

READING SAVAGE FIELDS

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It is much easier, I have discovered, to read *Savage Fields* as five or six books which it is not, than as the book it's trying to be. Rather than responding to Bradshaw's and Godfrey's critiques in detail, I'd find it more constructive to speak to that problem. And I'll ask the reader to join me in taking the content of the book for granted; the discussion will try to clarify, not what is in *Savage Fields*, but how to read the book as itself.

A. The Difficulty of Reading *Savage Fields*

The lowest-level confusions have arisen because *Savage Fields* gives a reading of two Canadian books. Doesn't this mean it must be a study of Canlit? or the Canadian identity? or modern literature at large? Read in this way, of course, it is an altogether weird book, which veers from detailed textual analysis of a scanty two novels to sudden, irrelevant generalizations about neurobiology and the planet earth — with hardly a word about Canada, and in fact with no real logic at all in its zigzag course.

But this is a banal misreading. The book uses Canadian examples because I happen to be a Canadian, and it uses literary examples because I happen to be interested in literature. But the subject it is broaching is not reducible to either of those areas of enquiry.

The project which *Savage Fields* does pursue is more ambitious, and less familiar. The book tries to think through a new paradigm of order. In fact, it attempts to re-conceive the character of rational coherence — to imagine a different *logos*. This is something like doing a gestalt puzzle: it is a matter, not just of re-arranging the same parts into a different whole, but of re-seeing the basic relationship of 'parts and whole' altogether. It entails identifying a cosmology which embodies the new mode of coherence (that of 'savage fields'), and also contesting the cosmology which has been the matrix of meaningful order for several centuries (the 'liberal' cosmology of objective facts and subjective values).

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This programme, of tracing/inciting a shift in paradigms of order, is bound to cause difficulty for a reader. And the reason is interesting: the liberal categories which *Savage Fields* is trying to subvert are also, inevitably, the very categories through which a reader will apprehend its argument. For they are the self-conscious terms of discourse with which our era organizes its thought.

Putting it the other way round: to draw on categories such as 'man and nature', 'fact and value', 'subject and object' in analyzing *Savage Fields* is to refuse — by that very act — to hear what *Savage Fields* is saying. It is a 'refusal' because those categories already express the cosmology which the book is calling in question. So they must be set in brackets while reading the book; to use them to interpret the argument simply prevents one from grasping the force of the enquiry at all.

But if a reader accepts that his basic mental categories are being called in question — in fact *are* 'the question' — then he enters a zone where there seem to be no paths and no rules. How can we think at all, if we relinquish the fundamental syntax of thought with which our era furnishes us?

Exactly How can we? ... That is the guiding question of *Savage Fields*. And if a reader reaches a point of puzzlement, vexation and discomfort at that prospect, he has arrived at the starting-point of the book's exploration.

To proceed further, he must have a certain capacity for kinetic passivity, a taste for scouting new terrain without too restless a craving for pre-validated maps. The goal is, precisely, to let one's sense of structure be re-shaped — not by whatever *Savage Fields* may say, but by that which emerges as there-to-be-thought.

Relinquishing our basic categories is an unnerving step to take, however, and it is understandable that so few people have been willing to take it — or even discerned that it is there for the taking. Unfortunately, this makes the book impossible to read as the project it is. And that is the first difficulty confronting a reader.

There is a second difficulty, which is the result of a misjudgment in the book's approach. It is not intrinsic to the subject of cosmology. But it makes my presentation of the subject more obscure than it needed to be.

Savage Fields assumes that its preoccupations will be shared *a priori* by anyone who considers an "essay in literature and cosmology" worth reading in the first place. So the book refrains from spelling out its aims at the beginning, and tries instead to explain them by actively exemplifying them.

But why expect readers to twig so readily? *Savage Fields* was trying to accomplish something that was not defined elsewhere as a thing-to-do. And without making its aims explicit, it was naive to expect it to be recognized as a

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quest for new reflexes of reasoning. In Chapter V (pages 47-49), the ground-plan of the book is finally supplied. But it comes too late. I now think the book should have explained its novel trajectory at the beginning — in a preface — as well as defining that trajectory by where it goes and what it does.

This problem, of recognizing what *Savage Fields* is up to, is compounded because the book still retains traces of its successive drafts. It began as a basically literary study, and it was only as I pursued it through several versions that I realized what the trajectory of enquiry actually was. The book is somewhat awkwardly-proportioned as a result, and that too makes it harder for a reader to bring the whole thing into focus.

All that said, I am both bemused and impressed by the generosity of spirit with which many people have applied themselves to the book, making what sense they can of its parts while the drift of the whole stays opaque for them. But it also chafes me, to realize how much easier it could have been to connect with the book I actually wrote.

B. A New Paradigm of Coherence (Chapter I)

The difficulty of grasping the first chapter, which sets out the paradigm of savage fields, is distinct from the problem of assimilating the main body of the book. Here I will discuss only Chapter I.

How are we to think the coherence of what-is, the logos of the cosmos? Chapter I defines 'world' and 'earth', and proposes the unusual model in which they are identical at every point, yet are at war with one another at every point.

This model gives a different account of planet-order from the liberal. And more than that, the model itself constitutes an alternative matrix of coherence, which would conceivably (if one could pursue it) generate a form of rational thought, possibly even of logic, quite unlike those of the last few centuries.

Now, no difficulty arises with this model so long as one merely tries to understand it. Keeping the model at arm's length, as an 'object of knowledge', any moderately sophisticated person can grasp the notion of two antagonistic fields coinciding in the same space. To apply that paradigm to the planet at large is a bit more unconventional, to be sure; but while one may or may not consider it a useful exercise, there is no great difficulty in understanding what the paradigm consists of.

What is vastly more difficult, however — and what transforms one's clear and distinct understanding of a model into tongue-tied perplexity about the very nature of thought — is to take the paradigm seriously, and step inside it. For once one flirts, even tentatively, with the possibility that planet actually *is* configured as in the paradigm — that the model is not just something to

dandle mentally — then one's categories of 'understanding' swim completely out of focus, become useless.

