

Armies Moving in the Night: The Fictions of Matt Cohen

GEORGE WOODCOCK

At the end of the 1960s, when native Canadian publishing developed a crusading fervor with the appearance of new avant-garde enterprises like the House of Anansi and New Press, experimental fiction became a vogue in Canada in a way anticipated by only a few isolated works of earlier decades like Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* (1959) and Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* (1939). Perhaps the great publishing event of the waning decade, because it made us aware of a strong *nouvelle vague* of discontent among younger writers with accepted forms, was Anansi's launching of Spiderline Editions, an inspiration on the part of Dennis Lee, but in some ways a self-defeating one. It was a series devoted entirely to "first novels," and for a couple of years it tapped hitherto unexploited sources of imaginative energy, but then the flow of brilliant available material dried up and the series came to a quiet end.

The first batch of Spiderlines was a highly promising one, including Peter Such's *Fallout* (1969), John Sandman's *Eating Out* (1969), Russell Marois's *The Telephone Pole* (1969), and a translation of Pierre Gravel's *A Perte de Temps* (1969), all of them brief and highly experimental fictions and all of them worth attention; but certainly among the anglophone contributions to the series the best was Matt Cohen's *Korsoniloff* (1969), and none of the later titles (though Rabbel Wyatt's *The String Box* (1970) and Michael Charters' *Victor Victim* (1970) were both highly interesting books) seemed so sure in technique or so original in insight. The impression was a lasting one because Cohen became the only one among the writers discovered and published by Dennis Lee during that brief creative springtime who has continued to write with a growing power, and who has developed in less than a decade into one of the most interesting and versatile among the younger generation of Canadian novelists.

Up to the time when I write this essay, Matt Cohen has published eight books in all. Two of them, *Korsoniloff* (1969) and *Johnny Crackle Sings* (1971), are experimental novellas; one, *Too Bad Galahad* (1972) is a fantasy for juveniles; two others, *Columbus and the Fat Lady* (1972) and *Night Flights* (1978) are collections of short stories of which the second largely duplicates the first; the remaining three are full-length fictions of which *The Disinherited* (1974) takes the form of a family chronicle, *Wooden Hunters* (1975) that of an elegy on dying peoples and cultures, and *The Colours of War* (1977) that of a political fantasy in which the search for the future becomes a flight to the past.

Here I shall be concerned mainly with Cohen's three larger books as representative of his mature achievement and likely to point the direction of his writing from this middle point in his career. (He is now in his later thirties). At the same time, the two novellas and the short stories merit at least brief attention since they give first expression to some of Cohen's lasting formal and thematic preoccupations.

Night Flights consists of fifteen stories, of which four had appeared already in *Columbus and the Fat Lady* and represent the material (including the title story) which Cohen decided to retain from the earlier volume. *Night Flights* shows

perhaps better than any other volume the variety of Cohen's capabilities, his technical versatility, though to appreciate the scope of his fictional vision and the depth of his understanding of human predicaments one has to turn to his longer works. The stories vary in tone and approach from the mannered and decadent fantasy of "The Cure" and "A Literary History of Anton" to the near-realism of stories of rustic decay like "Brain Dust," "Country Music" and "Glass Eyes and Chickens," small masterpieces of the darker comedy. But deep in all these stories, whatever their manner, is the sense of alienation that is equally strong in Cohen's novels. By alienation I mean more than what Marx had in mind by the term—that a man's socioeconomic situation may detach him from his natural humanity. I mean also what the proto-psychiatrists of the early nineteenth century meant when they called themselves alienists: an inner division that splits a man's will so that in fictional terms he can be seen as schizoid, divided into two beings, of whom it is not always easy to know which is the real self and which is the persona, or, for that matter, whether self or persona is dominant and directing.

The problem occurs, in the sense of a division between role and personality, in "The Cure" when Eliot, the rich psychotic whose relationship with his senilely demented father forms the core of the story, "suddenly felt himself to be no more than an attempt by his bank balance to project someone human, an account book to live in, the living shadow of his own money."¹ So far, so Marx; but we proceed into an alienation beyond the economic when Eliot "cures" himself in a hysterical scene where he transfers the sense of madness he feels rising within himself on to his father: "'I can't take you out,' he whispered, 'you're crazy.' And then he was shouting, 'You're crazy, YOU'RE FUCKING CRAZY'" (p. 16). But in fact he has merely confirmed his alienation from his own self. He tells his doctor that the situation is "excellent," but "The situation was in the centre of his mind, and from there he saw himself, absolutely inspired, so false he could have flown, raise one arm and place it, loose and familiar, on the shoulder of the doctor" (p. 16).

In another story, "Janice," there is a trio of Janice, the narrator Robert, and a mysterious Nicholas who is drowned, then survives to marry Janice, and finally fades into "Nicholas someone," half-forgotten; he is clearly Robert's *doppelgänger*, the feared other side of himself who must be destroyed.

