

“The Past is Perfect”: Leonard Cohen’s Philosophy of Time

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation, “*The Past is Perfect*”: *Leonard Cohen’s Philosophy of Time*, analyzes the concept of time and aspects of temporality in Leonard Cohen’s poetry and prose, both published and unpublished. Through imagination and memory, Cohen continuously explores his past as a man, a member of a family, and a representative of a culture. The complex interconnection of individual and collective pasts constitutes the core of Cohen’s philosophy informed by his Jewish heritage, while its artistic expression is indebted to the literary past. The poet/novelist/songwriter was famously designated as “the father of melancholy”; it is his focus on the past that makes his works appear pessimistic. Cohen pays less attention to the other two temporal aspects, present and future, which are seen in a generally negative light until his most recent publication.

The study suggests that although Cohen’s attitude to the past has not changed radically from *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956) to *Book of Longing* (2006), his views have changed from bitterness prompted by time’s destructive force to acceptance of its work and the assertion of the power of poetry/art to withstand it; there is neither discontent with the present nor prediction of a catastrophic future. Time remains a metaphysical category and subject to mythologizing, temporal linearity often being disregarded. Although Cohen’s spiritual search has extended throughout his life, his essential outlook on time and the past is already expressed in the early books; his latest publications combine new pieces and selections from previous books of poetry and prose works, confirming the continuity of ideas and general consistency of his vision.

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INTRODUCTION

The phrase “Leonard Cohen’s philosophy of time” rightfully begs the question of whether he has one. All his roles considered (poet, novelist, singer, songwriter, and more), a professional philosopher he is not. He certainly does not systematically address fundamental aspects of being in scholarly tracts designed to reveal his rationally constructed opinions. Nevertheless, every person has an array of views on essential problems concerning his or her understanding of the world at large and of particular topics, such as faith, language, existence, ethics, mind, and time. Unlike other people, writers are privileged to have the ability of expressing these views on paper, in the form of fiction, drama or poetry, and occasionally to get credited for sustainable vision. Some authors give their philosophical standpoints a conscious expression and devote their works to a meticulous revelation of their perspectives; others disperse elements of their fundamental views and attitudes throughout their entire body of work.

Even if a writer provides no rationalized theory concerning a philosophical problem, the essential outlook, or *philosophy* in a broad sense of the word, can be reconstructed on the basis of the totality of his or her written texts which enhance and complement each other. While in his key works, the poetic manifestoes, a poet consciously reveals his views, in minor poems he does so less deliberately; since lyric poetry by definition expresses momentary emotions, a wide range of works provides the evidence for a more detailed, complex, and accurate picture, uncovering various shades of attitude. The same method allows one to trace the continuity and the dynamics of the author’s system of views. In other words, larger numbers of works which have no quality

of a manifesto add up to exposing emotions and views the poet did not intentionally formulate for the readers but experienced and recorded in passing. Casting a broad net therefore supplies more facts on Cohen's attitude to time than an analysis of a handful of his touchstone poems would do.

Time is a universal category of being; it has been intriguing thinkers and writers for centuries, from Heraclites, Aristotle, and Saint Augustine to Marcel Proust, Henri Bergson, and Martin Heidegger. Every artist with a penchant for self-reflectiveness has a personal idea of time, and Cohen is no exception. A reader of his poetry and prose receives the impression that time for him is a potent force, determining human actions and affections. Ira Nadel quotes the poet's essayistic rumination: "I have never loved a woman for herself alone, but because I was caught up in time with her, between train arrivals and train departures and other commitments" (*Various Positions* 28). In his works, Cohen touches upon all three aspects of time, the past, the present, and the future; the most attention, however, is given to the past. The author's poetry and prose are past-oriented; he focuses on coming to terms with himself and the outside world in the contexts provided by the past. Cohen's artistic output is known to be melancholic, despite his subtle humour and ubiquitous irony. Among the factors creating this impression of pensive sadness is his fascination with the past, which prompted the title of a recent book about him: *Yesterday's Tomorrow – Leonard Cohen* by Marc Hendrickx. One can claim that it is this detachment from the "here and now" and an intense gaze trained on the past that earned Cohen his famous designation as "the father of melancholy."

It is important to note that "past" does not equal "history." There are a number of reasons for drawing a line between the two notions: history gives shape to the past

through narrativization; it deals (at least, is supposed to deal) with facts. The past is a more general notion and involves personal perspectives. There is a further discrepancy between history and the past in literature; as formulated by Aristotle, it is the following:

the function of the poet is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e., what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity. The historian and the poet are not distinguished by their use of verse or prose; it would be possible to turn the works of Herodotus into verse, and it would be a history in verse just as much as in prose. The distinction is this: the one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that would happen. For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. (16)

Cohen conceptualizes the past and transforms it into literature.

History imposes a structure on facts in the form of chronology, while Cohen in his works, especially in *Beautiful Losers*, carefully orchestrates a seeming disorder, disjoins and compromises chronology, replacing it with a-chronological non-discrete mythic time, in accordance with his 1956 pronouncement: “I want to put mythic time into my poems, so they can be identified with every true fable ever sung, and still be concerned with our own time, and the poems hanging in our own skies” (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 46). The cultural inheritance of Jewish mysticism reveals itself in Cohen’s metaphysical predisposition, his prophetic stance, and his a-historical, mythic vision of time with the idea of the earth as “a province of Eternity” (*Beautiful Losers* 105). Whatever Cohen writes, regardless of the genre, his mythological thinking relies on material which is

“anecdotal, testimonial, and ritual,” non-chronological and a-historical by definition; he stays “outside the boundaries of history” (Adria 125) and their inexorable limitations.

Finally, history is always written from a given ideological position, something that Cohen tries to avoid in his works, attempting to adopt multiple points of view. This quality may place his novels into the category of *historiographic metafiction*, a type of self-referential literature that involves the reader in the process of looking for elusive (and illusive) “truth” through offering either a dubiously reliable narrator or “various and fragmentary points of view” (Hutcheon *The Canadian Postmodern* 65). Despite the “historiographic” part of the term, the author is more concerned with the emotional authenticity of reaction to the past than with pushing an ideological agenda. Hutcheon states: “Historiographic metafiction ... is ideological fiction ... To write either history or historical fiction is equally to raise the question of power and control; it is the story of the victors that usually gets told” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 72). By contrast, as if to challenge this assertion, Cohen’s most “historiographic” work is called *Beautiful Losers* and depicts the failure of various ideologies. In the poems, Cohen’s vision of events and personas is more subjective, protean, often ironic, and at times enigmatic. Unlike history, the past is declaratively subjective, individualistic, fragmented, composed of unstructured recollections and visions; it belongs to the mythically rather than chronologically arranged temporality, and is presented in the form of artistic images.

In the poem “Streetcars,” Cohen proclaims, “I carry a banner: / The Past Is Perfect.” The word “perfect” in this line is not a synonym for faultless and ideal. The past is “perfect” because it has happened and consequently has become complete, not subject to change. The poet’s play on words involves the grammatical term Past Perfect, the tense

indicating that an action happened before another action or prior to a specific date in the past. Grammatical Past Perfect, when used in a conditional clause, points to irreversible circumstances which affected a later event or a decision: if something *had happened*, the outcome would have been totally different, but in the present time nothing can be done about that. The word “perfect” has no qualitative connotation here. The irrevocable “perfect” past, being complete and finished, may provide a closure; more importantly, it becomes an object for continuous exploration; it can be appropriated, mythologized, interpreted, but not changed. The past is also “perfect” since certain things, such as a human body, are fragile in the face of time, and they remain beautiful only in the past, the memory and poetry preserving them.

For Cohen time is, most commonly, the *passing time*. During the 2009 concert tour, he amiably told the public that he had a piece of advice for them: no one over the age of fifteen should ever look at a magnifying mirror of the type usually found in hotel bathrooms. The joke, though met by the audience with hearty laughter, reveals a serious and important aspect of Cohen’s outlook: time does its ruinous work, and no human being will be spared. It is not by chance that his latest published work, *Book of Longing* (2006), contains numerous self-portraits, sketchy drawings documenting the work of time on his aging face; they are grotesque evidences, sparing no wrinkles, thinning hair, and sagging features. Cohen emphasizes that in one’s past everyone was a better version of the self, at least, physically. The idea is not new or exclusive. In Alexander Pushkin’s classical verse novel *Eugene Onegin*, the female protagonist Tatiana Larina says, meeting her first and only love after several years spent apart, “Onegin, at that time I was younger and, it seems, [a] better [person]” (my prose translation – *NV*); a present-day bawdy joke

paraphrases Tatiana's line as "I was younger and of better quality" (playing on phonetic similarity between Russian words for "it seems," *kazhetsia*, and "quality," *kachestvo*). In Cohen's works, the motif of youthful strength and beauty escaping one's body as time passes is ever-present: "I was handsome, I was strong / I knew the words of every song" ("Teachers"), he writes as a young man in 1967. About twenty years later, another song contains the lines: "My friends are gone and my hair is grey. / I ache in the places where I used to play" ("The Tower of Song"). From some of Cohen's remarks one can also see that he considers his early work superior to what was done later: "It's been downhill ever since. Those early poems are pretty good," he said in 1994 about his poetical production of the 1950s (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 47).

Passing time and the transience of life are one of Cohen's major motifs throughout his literary/artistic career. He repeatedly returns to the idea that the past of his family and the past of his ancestors and of his country never let him go; he can never liberate himself from them. Being obsessed with time in general and the past in particular, Cohen is different from many Canadian writers for whom the spatial dimension and landscape are the predominant concern. Mikhail Bakhtin's words about Goethe seem apt with regard to Cohen: "[he] saw everything [...] in time and in the power of time. [...] Everything – from an abstract idea to a piece of rock on the bank of a stream – bears the stamp of time, is saturated with time, and assumes its form and meaning in time" (Bakhtin "The Bildungsroman" 42). Cohen's works present various temporal perspectives and their intersections; although he "exorcises" the past, he is fascinated with it and never stops writing about it. It is important, therefore, to explore

what constitutes the notion of the past, both personal and communal, in his writings, and what are his means of expressing his attitude.

The writer's concept of the past and his philosophy of time have already drawn the attention of some scholars, though they have not been examined methodically so far. Marco Adria, focusing on the problem of temporality, asserts that one of the features intrinsic to the poet's creations, be it poetry, music, or novels, is "the motive of the suppression of time," which means "an attempt to undermine or subvert the temporal dimension" (125). Dennis Lee demonstrates that in *Beautiful Losers* time, specifically the past, belongs to the mythological sphere: a character is "obsessed ... [with] men's incarceration in historical time, their exile from eternity" (67). Douglas Barber in "Down With History" underlines that the struggle with time and liberation from history are central in *Beautiful Losers*.

Cohen's prose, *Beautiful Losers* in particular, has been studied more meticulously than his poetry. Most academic analyses limit themselves to either his poetry or his prose; his later books of poetry have received little attention. The important scholarly task of today is to explore all of Cohen's literary works together, as his favourite motifs and concepts travel freely from his poetry to novels to songs and back to poetry; the same themes re-appear throughout his writings, evolving, taking various forms, and being explored from different angles; in his own words, "everybody's work is all of one piece" (qtd. in Daurio 27). The books therefore are inter-dependent, complementing and enhancing one another. Cohen's works in different genres present various facets of one and the same creative persona and expose the same complex poetic world vision: Cohen, as Nadel writes, once professed "that an artist has only one or two songs or poems that he

constantly reinvents and that his earliest work contains all his later themes and variations” (*Various Positions* 154). In 1966 the writer made an important self-explanatory and self-reflective remark: “Each book represents for me a different kind of crisis. I never felt that I changed from one thing to another, but that things around me changed. I just responded in a different way. I never felt anything really move. I saw that the page looked different, sometimes it was prose, sometimes poetry” (qtd. in Devlin *Leonard Cohen* 47). From this perspective, a better understanding of the writer can be achieved if the analysis of his prose is coordinated with that of his poetry, facilitating a focus on one of the fundamental characteristics of Cohen’s works: his concept of time and especially the past.

As an artist, Cohen is firmly rooted in the past of literary practice; paradoxically, he stays a devoted traditionalist even when he delves into experimentation.¹ Although *Beautiful Losers* is often regarded as the first postmodern novel in Canadian literature, the postmodernity of his poems is reasonably doubted by the critics; Clint Burnham’s question “How Postmodern is Cohen’s Poetry?” is indicative of this line of thought (65). Cohen’s artistic tastes never followed the mainstream. In his student years, he operated, with a couple of friends, a gallery called Four Penny Art Gallery where they “exhibited the work of figurative painters, unusual in Montreal at the time, when the abstract expressionism of Riopelle and others was in vogue” (Nadel *Various Positions* 57). When counterculture poets raved about Allen Ginsberg and copied him, Cohen only partially participated in the trend and experimented with style on his own terms. While he names

¹ He says about his early years as a poet: “I was writing for William Butler Yeats. I wouldn’t say Shakespeare, because I never really enjoyed Shakespeare, but there were other poets that I was writing for that were dead” (qtd. in Hesthamar n. pag.).

Louis Dudek, Irving Layton and Abraham Klein as the mentors who taught him what poetry was, he did not follow their creative lead directly, always finding his own path. In an era of radical innovations, his conservatism stands out: for example, unlike most contemporary poets writing in English, Cohen remains a traditionalist in using rhyme; he is not afraid of it as a *passé* element of the poetic form and freely resorts to it in many of his works, which probably reflects his love for structure and spiritual discipline, as well as familiarity with classical poetry.² This distinctive trait of Cohen's poetry is connected to the fact that some of his poems started doubling as lyrics for his songs (or his songs doubling as poems); therefore, rhyme supplies them with a more articulate form and contributes to their memorability. At the same time, rhyme serves as a powerful link to a long literary tradition many consider outdated but Cohen actively follows; the most striking example is the libretto for an opera, *Night Magic* (1982), which he wrote in the distinctive and restrictive Renaissance form of the Spenserian stanza. As Nadel comments on this artistic enterprise, "Cohen felt he needed to locate himself in a literary tradition in order to give his work resonance" (*Various Positions* 235). Notably, the tradition he chose to lean upon originates in the distant past.

Cohen's poems are commonly viewed against the background of Walt Whitman, Charles Baudelaire, and the Romanticists; his poetry was more than once called "neo-Keatsy" and the poet himself was likened to Keats. The model author in Cohen's personal literary pantheon is an experimenter relying on ancient traditions: Federico García Lorca; as other influences on his writings Cohen lists Medieval Persian poetry

² "My friends tell me that we played incessantly with an English anthology of poetry. They would open it to a random page, read me a line and I had to complete the poem" (qtd. in Fevret n. pag.).

such as the works of Rumi and Attar. His first published novel, *The Favourite Game*, took the form of a typical *Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman*, following the long-established genre and the model of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As the author of *Beautiful Losers*, Cohen was compared by a reviewer to Joyce and labeled as "a James Joyce circumcised living in Montreal" (qtd. in Harris "An Interview" n. pag.). His interest for the art and symbolism of the past found a pictorial expression in the choice of the cover picture for both the song album *New Skin For the Old Ceremony* (1974) and the book of poetry *Death of A Lady's Man* (1978): an illustration from a sixteenth-century alchemical tract.

The compulsive attraction to the past could possibly arise from Cohen's, to use his famous words, "neurotic affiliations" and the vision of his native city; as he bitterly states in *The Favourite Game*, "in Montreal there is no present tense, there is only past claiming victories" (125). The Montreal of his youth, when his character and views were forming and his major literary themes were taking shape, was a city where intercultural tension was palpable. Francophone nationalism was on the rise, boiling under the seemingly tranquil surface, building up to the Quiet Revolution and the civil unrest of the 1960s, when the statue of Queen Victoria on Sherbrooke Street fell a symbolic victim to the conflict fuelled by the past of the two cultures. It is the need to come to terms with his native city, the province of Quebec, and Canada as a whole that drives Cohen's necessity to dig into their past. In *Beautiful Losers*, he attempts to unwind the cobweb of relations between the aboriginal people, Catholic emissaries, and francophone colonists along with anglophone settlers and their descendants, contemporary to the presumably Jewish protagonist. Since no historiography succeeds in a rational explanation of this complex

interaction and its ramifications, Cohen resorts to a mythological illumination of the Canadian past and places the characters within mythical time outside of conventional chronology.

As an English-speaking Jew in the francophone province Cohen, like his character I, finds himself between the two cultures and languages; in the poem “French and English,” he calculatedly insults both languages in order to preach humility and urges them, as metonymies for those who speak them, to “surrender to each other” and “be awakened by a virgin / into the sovereign state of common grace,” the virgin being Kateri Tekakwitha whose story embodies for Cohen the crux of Canadian history. His fascination with Tekakwitha constitutes one of the aspects of his interest in the past of Catholic Quebec. The writer, not being Catholic himself, easily relates to Quebec’s Church with its ambiguous historical role: “We who belong to this city have never left the Church. The Jews are in the Church as they are in the snow” (“Montreal”). As a Jewish Montrealer and Canadian, Cohen could not shake off the tensions created by the past; his poetic persona and the protagonists of his prose are associated with the past of both Montreal/Quebec and Canada. In *The Favourite Game*, Breavman declares: “Everybody is Canadian. The Jew’s disguise won’t work.”

Cohen’s own Jewishness, however, is something more significant than a “disguise”: his traditional Jewish education is another source of his attraction to the past. In the Judaic vision, the past is by definition better than the present because it stands closer to the definitive point in time when Moses received the Tablets from God and the people of Israel were granted the Law. Cohen was raised in the cultural context of Judaism and was well-read in religious texts. As a boy, he used to spend long hours with

his maternal grandfather Solomon Klonitzky-Kline, or Rabbi Kline, a prominent Talmudic commentator. They read a bilingual version of the Book of Isaiah together, and the grandfather would “explain it in a combination of English and Yiddish” (Benazon 52). Cohen frequented the synagogue with his family and, in addition to attending regular school, studied at the Hebrew School three times a week; he recalls being “taught how to read the Bible in Hebrew, [...] the Torah, the five books” (Benazon 51). He quotes “loyalty to the past” as one of the family values (Fevret n. pag.). As a result, the entrenched focus on the biblical past, the images of mighty kings, wise prophets, and great heroes, the story of the Temple of Jerusalem, along with the Jewish tales and legends from Eastern Europe contributed to the formation of his vision. The traditional concepts of Judaism, including the attitude to the past, informed Cohen’s own personal philosophy. The poet was shaped by the imagery of biblical writings and other religious sources, including Kabbalistic texts and Judaic liturgy.

Despite his famous foray into Buddhism, Cohen has never ceased being a practising Jew and revering his heritage. Communicating to some of his old-time Montreal friends, he prefers signing messages with his Hebrew name Eliezer³. The degree of Cohen’s consideration for his background and for the religious significance of his family name can be illustrated by an episode from the 1960s. When Cohen’s mother was going to visit him in his Hydra home, he had to arrange for his civil wife of the time Marianne Ihlen to move out temporarily. As a *Kohein*, a member of the clan whose lineage dates back to the High Priest in the Temple of Jerusalem, he had no right to marry a non-Jewish woman and a divorcée (not to mention living with her without being

³ A fact provided by Seymour Mayne in a private conversation.

properly married). In front of his mother, a Talmudist's daughter, the poet displayed respect for the code of behaviour expected from a good Jew. The importance ascribed by Jews to the name of Cohen is hard to overestimate. To provide one example, in Cracow's Jewish district of Kazimierz where the Nazis destroyed an ancient cemetery and paved the sidewalk with gravestones, a special warning was placed on the wall so that *Kohanim* would take the other side of the street and avoid the danger of accidentally stepping on a gravestone, their status forbidding them to come in contact with anything related to the dead. Judging by interviews and by what Cohen attributes to Breavman's family in *The Favourite Game*, his family conformed to the rituals and traditions without contemplating their deeper spiritual significance but remembered and revered the meaning of their name.⁴ Since childhood, Cohen was taught to remember his origin: "I had a very Messianic childhood ... I was told I was a descendant of Aaron, the High Priest ... I was expected to grow into manhood leading other men" (qtd. in Devlin *Leonard Cohen* 7). In his own way, he did measure up to the expectations of his family⁵: as a songwriter and singer, he claims to be continuing the tradition of King David and Isaiah; he has earned

⁴ "I strongly felt that my family was conscious of representing something important. For example, my name, Cohen, means "rabbi." I had the impression that my family took this literally, that they felt that in a way they were rabbis by heredity, that they were part of a cast of rabbis. They were conscious of their own destinies and of their responsibility to the community. They founded synagogues, hospitals and newspapers. I felt like I had received a heritage that concerned my own destiny in the world" (qtd. in Fevret n. pag.).

