

## *Two Artists, Two Portraits: Cohen/Joyce – A Study in Affinity*

### *Dois artistas, dois retratos: Cohen/Joyce – Um estudo de afinidade*

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**Abstract:** *Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen (1934-2016) was a poet and novelist before becoming world-famous as part of the 1960s and '70s counterculture. His two novels, The Favourite Game (1963) and Beautiful Losers (1966), are significant contributions to Canadian literature and to postmodern fiction in general. Cohen himself, and more than one contemporary commentator, claimed for them certain affinities with the work of James Joyce, and the present account reflects on this claim. What in the progress of Cohen's protagonist Lawrence Breavman, of The Favourite Game, echoes the education in consciousness of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus? Religion, politics, and sexuality are emphatic presences in both narratives; art too, clearly. But, is Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) simply a template for later autobiographical Künstlerromane, or is it Joyce's example as an original master of the form that may be more pertinent here? Where are the main points of convergence and divergence between these two artists and their fictions? An attempt to elucidate some answers may contribute to the construction of an early consensus regarding Cohen's literary status – and to the question of Joyce's ongoing importance to later generations and later phases of artistic and cultural production.*

**Keywords:** *Leonard Cohen; James Joyce; artistic affinity; Künstlerroman; autobiographical fiction.*

**Resumo:** *O cantor e compositor canadense Leonard Cohen (1934-2016) foi poeta e romancista antes de se tornar mundialmente famoso e parte da contracultura dos anos 1960 e 1970. Seus dois romances, The Favorite Game (1963) e Beautiful Losers (1966), são contribuições significativas para a literatura canadense e para a ficção pós-moderna em geral. O próprio Cohen e alguns comentaristas contemporâneos reivindicaram para esses romances afinidades com a obra de James Joyce, e o presente relato reflete acerca dessa afirmação. O que no progresso do protagonista de Cohen, Lawrence Breavman, de The Favorite Game, ecoa a educação na consciência de Stephen Dedalus de Joyce? Religião, política e sexualidade são presenças enfáticas em ambas as*

*narrativas; arte também, claramente. Mas, seria Um retrato do artista quando jovem de Joyce (1916) simplesmente um modelo para um Künstlerromane autobiográfico posterior, ou seria mais pertinente aqui o exemplo de Joyce como um mestre original da forma? Onde estão os principais pontos de convergência e divergência entre esses dois artistas e suas ficções? Uma tentativa de elucidar algumas respostas pode contribuir para a construção de um consenso inicial sobre o status literário de Cohen – e para a questão da importância contínua de Joyce para as gerações e fases posteriores da produção artística e cultural.*

**Palavras-chave:** Leonard Cohen; James Joyce; afinidade artística; Künstlerroman; ficção autobiográfica.

“James Joyce is not dead,” claimed *The Boston Globe* in 1966. “He lives in Montreal under the name of Cohen.”<sup>1</sup> The reference was to Leonard Cohen, known principally at that time as a poet; the occasion being a review of his second novel, *Beautiful Losers* (1966). This – to clarify – was some years before the start of Cohen’s career as a singer-songwriter that was to bring him international fame. What then, specifically, led the reviewer to make such an extravagant claim, so strongly worded? Certain kinds of popular Joycean associations – formal experimentation, verbal inventiveness, obscurity, even “obscenity” – may surely be assumed to be in play, as even a cursory examination of the text may confirm. However, it is not the remarkable *Beautiful Losers* that I wish to prioritize here, but Cohen’s first novel, *The Favourite Game*, published a few years earlier, in 1963.

In Canadian Broadcasting Company footage from the time, Cohen firmly but humorously denies what, to most readers of *The Favourite Game* (especially to those – probably not a few – who knew anything of the author previously), would have looked obvious: “It is NOT autobiographical,” he says to the interviewer. “I made it up, out of my little head.”<sup>2</sup> He was being disingenuous – there are many details in the narrative, and in the circumstances of its protagonist Lawrence Breavman, that derive directly from Cohen’s early life.<sup>3</sup> But Cohen’s reluctance to confirm publicly the strength of the connection is understandable; he was projecting himself in this interview as an artist of integrity, while defending the novel against an introductory characterization from the interviewer that claimed for it merely “the flaws and virtues of a diary, shuffled, selected and re-arranged”. Cohen insisted that, on the contrary, the work was “very highly crafted and very highly disciplined”.

