

## Leonard Cohen's Traffic in Alterity in Beautiful Losers

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Article abstract

While Beautiful Losers deserves its reputation as a subversive text inasmuch as its overall libidinal freedom -- the "obscene" references to the anal and scatological in particular -- can be seen as disrupting sexual norms, in the end Cohen's example of what Linda Hutcheon tags "postmodern metafiction" simply reinscribes and reaffirms the (hetero)normative order of dominant knowledges, social hierarchies, and binary oppositions. An analysis of Beautiful Losers drawing on the criticism of Irigaray, Sedgwick, and Seidman suggests that despite postmodern claims for Cohen's disruption of traditional constructions and understandings of gendered identities in his narrative, the novel is still governed by a rhetoric of hierarchical dominant male discourses. The traffic in alterity presented in Cohen's text is falsely congruent with the presumption that simple evocation of otherness implies understanding and knowledge of the Other's specific and discrete difference.

## LEONARD COHEN'S TRAFFIC IN ALTERITY IN *BEAUTIFUL LOSERS*

*Andrew Lesk*

*Beautiful Losers* deserves its reputation as "subversive" insofar as its author, Leonard Cohen, can be seen to be disrupting sexual norms; indeed, this "obscene" novel abounds in libidinal freedom, "abnormal" desires, and references to the anal and scatological. Moreover, the text's curious, central relationship, between the narrator, I, and his mentor and friend, F., exemplifies Cohen's mid-1960s literary destabilization of socially admissible expression. Yet, notwithstanding the author's questioning of acceptable discourses, the (hetero)normative order — of dominant knowledges, social hierarchies, and binary oppositions — is reinscribed and reaffirmed. Despite its reputation as an experimental novel, *Beautiful Losers* fosters male (heterosexual) subjectivity through the appropriation of the Other, primarily women and homosexuals. Not unlike F.'s dream of the New Jew — "queer, militant, invisible, part of a possible new tribe" (172) — Cohen's challenge to the old literary order is inevitably foreclosed upon. His traffic in alterity is congruent with a presumption that simply evoking otherness will imply knowledge or understanding of that Other's specific and discreet difference. This, of course, is patently false.

That said, I realize that it is difficult to make such claims upon a text which, at every turn, denies expectations that it is in any way a realist fiction. From a postmodern perspective, *Beautiful Losers* is, as Linda Hutcheon says, a "fiction that is also about fiction, that contains within itself a . . . critical commentary on its own nature as narrative and language" (27). However, assessments of the novel which utilize Hutcheon's (now standard) tag of "postmodern metafiction" frequently avoid the implications of the ideologies that nonetheless inform Cohen's depictions of otherness. I would argue that this is the result of critics being

most often concerned with the novel's play of words and images. Hutcheon writes, for example, that "the novel's sexuality and even obscenity of theme and language invite us to see that here it is the flesh that is made word. . . . [W]ords openly refer to everything from themselves to verifiable historical and political actuality" (27-28). One of the problems with this argument is that Hutcheon ignores both *how* the flesh is "made" (or *who* "makes" the flesh) word and the ideological baggage inherent in making these words *mean*. *Beautiful Losers*, despite its poetic concerns with the oppressive regulation of institutions and systems, especially those which coerce people into conforming to authorized story and history, remains fractured in its misrepresentation of these Others depicted therein. Discovering or evoking alterity is not, even in Cohen's self-reflexive work, concomitant with the understanding or adequate representation of such difference.

