

## POSTMODERN AND POSTCOLONIAL ELEMENTS IN LEONARD COHEN'S OEUVRE

KAROLINA ADAMSKICH

**Abstract:** The article, apart from examining briefly the reception of Leonard Cohen's art and persona by the critics, presents him also as a writer preoccupied with ethical issues. It will be demonstrated that, along with creating his own eclectic spiritual system by synthesizing elements borrowed from different religions and wisdom traditions, Cohen has been also influenced by the socio-political situation in Canada and worldwide. Hence, Cohen's art will be discussed in relation to the post-Holocaust reality, the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, the sexual liberation, the process of Canada becoming a "postmodern country", as well as cultural changes, such as the shifting position of the popular culture. The article aims also at highlighting the postcolonial and postmodern elements in Cohen's oeuvre, inasmuch as Cohen has been argued to be one of the first Canadian representatives of these literary trends.

**Key words:** Leonard Cohen, Canadian identity, postcolonial Canadian literature, postmodern Canadian literature, *Beautiful Losers*

**Słowa kluczowe:** Cohen Leonard, kanadyjska tożsamość, postkolonialna literatura kanadyjska, postmodernistyczna literatura kanadyjska, *Beautiful Losers*

### 1. The reception of Cohen's art by the critics

Leonard Cohen has been called "the exiled poet-priest" (Djwa 1967: 37), "an otherworldly figure", "a musician with a touch of the mystic" (Dougherty, Massello 1996, as quoted in Balfour 1998: 40), as well as "an intensely personal poet whose works reflect the inner turmoil of a sensitive artist in conflict with a violent, dehumanizing and over-mechanized society" (Allan 1967: 1). Many critics, in accordance, stress his eclecticism and the ability to create his own ethical system by synthesizing the elements borrowed from different spiritual systems and beliefs with his personal experiences. It has been argued that he is a "bricolage artist [who] draws on Hellenistic myths, fairy tales, Biblical imagery (...), his inherited Jewish popular customs, adopted Zen Buddhism philosophy (...) [and] the social-political state of Canada" (Watson [n.d.]: 6). As it can be observed, Cohen has been widely acknowledged as a poet exploring the themes of religion

and spirituality, situated ambivalently between – frequently mutually exclusive – systems and traditions. This ethical ambiguity, however, seems to be the major factor that makes Cohen the representative and, as it were, a spokesperson of the contemporary times. In the times of relativity and plurality, he can be viewed as an artist recording this state of confusion:

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 (...) (Djwa 1967: 33).

As it will be presented later, it is safe to assume that Cohen's preoccupation with spirituality and ethics, along with his frequent use of irony and paradox, is a result of participating in the social revolution of the 1960s, his Jewish heritage and the identity of a Canadian artist.

## 2. The shaping factors of Cohen's persona and art

Theorists of postmodernism agree that the notion of "individuals [as] autonomous, able to transcend their place in history, class, and culture" (Vanhoozer 2003: 8) cannot be accepted in relation to postmodernity. On the contrary, it can be argued that it is the time driven by political, economical and cultural changes; the individual, in accordance, cannot stay on the margins of those fluctuations and is constantly shaped by them. As literature is stressed to be "one of the most important laboratories of postmodernism" (Connor 2004: 62), this fact applies also to postmodern writers.

Vermeulen (2011: 1) stresses the fact that "[o]ne of the most important principles of postmodernism is the realization that a literary work does not exist in a vacuum" and that "[e]very author is influenced by the place and the time in which he or she was born, as well as by all literature, or indeed all language, he or she ever came across [because] [a]ll literature engages in dialogue with its literary context". It can be argued that the turbulent relation between the social and political situation and a writer is clearly visible in Leonard Cohen's works.

First and foremost, it is safe to assume that the prominent position that is given to the Jewish culture, as well as countless references to Judaism that are present both in the artist's poems and his prose, stem from his belonging to the Jewish community of Montreal during his formative years. According to Cohen's leading biographer, he was born into the upper-class Jewish family that was fairly orthodox and which followed the rules of Judaism very strictly: "(...) Cohen entered a family that retained its Jewish traditions. His place in the synagogue was prominent, and early in his youth he participated in the daily prayers and weekly

celebrations. Each Friday night the family observed Shabbat” (Nadel 1996: 15). Nadel (1996: 16) quotes also Cohen’s statement that “religion structured [the] life [of his family]”. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that in a country such as Canada, one is rarely exposed only to the influence of one’s racial or religious group. Coming from Montreal, Cohen was surrounded from his earliest years by the Catholic majority. The situation of the Jewish community, however, had already improved since the pre-World War II times. Before the war, the Jewish people of Montreal inhabited, to a large extent, only the part of the city along St. Lawrence Boulevard and often faced discrimination. This oppression and lack of dialogue between the two groups ended mainly as a result of the shock that was brought by the Holocaust (Ward 2008: 4). It can be argued that the crimes committed by the Nazi “prompted a reevaluation of the Western attitude towards Jews” (Ward 2008: 4). Hence, as a consequence of these changes in mentality, as well as because of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec that began the process of the secularization of the country, the Jews who were born or brought up after the war became less marginalized, “grew up speaking English rather than Yiddish, went to university, and interacted with the French-Catholic community much more than had Jews of the previous generation” (Ward 2008: 5).

