THE WORLDS OF LEONARD COHEN:
A STUDY OF HIS POETRY

by

Roy Allan

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Approval

Name: Roy Allan

Degree: Master of Arts

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Examining Committee:

Dr. Sandra Djwa
Senior Supervisor

Dr. Bruce Nesbitt
Examining Committee

Professor Lionel Kearns
Examining Committee

Dr. William New
Associate Professor of English
University of British Columbia
Vancouver 8, B.C.

Date Approved: [illegible]

Dedicated to Mauryne who gave me help, encouragement and love when I needed them most.

Abstract

The creation of interior escape worlds is a major preoccupation in the poetry of Leonard Cohen. A study of this preoccupation provides an insight to the world view and basic philosophy of the poet and gives meaning to what on the surface appears to be an aimless wandering through life. This study also increases the relevance of Cohen's art by explicating the many themes that relate to the struggle of modern man in a violent and dehumanizing society.

The formation of Cohen's world view begins in Let Us Compare Mythologies with his innocent and perhaps naive questioning of the mythologies upon which man bases his various religions and philosophies. The ultimate conclusion Cohen draws from this questioning is initially an acceptance of the "elaborate lie" that rationalizes the violence of life and death. There is, however, the growing desire on the poet's part to escape this violence. This escape takes the form of the passive acceptance of reality and the creation of escape worlds dominated by love in which the poet becomes a Messiah-like figure controlling his and his lover's destiny. The communication between Cohen and his loved one is exceptionally important and results in his quasi-religious state of grace. This experience becomes for Cohen a means by which, as he claims, "to rise to the chaos" around him.

His state of grace also becomes a vital means of communicating with God. This book is particularly important with regard to this study, for from this point on most of Cohen's poetry reflects themes established here.

In The Spice-Box of Earth love becomes the principal theme as Cohen continues to create interior worlds in which he can escape the violence of the real world. In this book his craftsmanship as a poet reaches its highest level. Here he sees himself as a high priest of love, his poems become his liturgy and his lovers become disciples spreading the holy word. Paralleling the themes of this book are the experiences Cohen records in his first novel, The Favorite Game. In many cases passages in the novel aid in an understanding of particular incidents related in the poetry.

To further escape the brutality of a society that is created by its own violence Cohen occasionally adopts a stance of passive acceptance that allows him to function as a member of society, yet to ignore its violence. In Flowers for Hitler this stance provides Cohen the opportunity to examine the outside world and to investigate and expose the inner recesses of his own mind. The resulting discovery of violence within himself makes escape far more difficult than it had been earlier. Now in many of the poems of this book and in his second novel, Beautiful Losers, the poet plunges into the depths of his being

in the hope of finding a means to a rebirth and a renewed and purified vision of the world.

In Parasites of Heaven, following the disintegrative journey into his personal "underworld", Cohen appears to have returned with his desired purified vision, but his world is still dominated by a stance of passive acceptance. He is still unable to confront the violence of reality. His renewed vision is governed by a sense of numbness and the masses around him appear as a "lost generation" with no future. For himself, Cohen is locked in a state of limbo; his renewed view of the world makes escape impossible and even love and fantasy dreams begin to lose their protective powers. The poet now sees himself as merely a "tourist" in the world and he can escape the harshness of reality only by remaining uninvolved.

The new poems in Selected Poems: 1956-1968 seem to indicate that Cohen's search for meaning in life is over, but he has, in fact, attained a sense of innocence through experience. He has returned to his initial state of innocence and naïveté. He is careful, however, to caution his readers that his poetry only records his personal experiences and that they should not blindly accept his solutions.

At this point in Cohen's career his art takes a new direction as he turns from poetry to songwriting and singing. In his first recording there is still an emphasis upon the

intrinsic meaning and thematic depth of his verses. The second recording, however shows a marked decline in the emphasis upon themes in his poetry with an increased emphasis upon the sound of the words rather than upon their meaning. He no longer appears concerned with creating escape worlds within his art but seems to be attempting to gain acceptance in a society that he previously rejected.

Contents

Introduction

With four volumes of poetry, a volume of selected works including twenty new poems, two novels and two recordings of his own songs, Leonard Cohen has become one of Canada's best known and most important writers. His works appeal to an audience ranging from the sub-literate to the academic and in most cases his readers find the themes of his poetry exceptionally relevant to their own predicament in modern society. Furthermore his love poetry, as well as being generally moving, expresses with a simplicity yet penetrating depth the widespread desire to overcome the feelings of separateness or alienation so common in the world today. Criticism of Cohen's works covers an equally large range from exaltation on one hand to damnation on the other. But audiences and criticism have, until recently, had little bearing on Cohen's art. He is, above all, an intensely personal poet whose works reflect the inner turmoil of a sensitive artist in conflict with a violent, dehumanizing and overmechanized society.

① Cohen's poetry is influenced most strongly by his Jewish heritage, for Jewish literary traditions, both written and oral, have contributed to the formation of many elements of his writing style. Moreover, the suffering his people have encountered throughout their history forms an integral part of his world view.

Cohen has been further influenced by the impressively large body of Jewish-Canadian writers. Among these writers

A.M. Klein is the most obvious of Cohen's mentors. Klein's personal approach to God in his poetry recurs as an important theme in Cohen's work. Irving Layton, a close friend of Cohen, has been a further major influence in the formation of Cohen's style.

While attending university Cohen also had such eminent Canadian writers as Frank Scott and Louis Dudek for teachers. Dudek, in fact, took a personal interest in Cohen's early work and first published Let Us Compare Mythologies in the McGill Poetry Series.

These influences combined with his own natural lyric talents have allowed Cohen to develop a personal writing style that most accurately translates his deepest sentiments into the printed word. His words, in turn, describe for the reader the intensity of the poet's love for a woman, his praise of God and his fear of the violence of modern society.

An important aspect of poetry is the poet's unique statement of his individual response to situations that many people have experienced before. Similarly much of Cohen's importance lies in his ability to translate his responses to given situations into words, images and themes that relate to the experiences of so many people today. Furthermore, Cohen is generally an intensely personal poet whose life style and statements made outside of his poetry indicate a strong link between poet and persona. Consequently, the most effective way to study and explicate his works is to concentrate upon the thematic development

of his works and the ways in which he attempts to solve the problems facing the individual in a violent, destructive and impersonal world.

Let Us Compare Mythologies is the most important of Cohen's books in which to study the development of his art and philosophy. This one volume of poetry shows many of the sources of Cohen's later images and themes. Here he compares the classical, Hebrew and Christian mythologies that have contributed to the formation of the "elaborate lie", the rationalization that allows man to accept and believe in his own violence. Here also the poet's desire to flee from this violence begins and he can be seen creating his interior worlds of escape. The creation of these worlds dominated by love or by passive acceptance is a major preoccupation in all of Cohen's works. A study of the thematic development of this preoccupation throughout the cycle of Cohen's works will emphasize the relevance of his works to readers who find themselves sharing his world view. This study will further give an insight into the life and philosophy of Leonard Cohen the lover, poet and singer.

Chapter I

Let Us Compare Mythologies

"Then let us compare mythologies.
I have learned my elaborate lie..."

In a review of Cohen's first volume of poetry, Let Us Compare Mythologies, Desmond Pacey viewed the poet as a Thursday's child and aptly claimed "he certainly has far to go."[1] Pacey's foresight was even further demonstrated in the content of the review, for he concentrated upon a theme of this book that was to become one of the main points of interest in all of Cohen's work:

> He is not merely a sensuous lyric poet, however--he is preoccupied with violence, particularly the sacrificial deaths of gods, and more particularly with the crucifixion of Christ, an event which occurs and recurs throughout his book as a thematic motif. Cohen's vision of the world is of a place of violent contrasts, where gentleness is in constant collision with brutality.[2]

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[1]Desmond Pacey, "A Group of Seven", Queen's Quarterly, LXIII, 3 (Autumn 1956), 438.

[2]Ibid., 439.

Cohen's vision of the world as "a place of violent contrasts" begins with "Elegy", the first poem of this volume. Here the shredded body that cannot be found in "brittle mountain streams", "angry rivers" or "under shore stones"[3] vividly recalls the fate of Orpheus, the poet-musician of classical mythology. Orpheus, brutally dismembered and cast into the river Hebrus by a group of Maenads, found escape from the cruelties of his life not in self-imposed exile nor exclusively in death but in a resurrection or rebirth in a world enchanted by his art. Consequently, the first six lines indicate to the reader that the true nature of Orpheus or of Cohen himself will not be found in the harsh external world.

> Do not look for him
> In brittle mountain streams:
> They are too cold for any god;
> And do not examine the angry rivers
> For shreds of his soft body
> Or turn the shore stones for his blood;[4]

Cohen claims that the essence of the poet will be found in an inner world of his own creation, a world of rebirth and escape, a world of beauty and gentleness in art. This inner world is portrayed in the concluding seven lines:

> But in the warm salt ocean
> He is descending through cliffs
> Of slow green water
> And the hovering coloured fish

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[3]Leonard Cohen, Let Us Compare Mythologies (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p.13. (Hereafter cited as Mythologies).

[4]Ibid.

Kiss his snow-bruised body
And build their secret nests
In his fluttering winding-sheet.[5]

Here the hostility of the "brittle mountain streams" is replaced by the serenity of the womb-like "warm salt ocean" and the tumult of the "angry rivers" is supplanted by the tranquility of "slow green water" and "secret nests". The beauty of this "other" world lies primarily in its gentleness and its escape from brutality and it is made aesthetically pleasing by the visual images of "slow green water" and "hovering coloured fish".

In this first poem then, Cohen introduces the paradoxical idea of escape from the violence of reality through what is an essentially violent act in itself, death by drowning. Though exceptionally well handled, this is not a particularly unique theme, for there are many recurrences in the history of literature of the Orpheus or dead and drowned archetype. The most famous example of the drowned poet in English poetry is Milton's "Lycidas". Superficially, "Lycidas" is an elegy for Milton's friend, Edward King, but in depth the poem tells us much more about the poet himself. Lycidas and in effect Milton are

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[5]Cohen, Mythologies, p.13.

simply passing through a state of symbolic death and like Orpheus and Cohen should not be mourned, for they will be reborn in a new world of artistic beauty.[6]

> Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,
> For Lycidas, your sorrow, is not dead,
> Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor.
> So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,
> And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
> And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled ore
> Flames in the forehead of the morning sky.[7]

This drowned poet theme was first explored in Canadian poetry by Duncan Campbell Scott in "The Piper of Arll". Here the death of the poet, like that of Orpheus or Lycidas, is again not an event to be mourned, for the piper and his ghostly shipmates are not forever lost but rest in a tranquil, surrealistic world where drowning brings beauty rather than a traditional idea of death.

> Empearled within the purple heart
> Of the great sea for aye and aye.
> Their eyes are ruby in the green
> Long shaft of sun that spreads and rays,
> And upward with a wizard sheen
> A fan of sea-light leaps and plays.
> Tendrils of or and azure creep,
> And globes of amber light are rolled,
> And in the gloaming of the deep
> Their eyes are staring pits of gold.[8]

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[6]William Empson, quoted in "William Empson and Categorical Criticism", The Armed Vision (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p.259.

[7]John Milton, "Lycidas", The Complete Works of John Milton, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), p.147.

[8]Duncan Campbell Scott, "The Piper of Arll", The Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1926), p.40.

A.M. Klein later made more specific reference to the link between the poet and the symbolic dying or drowning. In "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" he begins by viewing the unknown poet as a "shelved Lycidas"[9] and concludes with him living anonymously and alone where "his secret shines/ like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea."[10] Though similar in attitude to these forerunners, Cohen's poem appears to exhibit the increased sense of existential aloneness of modern man in a technological and depersonalizing society, man against universe, art against reality.

The view of the world held by Orpheus in his distressed years after the loss of Eurydice is described in "Twilight" by Cohen in a manner paralleling his own often-portrayed view of life in contemporary society.

> Those days were just the twilight
> And soon the poems and the songs
> Were only associations
> Edged with bitterness
> Focussed into pain
> By paintings in a minor key
> Remembered on warm nights[11]

During this time prior to his death, Orpheus was unable to become interested in women, for the memory of Eurydice plagued

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[9]A.M. Klein, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape", The Rocking Chair (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1948), p.56.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Cohen, Mythologies, p.53.

his mind. His previous powers with poetry and music meant little to him, but they too lingered in his mind and haunted his life.

> When he made love to strangers
> And he would struggle through old words
> Unable to forget he once created new ones[12]

As death approached, the memories of lost youth, lost love and a wasted life were of little solace for a man to whom

> like fire-twisted shadows of dancers
> Alternatives would array themselves
> Around his wicker chair
> And he regretted everything[13]

At this point in his life "alternatives" are only what could have been in the past and the past cannot change. The alternatives to the continuation of a miserable, painful life lead only to death. But even if Orpheus "regretted everything", he does not fear the inevitable in his future. Cohen through Orpheus in these two poems appears to see a release or promise in death that allows a stoic acceptance of the trials of the present.

In several poems, Cohen's concern with death and the escape it provides goes far beyond the Orpheus or drowned poet motif. In many of these cases death is a solace from the

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[12]Cohen, Mythologies, p.53.

[13]Ibid.

afflictions of life. In "Rites" the poet discusses the death of his father and the release it offered a man who spent the last days of his life

> ...on a blood-sopped pillow,
> his heart half rotted
> and his throat dry with regret.[14]

To Cohen, death in this case "seemed so obvious" and "quite so necessary", but the other relatives at the bedside do not appear to share his view. His uncles, for example,

> prophesied wildly,
> promising life like frantic oracles;
> and they only stopped in the morning,
> after he had died.[15]

To the uncles, death is the end of life and is consequently to be feared. Cohen sees death at this point in the father's life as a necessary and welcome end to pain and suffering. Here, as with the drowned poet, death should not be a cause for mourning, for it merely signals an end to life in this world with the hope of a new life in a world beyond the realm of "reality". This death further signals a new life or new world for the son who "had begun to shout" at the end of the poem. The son now inherits the father's "world" and pre-empts the father's role as head of the family.

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[14]Cohen, Mythologies, p.19.

[15]Ibid.

The mixed blessing of death as an end to life and escape from reality reaches an extreme bordering on the absurd in "Item". Here death for the still-born eagle is truly an escape from life and is possibly a painless way to avoid the hunter's arrow.

> Let the still-born eagle demonstrate
> how he avoided the arrow
> with its predicament of death.[16]

But death can only afford solace if the pain of living is known. The logic of the sentiment involved in the lines "Let him teach how wise/ was his early death" [17] leaves much to be desired, for the death of the eagle does not signal its transport into another world. The lesson to be taught however is by example. "The heroes with their promised swords" are the ones who should benefit from this seeming insignificant death. They are the ones who must consider the "darker battle", the pain of dying, the pain of inflicting death, and the fear or acceptance of the unknown that lies beyond their world of violence. In the concluding lines, Cohen appears to indicate that death should not be feared, for he feels these heroes should "remember the still-born eagle/ and the young bird bones which do not hurt or rattle".[18] The still-born eagle is,

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[16] Cohen, Mythologies, p.24.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

for example, much better off than the veteran in the following poem, "City Christ". Here, the man who could once have been one of the heroes from the previous poem must now patiently await an unglorious death.

> Blinded and hopelessly lame.
> He endures the morning streetcars
> And counts ages in a Peel Street room.[19]

The people he once defended now have little place for him and "He is kept in his place like a court jew/ To consult on plagues or hurricanes."[20] Here, as with the still-born eagle, death again seems to offer a solace from a cruel and insensitive world.

The exemplary death of the still-born eagle is only of minor importance when it is considered in relation to the major death theme running through the book which, as Pacey claims, is concerned with the "sacrificial deaths of gods, and more particularly with the crucifixion of Christ."[21] "For Wilf and his House" begins Cohen's examination of sacrificial death and martyrdom. Here he finds that part of the violence that he so often wishes to escape from lies within his own people.

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[19]Cohen, Mythologies, p.25.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Pacey, loc. cit.

> When the young Christians told me
> how we pinned Jesus
> like a lovely butterfly against the wood,
> and I wept beside paintings of Calvary
> at velvet wounds
> and delicate twisted feet.[22]

The word "we" includes the whole Jewish race and this first stanza develops the idea of the "guilt" of the Jews regarding the crucifixion of Christ. This guilt is virtually a magnification of the warning given Moses by God.

> Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:7)

Apparently recalling his feelings as a child, Cohen emphasizes his horror and guilt by describing his vision of the crucifixion in a form of plurisignation. The image of a "lovely butterfly" and the adjectives "velvet" and "delicate" suggest a scene of sensitive beauty. When viewed in context, however, this form of description increases the sense of brutal violence. His deep concern and sensitivity forced the poet to reject the teachings of his faith and to inform his brothers of the serious inconsistencies he had discovered in their belief.

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[22] Cohen, Mythologies, p.14.

> ...when I faced the Ark for counting, trembling
> underneath the burning oil, the meadow of running
> flesh turned sour and I kissed away my gentle
> teachers, warned my younger brothers.[23]

But Cohen attributes this fear and skepticism to his youth, to the age at which he was able to "sing my heathen tears/ between the summersaults and chestnut battles."[24] During this period of his life he had the sensitivity that allowed him to "love the distant saint/ who fed his arm to flies."[25] He was able to question the laws of life that decreed death and he was able to "mourn the crushed ant/ and despise the reason of the heel."[26]

Life and awareness of pain and death, however, eventually develop a callousness that comes with maturity.

> Raging and weeping are left on the early road.
> Now each in his holy hill
> the glittering and hurting days are almost done.[27]

Reaching this level of maturity or, at least, passive acceptance, the poet can now objectively view both the good and the bad elements of Christianity and Judaism alike.

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[23]Cohen, Mythologies, p.14.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid., p.15.

Then let us compare mythologies.
I have learned my elaborate lie
of soaring crosses and poisoned thorns
and how my fathers nailed him
like a bat against a barn
to greet the autumn and late hungry ravens
as a hollow yellow sign.[28]

The "elaborate lie" allows the poet to accept the previously questioned laws of life. Unnatural death and violence can now to some degree be rationalized to conform to the requirements of his world view. There is now a distance between him and the sacrificial death and the burden of guilt has been lifted. The "fathers" are the guilty ones and even their guilt is lessened as the initial tragic beauty of the crucifix takes on the appearance of a scarecrow "to greet the autumn and late hungry ravens." The death of Christ now becomes a necessary example and symbol of both death and life to Jew and Gentile alike. The earlier beauty is now described as "a hollow yellow sign." To the Jews the crucifixion fulfilled the law of God that demanded the death of a man who presumed to be the son of God and called himself the King of the Jews.

And if a man have committed a sin
worthy of death, and he be to be put to death,
and thou shalt hang him on a tree:...
for he that is hanged is accursed of God.
(Deuteronomy 21: 22-23.)

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[28]Cohen, Mythologies, p.15.

To the Christians the crucifixion is a symbol of God's ultimate sacrifice for man; He sent His son into the world "to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45) To Cohen, both views represent the "elaborate lie", on the one hand a justified death, on the other a rationalized sacrifice. In either case, however, the loss of a life still exists and this fact alone appears to haunt Cohen's world.

In another poem concerning the crucifixion of Christ, Cohen indulges in some myth-making of his own. "Ballad" describes the murder of a man who, supposedly in the poet's story, dipped a flower into Christ's wounds in the hope "that a garden/ would grow in his hand."[29] Christ responded with the questions:

> 'Will petals find roots
> in the wounds where I bleed?'
>
> 'Will minstrels learn songs
> from a tongue which is torn
> and sick be made whole
> through rents in my skin?'[30]

This response frightened the people who had crucified Christ, for they "knew something/ like a god had spoken."[31] In fear, the people killed the man "to honour the voice/ with a sacrifice."[32]

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[29] Cohen, Mythologies, p.42.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

But in their fear and ignorance the people honoured only the voice and not the words. In essence the words pointed out the futility of a sacrificial death. Granted, Christ died so that others might live, but, Cohen asks, would this death actually bring forth new life, would "petals find roots" in his wounds? The people heard, but they did not listen. They immediately sacrificed another life. To this day people have not learned from the death of Christ; they honour the sacrifice but fail to view it as an exemplary death or a lesson in futility. In his concluding stanza, Cohen points out how little the words meant and how needless were the deaths.

> And men from Golgotha
> assure me that still
> gardeners in vain
> pour blood in that soil.[33]

From the violence within his people Cohen turns to the violence against his people. "The Song of the Hellenist", contrary to the title, views the centuries-old conflict between Hellenism and Hebraism from the point of view of a Hebrew, but one who sees his people and is himself accepting the inimical ideals of the Greek alliance of the Decapolis. Although Hebraism and Hellenism are comprised of ineffaceable differences, the final aim of both ideals is ultimately the same or, as Matthew Arnold claims in Culture and Anarchy, both try to achieve "man's perfection or salvation."[34] To the holder of

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[33]Cohen, Mythologies, p.43.

[34]Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965, [1883]), p.165.

either ideal, however, there usually can be no resolution between the two. Even in the poem in question, the poet's attempt to maintain a veil of irony wears thin as his own beliefs show through. In the years following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. and the later Roman domination of the Middle East, however, the effects of Greek, Hellenistic culture were so great that even the Hebrew people, with the exception of those in Palestine, began to accept the opposing culture.[35] With a certain distaste, Cohen describes the influence of the Greeks upon the people of Jerusalem.

> O cities of the Decapolis across the Jordan,
> you are too great; our young men love you,
> and men in high places have caused gymnasiums
> to be built in Jerusalem.
> I tell you, my people, the statues are too tall.
> Beside them we are small and ugly,
> blemishes on the pedestal.[36]

So great is this influence that the "men in high places" (meaning the priests and leaders of the religious community)[37] were shifting the emphasis upon worship, study, and obedience to the Hellenistic ideal of physical prowess and perfection of the individual. The proportions of the statues of the

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[35]P.A. Marijnen, ed., The Encyclopedia of the Bible, trans. D.R. Welsh (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), pp.102-3.

[36]Cohen, Mythologies, p.16.

[37]Encyclopedia of the Bible, pp.107-8.

Greek gods and heroes were causing the Hebrew people to feel physically inferior or "small and ugly". Even the Hebrew names, traditionally of religious origin, were being dropped in favour of common Greek names.

> My name is Theodotus, do not call me Jonathan.
> My name is Dositheus, do not call me Nathaniel.
> Call us Alexander, Demetrius, Nicanor.[38]

The events Cohen has thus far described have an interesting parallel in II Maccabees of the Apocrypha. Here the account of Jason, a corrupt high-priest, in his attempt to force the Jews to adopt the Greek ways adds much validity to the poet's description of one of the early attempts to destroy the sacred heritage of his people.

> He [Jason] lost no time in establishing a sports-stadium at the foot of the citadel itself, and he made the most outstanding of the young men assume the Greek athlete's hat. So Hellenism reached a high point with the introduction of foreign customs through the boundless wickedness of the impious Jason, no true high-priest. As a result, the priests no longer had any enthusiasm for their duties at the altar, but despised the temple and neglected the sacrifices; and in defiance of the law they eagerly contributed to the expenses of the wrestling-school whenever the opening gong called them. They placed no value on their hereditary dignities, but cared above everything for Hellenic honours. (II Maccabees 4:12-15)[39]

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[38]Cohen, Mythologies, p.16.

[39]The New English Bible. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), (hereafter cited as NEB).

With a peculiar triple-entendre Cohen manages to bridge many centuries of Jewish history in one stanza of this poem while at the same time he further points out the transformation that affected his people.

> 'Have you seen my landsmen in the museums,
> the brilliant scholars with the dirty fingernails,
> standing before the marble gods,
> underneath the lot?'
> Among straight noses, natural and carved,
> I have said my clever things thought out before;
> jested on the Protocols, the cause of war,
> quoted 'Bleistein with a Cigar.'[40]

The question contained in the first four lines is, on the first level, rhetorical. The initial narrator, again with a feeling of inferiority, is simply stating that none of the scholars from among his people can compare with or even be considered next to the gods and heroes of the Greeks. On the second level, the same narrator is pointing out that his people are now taking their place among the Greeks and continues throughout the stanza to show how this is being accomplished. On the third level, the present day Jew, the "'Bleistein with a Cigar'", is also asking a rhetorical question but in contrast to the question on the first level he is now pointing out that his people have taken their place among the exaulted Greeks.

The acceptance of Hellenism did very little for the Hebrew people, however, for in centuries to come many of the

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[40]Cohen, Mythologies, p.16.

philosophies born in the era in question were to grow into monsters of destruction. The Christian philosopher Arius of Alexander, for example, promulgated the heretical theory denying the preexistence of Christ and denying the coequal role of Christ with God. Arius admitted that Christ represented God but denied that Christ was in any way God's personal presence on earth. This theory, Arianism, was ultimately a denial of Trinitarianism in favour of a one-person God. Ironically this theory had many parallels with the basic Hebrew beliefs. But Arianism was to become very popular among the Christian German tribes and in conjunction with a unity of Germanic languages was to contribute to the formation of a theory of racial unity. This theory later formed the basis of German National Socialism or Nazism. National Socialism with its emphasis upon unity and order is, in essence, an extreme form of Hellenism. Consequently the split between Hellenism and Hebraism has been carried into modern times. Cohen emphasizes the irony in the basic parallels between these divergent philosophies when he shows his narrator joking with the Greek scholars and philosophers, or as he calls them the "Herrenmenschen" (masterminds). The implications are many and the tone can only be described as sardonic when the narrator claims

> ...,I made them laugh
> when the child came in:
> 'Come I need you for a Passover Cake.'[41]

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[41]Cohen, Mythologies, p.17.

The Hebrew acceptance of Hellenism is here shown in its true nature and the resulting picture has a vividness and horror not unlike Goya's representation of Saturn devouring his sons. The mention of the child being cooked in a Passover Cake is exceptionally horrible yet ironic when considered in conjunction with the ovens of Dachau and Buchenwald.

The concluding stanza of Cohen's poem completes the Jewish acceptance of the Greek culture.

> My children will boast of their ancestors at Marathon
> and under the walls of Troy,
> and Athens, my chiefest joy.[42]

The final line shows the ultimate denial of a sacred past. Where the narrator previously asked, "Call us Alexander, Demetrius, Nicanor...", he now completely commits himself personally "O call me Alexander, Demetrius, Nicanor..."[43] Perhaps the prophetic note following the description of the Jews striving for "Hellenic honours" in II Maccabees has, as Cohen indicates in his poem, a far deeper meaning and a far greater significance than can be appreciated in the biblical context.

> Because of this, grievous misfortunes beset them, and the very men whose way of life they strove after and tried so hard to imitate, turned out to be their vindictive enemies. To act profanely against God's laws is no light matter, as will become clear in due time. (NEB, II Maccabees 4:16-17)

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[42] Cohen, Mythologies, p.17

[43] Ibid.

In a poem simply titled "Lovers", Cohen describes an unorthodox love affair taking place during one of the most violent and destructive of the "grievous misfortunes" to befall his people. The lovers are portrayed "trading" their love during the mass murders of the Jewish people in Poland or Germany. The woman in this relationship is obviously Jewish and the man appears to be a sympathetic soldier or Jewish collaborator. Cohen describes the depth of their love as he relates how

> ...at the hot ovens they
> Cunningly managed a brief
> Kiss before the soldier came
> To knock out her golden teeth.[44]

In a simple description of this horrible event Cohen is pointing out that the love transcending the barriers of race and religion of these two people is far more significant than the pain of broken jaws and smashed teeth and even more important than the prevalence of death. The soldier's last attempt to demonstrate his love as the flames consume the woman's body further emphasizes the depth of his love in contrast with the violence of her death. In effect there is contrast between the fire of his passion and the fire of the furnace.

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[44]Cohen, Mythologies, p.33.

And in the furnace itself
As the flames flamed higher,
He tried to kiss her burning breasts
As she burned in the fire.[45]

The concluding stanza shows the soldier left wondering "Was their barter completed?"[46] The word "barter" relates back to "trading" in the first stanza and provides a unity to the essential idea of the poem. The lovers had traded their love but the woman had died leaving the soldier with nothing. "While men around him plundered/ And knew he had been cheated."[47] While his comrades are gaining materially, the soldier is left with nothing but his initial "history-full of poems" and the memory of his dead loved one. The woman, on the other hand, gains from the transaction of dying with the knowledge that she is loved. She takes with her the love of the soldier and leaves him with the burden of guilt for her death. Though nowhere explicitly stated within this poem, there seems to be an undertone of passive acceptance on the part of the woman. This could perhaps, in a broader sense, be a form of passive acceptance of fated "grievous misfortunes" on the part of the Jewish people in general. Perhaps this "acceptance" is even further a defiant disregard for the genocidal laws of tyrants

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[45]Cohen, Mythologies, p.33.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid.

against a race who believe they are the "chosen" people of God. The punishment and death that many must face now only serves to pave the way for future generations to enter the "promised land".

The motif of passive acceptance in the face of death appears in several poems in this volume and, as in "Lovers", it always becomes a rationalization for death or an escape from the recognition of some form of violence. The poem "Letter", for example, is based solely upon this idea of acceptance, submission or rationalization. The narrator, either male or female,[48] begins with the callous or dispassionate statement:

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[48]In this particular poem there is some confusion as to whether the narrator is male or female. As the narrative develops the speaker appears to be the lover of a king or ruling general and the line "the harlots put to the sword" appears to indicate inevitable death for a woman. However, the statement "when one morning my head/ hangs dripping with the other generals" appears to indicate that the speaker is also a general, a highly unlikely role for a person so intimately associated with a king or ruler. One logical possibility can be found in a comparison with the Antony and Cleopatra love story as told by John Dryden in the play All for Love. In this case the narrator could be either Antony or Cleopatra; in fact, one speech by Cleopatra echoes the same passive acceptance of death, a death made easier by the knowledge that she once loved and was loved.

> Farewell, my cruel lord!
> The appearance is against me; and I go,
> unjustified, for ever from your sight.
> How I have loved, you know; how yet I love,
> My only comfort is, I know myself:
> I love you more, even now you are unkind,
> Than when you loved me most; so well, so truly
> I'll never strive against it; but die pleased,
> To think you once were mine.

From John Dryden, All For Love, ed. Benjamin W. Griffith (New York: Barron's Educational Series, 1961), p.132.

"How you killed your family means nothing to me."[49] But this sentiment is tempered in the next line: "as your mouth moves across my body."[50] Statements showing a recognition of the cruelties of a war raging around the lovers are negated throughout the poem by contrasting statements such as: "these mean nothing to me", "blood means nothing to me" and "tasting blood on your tongue/ does not shock me." The narrator admits a complete knowledge of what is happening in the outside world and realizes the inevitable outcome of his or her involvement in the death and destruction of the war.

> Do not think I do not understand
> what happens
> after the troops have been massacred
> and the harlots put to the sword
>
> ....
>
> that when one morning my head
> hangs dripping with the other generals
> from your house gate.[51]

The passive acceptance of an unpreventable fate becomes, first of all, an escape from the horror of the anticipation of that fate. Secondly, in this particular case, the knowledge of the inevitable becomes a weapon with which the narrator wields the final blow and, though dead, emerges victorious.

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[49]Cohen, Mythologies, p.36.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid., p.37.

...I write this only to rob you

. . . . . .

...all this was anticipated
and so you will know that it meant nothing to me.[52]

Ultimately the sexual-spiritual encounter has become more destructive than death and, in effect, it has become more important, for it has provided a solace from the harshness of reality.

Cohen himself appears at times to believe strongly in the paradox of escape through submission to, or passive acceptance of the trials of life in modern society. In "Jingle" he demonstrates an attitude of mental submission to the fate of simply being involved in a world that man himself has made far too complicated. He begins by describing the death and dissection of a small animal at the hands of curious young boys. The exposure of the "fat brain" is portrayed as "the final clever thrill/ of summer lads."[53] In the second stanza the poet offers his own brain for society to use as it wishes.

So here is mine,
torn and stretched for the sun,
to be used for a drum or a tambourine,
to be scratched with poetry
by Kafka's machine.[54]

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[52]Cohen, Mythologies, p.37.

[53]Ibid., p.59.

[54]Ibid.

The juxtaposition of the two stanzas of this poem forms an elaborate metaphor the tenor of which is simply submission. The plight of the animal in the first stanza indirectly becomes that of the poet in the second stanza. The main idea produced is that of helplessness in the face of destruction. The "summer lads" of the first stanza have the power over the animal that "Kafka's machine", or contemporary society, has over the poet in the second stanza. The poet submits his brain to be used for "a drum or a tambourine," to resound with whatever sound the masses desire. His submission produces a Kafka-like feeling of total futility in a world that man has created but cannot control. Submission is, however, an escape; it offers the poet the opportunity to avoid a fight that he cannot possibly win.