Cohen’s sense of his achievement in *The Favourite Game* is attested to in a letter that he wrote to his sister in 1962 as the novel was approaching publication; at the same time he anticipates with accuracy the kind of reception he was to encounter in the studios of CBC.<sup>4</sup>

He described the work, with no false modesty, as “an extremely subtly balanced description of a sensibility, the best of its kind since James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [sic].” He feared, however, that it would be “misunderstood as a self-indulgent childish autobiography, disordered and overlong.”<sup>5</sup> So, twice James Joyce is invoked: once by a reviewer, attempting to capture the essence of Leonard Cohen’s second work of fiction; once by Cohen himself, attempting to capture the essence of his first. How far – one might reasonably ask, in this particular period when Cohen’s posthumous reputation has yet to settle – might the comparison be justified? Might Cohen rightly be viewed as an heir of James Joyce? Or, to shoot a little lower, might we at least be permitted to speak of them in the same breath?

*The Favourite Game* is a Canadian *Bildungsroman*, or to be more precise, a *Künstlerroman*: a novel that depicts the formation of an individual – in the second case, specifically an artist – from infancy to maturity. It is a portrait of the artist as a young man (through time) in other words; and therefore, very likely to be comparable, at least at the most basic level, to Joyce’s masterpiece. But Cohen himself suggests substantially more – that his novel is “the best of its kind” since Joyce’s *Portrait*. We may no longer be very interested in the ranking game, but there is still a challenge for cultural commentary worth taking up here: what are the points of comparison between Cohen’s novel and Joyce’s, and where do the divergences lie? And if we are interested in this, isn’t it also a legitimate question as to how these two artists – and *men* – compare, going beyond these two works into the further reaches of expression, and achievement, that in each case followed?

To begin with, we might note that both *The Favourite Game* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* locate their protagonists firstly, within a somewhat complicated family circle, and secondly, within a city identified with a particularly complex colonial history – Cohen’s novel being set primarily in Montreal, Canada, as Joyce’s is set in Dublin. Just as Stephen Dedalus moves within a politically charged background, with the Irish independence debate an increasingly significant source of narrative tension, so Lawrence Breavman grows to maturity within politically urgent times: his boyhood is passed through the years of the Second World War, his adolescence and early manhood within the context of Cold War and the period of nascent French separatism in Quebec, his native province.

Growing up amongst Montreal’s Jewish elite, Breavman views the war at first largely through the lens of popular juvenile narratives – comic-books and films wherein the Germans and Japanese are caricatured as cardboard cut-out villains. He comes to understand the nature of the Holocaust soon enough, but in conversations with his best friend Krantz<sup>6</sup> distances the horrors through ironic detachment. The strategy is consistent with the character’s later political positionings, and may perhaps seem an uneasy straddling of the line between freedom

and irresponsibility (lack of seriousness, to the more committed); but it aligns him, at least arguably, with such a precursor as Joyce's Dedalus. There is little commitment, for example, attached to Breavman's attendance at meetings of the local branch of the Canadian Communist Party: he and Krantz are configured as jokers and disrupters in these scenes, more interested in the young women present than in questions of policy. Rivalry between the Anglophone and Francophone communities is also reduced to something more personal than political, with once again – in a dancehall setting this time – girls being the principal object of interest for the two Jewish boys. (The crude anti-Semitism of the French-speaking youths is at least as notable in this scene as any sense of Francophone resentment against the English-speaking community.)

As for “family” – at a certain point, Breavman takes a position in the tailoring firm run by his uncles, but there is no long-term commitment. Later on, as his poetic ambitions become more serious, alongside one particular love-affair, his mother – always portrayed as neurotic, now confined to a psychiatric ward – condemns his “betrayal” of family tradition, of herself, and of his cultural identity as she sees it (172). His bohemian social connections threaten her more traditional bourgeois values; his affective involvement with an American girl from the elite “WASP” (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) classes (his *shiksa*, as she puts it, disparagingly), is, for her, a final index of this treachery.