All planet is instinctual energy, is earth; *all* planet is held in the sway of consciousness, is world. Two mutually exclusive domains are living out their necessities simultaneously, each co-extensive with the entire planet-space that surrounds and permeates us, configuring the very same trees and streets and minds in their warring fields. And oneself is an event in the strife; there is no purchase outside it for the mind, for there *is* no 'outside it'.

At this point, the recognition surfaces: the words that are now bred into the very reflexes of our articulacy all distort that intuition of order, wrench it back into the shapes of the liberal paradigm. But the liberal paradigm will not do; and so familiar projects of thought, particular concepts, even individual words — all the categories which shape our minds' response come to feel inadequate, alien, bizarre. The whole liberal credo, that 'consciousness' 'perceives' and 'describes' an 'objective universe' 'outside itself', begins to sound like a strange dream, almost a sequence of nonsense syllables. And eventually there are no mental reflexes by which to navigate — for none of them flows with the grain of this new matrix of coherence.

The first result of trying out the model from the inside, then, is to render one inarticulate. The process is matter-of-fact, even impersonal; certainly there is nothing hysterical about it. It is simply very perplexing, to find the whole language gone mute as a means of articulating order.

Chapter I sets down this intuition of savage fields. The rest of the book, necessarily, will take the muteness which ensues as its starting-point. And once it does, there can be no question of developing a completed system of thought; to begin to think at all is a titanic ambition.

A reader starts to understand *Savage Fields*, in any authentic sense, only when he too enters this silence of mind, and accepts that he may not be able to tidy up and organize this zone of cosmological pre-definition in a matter of hours — nor even days or weeks. Indeed, the task may not be to organize the mental space of cosmos at all, but to sit still until *it* begins to declare the terms of its structure, and to re-make one's mind.

C. A Strategy for Thought: 'Mapping a Possible Enquiry'

So. How are we to think rationally outside the liberal paradigm? How can we reason so as to honour the still-undeclared logos of savage fields?

The next three Parts of the book (Chapters II through VIII) will seem very arbitrary, as an overall trajectory of thought, unless one senses the way they

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dwell in uncertainty and attending. For their author had no pre-conceived idea how to proceed with the task of thinking within this new mode of coherence — nor where it would lead. Or, more accurately, the ideas and reflexes he brought to the task all had to be un-learned as he went. So it was a matter of trial and error, of improvising, groping in the dark. There were often months and years between the emergence of the most rudimentary reflexes and insights; and the smallest step forward seemed like epochal progress. These things are not said to elicit any personal response, but to convey the scale of expectation that is appropriate to the scope of the book's achievement — which by normal standards is minimal.

Faced with the question of how to think, the book improvises an approach which may take a little while to assimilate. Namely, it sketches a certain *possible* (that is, beckoning but unclaimed) trajectory of enquiry. In effect it says, "Suppose it were feasible to think fruitfully from within this paradigm. If such an enquiry were actually underway, what would it look like?" It then attempts to imagine, and selectively demonstrate, that possible enquiry.

The book does not try to achieve the whole enquiry it is blocking out; far from it. That would be the work of several lifetimes. Rather, it projects its shape and fills in a few of the segments. It maps out possible questions, as a way of asking whether such a gesture of questioning can be carried through at all from within this new matrix of coherence. The goal is to open enough vistas that one begins to see what it would be, to think within the paradigm of savage fields. What are the real questions? how would one handle them? where might they lead?

The project is speculative, then — yet in a peculiar off-and-on way. For the mapping is also accomplished concretely at times. There are three stages in the hypothetical enquiry, and at each stage the book makes enough assumptions that it has somewhere to start from — and then settles down to a specific task of thinking, to see whether it can be achieved. The aim of this procedure is to find out, and demonstrate, what it might be like to pursue *this* stage of the enquiry.

The flow of the book has an oddly patchy texture as a result. It alternates between long sections of close reasoning about relatively limited matters, and short speculative passages which race ahead full tilt and carry the enquiry into the next stage — where the process starts again. The bumpy, leap-frog effect is not the result of absentmindedness in the text; it is a direct expression of the strategy it is following.

It should be clear that such a strategy cannot hope to discover many things with certainty. (When it does, they are likely to be particular difficulties which crop up with enough regularity that they become landmarks.) To 'map a

possible enquiry' is to limit one's scope from the beginning, then, for there will not be a broad enough range of thorough investigation to permit much generalization. Nevertheless, this was the only way I could find of making a beginning at all. The book aims to accomplish at least a preparatory reconnaissance of its new terrain. And the dead ends and points of confusion will be as informative as the stretches of straightaway.

Until a reader senses the logic and trajectory of these three stages, he is unlikely to discern the book's genuine limitations, flaws of presentation, and errors of thinking — let alone take the measure of its achievement. The sections which follow will provide more detailed notes on those stages.

D. An Example of Finding Examples: Reading *Billy the Kid* (Chapters II-IV)

In what form would one find the intuition of savage fields in literature, or architecture, or microbiology? *Savage Fields* imagines an enquiry which would begin by asking this question. And it demonstrates how it might proceed by itself looking at a literary work. Examining the sense of planet-order which informs *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, it finds the cosmology of strife implicit there.

As a reading of *Billy the Kid*, this part of the book has whatever value it may have. Simultaneously, however, it demonstrates the first stage of the enquiry — the search for widespread examples. And that in turn prepares the book for its first major leap of assumptions.

Let us presume that one has read these three chapters, and concluded that they seem reasonable. They are now to be taken, in the book's overall project, as a demonstration that one could indeed uncover a broad range of examples — in further works of literature, but equally in other disciplines. It would take some years to verify the supposition, and meanwhile I cannot imagine how the paradigm would be expressed in painting, say, or economic theory (if indeed it is). The book simply assumes, by a jump of faith, that construing a single case demonstrates that one could uncover many more. It is now ready to map out the second stage of its hypothetical enquiry.

But why push ahead so abruptly? Why not take the time and find more examples?