In "Vogel," the protagonist Sam Vogel tries to escape from death by tuning up programs and middle-aged sexual adventure, but does no more than change the form (not the way) of his death. He dies, essentially, from the split between the inner self represented by a twenty-five years' old graduation photograph and the new self created when the doctor tells him he must become athletic in order to survive. The new self "existed solely in his mind and was not something that could be seen. It was a sensation. The feel of his own body in flight, running: one foot on the ground, taking his whole weight and springing it back, while the other licked out front, confidently reaching."²

This image "in the mind" is regressive, so that Vogel lies like a child in his young mistress's bed, and dies from a heart attack on the running track, "curled up like a baby on the special composition surface of the track" (p. 45). Sam Vogel's death is like a journey into birth, just as his life had been a journey

¹Matt Cohen, "The Cure," in *Night Flights* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1978), p. 143. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

²Matt Cohen, "Vogel," in *Night Flights*, p. 45. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

into death, a journey of forgetting the early self of the graduation photograph: ". . . whoever had lived inside that picture, whoever had walked around with whatever forgotten obsessions, had been buried in circumstance" (p. 55).

Such stories relate very closely to Cohen's early novellas, *Korsoniloff* and *Johnny Crackle Sings*. Both of them are stories of inner alienation, of that division of the self which can end only in permanent loss. *Korsoniloff* concerns a failed teacher in philosophy, a schizoid who tells the story of his divided self—the separate lives of the cold "I" and the ineffectually passionate and amoral Korsoniloff: "Me cold? with my secret lusts and satanic nights, me, my career turned upside down by Korsoniloff—who is nothing but a bundle of super-charged impulses? Cold?"³ So at one point the narrator speaks, yet in another place declares: "I lead my life; Korsoniloff leads his. From time to time there is a shift in the balance of forces; the 'I,' as it were, switches to the new prevailing direction" (p. 48).

"I" is involved in a court case through the actions of Korsoniloff, who turns up at the marriage of their former mistress Marie, disturbs the peace, and is prosecuted. The incident is seen in terms of fantasy by Korsoniloff, of uncomfortable reality by "I." Marie had already sized up the situation: "She looked at me and told me that before she had met me she had known no one deeply and had felt alone within herself but that now she felt not only alone but isolated and that she wasn't sure but that she preferred the first" (p. 62). And so we are not surprised, as the bathetic comedy of the trial goes on, to find "I" speculating: "Who was the master and who the pupil? I could see it both ways. For not only did I create Korsoniloff; Korsoniloff's existence transformed me" (p. 88). And behind this division of the self into alternately dominating personas, we find at the end the unconscious guilt, submerged in amnesia, of the child who sees his mother fall into the river, perhaps even pushes her, and immediately forgets. Korsoniloff is the unconscious self rebelling against the self-preserving censorship of "I," the ego.

Neither Freud nor Jung ever made a bad artist into a good one, and we can reasonably leave aside the possible sources in psychological theory of *Korsoniloff* to remark that it owes perhaps more to Kafka and other European writers in the essential terms of form and feeling than it does to either of the two great psychoanalysts. It is a polished miniature masterpiece that—if it had not been set in Toronto—one could well have imagined in an ambience of Prague or Vienna or even, so sharply ironic is the moral edge, of Gide's Paris. Outside John Glassco's prose, I know few Canadian pieces of writing that so naturally demand a cosmopolitan connection. One can see *Korsoniloff* in the context of the *nouvelle vague* fiction that became so important in France a decade before, the novels of Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor. It has the same intellectual translucency, the same alabasterine unemotionality, as these writers display.

Cohen's other novella, *Johnny Crackle Sings*, has a similar combination of stylistic brilliance and emotional detachment as *Korsoniloff*, and yet, in its eccentric way, it is as Canadian as its predecessor was European in feeling, and as temporally tied to the 1960s as Cohen's later novels have tended to move out of time, or at least out of the novelist's present.

³Matt Cohen, *Korsoniloff* (Toronto: Anansi 1969), p. 42. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

The setting is rural eastern Ontario, the Ottawa Valley, with the old Upper-Canadian order disintegrating under the impact of urban influences. Johnny Harper is a high school dropout built up by an unscrupulous and stupid local impresario into a pop singer doomed to failure, partly because of his lack of talent but partly also because of the self-destructive urge that makes him take so easily to drugs. It is with a strangely sardonic tenderness that Cohen charts out Johnny's erratic course to hallucinatory triumph, to actual failure, to mental breakdown, to convalescence on a counter-cultural farm in the Ottawa Valley and back to the singing circuit that will destroy him.

The manner of telling is oblique and deliberately discontinuous; Johnny's own inner fantasies alternate with the narrations of Lew Clinton, the civil servant turned farmer and shaman who both encourages Johnny in drug-taking and saves him after his worst excesses, and with the newspaper reports of the fictional *Ottawa Citizen* columnist, Frank Shaughnessy, who follows the highs and more frequent lows of Johnny's career. Always one is conscious of the inner division between Johnny the country boy who a generation ago might have been a happy farmer and the disoriented product of the modern educational system whose phony ambitions make him victim of the exploiters who preyed on and destroyed whatever creative impulses existed in the youth culture of the 1960s. *Johnny Crackle Sings* was an interesting *jeu d'esprit* when it appeared in 1971; now it reads as a bright period piece, less relevant outside its temporal setting than almost anything else Cohen has written.