This inadequacy, or crisis in representation, finds a reflection in the dearth of available studies of the relationship between F. and I, the liaison which is central to the novel's "story." Neither strictly homosexual nor platonic in their intimacies, the two men affirm a world of male subjectivity: rational, transcendent, powerful, and hence dominant. These kinds of ties, in which male bonding and mutual desire do not necessarily include or preclude genital homosexuality, are understood to be homosocial.<sup>1</sup> F. and I's hom(m)osexual friendship<sup>2</sup> is built upon what I have called trafficking in alterity, a manipulation of the marginal, less-empowered Other, which serves to strengthen the male domain. F. and I's homoerotic encounters are little more than a literary device which Cohen uses, perhaps, to thwart the expectations of his audience. But the facade of what may even be called queer<sup>3</sup> falls away in the novel; as F. writes to I: "Our queer love keeps the lines of our manhood hard and clean, so that we bring nobody but our own self to our separate marriage beds, and our women finally know us" (164-65). This depiction of F. and I's homosociality (which I read as a failed attempt at irony) reveals the essence of how the two men dominate their world, especially as their mediated form of homosexuality-masking-heterosexuality involves an exchange of women between men (Gallop 84).

The two women — "our women" — featured in the novel, Edith, I's wife, and the Indian saint Catherine Tekakwitha, com-

plement each other as members of the same tribe; the former seeks transcendence through sex whereas the latter denies the flesh in order to transcend the known world. My discomfort in reading of their respective situations does not arise from thinking that Cohen should have invested the Others of his novel with more humanity; *Beautiful Losers* is, as I have mentioned above, a work of non-realistic fiction. Nonetheless, the novel is a manifestation of what happens when poetic licence corresponds with patriarchal licence. The reification of male subjectivity and the redemption of male desire finds expression, in part, through the female; how the flesh is "made" word is, in this case, particularly sexist. F. and I possess female flesh and thereby assert ownership of all words and their meanings. As David Leahy writes of the blending of Edith and Catherine, "the trinitarian woman as saint, wife and fertility goddess can be read as the romantic vehicle and holy manna en route to male transcendence" (34). Poetic licence — licence to own the word, to dominate its meaning — is Cohen's own method of expressing the homosocial quality of F. and I's relationship.

The notion of male ownership of the female as essential in asserting control appears throughout the novel, especially in what Leahy calls "several disturbing instances of highly symbolic females being made simultaneously peripheral and/or disappeared" (34). Though Leahy does not list them, such instances are not difficult to find. I narrates, for example, that from an early age Edith "infuriated a number of men who thought that they should be able to rub her small breasts and round bum simply because she was an Indian" (*Losers* 28); she is "finally raped in a stone quarry" by the men who pursued her there. At the risk of over-determining the use of Cohen's words, I will point out that the use of "finally" (as opposed to "ultimately") suggests that the rape was the natural (and thus, logical) outcome of the various pursuits. After Edith commits suicide by sitting at the bottom of an elevator shaft whereupon she is crushed (unwittingly) by a Bar-B-Q delivery boy, I and F. spend the night together: "We ordered chicken from the same place and we talked about my poor squashed wife, our fingers greasy, barbecue-sauce drops on the linoleum" (7). F. confesses to having had sex with Edith; but the night ends with the two men "pull[ing] each other off" (9). Despite what may be Cohen's

attempt at dark humour, Edith's death and correlative disappearance facilitates the homosocial congress between men.

Cohen's traffic in "disappeared" women extends to the appropriation of what is gendered (or has been rendered) female. In the Charles Axis scenario, I takes the place of the weakling's girlfriend. When the beach bully appears, he kicks sand not at a man and woman but at two men, I and F: "Hey, I cried: Quit kicking that sand in our faces! F, I whispered: That man is the worst nuisance on the beach" (77). Years later, when F. torments I for not having sent in his own coupon to Charles Axis, I confesses to a desire for hypermasculinity, for the suprahuman transcendence found only in Nietzschean superheroes like Captain Marvel or Plastic Man (123). His confession underscores a wish for a (re)creation of the self without effort, a world of Batman and Robin without women. Naturally, the easiest route to a world comprised solely of men is to get rid of women or, at least, to construct and dominate their representation(s). And again, once I's confession is complete, sexual congress occurs: I, naked, proceeds to undo "the top clasp of [F.'s] beltless Slim Jim slacks" (124).