⁵ He tells in a 1967 interview with Sandra Djwa: "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" ("After the Wipe-Out" 8). In 1993, he says: "I wanted to be that figure who sang [in the synagogue, lifting up the Torah], 'This is a Tree of Life' [...] I tried to become that. That world seemed opened to me. And I was able to become that. In my modest way, I became that little figure to myself" (qtd. in Kurzweil 19).

various designations descriptive of a religious leader (such as “Prophet of the Heart”); journalists compare the international army of his fans to followers of a spiritual teaching.

Cohen employs a number of strategies of appropriating the past as the foundation for his self-identity: he creates a personal myth on the basis of a composite structure of several “pasts” he can identify with. For him, the past is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be reduced to history and tradition – at least, to one history or one tradition; “the past that happened somewhere else” (*The Favourite Game* 122) is as lived-through emotionally as his individual past. His works move “from history to his-story; from the past to the present; from the tradition to the trauma” (Dorman and Rawlins 370), and the challenge is to trace this movement. As a descendant of Jewish immigrants, Cohen has a double sense of belonging: although his connection to the past of his birthplace, Canada, is indubitable, his family history ties him to Eastern Europe from which his ancestors emigrated. While his understanding of Canadian history is intimate, the idea of the “old country” and what happened there is limited to common knowledge and even clichés. Cohen constructs his self-identity, as children and grandchildren of immigrants often do, on the basis of the mythologized past of his ancestors and the history of the country he was born into. Through his poetic imagination, he appropriates the past less known to him and mythologizes the history of his own country, Canada, in an attempt to achieve a balance: there is no single mythology for him, but a whole range of possible ones (as stressed in the title of his first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*).

Both paternal and maternal ancestors of Cohen were Litvaks, that is, Jews from Lithuania; while his paternal grandfather grew up in Canada, his grandfather Klonitzky-Kline was a first-generation immigrant who imported his culture to Canada and instilled

it in his grandson. Rabbi Kline belonged to the “learned” trend in the East European Jewish tradition, the *Misnagdim*. Nicknamed “the Prince of Grammarians” for his scholarly endeavours, he epitomized the Litvak intellectual tradition as opposed to the emotional Judaism of the *Hasidim*. While the *Hasidim* believed in the special powers of their rabbis, the *Misnagdim* preferred to learn from them, trusting knowledge more than mystical inspiration. Learning and interpreting the Talmud were the central occupation for Lithuanian religious scholars.

Cohen’s grandfather as a follower of the rabbinical leader Yitzchak Elchanan most likely was opposed to the orthodox *Musar* movement popular among the *Misnagdim* of Lithuania, but could hardly avoid its influence altogether. The ethics of *Musar*, rooted in the teaching of the legendary eighteenth-century rabbi Elijah of Vilna, or the *Vilna Gaon* (“the saint of Vilnius”), included deep contemplations about personal responsibility, individual predestination and the goal of existence. According to *Musar*’s principles, every man should reflect on the part of life he left behind and account to himself for everything he did. Those meditative recollections would often take the form of brooding songs, pensive reports on the story of one’s soul – a description strikingly similar to Cohen’s artistic output as a singer/songwriter. Unlike the communal rituals of the *Hasidim*, the religious practice of Lithuanian Jews was more focused on individual song/prayer. The obligation of a lonely human soul to self-reflect constantly and report its deeds to God through songs/prayers seems to be a part of the Litvak tradition passed on to Cohen.

At the same time, as a secular person born outside the “old country” of his ancestors and remote in time from the rigorous arguments and acute controversies

between the rival trends in East European Judaism, Cohen is no alien to Hasidism with its mystic world vision, emphasis on religious ecstasy brought on by music, and the belief in the special, almost magic role of a spiritual leader. His near-alter-ego Breavman in the semi-autobiographic *Favourite Game*, faithful to the Jewish roots, occasionally expresses joy by breaking “into little Hasidic dances around the tea table” (107); he believes in the “sacredness of songs” and at one point comes to thinking that he wishes to be “the gentle hero the folk come to love, the man who talks to animals, the Baal Shem Tov who carried children piggy-back” (196).

Although Cohen’s ancestors in “the old country” were not *Hasidim*, he was not alien to this branch of Jewish religion and culture. His contact with it became more direct in the late 1970s, when he came into communication with Hasidic rabbis and was “using a Hasidic prayer book which the Lubavitcher movement [...] print[ed] bilingually” (Benazon 53). Hasidism, an East-European Judaic religious movement founded in the eighteenth century by the charismatic spiritual leader Ba’al Shem Tov, had an all-encompassing influence on the Jews of the region now known as Poland and Lithuania; it shaped their society, from beliefs and spiritual practices to every aspect of their daily lives. Hasidism as a teaching and a way of living has always ascribed a special meaning to the past. According to its concept of *gilgul*, souls are pre-existing spiritual entities that undergo several transmigrations: they revive in human bodies and then move through time in accordance with what they deserve: as a punishment for reprehensible deeds, a soul may transmigrate into a non-human object or, as a reward for exceptionally noble qualities, it ascends to be reborn as a king or a *tzaddik*, “a righteous one.” Hence, it is desirable to look into the past of one’s soul in order to make corrections. Only chosen

sages possess the memory of *gilgul*, while ordinary people with turbulent lives may be left in a state of longing without this key knowledge, the past of one's soul being a perpetual concern. This Judaic concept is similar to the Buddhist idea of the chain of reincarnations, which Cohen later expressed in *Book of Longing*. Another aspect of Hasidic concentration on the past is the word-for-word interpretation of the Torah and building the whole way of living around it. Deep reverence for traditions and especially tales of the great *tzaddiks* contribute to Hasidic veneration of the past as well. For these reasons, continuously contemplating the past, interpreting the past, and consulting stories of the past are intrinsic to the Hasidic way of thinking. With his interest in this culture, Cohen has absorbed its outlook, his literary practice coming especially close to what the Hasidic concept enunciates, according to Eli Lederhandler:

It is not history as we think of it that is important to Hasidim, rather, it is memory, a collective enterprise that is highly selective, anecdotal, testimonial, and ritual. There is a tendency to mix up past and present in one spiritual reality [...]. Time is not 'then vs. now,' but a continuous present. The past is useful only insofar as it justifies the present; the present is not of value in itself or autonomous, but subject to the image of the past. (qtd. in "Hasidism and History" n. pag.)

In Jewish life and religious practice a special place belongs to the figure of the teacher, master, leader. Halkowski points to a particular pattern in the lives of famous *tzaddiks*: after a long quest for "true learning" from several teachers in various places, promulgating Hasidism on the way, the man takes residence in a town and becomes a

teacher providing his guidance to people. They come to their spiritual leader “to pray with him, and simply, to be with him” (Halkowski 159). This model of spiritual search, moving from teacher to teacher preaching and endowing people with “truth” can be seen in Cohen’s own life, his teachers varying from poets to a Buddhist sage (whose title “Roshi” means the same as “Rabbi”). The pattern is ingrained in his cultural heritage, and one can only speculate to what extent it was activated subconsciously and what was done with intent. In any case, Cohen’s relationship with his Zen mentor Roshi is reminiscent of a characteristic Hasidic story: “Aryeh Leib was once asked why he had worked so hard to visit his master, Dov Ber the Maggid of Mezhirech, and he said, ‘To watch him tie his boot laces’” (Halkowski 159).

Music plays a significant role in Jewish religion and way of living: it is thought to unite people and help them express their joy, their love for God, and their gratitude to him. Neither liturgy nor holiday celebrations go without music, especially singing. Many outstanding Hasidic leaders were famous for creating and performing music, such as the legendary eighteenth-century *tzaddik* Moshe Leib of Sasov who “composed many Hasidic *nigunim* (melodies) and dances” (Halkowski 170); in Hasidic legends, music is linked to miraculous occurrences. A cantor’s voice coming directly from the soul and particularly pleasing to the people was called a “moral” voice. In Yiddish, the same word *lid* designates a poem and a song, which calls to mind Cohen’s refusal to distinguish between his song and poems.

In Hasidic tradition, the ultimate prayer is the one that makes man mentally abandon his corporeality in order to elevate his spirit. In terms of the secular occupation of writing, this concept translates into deep concentration on work, to the point of

abstracting oneself from the normal functions of the human body. When Cohen was writing *Beautiful Losers* on the isle of Hydra, he felt an urge to restrict his body in favour of spirit by fasting and limiting his sleeping time to a dangerous minimum. The final stage of working on the draft involved countless hours of writing followed by abstention from food; as a result, when the novel was finished, Cohen collapsed with mental and physical exhaustion. Even though he took himself through the process with the help of narcotic substances, the technique of fasting worked as a tool for reaching the necessary spiritual state akin to that of a fervent prayer. Moreover, in the Hasidic context, the writer's attempt at self-isolation on an island for the sake of writing a novel with a distinct touch of mysticism, is oddly reminiscent of an episode from the biography of the celebrated Kabbalist, "the Sacred Lion" Ha-A-r-i, who "started his esoteric studies, leading a life of seclusion on an island on the Nile near Cairo for seven years" (Halkowski 173). All in all, the models and values of Cohen's heritage are largely definitive of both his life and art.

The importance of the notion of time and the past in particular in Cohen's creative activity prompted the focus of this thesis, which aims to analyze his attitude to the aspects of temporality expressed in his writings. Special attention will be paid to the following layers of the past: literary, familial, ancestral (Jewish), personal, and when applicable, the past of Montreal and Canada. The notion of memory as the instrument of connecting to the past, along with the writer's vision of the two other aspects of time, the present and the future, will also be studied.

The thesis is organized chronologically to trace the trajectory of Cohen's views on the aspects of temporality and attest to their sustainability through the analysis of the

body of his literary works. Cohen's creative persona is complex and multi-faceted: as the poet and novelist reinvented himself with the help of music, he found means of self-expression which are beyond traditional objects of literary studies; they involve songs, synthetic texts incorporating both textual and musical components, which will not be examined in this thesis.

Cohen's ten books of poetry are divided into three groups. First, there are his early books written in the 1950s – 1960s (*Let Us Compare Mythologies*, 1956; *The Spice-Box of Earth*, 1961; *Flowers For Hitler*, 1964; *Parasites of Heaven*, 1966; *Selected Poems: 1956-1968*, 1968). During the period from 1956 to 1966, Cohen's prose was written. It incorporates two published novels (*The Favourite Game*, 1963 and *Beautiful Losers*, 1966) and unpublished materials composed in late 1950s-early 1960s: several stories and the novel *A Ballet of Lepers*.

The second group of poetic publications comprises the works of the 1970s published after the beginning of Cohen's career as a singer/songwriter (*The Energy of Slaves*, 1972; *Death of A Lady's Man*, 1978) and the only volume of the 1980s, *Book of Mercy* (1984). The latter is a milestone in the history of the poet's publications because after it the temporal gaps separating new books turned from several years to decades. Finally, the third group includes later books: *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*, 1993 and *Book of Longing*, 2006.

CHAPTER I. THE GLORIOUS BEGINNING: POETRY 1956-1968

1. Looking Back in Search of the Self: *Let Us Compare Mythologies*

“The past is man’s moment of identity.”

José Ortega y Gasset

“To me, no man is himself, he is the sum of his past.”

William Faulkner

“No other Canadian poet known to me is doing anything like this, and I hope to see more of it -- from Mr. Cohen, that is.”

Northrop Frye

Cohen’s first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, appeared in 1956 when he was still an undergraduate at McGill, in a limited edition of four hundred copies. According to Cohen, a professor of literature (Louis Dudek) and the young poet himself came up with an idea to launch a series of poetry books and call it the McGill Poetry Series: “We got a few subscriptions together, enough to pay for the printing and we sold them round the campus” (qtd. in Devlin *Leonard Cohen* 47). This enterprise was a natural beginning to a career driven by the poet’s longing for self-expression. The thin volume containing forty-four poems was of Cohen’s own design, with seven drawings by his friend Freda Guttman, including a front-cover illustration representing a warped female figure attacked by birds. The back cover has the poet’s photograph on it; he stares the

viewer in the eye and “[i]n spite of the sober expression, [...] looks very young” (Simmons 51).

Unlike many first books of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* is not focused on love, nor is it the self-analysis of a young person’s coming of age. Rather, the focal point is the poet’s search for his cultural status within the framework of circumstances he was born into: an Anglophone in a French-speaking province; a Jew in a predominantly Christian country; a well-heeled “golden boy” from Westmount disconnected from Montreal’s underprivileged Jewish community of St. Urbain Street and the Main (St. Lawrence Boulevard). Cohen “compares mythologies,” such as classical Greek, Christian, Jewish, and oriental ones and creates his own as a result.

An essential part of any mythology is that it is usually left to us by an earlier culture, passed down from previous generations; myths, allegedly “truthful” stories about the distant past, serve to explain the existing order of things (Bascom 9). Another important aspect is that myths are considered sacred, and comparing mythologies, that is, exposing their strong and weak sides by judging them against each other, sounds like a daring and rebellious act. The title is tantalizing and intriguing, and its imperative form (*Let Us...*) provokes several interpretations. Is it an invitation, addressed to some imaginary interlocutor(s), to do the comparison, so that the winner could prove his advantage? Is the poet defying his readers? As a challenge, it is evocatively reminiscent of children’s obsession with comparing whatever treasures they cherish (a theme later developed in *The Favourite Game*). Or does the titular phrase suggest a tranquil academic tone and the authorial “we,” as in “now, let us do a comparative study of ...”? When repeated in the second poem of the book, “For Wilf And His House,” the enigmatic

statement does not become clearer: essentially, in this text Cohen declares that a mythology does not represent true stories, but rather that it is a lie, an instrument of either accusation or defense, as in both the vulgar Christian version of Jews' responsibility for the death of Jesus and its bitter inversion in "For Wilf And His House."

In this poem, there is a clear opposition between "when" ("when young," a moment in the past) and "now," as well as a dichotomy between "Christians" and "us." The poetic persona stresses his Jewish identity, sharing the mythical blame with his ethnic ancestors: the phrase "we pinned Jesus" at the beginning of the poem echoes in "my forefathers nailed him" in the final sentence of the text. The addressee of the poem, Wilf, was a YMCA leader at McGill at the time Cohen studied there; "His House," accordingly, stands both for the Young Men's Christian Association and their meeting place, the co-called Yellow Door café. The poetic argument could probably arise from a real-life dispute between Jewish and Christian students that occurred on campus. In the poem, Cohen brings the discussion to a different level, turning it inward rather than outward. The opening stanza provides the Christian "myth":

When young the 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.

The myth proves to be not plausible and therefore not durable. The poetic persona "kissed away [his] gentle teachers. / warned [his] younger brothers" and, having realized

his “heathen” innocence, comes up with a version of his own. The titular phrase of the book recurs as the poem’s climax, visually separating the last stanza from the rest of the poem:

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.

The two “myths” appear as one, though turned inside out like an ill-fitting glove: the images of a “lovely butterfly” pinned against the wood and of a bat nailed against a barn are interchangeable (as stressed by their formal parallelism in the text) because both are equally untruthful. It is another “mythology” instead of the truth that rises to fight the opponents. The truth is as obscure as myths and is easy to mythologize; it is mythologies that we operate with: stories of the distant past made up with a purpose but believed to be true and accountable for the way of the world.

Throughout the book, the poet brings up several mythologies and cultural strata without giving the status of truth to any of them. Cohen’s personal “mythology” is a combination of mythologies appropriated by his imagination. In his first book he establishes the mythological (antonymous to realistic) way of thinking as the only one feasible in the world he (re)creates in his works. This approach deletes boundaries

between the past and the present, bringing back fallen heroes, expired gods, and personal memories.

The volume opens with a reference to memory, the dedication “To the memory of my father Nathan B. Cohen.” The poet addresses his childhood loss (his father died when Cohen was only nine) and thus replicates the symbolic act he committed back then: to express his sorrow, the boy wrote a note, sewed it into a bow tie, and buried the whole thing deep in the snow in the backyard garden. As Nadel interprets the symbolism of it, “[t]he message ... preserved a link with his father which was re-enacted each time he composed” (*Various Positions* 5). The dedication of *Let Us Compare Mythologies* is a clear manifestation of this link; it is also a reference to childhood emotions which, though experienced long ago, stayed with the poet for life, informing his writings. Decades later, in a 1980 interview given to *People* magazine, Cohen recollects the note in the bow tie: “I’ve been digging in the garden for years, looking for it. Maybe that’s all I’m doing, looking for the note” (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 6). This symbolic object disappeared, dematerialized, becoming a part of his personal mythology and the embodiment of an elusive but unforgettable family past.

Another type of the past significant for Cohen comes from literary “mythologies.” After the dedication, the book has an epigraph, a quotation from William Faulkner’s *The Bear*. In the cited passage, two characters, an unnamed “he” and McCaslin, discuss a poem which was read but not completely understood by “him” before. McCaslin suggests re-reading, “but only one stanza this time,” and then recites by heart a couple of lines: “She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair.”

The dialogue that follows is brief: “ ‘He’s talking about a girl,’ he said. ‘ He had to talk about something,’ McCaslin said.”

Cohen’s attention to Faulkner’s novel seems fitting for a beginning author, since the American writer’s modernist experiments provide a good example to observe and study. Besides, *The Bear* is a coming-of-age story, and the protagonist is roughly the same age as Cohen was in 1956. The plot of the novel spans several time periods, deals with family history, and traces the effect of the past on an individual – the same things that Cohen explores in his first book. The lines Faulkner’s characters discuss are borrowed from John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” one of the poems forming the cycle *Great Odes of 1819*. Cohen’s choice of the episode for an epigraph manifests the themes of poetry and love and points to a certain poetic tradition (Cohen and Keats is a topic deserving thorough investigation); it also creates a *mise-en-abîme*, providing additional dimensions to the whole book: we read Cohen who reads Faulkner whose characters read Keats.

Faulkner’s characters are discussing poetry. The title of Cohen’s book, with its exhortative form, suggests a dialogue with the implied reader, which was one of Keats’s favourite techniques. His *Odes* are known for their innovative advancement of the classical genre. Along with using uncharacteristic metrical and strophic patterns, Keats modernized the ode by putting in it an additional voice other than that of the poetic persona. As a result, he opened the possibility of a dialogue between those two voices within the ode and destroyed its traditionally monological structure. Cohen, by choosing the episode in question, brings to the table both Keats and Faulkner. He draws attention to the idea of a dialogue, a discussion of poetry, and to the fact that poems should be re-

read and ruminated about in order to be understood; he leaves the readers the option of *not understanding* poetry from the first glance. It is re-reading, returning, revisiting that leads to understanding, and the readers are invited to go through the process together with the poet.

There is another reason why the lines from Keats cited by Faulkner are of great consequence in the epigraph to Cohen's book. In his ephrastic ode, the English Romanticist, while focusing on ornaments on an antique urn, turns the description of these designs into philosophical and aesthetic statements. Among them is the idea of a moment of time caught and preserved for eternity with the help of art. One of the designs on the urn portrays a man and his beloved, two figures separated by a little distance. Being a part of a static picture, they are unable to move and get near enough for a kiss; they will never approach each other, however close they are in the picture – their love is destined to remain unfulfilled. At the same time, the passion and beauty “cannot fade”: the lovers are immortalized as the decoration on the urn, and the moment will exist forever. The urn is made of stone, therefore it is time-proof; it preserves the story depicted on it as a “sylvan historian” (line 3). In effect, it represents eternity:

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold pastoral! (lines 41–45)

The epigraph and the Keatsean quotation introduce the themes of eternity and of love preserved in memory and art, along with the theme of unachievable love. It is important to note that love here does not necessarily mean an earthly, sexual feeling. Let us recall the dialogue of Faulkner's characters: “ ‘He's talking about a girl,’ he said. ‘He had to talk about something,’ McCaslin said.” “A girl” as such is not the focal point; she

is an almost randomly picked subject to write about in order to express evasive ideas and feelings that are hard to pin down. “A girl” may be a synecdoche for passing beauty preserved by art and for everything desired but inaccessible. She is a figure of speech rather than a woman, a representation of a concept so abstract, metaphysical, and inconceivable that it calls for something easier to grasp (such as “a girl”) to stand for it. “He had to talk about something” means that a poet of metaphysical inclinations, be it Keats or Cohen, needs a feasible subject to express what goes beyond the material. McCaslin’s remark could be understood in the opposite way, as deeming any poetic subject insignificant; a poet “had to talk about something” for the want of a better occupation. Cohen ends the quotation with this particular phrase and provides no further context. The stress is laid, then, on Keats’s lines and on the role of “a girl” as an instance of “something.” It is doubtful that the author of *Let Us Compare Mythologies* would be dismissive of writing as a trivial activity concerned with whatever accidentally comes to mind.