In "Story", Cohen further develops the theme of passive acceptance as he considers his role in the life of an unnamed woman. The woman appears to be constantly preoccupied with thoughts of death and continously relates the story of a child killed in a traffic accident. But the poet claims,

> Each time I visit her
> she repeats the story of the child to me,
> I never question her. It is important
> to understand one's part in a legend.[55]

He does not try to change her outlook or her way of life, for he knows it is her way of accepting her fate and, like him,

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[55]Cohen, Mythologies, p.63.

she does not fight the inevitable. The poem concludes with both the poet and the woman calmly and passively awaiting whatever their destiny may be.

> I take my place
> among the paper fish and make-believe clocks,
> naming the flowers she has drawn,
> smiling while she paints my head on large clay coins,
> and making a sort of courtly love to her
> when she contemplates her own traffic death.[56]

The poet's escape from the violence of reality is often accomplished through a sexual-spiritual relationship with women who appear out of step with contemporary society. "Song of Patience" is the first of many of Cohen's poems that dwell upon the theme of the "madwoman". In the first lines he claims "For a lovely instant I thought she would grow mad/ and end the reason's fever."[57] This first sentence produces a complex paradox, but one, however, that is essential to an understanding of the madwoman theme. Madness appears at first to be a violent state, but it is in many cases only an inability to conform to the ways of a society that is itself essentially violent. Consequently, madness may often be an escape from external hostility to an inward serenity. The external world abounds with

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[56]Cohen, Mythologies, p.63.

[57]Ibid., p.26.

"reason's fever" or a madness of its own. The introversion or escape of the so-called madwoman brings a harmony of mind and body as seen very clearly in the later song of the same theme, "Suzanne". Here Cohen claims it is the madwoman he can trust to lead him away from "reason's fever", for she has found the harmony of mind and body that has been lost to man for so long. Suzanne had, he claims, "touched her perfect body/ with her mind."[58] In "Song of Patience" the poet allows himself to be completely possessed by the woman who he claims "wove intricate initials in my throat."[59] The poet's more conservative friends fear the woman is a witch and warn him to "'Journey with a silver bullet,'" or "'Conceal a stake inside your pocket.'"[60] But the poet knows they cannot understand the purpose of his willing submission in this relationship and he can only "smile as they misconstrue your insane letters/ and my embroidered throat."[61] The poet wished others could share the beauty he has found in the madwoman's world. He wishes to tell others

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[58]Cohen, Parasites of Heaven (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p.71.

[59]Cohen, Mythologies, p.26.

[60]Ibid.

[61]Ibid.

...to love you carefully;
to honour you with shells and coloured bottles;
to keep from your face the falling sand
and from your human arm the time-charred beetle;
to teach you new stories about lightning
and let you run sometimes barefoot on the shore.[62]

When the next lover also has the mystic initials woven in his throat then he too will "...know how beautiful it is/ to be loved by a madwoman."[63] Time will destroy the present logic of the madwoman's words, however, and the poet claims he will not "gladly wait the years" until the time when "my fingernails are long enough/ to tear the stiches from my throat."[64]

Madness does not always lead to beauty, however. For example, in "Ballad" ("My lady was found mutilated") Cohen turns to a look at the destruction and violence in the needless murder of a loved one at the hands of a sex-crazed maniac. Here the poet rapidly depicts the murder scene and emphasizes its horror and repulsion through the use of contrasting descriptions. He describes the woman in life as:

...a tall slender love,
like one of Tennyson's girls,
and you always imagined her erect on a thoroughbred
in someone's private forest.[65]

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[62]Cohen, Mythologies, p.26.

[63]Ibid.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid., p.46.

Immediately Cohen's "lady" is pictured as the wanton huntress of Tennyson's 1830 work simply titled "Sonnet":

> ...like a master painting where she stood
> Looked some new goddess of an English wood.[66]

Tennyson's English Diana cast an air of beauty on the death around her.

> Made quiet death so beautiful to see
> That Death lent grace to Life and Life to Death
> And in one image Life and Death reposed.[67]

Cohen's mutilated lady, on the other hand, becomes a grotesque image of violent death made more hideous by the juxtaposed description of her maimed body.

> But there she was,
> naked on an old bed, knife slashes
> across her breasts, legs badly cut up:
> Dead two days.[68]

The poet lists several possible suspects, yet knows the murderer will never be discovered, for

> There are so many cities!
> so many knew of my lady and her beauty.[69]

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[66]Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Sonnet", in The Norton Anthology of English Literature (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1968), p.1846.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Cohen, Mythologies, p.46.

[69]Ibid., p.47.

The humour of the following four lines contrasts sharply with the mood of pathos developed in the preceding stanzas.

> Perhaps he came from Toronto, a half-crazed man
> looking for some Sunday love;
> or a vicious poet stranded too long in Winnipeg;
> or a Nova Scotian fleeing from the rocks and preachers.[70]

Here again Cohen is emphasing the violence of the death by juxtaposing horror on one hand with the ironies of possible murderers on the other. The serious tone is restored in the next stanza as he again metaphorically describes the beauty of his lady. The concluding two stanzas are unusual in the context of this poem, for they are in the form of rhyming lyric poetry.

> We buried her in Spring-time.
> The sparrows in the air
> wept that we should hide with earth
> the face of one so fair.
>
> The flowers they were roses
> and such sweet fragrance gave
> that all my friends were lovers
> and we danced upon her grave.[71]

Though written in a rather loose iambic trimeter with rhyming second lines, this conclusion becomes the ultimate poetic final tribute to a woman the poet found so beautiful.

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[70] Cohen, Mythologies, p.47.

[71] Ibid.

The sparrows mentioned in the conclusion of "Ballad" can relate to an earlier poem called "The Sparrows". Here the poet and perhaps the same woman are avoiding the gloom of a winter's day by pretending that the sparrows who never seem to migrate are heralds of approaching spring. The other birds have left for the winter or as the poet says "the traitor birds have deserted us."[72] The couple in this poem are briefly unsure as to what their attitude toward the sparrows should be.

> ...should we plant our yards with breadcrumbs
> or mark them with the black persistent crows
> whom we hate and stone.[73]

But finally it is the sparrows who provide "the dimmest flutter of a coloured wing" that "excites all our favourite streets/ to delight in imaginary spring."[74]

"The Sparrows" indicates a traditional approach to spring, but when it comes Cohen appears to share the attitude of T.S. Eliot toward this season. "A painful rededication, this Spring",[75] the first line of "Rededication", repeats the sentiment of "April is the cruelest month," the first line of Eliot's

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[72]Cohen, Mythologies, p.22.

[73]Ibid., p.23.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Ibid., p.20.

"The Waste Land". Eliot's complex image of a spiritual waste land is echoed by Cohen as he views a world in which "we are almost too tired to begin again".[76] Eliot claims, "Winter kept us warm, covering/ Earth in forgetful snow." Similarly Cohen recounts: "We had learned a dignity in late winter,/ from austere trees and dry brown bushes."[77] To Cohen "...Spring disturbs us like the morning."[78] There is no hope in rebirth here; the only hope is for the impossible, the hope "for no October",[79] for no Fall and for no Winter death. Spring is no longer the season of joy and renewed life. It now only signifies the pain of birth and rebirth into a world that Eliot pictured as "stony rubbish" with the "Unreal City/ Under the brown fog of a winter dawn," a world that Cohen feels is typified by a scene in which "The Cadillacs go creeping down/ Through the night and the poison gas."[80] In Cohen's real world Spring ultimately signifies that "The age of lust is giving birth."[81]

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[76]Cohen, Mythologies, p.20.

[77]Ibid.

[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Cohen, "Stories of the Street", Songs of Leonard Cohen (New York: Collier Books, 1969), p.45.

[81]Ibid.

In a world so harsh and ugly even the simple beauty of a sunset becomes a violent event. Cohen's "Prayer for Sunset" depicts the brilliant chiaroscuro of black branches against the flaming sun as a scene of death.

> The sun is tangled
> in black branches,
> raving like Absalom
> between sky and water,
> struggling through the dark terebinth
> to commit its daily suicide.[82]

The way in which the sun appears to be tangled in the tree recalls the fate of Absalom.

> And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away. (II Samuel 18:9)

As the sun passes below the horizon the sea appears to consume the sun but not without injury to itself. The last traces of light and colour appear as

> ...a glistening wound
> on the water,
> a red scar on the horizon.[83]

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[82] Cohen, Mythologies, p.41.

[83] Ibid.

The sounds of the darkness are far from comforting to the poet, for he claims he is

> terrified by the clash of wind on grass,
> and the victory cry of weeds and water.[84]

The once gentle sounds of nature are now sounds of battle and the clash of Biblical armies persists in the poet's mind as he concludes with a continuation of the story of Absalom.

> Is there no Joab for tomorrow night,
> with three darts
> and a great heap of stones?[85]

The mention of Joab completes an elaborate analogy between the sunset and the death of Absalom.

> Then said Joab, I may not tarry thus with thee. And he took three darts in his hand, and thrust them through the heart of Absalom, while he was yet alive in the midst of the oak.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> And they took Absalom, and cast him into a great pit in the wood, and laid a very great heap of stones upon him: and all Israel fled every one to his tent.
> (II Samuel 18: 14&17.)

Ultimately, Cohen's prayer is for a sunset for the following night, a prayer that can only be phrased in terms of violence, for even nature appears to reflect the violence that man has

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[84]Cohen, Mythologies, p.41.

[85]Ibid.

created in his world.

Though Cohen's world view seems generally pessimistic, there are the occasional notes of optimism. In "Prayer for Messiah" the poet says, "O send out the raven ahead of the dove".[86] Though superficially alluding to the raven Noah first sent out in an attempt to find dry land, Cohen is claiming that an age of violence symbolized by the raven must precede an age of peace symbolized by the dove and ultimately signify the coming of the Messiah. There can be no way of telling when this Messiah will come but the poem concludes with the vaguely optimistic note:

> O break from your branches a green branch of love
> after the raven has died for the dove.[87]

Cohen's art is not always concerned with death, destruction and violence, but often leads him to a peaceful internal world and a solace from the things he fears in the outside world. His poem "Song" ("The naked weeping girl") demonstrates his belief in the solace provided by love. Here love, both physical and spiritual, creates an environment or world in which both the poet and his loved one are safe from the hostilities of the external world. The lover's beauty is protected by gentle thoughts in the poet's mind:

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[86]Cohen, Mythologies, p.18.

[87]Ibid.

May soft birds
soft as a story to her eyes
protect her face
from my enemies[88]

The lover's room or the peaceful, imaginary world in which they live is guarded by the poet's ability to create defences in words that are described as "vicious birds". He believes that these birds "Whose sharp wings/ were forged in metal oceans" will "Guard her room/ from my assassins".[89] Cohen finds more than love and peace in this particular new world, however, for there is an overall sense of the attainment of immortality if only in the mind of the lover as she

is thinking of my name
turning my bronze name
over and over
with the thousand fingers
of her body
anointing her shoulders
with the remembered odour
of my skin[90]

His name and the love between them will "grow brighter with her weeping" until the poet is

...fixed like a galaxy
and memorized
in her secret and fragile skies.[91]

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[88]Cohen, Mythologies, p.30.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Ibid.

[91]Ibid.

Cohen's desire to achieve peace and immortality has an even greater significance if the implications of the meaning of the second stanza are considered.

> O I am the general
> in her history
> over the fields
> driving the great horses
> dressed in gold cloth
> wind on my breastplate
> sun in my belly[92]

These lines could relate specifically to the Jewish concept of Messianic identification. Here Cohen places himself in the role of a Messiah who, as David Bakan in Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition claims,

> would be a warrior, a military hero in the fullest sense, and who would eventually be killed. This Messiah, when he arose, would with great might vanquish all enemies and prepare the way for the Messiah-ben-David.[93]

With this concept in mind, the word "assassins" in stanza three can take on a very literal interpretation. A more figurative than literal meaning should be maintained, however, to allow the poem to retain its introspective tone. If Cohen wished to become a Messiah it is only in that small world populated by

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[92]Cohen, Mythologies, p.30.

[93]David Bakan, Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p.171.

him and his loved one. This microcosmic world is ruled by Cohen's concept of "a state of grace". The poet's own definition of this state further substantiates the introspection of the poem in question and will explain many aspects of later works.

> A state of grace is that kind of balance with which you rise to the chaos you find around you. It's not a matter of resolving the chaos, because there is something arrogant and warlike about putting the world in order.[94]

Cohen's state of grace transforms the sex act into a vital form of communication. It is the ultimate exchange of emotion between two human beings. In his first published novel Cohen points out how important this communication is to him.

> "A friendship between a man and a woman which is not based on sex is either hypocrisy or masochism. When I see a woman's face transformed by the orgasm we have reached together, then I know we have met. Anything else is fiction. That's the vocabulary we speak in today. It's the only language left."[95]

This "language" is the only meaningful language in the poet's inner world. It is a language that exists beyond the scope of his poetry, for poetry at best can only give a superficial

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[94]Leonard Cohen, quoted by Jon Ruddy, in Maclean's Magazine, October 1, 1966, p.18.

[95]Cohen, The Favourite Game (London: Secker and Warberg, 1963), p.112.

impression and, even then, it is coloured by the vocabulary of the reader. As Cohen says:

> Poetry is a verdict, not an occupation.... The poem is a dirty, bloody, burning thing that has to be grabbed first with bare hands. Once the fire celebrated Light, the dirt Humility, the blood Sacrifice. Now the poets are professional fire-eaters, free-lancing at any carnival. The fire goes down easily and honours no one in particular.[96]

The poem that "honours no one in particular" only has full meaning in the poet's world and this world provides the poet with his desired escape. A.W. Purdy once recognized Cohen's ability to isolate himself or to withdraw from the external world when he claimed,

> Perhaps in Cohen's world the things he writes about exist, but only rarely do they touch on my personal existence. I admire the poems tremendously; they are the work of a master craftsman, who must simply be living in another time dimension than my own.[97]

In Cohen's world the state of grace or sexual encounter often becomes a quasi-religious experience. Many of his love or sexually oriented poems can assume a religious nature very similar to the love poems of John Donne or the Song of Songs in the Bible. In "On Certain Incredible Nights" the poet wor-

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[96] Cohen, Favourite Game, p.162.

[97] A. W. Purdy, "Leonard Cohen: A Personal Look", Canadian Literature, no. 23, Winter 1965, p.10.

ships his loved one in a manner not unlike that of Solomon. The similarities between the following passages could lead to similar interpretations:

> On certain incredible nights,
> When your flesh is drenched with moon
> And the windows are wide open:
> Your breasts are sculptured
> From the soft inside of darkness
> And your belly a fragment of a great bright flask.[98]

> How beautiful are your sandalled feet, O prince's daughter!
> The curves of your thighs are like jewels,
> the work of a skilled craftsman.
> Your navel is a rounded goblet
> that never shall want for spiced wine.
> Your belly is a heap of wheat
> fenced in by lilies.
> Your two breasts are like two fawns,
> twin fawns of a gazelle. (NEB, Song of Songs 7:1-3)

In both cases the love between the man and woman or bride and bridegroom can have an allegorical interpretation which shows the love between God and the people of Israel, between Christ and the Church, or between God and the individual soul.[99] Cohen continues his poem in a more secular vein, however, by thanking God for "a peninsula of sheet across your waist/ [that] Imprisons you upon my bed."[100] So intense is Cohen's feeling

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[98]Cohen, Mythologies, p.58.

[99]The Encyclopedia of the Bible, p.226.

[100]Cohen, Mythologies, p.58.

for his loved one that he is afraid to look away for a moment in case she should suddenly vanish.

> O not toward the glory
> Of the beautifully infested outside skies,
> Where girls of light are floating up from every room,
> Would I a moment turn my head,
> As other men have innocently done![101]

Love or sex alone are not enough to complete the feeling of harmony in the poet's world that is so much a part of his state of grace; the two are inseparable. In "Had We Nothing to Prove" Cohen claims,

> Had we nothing to prove but love
> we might have leaned all night in that window,
> merely beside each other.[102]

But love alone is not sufficient to provide a complete feeling of unity between the lovers and the poet continues with the overly objective statement:

> but there were obligations, the formalities
> of passion; so we sealed the shutters
> and were expedient in the brevity of night.[103]

The rest of the night is spent in a state of ecstasy where

> both of us anxious and shaking the night,
> with all my arm, she with fingers and gentle;
> no hope for silver leaves in the morning.[104]

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[101] Cohen, Mythologies, p.58.