On the face of it, this is a fair reservation. And one could envision settling into a lifework of explicating instances of the paradigm (as well as noting cases where it was not in evidence). Indeed, much of the force of the argument would collapse if one could not discover such examples. It would be a demanding search, which might or might not be fruitful.

Nevertheless, it seemed to me that in this originating essay it would be sterile and almost careerist to settle for that. The questions at stake involve more than

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just the opportunity to carve out a piece of intellectual property, to claim a role as cataloguer of the paradigm's various embodiments.

Unless one pushed deeper, moreover, it would be hard not to pursue examples in the spirit of liberal research, where the subject of enquiry (here, the model itself) is objectified and devalorized and treated as one more neutral specimen. That epistemology of conscious subjects and factual objects is cast in a new light in the cosmology of savage fields, where it is seen as an ideology, part of world's technique for dominating earth. But the relation of thinker and to-be-thought has still to be reconceived within the new terms of order. And meanwhile, simply trundling laterally from discipline to discipline, finding and analyzing fresh examples of the paradigm, would not in itself allow one to overcome the liberal assumptions and method. It could, in fact, become a way of evading most of the challenges raised by the new paradigm.

Once the intuition of savage fields has been uncovered in *Billy the Kid*, then, the book continues with blocking out such an overall enquiry. It simply assumes that the first stage of such an enquiry — the discovery of widespread examples — has now been shown to be feasible.

E. An Example of Testing the Paradigm: The Neurobiological Paradox (Chapter V)

We come now to the most gnarled, condensed, and speculative stage of the hypothetical enquiry.

The next question is this: Does the paradigm make sense of our planet, or does it not? The second stage of the enquiry is projected as an attempt to validate or falsify the new cosmology, by referring it directly to experience. Thus the book now has to imagine some test being applied, which would result in the paradigm being shown to be true or false.

That is more easily said than done. The first possible demonstration that came to mind was to take some phenomenon and 'situate' it mentally in the strife of world and earth, to see whether a reading of it as an event in the savage field would be illuminating. The phenomenon could be any thing, in principle — from an incident in one's life, to an everyday object, to a large-scale historical occurrence or trend.

That approach was inadequate; the problem was, it wasn't clear what it would prove. For it is a commonplace that any system of interpretation will permit one to find significance in the most unlikely data; the world is full of people who can explain everything in sight, to their own satisfaction, in terms of numerological principles, or the Book of Revelations, or the history of the extensions of the senses. While their conclusions may strike everyone else as dippy, there is no denying that once one steps within their framework of

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coherence, the conclusions make sense. But I had no desire simply to create one more self-contained system, which fed its own assumptions in at one end and plucked them out at the other, taking them to be somehow proven in between. Some test was needed which would offer a more rigorous challenge to the paradigm.

At this point, the strategy suggested itself of taking a phenomenon and imbedding it both within the cosmology of savage fields, and also within the cosmology of facts and values. That would provide a cross check, rough and ready though it might be; the method at least would be respectable. Which paradigm would accommodate it more convincingly? Within which logoi would it make more sense? And that is in fact the basic strategy for this second stage of the hypothetical enquiry.

The strategy itself may or may not be finally useful; I am not sure myself. But while this is an important question, what matters most at this point is to exemplify the task at hand, of trying to see whether or not the paradigm stands up. If a reader saw something wrong with this particular method, I thought, he would at least get the gist of what was being attempted.

The sample phenomenon which Chapter V chooses is at once misleading, and informative, and unsatisfactory. It is the recently-developed science of neurobiology — or at least the fact of its existence. What would happen, the book asks, if we were to situate a rigorous science of the brain within the liberal cosmology, and then within that of savage fields?

As the reader will recall, the result is twofold. The liberal cosmology appears to self-destruct in consequence, to develop internal contradictions which are too fundamental to ignore. But although the paradigm of savage fields seems able to include a science of mind without self-contradiction, the attempt to describe that science as both a world-activity and an earth-activity bogs down. That is, the book does not have adequate resources of thought to carry the demonstration through.

This does not falsify the paradigm, as far as I can see. But it does indicate that it needs to be deepened before it would be analytically usable, or even fully testable. (The same thing would have emerged, I believe, with any other example; it is not merely a function of the neurobiological case.) This task of thought is something the book bequeaths to author and reader, to be taken up after the book is finished; it is carried no further within *Savage Fields*. And the discovery of the difficulty is the main, if negative accomplishment of this section of the demonstration.

Let us go back a step. The example of neurobiology is misleading, in that it provides more dramatic results — the collapse of liberal epistemology — than

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one need necessarily expect. Many phenomena might fit with equal ease into both cosmologies; if the liberal cosmology is indeed inadequate or wrong, there is no reason to expect it to be revealed as such by every example. Hence this demonstration case may not be representative.

The example is informative because, if the reasoning of the chapter stands up (and I believe it does, though I have yet to read a serious critique of it), then it is a matter of some interest that the liberal paradigm is susceptible of a *reductio ad absurdum* from within.

And the example is unsatisfactory because it does not permit a full-fledged comparison of the two cosmologies, due to the relative primitiveness of the model of strife. It is like testing a stereo set in a house with congenitally faulty wiring (where it clearly will not work), and then in a house which is not fully built yet (where one can get it plugged in, but can't test the sound properly). One is left certain that the first house is defective, but uncertain whether the second house will ever be finished, and how the stereo will work if it is.

The book now changes gears again. It makes a fresh assumption: that the paradigm could be tested further by situating more phenomena within it and the liberal model; and — in a much greater leap of faith — that the paradigm of savage fields would prove to articulate the structure of what-is in a trustworthy way. (This depends, in turn, on assuming that some adequate way of thinking world and earth simultaneously could be found.) The book does not achieve the thought which would make those assumptions good; in fact, it would be well to describe them as profound challenges to be mulled on further, rather than as assumptions the book makes lightly. In any event, it now moves past these matters so that an equally pressing question can be mapped.

