



## ARE SAINTS BIODEGRADABLE? —AN ANALYSIS OF LEONARD COHEN'S *BEAUTIFUL LOSERS*

by Richard Denner for Robert Allen's Canadian Literature Class, U of Alaska, Fairbanks (1972)

Annul in me my manhood, Lord, and make  
Me woman-sexed and weak  
If by that total transformation  
I might know thee more.

—Brother Antonius

There is a tribe that weaves cloth with tie-died threads. Each thread is carefully tied in a precise pattern to form a series of dots. When the threads are woven properly, they line up to form a complete image. Looking at this cloth is much like reading *Beautiful Losers*. Leonard Cohen reveals his narrative through a complex pattern of reoccurring images and symbols.

Who are beautiful losers? They are the ones that lose their Self and become the victims of the physical world yet gain the internal, spiritual beauty of the energy of love that is God. In an interview with George Woodcock, Cohen describes his concept of God:

I think there really is a power to tune in on. It's easy for us to call that power God. Some people find it difficult. You mention the word God to them and they go through a lot of

difficult reactions, they just don't like it. I mean that there's certainly no doubt about it, that the name has fallen on evil days. But it doesn't have those evil associations for me. It's easier for me to say God than some unnamable mysterious power that motivates all living things. The word God for me is very simple and useable.<sup>1</sup>

When a person achieves this energy level of love, he or she becomes a saint. The narrator of the novel ("I.") describes sainthood:

What is a saint? 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 a saint dissolve the chaos for himself, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory.<sup>2</sup>

When this balance is achieved, the physical body becomes an empty vessel into which the energy of divine love can freely flow.

Main Characters of *Beautiful Losers*: (a) "I." is the unnamed narrator (here referred to as "I.") is an anthropological scholar studying a nearly extinct, Indian tribe; (b) "F." is a close friend of "I." and his teacher. He has developed a high level of intellectual and mystical knowledge; (c) Edith is married to "I." and is the last member of the tribe that her husband studies; and (d) Catherine, Kateri Tekakwitha, a 17th-century Mohawk Christian convert who, in 2012, was canonized as a Roman Catholic saint.

A study of the lives of the saints reveals a panorama of human activity and individual history. There is a well-established set of circumstances that occur. They may be martyrs or offer their penance in unusual manners, such as self-torture. Religious ecstasy and visions are common. Sometimes they possess healing powers. Sometimes their bodies do not decay after death and smell of flowers. In the novel, Catherine's sainthood includes most of the classic attributes of a Roman Catholic saint. She is venerated by the Church, and her body is used for relics. Cohen, while his definition of saint includes the classic attributes, proposes a broader concept based on Eastern philosophy.

In Tantric yoga, sexual imagery in relationship to liberation and sainthood is sometimes explicit, seeing the sexual act as a means for meditation and as a tool for spiritual realization. Sexual energy can be in the service of arriving at the source of mystical coition-union. Regarding sacramental union, Omar V. Garrison says, "Tantriks believe that the partners become for the time being a divine couple, through them flowing the cosmic creative of the universe."<sup>3</sup>

Catherine achieves liberation from sexuality by going beyond her natural religious heritage and becoming an orthodox Catholic saint. Edith, whose moral standards are not proper by Christian standards, liberates herself through sexuality.

When “F.” first met Edith, she was a pimply-faced reincarnation of Catherine. In Freudian-Pygmalion fashion, he undertakes to remake her. To perfect “the pan-orgasmic body and extend the erogenous zone over the whole fleshy envelope,” he introduces a variety of manuals and artificial phalli.<sup>4</sup> Although stimulated by the reading of these books, Edith cannot achieve orgasm. “F.” introduces the “Danish Vibrator” which brings her to climax. The vibrator then takes on a life of its own and buggers “F.” Edith unplugs the vibrator, but it refuses to stop and fucks Edith. Jumping out the window, it crawls into the ocean.

Edith’s tension is relieved; her acne disappears; and her liberation prepares her to meet the black beast of the white race, Hitler, symbolic of the genocide of the American Indian. What Hitler did to the Jews with gas chambers and concentration camps, the white man did with disease, and reservations. Hitler baptizes Edith and “F.”. Edith returns home, shoot up holy water (H, heroin, the Host), gives “I.” a blow job (imbibing a sacramental Eucharist), and unceremoniously steps into an elevator shaft and off the wheel of karma.