There is a family dynamic and a wider socio-political dynamic in both texts, then. And as is well-known, Joyce's Dedalus determines to “fly by those nets” – the constricting pressures of Family and Politics – towards his artistic vocation; as just indicated, the same might be said for Breavman. The other main trap is also in evidence: religion pervades Cohen's novel as it does Joyce's. Both Breavman and Dedalus are forcefully made to be profoundly aware of their religious inheritance: Dedalus principally through his Jesuitical Catholic education, Breavman through his family's distinction as rabbinical leaders of the Jewish community in Montreal. And both come to a point of radical denial: “I will not serve” (the famous *non serviam*) in the case of Dedalus, and less formally in the case of Breavman (albeit only at this point a boy responding, with increasing vehemence, to a dare): “Fug God.” . . . “Fuck God!” . . . “FUCK GOD!” (13)<sup>7</sup> For Cohen's protagonist however, the rebellion is transitory – an underlying sensitivity to manifestations of “the divine” abide. . .

Lawrence Breavman's vocation, like Stephen Dedalus's, is art – poetry, specifically. But their times are different, and what for Stephen was the source of much adolescent anxiety and in Joyce's novel became a suggestive lacuna in the narrative – the nature of Stephen's first sexual experiences, barely hinted at – is for Breavman (and Cohen) a source of artistic inspiration explored at some length. More than this – sex drives the narrative, in Cohen; here,

and in his second novel, *Beautiful Losers*, even more clearly. To an extent, modernists like Joyce made this possible, pushing at the boundaries of what might be said in fiction; Cohen is a beneficiary of his times in this (and of such landmark legal cases as the *Howl* and *Lady Chatterley* trials, conducted a few short years before his novel came out).<sup>8</sup> But sex in *The Favourite Game* – as in all of Leonard Cohen’s output, as is well known to followers of his later career – is always infused with a sense of the sacramental; beauty and “grace” (in its full-blown religious sense) are aligned; from the beginning, desire and ritual, pleasure and discipline (including self-denial), are inter-dependent.<sup>9</sup>

As a young man, Joyce perhaps (Stephen Dedalus certainly) contemplated a life in the Catholic Church; the nature of his subsequent commitment to writing has about it the quality of a sublimation of this original impulse. Cohen, scion of rabbinical authorities, though doubtful of orthodoxy, by the time of his death had written himself into the tradition<sup>10</sup> – and became too an ordained (Zen) Buddhist monk. Both writers, one could say, combine something of the heterodox and the priestly – albeit, perhaps of the defrocked variety, in Joyce’s case. . .

All of the foregoing may be offered to back up the case that there are valid points of comparison between these two artists, as young men, and between the fictions that they wrote. But it may be true that any such works as these two (autobiographical novels) will touch on the same subjects – family, politics, religion, and the artist’s rebel heart. Is Cohen consciously following Joyce, then? His easy acknowledgement, in a private letter to his sister, of a debt to the earlier writer – or at least, his competitive posture – has been noted. But although a number of writers are referenced at various points in *The Favourite Game* (Keats, Whitman, Hopkins, Kafka, Dylan Thomas, Ivy Compton Burnett<sup>11</sup>) Joyce’s name is absent – evidence, if one wished to take it as such, for Harold Bloom’s “anxiety” complex operating at a more subterranean level. The debt in question – if such it be – may reside less in the *matter* of Cohen’s narrative, as explored up to now (young man in the toils of everyday life comes to the verge of his artistic destiny), than in its formal organization and inventiveness, its confidence and poetic energy; that is, in Joyce’s example as an original – even daring – innovator.

Structurally, *The Favourite Game* is a work of some complexity. Its four parts (denominated “Books”) progress chronologically through the protagonist’s childhood, adolescence and young-manhood, but each is composed of a large number of sections – from fifteen to thirty – some of which advance the narrative in a conventional way, some of which effect an observational or reflective pause, some of which anticipate, proleptically, moments in Breavman’s life that still lie in the future (in some of which, he narrates to a lover in that future episodes from this earlier period of his life).

