

A SECOND LOOK AT SAVAGE FIELDS

Leah Bradshaw

Master and Lord, there was a
measure once.
There was a time when men could say
my life, my job, my home
and still feel clean.
The poets spoke of earth and heaven.
There were no symbols.

Dennis Lee, *Civil Elegies*

In his *Savage Fields: An Essay in Literature and Cosmology*¹ Dennis Lee has attempted a novel analysis of Canadian literature. Employing a theoretical model of the modern world that he terms the "cosmology of savage fields", Lee has tried to show how this model is reflected in Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*,² and Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*.³ More generally, Lee has used the model to make sense of the modern world. In this paper I argue that, while Lee has accurately identified the *malaise* of contemporary thought, his model does not go far enough towards an inquiry into the process of human understanding. Consequently, he places too much hope in the possibility of a recovery of "meaningful" existence. The paper is divided into three sections, each of which is designed to deal with a specific inquiry. The first is a brief synopsis of Lee's theoretical viewpoint, as it has been elaborated in *Savage Fields*. In the second section, I pose an alternative model of understanding, which will shed quite a different light on the state of affairs in the modern world, and finally, this alternative model is applied to the *Collected Works* and *Beautiful Losers*, and compared with Lee's application of the model of "savage fields" to these same works.

I

As Dennis Lee views the cosmology of savage fields, it is the conflict between "earth" and "world", world being defined as "the ensemble of beings which are either conscious, or manipulated by consciousness for its own purposes",

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and earth being defined as the manifold of that which is "material, alive, and powered by instinct". (*S.F.*, pp. 4-5.) Another manner of expressing these two constituent elements would be to describe world as that which is moved by reason, and earth as that which is natural, and non-manipulative. Lee tells us that the relationship between the conscious world and the natural earth is one of both complementarity and friction. It is difficult to distinguish theoretically between the two since we can speak of earth only in terms of our consciousness of it; hence, to know earth, is to project the influences of consciousness onto it. As creatures of world, we can never know earth except as it is mediated through our use of it.

Despite the indeterminate character of either earth or world, Lee would like to maintain a distinction between the two because he seems to say that earth does exist in itself as the stable support of life, without which world could not survive. Moreover, he argues, it is fully evident in the modern era that the strife between earth and world far outweighs the complementarity of the two. The action of savage fields is the perpetual assault of world and earth on each other, each vying for domination. World "attacks and destroys" earth through the imposition of technology when it masters, but is incapable of knowing it, and earth retaliates, "frustrates consciousness" and "destroys individual life", through its constant reminder that man is always bound to his natural origins (*S.F.*, p. 9). Lee is disturbed by the thought that this struggle is no longer a fair battle, and that world is fast approaching a victory over earth. The *raison d'être* of world seems to be nothing more than the violent subjugation of earth. As Lee portrays the modern man, he is a creature whose drive is concentrated in the mastery over nature. His efforts are directed toward the improvement of skills whereby he can achieve this end, and the justification for his existence is located in the technique of mastery. Lee comments that "the only authentic I in the modern world is the one driven by technique, which must compulsively create new I-systems". (*S.F.*, p. 101)

The perpetual creations of new "I-systems" is what can be properly called the drive to mastery, and ultimately it is self-destructive. In the total, *i.e.*, non-dialectical, overcoming of nature, man finds that he can no longer identify himself within the order of the cosmos. If nature has been totally appropriated, and if it is the case that nature is nature only because it resists world, then, with the total subjugation of nature, the *distinctiveness* of nature as non-conscious material ceases to exist. Likewise, the distinctiveness of world, or consciousness, ends, for world no longer has any force against which it can measure its own essence. The man who has perfected technique to the point where all the natural world is his, is no longer different from, or related to, anything. He is eternally identical to himself and, as such, he has simply "collapse[d] back into the chaos of his frenzied world-space". (*S.F.*, p. 102)

In the final outcome of the interplay of savage fields, world completely dominates earth, absorbs it for its own purposes, and consequently suffers the emptiness of a world without meaningful action. The world is meaningless because man has conquered all; having conquered all, man is absolutely free;