[102] Ibid., p.50.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid.

Morning and the end of their communion brings a mood not unlike that found in John Donne's "The Sunne Rising" or "Breake of day". In the former poem for example, Donne begins with the statement:

> Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,
> Why dost thou thus,
> Through windowes, and through curtaines call on us?
> Must to thy motions lovers seasons run?

Similarly Cohen laments the intrusion of the cares of day in his concluding lines:

> And always a glance for the brightening window,
> a suspension of breath for the hearing of birds
> and incantations to the sun
> which stirs in dust behind stone horizons.[105]

The fear of morning, however, is not as great as the fear of losing his loved one to another. "Poem" ("I heard of a man") exaggerates the poet's fear of some unknown Lothario but shows how much he values his love and the solace it provides.

> I heard of a man
> who says words so beautifully
> that if he only speaks their name
> women give themselves to him.
>
> If I am dumb beside your body
> while silence blossoms like tumors on our lips
> it is because I hear a man climb stairs
> and clear his throat outside our door.[106]

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[105] Cohen, Mythologies, p.50.

[106] Ibid., p.55.

Cohen writes also of the woman who cannot return his love and can therefore not share the solace of his world. "Folk Song" begins by describing the beauty of the poet's love in an elaborate metaphor.

> The ancient craftsman smiled
> when I asked him to blow a bottle
> to keep your tears in.
> And he smiled and hummed in rhythm with his hands
> as he carved delicate glass
> and stained it with the purple
> of a drifting evening sky.[107]

But the love is wasted and lost, for the loved one could not share his emotion: "but the bottle is lost in a corner of my house/ How could I know you could not cry?"[108]

As in "Song" ("The naked weeping girl"), the first love poem discussed, in his own private world the poet often views himself as a Messiah or supernatural figure. In "These Heroics" Cohen feels that if he were really a Messiah or some other great figure, his poetry and the world of his love would become unnecessary. He believes that if he were like Moses and "had a shining head", like Proteus and "could stretch my body/ through the bright water" or like Icarus and "could ruin my feathers/ in flight before the sun" all else would be unimportant.[109] The fantasy worlds that he must now create would be

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[107] Cohen, Mythologies, p.29.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid., p.28.

completely abandoned if he could become a real "hero".

> do you think that I would remain in this room,
> reciting poems to you,
> and making outrageous dreams
> with the smallest movements of your mouth?[110]

But this is, of course, impossible and the poet must remain the Messiah of his own world. "Pagans", for example, shows the poet assuming a god-like control over the events of his imaginary world and, in effect, creating the people he wishes to have share this world with him, for he claims, "I perverted the Golem formula/ and fashioned you from grass."[111] The Golem formula Cohen mentions comes from Hebrew folklore in which the story is told of the medieval mystic Rabbi Loew of Prague who wrote the unspeakable name of God or Yahweh on parchment and placed it in the mouths of androids to bring them to life. Removal of the enchanted parchment would render the androids lifeless again.[112] The poet in his private world has powers similar to those of Rabbi Loew. He is further a Messiah, Creator and pagan god who receives the approval of other gods.

> O pass by, I challenged you
> and gods in approval
> rustled my hair with marble hands.[113]

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[110] Cohen, Mythologies, p.28.

[111] Ibid., p.38.

[112] Russell Ames, "The Dictionary of Mysticism", Occult, I, 1 (February 1970), 109.

[113] Cohen, Mythologies, p.38.

To create is easy for the self-made Messiah, but the people he allows to enter his world do not always remain happy there.

> I know how our coarse grass
> mutilates your feet,
>
> . . . . . .
>
> and how you lean for hours
> at the cemetery gates.[114]

Because his world is totally mental, however, the self-made Messiah finds it nearly impossible to release or to destroy his creations.

> ...I fear I will never find
> the formula to let you die.[115]

In effect, Cohen is here disturbed by the persistence of memory. Those he has once loved and shared his life with remain in his mind as lovers even when in reality they are gone.

Cohen knows that worlds he creates are imaginary and serve only to provide an escape from the violence of the present day. But this is the violence preceding the peace of the promised Messiah, the violence of the raven sent out ahead of the dove.[116] The peace and safety the poet finds in his inner world is only a temporary substitute for the peace that he expects in the real world with the coming of the Messiah. After

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[114]Cohen, Mythologies, p.38.

[115]Ibid.

[116]Ibid., p.18.

examining the violence of his contemporary world and after avoiding this violence through death, recognition and love, Cohen concludes with a poem that shows the hope he has for an end to the world as we know it, a world "of violent contrasts, where gentleness is in constant collision with brutality."[117] Here, in "Beside the Shepherd", he describes a world in which the prophesy of Isaiah is fulfilled. When "finally it has happened",[118] when the true Messiah has finally come, then peace will truly come to the world. This will be the time when, as Cohen says, "beside the shepherd dreams the beast/ Of laying down with lions."[119] This total peace and gentleness will complete Isaiah's prophesy that claimed,

> ...with righteousness shall he judge
> the poor, and reprove with equity for
> the meek of the earth.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb,
> and the leopard shall lie down with
> the kid; and the calf and the young lion
> and the fatling together; and a little
> child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:4,6)

With the coming of the Messiah, man will again be able to see and communicate with his fellow man or, as stated by Isaiah,

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[117] Pacey, loc. cit.

[118] Cohen, Mythologies, p.70.

[119] Ibid.

> The people that walked in darkness have
> seen a great light: they that dwell
> in the land of the shadow of death,
> upon them the light shined. (Isaiah 9:2)

To Cohen the beginning of this new age will be like the dawn of a new day in the promised land and "the gorgeous fallen sun/ Rolls slowly on the promised city."[120]

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[120]Cohen, Mythologies, p.70.

Chapter II

The Spice-Box of Earth

"Lovers of my beloved,
watch how my words put on her lips like clothes,
how they wear her body like a rare shawl."

The Spice-Box of Earth, Cohen's second volume of poetry, demonstrates the poet's mastery of his craft. Though far less varied in subject, mood, and tone, the poems of this volume are carefully wrought statements relating primarily to the poet's view of his inner world. Stylistically Cohen is now a far more accomplished poet and can gamble with his virtuousity. He can write poems about himself writing poems, "I Wonder How Many People in this City"; about the moth that drowned in his urine "Inquiry into the Nature of Cruelty"; and light-hearted lyrics about catching angels, "Dead Song". He can also create songs and ballads with a definite Elizabethan or Seventeenth Century flair such as "Go By Brooks" and "Song" ("When with lust I am smitten"). But, by far the most important aspect of Cohen's

poetry in this volume is his philosophy of love.

In the years between the publication of Let Us Compare Mythologies and that of The Spice-Box of Earth Cohen appeared to find some of the peace for which he so ardently sought in his early works. In The Spice-Box of Earth Cohen still appears painfully aware of the violence in the outside world, but he is now, for the most part, able to dismiss it from his world. Pain and suffering, however, are never far from his mind, nor are the

> ...wounds and relics,
> or combs of iron,
> or bodies wrapped and burnt in scrolls![1]

He could never completely forget the Jews of Dachau who were forced to

> ...lie down in lime
> with twisted limbs
> and bloated pain
> no mind can understand.[2]

But the majority of the poems in this volume are primarily a celebration of life and love. In the first book Cohen examined

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[1]Cohen, The Spice-Box of Earth (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), p.22. (Hereafter cited as Spice-Box).

[2]Ibid., p.79.

and compared the mythologies of man and the "elaborate lie" that allows man to accept the destruction that he inflicts upon himself. Unable to lie to himself in this way, Cohen then began to form his own religious beliefs, his own mythology based on his concept of love.

As with the first book, here the title is again significant. The sacredness of the spice-box that sanctifies the synagogue prior to Sabbath prayers is transplanted by Cohen to sanctify the book containing his personal philosophies and prayers. Cohen does not presume to create a new religion but emphasizes the secular nature of his approach to God by pointing out that his spice-box is of earth rather than of heaven.

The secular nature of Cohen's belief can be seen most clearly in "Out of the Land of Heaven". Here the poet describes how "Down comes the warm Sabbath sun/Into the spice-box of earth.[3] In other words, Cohen is confident in the validity of his faith, for he is sure God will provide His blessing. The emphasis Cohen places upon love is related in a marriage between the rabbi, assumed to be Cohen, and the Sabbath Queen or the woman who enters with him into the state of grace:

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[3]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.71.

Down go his hands
Into the spice-box of earth,
And there he finds the fragrant sun
For a wedding ring,
And draws her wedding finger through.[4]

The secular nature of Cohen's faith is further emphasized in the lines "Who calls him Rabbi?/Cart-horse and dogs call him Rabbi."[5] He is the rabbi of earth rather than heaven and his followers are the creatures of the earth.

Although it is now somewhat faded, Cohen retains much of his inherited faith as can be seen in poems of such simple beauty as "After the Sabbath Prayers". In this work he relates a story describing the immutable beauty of an object of nature in a manner not unlike many of the tales of the Baal Shem Tov. But the object of his story becomes directly related to himself rather than pointing out an article of faith and he concludes in a tone of questioning sarcasm.

And how truly great
A miracle this is, that I,
Who this morning saw the Baal Shem's butterfly
Doing its glory in the sun,
Should spend this night in darkness,
Hands pocketed against the flies and cold.[6]

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[4]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.71.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid. p.2.

The hope that Cohen earlier placed upon the coming of the Messiah seems also to have faded as his own belief strengthened. In "Absurd Prayer" he claims that society causes the individual enough pain and should God expect more he will willingly die first and remain that way.

I disdain God's suffering.
Men command sufficient pain.
I'll keep to my tomb
Though the Messiah come.

Though He summon every corpse
To throng the final Throne,
One heap shall remain
Immovable as stone.[7]

While alive, however, Cohen intends to honour God in whatever way he finds possible. As mentioned in the previous chapter many of his love or sexually oriented poems are, like those of John Donne before him, basically religious in nature. The object of his love, for example, can simply be a physical substitute for God and the physical encounters he describes produce the state of grace or ecstasy that brings him as close as possible to a union or communication with God. In The Art of Loving Erich Fromm claims,

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[7]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.73

> the basis of our need to love lies in the experience of separateness and the resulting need to overcome the anxiety of separateness by the experience of union. The religious form of love, that which is called the love of God, is psychologically speaking, not different. It springs from the need to overcome separateness and to achieve union.[8]

Cohen's "experience of separateness" is a facet of his world view that is often expressed in works that portray a sense of existential aloneness. "Twilight" in his first volume gives the clearest expression of a man's feeling of separateness in modern society. In this second volume this feeling is again considered in "It Is Late Afternoon". Here the poet describes his aloneness and his inability to cast off the pain of this aloneness.

> It is late afternoon.
> I have put Beethoven on.
> It is foolish to impute pain
> to the intense sky
> but that is what I have done.
> And I will impute loneliness
> to the appearing moon.[9]

This sense of separateness and pain pervades Cohen's works and he has been quoted as saying at readings and concerts,

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[8]Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving (New York: Bantam Books, 1956), p.53.

[9]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.12.

"the person here in the most pain is me."[10] His friends believe that "he actually does see himself as a constant wanderer, as a kind of travelling body of pain."[11] The poet feels that he is, like the moon, drifting alone in the universe and that little can be done to change this situation.

> I walk on Murray Hill.
> The moon needs no legend.
> It proclaims its interest
> in time, in the immediate night.
> I decide to leave it alone.[12]

He does, however, conclude with a slightly optimistic note.

> In my room
> the music is turning
> because I expect a friend.[13]

The arrival of the friend should, first of all, put an end to his feeling of separateness. Secondly, union with the friend, either sexual or spiritual, will bring them closer to a communication with God. Ultimately, a sexual union will induce a state of grace and a feeling of harmony and oneness

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[10]Jack Batten, "Leonard Cohen: The Poet as Hero", Saturday Night, XXCIV (June, 1969), p.25.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.12.

[13]Ibid.

with the world. In "Owning Everything" the poet describes the development of this feeling of harmony. The presence of the lover initially dispels his separateness.

> Because you are close,
> everything that men make, observe
> or plant is close, is mine.[14]

The physical encounter brings complete fulfillment and a complete feeling of oneness with all things.

> With your body and your speaking
> you have spoken for everything,
> robbed me of my strangerhood,
> made me one
> with the root and gull and stone,
> and because I sleep so near to you
> I cannot embrace
> or have my private love with them.[15]

This harmony brings total peace to Cohen's world and, if only temporarily, he feels he no longer has to wander through life alone.

> You worry that I will leave you.
> I will not leave you.
> Only strangers travel.
> Owning everything,
> I have nowhere to go.[16]

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[14]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.34.

[15]Ibid., p.35.

[16]Ibid.

Cohen is no longer forced to travel alone in his search for peace and communication with God. But once he achieves his goal he shows a growing ambivalence toward his security and he wonders if it would be possible to reach God on his own, to not have to share his world with another person, or "to love alone." The poem "Travel" initially raises these questions.

> Loving you, flesh to flesh, I often thought
> Of travelling penniless to some mud throne
> Where a master might instruct me how to plot
> My life away from pain, to love alone
> In the bruiseless embrace of stone and lake.[17]

But his questioning brings him unexpected answers and unexpected insight into the very nature of love itself.

> Now
> I know why many men have stopped and wept
> Half-way between the loves they leave and seek,
> And wondered if travel leads them anywhere.[18]

The insight Cohen gains within his personal world allows him to identify with the experiences of lovers both in and beyond his immediate situation. This insight and identification periodically give Cohen a Whitmanesque sense of "oversoul". In Leaves of Grass, for example, Whitman examined the life of America by feeling that his soul could travel through the land and unite with all other souls it encountered.

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[17]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.52.

[18]Ibid.

Ultimately, this remarkable ability allowed the poet to totally identify with or to "become" all things he examined. In "Song of Myself" Whitman began with the statement,

> I celebrate myself;
> and what I assume you shall assume;
> For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.[19]

Total assumption such as this allowed the poet to figuratively pass through America and to become, know, and thereby understand all elements of life. Cohen adopts a similar "oversoul" stance in his examination of love in "You Have the Lovers". In this particular poem he is not celebrating his own love-making but standing back, objectively making notes as the lovers perform before him. After many years the lover's room or their own private world "has become a dense garden,/full of colours, smells, sounds you have never known".[20] On the surface this is the external beauty of the love the two people share but within it represents the memories and emotions that only they and the poet with his insight can know. The poem becomes a Masters and Johnson examination of emotion as the lovers perform what the reader is told to pretend is only a ritual.[21] The poet identifies so totally with the lovers

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[19] Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, The Portable Walt Whitman [1855] intro. Mark Van Doren (New York: The Viking Press, 1945), p.61.

[20] Cohen, Spice-Box, p.29.

[21] Ibid.

that he believes it is possible to become a part of their ritual.

> You stand beside the bed, weeping with happiness,
> you carefully peel away the sheets
> from the slow-moving bodies.
> Your eyes are filled with tears, you barely make out
> the lovers.
> As you undress you sing out, and your voice is
> magnificent
> because now you believe it is the first human voice
> heard in that room.
> The garments you let fall grow into vines.
> You climb into bed and recover the flesh.
> You close your eyes and allow them to be sewn shut.
> You create an embrace and fall into it.[22]

This is not unlike Whitman's passage through a similar bedroom when he claimed,

> I turned the bridegroom out of bed, and stay with the
> bride myself;
> I tighten her all night to my thighs and lips.[23]

But Cohen is concerned only with the lovers and their ritual rather than the characteristics of a nation. After supposedly joining the lovers he briefly questions the universality of the ritual and its attendant emotions.

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[22]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.30.

[23]Whitman, Leaves of Grass, p.106.