Furthermore, what seems crucial to the shaping of Cohen’s persona and his literary style is the cultural revolution of the 1960s. Vermeulen (2011: 4) calls this time “[a] period of increasing individual freedom, welfare, and economic as well as demographic growth” and argues that the 1960s should be viewed as “a golden decade of social revolution in the Western world”. The fact that it was the Western, advanced society that “had undergone fundamental changes in their organization” is also stressed by Connor (2004: 2). From the perspective of gaining personal rights, the social revolution of the 1960s can indeed be viewed as a milestone for the previously marginalized groups of society and ethnic minorities. In addition, the attitude towards the so-called alternative lifestyles and sexual freedom changed considerably. Before the sexual liberation of the 1960s, “[s]ex used to be proclaimed to be the secret, forbidden truth of human nature”, whereas afterwards it became “the most manifest, ubiquitous, and compulsory truth” (Connor 2004: 11). Also in the field of culture, especially in Canada, the changes that were introduced with the approaching postmodern phase can be viewed as positive. Kroetsch (1985: 22), for instance, enthusiastically called Canada “a postmodern country” and speculated that in the new reality it is the country such as Canada, the postcolonial and multicultural one, that has the greatest potential: “The centre does not hold. The margin, the periphery, the edge, now, is the exciting and dangerous boundary where silence and sound meet. It is where the action is”. This readiness for the approach of the new cultural period resulted, according to Vermeulen (2011: 1), in Canada being one of the first countries in which “literature boom” has been observed after the World War II. Finally, the marginal position that Canadian literature had occupied, as well as American imperialism restricting the cultural growth of the country, came to be criticized by

the prominent Canadian writers, such as Robert Kroetsch and Margaret Atwood (Vermeulen 2011: 5).

The social revolution, however, brought various negative changes as well. It has been observed, most importantly, that the Western world is “a (...) society (...) driven ceaselessly onwards by technological advance” (Berry 2004: 168), with the detrimental effects of this situation being vastly commented upon by many contemporary leading philosophers and ethicists, such as Zygmunt Bauman (1988). What is more, the rise of consumerism and the stress that started to be placed on liberated sexuality resulted, according to some, in the objectification of the human body and in unstoppable “pursuit of new sensations” (Deer 1994: 52). Finally, the political changes, such as for instance the efforts of the Québécois towards independence created tensions within the society.

Furthermore, it was during the 1960s that Holocaust started to be an openly discussed topic, inasmuch as “[u]ntil the mid- to late 1960s, the shadow of the Nazi death camps was an ever present but virtually unacknowledged background to Jewish life and belief in Europe, Israel, and North America” (Morgan and Gordon 2007: 10). This change, undoubtedly, influenced the works of many writers of Jewish origin, one of them being Leonard Cohen.

Lastly, Cohen’s use of multiple voices and perspectives that prevails in his writing can result from his identity of a Canadian writer. Undoubtedly, the issues of identity and ethnicity prevail in Canadian literature, which is a consequence of the country’s former status as a British colony, along with Canada’s issues related to immigration and multiculturalism.

Hammill (2007: 57) argues that in Canada, one can be assigned one of two possible positions. The first one is being viewed as possessing the “Canadian” identity, “generally depicted as not much different from no ethnicity at all”; the second one is related to belonging to an ethnic minority. In the realm of literature, the works created by the writers from ethnic minorities, though seen as “exotic” and therefore interesting, are at the same time treated as inferior to what is collectively treated as truly Canadian literature.

However, this alleged lack of identity and the state of ambiguity connected with it can be seen as the precise factor that places contemporary Canadian literature and the nation in general in a privileged position. According to Kroetsch (1985: 22), the very fact that Canada has not been a united entity with the common centre, history or roots, enabled the country to raise into prominence in the contemporary, post-World War II times. He states that after the war,

[t]he stories that gave centre and circumference to the modern world were losing their centripetal power. (...) It was this very decentring that gave a new energy to countries like Canada. Canada is supremely a country of margins, beginning from the literal way in which every city borders on a wilderness. The centeredness of the high modern period (...) made [Canada] almost irrelevant to history. (...) In a high modern world, with its privileged stories, Canada was invisible.

Thus, as Kroetsch (1985: 23) explains, Canada should “remain polyphonic” to be able to pass the message that is relevant in contemporary times and to stay true to its roots as the country possessing, as it were, multiple identities.

It is in this context that the beginnings of Cohen's career should be analysed; those beginnings can be argued, in addition, to contribute to the presence of ambivalence that can be traced throughout his oeuvre.

### 3. Postmodern distrust towards history and re-interpretation of the past

Postmodernism can be argued to value plurality instead of uniformity and unity. At the same time, it is stressed that all that had been previously considered objective becomes undermined (Sim 2001: 8); thus the need for the re-interpretation of the history and of the principles that had been previously deemed universal. As “[i]t was no longer clear who had the authority to speak on behalf of history” (Connor 2004: 3), new voices had to be implemented in literature to account for those groups that had been earlier ignored, repressed or in other ways silenced, mainly “because of their social class, race, gender, age or sexual orientation” (Olkiewicz 2006: 287). As Olkiewicz (2006: 286) further argues,

the postmodernist treatment of the past and history, in contrast to the modernist attempts to reject or improve the past in the name of the future, advocates a re-interpretation or re-examination of the past referring to the present. Thus, the existence of the past is not undermined but merely it arouses suspicions whether we are able to possess absolute knowledge about the past other than through its historical records, which in turn may be variously interpreted depending on shifting perspectives and ideologies.

As it can be seen, this distrust towards the past and historical records stems most of all from the fact that history was written mainly by those belonging to the majority and to the currently ruling stratum of society. In case of Europe and North America, it was from the perspective of white, male, heterosexual and usually Christian settlers and colonizers that history was recorded. The “postmodernism's attack on the lawful, (...) its assault on the past, and (...) its unmaking of the subject of self” (Wyschogrod 1990: 244), on the other hand, offered a different perspective.