At the political rally the two men attend shortly after Edith's death, I notices that "everyone had a hard-on, including the women" (125). In again trying to be Plastic Man (128), I presses close against a woman whose face he cannot see, her body a vehicle by which to express desire and achieve sexual fulfilment: "We began our rhythmical movements which corresponded to the very breathing of the mob, which was our family and the incubator of our desire" (128). I, an interloper at an assembly of separatists with whom he has no political truck, suppresses his knowledge of this woman's gender and imaginatively turns her into a "woman with a hard-on." He says: "I did not dare turn around to face her. I did not want to know who she was — that seemed to me the highest irrelevance" (127). Although Cohen parodies how nationalist rhetoric mirrors the often blind nature of sexual fervour, he also unwittingly indicts the culture of politics as a male domain. Political rhetoric, or the use of words, induces "hard-ons," ultimately resulting in the legislation of phallic law. Giving women hard-ons — the word made phallic flesh — reveals the poverty of a vocabulary unable to understand the Other's difference.

Women as conduits for male self-fashioning continues in the

parody of the Danish Vibrator. F. reads "case histories" to Edith in order to spark her arousal, stories of "the new American woman. . . . She will not be denied the pleasures of sex" (181). This recalls how Edith, as a sexually insatiable woman who will not be denied, is, apparently, "a promoter of sex orgies and a purveyor of narcotics" (159). Subsequently, Edith "scream[s] for deliverance, the flight of her imagination commanded denied [sic] by a half-enlightened cunt" (182). Cohen's spoof, however, focuses not on the cultural ideology of phallic supremacy but, rather, on how technology disembodies human beings. True, Edith may be a victim of this technology as much as F. is; but it is the disassembling of Edith into parts which evokes her lack of subjectivity throughout the novel. Thus, her "half-enlightened cunt," whose only deliverance is the phallic vibrator, suggests that her rescue, in any case, can only occur with the intervention of a possessor of a literal or figurative phallus. The phallus *makes* Edith possible; it inscribes, pen(is)-like, the possibility of her subjectivity.<sup>4</sup>

The anxiety to perform, for both F. and Edith, centres on the phallus, the distributor and allocator of power, one which is able to "erect" meaning. This concern with phallic power also informs I's anxiety with the site of constipation, his anus, a place where meaning is absent, where the distinction between man and woman is elided since both possess an anus. Wayne Pounds writes that the anus

represents the principle of parodic degradation to the lower stratum: it functions as metonymy (the human reduced to a biological function or need), as mouth (voice) and eye/I (point of view). . . . [T]he primacy of the asshole, as point of view and as sexual organ, rewrites the symbolic code — that is, the patriarchal code — by restructuring its fundamental oppositions. (618-19)

I, like F., does not want to forfeit dominance. To prioritize his anus over his penis threatens to restructure patriarchal subjectivity. An anal point of view — eye/I — would relegate the phallus, around which a predominantly masculine society is structured, to a marginal position. This also implies that the anus, both in its use as a sexual organ in male (homosexual) intercourse and in its resemblance to the female vagina as symbolizing "lack," would reproduce an order that is dominated by the Other rather than the governing

(heterosexual) male. I's dilemma is that he might be misidentified as homosexual or female, and therefore marginal, and so he must find a way to subsume the anal within the order of phallic identity.

I realizes that "this [anus] is a better common button we both have . . . this is Edith its virgin pink brown hairy same as mine same same same as us all" (69-70). His anxiety about his defecation problems and, by extension, the role of his anus as a potential eraser of heterosexually-inscribed identity, finds voice in his complaint: "Why me? — the great complaint of the constipated. Why doesn't the world work for me?" (40). For I to remain constipated, and thus to remain concerned with the possible loss of identity, is to be "the sealed, dead, impervious museum of my appetite. This is the brutal solitude of constipation, this is the way the world is lost" (42). The world will not work for him if he becomes a member of one of the marginalized groups he traffics in.