There is only one moment of pain or doubt
as you wonder how many multitudes are lying beside
your body,
but a mouth kisses and a hand soothes the moment away.[24]

The answer is, of course, obvious, for he knows through the experience he has just described that love can provide solace and an escape into a world of its own. Consequently, his conclusion is not derived from the experience but stated at the outset:

You have the lovers,
they are nameless, their histories only for each
other,[25]

The solace or escape from the dangers of the outside world that love provides was thoroughly examined in "Song" ("The naked weeping girl") from the first volume. Now, in a poem appropriately titled "Credo", Cohen re-examines the security of his world, but in an historical context. The poet tells a story of love in Egypt during the days of the Exodus. The lovers lie safe in the seclusion of ferns and grass and safe in the strength of their love. Meanwhile, clouds of grasshoppers devour any vegetation that had not been previously destroyed by the hail wrought by God upon

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[24]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.30.

[25]Ibid., p.25.

the Egyptians. (Exodus 10:5) The poet thinks briefly of the destruction of Egypt,

> ...of pyramids overturned,
> of Pharaoh hanging by the feet,
> his body smeared--.[26]

But his lovemaking is at present far more important and he claims,

> Then my love drew me down
> to conclude what I had begun.[27]

As the people of Israel begin their Exodus the poet is tempted either "to leave my love/ and join their wandering" or to "take my love/ to the city they had fled".[28] But either opportunity "could not tempt us from each other."[29] Since the poet could join the Exodus but would be forced to leave his love behind, obviously he is an Israelite and she an Egyptian. Their love, like that of the aide or soldier and Jewish girl in "Lovers" from Let Us Compare Mythologies, transcends the barriers of race and religion. But in this case both partners gain from the experience. Cohen claims

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[26]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.25.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid., p.26.

[29]Ibid.

Our ordinary morning lust
claimed my body first
and made me sane.[30]

His sanity is the knowledge of the security in their love for one another away from the afflictions of Egypt and away from the trials of the Israelites as they set out upon their journey. The place where the lovers lie is described as a "small oasis". This description suits the security of their spiritual world also, for their love rises like a flowered oasis in a desert of hatred, fear and destruction. Even if this love and security will last "only for a time", the poet and his loved one have discovered the safety in living "between/ a ruined house of bondage/ and a holy promised land."[31]

Cohen appears at times to regard himself as a high priest of love. Perhaps, in his world, he is. His religion is taught and communicated through the sexual encounter. In "The Priest Says Goodbye" he shows how quickly his pupils learn from him.

My love, the song is less than sung
when with your lips you take it from my tongue--.[32]

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[30] Cohen, Spice-Box, p.26

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., p.37.

The love he teaches is not found in eroticism alone: "nor can you seize this from erotic grace".[33] Erotic love alone lacks the depth and intensity that Cohen seeks. Eric Fromm, in his discussion concerning erotic love, appropriately defines the type of relationship that Cohen is attempting to avoid.

> After the stranger has become an intimately known person there are no more barriers to be overcome, there is no more sudden closeness to be achieved. The "loved" person becomes as well known as oneself. Or, perhaps I should better say as little known. If there were more depth in the experience of the other person, if one could experience the infiniteness of his personality, the other person would never be so familiar--and the miracle of overcoming the barriers might occur every day anew. But for most people their own person, as well as others, is soon explored and soon exhausted. For them intimacy is established primarily through sexual contact. Since they experience the separateness of the other person primarily as physical separateness, physical union means overcoming separateness.[34]

Granted erotic love does briefly overcome feelings of separateness, but erotic practices and fetishes without the accompaniment of sensitivity or compassion cannot teach the harmony of mind and body or "absolute ballet" of Cohen's love.

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[33]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.37.

[34]Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving, pp.44-45.

> Harry can't his face in Sally's crotch,
> nor Tom, who only loves when neighbours watch--
> one mistakes the ballet for the chart,
> one hopes that gossip will perform like art.[35]

In a peculiarly unromantic stanza Cohen points out that in his world when sexual excitement has abated love or friendship still remain.

> And what of art? When passion dies
> friendship hovers round our flesh like flies,
> and we name beautiful the smells
> that corpses give and immortelles.[36]

But, as seen in many of Cohen's works, the lovers are compelled to part and there is a distinct impression in this particular poem that the parting is necessary to further learn and spread the high-priest's gospel. "As separate exiles we can learn/ how desert trees ignite and branches burn."[37]

His disciples are able to communicate his teachings through their own future sexual encounters. "You All in White" shows one of the poet's lovers furthering his holy doctrine.

> Strangers in your bed,
> excluded by our grief,
> listening to sleep-whispering,
> will hear their passion beautifully explained.[38]

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[35]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.37.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid., p.38.

[38]Ibid., p.9.

Cohen is careful to point out that it is specifically his words that enable the woman to explain their passion.

> Lovers of my beloved,
> watch how my words put on her lips like clothes,
> how they wear her body like a rare shawl.[39]

When Cohen himself is speaking as lover and poet the result is some of the most beautiful and most intense poetry in this volume. The second stanza of "When I Uncovered Your Body" shows the poet worshipping the body of his loved one with words that he indicates are hardly sufficient to describe her beauty.

> ...the real and violent proportions of your body
> made obsolete old treaties of excellence,
> measures and poems,
> and clamoured with a single challenge of personal beauty,
> which cannot be interpreted or praised:
> it must be met.[40]

The theme and mood of this particular poem parallels a similar incident in his first novel, The Favourite Game. In the scene in question the would-be poet Lawrence Breavman is writing love poetry to Shell, the woman he is living with. The description of Breavman's adoration of Shell's body is a prose-poem that is almost a direct paraphrase of this poem.

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[39] Cohen, Spice-Box, p.9.

[40] Ibid., p.31.

> He would fold the sheet away from her to watch her while she slept. There was nothing in the room but her uncovered flesh. He didn't have to compare it with anything. To kneel beside her and run his fingers on her lips, follow every shape, was to annihilate sunsets he couldn't touch. Ambition, demands of excellence were happily lost as he rested in her. She was most excellent. But she had to feel herself whole. A goddess mustn't fidget. So he must work to make her joyous and still. She learned the conventional instrument of climax, which for a woman is the beginning of pride and stillness.[41]

Breavman and Shell are living in a world of their own, a world dominated by their love and a world isolated from the confusion of a society they cannot cope with.

Coincidently, at this point in the novel Breavman is supposedly writing "Beneath My Hands", one of Cohen's most delicate, ultimate tributes to the woman he loves. Using unusual animal imagery Cohen praises his loved one's breasts.

> Beneath my hands
> your small breasts
> are the upturned bellies
> of breathing falling sparrows.
>
> Wherever you move
> I hear the sounds of closing wings
> of falling wings.[42]

Her breasts assume the fragile beauty and independent life of small birds and her movements can only be described with the

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[41] Cohen, The Favourite Game, p.162.

[42] Cohen, Spice-Box, p.57.

softness and gentleness of feathers. The loved one has a typically feminine lack of confidence and false modesty. Thus, this poem is intended in part to testify against her, to assuage her doubts, to restore her self-confidence.

> When you call me close
> to tell me
> your body is not beautiful
> I want to summon
> the eyes and hidden mouths
> of stone and light and water
> to testify against you.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I want my body and my hands
> to be pools
> for your looking and laughing.[43]

Other than the fact that this is such a deeply personal poem, there is no indication of the peace and desired isolation the poet feels at this time. In the novel, however, as Breavman is writing this poem and watching Shell as she was sleeping a cry from the street penetrated the seclusion of their room. Breavman thought it sounded like something dying but decided he did not care what was happening in the outside world. He and Shell have peace and security in their room, in their love, in their world. Breavman concludes that the

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[43]Cohen, Spice-Box, pp.57-58.

only care he has for the outside world is a "cool condolence for the women less beautiful than she, for the men less lucky than he."[44]

Friends from the outside world may at times be allowed to enter the lovers' world but, as Cohen says in "Now of Sleeping", they must promise to leave when they are no longer wanted.

> Well-wishers and her true lover
> may stay to watch my Annie
> sleeping like a perfect lady
> under her grandmother's patchwork quilt
> but they must promise to whisper
> and to vanish by morning--
> all but her one true lover.[45]

Annie appears again in one of Cohen's tenderest odes to his loved one, "For Anne".

> With Annie gone,
> whose eyes to compare
> With the morning sun?
>
> Not that I did compare,
> But I do compare
> Now that she's gone.[46]

This short ode reminiscent of the lyrics of seventeenth century poets such as Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan was once

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[44]Cohen, Favourite Game, p.165.

[45]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.61

[46]Ibid.

chosen by Cohen as his favourite poem. His reason for choosing this particular poem from such a broad selection of works was:

> I want to write and read poems filled with terror and music that change laws and lives. This isn't one of them. But it has stuck with me long enough, like a lucky stone, to suggest that it's true.[47]

But "For Anne" is written from within Cohen's world; to write poems filled with terror he must look beyond the immediate security and harmony of love into the ever-present "real" world of violence and hatred.

Through this "real" world the poet's ancestors have persisted in their tortured quest for the peace of the promised land. Cohen can partially find this peace within himself but he can never forget or deny the violence inflicted upon his people. In "Lines from My Grandfather's Journal" he concludes his songs of celebration and love by moving beyond his spice-box, beyond his interior world, into the reconstructed reminiscences of of his grandfather. In this elaborate prose-poem the poet shows how deep are the wounds of his people, yet how unfailing is their faith in God. The choice between torture or life in ghettos and the feeble attempts to fight back with

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[47] Cohen, quoted in Poet's Choice, ed. Paul Engle and Joseph Langland (New York: Delta Books, 1962), p. 29.

"patriotic arrogance" always results in death.[48] Recollection of the past is always painful and the atrocities of the "Belsen heap" are never far away.[49] Faith in the teachings of the past may be shaken and the poet claims his grandfather may have been

> Doubting everything that I was made to write. My dictionaries groaning with lies. Driven back to Genesis. Doubting where every word began. What saint had shifted a meaning to illustrate a parable. Even beyond Genesis, until I stood outside my community, like the man who took too many steps on Sabbath. Faced a desolation which was unheroic, unbiblical, no dramatic beasts.
> The real deserts are outside of tradition.[50]

But, however deserted and alone the grandfather and the poet himself may feel, there is the final note of faith in God and that He will ultimately

> Lead your priest
> from grave to vineyard.
> Lay him down
> where air is sweet.[51]

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[48] Cohen, Spice-Lox, p.81.

[49] Ibid., p.85.

[50] Ibid., p.84.

[51] Ibid., p.86.

Chapter III

Flowers for Hitler

"But I am not lost
any more than leaves are lost
or buried vases
This is not my time
I would only give you second thoughts"

In Cohen's third volume of poetry, Flowers for Hitler, there is a combination of his earlier phases of outlook and a great range of styles. Through his first two volumes the poet can be seen progressing from a phase of outward questioning of the rationale that allows violence to dominate the world to a phase of inward isolation and escape from that violence. His style also ranges from clumsy attempts to mimic seventeenth century lyrics such as seen in "The Fly"[1] to the beautifully chiselled verses in poems such as "Song for Abraham Klein".[2] Particularly noticeable in Flowers for Hitler is the serious

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[1]Cohen, Mythologies, p.60.

[2]Cohen, Spice-Box, p.67.

examination of the outside world complemented by the exposure of the inner recesses of the poet's mind and personal world. To span so great a scope of thought, feeling and ideas, Cohen's style here ranges from banal to sensuously descriptive.

In examining Cohen's writing at its worst one cannot overlook the poem titled "A Migrating Dialogue". Here Cohen appears to abandon all subtlety as he records the thoughts passing through his mind. With some control or direction this form of writing can produce extremely effective insights into the life and psyche of the poet, but at its worst, as in the following stanza, the result can only be described as banal:

> Don't bite your nails, I told him.
> Don't eat carpets.
> Be careful of the rabbits.
> Be cute.
> Don't stay up all night watching
> parades on the Very Very Very Late Show.
> Don't ka-ka in your uniform.[3]

Too many of the poems in this book give evidence of a total lack of editing. The poet may have a message for the reader or for himself in "Opium and Hitler", but doggerel is far too cute a medium in which to be serious. The first few stanzas, for example, shift the emphasis from what the poet is attempting to say about Hitler to a facetious description of an opium

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[3]Cohen, Flowers for Hitler (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p.72. (Hereafter cited as Flowers).

dream.

> Several faiths
> bid him leap--
> opium and Hitler
> let him sleep.
>
> A Negress with
> an appetite
> helped him think
> he wasn't white.
>
> Opium and Hitler
> made him sure
> the world was glass.
> There was no cure
>
> for matter
> disarmed as this:
> the state rose on
> a festered kiss.[4]

Cohen is, however, at his best in the few works in which he uses his art to its fullest advantage as a vehicle of description. Noticeably, with perhaps a few left-over sentiments from The Spice-Box of Earth, the few love poems in this volume contain some of his most beautiful and most sensuous descriptive lines. In the conclusion of "One of the Nights I Didn't Kill Myself" his loved-one's breasts are indirectly compared to the radiant beauty of a sunset.

> and I will kiss again the slope of a breast
> little nipple above me
> like a sunset.[5]

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[4]Cohen, Flowers, p.120.

[5]Ibid., p.52.

Also in his tribute to the woman who played so important a role in his life, "For Marianne", Cohen describes his love for her with a delicate simplicity coupled with an inclusive depth.

> It's so simple
> to wake up beside your ears
> and count the pearls
> with my two heads.[5]

Here again is the security of the lovers' world. Their bed is the center of their world and life is at its simplest when they are together there. The poet worships his loved-one's beauty or, as he says, "count the pearls/ with my two heads". His "two heads" are his eyes; they have, in a sense, replaced his mind, for all that is important is happening within his sight.

Less pleasant but certainly unique are some of Cohen's extremes of description. In a poem appropriately titled "Style", for example, he develops an elaborate metaphor to effectively portray the image of a blood-red dawn cutting between the blackness of the sky and the horizon.

> Now a rooster with a razor
> plants the haemophilia gash across
> the soft black sky.[6]

In "Congratulations" Cohen develops another unique and in this

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[5]Cohen, Flowers, p.52.

[6]Ibid., p.27.

case ironic metaphor.

> Here we are eating the sacred mushrooms
> out of the Japanese heaven
> eating the flower
> in the sands of Nevada[7]

Here he points out that man is continually poisoning himself by eating the radio-active fallout from the atmospheric tests of nuclear bombs similar to the ones that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is ironic that man should slowly kill himself by experimenting with weapons developed to destroy others. It is equally as ironic that he should further plot his own destruction through the underground tests of these weapons in the deserts of Nevada.

The only justification for this extreme range in Cohen's style can perhaps be found in the meaning of the word style itself. If style is "the arrangement of words in a manner which at once best expresses the individuality of the author and the idea and intent in his mind"[8], then there is some explanation for the poet's inconsistencies. Ironic, unique and sensuous styles do express Cohen's ideas but no rationalization can account for the banal. Perhaps the poet, Michael Ondaatje,

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[7]Cohen, Flowers, p.15.

[8]William F. Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature (New York: the Odyssey Press, 1960), p.474.

was close to an explanation when he claimed about Cohen,

> Layton has made it fashionable to print all, saying time will pick the good poems anyway, but it seems pointless to waste everyone's time with poems that are obviously poor or obviously just private jokes.[9]

As with the first two volumes the title of this book is also significant. There is of course considerable irony in the idea that a Jewish poet should dedicate a book to the dictator who was responsible for the deaths of millions of Jewish people. But Cohen is not directly attempting to use his poetry as a medium for passing judgement upon people such as Hitler. "All There is to Know about Adolph Eichmann", for example, shows that one of Hitler's executioners was, physically at least, just an average human being. In what can hardly be considered a poem Cohen lists Eichmann's physical characteristics and finds that they are all "medium". The man, one would expect to have fiendish characteristics to match his heinous actions, has ten fingers, ten toes and no distinguishing features. Cohen concludes his list with a series of rhetorical questions that further point out that Eichmann was really not unlike anyone else.

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[9]Michael Ondaatje, Leonard Cohen, (Canadian Writers Number 5, New Canadian Library), (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p.43.

What did you expect?
Talons?
Oversize incisors?
Green Saliva?
Madness?[10]

That Eichmann was merely human emphasizes the irony of the title. Cohen believes that Hitler too was human, though perhaps evil to a greater degree than most of his counterparts. He sends his flowers to Hitler. Though we are all guilty, Hitler is only the scapegoat for a world that needs someone to blame for its own violence. Mankind is essentially violent and Hitler is merely the epitome of that violence.