This attitude of postmodernism towards the past and the established histories is visible in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966). In the novel, the narration is mostly led by the Historian – a scholar specializing in the history of the North American Indian tribe known as the A—s. As he mentions, in the time of his recording of their history, there were only about ten members of the tribe, all of them female (*BL* 1993: 7). Apart from that, the tribe came to be recognized as the community consisting of failures, insofar as “[t]here is no record that this unfor-

tunate people ever won a single battle, while the songs and legends of its enemies are virtually nothing but a sustained howl of triumph” (*BL* 1993: 7). According to the Historian, even the name of the tribe is symbolic in the context of them being ridiculously insignificant, as “[their] very name (...) is the word for corpse in the language of all the neighboring tribes” (*BL* 1993: 7). The narrator’s interest in the A—s is, however, more personal. First and foremost, his wife Edith came from this very tribe (*BL* 1993: 14). In addition, although he himself has no personal connection to the A—s, he feels a deep bond with them, inasmuch as he identifies with losers. He says: “My interest in this pack of failures betrays my character. Borrowing money from me, F. often said: Thanks, you old A-!” (*BL* 1993: 7).

The presence of the A—s, as well as Edith’s, and the narrator’s identification with defeat and failure can be seen as a reflection of the postmodern representation of the previously marginalized groups. It is, however, not the only allusion to this re-establishment of history, as one of the main characters in the text is the Native American saint living in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Kateri Tekakwitha. Not only is she given a voice as a young Native woman who was in her teens when she converted to Christianity and who died from self-mortification in her early twenties, but this voice is also extremely controversial, provocative and highly sexualized, as it will be presented later.

*Beautiful Losers*, in addition, is ambiguous in relation to the notion of race and religion. As it has been already mentioned, one of the groups re-gaining their voice in the novel are the indigenous people. What is also significant is the fact that the narrator and his friend F. take part in a manifestation during the time of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec. F., a francophone, is also presented as a nationalist and revolutionist. The issue of national and religious identity reappears throughout the novel and it is inseparably connected with the problem of victimization. As Hutcheon (1974: 45) points out, the topic of victimization, which had been already signaled with the introduction of the A—s, is strongly connected with Canadian history: “As he delves into his own consciousness, the nameless man stumbles upon the truth about Canada. This truth is closely linked with his taste for victims, for, like the novel, Canada’s past is coloured by the blood of her defeated peoples.” The same observation is made by Perez (2012: 28), who notices the continuity between the fates of the Native American tribes, the French and finally the English colonizers. He argues that one of the most prominent themes in the novel is “the levels of oppression that Canada has suffered throughout history: what the British impose on the French is what the Jesuits impose on the Indian tribes and what the contemporary British Canada imposes on Quebec in the 1960s.” Indeed, on the first pages of the novel, the narrator addresses the Indian saint: “Catherine Tekakwitha, I have come to rescue you from the Jesuits” (*BL* 1993: 7). It can be hypothesized that what the Historian plans to do is to take the Native people’s story away from the Europeans – symbolized in *Beautiful Losers* by the French colonizers – and restoring it to them. In the first sentence of the novel, the narrator asks: “Catherine Tekakwitha, who are you? Are you

(1656–1680)? Is that enough? Are you the Iroquois Virgin? Are you the Lily of the Shores of the Mohawk River?” (*BL* 1993: 7). The same uncertainty as for the question of identity is expressed when he alludes to the fact that the name of the tribe from which she comes is of the French origin:

The French gave the Iroquois their name. Naming food is one thing, naming people is another, not that the people in question seem to care today. If they never cared, so much the worse for me: I'm far too willing to shoulder the alleged humiliations of harmless peoples, as evidenced by my life work with the A—s (*BL* 1993: 8).

As Hutcheon (1974: 45) also mentions, in *Beautiful Losers* there are numerous references to the Holocaust, one of the most striking ones being F.'s remark that “[e]very generation must thank its Jews (...) [a]nd its Indians” (*BL* 1993: 24) because, by the fact of them being submissive, conquered and slave-like, they contributed to the progress made in various fields by their conquerors.

Apart from the issues of nationality and victimization, there is also the theme of sexuality. The homosexual relation between the narrator and F. can be argued to undermine the notion of – previously superior – heterosexual masculinity, thus creating one more element representing the margins rather than the centre. In addition, the portrayal of the body that is present in the novel, especially in the context of Catherine Tekakwitha, is also typical for postmodernism, inasmuch as the descriptions of her corporeality may be viewed as profaning the sacrum.

#### 4. The ambivalence of the concept of identity

It can be argued that one of the recurrent problems in postmodern fiction is the question of identity. According to Vermeulen (2011: 12), the postmodern preoccupation with this issue reflects the fact that in postmodernism the human being is perceived as “fragmented and unstable”. This fragmentation and instability may be explained by various forces that influence an individual.

One of the most important reasons behind the ambiguity of the concept of self is the rise of consumerism that has been observed in the post-war times. As Bauman (1988: 63) argues, in contemporary Western society the identity is viewed as yet another commodity that can be purchased and abandoned when it does not meet one's standards. This new identity can be obtained by using certain products and services, or changing one's lifestyle:

The freedom to choose one's identity (...) becomes a realistic proposition. There is a range of options to choose from, and once the choice has been made, the selected identity can be made real (...) by making the necessary purchases or subjecting oneself to the required drills – be it a new hair-style, jogging routine, slimming diet or enriching one's speech with currently fashionable status-symbolizing vocabulary.

At the same time, there is an alleged life-changing potential to every one of such products; the goods, therefore, cease to be perceived as mere objects or services. As Bauman (1988: 58) states, “[w]e can say the goods are desired not for their capacity to enhance one’s body or mind (make them healthier, richer, more fulsome), but for their magic potentials to give a particular, distinguished and hence desired, shape to the body or the spirit (...)”.

