

ON SAVAGE FIELDS AND THE ACT OF CRITICISM

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Savage Fields does not even look like criticism. Shaped and formed, more so than many modern works of art, it deals with two difficult books that themselves examine the edges between art and non-art. Dennis Lee's important role in the manifestations of the 1960's has ensured what passes for critical attention in these disco-days, but of some two dozen reviews I have examined, only two have dared (or been able) to come to terms with what it is that the book says or with its validity.

What Lee says in *Savage Fields* is not really that difficult. Honestly enough, he begins in doubt (but does not end there):

Several years ago I became aware that 'nature and civilisation' loomed very large in works of fiction by some of my contemporaries. In most cases I felt at home with the theme. But I was obscurely stymied by a couple of these books, because their accounts of a person, a pop song, a death, a walk in the country implied a different kind of relationship between the two domains than I was accustomed to. Moreover, it was no longer merely a 'theme'; the books seemed to treat it as the context of everything that occurred. 'Nature and civilisation' had become virtually a cosmology in its own right, in the books that puzzled me, and it followed a logic of its own. (Page 3)

His honest doubt leads him to an elaborate system designed to reduce that doubt, or to at least soften its dangers by means of metaphor. A human enough occupation, for poet or critic.

In Lee's savage field, two modes of planet act, coterminously but in strife. That is, planet is, " 'everything that is (including the rest of space), as it affects or can be known or imagined by inhabitants of our planet.' " Yet while planet is "seamless with itself," for Lee it "obliges us to derive two exhaustive, contradictory models of itself: world and earth. Not only that, it behaves as though both models were simultaneously true, and determined its [planet's] history and structure by their interaction."

World, for Lee, is more than civilisation, although it includes that. "World is the ensemble of beings which are either conscious, or manipulated by

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consciousness for its own purposes." (p. 4) Similarly, "'Earth' includes 'nature'," but, "Earth appears to world as the ensemble of beings which are some or all of: material, alive, and powered by un-self-conscious instinct."

(p. 4)

Both world and earth, for Lee, function as opposing patterns of behaviour of planet; it is this structural model of planet as strife between world and earth that he terms savage fields (drawing on a metaphor from physics for clarification: two opposing and fluctuating electromagnetic fields occupying the same space).

The flaw in thought is fairly obvious; the question is whether Lee's metaphor is helpful in explaining the intention and form of Ondaatje's and Cohen's art.

For Ondaatje, the answer is presumably yes; through these infra-red lenses Lee can see elements of *Billy the Kid* which one assumes were not visible to him before. Treating the book as a "concrete model of the savage field" allows Lee to discern three major moments and three minor moments as its underlying structure. "[V]irtually every episode assimilates itself to one or another of these paradigms of strife." (p. 16)

In the moments of earth assault, a human consciousness is pummelled by instinctual energy, either literally or perceptually. In the complementary moments of world assault, men torment and slaughter the creatures of instinct. By adopting a conquest ideology, as world must, "the moral of newspapers or gun", Billy can totally separate world and earth, making earth neutral and value-free, and letting earth, thus defined, include the unreal, unreal suffering bodies of other men he has murdered.

There is a third moment, however, which denies that belief in separation, the moment of earth-in-world. For Lee, the most horrific moment occurs during Billy's sunstroke when, "[t]he earth which Billy has been assaulting recoils and shows him, on his own nerve-ends, that he himself *is a body*, is creature of earth". (pp. 76-77)

The three minor moments, stasis, union and skeletal, are self-explanatory — representing truce, reconciliation and the loss of consciousness, the reduction of world to earth.

The presence of these six moments seems to please Lee, allowing him to resolve his initial doubt. The six moments become a "syntax" of strife, rhyming with one another despite differing presentations while the orchestration of these variations on six moments makes the book feel coherent and firmly ordered.

So far, so good. The logical flaw in the theory has not led Lee into a false interpretation of the book and who is to say that simpler ways of clarifying the book's form and content would be simpler for all potential readers? Later, we shall examine Lee's discussion of the purpose (or lack thereof) of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*.

Lee's participation in *Billy the Kid*, both before and after his development of a terminology, remains pleasurable. So he can say, "Though I loath modernity (while being a product of it), I can only applaud Ondaatje for the clarity,

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courage and verve with which he depicts it''.(p. 41) It always seems easier for critics to retain the personal qualification when approving. If I like it, there's no need to say that the world will gobble it up. If it doesn't, *tant pis*.