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free to do anything or nothing. Freedom means nothing, just as the utterance of the word "I" means nothing. Consequently, as Lee remarks, "there is no longer such a thing as I in the modern world. Or rather, that there is nothing *but* I's in the modern world, teeming and various and concocted, like a convention of window-dressed dummies". (*S.F.*, p. 101)

Lee has given a perceptive account of the vacuousness of modern existence as it has emerged from the conquest of technology, but he does not stop with a description. The book is full of references to a tentative solution to the problem that he has outlined, but the solution never materializes. The closing comments of the book are desultory thoughts of one who desires something new in the cosmos, but who can find no tools with which to create it. Lee says that it may be possible that we shall continue to live in a "frenzied world space", that, indeed, we may have to, because it may be impossible for us, as world-creatures, to offer any genuine alternative that would not be simply dragged "into our own orbit as another power technique". (*S.F.*, p. 108) Nevertheless, Lee postulates that the first step toward recovery is the recognition of the world as it really is, or rather, the identification of one's native space as hell (*S.F.*, p. 111). He adds that there has to be something we can do besides collate maps to trace its path.

Of the many questions that could be posed, the most important is: by what standard does one judge the modern world a hell? If the only authentic existence we know is one of various and teeming I-concoctions, there is no ground upon which we can judge the quality of life. For one who inhabits the savage field, his world is the *only* world, and as such, is neither good nor bad, neither heavenly nor hellish. There is only total lunacy, or its inverse, total joy. Both can be drawn from Lee's depiction of the savage field. Indeed, there is a good case for arguing that the modern world offers most of its citizens an unprecedented happiness. Choices in one's style or way of life are virtually unlimited; if one I-system is unsatisfactory, one proceeds to another. There are no moral limitations upon choice, and there are no standards that could be employed to judge the moral worth of one life, over another. Everyone does his own thing, and each thing has as much sanction under the umbrella of the state, as another.

Why, then has Lee chosen to describe his world as hell? Hell surely belongs to those who have been severed from the source of their being, and who have committed an injustice to that source. Lee obviously finds no solace in the argument that history has worked out its course in such a way that the result is the savage field. History, or the work of man, according to Lee, is not sufficient as a justification for just any state of affairs. What he is suggesting is that we reach out beyond ourselves as world-creatures and embrace the pre-conceptual source of our being: earth. Lee seems to envisage a reconciliation between world and earth that would entail an almost mystical act of forgiveness on the part of earth.⁴ Justice requires that we, as world, extend ourselves beyond our experience of phenomena, of what appears, in order to experience the whole within which we are merely one part. Even Lee is unsure of the practicality of

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such a suggestion. He asks: "Can a man think his earth-belonging without merely possessing it conceptually, thus re-making it, un-selving it?" (*S.F.*, p. 110) Still, he is hopeful that such a thing can be accomplished.

II

Lee's question is directed toward the possibility of overcoming the radical distinction between world and earth, so that each can be seen to be intrinsically dependent upon the existence of the other, as willing participants in the openness of being. That is to say, he imagines the overcoming of the liberal, dualistic ontology in which man and nature are pitted against one another. The savage field can be regarded as a product of liberalism, "that cosy, stoic delusion of a *manageably* bleak universe, out there, in which you could at least count on greed and the lust for power to see you through". (*S.F.*, p. 111) However, the universe is no longer manageable, for reasons that have been elaborated above, and thus, Lee states: "What is called for, clearly, is a post-liberal way of articulating a planet" (*S.F.*, p. 122) by which he means that "consciousness is trying to think the whole of which it is itself a part". (*S.F.*, p. 121) Yet Lee has confirmed the fact that thought is a function of world, existing in the interplay of savage fields: "The act of thinking manifests the very symptoms which it purports to be diagnosing." (*S.F.*, p. 111) The realization that thought, including Lee's own, is necessarily a manifestation of the dominating power of world would seem to call into question the entire enterprise.