In *Beautiful Losers*, the character of Charles Axis represents such “magic potential”. Axis, the bodybuilder, claims to have the power to transform an individual not only physically but also mentally. Interestingly, Axis is modeled on a real-life bodybuilder and the inventor of a revolutionary workout method, Charles Atlas, who enjoyed tremendous popularity during the 1930s and 1940s. Atlas, once a “97-pound weakling” himself, transformed not only his body and the bodies of his followers, but aimed to be also their guide and became a widely recognized cultural icon (Black 2009). Similarly, by replying to the advertisement of his method and “[giving] Charles Axis fifteen minutes a day in the privacy of his room” (BL 1993: 39), F. is able to gain a new identity; something that the narrator, though encouraged by F., has no intention of doing. However, in the end, the results of following the rules of consumerist society can be disastrous, insofar as the unrestricted access to the goods and new sensations breeds confusion, overabundance and “insatiable appetite for new and surprising products and life-styles” (Deer 1994: 52). Similarly, new identities can be adopted regularly, which magnifies the feelings of chaos and lack of stability. In the words of Bauman (1988: 63), “[i]n the game of consumer freedom all customers may be winners at the same time. Identities are not scarce goods. If anything, their supply tends to be excessive (...)”. Also Deer (1994: 52) shares with Bauman the view on the excess of the identities that are available to the individual, inasmuch as he argues that “[t]he world offers up thousand of roles, like so many commodities, and implants a desire for the consumption of all products”.

The issue of identity that is introduced in *Beautiful Losers* has also another dimension. As Perez (2012: 27) points out, the fact that the narrator of *Beautiful Losers* is not introduced by his name is extremely meaningful, inasmuch as it suggests fluidity and uncertainty. According to Deer (1994: 51), similarly, the Historian “longs for identity”; however, the overabundance of possibilities as to creating oneself breeds the contrasting needs. At one point, the man states:

I always wanted to be loved by the Communist Party and the Mother Church. I wanted to live in a folk song like Joe Hill. I wanted to weep for the innocent people my bomb would have to maim. I wanted to thank the peasant father who fed us on the run (BL 1993: 14).

As this fragment exemplifies, in the society where one is constantly being offered many identities, the search for fulfillment is fruitless, insofar as the “contradictory choices (...) prevent [one] from having any identity” (Deer 1994: 55).



The narrator's is not the only identity that is not wholly revealed in the text. F., for instance, is never mentioned by his full name; rather, the Historian frequently calls him his friend. F., on the other hand, calls himself the narrator's teacher several times. This nonspecificity, according to Perez (2012: 27), accentuates in the case of F. "the idea of mutability and changeability, since 'F' can stand for many identities". Edith, too, despite being described in close detail, from her Native American origin to her appearance, can also be argued to have adopted an ambiguous identity. First of all, she may be viewed as a continuation of the character of Catherine Tekakwitha, with both of them being Indian and dying from self-destructive behaviour. She also tries to "make a connection" by injecting into her veins the water from Lourdes and Tekakwitha Spring instead of heroine (*BL* 1993: 57). What is more, not only can Edith be viewed as an incarnation of Catherine, but both women can in fact represent a female element or the same female deity, since "all the women of the novel are essentially the same woman, or the same goddess" (Pacey 1967: 18). What supports this hypothesis is also Edith's speech in Greek, in which she claims to be the goddess Isis: "I am Isis born, of all things, both what is and what shall be, and no mortal has ever lifted my robe" (Pacey 1967: 18). Finally, even Catherine Tekakwitha, despite being an authentic historical figure, is depicted in an ambiguous way and her identity is questioned by the narrator when he addresses her: "Catherine Tekakwitha, who are you? (...) Are you the Iroquois Virgin? Are you the Lily of the Shores of the Mohawk River? (...) I fell in love with a religious picture of you" (*BL* 1993: 7). As Deer (1994: 50) points out, "the implied narrator, the addresser (...) does not know *what* Catherine is"; therefore, he is free to retell her history.

Furthermore, Deer (1994: 54) argues that one of the vital themes in *Beautiful Losers* is "the nihilistic joy of losing one's identity". Shedding one's identity takes various forms and in Cohen's novel it is frequently associated with sexual acts, or taking part in extreme or religious activities, as well as using drugs. One of the examples of such practices is the scene in which the narrator and F. masturbate while driving a car:

How I was torn between the fear for my safety and the hunger to jam my head between his knees and the dashboard! (...) Thus we existed in some eye for a second: two men in a hurtling steel shell aimed at Ottawa, blinded by a mechanical mounting ecstasy, the old Indian land sunk in soot behind us, two swelling pricks pointing at eternity, two naked capsules filled with lonely tear gas to stop the riot in our brains, two fierce cocks separate as the gargoyles on different corners of a tower, two sacrificial lollipops (orange in the map light) offered to the raptured highway (*BL* 1993: 48).

In this fragment, all main motifs that continue throughout the novel appear. First of all, the ecstasy that two protagonists experience is described with the word "mechanical". As it will be presented later, the motif of machinery is one of the most important ones in the novel, especially in relation to the human body

and its possibility to achieve the connection with the universe or God. Similarly, the fact that this scene takes part in a car – a mechanical construction, a “steel shell” – points at the same motif. What is more, the Historian is able to spot “the old Indian land” from the window of the car. In view of the fact that Catherine Tekakwitha is supposed to be the narrator’s gate to finding his identity and the connection with a higher force enabling him to save himself, it may be safely assumed that the Native American elements play an important role in the novel with regard to the awaited communion with one’s spiritual self. Finally, the narrator speaks about “the swelling pricks pointing at eternity” and “two sacrificial lollipops (...) offered to the raptured highway”. Clearly, the description uses religious imagery, and typically for Cohen, it ambivalently mixes the attributes connected with religious rituals, such as sacrifice, with sex and mechanical world in the form of “the raptured highway”. What adds ambiguity to this fragment is also the fact that the men’s activity is summed up by the narrator in such a way:

I was suddenly forlorn – I was suddenly without desire – I was suddenly more awake (...) than ever before in my whole life. – The wall! – The wall occupied the whole windshield (...). We passed through the wall because the wall was made of a scrim of painted silk. The car bumped over an empty field, the torn fabric clinging to the chrome Mercedes hood emblem. (...) On the wood counter I noticed an empty bottle with a perforated cap. I stared blankly at it. – Did you come? asked F. My prick hung out of my fly like a stray thread. – Too bad, said F. I started to shiver. – You missed a great come. I placed my clenched fists on the top of the dashboard and laid my forehead on them, weeping in spasms.” (*BL* 1993: 49)

What this description illustrates is the fact that the desire for fulfillment is not satisfied and that each attempt at it “ends in melancholy” (Deer 1994: 54), making the individual even more at loss that they had already been. A similar situation is portrayed when Edith and F. invent the Telephone Dance and they “become telephones”, with “Edith [being] the electrical conversation that went through [F.]” (*BL* 1993: 21), or when the narrator’s wife paints her body red. As Hutcheon (1974: 44) writes,

[t]he Indian Edith wants to be someone else too, so plans an unappreciated surprise for her husband, who tells us: “she was waiting for me all covered in red grease and I was thinking of my white shirt”. Not long after this she is a bloody corpse at the bottom of an elevator shaft.

As it can be seen, the attempt at losing one’s identity and becoming someone else has, in this case, tragic consequences and leads to self-destruction. Also the part in which Edith and F. inject the water from Lourdes into their bodies is portrayed in the same light, as the narrator comments: “I think they were both weeping, for there was mucus in her voice, and F. seemed to tremble like someone falling off to sleep. That night in the bedroom Edith did whatever I wanted.

(...) A week later she was under the elevator, a «suicide» (BL 1993: 58). It may be also added that, according to Deer (1994: 57), the fact that in the novel self-destruction is inseparable from sex is of great importance, inasmuch as “[t]he coupling of sex with self-destruction contradicts the ideology of sexual liberation that permeates the narrator’s world, [as] [i]n most cases the experiments with liberated sexuality involve subjugation, humiliation, and death wish”.

However, playing with the concept of identity in the novel may be also seen from a different perspective. On the one hand, the deeds of the protagonists can be undoubtedly viewed as self-destructive: Edith commits suicide, while Catherine Tekakwitha dies from self-mortification. Also F. finds himself in an asylum and “die[s] in a padded cell, his brain rotted from too much dirty sex” (BL 1993: 7). The fate of the narrator is ambiguous, as he can be hypothesized either to have gone mad or to dissolve, having become a part of the film that he is watching at the cinema. Thus, as Pacey (1967: 18) observes, “[i]n the eyes of the world, they are ‘losers’, for they are victims”. Nevertheless, their deaths may be seen as having a higher aim; therefore, in fact, they are not losing but “voluntarily surrendering their selves and the ordinary world” (Pacey 1967: 18). Shedding one’s self, as a result, has spiritual or even strictly religious connotations:

Catherine deliberately surrenders herself to be the Bride of Christ, is canonized, and becomes a miraculous healer; Edith commits voluntary suicide to teach “I” a lesson which at first he ignores but which ultimately leads him to his apotheosis; Mary Voolnd surrenders herself to the sexual pleasure of F. when he is at his unattractive worst and brings him the good news of his recognition as first president of the republic; F. deliberately casts himself in the subordinate role of teacher and guide of “I” and shows him the way to the Promised Land; “I” achieves final apotheosis and in the last paragraph of the novel is seen playing the role of Mediator between God and Man (...) (Pacey 1967: 18).

Hence, it can be assumed that when analysed from this point of view, the spiritual journey and the search for fulfillment that each character undergoes is far from being fruitless.

## 5. A poet as the trickster. The role of a postmodern poet

According to Vermeulen (2011: 10), the use of irony creates a distance between the postmodern writer and his creation. Such distance, in consequence, makes “an observational outsider” of the author, enabling them to maintain a “position that allows [them] to adopt a combination of various, often opposing, perspectives” (Vermeulen 2011: 10). Since in postmodernism everything is relative and everyone can be given their voice, such a technique of creating a literary text reflects this situation. However, as Vanhoozer (2003: 10) observes, the presence of multiple voices and points of view can be also problematic, as it is impossible

to decide on one superior voice and version of events. Thus, as Vermeulen (2011: 9) argues, the authors find themselves in an ambivalent position of an outsider, a traitor, or a trickster.

The trickster is a figure known in many cultures under various names and incarnations (Radin 1956). As Koepping (1985: 194) explains, “he appears (...) worldwide in primitive mythology and in classical antiquity as well as in modern deritualized and more secularized form as the fool and jester in the prankster tales of the time of the Reformation (...) with close connection to the literary fool of the dramas of Shakespeare”. Irrespective of the culture or mythology in which the trickster appears, his presence serves similar purposes. Primarily, he breaks the imposed rules and order, usually by engaging in foolery and playing tricks on humans, animals or gods (Hynes 1993: 14–15). Most importantly, he occupies the niche between different spheres and therefore can be seen as the “form of ambiguity and inversion” (Koepping 1985: 193), inasmuch as he has no regard for taboos and imposed social rules, especially those connected with religion and sexuality (Koepping 1985: 212). In doing so, the trickster constantly bridges the spheres that are normally considered to belong to completely separate units:

In short, trickster is a boundary-crosser. (...) We constantly distinguish – right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead – and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction. (...) Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox (Hyde 1998, as quoted in Vermeulen 2011: 8).