F. An Example of Raising the Question of Nihilism: Examining the Quest of *Beautiful Losers* (Chapters VI-VIII)

The final stage of the hypothetical enquiry starts from the question, What is the effect of thinking the paradigm of savage fields? The book has examined (on pages 50-54) the nihilism latent in the liberal paradigm, which severs the valuative dimension from an objectified cosmos. Eventually that whole dimension of quality and value becomes a kind of ghostly after-image, lingering epiphenomenally after its substance has vanished, though still invoked for ritual comfort by less-than-hardy minds. But to actually *think* 'good' or 'evil' (as anything but historically-determined 'values', which are themselves value-free objects of study) is not possible within the liberal cosmology.

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But does the new syntax of order, any more than the liberal, permit one to comprehend that which men once named 'justice' (for example), 'evil', 'the numinous'? It is not a question of trying to resurrect those pre-liberal verities within the logos men then shared; their language of order is one we no longer speak. But does the mere act of thinking from within the field of strife, in categories which strive to honour its terms of existing, mean that we cannot hold in mind 'holy and secular', 'just and unjust', 'evil and good' as primal attributes of what-is? however that would be done? To speak less subjectively: if the cosmos is indeed structured as this model declares, is anything now real but the amoral process of strife? Considering what that process actually includes, and what it does not, this would be a vision of hell.

Until this fundamental quandary is faced, much of the earlier exploration of the paradigm seems naive, virtually myopic. And so one must ask, Is there any way, without indulging in wishful thinking, to honour this intuition of planet-structure without surrendering to nihilism? The task of the third stage of enquiry is to demonstrate how that question might be addressed.

The strategy the book finds for demonstrating it is to explicate a novel in which the questions are raised, Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*.

In terms of method, I do not believe this was the most helpful demonstration to give. For there is no reason to imply that the normative approach to the issue of nihilism would be to explicate literary texts — rather than, say, to discuss the issue directly.

In the first stage of the enquiry, of course, one must by definition look for the paradigm in existing works of reason or the imagination. But this case is different; to examine such works is in no way intrinsic to the task of this final stage — even if they might turn out to be useful reference-points. The basic strategy of these chapters is misleading, then, since it may suggest that the overall enquiry is basically one of literary criticism. And that is not the case.

However, that problem is one of presentational strategy, not one of substance. The effect of examining *Beautiful Losers* at this point is to make *its* quest the demonstration case, the example which figures how one might pursue the third stage of the enquiry. And the quest of *Beautiful Losers* is directly germane to the enquiry. Cohen's novel wrestles with the crucial issue: can the field of cosmos be experienced, without dishonesty, as anything other than strife? Raising the question — and arriving at the terrible answer — constitutes the central action of *Beautiful Losers*.

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The quest of the novel is generated by an imagination trapped in the savage field, striving to come to terms with its own experience and the order of what-is. Structurally (to use the analytic terms of *Savage Fields*), planet is intuited as a strife of world and earth. But that is only a beginning. What if that field-structure configured a meaning wholly other than 'strife'? Might the agony of enacting the warfare in one's own being not in fact be purgative, an incitement to ecstatic enlightenment? Mightn't the savage field be an 'Isis continuum'? Yet finally, the novel concludes, this attempt to see with transformed eyes is itself one more expression of world's will to mastery through technique — in this case, the technique of ecstasy. Within the authentic action of *Beautiful Losers*, every attempt by world to transform the savage field, or to leave it behind, becomes an even bleaker confirmation of world's fate — which is to inhabit the field and recreate it forever.

This reading of the novel has aroused some controversy. But while it continues to seem conclusive to me, pursuing a critical debate is less important (in this context) than the larger goal, of glimpsing what the issue of nihilism would look and feel like from within the paradigm of strife. Reading *Beautiful Losers* is a good way of getting such a glimpse.

For that matter, one would not have to raise the question of nihilism exactly as the novel does. But that too is immaterial here. *Beautiful Losers* scouts real questions, and runs into real difficulties. It is an exploration to be grateful for, and learn from, and regroup after.

G. Taking Stock: Some Problems in the Paradigm (Chapter IX)

With this, the mapping of the hypothetical enquiry is done. Any firm results are very fragmentary; but the more provisional aim of reconnoitering an uncharted terrain, and improvising means of thinking within it, has sometimes succeeded. Now the final chapter tries to specify areas in which more thought is needed — to identify the quandaries of analysis and being into which it has strayed, and in which it is preparing to pitch camp as the book ends.

This should have been the most energizing chapter in the book in some respects, for the proper harvest of an essay such as this is not firm answers, but a deepening of its central questions. But the attempt in Chapter IX is not satisfactory; I'll try to refocus it here. These are problems which demand further thought.

(1) The paradigm of savage fields is based on the intuition that world and earth coincide at every point in planet. In principle, the particular *mode* of their coincidence is not important; it could be play, for example, or strife, or union, or mutual quiescence. Or planet could keep changing from one mode to another. In formal terms, the paradigm is not reducible to any single one of the possible modes of coincidence.

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Yet the book appears to recognize only one such mode, that of strife. It's true that it explicates six moments in *Billy the Kid*, and acknowledges the Isis mode in *Beautiful Losers*. Yet the book itself is a good deal less flexible than are the two novels it examines; it tends to assume, in its own explorations, that 'the coincidence of world and earth' means always and only 'the strife of world and earth'.

In formal terms, at least, this impoverishes the paradigm greatly. Whether or not it also skews the argument of the book, forces it to interpret things as manifestations of strife when they should be construed differently, is a question I have not yet gotten into focus. It could be that the generative structure of modern planet *is* indeed the *strife* of world and earth — that the field is essentially savage in our era. But it begs a very large question to assume that from the beginning, excluding all other possibilities without discussion.

The basic intuition of a non-liberal logos, of course, is in no way affected if one allows the possibility of other modes of coincidence. The structure of the matrix would be constant, from one to another of the various models it generates. Recognizing this might also make it easier to discuss planet historically — to discuss pre-technological eras within the structural language of the paradigm, without having to force them improperly into the sole mode of strife.