If the act of thinking presupposes the bifurcation of planet into earth and world, and if thinking declares its intentions through the mediation of earth for its own purposes, how can it be possible to unite earth and world in a common force without thereby destroying thought? Surely, if earth and world are reconciled, thought no longer has any substance to *think about*. The world beyond savage fields may not have the ills of egoism and technological madness, but mute inarticulateness seems equally undesirable. Once man is "at home" in nature, he will construct his works of art as birds build their nests, perform his music after the pattern of frogs and cicadas, play like animals and communicate like beasts. The annihilation of the dualism between man and nature ultimately seems to suggest the disappearance of human discourse.⁵

If it is desirable to preserve the significance of thought (and Lee seems to think it is), then it is necessary to preserve the antagonism between earth and world in some form. To recognize anything as being meaningful, it is necessary to see it as something that is distinct from the totality in which it is enveloped, and this implies a human consciousness that is radically different from that which is being revealed. Historically, it has been the case that world has maintained its distinctiveness from earth by negating earth for its own uses. Man's history, his creativity, and his freedom have been attained through his dialectical transformation, as it has been performed upon a non-dialectical, static, nature. Man has always transformed the earth to suit his own needs. As

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Lee has said, earth may have "retaliated" by recalling to man his mortality: by claiming his body, nature also claims his mind. Yet, man's essential activity has been to negate the given, to overcome nature not only through physical mastery, but through the creation of imagery to carry men beyond the grave. In order to *be*, world has had to negate earth. Therefore, it seems unlikely that consciousness could be preserved in a situation where the pre-conditions for its existence have been removed.

Lee's proposed reconciliation of earth and world does not help us to get beyond the frenzied world-space of savage fields. He laments the subjugation of earth in world, and concludes that this absorption destroys both the significance of man and of nature. Yet he is advocating absorption through another means: mutual surrender rather than subjugation of one by another. Nevertheless, absorption, however attained, has the same consequence: through surrender or submission, the result is a nihilistic world. In both instances, history, as it has been experienced through man's negation of natural being, is brought to a close. As Alexandre Kojève expressed this end: "What disappears is Man properly so-called - that is, Action negating the given, and Error, or in general, the subject *opposed* to the Object".⁶ Nature has been conclusively mastered, that is, *harmonized* with man.

If it is desirable to preserve man — that is, historical man — it seems necessary to preserve a dualistic structure of being, and not, as Lee suggests, abandon it. However, it must be possible to preserve such a dualism in a way that is not self-destructive. If, as Lee has said, earth has been thoroughly manipulated by world so that it no longer provides a substantial resistance to world's mastery, then another source must be defined, against which world can identify itself. Kojève's argument provides the basis for such a source. Like Lee, Kojève thinks it is no longer possible to act meaningfully in the modern world, within the structure of the interplay of savage fields. He is in full agreement with Lee with respect to the conclusion that the negation of nature is no longer purposeful. Yet, unlike Lee, Kojève does not despair at this realisation. For Kojève, the very possibility of experiencing a sense of loss in the modern world is contingent upon a recollection of what was meaningful in the past. The wise man of the modern era understands his history, why it has ended, and he accepts the fact that he can no longer act meaningfully within the polarization of world and earth. To Kojève, "it is clear that all possible questions-answers have been exhausted".⁷ Yet, as he explains, the wise man is nevertheless a human being. In order to escape being re-integrated into nature as an animal, or becoming a "jaunty old Dionysiac"⁸ experiencing a sequence of equally senseless diversions, it is necessary that man remain as "Subject opposed to the Object, even if action negating the given Error disappears".⁹ This "formal" preservation of opposites is fundamental to our post-historical existence, if we are neither to go mad, nor quietly and "naturally" vanish into peace.

This means that while man speaks of everything that is, and knows that he can create nothing new in the cosmos, nonetheless he will continue to view

himself as a being that is formally detached from an abstract "otherness". In this way, he can still act, not to change, but merely to preserve. Modern man can retain this formal recreation of the interplay of savage fields, because his wisdom constitutes a phenomenological understanding of what it is to be a human being. Therefore, he has a calculated awareness of the necessity of preserving an ideal dualism between man as a dialectical being, and something other. It is *only* in this preservation, at least in principle, of an ideal dualism, that man can avoid the plunge into nihilism and silence.

