THE PROCESS OF SELF-DISCOVERY IN MATT COHEN'S NOVELS FROM KORSONILOFF TO FLOWERS OF DARKNESS

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IN

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by

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ABSTRACT

To read a Matt Cohen novel is to experience a sense of futility and despair followed by a faint sense of confidence in human beings to achieve psychological and spiritual maturity. His characters are constantly bombarded by familial, amorous, or sociological problems, and are often driven to the brink of confusion with only a glimmer of hope for survival and recovery. But survive and recover they do, and with an appetite for life that leads them towards self-knowledge and the possibility for self-discovery.

Regardless of the setting or plot in each novel, the main issue is always the perpetual quest of his pathetic central characters for self-identification. The sense of futility and despair is engendered by their successive failures to recognize themselves as whole individuals amidst the wreckage of their past lives; they cannot seem to discern the detailed characteristics of their 'real' selves because they have always practised self-deception or allowed themselves to wander aimlessly from relationship to relationship without concern for permanence.

The sense of confidence in human beings to achieve maturity comes with the characters' success in mastering their own fears and emotions, and in penetrating the superficial

layers of their psyches to glimpse the nature of their true spiritualities. Although the depth of penetration and the clarity of their perceptions vary with each character, it is the precarious survival of his characters themselves and the possibility for further growth which becomes the trademark for Cohen's novels.

INTRODUCTION

Matt Cohen has now published fourteen works of fiction, including nine novels, and has been praised as one of Canada's most important writers. But despite this recognition, his work has been neglected as the subject of any substantial critical study. In contrast to the numerous book reviews and short articles written in response to his work, only a few full length articles can be found that attempt any survey or concentrate on any specific aspect of his novels. Virtually no criticism has dealt directly with his treatment of the theme of self-discovery, which is central to his narratives. I have taken his first seven novels, in order, and tried to trace the development of each main character's spiritual and emotional growth, and, also, to explain how the outcomes of each novel coalesce to form a unified vision of the individual's quest for self-discovery.

Korsoniloff and Johnny Crackle Sings are novellas and are discussed together in Chapter One, while each of the other novels is discussed separately. The Spanish Doctor and Nadine, Cohen's most recent novels, are not included in the discussion because they signal a new direction in his thematic interests and reveal little about his perceptions of the individual and self-discovery that has not already been explored in his previous novels.

His method of writing involves setting his characters in emotionally and spiritually chaotic situations, and then showing, through the development of the narrative, the range of possibilities between survival and defeat. If they survive, the pattern for growth usually progresses from chaos to rebirth, and then to a stage of slow development.

At some time early in their lives, usually before the fictional present of the novels, the characters experience some traumatic event or revelation which throws their ordered lives into turmoil and their sense of identity into confusion. They eventually come to intuit certain truths about reality and their identity which ineluctably leads to an epiphany of some kind. The epiphany scenes are often punctuated with baptismal images and symbols which suggest an emotional and spiritual rebirth. The characters come to realize that they are multifarious individuals and that some kind of metamorphosis is occurring, or has occurred, which could lead to self-discovery.

After the rebirth, the characters enter a period of development in which they struggle to learn more about their inner selves. The extent of their self-knowledge depends on each character's forbearance, prevision, and clarity of perception. If they maintain self-control and are able to comprehend the extraneous forces at work on their psyches, they can come close to self-discovery. However, if they

realize certain verities without accepting and acting on them, they succumb to self-deception.

The main concern of my thesis, then, is the exploration of Cohen's fictional worlds to see how his characters begin their process of self-discovery, what forces and circumstances are at work to influence them, and how their process ends. During the course of discussion, I will also show how the ending to each book reflects certain changes in Cohen's attitudes towards self-discovery and the individual. In most cases, there is a development in attitude towards an affirmation of the individual's potential to wrest from reality and the sociological environment, a sense of identity and a recognition of emotional and spiritual character. The development, however, is slow and accompanied by only a subdued and cautious optimism in the individual's ability to achieve self-discovery.

CHAPTER ONE

KORSONILOFF AND JOHNNY CRACKLE SINGS

With the publication of Korsoniloff in 1969, and Johnny Crackle Sings in 1971, Matt Cohen introduced himself as a capable and innovative new writer in Canada, and started producing a succession of novels which depict characters who are, among other things, engaged in the process of self-discovery. The central characters in these first novellas are set the task of trying to define themselves within the context of societies which threaten to confuse and even destroy any sense of self they might already possess. Given their sensitivity and the complexity of their problems, it is not surprising that they do not fully complete this process.

The critical responses generated by these first works were few and mixed. They do, however, focus on the themes of self-alienation, self-discovery, and the inner quest, as well as the experimental techniques Cohen uses to convey them. Later reviews and articles, notably by George Woodcock, Jon Kertzer, and Betty Moore Ewing, also approach these novellas from a thematic perspective, but do little more than recognize, in general terms, what Cohen is trying to

accomplish.[1] They do not provide an in-depth study of the psychological and spiritual development of the two main characters, or to reveal how these works form the foundation of a philosophy which studies characters struggling against the dehumanizing forces of society in an attempt to discover and maintain their individuality.

Korsoniloff and Johnny Crackle Sings portray two central characters, Andre Korsoniloff and Johnny Harper, or Johnny Crackle as he later renames himself, who have psychological problems which stem from an inability to deal effectively with certain traumatic events that occur fairly early in their lives. The death of Korsoniloff's mother, and the deaths of Johnny Crackle's father and brother, along with other family problems, cause these two main characters to remove themselves, by gradation, from meaningful interaction with their social environments. Their efforts to come to grips with their situations involve the process of self-discovery, which, in both cases, is never successfully completed.

Andre Korsoniloff, a philosophy professor in Cohen's first novella, considers his personality divided between his

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[1] George Woodcock, "Armies Moving in the Night: The Fictions of Matt Cohen," in The World of Canadian Writing: Critiques & Recollections (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980), pp. 127-48; Jon Kertzer, "Matt Cohen," in Profiles in Canadian Literature #4 (Toronto: Dundurn, 1980), pp. 125-32; Jon Kertzer, "Time and Its Victims: The Writing of Matt Cohen," in Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 17 (1980), pp. 93-101; Betty Moore Ewing, "Matt Cohen's Monologue In Morality," Canadian Literature, No. 72 (1977), pp. 41-44.

rational, analytical, and controlled side, which he refers to as "I," and his irrational, instinctual, and impetuous side, which he refers to as "Korsoniloff." The book is narrated by the "I" side, who considers it to be his journal. In it, he presents us with two main narrative lines which are developed by tenuously connected scenes and fragments drawn from various times in his life. The main narrative contains the introspective thoughts of "I" as he wrestles with the problem of his dual personality, and tries to make some sense of reality itself. The other narrative is interwoven with the primary one, and recalls episodes from his life as a child. These flashbacks are intended as an investigation to determine whether or not Korsoniloff, as a child of three, was responsible for his mother's death by pushing her off a dock.

It seems that the narrator's emotional and psychological problems might somehow be solved if only he could discover, through either his father or Korsoniloff, the exact circumstances of that day's tragic event. His failure to do so becomes the wedge that splits his personality into two distinct halves, and provides the catalyst for the schizophrenia to which he periodically succumbs. The story of Andre Korsoniloff's process of self-discovery, then, becomes the story of his introspective glimpses at the nature of his dual personality, and his attempts to recall the role he played in the scene on the dock.

The narrator's problems can be more specifically defined as a failure to discover and understand the sources of Korsoniloff's emotional instability and spiritual paralysis, and a failure to reconcile himself with his past, Korsoniloff, and with reality itself. Because he is conservative by nature, and adheres to the norms and "patterns" constructed for him by the society in which he lives, he antagonizes the Korsoniloff side of his consciousness and thinks of him as abnormal. Consequently, his attempts at self-discovery are never successfully completed, and at the end of the novel he remains almost as powerless to solve his problems as he is at the beginning.

Before examining the details of the narrator's problems, we must briefly consider what the journal means to him, and how it becomes the basis for his most important self-discoveries. In the third chapter he thinks of the journal as "nothing but a series of connected curves spiralling towards a non-existent centre,"[2] but which he is writing anyway in the "hope that it will teach me something" (K, p. 16). The series of "connected curves" becomes the important events of his life recorded, not in chronological order, but in the random order in which they occur to his memory. He recalls, alternately, his most recent past, and the events of his

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[2]Matt Cohen, Korsoniloff (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1969), p. 18. (In future references, the title of this book will be abbreviated to K).

childhood after his mother's death. The journal seems to be an attempt to pull together these fragmented memories of his life into one comprehensive whole, and to unify the divergent aspects of his personality, despite the fact that he believes he does not have an emotional or spiritual "centre." He does manage to make several important discoveries about himself through the journal, but, unfortunately, fails in the overall process because he is unable to accept himself as a whole personality.

Of the several problems already mentioned which prevent the narrator's emotional and spiritual growth, the first we encounter in the journal is his lack of control of his sense of reality and time. In the opening chapter we are introduced to Andre Korsoniloff during two different periods in his life. In one narrative we see him as an awkwardly dressed, spiritually depressed citizen of Toronto out for a walk on a sunny morning in April, while in the other narrative, we see him as a young boy after the death of his mother, trying painfully to cope with her loss. We learn that at both stages he is an emotional and sensitive person who allows his imagination to take him from the real world to another world of fantasy where the concepts of time and space are distorted. We see him as a boy: "Lying suspended, half-formed thoughts dissolving in the warm morning, time floats like a nowhere tide" (K, p. 4); and we see him as an adult walking towards his ex-girlfriend's outdoor wedding reception

"Seized by the moment, caught in the interstices of time, so aware that the moment is a snapshot memory" (K, p. 6). It is their lack of control of their sense of reality and time, and their ignorance of the consequences of their actions which differentiate Korsoniloff as boy and adult from the narrator.

Later, in chapter three, when the narrator introduces himself and recalls the wedding scene in which Korsoniloff strikes the groom, he confesses that "You will not find in me a virtuoso control of reality. Korsoniloff's only accomplishment is the complexity of his contradictions" (K, p. 15). He also refers to that scene as:

> the moment in which Korsoniloff has finally outwitted himself; that is, acted himself into inactivity. And so I have moved one step forward towards the apocalypse which I await. The vision of destiny. The ultimate battle.
>
> (K, p. 15)

The narrator's attitude in this scene is an expression of his antagonistic response to Korsoniloff, and his desire to confront and destroy him represents a retrogressive step in his process of self-discovery. At this point he still views Korsoniloff's behavior at the wedding as objectionable, and reproves him for his total lack of remorse. He has not yet realized the similarities between Korsoniloff's and the boy's need for attachment, their impulsive behavior, nor the agony they experience because of their loneliness. Neither

has he realized that recognizing and accepting both of them as an integral part of himself and his past would mean discovering his essential self.

Besides his lack of control of reality and time, and his inability to accept Korsoniloff as part of his true nature, the narrator is unable to discover the source of Korsoniloff's emotional instability and spiritual paralysis. It is this discovery which holds the key to his success at self-identification. He is aware of Korsoniloff's emotional turmoil and paralysis, and has a vague idea that it is connected to his mother's death, but cannot get a clear focus on the problem, or use the self-knowledge he already has to effect a solution to it.

In one important scene near the end of the first chapter, Korsoniloff, the child, receives a photograph of his dead mother Anne, from his father. The gift leaves Andre with:

> a terrible tension in his stomach - not a new feeling but a magnification of something that was already there....and Andre pressed the photograph against his stomach where it hurt, hardly able to hear the words...until the tension spread through his whole body, buzzing and numbing, filling his mind and blocking all sound.
>
> (K, p. 8)

The gift of the photograph seems to have triggered the invocation of some excruciatingly painful subconscious memory which the boy cannot fully comprehend, and which yet manages

to stultify his senses to the degree that he experiences a physical and emotional paralysis. This psychosomatic pain and its resultant partial paralysis of the senses and emotions, is common to Korsoniloff the adult as well.

In the second scene after this one, Korsoniloff is at the wedding of his ex-girlfriend, Marie, and is observed by the narrator to be "never violent and always paralysed" (K, p. 8). Later, when the narrator is looking at the scene in retrospect, he mentions the presence of a similar paralysing pain in Korsoniloff's stomach, and believes that "it was only that spring morning, with the gift of the mandala, that it finally exploded through me, suffused me entirely, ran through my veins and left me" (K, p. 86). This "therapeutic apocalypse," as he refers to it, relieves Korsoniloff's pain only temporarily; it returns many times after to paralyse and numb him again (K, p. 86). What the narrator fails to recognize here is that the pain is a psychogenic manifestation of the mental agony he feels over the loss of his mother and the possibility that he was ultimately responsible for her death.

This becomes one of the major obstacles that the narrator has to overcome before he is able to realize or discover his true self. Korsoniloff's memories of that day on the dock have been lost to oblivion, and he has now become the victim of his own defense mechanisms. This is why, when he tries to lift the barrier or "line of contiguity" which separates the two compartments of his consciousness, the "I" and

Korsoniloff, he feels completely confused (K, p. 48). He comments that the experience:

> brings forth, expands beyond their usual 1-dimensional domain, certain conflicts with which, to be candid, I am completely unable to deal. My mind becomes a maze of questions....I always feel distinctly uneasy and wish that I might resolve whatever it is that is so provoked.
>
> (K, p. 49)

Discovering what is "provoked" leads us to the final important problem which prevents the narrator from achieving full self-discovery, his attitude towards self-knowledge itself, and his failure to use it to better his condition.

Instead of reconciling himself to the fact of his dual consciousness, the narrator continues to distance "himself" from "him." Actually, he doesn't even consider recognition of his dual consciousness as an aid in solving his problems at all. He comments fairly early in the book that:

> If knowledge is the path to enlightenment, then I ought to be free of such encumbrances. But no, Korsoniloff is completely enslaved. Not only by his own passions and impulses -- which even in themselves lead to enough problems -- but also by myself -- ever-chiding and reminding him that he drives himself deeper into his own circles.
>
> (K, p. 19)

The narrator is perpetuating his own mental turmoil by trying to destroy one part of himself in order to keep another part alive and whole. It is not until his short

talk with Mr. Smythe, his colleague, that he realizes that the part he is trying to nurture may not be quite as attractive as he first thought.

After the departmental meeting at the university, Smythe calls him a "cold fish," a term which causes him to turn from an analysis of himself through introspection to an examination of himself from other people's points of view. He begins to wonder, "Did I face the world as Korsoniloff or did the world see the part of me that observed him" (K, p. 43). This question leads him to the conclusion that it is very difficult to judge a person's character from the exterior, since a person's actions reveal only a small, and possibly uncharacteristic, portion of his or her personality. He then thinks of his habit of introspection and decides that "not only did I not know myself but I had no intention whatsoever of self-knowledge. In fact I found the goal both impossible and undesirable" (K, p. 44).

Superficially, this insight seems to retard the narrator's process of self-discovery, but paradoxically, it represents another self-revelation. He thinks he doesn't believe in self-knowledge, but then, on the very next page he returns to self-analysis and introspection. He decides that his personality is opaque, and comments that:

> the darkness was a result of my persistent efforts to hide and subdue Korsoniloff. Who, despite the energy directed at his destruction, was presently prevailing in all areas. Was not this tenacity proof

> in itself of his being the essential me? Instead of trying to smother him, me, I should give in and let events proceed untrammelled. Give up my bland exterior and become completely random.
>
> (K, pp. 44-45)

The unexpected "apocalypse" has now been supplanted by a truce, and a proposed integration with Korsoniloff, which the narrator prophesies will bring about a personality "transformation or rebirth" (K, p. 45).

Recognizing the solution, however, does not always insure resolution of the problem. Despite the fact that he writes the journal to direct that "series of connected curves" towards his emotional and spiritual "non-existent centre," he is never in full control of Korsoniloff, and is never able to reconcile himself fully to the conditions of his dual consciousness (K, p. 18). His process of self-discovery reaches the stage where he thinks about himself and Korsoniloff, and decides "I am neither and both....Since I am I and am all that I am I must be all my forms. Very neat? But I didn't feel it" (K, p. 74). One of his later definitive considerations on the subject is that "I felt trapped in thought patterns that I'd made too complicated to unravel" (K, p. 74).

Throughout the journal he is unable to extricate himself from these patterns and remains forever in doubt about the role he might have played in his mother's death. On the last page of the journal he asks himself, "Did I do it or

didn't I? I still don't know. But I know I never will" (K, p. 106). This final comment confirms the futility of any further self-analysis which in turn reduces the possibility of any further self-discovery. His process has apparently been stymied.

Johnny Crackle seems to suffer from the same basic problems that Korsoniloff does. Johnny finds himself incapable of coping effectively with reality and time, he has problems accepting the deaths of his father and brother, and most importantly, he feels that the pressures of society, which threaten to 'pattern' and mould him, are robbing him of his individuality and freedom. His attempts to solve, or at least come to terms with, these problems, lead him to several important experiences and revelations which constitute his process of self-discovery. These include recognizing how people lose their individuality by role-playing for society, how they can regain it by withdrawal from society, and how withdrawal can be more devastating than role-playing itself. Unfortunately, like Andre Korsoniloff, Johnny fails to reconcile himself successfully with reality and time, and achieves only limited success in harmonizing with society. Furthermore, his attempts at self-realization become impeded by his own temporary withdrawals from reality into a state of

passivity which he calls "condition zero."[3] Eventually, he withdraws from intimate social interaction altogether, and from objective reality, into a lonely dream-like world of psychedelic images and thoughts. On the night of his graduation, for example, he attends a party near a river, but eventually walks away and allows his imagination and thoughts to take him to a half-real, half-fantasy world where he thinks he sees Stephen floating on a raft in the middle of the river. Lured by the vision, he tries to swim out to the raft but:

> ...a funny thing happened. Or maybe it didn't happen but it seemed to happen and there's really no difference. Stephen leaned over the raft, pointed to me, and said, Now you're it. It was weird because that was exactly what had gone through my head when I found out he was dead.
>
> (JCS, p. 51)

This episode helps Johnny crystalize certain ideas about himself and his relationship to society as a whole. Being "it" for Johnny means fulfilling the roles that other people have assigned for him. He knows he is supposed to succeed in highschool like the rest of his friends, and then go on to some prominent position in life. But, like Stephen, he rejects the prospects for conventional roles. Unlike Stephen, though, Johnny decides to stay alive. He had the same

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[3]Matt Cohen, Johnny Crackle Sings (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1971), p. 89. (In future references, the title of this book will be abbreviated to JCS.)

opportunities as Stephen, but admits that "I was it but it wasn't all there. In fact I blew it. What else was there to do?" (JCS, p. 51).

What he does do is develop his talents as a vocalist and guitarist to a moderate level, and becomes a rock performer. This in itself does not lead Johnny to immediate self-recognition, but it is at this stage in his life that he becomes more cynical about society as a whole, and even feels assaulted by it. He, like the narrator in Korsoniloff, feels that the institutions and systems mould people into certain standard roles, and obliterate any trace of their individuality. The narrator in Korsoniloff suggests that

> ...the gut is where its all taken in....The gut is jammed into patterns. Stamped and moulded. Dumping grounds for obscene ideologies are cleared. Passageways are twisted and contorted so that the slightest deviation will produce terror and pain and thus normalization. Controls.
>
> (K, pp. 78)

Johnny believes in much the same thing when he says "They do it to you. They clean you right out. Everything paranoid you ever thought is true. Living in their world is like swallowing a worm" (JCS, p. 19). Johnny's defence against this apparently dehumanizing society leads him to a philosophy which involves an unusual type of passivity and imagination. Besides believing that he was born without a destiny (JCS, p. 48), he also believes that:

> we are all perfect unblemished untouched
> it all passes through us we are coloured
> stones beneath clear water nothing
> changing nothing constant and the waves
> pass through and over us and we are
> still perfect

(JCS, p. 19)

He thinks of the human soul or essence as coloured stones through and over which the flood of time and reality moves without having any effect on them. His philosophy seems to be a cross between fatalism and nihilism, a composite which declares that all events are inevitable and that they have no meaning or significance. His belief in these eclectic thoughts stands behind his comment later in the book that "there's no point hoping for anything anyway. If I did it just might happen and then where would I be" (JCS, p. 72)

One would be tempted at this point to suggest that Cohen is using Johnny as a spokesman to expound his own philosophy. And, in part, he is. Cohen expands, in later novels, on the idea that reality is a continuous series of random and chaotic happenings which can be only partially controlled and ordered by individuals through sociological systems. Here, though, Cohen's ideas are in a rudimentary form, and obfuscated by Johnny's pseudo-religious visions. What happens next to Johnny in the novel reveals what Cohen suspects might happen to anyone who tries to separate himself totally from reality, as well as society; he is forced

without options to return to the very systems and institutions he was trying to escape from in the beginning.

Johnny's drift from the norms of society and reality continues with his lapses into "condition zero" which is "the point at which everything blended so perfectly that it all cancelled out. In condition zero there was no input and no output. Just the circular rhythms of his own energy flow" (JCS, p. 89). It is a trance-like state where conventional reality presents itself in the form of energy flows, currents, and vibrations, and all Johnny has to do in this condition is maintain his energy equilibrium.

In one instance Johnny stays in "condition zero" for several days and has to be hospitalized. He is diagnosed by his doctor as being in "a state of acute depression and shock" with the "possibility of latent psychosis" (JCS, p. 88). Betty Moore Ewing, in her short article "Matt Cohen's Monologue in Morality," comments on the dilemma Johnny faces at this time:

> As Johnny escapes reality and moves into a state of (as he sees it) oneness with the universe, he is menaced with having to face the responsibility which accompanies refusal to conform and communicate as demanded by his role. Threatened in a psychiatric clinic with shock treatment, Johnny realizes that variance from the norm will bring neither escape nor peace but rather a discomfort far greater than that produced by role playing.
>
> (Ewing, "Matt Cohen's Monologue," p. 42.)

Johnny's decision to rejoin society is a momentous one for him and signals the development of his new attitude towards reality and society. From the hospital, he goes to Lew Clinton's farm to recuperate, and then decides to start a new life for himself and his wife, Jenny, by heading to Victoria, B.C.

Johnny's return to society is marked not only by his assuming the responsibilities of a husband and father, but also by a change in his name from Johnny Crackle back to Johnny Harper. His transition from one identity to another seems to reflect his acceptance of reality and society, and of the roles society has to offer him. His process of self-discovery has not been completed, though, mainly because he still seems to retain vestiges of his old attitudes to the way things happen in his life. For example, when he has taken down the walls of his house in Victoria to make room for his musical instruments, he says "it all happened by itself so i guess its okay" (JCS, p. 103). He has not yet come to realize that he can use his will more fully to direct certain forces that control his destiny. If he were ever to experience this revelation, only then would he come closer to a higher degree of self-realization and self-discovery.

The conclusion to Johnny Harper's story represents a more successful attempt at self-realization than the conclusion to Andre Korsoniloff's, even though Korsoniloff's was more mindful and deliberate. Johnny has gone through a very

disorienting crisis in his life, after which he settles down, however precariously, in a home of his own with some hope of harmonizing with his physical and social environment. Korsoniloff, on the other hand, remains as oblivious to the memories of his mother's death at the end of the book as at the beginning, and has assumed no greater control over Korsoniloff's behavior. Cohen's attitude towards his characters' chances of achieving some significant degree of consonance with their inner and outer worlds seems to be progressing from pessimistic to less pessimistic. The narrator in Korsoniloff is forever doomed to struggle for control over Korsoniloff, and to search after a lost memory which he can never find. Johnny, in contrast, stands a chance to discover he can play "it" and be successful; all he has to do is move away from "condition zero" to a state of consciousness which involves greater exercise of his will in determining the direction his life will take.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DISINHERITED

In contrast to Korsoniloff and Johnny Crackle Sings, The Disinherited has made a much larger splash in Canada's literary waters, and has drawn more critical responses than both of these novels together. It is considered by the majority of Canadian literary critics who have commented on it to be a Canadian classic, despite its few minor flaws, and has been heralded by John Moss as "The novel most effectively evoking both our literary and social tradition."[4] Many of the reviews and articles that have been written on The Disinherited, center their attention on Cohen's central theme, which involves the increasing failure of the farming tradition to provide the individual with the basic moral and social values that have become part of the fiber of rural Canadian society. The question of self-discovery is closely related to this theme, but is left mostly unexplored except for two articles by Jon Kertzer and one by George Woodcock.[5]

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[4]John Moss, Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel: The Ancestral Present (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), p. 7.