(2) In the second footnote to Chapter I, the following remarks occur:

...earth cannot be known by consciousness in the terms in which earth itself exists.... We are citizens of both domains. But we speak of earth only in terms of world's knowledge of it, because to speak at all is to assert our world-nature. (114)

This is a mixture of clear and muddled thinking, which re-surfaces repeatedly in the more general sections of the book. That reflects the degree to which my thinking remained dependent on the liberal dichotomy of nature and consciousness, even while trying to struggle free of it.

It is accurate to insist that earth is inscrutable to world — at least within the mode of *savage* fields. But there is no reason not to insist, simultaneously, that the purposes of world are equally discontinuous with those of earth, equally incommensurate. The two domains are *mutually* inscrutable.

Otherwise, the speaker who is finding earth inscrutable is trying to locate himself exclusively in world, from which he looks across a great divide at earth. But this is simply to recreate the knife-cut dichotomy of man and nature — refusing the whole logos of coincident fields. It is also to acquiesce in all the dead ends of liberal epistemology: "What does the inscrutable 'thing-itself' ,

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which stands behind the object known by men, actually look like? can we know it at all? does it even exist? etc. etc." Hence, if one wishes to speak of inscrutability, it is just as important to specify world's inscrutability to one's earth-mode as to do the opposite.

(3) The statement, "To speak at all is to assert our world-nature", is an even more blatant example of this one-sided replication of the liberal view of man. Speech, like every other thing, must be understood as simultaneously a world-activity *and* an earth-activity. Otherwise the whole challenge of the new paradigm is evaded.

This error of one-sidedness crops up whenever the matter of thinking the field becomes thematic. If it were not corrected, it would throw subsequent thinking more and more out of kilter. Much of the agonizing of Chapter IX, in particular, is based on disregarding this fundamental aspect of the paradigm; it assumes that thought is solely an expression of world-mastery. But while it *is* that, and should be analyzed as such, it is equally an expression of earth-energy — and should be analyzed as such. The fact that I cannot yet specify it as both simultaneously is no reason to retreat to the liberal model, in which consciousness is the sole and hemmed-in seat of being-human.

(4) To recast the same point: I can now see no reason why speech should not articulate earth as earth, just as much (or as little) as it articulates world as world. Indeed, that is the only reasonable expectation from within this paradigm. This represents a fairly serious revision of the notion of Heidegger to which I refer at the beginning of the book. (It speaks particularly to the cul-de-sac encountered on page 58, and in footnote 7 of Chapter V, pages 121-122.)

It is one thing for speech to be both world-act and earth-act, of course, and it is another for it to articulate both world and earth. I am not sure that the second flows automatically from the first. But in any case, language will have to understand its potency and impotence in a different way from that now found in *Savage Fields*, if it is to honour its own double situation in the field. This means, of course, that any further thought in this area also depends upon such a deepening of self-understanding.

(5) The most far-reaching conclusion I have come to, reflecting on the project of *Savage Fields*, is that it cannot be carried much further within the mode of logic we are familiar with, and which can be labelled 'aristotelian'. I do not pretend to more than a layman's knowledge in this area. But it seems to me that the form of a rigorous logical statement needs to be dramatically different, if it speaks permanently from within a situation in which two things are always simultaneously true; both must be affirmed; yet each is false or inscrutable from within the frame of meaning of the other.

What such a logic would look like, I do not know. I am not even clear that the mind would be capable of functioning easily within it. But until it is

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developed, the primal syntax of one's thinking remains radically at odds with the terms of existing of that which one is seeking to articulate.

Developing such a logic might be comparable to developing one of the non-euclidean geometries. Or it might be a matter of reaching a more general logic, of which the aristotelian was a special case. This would mean seeking a logos of possible logics.

Savage Fields maps an enquiry which might follow from the intuition of savage fields. And it is reasonable to ask: After blocking out that enquiry and pondering the results, do the routes and priorities which it enunciates still seem valid?

For what it's worth, I am now inclined to envision the possible enquiry somewhat differently. One priority would be the substance of (1) above: the inadvisability of collapsing 'coincident fields' into 'savage fields' prematurely. A second priority would be the substance of (5) above, which in fact underlies (2), (3) and (4): the necessity of devising a logic which enables one to make two statements simultaneously, from within each of which the other is false or inscrutable. And a third priority would be the substance of section F above: the question of nihilism.

Several of these problems, the reader will notice, throw the basic assumptions and working methods of *Savage Fields* into question. That may seem a bit surprising, but it is merely part of the exploration which *Savage Fields* initiates and (haltingly) is. There is no need to cover for the book, at points where its improvisations were not adequate; if this leads to reconceiving its project in more adequate terms, so much the better. At the same time, of course, it is still not helpful to praise or criticize the book without understanding what it is trying to do.

These problems do not call for a series of patchwork repairs to the book, but for a quantum leap of thought. If they are at all promising, it is because of the possibility that they will someday generate it.

H. Bradshaw's Critique

I enjoyed Leah Bradshaw's reflections. Unfortunately, as the preceding discussion will make clear, they do not connect with the substance of *Savage Fields*.

In her fourth footnote, Bradshaw remarks that the paradigm of savage fields is "more complex" than her account of it would indicate. This is true. In fact, her article does not seem even to have noticed that the paradigm differs from the liberal model of 'man and nature', on which her explication relies. This

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unconscious conversion of the paradigm into the very categories of order it rejects is understandable, for reasons I have discussed. But it means that the critique does not succeed at any point in being about the model I proposed.

Neither is there any similarity between the overall project of *Savage Fields* and the version Bradshaw gives of it. But here the misreading is more eccentric. As far as I can tell, she has taken from Kojève the account of an escapist stance — the desire to abrogate civilization, and sink back into the processes of nature — and projected that stance, at every point in her reading, onto the intent of *Savage Fields*. But this is a perverse exercise.

Savage Fields does not recommend “the annihilation of the dualism between man and nature”. There is no “proposed reconciliation of earth and world” in it. I am not “advocating absorption through another means: mutual surrender rather than subjugation of one by another”. And I do not propose that we “abandon... a dualistic structure of being”.