Surprisingly, Cohen's most significant statement concerning Hitler comes from one of the poems that should have been omitted from this book. In the conclusion of "A Migrating Dialogue" Cohen emphasizes his belief in Hitler's humanity when he sees Der Fuhrer as a being capable of loving.

Braun, Raubal and him
(I have some experience in these matters),
these three humans,
I can't get their nude and loving bodies out of my mind.[11]

But Hitler and the people and the atrocities associated with

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[10]Cohen, Flowers, p.66.

[11]Ibid., p.74.

him are now all a part of past history. His name alone, however, can strike fear into the hearts of many people. Cohen points out how strong this fear can be in "On Hearing a Name Long Unspoken."

> Listen to a name
> so private it can burn
> hear it said aloud
> and learn and learn[12]

He further points out that history only preserves the best or worst qualities of a man or nation.

> History is a needle
> for putting men asleep
> anointed with the poison
> of all they want to keep[13]

To Cohen, there is enough violence and hatred in the real and present world and the fear of Hitler should be allowed to die out on its own.

> Now let him go to sleep with history,
> the real skeleton stinking of gasoline,
> the mutt and jeff henchmen beside him:
> let them sleep among our precious poppies.[14]

But the lesson to be learned from history is lost in a society that thrives upon violence. In the poem "Hitler" Cohen claims that

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[12]Cohen, Flowers, p.25.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid., p.125.

the memories of a horrible past "turn up as poppies/ beside the tombs and libraries of the real world."[15] Yet, history seems always to repeat itself, for "the leader's vast design, the tilt of his chin/ seem excessively familiar to minds at peace."[16] Where society is always ready to scorn the events of the past, Cohen appears now to be saying that we should forget the past and concern ourselves with the present to avoid a repetition of that past.

A.M. Klein wrote the ultimate, Canadian, poetic denunciation of Hitler in his The Hitleriad. A mock-epic, similar in some respects to Alexander Pope's Dunciad, The Hitleriad is an extremely bitter, witty and satirical poem attacking Hitler, "a seig-heil'd deity," and his evil "crew unto their leader like!"[17] At the time it was written this work was very topical and Klein was openly attempting to write virulent satire against a man and a nation engaged in the genocide of the Jewish people. Klein did not ask his muse to guide him toward poetic perfection, but in the last lines of his invocation stated his purpose quite plainly:

> Wherefore, O Muse, I do invoke thy aid,
> Not for the light and sweetness of the trade,
> But seeing I draw a true bill of Goth,
> For the full fire of thy heavenly wrath![18]

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[15]Cohen, Flowers, p.125.

[16]Ibid.

[17]A.M. Klein, The Hitleriad (New York: New Directions, 1944), p.5.

[18]Ibid., p.6.

With the vast cushion of time to protect his senses, Cohen cannot view Hitler with quite the same degree of indignation. At his most critical, Cohen can only assume what it must have been like to live in Nazi Germany. From this stance the worst he can do is see Hitler as a brain-mole. "Hitler the Brain Mole" gives a surrealistic description of the formation of a man-machine built to serve the Third Reich.

> Hitler the brain-mole looks out of my eyes
> Goering boils ingots of gold in my bowels
> My Adam's apple bulges with the whole head of Goebbels[19]

In other words, the German people had their intellect dominated by Hitler, the very bowels of their industry controlled by the industrialist, Goering, and the rhetoric and rationalization for their actions provided by the intellectual, Goebbels.

The latter receives special treatment in "Goebbels Abandons His Novel and Joins the Party". Here the poet examines the type of man who could create Nazi propaganda, who could, in effect, create the Hitler myth, and who could encourage Hitler himself to the most expedient methods possible in exterminating the German-Jewish population. Ironically, Cohen sees this man initially as a poet, a poet whose

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[19]Cohen, Flowers, p.43.

...last love poem
broke in the harbour
where swearing blondes
loaded scrap
into rusted submarines.[20]

But he also sees him as the man so lacking in conscience he

...remembered perfectly
how he sprung
his father's heart attack
and left his mother
in a pit
memory white from loss of guilt.[21]

To Cohen Goebbels was truly a "Doctor of Reason", a reason so often called "right reason", yet a reason that can convince millions of people that violence and power lead to the betterment of mankind. Finally, Cohen asks what power has the beauty of poetry against the power of propaganda of hate.

Ah my darling pupils
do you think there exists a hand
so bestial in beauty so ruthless
that can switch off
his religious electric exlax light?[22]

The concluding lines form an exceptionally complex metaphor describing Goebbels' propaganda as religious dogma that is like a light that cannot be shut off and as verbal diarrhea that cannot be stopped. The latter is an excellent description of the

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[20]Cohen, Flowers, p.28.

[21]Ibid., p.29.

[22]Ibid.

writings of the Minister of Enlightenment and Culture for the Third Reich who, in addition to his propaganda writing, is believed to have written a 70,000 page personal diary during the two hectic years of 1942 and 1943.

Goebbels' propaganda can be accepted as merely the rationalizations and subtle lies of a twisted mind. But any coherent statement of a belief can itself be a form of propaganda. In the poem "Propaganda", for example, Cohen contrasts the coherent statements concerning the beliefs of two generations. The poet's father is concerned with

> ...the nature of religion and
> the progress of lust in the twentieth
> century.[23]

whereas, the poet himself claims,

> I myself have several
> statements of a competitive
> coherence which I intend to spread
> around at no little expense. I
> love the eternal moment, for
> instance.[24]

Neither point of view is necessarily "right", but both are firmly held beliefs that hold a certain amount of truth and validity for the believer. Any two opposing beliefs, however,

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[23]Cohen, Flowers, p.78.

[24]Ibid.

generally contain some lies. The "elaborate lie" that once allowed the poet to accept the laws of life and the rationalization of death began to lose its validity as Cohen progressed through The Spice-Box of Earth. Now, in the first poem of this book, "What I'm Doing Here", he claims, "I do not know if the world has lied/ I have lied".[25] He now completely refuses to accept the "elaborate lie" or, as he claims, "I refuse the universal alibi".[26] He concludes this confessional-poem with the demand that his readers search their own souls and enter with him into a brotherhood in which lies, conspiracy, torture and hatred are no longer mere facts of life. His concluding lines, however, contain a pessimistic note as he claims, "I wait for each one of you to confess".[27]

Cohen's honesty in his confessions may at times be questioned, for often he appears to be posing or playing a role. In this volume there are, however, several poems in which he looks beyond himself and considers the goals and destiny of his country. A trip to Cuba in 1961 inspired a retrospective examination of Canada's multiple problems and a resulting poetic list of suggestions, many facetious, to solve these problems. "The Only Tourist in Havana Turns His Thoughts Homeward" may

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[25]Cohen, Flowers, p.13.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid.

not provide the guide-book to finding Canada's national identity, but the poet is serious when he claims,

> Come, my brothers
> let us govern Canada,
> let us find our serious heads.[28]

In a further comic mood, Cohen indulges in a satiric consideration of the pettiness of Canadian politics. "Business as Usual" describes what the poet sees as a typical day in the Canadian Parliament with the elected politicians "hunchbacked/ from climbing on each other's heads."[29] The most important item of business on this day appears to be the entertainment of "an entire sled-load of Miss Canada losers".[30] Serious problems interfere with business and, for example,

> Some fool (how did he get in) who
> wants jobs for everyone and says
> so in French is quickly interred
> under a choice piece of the cornice
>
> and likes it.[31]

As humourous as it might seem the last stanza of this poem is not far from the truth, but the poet's seriousness is likely to be lost in the levity of the overall mood.

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[28]Cohen, Flowers, p.38.

[29]Ibid., p.18.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

Don't cry, Miss Canada,
it's not as though the country's
in their hands.
And next year we're piping
Congressional proceedings
direct from Washington--
  all they'll have to do
is make divorces.[32]

The poem "Cherry Orchards" is far more serious in tone than the above works and here Cohen makes some positive statements concerning Canada's destiny. The opening lines do not particularly advocate war and insurrection, but suggest that Canada needs something to unify her people in their quest for nationhood and independence.

Canada some wars are waiting for you
some threats
some torn flags
Inheritance is not enough
   Faces must be forged under the hammer
of savage ideas
   Mailboxes will explode
in the cherry orchards[33]

Cohen, like most Canadians, is sure that Canada could have a future. Cohen, unlike most Canadians however, feels that something must be done to create that future, for it will not just happen on its own.

   There's a story out there boys
Canada could you bear some folk songs
about freedom and death[34]

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[32]Cohen, Flowers, p.18.

[33]Ibid., p.122.

[34]Ibid.

Despite his insights into Canada's ailments, Cohen does not appear willing to attempt any kind of cure. In "Montreal 1964" he discusses the spreading disease of urbanization in Montreal but then states,

> Canada is a dying animal
> I will not be fastened to a dying animal
> That's the sort of thing to say, that's good,
> that will change my life.[35]

Fortunately for Cohen he can escape the "dying animal" by retreating to his adopted home in Greece. There he can live a far simpler life than can ever be found in Montreal, the city to which he occasionally returns to "renew neurotic affiliations". Life in Montreal, or any large city, is dominated by the violence of motion and noise, the violence of man's daily, industrial life.

> ask a man for the time
> your voice is ruined with static:
> What a racket! What strange dials!
> Only Civil War can fuse it shut--
> the mouth of the glorious impatient
> ventriloquist performing behind our daily lives![36]

In contrast, life in Greece, specifically on the island of Hydra is ruled by quietness and peace. Cohen describes this peace in his poem "Hydra 1960".

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[35]Cohen, Flowers, p.35.

[36]Ibid.

(Note: to "renew reurotic afflilations" is a phrase often used by Cohen to describe Montreal.)

Anything that moves is white,
a gull, a wave, a sail,
and moves too purely to be aped.[37]

The dominance of the colour white and the purity of motion portray the feeling of tranquility in a world in which violence enters only in terms of sharp contrasts. These contrasts the poet claims are

...ruthless: rooster shriek,
bleached goat skull.
Scalpels grow with poppies
if you see them truly red.[38]

When trapped within a city and tortured by the pressures of modern society, Cohen can escape into one of his internal worlds. The solace provided by the sexual-spiritual encounter can still be seen in the few love poems in this book. As mentioned earlier, "For Marianne" comes from the depth of his internalized world, that earlier was dominated only by love. The ultimate expression of this love and its importance in Cohen's world is portrayed in "Promise" where he states

To love you
is to live
my ideal diary

which I have
promised my body
I will never write.[39]

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[37]Cohen, Flowers, p.54.

[38]Ibid., p.55.

[39]Ibid., p.57.

Cohen's solace in love can be further seen in "The Rest is Dross" as he examines the relationship between lovers who are "not each other's/ but lovers still".[40] He concludes this study of the beauties of a clandestine affair with the declaration:

> God I'm happy we've forgotten nothing
> and can love each other
> for years in the world[41]

Here "world" carries a two-fold meaning. It is, first of all, the real, external world in which they can continue everyday life, yet carry the secret knowledge of their love. Secondly, and perhaps most important, it refers to the secret internal world of escape from that real world that only they as lovers know and which only exists for them.

At this point in his career escape appears to become more important to Cohen and a new phase in his writing can be seen developing. Many of his poems now appear to be inspired by his use of drugs. At times he seems to have heightened insights regarding the world around him, but these insights are admittedly lost in the transformation from thoughts to written words. In "I Had It for a Moment" he states his inability to express what he feels for his loved-one. He begins by claiming "I had it for a moment/ I knew why I must thank you",[42] but then a remotely

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[40] Cohen, Flowers, p.76.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., p.81.

related vision interrupts his train of thought. He knows he is "losing why I must thank you",[43] but the visions continually crowd out the urgency of his purpose until finally he claims, "I've lost why I began this".[44]

In "On the Sickness of My Love" Cohen takes this inability to translate his feelings to an exaggerated extreme.

> Poems ! break out !
> break my head !
> What good's a skull?
> Help ! help !
> I need you ! [45]

The end result he admits is not a poem and perhaps not even what he intended to produce at the outset:

> You're no poem
> you're a visa.[46]

This phase of drug inspired poetry is closely related to Cohen's earlier escape through passive acceptance. Now he appears to be completely submitting himself to the whims of society while at the same time examining and exposing the inner recesses of his mind. "Old Dialogue" states explicitly how Cohen's art and life are carrying him toward some unknown goal.

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[43] Cohen, Flowers, p.81.

[44] Ibid., p.82.

[45] Ibid., p.51.

[46] Ibid.

-Has this new life deepened your perceptions?
-I suppose so.
-Then you are being trained correctly.
-For what?
-If you knew we could not train you.[47]

Initially driven by society to seek refuge in self-made fantasy worlds, Cohen now attempts to escape further and to deepen his artistic perceptions through the use of hallucinogenic drugs. He claims, however, that these drugs have had no effect upon him.

> I don't get high with LSD. I see people hallucinating all around me, but I don't get high. I don't mean to say that I got there first, but I just know that vision. You know, I find it very familiar. It's one that I'm in most of the time. Taking LSD for me was not the most significant spiritual experience. I don't want to put it down--it has done beautiful things for a lot of people. But for me it was just revisiting somewhere that I am anyway.[48]

If what Cohen says is true, then "Sick Alone" must describe a very terrifying physical-mental ailment.

Nursery giant hordes return
wading in the clue taste of bile
You ate too much kitchen
went green on the lone looptheloop
It will not let you off to sleep
It is too fast. It is too steep
Crash past a squashed group
of bible animals lion child kitten
Where where is your demonic smile
You vomit when you want to burn[49]

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[47]Cohen Flowers, p.107.

[48]Cohen, quoted by Jon Ruddy, in Maclean's Magazine, October 1, 1966, p.33.

[49]Cohen, Flowers, p.40.

Similarly, "On the Death of an Uncharted Planet" certainly describes an abnormal feeling not unlike a hangover, but the accompanying hallucination is similar to those often induced by "mind-expanding" drugs.

When suddenly I
I knew it died
Clean blazing death
So bright
So irrelevant
Puff it went
Ten times the
Weight of the world
Lost to nobody
New meteors
New collisions
What comfort
At my stomach gnawed
The divine emptiness[50]

In "Nursery Rhyme" Cohen mentions being in a cocktail lounge but the images he proceeds to describe are not those normally created by alcohol.

I have seen angels pulsing
    through the veined atmosphere
I am alone with a window
    full of bones and wrinkles
O terrible eyes
O perfect mouth
    my fantasy shipwrecked
on the metal of your hair
Your beauty rides a wet flower
like a sail above a deep old hull
    I need to touch you
with my fleshy calipers
Desire is the last church
and the ashtrays
    are singing with hunger[51]

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[50]Cohen, Flowers, p.23.

[51]Ibid., p.106.

In fact, there is a strong similarity here to the pulsing sky and animated objects often seen by the users of mescaline and peyote.

With "Leviathan" Cohen takes the ultimate plunge into the depths of his tortured mind. Whether induced by drugs or not, the result is a phantasmagoria of terrifying images emanating from the previously hidden recesses of the poet's mind.

I learn nothing
because my mind is stuffed with bodies:
blurred parades, hosts of soft lead wings,
tragic heaped holes of the starved,
    the tangled closer than snakes,
swarming gymnasiums,
refuse of hospitals compose my mind:
no neat cells,
limbs, rumps, fetuses compose my mind.

It reels like Leviathan in oldtime cuts,
a nation writhing:
mothers, statues, madonnas, ruins--
I'm stripped, suckled, weaned,
I leap, love, anonymous as insect.
There is no beauty to choose here:
    some mutilated, some whole, some perfect severed thighs,
embryos, dried skin:
the mass so vast some scales, some liquid never meeting.

Language is gone,
squeezed out in food, kisses.
Arithmetic, power, cities never were.
God knows what they've built today.
    Only the echo I cast in world offices
returns to damn me ignorant--
as if I can hear in the screech of flesh
or talk back with mouth of hair.[52]

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[52]Cohen, Flowers, pp.55-56.

As Cohen's images spew forth his poetry becomes like trappings in the bottom of a sieve. He claims "language is gone" but so is the beauty and sensitivity he was once able to capture. At this point in his career Cohen is beginning the "wipe-out" before the "renewal",[53] the archetypal descent of the artist into the underground prior to the rebirth with a renewed and purified vision of the world.