Yet the sense of living unhappily between two worlds, "one dead, The other powerless to be born"⁴ that one senses in *Johnny Crackle Sings* is certainly one of the leitmotifs of all Cohen's major works, *The Disinherited*, *The Wooden Hunters*, and *The Colours of War*. Orders that seem stable, like the agricultural economy of Upper Canada and the elaborately ceremonial culture of the British-Columbian Coast Indians, collapse and leave their peoples disoriented, searching between a lost past and an unrealized future, until, in the third novel, the direction of progress becomes confused, and a search for the future becomes a journey into the past. It is in this confusion that the characters reveal their divisions of purpose, the essential alienations that warp their natures.

The Disinherited and *The Colours of War* are both set in an eastern-Ontario countryside where Loyalists, later American migrants, and early nineteenth-century immigrants from Britain cleared the forests, built towns of stone and farmhouses capable of lasting for generations, and established a stable and prosperous farming economy that seemed eternal—and lasted little more than a century before machine technology and urbanization changed it from a way of life into an industrial pattern. This countryside and its inhabitants are actually introduced in three of the stories in *Night Flights*, all of them written before *The Disinherited*, and all of them concerning two rustic drunkards, Pat and Mark Frank, who will assume minor roles in *The Disinherited*, and one of whom, Pat, will appear in *The Colours of War*. The Malone family, whose matriarch Katherine is a key character in both the novels, is introduced in "Brain Dust," and in this story the destination of Theodore Beam's flight in *The Colours of War* is also first mentioned; Pat Frank, now believing that drinking is slowly shrinking and pulverising his brain, works in the Salem Garage and General Repair; Salem, in *The Colours of War* is the old stone market town, epitome of rustic virtues and failings, that projects an eccentric sanity in a world of collective madness.

⁴Matthew Arnold "La Grande Chartreuse."

The world of Salem, as Cohen projects it, is one where, as a character in "Country Music" remarks, "people out here are awful liars"⁵ and where truth seems to shift according to the story and the teller. For in "Country Music" Pat and Mark are represented as being the sons of the widow Frank by a wandering single-day lover named John McRae, whereas in "Glass Eyes and Chickens," and later in *The Disinherited*, they have been brought up by their widowed father, Mark Frank, a prosperous farmer who took to drink, and whose farm, where Mark now lives by repairing decrepit trucks with bits of even more decrepit vehicles, serves as a paradigm of the decay of the land and its submergence under the relentless invasion of the machine:

In the time of his father's sobriety, there had been a white frame farmhouse surrounded by four barns, two hundred acres of only mildly rocky land, and a huge maple bush that backed down to the lake. Successive waves of alcoholism and fire had swallowed the land and burned down the original house. The new house was only the old pig barn in disguise; it was flanked by the two other remaining barns, which sat in front of it like twin warnings of disaster. Between them, leading from the house to the highway, was a hundred-yard driveway littered on either side with dead vehicles and spare parts, a true cornucopia of ancient and rusting cars and trucks. They filled the barnyard better than pigs or cows ever had. Like crops, they were planted from time to time and harvested when needed; but unlike crops, they demanded nothing, had no rhythm of their own, only the rhythm of his own days and whims.⁶

This world of transition and decay is transposed, in *The Disinherited*, on to the screen of a novel in the classic manner, a family chronicle centred on the death of one of the family's members and evoking a long past through the apparently erratic but really cumulative operation of memory. The action is rich, but it is seen through the inner eye.

Richard Thomas, a farmer in the countryside somewhere around Kingston, and a neighbor of the Frank brothers, goes out early one morning to inspect his property and is felled by a stroke; he is taken into a hospital and there, when it seems as though he is about to be released at least partially cured, he dies of a second attack. As he lies in bed he remembers, and his memories and emotions are complemented by those of his wife, his son, and his adopted son. There is a chronological succession on one level and in one stretch of time—the succession from Richard's stroke to his death and funeral, embracing the conflicts that will arise within the family over what will happen to the farm on his death. But the past appears sporadically, in fragments, as associations create it, and finally clusters into completeness.⁷

The pattern that is recovered from time by the end of *The Disinherited* is one that justifies the title, since it presents the history of an Ontario rural family, founded by Richard Simon Thomas who came in the mid-nineteenth century as the ancestral earth-breaking pioneer. In their differing ways vigorous and cunning and earthily amoral, Richard Simon and his son Simon and his

⁵Matt Cohen, "Country Music," in *Night Flights* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1978), p. 105.

⁶Matt Cohen "Glass Eyes and Chickens" in *Night Flights*, p. 94.