Time, indeed, is a recurring focus. While the past tense is predominant, the present tense intervenes at intervals, whether for the length of a whole (short) section, or just a line or two, lending immediacy to certain moments, and timelessness, or an aphoristic quality, to certain phrases, or authorial propositions. (There is complicity between the authorial voice and protagonist, throughout.) The passing and preservation of time becomes a significant theme: photography that freezes a moment forever; films (home movies) that capture a few minutes of people's lives; the paintings of Henri (*Le Douanier*) Rousseau – “the way he stops time” (55) All are evoked, and celebrated, and all imbued with an ineffable sense of loss.

The paragraphs and pages that make up each of the novel's ninety-one separate sections are also, in many cases, “snapshots” of moments in Breavman's life – episodes that accumulate to define a sensibility, a “consciousness” (the word is Cohen's<sup>12</sup>) in formation. If some of these episodes resemble Joycean “epiphanies”, only worked-up and elaborated, they testify to the connection between the two writers;<sup>13</sup> as fragments, cumulatively collage, they position Cohen in *The Favourite Game* as an heir to Modernist poetics (as does the emphasis on time, simply). More particularly, in relation to Joyce, there is the inclusion (Book III, section 12) of a poem (“Beneath my Hands”) from the author's past,<sup>14</sup> attributed here to his protagonist. Like Joyce's “Villanelle of the Temptress” in Part 5 of *A Portrait* (attributed to Stephen, written by Joyce around 1900), the lines are distributed – in the correct order – through a narrative episode in which the female object of the poem's interest is also within the frame. But whereas in *A Portrait* Stephen recalls this figure at a distance, and the principal focus of the text is the process of composition, in Cohen, she is present in the moment, and at a certain point Breavman reads the work to her (although we only have the poem in fragmented form, inter-cut with lines of narrative – unlike Stephen's “Villanelle”, which we are given in its entirety at the conclusion of that episode). In both cases it is effective confirmation of the novel's autobiographical status; whether Cohen was conscious of the close parallel at this point between his text and Joyce's is impossible to know.

A somewhat comparable passage, involving a previous girlfriend, occurs earlier on in *The Favourite Game*, beginning as follows (85):

Breavman let Tamara see some notes of a long story he was writing. The characters were named Lawrence and Tamara and it took place in a room.

‘How ardent you are,’ Tamara said theatrically. ‘Tonight you are my ardent lover . . .’

The transition from text a), the principal narrative to text b), Breavman's manuscript, is not immediately obvious – Tamara's speech here, which continues for several lines, comes from the latter. But b), which finally stretches across three-and-a-half pages of the novel, is a first-person



narrative, its rhetoric and abrupt tonal changes awkward (so there are clues). It reads like an earlier version – a draft version – of an episode in the novel itself; perhaps this very episode in which it appears. This may be more of a postmodern than modernist gesture, but as an illustration of Breavman’s evolution as an artist, a writer (here, in prose), it is original, and effective; as though Joyce had incorporated something of *Stephen Hero* into *A Portrait*, word for word, to the same end: Cohen in this particular instance even outdoing the master, one could suggest.

In the list of his achievements, Cohen’s novels may appear apprentice works; *The Favourite Game* – conforming to common expectations of a first novel that it be, obviously or not, autobiographical – especially. But the writer, at twenty-nine years old in 1963, was already the author of two critically well-regarded volumes of poetry, and very committed to his art; hardly an apprentice then. A third volume of poetry preceded his next novel, *Beautiful Losers* (1966) and then came the move into music, and all that followed (another story, in the current context).

*Beautiful Losers*, like *Ulysses* (1922), is a work in three parts, with three principal characters. Like *Ulysses*, it was condemned as pornographic; like *Ulysses*, it is formally “open” to a multiplicity of rhetorical registers – in this case, sacred and profane, personal, and political. Historiography – the story of a real-life indigenous saint, as recorded by Jesuit priests – combines with (or collides with) the story of an unnamed narrator, his lover-inspiration-guide, F., and his lost (by suicide) indigenous wife, Edith . . . It is a long way from Dublin, right enough; but Cohen’s ambition as a writer reflecting on national identity, sexuality, politics and literature, among other things, is no less serious than Joyce’s, arguably – and possibly, not much less original or impressive in expression.