Finally, the reference to “Ode on a Grecian Urn” launches the theme of classical culture and mythology (Hellenism) developed throughout Cohen’s book, especially in such poems as “The Song of the Hellenist” and “Pagans.” The opening text of *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, “Elegy,” alludes to the traditional genre of classical Greek poetry. The poem presents an image of a dead god whose body is dissolved in “the warm salt ocean”: there are no traces of his flesh left, no “shreds of his soft body,” save for the “slow green water itself.” The image of streaming water in the context of the elegy evokes Heraclites with his famous adage bringing together water, passing time, and, consequentially, memory. Indeed, one’s inability to step twice into the same river is

similar to the useless attempts to look in “brittle mountain streams” or “the angry rivers” for the remains of a dead god; using the mourning genre of elegy to connect with a loss (of the father, as the dedication recalls) may be an equally futile endeavour.

The word *mythology* is commonly associated with the ancient body of classical myths. Images borrowed from them are familiar conventions in literature. The imagery of “The Elegy,” though, is not limited to Greek allusions. Cohen ingeniously combines and “compares mythologies”: pagan, Christian, and autobiographical. Although the deity in the poem ceased to exist in his human-like mortal form, he turned into another substance and acquired another quality through this transformation. The poem is cut into two symmetrical and quantitatively equal parts: a negative one, imperatively asserting the pointlessness of searching for what is gone (“Do not look for him”) and a positive one that leads to a perception of existence beyond flesh. Six lines of the first part are divided from the same number of verses in the second part by a sentence starting with a hope-giving “But.” In the last lines of the poem, no other creatures than fish – a major Christian symbol – “build their secret nests / In his fluttering winding-sheet.” The image of an empty shroud left when the body has been transformed (or, pushing the Christian allusion, transfigured) plays with the idea of resurrection. It is the act of remembering and writing an elegy that makes existence in another shape possible in the same way as Keats’s description of the designs on an urn gives a second, longer life to the disappeared object.

Through the use of quotations, literary conventions, and mythologies Cohen establishes the range of themes he explores in the book, such as the fragility of life and beauty and the power of art to preserve them; poetry and memory; mortality and

resurrection. He also demonstrates his appreciation of the literary past and a deep connection to it. This foundation helps Cohen to construct a poetic identity where his Jewish heritage and the cultural inheritance from world literature are interlaced, both colliding and collaborating.

The poem “The Song of the Hellenist” takes a plunge into history, both ancient and modern, revealing the past as the cause of the present state of things. There are at least two voices in the poem, that of an ironic persona watching his people reject their culture for the sake of a more “civilized” one (and gradually succumbing to temptation himself), and a collective voice of youths discarding even their original names as not fashionable enough. The ironic persona observes the people of Jerusalem who admire the neighbouring Greek cities of the Decapolis and worship Greek art and way of living; they change their Hebrew names, believing that Theodotus (“given to God” in Greek) sounds better than Nathaniel (“gift of God” in Hebrew), as any Greek name is by definition more desirable than a Hebrew one:

My name is Theodotus, do not call me Jonathan.

My name is Dositheus, do not call me Nathaniel.

Call us Alexander, Demetrius, Nikanor...

It does not matter for those ancient self-hating Jews that Jonathan is the name of a biblical hero, King Saul’s son and King David’s close friend at the time when David was a nobody: “Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself” (1 Samuel 18:1); it was Jonathan who foresaw David’s fate as a future king and assisted him in running away from Saul. They care even less for the name of Nathaniel, one of the apostles according to the Gospel of John. To feel progressive and assimilated into the

more powerful civilization, the young men living on the Jordan aspire to blend in with the population of the Decapolis; it is not an external evil force that ruins their Jewish identity but the young people's own wish to become a part of another culture.

This self-deprecating past instigates an even more humiliating present, where a Jew “among straight noses, natural and carved” of classical statues and gentile people has to be constantly self-ironic and turn cliché antisemitic accusations into jokes before someone cites them seriously:

I have said my clever things thought out before;

Jested on the Protocols, the cause of war,

Quoted ‘Bleistein with a Cigar.’

While the persona admits quoting “Bleistein with a Cigar,” the author himself cites it in “The Hellenist”: “the brilliant scholars with the dirty fingernails, / standing before the marble gods, / underneath the lot”; the lines refer to “The Jew is underneath the lot,” a quotation from T. S. Eliot's seemingly antisemitic 1920 poem “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar.” In Eliot, Bleistein is a non-existent Jewish last name reminiscent of the common Goldstein; it means “leadstone” (gold turning to lead is a reversal of the alchemical transformation of the philosopher's stone). The poem contains a hideous portrait of Bleistein the Jew and is seemingly antisemitic, as follows from this excerpt:

But this or such was Bleistein's way:

A saggy bending of the knees

And elbows, with the palms turned out,

Chicago Semite Viennese.

A lustreless protrusive eye
 Stares from the protozoic slime
 At a perspective of Canaletto.

Patricia Sloane has shown that this text more likely represents a satire on antisemitism than Eliot's own attitude toward Jews; however, common readings of this complex, allusion-laden poem are misinformed and straightforward, taking the persona's antisemitism for that of the author. There is no evidence that Cohen would read "Bleistein" any differently. On the contrary, the way he refers to it in "The Song of the Hellenist" indicates that a young Jewish-Canadian poet was hurt by the offensive lines coming from an idol of Anglophone poetry, a major representative of gentile culture (in the context of the poem, of "the Decapolis").

The persona of Cohen's "Hellenist," in order to be accepted by the mainstream "Herrenmenschen" (an intentional or accidental cross between *Herrenvolk*, "Master Race," and *Übermenschen*, "Super Beings"), has to make jokes about using a gentile child "for a Passover cake" (an old Christian prejudice responsible for numerous pogroms). He still remains Jewish; he sees the "tall clean" gentile women as alien, non-kosher, "somehow [...] unclean, / as scaleless fish." This identity, though, already belongs to his personal past, and the future of the speaker's race is grim: it is destined to assimilation, replacing its own names and history with those of "the Decapolis": "My children will boast of their ancestors at Marathon"; "O call me Alexander, Demetrius, Nicanor..." It may be the same protest against classical culture as someone else's dominating civilization that inspired the scene in *Beautiful Losers* where the characters paint a plaster model of the Akropolis (Cohen's spelling – *NV*) with red nail polish:

I could not take my eyes from the tiny brush which he wielded so happily. White to viscous red, one column after another, a transfusion of blood into the powdery ruined fingers of the little monument. [...] So they disappeared, the leprous metopes and triglyphs and other wiggly names signifying purity, pale temple and destroyed altar disappeared under the scarlet glaze. F. said: Here, my friend, you finish the caryatides. So, I took the brush, thus Cliton after Themistocles” (10-11).

In this scene, Cohen plays on the concepts of destruction and appropriation. Elements of Greek architecture “disappear” under the brush, as if erased, not painted; notably, the word “to finish” (in “you finish the caryatides”) means both to complete a job and to put an end to something. The image of painting the Akropolis red is likened to a blood transfusion, filling the old “body” of classical culture with the new blood that takes it over – as if it were an act of revenge on the part of the Hellenist from the corresponding poem.

The Hellenistic theme resurfaces again in the poem titled “Pagans.” Greek heroes/gods “swarming around” the lyric “I”’s shoulders participate in his summoning to life a mysterious person (possibly, Dante’s Beatrice); they “rustle [his] hair with marble hands” “in their approval” of the success of his conjuring. It is worthy of note that these Greek gods play a supporting role only, like cheerleaders who do not actually participate in an event. It is Jewish magic that works, “the Golem formula” “perverted” by the persona of the poem. The word used to describe the Hellenistic deities, “swarming,” evokes an image of some importunate insects interrupting the persona’s work. He has left

the Hellenistic stage behind; it is a different past that he wants to keep alive, that of a Dantean ideal and the art dedicated to it. Once brought to life, this personified poetic past stays with him, even though in a zombie-like state (“everywhere / the dangerous smell of old Italian flesh”; “you lean for hours / at the cemetery gates”). The apparition is angry at the poem’s persona (“I [...] watched you glare (O Dante) / where I had stood”) – maybe, because he is not Dante? The ghostly figure is only partially compatible with the contemporary world (“I know how our coarse grass / mutilates your feet”), and the present it faces is ugly (“the city traffic echoes all his [Dante’s] sonnets”); nevertheless, this conjured-up embodiment of the poetry of the past is trapped – the persona cannot let it go: “but I fear I will never find / the formula to let you die.”

This story of a magical revival is an integral part of the layer in the book’s representation of the past focused on poetry and the poet’s predecessors. As Sandra Djwa notes, “Cohen’s poetry reads like an index to the history of European romanticism” (*Leonard Cohen* 94), meaning numerous influences palpable in the poet’s first three books. In addition to Dante, the list of poets and writers directly named in *Let Us Compare Mythologies* includes troubadours and minstrels, de Bergerac, Kafka, Tennyson. While T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, John Keats, and Walt Whitman are not directly mentioned, they are still a noticeable and powerful presence. As follows from this inventory, Romantic poets by far outnumber modernists; even troubadours and minstrels as sources for Cohen’s inspiration are rather a product of the Romanticist Gothic revival than the original medieval figures. The Romantic poets’ interest in the past, in memories and recollections, in mythology, and in death fittingly aligns with Cohen’s own.

Cohen's indebtedness to the Romanticists can be seen throughout the book. Whitman's poetics in particular is traceable in Cohen's manner of giving titles to some poems so that the same phrase does a double duty first as the title and then as the poem's opening line ("When This American Woman"; "Had We Nothing to Prove"; "On Certain Incredible Nights") – a technique continuously used by Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*. It was also typical of Whitman to call a poem "A song" or "Song of..." (as in "Song of the Open Road" and "Song of the Exposition"); in Cohen's first book there are such titles as "The Song of the Hellenist," "Song of Patience," "Folk Song," and two poems named simply "Song."

A personification comparing Montreal snow to de Bergerac in "Just the worst time" ("No. It could not come like an aristocrat, / like de Bergerac, like a white waving plume") appears to be an allusion to Edmond Rostand's Neo-Romanticist play devoted to the legendary French poet and duelist, and not a mention of the historic de Bergerac himself. The protagonist in Rostand's play is the epitome of aristocratic honour and elegance of mind, as well as an archetypal Romantic figure of a poet who values verses above life. This allusion, brief as it is, discloses young Cohen's enchantment with the Romantic vision of poets like Rostand's de Bergerac as an ideal hard to measure up to in his contemporary reality where even the snow is "like cheap gauze" and not like "a white waving plume."⁶

⁶ Compare: "Truth, Independence, are my fluttering plumes" (Rostand Act I Scene 1.IV) and:

I say, that Henri Quatre
Had not, by any dangerous odds, been forced
To strip himself of his white helmet plume (Rostand Act IV Scene 4.IV).

In “Ballad,” the portrait of a young woman murdered in a Montreal boarding house is constructed entirely from references to literature, cinema, and painting: “My lady was a tall slender love, / like one of Tennyson’s girls”; “Everyone knew my lady / from the movies and art galleries, / Body from Goldwyn. Botticelli had drawn her long limbs. / Rossetti the full mouth. / Ingres had coloured her skin.” Apart from Goldwyn (a metonym for films produced by Metro Goldwyn Mayer company), all these references point to the past, describing the heroine of “Ballad” in terms of presumably incomparable perfection of old-time art. The artists mentioned in the poem belong to the Romanticist movement; they are tightly interconnected by themes and influences in their works, and, most of all, by their interest in the past. The Pre-Raphaelite Rossetti was an admirer of Botticelli’s paintings; Ingres considered himself a follower of Raphael and preserver of old masters’ traditions. Tennyson, the only poet in this honourable company, wrote extensively on Medieval and mythological topics. His ballad “The Lady of Shalott” (the same genre as Cohen’s poem in question) sparked the Pre-Raphaelite interest in Arthurian legends and was illustrated by Rossetti. Cohen’s heroine is “tall” like Tennyson’s Maud, “slender” like his Etti, and has a “face so fair” like the Lady of Shalott; besides, like several of Tennyson’s “girls,” she is dead. A young beauty, as if stepped out from the Romanticist art, is crushed by the ugly circumstances of modern life. The line “So many knew of my lady and her beauty,” on the one hand, is reminiscent of the glorification of a beautiful lady in medieval chivalric literature (or in the Romantic

poetry influenced by it); on the other, the same phrase serves as an indication of the mundane occupation of the dead girl – prostitution⁷.

The Romanticists were fascinated with the out-of-the ordinary, history, and death, as well as with folklore depicting those things. This fascination found its expression in their love for the genre of folk ballads, often dark and sad, and sometimes gory or sublime. Cohen uses several genre forms that connect his work with this trend in romantic poetry of the past. Two poems in the book are titled “Ballad;” in addition, the poem named “The Warrior Boats” has a ballad-like plot; “Prayer for Messiah,” though its title refers to a non-literary type of a text, also qualifies as a ballad due to its imagery typical of folk and romantic ballads (a raven, a dove, love, a grave), ballad stanzas (quatrains), and characteristic refrains; moreover, the lyric “I” directly refers to “my ballad,” thus giving it a clear genre designation.

“Warning” unfolds an imaginary situation where a disappearance of one person can get infectious and affect others who “will be gone” too; it explores the danger of negative information and its mysterious effects. Written in unrhymed quatrains, it retains ballad-like qualities: parallel constructions and repetitions; a wife, a daughter, a son and some neighbours as characters, and the general uncanny atmosphere, intensified as the poem progresses. “The Warrior Boats” has a ballad-like plot dealing with a quasi-historical fantasy of Portuguese “beautiful dead crewmen” who still roam the lanes of a port town; belonging to the past, they do not care about changes brought on by the present: “their maps have not changed.” This past meets the present in the dreams of a living girl who sees the dead sailors in her sleep; the past is alive as long as someone

⁷ In a later song lyric, “Everybody knows” (1988), this image is echoed in the lines: “There were so many people you just had to meet / without your clothes.”

dreams of it. The dead crew, the supernatural overtones, and the dying sea birds in the poem are images explicitly reminiscent of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

"Song," a five-stanza imitation of a folk ballad, tells the reader four stories of successful transformations performed by a female magician, or a witch, on her lovers. She marks the four cardinal points (south, west, east and north) with her creations leaving in different directions; it means that her fifth lover, who appears in the final stanza, does not fit into the common notion of earthly space. The lovers-changed-to-creatures belong to the female speaker's past, but her future lover is different, because he has no name, is already a being with fur, and can serve as the witch's protection from "blame." Given that while the first three lovers praise the speaker and the fourth lover names her "Death," he could be the Devil, a common motif in folk ballads rediscovered by Romanticism.

Romanticists valued the concept that art, especially poetry, is the product of the artist's suffering, whether emotional or physical. Cohen adheres to this idea; in *Let Us Compare Mythologies* he formulates it for himself and for his intended reader, using both the Romanticist and non-Romanticist writers' works as evidence. In an eerie poem titled "Jingle" there is an allusion to Kafka that establishes a firm connection between Cohen's own views on poetry and the traditional idea of pain as the source of art. In his 1956 review of Cohen's first book Northrop Frye states that the allusion "distract[s] the attention and muffle[s] the climax" (Frye 67). The scholar's quibble is arguable because the quotation forms the core of the poem and helps to express the cause-and-effect relationships between pain and art. The allusion to Kafka in "Jingle" serves to compare poetry to a sinister instrument of execution; "to be scratched with poetry / by Kafka's machine" essentially means to be killed by needles deeply engraving words on living

flesh, as in Franz Kafka's *In The Penal Colony (In Der Strafkolonie, 1914)*⁸. The monstrous mechanism from the Austrian writer's grotesque story turns into a metaphor of poetry wounding human flesh, literally scarring a poet's brain – an image that resonates with Cohen's persistent notion of art as being born from suffering and inflicting it (which in turn evokes Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* with its emphasis on suffering as “the secret of life” and creativity).

The Romanticist connections in *Let Us Compare Mythologies* endorse Baudelaire's famous aphoristic statement: “Le romantisme n'est précisément ni dans le choix des sujets, ni dans la vérité exacte, mais dans la manière de sentir” (125). Like the Romanticists, Cohen revisits the mythologies of the past with a special “manner of feeling.” For example, he evokes biblical images with erotic intensity worthy of Delacroix's passion praised by Baudelaire. Cohen's poem “The Letter” is addressed to a beautiful but violent character similar to the biblical Judith; the speaker of the poem is, accordingly, akin to Holofernes, an Assyrian general of Nebuchadnezzar's army invading ancient Israel. Unlike the biblical Holofernes, though, the speaker has no illusions and foresees his grim future:

one morning my head
hangs dripping with the other generals
from your house gate

⁸ “The long needle does the writing, and the short needle sprays a jet of water to wash away the blood and keep the inscription clear” (Kafka 200); “So it keeps on writing deeper and deeper for the whole twelve hours” (203); [After six hours] the man begins to understand the inscription [...] [he] deciphers it with his wounds” (204). This translation by Willa and Edwin Muir was first published in 1948 and is the edition Cohen probably read as an undergraduate at McGill.

Despite the consequences, he is content to make love to her while their physical proximity is possible:

tasting blood on your tongue
 does not shock me
 as my arms grow into your hair

Cohen borrows the eroticism of violence from the biblical past where both love and massacre had epic proportions, suitable for the poet's "Romanticist" emotional affectation. Historical imagery and eroticism go hand in hand in his poetry, as they did in Romanticist art. In addition to "The Letter," "When This American Woman" provides an example of this coordination. In this poem Cohen draws a picture of bold and powerful femininity by using a metaphor of "a forest-burning Mongol tribe" which seizes the city with such force that "brittle buildings of a hundred years / splash into the street."

There are poems in the book pointing to various traditional genres favoured by the poetry of the past: "Elegy" refers to the mournful classical genre; in "Folk Song," the title provides a genre reference. Another work, "The Flier," is a sonnet that nods to the classical form without blindly following it; even though not strictly Shakespearean or Spenserian, the sonnet form is easily recognizable. Some poems point to concrete predecessors, for example, "The Fly." Scobie calls it "a rather poor imitation of [John Donne's] 'The Flea'" (*Leonard Cohen* 24). The judgmental aspect of this opinion aside, it is hard to disagree that the poem is Donnian in its feeling (bold sexuality), logic (a passionate lover compared to an object that has an access to a woman's body the man has not), and imagery, as there is a conceit, an extended metaphor of a female body as a field:

In his black armour

the house-fly marched the field

Of Freia's sleeping thighs

The poem is written entirely in the past tense. It evokes an incident the speaker remembers from his love affair with a lady referred to as Freia. The name is that of a Scandinavian female deity whose realms are war, death, and love, and who welcomes fallen Norse warriors in her next-world field: hence the field metaphor in Cohen's poem and the "black armour" of the fly marching across the field. The poem addresses the personal past of the speaker, the literary past (Renaissance poetry), and the mythological past personified in the beautiful Norse goddess.