I's anus, a "blind eye," is a site of potential dissipation, a place which signifies the loss of ownership of the self to the Other. The marginalized Edith, crouching at the bottom of the elevator shaft, is for I a scene "for as long as I, this book, or an eternal eye remembers" (17); eternal memory is associated, in a daisy chain of meaning, with sight, with I-sight, with books, *this* book, whose words are formed by I, the author, as he makes the word flesh, or, when convenient, makes the bearer of female flesh disappear. Additionally, I wants to defecate in order to rid himself of "history," notably the histories of those troubling Others; however, he must not lose his ability to be judicious about controlling the outflow of "shit" since this would threaten a loss of control over what history means. Guy Hocquenhem writes that "the ability to 'hold back' or to evacuate the faeces is the necessary moment of the constitution of the self" (99). Therefore, I's defining issue is one of control; to this end, he asks his friend F. to "teach me everything" (*Losers* 97).

Of course, F. is eager to instruct, using I's asshole in order to fertilize the pupil with the master's seed; as I admits, "His style is colonizing me" (43). Not surprisingly, critics discuss this mutually beneficial hom(m)osexual relationship as about everything *but* male homosocial desire and its ideological implications.<sup>5</sup> This may be due in part, I think, to the ability of patriarchal ideologies to insinuate themselves invisibly within the very structure of available discourses; Cohen's rather dense fiction abets such "disappearances." (I do

not wish to imply, though, that all readers of F. and I's coupling are naïve.) Perhaps, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, the patterns of these relationships are only now becoming apparent. She writes, furthermore, that

in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence. For historical reasons, this special relationship may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two. (25)

Indeed, F. and I's traffic in homosexual alterity eviscerates the "homo" in favour of an ideological structure which transcends (while simultaneously capturing) the marginal: heterosexuality. Their play at homosexuality, like their usurpation of the female/feminine, elicits a look at the historical resonance of such gaming.

F., the political aspirant, acquires a knowledge of ancient Greece, based entirely on "a few homosexual encounters with [Greek] restaurateurs" (*Losers* 10). F.'s political awareness, concomitantly sexual, complements his understanding of what Leo Bersani calls ancient Greece's "hygienics of social power" (212). He writes that, in Greece, the structuring of sexual behaviour "in terms of activity and passivity, with a correlative rejection of the so-called passive role in sex [parallels] a legal and moral incompatibility between sexual passivity and civic authority" (212). If F. is to win and maintain civic authority, he must, as the representative of the formerly "passive" French Quebec people — the ones who were, presumably, screwed by the British and by the political arrangement of Confederation — become the dominant partner. He must curb his sexual appetites, putting them in service of the emerging Quebec political order. F.'s pretensions to civic statesmanship *requires*, at the very least, the adoption of Sedgwick's "ideological homosexuality," a provisional engagement *not* necessarily implying real male/male intimacy, but one meant to exclude women in order to fortify male dominance.

When F. says, "We've got to learn to love appearances" (*Losers* 4), and that "At sixteen I stopped fucking faces" (5), he tacitly admits that in order to achieve goals, primarily political ones, he



will exercise his libido regardless of his partner's physical profile, irrespective of gender. He not only fornicates with Edith and the other surviving members of the A— tribe, but with I as well, all in order to achieve dominance in social and legislative arenas. F's role as rising political star is rooted in the need to dominate society; to this end, he literally and figuratively fucks everyone, thereby asserting the phallically inspired nature of his ongoing conquest.

Here, in Cohen's depictions of sex that illustrates the use (and abuse) of power, the traffic in alterity is most striking. F. mentions that I should not feel guilty about "Oh, you know, sucking each other, watching the movies." When I says he does not feel guilty, F. responds, "You do. But don't. You see . . . this isn't homosexuality at all" (18); and, furthermore, "You mustn't feel guilty about any of this because it . . . isn't strictly homosexual, because I am not strictly male. The truth is, I had a Swedish operation, I used to be a girl" (19). Cohen's confusion of gender appears, initially, to be a humorous attempt to disturb gender distinctions and therefore expose the fallibility of presumed "clarity." But although the play with roles may appear queer, such sexual otherness merely serves, as I have mentioned above, as a vehicle for F's drive towards power.