Both of Cohen’s novels deserve much more extensive commentary; up to the present, critical attention to his work has concentrated far more on his subsequent musical/lyrical production; articles on the fiction (and poetry, when considered distinct from the lyrics) are relatively rare. Joycean resonances appear, at least, to be present – and enable discussion of Cohen the novelist within a certain strand of twentieth-century prose-writing. Such resonances alone do not “validate” the novels, clearly, but they can be taken, I would suggest, as an index of their interest.

These works are not anomalies, finally, but (arguably) major achievements within a rich and surprising career. One of the more surprising aspects of that career, unfortunately, is the fact that Cohen never wrote a third (or fourth, or fifth) work of fiction. But Joyce, after *Ulysses*, could only write *Finnegans Wake* (this isn’t disparagement – he was surely driven to it); isn’t it equally extraordinary to master a whole other genre, and help to define its possibilities, as Cohen did in the songs he recorded and released up to a month before his death, fifty years

later? Joyce himself – he of the “sweet tenor voice”,<sup>15</sup> whose own guitar is displayed in the Martello Tower at Sandycove – might even have agreed.

## Notes

- 1 Words cited subsequently on the cover of various editions of the novel, and by many commentators (e.g., Simmons, 2012, p.135). The name of the Boston Globe reviewer has not been ascertained.
- 2 <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/playing-the-favourite-game>
- 3 See the two main biographies by Nadel (1996) and Simmons (2012)
- 4 Canadian Broadcast Corporation.
- 5 Nadel, p.177.
- 6 The proximity of *Krantz* and *Cranly* (the names of Breavman’s and Dedalus’s best friends, respectively) is worth mentioning, perhaps – a subliminal echo?
- 7 It should be noted that Breavman’s friend Bertha falls from the tree at this moment and suffers a serious injury; blasphemy may have consequences then? The text leaves it open.
- 8 Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* was tried for obscenity in the USA in 1957; D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was tried in the USA in 1959, and in the UK in 1960. The prosecution in all cases failed.
- 9 Rather than *A Portrait*, it may be that the phantasmagoric ‘Circe’ chapter of *Ulysses* best connects this aspect of Joyce’s and Cohen’s art.
- 10 See, for example, the prayer-like texts of *The Book of Mercy* (1984) and *The Book of Longing* (2006); see the commentary on ‘You want it Darker’ by Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s3kQSZ\\_Qxk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s3kQSZ_Qxk)
- 11 There are also three iterations in the text of the adjective ‘Laurentian’, deriving from D.H. Lawrence of course - with resonances vis-à-vis the name of Cohen’s protagonist.
- 12 ‘I wrote the sexual episodes to indicate the development in the consciousness of the main character’ - <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/leonard-cohen-prolific-in-swinging-sixties>
- 13 To illustrate, Book I, section 19 (complete):

Fur gloves in the sunroom.  
Certain years the sunroom, which was no more than an enclosed balcony attached to the back of the house, was used to store some of the winter clothes.  
Breavman. Krantz and Philip came into this room for no particular reason. They looked out of the windows at the park and the tennis players.  
There was the regular sound of balls hit back and forth and the hysterical sound of a house fly battering a window pane.  
Breavman’s father was dead, Krantz’s was away most of the time, but Philip’s was strict. He did not let Philip wear his hair with a big pompadour in front. He had to slick it down to his scalp with some nineteenth-century hair tonic.  
That historic afternoon Philip looked around and what did he spy but a pair of fur gloves. He pulled on one of them, sat himself down on a pile of blankets.  
Breavman and Krantz, who were perceptive children, understood that the fur glove was not an integral part of the practice.  
They all agreed it smelt like Javal water. Philip washed it down the sink.  
“Catholics think it’s a sin,” he instructed. (31-2)
- 14 *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961).
- 15 Opinion of the *Freeman’s Journal* (1904). See Ellmann, p.168.



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