Along with the literary, classical, and biblical mythologies, the poet's individual epistemology includes his personal myths. Cohen looks back at his own past and draws moments and memories from it. A poem, according to a Russian poet and literary scholar Tamara Silman, reflects "a state of lyric concentration" (Silman 6; my translation – *NV*), that is, an emotion stopped in time. In the same vein, a Wordsworth scholar David Perkins notes that "A romantic poem especially exploits and depends on our sense of time passing" (qtd. in Baker 32) – as a result, "'freezing' the moment is an artistic necessity" (qtd. in Baker 145). Applied to Cohen, this suggests a moment of the past stopped, or captured, within a poetic text, which seems especially true in the context of young Cohen's semi-professional interest in photography and cinematic freeze-frames in *The Favourite Game*. The poet "freezes" a past moment within its time frame or preserves it as a fly in amber as eternal present. "On Certain Incredible Nights," a love poem celebrating a woman's body, has a temporal pattern unusual for *Let Us Compare Mythologies* but typical of a lyric poem as a genre where the present tense (including a

subjunctive clause) usually prevails because the emotion experienced by the speaker occurs here and now. The only vague reference to a non-present event is expressed in present perfect: the speaker refuses to take eyes from his beloved in order to see ethereal “girls of light,” “as other men have innocently done.”

In his first book, the poet revisits his personal past filled with emotional events; he also searches for cultural self-identity, which takes Cohen to the past of his Jewish ancestors. The personal and the historical are intertwined in “Rites,” a painfully private poem presenting a recollection of the death of Cohen’s father. Despite its autobiographic accuracy, the picture drawn in “Rites” contains elements of the biblical style, starting with the opening lines: “Bearing gifts of flowers and sweet nuts / the family came to watch the eldest son, / my father.” Ceremonial gift-bearing and ritualistic reverence for a family elder are reinforced with a simile comparing the dying man’s brothers to “frantic oracles.” Through the quasi-biblical tone, the private tragedy in the poem acquires the metaphorical dimensions of a death-versus-life parable. The scene belonging to the past, to the time when the future poet was a young boy, is written in such a manner that it seems to be even more distant in time, even archaic. On the level of grammar, the poet takes a double step back by employing the past perfect, or “the past before the past,” as grammarians call it: “and they only stopped in the morning, / after he had died / and I had begun to shout.” As a result, “Rites” (a title nodding to religion strategically placed next to the explicitly archaic “Prayer for Messiah”) reads as both personal and parabolic in the context of a book dedicated to personal and cultural memories and mythologies.

“Saint Catherine Street” combines sketches of Montreal street life, a caricature on stern-looking nuns who scare boys from their seats on a tramway, and a horrifying

picture of some underprivileged men drowned in the river. These scenes evoke ruminations on martyrdom in its elevated version described in the lives of saints, something that would never happen to contemporary people unlike the ugly and real suffering of the sick and poor whose bodies “once took bitter alms / but now float quietly away.” It remains unclear whether in the lines “was that forsaken man’s pain / enough to end all passion” the speaker means the Saviour as described by formal religion or an unnamed dead street person.

One of the two poems titled “Ballad” relates the story of the mysterious murder of a beautiful woman in a Montreal boarding house. The graphic events of this poem celebrate romantic beauty and are saturated with references to literature and fine arts, mostly of the Romanticist genus; nevertheless, they are firmly located in time in the recent past of the poet, namely in 1954. The date can be easily deduced from the lines “that was the Marian year, the year / the rabbis emerged from their desert exile”: it was in 1954 that the Marian Year, the year formally dedicated to the Virgin Mary, was declared by the Pope for the first time in history; the same year was marked by the return of the Four Dead Sea Scrolls, unique ancient biblical manuscripts, to Israel. As is characteristic for *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, Cohen adds the dimension of the past to examine the present state of things.

“Summer Night” presents an account of a remembered event, a late-night outing of a group of young people, including the lyric “I.” The first lines (“[t]he moon dangling wet like a half-plucked eye / was bright”) provide a perfect setting for a reminiscence. Under the moon a happy youthful orgy takes place. At the time, any kind of awareness of passing time and eternity as represented by nature seemed frightening to the young

people gathered to celebrate their youth and sexuality. “I will not be old,” says one of them to his girl companion and to “the slight old hills.” The remembered moment from the speaker’s juvenile past reads much like an episode from *The Favourite Game* where Cohen examines the process of *l’éducation sentimentale* of a person who gradually comes to terms with himself and the passage of time.

“Had We Nothing to Prove” is a memoir-like piece evoking a young couple in love on the background of “Victorian silhouettes” and “stone horizons” of the Montreal cityscape. The poem begins with a subjunctive construction (“had we nothing to prove but love, / we might have leaned all night at that window”); it relates something that did not happen and was unlikely to happen in the past, expressing a shade of regret. The speaker, though, does not concentrate on regrets; he focuses on detailed recollections, including emotions and physical sensations, as well as the sound and visual surroundings that provided the setting for the remembered love. The birds that used to mark the coming of daybreak after a night of love allude both to the old Provençal genre of alba (a song of lovers’ parting at dawn) and Chaucer’s “smale foweles maken melodye”:

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.

“Friends” is a prose poem that contains a recollection of a momentous experience the speaker had with his companions a long time ago on a river at night. The poet draws a distinctive line between “then,” when the friends were together and would argue “tenderly” over their fantasies, and “now” when they are away from each other. The

importance and value of the friends' shared memory is stressed by the mention of one of them who "sculptured [them] all in white marble," in other words, eternalized their mutual past in a durable form symbolic of elevated feelings and reminiscent of classical art (possibly alluding to the proverbial noble friendships of antiquity).

"Satan in Westmount" presents a portrait of a sophisticated but sinister figure described in the past tense. This character, with his "finely carved" hands and "cultivated" fingernails, acts as a siren, singing old songs and luring the listeners into developing love for poetry and arts. The danger radiated by the Dante-quoting, ages-old Satan is indicated with "a sprig of asphodel," the flower associated with the underworld and death. He wears his asphodel "discreetly" in his lapel: while he advertises Art, he puts out of sight the perils that come with it. The poem reads as a reminiscence of someone who fell into the trap of seductive songs and speeches. In the title, there is an intentional semantic discrepancy: "Satan" represents temptations and evil, sometimes masked with decadent beauty, while "Westmount," a privileged neighborhood in Montreal where the poet was born and raised, stands for the comfortably ordinary bourgeois life. The narrator of the poem calmly recalls both Satan's seductions and the delights of Art with their deadly price symbolized by the asphodel; nevertheless, he expresses no regrets.

The enduring power of art lies, among other things, in its ability to remember (that is, preserve) evanescent things. In the short and beautiful "Folk Song," there are two layers of remembering: a recollection of the persona ordering an elaborate glass vessel to keep his lover's tears in, and a later moment in the last line (the coda of the poem) when

the speaker regrets his lover's inability to cry. The poem provides a metaphor for the poet's method of preserving "tears" of the past in the "glass vessel" of his works.

In "Les Vieux," the title itself makes connection with the past, pointing to the older generation of Montrealers Cohen used to watch as a teenager, as he recalls in the interview with Michael Harris: "I used to hang out in Philips Square and talk to those old men [...]. I was only thirteen or fourteen at the time. I never understood why I was down there except that I felt at home, at home with those people" ("An Interview" n. pag.). The past in this poem is that of the lyric "I" who recalls the old men of Montreal and that of the old men themselves, represented by their "sad lies" and "letters of reference crumbling in wallets." Clinging to the bygone times, the old men are "unaware of St. Catherine Street" (busy and youthful) and even of "grey and green pigeons / inquiring between their boots."

"Story" deals with a blend of imagination and reality; it explores the fine line between the credible and the unreliable in an account of a past event. The poem is centered upon a girl telling the speaker about a child who "built her house / one Spring afternoon" but then was "run down by an automobile." The house filled with paper objects and balloons is not solid and neither is the girl's story about the child: "Of course I do not believe her." The girl's persistence, though, makes the story truthful in its own bizarre way:

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.

The last phrase relates both to the girl who “contemplates her own traffic death” and the speaker who makes a place for himself in the fragile, imagined story where time is measured with pretend chronometers; “I take my place / among the paper fish and make-believe clocks.” He acquires his “part in a legend” by “making a sort of courtly love to her.”

To stay connected to the past, a person relies upon memory, one of the key concepts in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. Memory holds more value than the event itself in the moment of occurrence. In “Song,” the mysterious knight of a speaker is a part of a “weeping girl’s” memory: she treasures “the remembered odour of [his] skin;” “O I am the general / of her history,” he says. He wants to be “fixed like a galaxy / and memorized / in her secret and fragile skies”; becoming an eternal reminiscence seems to be a goal more important than being loved in the present.

“Song of Patience” is a surrealistic ballad with vampire references. The heroine of the poem, a madwoman, has left or is going to leave the “I” for another lover; the romance has left both memories and physical traces on the speaker’s body: “but I remembered clearly then your insane letters / and how you wove initials in my throat.” Although he does not look forward to erasing these souvenirs of love, he realizes that the years to come will wipe them out: “then your letters too rot [...] / and my fingernails are long enough / to tear the stitches from my throat.” The *ubi sunt* motif in its classical form is noticeably present in the poem:

And I do not gladly wait the years
for the ocean to discover and rust your face
as it has all of history’s beacons

and have turned their gold and stone to water's onslaught

Meanwhile, the speaker expresses the importance of protecting the woman from the destructive work of time coming in the form of sand falling on her face and – the most important image that makes the reader suspect that she is dead – in the form of “the time-charred beetle” trying to settle on her “human arm.” Memory and love clash with the inevitable passage of time, both destructive and liberating.

The three aspects of time, the past, the present, and the future are ascribed unequal merit in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, the present being inferior to the past and the future holding the least value because it furthers obliteration of living beings and inanimate objects. The idea of the long gone glory of people and places is expressed in “Fragment of Baroque.” The poem restores, though only as a mental image, the splendour of Schloss Monbijou at the highest point in its history. This royal palace in Berlin, a residence of Prussian queens, was completely destroyed at the end of the Second World War. In Cohen's poem, there are two layers of the past: first, in the line “Schloss-Monbijou before the war” the palace is called back to existence; then, in the rest of the poem, a deeper past, the Baroque glory of the *Schloss*, filled with exquisite harpsichord music and beautiful objects (such as “white lace and silk fans”), is revived. Although the poet calls this gorgeous past “Quiet days for some” (the partakers of the royal pastime), he adds that those “quiet days” were a subject for the damaging work of time; they were “measured by the subtle ring of crystal / and nods of ivory heads,” where the word “measured” means both “marked” and “deemed finite,” sentenced to future destruction. The poem is another manifestation of the *ubi sunt* motif in Cohen's work.

The brighter past is recalled in “City Christ” where the character “has returned from countless wars, / blinded and hopelessly lame,” before becoming a pathetic inhabitant of “a Peel Street room” in contemporary Montreal. He is tolerated but not particularly welcome; he has to endure city noises while he “counts ages.” The active and presumably heroic past of the character radically differs from his passive and dependent present.

“The Sparrows” puts the past filled with games and bird-watching in contrast to the unexciting present devoid of birds other than “the dullest brown sparrows”: “Catching winter in their carved nostrils / the traitor birds have deserted us”; “Now the hollow nests / sit like tumors / or petrified blossoms / between the wire branches.” The poet resorts to the *then versus now* temporal model, where *then* indicates a moment in time that is better, livelier, and more colourful than a duller and emptier *now*.

In “Item,” the unrealized potential of a stillborn eagle (a creature that experiences no present and has no future) is weighed against prospective actions of “the heroes with their promised swords” that might cause pain, regret, and death. The “item,” the dead bird, has only the past; there are no consequences of its un-lived life for itself or anyone else: “the young bird bones [...] do not hurt or rattle.”

While the present is dull, the future is no brighter. In “Pioneers,” a hopeful vision of the future (from a past point of view) is juxtaposed to what happened in apocalyptic “reality”:

After one furious year
you thought you could come back
with singing armies,

to cheer the landscape
 and startle old streams.
But (my cursive – *NV*) someone’s bulldozers⁹
 had heaved the river aside
 and fish screamed against fossils
 in the drying sand.

The present in the poem is destructive, and so is the future (“nourish the tired saplings / with your marking axe, / and if your swing draws blood, / dig deeper, / and the autumn path / will not seem so intricate”).

In “Prayer for Sunset,” Cohen refers to Deuteronomistic history, comparing the sun “tangled in black brunches” to Absalom who, according to the Second Book of Samuel, was caught by his lavish hair in a tree. Watching a sunset that is terrifying like a battle, the lyric “I” wishes that the next sunset will be the defeat of the sun, as he hopes for a Joab “with three darts / and a great heap of stones” (the weapon Joab used to kill Absalom hanging in the oak, and the material he used for the murdered man’s secret burial in the forest). The speaker displays a distinctive reluctance to see the future, the inevitable cycle of sunsets and sunrises.

“To I.P.L.,” a poem dedicated to Irving Layton, relates a metaphorical tale of the older poet’s rebelliousness that stretched as far as confronting God; interestingly, in this text addressed to a fellow Jewish poet, Cohen observes the traditional taboo and does not use the word “God,” resorting instead to the third-person pronoun “He” (spelt with the

⁹ A murderous bulldozer is a recurrent image of an indifferent machine digging into the flesh of nature or a human being; it will take Martin’s young life of in *The Favourite Game*.

capital letter to make the reference unmistakable). The poem is written as a rendering of one of the addressee's own "zarathustrian tales." It recollects "I.P.L." telling a story about something that took place in the past relative to the time when the speaker of the poem heard it, therefore what "happens" in the text belongs to the past twice removed from the present of the poem.

"Just the Worst Time" takes the form of the lyric "I"'s reminiscence of an unusually long autumn and "unsolicited sun," followed by scarce first snow, unable to cover "trees and bare streets" but efficient in "preserving footprints in the mud" (an image rhyming with imprints of human bodies in the snow in *The Favourite Game*). These preserved footprints of the past are, in turn, eternalized by the poet's writing about them. The themes of "Poem" are the power of words and insecurities of a poet. It is centered upon a mythic figure the lyric "I" "heard of" – a mysterious man to whom women yield "if he only speaks their name." The poem expresses the lyric speaker's insecurity concerning his own gift for words, based on the fear that there is someone out there who surpasses him by far.

Although not all recollections are positive, even dark ones are treasured, as in "Halloween Poem." According to Michael Q. Abraham, it first appeared "in *CIV/n*, an influential Montreal literary magazine, bearing the longer title 'An Halloween Poem to Delight My Younger Friends' and, perhaps more importantly, included Dudek's question ['Où sont les jeunes'] as a parenthetical subtitle" (98). The poem recounts a creepy episode of children's cruelty, their burning birds and frogs alive on "heaps of rattling leaves" once in late October. The speaker recalls the grim incident he witnessed but did not partake in; it remains unclear if he was a child at the time. He remembers various details

he noticed, such as the particular kind of parcel twine used by the children to tie their victims; he even times the events:

It was a quarter-to-nine
 when one bright youngster
 incited the group to burn the frogs,
 which they did at nine.

Cohen uses a quotation from Harold Lamb's description of thirteenth-century Mongol warriors' atrocities in *Genghis Khan The Emperor Of All Men*¹⁰ and then cites Law Ten of "The Laws of Genghis Khan" concerning the Mongols' ritual cruelty to animals quoted in the same book (215). Through these quotations, the poet creates a parallel between ancient ritualistic practices and the murderous inclinations of children proving, like William Golding in his *Lord of the Flies*, that cruelty is intrinsic to human nature and freely manifests itself in people at their "uncivilized" stage, be it medieval military hordes or contemporary children. Abraham also finds "a correlation between the enthusiastic cruelty of these children and the genocidal cruelty of some modern adults. [...] Darker still, the [...] murderers are Dudek's *les jeunes*, following the example set for them in the crematoria of Europe" (98). To Cohen, the past is the source of the present; the former never dies within the latter.

"Twilight" is a perfect example of the past juxtaposed to the present. There are several temporal layers in the poem tracing the later years in the life of an unnamed male character. In the opening line the "twilight" days are mentioned, then the narration progresses to the next stage in the past when all good artistic things ("poems and songs")

¹⁰ "The effluvia of festering bodies was so great / that even the Mongol avoided such places and / named them Moubaligh, City of Woe" (*Let Us...* 48; same in Lamb 209).

become mere “associations” or memories. The character’s creative power fails him: “he would struggle through old words / unable to forget he once created new ones”; finally, in the second part of the poem, “he did become very old.” The character looks back to the past at every stage of his life related in the poem. First, he remembers “paintings in a minor key”; then, he is “unable to forget” what he used to be capable of, and at the end, he has “little to do / But sift years through his yellow fingers.” The lonely man, a former poet and lover, dedicates himself entirely to the job of recalling the past, regretting the roads not taken.

The poet’s concentration on the past turns him to appropriating the experiences he has not personally lived through. In search of identity he explores the historical past and even develops a special technique of penetrating it despite the time barrier. In “Lovers,” Cohen for the first time in his published poetry turns to the theme of the Holocaust, creating a dazzling picture of violence and suffering, a tragic story of a young couple whose love died in the flames of an oven. There is an odd twist to the poem: while the lovers are in the deadly furnace together, it is only the girl who is described as burning:

And in the furnace itself
 As the flames flamed higher,
 He tried to kiss her burning breasts
 As *she* (my cursive – *NV*) burned in the fire.

This emphasis on *her* and not her unnamed lover’s physical suffering is reinforced by a line in the previous stanza where a soldier comes “to knock out *her* (my cursive – *NV*) golden teeth.” In both stanzas, while horrible things are happening to the girl the male character either kisses or tries to kiss her. Moreover, the last quatrain of the poem

unequivocally states that the young man survived the burning oven, which defies any common logic. Cohen creates a complicated temporal structure here, a Chinese box of occurrence in the past (*later* versus *then*; “was” versus “had been”), where a rumination that takes place in the character’s life after the tragedy (“Later he often wondered”) leads to memories of earlier events (the tragedy itself) and the episode preceding it (“the first pogrom”).

The poem moves from deeper past to later past when the male character renders his love story. The main question still remains: who is this character and why did he miraculously survive burning in the furnace? On the one hand, artistic conventions may allow yet stranger things; on the other hand, one can hypothesize that the enigmatic lover of the perished girl is the poetic persona of the author who placed himself, in his imagination, in the middle of the Holocaust catastrophe. Although he stays by the side of the girl throughout the ordeal, he remains unharmed. Cohen, being born on the safe side of the Atlantic, never experienced the horror European Jews had gone through during the pogroms and the Second World War. As a young man in his twenties writing his early poems, Cohen must have tried to grasp mentally the gruesome past that did not happen to him but left six million of his people dead. This poem is an attempt to reinforce Cohen’s affiliation with Jewish history and share with the Holocaust victims, at least in his poetic imagination, the “past that happened somewhere else” (*The Favourite Game* 122). This character in the poem can be reasonably compared to an avatar in video games allowing its user to enter an otherwise physically inaccessible imaginary world.

Where the past and the myths surrounding it are difficult to comprehend and cope with, it is the privilege of poets to create their own mythologies, and Cohen uses it to the

full extent, going as far as “rewriting” the Gospel. “Ballad” retells the story of the Crucifixion adding a new character to it, a man who came up to “the hanging man” with a flower in hand and

dipped the flower
 into a wound
 and hoped that a garden
 would grow in his hand

The flower thrust into a wound causes the man’s death from “spear and knife” of the people who “knew something” and were scared by their own deed of crucifying “the hanging man”; they needed to “honour [his] voice / with a sacrifice.” In this “Gospel according to Cohen,” the Christ figure and the flower-bearer are buried together: before leaving, the people “hid two bodies / behind a stone.” At the end of the ballad, the idea of blood helping flowers grow lives long after the events, even though no flowers have ever appeared: “still / gardeners in vain / pour blood on that soil.” On a metaphoric level this stands for the futility of sacrifices and clearly indicates doubts in the effectiveness of Christianity as based on a sacrificial death; as “the hanging man” himself says,

‘Will petals find roots
 in the wounds where I bleed?’¹¹

‘Will minstrels learn songs
 from a tongue which is torn

¹¹ This phrase contains a veiled reference to the concept of Christianity as a branch growing from the root of Judaism – a metaphor created by Apostle Paul in Chapter 11 of his *Epistle to the Romans*, which the ignorant and antisemitic “young Christians” from Cohen’s poem often neglect or fail to recognize.

and sick be made whole
 through rents in my skin?’

Though for Christian believers the answer to this query is “yes,” in the context of the poem the questions appear rhetorical, presuming an obvious “no” for the reply. “Ballad” takes the reader back to “the young Christians” in “For Wilf and His House,” who are neither forgiving nor tender at heart: no flowers sprung from the wounds. The past coloured with spilled blood produces no beauty in the years to come.