⁷The process Cohen uses is rather similar to the process of recollective reconstruction I remember in my own experience when recovering from a brief period of amnesia: memories emerging apparently spontaneously and others being drawn in by association, so that blocks of the past were created rather haphazardly but by a steady process that in the end filled in the jigsaw puzzle of lost time, leaving unremembered only the eight hours when I was actually in an amnesiac state.

grandson Richard carry on the farm in splendid style, each opening up new fields to satisfy his ambitions, and in their century of occupation it assumes that illusive appearance of antique permanence which the earlier-settled parts of Canada so quickly took on. But Canada was not in fact allowed the slow growth from the medieval into the modern world, the slow maturing that made the peasant order of Europe a matter of centuries, even millennia, rather than generations.

By Richard's end in 1970, it is evident that the energy of the Thomas race is being sapped as surely as its land is being ruined by the creep of urbanization. Richard has held out obstinately against the tempting offers of land speculators who wish to build summer cottages and a resort marina on the lakeshore of his property. But his son Erik, through whose mind the novel is drawn to a close, is uninterested in following his example. Like Korsoniloff, he is a budding academic afflicted by a divided will, and the difference between him and his father is shown in a key conversation in the hospital when Erik is trying to justify his choice of a university career as distinct from the agrarian life that would keep the farm in the blood line of the Thomases. The passage is a long one, but it contains the thematic key to *The Disinherited*.

"You know," Erik said, "that just because I don't want to live on the farm, it doesn't mean I didn't learn anything from you."

"That's nice," Richard said.

"It's just that, well, there's a lot of important things going on in this country and so, you know, people have to be able to think clearly. And the university is the place where that happens."

"The rules..." Richard said, remembering a previous argument when Erik had claimed that all logical thinking had rules.

"Yes."

"You teach people the rules," Richard said.

"Yes."

"What about life?"

"What about it?"

"Who teaches people how to live?"

"I don't know," Erik said. Richard could tell he was starting to lose his temper. He had just put out one cigarette and was now lighting another, forgetting even to go and smoke it by the window. "People have to teach themselves how to live."

"God help them," Richard said.

"He never has." Erik was up on his feet, pacing back and forth from window to door... "People think well, all right, all they have to do is tend their own garden as best they can, never look beyond it, as if the world has stopped so they can do whatever they want, but it's not true, things have changed, the whole world is connected together."

"It was always connected together," Richard said.

"Politically."

"That's what Hitler wanted."

"God." Erik had sat down now, giving up entirely, looking as if he had decided he would sit there without speaking until either someone else came or Richard died, whichever came first, it didn't matter.

"I'm sorry," Richard said. "I'm just an old man."

"It doesn't matter."

"But I've always thought that there was more to life than rules and logic."

"Of course," Erik said.

"A man has to know his own destiny."

"Oh Christ," Erik sighed, starting to get to his feet again and then slumping down back into his chair. "No one has destinies any more," he said. "They live in apartments and breed goldfish." It was early afternoon, just after lunch. The courtyard was emptier than ever, mid-August doldrums, and the sun shone flat and hot on the black asphalt. Around the edges of the courtyard, and slowly encroaching on the middle, were crumpled-up chocolate bar wrappers, old newspapers, crushed milkshake cartons. There were only a few cars parked there, all of them seeming dusty and familiar.⁸

No matter what he had done to change him, Erik always "seemed city to Richard, the way he avoided things with his body, wore his clothes as decorations, was always glancing nervously about him, as if there were something about to bite" (p. 147). The adopted son, Brian, disgusts Richard with his stupidity from boyhood, yet he is "stronger and more capable" than Erik and turns out in the end to be the only possible heir. But there are ambiguities even in this situation which make Brian attack Erik with a broken bottle at Richard's funeral even though the farm has been left for him to operate as long as he wishes. For the line between the organically healthy and the alienated in *The Disinherited* is never so clearly drawn as it might first appear. The rural existence is no guarantee of a sane or serene way of living. Richard and his father Simon fight almost to the death over Katherine Malone. And if one seeks for personifications of alienation they can be found not only in city-lost men like Erik but equally well among the Franks and their companions, "drunken white witch doctors staggering around in the middle of winter passing through convulsions for this brief vision . . ." (p. 155).

The Franks provide a kind of chorus of sad buffoons to the life of Richard and his ancestors, just as the night nurse in the hospital, with her tales of grotesque sicknesses and deaths, and his fellow patient Zeller, visibly shrinking from a rampant cancer and a stiff upper lip, provide the chorus to his death. The tragic and the bizarre, Cohen never ceases to assure us, are sibling conditions.

But to reduce *The Disinherited* to the Thomas men—even though that includes the mystic poet cousin William C. Thomas who seduces old Richard Simon's wife—is to diminish it greatly, for the women play the potent roles of reconciling the irreconcilables. Just as Richard Thomas's wife Elizabeth, through lying in a barn with the poet, becomes the mother of the mad and exalted Frederick Thomas as well as of her legitimate son, the shrewd and vindictive Simon, so Katherine Malone is the mistress of Simon and Richard, father and then son, and Miranda, whom Richard meets and marries when he too thinks of the city and spends a brief time at the university, provides the only true bridge between Richard and their son Erik. There is also a curious link between Miranda and Erik through the strange, self-contained Rose Garnett, who seduces Erik when he encounters her living in a decayed farmhouse on a backwoods road, and then surfaces to become a well-connected fortune teller whom Miranda recommends to her son.