Hynes (1993: 37), similarly, calls the trickster “the official ritual profaner of beliefs”. As he points out, for this figure “[n]o order is too rooted, no taboo too sacred, no god too high, no profanity too scatological that it cannot be breached or inverted”. However, the violation of taboos is definitely performed not only for its own sake. Whereas the trickster’s deeds are perceived as mischief, foolery or cunningness, his role is more symbolic, as it was already signaled by Hyde (1998). Koepping (1985: 199), for instance, calls him a mediator, and points out to the fact that the trickster’s duality and moral ambiguity correspond with Douglas’s theory that what is considered to be sacred and profane is frequently not strictly separated from one another, but rather able to penetrate the other sphere (Douglas 1966). Vermeulen (2011: 8), too, agrees that trickster is “the transgressive figure” and therefore the potential “author of changes and new possibilities.” In accordance, breaching sexual and religious boundaries is bound to bring them to a closer focus simply by questioning them (Hynes 1993: 2), because “[p]rofaning or inverting social beliefs brings into sharp relief just how much a society values these beliefs” (Hynes 1993: 37). Lastly, the trickster is argued to act also as a messenger between heaven and earth (Hynes 1993: 39). In view of these opinions, it is interesting to note that, as Vermeulen (2011: 7) observes, it has been suggested that the role of a postmodern writer is similar to

this of the trickster. According to him, it is especially true in relation to Canadian postmodernism, inasmuch as “[t]heir [Canadian] national history (...) provides Canadian writers with a natural feeling for paradoxes and the boundary crossing (...)”. Furthermore, Vermeulen (2011: 7) argues that “the postmodern storyteller has been linked to both the mythological trickster figure and the function of priest or prophet within a community”. This view is similar to the one expressed by Koepping (1985: 199), who claimed that the trickster resembles a mediator.

It seems that all of these characteristics can be indeed used to describe at least a part of Leonard Cohen's oeuvre; most importantly with regard to the role of the narrator in *Beautiful Losers*. According to Hynes (1993: 34), for the trickster “[n]o borders are sacrosanct, be they religious, cultural, linguistic, epistemological, or metaphysical”. In Cohen's second novel, all of them are crossed; from the notion of the language and historical truth to bodily taboos and religious symbolics. As Hutcheon (1974: 42) notes, “*Beautiful Losers* has been called everything from obscene and revolting to gorgeous and brave”, with its language “of often vulgar sexuality”. What is also significant is the fact that usually the use of obscene imagery and vulgar language is motivated by the narrator's depiction of one of the main characters of the novel, Saint Catherine Tekakwitha, and a semi-biographical account of her life. Being one of the first Native American saints acclaimed by the Roman Catholic Church, Kateri Tekakwitha is typically referred to with regard to her holiness or the issue of women empowerment (Shoemaker 1995: 52). Cohen, however, offers a different perspective: “(...) find a little saintly faker like Teresa or Catherine Tekakwitha or Lesbia, whom prick never knew (...), find one of these quaint impossible cunts and fuck her for your life, coming all over the sky” (*BL* 1993: 11). On another occasion, the narrator describes how the saint decided on taking a vow of chastity:

A burning circle attacked her cunt and severed it from her crotch like the top of a tin can. She lived in a woman's body but it did not belong to her! It was not hers to offer! With a desperate slingshot thought she hurled her cunt forever into the night. It was not hers to offer to the handsome fellow, though his arms were strong and his own forest magic not inconsiderable. (...) Ah, the pain eased, the torn flesh she finally did not own healed in its freedom, and a new description of herself, so brutally earned, forced itself into her heart: she was Virgin (*BL* 1993: 28).

Once again, stressing the saint's corporeality may be seen as profanation of the sacrum; however, it is safe to assume that it is not only the shock value that was aimed at by Cohen. On the contrary, the way in which Catherine Tekakwitha is portrayed in *Beautiful Losers* is seen by the critics as yet another implementation of the figure of the trickster in the role of the narrator:

Cohen also soils his own inherited imagery and iconography of medieval Judeo-Christian nobility and saintly pride, and ridicules the validity of the 'saintly' voice by reducing the 'saintly stories' to bawdy tales of closeted lust, guilty perversion

and voyeurism. Cohen's role is comparable to Shakespeare's archetypal fool, who through mockery reveals hidden depth and truth (Watson [n.d.]: 14).

While it is generally agreed among the critics that "the more sacred a belief, the more likely is the trickster to be found profaning it" (Hynes 1993: 37), some recognize his doings as not so much a ridicule as an attempt to restore old values from the chaos, by means of paradox (Vermeulen 2011: 36). As Hynes (1993: 37) observes, in the stories of the trickster "[w]hat prevails is toppled, what is bottom becomes top, what is outside turns inside, what is inside turns outside." All of this, according to Vermeulen (2011: 10), is done to force a given community "to question the validity of its own conventions", but also because of the fact that the trickster or the poet's role "is not so much to create something new but rather to reveal what is already there, but has been forgotten or repressed (Vermeulen 2011: 36).

Furthermore, the lack of inhibitions as for the language and imagery that characterizes postmodern fiction can be seen as forced by the post-war reality. After the Holocaust and war atrocities, there is no language left to describe human experience. What is more, the same is true if the author tries to illustrate the supposed lack of morals and degradation of the Western world:

How can literature be both literary in the 'proper' sense and honest at the same time when just about everybody seems to be into drug-trafficking and incest nowadays? How can the genre of the novel proper, in other words, possibly tell it like it is if the way that things are now is so utterly improper and, according to standard codes of sense-making, so absolutely unrepresentable? In a word, the answer to these questions (...) is to write *unreadable* literature (Lucy 1998: 55).

