thought. Somewhat surprisingly none of these interpretations—except, briefly, Djwa's—seriously consider the religious element detached from the sexual; faith is assumed, not questioned. This exclusion seems a substantial error in analysis.

2.3

Complementary to the intermingling of the sacred and the profane, the rejection of purely rational systems of thought pervades *Beautiful Losers*. Characters, events, and themes frequently assume contradictory or paradoxical significance; in some instances their meanings are entirely inverted. F. typifies this behavior, often uttering superficially profound gnomes that yield ludicrous notions when analyzed. The first words attributed to him in the novel—"We've got to learn to stop bravely at the surface. We've got to learn to love appearances"—sound almost mystical, especially in relation to his later assessment of the world: "It's all diamond" (*BL* 4; *BL* 8). One is tempted to associate the axioms given their textual and apparent contextual nearness, but, alas, F. himself forbids this with his command to "connect nothing" (*BL* 16). This directive is perhaps the most acute joke in a deeply comic work considering the tight construction and incessant self-referencing of *Beautiful Losers*.

The manifold interpretative possibilities capable of emerging from collocations such as the one above speak to the difficulties inherent in any assessment of the novel. How can a work that happily denies logical continuity be consistently analyzed? Previous writers identify the solution to this dilemma in the imposition of external systems. Through reducing fundamentally irreducible elements to discrete aspects of restrictive rational structures, Cohen's critics simplify the novel in the service of precipitating a few choice arguments from the muddled whole. These hard-won and often contrived conclusions are not uniform among the critics who extract them, though intragroup attitudes exist between those who locate a negative sense of irrationality in the book and their either neutral or positive counterparts.

Djwa ascribes the negation of rationality to a neglect of ordinary human experiences. Cohen, she contends, "substitutes a narrowed, bizarre area of human experience at the expense of the ordinary human average" (*LC* [1976] 102). Such a refusal—or inability—to engage the "real" world of moral and legal accountability is a distinguishing trait of the Black Romantics and speaks to the importance of sensationalism in their writing. Sensationalism in this context connotes both the common contemporary definition of reliance on extraordinary or fantastical events or ideas for effect as well as the more philosophical sense of knowledge gained solely through sensation (*OED*). Speaking of the characters in *Beautiful Losers*, Djwa observes they rely "on increasing doses of sensationalism to be effective" (*LC* [1976] 102). Recalling *I* and *F.*'s drive to Parliament or *F.* and Edith's encounter in Argentina, the point is well taken. The belief that, "the old rules of religious rationality and romantic idealism exist to be questioned" follows naturally from this theory of superficial cynicism (*LC* [1976] 103).

John Wain takes Djwa's claims a step further, arguing Cohen—and, "Modern literature" as a whole—" [censors] out the whole rational and moral side of man's life" (*LC* [1976] 24). A

bold claim to be sure; is it defensible? Wain prefaces his stance by identifying what he believes is a “common idiom” shared by writers such as Cohen and Burroughs: “a loose-knit, evocative rhetoric whose object is to present the surrealist landscape of the inner mind, that state of consciousness which is felt to be “real” because it lies below the reach of reason and conscious choice” (*LC* [1976] 23). This style certainly lends itself to a neglect of the rational but seems to have little to do with morality—a nebulous term left undefined by Wain. Barring an implicit adherence to a universal morality, the exploration of the “inner mind” more convincingly points *toward* morality for an absence of “reason and conscious choice” prevents any consensual adoption of a moral system exterior to one’s innate, involuntary existence. To call this essential sounding of the soul “a failure of nerve” is, at best, unfair (*LC* [1976] 23).

The deficiency of Wain’s vision is addressed—indirectly—by Scobie. Cohen, he asserts, opposes the “new morality,” the idea prevalent in society, “that no general, inflexible rules can be laid down which cover all possible situations” (*LC* [1976] 106). At a glance, this position supports Wain’s argument—personal, subjective morality subservient to...what? Here surfaces the crux of that critic’s shortcoming: his inability to provide an alternative. Scobie avoids this problem, recognizing “the deliberate attempt to destroy one’s own individuality” as the result of eschewing personal morality (*LC* [1976] 106). Though certainly not affirming of the individual, personal suppression also conflicts with societal expectation. “Our society,” Scobie writes, “has assumed that any answer to “the human predicament” must start with the individual’s acceptance of the responsibility of his own individuality. The protagonists of [*Beautiful Losers*] respond by annihilating that responsibility” (*LC* [1976] 110). Where, then, do Cohen’s creations stand in relation to rational existence? Separate from both themselves and broader humanity, they live satellite lives of unknown direction or purpose. By Cohen’s definition, they are saints: “What is a

saint? A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is” (*BL* 95).

Barbour largely agrees with Scobie’s reading, though he finds F.’s mentorship of *I* to be the most compelling example of rational renunciation. *I* suffers and, “life overwhelms him as long as he insists upon trying to organize it all logically, rationally” (*LC* [1976] 136). A certain disregard of reason seems appropriate here, but to what end? Exchanging one known, faulty way of life for a different, unknown reality carries no promise of inherent improvement. F.’s calls for *I* to abandon reason are not blind urgings, however. When compared to Cohen’s conception of sainthood, they are “entirely proper from a religious standpoint” and move *I* further from the orderly core of society (*LC* [1976] 136). As Barbour observes, “to be remotely human, living at the edge, on the extreme verges of human possibility, one must give up reason and the reasonable” (*LC* [1976] 136).

If one were pressed to trace some sort of continuity between the above critics’ treatment of rationality in *Beautiful Losers*, emphasis would be placed on the role of irrationality as a transformative vehicle. Djwa and Wain acknowledge sensationalism and surrealism, respectively, as the catalysts of change. They define these modes negatively, however, associating them with an ignorance of normality and morality—terms, it must be noted, they leave indeterminate. Adopting a more constructive tact, Scobie and Barbour stress the spiritual consequences of rational rejection. Attainment of sainthood requires a break with reason, a formulation reminiscent of the oft-quoted lyric from Cohen’s 1992 song, “Anthem”: “There is a crack in everything/that’s how the light gets in” (*The Future*). But whence comes the light?

2.4

Stepping back from abstract concerns of faith and logos, a more tangible but no less essential theme surfaces in *Beautiful Losers* and its associated critical studies. History, politics, science, and pop culture all figure heavily into Cohen's vision, informing his presentation of the themes discussed above and establishing the tenor of his work. These worldly elements, however, only approximate reality: the history of Catherine Tekakwitha mixes myth and scholarship; the politics of the Québec Separatist movement is secondary to its sex; pop culture references deviate from their prototypes in unexpected and sometimes sinister ways. In a sense, the common perception of these banal aspects undergoes a refraction within the text, emerging as products of Cohen's uneasy societal observations—a particular attitude not always detected by critics.

In keeping with her previous thematic criticism, Djwa finds the social implications of *Beautiful Losers* adversely restrictive. Her assessment stems from the above-mentioned belief that Cohen “substitutes a narrowed, bizarre area of human experience at the expense of the ordinary human average” (*LC* [1976] 102). Implicit in this quotation is the contention that fundamentally ordinary institutions such as history and politics cannot be effectively addressed without accounting for their basic normality. Djwa argues the common incidents of life are inevitably disregarded in *Beautiful Losers* as, “it is the universe itself which is breaking down” (*LC* [1976] 104). Put another way, Cohen does not reject social norms or propriety; rather, his interest lies elsewhere, specifically with questions of eschatology. This fascination translates unexpectedly well to the realm of pop culture. Considered a successful example of “pop-art”, the disintegration and subsequent restoration of the old man at the end of *Beautiful Losers* fits Djwa's conception of “a breakdown in the structure of the world” (*LC* [1976] 104).

In an attempt to appreciate the role of the banal without disassociating it from its context, Pacey focuses on the transformative effects of machinery and movies in *Beautiful Losers*. A camera, he writes, has the ability “to transfigure reality, to intensify experience, and to suggest symbolic overtones by its searching examination of the details of fact” (*LC* [1976] 81). That is to say, a camera exercises total control over the compositional elements of a film and additional, substantial influence on themes derived from it. Or, more bluntly, movies inherently lie. This point is made quite dramatically at the moment of the old man’s apotheosis. Observing this astonishing process, an unidentified onlooker exclaims, “Thank God it’s only a movie” (*BL* 242). Though what exactly has happened to the old man is not known, it seems certain it is not “only a movie.” Pacey’s holistic approach fails here. A complete reading cannot be achieved without acknowledging the subtle technological anxiety present in *Beautiful Losers*—an anxiety manifested most clearly in Cohen’s treatment of films.

Outright disregard replaces unease when history, politics, and science are addressed. As Pacey correctly notes, “magic and religion *not* science and politics are the real powers in the world” (*LC* [1976] 90). The empirical systems’ weaknesses originate with their limiting nature. Politics and science are necessarily constrained by measurable and observable variables; magic and religion not only exist outside quantification but triumphantly exceed such parameters.

Barbour provides an uncommonly strong interpretation of the banal aspects of *Beautiful Losers*. Characterizing the work as “a sustained attack on History,” he argues it is history itself which prevents one “from living in the Eternal Present” (*LC* [1976] 137). The Eternal Present—never precisely defined—bears a strong resemblance to the constantly mutable character of pop culture, an affinity Barbour makes explicit with a cursory analysis of the novel’s chronology. Between the end of Book One and the beginning of Book Three an indefinite amount of time

elapses. This passage of time is enough to engender a change in the men and women of Montréal—“they are sexually freer than they used to be” (*LC* [1976] 140). Barbour believes this revolution is due not to politics—in his estimation, beaten “to a pulp” by sex—but to pop culture. It is therefore fitting the old man escapes linear time via a movie: “the film no longer dictates what he shall see. History no longer dictates what he shall be: he can become a movie, and he does” (*LC* [1976] 140). For Cohen, immersion in the banal presents “a new way to the supernatural overworld of religious ecstasy” through mystical expansion of the mind (*LC* [1976] 145).

Reiterating many of Barbour’s points, Scobie finds in *Beautiful Losers* the relentless destruction of systems both irrational—religion and sex—and mundane—history, politics, and pop culture. Disassembling systems allows one,

To escape the bounds of time; to destroy history; to move beyond individual personality; to become Magic; to enter...the “overworld”; to transcend the limitations of reason, of humanity, of mortality itself.
(*LC* [1978] 99)

Here again history is singled out as a structure worthy of eradication. The success of such a removal determines whether the old man’s transfiguration ever occurs; transcendence requires anarchy. F. supplies political disorder, but it quickly cedes to the immediacy of sex. This hierarchy appears most clearly at the Québec separatist rally. An event conceived and staged for ostensibly political reasons, the rally “is used solely as a means of sexual stimulation” (*LC* [1978] 112). The eroticism surpasses any one personal connection, as *I* describes the feeling that everyone in the crowd, “all of us, not just the girl and me, all of us were going to come together” (*BL* 121). Scobie identifies in this sentiment an, “appeal...to ignore the individual response in favour of a mass response” and links it with the impersonal nature of machinery (*LC* [1978] 115-

16). As it is represented in *Beautiful Losers*, however, machinery is not detached from individual experience; rather, it assumes alarmingly intimate functions.