What the book does recommend is that we replace the liberal model of dualism with a better model of dualism, one that affords a more accurate structural account of what-is. To think that new dualism through is not to lapse into the comatose absorption in natural energies which Bradshaw, in a triumph of sustained misreading, finds advocated throughout the book. (I would hasten to say that I support almost all her strictures against primitivism, except that it would be beside the point to do so.) And since this misinterpretation forms the basis of her whole critique, the article simply fails to intersect with the book.

There are local misreadings which startled me as well; Bradshaw’s account of what the book is saying about *Billy the Kid* and *Beautiful Losers* is an inventive one at times. But that is a secondary matter. *Savage Fields* rejects one model of dualism, but not in order to escape from dualism *per se*. It is not pursuing the project of primitivist ‘reconciliation’ characterized by Kojève, and assailed by Bradshaw; it is engaged in a different project altogether.

Whatever its merits as an attempt to assimilate Kojève, then, this is not a helpful reading or critique of *Savage Fields*.

I. Godfrey’s Critique

There is so much going on at once, in Dave Godfrey’s spirited, self-confident critique, that it is hard to know where to begin. The article does not connect with the overall project of *Savage Fields* either, but its local criticisms should be valuable nonetheless, for the strenuousness of their challenge. Since his attack on the reading of *Beautiful Losers* is the most extensive part of the article, and apparently the most damning, let me turn to it first.

Virtually all serious readings of *Beautiful Losers* recognize, with Godfrey, that it is a modernist work which operates on principles of discontinuous form. Hence they do not look for a linear progression in it — a beginning, middle and end — but rather see the work as 'spread out in space'. And they concentrate on the motifs — myths, symbols, image-clusters, thematic concerns and the like — which organize the novel across many pages by the patterns of their congruence. There is no one privileged version of any of these, of course; a typical motif occurs as a series of rhyming variations which are exciting both because they rhyme, and because they vary. The formal ironies which flicker back and forth across the work become its basic structural language, as well as the substance of its vision.

Godfrey's reading is particularly strong in that he sees the act of modernist formalizing as integral to the novel's way of being itself, rather than as merely a critical strategy for making sense of the novel. For him, to read *Beautiful Losers* at all is to enter the play of a structuralist wit which enjoys comparing and juggling imaginative syntaxes.

This ironic/relativistic approach is so basic to Cohen criticism, indeed to modernist criticism in general, that I have simply taken it for granted in *Savage Fields*. Godfrey announces his belief in structuralism, and tells over its critical terms; and that school is one worthy recent expression of the approach. But critics, however, have been demonstrating this cast of mind, and explicating it in literature, for over 50 years; think of *The Waste Land*, and the New Criticism. It is part of the landscape of twentieth century thought and art.

Now, it happens to be true that I oppose this commitment to formalism, with its conviction that the ultimate use of reason is to map transformations between value-free structural grammars. I do not accept that this *is* the ultimate use of reason. But contesting that approach does not mean becoming an ostrich. The approach exists. It works. It is everywhere. In the century of Einstein, Jung, Joyce, Lévi-Strauss, Chomsky, a man would have to be a fool not to recognize it as the dominant rational technique of the age, the most recent and most potent liberal strategy. And only a lobotomized reader could fail to notice that *Beautiful Losers* participates in the structuralist cast of mind; that Leonard Cohen compares mythologies. *Savage Fields* makes a point of that fact only when there is some special reason to do so (on pages 87-90, for example). Earlier drafts of the book, I might say, explicated it almost *ad nauseam*.

So modernist form is simply not the stop-press news that Dave Godfrey seems to find it. But if it will allow the discussion to proceed more sensibly, let me say something out loud. *Beautiful Losers* is indeed a structuralist novel. I accept the general drift of Godfrey's reading without question, and I accept most of its detail. For that matter, I accept many of the numerous comparable readings which are current.

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And I regret that my taking the whole approach for granted has been construed as ignorance of the approach, which must be vigorously rectified. That has turned the discussion into an absurd excursion in irrelevance, as the reader will see The only thing I do not accept is that any of this was necessary. Does Dave Godfrey also plan to notify us that the earth moves 'round the sun?

If we can assume that no reasonable person would dispute Godfrey's reading of *Beautiful Losers*, in its broad outline at least, perhaps we can move on to the reading proposed by *Savage Fields*. And the book makes a heretical suggestion: that *Beautiful Losers* should also be read as having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Whatever else it may be, the novel is simultaneously a 'complete action' — a movement-of-spirit externalized in an organic sequence of fiction, unfolding from page 1 to page 307. This does not seem like an obvious way to read the novel, on first glance at least. Yet a good many things begin to make sense when one does, and none of the structuralist readings are cancelled out, though their context shifts.

The 'story' is not just the sum of the discontinuous incidents involving F., the narrator, Edith and Catherine. The 'story' is the actual writing of the novel. The act of imagining Book One is the beginning; the act of imagining Book Two (up to page 237) is the middle; and the act of imagining the final 70 pages is the end. *Savage Fields* seeks to clarify this 'action' — to discern the movement of spirit which that progression enacts.

Now, the cosmos Cohen depicts has the structure of savage fields (although with a different configuration than *Billy the Kid* proposes). And the burden of the action is to investigate whether enlightenment, or salvation, is possible in such a cosmos.

Book One affirms that sensual excess can lead to enlightenment; excess reveals the savage field to be an 'Isis continuum', which illuminates men through ecstasy. The novel makes this affirmation by imagining a dionysiac guru, F., and imagining the progressive enlightenment of a man embedded in the field, his friend the narrator. 'Positing' F. and the narrator's enlightenment, then, is the initial step in the novel's action.

Book Two then undercuts that Isis-possibility, chastising the act of imagining it as an expression of world's power-mania. Within the novel's whole trajectory, creating F.'s long letter from prison enacts this recoil from the affirmation of Book One. Finally, the last 70 pages try out various responses to the consequent blockage in the novel's project; those responses do not succeed. By 'do not succeed' I mean that they neither win through to enlightenment, in a way that convincingly overcomes the obstacles raised by Book Two, nor enact the failure to do so in an artistically resonant way.