Lastly, as it has been already mentioned, the figure of the trickster, as well as the one similar to it, namely this of a postmodern writer, can be connected with deconstruction and profanation. Thus, the very language of a postmodern text has to reflect it:

The part of our being (mentality, feeling, physicality) which is free of all control let's call our 'unconscious'. Since it's free of control, it's our only defense against institutionalized meaning, institutionalized language, control, fixation, judgment, prison. (...) What is the language of the 'unconscious'? (...) Its primary language must be taboo, all that is forbidden. Thus, an attack on the institutions of prison via language would demand the use of a language or languages which aren't acceptable, which are forbidden (Lucy 1998: 55).

To conclude, it can be suggested that by placing himself, as it were, both inside and on the margins of society to which the postmodern poet belongs, he is able to transgress what is generally agreed on as acceptable in a given community.

## 6. Postmodern plurality and the lack of centre

It can be argued that the question of plurality is inseparably connected with the notion of chaos and the lack of the centre. Indeed, the critics agree that “postmodernism accepted and embraced the inevitable existence of chaos” (Perez 2012: 12) and that “[t]he postmodern condition (...) pertains to one's awareness of the deconstructibility of all systems of meaning and truth” (Sim 2001: 13). Therefore, as it was already mentioned, postmodern literature is characterized by the distrust towards the authority, be it a political, philosophical or religious system. As a consequence, because “traditional conceptions of knowledge and religion appear increasingly redundant in the context of a postmodern pluralism” (Berry 2004: 168), eclecticism and deconstructionism seem prevalent. Sim (2001: 3) points out that postmodernism is characterized by “scepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms” and that the authors agree that “[they] should reject the ‘grand narratives’ (...) of the Western culture because they have now lost all their credibility.” Vermeulen (2011: 6), in addition, comments on the fact that in spite of implementing eclectic modes of narration, such as “frequent mixture of fiction with non-fiction, which often results in an interweaving of fantasy, historiography and (auto)biography, and (...) other literary and non-literary genres, from poetry to newspaper articles”, all of those sources and techniques are treated by the author with irony. According to him, “[p]ostmodern writing gratefully makes use of literary conventions and traditions, but criticizes them at the same time, implying that they are far from perfect or absolute” (Vermeulen 2011: 10). Such ambivalence is, again, present in *Beautiful Losers*. On the stylistic level, Cohen mixes various types of narration and literary conventions. The re-telling of the story of Catherine Tekakwitha, for instance, may be seen as the example of historical metafiction. Such a technique, as it was already mentioned, enables the narrator to question the relevance of the “‘grand narratives’ of the Western culture” (Sim 2001: 3), especially those of colonization and conversion of the “savages” to Christianity, inasmuch as it provides, to a certain extent, a parody of the stories of the saints' lives. In addition, Perez (2012: 27) observes the link between the allusions to numerous spiritual systems and cultures that appear in *Beautiful Losers* and the fact that the novel was meant to present also essentially Canadian problems:

Pop icons such as James Dean, Sophia Loren or Marilyn Monroe exist along with the protagonist triangle of the story: the narrator, F., and Edith, as well as with historical figures such as Catherine Tekakwitha (...). These characters share all the same space despite historical timing differences and they all come from different traditions: Indian, Christian, Jewish, American pop and even Greek myths which stand all probably for a metaphor of what Canada represents itself, a land where different traditions meet and coexist.

These allusions, apart from presenting the Canadian reality as the mix of different voices and the representation of multiculturalism, may also symbolically point at the post-war times as being chaotic and lacking any roots and centre. In doing so, the next level of irony would be added to the text, insofar as, according to Sim (2001: 150), “postmodern cultural texts do not just quote other cultures, other historical moments, they randomly cannibalize them to the point where any sense of critical or historical distance ceases to exist – there is only pastiche.” Also Perez (2012: 26) claims that by means of implementing intertextuality and using various styles of narration, Cohen aims to “portray a fragmented and chaotic society”.

## 7. Reevaluation of the concept of authority

As Hutcheon (2001: 2) observes, postmodernism is inseparably linked with and influenced by politics, which means that the political issues, as well as current ethical problems, have shaped, to a large extent, the postmodern literature. Thus, one of the major problems that have been reflected in it is the question of authority and power. It can be argued that postmodernism, above all, favours decentralization and rebellion against the established systems, along with approving of heterogeneity. More often than not, such rebellion takes an extremely radical form (Deer 1994: 51).

A tendency to comment negatively on authority, be it in the form of criticizing the Canadian government, contemporary consumerist lifestyle or the Church, is visible also in Leonard Cohen’s works. Whereas his poems and song lyrics often provide an ironic insight into the issues that Cohen feels ambivalently about, it is his second novel, *Beautiful Losers*, that constitutes Cohen’s most aggressive and unsuppressed attack on the establishment. However, as Deer (1994: 48) observes, this attack is also highly postmodern in its tone, inasmuch as the rebellion against various institutions, systems and ideas does not really lead anywhere. He states that “the voices of the novel experiment with a decadent radicalism, a kind of directionless revolt against the truisms of political, social, and economic repression, yet also mock this radicalism: the state, the church, and capitalism are targeted for criticism (...)”. This duality can be seen in F.’s letter to the narrator:

I was never sure whether I wanted disciples or partisans. I was never sure whether I wanted Parliament or a hermitage. I will confess that I never saw the Quebec Revolution clearly (...). I simply refused to support the War, not because I was French, or a pacifist (which of course I’m not), but because I was tired (*BL* 1993: 83).