Yet when critics condemn, a different need arises. A personal negation must be confirmed by creating the support of others. Lee cannot participate in all of *Beautiful Losers*. Therefore, *Beautiful Losers* fails:

[T]he third movement is suddenly stumbly and out of synch with itself I make the assumption, in fact, that Cohen became genuinely zonked as he was trying to finish *Beautiful Losers*, capable of blunders he would never have made earlier in the book. Whatever the reason, the governing consciousness had already shot its bolt before the third movement began, by the point where it composed the interlude on drug addiction. ... The best that can be said for Book Three is that it fails to find a satisfactory voice and form. ... It is finally a waste of time to read *Beautiful Losers* right through, clucking in disapproval at the final seventy pages The authentic action of *Beautiful Losers* is incomplete, but unforgettable. (pp. 94-95)

If the logical flaw in his theory supports Lee's arrival at such a hopelessly invalid conclusion, then one must state serious reservations about the use of the book as well as the foundation of its theory.

What does he think Cohen is trying to do? According to Lee:

[T]he overall action of *Beautiful Losers* ... is a psychomacheia, a struggle within the consciousness of one person In the course of the psychic drama it enacts, both F. and the narrator embody a succession of contradictory stances in the central consciousness That consciousness inhabits a planet defined by world's repression of earth, where carnal joy is taboo and spiritual joy is a travesty What is the nature of things? And what must a man, imprisoned in savage fields, do or be to be saved? The central motive of the novel is to answer these life-questions. And in each movement of the book Cohen's governing consciousness deploys F. and the narrator differently, as it pursues the ontological quest through another stage. (p. 92)

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There are other interpretations, to say the least. Let us present one that seems to me to be far more useful. What fascinates Cohen? The boundary between the natural and the supernatural; the gateways between the two; the roles of death, sex and torture; speech versus print; and repression versus excess in different societies. A comparativist at heart, he takes four societies (Indian, Catholic, Protestant and Banal) and examines these forces at work in them. The suspense of sexuality is matched by a suspense of participation, but there is no more justification for saying that Cohen is any of these characters than that Ondaatje is Billy the Kid — nor, any less.

The examination of the four societies and of these forces at work within them provide a coherent structure for *Beautiful Losers* (if one needs that), but applying Lévi-Strauss and Harold Innis to *Beautiful Losers* reveals far more than applying Lee's terminology. One might say that where Lee (like the narrator), is attempting to find a pattern to collect experience within, Cohen is comparing some of the patterns which men have created to trap their experience. If the brain's structure is organic, then there might be patterns in apparent diversity. For Cohen, part of that pattern is excess: the excess of curative sexuality in the Indian way, of bodily torture in the Catholic, of mind-repression in the Protestant, of machine-orgasm in the Banal. Lee seems to think that Cohen demolished F. only in mid-stream. Nonsense; he had "demolished" him from the beginning, but he is still interested in the ways in which an F., a Banal John the Baptist, would live out the older patterns: not head-piercing; not recreating Gesthemene; not playing hide-and-seek with Calvinistic interviews with God in the flesh; but still searching for salvation, for a gateway to the supernatural through excess. Seen in this context, there is no sudden break in the middle of Part Two and it is not a waste to read nor even a waste to teach *Beautiful Losers* as a clever example of form. (And I make no claims for this as the "exclusive" interpretation of intent and form in the book.)

The last part of *Beautiful Losers* is funny. It is not serious, nor is it intended to be. The Banal mode of seeking salvation is comic, but so are all the others. Of course, perhaps without knowing it, Cohen retreats to a New Englandish transcendentalism in attempting to find a suitable way of showing the Banal's mode of seeking the supernatural:

And that point where he was most absent, that's when the gasps started, because the future streams through that point, going both ways. That is the beautiful waist of the hourglass! That is the point of Clear Light! ... For all the time that it takes to launch a sigh he allowed the spectators a vision of All Chances at Once!

(*Beautiful Losers* pp. 241-242)

So what? What are the limitations that any writer works within? Language in

its human context; myth in its human context. He *can* create either of those, but the more he creates the more of his audience he loses.

All criticism is subjective and therefore the critic should remain skeptical about his judgments. A truly scientific criticism would recognize that the proper object of its study was work plus response. There is precious little of such criticism around, but it could make statements. It could say that 57% of Caucasians trained at the University of Toronto lost interest in *Beautiful Losers* halfway through part II. Lee's position might then have some validity, at least for a certain group. At the moment, all one need say is that I, a single intelligent reader who enjoys irony and Lévi-Strauss, disagree with Lee; therefore, his argument is invalid since he presents no other proof than his own interpretation of the book, and his own emotional response rooted in that interpretation, for the "failure" of the book.