The maintaining of an "ideal dualism" certainly can not involve a revitalization of the interplay between earth and world since, as both Kojève and Lee concede, earth has been subsumed into world. However, the dualism can be preserved in recognition of its abstract reality. That is, world is capable of constructing a meaningful existence on the basis of memory, and it is equally capable of imposing that reality on those whose memory has been "misplaced". Here, one must interject that Lee has omitted an important dimension of the interplay of savage fields: the assault of world upon world. If the action of savage fields is regarded primarily as the friction between earth and world, the disappearance of either one of the contestants constitutes a cosmic catastrophe. Yet while the negative relationship of man to nature is significant, the fact remains that it is significant *only* because the relationship is perceived by world. This suggests still another consideration: that world has the capacity to confirm its stature, a feature that earth is lacking. World can not know itself except where and when it has its identity confirmed. This seems obvious enough, for if men are different from nature, it is because they know they are different, and knowledge presupposes revelation through discourse, and discourse entails mutual recognition among a manifold of individual discussants. The history of men can be seen, in this light, to be the history of man's desire to be absolutely sure of his knowledge. It is true that men have acted in history, and violently subdued nature to create a world in their own image, but this transformation has not been the sole aim of their efforts. The subjugation of nature was a means to the end of recognition. However, once that subjugation has been accomplished, it does not follow that all men have the recognition they feel they deserve. In fact, men will willingly and gratuitously die in order to achieve recognition. The domination of the natural world is not the end of man's struggle. In the bid for universal recognition, men are willing to give up their lives for freedom, honour and prestige, and no other living creature would sacrifice its natural life for such a content-less ideal.

It is quite possible that men should oppose themselves ceaselessly to other members of "world", who do not hold the same abstract principles as they. Men, as negators, oppose themselves to a state of affairs or a political system, that is purely a product of world. In a world that no longer bears the necessity of subjugating nature, there still exists the compulsion to subjugate man. The interplay of savage fields can be seen as a purely political struggle where men derive meaning by gaining the maximum recognition for their political platforms. Marxists oppose themselves to the "false consciousness" of the

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bourgeoisie, the champions of modernization oppose themselves to the underdeveloped or traditional nation, and so on. Opposition is no longer directed toward the transformation of nature, but fully toward the transformation of one part of "world" in accordance with the ideals of another part of world.¹⁰

From Lee's perspective, the modern situation demands an immediate re-appraisal of the structure of thought. According to his analysis, planet "worlds" in full control of the cosmos, yet world continues to deny the fact that its "worlding" is actually a combination-in-strife of a "world mode" and an "earth mode". (*S.F.*, p. 58) Lee's minimum demand is for honesty: that world admit its dependence upon the "earth mode". Yet, he comments that because the cosmology of savage fields is predicated upon the domination of earth by world, "*Savage Fields* reaches the limit of its speculative resources at the point where it attempts to think earth in earth's own terms". (*S.F.*, p. 58) Furthermore, he contends that we cannot go beyond the model of savage fields, until we can accomplish this task. In sum then: the situation is desperate, but there are no adequate theoretical alternatives.

If the focus of the problem is directed away from the conflict between world and earth, and aimed at the conflict between *members* of world, it is possible to avoid the "crisis of ontology" depicted in Lee's book. Indeed, as Lee has stated, "planet worlds" in the modern era, and this has created a whole new set of problems in the form of competing ideologies. The kind of strife that emerges from the savage field is barely mentioned by Lee, and I suggest that it is precisely this area that needs more analysis. The effort to think earth in earth's own terms seems to be fruitless, since those terms have already been eradicated already by technology. On the other hand, it is inconceivable that the struggle of world against world should subside in the near future. Its resolution would demand the effective subjugation of each and every individual to the universal recognition of a universal idea, and from all evidence, men are more effective than nature in resisting the efforts of other men. For every idea or technique presented in the cosmos, there is another to challenge it; each demands recognition from the greatest number. This problem of domination and recognition among men transfers the solution from an epistemological level to a political one, from theory to practice; if, as it has been argued here, an ideal dualism is mandatory for a meaningful human existence, then this dualism must be preserved. That is, the dualism requires political sanction. Lee is correct when he states that "The coming decades hold undreamed-of forms of tyranny", in which men will try to impose their techniques and expertise upon unwilling participants, but we are hardly going to escape that tyranny by apologizing to earth for the gratuitous harvest of her dignity. If we escape at all, it shall be through a calculated administration of the various activities of the conflicting members of the world. That is, while the fight for recognition is respected by all, the game is constrained by the rule that no one has the right to win.