[5]Jon Kertzer, "Matt Cohen," in Profiles in Canadian Literature #4 (Toronto: Dundurn, 1980), pp. 125-32; Jon Kertzer, "Time and Its Victims: The Writing of Matt Cohen," in Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 17 (1980), pp. 93-101; George

In his article "Matt Cohen," Kertzer believes that Cohen's characters "are in search of themselves yet they die of being themselves" (Kertzer, "Matt Cohen," p. 127) and links the quest motif in all of Cohen's work to the question posed in The Disinherited, "how do you get to be alive?"[6] This article, like his other, "Time and Its Victims," which is merely a slightly altered version of "Matt Cohen," is a survey of Cohen's novels and short stories up to The Expatriate, and fails to deal with the theme of self-discovery except in a cursory manner. These articles mention this theme, but only as an adjunct to what Kertzer considers to be the much more important themes of "self-possession and dispossession" (Kertzer, "Matt Cohen," p. 126). Consequently, the idea of self-discovery is ignored in both articles.

Much the same can be said of George Woodcock's article, "Armies Moving in the Night," although Woodcock never once mentions "self-discovery" or "self-possession," and later devotes his analytic energies to the exploration of the themes of "inner alienation" and the "division of self" (Woodcock, "Armies," p. 130). Other articles by John Mills, Wilfred Cude, Robert Lecker, and John Moss toy with the idea

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Woodcock, "Armies Moving in the Night: The Fictions of Matt Cohen," in The World of Canadian Writing: Critiques & Recollections (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980), p. 132.

[6]Matt Cohen, The Disinherited (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p. 182. (Future references to this title will be abbreviated to D).

of self-discovery, but never really confront it or consider it as a theme in itself. John Mills, for example, identifies Erik's "spiritual and emotional alienation,"[7] while Cude briefly mentions Erik's chance near the end of the novel "to discover himself amid terrors and marvel."[8] Other oblique references occur with Lecker's mention of Erik's finding "his true identity by rejecting the past and celebrating the potential of the future,"[9] and Moss's depiction of him at the end of the novel "as disinherited, dissociated, as rootless and committed to an unknown future as his eccentric predecessor" (Moss, Sex and Violence, p. 194). While only these few articles suggest the possibility of Erik's quest for self-discovery, none mentions Richard's quest at all.

The reviews fare just as badly in this respect. Most of them dwell on Cohen's technical accomplishments in The Disinherited and extol his keen sense of perception, but none discusses the theme of self-discovery itself. In the following chapter I intend to follow and highlight the processes of self-discovery through which Richard and Erik

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[7]John Mills, "Two Novels by Matt Cohen," in Present Tense, ed. John Moss (Toronto: NC Press, 1985), p. 138.

[8]Wilfred Cude, "From Bubbling Frog To Burning Ring: Ontario In the Fiction of Hood and Cohen," in Present Tense, ed. John Moss (Toronto: NC Press, 1985), p. 154.

[9]Robert Lecker, "Past the Grinning Masks: Temporal Form and Structure in The Disinherited," Journal of Canadian Studies, No. 16 (Sum. 1981), p. 104.

progress, and to explain the outcome of these processes in the context of Cohen's previous two novels. This will allow the novel to be seen not only in terms of man in conflict with the land, but also in terms of man in conflict with himself and sociological traditions.

Cohen's third novel, The Disinherited, is far more complex in design and greater in thematic scope than either Korsoniloff or Johnny Crackle Sings, and has prompted John Moss, in his introduction to the New Canadian Library edition, to comment that it is:

> counter-traditional, a damning-up of the mainstream to generate a controlled surge in new directions.... The Disinherited signals the closing of an era, the conversion of human resources and necessities to the conditions of a new world we have already entered.[10]

It may be regarded as "counter-traditional" not only because of Cohen's treatment of the themes of the work ethic, family unity and stability, time, and life and death, in relation to the agrarian mode of life, but also because of its depiction of the "new world" Moss alludes to. Cohen tries to show, through four generations of the Thomas family, especially through Richard and his son Erik, that the family farm tradition in Canada, and possibly elsewhere in the world, is not permanent, as many people thought. The two main characters

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[10]John Moss, "Introduction," in The Disinherited (1974; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), p. XIII.

in this novel are in search of a sense of identity which involves conflict with each other and themselves, and which centres on their acceptance or rejection of the farm as a way of life. It seems that with Erik's generation people are becoming less enchanted with the farm setting and the traditional values it is supposed to represent, and are turning more towards the city, which represents the "new world," in search of a better life and newer values.

The central characters in this novel, Richard and Erik Thomas, epitomize the two polarities of response to the farm, which has been in their family since it was first cleared by Richard S. Thomas, Richard's grandfather, in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Traditionally, the property has been handed down from father to son with the mutual understanding that each successive owner would continue the custom. Through the use of multiple points of view, flashbacks, and fragmented images and scenes from various characters' memories and thoughts, Cohen reviews selected events from the history of the Thomas clan to show how each son has handled the affairs of the farm up to the present owner, Richard. The growing sense of futility and disillusionment connected with the ownership of the farm comes to a head with Erik, who abnegates his rights to the inheritance, severs his connections with his rural environment, and moves to the city to live. His attitude represents the antithesis of Richard's, which predicates the value of the

farm as the most important background against which a man can play out his role in life. The forming of their attitudes occurs at different times in their lives, and marks the start of their process of self-discovery.

Richard is unsuccessful in his attempts mostly because of self-deception. He experiences several important revelations at crucial moments in his life which point the way to self-discovery, but because of his fervent passion for work and his romantic idea of achieving a conquest over nature through farming, he succumbs to self-deception. These revelations occur in scenes set when he is riding on a streetcar in Toronto; when he is with Miranda, his wife, looking at his farm; with Simon, his father, in his new field; when he has the stroke on the beach; and when he is in the hospital reflecting on his life and accomplishments. Although he truly recognizes that he is not in control of his land, his mortality, his destiny, or time, and that he has been creating illusions for himself, his belief in his dreams becomes so intense and concentrated that they overshadow his sense of truth and reality. The consequences of his self-deception prove almost unbearable for him when he is in the hospital, and ultimately lead him to a state of confusion which ends not with his acceptance of the fact that he has deceived himself, but in the affirmation of his decision to become a farmer. His attempt at self-discovery ends with this final resolve.

Erik, too, has little success in his attempts to find his true spiritual centre. His failure, up to the time he meets the pregnant girl in Toronto, is due mainly to his decision to disconnect himself from everything, and to alienate himself from everyone. When forced to make a choice between staying on the farm and leaving, he leaves for the city to attend university. Although he is not sure that he will find all the answers to his philosophical questions there, he does know that they are not to be found on the farm. His process of self-discovery starts at the age of nineteen with self-alienation and his repudiation of the 'mythology of possession,' and progresses to the stage at which he realizes that self-fulfillment involves reconnecting himself to society, and the reconsideration of the idea of possession and being possessed. His progress is also marked by a series of revelations, but, unlike Richard's, most of Erik's occur in relation to the present rather than the past. After his initial decision to leave the farm, Erik isn't forced to re-evaluate the major decisions he has made in his life until he encounters a disputatious Richard in the hospital in Kingston. These revelations involve images and scenes set when he returns home at nineteen; when he imagines himself floating through space in a glass ball; when he is with Valerie or Rose; when he is visiting Richard in the hospital; and when he is in Toronto after Richard's death. Success for Erik, up to the time Richard dies, can

be measured only through his rejection of choices which would have led him away from self-discovery rather than acceptance of those which would have led him towards it. After Richard's death, he starts to gain some sense of control over his life and begins to make positive decisions that could lead him to further self-knowledge. He is left, at the end of the novel with the hope that his future in the city will be more fulfilling now that the question of the farm has been settled, and he is making tenuous but sincere emotional connections for the first time in his life.

William C. Thomas, the mystical poet figure and supposed cousin of Richard S. Thomas, once wrote in his diary that:

> Each man therefore owns himself & sets himself a place in this mortal world of life & death saying I have so much life & therefore can cause so much death as if there were no other way.
>
> (D, pp. 221-22)

And so it is with Richard Thomas, who decides that his place in the "mortal world" will be on the farm which he has inherited from his father Simon Thomas. Richard's process of self-discovery is linked almost inextricably to his desire to 'possess' his family's farm and to work it until it is time to pass it on to Erik. The single most important event which leads Richard to this goal is what Cohen refers to as "a romantic epiphany on a streetcar" (D, p. 41). In Toronto, while on his way to propose to Miranda, Richard experiences

a moment of clarity when he realizes the artificiality of the city. He recalls, "It came upon me suddenly. I felt out of place in those crazy clothes, sitting in a metal machine running down a piece of pavement" (D, p. 41). This "illumination by streetcar" represents a starting point for Richard's process of self-discovery because as of yet he has not deceived himself by worshipping illusory images of the ideal farm (D, p. 41). It is also the start of his life-long aversion for anything urban, a characteristic which develops, later, as the basis for his condemnation of Erik.

Richard's true moment of decision as to the course his life will take comes when he is thirty-three years old in a scene with Miranda when they are surveying the farm. He considers the religious and moral overtones associated with the tradition of farming, and also the sense of duty that it entails. He thinks he "would have his turn to do his, it being left unclear whether there was any larger possible purpose or simply the holy mission of colonizing the earth" (D, p. 143). Cohen enlarges the scenario through Richard's thoughts that he and Miranda were like "Abraham and Sarah," and that:

> in their new possession of this land they would be able to have children. Or else be condemned to a purposeless self-preservation, to milk the land every year, enough to fill their bellies and their bank balance, nothing more, a

> straight trade, body for earth, three
> generations of bones to feed the land
> like so many fallen trees, and animals.
>
> (D, p. 143)

Richard seems to be balancing two opposing concepts or images of the farm here. From one perspective, it is seen in biblical terms, as the promised land on which it is possible to fulfill some holy purpose connected with procreation. From another, less idealistic perspective, it is seen as a demoniacal presence which gives life, but only at the same rate that it consumes it. It is Richard's acceptance of the first, glorified image of the farm at the expense of the other which leads to his self-deception, and engenders the idea of a 'false spiritual centre.' It also informs the nature of his inner struggles because after this point he is plagued with the problems of trying to justify his choice of perspectives, and of trying to reconcile these two images of the farm.

The two images, one of permanence, security, and life, the other of temporality, insecurity, and death, constantly vie for attention in Richard's consciousness. Even when he is in hospital after his initial stroke, he is still not able to justify his decision to perpetuate the life-cycle of his farm. During one flashback, he recalls when Simon and he were out in a field on a warm day, and

> Richard had a sudden desire to let
> himself be taken over completely by the

> land, absorbed as if buried, his will tenuous and snapping as the poet had said it must, and could feel it ebbing from him that quickly...and the land return to its own chaotic intentions, as if the farm was only a thin transparency laid on it like a decal that could be blown off easily by wind and time...
>
> (D, p. 99)

And later, he felt as if

> the field was just another chapter in the insane struggle to dominate this land in a way which had nothing to do with it, and that the three generations of Thomases would have accomplished nothing except to scar and chop up enough land for their own survival.
>
> (D, p. 100)

Richard realizes, in these scenes, the precariousness which characterizes the farm's and his own existence. The changes in nature which he and his family had effected were only superficial and temporary, and he realizes that once they stop work on the land, it will be reclaimed by nature. Unfortunately, Richard's moments of revelation and self-realization are so fleeting that they fail to inculcate any lasting impression, and he reverts to his old philosophy that the land can be made to serve man and the final "victory" gained, where "it would be necessary only to sow and to harvest in some unknown and paradisiacal god-assisted rhythm" (D, p. 100). His process of self-discovery had taken a turn towards its goal with his quick glimpse of reality, but, then, just

as quickly, had swerved away to follow its erratic course towards a 'false centre.'

His whole process of self-discovery is marked by a tortuous route over uneven psychological terrain. Only when he is shaken out of his self-induced trance to see the world as it is does he make progress again. But the clarity of his thinking is often dulled by his pride in owning the farm and by his physical ability to maintain and operate it. These problems, along with his strong identification with the past and traditional values, result in sudden changes of direction away from self-knowledge and self-realization towards that enchanted, chimerical ideal of the farmer-conqueror figure he tries to become. On the day that he has the stroke, Richard the giant, the land-tamer, is finally brought down to earth, both literally and figuratively, and is forced to re-evaluate his life, this time from a less secure, less permanent standpoint.

Up to the point at which Richard actually feels the acute pain of the stroke, he is walking along on his beach recounting scenes from his past which relate to his family and farm. Images of life and death, growth and decay, intrude into his memory in disconnected fragments. There are also various references to hands, fingers, eyes, skin, to the overall physique of several characters, and to Richard's deteriorating health. Finally, when the pain hits him, he is brought back from the past to the present, and from his

thoughts of other people to his immediate physical condition. He feels as if "the morning jolted and stopped," but:

> knew in the very centre of it there would be a place where he could gather himself and survive. It was as if some giant hand had wrapped around his ribs and was locking him into that one particular moment.
>
> (D, p. 5)

The pain temporarily transforms Richard from a man whose mind has been wandering through the past to a man who is forced to reckon with his own physical being in the here and now, with the fact of his own mortality. This very intense awareness of himself and present time represents "a new beginning" for him, a chance to change from reliving the past through memories to living in the present (D, p. 10). It is as if he were resurrected from the death represented by his memories of the past, and given another chance at trying 'to get to be alive.'

The question "how do you get to be alive" is of crucial importance to both Richard and Erik, and functions as a catalyst which forces them to reconsider their philosophical standpoints on life (D, p. 182). Jon Kertzer suggests that many of Cohen's central characters are involved in an "inner quest" for "self-knowledge" which leads them towards "self-possession," and believes that it is the question of "how do you get to be alive" which "plagues all of Cohen's characters and sets them on their quests" (Kertzer, "Matt Cohen," pp.

125-26). This question and the quest motif may be linked more closely in the proposition that 'you get to be alive' through the process of self-discovery or by fully realizing the nature of your spirituality. For Richard, the answer to this question remains elusive, and consequently his quest is never completed. There are several reasons for this. Besides failing to admit to himself that land cannot be possessed and turned into an agrarian paradise, he also refuses to accept the fact that he has no control over his mortality, his destiny, or time.

Throughout his life, Richard has associated himself, through his relationship with the farm, with male virility (symbolized by the images of the bull), and immortality (symbolized by his memories of the past, and the objects which represent the past, such as the poet's diaries, the rows of trees planted by his grandfather and the poet, and by the entire farm itself). Although he has gained, intuitively, the knowledge that he will eventually weaken and die, he refuses to bring it to the foreground of his consciousness. On the morning that he has the stroke, for example, he feels pain in his abdomen, and "he reassured himself by saying that he had always had a weak stomach, that nothing had changed; but he knew better" (D, p. 4). That is Richard's greatest problem, knowing the truth of something but still refusing to accept it as such. This type of self-deception prevents him from realizing his limitations as a person, and from

ever attaining any significant level of self-knowledge. At this point Adrian Mitchell's comment that "Richard Thomas's life has happened to him. He has inherited his life, not mastered it - and to that extent he is in fact disinherited" seems to be particularly valid.[11]

Later, when he is in hospital, the question of his mortality arises again when he admits to himself that his fear of dying has been one of his greatest weaknesses:

> he was so afraid to die that he had been hurting from it all day, that the fear was what had him that first day, bile and death, without knowing it, trying to fight it off by going out and then being caught anyway ...and remembering again how it had locked him, kept ~~him~~ in the moment, tried to warn him that he was only struggling against his own life like an animal caught in a trap, twisting open its own arteries and bleeding to death.
>
> (D, p. 147)

According to his own philosophy that "every man caused his own death...in bits and pieces scattered throughout his life" (D, p. 76), and "Everything causes its own death and dies of being itself" (D, p. 77), Richard causes his own spiritual death by failing to admit his fears, and facing the inevitable. His mind is not strong enough to deal with his dying, and, consequently he has no resources left to

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[11]Adrian Mitchell, "Getting The Voices Right," Canadian Literature, No. 62 (Aut. 1974), p. 88.

rely on. When he is completely racked with pain in the hospital, he thinks:

> His body had completely betrayed him and become a battlefield of competing pains. With his eyes closed, he could make his retreat from the edges, find places to rest and curl about his fear, like a small child with a summer illness.
>
> (D, p. 81)

Richard has lost control over his physical and mental stamina, and ultimately over his own destiny. He doesn't know how or when he will eventually die, and it is this not knowing which causes him the anxiety and fear he experiences. He says earlier in the book that "A man was supposed to be prepared when his time came" (D, p. 6), and later, in a conversation with Erik in the hospital, that "A man has to know his own destiny" (D, p. 146). He wants to believe in the concept of destiny, as well as in other illusions about the farm which he fosters, but, much to his chagrin, he fears that Erik is right: "No one has destinies anymore.... They live in apartments and breed goldfish" (D, p. 146).

Like his concepts of death and destiny, Richard's impressions of time are deliberately distorted to fit his beliefs associated with the value of the farm in preserving the continuity and unity of the Thomas family. He is a man who lives in the past, who barely acquiesces to the idea of the present, and who refuses to think of the future. In his

article dealing with time in The Disinherited, Robert Lecker states that the

> urge to join the past through memory is evidence of his faith in a temporal continuum, and of his conviction that by preserving that continuum, one can preserve one's self. So long as Richard remains involved with the movement of time, he can deceive himself into believing that his time will not stop, that he will not die.
>
> (Lecker, "Past the Grinning Masks," p. 109)

But with the intense pain of the stroke and the "new beginning" which it symbolizes, Richard realizes, while in the hospital, that:

> A new point of time had come into existence. Despite all his sluggish efforts to make it his own, it never existed in the present but appeared only in retrospect, like a vehicle moving up quickly in a rear-view mirror: the knowledge that he was going to die in this hospital, that the choice had already been made.
>
> (D, p. 103)

Despite these thoughts, he is still unable to remain in the present, to grasp and understand the concept of "compulsory time that he must live through" (D, p. 132). His consciousness becomes a prisoner of time past, and, as he is dying, it focuses, not on the present, but on images from his youth when he was still a strong and capable young man. Again his self-delusions provide him with an escape from the facts of

reality and the present, and allow him to justify his life according to his own value.

Richard's knowledge of, but refusal to accept, the propositions that land cannot be possessed, that no one can have full control over his destiny, morality, or time, and that fear must be faced and conquered represents the self-deceptions that lead him away from the possibility of ever coming to know or realize his true self. His process of self-discovery can never be successfully completed because, even up to the time of his death, he rejects anything which threatens his 'mythology of possession.' Modern technology, machines, even the city itself, are repudiated in favor of physical labor and devotion to the soil. When the final attack comes he knows he is going to die, but still "even as he fell he knew that part of him must fight" (D, p. 208). Ironically, it is this indomitable spirit itself which prevents Richard from ever getting to be fully alive or realizing the nature of his spirituality.

In his characterization of Erik, Cohen has shown him to be Richard's negative. They are diametrically opposed on many issues and represent the antithesis of each other. If we think of the references to each man's "place in this mortal world," quoted earlier from the poet's diaries, we can see the point of departure for their divergent philosophies. Whereas Richard has opted for the 'mythology of possession' as a means to self-discovery, Erik has chosen his "mythology

of escape," which signifies his rejection of the idea of possessing anything or of being possessed by anything in a permanent way. His choice makes it much harder for him to find his "place," and introduces him to a life of wandering and incertitude in which he finds it very difficult to sense the proper direction to his spiritual 'centre.' Anthony Brennan aptly describes Erik in his article, "The Nomads of Ontario," as "a brilliant study of rudderless modern man."[12] But being "rudderless" does not mean he does not know what he is searching for. It implies, rather, that he is mostly ineffectual in trying to find a way of life through which he might discover more fully his spiritual identity. He is, as George Woodcock suggests, "taken up in the essential loneliness, the unrelenting alienation of modern man" (Woodcock, "Armies," p. 137).

The circumstances which lead to Erik's self-alienation, and the reasons for his decision to excommunicate himself from the farm are important in understanding his process of self-discovery. They are related directly to his clear perception of reality, and his recognition of the detrimental effects of time and nature on the farmers' efforts to sustain a livelihood from the soil.

When, at nineteen, Erik returns from the university in Toronto for a visit on his father's farm, he feels very uneasy:

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[12]Anthony Brennan, "The Nomads of Ontario," The Fiddlehead, No. 102 (1974), p. 109.

> being home was uncomfortable for him and he was resentful of the feeling of familiarity, of relief almost, of the way Richard and Miranda and Brian still claimed him for their own, as easily and thoughtlessly as the land.
>
> (D, p. 13)

His stay in the city seems to have helped recondition him to a life of anonymity and detachment, so that the idea of being 'possessed' or of 'possessing' something or someone seems repugnant to him. At this point, Cohen portrays him as a wanderer who is without any real sense of direction whatsoever. In one scene, we find him driving:

> aimlessly and without any real sense of where he was, the first summer Richard let him use the car. His drives then took place in some vaguely indistinct geography; he never knew the exact location of what he found except in the terms of the mythology he constructed on those hazy afternoons when he wanted only to get away from everything, to have time pass quickly so that he would be away from home finally, somewhere where he was not known.
>
> (D, p. 13)

The "vaguely indistinct geography" of the physical landscape above has a parallel in Erik's mind. He is running away from a place and identity, to a spiritual wilderness where he has to recreate himself anew, independent of the Thomas family and its inheritance.

The realization of his need to escape the farm for good comes on one of his drives. He discovers an old empty dilapidated house:

> The wood, never painted, was weathered grey and the roof was sagged and missing patches of shingles. There was an apple tree beside the house, so close that one of its branches was pushed right through a broken window in the downstairs....
>
> In his mythology of escape the old house had endured in his memory as the place where he had most clearly known his own desire to leave the farm.
>
> (D, p. 14).

It is this image of fecund nature destroying, through its inevitable process, man's abandoned projects, that convinces Erik the idea of possessing land is a myth. Richard, too, experiences the same insight when he recognizes the farm as "only a thin transparency laid on it like a decal that could be blown off easily by wind and time" (D, p. 99). But whereas Richard ignores his prophetic vision, Erik accepts his. During a conversation with Richard in the hospital, later in the novel, he makes a prediction concerning the future of the type of farm owned by his father:

> "In a few years only rich city people will be able to afford to live on this kind of farm. All the food will be grown on huge farms run by businessmen.... In a few years this kind of farm won't even exist," Erik said again. "Less families live here than did ten years ago."
>
> (D, p. 41)

Here, Cohen supplies a reason for Erik's desertion of the farm in favor of a life in the city. He suspects that the progress of society and technology will mean the eventual encroachment of urban population and its influences on the rural setting. The acquisition of small farms by large business corporations seems ineluctable to Erik, and confirms his earlier decision to leave. He is, at this point, beginning to lead a life which one critic, Roy MacSkimming, believes "is rooted only in negativity."[13]

But in the leaving, Erik has cast himself adrift from the only anchor he had in life. He is continually associated with images of detachment, isolation, separation, and sterility. On the first page of the novel, for example, Richard thinks of "his son Erik, in the city, in his glass cage" (D, p. 1), and later, Erik has a dream where "he was the perfect man, floating through space in a glass ball" (D, p. 169). From the time he leaves the farm until Richard has the stroke, he achieves the ultimate escape in Toronto by refusing to become intimately involved in personal relationships, and by achieving spiritual and emotional sterility. Erik's process of self-discovery, then, involves a total separation or disconnection from all other worlds, in order to find, in isolation, the nature of his individuality. He 'disinherits' himself from everything except what is necessary to function

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[13]Roy MacSkimming, "Gothic tales in the country of defeat," Saturday Night, No. 89 (May, 1974), p. 41.

on a minimal level as a social being, and then tries to resurrect himself back to life. Through his relationships with other characters, such as Richard, Valerie, Rose, Mr. Zeller, and the pregnant girl, and through their images of Erik, Cohen shows that he is not very successful.