If Katherine Malone, so fertile that almost any casual encounter seems to make her pregnant, is the earthmotherly symbol of other-containment in *The Disinherited*, Rose is the challenging personification of self-containment, as perilously challenging as Jung's anima. When Erik sees her in her new role:

⁸Matt Cohen, *The Disinherited* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), pp. 145-46. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

"Whatever it was that had first made her seem so exotic had spread to her bones and muscles: now it was not only the way she held herself and dressed, but in every movement she made, like a fencer, parrying the world with swift invisible strokes, never straying from the tape . . . When he asked her about the changes she just laughed, said that he had never appreciated her, now the complete jungle cat, sensuous and without the most momentary of debts" (p. 178). When Erik suggested to Rose that they live together "she had ignored it, as if it was clear that he couldn't mean such a thing, that he was obviously incapable of letting anything pass in or out of his own boundaries" (p. 218).

And, indeed, when Erik does seem to achieve the kind of union with another human being that takes him temporarily out of himself, it is with an unnamed pregnant girl whom he meets and sleeps with casually and gives the ring of the mystic poet though he knows they will never live together. In all his actions he shows himself taken up in the essential loneliness, the unrelenting alienation of modern man, from which the very precariousness of their way of life seems to shield the traditional farming people who gathered at Richard Thomas's grave and "mourned him without particular grief or feeling but as a necessary marking of their own passing" (p. 227).

The Disinherited is a work of unusual vigor and density. The sense of warring past and present is splendidly created, the characters swell to giants as they recede into memory, and the whole novel, though it is of no more than average length, has a largeness of texture that leaves a massive shadow on the mind. To the time of writing this essay it is, I believe, Cohen's finest work.

But this is not to deny the special qualities of *Wooden Hunters* and *The Colours of War*. *Wooden Hunters* leaves the setting of eastern Ontario for the new terrain of British Columbia's west coast and an island that seems very much like one of the Queen Charlottes, inhabited by the survivors of a great Indian nation, living side by side with itinerant loggers and a few lifestyle refugees from the straight world. It is a place where nature seems irrepensible, constantly self-renewing: "The alder silhouetted against the blue sky, the coloured leaves and frozen morning reminded him of the east but the wetness and fertility of this island, the newness of the air, the speed with which things seemed to grow and then be re-absorbed into the forest floor all made the east seem used and impossible to him, a place that could no longer renew itself, and now sometimes he imagined that whole section of the continent as a vast conglomerate city of doomed smokestacks and concrete."⁹ And in a way this sense of decay and everlasting renewal reconciles the characters with the setting, for all the people we encounter in *Wooden Hunters*—unlike most of the inhabitants of *The Disinherited*—have lost or forsaken their pasts. There are the Indians with their vanished extravagant culture, their old deserted villages and moldering totem poles, of whom the personification seems to be Johnny Tulip, drunken, drug-soaked, dying and sustaining his last months playing old jazz tunes on the warped piano in the local hotel. "Johnny Tulip laughed his crazy broken laugh, laughed and then coughed again. It seemed impossible to Calvin that this man could have a past, at least a past other than what he carried with him, marked into his body and face, so much his own now that other people's mistakes could no longer touch him" (p. 20).

The pasts are there of course. Indeed, they are the reasons why such incongruous people as Calvin, the wandering white intellectual ("a weak and persistent moth" [p. 20], as he sees himself), and Laurel Hobson, his lover

⁹Matt Cohen, *Wooden Hunters* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975), p. 14. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

and once Johnny Tulip's, and the hotel manager C. W. Smith from Montana, with his undertaker's clothes and the hearse he drives around the island, have been brought together on this ultimate edge of North America, an edge beyond civilization where nature is still strong enough to threaten and where the old wars between traditions are yet unstilled. Smith thinks he has "slipped away from his past, eluded it in some secret and final way" (p. 79), but it is waiting to reclaim him and eventually does, just as, despite Johnny's air of self-containment, he has never ceased to be an Indian.

Wooden Hunters, in fact, is constructed to take account of the reality of the past, even if ultimately to reject it, for it assumes a similar general forward movement in time punctuated by flashes into the past as *The Disinherited*, though the time recovered is not so deep or rich as in the larger novel, since *Wooden Hunters* is not concerned with creating a dynastic record but rather with releasing the tensions of a violent present.

The memory patterns of the various characters differ considerably in intensity. Calvin has few memories except of how he encountered Laurel Hobson after he left his life in the east to discover a new existence, perhaps a new personality, in the west, and this limitation marks his sense of starting afresh, almost as ineffectual as a child, in this new and harsh environment where he feels he can survive only by a self-transformation he has not yet achieved. He is too involved in this immediate process to have much concern for his own past.