Ultimately, the next novel, Beautiful Losers, became the culmination of this wipe-out, descent, or disintegration. Going one step beyond writers such as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Jean Paul Sartre, who have descended into their own dark recesses to attempt to find the sickness of modern society, Cohen examines the rotting core of modern technological man. Further, Cohen himself claims,

> In that book I tried to wrestle with all the deities that are extant now--the idea of saintliness, purity, pop, McLuhanism, evil, the irrational--all the gods we set up for ourselves.[54]

In essence, Beautiful Losers becomes a mirror image of modern society, a society in which we are all losers and have condemned ourselves to the varying degrees of punishment of living in our own evil world.

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[53]Cohen, quote by Sandra Djwa, in The Ubyssey, Friday, February 3, 1967, p.8.

[54]Ibid.

The only indication Cohen gives in his poetry that there may be a return for him is contained in the appropriately titled poem "The Way Back".

> But I am not lost
> any more than leaves are lost
> or buried vases
> This is not my time
> I would only give you second thoughts[55]

The poet claims we must all make the same inward journey into our own worlds and even that may change nothing.

> I wait for you at an
> unexpected place in your journey
> like the rusted key
> or the feather you do not pick up
> until the way back
> after it is clear
> the remote and painful destination
> changed nothing in your life[56]

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[55]Cohen, Flowers, p.62.

[56]Ibid.

Chapter IV

Parasites of Heaven

"I am very alone from aiming songs
at God for
I thought that beside me there was no one
Solomon"

Although published in the same year as Beautiful Losers, Cohen's fourth volume of poetry, Parasites of Heaven, presents a very different world view. The poems in this book are collected from over a period of ten years but are united in a common ranging outlook that would seem to follow after Cohen's disintegrative journey in his novel. With Parasites of Heaven Cohen retains and intensifies his stance of passive acceptance, yet he seems also to have attained his renewed or purified vision of life.

Many of the poems in this book appear to be random thoughts written in either poetry or prose and consequently all are untitled. Further, Cohen is generally a very personal poet and in this book he often appears to be carrying on a dialogue with himself. In the first poem, for example, he questions himself,

So you're the kind of vegetarian
that only eats roses
Is that what you mean
with your Beautiful Losers[1]

At other times he writes as though he were someone else writing about Leonard Cohen.

Leonard hasn't been the same
since he wandered from his name[2]

These internal dialogues and exterior views of himself tend to heighten the personal aspect of Cohen's writing while at the same time giving the reader a deeper insight into the poet's view of his world. The reader can easily speculate that success will change the outlook of a poet so that he writes to please his audience but a statement such as the one quoted above shows that the poet himself realizes this change.

Success and change in Cohen's case may have made him more aware of his audience but it has also contributed to his desire to withdraw further into his escape worlds. His poetry still shows a concern for the violence in the world but his passive acceptance of that violence allows him to be totally aware, yet at the same time he can ignore its horrors and step out of the

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[1]Cohen, "So you're the kind of vegetarian", Parasites of Heaven (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p.11. (Hereafter cited as Parasites).

[2]"Nancy lies in London grass", ibid., p.33.

harshness ~~of reality in~~ the way one would leave a room.

> The nightmares do not suddenly
> develop happy endings
> I merely step out of them
> as a five year old scientist
> leaves the room
> where he has disected an alarm clock[3]

Cohen still sees the ugliness and stagnation in the world around him but it is as if he himself is numb to it. Here a poem written several years earlier is now appropriate to describe his growing disinterest in life and those things that once held great meaning for him.

> One night I burned the house I loved,
> It lit a perfect ring
> In which I saw some weeds and stone
> Beyond--not anything.[4]

Blackness describes even the world of his escape as his withdrawal becomes almost oppressive.

> Now I sail from sky to sky
> And all the blackness sings
> Against the boat that I have made
> Of mutilated wings.[5]

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[3]Cohen, "The nightmares do not suddenly", Parasites, p.13.

[4]"One night I burned the house I loved", ibid., p.18.

[5] Ibid.

The totality of the "wasteland" has filled Cohen with a feeling that everything is now insignificant.

> When I paid the sun to run
> It ran and I sat down and cried
> The sun I spent my money on
> Went round and round inside
> The world all at once
> Charged with insignificance[6]

The masses Cohen observes are all members of a "lost generation" reminiscent of that of the between-war years, but far more widespread. Modern life in North America has become a self-indulgent perpetual picnic with shallow relationships and decaying morals. But Cohen continues to display his passive acceptance of this life and of his own situation in it.

> It's not too late for goodbyes
> That's what I want to tell you all
> who are waiting with indifferent expressions
> between me and the honey flies[7]

The "real" world that Cohen sees appears to him as a long, slow, grey parade of lifeless puppets doomed to a vacuous end.

> Lifetime staircase people
> we're drifting together
> There's nothing in store
> for the doomed armada of wooden steps[8]

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[6] Cohen, "When I paid the sun to run", Parasites, p.24.

[7] "You know there was honey in my system", ibid., p.21.

[8] "Desperate sexual admirals", ibid., p.32.

There is no longer real love between people in the generation Cohen views, only hatred for the role-playing of others and perhaps of themselves.

> And all my friends are fast asleep
> in places that are high and steep
> their bodies torn on crosses
> that their visions meant to leap
> And in between their dreams they hate
> the company they keep[9]

Cohen realizes that he lives in an age of role-playing and that we all wear masks. His world view is not unlike that of many artists before him. Hemingway and Fitzgerald wandered in and out of their own "lost generation" and wrote their impressions of its people and values. However, the assessment of the predicament of twentieth-century man and the dilemma of the artist that is most penetrating and that corresponds most closely to Cohen's views is that of Luigi Pirandello in his book Umorismo:

> In certain moments of interior silence, in which our spirit divests itself of its habitual pretences and our eyes become sharper and more penetrating, we see ourselves in life, and life itself, as if in a sterile nudity, and we are troubled; we feel ourselves assaulted by a strange impression, as if, in a flash, a different reality from that which we normally perceive were clarifying itself, a living reality beyond human sight, outside the forms of human reason. At such times the fabric of daily existence, almost suspended in the void of our interior silence, appears

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[9]Cohen, "Nancy lies in London grass", Parasites, p.33.

> with blinding clarity to be without sense and purpose; and as all our habitual sham connections for sentiments and images are disjointed and broken up, the new reality seems horrible in its impassive and mysterious severity. The inward void gets larger, goes beyond the limits of our body, becomes a void around us, a strange emptiness, like a pause in time and in life, as if our interior silence were sinking into the abysses of mystery. With a supreme effort we try to re-acquire our normal consciousness of things, to re-establish the usual ties between them, to re-connect ideas, to feel ourselves alive again in the normal way, as before. But in this normal consciousness, in these re-connected ideas, in this habitual sense of life, we can no longer have faith because by now we know that they comprise a deception for the purpose of living, that at the cost of dying or going mad. The whole experience has taken only an instant, but its impression endures in us for a long time, like a dizziness to which is contrasted the stability, however unreal in actuality, of things--ambitious, paltry appearances. The life that wanders about, small and habitual, among these appearances seems almost to be no longer real, to be a mechanical fantasmagoria. How can we give it importance? How can we respect it?[10]

In a poem written in 1964 Cohen indicates that he was searching for the way back from his disintegrative journey before it began, that he was even then attempting to "re-acquire his normal consciousness".

> Did I have leisure time
> before I started to reconstruct
> every one of your nights?
> Did I yawn?

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[10]Luigi Pirandello, "From Umorismo", in Anthony Caputi, ed., Modern Drama (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966), p.475.

Did I take walks without
looking for bodies?
Did I believe conversation?
Was music as necessary?
Did I love Euclid?
Was the air big?
Did I like surprises?[11]

Cohen is locked in the void Pirandello describes. From this state of limbo he searches for meanings and reasons and tries to remember what life was like before his bitterness engulfed him. The drug experience and the continual examination of the sordidness of reality have only heightened his awareness of the never-ending violence of life.

Love and fantasy dreams had once provided Cohen with an effective escape from reality, but now even they have begun to lose their protective powers, for he claims,

Love wears out
like overused mirrors unsilvering
and parts of your faces
make room for the wall behind[12]

Because love is so closely associated with Cohen's approach to God he is now becoming disillusioned with this attempt to form a belief or hope in God.

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[11] Cohen, "What did I do with my breath", Parasites, p.36.

[12] "The nightmares do not suddenly", ibid., p.13.

I am very alone from aiming songs
at God for
I thought that beside me there was no one
Solomon[13]

But there is still a faint glimmer of hope as he likens his prayers to those of Solomon. Here a poem from the past comes forward to become a direct communication with God.

O God as I called you before
when I was my father's father
It is thy world again
O God you are a souvenir of Lourdes
I am not ashamed to be a tourist
in the milky world[14]

As Cohen accepts his role as merely a "tourist" in the world he is able to escape the harshness of reality by remaining uninvolved. He can see his past as exactly that, a past. The experiences, good and bad, the bitterness brought on by his clear-eyed look at reality and the escape-route of drugs have taught him that he is now just beginning. He has achieved his rebirth. He is now, rather than obsessed with the slime of a stagnating, granite planet, being bombarded by molecules of life. Again, a poem written several years earlier describes his new directionless journey.

I am anointed with directions
Trees and ships
see me stagger
like a fish in a shock of underwater dynamite

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[13]Cohen, "When I hear you sing", Parasites, p.41.

[14]"O God as I called you before", ibid., p.44.

Blessed by the end of the world
I spin without wobbling
among the weathervanes
which hover like homeless helicopters
over the endless landing feast[15]

The conclusion of another poem, later recorded as a song, accents the poet's feeling of a new beginning and rebirth.

Teachers, are my lessons done,
or must I do another one?
They laughed and laughed
Child, you've just begun.[16]

At this point Cohen's work has completed a full cycle and he has returned to the state of innocence with which he began his questioning in Let Us Compare Mythologies. His whole journey through the cycle is summarized in the following poem:

I've seen some lonely history
The heart cannot explore
I've scratched some empty blackboards
They have no teachers for

I trailed my meagre demons
From Jerusalem to Rome
I had an invitation
But the host was not at home

There were contagious armies
That spread their uniform
To all parts of my body
Except where I was warm

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[15]Cohen, "I am anointed with directions", Parasites, p.55.

[16]"I met a woman long ago", ibid., p.57.

And so I wore a helmet
With a secret neon sign
That lit up all the boundaries
So I could toe the line

My boots got very tired
Like a sentry's never should
I was walking on a tightrope
That was buried in the mud

Standing at the drugstore
It was very hard to learn
Though my name was everywhere
I had to wait my turn

I'm standing here before you
I don't know what I bring
If you can hear the music
Why don't you help me sing[17]

The last stanza of this poem is especially important to an understanding of Cohen's priest-like role for a large number of readers. He claims not that he is creating the role, but that he is created by his audience and his writing.

> I've always wanted to be created just like the priest creates the prayer for the mass for the congregation. It's not the idea of imposing a prayer but that he creates the finest part of themselves. It's that job more than anything else that I'm interested in.[18]

Ultimately, he is not writing a philosophy but recounting his impressions of his journey through life. The journey itself has metamorphosized Cohen, not singular incidents along the way.

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[17]Cohen, "I've seen some lonely history", Parasites, p.59.

[18]Cohen, quoted by Sandra Djwa in The Ubyssey, Friday, February 3, 1967, p.8.

No disease or age makes the flesh unwind
but some strange unity of flesh and mind.
Your body's like those ships men must empty
of gold and oil to ride an unweaned sea,
boat of rib and skin, nothing that can bleed
or seas can suck or even death could need,
proving through the stark holds you bear and bring
that the voyage itself was everything.[19]

The change in Cohen's view of life is apparent in the few poems that followed Parasites of Heaven. "New Poems" in "Selected Poems": 1956-1968 demonstrate in part an overall gentleness of tone and a return to the sensuality of The Spice-Box of Earth. There is a brief mention of the lost generation in "She Sings So Nice".

She sings so nice
there's no desire in her voice
She sings alone
to tell us all
that we have not been found[20]

Although there is still a feeling of aimlessness in this particular poem the remaining works generally give an impression of security. The short plea in "Marita",

MARITA
PLEASE FIND ME
I AM ALMOST 30[21]

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[19]Cohen, "No disease or age makes the flesh unwind", Parasites, p.60.

[20]Cohen, Selected Poems: 1956-1968 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p.231. (Hereafter cited as Selected Poems).

[21]Ibid., p.239.

rings with a feeling of desperation, yet this feeling is completely overshadowed by the peace and security of poems such as "This Is for You". This poem appears to be one of Cohen's sincerest love poems. It does not celebrate the accomplishments of the poet nor does it seek an escape into an interior world, instead it is directed to the woman he loves.

> This is for you
> it is my full heart
> it is the book I meant to read you
> when we were old[22]

Here love, rather than providing escape, gives Cohen some direction in life.

> I long for the boundaries
> of my wandering
> and I move
> with the energy of your prayer
> and I move
> in the direction of your prayer
> for you are kneeling
> like a bouquet
> in a cave of bone
> behind my forehead
> and I move toward a love
> you have dreamed for me[23]

In the final poem of this book, "He Studies to Describe", Cohen portrays the plight of the poet-lover.

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[22]Cohen, Selected Poems, p.221.

[23]Ibid., p.222.

He studies to describe
the lover he cannot become
failing the widest dreams of the mind
& settling for visions of God[24]

His words are always far beyond his capabilities and he must settle for success in his previously established worlds of vision and fantasy. He concludes with a note of warning not unlike the caveat emptor he writes on the wall in the film, Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen.

He does not know how
to trade himself for your love
Do not trust him
unless you love him[25]

This warning is directed not so much to his lovers as to his readers. Through all of his poetry he has recorded personal experience. He has shown the reader how he, Leonard Cohen, responds to a world that seems to be in a constant state of chaos. But he cautions his readers not to accept his solutions unless they believe and trust him.

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[24]Cohen, Selected Poems, p. 239.

[25]Ibid.

Chapter V

Songwriting and Music

" My idea of poetry was as a singer."

The latest phase of Cohen's art has led him away from purely literary methods of expression into songwriting and singing. His recordings have become excellent examples of the contemporary poet utilizing modern electronic media to present his poetic sentiments to a wider audience than could be reached with written poetry. In Songs from a Room, Cohen's second recording, there is, however, a marked decline in the thematic depth of his poetry. He no longer appears to be concerned entirely with what he is saying but with how he is saying it. For example, the intensity of the poet's aloneness and separateness in poems such as "Twilight" in Let Us Compare Mythologies and "It Is Late Afternoon" in The Spice-Box of Earth has given way to the melodious but simple lament in "Bird on the Wire".

Like a bird on the wire
Like a drunk in a midnight choir
I have tried in my way to be free

....

Like a baby stillborn
Like a beast with his horn
I have torn everyone who reached out for me[1]

The reasons for this new direction in Cohen's writing are almost impossible to establish but two logical conclusions can be assumed. The first, and most cynical assumption, is that Cohen is sacrificing his art in order to pander to popular appeal. He has admitted himself that he wants to be created by his audience and "whatever sounds I project when I'm away I feel reach the marketplace."[2] Secondly, and certainly more complex, is the belief that we are living in an age of rapidly changing values and technologies and that literature as we know it is soon to disappear to be replaced by more primitive, yet paradoxically more sophisticated and more immediate, means of communication. That Cohen himself should become the ideal example of the destructiveness of modern technology upon the artist is extremely interesting, for this has been a recurring theme in his own works.

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[1]Cohen, Songs of Leonard Cohen, ed. Harvey Vinson (New York: Collier Books 1969), p.36. (Hereafter cited as Songs).

[2]Cohen, quoted by Michael Harris in "An Interview with Leonard Cohen, Duel, I,(Winter 1969), p.93.

Contemporary poetry reveals a renewed emphasis upon the spoken word. This trend in twentieth century writing is a move away from literature as an essentially visually oriented entity on the printed page toward, as Northrop Frye claims, "the direct verbal expression of kinetic emotion."[3] Poets are becoming performers; they must now present their art as immediate experience. Cohen, for one, has slowly developed from poet to reader to singer as his personal need to communicate his feelings to his audience has increased. This movement in his and other poets' works away from the previous strongly emphasized visual qualities and linear functions of literature may result in the destruction of the values of both the written and the spoken word as an art form. But it may also mean a return to a balance in the manipulation of the five bodily senses in man's creative expressions, a state in which, as Dylan Thomas said, "all my five and country senses see."