Erik's relationship with Richard, for example, reveals the imbalance which exists between Erik's mental strength and his physical weakness. Cohen uses Richard's physical stature and strength, and his mental incapacities, as a foil to emphasize Erik's physical timidity and mental maturity. They are, in fact, the reciprocals of each other. Richard is large, heavy set, and solid, while Erik, in contrast, is thinner with slender fingers, and

> gave the impression of being vaguely ethereal, of being cautiously balanced in his movements - as if he didn't quite trust the reality of his body and was carefully shepherding it through the necessary obstacles.
>
> (D, p. 23)

One is of the body, the other of the mind, and the major problem confronting both is their inability to reconcile the two dimensions of their being, to become whole and alive.

In one scene Richard does come close to this physical and mental integration, and experiences a revelation of his own death:

> when he had finally accommodated his mind to his body's precarious position,

> it would strike him that the darkness when he closed his eyes would one time be the darkness of death, that it would come over him as a veil and he would never see anything again.
>
> (D, p. 85)

Erik, too, has his quiet moments of revelation. But to Richard he is still seen living "only through words and his head so that his body was already vestigial, threatening to grow old before it was ever claimed by this world" (D, p. 104). While working on the farm, Erik, himself, thinks of his physical condition, and his body

> that has been violated by atrophy and smoke and time, that maybe is somnolent and in the process of being revived or maybe is just a corpse disturbed by all this unexpected activity.
>
> (D, p. 163)

Cohen uses this image of Erik's physical lifelessness to suggest that he is also emotionally and spiritually lifeless, a characteristic which complements the image of him floating through space in a glass ball. For example, in his relationship with Valerie, his girlfriend, he admits to himself that "He felt he only met her at certain moments" (D, p. 20), and that "even when he was with her, had known that what made it possible for them was the knowledge that he would leave" (D, pp. 27-28). In an argument with Rose, she challenges him to "Go ahead. Do something. Do anything.... I thought you were dead" (D, p. 179). And later, in a

reference to sex, she says "God, my husband was like that too. Scared all the time. You don't even feel, it do you?" (D, p. 180).

The most important reference to Erik's reluctance to reconnect himself with the world through his emotions occurs in an important scene at the hospital which involves Mr. Zeller. It is here that the issue of Erik's aversion to commitments is related to the question "how do you get to be alive" (D, p. 182). Mr. Zeller has been observing the family conflict as it presented itself in the hospital, and, in this particular scene, performs the role of adjudicator of the supposed Thomas play. He summarizes the plot by saying "The father is dying and the young son pines away, afraid to take what is his," and later, "the father is afraid to die and the son is afraid to live" (D, p. 191). In relation to the mythologies of possession and escape, then, Richard is afraid to face the dispossession of his past and degenerating health, while Erik is afraid to face possession of the farm, and the possibility of intimate human contact. Mr. Zeller tells him:

> "Your problem is that you're not allowed to kill yourself until you are alive."
> "And how do you get to be alive?"
> "That is the question."
> "And the answer?"
> "Well," Nemo said. "Who knows?"
>
> (D, p. 182)

Cohen's implication, here, is that it is every man's task to confront the forces at work in his life, and to take charge and direct them to his best advantage. Because Erik refuses to take the initiative to reckon with these forces, his life is without direction or control. He is as Mr. Zeller describes him:

> almost thirty years old; your father is dying, your women abuse you, your brother would like to kill you, you have no money and you hate your job before the first day of work.... These things happen but you are barely aware of them. The events are like undelivered mail. While your house burns down you are sitting in the basement, pricking yourself to see if you can bleed.
>
> (D, pp. 182-83)

Not only is Erik insensitive to the emotional needs and desires of others, he is also insensate to his own. His withdrawal has severe consequences for his own emotional growth, which has become desperately retarded. Although he realizes this, he does nothing to rectify his problems; he is no more disposed to accept their solutions at this point, than Richard is to accept the solutions to his problems. He can think only of his failure to respond to affection as a self-destructive tendency, and when he is in hospital with Richard, he wonder

> if Richard, lying in his bed and trying to force them to accept his will about the farm, had also turned his back on life at every moment, had denied Miranda

> and withheld himself from her the way he was now excising Valerie: long smooth death-strokes where the blood never showed.
>
> (D, p. 33)

These "long smooth death-strokes" refer more to the wounds Richard and Erik inflict on themselves, wounds which result from their turning away from opportunities to participate more fully in life, and which threaten to terminate their emotional and spiritual growth. Erik's failure to give himself completely to Valerie, Rose, or the farm represents the "bits and pieces" or the events "scattered through his life" which cause his own spiritual death. He is engaged, as Richard was, in a slow spiritual and emotional suicide.

After Richard dies and Erik has returned to the city, we see him at the height of his self-alienation. It is a time in his life which represents a turning point, a moving away from his tendency to disconnect himself from everything to a desire for some kind of emotional and spiritual stability, the desire to connect once again. Until his return to Toronto, he has effectively removed himself from all points of contact with his family and his past, with the exception of the poet's diaries and the ring attached to it, so that now "he is truly marooned in the city" and is at risk of becoming "one of the millions of peripheral existences that the city pulls into its edges, make-believe destinies that it uses to fuel itself (D, p. 212). We also see him on a sidewalk in a crowd which was "pushing him into a decision,

demanding that he somehow organize an entire life, a destination, at least an attempt at appearances" (D, p. 211). In this scene, Cohen gives us a subjective glance at the psychological pressure Erik feels the city is exerting on him to create a niche for himself in society.

It is at this crucial juncture in his life that he meets a young pregnant girl, a female version of himself, who seems to him to be "attentive, smiling he thinks because she has finally in the middle of the night run into someone even more disorientated than herself" (D, p. 213). Because she is pregnant, he considers her to be "possessed, therefore, by his estimate, of several times the life he is" (D, p. 213), and later, when he has returned with her to her apartment, "He feels there is no way at all that he can connect with her except to drink the tea she has brought" (D, p. 214). But he does make a connection with her, a symbolic one, when he gives her the ring which was attached to the poet's diaries. He places it on her "second-last finger of her left hand, wedding band, wondered if this was the poet's intention, to have the ring passed through the family this way, as a sign" (D, p. 238). It is this act which represents the "new beginning" for Erik, a chance to take control of his life and give it new direction.

Although the ending is a rather ambiguous one, it is clear that Erik is becoming more sincere and honest with himself, and is beginning to discover that spiritual growth

starts with reconnecting himself with others, just as Johnny Crackle discovers that survival for him means moving away from "condition zero," to connections with the real world. Erik is moving from his "mythology of escape" towards Richard's 'mythology of possession," but not with Richard's blind idealism. This is suggested through the parallels Cohen develops between Erik and the poet, as well as through Erik's symbolic marriage to the pregnant girl.

Erik is the twentieth-century pioneer, and his wilderness is the city, a huge mass of towering buildings and rows of houses, all of which seem to be "a new kind of flesh, babyish and hesitant, that required love and compassion like a rare and delicate desert flower with its exquisite brief petals and quick poison" (D, p. 226). The horticulture imagery helps show the similarities between Erik in the city and the poet and his grandfather in the wilderness when they first come to Canada to clear land for their farm. With the images of Erik as the twentieth-century pioneer and symbolic father and husband, Cohen seems to be suggesting that he has a new chance to start over, a chance to make true connections with others, and possibly to fulfill his own dictum that "People have to teach themselves how to live" (D, p. 145). An earlier image of Erik shows him "fixed on some other time, some immense single conglomerate complaint from his past that was supposed to be his excuse, and some equally compelling fantasy of the future in which everything would

finally ~~come right~~" (D, p. 172). Even though Erik's "fantasy of the future" might never materialize for him, just as Korsoniloff's "vision of destiny" (K, p. 15) might never materialize for him, there is some optimism inherent in the phrase "this new beginning" (D, p. 240). Cohen shows Erik coming to life near the end of the novel, especially in the scene where he is with the pregnant girl. He begins to sense emotions and life in her, and

> to feel the extra heartbeat of this hidden child, to feel something for this girl who moved beneath him in harmony with Richard's death, finally drawing the tears out of him, opening his throat and his belly but knowing nothing of what she was doing.
>
> (D, p. 239)

And near the end of the book he sees an image of his own face as a mask "transparent and desperate that there would be something to forgive him, swallow and forgive like a mother who had only imagined her children" (D, p. 240).

These scenes and images indicate how Erik is breaking out of his glass ball, and reaching out into that void of space for a "place in this mortal world," and for human affection.

Erik does not make much progress towards self-discovery. He has refused to accept his rightful patrimony, severed himself from his past, and disconnected himself from everyone he has known, with the exception of the pregnant girl whose

identity does not really matter to him. He has reached the point in his "mythology of escape" where he has nothing left to escape from. The final few scenes, however, firmly establish the possibility that Erik will emerge from his protective shell and achieve some significant level of self-knowledge through his re-established link with humanity. They also seem to confirm Patricia Morley's statement in her review of The Disinherited that Cohen is "finding his way through despair and absurdity to hope. The comedy may be black at times, but the affirmation comes through."[14]

In relation to Korsoniloff and Johnny Crackle Sings, I think the point has already been made that The Disinherited reflects a growing optimism in Cohen as to the possibilities for self-discovery and self-realization. Richard may have been a failure in using the self-knowledge he acquired, but at least he realized, to some degree, what his problems were. With Erik, there is even a greater chance that self-knowledge and self-realization will lead to a greater sense of self-fulfillment. He represents Cohen's dubious, but existing and growing, faith in the survival of human individuality amidst the evolution of science, technology, and civilization itself.

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[14]Patricia Morley, rev. of The Disinherited by Matt Cohen, Queen's Quarterly, No. 81 (Aut. 1974), p. 478.

CHAPTER THREE

WOOD HUNTERS

Cohen's fourth novel, Wooden Hunters, has not been received with the same general applause or enthusiasm as The Disinherited. The central characters, Laurel Hobson, her lover Calvin, and her ex-lover and friend Johnny Tulip, have been criticized by such reviewers as John Mills, Herbert Rosengarten, and Francis Mansbridge, not so much for the way they are characterized, but for the pathetic characters that they are or seem to be. John Mills refers to Laurel and Calvin as "drop-outs," and labels Johnny Laurel's sabotage of a piece of construction equipment as "mindless and unmotivated."[15] Herbert Rosengarten, whose review of Wooden Hunters is mainly positive, sees Laurel as "a colourless figure, almost as indistinct in person as she is in personality,"[16] and Francis Mansbridge views Calvin as "a passive, self-centred figure, unable to cope successfully

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[15]John Mills, rev. of Wooden Hunters by Matt Cohen, The Fiddlehead, No. 107 (1975), pp. 135-36.

[16]Herbert Rosengarten, "Violation Of The Burial Places," rev. of Wooden Hunters by Matt Cohen, Canadian Literature, No. 67 (1976), p. 91.

with his environment because he is unable to cope successfully with himself."[17]

Other reviewers, such as Woodcock, Kertzer, and Moss, are less strident in their remarks on these characters than the previous three critics, and are able to appreciate the characters as victims who have escaped from a dehumanizing society prevalent on the mainland. Woodcock understands Calvin to be a "wandering white intellectual" who "left his life in the east to discover a new existence, perhaps a new personality, in the west...where he feels he can survive only by a self-transformation he has not yet achieved" (Woodcock, "Armies," pp. 138-39). Kertzer perceives Cohen's characters to be "simple people caught up in increasingly complex feelings and circumstances," but believes that Laurel and Calvin "have run away from respectability and responsibility" (Kertzer, "Matt Cohen," pp. 126, 129). Moss describes Calvin as a "counter-culture drifter,"[18] and considers Laurel to be Cohen's "finest creation" (Moss, "Introduction," p. vii).

I agree, first of all, with Woodcock's suggestion that Laurel and Calvin are "wanderers" who are searching for new roots and new identities. I agree, secondly, with Kertzer's

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[17]Francis Mansbridge, rev. of Wooden Hunters by Matt Cohen, Canadian Fiction Magazine, No. 20 (1976), p. 101.

[18]John Moss, A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel (Toronto: McClelland Stewart, 1981), p. 50.

notion that they are caught in a bewildering complex of emotions from which they try to escape. I do not believe, though, that they are trying to escape responsibility, especially since they had little to escape from, and seem to have more to be responsible for on the island than they did on the mainland. Neither do I believe that they are "drop-outs" who are "unable to cope." I tend to view these characters as escaping from the same emotionally and spiritually deleterious urban influences that Korsoniloff, Johnny Crackle, and Erik recognize and try to escape from.

Korsoniloff becomes deluged with convoluted ideas that obfuscate his sense of self and divide his personality into opposite halves, one intellectual, one behavioral. He wishes he could "strip off all the scaffolding and complexities, to emerge suddenly from behind the cape, naked," but realizes that the roles society has demanded him to play have become submerged in his personality (K, p. 17). He confesses that once

> the roles become compulsory and people play only themselves, desperately maintaining their every vestige and detail of ego, then they experience only grief and frustration. They long for escape but act only to secure themselves in their own chains.
>
> (K, p. 19)

Johnny Crackle articulates a similar complaint when he says "They do it to you. They clean you right out. They're

after your guts and your soul" (JCS, p. 19). Erik, too, seems to be the victim of a society which sterilizes people's personalities and spiritualities, and leaves them floating in 'glass balls' or living in 'glass cages.' In Wooden Hunters Laurel is also trying to "strip off all the scaffolding and complexities" that have developed from her parents' deaths, and which are about to be compounded by her life at the university she is attending.

Calvin, in turn, is escaping from the east, which he considers to be "a vast conglomerate city of doomed smokestacks and concrete" (WH, p. 14). He is not a "drop-out" but a victim who has suffered the scourge of a formidable, daunting enemy whose rapaciousness knows no bounds. Calvin's vision of eastern society seems to be an expansion of Erik's view of Toronto as a meretricious nest that "pulls into its edges, make-believe destinies that it uses to fuel itself" (D, p. 212).

What Cohen is doing in Wooden Hunters is translating into fiction the dangers inherent in the patterning processes that society imposes on people, and the possibilities of escaping from its various systems, intellectual, religious, social, etc., to reconstruct oneself anew. The characters begin as baffled, resigned victims but follow an innate longing to move out of society's purview to a neutral zone where they can take time to recuperate from the incessant deluge of sociological influences. They then begin a

regenerative process in which they attempt to transform themselves from amorphous peons of the city into free individual creatures of nature. They try to regain that state of innocence and perfection that Johnny Crackle insists everyone has before we are born into a world which "is rotting and polluted," and where "our guts are twisted and rotting and decaying and filled with artificial jam and ulcers and cancer and soot" (JCS, p. 19). This process is actually one of self-discovery which involves a spiritual and emotional rebirth that allows the characters to develop a greater sense of spirituality and individuality.

The critics seem to have ignored this aspect of Cohen's novel, while a few, like Woodcock, Kertzer, and Moss, have fleetingly suggested that Cohen's characters experience self-discovery, but have done nothing to interpret the novel using self-discovery as a possible thematic approach. They might agree that the characters start on a quest and that none of them fully succeeds. They also recognize the influences that family, heritage, and perception of time have on these characters, but unfortunately do not go into detail when discussing these influences.

Neither do these critics seem to realize the details of each quest, that each character's process of self-discovery has a discernible starting point and is marked by major events and scenes along the way which function to retard or accelerate that character's spiritual development. The

characters and the events are part of a philosophical framework which Cohen builds using reality as his model. Consequently, Laurel's and Calvin's fates become poignant statements about the survival of individuals in a society which perpetuates itself by standardizing its members. This is why many of Cohen's main characters, such as Johnny Crackle, Erik, Laurel, and Calvin, and even many minor characters, are transients. They are usually trying to get away from the standardization process Cohen has associated with modern Canadian society, and try to escape from one situation in search of another which might be more conducive to individual growth.

Besides Laurel and Calvin, two others characters Johnny Tulip and C.W. Smith, a hotel owner on the island, also experience inner struggles which lead them to search inside themselves for solutions which might alleviate the mental torment and confusion they experience because of familial or personal problems. Although they strive for peace of mind in the form of an emotional and spiritual equilibrium, they never get very far. Theirs is less a quest for self-knowledge and self-realization than Laurel's or Calvin's, and because of this, the focus here will be on Laurel and Calvin only.

George Woodcock states in his lecture "The Meeting of Time and Space" that

> The experience of being born again is not restricted to pentecostal religion;

> it can be the experience of any person who at a critical point in his or her life finds that a new setting, with its own geographical shape and historical resonances, offers a home to the emotions he needs to express. Strangers as well as natives can live in their minds the life of a region, so long as they accept 'other people's ancestors.'[19]

Although this statement refers to writers who find a new location as a setting for the expression of their artistry, it may also refer to characters who find a new environment in which they can experience a spiritual regeneration. Cohen tries to show, in Wooden Hunters, that it is possible to disconnect yourself from one environment and set of traditions and reconnect yourself to others, provided you adjust to the landscape and plug into the racial mores of "'other people's ancestors.'"

Laurel and Calvin find themselves on an island off the coast of British Columbia for essentially the same reasons. They have disassociated themselves geographically and spiritually from their homes and their pasts, in search of a new environment which might serve as a more suitable medium in which to discover and realize their true identities. The rugged terrain of the island, along with the primitive culture of the Indians who live there, provides these two characters with the setting they need to ease the inner tension that

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[19]George Woodcock, The Meeting of Time and Space: Regionalism in Canadian Literature (Edmonton: NeWest Institute, 1981), p. 9.

has developed from their rejection of their pasts and a conventional life in the city, for the present and a radical life in the wilderness. More importantly, it provides them with a new landscape for their psychological explorations. These explorations become part of a process of self-discovery which takes each of them from a state of emotional malaise and spiritual bewilderment to a relationship with each other that proffers the hope of psychological growth and maturity.

They leave their respective homes at different times and for different reasons, but search for the same things, a release from the social conditioning and artificiality which are a part of the urban experience. Although there are no easily discernible stages through which each character progresses, certain events occur which mark a transformation in their spiritual characters and lead them to self-awareness. The most significant of these occur when they are with each other or with Johnny Tulip and the other Indians. From each other they are able to realize who they are; from the Indians and the land, they are able to realize who they are not.

In Laurel's case, these events centre on the death of her parents, her initial trip to the island, her decision to quit university and return to the island, and her relationships with Calvin and Johnny Tulip. In comparison to these, the events which prompt Calvin to search more deeply for a sense of spiritual identity than he had before are less dramatic. He becomes displeased with the whole concept of an industrial

heartland, represented by Toronto and the east, and decides to escape to the west. This decision leads him to Vancouver and then to the island where he meets Laurel.

There, the layers of civilization are stripped from him, and he becomes inducted into a more primitive and instinctual way of life in which survival is the main priority. Through several scenes which include the killing of a deer and salmon fishing, and through various images, which include Calvin as a "resigned prisoner" and 'noble savage,' Cohen illustrates Calvin's gradual progress towards self-discovery. Despite the progress that both Laurel and Calvin make throughout the course of the novel, though, we find them at the end still just beginning to explore the psychological terrain of their inner landscapes.

The death of Laurel's parents in a car accident is the single most important event which leads her towards her goal of self-discovery. It leaves her in a state of wonderment without any real sense of purpose or direction, and deprives her of the security and love she had previously depended on. The loss of her parents also creates a void in her which she is unable to fill for the duration of the novel, and which leaves her emotionally empty and spiritually desiccated. As they are being buried,

> Laurel stood there, straight and sober, watching them disappear on this harmless day and feeling her past suddenly, the moment she turned away, sealed off from

> her.... And still, as she walked she felt nothing. Only vaguely empty and vaguely sad...[20]

And then, on her way out of the cemetery she stops to smell the flowers, and "guiltily started forward again, afraid that this was wrong" (WH, p. 44). Because of this freak car accident, Laurel finds herself suddenly disconnected from her previous life, much as Erik does when he returns to Toronto after Richard's death, and has to rely on her own volition and instincts to carry on.

Although the death of her parents destroys part of Laurel's spirituality, it also leaves her free to discover what her capabilities and limitations are, and what kind of mettle she is made of. At this juncture in her life she actually starts her process of self-discovery which is marked by a physical journey from her home to an island off the coast of British Columbia. She agrees with her aunt that "there was no point staying and wishing things were different" (WH, p. 45). (I think this decision alone absolves Laurel from the charge of being a 'drop-out,' and gives evidence of a nascent will to be master of her own destiny). She then leaves with her girlfriend, Louise, to go to the island for a summer vacation. In this way, her geographical

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[20]Matt Cohen, Wooden Hunters (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975), p. 44. (Further references to this title will be abbreviated to WH.)

dislocation becomes a means to emotional and spiritual regeneration.

On the island, two important things happen to Laurel which quicken her transformation from adolescence to adulthood. The first is the loss of her virginity to Johnny Tulip, and the second is an accident in which she falls down a slope and injures her spine. Both incidents seem to function symbolically as "rites of passage" into the violent and primitive ways of the island. Her spinal injury paralyzes her only temporarily, but the emotional scar stays with her and the injured spine becomes "that new centre that objected to everything" (WH, p. 44). George Woodcock believes that

> It is almost as if the breaking and knitting of her spine were a symbol of the remaking of her personality, just as in shamanic myths the initiate is dismembered and reassembled to mark his inner transformation.
>
> (Woodcock, "Armies," p. 139)

Laurel is finding that life does not contain the type of "fantasies" she had dreamed of, that pleasure is always mixed with pain. She also discovers that the decisions she makes are excruciatingly difficult for her, and the results do not always lead to instant gratification.

Before she decides to go to the island to live, for example, she tries to register for her second year at the university. While trying to fill out her forms she observes the students and realizes that "All of them were clear of

purpose in a way that escaped her" (WH, p. 57). Consequently, her interest in this venture flags, and she retreats to nature for solace by going down to the beach

> day after day, to sit on fat driftwood logs and mindlessly watch the water.
>
> She had felt broken then; there seemed to be something she needed that she couldn't eat or drink or smoke or even get from other people, a need trapped in her like a sliver or a hangnail. Finally she had had to give up on the university and one day flew back to the island, carrying her pack and her father's rifle.
>
> (WH, p. 58)

Again, it seems Laurel's decision to move away from Vancouver is a matter of necessity and survival rather than an escape from "respectability and responsibility" as Kertzer suggests.

This is the "crucial point" for Laurel which Woodcock refers to, a critical juncture in her life when she has a vague recognition of a desire to satisfy her more primitive needs, as opposed to her intellectual needs. The trip to the island is a move away from civility and intellectuality, represented by the city and the university, to a wilderness represented by the island itself. This change in environment involves her in a type of social atavism in which she has to rely on her own resources and hunting skills in order to survive. Cohen is suggesting, through Laurel's rejection of the urban environment, that self-knowledge is possible in this case through a close communion with the natural world and with

one's basic, natural needs and desires. On the island, Laurel discovers more about the real, wild side of her personality and her need to be free than she could possibly have in the city.

Calvin remembers the first time "he had seen her, dangerous and sharp, a crazy woman running through the woods with her knife, her bottle, her taped-up rifle" (WH, p. 196). He realizes when he meets her that she "had already been turned wild by this island and was imparting the same thing to him" (WH, p. 2). Like Johnny Crackle's escape to Lew Clinton's farm and Erik's escape to the farms around Salem, Laurel's escape to the island is a rejection of the debilitating, sterilizing environment of the city in favor of the more unfettered, generative environment offered by nature itself. She is able to tune herself in to the self-perpetuating rhythms of the natural world on the island, and to use that sense of harmony to direct her own spiritual growth. Her eventual pregnancy becomes a tangible symbol of that harmony and maturity. Through her stoic acceptance of everything that has happened to her, and her decision to quit society in favor of nature, Laurel has "reassembled" her personality and has started to become spiritually mature. The mindlessness which she sensed at the university has been supplanted by a growing sense of self-worth, purpose, and independence that becomes evident in the facile way she adjusts to the primal environment on the island. Cohen's

portrayal of her as a Canadian amazon whose "back was hard and muscular" (WH, p. 11), and as a mythical goddess of life and death who kills a deer and tears out its heart to offer to her lover (WH, p. 6), help reveal the psychological transformation she has achieved.

Still, many problems exist for her. Even though she has accepted the death of her parents and her inability to sense her past, she is still haunted by memories and dreams of both, and still feels unfulfilled and incomplete. Further progress for Laurel comes through her relationships with Calvin, and Johnny Tulip and the Indians.