The moment of world's assault on world runs through both the works that Lee considered in *Savage Fields*, although Lee concentrated primarily on the

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moment of world's assault on earth. In the next section the former moment will be examined, as it is portrayed in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Beautiful Losers*. The conclusions derived from this analysis contrast sharply with Lee's resolutions in *Savage Fields*.

III

The struggle for recognition is central to the theme of *Savage Fields*, although Lee has not referred explicitly to it. In Michael Ondaatje's book, we see the striving for recognition operating co-extensively with the world-impulse to subdue earth. It is not enough for Billy the Kid to ravage the natural world; what he foremostly wants to do is ravage the *human* world. He constantly lived under the threat of death, and he did nothing to eliminate that threat. On the contrary, he fostered it by moving from one fight to the other, acquiring greater notoriety, until the struggle for recognition finally concluded, perhaps inevitably, in his death. The unspoken message of *The Collected Works* is that man's violent subjugation of nature, and his assault upon other members of world, end only in death.

The moment of "earth assault" in Ondaatje's work is what Lee terms a human consciousness "pummelled and nearly demolished by instinctual energy" (*S.F.*, p. 16). The moment is prevalent in the book, since we are constantly reminded of the awesomeness of the western landscape during the frontier years. Everywhere, nature is threatening with its dry winds and its miles and miles of desert.¹¹ Yet in contrast to the initial moment of earth assault, which is merely man's awareness of his differentiation from nature, Lee has formulated the moment of "world assault", whose distinctive characteristic is man's affirmation of his self-consciousness. The moment of world assault constitutes a conversion of the awe before nature, into the impulse to dominate it. Man assumes an image of himself that is separate from, and master of, his natural being, or as Lee expresses it, "World assault depends on men living out a particular image of themselves and adopting a particular ideology." (*S.F.*, p. 18) World assault can be seen as the general defiance of natural existence, but it is manifested in many distinctive ways.

In one respect, as Lee mentions, "World exists in order to control earth, usually by violence. And earth is neutral, value-free like a bunch of 'paper flowers'." (*S.F.*, p. 19) In *The Collected Works*, we witness this violent control exercised by Billy, in a scene where he lies ill, in a barn, surrounded only by animals and desert. In a moment of fury, he tries to annihilate everything around him. He shoots "... until my hand was black and the gun was hot and no other animal of any kind remained in that room but the boy in the blue shirt, sitting there coughing at the dust".¹² The passage is revealing, for while Billy has succeeded in his desire to master his surroundings, he is still little more than a natural being — an animal in a blue shirt. Since no other member of world has recognized his victory, it has no significance.

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The third moment in *The Collected Works* that Lee discusses is the moment of "earth-in-world", the reconciliatory moment when man discovers that he cannot deny his natural existence. "[A] member of world is forced to accept his citizenship in earth" (*S.F.*, p. 21). Ironically, the moment can occur only in Billy's death. As Ondaatje describes Billy's thoughts at the moment of death, they are a curious mixture of animal sensibility and self-reflection. Finally, in death, world and earth are subsumed in one another and Billy can no longer tell where his body ends and his self-consciousness begins. Ondaatje writes through the character of Billy:

...oranges reeling across the room and I KNOW, I KNOW
it is my brain coming out like red grass this breaking where
red things wade.¹³

It is not surprising that this fusion of earth and world can occur only at Billy's death. It takes the moment of death to provide a reconciliation, for as long as man lives, and insofar as he exists as a creature of world, he must necessarily oppose himself to nature, to given-being. This is precisely why Billy died fighting: there were no other options. Lee comments that Billy the Kid had to "kill earth again and again, even if what he kills is himself" (*S.F.*, p. 23), but this is not entirely accurate. Billy did not have to kill earth, although he may well have done that. What he did have to kill again and again were other men who were a threat to his individuality. The heroic image attached to the mythical drama of Billy the Kid is intrinsically tied to his fearlessness before the threat of death induced by his enemies.