“Saviours” has a striking plural in its title (not *the* Saviour). In the poem, the grand biblical figures of Moses, Job, and David, “dead heroes,” are resurrected, “raised on wood / above their discovered tombs” and discussed in the present tense, as if acting here and now. Their deeds are ahead of them (“the people say that in [David’s] mind / he and his warriors build a great temple”); they are “exhumed to die again.” The past and the future switch places. An unnamed figure, apparently Jesus Christ, is about to die through “[t]he Roman sport of crucifixion”; the future seems to be known to the people “singing before his death / O he will love us O he will approve of us.” The actual Bible-related archeological excavations and findings that occurred in the land of Israel, including the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1948, could have kindled the imagery of the poem, as the second stanza indicates:

In the valley men review
 their people’s documents
 and parties are dispatched to find
 this heap of stones and this cave and this pillar.

The notable image in the opening lines of the poem, “an old heavy shadow” that is “cast [...] across the lands and oceans” by the Romans’ zeal for executions, originates from T.S. Eliot’s refrain “Falls the shadow” in “The Hollow Men”.

The speaker in “Exodus” is an omniscient figure transcending time and space. In the first half of the poem, he talks about the experience of his people (apparently, the Jews in Egypt) who feel unwelcome “visitors” in a foreign land, using an intricate combination of the past, the present, and, occasionally, even the future tenses, to the general effect of someone speaking from inside the past. Later in the poem, a lapse in time occurs; what was yet to happen to the Jewish people leaving Egypt and to their Egyptian persecutors becomes the events of the past. The Plagues of Egypt and the sea waters that engulfed the Egyptian army pursuing the Jews are referred to as remembered by the speaker’s “distant enemy in his linen tomb,” the Pharaoh. The past of the ancient peoples has direct links to the present of the poet, that is, to the time when the poem was written. The words addressed by the speaker to the Pharaoh imply the military conflicts between Israel and Egypt that led eventually, in the year when Cohen’s book was published, to the Suez Crisis: “your seed and mine / gather in armies of blind giants / to war again at ancient useless borders.” The speaker disregards the temporal distance between the enslavement of Jews in the biblical past and the concentration camps of the Second World War, since both instances of the people’s sufferings are of epic proportions and both partake in the big picture of national history and identity:

how long in the wilderness of Sinai
 until the sons of bondsmen
 understand their fathers’ slavery;

who will read the chart of whip-scars on the backs;
 who will interpret the numbers
 burnt on our brothers' wrists.

The titular word "Exodus" alludes both to the name of the corresponding book of the Bible and to the long-awaited end of the literal and metaphoric slavery of Jews and the creation of their national state, *Medinat Yisrael*, after twenty centuries of dispersion.¹² At the end, the poem stresses the triumph of the speaker's "us" over the enemies whose "uncommitted bodies / dried the swamp toward Jerusalem." Thousands of years of Jewish history are compressed here into two events, slavery and exodus (or suffering and triumph), the biblical and a more recent past merging together.

"Beside the Shepherd" starts with a biblical allusion, a reference to the Book of Isaiah: "Beside the shepherd dreams the beast / Of laying down with lions."¹³ This part of the Scriptures holds a special personal meaning for the poet. As a boy, he studied The Book of Isaiah under the guidance of his grandfather Rabbi Klonitzky-Kline; Cohen recalls that "sometimes the whole evening would be spent on one or two lines" and that he "was interested in Isaiah for the poetry in English more than the poetry in Hebrew"; Isaiah "remained a lasting influence on Cohen's work and forms one of several core texts for his literary and theological development" (Nadel *Various Positions* 13). The second quatrain of the poem also alludes to Isaiah: "Glory, Glory, shouts the grass." This personification recalls Isaiah's phrase "All flesh is grass" (40:6). Another quotation

¹² The State of Israel was less than ten years old when *Let Us Compare Mythologies* was published.

¹³ "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 11:6).

from the Prophet reads, “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the Word of our God stands for ever” (Isaiah 40:8); it points to the transitory nature of human beings as opposed to God’s word. What happens in Cohen’s poem contradicts Isaiah, as a physical sensation momentarily experienced by flesh overcomes the Word:

Naked running through the mansion
 The boy with the news of the Messiah
 Forgets the message for his father,
 Enjoying the marble against his feet.

“The message” appears fragile, and the poem (as well as the book) ends with a man making an assumption that the Messiah has come: “Well finally it has happened, / Imagines someone in another house.” The coming of the Messiah, the teleological event of Judaism awaited by religious Jews, is represented in the poem as an accomplished fact of an unspecified recent past which occurs without being recognized; the message is either forgotten or imagined.

As the book’s title suggests, comparing mythologies is its central task. As a part of its fulfillment, the poem “Pagans” contains both a reference to the story of Golem, a legendary being made from clay by East European Cabbalists, and to the Greek myth of Galatea, a marble statue brought to life by its creator’s love. In accordance with the volume’s name, Cohen “compares” classical Greek and mystical Jewish mythologies by putting them side by side. The speaker makes a creature “from grass,” using both the help of “Greek heroes” and the “perverted [...] Golem formula.” Unlike his predecessors, he does not succeed: the creature neither loves him as Galatea, nor has the ability to die at the master’s command as the Golem. His magic fails: “I fear I will never find / the

formula to let you die.” The past once again triumphs over the present, as “each burnt paper” the speaker turns to in search for the proper spell refuses to reveal its secrets.

Let Us Compare Mythologies lays out Cohen’s vision, or philosophy, of the aspect of time and provides a model for his later books where he will explore his personal and familial past, contemplate the Jewish past of his ancestors from biblical times to the “Holocaust generation” (*Flowers for Hitler*), and revisit the literary past including ideas, styles, genres, and individual writers. The poet will work out the concepts of remembering and preserving memories and ruminate on the destructive force of time in *ubi sunt* laments. This train of thoughts will prove long-lasting and sustain, though with variations, throughout his writing career.

2. “[T]he king, David, begins his ageless psalm”:

Literary and Ancestral Past in *The Spice-Box of Earth*

“A man in love with the past.”

Wyndham Lewis about Ezra Pound.

Funded through the Canada Council, Cohen’s second collection of poems, *The Spice-Box of Earth*, appeared in 1961. The publication from McClelland and Stewart signaled the beginning of the writer’s professional career. Hailed by critics, it made Cohen, in the eyes of many poetry-lovers, “probably the best young poet in English Canada” of the time (Weaver qtd. in Simmons 99). For the next two decades the book became, according to Scobie, “the most popular single volume of Cohen’s poetry” (*Leonard Cohen* 25).

The Spice-Box of Earth, as well as Cohen’s first book, bears a dedication to family, in this case, to his paternal grandmother and his maternal grandfather, thus embracing both sides of the poet’s family tree and paying tribute to the only set of grandparents he knew (he never had a chance to meet his maternal grandmother; his paternal grandfather died when Cohen was only three). The poet calls his grandmother by her married name, Mrs. Lyon Cohen, and the grandfather by the formal title, Rabbi Solomon Klonitzky – in other words, he refers to their social status, that of housewife and that of religious scholar/teacher respectively. This dedication not only expresses reverence to his grandparents, it establishes a point of reference for the poems in the book: Cohen’s Jewish heritage. A Jewish grandmother usually is the keeper of the family, a person who

unites children and grandchildren around her, passes both household and national traditions on to them, while a grandfather normally has a patriarchal authority: for Cohen, Solomon Klonitzky was literally a *rebbe* – a person who influenced his religious education and Jewish cultural consciousness.

The title of the book, as Nadel explains, is “drawn from the spice-box that is blessed and then its contents inhaled after sundown on the Shabbath, [which] marks the boundary between the sacred and the profane. The spice is a fragrant reminder of the link between the religious and the everyday, the holy and the unholy” (*Various Positions* 99). The traditional spice-box is used for the ritual of *havdalah* (“separation”) to indicate the end of Shabbat and the beginning of the next, ordinary weekday. Sniffing the spices helps a person return from a special spiritual Shabbat state to the mundane human condition, but also to remember the holiday and preserve the memory of holy joy. The mix of spices may vary from household to household, as long as it is aromatic, with a long-lasting smell (such as that of cloves). A spice-box can be of plain or intricate design, made from a valuable or a simple material; it is often a family heirloom, opened every Shabbat by one generation after another.

There is another Jewish ritual box that contains pleasantly smelling matter, the etrog box, ceremonially used for the holiday of Sukkot. The *etrog* (a kind of a citron) and the *lulav* (a combination of palm, laurel, and willow-tree branches) are placed together during the feast; then the fruit is stored in a special etrog box, conserving its fragrance till the next Sukkot. Although the religious symbolism of the two boxes is different, they have something in common; they are physical containers, which preserve something of immaterial significance, that is, an aromatic essence with spiritual meaning. Cohen’s

book is functionally similar to the boxes: it preserves religious and amorous feelings, love in its various facets, and the poet's self-identity as the inheritor of his ancestors' spirituality.

Rabbi Lawrence Troster dwells upon the title of Cohen's book of poetry, interpreting it as an image beyond a particular ritual object – rather, as a metaphor for memory:

[T]he image of the spice-box of earth reminded me not only of Havdalah but also the fragrances of the natural world: grass, trees and flowers. Often, such fragrances evoke memories of when we first smelled those scents. For me, the smell of the trees on a warm summer night brings back very specific memories of teenage experiences many years ago. [...]

It has been shown scientifically that our sense of smell is a powerful memory trigger and certain scents evoke very clearly scenes from our early life. The parts of our brain that process smells are contained within the sections of our brain that are the sources of our emotions and where emotional memories are stored. So scents, emotions and memories are entwined. (Troster n. pag.)

Cohen's "spice-box" does not emanate a pungent smell of cloves: it contains earth. This peculiarity was underscored by the design of the later UK edition (Jonathan Cape, London, 1973): the simple ivory-white cover featured an overturned box, not an ornate one but a simple plywood container with black earth spilling out of it. This visual image,

as well as the words in the book's title, calls to mind the earth that gives life by nourishing flowers, trees, and greens, and also the native soil and the symbolic earth brought from the old country by immigrant forefathers. Another "earth" the cover reflects is the biblical dust, the destiny of all human flesh (and certainly a reference to Eliot's "fear in the handful of dust"); by close association, it is the ashes of the Holocaust, too.

Different critics have singled out various themes in *The Spice-Box of Earth*. David Bromige, one of the earliest commentators on the book, denotes it as "some fifty poems on various aspects of sexual love" (Gnarowski 16). In Michael Ondaatje's opinion, "Cohen dropped his wide-ranging view of the world and turned to two specific themes or subjects: himself as an artist, and his love-life" (15). Scobie points to "three main themes – the role of the poet; love; the inheritance of Jewish tradition" (*Leonard Cohen* 25). Given that the book starts and ends with unequivocal references to family history (the dedication and the final text, "Lines From My Grandfather's Journal"), it would be safe to claim that the topics of the poet's personal and family past, his roots and his Jewish identity are among the prominent themes in the volume.

Scobie examines in great detail the topics of poetry and love in *The Spice-Box of Earth*. He also touches upon their further expansion in Cohen's novels, showing how the lyric "I" of the second book of poetry moves to become Breavman in *The Favourite Game* and how the specific themes of sainthood and sex in the poems adumbrate *Beautiful Losers*. He pays less attention to what he calls the theme of "the inheritance of Jewish tradition," concentrating mainly on "Lines From My Grandfather's Journal" and the tension between the persona and the tradition (which is not clearly defined). The

omnipresent references to the cultural and familial bequest in its various aspects remain out of the focus, as well as Cohen's intense fascination with the past.

The first and the second of Cohen's books differ in the use of grammatical tenses: while in *Let Us Compare Mythologies* the poet tends to employ past tenses often, in *The Spice-Box of Earth* he prefers to write in the present and even the future to communicate his a-glance-over-the-shoulder mind-set. He said in one of his interviews: "I am not a very nostalgic person and I don't really look at the past. So I neither have regrets nor occasions for self-congratulation" (*I'm Your Man* DVD). There is indeed little deliberation in his analysis of things bygone; the past is simply always there as a reference point or as the origin of a problem, a memory of a feeling, and the cause of an attitude.

In relation to the past, the poems in *The Spice-Box of Earth* fall into several interconnected categories. First, there are poems referring to the literary past and poetic traditions providing the context the author associates himself with. Second, several poems deal with the lyric "I"'s personal past, specifically, that of his love life. The third group of poems includes reflections on the Jewish past and Jewish self-identity. An adjacent category concerns the biblical past and is characterized by extensive biblical allusions. Finally, there are poems where the philosophical *ubi sunt* motif is prominently present.

These groups of poems can be only roughly distinguished because they overlap one another through common motifs. For example, starting with the first poem in the book, "A Kite is a Victim," the motif of a prayer makes a powerful appearance. Scobie rightfully interprets "A Kite is a Victim" as a piece about the role of a poet. The poem is,

among other things, about freedom on a string controlled by someone and about the qualities necessary to write poetry as being granted rather than produced from within; one must pray for it: “then you pray the whole cold night before, / under the travelling cordless moon, / to make you worthy and lyric and pure.” The second poem, “After the Sabbath Prayers,” picks up the motif of prayer and places it in the context of Jewish imagery. The kite is replaced by a butterfly, also fragile and vulnerable in its flight; in this poem it is not any abstract fluttering insect but the Baal Shem’s butterfly from an old Hasidic tale about one’s conscience and free choices. Through the title, a non-specific night prayer gets contextualized as “Sabbath prayers” of the Jewish tradition.

In “Credo,” the motif of prayer is presented in the title referring to the Christian prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, while the poem itself takes an unexpected turn, hinting at the Jewish past during the Egyptian enslavement, and, possibly, the Holocaust: “The smell that burning cities give / was in the air.” At the same time, the poem focuses on a personal memory of an erotic encounter of the lyric “I” and his lover. The motif of a prayer resurfaces in “Absurd Prayer” where the persona expresses disdain for God and the idea of resurrection of the dead; he prefers to “keep [his] tomb / though the Messiah come,” not to move on to the afterlife from the known past of death, as he foresees a “Doom” for the souls that will be still worse. Close to the end, in “Prayer for My Wild Grandfather,” the lyric “I” addresses God while mourning an ancestor’s inability to return God’s love and the consequences of that for the next generations, including the “wild grandfather”; beside an obvious family reference, the poem alludes to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, indirectly dwelling upon Jewish sufferings, collective and individual, throughout history. The motif of a prayer, pious or blasphemous, is one of many motifs

that unite various groups of poems and bring together the topics of the poetic, personal, and familial past, as well as the past of modern and biblical Jewish history.

References to the literary past saturate *The Spice-Box of Earth*. As in his first book, Cohen continues using traditional and even archaic forms, particularly ballads.¹⁴ A short poem “Go By Brooks” is composed in quatrains, with the second and fourth lines rhymed:

Go by brooks, love,
Where fish stare,
Go by brooks,
I will pass there.

With its love-related subject matter, a distinctive rhythm, repetitions, parallelisms, and animalistic imagery, the poem stands out as a reincarnation of the original ballad, the medieval *chanson balladée*, contrasting with the more modern blank and free verses so popular in the 1950s-1960s. Another ballad-like poem, “My Lady Can Sleep,” written in a similar manner, has imagery alluding not to French but to Celtic ballads, with their fairies and hunters, and hinting at mysterious ritual offerings:

My lady can sleep
Upon a handkerchief
Or if it be the Fall
Upon a fallen leaf.

I have seen the hunters

¹⁴ In this book Cohen “relies on the strict ballad form,” as Ondaatje observes (19).

Kneel before her hem –
 Even in her sleep
 She turns away from them.

The iambic quatrains of “I Long to Hold Some Lady” have perceptible features of a troubadour ballad; the poem speaks about a perfect but “distant” and therefore inaccessible lady whom the persona of the poem compares to a beautiful inanimate object of universal admiration:

As though she were a masterpiece
 In some castled town,
 That pilgrims come to visit
 And priests to copy down.

The mention of a “castled town,” pilgrims and priests supports and furthers the allusion created by poem’s form and the image of the unreachable lady. In an accurate reproduction of the medieval courtly love culture, the persona of Cohen’s ballad “long[s] to hold some lady,” a “warm and sweet” body of flesh and blood, while it is impossible for him to “sleep too close beside” the lady of his dreams; he can adore her only from afar.

“The Unicorn Tapestries,” an ekphrasis based on the iconography of the illustrious fifteenth-century series of tapestries *La Dame à la licorne*, is linked to the courtly ballad thematically: the cruelty of love, and several lines from the first stanza are repeated at the end of the poem – a typical ballad device. The eight-line “The Morning Song” alludes to the courtly genre of *alba* – a morning parting song of lovers. Although the lovers in Cohen’s “Morning Song” do not separate and the poem does not follow the

compositional structure of *alba*, the title and the lines “This she dreamed on a morning / Of a night she slept beside me” (repeated, with a slight modification, in the next quatrain) point to the genre. At the same time, the quatrains, repetitions, and the abcb rhyming scheme reflect the ballad form.

The genre of the medieval ballad is evident in a poem poignantly modern in form, “I Have Not Lingered in European Monasteries”:

I have not lingered in European monasteries
and discovered among the tall grasses tombs of knights
who fell as beautifully as their ballads tell;

In the adjacent poem, “It Swings, Jocko,” the allusions to the “fifteenth-century prayers” and courtly love of the ballads are no less explicit:

love with no climax,
constant love,
and passion without flesh.

Although the parabolic poem “The Girl Toy” is not a ballad in the formal sense, it meets the specifications of a ballad due to its narrativity and a distinct plot. Here Cohen tells a legend reminiscent of oriental tales. The poet skillfully imitates a legend of the kind usually found in ballads; he recreates the pattern of a typical eastern story of an ancient king whose affluence brings him both a most unusual lover (a mechanical girl made of gold and precious jewels) and his subsequent decline. Cohen stresses the genre of the poem by using the word “ballad” in the last line: “she’d hum or sing a ballad of their wedding feast.”

“As the Mist Leaves No Scar,” the poem later used as an epigraph to *The Favourite Game*, is made of three quatrains, rhymed as abab (one of the usual ballad rhyming schemes) and contains three parallel comparisons between human actions and natural phenomena, which is characteristic of folkloric ballads. One of the two poems titled “Song” also consists of five iambic (though irregular) quatrains with exact rhymes following the abab pattern; the tone of the poem has an archaic air to it, due to the vocabulary and phrasing used by Cohen (as in the line “Alas I find no rest”). The poem speaks of the fleshly love the persona longs for, and the “sainthood” of lust described in the “holy tomes” in which he seeks consolation – both a continuation of the ballad tradition and an inversion of it.

The enigmatic “Angels,” too, retains a ballad-like structure. While the rhymes are mostly oblique, the poem is written in quatrains and contains repetitions and parallelisms:

Garnets are brighter than angels,
 He sang as he made his poems.
 Garnets are brighter than angels,
 He sang as he crushed his loins.

“Angels” tells a story (however puzzling), in accordance with the narrative nature of the ballad: someone is held in luxurious, protective captivity; he “makes” poems, suffers, and dies. The image of an artistic individual, specifically, a poet who dies under dramatic circumstances, along with the figures of his mysterious and mystical antagonists, complies with the poetic conventions of the Romantic ballad and makes the reader think of Walter Scott, Keats, and Coleridge. Such characteristic details as “gems,” “garnets,”

and “golden feathers” add to the effect. Cohen is cataloguing various aspects of the ballad’s tradition and reviving the centuries-old genre for his own poetic ends.

The literary traditions of the past Cohen employs in *The Spice-Box of Earth* are not limited to the ballad. “The Priest Says Goodbye” is written in heroic couplets; in combination with the contrast between high-style expressions and near-obscurities, the rhetorical mention of art, and an allusion to Abelard’s love story, the form of the poem points to the object of stylization: the poetry of Alexander Pope.¹⁵ Cohen’s imitation of Pope is a Popean gesture in itself since imitation was an essential concept for the eighteenth-century poet.