Cohen doesn't give us any significant details about Calvin's past. We know only that he came from the east, a place which seemed

> used and impossible to him, a place that could no longer renew itself, and now sometimes he imagined that whole section of the continent as a vast conglomerate city of doomed smokestacks and concrete.
>
> (WH, p. 14)

It is this vision of inevitable doom and death from which Calvin tries to escape. He, too, becomes a wanderer searching for something to heal the pain caused by a troublesome past, which to Laurel appeared as a "gap in him, a canyon running up the middle of his body that had been opened when he left the east" (WH, p. 58). Like her, he has disconnected himself geographically and emotionally from his home with the hope

of finding some milieu more suitable for his spiritual healing and regeneration than the east. His quest for self-discovery starts as an escape, and because of this, he has no definite sense of direction which would lead him immediately to self-discovery. His lack of confidence in himself and his vague sense of identity are further obstacles for him to overcome. He, like Laurel, makes some progress in overcoming these obstacles, but, at the end of the novel, still remains uncertain about himself. Cohen provides a slightly optimistic ending though, and leaves the impression that both Laurel and Calvin will continue to gain greater insights into their psychological nature.

Calvin's greatest problem is his lack of a strong sense of identity. In fact, he develops two contrasting images of himself and becomes unsure as to which one reflects his true self. One he develops from a painting Laurel does of him in a dream. She paints him behind "a giant reptilian eye" where he is "posing, looking through like a resigned prisoner, his hands in his pockets and his features calm and blurred" (WH, p. 13). Cohen could be suggesting through this image that Calvin is trapped by time, especially by the past, which is represented by the reptilian eye, and that he has accepted his fate but not given up hope that one day he will be free to perceive time in all its dimensions. Another is the image of how he thinks he might be becoming: "not blurred but tall and bony, his limbs long and angular" (WH, p. 13).

Calvin makes progress towards self-discovery when he comes to realize that he is becoming more inured to the wilderness and the unrelenting hardships it inflicts upon its human inhabitants, and is changing from the "resigned prisoner" into the 'noble savage.'

This process starts after only a few months on the island. At first he felt "His feet were only halfway adapted from the city and running made them tender and sore" (WH, p. 15), and

> Sometimes he felt like a scientist on a new planet, and spent the time inspecting all the strange tiny flowers and stones, poking the barnacles on the rocks to watch them open and close, trying to memorize the strange shapes and colourations of the shore birds and the high sand cliffs that lined the beach.
>
> (WH, p. 16)

The ambiguous nature of Calvin's sense of identity lingers with him throughout the summer and into the fall. Even then he feels confused about himself.. At one point he thinks of his eyes and how they are

> further unnecessary proof of his whiteness, of his inability to survive here except by the good graces of those who surrounded him. But otherwise he could imagine himself: tall and bony, like his shadow flailing along the beach as he ran, tall and bony with straight dark hair and thick heavy arms.
>
> (WH, p. 116)

On further observation he realizes that indeed his arms were "suddenly outsize, swollen beyond recognition by the continuous use of axe and chainsaw, the skin being gradually toughened by the weather", (WH, p. 116). But then he thinks of how he feels on the inside, "still the same, weak and fluid, the nerves through his whole body still tied to Laurel's slightest motion" (WH, p. 117). This kind of discrepancy between his physical strength and his psychological weakness prevails to the end of the novel when Laurel and he decide to leave the cabin for the winter. Again, Cohen leaves no certain evidence that Calvin will become reasonably self-confident, only the hint that further growth is possible through his relationship with Laurel and Johnny Tulip.

For Laurel and Calvin, moments of self-discovery and self-realization come mostly when they are interacting either with each other or with Johnny Tulip and the Indians. It seems Cohen uses these characters as sounding boards for each other, almost as mirrors through which they come to recognize their strengths and weaknesses.

Johnny represents the Indian population on the island, as well as their ancestral spirit, and often functions as a foil to highlight Calvin's and Laurel's failed attempts to identify with his people and their history. In one scene, he is with Calvin, who is thinking that it is impossible for Johnny to have a past. Johnny stares at him from across the table and--

> Calvin was swept by a sudden flash of nervousness, a recognition of his own insubstantial and alien spirit, as it must seem to Johnny Tulip, a spirit so fragile and so white it could only stagger in and out of the cabin, Mr. Calvin, the gentleman of leisure, like a weak but persistent moth waiting to be burned.
>
> (WH, p. 20)

In another instance, when they are discussing loggers, Laurel makes a comment which shows how little she really knows about the Indian's past:

> "They can have the south end of the island," Laurel said. "No one ever lived there anyway."
>
> "Except Indians," Johnny said, startling Laurel who was standing at the counter, mixing pancake batter which tipped when Johnny spoke, but only half-spilled because Laurel recovered almost as quickly as she had slipped.
>
> (WH, p. 123)

Their identification with the Indians and their way of life gives both Calvin and Laurel a sense of heritage and culture which they lacked before. But they keep forgetting that the best they can hope for at this point in their lives is to be accepted by the Indians as adopted white foreigners. Although they try, they cannot yet make "other people's ancestors" their own, and they are continually reminded of this during certain encounters with Johnny, the degenerate Indian who functions as a touchstone for Calvin's and Laurel's image of themselves as possible half-breeds.

Although they make significant progress towards self-discovery through their relationship with Johnny, it is with each other that the most important advancements are made. The nature of their emotional and spiritual characters becomes more apparent to themselves during several important scenes which involve the themes of life and death.

During the early part of their relationship, when Calvin first arrives on the island, Laurel takes him to a lake where, one night, they kill a deer. For Laurel, the kill is an act of survival, a "contest" almost, between her skills as an hunter and the natural fleetness of the deer (WH, p. 7). For Calvin, it is a tragedy, an event which evokes images of the death of a young boy killed in a traffic accident. The effect of the incident on him becomes more intensified because of his lack of preparation for it. Laurel had the deer in her sights but then

> seemed about to lower her rifle, as the tension began to ebb and settle into some peace so he could be connected to her and to the deer by this light in some mystical or at least final moment that would end and allow each of them to resume where they had left off before this unnecessary melodrama had begun, at the very end of the moment when it was no longer possible for anything to happen there was the explosion of the rifle....
>
> (WH, p. 5)

The crack of Laurel's rifle and the death of the deer serve to initiate Calvin into the killing rituals necessary for

survival in the wilderness. Later, he has to carry the bleeding animal in and out of the canoe, an act which soaks him in blood and makes him wonder "what the rules were here, whether it was considered normal to hunt and kill animals, and then take them apart" (WH, p. 11). Because of these incidents, Calvin later comes to realize that his normal sensitivity to death is out of place on the island, and that coming to terms with killing and death is a prerequisite to understanding the nature of human life itself.

This revelation occurs for him again one morning when he is with Laurel by the side of a stream. In one of the most symbolic and poignant scenes in the book, Cohen interweaves images of life and death, and violence and love, to show how the direction, quality, and success of their lives are dependent on the unpredictable forces of nature and fate. They make love in the wet grass, and immediately notice a salmon in their net in the stream, "splashing and fighting, killing itself by its own struggle" (WH, p. 33). Then, Laurel, the high priestess of life and death, retrieves the dead fish from the net and

> in a practised ritual, pulling out the guts and eggs and pushing them off the table, turning to him as if there was nothing left to say, then walking towards him, suddenly sliding her hands up onto his chest rubbing in the blood and eggs; and he had felt something strange and unexperienced since childhood, a current jumping through his body so forcefully

> he seemed to have been jolted on his feet, a current of mixed fear and violence.
>
> (WH, pp. 33-34)

The "blood and eggs" symbolize life and death, and Laurel's anointing Calvin with them represents his formal induction into the mystical cult of life. She has been on the island much longer than Calvin and has adapted to its way of life so well that she is able to assume the role as his mentor with some degree of authority. At this point, she is further advanced than Calvin spiritually, and remains so until her pregnancy when they turn more towards each other than to the Indians and the island for comfort and identity.

Beginning with this scene, the images of Laurel and Calvin as fish struggling to find their way from the ocean upstream to its source serve to give this motif resonant power. Even during that scene, Calvin wonders if Laurel "thought herself one of the ones that made it upstream" (WH, p. 33). It is, in one sense, another parallel to the quest motif in which self-knowledge and survival depend on instinctual knowledge of where you are and where you are going, and your determination to get there.

Calvin and Laurel, however, do not always know where they are or where they are going. Later in the novel, Calvin "felt like a school of fish, confused and swimming off in all directions" (WH, p. 105). Earlier, he thinks of

Laurel in the same way, "seeing her lives go in different directions, so she was constantly tripping and falling over some old pattern that should have been discarded long ago" (WH, p. 21). Even the meaning of her name suggests this motif; "L-A-U-R-E-L. (six letters): a salmon that has spent the summer in fresh water" (WH, p. 69-70). During a conversation with Laurel, in another scene, Calvin says "Sometimes I wonder where I am" (WH, 103), and in a later conversation, Laurel confesses

> "I just don't know if I can be with anyone now."
> "You seem to be here," Calvin said.
> "I don't always feel here."
> ....
> "Sometimes I'm just waiting to die," Laurel said.
> ....
> "Don't you like being alive?"
> "I don't know."
>
> (WH, p. 108)

Despite this ostensible lack of direction in their lives, metaphorically they are still guided by a certain instinct which at least keeps them alive and in the mainstream of life. In their incessant struggle for survival, they are ineluctably drawn towards each other for strength and comfort, and through this act of giving and receiving love and support their desire for life is replenished. Paradoxically, in losing themselves in each other they come closest to finding themselves.

One particular scene which illustrates this point, is where they are making love, and Calvin remembers

> the morning by the stream when she killed the salmon and drawn him in so deep, like this, so deep he lost himself in her.... And in that light her face and body were only lines and shapes, a ritual mask that drew them through the loop of night and into their own special country where more and more it seemed they were without personality or past.
>
> (WH, p. 113)

It is here, especially, that Cohen seems to be indicating that self-discovery for Laurel and Calvin is possible more through their relationship with each other than with the Indians and the land. With each other they can escape into that mythical "special country" which seems to be the ideal, paradisiacal place for untrammelled spiritual growth.

Cohen, however, does not elaborate about such a fabulous place. He quickly returns to the reality at hand and proceeds to chronicle the sluggish development of Laurel's and Calvin's rather uninspiring relationship.

Near the end of the novel, Cohen takes that relationship another step further. Laurel becomes pregnant and so they decide to move away from the cabin because of the risk of being snowed in when Laurel has to go to the hospital. Again, Cohen uses a physical move to indicate another advance in their spiritual development. With the pregnancy, they become more committed to each other and their future, and, in a vague way, it gives them the sense of direction in life that they lacked before. It also eases the tension between them, and it seems to Calvin that "Since she had told him

she was pregnant they had existed in a new kind of truce, at least committed to go through whatever had begun" (WH, p. 195).

They also become more sensitive and understanding towards each other. Laurel recognizes Calvin's physical strength and endurance, which is becoming more evident through his changing physique, while Calvin learns to respond more empathetically to her emotions. During the funeral scene near the end of the novel, for example, "He felt her crying and it made him cry too, his throat tight and painful at first, and then releasing with the flow of his tears, unsure if he was crying for the boy, himself, or the wet winter that still lay ahead" (WH, p. 209). They now seem more emotionally and spiritually connected to each other, and with the thought that "In the spring they would explore the coast, live on mussels and claims, make salads of wild peas and plantain," Cohen suggests they will remain together, at least for a while (WH, p. 218). If we think of the island in the terms Woodcock presents to us in his essay The Meeting of Time and Space, then, symbolically, Calvin and Laurel will be living "in their minds the life" of a psychological landscape where they will actually be exploring themselves. This is also suggested in the idea that they will be observing the sea birds which Cohen refers to as "spirit birds" or "the souls of the ancestors" (WH, p. 217). Their process of self-discovery does not end when they leave their cabin; it

is then that they start to develop into another stage that should show them further possibilities for maturity.

Some critics, such as John Moss, Francis Mansbridge, and George Woodcock, believe that Laurel and Calvin have varying degrees of success in making the adjustment from one setting to another, of coming to terms with their pasts, and of achieving a self-transformation. Moss, for example, believes Laurel has become "reconciled to the present, has assimilated her past and has tentatively discovered the future open before her" (Moss, A Reader's Guide, p. 50). With some reservations, Francis Mansbridge believes that, when the novel ends, Calvin "has made some progress towards self-realization but remains a troubled and uncertain figure" (Mansbridge, rev. in CFM, p. 101). Woodcock mentions both Laurel's and Calvin's attempted "self-transformation" in saying that Calvin has not yet achieved his while Laurel has already done so and survived (Woodcock, "Armies," p. 139). The consensus seems to be, though, that significant progress has been made by both characters towards self-discovery.

Cohen suggests, through the ending, that more progress can still be made if Laurel and Calvin maintain that shaky spiritual union they seem to have formed. Although the question of conventional marriage has been rejected, Johnny's mother, who "has the second sight" and "can tell the future" (WH, p. 20), extends to them the wish or prediction that they "have a good future" (WH, p. 219). This bodes well for

them and indicates the possibility that their spiritual marriage will last into the near future, especially since the wilderness has now become a new, but rough, paradise where each fills the other's void that was created by the loss of their pasts. Time itself can be perceived as a continuum and considered in its three aspects which are presented in Calvin's thoughts of the boy, who represents the past, himself, who represents the present, and the coming winter, which represents the future.

With this ending, Cohen is suggesting that, although neither Calvin nor Laurel has yet come to a full understanding of themselves or each other, and has not yet achieved any high level of self-esteem, they have come to realize and accept themselves as they are, and are capable of gaining even greater insights into their spiritual nature as they mature together. Their relationship holds more promise than Korsoniloff's, Johnny Crackle's, or Erik's and indicates Cohen's indubitable faith in the ability of individuals to salvage themselves from the wreckage of their pasts, and to rejuvenate themselves through close emotional and spiritual ties with others. So far, theirs are the most successful attempts at self-discovery.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE COLOURS OF WAR

The Colours of War is Cohen's fifth novel and the second in the Salem quartet. It is less admired by the critics than any of his previous novels for several reasons. In one review, David Jackel criticizes the book because he believes that

> Of the various questions -- philosophical, historical, political, religious, familial and sexual -- which the novel raises, none receives consistently effective treatment; the questions themselves are not trivial or uninteresting, but they require more sustained and careful consideration than Cohen has chosen to give them.[21]

Jackel also believes that Cohen did not make Theodore Beam, the central character, an interesting enough narrator, and argues that "Despite its serious intentions, its ambitious scope, and its occasionally unsuccessful moments, The Colours of War shows Matt Cohen is not yet sufficiently in control of his art" (Jackel, p. 41).

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[21]David Jackel, "An Abridged War and Peace," rev. of The Colours of War by Matt Cohen, Canadian Forum, Dec.-Jan. 1977-78, p. 41.

Another reviewer, Sandra Martin, insists that Cohen "has ruined his book by imposing an implausible civil-war context on what is essentially a story about a man, his woman, and his parents."[22]

While most of the critics tend to openly disparage The Colours of War, a few, such as John Mills, George Woodcock, and Jon Kertzer, pass only mildly negative comments.[23] Mills suggests that this novel "is neither good nor bad merely dull" (Mills, p. 123), while Kertzer comments, incidentally, that it "has difficulties with plot and narration" (Kertzer, "Time," p. 99) and "is good in parts but weak as a whole" (Kertzer, "Cohen," p. 129).

Despite the large number of negative responses to this novel, there is some positive criticism in the form of praise for Cohen's treatment of Theodore Beam and the process of self-discovery. Sandra Martin believes that the book "is best when Cohen is writing about Beam and [redacted] relationships with Lise and his parents," and that "Theodore's growing self-awareness is developed with warmth and perception" (Martin, p. 16). Jackel, too, says that Theodore's developing

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[22]Sandra Martin, "If you myth the train I'm on," rev. of The Colours of War by Matt Cohen, Books In Canada, Aug.-Sept. 1977, p. 16.

[23]John Mills, rev. of The Colours of War, by Matt Cohen, The Fiddlehead, No. 119 (1978), pp. 123-4; George Woodcock, "Armies," pp. 127-48; Jon Kertzer, "Time," pp. 93-100.

understanding of his father is perhaps the most successful part of the novel" (Jackel, p. 41).

But this is the extent of their concern for the theme of self-discovery in The Colours of War. With the exception of Woodcock's "Armies Moving in the Night" and Jon Kertzer's articles "Time and Its Victims" and "Matt Cohen," few reviews and articles go beyond the recognition of this theme, and even the Woodcock and Kertzer articles do little more than make general comments on Theodore's spiritual maturity. The intricate structure of Theodore's process of self-discovery and the philosophical overtones inherent in that structure have lain as unexplored in this novel as they have in Cohen's previous works. In order to understand Cohen's attitudes towards self-discovery and the individual in society, further explication of the details of Theodore's spiritual and emotional development is necessary.

Theodore's search for a clearer understanding of himself and the forces that influence the course of his life is graphically delineated in one of Cohen's most violent and dramatic plots. As the central character, he embarks on a spiritual odyssey which is given a physical parallel in the form of a train ride from Vancouver, B.C., where he has spent the last ten years, to his boyhood home in Salem, Ontario. Because the trip is from west to east, from an urban environment to a rural one, and from his present home to the home of his past, it also suggests a journey back

through time. On all three levels, advancement from one point to another functions to indicate the progress Theodore makes in realizing the nature of his character, the breadth and range of his emotions, and the meaning of fate and the part it plays in his life. Set in the larger context of a war in Canada sometime in the near future, the story of Theodore's spiritual growth is sometimes as dramatic and unpredictable as the events of the war itself.

As the compulsive narrator of a journal he is writing, Theodore is introduced to us while pondering over the nature of the 'sound of his own voice.' It is, as he describes it,

> Not the voice I hear when I talk. Nor the voice that sounds in my mind as I say things I should have or didn't dare to. Not even the voice that I will have when I am old.
>
> Maybe it is only the sound of the beating of my heart. But now I can hear it, though for most of my life it was silent. This is my voice: the sound of past and future singing through my bones.[24]

The sound of this mysterious voice becomes a rather nebulous symbol to Theodore for the sound or voice of his soul or spirit. His search for a clear understanding of its identity and source becomes the basis for his quest for self-knowledge and self-realization which actually starts in Vancouver, but which can be traced back to his urge to leave Salem when he

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[24]Matt Cohen, The Colours of War (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), pp. 9-10. (Future references to this title will be abbreviated to CW).

is a boy of seventeen. It progresses throughout his trip to Salem and continues up to the time it loses momentum when he moves in an old stone church there.

Theodore's process of self-discovery can be divided into four major stages. The first stage extends from the time he decides to leave Salem when he is seventeen to the time of his spiritual re-awakening or rebirth in Vancouver when he is twenty-seven. The second stage includes his train ride to Salem and is the most important because of the people he meets and the plurality of revelations he experiences on the trip. The third stage begins when he arrives in Salem and concludes when he decides to move into the old stone church that belongs to Katherine Malone. The fourth stage includes the time he spends living in the church and is characterized by rare moments of spiritual insight and a deceleration of the rate of progress he was previously experiencing. At the end of the novel he is concentrating more on survival than on spiritual maturity. This would suggest that he has come full circle, and has entered a stage where further progress is possible only through another move away from Salem.

During the first stage, Theodore experiences only vague feelings of spiritual and emotional uneasiness which prompt him to move from Salem, and later to move from Vancouver. At this time, he is unsure of what he is searching for, but realizes that his search is related to his spirituality. It

is also a period of doubt and incertainty for him because he is unable to identify himself with a distorted family unit composed of an alcoholic father, who spends most of his time away fighting other people's wars, and a psychotic mother.

In Vancouver, he is still unable to find any stability or sense of self-possession. He tries working with a newspaper, goes to university for three years, spends several years doing odd jobs, and eventually becomes a freelance reporter. Still he remains spiritually vapid. It is much the same type of phase that Laurel goes through immediately after her parents are killed, that Calvin experiences before he meets Laurel, and that Erik struggles through from the time he leaves the farm until his father becomes sick. But then there is that turning point in their lives when their quiescence gives way to a throbbing impulse to redefine themselves, to an innate desire to identify the influences which have shaped their lives and determined their fates.

For Theodore, this turning point occurs on his twenty-seventh birthday in Vancouver when government agents break into his apartment and threaten physical assault. He experiences a brief transitional period which marks the end of his spiritual torpidity and the rebirth of his sense of self. The most important revelations for him at this time come in the scene where the agents rough him up, and in the scene in the mountains where he stops to think by a stream. When he

returns to his apartment, his decision to move back to Salem seems already confirmed.

The second stage of his process of self-discovery covers his trip back to his hometown. During this time he meets several characters who become very influential in determining the rate of his emotional development. Lise, a member of the insurgent army who later becomes his lover, Christopher Perestrello, the leader of the insurgents on the train, Felipa, his wife, and Dr. Fine, a civilian who joins the insurgents in Regina, all interact with Theodore in ways which allow him to realize the quickening pace of his own spiritual and emotional progress. Through them and the events that occur on the train, he discovers his capacity for love, violence, and fear, the ambiguous and confusing nature of his emotions, the curious way he feels detached from himself at certain times, the paradoxical constitution of fate, and the probability that we are all interlinked in a network of human relationships. These revelations are all subsumed under the general 'rebirth' motif which has become, at this point, one of the main structural elements in the narrative..

With his arrival in Salem, Theodore begins the third stage of his process of self-discovery. During this period, he continues to make important discoveries about himself, especially about his love and devotion towards his family, the physical resemblances between himself, his father, and

his grandfather, the responsibility he has to carry on the Beam legacy, and the extremes of love, violence, and fear he is capable of in carrying out those responsibility. His commitments to his family lead him to murder and the decision to remain in Salem. It is this final choice, to make his home in Salem, as opposed to following Lise and the rest of the rebels, which takes Theodore into the fourth stage of his process of self-discovery.

By making the church his home, and sequestering himself away in its attic, Theodore literally and figuratively closes the door to any other immediate or important revelations. The rate of progress he has been making up to this point levels off, and at the end of the novel he seems to be making no progress at all. The reasons for this are linked to Cohen's impression of the family and home as being both a positive and negative influence on a person. They can offer security and an identity, but they can also stifle a person's spiritual and emotional growth, and might even become so detrimental as to cause that person to retrogress psychologically. Although Theodore does not reach the point of retrogression at the end of the novel, he seems to have entered a period when further psychological growth is difficult, and when he might even become as mentally flaccid as he was in Vancouver before his twenty-seventh birthday.

Theodore's actual quest for self-knowledge starts much the same as does Laurel's, Calvin's, and Erik's; it results

from an intolerable situation which does not allow him any happiness or room for personal growth. When he is seventeen in Salem, his only urge is to escape from a family environment characterized by lack of verbal or emotional communication, and which threatens to upset his mental equanimity. Ten years later, in Vancouver, his memory of that time in his life causes him some distress, and reminds him of the reasons that he left. He thought the three of them were "strangers" to each other, and that their home felt like a "jail...with my father's drunken tantrums and my mother's inexplicable happiness -- delighting in him, liking him better the crazier and drunker he was" (CW, p. 31). He thinks further that "I always felt there that I was only a mistake they shared, an accident in timing" (CW, p. 31). This thought, in particular, strengthens Theodore's resolve to leave his home where they "had lived as eccentrics and strangers" and to seek liberation somewhere in western Canada (CW, p. 41). At this early stage in his life, home, family, and the past evoke poignant memories that need to be distanced from his consciousness.

With his move to Vancouver, he succeeds in achieving this distance, but realizes, after ten years, that he did not feel any great sense of self-satisfaction, or think that he had covered any significant ground in trying to discover himself. In retrospect he thought of his stay in Vancouver as a "barren" and "strange" time in his life when "it seemed as if past and future hardly existed" (CW, pp. 16-17).