Though all of the above writers interpret the banal themes of *Beautiful Losers* distinctively yet cogently, they tend to focus heavily on the perceived positive aspects of pop culture while universally denouncing the role of history or politics. The contempt for history and politics seems appropriate given the works emphasis on irrationality and temporal subjectivity. Cohen, however, renders a far more ambivalent assessment of pop culture and its effects on humans and society than is commonly accepted. Popular culture is not a diversion for Cohen; its sensibilities and values immensely interest him as they present a novel way of approaching power. With this potential comes uncertainty: is it personally permissible to influence others through emotional manipulation? Can an individual retain any sense of moral bearing while pursuing mass approval? Where is God?

3. The struck God: Lurianic Kabbalah and Cohen

3.1

Mysticism does not deny or overlook the abyss; on the contrary, it begins by realizing its existence, but from there it proceeds to a quest for the secret that will close it in, the hidden path that will span it. It strives to piece together the fragments broken by the religious cataclysm, to bring back the old unity which religion has destroyed, but on a new plane, where the world of mythology and that of revelation meet in the soul of man.

(Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 8)

Jewish mysticism, known as Kabbalism from the thirteenth century onward, is an essentially redemptive tradition. The Kabbalist recognizes the cosmic separation between God and creation and devotes the totality of his existence to closing this gap. The religious framework constructed in the interval following the fragmentation of the original unity—Orthodox Judaism for a Kabbalist—is exceeded in the pursuit of divine restitution. Speaking at the Jewish Public Library of Montréal in 1964, the Jewish poet Leonard Cohen defends the efficacy of unorthodox spiritual labor, proclaiming,

Let us refuse the title ‘Jew’ to any man who is not obsessed by God. Let that become the sole qualification of Jewish identity. Let us encourage young men to go into the deserts of their heart and burn the praise of perfection. Let us do it with drugs, or whips, or sex, or blasphemy, or fasting, but let men begin to feel the perfection of the universe (“On being a Jewish writer.” 00:15:07-00:15:38)

Emphasizing the precedence of personal action in contemplation, Cohen implicitly marginalizes the systematic precepts of Orthodox Judaism. The structure of rabbinic Judaism does not permit the sort of individual transcendent expression the poet advocates; thus, it is subsumed into the mystical determinations of Kabbalism.

Cohen incorporates a number of Kabbalistic doctrines into *Beautiful Losers*. The work's form imitates the Lurianic progression of celestial concentration, creation and destruction, and restoration—rendered *Tsimtsum*, *Shevirah*, and *Tikkun* in Hebrew. Lurianic Kabbalism grew out of the teachings of Isaac Luria, a sixteenth century Kabbalist residing in the Palestinian city of Safed. Luria's system emphasizes the role of human engagement in the process of *Tikkun*, maintaining that through acts of devotion, or *Kawwanah*, men and women can perceptibly heal God. *Kawwanah* effect restitution by purifying the sparks of the Shekhinah within humans—the *Neshamah*—and returning them to the Godhead via the process of *Gilgul*, the Hebrew term for metempsychosis. The Shekhinah is the hypostasized feminine form of God's immanence. *Shevirah* results in the fracturing of her soul and subsequent entrapment of the shards within matter. Lurianism connects the cosmic exile of the Shekhinah with the historical Diaspora of the Jews, claiming the physical exile of the Jewish people will be alleviated synchronously with the spiritual renewal of the Shekhinah. Pieces of Sabbatian belief also appear in *Beautiful Losers*. The notion of 'redemption through sin' most crucially informs Cohen's allusions to the heretical Messianic sect—the old *Kawwanah*, Sabbatians argue, are no longer effective; new forms of worship opposed to Mosaic Law are now necessary to escape the corporeal and psychical constraints of exile.

The spiritual core of *Beautiful Losers* is the New Jew. The New Jew is sometimes Jewish, "but always he is American" (*BL* 161). That is to say, he is shameless in his pursuit of God, exhausting himself and the sacred potential of the world in his obsessed search for divine communion. If the spirit leads him to orthodoxy, there he shall dwell; if the spirit demands "whips...imperial commands...a leap into [the] mouth and a lesson in choking," he will lash and throttle his way to some sort of grace (*BL* 25). The beauty of the New Jew is his mania—he

accepts all loss so long as it does not detract from God. He is, to use Cohen's words, a man nurtured not by definitions but "nourished on the Almighty," and he will seek this sustenance until the moment of completion ("On being a Jewish writer" 00:32:22-00:32:26).

3.2

If there is a single, unifying Kabbalistic element present in *Beautiful Losers*, it is the cycle of *Tsimtsum-Shevurah-Tikkun*. Translated as concentration, destruction, and restitution, these concepts emerge frequently in both action and dialogue. Cohen depicts the cycle as a personal process, letting it occur through his focal characters. The universal implications persist, but they are refracted against the pain of daily life and the search for a slightly less onerous existence.

In his *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem describes *Tsimtsum* as preparation for future generative actions:

God was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which He withdrew in order to return to it in the act of creation and revelation. (261)

God's emptying of Himself not only allows communion with other existences, it creates the possibility of it. The void left by His contraction becomes a garden from whence creation springs. It is, in a dual sense, the abolishment of individual life—God erases His singularity and allows for the possibility of mortal evolution. The emphasis placed on potential action is indicative of Kabbalistic reasoning as a whole, positioning the past as the causal predictor of the future.

The central image of *Tsimtsum* in *Beautiful Losers* presents concentration in starkly physical terms. In the first book of *Beautiful Losers*, “The History of Them All,” *I* begs for deliverance from the daily affliction of constipation. Frantically petitioning *someone*, he begs,

Please make me empty, if I’m empty then I can receive, if I can receive it comes from somewhere outside of me, if it comes from outside of me I’m not alone! I cannot bear this loneliness. Above all it is a loneliness. I don’t want to be a star, merely dying. (BL 39)

Emptiness is a prerequisite for communal life. Only through clearing space within oneself can any thing not of the self enter. Contact with the not-self begets community, an awareness and sharing in of life outside personal bounds. Loneliness opposes community, isolating the individual like a dying star removed from other existences by vast reaches of space.

How then is *I* alone? F. provides an oblique answer at the height of the Argentinian Orgy, pleading, “Dear Father, accept this confession: we did not train ourselves to Receive because we believed there wasn’t Anything to Receive and we could not endure with this Belief” (BL 178-79). *I*’s lack of communion has nothing to do with any action of God; rather, it reflects his abandonment of hope that any such communion could take place. By denying the possibility of intercourse with God and fellow humans, *I* shuts himself and severs—temporarily, for it can never fully be cut—the fundamental connection between God and His creation.

Considered together, *I* and F’s logic carries a curious implicit symmetry: if creation requires a void, what action may be effected once the lack is alleviated?

In the Lurianic tradition, concentration is succeeded by destruction. The Breaking of the Vessels, or *Shevirah*, acts as a foil to *Tsimtsum*, following every contraction of the divine breath with an exhalation. The metaphor of divine respiration resonates with the doctrine as it succinctly and evocatively describes the drawing in of God to allow creation, and the forcing out

of His immanence into the cosmos. The expulsion of God's indwelling eminence engenders the need for restitution, as it exceeds the strength of the receiving vessels and enters the world at large. Scholem neatly captures the reciprocity of *Tsimtsum* and *Shevirah*, arguing,

In the 'Breaking of the Vessels,'...something of the Divine Being is exiled out of Himself, whereas the *Tsimtsum* could come to be considered as an exile into Himself. (*MTiJM* 261)

Scholem's doctrinal equivalency hints at a fracture within the Godhead. Filling the world with His greatness, God necessarily relinquishes some aspect of Himself. This 'exile from the self' encompasses a profound paradox at the heart of Kabbalism: the primal origin concealed within a divine wound.

Shevirah develops in *Beautiful Losers* as an acknowledgment of the broken state of the Godhead. While planting corn, Catherine Tekakwitha's uncle translates the myth into the Mohawk tradition, musing aloud, "Ah...in such a way did our Female Ancestress fall from heaven into the waste of primeval waters" (*BL* 85). The ancestress mentioned by the uncle seems cognizant with the Shekhinah—the hypostasized, female spirit of God's immanence in the world. The Shekhinah's dislocation from God and entrance into the world, though disastrous from an eternal perspective, presents humanity with an essential purpose. As Scholem states,

The exile of the Shekhinah is not a metaphor, it is a genuine symbol of the 'broken' state of things in the realm of divine potentialities. The Shekhinah fell, as the last Sefirah, when the vessels were broken. (*MTiJM* 275)

The shattering of the Shekhinah scatters her spirit throughout creation. As these sparks circulate, they enter matter—humans, trees, stones; all are imbued. Man's task is "to reassemble them, to lift them to their proper place and to restore the spiritual nature of man in its original splendor as

God conceived” (*MTiJM* 278). Taken to its logical extreme, the act of *Shevirah* vindicates creation, as the fragments of the Shekhinah enrobed in flesh would not need to be restored if they had never been dispersed. Associating the dislocation of God’s immanence with the planting of corn augments the temporally nourishing aspect of *Shevirah* while suggesting mundane sustenance has no eternal benefit.

The effect of *Shevirah* on God primarily concerns Catherine Tekakwitha. Near the end of her life, the Mohawk saint prays,

O God, show me that the Ceremony belongs to Thee. Reveal to your servant a fissure in the Ritual. Change Thy World with the jawbone of a broken Idea. O my Lord, play with me. (*BL* 207)

Cohen indicates God’s received deficiency fundamentally alters the nature of religious service. The God Tekakwitha addresses shapes the world through a jawbone capable of transmitting broken ideas—a notion which prompts the question, how does one worship an imperfect God? The above prayer indicates the flawed God ought to be encountered in an imperfect manner; like recognizing like. The sexual longing latent near the end of the prayer seems incognizant with the theological bent of the petition, though it suggests an affiliation with the Shekhinah. “This mystery of human existence is... nothing but a symbol of the love between the divine ‘I’ and the divine ‘You’, the Holy one, blessed be He and His Shekhinah,” writes Scholem (*MTiJM* 227). Tekakwitha’s plea is not one of physical longing but of spiritual inclusion in the eternal marriage of God and His Shekhinah. The satisfaction of this desire would represent the personal spiritual restoration of the saint.

Universal spiritual restoration is the central project of Lurianic Kabbalism; it is doctrinally realized as *Tikkun*. Scholem describes *Tikkun* as a regenerative process:

the restoration of the ideal order, which forms the original aim of creation, is also the secret purpose of existence. Salvation means actually nothing but restitution, re-integration of the original whole, or *Tikkun*, to use the Hebrew term. (*MTiJM* 268)

The “ideal order” implies an ideal God—a state only effected through the release of the shards of the Shekhinah within humans and other matter. These sparks, termed *Neshamah* in Hebrew, constitute the core of men and women’s souls; as divine fragments, they represent the presence of God and His Shekhinah among humanity. In Scholem’s estimation,

“Sparks of the Shekhinah” are scattered in all worlds and “there is no sphere of existence including organic and inorganic nature, that is not full of holy sparks which are mixed up with the Kelipoth and need to be separated from them and lifted up.” (*MTiJM* 280)

Kelipoth are the material vessels of *Neshamah* and consist of the entirety of matter; deliverance from the spiritual restrictions of physical existence requires the transmigration of the sacred sparks from the *Kelipoth* to God. This transference is known as *Gilgul* and is the chief vehicle of *Tikkun*.