The poem called “Summer Haiku” has a self-explanatory title. This work, dedicated to the poet and law professor Frank Scott and his artist wife Marian, although not a regular three-line haiku (it has four lines), approaches the genre by quoting a season, being lexically minimalistic, and basing the meaning on two nature-related images: deepening silence and hesitating crickets. The haiku were not an outdated poetic form in the 1950s-early1960s; on the contrary: previously “discovered” and popularized by Ezra Pound and other imagist poets, the laconic Japanese genre was on the rise among the Beat generation, as if to balance the wordiness of their other poems. This background, instead of making Cohen’s use of this genre experimental, confirms his traditionalism, even though within a tradition recently established.

A number of poems recall Walt Whitman, whose pivotal influence was so ubiquitous in Cohen’s first book. As in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, there are titles in

¹⁵ In the late1950-s – early 1960-s the monumental eleven-volume Twickenham edition of Pope’s works was being published, refreshing the reading public’s interest in the poet’s legacy.

The Spice-Box of Earth that repeat first lines of the poems, which is Whitman's signature trick of doubling. The word "song," so characteristic of Whitman's universal polyphony in *Leaves of Grass*, appears in several titles in *The Spice-Box of Earth*, such as "Song To Make Me Still," "The Cuckold's Song," "Morning Song," "Dead Song," "Song For Abraham Klein," and finally, two consecutive poems simply titled "Song."

The poem providing the strongest evidence of Whitman's omnipresence is "Call You Grass." The central image, a person as grass, is based on Whitman's fundamental metaphor that forms the meaning of *Leaves of Grass* and permeates the American poet's work; this metaphor is, in its turn, derived from the Book of Isaiah and the prophet's saying "All flesh is grass" (Isaiah, 40:6), a powerful assertion of human mortality. Cohen alludes to Whitman (and Isaiah, which finds confirmation in another poem in the book, bearing the prophet's name) and develops his metaphor, the speaker of the poem saying to an unspecified addressee:

Call you grass
 call you wind-bent slender grass
 say you are full of grace
 and grown by the river

Whitman's "leaves of grass" – the metaphorical sprouts of flesh – become in Cohen "the speared hands"; in the lines "Claim you / claim you in my father's name / Call you grass" the "father" could be either the poet's father (thus adding to the subject of human mortality) or God. In both cases, the metaphor-based theme started by a poet-predecessor a century before *The Spice-Box of Earth* finds further development.

As a lyric poet, Cohen is concentrated on examining and expressing his emotions, be they love-related feelings and other events of his intense inner life or his responses to interactions with the outside world and various people. It is characteristic of him to focus on the things that have happened, not are happening or will happen (with a notable exception of openly erotic poems celebrating the moment, such as “Beneath My Hands” and “Celebration”). Time encapsulates all people’s actions; no one can escape: “[w]ith thongs of time / bind to your body / the heart of man” (“A Poem To Detain Me”); the past retains its power and deserves a manifold artistic examination.

A number of poems provide a reaction to a recently occurred or a remembered event, telling the story of the lyric “I”’s personal past. The elements of this story could be seemingly insignificant, as in “Inquiry Into The Nature Of Cruelty,” where a moth drowned in the speaker’s urine provokes a philosophical rumination, or of much larger proportions, as in “Travel,” where a reminiscence of love (lost or left) leads to a revelation about its influence on the speaker’s perception of reality. “It Is Late Afternoon” follows a day lived by the speaker step by step. The poem recalls a succession of diary entries documenting what has happened at various points from late afternoon till night. The poet uses a combination of present tenses, though the events described have sunk into the past:

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.

It is early night.
Down the lighted city
the tedious hunts begin.
I have been assured
there is no cause for shame.
I am not ashamed.
I turn the music louder.

The speaker's perspective is unusual: he looks at himself doing things as if reading a diary or watching his day that has been filmed. The actions become things past right in front of his (and the reader's) eyes as the poem unfolds; for example, the intention to "impute loneliness / to the appearing moon," expressed in the future tense, sinks into the past as the condition is fulfilled in the subsequent stanza ("There's the moon / in my room's window.")

"The Flowers That I Left In The Ground" enumerates things to be commemorated, remembered despite their deterioration (flowers rotted, ships wrecked, the child the speaker used to be now grown to be "sly and hairy"). The lyric "I" likens his body to a museum (the image to be later developed in *Beautiful Losers*) consisting of different items preserved by memory: "this part remembered because of someone's mouth, / this because of a hand, / this of wetness, this of heat." The ethereal beauty of the

“you” of the poem escapes being appropriated by memory, and the speaker’s love for her never becomes a part of the past.

“When I Uncovered Your Body” relates a personal memory of an erotic encounter with a woman whose perfect beauty, though made of flesh, exceeded the faultlessness of immaterial concepts of perfection, “made obsolete old treaties of excellence, / measures and poems”; the speaker could not comprehend that beauty at first and “thought shadows fell deceptively, / urging memories of perfect rhyme.” The woman’s body recalled by the lyric “I” is the remembered source of his poetic inspiration, the starting point of his “perfect rhymes.” In “Morning song” a memory of a moment of love is complicated with the woman’s dream she had “on a morning / Of a night she slept beside” the lyric “I” and then told him about; the poem contains a double dive into the past, a remembered account of a remembered event.

One of the two poems called “Song” underscores the value of remembering and memories. As one could say that he almost went to bed without saying prayers, the speaker confesses that he “almost went to bed / without remembering” precise details of a romantic gesture he had made during a date with his lover: “the four white violets / [he] put in the button hole / of [her] green sweater,” and the kiss they had as if it was their first one. Remembering the mementoes of love is an important ritual. Repetitious commemoration makes the feeling more durable, keeping the emotions alive.

A short six-line poem “For Anne” looks at the former lover with regret (mostly aesthetic) about the loss and a touch of self-reproach:

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.

It is not specified in the text what happened to Annie and whether “gone” means death or a mere separation from the speaker.¹⁶ This near-lamentation brings to mind Wordsworth’s “Lucy,” with its sad feelings about a girl “fair as a star, when only one / Is shining in the sky,” who is no more. As Wordsworth’s Lucy who “lived unknown,” Annie in Cohen’s poem was underestimated and underappreciated when the lyric “I” was with her (“Not that I did compare”); her disappearance brings forth a reevaluation of the past: “But I do compare / Now that she’s gone.” The absence of Annie makes an impact similar to that of Wordsworth’s poem, where the speaker states “But she is in her grave, and oh, / The difference to me!” While the speaker of “Lucy” is remorseful about something he came to value too late, Cohen’s more laidback lyric “I” regrets the beauty vanished from his life, making the past more inspirational than the present.

The past that affects the lyric “I” gets more personal and seems to intersect with that of the author himself in the bitter “The Cuckold’s Song,” where the former and the latter merge into one, accusing their rival that for him “the important thing was to cuckold Leonard Cohen.” The phrase is repeated twice, with the link between the speaker and the author reinforced by the words “I like that line because it’s got my name in it.”

¹⁶ In reality, the Anne of the poem was Georgianna Sherman, “Leonard’s first great love” (Aviva Layton, qtd in Simmons 60) and the prototype of Shell in *The Favourite Game*; years later, she published a book of her own poetry.

The lover's infidelity instigated by the speaker's friend is an event of the recent past that has impregnated the present with imminent changes: "everything goes on as it went before [...] But not for long." The lyric "I," martyred by the double betrayal, is "still a sort of friend" and "still a sort of lover," but he is "turning to gold" (probably, getting cleansed from false affinities). The first stage of this transformation is that he has "already turned to clay," that is, became aware of his human vulnerability, as in Isaiah: "we are the clay" (64:8).

The personal past also includes the grief over the lost father that resurfaces periodically, at times unexpectedly. "Sing To Fish, Embrace The Beast" turns the mythological notion of half-animal, half-human creatures inside out, proclaiming separation instead of fusion, and preservation of human nature even in the closest proximity to the realm of beasts: "don't get up from the pond / With half your body a horse's body." The last lines of the poem, which up to this moment reads as an abstract poetic speculation, suddenly reveal the decades-old pain of the poet who lost his father at a young age:

The dead are beginning to breathe;
I see my father splashing light like a jewel
In the swamp's black mud.

Similarly, "Call You Grass," the poem about the fragility of flesh, ends with the words "Claim you in my father's name / Call you grass," thus adding the theme of mortality and memory, sacred enough to be used for an invocation.

The father is recalled again, more poignantly, in “Priests 1957,” a bitter poem about the Cohen family (the word “priests” referring to the Hebrew meaning of the surname):

My father died among old sewing machines,
echo of bridges and water in his hand.

I have his leather books now
and startle at each uncut page.

The father is shown here as a person of unrealized potentials, a man clinging to his past that had more to it than “sewing machines”; the only thing he gets hold of is a phantom of what has long been gone. Though it is usually wrong to equate the “I” of a poem to the person who wrote it, in case of “Priests 1957” biographic parallels are undeniable. Nathan Cohen, the poet’s father, had a military career as “one of the first Jewish commissioned officers in the Canadian Army” (Simmons 8) during the First World War, and was rightly proud of his medals. Later, poor health and lack of genuine enthusiasm for business made him the head of the family company mostly on paper, while his younger brother played the leading role in it; “Nathan [...] dealt with the factory, the workers, the machinery, and the suppliers” (Nadel *Various Positions* 14). The poem reflects the death “among old sewing machines” (the opposite of an old gun and medals or other symbols of military prowess) as the sad fate of dying as an ordinary businessman rather than as a celebrated officer.

The “leather books” with uncut pages have a factual origin, too. The poet’s father was never attracted to books, preferring music and photography; the collection of leather-bound volumes of English poetry he owned remained for the most part uncut when his

son received them (Simmons 8; Nadel *Various Positions* 15). “Each uncut page” makes the speaker of the poem (and, in all probability, the author) “startle.” These pages make him recall his father and think of the things the man has not done in his life; they represent the memory of what happened (the father’s presence in his son’s childhood) and the phantom memory (similar to phantom pain in an amputated body part) of what could have happened but never did.

“Priests 1957” explores other themes as well; among them, the family past and the self-identity of the poet. It is biographically accurate, presenting details of the Cohens’ lives: one of the uncle’s days indeed was spent “beside the brassworks” at the foundry; the father was responsible for the equipment (“old sewing machines”) at the factory; Cohen’s cousins, also involved in the family business, had interests such as cars and music (“One is consoled with a new Pontiac, / one escapes with Bach and the folk-singers”). What the poem concentrates on is the profound desolation of all those people while running a well-organized business and having financial success: the uncle “grows sad”; the father dies clutching the “echo” of his vibrant past; the cousins are plainly “unhappy” (one needs to be “consoled” and the other “escapes”). Though the speaker is absent from this sad picture, he includes himself as a sharer of the sadness through the first-person pronoun “we”: “Must we find all work prosaic / because our grandfather built an early synagogue?”

The fact from the family past revealed in the final line of the poem explains the misery described: the grandfather was a great man, the leader of the congregation and the founder of “an early synagogue”; his descendants have a business to operate, and their sons, in turn, are left with no choice but to join them, bored and needing to distract

themselves with something else as compensation. In the poem, in full accordance with the traditional religious Jewish vision, the past is more glorious than the present; the further from the past, the shallower and more prosaic people's occupations become. As the family name suggests, in times gone by the legendary distant ancestor was the biblical Aaron; then, there were the *kohanim*, the priests of the Temple. In the more immediate past, at the turn of the twentieth century, there was the grandfather who "built an early synagogue." In 1957, the Cohens, "priests," are reduced to ordinary businessmen with none of the special spiritual duties they still long for, consciously or not.

The question asked by the lyric "I" at the end of the poem proves to be rhetorical, since his prototype, the poet himself, has answered to it by his reluctance to take up a job in the family business, apart from a short-term experience in the shipping department and at the foundry; he dared to follow the path of poetic spirituality and establish a "synagogue" of his own, that of his readers, and, later, of the fans of his music. The uncle in "Priests 1957" is only "disturbed by greatness / and may write a book" (apparently, he never did); the youngest of the "priests," the poet has realized this ambition, as the poem is a part of a published book. The poem expresses a raw feeling concerning the present overshadowed by the past. At the same time, it serves as a proof of survival of the forefathers' spiritual legacy, which has taken a different form.

"Last Dance At The Four Penny" combines Cohen's declaration of his kindred-spirited friendship with Irving Layton, and both poets' devotion to their Jewish heritage and cultural memory.¹⁷ The title refers to the Four Penny Art Gallery young Cohen used to run on Stanley Street in Montreal together with his friends Lenore Schwartzman and

¹⁷ Their attitudes to Jewish heritage were not the same, though, as discussed by Michael Q. Abrahams and Joel Deshayé.

Mort Rosengarten before the gallery unluckily succumbed to a fire (Nadel *Various Positions* 57). The gallery was a meeting place for Cohen's circle of poets, artists, and other creative people; occasional parties were held there. The speaker (in this case, largely coinciding with the author) addresses Layton, saying that as they dance their *freilach* "under the ghostly handkerchief" (an imagined replacement for the object used for Yiddish folklore dancing), their Jewish ancestors are brought back to life: "the miracle rabbis of Prague and Vilna / resume their sawdust thrones." The dance, as a form of paying tribute to the memory of Jewish "angels and men," instigates their resurrection and revives the culture that has long been gone, along with the people in "Prague and Vilno," their "sausage-hung kitchens," and Talmudic discussions. It symbolically unites the two poets, whose ancestral Jewish traditions, a Hasidic and a Misnaged one, are widely divergent, though this difference is of no importance at this celebratory moment.

The main purpose of *freilach* (translated from Yiddish as "happy") is to express joy and gratitude, be it a simple human joy at a wedding or a religious one that celebrates people's connection to God. *Freilach* makes dancers lose themselves in a blissful ecstasy and cleanses them from daily worries. Its effect is similar to that of the ritual dances of Sufi whirling dervishes and North American First Nations. The two poets swirling together perform their magic of commemoration. In the second section of the poem, Cohen calls his fellow poet by the latter's Jewish last name, "my friend Lazarowitch"; they are two Jews dancing a *freilach* "in this French province, cold and oceans west of the temple" – chronologically and geographically further from Jerusalem and *Beit HaMikdash* than the extinguished Yiddish civilization was – for the spiritual purpose of reversing the past: "No Jew was ever lost / while we two dance joyously." In this light,

the metaphor of the dancers' "stitching thumbs" (an effective and illustrative way to describe the hand movements in *freilach*) becomes deeper than it might seem: the fabric being stitched during the dance is time. In effect, the first two sections of the poem send a trivial but true and artistically expressive message that even a physically disappeared culture still exists as long as it is remembered and its rites are performed, even if only in the form of a dance.

In the third part of the poem Cohen's friend and mentor, previously addressed by his pen-name Layton, then by his family name Lazarowitch, progresses to being called "Reb Israel Lazarowich" – an ironic hint at Layton's role of mentor and self-proclaimed messianic figure. The speaker's monologue is not about dancing and memory any longer. The spell is broken, the focus shifts to the present, though the poets' dispute over artistic authority is based, however playfully, on their background: "Who cares whether or not / the Messiah is a Litvak?" (the tongue-in-cheek peacemaking phrase suggests Cohen's pride as a pureblood Litvak, a descendant of the most refined Talmudic scholars in Europe). A truce is signaled with "a bright white flag" and marked by raising "our battered fathers' cup of wine," though there is no happiness and unity in perspective. The joy of *freilach* turns out to be finite, the music will last "until morning and the morning prayers" interrupt, meaning that daily life will prevail over the enchantment of the dance; "we [...] dance so beautifully / though we know that freilachs end," as does the unanimity of the poets. The poem, with the phrase "last dance" in its title and "end" as its

final word, is sad; it recalls a moment of magic and unity brought on by a celebration of common heritage and cultural memory.¹⁸

The theme of Jewish cultural memory and self-identity comes up in “After the Sabbath Prayers”: the lyric “I” of the poem sees a butterfly that follows him as the legendary insect from tales of Baal Shem Tov (Besht), the founder of Hasidism. It is unclear which particular story Cohen refers to because a butterfly appears in more than one rendering of Baal Shem’s wisdom. In one of the best-known tales, Besht counts a butterfly that flew into the room as the tenth man when there are only nine present for the *minyan*,¹⁹ and claims that it is the soul of a late rabbi who heard of the incomplete assembly (Kugelmass 179). In another story, a young man tries to baffle Baal Shem; he hides a butterfly between his hands and asks the rabbi to guess whether it is alive or not. If Besht answered “alive,” the young man would squash the insect and kill it. If the reply was “dead,” he would let the butterfly go. The rabbi does not hesitate and replies that the choice is in the young man’s hands. While this answer accurately corresponds to the circumstances, it provides a metaphor of man’s free will to commit evil or choose goodness.

¹⁸ Deshayé argues that in this poem Cohen is “writing elegiacally about transitions in his career” and “is preparing himself — and Layton — for a ‘poetic departure’ (Abraham 119) that would reduce the Jewish aspect of his image and help to make him appear more secular — a ‘pop-saint,’ yes, but with the emphasis on ‘pop’”(85). While it would be impossible to dispute the elegiac mode of the poem and the sense of coming changes it conveys, it is hard to agree with the statement about Cohen’s diminishing of the Jewish aspect of his image, since it remains in most of his works written since then. If any “reduction” has occurred, it concerns solely the public image of Cohen as a performer; even that self-presentation, however, has been deeply rooted in Jewish culture and religion.

¹⁹ In Judaism, the minimal quorum of ten adult men requisite for a communal prayer.

In Cohen's poem, the speaker draws on Baal Shem's metaphor likening a man to a butterfly, and makes a parallel between himself and the butterfly, both being cold, lonely, and fragile:

And I am shivering as I did last night,
 And the wind is not warmer
 For the yellow butterfly
 Folded somewhere on a sticky leaf
 And moving like a leaf itself.

The man links himself to his Jewish heritage through the insect, its yellow colour being a shadowy reminder of persecution and the yellow stars of David the Jews had to wear; its flight is as miraculous as deliverance of the survivors. The butterfly itself is a miracle, as is the fact that someone can identify Baal Shem Tov's symbols, though the rabbi has been dead for centuries and there were wars and massacres since then:

So this was a miracle,
 Dancing down all these wars and truces
 Yellow as a first-day butterfly,
 Nothing of time or massacre
 In its bright flutter.

It is a wondrous incident that the three meet: the butterfly, the man, and the man's thought of Besht's tales. Significantly, it occurs "[a]fter the Sabbath prayers" with "sharp stars in the sky," meaning that the Sabbath has come. While one is supposed to be with family on Sabbath, the speaker is alone but for the butterfly, who "followed [him] down the hill" as if to keep him company, almost like the soul flying into the room of the

incomplete *minyan*. Seeing the butterfly makes the speaker think not only of his loneliness on a cold night, but of Besht, history, and miracles, creating a connection to his lineage and sharpening his self-awareness expressed in the acrimonious last lines.

Being a rightful heir to the tradition, the poet occasionally allows himself a degree of irreverence. The lines “I bound to my temples a box of flesh / filled with holy letters & captured poems” in “A Poem To Detain Me” are an impious allusion to *tefillin* – a small ritual black-leather box containing tiny parchment scrolls with lines from the Torah that observant Jewish men must wear on the head during morning prayers (with a similar box placed on an arm). To fix the head *tefillin* above the forehead, special leather straps are wrapped around the head, hence the phrase “I bound to my temples [...] a box” in the Cohen quotation. Though the context of the poem, the “holy letters” might still be those coming from the sacred text, as the content of the mock-*teffilin* made “of flesh” they are mixed up with secular writings. Cohen indirectly equates poems and quotations from the Torah, both elevating poetry to the level of the scripture and depriving the biblical text of its uniqueness as the holy book. The poet forms his daring message on the basis of cultural and religious notions that he grew up with and uses them to strengthen his imagery, not to offend the holy.