Ultimately, there is no actualization of the moment of "earth-in-world", for the moment can occur only in death. Billy's existence was predicated on his relentless pursuit of mastery, both over the Western terrain, and the men who ruled it. Lee is aware of the finality of the realisation of "earth-in-world", since he writes that the final stage in Ondaatje's book is the skeletal moment, the moment of death in which "infatuation with the power that decimates earth reveals itself, finally, as infatuation with death" (*S.F.*, p. 27). Lee is distraught with the consequences of this position: if the reconciliation of earth and world can come about only in death, which is the annihilation of all life, whether that life be conscious or not, then the reconciliation really matters very little. Pushing the implications even further, he concludes that world's drive is always aimed toward its own destruction, "its makeup is finally predicated on suicide" (*S.F.*, p. 41). This conclusion is "disturbing in the extreme", for the outcome appears to be "destructive madness, lobotomy, suicide, in short, nihilism".

Do we have to look upon death or suicide as evidence of madness? Suppose one saw death as the ultimate expression of freedom, then the assault in natural life to the point of risking one's own life would not be "lobotomy" or "madness", but the rightful victory of self-consciousness over bare existence.

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In contrast, the reconciliation of earth and world *within* life would be madness and nihilism, since it would effectively transcend and obliterate the human condition of desire and negation. If Lee is seeking to preserve freedom and purpose in the world, he should be attempting to understand the implications of the dualistic ontology. He should be praising Billy the Kid as the hero of the savage field, not lamenting him as its victim. After all, the Kid's death was hardly tragic:

Poor young William's dead with blood planets in his head
with a fish stare, with a giggle like he said.¹⁴

Billy did not inhabit a nihilistic world. We know that history continues, after his death, as the history of men just like him who are willing to die in the name of a *particular* image of themselves. From this point of view, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is an affirmation of the determination of men to avoid absorption into the anonymity of natural space.

Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, the second literary work that Lee dealt with in *Savage Fields*, has quite a different outcome from Ondaatje's book: it clearly captures the spirit of a nihilistic world. Rather than describing a struggle between man and man, or man and nature, it is representative of a world where the interplay of savage fields has dissolved and there are no longer any meaningful distinctions. The cosmos of *Beautiful Losers* is located in a genuinely post-historical setting. Throughout the book, Cohen tries to imagine a return to a state of existence antecedent to the violent and conflict-ridden stage of "historical" human being. He imagines a world where man is merely part of a continuum of nature, or what Lee terms "carnal participation in unified being" (*S.F.*, p. 64). The harmonious continuum of nature is portrayed by Cohen as an idyllic state, devoid of the tension, guilt, and strife that are associated with man's fallen state. The primary aim of the book is to restore the "ordinary eternity" that preceded this historical nightmare. As Lee says: "Episode after episode, speech after speech turns out to have been instruction in the nature of fallen history, and exhortation to burst free of it by ecstasy." (*S.F.*, p. 69)

It appears that the futility of regaining a harmonious equilibrium is the main anxiety experienced by the characters in *Beautiful Losers*: they are compelled always by their own "world" natures, to act as men. The principal character, F., is struggling to achieve a moment of dionysiac celebration, which Lee calls the "Isis continuum" (*S.F.*, p. 76). Yet the fact that F. pursues (*i.e.*, desires) this state of being, rather than living, or being, it, indicates that there is action, and hence negation, going on. His efforts to regain the Isis continuum wrench him back into the very condition that he is attempting to escape. As Lee states:

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Each cosmology — savage fields and the Isis continuum — subsumes and cancels the other. Yet neither manages to win out. The book consists, from this angle, of a series of attempts to get from the fallen reality of the savage field to the ecstatic reality of the Isis continuum. And the result is a nerve-grinding oscillation between the two.
(*S.F.*, p. 76)

It is obvious that F. cannot escape the essence of his own acting and knowing process, and hence, an achievement of any sort can only be an achievement, a victory, *for* man. As such, it would not represent the return to the Garden of Eden, but rather, the venture into a new world that bears the burden of a history of negation. The world that F. (and perhaps, Cohen) inhabits is one that Lee calls "the inception of radical freedom" (*S.F.*, p. 100), that is, a world where there is no experience of absolute standards, and where man is "unserved of all but the will to create itself" (*S.F.*, p. 100). His world is the system of "I-systems" to which I referred earlier in this paper.