Laurel Hobson, who is his mentor as well as his lover, and in her self-containment somewhat resembles Rose Garnett in *The Disinherited*, has transformed herself and survived, a process that began with her first visit to the island six years ago as an innocent, to be seduced by Johnny and then to break her spine falling down a cliff. Unlike Calvin, she can afford to remember because she accepts the apparent accidents that changed her life. Recovering from her almost mortal injuries in Vancouver, she finds her middle-class life there so insipid that she returns to the island, takes over an abandoned cabin, and learns to become the ruthless hunter who sets a pattern of violence in the first pages of *Wooden Hunters* by initiating Calvin into the brutal west-coast custom of pitlamping—shooting a deer at night by holding it in the fascination of a torch beam. Laurel is wild and degenerate at the same time, scarred by long sessions of alcohol and morphine and cocaine, yet at the same time surprisingly tough and resilient in both mind and body. It is almost as if the breaking and knitting of her spine were a kind of symbol of the remaking of the personality, just as in shamanic myths the initiate is dismembered and reassembled to mark her inner transformation. (Interestingly enough, Rose Garnett, who seems in *The Disinherited* to have undergone her own kind of inner transformation, had also suffered and recovered from a broken spine.) "Despite everything that was animal about her—Calvin thinks—she seemed entirely rational to him, each action thought out and consecutive, one day following the other in some great inevitable framework whose shape was known to her, if no one else, its existence guaranteed by the absolute conviction with which she did everything . . ." (p. 67).

In Laurel's learning to live with *sangfroid* in her cruel and tender world, where piano-playing Johnny presides as a shabby and self-destroying shaman, there is of course an exemplification of the theme of survival that would fit admirably into Margaret Atwood's critical theses in her book *Survival* (1972). But at the same time one is also aware of the repetition of a pattern familiar in the novels of the European existentialists: the deliberate courting of extreme

situations in which, by choices in the face of death (one's own or those of other men or creatures like deer and salmon brutally slaughtered), one recreates oneself. For there is a strangely triumphal quality to Laurel, with her scarred body and mind, that counterpoints the elegiac music of Johnny's inevitable decline, trapped as he is in the collective tragedy of his people. It is with Calvin that Laurel leaves, after the last encounter with Johnny and his mother who promises a "good future" seen through the luminous wooden eyeballs of her blindness: Calvin who has come west, his mind a *tabula rasa*, not to lose but to find himself. "In the spring they would explore the coast, live on mussels and clams, make salads of wild peas and plantains" (p. 216).

The Colours of War opens with Theodore Beam finding under the hard fists of police thugs that the west, where he had drifted like Calvin, and like Johnny Harper at the end of *Johnny Crackle Sings*, in the search of a freer and perhaps more natural life, is engulfed in war. War as a figure for the conflict of generations and ways of life had been present in *The Disinherited*. It moves sharply towards reality in *Wooden Hunters*, where Johnny Tulip one day greets Laurel with the mysterious remark, "It's war" (p. 64), and then takes her on an expedition to destroy the giant tractor which Smith and the logging company have taken into the woods to start a massive timber operation that will destroy the site of the old Indian village beside a deserted inland lake. This act is the beginning of a miniature war that gives its touch of melodrama to the novel as Smith retaliates by blowing up the mortuary poles at the lakeside village, and then himself is killed, on an evening when the Indians are about to riot in the hotel, by a psychotic youth who, ironically, had driven the hearse over from the mainland. That round of warfare, with its aspects of a revolt against the exploitative materialism represented by Smith and the logging company, subsides as the survivors go on with their personal lives and deaths. But the conflict of *The Colours of War* is no longer episodic; it has become a general condition of the times.

The visible action of *The Colours of War* takes place in the future—but not too far in the future, since characters out of *The Disinherited*, like Katherine Malone and Pat Frank, have survived to take part in it. The plot is built around a bizarre journey which extends physically across Canada from Vancouver to Salem in Ontario, but the journey is also one in time. Theodore Beam is traveling through what, to the reader, is the future, on his way back to the past. Once again, it is a memory novel, and as he journeys, past, present, and future (hardly a factor in the earlier novels) mingle like the colors of a shaken kaleidoscope.

In Vancouver, where he lives the kind of easy existence without destination that is possible on the Coast, Theodore—the son of a Jewish newspaper editor in Salem—becomes dimly aware that social life is breaking down all over North America, for hunger has at last begun to afflict even the formerly affluent lands, and disorder follows hunger. Governments react in the only way that governments can: "Every day it seemed there were new declarations of emergencies and martial law. Not exactly a new law; things being the same as always but carried one step further."¹⁰ One day the irrational hand of power reaches out to Theodore, when two detectives invade his flat, rough him up and ransack his rooms. He is not sure whether they have come because of the packet of cocaine his Chinese landlady expertly removes from their sight, or for something mysterious which he does not in fact possess.