Cohen connects the internment of the *Neshamah* with symbols of Catholic orthodoxy. *I* twice muses on the spiritual properties of devotional trinkets, asking, “Is there a part of Jesus in every stamped-out crucifix? I think there is,” and praying, “Be with me, religious medals of all kinds...be with me as I witness the ordeal of Catherine Tekakwitha” (*BL* 5-6; *BL* 80). Using religious objects to suggest the notion of *Kelipoth* creates a sense of irony—items often associated with spirituality cited for their innate physical meanness.

Gilgul cleanses the *Neshamah* of any material taint. Its palliative effect is curiously linked to parallel physical purification in *Beautiful Losers*. Recounting the details of Catherine Tekakwitha’s death, F. shares the following detail:

From the age of four years, Catherine Tekakwitha's face had been branded by the Plague; her sickness and her mortifications had further contributed to the disfigurement. But this face, so battered and so very swarthy, underwent a sudden change, about a quarter of an hour after her death. And in a moment she became so beautiful and so white... (BL 210)

Cohen seems to be challenging the traditional Kabbalistic disdain for earthly substance. The spiritual release of the Mohawk saint is not accompanied by fleshy decay; rather, corporeal refinement and preservation occurs. Cohen reveals the mechanisms of the transfiguration in an effectively playful passage:

At that precise moment the girl entered the eternal machinery of the sky. Looking back over her atomic shoulder, she played a beam of alabaster over her old face as she streamed forward on the insane grateful laughter of her girl friend. (BL 211)

Drawn heavenward by “the insane grateful laughter” of an entity suggestive of the Shekhinah, Catherine Tekakwitha whitewashes her old face—an action equal parts profound and mischievous. God answers Tekakwitha's prayer: she is handled, altered, and liberated by His revelation.

The success of *Tikkun* ultimately depends on communal human action. Prompted by F's directive, “Connect nothing,” I recalls an integrative experience:

Sometimes after I have come or just before I fall asleep, my mind seems to go out on a path the width of a thread and of endless length, a thread that is the same color as the night. Out, out along the narrow highway sails my mind, driven by curiosity, luminous with acceptance, far and out, like a feathered hook whipped deep into the light above the stream by a magnificent cast. Somewhere, out of my reach, my control, the hook unbends into a spear, the spear shears itself into a needle, and the needle sews the world together. (BL 16)

I envisions a universal consensus circumscribed by his own mind. The image of a sewn together world emphasizes the sense of personal agency so vital to *Tikkun* and reflects the cohesiveness gained through the process's fulfillment. *I*'s assertion that the needle is "out of [his] reach, [his] control," casts the revelation as a prefiguration of the final restorative act. In this moment, humanity's work is complete: purified by *Gilgul*, the *Neshamah* return to God, and history concludes.

3.3

Though *Gilgul* guides *Tikkun*, restitution fundamentally asks of humans a deep, genuine prayerfulness. This aim—*Kawwanah*—is, "literally "intention," i.e. mystical meditation on the words of prayer while they are being spoken. *Kawwanah*, in other words, is something to be realized in the act of prayer itself" (*MTiJM* 101). Scholem's definition of *Kawwanah* raises a vital question: what is prayer? Cohen associates prayer with seemingly sinful or deviant acts such as, "drugs, or whips, or sex, or blasphemy, or fasting." Through expanding the conception of prayer, Cohen indicates the intention of the supplicant supersedes the scriptural permissibility of his or her action. This belief is consistent with the teachings of Sabbatai Zevi, a false Jewish Messiah of the seventeenth century. The radical followers of Zevi advocate for active violation of the Torah, maintaining,

just as a grain of wheat must rot in the earth before it can sprout, so the deeds of the "believers" must be truly "rotten" before they can germinate the redemption. This metaphor, which appears to have been extremely popular, conveys the whole of sectarian Sabbatian psychology in a nutshell: in the period of transition, while the redemption is still in a state of concealment, the Torah in its explicit form must be denied, for only thus can it too become "concealed" and ultimately renewed. (*The Messianic Idea in Judaism* 116)

Sabbatian intention is paradoxical—the accepted good must be purposefully degraded by mortal dissipation. “Redemption through sin” suggests the highest level of devotion to God; it compels the believer to make his or herself mundanely iniquitous in service to an unseen divine potentiality. The essence of Cohen’s *Kawwanah* is thus: any spiritually deliberate act committed by a person “obsessed by God” aids the realization of *Tikkun*.

Mindful of the above redemptive paradox a scene such as F. and I’s drive to Parliament yields a spiritual reading. Though superficially a deeply comic depiction of a homoerotic tryst, the friends’ journey alludes to critical mystical truths through simple dialogue:

- Take it easy, F.
- It’s my night! My night!
- Yes it is, F. You finally made it: you’re a Member of Parliament.
- I’m in the world of men.
- F., put it back. Enough is enough.
- Never put it back when it gets like this.
- My God! I’ve never seen you so big! What’s going on in your mind? What are you thinking of? Please teach me how to do it. Can I hold it?
- No! This is between me and God. (*BL* 91)

The focal point of the exchange—F’s erect phallus—occupies an intermediate position between the material world and the divine. Like a spire, it points heavenward, inciting awe and desire. Poor I is transfixed, his interjection—“My God!”—seeming as much a figure of speech as an actual address to the divine. F’s subsequent servicing of his “greasy tower”—and his refusal of I’s assistance—stresses the essential solitude of this unorthodox act of *Kawwanah*; it is between F. and God. The blasphemous nature of the scene adds to its effectiveness, echoing the Sabbatian notion of redemption through sin.

Unlike the Sabbatians Cohen does not entirely abandon prayer as a form of *Kawwanah*. Rather he incorporates the traditional practice into more errant spiritual events. Excepting Edith, all of the focal characters in *Beautiful Losers* address God in prayer. The content of their prayers

reflect the heretical methods of *Kawwanah* they employ: *I* ruminates on masturbation and fasting; *F.* laments his grab at insanity; Catherine Tekakwitha asks God to, “Let me, my God, take the burden of your anger,” a vision of birch-bark whips informing her (*BL* 199). The efficacy and aim of this style of prayer can be surmised from *F.*’s remark to *I*,

You see, darling, I have to trap you on an altar before I can tell you anything, otherwise my instruction is just a headline, just a fashion. (*BL* 195)

This pretense of the sacred goes to the heart of Cohen’s conception of *Kawwanah* and Kabbalah in general. Orthodoxy, while providing a nice structure, is spiritual dead-weight. It anchors humanity to the broken ritual and ignores the organic mutability of genuine, spontaneous restorative deeds performed by believers. To move outside orthodoxy is to approach God.

Cohen appears to model the relationship between *I* and *F.* after the bond between Sabbatai Zevi and his foremost apostle, Nathan of Gaza. Zevi, who does not write, relies on his disciple to promulgate “the commission of antinomian acts which in [Sabbatai Zevi’s] state of exaltation he appears to have regarded as sacramental actions” (*MTiJM* 293). “Nathan does not himself practice antinomianism; he interprets it,” writes Scholem; though *I* commits heretical actions, he also relates *F.*’s blatant antinomianism, often using his teacher’s example as justification for his own deeds (*MTiJM* 296). *I* evinces ambivalence toward this task, questioning,

Why must I reproduce these conservations so painstakingly, letting not one lost comma alter the beat of our voices? I want to talk to men in taverns and buses and remember nothing. (*BL* 34)

The burden of memory traps *I* not on an altar but within the confines of his own received education.

Imparted by F, this pedagogy consists of sexually-focused libertinism. How else to interpret F's fervent revelation to *I*,

All parts of the body are erotogenic. Assholes can be trained with whips and kisses, that's elementary. Pricks and cunts have become monstrous! Down with genital imperialism! All flesh can come! (*BL* 32)

Or his rabid invocation to *I* to,

Fuck a saint...find a little saint and fuck her over and over in some pleasant part of heaven, get right into her plastic altar, dwell in her silver medal, fuck her until she tinkles like a souvenir music box, until the memorial lights go on for free (*BL* 12).

The notion of 'fucking a saint'—reconcilable with F's pansexual inclinations—appears repeatedly in *Beautiful Losers*. It is reminiscent of Sabbatian *Kawwanah* with its emphasis on scripturally forbidden practices. As Scholem observes,

the attraction of saintliness is not always sufficient to liberate the sparks from their prisons, the *Kelipoth* or "shells." There are stages of the great process of *Tikkun*, more particularly its last and most difficult ones, when in order to liberate the hidden sparks from their captivity, or to use another image, in order to force open the prison doors from within, the Messiah himself must descend into the realm of evil. (*MTiJM* 311)

This explanation defends F's exploits inasmuch as he resembles the false Messiah, but what of *I* and Catherine Tekakwitha: are their intentions also holy? Radical Sabbatian doctrine suggests they are. Returning once more to Scholem, it is shown that,

One of the strongest factors in the development of a nihilistic mentality among the "radicals" was their desire to negate an objective historical order in which the exile continued in full force and the beginnings of the redemption went unnoticed by all but the "believers" themselves. (*TMIiJ* 121)

Put bluntly, it is not enough for the Messiah to descend into mortal iniquity; “We must *all* descend into the realm of evil in order to vanquish it from within” (*MTiJM* 315).

3.4

Cohen offers a vision of universal *Tikkun* in the last book of *Beautiful Losers*—“Beautiful Losers: an Epilogue in the Third Person”. He represents the actual workings of the event as a mystical reprieve from exilic existence, a reading coherent with the argument put forth in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*:

the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria may be described as a mystical interpretation of Exile and Redemption, or even as a great myth of Exile. Its substance reflects the deepest religious feelings of the Jews of that age. (286)

The theme of exile resonates deeply with *Beautiful Losers*. Cohen’s personal exile as a Canadian Jew writing in Montréal mirrors the Diasporic exile of Luria, who developed his Kabbalistic system in Palestine following the expulsion of all Jews from Spain in 1492. Scholem connects this historical fact to the Lurianic concept of *Galuth*—the exile of the *Neshamah* within humans. Humans escape *Galuth* through the previously-mentioned process of *Gilgul*, or the transmigration of souls: “[*Gilgul*’s] function was, as it were, to lift the experience of the Jew in the *Galuth*, the exile and migration of the body, to the higher plane of a symbol for the exile of the soul” (*MTiJM* 281). Scholem contends that,

This new doctrine of God and the universe corresponds to the new moral idea of humanity which it propagates: the ideal of the ascetic whose aim is the Messianic reformation, the extinction of the world’s blemish, the restitution of all things in God—the man of spiritual action who through the *Tikkun* breaks the exile, the historical exile of the Community of Israel and that inner exile in which all creation groans. (*MTiJM* 286)

The ideal moral human seeks to unify God and thus the world through fulfillment of *Tikkun*. Such a man lives on the perimeter of community; he is, in Cohen's own words, "a remote human possibility" (*BL* 95). His spiritual work ultimately effects the physical reality of exile and mitigates its hold on Jewish history.