Neither Cohen nor F. seems to realize the difficulty of transcending the historical being of man. It is F.'s intention to relieve man of the "final burden" of history under which men "suffer in such confusion".¹⁵ He advises: "Let it be our skill to create new legends out of the disposition of the stars, but let it be our glory to fight the legends and watch the night empty."¹⁶ The book is littered with such images of "forgottenness", and Cohen's central difficulty in realistically dealing with the modern world is tied to this effort to forget. His reluctance to come to terms with his past is what makes him such a desperate nihilist.¹⁷ Ultimately, F. fails in his attempts to overcome himself, and as Lee views it, the conclusion of the book is at worst a "cop-out" (*S.F.*, p. 94). After Cohen had succeeded in the "demolition of his hubris", he found that he had done it so thoroughly that he no longer had any bearings, either in the savage field, or in the Isis continuum. He had utterly destroyed himself as being.

Lee's reaction to *Beautiful Losers* was anger. He was disappointed with Cohen for having raised his "hopes for redemption in the savage field", but then concluding with a "terrible closure of those hopes" (*S.F.*, p. 95). Lee did not, however, consider the possibility that the outcome of *Beautiful Losers* may have been inevitable. How could F. possibly have been redeemed, when there is no source in the modern world that could perform such a miracle? Grace and redemption seem inappropriate within the context of savage fields. F. abandoned his "world-stance" in the hopes that he could attain a higher reality in the mystical reunion of earth and world. He found that his hope could not sustain him, and moreover, that in the process of inquiry, he had destroyed himself. Unlike Billy the Kid, who died with a smile on his face, F. died as a heap of drugged, scatological matter.

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Beautiful Losers possibly contains a lesson on the benefits of moderation. If one understands oneself only as an active negator, as has been argued, then it is folly to try to venture beyond the limits of self-understanding. In enduring the savage field, perhaps there are only two options: either one responds with dread and nausea (like F.), or one confronts it with courage (like Billy the Kid). Even Lee admits that any reaction beyond these choices implied the capacity "to think more deeply than thought" (*S.F.*, pp. 112) — and this seems impossible.

Savage Fields does give us an insight into the potential destructiveness of a dualistic ontology. However, the conclusion we may well be intended to draw is that the best one can do is avoid the worst, and that, through good management. As Lee said at the close of his book, "[T]here are times when thinking can be faithful to its situation only by sitting still, and unclenching, and waiting to see what will happen". (*S.F.*, p. 112) I am suggesting that the modern technological world is such a time, and therefore, that even our best efforts are bound to be frustrated by thought. As a certain school of political thought would contend, what we need now is real *praxis*. When all original thought is exhausted, and all possible questions have been answered, it seems that little remains but to re-arrange the world in accordance with final principles, an outcome as melancholy as it is inevitable.

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Notes

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1. Toronto: Anansi Publishing House, 1977. Further references will be indicated by *S.F.*
2. Toronto: Anansi Publishing House, 1970.
3. New York: Viking Press, 1966.
4. Lee's formulation of the relationship between world and earth is more complex than this, and is, as he states, bound up with some of Heidegger's conceptualizations. In a lengthy footnote, Lee expounds his agreements with, and departures from, Heidegger's thought.
5. The images of reconciliation are drawn directly from Kojève's description of the post-historical world. See *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols Jr., New York: Basic Books, 1969, pp. 159, 160.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

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8. *S.F.*, p. 84.
 9. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 162
 10. In Kojève's words: "While henceforth speaking in an *adequate* fashion of everything that is given to him, post-historical Man must continue to *detach* 'form' from 'content', doing so no longer in order actively to transform himself, but so that he may *oppose* himself as a pure 'form' to himself, and to others taken as 'content' of any sort." Note to the 2nd Edition, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 162.
 11. Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works*, p. 70.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
 15. Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers*, p. 237.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
 17. Stanley Rosen has well expressed the relationship between nihilism and "forgottenness". He states: "Nihilism is fundamentally an attempt to overcome or to repudiate the past on behalf of an unknown and unknowable yet hoped-for future. The danger implicit in this attempt is that it seems necessarily to entail a negation of the present, or to remove the ground upon which man must stand in order to carry out, or even merely to witness, the process of historical transformation... the attempt to overcome the past is necessarily rooted in a judgement upon the past." *Nihilism: A Philosophic Essay*, 1976, Yale University.
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