Another sacred notion, the Sabbath, is in the centre of “Out Of The Land Of Heaven,” the poem dedicated to Marc Chagall²⁰ and featuring the title phrase of the book:

²⁰ The original title of this work when it first appeared in the only issue of *The Phoenix* magazine started by Cohen in 1957 was “Poem For Marc Chagall.” With the change of the title, the connection to Chagall remained in the dedication, but became less emphatic. The poem’s connection to Chagall’s imagery manifests itself in the non-realistic figures of the rabbi and his pupils dancing in the air, and the bride – a recurrent motif in the painter’s works; the rabbi talking to domestic animals is clearly Chagallian, too. Above and beyond, the Queen Sabbath in Cohen’s poem reminds one of Queen of Sheba on one

“Out of the land of heaven / Down comes the warm Sabbath sun / Into the spice-box of earth.” The whole world becomes one enormous *shtetl*, a Jewish village, celebrating Sabbath, praying, dancing and singing along with its rabbi in a festive “white silk coat.” The speaker irrefutably counts himself among the rabbi’s followers and co-celebrators by repeatedly using the pronoun “our” (“our rabbi,” “our lawns”). The rabbi is a mythological, hyperbolic, and utterly non-realistic figure, wearing “lawns like a green prayer-shawl, / brandishing houses like silver flags.” The unanimous celebration of the Sabbath is followed by the rabbi’s wedding to the mystical Queen; when in the middle of the poem she is identified as “the Sabbath Queen,” it becomes clear that the rabbi in the poem is God himself, marrying *Sabbath Ha-Malka*, Sabbath the Bride – an image created by the imagination of medieval Jewish mystics that has become the transcendental meaning of the weekly festivity.²¹ Accordingly, one of the many meanings of the title phrase in this poem is the cosmological image of the entire earth as a fragrant spice-box: “Down go his hands / Into the spice-box of earth, / And there he finds the fragrant sun / For a wedding ring.”

As the poem progresses, the designation of the divine figure dominating it is appropriately spelt with the capital “R”: “Who calls him Rabbi?” The reply to this

of Chagall’s etchings from his biblical series (“Arrival of Queen of Sheba in Jerusalem,” 1956). The combination of biblical images, kabbalistic mysticism, Yiddish folklore and daily scenes from the life of a *shtetl* provides another parallel between “Out Of The Land Of Heaven” and Chagall’s art.

²¹ “One must prepare a comfortable seat with cushions and decorative covers, from all that is found in the house, like one who prepares a canopy for a bride. For the Sabbath is a queen and a bride. This is why the masters of the Mishnah used to go out on the eve of Sabbath to receive her on the road, and used to say: ‘Come, O bride, come, O bride!’ And one must sing and rejoice at the table in her honor ... one must receive the Lady with many lighted candles, many enjoyments, beautiful clothes, and a house embellished with many fine appointments” (*The Zohar* qtd in Dennis 226).

question is that every creature does, “[c]art-horse and dogs call him Rabbi,” as God created not only people but also beasts. The speaker of the poem participates in the celebration of the universal Sabbath and in the mystical wedding, presided over by the Rabbi of men and animals, master of heaven and earth. A significant line, enigmatic when it appears in the second sentence of the poem, becomes clear as it is repeated, with a variation in tense, at the end: “The Queen makes every Jew her lover”; first, it was a promise (“will make”), now it is a fact, as everyone is involved in the joyous celebration of the mystic wedding. The word “lover” in this line can be interpreted both as someone who worships Sabbath the Queen and as her erotic partner, in the vein of the sensual kabbalistic symbolism of *The Zohar*.²² Evidently, the speaker of the poem is one of those lovers, as is the author.

The religious meaning of Sabbath is a ritual reminder of creation, freedom, and *Eretz Yisrael* as the ultimate home for all Jews; moreover, Sabbath *is* the home uniting all Jews under a common invisible roof. This common home is represented in “Out Of The Land Of Heaven” by the image of the street where the celebration occurs and the community of its inhabitants symbolizing all Jews; the festivity is an extended metaphor representing the joy of the Jews’ unity with God. Thus, the poem is a triumph of the author’s identity, demonstrating his deep comprehension of the spiritual, symbolic, and kabbalistic meanings behind the rites of the Sabbath, and his sense of belonging to the religion, the people, and the tradition.

Toward the end of the book, the theme of Jewish past and identity intensifies. “Out Of The Land Of Heaven” precedes “Absurd Prayer,” with its grim eschatological

²² *The Zohar* – a medieval collection of esoteric commentaries on the Torah, the fundamental text of the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism.

visions of the Messiah coming and the dead rising to greet him. Next comes “Prayer Of My Wild Grandfather,” a lamentation addressing God who gets across his anger with the speaker’s “family” (that is, the Jews) by withdrawing himself from them; it is only the mad man with “honey-combed” mind who preserves the link between God and the people through his faith. God brought his punishment upon the whole “family” because someone “hated [his] love”; as a consequence, horrible things occurred to the offender: “He gave you his children / opened on the table, and if a ram / ambled in the garden you whispered nothing / about that, nor held his killing hand.” The biblical story of Abraham, stopped just as he was about to murder Isaac out of his loyalty to God, repeats itself, but without the happy ending. This parable refers to the atrocities suffered by the Jews with God not present there to stop the horrors. For the speaker, allegedly the poet’s “wild” (demented) grandfather, God’s reluctance to interfere due to hatred in return for his love is the explanation why “fields and governments / rotted,” and the new Isaacs were not replaced with rams.

The next poem, “Isaiah,” draws the picture of what preceded the times of destruction: the people of Zion are a content and prosperous nation; “[b]etween the mountains of spices / the cities thrust up pearl domes and filigree spires”; the glorious temple of beautiful Jerusalem attracts pilgrims; “fields and governments” from the previous poem are flourishing; no war is feared. It is only Isaiah who sees through the time and “rage[s] and c[ries],” presenting the future as the present: “Jerusalem is ruined, / your cities are burned with fire,” “your country is desolate.” The prophet becomes, in the last third of the poem, the embodiment of the destructive force of time, turning present to ruinous future at his touch: “the sculptured walls [...] consume / their full age in his

embrace and powder / as he goes by. He reels beyond / the falling dust of spires and domes”; “heavy trees he sleeps under / mature into cinder and crumble”; “[t]he rocks go back to water, the water to waste.” Much as the “wild grandfather” prays for the forsaken people in the distant future, Isaiah “gently hums a sound / to make the guilty country uncondemned”; with these poems Cohen does the same thing, taking on the burden of praying for his people.²³

The penultimate poem, “The Genius,” enumerates in six stanzas various negative clichés formed about Jews throughout the centuries: a white-stockings-wearing poisoner of wells, a ritualistic baby-killer, a mean banker, a Broadway black-marketer, a wicked doctor, and, finally, a death-camp victim. The latter makes a stark contrast to the previous five. First, it refers to a victim, not a wrongdoer; second, it represents not a fantasy invented by a hostile mind, but a true-to-fact historical image of “a Dachau jew / [...] with twisted limbs / and bloated pain / no mind can understand”; second, it is not negative, in the sense that it evokes shock and compassion, not repulsion, as the other five do; there is no sarcasm in the last stanza. The image of the Dachau Jew fits into the list as it is stereotypical, but this stereotype is based on reality and does not contain lies, providing a counterpoint to the dark clichés. The speaker expresses his readiness to assume any of those roles, from the malevolently stereotyped Jews to the martyr victim of Dachau, for the sake of “you.” The question arises, who this “you” is. The first instinct would be to assume that it is a female addressee: the speaker’s love is so strong that he is ready to turn into a villain or a victim, imaginary or real; this meaning is definitely a possibility. However, the position of the poem within the book, among the poems

²³ Scobie rightfully asserts that “Cohen compares his role as poet with that of the old prophets, the supreme interpreters of their age” (*Leonard Cohen* 42)

centered upon Jewish history, family identity, and Judaic relationships with the Creator allows one to hypothesize that “you” could as well be God, for whom Jews suffered false accusations throughout history and were murdered in death camps. As a Jew, the “I” of the poem shares the faith and the traumatic collective past of his people, and is ready to go through all that himself in his personal quest for martyrdom - the ultimate demonstration of his cultural affiliation and identity.²⁴

With its final text, “Lines From My Grandfather’s Journal,” *The Spice-Box of Earth* turns full circle, as the speaker here is one of the grandparents to whom the book is dedicated: Cohen’s maternal grandfather, Rabbi Solomon Klonitzki. The persona of the imaginary journal is a figure conjured up by the poet and has only a little in common with the real-life prototype through shared biographic details. The speaker, like Rabbi Solomon, comes from the borderlands of Russia where he “escaped conscription”; he “fled several cities”; he lived in Kovno, New York, and Montreal (in the lines where the man “stares” at “Montreal trees, New York trees, Kovno trees” his memory is working in a reverse chronological order); he authored “poems and dictionaries.” The phrase “[i]t was my honour to close the eyes of my famous teacher” refers to an event in the life of Cohen’s grandfather, who was a devoted disciple of Rav Yitzhak Elchanan Spektor, chief rabbi of Kovno, a great nineteenth-century rabbinical scholar and leader. Interestingly, the speaker’s claim that he is a descendant of a priestly dynasty (“All my family were priests, from Aaron to my father”) points to the name of the poet’s paternal side of the

²⁴ Cohen’s affection for his cultural legacy is so prominent in *The Spice-Box of Earth* that it has occasionally met unjust criticism, as in Ondaatje’s book: “[Cohen] is a rich, excessive poet who uses, sometimes flaunts his Jewish heritage for all it is worth” (23).

family and therefore blurs the distinction between the two grandfathers, Klonitzky and Cohen, widening the distance between the persona and the prototype.

Further complicating the speaker's figure, the "I," the author's lyric doppelganger, transforms in this poem into his grandfather or, as Ian Rae writes, Cohen "merges his poetic voice with the learned voice of his grandfather to lyricize entries from the elder's journal."²⁵ In Rae's opinion, "'Lines from My Grandfather's Journal' examines a deep personal scar in Cohen's life: his feeling of inadequacy in comparison to his maternal grandfather" (53), the celebrated author of highly acclaimed books of Talmudic commentaries and a dictionary of Hebrew homonyms and synonyms. This inference is not completely convincing, since Cohen's ambitions as a writer have always been secular and non-scholarly, lying in a sphere entirely different from Rabbi Klinitzky's accomplishments; besides, the latter's fame was limited to a particular ethnic and religious group, while his grandson was interested in a significantly more universal readership. The speaker in "Lines from My Grandfather's Journal" has the same prototype as the one in "Prayer of My Wild Grandfather" or in the unpublished story "One Hundred Suits From Russia" – a mentally confused old man whose glory is the matter of the past, not tangible any longer, especially for those not involved in rabbinical scholarship. This grandfather is the object of love, reverence, pride, compassion, and other feelings; writer's envy is hardly among them. The grandfather and grandson had a

²⁵ Scobie points to this amalgamation as well, but sees it negatively as a confusing drawback of the poem, as if a poet and his "I" could ever be the same individual: "Cohen never defines precisely enough the relationship between author and persona. The use of the figure of the grandfather is another move in the direction of fiction, the distancing of Cohen's ideas away from the dominating first person in the lyric; but in this poem the distinctions between Cohen as poet and his grandfather as character are not kept clear enough" (*Leonard Cohen* 42).

special bond with each other based on being men of letters but there was no place for competition.

Cohen has been indebted to his grandfather as the most immediate and personal link to his Jewish heritage. In a heart-breaking episode in “One Hundred Suits From Russia,” the young protagonist experiences a revelation listening to his old senile grandfather sing; he realizes what it means to be of the same blood as one’s kin and to belong to something larger than oneself. In “Lines from My Grandfather’s Journal,” the lyric “I” goes even further, essentially *becoming* his own grandfather, meditating on the many topics important for both of them: Jewishness, cultural memory, the past, the Holocaust, “an answer to the ovens,” creativity, prayer, loneliness, the Law, and God. Tradition is another unifying aspect of this poetic monologue, since it links the poet (and the “I”), his grandfather, and all the Jews alive or dead.

“The central subject of the meditation is tradition: the strength and the attractiveness of the Jewish tradition which Cohen inherits, his needs to understand it, and also his need to resist it, to live outside it,” as Scobie notes (*Leonard Cohen* 42). For the speaker, tradition is both unifying (“[t]he real deserts are outside of tradition”) and oppressive: “I will never be free from this tyranny. A tradition composed of the exuviae of visions. I must resist it.” Scobie comments that “[e]xuviae are the cast-off skins of larvae and insects, stages of growth which must be left behind. The tradition must be grown out of” (*Leonard Cohen* 43). The speaker does not go through with his wish to break off; “the exuviae of visions” never leaves him because tradition demands something that is painful but unavoidable – remembering the past and not allowing it to slip away into obscurity. The past of the ancestors affects the present of the speaker: “We

were not permitted to own land in Russia. Who wants to own land anywhere?" He strains his senses never to let the past go: "Sometimes, when the sky is this bright, it seems that if I could only force myself to stare hard at the black hills I could recover the gulls. It seems that nothing is lost that is not forsaken."

No matter if the "I" wants to shake off the past: he cannot do it, as his voice speaks for those who are unable to speak for themselves: "there was a covenant with me after a flood drowned all my friends, inundated every field." It is a difficult task to represent the past that one does not fully own, especially when it comes to the unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust: "The ovens have no tongue. The flames thud against the stone roofs. I cannot claim that sound." The speaker of "Lines from My Grandfather's Journal" confesses: "It is painful to recall a past intensity, to estimate your distance from the Belsen heap, to make your peace with numbers." This phrase demonstrates a well-known phenomenon to which Cohen is no stranger, that a person who did not fall victim of the Holocaust due to a spatial or temporal distance from the place and time of the tragedy feels irrational guilt and is haunted by a survivor's trauma. The feeling is so intense that the speaker sounds as if he experienced the horrors firsthand, leading to a reader's confusion.²⁶ Scobie underscores that there is no escape from these emotions and mental images for the speaker, whether he is Cohen's lyric "I" or the grandfather: "This knowledge is with him all the time, each morning as he wakes." The tragic past stays with the speaker and influences his life on a daily basis, even though it is

²⁶ It is easy to fall into the trap: Ian Rae writes, "Cohen jolts the reader with powerful but disjointed images of his grandfather's flight from Nazi persecution in Europe" (54), which is a chronological impossibility since Cohen's grandfather left Europe decades before the Nazis came to power.

the past that “happened somewhere else” (*The Favourite Game* 122) and was not lived through personally: “Let me refuse solutions, refuse to be comforted...”

Images of the Holocaust horrors never leave the poet’s imagination; the most mundane and even base situations can trigger a discussion of the unthinkable evil, as in “Inquiry Into The Nature Of Cruelty,” where the lyric “I” compares his own eyes looking at a moth drowned in a urinal to “tiny dancing crematoria.” He justifies the unintended cruelty of the death of the creature by the unfortunate circumstances: he would have saved the moth “[h]ad he not been bathed in urine.” The work reads as an investigation into the strange forms evil can take and the reasons behind one’s actions or passivity leading to murder; it is not by chance that the moth is ascribed a gender: the poet uses the pronoun “he,” not “it,” as if he were talking about a higher form of life than a mere insect.

The speaker of “Lines from My Grandfather’s Journal” is lonely in his historical and religious ruminations, as if he were the only person burdened with tradition and memory: “The Christians no longer want to debate. Jews have forgotten the best arguments.” The title itself accentuates loneliness and meditation about the past since writing a journal suggests lonely contemplations of something that has happened before. One faces the past on one’s own; it is not by chance that the speech Cohen wrote for the Montreal Jewish Public Library in 1964, three years after the publication of *The Spice-Box of Earth*, is titled “Loneliness and History.” In the picture the persona of “Lines from My Grandfather’s Journal” evokes, even God is alone: “a master-God floats through the firmament like a childless kite” – an image rhyming with that in the opening poem of the book, “The Kite is a Victim.” The faith, God, rituals and traditions of the past are gone;

there is no “listening sky” any longer, but one has to persevere in praying; “Prayer makes speech a ceremony. To observe this ritual in the absence of arks, altars, a listening sky: this is a rich discipline.” The phrase “Let me never speak casually,” belongs to the voice of the poet’s lyric “I” rather than his grandfather, since the last part of “Lines from My Grandfather’s Journal” is a prayer-like poem, “[i]nscription for the family spice-box” that ties together the themes of memory, family, tradition, prayer, and poetry.

As well as memories of the Holocaust, references to the much earlier, biblical past, a significant and unifying part of Jewish heritage, punctuate *The Spice-Box of Earth*. Biblical metaphors, imitations of biblical language, and allusions to biblical stories resurface throughout the book. In “You All In White,” Cohen masterfully stylizes the lavish imagery of Song of Songs, though with his own bitter twist of unhappiness and separation instead of joyful courtship, so that all the beautiful objects (“a rare shawl,” “Lebanese cedar and gold,” “filigree cages”) create an unsettling atmosphere:

Lovers of my beloved,
 watch how my words put on her lips like clothes,
 how they wear her body like a rare shawl.
 Fruit is pyramided on the window-sill,²⁷
 Songs flutter against the disappearing wall.

The sky of the city
 is washed in the fire
 of Lebanese cedar and gold.

²⁷ This image also appears in the stories “Tamara” and “My Sister’s Birthday,” as well as in *The Favourite Game*, and has a clear connection with the themes of memory and love.

In smoky filigree cages
 The apes and peacocks fret.

In the middle of the poem, there is a turn, characteristic of Cohen's poetry, from the described sumptuous world to its destruction in the "now":

Now the cages do not hold,
 in the burning street man and animal
 perish in each other's arms,
 peacocks drown around the melting throne.

This image explains the beginning, where "cities [...] brought down" feature in the first line, and the speaker promises his beloved he "will always bring her poems"; the city is destroyed, the beloved has "strangers in [her] bed," the world of beauty has collapsed, and it is poems that linger. The almost biblical "beloved," separated from the lover/speaker, is preserved through his words. Whether the beloved is taken by an eloquent biblical king ("Is it Solomon or David") or a less articulate medieval one ("stuttering Charlemagne"), the accent is on words, verbal communication, so important for the logocentric civilization that sprang from the Bible. Notably, at the end of the poem, where it turns out that the biblical visions were only a dream witnessed by "the sad-eyed man" (the speaker), there is a phrase addressed to his awakened beloved: "You will have something / to say to him."

"Before the Story" points to the Bible as its source more manifestly: it is preceded by an epigraph from Second Samuel, quoting the passage where King David, standing on the roof, first sees Bathsheba wash herself; then, David's son Absalom enters the picture, followed by King David composing his "ageless psalm" and the bathing Bathsheba. The

biblical images are intercepted with a refrain taking the reader to the speaker's "now," where he and, presumably, his lover are lying together; the poet and his beloved are implicitly compared with King David and Bathsheba, the Biblical story becoming the blueprint for a modern love affair – hence the title, "Before the Story." King David as a poet serves as the model for the lyric "I" of the poem. *Before* the story of the present comes the biblical past, providing the pattern and allowing the "we" of the poem to feel related to its "thrones," "caves," and "castles."

In "Isaiah," the biblical imagery of "the golden statuary," "pearl domes and filigree spires," "fragrant hills," "scented feet," orchards and palaces is as prominent as the theme of destruction and burning cities. Though the poem focuses on the Prophet Isaiah, there is also the figure of the "beloved", the addressee of the speaker's love song that imitates *Shir Hashirim*, Song of Songs:

Now will I sing to my well-beloved
 a song of my beloved touching her hair
 which is pure metal black
 no rebel prince can change to dross,
 of my beloved touching her body
 no false swearer can corrupt,
 of my beloved touching her mind
 no faithless counsellor can inflame,
 of my beloved touching the mountains of spices
 making them beauty instead of burning.

Cohen employs the style of Song of Songs as the ultimate tool for writing about the sacredness and power of beauty. In “Isaiah,” and throughout Cohen’s other works, beauty is the only thing that stands against destruction; the poem carries a nearly Dostoevskian message of beauty saving the world²⁸ from condemnation and time:

all men, truthfully desolate and lonely,
as though witnessing a miracle,
behold in beauty the faces of one another.

The biblical imagery is ubiquitous in *The Spice-Box of Earth*. There are allusions to the story of Abraham in “To A Teacher” (an implicit play on the name of the biblical patriarch and Abraham Klein, who is the dedicatee of the poem): “you glinted in every eye the held-high razor, / shivering every ram and son.” In “Credo,” the image of grasshoppers startled by the lyric “I” and his lover in the grass brings forth, by association, the motif of afflictions of Egypt: “I wondered [...] what slave people would go free / because of them. / I thought of pyramids overturned, / of Pharaoh hanging by the feet.” When later “a cloud of grasshoppers” goes the other way, as if having accomplished their mission of destruction, the “I” of the poem finds himself thinking of the choice between joining “batallions of the wretched, wild with holy promises” or taking his “love to the city they had fled.” The insistent repetition of the word “holy,” in conjunction with “land,” “promises,” and “promised,” recalls Moses taking his people to their original homeland and the modern Zionist movement with its ideology of leading Jews out of their “slavery” in various countries to Israel. The speaker finds himself in an

²⁸ “Is it true, prince, that you once declared that ‘beauty would save the world’? Great Heaven! The prince says that beauty saves the world!” (Dostoevsky 701) While in Dostoevsky’s novel this quotation is ironic, Cohen’s poem takes the redeeming power of beauty seriously.

intermediate position, belonging neither to the burnt city of “Pharaoh,” nor to the wanderers in search of their ideal holy land:

It is good to live between
A ruined house of bondage
And a holy promised land.