“F.” is John the Baptist, the forerunner of “I.”, a Christ figure; “F.” is a member of parliament; “F.” is Freud; “F.” is Moses; “F.” is Pygmalion. He is the universal guru. Although he believes in his guru-ship, “F.” comes to realize he has underestimated Edith’s essential character. “F.” projects his female attributes (*anima*) onto Edith, while she is between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, as she emerges from her “fairy-like” maidenhood. “F.” realizes that he has erred, and that the physician must heal himself. According to C.G. Jung:

The projection of the anima...can lead to the so-called “human triangle” with its accompanying difficulties. A bearable solution to such a drama can be found only if the anima is recognized as an inner power. The secret aims of the unconscious in bringing about such an entanglement is to force a man to develop and bring his own being to maturity by integrating more of his unconscious personality and bringing it into his own life.<sup>5</sup>

Relinquishing the psychoanalytic method, he turns to anarchy and martyrdom. The destruction of the statue of Queen Victoria is symbolic of the overturning of the outworn world. Even after his incarceration in a mental hospital and his contraction of syphilis, his followers still contend he is the man to save the world.

“I.’s” impediment to liberation has its source in the division of his anima. The split-projection of “I.’s” anima on Edith and Catherine leads him to a self-destructive intellectualism, and he realizes that the effect of the anima acting in such a manner is noticeable...

in all those neurotic pseudo-intellectual dialogues that inhibit a man from getting into direct touch with life and its real decision. He reflects about it and loses all his spontaneity and out-gong feeling.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of this realization, “I.” buries his Self in his anima projections of Edith and Catherine to escape reality.

In Hinduism, there are several methods for escaping from the anima projections and achieving liberation that are found under the rubric of *yoga*. Yoga is a group of physical, mental, and spiritual practices used to control and still the mind. The way is four-fold: *Jnana yoga* is the way to God through knowledge; *Bhakti yoga* is the way through love; *Karma yoga* is the way through work; and *Raja yoga* is the way through psychological exercises. For different personality types, a different type of yoga is implemented.<sup>7</sup>

Of a reflective, scholarly nature, "I." is unable to resolve the conflict of his dual anima projection until he realizes he needed Edith and "F." With Edith dead and understanding that "F." has taught him all he can, "I." achieves the third person omnipotent.

To reiterate, a beautiful loser is one who loses his Self to gain the beauty of union with the energy of love that is God. "I." is essentially a reflective person; Edith is emotional; Catherine is active; and "F." is experimental. Each follows the path that is basic to his or her nature towards their potential liberation.

With full knowledge of his impending death, "F." is unconcerned. Catherine's knowledge of the tetragrammaton (*YHVH*, Hebrew letters read right to left representing the name of God) inspires her towards everlasting life. Edith, her liberation manifested in sexuality, destroys the embodiment of her sexual being. The ego death of "I." creates a composite of all the aspects of his personality. The fusion of aspects in "I.'s" personality has its root in his relationships with Edith, Catherine, and "F.". Edith's influence rivals Catherine's influence and resembles the conflicts in Christ-Isis mythology. Edith is symbolized as the embodiment of Isis, the Egyptian Universal Mother, goddess of the soul's immortality and regeneration. According to Huston Smith, "Her mythological role in piercing together the fragments of her husband Osiris symbolized her miraculous healing power."<sup>8</sup> Renouncing the flesh, Catherine identifies with the Virgin Mary. Catherine's love of God is on an active spiritual plane. Edith's emotional love is Tantric, which is a transformative spiritual plane that involves the physical senses. Both possess miraculous healing powers.

"F.", like Moses, leads his followers to new experiences (e.g. the episode of masturbating in a speeding car), and like John the Baptist, he prepares the way to future freedom. If "F." develops into a leader-type figure, "I." comes to embody all the characteristics of "F.", Edith, and Catherine. "I." develops into a Christ-figure. The time "I." spent in the treehouse can be compared to the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, and this "wooden tower" to the cross. The four characters of *Beautiful Losers*, each a different embodiment of the other, undergo psychic-cosmic-erotic transformation and enter union (as a saint, as the embodiment of sexuality, or as a theater screen) with a form of reality for which words are inadequate to describe.

(Revised in Ellensburg WA, 2023)

## FOOTNOTES

1. Woodcook, George. *Odysseus Ever Returning*, McClelland & Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1970, p. 106.
2. Cohen, Leonard. *Beautiful Losers*, The Viking Press, NY, 1969, p. 95.
3. Garrison, Omar V. *Tantra*, Julian Press, NY, 1964, p. 103.
4. Cohen, op. cit.
5. Jung, C.G. *Man and His Symbols*, Doubleday & Co, NY, 1969.
6. Cohen, op. cit., p. 187.
7. Smith, Huston. *Religions of Man*, The New American Library, NY, 1959.
8. Ibid., p. 39.