Cohen's "man of spiritual action" is the New Jew—a spiritually omnivorous seeker of God. *I*, *F.*, Edith, and Catherine Tekakwitha are all New Jews, as is the old man. The New Jew,

confirms tradition through amnesia, tempting the whole world with rebirth. He dissolves history and ritual by accepting unconditionally the complete heritage. He travels without passport because powers consider him harmless. His penetration into jails enforces his supranationality, and flatters his legalistic disposition. Sometimes he is Jewish but always he is American, and now and then, Québécois. (*BL* 161)

The aim of Cohen's New Jew is the same as Scholem's ideal Lurianic human: the deliverance from exile by means of *Tikkun*. The old man accomplishes this task through cunnilingus, orally pleasuring a woman who identifies herself as Isis, the Egyptian goddess of magic. Fleeing the woodland solitude of *F*'s treehouse, the old man encounters a pants-less woman wearing moccasins and driving an Oldsmobile. Stepping into her car, the old man asks the goddess,

—Are you married?
 —What if I am?
 —I don't know why I asked. I'm sorry. May I rest my head in your lap?
 —They always ask me if I'm married. Marriage is only a symbol for a ceremony which can be exhausted as easily as it can be renewed.
 —Spare me your philosophy, Miss.
 —You filthy heap! Eat me! (*BL* 234)

Isis ridicules the transience of marriage—a criticism ironically inconsistent with the desperate escapes of Edith and Catherine Tekakwitha from the bonds of the rite. The goddess’s disdain for marriage reflects Sabbatian attitudes toward the custom; the old man’s ambivalence toward the sacrament indicates he is not a Sabbatian partisan, but rather one who has “[accepted] unconditionally the complete heritage.” His consumption of Isis’s divine essence satisfies F’s recommendation to “fuck a saint.” It also initiates the end of time and history.

The cessation of history is not a simple erasure of the past; it is also a vision of the future. When the old man contacts Isis, he both violates any notions of linear time and discrete space, and asserts a mortal connection between humanity and divinity. The old man, Cohen suggests, becomes aware of this fact while at the System Theatre, noticing, “The move was invisible to him. His eyes were blinking at the same rate as the shutter in the projector, times per second, and therefore the screen was merely black. It was automatic” (*BL* 236). “Ordinary eternal machinery” is no longer heard indirectly but integrated within. The attainment of this state leads “not to perpetual suspense, but to a black screen” (*BL* 236).

In the absence of suitable entertainment, the old man puts on his own show. It begins with the liberation of his soul—the *Neshamah*—from his body: “He disintegrated slowly; just as a crater extends its circumference with endless tiny landslides along the rim, he dissolved from the inside out” (*BL* 241). The old man’s *Galuth* proceeds from a vitally interior space, the release of his *Neshamah* resulting in the dissolution of his body. His success, witnessed by an entranced crowd, serves as an example to other New Jews:

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 point of Clear Light! Let it change forever what we do not know! (*BL* 241)

In the throes of spiritual emancipation, the old man shares a glimpse of the restored God—the point of Clear Light. Cohen emphasizes the paradoxical revelation of the divine point of concentration, promoting its ability to alter unknown knowledge.

The old man's corporeal *Galuth* is followed by a spiritual transformation: "Quickly now, as if even he participated in the excitement over the unknown, he greedily reassembled himself into—into a movie of Ray Charles" (*BL* 242). Abandoning his previous identity, the old man assumes a new, distinctly American character. Returning to Cohen's description of the New Jew, one recalls he or she is "always...American," America a metonymy for spiritual fusion. The New Jew distinguishes herself through the persistent search for God as He appears in the world and recognizes this trait in others. A New Jew present at the old man's emancipation observes, "Hey. Someone's making it!" (*BL* 242).

Beautiful Losers closes with a direct address to the reader. The section resembles a dedication to the values of the New Jew; the unidentified narrator declares his absolute duty to the ideal, imploring,

Poor men, poor men, such as we, they've gone and fled. I will
plead from electrical tower. I will plead from turret of plane. He
will uncover His face. He will not leave me alone. I will spread
His name in Parliament. I will welcome His silence in pain. (*BL* 243)

The narrator asserts God ought to be sought in an absolute sense. The Hasidic adage, "no place can be void of the Shekhinah" encapsulates this responsibility—God's immanence is ubiquitous in the world. Cohen highlights the necessity of casting off not only the *Kelipoth* of human bodies, but the attendant communal concerns as well:

I have come through the fire of family and love. I smoke with my
darling, I sleep with my friend. We talk of the poor men, broken
and fled. Alone with my radio I lift up my hands. (*BL* 243)

The New Jew disregards social convention, her entire purpose fixated on experiencing communion with God. She speaks to her friends and lovers about the poor, broken humans who inhabit the earth like solitary points of light; she is one of them. Her affirmation is a greeting:

Welcome to you who read me today. Welcome to you who put my heart down. Welcome to you, darling and friend, who miss me forever in your trip to the end. (*BL* 243)

The final *Tikkun*, itself comprehensive, is the consequence of the combined monomaniacal spiritual strivings of myriad individuals. Leonard Cohen in one such searcher, and *Beautiful Losers* is his offering.

4. Eternal recurrence: Valentinian Gnosticism in *Beautiful Losers*

4.1

As mythological systems, Gnosticism and Kabbalism share a number of attributes. The Valentinian Gnostic tradition and Lurianic Kabbalistic tradition are particularly cognate, espousing—among other doctrines—the belief in a transcendent God, an eternal cycle of creation, destruction, and restitution, and the indwelling of God’s immanence in humans. These similarities, however, are coincidental:

the form in which Luria presented his ideas is strongly reminiscent of the Gnostic myths of antiquity. The similarity is, of course, unintentional; the fact is simply that the structure of his thoughts closely resembles that of the Gnostics. (*MTiJM* 260)

Scholem’s emphasis on structural continuity is telling as it hints at theological differences between the two mystical religions. Valentinian Gnosticism fundamentally diverges from Lurianic Kabbalism on the question of divinity. The Kabbalistic God, though fractured, is the sole spiritual arbiter of the universe. The supreme being in the Valentinian tradition exists outside of the universe; a separate entity, the Demiurge, fashions material and metaphysical worlds. The Gnostic doctrine of duality denies humanity the level of accountability exercised in the Lurianic system, marginalizing the efficacy of personal devotional practices such as prayer or study. In the absence of reconciliatory agency, human salvation—and, causally, divine restoration—depends on the reception of sacred revelation.

Leonard Cohen articulates a desire for revelation in his 1964 address at the Jewish Public Library of Montréal, citing the need for all aspects of creation to experience a singular existence,

so that the individuality, so that the oneness of each thing can express itself and not obscure itself in this dead center of acceptance and definition and clarification. Let us refuse to clarify. Let

us only follow the allegiance that we know we owe.
 (“On being a Jewish Writer” 00:33:46-00:34:05)

Read in a mystic context, Cohen’s remarks evince a want for universal spiritual restitution. The allegiance he speaks of is to God; only through recognition of the *pneuma*—the divine substance within all created objects—can this duty be met. Cohen depicts this longing for fullness in *Beautiful Losers*, complementing the novel’s Kabbalistic tendencies with kindred Gnostic doctrines. The denseness of his symbology coupled with the metaphorical plasticity of Valentinian Gnosticism also permits novel readings of scenes and characters from the book; this work devotes particular attention to F’s affinity with the Demiurge. As a “*dualistic transcendent religion of salvation*,” Gnosticism privileges knowledge of God, or *gnosis* (*The Gnostic Religion* 32). The men and women of *Beautiful Losers* achieve this knowledge variably, affirming the essence of Gnosticism and vindicating Cohen’s claim that the method of spiritual furtherance is subordinate to the objective.

4.2

Valentinian Gnosticism identifies three major phases of existence: emanation, crisis, and restitution. These stages correspond convincingly to the Kabbalistic cycle of *Tsimtsum-Shevirath-Tikkun*; indeed, close Gnostic readings of many of the passages analyzed in the previous chapter yield the same thematic conclusions as the Kabbalistic interpretations. Gnostic and Kabbalistic thought deviates at a crucial point: the nature of God. As previously detailed, the Kabbalists’ God is a single though compromised entity, His hypostasized immanence—the Shekhinah—fallen into and scattered among creation; the hope of all believers is the restoration of His eminence and communion with Him. The Gnostic conception of divinity is dualistic—the true, hidden God exists outside of cosmological creation; the Demiurge, cognate with the Judeo-

Christian God and ignorant of the hidden God's presence, fashions creation in his own image, frustrating the fulfillment of divine restoration. Gnostic scholar Hans Jonas describes the two beings thusly:

In invisible and nameless heights there was a perfect Aeon pre-existent. His name is Fore-Beginning, Fore-Father, and Abyss. No thing can comprehend him. Through immeasurable eternities he remained in profoundest repose. (*TGR* 179-180)

And as for the Demiurge,

Out of the psychical substance, the lower Sophia shapes the father and king of all things psychical and material, for he created everything that comes after him, though without his knowledge guided by his mother. He is called "father" of the right-hand things, i.e., the psychical, "artificer" (demiurge) of the left-hand things, i.e., the material, and "king" of them all, i.e., of all things outside the Pleroma. (*TGR* 190)

The ontological differences between these two spirits permits a uniquely Gnostic explication of the mystical context of *Beautiful Losers*.

Valentinian Gnosticism envisions the original action as a sacred conjugation—the Fore-Father depositing the primal seed into his consort, the Silence:

And once this Abyss took thought to project out of himself the beginning of all things, and he sank this project like a seed into the womb of the Silence that was with him, and she conceived and brought forth the Mind (*Nous*: male), who is like and equal to his begetter and alone comprehends the greatness of the Father. He is also called Only-Begotten, Father, and Beginning of all beings. Together with him Truth (*Aletheia*: female) was produced, and this is the first Tetrad: Abyss and Silence, then Mind and Truth. (*TGR* 180)

Particular significance is ascribed to the separation of the Abyss from other entities—his offspring included. His alternate title, Fore-Father, highlights this isolation, placing him before the progenitor; the appellation also underscores the singular familiarity between the hidden God

and his first progeny. From the initial Tetrad spring twenty-six more Aeons; collectively, the thirty Aeons constitute the Pleroma, or totality of God. As the above discussion of the Fore-Father and Demiurge illustrates, the Pleroma endures independent of creation. In this sense the hidden God is three-times-removed from humans and other aspects of physical design, the other Aeons of the Pleroma and the Demiurge dividing the Fore-Father from material life.