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An aside: I do not argue that one option is right and the other wrong — getting enlightened or failing resonantly. I do not have a programme for the novel. I do, however, argue that Cohen has to do one or the other, after what has come before, if the novel is not to seem dilettantish. The courage and stature of his own quest in the first 237 pages make that incumbent upon him. Of course he is free to do other things at the same time.

This is a summary of 40 closely-written pages, perhaps abbreviated beyond the point of comprehensibility. I have to ask the reader to accept that, in *Savage Fields*, the argument is anchored firmly in the text of *Beautiful Losers*. But even on the evidence of this précis he may notice that Godfrey does not deal with the reading in its own terms at all. He does present a pot-pourri of quotations from *Savage Fields* at one point, which a reader who knows the book might recognize as encapsulating my argument. (Anyone else, I am sure, will be thoroughly bewildered by it.) Yet what is his own interpretation and assessment of the reading? After all, there is nothing in the three Cohen chapters *but* this reading; it is not an easy thing to miss.

Let me quote his treatment in full: "There are other interpretations, to say the least."

That summarizes Godfrey's critique of the reading; that *is* Godfrey's critique of the reading. He does not ask whether *Beautiful Losers* is indeed this kind of novel (one which enacts a movement-of-spirit). Nor does he evaluate specific details of this account of the novel-as-unfolding-action. For that matter, he seems not to have properly noticed that the novel has been presented as an unfolding action at all. Nowhere the question "Is any of this stuff Lee talks about actually there on the page?" As for the possibility that there might be some integrity to the novel's quest for enlightenment; that the quest might actually matter; or that it might be a genuine, painful defeat when the novel has to settle for *merely* tracing congruences among various salvation myths (as opposed to tracing congruences while also seeking salvation with conviction) — about the whole set of human possibilities which the reading opens up, Godfrey stays totally mute. In fact, he evades the reading in its entirety. He does not fail to refute it; he does not even *try* to refute it.

It is true that he challenges my judgement on the book's conclusion.¹ That judgement, however, is shorn of its whole rationale, which lies in the specific account of the novel's action from which it derives. Perhaps a reader who does not know *Savage Fields* will be impressed. But this is simply not a responsible way to argue, to silently slip around nine-tenths of the case one is professing to rebut.

Beyond that, Godfrey's way of dealing with the reading in *Savage Fields* is to ignore it and elaborate his own. Despite its considerable merit, however, sketching that interpretation does nothing to rebut the reading of *Savage Fields*. So the debate between book and critique could be epitomized thus:

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Lee: John Smith is six feet tall. [*He proves it.*]

Godfrey: Nonsense! John Smith weighs 180 pounds.

And he has red hair! And he used to drive back
in Flin Flon! [*He proves it.*]

If a reader is reluctant to believe Dave Godfrey is capable of such logic, I invite him to re-read the critique.

The effect is not to confirm *Savage Fields'* account of the novel, of course; since Godfrey never discusses it in the first place, the irrelevance of his 'refutation' proves nothing about the reading itself. The effect is simply to leave the reader back at square one, having to make up his own mind about *Savage Fields'* "argument *re* Cohen." As a contribution to that assessment, Godfrey's critique flaps its arms strenuously but never leaves the ground. He has proven nothing whatsoever about the book's reading of *Beautiful Losers*.

If Godfrey's 'refutation' collapses, however, his own reading points the way to a worthwhile task of thinking.

Savage Fields discusses the way *Billy the Kid* operates in two formal logics at once; the book shows (on pages 32-34) how "traditional and modern structural canons trace out their differing necessities simultaneously." The book does not attempt to analyze *Beautiful Losers* in the same way, since articulating the novel-as-action reading took all my concentration, and then some. It is true that it examines the way the novel takes refuge in 'mere' structuralism, at the point where its initial quest has become paralyzed. But though this responds to the central action of *Beautiful Losers*, it would be inadequate, in a more complete reading of the novel, to concentrate on its formalist virtuosity only when it emerges as part of the underlying action. For *Beautiful Losers* is formalist from beginning to end, as Godfrey properly insists.

I cannot begin the task here. But it would be intriguing to read through *Beautiful Losers*, responding to the formalist romp that Godfrey concentrates on, with its non-linear and comparativist sense of structure, and responding simultaneously to the unfolding action which *Savage Fields* discerns. Do those formal logics operate on the same page throughout, or do they emerge in successive sections (as in fact they do in *Billy the Kid*), appearing 'simultaneous' only in retrospect? Do they squabble? travel in parallel? or enrich one another? I would expect to find that the novel is at its best when Cohen can honour both impulses fully, proceed both spatially and linearly at the same time, be playful and dead serious at once. But that may just be my preconception.

In any case, seeing how these formal aspects of the novel complement one another (and how they contradict one another) would be more interesting than

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prolonging a huffy or point-scoring debate. I am more convinced than ever that *Beautiful Losers* enacts an (incomplete) movement of spirit, and that reading the book adequately involves perceiving that movement, and joining in. But such a reading does not exhaust the novel's resources by any means, and an approach which does justice to other aspects is equally to the point.

I do not want to linger over Godfrey's two other areas of controversy, which are the book's reading of *Billy the Kid*, and the validity of the paradigm of savage fields.

With the Ondaatje reading, the same thing applies as with the Cohen. Godfrey's comments are very much to the point vis-a-vis *Billy the Kid*, and very little to the point vis-a-vis *Savage Fields*. Everything he says about Christ and texts and tricksters may be true, but having all the right answers does not guarantee that you are supplying them for the right questions. After one has noted Godfrey's answers, gratefully, there is no reason not to return to the question at hand: "What structure does *Billy the Kid* intuit in what-is?" Godfrey insists on the answer, "It intuits 'structure' by collating existing texts, observing the structure of previous imaginative structures." And that is one good answer — to other questions, and perhaps also to this one. But so, perhaps, is mine.

When it comes to Godfrey's criticism of the model of savage fields, I do not have a lot more to say of a systematic nature. He has not grasped the meaning of 'world'; it is emphatically not to be understood as the agglomeration of all the 'minds' or 'consciousnesses' attached to human bodies. Hence (for example) his injunction to *praxis*, worthy as it undoubtedly is, is not to the point.