One belabours the point only because so many literary critics use the same flawed process of reaching a judgment. It does not do this (to me); if it does not do this (to me), it cannot be good. I know nothing about what it does to anyone else, but since it must do the same to any intelligent sensitive person as it does to me, it must be bad.

If one lets *Savage Fields* be seen as narrative, or narrative autobiography — this is what happened to me, Dennis Lee, reading and re-reading this pair of books — then of course it ought to be criticized in the same terms. I enjoyed seeing Lee wrestle with these books, I enjoyed the story he made out of his reading of them, I would recommend them to anyone as one of a number of readings. "[B]etter to close the book at page 237, having witnessed a singular raising of hopes for redemption in the savage field, and a terrible closure of those hopes", is this an absolute statement and single interpretation?

Why does the I always disappear when the judgment is negative? That is one central question for any critic to ask at the close of a review.

If, on the other hand, one lets *Savage Fields* be seen not as narrative but as argument, then one must attack the logic. Does Lee create a cosmology (a science of the universe, a way of perceiving the cosmos, a social mythology), or simply a terminology? I fail to see that Lee is describing anything that cannot more simply be described in terms of matter, process, and mind. One can describe process as strife whether or not mind is involved. As absolute zero is approached (via machines and conceptualization), there surely is "strife" among the gases that are turned to conductive solids. If that is "strife", is there not also "strife" as glaciers move, untouched, unconceived or unseen by human mind? Being squashed by a wind-struck oak would be no less unpleasant than being run down by a vicious snowplow operator.

What happens solely in the mind does not happen in reality, although that process of thought happens in reality. No matter how hard I think of Ray Charles ascending into heaven, he is likely to show up in some nightclub tomorrow night. At the social level, it is true, a process begun in the mind can come into reality. Religious leaders can dream of religious kingdoms and soldiers can shoot civilians in subways. Still, as far as we know, there is a process

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involved. Lee's metaphor is a false analogy. If the world in process is seen as a fluctuating electromagnetic field, that is fine, but the world of consciousness is *not* an opposing field. However much I think of the conflict in Iran, however much I know of it, however much I feel of it, I do not project anything into it until I take some action. At that moment I become part of that process.

Consciousness is itself a process, but it does not necessarily affect the world of matter in process. If and when it does, it does so according to the rules of matter in process. Consciousness may or may not have an understanding of those rules of process. That we can fly a man to the moon indicates we have knowledge of some rules of process; that we can create and live in cities like Toronto indicates we lack knowledge of some other kinds of processes. Consciousness can never have full knowledge of itself for no matter how detailed our knowledge of the matter and processes of the brain becomes, the knower will never know the final moment of knowing.

Strife is a subjective attribute which Lee applies to process when human beings are involved. If one has watched thirty cows scapegoat a thirty-first cow and attempt to bully her into starvation, one is far less certain about the dividing line between that "ensemble whose members are conscious" and that "whose members are characterized by un-self-conscious material energy, powered by instinct." From the human point of view, of course, no action is value-free and Lee has always followed Grant firmly and properly in attacking that fallacy of the social sciences. Yet in order to attack that fallacy, there is no need to create a second fallacy. That which is material does not become conscious by means of mere involvement with consciousness. A man who is struck by a building toppled by an earthquake dies no differently from a man struck by the same building toppled by a terrorist's blast. One cannot say that the first is earth and the second somehow "world". This remains true no matter how deeply technology and the artifacts of technology invade the imagery of poets.

Let us return to Lee's original quandary. Out of what does the apparent strangeness of these works by Cohen and Ondaatje really arise? Nothing more strange, it seems to me, than the notions of texts, social mythologies, and the anonymous author. I have touched briefly on comparative mythologies in Cohen, let us look at the notion of texts in Ondaatje and in Cohen (Ondaatje's mentor, let us not forget, in a great deal of this technique and philosophy). One way of looking at the connection between the works would be to say that whereas Cohen tracks down the antecedents and parallels of a Ray Charles saint, Ondaatje deals with that figure, as Billy or as Buddy Bolen, in and of himself, retaining only as miasma that historical swamp which Cohen has comically delimited. The dead point in *Beautiful Losers* occurs on page 180, where the inserted text is a page of phrases from a translation handbook for use AT THE DRUG-SHOP. In structuralist terms, Cohen is saying that his entire novel is nothing more, and nothing less, than can be found in this list of phrases: "I shall be waiting./How must I take this medicine?/before the meal/after the meal/something for the headache/something for the throat/something for my stomach/please, nurse this wound/how much does