Cohen obliquely explores the notion of cosmological partitioning in the second book of *Beautiful Losers*, “A Long Letter from F.” Humans, F. suggests, have severed themselves from the mystery of God:

Now what about this silence we are so desperate to clear in the wilderness? Have we labored, plowed, muzzled, fenced so that we might hear a Voice? Fat chance. The Voice comes out of the whirlwind, and long ago we hushed the whirlwind. I wish that you would remember that the Voice comes out of the whirlwind. Some men, some of the time, have remembered. Was I one? (*BL* 148)

Alluding to Job’s encounter with an implacable God, F’s assessment of humanity is bleak. The voice from the whirlwind no longer justifies itself to men and women, silenced as it is by order and enclosures. Deprived of communion with God, creation succumbs to the interests of humans, “baptized with fire, shit, history, love, and loss” (*BL* 149). Cohen indicates this disconnection is deleterious, completing the baptismal statement with the command, “Memorize this. It explains the Golden Rule” (*BL* 149). In the absence of divine guidance, men and women treat each other as they have been treated: viciously.

The emanation of the Aeons and formation of the Pleroma is succeeded by a spiritual crisis. The Sophia—last and least of the Aeons—attempts to comprehend the Fore-Father and in doing so, “went out of her mind, pretendedly from love, actually from folly or presumption,

since she had no such community with the Father as the Only-Begotten Mind” (*TGR* 182). The passion of the Sophia,

was a search for the Father, for she strove to comprehend his greatness. This, however, she failed to achieve, because what she attempted was impossible, and so she found herself in great agony; on account of the depth of the Abyss, into which in her desire she penetrated more and more, she would in the end have been swallowed up by its sweetness and dissolved in the general being, had she not come up against the power that consolidates the All and keeps it off the ineffable Greatness. (*TGR* 182)

The Sophia retains her identity through the Father’s imposition of a divine limit; the sexual undertones of this action are inescapable. The encountering of this limit fractures the Aeon: the upper Sophia is spiritually cleansed and returns to the Pleroma; the lower Sophia, the hypostatized emotions of the fallen Sophia, remains outside the Pleroma. Here, “from the ignorance, the grief, the fear and the shock, material substance took its first beginning...It elaborated its own Matter in the Void.” (*TGR* 183). The catastrophe caused by the Sophia thus produces the tripartite constitution of humans—spirit (*pneuma*), soul, and matter deriving from the Father, the upper Sophia and Demiurge, and the lower Sophia, respectively. Resemblances between the Sophia and Shekhinah are manifold.

Echoes of the Sophia’s folly are found in Cohen’s depiction of F. and Edith’s Argentinian holiday. For untold reasons, Edith cannot come. F. recounts:

My recitals had served only to bring her closer to a summit she could not achieve. She moaned in terrible hunger, her goose-flesh shining in supplication that she might be freed from the unbearable coils of secular pleasure, and soar into that blind realm, so like sleep, so like death, that journey of pleasure beyond pleasure, where each man travels as an orphan toward an atomic ancestry, more anonymous, more nourishing than the arms of blood or foster family. (*BL* 173)

Cohen's conflation of sexual and spiritual release resonates with the Valentinian account of the Sophia's descent into unbearable sweetness. Edith approaches an insurmountable summit; the relief she desires lies distant the secular bonds that bind her. F. offers a vision of Edith's aspiration, emphasizing the boundless anonymity of personal liberation—the joy of which is greater than family. Both Edith and the Sophia seek this pleasure—unspeakable and unknowable; its fulfillment signifies the return of the *pneuma* to the Pleroma and the effected restoration. Such a state is analogous to the Kabbalistic doctrine of *Tikkun*, or the reintegration of the Godhead.

Gnostic conceptions of salvation proceed from the notion of *gnosis*. *Gnosis*, or knowledge, reaches humans through divine revelation. Jonas describes *gnosis* as, “the sole and sufficient vehicle of salvation,” explaining,

That knowledge affects not only the knower but the known itself; that by every “private” act of knowledge the objective ground of being is moved and modified; that subject and object are the same in essence (though not on the same scale)—these are tenets of a mystical conception of “knowledge” which yet can have a rational basis in the proper metaphysical premises. (*TGR* 175)

Though comparisons between *gnosis* and *Tikkun* or *Kawwanah* are valid and warranted, there is an earnest rational tendency in Valentinian Gnosticism which Lurianism lacks. Emphasis is placed on the reciprocity of spirit between the knower and his or her aim—a theologically compelling conceit justifying the merging of the subject, the knower and attendant *pneuma*, and the object, the hidden God. “*Perfect salvation*,” according to Irenaeus, an early father of the Christian Church and critic of Gnosticism, “is the *cognition* itself of the ineffable greatness: for since through “Ignorance” came about “Defect” and “Passion,” the whole system springing from the Ignorance is dissolved by knowledge” (*TGR* 176). That is to say, knowledge of the original

splendor of the Pleroma suffices to dispel the hypostasized products of the Sophia's fall, cleansing humans of matter and soul and releasing the *pneuma*.

The attainment of *gnosis* in *Beautiful Losers* occurs distinctly for each character. F. discloses his vision of knowledge near the end of his letter to *I*, pronouncing the beam of light from the System Theatre's projector as,

a ghostly white snake sealed in an immense telescope. It was a serpent swimming home, lazily occupying the entire sewer which irrigated the auditorium. It was the first snake in the shadows of the original garden, the albino orchard snake offering our female memory the taste of—everything!...I studied the snake and he made me greedy for everything. In the midst of this heady contemplation, I am invited to formulate the question which will torment me most. I formulate the question and it begins to torment me immediately:
What will happen when the newsreel escapes into the Feature? (BL 223)

Cohen connects the Genesis myth of Adam and Eve to the contemporary phenomenon of film projectors, subverting the accepted function of both story and mechanism. As with the snake-worshipping Ophites, the Valentinian Gnostics esteem the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Its purpose is the revelation of knowledge—a negative action in the Bible, but a necessary and redemptive function for the Gnostics as it stymies the laws of the Demiurge. F's fear of an unruly projection suggests an uneasiness with mass revelation; if the light is the serpent and the serpent imparts *gnosis*, who will *not* know when the light compounds itself?

4.3

F's apprehension of revelation is consistent with his demiurgical character. As he tells *I* in his long letter, "I love dances but I do not love foreign dances, I love dances that have rules, my rules" (*BL* 147). Such conceit marks the Valentinian Demiurge; "he believes himself to be alone and declares himself to be the unique and highest God" (*TGR* 191). The Demiurge is

epistemologically stunted, unaware of the Pleroma above him and detached, “unthinking and foolish” concerning his own cosmological fashioning (*TGR* 191). This ignorance imbues the structure of the Demiurge’s creation with a false sense of originality; in his arrogance, the artificer considers himself the origin of existence and order.

F’s impression of systems and their originations is essentially romantic. Relating his friend’s thoughts, *I* remarks,

What is most original in a man’s nature is often that which is most desperate. Thus new systems are forced on the world by men who simply cannot bear the pain of living with what is. Creators care nothing for their systems except that they be unique. If Hitler had been born in Nazi Germany he wouldn’t have been content to enjoy the atmosphere. If an unpublished poet discovers one of his own images in the work of another writer it gives him no comfort, for his allegiance is not to the image or its progress in the public domain, his allegiance is to the notion that he is not bound to the world as given, that he can escape from the painful arrangement of things as they are. (*BL* 55)

The creator is an artist; his or her attempt to alter the world after a personal ideal reflects a deep discomfort with the current state of affairs. The pain of living within another’s system drives men like F. to devise their own realities and develop their own dances. Desperate men such as Hitler and Jesus design systems meant to fail; “that is the way with the greatest creators: they guarantee the desperate power of their own originality by projecting their systems into an abrasive future” (*BL* 55).

F. forces his system—never codified; never explicated—on various characters in *Beautiful Losers*, but focuses the brunt of his efforts on *I*. Both men are aware of this relationship; as *I* notes,

I wish I knew why he took so much interest in me. Now that I look back he seemed to be training me for something, and he was ready

to use any damn method to keep me hysterical. Hysteria is my classroom, F. said once. (*BL* 55-56)

F. admits as much in his letter, explaining,

Something in your eyes, old lover, described me as the man I wanted to be... Your baffled cries as I tormented you, you were the good animal I wanted to be, or failing that, the good animal I wanted to exist. It was I who feared the rational mind, therefore I tried to make you a little mad. I was desperate to learn from your bewilderment. You were the wall which I, batlike, bounced my screams off of, so I might have direction in this long nocturnal flight. (*BL* 151)

F's self-awareness is remarkable for a demiurge. In the act of creation, he beholds an unanticipated circumstance: a rational, critical mind. Recognizing this novelty—and potential opposition—F. probes it, deliberately testing reason with illogic. His attempts at understanding a phenomenon as unexplainable in the contemporary world as sanity ultimately lead him to revelation and a confession: “I withheld certain vital items, an apparatus here, a fact there—but only because (yes, this is closer to truth) I dreamed you would be greater than me... I held things back from you because I wished you greater than my Systems conceived” (*BL* 160). F's admittance of lack is inconsistent with the Gnostic Demiurge's arrogance and indicates an internal transformation brought about through an external event.

F. and Edith's trip to Argentina is ostensibly intended to address Edith's fore-mentioned sexual dysfunction. Though that issue is redressed, it is not F. who restores Edith's ability to orgasm; rather, an absurd device known as the Danish Vibrator accomplishes the task—its initials, D.V., suspiciously reminiscent of *Deo volente*. Faced with the failure of his system and the usurpation of his authority, F. breaks down, tearfully asking Edith, “Was it selfish of me to try and end your pain, yours and his (you, dear old comrade)? I saw pain everywhere” (*BL* 174). After cataloging the various masochistic tendencies of his human fabrications, F. continues:

I seemed to wake up in the middle of a car accident, limbs strewn everywhere, detached voices screaming for comfort, severed fingers pointing homeward, all the debris withering like sliced cheese out of Cellophane—and all I had in the wrecked world was a needle and thread, so I got down on my knees, I pulled pieces out of the mess and I started to stitch them together... My needle going so madly, sometimes I found I'd run the thread right through my own flesh and I was joined to one of my own grotesque creations—I'd rip us apart—and then I heard my own voice howling with the others, and I knew that I was also truly part of the disaster. (*BL* 175)

Confronted with an orgiastic display of human suffering, F. struggles to impose order—his order. This proves impossible; as F. sews flesh to bone, he loses himself on the operating table of the world, sutured to and lamenting with the meanest products of his hand. F. recognizes his own culpability at this moment. For him, “it was the end of Action. I would keep on trying, but I knew I had failed the both of you, and that both of you had failed me” (*BL* 176). Though loath to abandon his demiurgical practices, F. concedes the limits of his skill and resorts to a final trick that results in “Edith’s suicide, [F’s] hospitalization, [I’s] cruel ordeal in the treehouse” (*BL* 176).