Coincidentally, Thomas is an interesting forerunner of the oral poetry renaissance. But Thomas is not a conscious herald of the "oral-electronic" age, for his poetry has its own roots in the past Welsh pre-literate oral tradition. Welsh bardic poetry with its emphasis upon meter and harmony or "cynghanhedd" (the emphasis upon alliteration, consonance and complicated rhyme patterns) forms a natural basis for his art. A consequent

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[3]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p.328.

result is the decline in emphasis on the visual qualities, though they still exist, and an increased expression of oral-aural values. A poet such as Dylan Thomas is an interesting study in his relationship to the past tribal, oral traditions and in his perhaps naive or unknowing anticipation of the impending rebirth of these traditions.

Many poets, more contemporary than Thomas, are consciously adopting oral techniques as a means of expression. Allen Ginsberg, for example, tours North America giving readings wherever people will listen; his words, coupled with a personal charisma, create a mystical atmosphere of personal involvement. Ginsberg's poems in this way assume greater meaning for a participating audience than for the noninvolved reader. Even more extreme are the poets cum singers or singers cum poets, who are using every possible electronic device to bombard the human sensorium with their "oral-electronic" poetry. These oral poets of the present "global tribe" are accompanied by music, sound, light, and colour, to effect a total saturation of sensation or artificially induced synesthesia.

As a well-established poet who has turned to music and recordings to express his feelings, Cohen plays an integral role in this current phase of contemporary poetry. Like Thomas, though in a more superficial sense, he is a link with a past oral tradition; like Ginsberg he exploits his personality in

order to reach his audience and in a rather moderate sense he has become one of the "oral-electronic" poets.

In terms of a link with the past, throughout his poetry Cohen has drawn heavily from his Jewish heritage in creating his escape worlds and in delivering his message to a contemporary audience. In Parasites of Heaven, for example, he stated explicitly, "claim me, blood, if you have a story/ to tell with my Jewish face."[4] This cultural continuation has manifested itself in many ways. Cohen speaks of his past as "an emptiness of history which I must seize/ and occupy, calm and full in this confine."[5] His poetry has been to a large extent inspired by a Jewish literary tradition that extends back to David and the early psalmists and by a Jewish-Canadian literary establishment that has rapidly mushroomed into a considerable and impressive body of writers. Like much of his poetry, some of Cohen's songs such as "The Story of Isaac" are directly related to themes from the Torah and the Bible, yet he always includes secular overtones that shift the emphasis from the religious-historical context to present day society. The story of Abraham and Isaac suddenly takes on a new meaning when Abraham is seen as modern society making schemes which will result in the death of its

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[4]Cohen, "Claim me, blood,...", Parasites, p.64.

[5]Ibid.

offspring, mankind.

> You who build the altars now
> To sacrifice these children
> You must not do it any more.
> A scheme is not a vision
> And you never have been tempted
> By a demon or a god.
> You who stand above them now
> Your hatchets blunt and bloody,
> You were not there before.[6]

Cohen's music, or his desire to sing his words, has an immense antecedence in Jewish history also stemming back to David, the semi-legendary king who "combined in his person the gift of the professional prophet with that of the born poet and musician."[7] Throughout their history the Jews have been noted for their songs and music. Their folk songs record much of their history and their religious ceremonies contain song as an integral part of their praise of God. Cohen in his youth would certainly have been exposed to the simple psalmody sung by a synagogue cantor and to response in which the cantor sings one line and the congregation replies with another.[8] In fact, when once asked how he thought of himself in regard to the role of ngin or singer

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[6]Cohen, Songs, p.51.

[7]Eric Werner, "The Jewish Contribution to Music", in The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion, ed. Louis Finkelstein (2 vols.; New York: Harper and Row, 1960), II, p.1289.

[8]Ibid., p.1298.

of the people, Cohen replied,

> Everybody has a sense that they are in their own capsule and the one that I have always been in, for want of a better word, is that of cantor--a priest of a catacomb religion that is underground, just beginning, and I am one of the many singers, one of the many, many priests, not by any means a high priest, but one of the creators of the liturgy that will create the church.[9]

Added to these influences is Cohen's natural lyric ability so apparent in many of the poems in The Spice-Box of Earth. Poems such as "I Long to Hold Some Lady", "As the Mist Leaves No Scar", and two works appropriately titled "Song" ("When with lust I am smitten" and "I almost went to bed") reveal a lyricism and internal harmony that seem closely related to ballads and folk-music. Cohen himself claims,

> ...I always had an invisible guitar
> in my head when I wrote Spice-Box.
> My idea of poetry was as a singer.[10]

In his first recording, Songs of Leonard Cohen, the songs are poetry and still retain much of the thematic depth and intensity of mood found in his earlier works. "Suzanne", "Stories of the Street", "Hey, that's No Way to Say Goodbye" and "Teachers" all demonstrate a continuation of Cohen's concern for using his

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[9]Cohen, quoted by Sandra Djwa in The Ubyssey, Friday, February 3, 1967, p.8.

[10]Cohen, quoted by Paul Grescoe in "Poet, Writer, Singer, Lover: Cohen", The Canadian Magazine, February 10, 1968, p.8.

poetry as a vehicle of personal statement. However, the second recording, Songs from a Room, with a few notable exceptions such as "The Old Revolution" and "Story of Isaac", shows a definite concern with sound and music rather than poetic sentiment. The title of this album would appear to indicate that its songs come from the depths of one of Cohen's interior world. But songs such as "A Bunch of Lonesome Heroes" are so lacking in theme and poetic statement that there is virtually no relationship between them and any of the poetry that has gone before. The first stanza of this particular song, for example, has virtually no meaning as either poetry or song.

> A bunch of lonesome and very quarrelsome heroes
> Were smoking out along the open road;
> The night was very dark and thick between them
> Each man beneath his ordinary load.
> "I'd like to tell my story,"
> Said one of them so young and bold;
> "I'd like to tell my story,
> Before I turn to gold."[11]

In another song, "Dress Rehearsal Rag", as yet unrecorded, Cohen appears to be attempting to emulate Bob Dylan but to no avail, for again the words contain little meaning and appear to be nothing more than a vehicle for carrying appropriate sound patterns.

> Got up some time in the afternoon
> And you didn't feel like much.
> Said to yourself, "Where are you, Golden Boy
> Where is your famous golden touch?

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[11]Cohen, Songs, p.39.

I thought you knew where all the elephants lie down
I thought you were the crown prince of all the wheels in
Ivory town."[12]

Fortunately some of Cohen's sung poems are effective. Marshall McLuhan claims, "song is the slowing down of speech in order to savour nuance"[13] and this is precisely the case with some of the poetry Cohen has put to music. "Suzanne" from the first recording is a beautiful and moving poem as a print oriented entity. When heard sung, however, the aural sense dominates and stimulates previously dormant feelings within the sensorium. In other words, the emotion excited by merely reading the poem is heightened upon hearing the words vocalized by the poet. The fact that the poet-singer is the actual composer of the song increases the feeling of personal emotion and the song itself becomes far more poignant. The effect thus created is not unlike that of the heart-rending ballads of the French chansonnier and the overall sound or tune is very similar. Further, in "Suzanne" there is an additional importance in the sound patterns of the song. The undulating rhythm increases the visual image of the "place near the river," for the sound imitates that of lapping water. With "Suzanne" and more particularly

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[12]Cohen, "Dress Rehearsal Rag", The Poetry of Rock, ed. Richard Goldstein (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1969), p.128.

[13]Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p.143.

"Master Song", "Stories of the Street", and "Teachers", the emphasis upon chant approaches the monotone, repetitive chant of the previously mentioned religious ceremonies. A sound pattern such as this is common in many recent compositions by other writers of the rapidly developing oral-electronic age. This is the obvious link with past oral traditions and a sign of rebirth of these traditions. The recurrent rhythm and regular pulsating meter of Cohen's songs is a particular feature of what Northrop Frye has described as "the organizing rhythm in epos."[14] This term is further described by Frye as "the literary genre in which the radical of presentation is the author or minstrel as oral reciter, with a listening audience in front of him."[15]

Should the rebirth and secularization of epos take place, the contemporary oral poets such as Cohen will play an important role in its development. But many of the new poet-singers lose contact with their audiences by demanding too much in terms of sensory response. The words become secondary to the total performance and there is a loss of art for the sake of commercial appeal. This seems to be what has happened to the thematic quality of Cohen's poetry on his latest recording but the reasons are not at all similar. Further, Cohen may also lose contact with a large portion of his earlier audience because of the monotony and repetitiveness of his songs. The principle that demands this repetitiveness is based on contrafact.

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[14]Frye, Anatomy, p.251.

[15]Ibid., p.365.

This technique can be traced back through the history of music, and, although "the use of the contrafact is probably as old as mankind, the first records of its being employed are found in the Psalms."[16] Consequently, another root in Jewish religious traditions is apparent. Basically, "contrafact is the use of a familiar melody for a new text".[17] The idea involved is to introduce new or important thoughts with a pre-established harmony in order to rapidly establish the listener's perception. Cohen reuses variations of many of his own tunes in this manner and also borrows freely from recognizable folk and country and western idioms. The historical precedent Cohen is perhaps unconsciously working from is the Jewish use of secular music with new lyrics containing religious significance or even for Martin Luther to take "'songs from the streets and to use them (with sacred texts) in the church. Why should the devil have all the fine tunes?'"[18]

In his personal life, particularly that presented as his public image, Cohen displays a personality that is in many ways similar to the exploited, exaggerated eccentricities of Byron, Poe, and Baudelaire. Frye describes this type of involvement

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[16]Werner, "Jewish Music", p.1290.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

that Cohen has between poet and persona as a development of the dichotomy between literature and verbal expression:

> The further we go in this direction, the more likely the author is to be, or to pretend to be, emotionally involved with his subject, so that what he exhorts us to embrace or avoid is in part a projection from his own emotional life.[19]

Frye further carries the progression of the split between written and oral expression to the point at which there may occur the disappearance of words altogether "...and we are back to a primitive language of screams and gestures and sighs."[20] This a very apt description of the supposedly avant-garde non-verbal poetry. Fortunately, Cohen was originally concerned with the human values of art rather than its dehumanization. From his earliest works he was primarily concerned with humanity and the inner sufferings of a sensitive man in conflict with the cruelties of life, whether real or imagined. And rather than continuously expounding upon the ills of society, he has sought means of escaping those ills and further he has displayed himself as an example of the oppressive effects of modern technology upon the private self of the artist and man.

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[19]Frye, Anatomy, p.328.

[20]Ibid.

He felt he lived in a world in which he was forced to conform to the restrictions of a dehumanizing overmechanization.

> ...I wore a helmet
> With a secret neon sign
> That lit up all the boundaries
> So I could toe the line.[21]

His only means of escape from the destructiveness of modern society would be to construct a fantasy world in which he could return to the innocence of a pastoral world.

> O, come with me my little one
> And we will find that farm
> And grow us grass and apples there
> To keep all the animals warm.[22]

The declining quality of Cohen's latest verse, however, seems to indicate a changing sense of values or a submission to the previously feared dehumanization of technology upon art and the artist. At this point Frye's progression of the written and oral dichotomy to the "primitive language of screams and gestures and sighs" assumes an added importance. This statement is, of course, applicable to many of the "oral-electronic" poets or "folk-rock" singers. Non-verbal verse is not, however, particularly unique to the poets and song-writers of today, for there are certainly many examples of nonsense verse

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[21]Cohen, "I've seen some lonely history", Parasites, p.59.

[22]Cohen, "Stories of the Street", Songs, p.45

being used in songs to translate various emotional states. Country and western and "cowboy" music seem to have almost their own non-verbal vocabulary and children's songs have always been composed of many passages of sounds.

But, with this in mind, what can be said about the concluding sounds of Cohen's songs "One of Us Cannot Be Wrong" from the first recording and "Tonight Will Be Fine" from the second recording? Do these sounds represent simply a common musical "filling" device, are they a return to a primitive language, or are they related in some way to Ginsberg's transplanted "oms" of Eastern religions? Perhaps Cohen and the more progressive "oral-electronic" poets are not regressing but progressing. The ultimate goal could here also have an unacknowledged precedent in Jewish religion: the wordless hymn. The chanting of single words of praise of the Divine Being such as Hallel led to the Christian "Hallelujah"[23] and Hasidism with its joyous approach to life brought increases importance to these wordless tributes.

> Among the Hasidim it was called Niggun, and many of these ecstatic, wordless tunes have come down

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[23]Werner, "Jewish Music", p.1299.

> To us. They were frequently composed by the Hasidic Saddikim (Saints) as a means to attain the highest transport, hitpashtut hagashmid, disembodiment.[24]

This is, of course, not unlike the "om" and perhaps their origins are the same in Eastern religions.

"Tonight Will Be Fine" appears at first to be little more than a loosely adapted "cowboy" song with a wordless refrain at the conclusion. But there is an increased sense of sexual excitement in the last verse:

> Sometimes I see her
> Undressing for me,
> She's the soft naked lady
> Love meant her to be
> And she's moving her body
> So brave and so free.
> If I've got to remember
> That's a fine memory.
> But I know from your eyes
> And I know from your smile
> That tonight will be fine, will be fine,
> Will be fine, will be fine for a while.[25]

This is followed, actually quite logically, with the wordless verse, for the sexual image developed would lead to Cohen's "state of grace" in which the sexual act completes the poet's concept of a secular-religious unity. Through this seemingly simple song, then, the poet has attained "the highest transport" or a complete sense of ecstasy. Consequently, what at first

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[24]Werner, "Jewish Music", p.1299.

[25]Cohen, "Tonight will be Fine", Songs, p.87.

appears to be a decline in the quality of Cohen's art, may ultimately be an attempt to translate earlier, more complex sentiments into far simpler statements suitable to "oral-electronic" media. Perhaps Cohen and the other "oral-electronic" poets have already transcended the restrictions of the poetic metaphor to the state in which their works have become "the direct verbal expression of kinetic emotion". Perhaps they have at the same time transcended the boundaries of comprehension leaving the listener with only "sounds from an empty room".

Conclusion

Cohen's poetry has completed a full cycle from innocence to experience and back to a state of apparent innocence. Throughout this cycle the creation of escape worlds has been his major preoccupation. His need to escape the violence of a society that seems bent on self-destruction is not unlike that of nearly every member of that society. Consequently, Cohen's importance lies in his relevance to the plight of modern man and in his ability to describe his impressions of the harshness of reality and how to escape that harshness, yet still function as a member of society.

In Let Us Compare Mythologies Cohen began his investigation of man's violence and began to search for ways to escape. Love with its attendant state of grace became part of his most important escape world. In the absence of love, passive acceptance of reality became another means of escape.

The Spice-Box of Earth was Cohen's deepest examination of love in its many forms. Many of the poems in this volume achieved a relevance to most readers that few poets can attain. Here Cohen not only praised his loved one and the escape provided by love but he also delved into the feelings of separateness and alienation that can only be overcome through physical or spiritual union with another person. There was, however, a growing feeling of ambivalence on Cohen's part toward love when it reached its complete fulfillment. When his world was complete he always seemed ready to start the search over again.

With Flowers for Hitler Cohen partially ignored the solace that love had been able to provide for him and began a thorough investigation of escape through passive acceptance. This investigation led Cohen into the deepest recesses of his being, a complete journey into the underground. His journey culminated in his novel Beautiful Losers.

The renewed and purified vision expected on the return from the journey resulted in merely a clear-eyed look at reality. Consequently, in Parasites of Heaven Cohen continued his escape through passive acceptance but he was then able to look more closely at the world he was attempting to escape from. The new poems in his Selected Poems: 1956-1968 were the return to his initial naïve questioning and completed the cycle of his works.

At this point in his career Cohen's writing is heading in a new direction, songwriting. The reason for this new direction is perhaps related to the ambivalence that arose when Cohen found completion in love. With his poetry finally forming a complete cycle and in many ways providing an escape in itself, perhaps Cohen now feels compelled to resume his search for escape but in a new direction. This new direction allows Cohen to reach a far larger audience than he could with written poetry alone. But to continue to reach this audience he must pander to its demands rather than to his own. No longer can he create escape worlds within his art. His confidence in his art has diminished as more people have paid attention to it. Consequent-

ly, his initial sensitivity must now become showmanship and the relevance of his work is created by the audience itself.

Perhaps with success there is a new type of escape for Cohen that can only be attained by continuing to "reach the marketplace". This type of escape, however, negates his past artistic integrity and thrusts him into the midst of the world he previously rejected.

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