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all cost? ten shillings. Thanks." Rather than creating his own language, his own "voice" as they used to say in the 1950's, a poet can use the texts of others. Cohen and Ondaatje both do this, Ondaatje perhaps more formally, concentrating on the way in which Billy's myth has been seen by different eyes of the society. Cohen's conceitful use of texts tends to be more abstract, but he never strays far from fairly clear themes and variations on Indian, Catholic, Protestant and Banal myths. The closer we get to our own time, the less likely we are to see these as myths and the more likely we are to want to see them as answers or as failed answers. Where Lee sees *Beautiful Loser* as a failed answer, Cohen would see *Savage Fields* as material of a myth.

As for Ondaatje, does he really fit so neatly into Lee's new terminology and avoid the underlying myths of the tribe? What about the crucial scene in *Billy the Kid*, the one Lee has described as earth claiming its dominion over world? The sunstroke episode can be just as validly described, it seems to me, as one more version of the Protestant self's quest for encounter with godhead. Lee says it is the sun, but Billy is more to the point: "I've been fucked by Christ almighty god I've been good and fucked by Christ but the chain held my legs to the horse and I was dragged picking up dust on my wet skin as I travelled in between his four trotting legs at last thank the fucking christ, in the shade of his stomach." If the roots of that are not in Bunyan and Luther, then I am a flat-worlder. This is the 1970's Christ/man confrontation: direct, but visceral; intense, but tortuous; liberating, but ironically; mystic, but sexual; religious, but vulgar. There is no way that a writer can get beyond the myths of his audience and still retain an audience.

Like Cohen, Ondaatje is a romantic of individualism. Like Cohen, Ondaatje creates anonymous author/heroes. As the times become more ironic, terser, more punky, he follows them; but, as with Cohen, it is the single life, on the edge, which fascinates him. Where Cohen jokes with descriptions of the conceptualized creation of the Banal saint, the new Jew, Ondaatje jokes with his actual existence in the form of "our" Billy the Kid, chosen by the people to represent their failed revolt against, and their suffering within, a particular historical society. The strife of technology and human viciousness that is there, does not need a cosmology to explain it. Ondaatje's use of structuralism, of "texts", does not need a cosmology to explain it. The human mind is quite capable of creating modes of human organization that lead to reasonably peaceful societies or to tense, competitive ones, full of strife; but we don't need a new cosmology to explain that lesson of history.

In short, then, Lee loses on three counts. His argument regarding Cohen can only be described as wrong, since it is invalid and yet stated as an absolute. His interpretation of Ondaatje is interesting, but explains nothing that could not be explained using other approaches. His own theory is exciting as a metaphor, but invalid as an argument because it attempts to re-describe nature and civilisation (two terms), but is really dealing at all times with three terms: matter, mind or consciousness, and process.

Does it fail? Comparing the book and the critical reactions to it, one can only

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regret the hard logic of this critique. As criticism, *Savage Fields* is potentially dangerous, but given that the majority of reviewers seem to praise it without seeing any of the flaws, one can't imagine it actually doing any harm. As art, it is fascinating; one can project a new text based on a combination of parts of *Savage Fields* and parts of *Beautiful Losers*. Given the state of reviewing in Canada, especially of fiction, where the writers are so many miles ahead of the critics that they are in great danger of totally isolating themselves, one can only respect the intensity of mind which Lee has brought to this task. Like the best of his work, it forces the mind out onto strange roadways and even contradiction becomes a pleasure.

The lasting conclusions of my own text, I would hope, are two-fold. One, never take Ondaatje or Cohen too seriously; they are tricksters; their purposes are those of trickster disc-jockeys. Two, criticism is not and cannot be objective because it has not yet found its proper object of study: the work plus the readings of the work. The proper object of study is, however, beyond full observation in any case. So, whether or not its methodology is objective, criticism's conclusions must remain subjective. All critics should accept that premise or prove it invalid.

A Proper Review

I liked *Savage Fields*, even though I disagreed with ninety percent of it. As they say in the country, a good mind dancing on water is worth twenty dullards shooting ducks in a swamp.

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