4.4

F’s trick—shooting up with water from the Fountain at Lourdes—is both blasphemous and deviant—two attributes that appeal to Cohen’s sense of spirituality. Though navigating the chronology of *Beautiful Losers* is uncertain, it is evident the injection of holy water occurs after F. and Edith’s time in Argentina; as *I* relates at the beginning of the former section, “I had just returned from a weekend in Ottawa, where F. had arranged for me to have access to the Archives”—the same period of time F. and Edith are experiencing, “a little sun and experiments” (*BL* 104; *BL* 164). The scene serves as an awakening for all three characters involved—a process evocative of the Gnostic Call; as the Lourdes water advertisement reads, “Imagine—holding in

your hand, touching with your fingers, SEEING WITH YOUR OWN EYES—water from the miraculous Fountain at Lourdes, *permanently* sealed in transparent rosary beads!” (BL 108). The mere sight of the water, the ad purports, heals any affliction; F. and Edith’s intravenous introduction must then constitute full revelation, or *gnosis*.

Functionally knowledge of the Abyss, *gnosis* is effected through reception of the Call—“the “call of Life” or “of the great Life,” which is equivalent to the breaking of light into the darkness” (TGR 74). The Call is issued by the Abyss and carried to humanity by the Alien Man, or Messenger—depicted as an Aeon in the Valentinian tradition. A number of objects, events, and people in *Beautiful Losers* are symbolically suggestive of the Call; the Lourdes holy water and Mary Voolnd among them. Acting as “a kind of abbreviation of Gnostic doctrine,” the Call,

connects the command to awake with the following doctrinal elements: the *reminder* of the heavenly origin and the transcendent history of man; the *promise* of redemption, to which also belongs the redeemer’s account of his own mission and descent to this world; and finally the practical *instruction* as to how to live henceforth in the world, in conformity with the newly won “knowledge” and in preparation for the eventual ascent. (TGR 81)

Mary Voolnd’s vaginally-transmitted message for F. fulfills all three above functions:

**ANCIENT PATRIOT
FIRST FATHER PRESIDENT
THE REPUBLIC SALUTES YOUR SERVICE
WITH ITS HIGHEST HONOR**
the escape is planned for tonight (BL 225).

The letter acknowledges F’s transcendent history and offers the hopeful expectation of deliverance; instruction comes from the messenger herself—Mary Voolnd. As she shepherds F. out of the hospital, she advises him, “Run, F.! Run. Run!” (BL 226).

The Call sends F. into a state of panic. In an uncommonly self-aware gesture, he pleads to Mary,

—But I think I could be happy here. I think I could acquire the desolation I coveted so fiercely in my disciple.
 —That’s just it, F. Too easy.
 —I want to stay, Mary.
 —I’m afraid that’s impossible, F.
 —But I’m right on the edge, Mary. I’m almost broken, I’ve almost lost everything, I almost have humility!
 —Lose it! Lose everything! (*BL* 225)

F’s reluctance to leave mirrors the Gnostic belief that the soul is “terrified at the prospect of having to depart and [clings] desperately to the things of this world” (*TGR* 87). Adherence to material life contradicts Gnostic doctrine, suggesting F. is not yet spiritually emancipated as he lacks humility. This humility is the antithesis of F’s demiurgical nature; it demands universal assent and individual dissent. Though it is developed and maintained through active means, humility leads to a contemplative existence devoid of the desire to affect mundane change.

Cohen regards saints as human outliers: they observe the world but do not attempt to repair it. “What is a saint?”, asks *I*:

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. (*BL* 95)

These “balancing monsters of love” achieve stability through individual *gnosis*—the energy of love (*BL* 96). Jonas writes, “Thus the call to the individual is connected with the general eschatology of the return of all souls,” souls referring to *pneuma* in this instance (*TGR* 88). The

personal attainment of *gnosis* permits the awakened a rarefied glimpse of a wholly balanced reality:

I remember once slobbering over Edith's thigh...I don't know what Edith did (maybe one of her magnificent lubrication squirts) or what I did (maybe one of my mysterious sprays of salivation) but all at once my face was wet and my mouth slid on skin; it wasn't Thigh or Cunt or any chalk schoolboy slogan (nor was I Fucking): it was just a shape of Edith: then it was just a humanoid shape: then it was just a shape—and for a blessed second truly I was not alone, I was part of a family. (*BL* 96)

I's vision of familial salvation depicts the perfection of space; the deconstruction of identity complete. The anonymity of this uniformity indicates the foretold loss of matter and soul. It is in this moment that the *pneuma* returns to the Fore-Father.

The Valentinian *Gospel of Truth* describes spiritual release in ecstatic, abstract terms. The generation of unity follows the rejection of ignorance:

As a person's ignorance, at the moment when he comes to know, disappears of its own accord; as darkness dissolves at the appearance of light; so also Deficiency is dissolved in the fact of Plenitude. Therefore, from that moment on, Shape is no longer apparent, but disappears in fusion with Unity—for now their works have become equal one to the other—at the moment when Unity perfected the spaces. (*TGR* 197)

Unity seems to constitute the redemption promised by the Call: it erases physical and psychological differences and finalizes creation. Its unanimity recalls the ideal primal state of being. Universal equilibrium requires the return of all the *pneuma* to the Pleroma; such a situation is only possible through mass revelation.

4.5

“The real object of salvation,” writes Jonas, “is the godhead itself, its theme the divine integrity” (*TGR* 196). As Kabbalism strives for the restoration of God’s fullness through the spiritual realization of men and women, Gnosticism connects the state of the Pleroma with the redemption of humans. Salvation is as much a restitution of the Fore-Father as it is an annulment of cosmic creation:

the Fullness is restored in its integrity, the original breach finally repaired, the pre-temporal loss retrieved; and matter and soul, the expression of the fall, with their organized system, the world, cease to exist. (*TGR* 196)

The world—and human life—exists for the sake of divine restoration and are therefore erased when the condition comes about. Absent in Valentinian Gnosticism is any sense of deliverance through prayer or study—common Kabbalistic preoccupations; *gnosis* is simply revelation of complete and abstract knowledge bestowed under sometimes arbitrary-seeming circumstances. But how does it progress through the world?

Cohen suggests knowledge of God circumscribes and infiltrates the earth as magic. This is the “sweet burden” of F’s argument, shared with *I* and reproduced in its entirety here:

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. God was ruler though his funeral lengthened. Though his mourners thickened Magic never fled. Though his shrouds were hoisted the naked God did live. Though his words were twisted the naked Magic thrived. Though his death was published round and round the world the heart did not believe. Many hurt men wondered. Many struck men bled. Magic never faltered. Magic always led. Many stones were rolled but God would not lie down. Many wild men lied. Many fat men listened. Though they offered stones Magic

still was fed. Though they locked their coffers God was always served. Magic is afoot. God rules. Alive is afoot. Alive is in command. Many weak men hungered. Many strong men thrived. Though they boasted solitude God was at their side. Nor the dreamer in his cell, nor the captain on the hill. Magic is alive. Though his death was pardoned round and round the world the heart would not believe. Though laws were carved in marble they could not shelter men. Though altars built in parliaments they could not order men. Police arrested Magic and Magic went with them for Magic loves the hungry. But Magic would not tarry. It moves from arm to arm. It would not stay with them. Magic is afoot. It cannot come to harm. It rests in an empty palm. It spawns in an empty mind. But Magic is no instrument. Magic is the end. Many men drove Magic but Magic stayed behind. Many strong men lied. They only passed through Magic and out the other side. Many weak men lied. They came to God in secret and though they left him nourished they would not tell who healed. 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 to my mind. This I mean to laugh with in my mind. This I mean my mind to 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. (BL 157-58)

Reading as a quasi-prose poem, F's exhortation recognizes the ubiquity of magic in the world, treating the substance as an extension and product of God. Similar to *pneuma*, magic is not of the world despite inhabiting it; further reminding of Gnostic cosmology, magic, "rests in an empty palm. It spawns in an empty mind." It brings humans to God in an ameliorative capacity, both parties finding respite though neither clarifies how. This process endures until the cessation of history and dissolution of time; "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."

"The Magic Length of God" implies a transmutation of physical properties to spiritual principles. The Valentinian system locates the healing power of *gnosis* in the reality of mundane

being, as it derives “the existence and condition of the composite entity “man,” from the *ignorance* of an Aeon and [reduces] the whole physical system to spiritual categories” (*TGR* 194). The Sophia’s ignorance, though divinely disastrous, is materially generative, compelling and justifying creation. Such an interpretation implicitly contests the Christian notion of Original Sin as it ascribes primal fault to an aspect of the divine Abyss; “thus the world...is for the sake of salvation, not salvation for the sake of what happened within creation and to creation” (*TGR* 196).

Cohen extends a vision of salvation near the end of *Beautiful Losers*. Descending from a treehouse supposed to be F’s, an old man reenters downtown Montréal with the help of a woman symbolically redolent of Catherine Tekakwitha and introduced as Isis. The old man—an amalgamation of *I* and *F*.—undergoes a profound transfiguration among the broken machinery of the Main Shooting and Game Alley, attracting “the divorced, the converted, the overeducated,...karate masters, adult stamp collectors, Humanists” and all other divisions of humanity (*BL* 240). Dissipating “from the inside out,” the man yet retains some vestigial identity when he begins to reintegrate himself; like an hourglass, he is strongest at his narrowest point—“the point of Clear Light!” (*BL* 241). This locus “is not a second chance;” it is, “a vision of All Chances at Once!” (*BL* 241-42). For all practical purposes, the old man broadcasts to the assembled masses the release of the *pneuma* within him. His liberation offers the spectators a preview of eternity—a taste of finality.

The old man’s *gnosis* appears lost on most of the onlookers. As he completes his metamorphosis, the old man—now a projection of Ray Charles—addresses the crowd:

- Just sit back and enjoy it, I guess.
- Thank God it’s only a movie.
- Hey! cried a New Jew, laboring on the lever of the broken Strength Test. Hey. Somebody’s making it! (*BL* 242)

Unwilling to accept an event as irrational as the transformation of a man into a film, humanity chooses to understand the miraculous as mundane reality. Cohen darkly insinuates that men and women, though faced with a clearly divine event, will resort to familiar explanations. Not so for the New Jew. The New Jew, last seen attempting the impossible, appreciates the irrational for what it is: the fulfillment of finite life.

5. Knights of Faith: an investigation of contemplative Christian mysticism

5.1

It perhaps seems out of place to discuss the influence of Christian mysticism on the work of a devout Jew, particularly if the man in question felt the need to write a poem as frank as ‘Not a Jew’:

Anyone who says
I’m not a Jew
is not a Jew
I’m very sorry
but this decision
is final (*Book of Longing* 158)

Interest, however, does not necessitate conversion. In his poetry, prose, and music, Leonard Cohen reiterates his fascination with Christianity, especially the figure and story of Jesus and the concept of sainthood. Sainthood, Cohen suggests, requires the careful application of an immoderate sense of devotion; its attainment constitutes communion with God—a furtherance of Kabbalistic and Gnostic doctrines. Christian mysticism lacks the mythological pageantry of these older systems, though its practices—most notably, contemplative prayer and ecstatic meditation—are cognizant with them. In *Beautiful Losers*, Cohen depicts the utilization of these Christian mystic methods in service to a profound search for a spiritual existence.