Until the government agents break into his apartment, this first stage of self-discovery becomes one of suspended animation for Theodore, a period of self-alienation which closely resembles Erik's self-alienation in Toronto. The words "barren" and "strange" also recall the image of Erik "floating through space in a glass ball," disconnected, as Theodore was, from his home and heritage (D, p. 169). In Vancouver, Theodore

> had been waiting to feel at home, truly rooted. But nothing seemed to pull at me, to live right in me: nothing but the imprint of one man's violence and the voice of my father, more real to me than any of the dozens of views that kept presenting themselves with every turn of the road-....
>
> (CW, p. 27)

Unlike Erik, Theodore is faced with the threat of violence which revives him from his catatonic state and moves him into action. He is now starting to become, as Roy MacSkimming describes him in a review, "the uprooted, hesitating, self-divided young man, goaded into being by pressure from others."[25] This incident with the government agents makes him think of "the surface of my life that covered everything like a busy skin," and brings him to the important realization that

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[25]Roy MacSkimming, "Revolution in a Rohmeresque Canada," rev. of The Colours of War by Matt Cohen, Saturday Night, No. 92 (Sept. 1977), p. 74.

> somewhere beneath -- in that place frozen with fear the moment the police walked in, in that part of me that felt encased, alone, untouched by anything except dreams, old memories and vague promises of the future -- it seemed to me I hadn't grown at all in ten years.... I didn't know myself very well then; I hadn't learned to see myself in other people, or how to betray, or to kill, or even to love. I only felt very vague stirrings beneath the surface, a half-knowledge that the policeman's careless gesture had tapped me into life again.
>
> (CW, p. 28)

The knowledge that he has experienced no spiritual or emotional growth at all during that ten year period ironically represents an advance for Theodore towards self-realization. Because he has recognized his problem, he is now able to deal with it more efficiently than before he left Salem.

Important, also, is the knowledge that he is experiencing a rebirth characterized by "vague stirrings" which later manifest themselves in a host of emotions which include love, hate, loyalty, and fear. On the night of his birthday he thinks "I could feel a new sensation -- the years piling up in me" (CW, p. 20).

Cohen continues to develop the rebirth motif using images associated with violence. For example, Theodore contemplates the bruise on his stomach as "this new sign" (CW, p. 23), and later drifts off to sleep, "my stomach knotted tensely around its bruise, my knees pulled up like a baby's, hoping to be born again" (CW, p. 34). The most

important references to rebirth, though, occur in a scene by a mountain stream where he has stopped just outside of Vancouver.

Lying by the stream, he becomes aware of his spiritual reincarnation when he realizes

> This place wasn't mine, didn't know me but I was allowed to be here, for now, now that I had promised to leave.
> The sound of the water seemed to grow right into my bones, dissolving the years I had spent here, stripping away the present and cutting loose thousands of jumbled memories of Salem --....

(CW, p. 32)

The image of water, here, as a cleansing and purifying element, elevates the scene to one of symbolic significance. Theodore is experiencing a spiritual baptism which releases him from the grip of a stagnant present and permits him to put his life into perspective by thinking not only of the present, but also of the past and the future.

The connotations of the words "cutting" and "stripping" also relate to the idea of getting to one's spiritual centre, of penetrating through the layers of useless and cumbersome experiences to realize the essence of one's being. Cohen uses a similar image in The Disinherited in a scene with Richard in the hospital:

> The sickness had made his body too large to deal with, so now Richard stripped away the edges, cut whole zones out of consciousness, reducing himself small enough to cup in his own mind.

(D, p. 58)

Although one character has lived in the past all his life and another has not lived there at all, both go through the process of "stripping" and "cutting" in order to recognize what has been important in their lives, the people and events which have helped shape their identities. Theodore, in this scene, wallows in his nostalgia, but although he thinks "The memory is perfect," he also realizes that "at the time it alternated between paradise and unbearable boredom" (CW, p. 32). He allows himself the pleasure of dreams at times but is always aware of, and connected with, reality. It is this type of "stripping" and "cutting" away the excrescences that gives him a clear perspective on his life and an easy path to self-knowledge.

After this scene by the stream, Theodore returns to Vancouver already decided to move back to Salem. This decision is paramount in his process of self-discovery, not only because it takes him back to the place of his birth and to his family, but also because it leads him to meet and interact with a variety of characters from whom he learns a great deal about his emotions, fate, and survival. From his experiences with them he is able to glean a vague understanding of the whirlpool of innumerable forces which combine to determine a person's fate, and the adventitious happenings that cannot be predicted or controlled, but which, more than anything else, become the events to be reckoned with if one is to survive and "get to be alive."

One of the first people he meets on the train is Lise, a beautiful young recruit who has been sent by Perestrello to retrieve a map from Theodore. From her he is able to experience love and sex, and learns that his emotions can become very difficult to understand. Lise is also important because she leads him to Perestrello from whom Theodore develops something of a philosophy of life.

After they meet on the train, Theodore quickly becomes enamoured of her, and they eventually make love after she gives him "a plain gold ring" which he places on his "wedding finger where it fits perfectly" (CW, pp. 71-72). The ring becomes a symbol of their tenuous and uncertain bond and a constant reminder to Theodore of his mutable and ambivalent feelings for her. Even when he first closes his hand with the ring on "it felt uncomfortable and strange" (CW, p. 72). At another time he thinks "it was only an impression I didn't know how to get rid of" (CW, p. 140). Earlier, however, when they first make love, the ring "felt like a gift" (CW, p. 91), and the experience symbolizes a sexual rebirth for Theodore, one by which he

> felt exhausted and brand-new all at once; my skin was so happy to have this stimulation it was going crazy dropping off layers of dead, unused cells and growing fresh ones to feel Lise that much more closely.
>
> (CW, p. 92)

His wavering sense of commitment to Lise, and his ambiguous feelings for her, which vacillate from compassion to indifference, reflect Theodore's lack of control over his emotional growth. He later admits to the confusion when he says "with Lise my feelings were only getting more complicated. It seemed they were growing in two opposite directions -- love and detachment" (CW, p. 162). Whereas his burgeoning emotional growth promotes his progress to spiritual maturity, his sense of confusion and detachment retards it. We are left again with another typical Cohen paradox, one which links love and union with detachment and separation, and which suggests that psychological growth depends on how well one is able to balance the contrasting elements in one's life.

Viewed from a wider perspective, this includes understanding life and death, and the symbiotic relationship between the two. Theodore comes close to understanding this relationship when he thinks of his "retreat to Salem to start all over again," and how his life is like Lise's, which had "divided in its centre. Somehow this all seemed vaguely romantic: the creation of life living through death" (CW, p. 54). In fact, this seems to describe Theodore's process of self-discovery very precisely. When he thinks of his real birth he imagines himself as an infant, "pushing and clawing through the hot noisy tunnel, wriggling and struggling with the cord around my neck" (CW, p. 17). If we combine these two images, Theodore's train ride to the "centre of the

continent" (CW, p. 61) becomes a stronger metaphor for his rebirth, and his survival becomes contingent on luck and nature, just as his physical birth did. The images of birth through a tunnel and rebirth through a train ride evoke the imagery in Wooden Hunters of the salmon trying to swim upstream, getting caught, and "splashing and fighting, killing itself by its own struggle" (WH, p. 33). Again, in The Disinherited, the same idea is presented when Richard thinks "Everything causes its own death and dies of being itself" (D, p. 76). Cohen is suggesting repeatedly that you cannot live without death and his frequent use of images of life and death in association with the train (and the events which happen on the train) functions further to show how Theodore's emotional and spiritual growth are in constant jeopardy. They also reveal how important a role fate plays in his survival.

Theodore's realizations about the meanings of fate, death, and survival are partially products of his relationship with Perestrello, and advance him further along on his process of self-discovery. These realizations are gleanings which, to Theodore, start as a muddled philosophy which posits the existence of change and fate as the dominate forces in our lives. But because these laws are incomprehensible to man, he sees life mostly as a series of random happenings. Much of his theorizing is influenced by Perestrello who, in a conversation with Theodore, explains

> "There are times in history," said Perestrello, "when everything hangs in the balance. No one can see the future. The prospect of death is meaningless. That's the worst thing. If a man can no longer hold his own death in his mind, if a man cannot balance the meaning of his death against his life, then he cares about nothing."
>
> (CW, p. 62)

These prophetic words inspire Theodore to narrow the focus of his thought down to ontological concerns through which he is able to recognize the key to the meaning of everything that is happening around him. As an adjunct to Perestello's compendious proclamation, Theodore speculates that

> it's one second after another, moments strung together in long irregular chains, and we all know, if only in our dreams: it's simpler than it ever was -- the force of one simple moment of living and breathing, of one long impulse to live thrown against the random net of history and chance.
>
> (CW, p. 62)

He goes on to say that all men, regardless of their wealth, "are finally equal -- pure survival is their only calculation" (CW, p. 62). Here, again, Cohen, through Perestrello and Theodore, is giving us another version of his philosophy that a man trying to live or to "get to be alive" is like a salmon swimming upstream, back to the source from which it came. That "long impulse to live" is innate in each of us, and our survival depends on our encounter with that "net of

history and chance" which is suspended in the tumultubus stream of life. Cohen is also saying, through Theodore and his learning experiences, that survival and growth can be calculated to a certain extent, but that the final determining factor for continuing is sheer fate. When reflecting on the death of a farmer and on Lise's bullet wound later in the novel, for example, Theodore realizes that "It was amazing how exact fate could be: "if the farmer has kept his mouth shut, he'd still be alive; if Lise had moved a half inch, she would not" (CW, p. 134).

Theodore's philosophy of fate and life leads him to the corollary that because all of us are governed by "the same laws of chance and nature," we are all "locked together" (CW, p. 12), in some universal fraternity or brotherhood, and that because of this, we are responsible to each other and the world we live in. For him, self-knowledge becomes possible through active participation in this network of human relations. After forming several relationships, which vary in degrees of trust and distrust, he learns he is capable of extreme reactions ranging from violence, which brings him to the brink of murder, to blissful love with Lise.

From a general perspective, Theodore views all of humanity as being "connected by long invisible strings" (CW, p. 55), and believes that "lives cross each other like vines, wrapping around each other without knowing why" (CW, p. 103). At times though, he feels something more than

"connections" with the characters on the train; sometimes he feels physically and emotionally that he is part of them all. With Dr. Henry Fine, and the old traditional order that he represents, for example, Theodore feels a great affinity. His name would suggest that he is indeed an amiable and virtuous character. When he is killed, Theodore admits that "I felt some part of me had died and I had been hurled into the future -- my past demolished" (CW, p. 131). With Lise, he makes love and compares the experience to that of a union between himself and the woman he sleeps with so that "When we separate, the known woman has vanished and the new one has begun to recreate herself -- partly out of me" (CW, p. 92). In contrast to his situation in Vancouver, where he felt alienated from everything, on the train he has a "vision" in which they were "all being joined together into one live being, flesh and metal joined together" (CW, p. 61), and later feels that

> we were all joined together, metal and flesh, my fingers to this ring, our bodies to this train, and nothing as different from anything else: brains, belly, arms, all felt the same, part of the same unlocated mass.
>
> (CW, p. 72)

These feelings of fusion with others and his surroundings represent an expanding of his sensibility, and a positive sign of his change from passive withdrawal from his social environment to active participation in it. He is changing

from a detached and unconcerned citizen to someone who feels more responsible for the things that are occurring around him. While in Vancouver, he thinks of the change himself:

> I had always thought that the external world would plod along forever, unchanged a comfortable and amorphous bureaucracy, surrounded my life like a giant marshmallow, a giant excuse. Now that was fading away and I was beginning to feel responsible for every moment I lived.
>
> (CW, p. 132)

This change becomes more evident in the scene in which he and Lise are making love and they hear loud noises outside their compartment. Theodore goes to check and finds a stranger beating Felipa. He struggles with the man, wrestles a knife from him, and then tries to stab him: "And as the knife pierced the cloth of his coat, my arm stopped, cramped. Wouldn't do it" (CW, p. 151). His emotions have become more intense since he left Vancouver and have now become so explosive and extreme that he is almost capable of murder. They continue to intensify into the next stage of his process of self-discovery, until eventually he reaches a pinnacle of emotional response to violence.

Counterpointing his feeling of "connection" with humanity is his feeling of detachment from himself. This discovery, that there is a part of himself that remains detached and aloof from what he is experiencing, is paradoxically one which represents a step towards his goal of self-realization,

and one which prevents him from ever becoming psychologically complete. It is much the same predicament that the narrator finds himself in at the end of Korsoniloff. His realization that he will never find the answer to the question of his complicity in his mother's death advances him in his process of self-discovery, but also prevents his spiritual maturity.

Early in the novel, when Theodore is first introduced to the leader of the insurgents on the train, he admits that, although he was drunk, there was a "tiny part of me that was still sober -- the part that can never get drunk, only increasingly detached" (CW, p. 60). After dreaming about the execution of the farmer in Regina, Theodore awakes to discover that the detached part of himself has a cold and objective edge to it which is in contrast to his normal self. Thinking about the dream he decides that

> some part of me, some tiny part of me, was not involved at all and was looking down and laughing contemptuously, Theodore Beam; it seemed to be saying, what an idiot you are.
>
> (CW, p. 141)

Even when he is with Lise during a moment of intimacy he realizes that "when I kissed her and said I loved her, loved her, I was still divided, and that skeptical part of me stood back and watched -- touched and drowned in this but still reserved, waiting" (CW, p. 141).

These examples indicate that Theodore, although he is emotionally committed to the relationships he is experiencing, and to the things he does, he is still not wholly committed to them. Despite the immeasurable influence that Dr. Fine, Perestrello, Felipa, and Lise have on him, his loyalty is not fully engaged by them. That part of his subconsciousness is reserved for something more distinctly important to him than new friends or even his physical well-being. Lise notices this later in the novel in a conversation with him:

> Sometimes I wonder where you go," Lise said. "I talk to you and you just stare into space. Is that how you are about everything? About Felipa? About this goddamned war?" Her voice was rising. "You'd like to do something but you just can't seem to concentrate."

(CW, p. 221)

The reason that he cannot seem to concentrate is linked to the problem involving the division of his inner self. This condition is not new to Cohen's characters; Korsoniloff, Johnny Crackle, Laurel, Calvin, and Erik, suffer from it in various forms and degrees. But with Theodore the division seems to become less severe as he approaches his home, and seems to be related to some instinctual, mythical sense of unity with the landscape. When the train approaches "the heartland of the continent," for example, it takes the form of a racial memory as he realizes

> There was some part of me, something infinitely older than this absurd body of twisted up mess of memory and desire- some part of me that could already sense the great sweep of forest, and the lakes that split apart the belly of this whole hemisphere,
>
> (CW, p. 161)

Unfortunately, Theodore's failure to identify or understand the nature and importance of his 'detached' self, which is an integral part of the 'sound of his own voice,' obscures the image of his spiritual being that he is trying to discern. Consequently, he is left at the end of this stage of his process of self-discovery, as well as at the end of the novel, still searching, still trying to intuit the nature of his problem.

Cohen never allows his characters to realize that the nature of their inner division is related to the dual nature of the world they live in. In The Colours of War, for example, Theodore, on the first page of the novel, alludes to "the comfortable dream of lies, the dream of everyday" (CW, p. 9). This is the same world that Johnny Crackle tries to escape from, the world of routines which tries to institutionalize and normalize the individual. The other world is the inner, subconscious world of instincts, primacy, and spirituality, which knows no laws or routines, only the obscure urge for the individual to remain innocent and complete. In Theodore's case, the schism created in Vancouver between his inner and outer worlds, which have parallels in

the consciousness and subconscious, becomes too great for him to overcome. Theodore has lost contact with his spiritual 'centre,' which is similar to the place Perestrello refers to that exists "somewhere inside us...that has never been touched and is still waiting to be discovered" (CW, p. 158). Although he hopes Salem will help bridge that gap and bring him into communion with himself, his wishes remain unfulfilled.

The second stage of Theodore's stage of self-discovery ends when he leaves the rebels on the train and shifts his focus of attention more towards his home and family than towards the rebels and the war. When he arrives in Salem he experiences a sense of belonging and security that marks the beginning of the third stage, a period which is characterized by an unalterable commitment to remain loyal to his family and heritage, by a continuing increase in the depth and intensity of his emotions, and by his realization that self-fulfillment is dependent on intimate and inviolable relationships with others.

Theodore's sense of responsibility towards his family and his strong identification with them develops over a period of time. From the time he leaves Vancouver, Cohen uses images of hands and eyes in particular, along with flashbacks, to show how Theodore reconnects himself with the continuity suggested by the last two generations of his family. In one scene on the train, he places his hand on Lise's stomach, and he imagines it "looked suddenly like my

father's hand, Jacob Beam's hand, still and wooden, thick with age, cunningly reincarnated on the end of my younger arm" (CW, p. 45). Theodore identifies even more strongly with his grandfather and believes they are "different versions of the same person" (CW, p. 153). Not only do they look alike and have the same name, they also have the same eyes, another characteristic which represents part of Theodore's physiological inheritance. Once his grandfather has died, Theodore thinks that he is

> the sole carrier of the eyes; everything had to be registered and recorded by me until I found someone to pass them to. The way he passed them on to me. The way he had given me the watch.
>
> (CW, p. 155)

Through the watch, which becomes an obvious symbol of time, and through references to eyes and hands, Cohen intensifies Theodore's sense of connection with his family, and his growing sense of responsibility for insuring the survival of their name and heritage in Salem. It is this love for his father and loyalty to his family tradition which motivates him to kill the soldier in Henry McCaffrey's house during the fire scene.

This event demonstrates Theodore's growing capacity for devotion to the people he loves, and the degree of violence he is capable of in order to protect them. Previously, he had fought a man who was beating Felipa, and almost killed

him. The fight and his promise to himself afterward to "finish what I had started" prepare him for the final act of killing which presents the shibboleth for his acceptance back into the family (CW, p. 206). At the time, though, Theodore had not acted on reason. Instead, he acted on impulse and instinct. His recollections of the event make him realize his reactions on that night were natural and totally emotional:

> Save Jacob Beam? I hadn't thought of it at the time, only that he was lying on the floor refusing to move, that I needed him to be alive and a crazy soldier was trying to push me away from him.
>
> (CW, p. 231)

At this point he has learned to betray, to kill, and to love, three things which in Vancouver he had not done, and which represent rituals he would have to perform in order to prove his emotional and spiritual growth (CW, p. 28). When he tells Felipa he killed the soldier because he had to, she says "No...you wanted to" (CW, p. 230). The incident reassures Theodore that he is no longer the naive, callow, and insipid personality that he had been in Vancouver, but rather a maturing individual who belongs somewhere and to someone, regardless of the price he must pay for these connections.

Early in the novel Theodore comments on the idea of "connections" and the necessity of belonging: "Home, yes, we're all so stupid that we'd give up anything to attain it,

to convince ourselves that this place, any place, is somehow where we belong" (CW, p. 102). It is the strongest desire that Theodore has, even stronger than his love for Lise, who tries to persuade him to go away with her. In the pivotal scene, in which she tries to exhort him to abandon his family, he says

> "I can't leave. I can't just leave my parents here. I'd feel like I'd be betraying them."
> "And yourself? What do you have to do for yourself?"
> "Stay here," I said. "This is where I live."
>
> (CW, p. 220)

His relationship with Lise becomes secondary to his relationship to his family and home. He confesses his fervent desire to possess and protect her, but understands also that it is guided by an unpredictable and unreliable force "according to its own laws, out of our control" (CW, p. 204). Hence, he makes his decision to remain in Salem and to abandon the rebel cause. It is a symbolic one which indicates a turning away from the future. (The future is represented by the old stone church and the tradition it stands for.) It is also one which marks the beginning of the fourth stage of Theodore's process of self-discovery.

With the security and sense of identity which is associated with the concept of "home" comes also the danger of impaired spiritual growth or possibly even spiritual suffocation. Theodore seems to have acquired all of these with the church

he has chosen to live in. Because Cohen sees the home as being both a blessing and a curse for those who return to it, and because Theodore is living in such a precarious and unpredictable situation, the question as to whether or not he will continue his process of self-discovery is left hanging. Cohen's suggested answers to this question are ambiguous.

On the one hand, Theodore, despite the progress he had made up to this point, has still not completed his process of self-discovery; he has not yet come to a full understanding of the 'sound of his own voice,' and has succeeded only in recognizing a vague image of his spiritual being, not a clear or well defined one. Also, because of the "unpredictability" of "the laws of chance and nature" (CW, p. 233), his quest may never be completed. Cohen has immersed him in a sea of fear and confusion where survival depends on a day to day struggle to deal with the flux of forces that threatens to drown him. His spiritual and emotional rebirth has allowed him to surface and "to be alive"; now he has to maintain that struggle.

On the other hand, because of his continued attempts at self-realization, his acceptance of his fear, which is objectified by the soldier's medal Theodore sometimes wears, his return to his ancestral home, and his ability to act on the self-knowledge he has acquired, he may still be able to make further significant advances towards self-discovery.

The fact that he has settled "in the middle of the continent" in "an old stone church near a diminished town in the centre of Ontario" (CW, p. 15) suggests further that he has completed a physical journey and arrived at a geographical 'centre,' and therefore might eventually come closer to his spiritual 'centre.' Although the church symbolizes spirituality in the religious sense, the images of death, symbolized by the rifle he keeps with him, and the dead soldier's St. Christopher's medal, and the fact that the church has been converted to suit more practical needs, indicate that it is a spiritual haven in a personal and secular sense.

The question of Theodore's success in completing his spiritual odyssey is left open in this novel as is the question of Erik's, Calvin's, and Laurel's in The Disinherited and Wooden Hunters. It seems Theodore has advanced to the same level of self-knowledge that Erik, Calvin, and Laurel have, but is capable of a more concerted attempt to reach a higher plateau than them.

It is interesting to note at this point that David Jackel and Sandra Martin believe Theodore has already made momentous progress towards psychological maturity by the time the book ends. Jackel suggests that "Theodore has moved towards a greater self-awareness and a better understanding of what one must do to survive with integrity in a world which seems to be collapsing" (Jackel, p. 41). Martin reiterates Jackel's comment in her claim that "Beam grows

from a callow self-centred boy to a man capable of love, violence, and self-commitment" (Martin, p. 16).

Cohen's philosophical stance is still difficult to pinpoint because he doesn't allow his narrative voices to articulate any consistent thoughts on fate or destiny. Although the question of destiny seems to be precluded by Theodore's belief in "the random net of history and chance," Theodore still maintains his belief in an "obscure plan" (CW, p. 83), and thinks the circumstances he finds himself in represent "some inexorable series of events that would swallow up my life" (CW, p. 104). This philosophy seems to be a vague extension of Erik's claim in The Disinherited that "No one has destinies any more" (D, p. 146), and of Miranda's that "It's all determined.... We can only bow to our fates" (D, p. 140). It is also interesting to note that Johnny Crackle believes in fate (JCS, p. 13), but does not believe in destiny (JCS, p. 48). Cohen has managed to convolute his own philosophy, over the course of several novels, to the point where a definitive labelling becomes impossible. He does this by presenting characters who wrestle with the ideas of fate and destiny, and then showing how none of their theories or philosophies adequately help them unravel the ponderous mysteries of life.

Within the context of The Colours of War, it seems that the author is emphasizing the notion that confusion and ambiguity are by-products of trying to make some sense of

the forces which control a person's life. Theodore summarizes his thoughts on fate near the end of the novel when he says "our lives are guided by the same gods, the same laws of chance and nature" (CW, p. 233). This statement is one of recognition, a clear declaration that although his life may be a series of random events that must be lived through and survived, and which at times he says cause the "confusion of my own existence" (CW, p. 63-64), it is also lived within the framework of some unknowable, inexplicable plan. What we have, then, is a belief in fatalism imbued with a belief in determinism.