¹⁰Matt Cohen, *The Colours of War* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), Pp. 16-17. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

The day is his birthday, and that night his father rings up from Salem. Theodore decides to accept Jacob Beam's suggestion that he return home. But the journey that takes him back into his past, and in a sense also into Canada's past, goes by way of a future that may await us all. When he reaches the station he finds it packed with people responding to obscure fears and self-preservation: "Not only were the departing trains completely booked, but the station was swollen with those who were arriving. And for every one of us who was fleeing to some more certain home in the East, it seemed there were several who hoped that the mild wet winters of the Coast would be easier to survive. I was reminded again of old stories of the depression and the vast armies of the unemployed crisscrossing the country; when nothing else is possible, motion promises to fill the stomach" (p. 36).

Theodore manages to book a roomette on one of the trains that are leaving, to find eventually that it is no ordinary train. True, there are coaches where bona fide travelers, unaware of the real purpose of the journey, are crowded together and give an appearance of ordinariness to the train. But there are also sealed vans, and these are filled with arms and ammunition, and are in the control of a group of guerillas. Theodore has already encountered the partisan leader Christopher Perestrello by chance in the station restaurant. "There was a certain power about him. His voice and features were so strong he seemed almost dangerous, even cruel: not the careless cruelty of the police but something more purposeful" (p. 38).

Perestrello, like Katherine Malone and Pat Frank, brings in an echo from earlier Cohen writings, and in particular "Columbus and the Fat Lady." This is the story of a fairground performer who trades on his psychoses by living out on the stage a tranced fantasy of having been Columbus, and who dies in the middle of his performance. His wife is—as was the wife of the original Columbus—Felipa Perestrello, and the wife of Perestrello (who bears the name of Christopher) in *The Colours of War* is also a Felipa, while the town of Salem, we later learn, was founded by a descendant of the Francisco de Bobadilla who in 1500 arrested Columbus and his son Diego. It is a fascinating pattern of connections, and a deliberate one for—as we shall see—Perestrello in *The Colours of War* is obsessed with the consequences of the Columbian discovery of America and is dedicated to reversing them. He is a Columbus enlightened and repentant.

At his first encounter with Theodore, Perestrello is attacked by a stranger, and when the two are escorted out of the restaurant by the police Theodore picks up an envelope Perestrello had left on the table. It contains a map of the route the train will traverse, marked at certain points with mysterious signs, and Theodore's possession of it leads him into contact with the partisans, for in the bar car on the train he meets a girl named Lise who takes him to her room on the train, and then pulls out a revolver and demands the map.

Theodore becomes Lise's lover, learns of her long connection with an underground group seeking to undermine the established governments of North America, and also realizes the true purpose of the train, which Perestrello has organized through his railway union contacts to distribute arms to partisan groups all over the country and to spread rebellion in its wake. Theodore is accepted into the partisan group, and is present when the citizen soldiers of Regina, mobilized by the government to preserve order, go over to Perestrello's cause, and the one farmer who opposes is shot outside the hotel as Theodore watches: "And standing in this window, looking out at this scene, we might have been anywhere, in any of the dozens of cities that have seen revolutions

and coups, reprisals and executions . . . I had always thought that the external world would plod along forever, unchanged, a comfortable and amorphous bureaucracy, surrounding my life like a giant marshmallow, a giant excuse. Now that was fading and I was beginning to feel responsible for every moment I lived" (p. 131).

The train goes on, stopping several times every night for crates of weapons to be hurriedly unloaded. Theodore feels "as if the train was now turning itself into a long metal arrow drawing together the endless years of strikes, shortages, summer riots, outbursts of violence, into one spectacular collision" (p. 148). He is not sure whether the partisans are involved in a general uprising in which the unions and the army may combine to take over the country, or whether Perestrello is merely hoping his journey will coincide with other events to make a revolutionary situation, journeying like Columbus into a great unknown.

All through this journey, in dreams and reveries, Theodore is returning to the past that Salem—daily drawing nearer—represents for him. Perhaps the most evocative memory is of a visit as a child to his ancient orthodox Jewish grandfather. He looks at the strange, gnome-like, ancient man, and shining out of a withered face sees "the pale blue eyes that I recognized as my eyes but a thousand years old, my eyes shining out of his face . . ." (p. 154-55). "As I lay in bed and waited for sleep, I held a secret in my mind—that grandfather and I were the same person, that I had seen myself in the mirror of the glass door, and then the door had opened and he stepped out: me in disguise" (p. 154). Apart from the characteristic Cohen theme of the division of the self, the haunting *doppelgänger*, the interlude reveals the same intense concern with tradition and continuity that emerged in Cohen's earlier novel, *The Disinherited*, and it is significant that the grandfather's gift to Theodore should be one of time, objectified in a gold watch, thin and old.