Drawing from the anonymous fourteenth century mystical treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the work of religious philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, this chapter explores the role of various Christian mystic doctrines in *Beautiful Losers*. Special consideration is given to the distinction between the active and contemplative lives and Kierkegaard’s concept of the ‘paradox of faith.’ Through close readings of the fore-mentioned texts, it is shown that a meaningful synthesis of disparate elements of Christian mysticism is both possible and

instructive. Applied to *Beautiful Losers*, this mystical fusion permits an original reading of the work, demonstrating that the attainment of spiritual perfection for Cohen's characters is consistent with Christian notions of contemplation and faith.

5.2

Christian mystic traditions identify two varieties of people: actives and contemplatives. The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th century guide to contemplative prayer, defines the two types hierarchically:

The active is the lower, and the contemplative is the higher... The nature of active life is such that it both begins and ends in this life, but this is not so with contemplative life, for it begins in this life and will last without end, because the part that Mary chose shall never be taken away. (31)

The active life consists of corporeal acts of faith and encompasses much of the basic directives of Christian doctrine. Such emphasis on worldly actions detracts from divine considerations; this split demonstrates the inferiority of the active life in relation to the contemplative. The contemplative exceeds the active through abnegation of the mundane:

the higher part of contemplation (so far as it is attainable on earth) rests entirely in this darkness and in this cloud of unknowing, with a loving stirring and a blind attention only to the bare existence of God himself. (*The Cloud of Unknowing* 31)

The contemplative forgets himself in his search for God. The sensation is akin to entering a dense cloud—God, the unknown aim, permeates its totality while all temporal concerns are placed beneath. In this state, the contemplative is above himself and below God. Reminiscent of the Kabbalistic concept of *Gestalt* or the Gnostic notion of *gnosis*, contemplation of God's

grandeur engages the spiritual faculties of humans at the expense of their bodily and psychological aspects.

The literal and metaphorical descent of *I* to the subsurface of the earth resembles contemplative practices in its desperation. Letting his body degrade, *I* becomes increasingly obsessed with contacting Catherine Tekakwitha. He prays frequently to God, but the Mohawk saint has a greater effect on him due to her status as a human who has successfully contacted the divine. Near the end of his stay in the sub-basement, he remarks of the saint's history, "How good to know something she did" (*BL* 68). This beneficence is contrasted with the physical state of *I*:

Come is much dirty underwear, real and dirty underwear, which
once, sealed in polyethylene packages, promised me such marble
flanks. There is hair under my fingernails. (*BL* 68)

The promise of marble flanks unfulfilled, *I* grows more frantic and less coherent. Lured from the basement by a trick of F., he ascends to his dead friend's treehouse. Here, bereft of anything approximating a pleasant existence, *I* tries once more to contact the saint:

Kateri Tekakwitha
calling you, calling you, calling you, testing 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
my poor unelectric head calling you loud and torn 1 2 3 4 5 6
7 8 9 (*BL* 136)

One is led to believe Tekakwitha does not answer, though the plea raises questions of love and knowledge. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* differentiates between the two faculties, ascribing precedence to the latter. God, he asserts,

is forever beyond the reach of the first of these, the intellectual
faculty; but by means of the second, the loving faculty, he can
be fully grasped by each individual being, to such an extent that
each single loving soul may, by virtue of love, embrace with

itself him who is fully sufficient (and beyond comparison more than fully) to fill all the souls and angels that can ever exist. (23)

Knowledge of God, the anonymous author indicates, is nothing more than love of God—a perfect, self-fulfilled entity. The infinite goodness of God is such that any who love Him are eternally possessed by Him.

Cohen's intimations of a spiritually wounded God diverge from his medieval counterpart's conception of a perfect God. Cohen asserts it is not enough to love God as He is—one must go further in their love and imbue it with a restorative vigor. Catherine Tekakwitha demonstrates this belief when she prays,

—O God, show me that the Ceremony belongs to Thee. Reveal to your servant a fissure in the Ritual. Change Thy World with the jawbone of a broken Idea. O my Lord, play with me. (BL 207)

Tekakwitha's masochistic pleas acknowledge both the broken state of creation and the necessity of accepting this state before addressing it. But how does one approach an undertaking as grand and seemingly presumptuous as healing God?

Cohen suggests physical penance is a necessary aspect of divine restitution. Catherine Tekakwitha exhibits especial fervor in *Beautiful Losers*, undergoing a number of vicious, self-imposed penitential acts. These acts are performed in a state of ignorance:

Kneeling at the root of the wood cross Catherine Tekakwitha prayed and fasted. She did not pray that her soul should be favored in heaven. She did not fast so that her marriage would never nourish history. She did not cut her stomach with stones so that the mission would prosper. She did not know why she prayed and fasted. These mortifications were performed in a poverty of spirit. (BL 194-95)

Here a curious discrepancy arises between Cohen and *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The latter work calls for a “blind stirring of love towards God for himself” and “a cloud of forgetting beneath you, between you and everything that was ever created” (33; 26). Catherine Tekakwitha observes these guidelines; her punishment is innocent. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, however, contains a separate injunction against physical penance. Untrained contemplatives may, through intellectual error, understand spiritual instructions, “not spiritually, as they are intended, but carnally and physically” (68). This mistake is a devilish trick:

Truly, many evils spring from this deception and its offshoots: great hypocrisy, great heresy, and great error. For in the Devil’s school such false feeling is immediately followed by false knowledge, just as in God’s school true feeling is followed by true knowledge. (69)

Catherine Tekakwitha evinces none of these deficiencies. In keeping with his public stance on corporeal atonement, Cohen seems to disagree with the medieval theologian.

5.3

Not unlike Kabbalah or Gnosticism, Christian mysticism differentiates between the temporal and the eternal. The temporal comprises everything of the earth—body, mind, matter; all subject to degradation. Often naught but a fleshy impediment, the temporal yet serves a purpose. It is the mediator of the eternal. Following the corruption of humanity in the Garden of Eden, the eternal existence given to man must be sought outside the cosmos, the temporal constituting a barrier to this objective. Søren Kierkegaard identifies this barrier as sin:

As the day wanes, may Thou give to the old man a renewed remembrance of his first resolution, that the first may be like the last, the last like the first, in possession of a life that has willed only one thing. Alas, but this has indeed not come to pass. Something has come in between. The separation of sin lies in between. (*Purity of Heart* 31)

Though not all temporal action represents sin, it is always subordinate to the eternal. In this sense the necessary lineage of the temporal proceeds from Genesis and at the pleasure of the eternal:

The Eternal will not have its time, but will fashion time to its own desire, and then give its consent that the temporal should also be given its time. (*PoH* 37)

The work of the eternal is contemplation, or suffering. It is the work man is called to but must neglect to some degree following the Fall. The contemplative practices radical egalitarianism—all people are equal to her in their deficiency and brokenness. This awareness includes a notion of self-lack, a recurrent preoccupation of *I*. Alone and constipated, *I* complains of his physical wounds, declaring,

The way I hate pain is most monumentally extraordinary, much more significant than the way you hate pain, but my body is so much more central, I am the Moscow of pain, you are the mere provincial weather station. (*BL* 63)

I betrays himself in his hyperbole. Attempting to claim precedence in the field of human misery, he only succeeds in emphasizing the absurdity of his claims. He inadvertently describes the function of the contemplative—to sit lower than all around them, and, through this sinking, remind their fellow man or woman of their own failings. Returning once more to Cohen's definition of a saint, certain parallels emerge:

Far from flying with the angels, [the saint] traces with the fidelity of a seismograph needle the state of the solid bloody landscape. His house is dangerous and finite, but he is at home in the world. He can love the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart. It is good to have among us such men, such balancing monsters of love. (*BL* 95-96)

The saint is not ethereal; he is of the earth, both generatively and actively. His worldliness is his power; his ability to accept and love his fellow humans is his gift. The monstrosity of his love derives from its intensity and totality. The saint loves all men and women—even the murderers, rapists, and thieves; perhaps, even Hitler. All men and women who take great love upon themselves, who flaunt expectations of decency or dogma to reach a state of grace are saints.

Such radical love has its roots in what Kierkegaard terms, “the paradox of faith,” or the absurd. He defines this notion in relation to the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham exhibited absurd faith through the double-movement of his heart: absolute willingness to obey God’s command, and absolute trust that the proscribed event would not come to pass. “Abraham made two movements,” Kierkegaard writes,

He makes the infinite movement of resignation and gives up his claim to Isaac, something no one can understand because it is a private undertaking. But then he further makes, and at every moment is making, the movement of faith. (*Fear and Trembling* 139)

The second movement—the movement of faith—separates the individual from the universal and, transitively, the ethical. The ethical is flagrantly disregarded in *Beautiful Losers*, especially in the persons of *I* and *F*. Consider the friends’ drive to Parliament:

—Take it easy *F*.
 —It’s my night! My night!
 —Yes it is, *F*. You finally made it: you’re a Member of Parliament.
 —I’m in the world of men.
 —*F*., put it back. Enough is enough.
 —Never put it back when it gets like this.
 —My God! I’ve never seen you so big! What’s going on in your mind? What are you thinking of? Please me teach me how to do it. Can I hold it?
 —No! This is between me and God. (*BL* 91)

Despite his pleas, *I* can never know what F. is thinking. In the throes of self-love, F. has removed himself from the universal to communicate to God as an individual; what transpires is between him and God and is incomprehensible to anyone else.

F's agony is related in its totality by *I*. Describing the inviolate moments before climax, *I* notes, "F. was screaming gibberish, his spit flying in all directions. —Face me, face me, suck bright, suck bright, F. wailed (if I remember the sounds correctly)" (*BL* 92). The uncertainty introduced by the parenthetical clause seems doubly significant when considered alongside the question of personal and universal duty—perhaps *I* chose to remember and relate this iteration of F's fit; perhaps F. was addressing God, not *I*. But what of *I*? Does he earn his come, his place near the angels? No; he experiences cessation:

As for me, I knew that one more stroke would deliver me—I hovered on the edge of my orgasm like a parachutist in the whistling doorway—I was suddenly forlorn—I was suddenly without desire—I was suddenly more awake (for this fraction of a second) than ever before in my whole life. (*BL* 93)

In the critical moment, *I* becomes a knight of faith. He supplants the prerogative of the moment—to come—through grace bestowed through witnessing F's albeit false communion with the divine. "The knight of faith is a witness, never a teacher" (*FaT* 107). Observation of active love transforms.

A similar transformation occurs at the separatist rally, though it is accompanied by an explicit rejection of processes and systems. *I* awakes the morning of the rally to find F. appraising him with, "a curious smile on his face which [he] had not seen before" (*BL* 115). "Confess, my friend. Confess about Charles Axis. Confess your sin of pride," F. instructs (*BL* 115). What sin is this; what pride does *I* evince? None but the arrogance of anticipated miracle.