Although Cohen may be suggesting, through Theodore and the theories of fatalism and determinism, that the process of self-discovery may never be fully completed by any character because of the chaotic and unpredictable forces in his world, it is possible for him to survive the chaos, and to read some significant level of meaning into his life. Like Laurel and Calvin in Wooden Hunters, Theodore has progressed from a stage of spiritual and emotional apathy or ennui to a stage in which he feels a slight sense of self-respect and probity. In comparison to them, he feels more intense about discovering his identity and even becomes obsessed with the idea. In The Colours of War, Cohen has brought the theme of self-discovery to the foreground and given it greater emphasis here than in Wooden Hunters. Despite this, though, his ending to The Colours of War indicates that failure is still imminent and success still elusive.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SWEET SECOND SUMMER OF KITTY MALONE

The third novel in Cohen's Salem series, The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone, has a finer reputation with the critics than its predecessor, The Colours of War. One of the main reasons for this is that Kitty Malone presents a more authentic and realistic account of its characters' psychological development than does The Colours of War. It depicts the story of two lovers in their separate struggles to achieve some sense of order and stability in their lives through the acquisition of self-knowledge and the attainment of self-control. As Pat Frank and Kitty Malone attempt to reconcile themselves with their pasts, with the fact of their aging, and with each other, they undergo a process of self-discovery which takes them from a state of confusion and ignorance about their existence to a state of enlightenment. It is on this process of self-discovery, and the credibility of the characters themselves, that most critics focus their comments.

Jon Kertzer, for example, remarks that "Cohen is a good storyteller and particularly deft at portraying character," and that, in this novel, "self-possession is allied to self-destruction, and is gained only through the family, which at

once affirms and denies the self."[26] His review contains some interesting points about the paradoxical role that the family plays in shaping a person's identity, but mentions very little of the process of self-discovery itself.

Closer to this topic is Ronald Hatch, who broadens his perspective in a review which considers the individual to be open to many influences. He alludes to "The destruction of the Edenic dream of the new land" which "means that characters must pursue their own sense of self to create new possibilities, without taint of past civilizations and value."[27] He adds that "Cohen's characters live in the force field of existence, attempting both to order it and yet also believing that they must allow themselves to find their own centres of gravity" (Hatch, p. 205). I agree with Hatch's idea of Cohen's characters existing in a "force field of existence," and believe, too, that it is through the ordering process that the characters gain the self-knowledge which helps stabilize them in that "force field."

Another reviewer, Anthony Brennan, is one of the very few who even allude to the actual stages of development through which Cohen's characters progress. In his review,

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[26]Jon Kertzer, "Bitter Season," rev. of The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone, by Matt Cohen, Canadian Forum, 59, No. 689 (1979), 30.

[27]Ronald Hatch, rev. of The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone, by Matt Cohen, Canadian Fiction Magazine, Nos. 30-31 (1979), p. 202.

he proclaims that Cohen's novel is mostly "concerned with tracing, in minute detail, the changing emotional states of his characters."[28] Although his argument leads from there in another direction, he also refers, although rather obliquely, to that "force field of existence" in mentioning "the limiting and liberating elements in the sheer physicality of our lives" (Brennan, p. 139). Brennan acknowledges, through this comment, the contrary and opposing powers in Cohen's fictional world, and the oppressive, destructive demands they levy on their victims. In The Sweet Summer of Kitty Malone, it seems that Fate is working adamantly to conspire against Pat Frank and Kitty Malone, who are permitted to survive, through marriage, only because of the wry, faint optimism of their creator.

The fictional world of Pat and Kitty functions under "the same laws of chance and nature" that Theodore Beam's does. Although, in Kitty Malone, Cohen creates characters that are more realistic and credible than those of The Colours of War, and plants them in a society constructed with a higher degree of verisimilitude, they still fall under the tyranny of unpredictable fate. The most important difference between the novels with respect to the individual and fate is that in Kitty Malone, the characters are allotted a more

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[28]Anthony S. Brennan, rev. of The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone by Matt Cohen, The Fiddlehead, No. 122 (1979), p. 138.

humane and compassionate destiny than Theodore in The Colours of War, or even any of the characters in Cohen's previous novels. Cohen now seems to be highlighting the intense nature of reality and the dramatic experiences endured by his characters rather than the sociological framework that the characters are trapped in. In Kitty Malone, the characters struggle more with interpersonal relationships and ordinary problems than do the characters in The Colours of War, who are inextricably and intrinsically involved with political and social issues.

Ronald Hatch focuses his discussion on this point in observing that "we are often plunged so directly and immediately into the lives of the characters that it is difficult to come to terms with Matt's own point of view" (Hatch, pp. 204-5). Just what that "point of view" is cannot be pinpointed or labelled because Cohen obfuscates any philosophical dialogue or thought in his novel, through paradox and ambiguity. He states himself, in an interview with Wayne Grady, that "I'm writing novels, not philosophy."[29] Hatch attempts an interpretation of Cohen's "point of view" by suggesting that

> So strongly is the sense of felt experience rendered that one is baffled to find an underlying metaphysics. But again this seems to be Cohen's point. We are forced in the novel to come to grips

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[29]Wayne Grady, "Interview," Books in Canada, Mar. 1981, p. 31.

> With a world in which most of our metaphysics is undermined...
>
> (Hatch, p. 205)

But Pat and Kitty are endowed with a tenacity of purpose that leads them through the tumult of their world to a definite affirmation of their 'metaphysics.' Cohen seems to be developing a stronger belief in the ability of an individual to transcend the quagmire of emotional and spiritual chaos to discover a more discernible image of their spirituality. In Kitty Malone, the outcome of Pat and Kitty's attempts at self-discovery could stand as plausible testimony to this predication.

In my discussion of Kitty Malone I intend to show how the novel can be interpreted as an affirmation of the individual's fortitude and tenacity in the face of elements which threaten to annihilate his or her very sense of individuality. Through the process of self-discovery, Pat and Kitty are able to recognize the existence of that infinitesimal kernel of their spirituality that holds so much promise and potential for growth and maturity. It is the very existence of the individual spirit and its triumph over the oppressive forces at work in life that Cohen celebrates in this novel.

During a few weeks in June of 1976, the fictional present of the novel, both Pat Frank and Kitty Malone reach critical points in their lives when they come to realize

that profound changes have occurred, and are still occurring, with regard to their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual growth. They also realize their love for each other is stronger than their hate, and that marriage is the most obvious solution to many of their problems.

In vintage Cohen style, the events which constitute each character's past are presented to us, not in chronological order or sequence, but as they randomly occur in the minds of the characters themselves. Through these events, as well as thoughts, memories, and dreams, Cohen exposes the troubles that Pat and Kitty face and which prevent them from attaining self-possession or from finding "their own centres of gravity" in that "force field of existence" (Hatch, p. 205). They are painfully aware that their 'centres' exist but cannot find them.

Cohen intimates the idea of a spiritual 'centre' himself on the first page of the novel through references to an emotional 'centre.' In the first scene, Pat is sitting in an attic bedroom in Kitty's house and "could feel the June air breathing, and he was right in the centre of himself breathing with it."[30] Later, on the same page, we find that "as of this happy huddled moment, with a cigarette in one hand and the brandy in the other, Pat Frank was perfectly in

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[30]Matt Cohen, The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), p. 7. (Future references to this title will be abbreviated to KM).

the centre of himself" (KM, p. 7). The idea of an emotional centre in this scene has a parallel in the form of a corresponding spiritual 'centre' which is arrived at when the characters come into true possession and control of themselves. The condition of total self-possession, however, is non-existent in Cohen's novels. The characters only get close to their spiritual 'centre' and to self-possession; they never achieve what might be the equivalent to an earthly nirvana.

Pat, for example, is seeking that moment of euphoria when "He could finally, suddenly, undeniably, permanently, ecstatically come into true possession of himself," (KM, p. 69). Kitty, too, is searching and hoping to discover her spiritual 'centre.' Cohen uses many references to Kitty's eyes, which are "refusing to fix on one place and move towards it, refusing anything except whatever she could see in the centre of herself" (KM, p. 72).

These references clearly indicate the concept of spiritual 'centres' in this novel, and the characters' desire to reach them. The only complication here is that the stages of Pat's and Kitty's attempts at self-discovery do not always begin and end at distinct times or during specific scenes. Unlike the stages in Theodore's process of self-discovery for example, theirs overlap and the lines of separation are sometimes blurred.

Generally, Pat and Kitty go through the same stages that Laurel and Calvin go through in Wooden Hunters. They, too, experience a preparatory stage characterized by feelings of spiritual rebirth. This first stage of their process is the longest, and one in which the characters experience a welter of confused, ambiguous feelings which culminate in an identity crisis. Their success in attempting to order their confused lives and in resolving their identity problems takes them to a second stage in which some sense of inner consonance is reached. It is at this point that Cohen chooses to terminate his novels.

Cohen gives us only a vague sketch of Pat's spiritual condition during the preparatory stage of his process of self-discovery. We discover that he has lived a life of alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, and debauchery, with no care about what his future holds for him. His 'rebirth,' which marks the beginning of his first stage, occurs gradually when he is forty-nine years old and begins to sense that another hour has passed on his biological clock. At this point, he stops to reassess the damage he has inflicted on himself and others, and evolves through a transitional period which takes him from spiritual anemia and emotional immaturity to a regenerated sense of self that carries with it the possibilities for self-control and self-possession.

During this stage, Cohen uses scenes, images, and references which develop a boyhood motif, and the youth,

innocence, and freedom that it symbolizes, and uses it as a foil to highlight the identity crisis that Pat faces. Pat is juggling two images of himself; one is of his ideal self which is epitomized in the image of himself as a boy, and the other is of the real, bibulous, atrophied Pat Frank who is forced to reconcile himself with his lover, Kitty Malone. The confusion that overwhelms him at certain times is manifested in an image of a "cloud" that obstructs his own view of his psyche. After a fight with Randy Blair Jr. and his father, that cloud becomes more complicated, but he begins to accept the reality of his aging and the fact that his boyhood image is merely an abstract one which has no resemblance to his real self. Soon after, he mends his relationship with Kitty and they marry.

Their marriage introduces Pat to a second stage which shows him establishing an anchor in life through his roles as husband and father. He has transfigured himself from a spiritual hobo to a maturing and confident figure in his own family. This maturity and confidence surfaces when he is with Kitty and "felt close to her, open, unafraid," (KM, p. 232) and in his stolid acceptance of his new role in "Family life," which he acknowledges is "the latest thing" (KM, p. 233). Although he has not reached that euphoric moment of self-possession that he dreams of, he has found his "place in this mortal world of life & death" (TD, p. 221), and is able to look forward to an optimistic future.

In Kitty's case, Cohen takes us back to specific scenes in her preparatory stage to reveal poignant moments that profoundly affect her emotional and spiritual growth. We come to know the individual people and the events, such as her father's funeral, Pat's denial of her love, and her marriage to Randy Blair, that cause her so much agony. Cohen develops the image of the "veil," during this stage, as a protective device which Kitty uses to cover her sensitive psyche. As a metaphor, it hides her weaknesses and disguises her true feelings to the point where she no longer feels vulnerable. As a tangible item, at Ellen's funeral, for example, it becomes "a compromise between ruining her vision and keeping in tone with the funeral" (KM, p. 194). The material veil becomes an objectified parallel for the metaphorical veil. In both forms it not only prevents others from perceiving the real Kitty, but it also prevents Kitty from perceiving her true self. At the time of Ellen's funeral, she has reached a full fledged identity crisis which can be resolved if only she can drop the veil and face the world and herself as she truly is. To some extent she succeeds in doing this. The death of her father and Pat's rejection of her cause that veil to be removed and she discovers a large "gap" or void in herself like Laurel does, that, for a while, remains unfulfilled. When she returns home from Toronto, after separating from Randy Blair, the

presence of her mother and her affair with Pat, help Kitty bridge that gap.

Her departure from Toronto also marks the symbolic beginning of her "rebirth" and the beginning of the first stage of her process of self-discovery. During this stage, Kitty realizes that she has deceived herself in her marriage with Randy Blair, and chides herself for leading a "false life" with him (KM, p. 94). She also experiences an identity crisis in which images from her past threaten to re-impose themselves on the new developing image of herself as a self-controlled woman. Cohen uses references to Kitty's 'shifting eyes,' to the veil and gap, to her retreat from the external world into herself, and to rebirth, as a means of illustrating the confusing struggle she faces for emotional and mental control. These references are contained in a number of significant scenes, which include the time she spends alone in Salem and in the hospital in Kingston, and which trace the victories and defeats she faces in her slow movement towards inner peace.

Her identity crisis and her other emotional and mental problems are partly solved through her marriage with Pat, which also introduces her to a second stage in her process of self-discovery. Her reconciliation with Pat, and the fact that she has attained a sense of identity through a closer association with her birthplace and her family, provides her with that anchor she has been searching for

since she left Salem to go to Toronto. Like Pat, she has not, by the end of the novel, completed her process of self-discovery but can still look forward to the promise of further spiritual progress.

Pat Frank's character is itself a study in the complexities of human nature. When the novel opens, Pat is introduced as an emaciated drunk who lives in Salem, Ontario, and works at the General Repair garage there. During the spring of 1976, he has become discontented with his life and his inability to analyze the complications which have disoriented his sense of self. The years of confusion up to this time can be referred to as his preparatory stage because during that time he makes no deliberate attempt to come to terms with the degenerate condition which has become his own life. This period from his twenties to his forties is characterized by his spiritual aimlessness, a supine attitude towards his life, a confused sense of identity, improvidence, and a frustrating inability to identify and satisfy his emotional and social needs.

When the novel opens, Pat has already taken the first step towards self-discovery, but has only just begun to recognize his problems which have their roots in his early years. One of the earliest and most important realizations he makes is that "he had lost whatever had propelled lives forward..." (KM, p. 12). Up to this point of transition in his life, Pat has been ignorant of his own spiritual needs.

The early days of his youth were spent on his father's farm where efforts to cultivate the land were punctuated by long bouts of heavy drinking with his father and brother. In his twenties, his drinking habits and the image of himself as a lost soul motivate him to reject Kitty's offers for a lasting relationship. Now, in 1976, he feels contrite over his lost years, but shows no obvious regret about his decision to remain single. It is not until he marries Kitty, though, that he realizes his vague longings and needs can be fulfilled through marriage and his responsibilities as a father and husband.

If the more than twenty years prior to the novel's fictional present represent Pat's lost years, the early summer of 1976 represents a spiritual and emotional "resurrection" for him (KM, p. 65). He experiences, during this time, a rebirth through which he becomes preoccupied with the idea of his boyhood, the innocence, youth, and freedom that it symbolizes, and with the 'opening' and 'exploding' of his emotions. But it is a resurrection tempered by his own obsession with the thoughts of his physical and mental decay, and an identity crisis. Pat's mixed thoughts concerning youth and middle age, growth and decay, spiritual freedom and imprisonment, and love and hate, are manifestations of the confusion he feels as a result of the changes that he is beginning to recognize in himself. The 'boyhood' motif is used extensively, along

with references to the brain and identity problems, to illustrate the conflict of forces that Pat is trying to deal with. The success he has in handling these problems is a measure of the progress he makes in his process of self-discovery.

Cohen uses images from the rebirth of nature in spring to form a parallel for Pat's emotional and spiritual rebirth. In the opening scene of the first chapter, for example, we find Pat

> breathing the dark air, slow and carefree, drawing it through places in his body that had slept for decades. The air shifted through him until it turned his life transparent, until he felt himself turn into the boy he had once been, felt his whole young body green and reedy, the force of the spring earth pushing through it, making him tingle like a seed ready to explode.
>
> (KM, p. 9)

It is passages like this which might have prompted Margot Northey to suggest in her review that Cohen is rarely equalled in the "evocation of the subtle interplay between inner and outer nature, a relationship often underlined by the recurrent motif of breathing."[31] Many of the other important scenes which depict the continued development of Pat's stage of

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[31]Margot Northey, "A Question of Character," rev. of The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone by Matt Cohen, Canadian Literature, No. 86 (1980), p. 122.

rebirth also contain references to nature and 'opening' and exploding' in connection with his emotions and feelings.

Even in the next paragraph, Pat is thinking that "Sometimes...dreaming his boy's dreams of iced spring water running through the creases of the land, he would forget himself, his age, everything that had disappointed" (KM, p. 9). The allusions, here, to water, agelessness, and the cathartic experience, cumulatively refer to the idea of a baptism much like the one Theodore experiences in The Colours of War (CW, p. 32). Cohen reinforces the 'rebirth' motif again when Pat thinks about "this whole long gentle spring that had somehow eaten into his nerves and was making him young again" (KM, p. 14). He does this repeatedly throughout the novel, but not always with the same refreshing appeal.

The spiritual rejuvenation which Pat experiences is accompanied by an emotional one which Cohen associates with an 'opening up' of uncontrollable sentiment. In one of the most direct references to his rebirth, Pat is thinking of himself as a boy sleeping and dreaming:

> 'Sometimes it seemed the boy he had been was being born in him again; and sometimes it seemed this resurrection was lighting up not only his brain but his heart too, making it swell and open with bursts of irrational sentimental love.
>
> (KM, p. 66)

This reference to youth and regeneration signifies Pat's desire to regain what he lost after his boyhood had passed.

It also appears to be a natural process over which Pat has little control. Cohen assumes the role as God of nature and humanity in his fictional world, and subjects his characters to the same regenerative process that nature itself evolves through annually. In this spring of 1976, he allows his characters to shake off the languor of winter and to experience the 'exploding' and 'opening' of emotions associated with nascent growth.

Pat's discovery of his ability to love 'openly' and without restraint makes him realize that he is not the self-contained, self-controlled person he thought he was. This surprises him, and in one scene he becomes convinced that

> After forty-nine years of trying to grow up it seemed that he had now collapsed, that he now wanted to cry every time someone smiled at him, wanted to explode with love and tenderness...
>
> (KM, p. 10)

In this scene, Pat feels closer to the image of himself as a boy than he normally does. Usually he feels he is the negative of that ideal image. The result is an identity problem characterized by the existence of two disparate images, one the negative of the other. Pat's realization of this problem, and his attempts to effect its resolution, help him mature towards the second stage of his process of self-discovery.

Pat's positive images of himself as a boy come in his dreams. Early in the book

> he would believe he had found his boy's body again, believe that his bones were soft and unmarked, his skin tense and white, his hands smooth and supple as his boy's hands had been...
>
> (KM, p. 9)

Later, he would dream "he was in a castle, a boy-prince imprisoned in his own stone castle," and "at that time he had loved his own prison, because it was rich and complex, because he was sure it was a place he would finally leave" (KM, p. 224). This gift of prescience, along with the youth, innocence, and freedom that the boy possesses, are lacking in Pat the adult. In contrast to his boyhood self, he "couldn't think ahead...couldn't think as much as one year into the future, could only escape into the past, into the memory of himself as a boy: looking forward" (KM, pp. 224-25). This collision of images causes Pat's sense of identity to become confused and muddled. He imagines the confusion to become manifested in the form of a

> complicated cloud of everything he was trying to figure out, a complicated cloud that was itself like his castle.... It was too much, too intricate, a grey aching maze with no escape.
>
> (KM, p. 225)

The cloud results partly from the fight he has with Randy Blair Jr. and his father, which, ironically enough, impresses on him the fact that he is a forty-nine year old man who has not psychologically adjusted himself to his age rather than a virile youth who is still capable of quick, controlled reactions.

Pat goes to Toronto to seek revenge against Randy Jr. who injured Kitty's brother, Charlie, with his truck in a motel parking lot. He thinks himself that "everything had changed, that he had stopped drinking and was now focussed on the hunting down of Randy Blair" (KM, p. 113). He refers to this mission as "the new and resolved direction of his life" (KM, p. 111), and has his "new purpose" (KM, p. 113). His encounter with Randy and his father in Toronto does represent a turning point for Pat, but ironically, it makes him realize something entirely unexpected; it confirms his weaknesses rather than his strengths.

After being beaten unconscious and left in an alley by Randy and his father, Pat realizes that "something irretrievable had happened," and that this fight "had crossed a new line. For this there would be revenge" (KM, p. 208). He confesses his physical infirmities to Mark on returning to Salem: "'I guess I'm getting old,' Pat said. 'Losing that old killer instinct.'" (KM, p. 213). Even earlier, in the hospital, he thinks of his dreams and accomplishments, and admits to himself that he is a failure:

> He might have been trying to remember important questions. Even quests: such as his own which had started off so elaborately, with a dream of his own boy's soul breaking free, and ended so badly, with a nightmare of his own prison, of his own ribs being kicked in and revenge being taken on him.
>
> (KM, p. 163)

Cohen further describes Pat as being "beaten by his own hero's dream" (KM, p. 230), and he is left near the chronological end of the novel, a confused, defeated, disillusioned individual who has few resources left. One of them happens to be marriage, or rather reconciliation with Kitty through marriage.

But even his relationship with Kitty is not stable. It is a love-hate relationship which is riddled with fights and reunions, and guided by the fluctuating moods of both characters. After they are married, Pat vacillates from one mood to another, and in one scene he becomes angry,

> angry at this woman for trying to lead him away from himself, angry at himself for being so desperate to escape that he didn't know anything about himself except that once he had been a boy who wanted to be a man,
>
> (KM, p. 227)

Despite the precarious and tumultuous nature of their relationship and the identity crisis Pat experiences, Cohen indicates, in the last scenes of the novel, that Pat will survive and find himself through his new roles associated with marriage. He moves in with Kitty in her grandfather's

house, and suggests that Lynn, their daughter, move in with them. His growing love for Lynn and his wish that "they could grow together" further suggest his willingness to accept his role as husband as well (KM, p. 229).

That Pat has moved on to another stage in his process of self-discovery now that he has reconciled himself to the death of his "hero's dream," and to his roles as husband and father, is obvious. Cohen even foreshadows this character development in an earlier scene in which Pat is thinking about Lynn, and he "wanted to see his own bastard child survive one more day just in case she turned into someone, in case he learned how to love her" (KM, p. 69). She is also the one who could help him fill that "unfillable need" and allow him to become "his own true self" (KM, p. 69). The anticipation of self-discovery and self-possession is also revealed here. Pat believes that he "could finally...come into true possession of himself" and reach that "absolute centre of his own being" (KM, p. 69).

Although this complete control and self-possession never occurs for Pat, he does seem to realize a great deal about himself, and to redirect his life more towards achieving ethical and moral goals. His life of profligacy and alcoholism seems to be behind him after he settles in with Kitty, and the fact that he will return to her at the end of the day strongly suggests the possibility of a lasting and more solid relationship. The "Sweet Second Summer" referred to

in the title will belong as much to Pat as to Kitty, and could symbolize a 'sweet second' chance at making their lives work. For Pat in particular, the beginning of his married life represents the end of the confusing first stage of his process of self-discovery and self-realization, and the beginning of another stage which could prove to be more spiritually satisfying for him.

Although Cohen's account of Kitty's development has been criticized for its superficiality, especially by such critics as Margot Northey and R.P. Bilan, we are given more details of her past than for many of Cohen's other characters.[32] Her search for happiness and peace of mind is one marked by confusion, broken dreams, disappointments, and loss, which are caused by several well described incidents that have profound and irreparable effects on her. The death of her father when she is a child, Pat's denial of her love when she is nineteen, and her failed marriage with Randy Blair, which ends when she is twenty-two, become experiences which collectively form the preparatory stage of her search for self-knowledge. In this stage Cohen introduces the "veil" and "gap" metaphors in conjunction with the idea that self-deception leads to a "false life," as a means of elucidating Kitty's psychological problems.

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[32] R.P. Bilan, rev. of The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone, by Matt Cohen, University of Toronto Quarterly, 49, No. 4 (1980), 328-29.

The most traumatic event to occur early in Kitty's life is the death of her father in a car accident, a fate similar to that suffered by Laurel's parents in Wooden Hunters. As Cohen describes it:

> When her parents were killed it had seemed as if a veil had been torn away and Kitty Malone had found a space in herself that was only dark, only wanted to cry, only wanted to hide.
>
> (KM, p. 82)

She becomes totally hysterical at the funeral and has to be led away by her brother, Charlie, to the edge of the cemetery. There she looks down over a cliff at a railway line, but sees instead "only a complete gap in herself that could never be closed" (KM, p. 29). The psychological repercussions of her father's death not only leave her with a sense of irredeemable loss, but also cause her to feel emotionally vulnerable and exposed, and spiritually enervated. In contrast to Laurel, who left her parents' funeral feeling "Only vaguely empty and vaguely sad" (WH, p. 44), Kitty is inundated by feelings of intense tragedy. Cohen is now intensifying his characters' reactions to what Hatch refers to as "felt experience" (Hatch, p. 205), in order to show the fragility of an individual, such as Kitty, in the face of a not uncommon realistic occurrence. In retrospect, we find that "No loss or betrayal ever shook her as much again, but there were two events that came very close (KM, p. 21).