Even Perestrello—and this assessment of the revolutionary mind is certainly one of the thematic notes of *The Colours of War*—is really entering the future to find the past. (And what else did either Marx or Bakunin attempt?) In the last scene in which he is actually present, Perestrello talks about "pure force," not merely as the urge of modern revolutionaries, but also as the urge that brought the people of the old world to the new world. Men had destroyed Europe; they came to the Americas where—this repentant Columbus tells us: "Before we came, men lived as true men, and every human being knew the meaning of his own life" (p. 157). The land was waiting, to "take for our own" (p. 158).

Perestrello shrugged and leaned forward over the table and the map this world had become. "Of course, we were wrong. The future was only the past in an elaborate disguise. The continent was ruined as easily as a child or a wife. With the slaves and the killings we poisoned ourselves. We began to realize that the new world had already become the old. There was no place to receive us. We could only go round and round, repeating ourselves.

"I still have hope," Perestrello said. "Somewhere inside us there's a place that has never been touched, and is still innocent, waiting to be discovered. When we've suffered, when the violence is over and the false governments have fallen, when we're simple men and women again, standing on the face of the earth, there'll be something we can reach for, something noble inside us." (pp. 158-59)

In fact, Perestrello is a creature of the time of violence, and never survives into an age of innocence regained. As the train continues on its journey, it becomes evident that all is not so completely in his control as it appeared. Felipa is attacked on the train by double agents; he himself is wounded by an unknown gunman at the last rendezvous for the delivery of arms; news comes that government troops have suppressed the insurgents in Regina and Vancouver; finally, the train reaches a railway yard where army units are awaiting it with artillery, and in the battle Perestrello is killed. Theodore and Lise escape and so, independently, does Felipa.

Theodore and Lise make their way to Salem, which is filled with government troops whom Theodore fears. Nevertheless, there are some hilarious bibulous interludes with Jacob Beam and other town characters, before Theodore takes refuge in an abandoned church in the countryside near Salem which belongs to Katherine Malone, now an octogenarian. When he goes there to ask her permission to live in the house, Theodore sees a picture of Katherine on her twenty-first birthday, sixty years before, when, as we know, she was the mistress of both Simon and Richard Thomas. "In those days she had been immortal; her bones slender and long, her eyes tinted so they shone like bright beacons of rural confidence. The house in the background had been almost a mansion in that era of prosperity. Although now it shambled and sagged, the wood coming through the paint, in those days it was gleaming white with hedges and flower bushes that grew thick around the stone foundation walls" (p. 201).

Katherine still lives as a personification of a simpler world, the old house still stands, the old church even more solidly. There Theodore lives, after Felipa had appeared and led Lise away to become an urban guerilla. Hiding from the soldiers, he writes the book we have read, hunting his food—like Laurel in *Wooden Hunters*—in the woods around with an old gun Katherine has given him, until, in the last pages of the novel, Lise returns.

Once we dreamed of being citizens of a perfect state. The cells of our body ran wild with faith, pushing us through childhood to this place we have reached. I remember the dreams; but sometimes it can't be helped—I hear not music but armies moving in the night.

The earth will try to feed us, no matter how foolish we are. Soon Jacob Beam will sit out in the garden in the afternoons, feeling his eyes go blind, the sun crossing his face.

Old words flood through me. This hand records them—my hand, my father's hand.

The sky is clear and the sun is out. I can see Lise walking across the field a rifle in her arms. For this day there is food again.

We will go on living here (p. 233-34).

It is Theodore, in his inaction, who had returned to the innocence Perestrello sought in vain through action.

There are features of *The Colours of War* that, if we consider the book as an ordinary novel, seem ineffectual. Perestrello is a figure we never enter; encased in his impeccable blue uniform, he is remote even from the other characters, and we do not witness his death, which is told of with offhand indirection. Lise and Felipa are types of naïve and cynical radicalism, the sacred and profane poles of political enthusiasm. All three might be members of a dream of which the great train is a vehicle and Matt Cohen has in fact been accused of populating his book with mannequins.

The criticism would be valid if *The Colours of War* claimed to be a novel in the ordinary sense. But by the same criterion, the King of Brobdingnag in *Gulliver's Travels* and even O'Brien in *1984* might also be dismissed as mannequins, because they have no depth of character and are hardly credible. But their function is quite different, and so is the function of Perestrello and the two women in *The Colours of War*. Theodore must be seen as a kind of latter-day Candide, set to wander as an innocent through the man-made jungles of the present, and to find that all the promises of the future are illusory in comparison with the rediscovery of roots and of Matt Cohen's wry equivalent of Voltaire's cultivation of one's garden. Despite appearances, it is, as Voltaire's was, a counsel of defiance rather than defeat, of life continuing its tenacious way in the ruin of social order and of political idealism. Considered as a parable, which I believe is what Cohen intended, *The Colours of War* is direct and luminous and salutary.

Matt Cohen is still in his middle thirties, with probably half a career ahead of him. He has just completed a new novel, which will be published almost certainly, in 1979, and I gather from those who have read it that it is a complex work of the stature of *The Disinherited*. Clearly he is destined to become one of Canada's major fiction writers, and indeed, in his three novels, he has already established his first claims to such recognition.