And in the drive toward the locus of Canadian power, Ottawa, F. brandishes his penis in a display of newfound authority. F. announces: "I'm in the world of men" while I looks on in admiration. "I've never seen you so big!" he says. "What is going on in your mind? What are you thinking of?" The connection between the mind, as rational instrument, and the phallus, as potential and portentous sovereign, resonates with the historical reality of perpetual male ascendancy. I's reaction is to "jam my head between [F's] knees and the dashboard," in an effort to share in F's "power" (97).

But whenever homosexuality *as an act* has the potential to break out into the public realm — as it does in the trip to Ottawa — it reverts to its status in the margins, suggesting that it should not be acknowledged as a viable alterity. I states, early on, that he has "suffered a fairy attack from my confessor" (22); of the System theatre, he says to F., "I know that dirty basement lobby! There's always some fairy hanging around there, drawing cocks and telephone numbers on the green wall" (31); and, after having sex with F. in the car on the way to Ottawa, he says, "Edith knows

about our filthy activities? . . . Edith knows we're fairies?" (100). Of course, this is not (necessarily) the author speaking; however, it is difficult to ascribe any kind of positive images related to I's "anti-fairy" rants, which border on self-disgust.<sup>6</sup>

Homosexuality, like the category of female sexuality, remains in the realm of the unrepresentable in *Beautiful Losers*. True, F. denounces "genital imperialism" (34) and admonishes I to "connect nothing" (17); yet despite postmodern claims that Cohen disrupts traditional constructions and understandings of (gendered) identities, the book remains governed by the rhetoric of hierarchical dominant male discourses. These regimes, Steven Seidman says, provide us with "a master framework for the constitution and ordering of fields of knowledge and cultural understandings [that] shape the making of subjectivities, social relations, and social norms" (134). Certainly, Cohen cannot be held responsible for the critiques and readings or the "societies" within his novel; but neither should we remain unaware of what kinds of societies *Beautiful Losers* is complicit in constituting. Given the current contestations over the utility of (strategic) identity and the (attempted) disappearance of, specifically, homosexual identities wrought by proponents of queer theory, celebrating a "queer Cohen" would be quite premature, if at all ever possible.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes homosociality as "the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship" (2).

<sup>2</sup> I am intentionally using Luce Irigaray's term (adjacent to "homosocial") to point out that F. and I's relationship is predicated on the author's somewhat negative (mis)conception of what *may* be construed as homosexual; I do not wish, though, to suggest that Irigaray herself is being homophobic with her construction of the term (although she may indeed be pointing to gay male complicity in maintaining patriarchal heterosexual institutions).

<sup>3</sup> Steven Seidman's explanation of queer theory is, I find, a succinct definition of the queer, as opposed to homosexual, contestation of binary opposite socio-sexual behaviours. Seidman writes: "Queer Theory is less a matter of explaining the repression or expression of a homosexual minority than an analysis of the hetero-homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviours, and social institutions, and social relations — in a word, the constitution of the self and society" (128).

<sup>4</sup> As David Leahy points out, "Throughout *Beautiful Losers* women are presented as being *jouissance* incarnate. (Or should we refer to them as phallogocentric muses for male orgasmic writing?)" (34).

<sup>5</sup> Though episodes involving F. and Edith — the Danish Vibrator, the Telephone Dance — have been extensively examined, no critic has (yet) sought to undertake a thorough analysis of F. and I's *queer communing*. Sylvia Söderlind's glance at it, for example, is not atypical of such brevity: "The homosexual relationship between himself [I] and F. is a masturbatory symbol for the struggling halves of one being" (92).

<sup>6</sup> I do not wish to demand of the novel that it must somehow yield positive images, since there may be homosexuals in Cohen's world who do not inspire any such images. What I do want to point out is Cohen's consistent inadequacies in depicting Others.

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