One of these is Pat's rejection of her. Three years after her father's death she finds herself attracted to Pat Frank, and with the somewhat feral and lascivious relationship that develops, she feels that "the place torn open by her father's death had begun to heal" (KM, p. 82). Then, the second emotional catastrophe occurs when one night Pat tells her he loves her, but then rejects her by saying "I'm too old. You have to make your own life" (KM, p. 83). Cohen continues to use the "veil" metaphor to describe how "The veil was ripped away again" (KM, p. 83), and how

> The first time, when her father died, she had passively cried, this time she turned her back on Pat Frank, ran through the fields to her house, and sat on the porch the whole night, clutching her stomach, every few minutes leaning over the rail to retch.
>
> (KM, p. 83)

This incident compounds her emotional problems and precipitates her escape to Toronto, a trip which complements those taken by Johnny Crackle, Richard, Erik, Laurel, Calvin, and Theodore, in the early stages of their spiritual development.

Soon after her arrival in Toronto, Kitty tries to penetrate the confusion of her emotions only to realize that "it wasn't the same as when her father had been killed; what she felt with not empty, but bitter -- not so much betrayed by Pat as by herself" (KM, p. 83). This sense of betrayal becomes one of the causes of her need to retreat into herself,

to hide from the image of herself she thinks is responsible for her problems and failures. The consequences of this running away from her true self lead her to an affair with Randy Blair, and eventually to a false conviction that she is actually in love with him. She tries to convince herself that marriage will work, and concedes to that "false life" she vowed "she would never lead" (KM, p. 94).

The options open to Kitty at this point in her life are comparable to those open to Richard when he is thirty-three years old surveying his farm with Miranda. His choice to be a farmer and his idealization of farm life lead him to self-deception and to a 'false centre,' just as Kitty has chosen to marry Randy and lead that "false life" with him. She knows she is not in love with him, and confesses at one point that "Somehow that place in her that had been exposed by Pat Frank was covered over now so thick she could hardly sense herself with Randy" (KM, p. 89). Eventually, however, Randy becomes intolerable, and she decides to leave him. She is able to experience those feelings of 'rebirth' at a much earlier age than Richard, and manages to discern the truth of her situation before it is too late.

Cohen's use of the 'rebirth' motif here helps to depict Kitty's psychological transformation from emotional and spiritual immaturity, which is symptomized by her self-deception, to a growing maturity, which results from her acceptance of the harsh, trying, vagaries of life. To

demonstrate how this transformation occurs, Cohen also uses references to the gap Kitty feels exists in her spirituality, and the veil which she uses to hide that gap; to her "private world" where she escapes from her fears; to her identity crisis in which the image of Kitty as a "crazy old woman" (KM, p. 190) is pitted against the image of her as a "formal and rejuvenated" woman (KM, p. 195); and to her "shifting eyes" which symbolize her spiritual insecurity.

The scene at Union Station is an important one because it occurs not only on Kitty's birthday, but also at the exact hour that she was born. This becomes very significant when viewed in relation to the fact that Kitty is starting a new life on her own back in her home town. The emphasis on time, in the form of dates and clocks in this scene, increases its symbolic meaning, especially in terms of the 'rebirth' motif. It seems that Cohen is setting up, in one scene, a parallel to Theodore's escape from Vancouver shortly after his twenty-seventh birthday. Both Kitty and Theodore are imbued with a rejuvenated sense of self that enables them to shake off the languor that results from leading a leisure "false life." Like Theodore's trip, Kitty's is also a return to a new life and freedom, an escape from the prison of self-delusion. Once on the train "she didn't care, she felt free at last" (KM, p. 24). But her 'rebirth,' like those experienced by most of Cohen's main characters, is a painful one which includes moments of agony and doubt.

Even as she approaches Salem, she thinks "she was coming back alone and defeated" (KM, p. 25). When she does arrive there and settles in, she tries to sleep, but then "felt the need to close off and retreat" (KM, p. 31). Then she thinks about her mother and these feelings dissipate. She regains her mental equilibrium when she realizes that

> in that place she had found empty when she cried for her father, she felt her mother's presence growing again, this half-bald lady's love filling her up like a well rising with water.
>
> (KM, pp. 33-34)

This feeling of satisfaction suffuses her consciousness and leads to tranquility when she thinks that "for the first time in years it seemed her mind had gone peacefully bland, ready to receive the summer" (KM, p. 34). It continues to dominate her moods until she thinks her past marriage, the change in her name it brings, and the division that that change represents between her past life and her present one. Her identity crisis becomes part of the rebirth process, in which Kitty alternately seems to break out of and retreat into her "private world" or "cocoon" (KM, p. 67).

George Woodcock says of Theodore in The Colours of War that he finds "all the promises of the future are illusory in comparison with the rediscovery of roots and of Matt Cohen's wry equivalent of Voltaire's cultivation of one's garden" (Woodcock, "Armies," p. 146). Kitty makes a similar

discovery when she returns to Salem to nurture her burgeoning sense of identity, or metaphorically, to 'cultivate her own garden.' The discrepancies between illusion and reality, past and present, and city and farm, loom large in Kitty's mind while she is reacquainting herself with her parents' farm, and lead towards the development of her dual sense of identity.

On a nostalgic walk towards her grandfather's house, the very question of her identity surfaces as she thinks of her recent change in names:

> Kitty Malone she had been. Kitty Blair she had become. And now she was going to be Kitty Malone again.... But though the night was waiting and it was her own name she was trying to come to, she knew she would never meet her old self again.
>
> (KM, p. 35)

This passage reveals the first strong evidence of the widening gap that has occurred in Kitty between her present and past lives and the images associated with each. From that moment on, she carries two images of herself with her: one of the old gullible Kitty, the other of the new independent Kitty. On the next page she thinks of these two images when she imagines "She felt like a double image: every gesture she made imposed on the gesture she used to make" (KM, p. 36).

The dual images vary in form in Kitty's mind, and don't really become a problem until the day of Ellen's funeral

when she dresses to go to the cemetery. While standing beside the sink in the kitchen, she glances in the mirror and

> She saw herself looking drawn, so worried she hardly would have recognized herself...and suddenly she saw she had become one of those old and crazy women she had always imagined, a crazy old woman with her insides choked sterile and her face bone-dry twisted around her crazy eyes.
>
> (KM, p. 190)

The problem, here, again becomes one of self-perception. When Kitty looks in the mirror she sees not only the flesh and bones Kitty, but also the image of herself that she is hiding in her mind, the mental image of herself that reveals her fears, her weaknesses, and her uncertainties. The "amazingly proper, even formal" (KM, p. 194) Kitty conflicts with the "crazy old woman" (KM, p. 190) image that she is harbouring in her mind. Her identity syndrome is similar in many respects to Calvin's in Wooden Hunters, who juxtaposes the image of himself as a "resigned prisoner" (WH, p. 13) with that of the free insouciant outdoorsman. Both characters slowly grow into their newer images and out of their older ones.

The image of the "formal and rejuvenated" Kitty seems to be that of the new Kitty who is finding a better life with Pat (KM, p. 195). The other image of the "crazy old woman," who is uncontained, might be the woman she was becoming while she was living with Randy Blair in Toronto. Evidence

to support this idea comes a little later when she is thinking of herself looking in the mirror, and

> for a moment the panic started to rise and she saw herself again in Randy's mirror, the woman-in-blue, the woman in the movie, narrow and uncontained. In the movie the glass cracked; the image split in two. Right now that was all she was: one woman split in two by these two men, by her children by them, by her own conflicting feelings.
>
> (KM, p. 199)

These insights enable her to establish a certain context for her life. She feels caught in that "force field of existence" with equal forces pulling her in opposite directions. The tension reduces her to an amorphous personality who can do nothing until one of the forces, either Randy or Pat, loses his influence over her. During her stay in hospital, where she is having a cyst removed, the forces seem equal when she imagines both of them joined as one force, one father for her children: "Randy and Pat -- their two heads rising out of one body, RandyPat the brand new Dad" (KM, pp. 157-58). After Pat and she are married, her thoughts of Randy dissolve and Pat takes the ascendancy.

The resulting release of tension leaves her with a curiously detached sensation where "She felt far away from herself" (KM, p. 199). In one scene, where Pat, Lynn, and she are out walking, she sees the three of them from an external point of view "and her sense of self was snapping

back and forth" (KM, pp. 199-200). These sensations are symptoms of her psychological transfiguration from the old self-deceiving Kitty to the new self-respecting Kitty. Lynn observes the change in her in the scene where the three of them go for a walk after Ellen's funeral:

> Ever since she had come back from the hospital Kitty had been almost impossible to recognize, her face dissolving into so many lines and worries it seemed she was trying to turn into someone else.
>
> (KM, p. 200)

In her abject despair, Kitty experiences a catharsis which, along with her marriage, leads her to the second stage of her process of self-discovery. This progression occurs around the time of her wedding celebration, which also doubles as a funeral party for Ellen, and is marked by her confirmation

> that after twenty years of messing around and being divided she had somehow tried to settle the whole entire mess she'd made, tried to put Randy Blair behind her and start to make whatever life she could with Pat. At least she was trying.
>
> (KM, p. 205)

Her relationship with Pat draws her away from her past and her old image towards the present and her new image. In this second stage of her process of self-discovery, Kitty is apt to perceive herself more as a self-confident, self-

controlled, and stable woman who has partially conquered her old persistent fears. In one scene after their wedding night, when Pat and Kitty are in bed, Kitty becomes afraid and begins to "feel the echo of the old panic welling up in her, but stronger yet was the need to touch him and be close. The fear slipped away" (KM, p. 230).

The final confirmation of her new resolve and strength comes in the final line of the novel where Kitty "was standing straight, ready to live out the warm endless summer ahead" (KM, p. 233). She has finally effaced the pungent memories and illusions of her past from her consciousness, and has begun to look to the present and the future as new grounds for discovery. Woodcock seems to suggest this himself when he comments that "it is only when she has finally surrendered the possibilities and illusions of youth that Kitty can really find herself" (Woodcock, "Armies," p. 147).

The connotations evoked by the adjectives "warm" and "endless" intimate a note of optimism for her future. If we relate this positive outlook to the theme of self-discovery, it would suggest that Kitty would have further success in finding her way towards her spiritual 'centre.' It would be pointless to speculate on the degree of her success in coming to realize the dimensions and depth of her true self beyond this final scene. The fact that Cohen allows her to attain such a position at the end of the novel at all is significant.

Critics such as John Mills, Anthony Brennan, and Peter Martin have interpreted the ending of this novel as a validation of the tenacious desire in Cohen's characters to achieve spiritual amelioration.[33] Martin, for example, declares that, in Kitty Malone, "the message is bold. Matt Cohen tells us that people can love each other, that true love can survive the manifold frailties of the lovers, and that a sweet second summer is ours if we want it" (Martin, p. 79). Brennan echoes Martin in suggesting that "in the end," Cohen's characters "persist with a gritty sense that fleeting joys are not over and that squeezing the last drop from the lemon is what we are committed to" (Brennan, p. 139). The most direct and strongest comment on Cohen's optimism, though, comes from John Mills, who compares the endings to The Disinherited and Kitty Malone:

> The pessimism which seems callow in the first novel and which charges his prose with a certain dreariness...is muted in the second and compensated if not by a 'yes-saying' finale, then at least with a 'perhaps.'
>
> (Mills, p. 144)

I believe Kitty Malone to be Cohen's most optimistic novel so far in dealing with the complexities inherent in close human relationships. The subject of this novel and

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[33]Peter Martin, "Two Lives At the End of Twenty Years," rev. of The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone by Matt Cohen, Tamarack Review, No. 79 (1979), pp. 77-9.

the realistic treatment he gives it are, themselves, a reflection of Cohen's growing concern with the inner workings of common people. Because of the social and psychological realism which permeates all aspects of the novel, and because Cohen takes his two main characters through the "grey aching maze" of their own failures, it is safe to say that he is continuing to reaffirm his faith in the ability of each individual to overcome the forces that threaten their emotional and spiritual health.

In his review of Kitty Malone, Ronald Hatch comments that Cohen's characters are

> not independent beings making rational choices, but characters who are very much part of a web of traditions and social forces, and who are attempting to battle themselves free to some kind of personal validity.
>
> (Hatch, p. 203)

I believe that most of Cohen's major characters are "independent beings making rational choices" and that they are also partly influenced by that "web of traditions and social forces." From Korsoniloff to Kitty Malone, Cohen has shown repeatedly that individuals can extricate themselves from the prehensile grip of an engulfing society, that they can avoid being "one of the millions of peripheral existences that the city pulls into its edges, make-believe destinies that it uses to fuel itself" (D, p. 212). If there is a developing philosophy in Cohen's writing, it is based on the

premise that an individual can "create order," to a certain extent, out of the maelstrom of forces that confront that individual every day. Some of his characters, such as Johnny Crackle, Erik, Laurel, and Calvin, do manage to assert their individuality, however precarious that assertion may be. Cohen's faith in the individual human spirit to survive the mire of emotional and spiritual despair is evident in his characters' pertinacious drives to elude what Johnny Crackle might refer to as "condition zero" (JCS, p. 89), and in their growth from a stage of disorientation to a state of spiritual cognizance. In Kitty Malone, Pat and Kitty were able to realize the circular patterns their lives were following, and to break away from the tyranny of routine and self-deception that created these patterns. Cohen, the sometimes beneficent ruler of his fictional societies, grants each character a certain amount of freedom and authority to determine his or her destiny. Given that the characters are psychologically normal, in most respects, and are not bombarded by insurmountable problems, it is possible for them to approach self-discovery, to recognize the seeds of their spirituality, and to watch them fructify. If, however, they cannot escape that perpetual cycle of routine, they are doomed to suffer a stereotypical existence created for them by the masters or leaders of society.

These stereotypical characters are never really fleshed out in Cohen's novels and are usually portrayed as vague

groups of amorphous personalities. The high school graduates at Johnny Crackle's graduation beach party, the doctors in the Kingston hospital in The Disinherited, the passengers on the train in The Colours of War, and the wedding party which drives under Kitty's balcony in Kitty Malone are examples of the general populace who are society's sheep. They are not individuals because their individuality has been swallowed by the systems, regulations, and rituals of their urban environment. Only those who recognize their uniqueness, and who are capable of clear perception, survive. This is why there are no heroes in Cohen's novels, only survivors.

CHAPTER SIX

FLOWERS OF DARKNESS

The publication of Flowers of Darkness, the last novel in the Salem series, has drawn only mild responses from Cohen's critics. Ranging from low-keyed, slightly negative comments to restrained, and equally subdued, praise, the criticism seems shallow, uninspired, and without substance. All that Jon Kertzer has to say about the novel, in the way of criticism, is that it is "self-sufficient," but that its author "does not quite succeed with his villainous hero."[34] Woodcock managed to write two reviews, one for Canadian Literature and another for Books In Canada. Both, however, are superficial and insipid. In Canadian Literature, the extent of his critical comments lies in his praise of Cohen's "luminous clarity of description,"[35] while his review in Books In Canada charges Cohen with being "a shade

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[34]Jon Kertzer, rev. of Flowers of Darkness by Matt Cohen, Fiddlehead, No. 131 (1982), p. 84.

[35]George Woodcock, "Twice As Natural," rev. of Flowers of Darkness by Matt Cohen, Canadian Literature, No. 89 (1981), p. 139.

melodramatic."[36]

Other reviewers, including Helen Hoy and Wayne Grady, refuse to be critical at all, and concern themselves only with plot summaries.[37] Douglas Hill ventures a little further than the others to suggest that this novel is "mature and intriguing fiction," and then fills the remainder of his review with brief comments on Cohen's style, technical accomplishments, and themes.[38] Like most of the other critics, he skims along the surface of the book highlighting various points, but fails to provide a perspective from which the reader can view the novel as a whole. Almost all the reviewers mention the ideas of fate and destiny, and the characters' attempts to impose order on the chaos that has disrupted their emotional and spiritual lives, but, again, their field of vision is too narrow to explain the book in terms of Cohen's basic philosophical standpoint. Flowers of Darkness needs to be seen from a wider, panoramic perspective, and viewed in the

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[36]George Woodcock, "Shady leaves of destiny," rev. of Flowers of Darkness by Matt Cohen, Books In Canada, Mar. 1981, p. 12.

[37]Helen Hoy, rev. of Flowers of Darkness by Matt Cohen, University of Toronto Quarterly, No. 51 (1982), pp. 327-28; Wayne Grady, "Cohen's Chronicle," rev. of Flowers of Darkness by Matt Cohen, Saturday Night, No. 96 (1981), pp. 50-1.

[38]Douglas Hill, "Finger on the pulse of a human mosaic," rev. of Flowers of Darkness by Matt Cohen, Maclean's, 16 Mar. 1981, p. 57.

context of Cohen's other novels and his developing socio-philosophical vision.

Questions need to be proposed and answered such as to what extent are the characters free to create their own order, or their own fate or destiny and to what degree are they restricted by society, or by their own passions and ideals from attaining psychological growth and self-discovery? The majority of critics already mentioned would agree on two major points concerning these questions. First, the characters are not free to shape or control their fates at all, and second, because of this, they experience no spiritual growth. Woodcock, for example, declares that Cohen's characters in Flowers of Darkness

> are not really free beings. They are shaped to their fates like Annabelle's clay puppets. And they destroy themselves because they remain the same. As characters they do not grow...
>
> (Woodcock, "Twice As Natural," p. 139)

Grady suggests that "an abstract and impersonal fate moves the stock characters in Cohen's morality play," and that they experience "no self-discovery" (Grady, "Cohen's Chronicle," p. 51). Kertzer, too, suggests a similar idea when he states that "Cohen's own characters are adrift in a timeless inner world of greed and the senses, a world they cannot control" (Kertzer, rev. in Fiddlehead, p. 84).

It is my contention that in the fictional society depicted in Flowers of Darkness, and the other Salem novels as well, the characters are able to order and control their lives to a certain degree, and, to attain certain levels of self-discovery. They can do this by fully understanding the "connections" and commitments they have with other people, the consequences of not honouring these commitments, and the problems associated with the social 'masks' they wear to cover their baser, primitive instincts and desires. Admittedly, only one character, the Rev. Gordon Finch, is able to achieve any noticeable progress towards self-discovery and self-control in this novel. Maureen, Finch's wife, and Annabelle Jamieson, Finch's mistress, try to maintain control over their lives and strive for self-discovery, but they are never able to override the religious and social influences that Salem society has on them.

The idea of interrelationships among Cohen's characters can be seen most plainly in "the rings of dancing figures" which "had been intended to symbolize...the connections people had to each other -- the connections which they themselves were unaware" (FD, p. 15). This network of connections, which could represent the tapestry of life, is also objectified in Annabelle's mosaic of Salem. It is, in fact, Cohen's small scale model of civilization which he uses to carry out a study of its inhabitants who are desperately seeking self-fulfillment. For Annabelle, it was meant to

"depict 'the human condition, the agony and the ecstasy, the glorious, suffering, wonderful ordeal and history of mankind'" (FD, p. 55). On another level, it could represent a model of the Kingston area society, which Wayne Grady suggests is Cohen's "microcosm of Canadian cultural identity" (Grady, "Cohen's Chronicle," p. 50). In this mosaic, the success of the characters in creating their own fate and moving towards self-discovery depends on their strength and determination to remove the social masks they wear and come to terms with the real images underneath.

As with many of his characters, Cohen's three central figures in this novel develop two contrasting sides to their personalities, and consequently come to live 'double lives' (FD, p. 156). He endows them with more than their share of sexuality, and then places them in a society where they have to control their primal instincts in order to become acceptable. The side they present to society is often a "mask" which symbolizes false control and covers their less acceptable qualities. The drama in this novel develops when the characters lose control over their desires and allow their passions to dictate their behavior. Annabelle, for example, becomes so desirous of Finch that she drops the mask of Annabelle Jamieson, the wife, and becomes Annabelle, the mistress. Finch removes the preacher's mask to become the philanderer, while Maureen struggles to the end to keep her mask of piety covering her desires for love, romance, and freedom. When

the characters learn the nature of the images behind the masks and learn to assert control over that nature, then they have moved towards self-discovery.

The dominant characteristic of Finch's real nature is lust. It is "the curse that rules his life" and the demon that has imprisoned his soul (FD, p. 199). His process of self-discovery can be divided into two stages which show him trying to struggle with this demon. The first stage involves his attempts to quell his sexual voracity after his wife is crippled with arthritis. Cohen uses images of Finch as a prophet and devil to personify the inner conflict Finch faces. During most of this period, which extends up to the confession scenes in his lawyer's office and in his church, he is portrayed as a demoniacal figure who uses lust as a means of easing his "tension" and satisfying his "need" (FD, p. 199). His lack of control over his lewd desires causes him much guilt, and it is not until he admits his sins to the congregation that he is able to alleviate his mental suffering.

The confession scenes themselves represent a transitional phase for Finch much like those experienced by Calvin and Laurel, Theodore, and Kitty and Pat. Cohen does not use the rebirth motif in this case, but he does use swimming imagery and the ideas of purification and catharsis which accompany the baptismal ceremony.

After these scenes, Finch realizes that he has crossed a "dividing line," much as Pat does, and is about to enter a new period of peace (FD, p. 232). During this time he also realizes that the moments of serenity are mixed with pain and sadness, and that a pall of gloom hangs over his spiritual triumph. He has no idea, though, of the opprobrium that Maureen has experienced because of his public confession, or the tragic act of vindication she has planned for him.

Although Maureen and Annabelle never make any progress in their attempts at self-discovery, they do endure prolonged inner struggles to realize the nature of their spiritualities which are imprisoned behind their social masks. Their failures have to be discussed because they reflect Cohen's negative vision of the possibilities for self-discovery, and reveal his idea of the strength that social and religious influences can have on some people in determining their fates.

In contrast to Finch, Maureen never even makes it past her own frustrations and confusion over her physical handicap, or her tempestuous relationship with her husband. Her life, up to the time she is stricken with arthritis, is a fantasy story for her; she is a radiant young beauty, a wild and carefree creature who is sincerely devoted to her mother, and later to her religion. When she marries Finch, however, she leaves the Catholic Church for Finch's Protestant Church of the New Age. Her change from Catholicism to Protestantism and her paralyzing arthritis work together to cause her

intense guilt and physical pain. She is never able to break out of that."glass cage of fear and sin" she constructs for herself, and she eventually becomes very emotionally withdrawn and mentally unbalanced (FD, p. 44). Although she never actually makes any progress towards self-discovery she does strive towards self-knowledge.

Annabelle seems to occupy a middle ground in relation to Finch and Maureen with regard to her drive for self-discovery. She makes a resolute attempt to control her life but never has the courage to move out of her comfortable situation with Allen. She seems to be on the verge of making some progress towards a first stage of spiritual development at several points in the novel, but is afraid to upset the precarious balance in her life that she has already achieved. Her decision to remain where she is dooms her to a life of private resignation, a life which could lead her to becoming like Maureen, a 'flower of darkness.' Unlike Finch, she does not have the courage or determination to straighten out her complex of problems.

Finch's life, up to the time Maureen becomes stricken with arthritis, is reasonably satisfying for him despite the fact he had to wait six years before he could marry her. Maureen fulfills his expectations of her as a good wife and lover, and provides him with two daughters. Then, with the increasing severity of her arthritis, she becomes confined to the house and has to use crutches, and finally a wheelchair,

in order to move around. It is at this point that it becomes extremely painful for Maureen to make love to Finch, and, consequently, their relationship begins to fail. Because of Finch's lust and passion, he seeks sexual satisfaction outside their marriage. In his relationship with Annabelle, he realizes that his lust

> was beyond his control; it was a force that he eagerly gave in to, a force like changing light in the sky or the delicious sound of popular leaves -- but stronger, irresistible, because it was the curse that ruled his life; it had nothing to do with other people, was only a blind compulsion to satisfy what could never be satisfied, to drain away the tension and need.
>
> (FD, p. 199)

Finch's realization that his lust for women is destroying his marriage and making him a hypocrite in his own church provides him with a clearer understanding of his broadening problem than he ever had before. The most salient characteristic of this first stage is his endeavors to exert a commanding control over his prurience, and to conform more to his role as a preacher than to his role as philanderer. The second most important feature of this stage is his failure in these endeavors. Despite the remorse he feels over his betrayal of Maureen, his need for involvement with other women overpowers any other, and he becomes a victim of his own sexuality. His preacher's 'mask' begins to dissolve, his congregation knows of his extra-marital affairs, and instead of "entering

a long and well-earned prime," he finds his life becoming more confused and difficult to live.