By the same token Godfrey is accurate, if not unusually profound, when he observes that, "That which is material does not become conscious by means of mere involvement with consciousness." The observation, however, is irrelevant; I never made any such claim. I simply said that planet as controlled, manipulated and deployed by modern human beings, planet as raw material, has a radically different character from planet as vital material energy; and that everything that is, now, is configured by the strife of those two coinciding domains.

Perhaps a valid point (which Godfrey does not make) would be to observe that I have "decomposed" the composite field, which is all we can in fact experience, into two *hypothetical* fields, by whose interaction I wish to account for the behaviour of the composite field, planet. Methodologically, I believe this is sound. But Godfrey would be right if he insisted that I cannot bring

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forth and present 'world' for separate inspection, or for pure and direct experience; it nowhere exists as I describe it. All I can present is planet *per se*, along with the conviction that understanding it as the savage composite field of planet-which-earths and planet-which-worlds makes better sense of it than does the liberal paradigm of objective facts and subjective values. (The latter is no less hypothetical a model, of course, although it does not *seem* to be, so long as one continues to think unreflectingly within its assumptions; then it seems to be the way things self-evidently are.) This, however, is not a criticism but merely an observation.

As an outgrowth of this, the fact that being eaten by a shark is no less fatal than being crushed by a Ford is also true, and also has nothing to do with the case. I am trying to find a way to talk about the structure of being, in an era when both shark and Ford are wholly members of earth, which incorporates everything; *and* wholly members of world, which incorporates everything; and must each live out both sides of the conflict which those domains are waging. How do you *think* that situation, without just getting a headache? Not, for sure, by converting the paradigm to its familiar liberal opposite, with birds and bees and sharks on one side and brains and bombs and Fords on the other. All Godfrey's example manages to prove is that he has not listened to what I am saying.

And you don't think our situation, lord save us, by trotting out 'mind' and 'matter' once again — with or without a 'process'. Perhaps Godfrey has spotted a flaw in my demolition of the liberal model, from which those terms, as cosmological building-blocks, are drawn. If so, I wish he would give me a clue — or even some indication that he read Chapter Five at all. Meanwhile, it is weird to carry on one more of the non-discussions which *Savage Fields* seems to provoke. Is it really so hard to try this way of seeing things — even on spec?

Those are scattered thoughts on Godfrey's criticism of the paradigm — which does not appear to accomplish anything more than his criticism of the Cohen reading and his criticism of the Ondaatje reading: that is, nothing at all. I am at a disadvantage, however, in responding to the section on cosmology, because I am unable to understand a fair amount of what it says, or to see why Godfrey thought it was worth saying in the parts I *can* understand. I know what all the words mean, but when I try to follow the train of thought I come a cropper. To cite two of several dozen examples: Godfrey keeps referring to the "logical flaw" in my theory, which is "fairly obvious" to anyone. Fair enough. But is there some point in this section on cosmology where he actually explains what the flaw is? I do recognize that he is criticizing the model, at many points, but what *is* this "logical flaw" which vitiates it? Again, what does it mean to say that "strife is a subjective attribute" — and then to 'prove' this by referring to strife among animals, which presumably began long before human 'subjects' even existed? Am I missing the point?... But these examples trivialize my confusion, since it is far more complete than they imply. I am

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simply at sea for whole paragraphs at a time.

I am sure this section of Godfrey's critique does not do justice to the cosmology he is trying to articulate. Perhaps it will come clear another time, or maybe my mind just does not work that way. Meanwhile, however, I have to reserve judgement on much of Godfrey's argument about cosmology, since I cannot make sense of it in this form.

What does this add up to?

Dave Godfrey has not grasped the overall project of *Savage Fields*, so his critique can contribute nothing to an assessment of it. His criticism of the paradigm of world and earth, at the points where it is comprehensible, is based on a misunderstanding of the paradigm, and an unreflecting reliance on the very categories it calls into question.

In the more limited area of literary criticism, he has not perceived the legitimacy, perhaps even the nature, of what the book is doing. (This is possibly because he believes that I consider my approach the only legitimate one — I don't.) His counter-readings of *Beautiful Losers* and *Billy the Kid*, worthwhile though they are, do not invalidate my own in any way. Effectively, the assessment of those readings has not yet begun in his critique.

At the same time, his insistence on a structuralist interpretation of such works would be a useful corrective, if I or anyone else felt tempted to approach them solely from within the concerns of *Savage Fields*. This is the one solid achievement of his critique.

Notes

1. Despite the prominence Godfrey gives it, my criticism of the last 70 pages of *Beautiful Losers* is the least important part of the reading.

I subscribe to its argument as firmly as ever. However, I now think it should be phrased as follows. The second half of Book Two (pages 240-279), in which F. recounts the last days of Catherine, is an almost unqualified artistic failure: long-winded, flat-footed, perfunctory, source-bound, and boring. A reader who is not connecting with the 'complete action' of the book will find these 40 pages a drag. A reader who *is* following that action will too — and will not be surprised that this artistic tailspin occurs at precisely the point where Cohen chooses (or is obliged) to abandon the wrestle with enlightenment, and has nothing left to do but trace parallels between enlightenment-systems. Both readers will be united, well before they have *thought* about the novel, in their immediate response to the line-by-line writing.

On the other hand, the last 19 pages of the novel (Book Three) may strike these readers differently. For the reader engaged with the overall action, it will likely seem just as evasive and unsatisfactory as the 40 pages on Catherine's last days, and even more sophomorically obscurantist. But at least it will seem livelier line by line. A reader who does not perceive any unfolding action, however, may find Book Three roughly comparable in quality to the first 237 pages. He has missed some of the deepest satisfactions of the novel's first three-quarters; but he is now spared the subsequent disappointment during these 19 pages.

The claim that Cohen has tried to sneak out of his own novel, then, applies equally across the last 70 pages. However, the claim that this results in an unmistakable drop in the quality of the writing applies unequivocally only to the first stretch of that section, pages 240-279.