F. is correct: “To become a New Man in just fifteen minutes a day” repulses *I*; *I* craves the sudden switch, “the Chance at All Possibilities at Once:”

Yes, yes, I confess. I wanted miracles! I didn’t want to climb to success on a ladder of coupons! I wanted to wake up suddenly with X-ray Vision! I confess! (*BL* 116)

Following Kierkegaard, *I* wishes to make “the movement of infinity,” the prerequisite to entering into absolute relation with the divine and made only “on the strength of the absurd” (*FaT* 97).

This process cannot be completed incrementally—it is enacted indefinitely, making a mockery of temporal considerations and echoing the precept, “the Eternal will not have its time, but will fashion time to its own desire” (*PoH* 37).

I later contradicts his declaration of individuality, describing himself as “a joyful particle” of the larger protest (*BL* 119). As the “long fingernails smooth and tapered as a fuselage” of an anonymous female partisan’s hand work themselves into *I*’s pants, the rally’s speaker addresses the mass:

—History decrees that there are Losers and Winners. History cares nothing for cases, History cares only whose Turn it is. I ask you, my friends, I ask you a simple question: whose Turn is it today? (*BL* 119)

History is the linchpin of the universal and the temporal. It does not abide individuals; it only knows humans in relation to their time and movement, their influence and import. No one is known for existing. *I* plays along with these notions of fraternal emancipation, tying his sexual prospects to the success of the entire demonstration:

[The speaker’s] voice caressed us, just as my fingers her, just as her fingers me, his voice fell over our desire like a stream over a moving water wheel, and I knew that all of us, not just the girl and me, all of us were going to come together...Every one of us there had the arms of Plastic Man, and we held each other, all naked from

the waist, all sealed in a frog jelly of sweat and juice, all bound in the sweetest bursting daisy chain! (*BL* 121)

Translating himself from the particular to the universal, *I* ascribes the singularity of miracle—the arms of Plastic Man—to the rally: this incongruity cannot hold. Nor does it—the meeting ends, and the daisy chain breaks. *I* does not come.

I's designation as an individual is clear in the aftermath of the protest. Seizing lapels and grabbing hands, he is intelligible to no one. Attempting to mount the shoulders of some larger separatists, he is rebuked:

—Get this creep off me!
 —He looks English!
 —He looks Jewish!
 —But you can't leave! I haven't come yet!
 —This man is a sex pervert!
 —Let's beat the shit out of him. He's probably a sex pervert (*BL* 122)

I is only saved from the fore-mentioned beating by the arrival of F., “big F., certifying my pedigree” (*BL* 123). Forlorn, *I* relates his ultimately unfulfilling experience to his friend:

—F., I cried. I didn't come. I failed again.
 —No, darling, you passed.
 —Passed what?
 —The test.
 —What test?
 —The second to last test. (*BL* 123)

Unable to come amidst a throng of well-lubricated partisans, *I* certifies his singularity. Only, he cannot see it; F must point the fact out to him through “compassionate tricks” (*BL* 78). Such is the faith of *I*. Focused on F., it sublimates, eventually leading *I* to fulfill Kierkegaard's vision,

that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal and as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. (*FaT* 108)

5.4

The dramatic attainment of spiritual communion does not come for *I* until the last section of *Beautiful Losers*. It is prefigured by two curious events: F's self-sacrifice, and *I*'s desperate prayers to Catherine Tekakwitha. F's abandonment of *I* is the unacknowledged "last test". It is meant to confuse and distress the "pitiful hunchback" of history, to make him "a little mad" (*BL* 133; *BL* 151). *I* retells this event from F's treehouse, where he has been led by the above-mentioned "compassionate tricks." From his desolate perch, *I* questions his long-dead friend, demanding, "—F., you lousy wife-fucker, explain yourself!" (*BL* 133). Shifting to an indeterminate past, Cohen relates *I* and F's final night together, their agony. "Why are you looking at me that way, F?" *I* asks; "I'm wondering if I've taught you enough" (*BL* 133). The lesson is two-fold: *I* must learn to live without F., and he must learn to live outside of himself. Announcing his intentions to further the revolution by dynamiting himself along with a statue of Queen Victoria, F. tests *I*, stating, "—I am wondering what will happen to you when I leave you alone" (*BL* 134). *I* pleads,

—Don't do it, F. Please.

—Why not?

I know nothing about love, but something like love tore the following words from my throat with a thousand fishhooks:

—BECAUSE I NEED YOU, F.

A sad smile spread on my friend's face...

—Thank you. Now I know I have taught you enough. (*BL* 135)

Like a psychotic grief counselor, F. requires *I*'s acceptance of his impending loss before affecting the actual event. What impression does *I* draw from this spectacle? Only "a clear impression of F's pain. His pain!" (*BL* 135).

F's project mirrors that of the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*: destruction of the self:

you will find, when you have forgotten all other created beings and all that they do, yes, and also all that you yourself do, that there will still remain, between you and God, a naked knowledge and feeling of your own existence; and that knowledge and feeling always need to be destroyed, before it comes about that you can truly experience perfect contemplation. (66)

F., however, destroys himself not for his own sake or God's sake, but for *I*'s benefit. This is the source of F's pain and the vehicle of *I*'s salvation. *I* needs to witness the methodical dismemberment of his friend if he is to grasp any notion of the importance of the task. In a sense, F. must become *I*'s god and subsequently idol for *I* to find the true God.

Cohen suggests this objective is met through the self-negation of *I*. Following F's self-exile and *I*'s "unelectric" call to Catherine Tekakwitha, *I* attempts to reach the dead saint through a different medium: translation. His source is "an English-Greek phrase book, badly printed in Salonica" (*BL* 56). It is given to him by F., who explains,

—I received this for an oral favor I happen to have performed for a restaurateur friend. It's a prayer book. Your need is greater than mine. (*BL* 56)

I's credulity of the book's spiritual efficacy prompts F. to explain,

—Prayer is translation. A man translates himself into a child asking for all there is in a language he has barely mastered. Study the book. (*BL* 56)

This conception of translation supersedes Kierkegaard's notion of the knight of faith being unable to make himself intelligible to others. F's translation is a direct shout from the individual to the absolute. It is more akin to *The Cloud of Unknowing*'s conception of prayer: "[prayer] is prayed with a full heart, in the height and the depth, the length and the breadth of the spirit of the person who prays" (61). Using physical proxies, the author of *The Cloud* describes the spiritual

work the penitent must perform to make himself known to God. The petitioner transmutes himself, attempting to contort his spirit to fulfill the exacting demands of a tireless God. It is an entirely individual process and cannot be understood by anyone besides the believer and his God.

I undertakes this task at the end of his History, proclaiming, “Phrase-book on my knees, I beseech the Virgin everywhere” (*BL* 137). His prayers are brief sketches of interactions between Catherine Tekakwitha and an unnamed narrator—presumably *I*. The subjects of the prayers tend toward the mundane: “KATERI TEKAKWITHA AT THE WASH HOUSE,” “KATERI TEKAKWITHA AT THE BARBER’S SHOP,” etc. (*BL* 137-141). The conversations are rendered in “execrable” English (*BL* 56). What is *I* asking for? In his own words, everything:

O God, O God, I have asked for too much, I have asked for everything! I hear myself asking for everything in every sound I make. I did not know, in my coldest terror, I did not know how much I needed. O God, I grow silent as I hear myself begin to pray (*BL* 142)

Free from F’s influence, *I* now understands the extent of his self-lack. He is, in spiritual terms, a child, “asking for all there is in a language he has barely mastered” (*BL* 56). The admittance of helplessness simply begins the process of divine integration, a process that ends with the loss of self in communion with God.

5.5

On the first day of spring, “in a national forest just south of [Montréal],”

An old man stood in the threshold of his curious abode, a tree-house battered and precarious as a secret boy’s club. He did not know how long he had lived there, and he wondered why he no longer fouled the shack with excrement, but he didn’t wonder very hard. (*BL* 230)

The old man is a curious amalgamation of *I* and *F*.—dubbed “IF” by many critics: his knowledge of Indian tribes mark the man as *I*, but his insistence on proper squatting technique and dialogue with Isis agree with *F*’s sensibilities. Such ambiguity speaks to the loss of personal identity lauded by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. To experience true contemplation, the mystic must destroy the “naked knowledge and feeling of [his] own existence” (*TCoU* 67). Only the grace of God and, “a deep and powerful spiritual sorrow” may achieve this cessation of self:

in this sense you need to exercise moderation in this way...
you must be careful at the time of this sorrow not to strain
your body or your spirit too harshly, but to sit quite still,
as if slipping asleep, worn out with sobbing and sunk into
sorrow. This is true sorrow, this is perfect sorrow and blessed
is he who achieves such sorrow. (*TCoU* 67)

The old man, rising “morning after morning...from soiled leaves and papers which comprised his mattress, frozen snot and tears in his eyebrows” is a sorrowful creature indeed (*BL* 231).

Feeling but “the vaguest mist of pain,”

he scraped his memory for an incident out of his past with
which to mythologize the change of season, some honeymoon,
or walk, or triumph, that he could let the spring renew,
and his pain was finding none. (*BL* 230)

His selfhood lost, the old man is free to contemplate the cultural banality surrounding him.

Separate from a sense of self, the old man has exceeded both the personal and the universal; he observes, “row after row of silent raised eyes, and the occasional mouth chewing mechanically, and the eyes shifted continually, as if they were watching a small pingpong game” of the System Theatre but cannot see the film itself (*BL* 236). The movie become part of him, “the old man relaxed totally” and smiled as the usher’s “flashlight beam went through him” (*BL* 236).

Later, reconstituting himself as a movie of Ray Charles, the old man offers a glimpse of eternity to the assembled—“those of us who were holding hands” (*BL* 242). The Ray Charles projection is linked to Jesus in this instance, the keys of his piano, “laid out...as though they were truly the row of giant fishes to feed the hungry multitude” (*BL* 242). This pure offering goes unnoticed by most. Desperate to explain in rational terms a decidedly irrational event, the crowd exclaims, “Thank God it’s only a movie” (*BL* 242). The familiar framework of film neatly encapsulates and frames this over-determined situation. Only the New Jew recognizes the metamorphosis for what it is: the natural beatification of what used to be a man or two. Faced with such an awesome spectacle, the New Jew announces, “Hey!...Hey. Somebody’s making it!” (*BL* 242). The New Jew’s witnessing of an individual placing himself in communion with God completes the cycle of *Beautiful Losers*. The losers—*I, F.*, Catherine Tekakwitha and all her guises—attain their own version of beatification/beautification; they disdain and exceed the temporal to successfully reach the eternal. The New Jew, privy to these transformations, accepts a prophetic role. It is his mission to translate himself from the observer to the observed; from the spectator to the actor. We are all the New Jew, we who miss Cohen forever “in [our] trip to the end” (*BL* 243). Whether we embrace the individual and shun the universal is a personal matter; its answer lies with faith. As Kierkegaard reminds us, “Faith is the highest passion in a human being. Many in every generation may not come that far, but none comes further” (*FaT* 146).

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