To illustrate the dual nature of Finch's personality, Cohen associates Finch both with images of the devil and images of a prophet. During his first stage he is referred to as "a tin-pot shaman" (FD, p. 56), "God's messenger" (FD, p. 72), a "lunatic" prophet (FD, p. 119), and a "devil" (FD, pp. 121, 127). Only after his confession in church does he sincerely consider himself more the prophet figure than the satanic figure.

The first important step Finch takes to alleviate the guilt he feels is to confess to Allen, Annabelle's husband, that he has been having an affair with Annabelle. The decision to confess is a spontaneous one for Finch:

> the confession hadn't been planned. It had been a sudden inspiration, right in Allen's office. The idea had come to him and it had instantly felt so pure and so right that he had simply leaned over the desk...and said 'Mr. Jamieson, we all sin; I have sinned with you wife.'
>
> (FD, p. 197)

After he realizes what he had done, he

> knew that with his own words he had not only ended the affair with Annabelle Jamieson but that he had also begun his final confrontation with the town.
>
> (FD, p. 197)

Finch knows he is changing direction, beginning to take control of his emotions, and starting to repent for his sins. The feeling is a gratifying one for him, and immediately after, he feels that "with this confession the pain that had been knotted inside him for weeks had started to ease" (FD, p. 197). But there is also another less gratifying feeling which comes a little later when he thinks that Allen's response "held the key to his future" (FD, p. 197). After Allen has forgiven him, instead of feeling jubilant, he becomes disconsolate:

> Finch had started talking but he already knew that his confession had been wasted on this lawyer: nothing was changed. There was no secret key to the future. He couldn't even find the door.
>
> (FD, p. 198)

Later, he thinks his future will be "blank and empty" (FD, p. 200), and doesn't experience any great sense of elation about his confession because he still cannot understand himself or Annabelle, who was

> like a part of himself, a secret twin who was beyond being judged, beyond ever understanding: a secret fact of nature as opaque to him as was his own inner self.
>
> (FD, p. 196)

Finch's final meeting with Annabelle comes soon after his confession in Allen's office. It is important because the revelations he experiences during this time help him

strengthen his determination to conquer his weaknesses, and to achieve a release from his spiritual troubles.

Besides reflecting on the dominant role lust has played in his life, the bleak future that lies ahead for him, and the pressures that his marriage and the townspeople are putting on him, Finch also thinks of his immediate situation with Annabelle, who has become an "extension of his own shadowed self" (FD, p. 201). Cohen uses the swimming metaphor again, as he did in Wooden Hunters, this time to help explain Finch's feelings in the scene where he is making love to Annabelle. He feels that he is

> swimming the river of all the women who had given themselves to him. And this swimming appeared to him suddenly as a long and endless ceremony, a mating without purpose:
>
> (FD, p. 201)

He realizes that it is not the "children" or the "climax" that he felt was most important

> but just the ritual itself, the slow and constant swimming, the long climb through the water: all he wanted was that it should last forever: all he wanted was that his body and hers join with the spirit of the river: all he wanted was that the river finally find his soul and release him from the life he had been condemned to.
>
> (FD, p. 201)

Cohen again uses water as a symbol for cleansing and purifying, as he does in Johnny Crackle Sings, Wooden Hunters, and The Colours Of War. But, as in these novels, the act of purification and the catharsis which should accompany it never occur without emotional and spiritual pain. When Annabelle leaves him at the end of this scene, he knows that "they would be separate again, lost" (FD, p. 201). He also feels "sad, driven down so deep into himself" (FD, p. 204), and thinks "about his own broken heart, his bleeding heart emptying into and filling the red lake of his own slow dying" (FD, p. 205).

The confession scene in Allen's office, and this final seduction scene, represent a prelude to Finch's confession in church, and a transition from his first stage to a second stage in which he actually makes progress in his attempt to get to know his 'opaque inner self' (FD, p. 196).

In the confession scene in church, Finch ultimately fulfills his dynamic role as preacher. His testimony in the pulpit moves the hearts of his congregation so that he appears to be "nothing but an image of strength and silence" (FD, p. 215). He explains that this particular sermon is "a turning point" (FD, p. 216), and goes on to relate the poignant story of his apostasy:

> it was a twist of fate that pulled the ground from under my feet; and since that time, friends, since that time I have been cowering in a dark corner of

> my soul; I have been cowering in the dark hell of my own guilt and damnation because I did not have the courage to face God and ask him His forgiveness.
>
> (FD., p. 217)

It is not until two days later, though, that he thinks of the cathartic effects of his ordeal in the pulpit. While standing in his barn door after milking the cows one morning, he realizes that

> since he had preached,...he had felt the whole time since, a wonderful relief, an exhausted conviction that he had stood up in the pulpit and had managed to pass through the knot at the centre of his own life, throw off and break the curse that had been handed down from his father.
>
> (FD, p. 231)

He has made some progress towards self-discovery because "he had for once turned his oratory to good purpose, had for once struck back at the demon that grasped his soul" (FD, 231). This conquest over his demoniac side and his lust mitigates his sense of guilt so that

> Since the sermon things had changed inside himself, and he had felt, if not cleansed, at least as if he had crossed a dividing line and was capable of starting to clear a new place in his life. And he felt, too, that with the sermon had been released all the fatigue of the past few years.
>
> (FD, p. 232)

But the damage is already done. Finch, although he has succeeded in rectifying his own spiritual problems, has overlooked the fact that his sexual debaucheries have worked to the detriment of Maureen's moral, emotional, and mental health. With his confession, he has publicly embarrassed her, and deprived her of any self-respect she might have had left. The disgrace she feels becomes too much for her, and so she seeks revenge in the form of murder. Finch may have crossed that "dividing line" in his life, but he can look forward to no "warm endless summer ahead" (KM, p. 233). The law of "chance" has worked through that "twist of fate" that Finch says he experienced, but the law of "nature," too, works on him in the form of Maureen's revenge. Her extreme reaction to Finch's involvement with Nellie Tillson might be considered insane, but Finch's lie on the Bible and his refusal to keep his affair with Nellie as private as possible provoke her beyond her limits. Finch's problem, then, is his failure to recognize and consider the "clear and simple truth, the beautiful map of what each person was doing to every other person" (FD, p. 39). If Cohen can tell the heart warming story of how two characters like Pat and Kitty can overcome their differences to find a life together, he can also tell the tragic story of what happens when two people fail to fulfill the commitments they have made to each other. Cohen does not sympathize with his characters in Flowers Of Darkness, or become overly sentimental about

them. The action and the characters may be melodramatic but the same mechanical rules of the universe, the "same gods, the same laws of chance and nature" prevail here as in his other novels.

Each character is, in fact, a subject for Cohen to experiment with for the purpose of testing his or her potential and capabilities in the "laboratory of LIFE," much as George Eliot uses hers in Middlemarch. He subjects them to emotional and mental pressures that are generated by society, the family, or by an identity crisis, to see how they respond and whether or not they can survive. Some experience that "twist of fate" that can drastically alter the course of their lives or even kill them, while others, such as Donna Wilson, live happily on, untouched by extraordinary events (FD, p. 217). But unlike the consummate scientist, Cohen does not provide explicit concise statements which summarize the conclusions of his experiment. Instead, he accepts the variety of his characters' responses and their rate of survival as conclusions on their own, without the intrusion of judgmental or evaluative morals. There are no easily applicable formulas for success in life attached to the ending of Flowers of Darkness, only the eerie feeling that an individual's search for self-knowledge can more often end with sensations of futility and tragedy than with euphoria. Still, Cohen seems to advocate the need for inner explorations and discoveries.

It is again ironic that the only character to achieve any control over his life, and to reach a point where self-knowledge is possible, becomes the victim of an insane act. This act, though, is precipitated by Finch's neglect for his wife's feelings and dignity. If the emotions in this novel were running at a lower level, Maureen might have forgiven Finch and we might have had another version of The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone. But Flowers of Darkness is Kitty Malone taken a step higher on the emotional ladder, and with the heightened emotional states come the abandonment of reason and the loss of behavioral control.

Maureen's attempts at self-discovery start with her early commitments to her Catholic faith, to her mother, and later to Finch and his religion. She, like Finch, tries to find answers to religious questions which would in turn help insure their spiritual well-being. From her youth, she remembers the happiness she experienced from enjoying and nurturing the wild and free side of her nature, but sacrifices that in order to fulfill her religious and moral duties. The realizations she makes after her marriage to Finch show her her mistakes. Because she can never overcome her guilt, or fully accept the tragedy of her physical condition, she can never act on her own self-knowledge. Although she has the potential, Finch's disgrace destroys her completely, and she is never able to move into that first stage of her process of self-discovery.

As a young woman of twenty-two, Maureen has so much to look forward to, her beauty, her vivacity, her heritage, and her religion. Then, the twenty-five year old Rev. Gordon Finch enters the scene one day, seduces her in a ditch, and makes her feel "the need to finally take the chance, break apart the glass cage of fear and sin that had encased her for twenty-two years" (FD, p. 44). This is when she becomes confused in her devotion to her Church. She feels the need to be free of the restrictions the Church has imposed on her, but at the same time, feeling obliged to stand by its creeds. Her solution is to go to confession where she cries:

> and as she cried she dug her fists into her eyes, hating her tears and everything in her that they represented: the craziness, the temper, worst of all the wilfulness that had pushed her through the convent school in Toronto...
>
> (FD, p. 44)

As part of her penance, she goes to Toronto to train as a "nursing sister" (FD, p. 134). But while she is there she writes a letter to Finch and lies to him. She tells him she planned to go to Toronto anyway. The importance of this action is that in mailing the letter she knows "the instant the red mailbox drawer swung shut that she had, once and for all, broken the hold of the church" (FD, p. 135). Maureen then returns to Salem to take care of her sick mother, and continues to write Finch, but refuses to marry him until her mother dies. When this happens, she is converted to the Protestant

faith, and gives herself entirely to him until her arthritis reduces her to an invalid. From then until Finch's affair with Nellie, Maureen experiences a slow desiccation of her emotional and spiritual life. She eventually refuses Finch's affection, and refuses to make love to him. She also wavers in her devotion to the Protestant Church, and recites her Catholic prayers:

> The Catholic prayers she had once tried to give up for him. Did he know that she longed for confession, the close safe darkness of the priest's box where she could whisper out her sins of pride, her refusal to give her husband his rights, and, worst of the worst, her failure to bring her daughters up in the church?

(FD, p. 186)

Maureen seems to be under the heavy influence of the Catholic faith, one of the systems which Cohen could be warning us about in Korsoniloff:

> ...the gut is where it's all taken in.... The gut is jammed into patterns...Passageways are twisted and contorted so that the slightest deviation will produce terror and pain and thus normalization.

(K, p. 72).

The discrepancy between what the Catholic Church expects of her and what she actually does causes her deep contrition. She does at times break out of that "glass cage," but more often than not she reverts to "the flat black street of her

own duty" as she does in the confession booth in Kingston (FD, p. 45).

Finally, because of the burden of her guilt, the opprobrium of Finch's philandering, and the overwhelming sense of her own physical tragedy, Maureen loses her mental equilibrium and kills Finch, Mandowski, and herself. Her last act is a desperate and almost impossible attempt to ride her horse, Sean, one more time. It represents her wish to regain the innocence and freedom she once had as a younger woman, and which is symbolized by the "rose shard" she keeps (FD, p. 237). This shard also associates Maureen with the "flower grown in darkness" image mentioned earlier in the novel (FD, p. 50). Light is to flowers what love and affection are to human beings, and because Maureen has lived in practical isolation in a home devoid of love and affection, she fails to reach spiritual maturity. She dies unable to resolve the question of her religious devotion, and unable to accept the tragedy of her health and marriage. She has become "a victim of her own strange beauty, of her wandering husband, of the illness that had forced her to watch passively" (FD, p. 51).

Annabelle's attempts at self-discovery can be subdivided chronologically into four different periods. The first period spans the time when she is with Isaac; the second, when she meets and marries Allen; the third, when she meets Finch; and the fourth, when Finch is killed and she returns

to Allen. Like Maureen, Annabelle learns many important things about herself, but does not have the self-control or fortitude to use the knowledge in a positive way that could improve the quality of her life.

Annabelle admits quite early in the novel that her youth, up to the time she meets Allen, had been "unformed and turbulent" (FD, p. 20). Later, she comments that during that same period, she had often felt "tense," and "temperamental and explosive" (FD, p. 53). She is searching for a solid permanent relationship at this time, something to reduce her nervous tension and calm her troubled life. Isaac cannot do this, so she refuses to see him again. This decision eventually proves to be a very judicious one for Annabelle since it leads her away from a situation which might have been emotionally stifling for her.

While living with Allen, Annabelle leads a life which becomes "orderly and calm" (FD, p. 19). It seems, though, that because "there was still a curious hesitation in her movements, a whippet-like tension that went across her shoulders into her arms and neck," she is not yet quite satisfied with her life (FD, p. 19). During this second period, she has still not experienced real love, and admits that she married Allen because he was "someone who wanted to care for her, to possess and protect. That was what she needed" (FD, p. 170). The real Annabelle is hiding behind a "mask" of acceptable social values at this point, and it is

not until she meets Finch that she discovers there is another side to herself that she had not known before.

With Finch, Annabelle begins to make some real discoveries about the nature of her personality. During this third period, she finds she is capable of lying, of deceit, and of true violent passion. Finch brings out the other side of Annabelle's personality, the 'shadowed side' which was before hidden by this mask which showed only a pretentious control.

She realizes in this extraordinary relationship that there is part of her that "couldn't be found in the bathroom mirror, couldn't be figured out by knowing Allen" (FD, p. 95). To explore that mysterious part of herself she has to risk the little control that she now exercises over her life.

During their first clandestine meeting, when Annabelle asks Finch to go for a ride, she finds herself in a field in a thunderstorm. Collapsing on the ground,

> She felt like a squirrel trapped inside its own hoarded nut. But the shell had been breached and with each crack of lightning, each thunderclap, it was forced further apart.
>
> (FD, p. 139)

When Finch finally comes to her in the storm, she

> felt dissolving inside her the last barrier against losing control, against Finch, against that chasm of terror that she had glimpsed with Isaac and that she

> had covered over with her civilized and ironical life.
>
> (FD, p. 139)

And then, after they make love, Annabelle's "face felt new, as though a mask worn too long had been torn away" (FD, p. 139).

The three images Cohen uses here, the squirrel breaking out of its shell, the glimpsing of "that chasm of terror," and the removal of the "mask," are all analogies which describe what at first might appear to be the start of a first stage of a process of self-discovery. She is indeed being lured out of her shell of self-protection, and is indeed catching a glimpse of a part of herself she had not seen before, but she does not take advantage of these new discoveries to forge ahead to sound the depths of her spirituality. In her relationship with Finch, for example, she ponders the question of "how she would give up the excitement of Finch for the narrowness of Allen," and how it was "a mystery she didn't want to solve" (FD, p. 152). She also has a fear that if she steps out of her protective shell, she will lose control of her life, and will be left exposed and vulnerable to others like Isaac. Why she feels like that she doesn't know. Near the end of the novel she thinks about that question, and "why was it that she alone lost control, while others like Allen and Finch broke the rules with impunity" (FD, p. 222).

Annabelle's sense of uneasiness at this time also comes from her reluctance to break out of her shell and become involved in her own "mosaic" of life. When she does become involved, she feels used and becomes angry:

> She was angry at her mother for having invaded her privacy, at Allen for having played her as a card in his elaborate poker game, at herself for having been sucked into the centre of other people's lives, for having a heart with boundaries so weak that it soaked up other people like blotting paper, letting them spread out inside her the way these ungainly clay pieces spread their awkward colours throughout the room.
>
> (FD, p. 225)

This anger is balanced with a need to interact, to live in that "new world" that Finch has opened up for her (FD, p. 112). The analogy Cohen uses to dramatize these conflicting desires takes the form of a battle between good and evil, in which good is associated with conformity to traditional social and moral values, and evil is associated with efforts to break out of the straight-jacket that these conformities create.

In one scene, Annabelle considers "the walk from church to hotel, from innocence to evil. Everyone takes that walk, Finch had said" (FD, p. 174). Then she attempts to walk towards the church thinking

> If I can make this journey, she said to herself, if I can take every step from here to the church and stand on its

> stone steps, then somehow I'll have started to redeem myself.
>
> (FD, pp. 174-75)

She never finishes her "journey" because she encounters Jacob Beam, the secular prophet figure through whom Cohen seems to speak. He tells her "there is no such thing as evil," that there is nothing, "Just us" (FD, p. 177). Beam is using the word "evil" here to refer to the existence of a demoniac force rather than to the existence of immorality. Cohen is suggesting that outside of man's own concepts of morality and immorality there are no representative beings, "Just us." This religious philosophy appears to be an extension of his statement in his introduction to The Story So Far/2 that "There is no central social or religious myth aside from corporate force."[39] Beam delivers this oracle in Biblical tones that make him appear as an ethereal figure, almost like the voice of a person's subconsciousness. The overall message seems to be that religion is just another system of beliefs manufactured by man to help order and explain his existence. But where Finch gains spiritual succour through his religion, and Maureen is driven to great emotional and spiritual pains because of hers, Annabelle has to turn away from her traditional concepts of the church altogether, and rely solely on the atheism of Jacob Beam.

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[39]Matt Cohen, "Introduction," in The Story So Far/2 (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1973), p. 7.

She is left stranded in a spiritual wasteland with no sense of direction.

At the end of her relationship with Finch, she destroys the clay figures in her mosaic, a symbolic act which represents her refusal to become involved any further with "the human condition," and her retreat back into the safety of her "shell" (FD, p. 55). This spiritual regression informs her condition in the last period of her process of self-discovery.

After Finch's death, Annabelle returns to that "orderly and calm" state she experienced before she meet him. She still feels like "her old quick and edgy self...but beneath that was running a calmer and more settled current, a relieved fatalistic feeling that her life had finally passed out of her own hands" (FD, pp. 242-43). Finch has roiled what lay beneath the surface of her mask, and introduced her to another life, so that eventually she realizes she has lead a "double life" (FD, p. 156). With his death, however, she tries to hide that "second life" she had lived with Finch (FD, p. 250). When thinking back on her passionate relationship with him, she believes that "once more she had hidden without being caught, her afternoons with Finch a secret woven so deep now that it could never be unravelled (FD, p. 250). Her belief that "it didn't seem she had learned very much" (FD, p. 245), that she had "burned away one more year of her life" (FD, p. 249), is evidence that no real progress towards self-discovery is made. She still lacks the emotional

vitality that she lacked earlier when she thought of "what her own life might be" (FD, p. 96), and answers lethargically to herself, "Not much..." (FD, p. 97).

No progress towards self-discovery is made because she turns away from, rather than towards, that "second life" she might have continued to live, and because she retreats into her "shell," into herself for sanctuary. The book ends with Annabelle making love to Allen, and her body seeking "its own release which was absolutely private and removed" (FD, p. 251). Both she and Allen have replaced their masks and covered their real spiritual identities once again.

With Flowers Of Darkness, Cohen has shown, in tragic form, the possibilities of success and failure when characters are confronted with questions concerning their spiritual identity. The extent of their progress seems to depend on their understanding of the circumstances they are involved in, and their desire to alter these circumstances to better suit their purposes. Maureen makes little progress because she cannot cope with the circumstances of her failed marriage, her dilemma over her religion, and her physical handicap. Annabelle is not able to find proper focus or direction for her life, and is unwilling to venture away from the safety and control offered by her marriage, to discover the 'shadowed' side of her personality. Finch, on the other hand, takes the risks and wins the battle with his conscience. But because he does not fully understand the effects of his

actions on Maureen, he pays the ultimate price for her insanity. Because Finch and Maureen die, and only Annabelle is left to carry on "the masquerade," Cohen is implying that spiritual growth and maturity cannot easily be attained, and might even be impossible. Self-knowledge is possible, but only at a very high price, and full self-discovery is possible only if one is willing to venture into that unknown and unexplored area of the self which rounds out a person's spiritual being.

In Kitty Malone, Kitty and Pat manage to explore their inner selves with some success, but they do not approach their tasks with the same zeal or determination as Finch. In Flowers of Darkness, Cohen goes one step further than Kitty Malone by showing both how gratifying and how tragic one's quest for self-knowledge can become. Despite Finch's death, the ending remains a positive one with regard to self-discovery. Cohen's implication is that it is better to embark on that quest, regardless of the consequences, than to become trapped, like Annabelle, in that insufferable state of spiritual malaise and stagnation.

CONCLUSION

The seven novels discussed in this thesis could form a collage of scenarios which represents the range of possibilities for survival in Cohen's fictional societies. The societies themselves are constructed on the basis of verisimilitude but sometimes appear obscure or awry when we look at them through the psychology of the various characters. The same fundamental "laws of chance and nature" exist in each novel, from Korsoniloff to Flowers of Darkness, but the characters' reactions to their world and to their identity problems vary significantly from each other (CW, p. 233). Cohen has presented his own "mosaic" of society by portraying characters whose quests for self-discovery usually lead them away from family connections and traditional values to a spiritual wasteland, and then back again to a rediscovery of what they left.

In Korsoniloff, Cohen writes of a narrator who is aggravated mentally by the mystery surrounding the death of his mother, and consequently fails to make the rediscovery. He inevitably develops a dichotomized personality, becomes spiritually devastated and turns to introspection as a means of solving his identity problems. Cohen never allows him to discover that mental and spiritual knowledge and tranquility are possible through the acceptance of the insoluble mystery

and the formation of strong interpersonal relationships with his intimate friends.

In Johnny Crackle Sings, Johnny, also, turns to introspection and escape as a means of alleviating his mental anguish. He is aware, at the end of the novel, though, that what he is escaping from, his friends and reality, are the panacea that could lead him back to good spiritual health and a clear self-image. With this novel, Cohen is starting to construct a more positive approach to the theme of self-discovery.

In The Disinherited, both Richard and Eric escape to the city for refuge from the decaying image of the farm. Richard returns to his farm and glorifies the agrarian way of life along with the work ethic. Unfortunately, he fails at self-discovery because he cannot face the real, decadent, and transient image of the farm that Eric realizes. Eric's escape to the city offers little hope of achieving self-discovery, also, until the end of the novel when he 'disinherits' himself from the self-deception of his past, and 'reconnects' himself with humanity through his symbolic marriage to the unnamed pregnant girl he meets. Eric, like Johnny Crackle, has struggled with an identity crisis almost all his life, only to find himself middle-aged and only at the starting point of self-discovery.

Laurel and Calvin, in Wooden Hunters, Theodore, in The Colours of War, and Pat and Kitty, in Kitty Malone, also try

to escape situations in which self-identification becomes difficult and spiritual growth ceases. Cohen leads them through the labyrinth of life, down all the dead end paths, but then shows them the twinkle of light and hope that lies in the direction of family life and solid human relationships. Although we never see them reach their goals, we do see them recovering from their disorientation and facing the right direction for spiritual and emotional growth. Even Gordon Finch in Flowers of Darkness manages to recognize the rejuvenating power inherent in being 'connected' to "the human condition," and the deleterious effects of its opposite, self-alienation (FD, p. 55).

From Korsoniloff to Flowers of Darkness, Cohen has sounded many of the notes on the bitter-sweet scale of human relationships. He has produced his own "mosaic" which contains spiritually tormented figures who search for the 'sound of their own voice.' Although none of them finish their process of self-discovery, some of them do find some semblance of happiness with others, and realize that 'connection,' not 'disconnection,' can lead to self-knowledge. Because Cohen's vision of the individual trying to authenticate his own spiritual existence is somewhat bleak, we see only partial successes and many failures. Collectively, his first seven novels reveal, not paradisiacal or fairy-tale stories, but a depiction of "the human condition, the agony and ecstacy, the glorious, suffering, wonderful ordeal and

history of mankind" (FD, p. 55). He dangles the prospect of self-discovery far in front of his characters; but it is there somewhere, obscured only by the distance.

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