Also the Historian is similarly torn, which is visible in his speech:

I would like to accuse the Church. I accuse the Roman Catholic Church of Quebec of ruining my sex life (...), I accuse the Church of killing Indians, (...) I accuse the



Church of haunting automobiles and of causing pimples, (...) I accuse the Church of stealing my sun tan and of promoting dandruff, I accuse the Church of sending people with dirty toenails into streetcars where they work against Science, I accuse the Church of female circumcision in French Canada (*BL* 1993: 26).

This “ironic contesting of the authority” (Hutcheon 2001: 107) can ultimately lead to chaos and confusion, which is illustrated in the novel by F.'s tragic fate and the collapse of his system. By calling himself the teacher and a spiritual leader of both the narrator and his wife, he put himself in a role through which he was able to pass to them the basis of his philosophy:

F. said: Connect nothing. He screamed the remark at me while overlooking my wet cock about twenty years ago. I don't know what he saw on my swooning eyes, maybe some glimmering of a fake universal comprehension. (...) 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. It sews skin onto the skeleton and lipstick on a lip (...), it goes through everything like a relentless bloodstream, and the tunnel is filled with a comforting message, a beautiful knowledge of unity. All the disparities of the world, the different wings of the paradox, (...) all the polarities (...), everything which has existed and does exist, we are part of a necklace of incomparable beauty and unmeaning. Connect nothing: F. shouted. Place things side by side on your arborite table, if you must, but connect nothing! (*BL* 1993: 12).

This conviction of the “beauty and unmeaning” of all things, which was the major point of F.'s philosophy, can be, however, detrimental. As Deer (1994: 51) notes, all the characters in Cohen's novel “continually cast off knowledge, traditions, and structures that provide their lives with meaning, even while fully aware of the dangers of this nihilism”. In the end, F.'s philosophy did not answer any questions that the characters had struggled with, and it was “finally reduced to a set of contradictions that remain a mystery for the reader” (Perez 2012: 28). After F.'s death, indeed, the narrator asks: “Where is the science-fiction world of tomorrow they promised us today? (...) Saints and friends, help me out of History and Constipation” (*BL* 1993: 58). Also F. himself, in his letter to the narrator, admits: “I wonder where my style has led you. As I stand on this last springy diving board I wonder where my style has led me” (*BL* 1993: 75).

On the other hand, it can be argued that in spite of the attempt of postmodernism to reject the traditional sets of beliefs and systems, there has been still a strong need to achieve a spiritual revival, which has been manifested by the rise of interest in so-called New Age spirituality.

As for the definition of the concept of New Age, there are no clear-cut borders as to what precisely is included in this phenomenon and what is not. There are, however, certain central elements that are accepted in relation to New Age, such as the focus on a holistic approach to spirituality and to a human being, the experimental and counter-cultural dimension of this phenomenon, as well as its bor-

rowing from various spiritual systems and religions (Flere and Kirbis 2009: 161). Hanegraaff (1996: 12), in addition, points out that it is a “movement of modern western, industrialized society” which originated from the alternative culture of the 1960s. Finally, it can be assumed that in New Age, it is not the concept of God that is accentuated, but that of the “ubiquity or immanence of the divine in the cosmos” (Hanegraaff 1996: 12).

The echoes of such views can be undoubtedly seen throughout Cohen’s oeuvre. Again, they are most prominent in *Beautiful Losers*, where spiritual revival is meant to be achieved by means of mixed and sometimes even mutually exclusive practices. The characters use sexual activities, along with semi-religious practices and drugs to form communion with themselves and with the outer world. However, they do not limit themselves to traditional forms of such practices. On the contrary, they try to achieve access to a different reality by means of “the Telephone Dance”, sadomasochist acts and other untraditional activities. Nevertheless, it can be argued that in the novel the alternative practices and New Age spirituality become also ridiculed and reduced to a set of meaningless actions and beliefs. According to Deer (1994: 56), the novel illustrates that in contemporary western society it is impossible to find spiritual fulfillment by following the ideals of the so-called counterculture, as this culture promotes the “attraction to enslavement”, as a consequence of still being part of consumerist society. In such society, “the individuals are forever bored, forever unsatisfied, forever searching for orgasms; their ambitions are short-term, not entirely goalless but eminently selfish” (Deer 1994: 55). In the end, the narrator of *Beautiful Losers*, in spite of following the system constructed by F., “does not find anything within himself to assuage his feelings of existential loss and his fear that the world has become intolerably banal and disenchanting” (Deer 1994: 54), which can be seen as a final failure of New Age philosophy and its stressing of the crucial role of the individual in their search for self-fulfillment. To sum up this bleakness, the Historian states: “astrology boredom accepted, (...) urban voodoo accepted, (...) square earth theories accepted, (...) all reasons accepted, (...) Zen Ph.D. tolerated” (*BL* 1993: 73). Also the very style of his utterances may be viewed as the reflection of his confusion and despair, as his language is “out of control – (...) unsubordinated, seriated, redundant” and thus seems to be an “overcompensation for some hollow, unfulfilled part of his being” (Deer 1994: 54).

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As for the factors that can be argued to have influenced Cohen’s art, making it multifaceted and often paradoxical, the first one of them was shown to be his identity of a Jewish Canadian. Being part of the Jewish community and coming from an orthodox Jewish family, Cohen interacted also, at the same time, with the Catholic majority, and was exposed to other cultures as well. In addition, the time when he started pursuing his literary career was rich in the socio-political

changes, such as the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, with the secularization of the country, or the sexual revolution. It was also the time marked by the rise in consumerism and changes in the lifestyle; the terms such as “centre” and “authority”, too, started to lose their credibility, also in relation to spiritual issues. The shattered beliefs as to the relevance of religion and the ability of the individual to find self-fulfillment through religious rituals are, in consequence, one of the most important topics in Cohen's works.

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