It is tempting to see the amorous scene among the ferns and grasshoppers as a metaphor for the discussion of the poet’s identity, his relationship with the prevalent non-Jewish culture of his birthplace, and a Jewish ideology (possibly, Zionism); in this case, Cohen states his position clearly: “I must not betray / the small oasis where we lie, / though only for a time.” The lover, in this reading, is not a woman, but poetry (or both, on different textual levels). The couple does not join either side, keeping themselves blissfully isolated and self-sufficient. In the speaker’s imagination, the biblical past is bound to repeat itself and liberate whoever is in the position of “slaves”:

A cloud of grasshoppers
will turn another Pharaoh upside down;
slaves will build cathedrals
for other slaves to burn.

The course of history, however, is not going to “tempt” the poet and his lover/art “from each other,” though it is “good to learn / the feet of fierce or humble priests / trample out the green,” and things do not stay the same. The allusion to the biblical past gives Cohen the idiom for discussing elevated and sensitive topics without sounding convoluted.

In “The Priest Says Goodbye” the waters of rivers – symbolically standing for passion – are likened, paradoxically, to “eternal fire in Moses’ bush”; then the metaphoric

allusion extends to erotic desire: “I will see / lust burn like fire in a holy tree.” The biblical allusion becomes the basis for a detailed conceit unfolding throughout the poem in the manner of metaphysical poets. Following its logic, the “I” of the poem compares his yearning for a lover to the feelings of the Israelites led by Moses: “I will sing beside / rivers where longing Hebrews cried. / As separate exiles we can learn / how desert trees ignite and branches burn.” This reference to the biblical past plays, once again, on the poet’s identity. The use of the Hebrew meaning of the author’s name (“Priest”) and the metaphor of the exile of the “Hebrews” for separation from a lover proves effective to express the mixture of the religious and the erotic that is so characteristic of Cohen’s poetic vision, and can be traced back to the imagery of the Bible.

Merging of the religious and the erotic with the help of biblical references occurs in “Celebration,” where a powerful orgasmic groan evokes the image of “those gods on the roof / that Samson pulled down,” and the speaker’s sexual climax is likened to the demolition of a pagan shrine after the “perform[ed] ceremony” of physical love; his body is presented as a heathen temple destroyed by *la petite mort*. The poem “The Adulterous Wives of Solomon” draws a picture of luxurious beauty and betrayal at the imaginary court of the King, another example of Cohen’s elaborate fantasies derived from the biblical imagery. In the third part of the poem, contrapuntal to the first two, the speaker addresses Solomon directly (“O Solomon, call away your spies”) and appeals to his memory, shifting from the biblical past of the Books of Kings to the more distant past of Genesis: “You remember the angels in that garden, / After the man and woman have been expelled.” The reminder of Eve “[c]alling for her lover and doubled with pain” calls for forgiveness of the “adulterous wives,” since their betrayal of the King is caused not by

their malice (“though they betray him [...] they love and honour him”) but by something that happened long before them and has been already paid for. The causal relationship between the origin of time and humankind, the mythical past, and the present is traceable in this poem and Cohen’s other works. The motif of a promiscuous woman who is not to be blamed for the reasons given in “The Adulterous Wives of Solomon” permeates Cohen’s poetry and prose²⁹ and provides an example of this cause and effect logic.

There are recurrent images of burning cities, ruined palaces, destroyed gardens in *The Spice-Box of Earth*, signaling the presence of the *ubi sunt* element. Indeed, the *ubi sunt* motif manifests itself in several poems, starting with “The Flowers That I Left On The Ground,” where the speaker declares: “My body once so familiar with glory, / my body has become a museum.” He brings back memories of various things gone, stressing the physical absence of those objects and the impossibility of keeping flowers “in poems or marble,” ships “in model or ballad,” and his own younger self “in confession or biography.” What belongs to the past stays in the past; the flowers “fell and rotted”; the ships, “huge and transitory as heroes,” are “wrecked and scuttled”; the child the “I” used to be inevitably matured, “growing sly and hairy”; the speaker’s predominant feeling that causes his parting with his lover is “weariness” and the sense of impermanence that can only be fought by remembering. He lets go of what he is unable to keep forever (including the “you” he loves), and commits them to memory, thus paradoxically “bring[ing] them back”. This complex mechanism of emotional appropriation of the

²⁹ Breavman’s lovers in *The Favourite Game* or the heroine of “Everybody Knows”: “Everybody knows that you love me baby / Everybody knows that you really do / Everybody knows that you’ve been faithful / Ah give or take a night or two.”

things impossible to own is demonstrative of Cohen's acute awareness of the transitory nature of the world.

The importance of commemorating as a means of resisting transience is stressed in "There Are Some Men":

There are some men
who should have mountains
to bear their names to time.

The speaker ruminates about the power of time to enforce oblivion when there is nothing material, be it an object or a person, to withstand it:

I had a friend:
he lived and died in mighty silence
and with dignity,
left no book, son, or lover to mourn.

Words, though, are material enough for a poet. The line "I name this mountain after him" concludes the poem, presuming that this rite creates a link with the past and bears the friend's name to time – at least, for the speaker himself.

The phantasmagorical and erotic poem "You Have The Lovers" describes, in a typically *ubi sunt* manner, the deadly passage of time affecting the life of a woman:

Your children grow up, they leave you,
they have become soldiers and riders.
Your mate dies after a life of service.
Who knows you? Who remembers you?

What is not so typical for the *ubi sunt* tradition, however, is the strong redeeming power of physical love that restores both flesh and spirit:

The garments you let fall grow into vines.

You climb into bed and recover the flesh.

Cohen displays his own identifiable mythological thinking here: while in the romantic view love can be (usually metaphorically) stronger than death, in Cohen's personal philosophy it is erotic, physical love that can fight or even reverse the passage of time and transience of human life.

In the ballad-like "Song For Abraham Klein," a similar redeeming power is ascribed to singing (which, as follows from the title/dedication, symbolically represents poetry). At first, as the Sabbath ends, all the festive and sacred things descend into the state of decline:

The table was decayed,

The candles black and cold.

The bread he sang so beautifully,

That bread was mould.

[...]

Abandoned was the Law,

Abandoned was the king.

Amidst this sad atmosphere, the "weary psalmist" starts singing simply because "[h]is habit was to sing"; he has no hope of bringing the Sabbath joy back. Unsurprisingly, it does not return, but he brings forth positive, restorative changes upon himself:

He sang and nothing changed

Though many heard the song.
But soon his face was beautiful
And soon his limbs were strong.

The recuperative power of music/poetry proves to be not universal, as it cannot unwind time; nevertheless, it allows the musician/poet to lift himself up above the decay and the otherwise inevitable way of all things. In relation to its dedicatee, the poem appears to value the persevering poetic voice over giving it up, and grieves the silence A.M. Klein preferred to the redemptive “music.”

If anything can resist time, it is art and tradition. *The Spice-Box of Earth*, being devoted to Cohen’s figurative ancestry in literature and his historic ancestry as a Jew, largely settles the question of these aspects of the past. When he revisits them in other books his attitude undergoes no radical changes. Although the past can be examined from various angles and to a different end, its fundamental importance remains, as well as the idea of the redemptive and preserving power of art that Cohen affirms in his second volume of poetry.

3. “Go write your memoirs for the Psychedelic Review”:

Timeless History, Self-Reflection, and the Past in *Flowers for Hitler*

“[T]he past that one would like to evade is still very much alive.”

Theodor W. Adorno

(“The Meaning of Working through the Past”)

“I think no one has ever slept but he / who gathers the past into stories”

Leonard Cohen

(“Independence,” *Flowers for Hitler*)

Published in 1964 by McClelland and Stewart, *Flowers For Hitler* became one of Cohen’s most controversial works along with *Beautiful Losers*. The book gained notoriety because of its provocative title “d’un esprit très proto-punk” (Tordjman 49), some allegedly disgraceful images, and poetic experiments. *Let Us Compare Mythologies* was a fairly conventional work in terms of genre; *The Spice-Box of Earth* involved a prose poem³⁰ inlaid with more explicitly “poetic” fragments. In contrast, *Flowers For Hitler* contains traditional rhymed and free-verse poems, avant-garde texts in the form of a list (“Portrait of the City Hall”), a questionnaire (“All There Is to Know About Adolph Eichmann”), a commentary (“The Commentary”), and a journal entry (“Indictment of a

³⁰ “Lines From My Grandfather’s Journal.” Ian Rae call it a “narrative long poem,” a form “allowing [...] to develop serial forms of narrative that can convey a sense of duration without sacrificing the intensity and concision of the lyric” (261). Although this assertion is highly arguable, it proves how different in form this work is from other poems in the book.

Blue Hole”); there are pictorial elements, such as crossed-out phrases and a visual poem, “A Note on the Title.”³¹ Finally, this book is the first to include Cohen’s drawings, similar to the doodles often found in Cohen’s manuscripts. These little scrawls, three in total, accompany the poem “Millennium” and have “handwritten” inscriptions on them. There is also a short dramatic text in *Flowers For Hitler*, “The New Step,” subtitled as “A Ballet-Drama in One Act.” The presence of the experimental elements and the multi-genre nature of the content illustrate how, as Michael Ondaatje noted, the book “brought a revolution of style for Cohen; it has also [...] drastically changed his outlook on the world” (39) and explains the author’s confidence in its innovative character.³² It was not the artistic experiments, however, that put the book into the spotlight, but its peculiar title.

The original idea the poet had for his title, *Opium and Hitler*,³³ happened to be too daring, and was indignantly rejected by Jack McClelland. The reason behind the publisher’s decision was probably to soften the shock the book would produce on the Canadian audience, as well as to find a compromise between Cohen’s intention of *épater les bourgeois* and practical acceptability that would facilitate selling the product. For Cohen the first variant of the title with the word “opium” in it must have been a reminder of the period in his life when he was having a brief romance with narcotics and

³¹It is “shaped both like the civic building that houses the corrupt governments of ‘Portrait of a City Hall’ and ‘Business as Usual,’ as well as the ‘little church’ of the poem ‘Folk’” (Berard 30).

³² Cohen’s quotation on the blurb famously claims: “My sounds are too new [...] Well, I say that there has never been a book like this, prose or poetry, written in Canada. All I ask is that you put it in the hands of my generation and it will be recognized.”

³³ As Cohen wrote to McClelland in defense of his choice of the title, “This title is damn intriguing and the diseased adolescents who compose my public will love it” (qtd. in Nadel *Various positions* 120).

maintaining friendships with drug addicts such as Alexander Trocchi, glorified in the poem bearing his name. The final version of the title, *Flowers For Hitler*, gained in semantic value as a better and broader metaphor.

The first thing that comes to the reader's mind while trying to understand this contentious title is that flowers are usually placed on one's grave as a tribute. In combination with such an infamous name as Hitler, it provokes a question: what kind of tribute could be paid to the worst criminal in history? A convincing explanation was discovered by Jordan Berard who productively collated the title of Cohen's book with the statement from Layton's "Foreword" to *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler* accusing poets who "absent-mindedly continue bringing their posies into the swept courtyards of Auschwitz and Belsen" (xix). Thus, it was in response to the challenge of finding adequate poetic means of writing about "the enormity of filth, irrationality, and evil" (Layton "Foreword" xviii) that Cohen produced his "experimental collection of po(e)sies" (Berard 21), fittingly grotesque and "ugly" enough to be the "flowers" for Hitler.³⁴ In addition, the title involves an allusion to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and therefore a reference to a particular tradition in European poetry of "extract[ing] the flowers of art" from "the blackness of the human capacity for evil" (Djwa "Leonard Cohen" 100).

The scandalous title drew much critical attention, inciting both positive and negative responses, mostly of an evaluative nature. According to Milton Wilson's review which immediately followed the 1964 publication, Cohen had demonstrated "the retuning

³⁴As wittily specified by Greyson, "Hitler's flowers are not daisies, or tulips, or roses. They are ragweed, and bramble, and poison ivy" ("Cohen Vomits Artistically" qtd. in Berard 31).

of a virtuoso instrument,” and the book was “exciting [...] in its own right” (21-22); at the same time, N. David Greyson proclaimed: “Leonard Cohen vomits on the street, and then bids us gaze at his vomit” (qtd. in Berard 1). To this day, many of those writing about *Flowers For Hitler* focus on the topics of the poet’s “anti-aesthetic” dealing with the Holocaust imagery and the representation of its most evil villains: Goebbels, Hitler, Eichmann, and a nameless pain-monger. The discussion of the book has so far been inseparable from a dichotomy between the ethical and the aesthetical. Sandra Wynands explores the aesthetic technique that helps Cohen to write about the inconceivable and rise both to Adorno’s much-quoted declaration “nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch” and Layton’s question “Where is the poet who can make clear for us Belsen?” asked in the “Foreword” to *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler* (which appeared one year before the publication of *Flowers*). Laurenz Volkmann provides “an overall assessment of controversies connected with Cohen’s handling of the Holocaust and Nazism” (211), while speculating about the poet’s goals and message. In his MA dissertation Jordan Berard analyzes *Flowers For Hitler* “within the context of the broad topic of Holocaust artistic representation” (2) and as a part of its Jewish-Canadian poetic branch; he also thoroughly examines the impact on Cohen’s third book of poetry of the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann and Hannah Arendt’s subsequent articles in *The New Yorker* about “the banality of evil.”³⁵

³⁵“The fact that the majority of the poems that appear in *Flowers for Hitler* were written during the time of the trials, with the book itself being published in 1964, together with Cohen’s obsessive fascination with artistic representations of contemporary culture and politics, suggests that Cohen’s writing was undoubtedly influenced by the Eichmann trial and Arendt’s theories” (Berard 3).

The majority of discussions devoted to *Flowers For Hitler*, with the notable exception of Scobie's chapter in *Leonard Cohen*, are limited to various types of contexts, giving disproportionately little attention to the text itself (as in Volkmann's thirty-page article, where only four pages concentrate on the poems as such). On the one hand, there is an obvious reason for this neglect: even a cursory glance at the table of contents reveals that there are only five titles pointing to the topic directly: "Goebbels Abandons His Novel and Joins the Party"; "Hitler the Brain-Mole"; "All There is To know About Adolph Eichmann"; "Opium and Hitler"; and "Hitler." In the book itself, not more than twenty poems out of the total of ninety-five address the themes of the Holocaust, the Second World War, or its anti-heroes. On the other hand, there are semantic links between the poems grouped together under one cover, and no coherent message could be extracted by singling out five poems while disregarding the other ninety. Moreover, there is a finely crafted prefatory complex that includes the title, "A note on the title," an epigraph, and a dedication,³⁶ which serves to solidify the poems into one entity with a complex meaning and helps to carve out the general message.

The book is preceded by "A note on the title," or, in fact, the first epigraph:

A
 while ago
 this book would
 have been called
 SUNSHINE FOR NAPOLEON,
 and earlier still it

³⁶Strictly speaking, the prefatory complex incorporates the table of contents as well, but the present study will leave it out as a potential topic for a separate discussion.

would have been

called

WALLS FOR GENGHIS KHAN

This text provides another historical dimension: it draws attention to the historicity of evil as well as the gradation of it. The legendary Genghis Khan was the epitome of evil and his victims were numerous, as young Cohen once learned from Harold Lamb's *Genghis Khan: The Emperor of All Men*. The next historical incarnation of a villain with ambitions to conquer the world was Napoleon, and his path was covered with blood, too. Then, as the top element of the gradation, comes Hitler, the vilest figure imaginable. The other two represented evil "a while ago"; after Hitler they are not relevant any more. As Greenstein says, "Cohen implies that evil is relative, part of a historical continuum." ("Canadian Poetry" 6). The gradation shows the evolution of violence and the progress of brutality; the course of history is from bad to worse. Implicitly, the first epigraph demonstrates Cohen's inherent conviction that as time advances, so does evil. The theme of the next moment in time being darker than the one before it develops in several poems of the book.

As the previous two volumes of poetry, *Flowers for Hitler* is dedicated to a person dear to the author. This simple dedication "For Marianne," however, was not Cohen's first choice. It replaced a more extensive text disapproved by Jack McClelland (Simmons 119):

With scorn, love, nausea, and above all,
 a paralyzing sense of community
 this book is dedicated

to the teachers, doctors, leaders of my parents' time:

THE DACHAU GENERATION

This dedication is personal and confessional – something the publisher could not relate to for socio-cultural reasons and found distasteful from the point of view of an “average” non-Jewish Canadian reader of poetry. The Holocaust, in a historical perspective, was a relatively recent event in 1964; until then, not much artistic exploration had been done, and representations of its horrors were yet to become international common currency in poetry, prose, cinema, and other arts. In the deleted dedication, Cohen, though only in passing, touched upon several issues of inter-generational conflict which only his Jewish peers would be able to understand fully. The first word the poet addresses to “the Dachau generation” is “scorn,” which comes as a shock; it might imply various things, from the highly controversial and sensitive question of the victims’ passivity to the more grounded issue of their Canadian counterparts not having done enough for their rescue.³⁷

The next word, “love,” is more understandable, as the dedicatee generation of “the teachers, doctors, leaders” includes Cohen’s parents as well as people he held dear, such as Louis Dudek or A.M. Klein (a decade older, but still within the same timeline).

³⁷Cohen was probably aware that Canada had turned down thousands of Jewish refugees from Europe immediately before and during the Second World War, eliminating their chances for survival: “Barriers were erected to Jewish immigration in the form of demands for documentation impossible for refugees from embattled Europe to obtain” (King *From the Ghetto to the Main* 208). The poet’s family would know more about these historical facts than the general Jewish community in Canada, being close to the Canadian Jewish Congress, the organization where his paternal grandfather had been one of the leading members. Cohen’s “scorn” could refer, then, to his bitterness over the failure of the Canadian Jewish Congress and a handful of rich families, like his own, to influence the government and save the doomed people in 1939-1945, even though it was hardly their fault under the circumstances of the time, with the “none is too many” antisemitic policy. As described in detail by Abella and Troper, the plea from the Canadian Jewish Congress and other organizations asking to accept Jewish refugees was turned down by Mackenzie King; public protests were ignored.

“Nausea” could stand for the eternal proverbial collision between generations that usually involves mutual misunderstanding and annoyance, though does not exclude love. Finally and most importantly, the rejected dedication names “a paralyzing sense of community,” that is, the sense of belonging and the ultimate acknowledgement of identity. After all, “the Dachau generation” is a broad concept, and Cohen himself escaped the Holocaust not because of remoteness in time but merely due to the spacial distance, which made him feel “the drastic guilt of him who was spared” (Adorno *Negative Dialectics* 363). Thousands of Jews sharing his birth year but not his luck of being born outside Europe did perish as children in death camps and ghettos. As Wynands comments, “Leonard Cohen might have asked himself where his life would have taken him had he been born in another place – say, Germany.” She rightfully argues that *Flowers for Hitler* was written “from a perspective of potential personal involvement: Cohen himself belongs to the primary target group of the Nazis’ exterminating crusades” (198).

Cohen tackles this moral predicament in the poem called “The Invisible Trouble,” where the persona feels ashamed of not being a victim: “His arm is unburned / his flesh whole: / the numbers he learned / from a movie reel.” The “blank” wrist he hides “under the table” prevents him from speaking up: “The chorus grows. / So does his silence.” It is hardly surprising for a poet of Cohen’s emotional intensity to experience and express “a sense of community” which is deep to the degree of being “paralyzing.” The capital letters used for the phrase “the Dachau generation” attract visual attention and mark these words as the most important part of the dedication, everything else leading up to them – an archaic but effective typesetting device. The publisher was possibly concerned that the straightforwardness of Cohen’s sentiments could limit the readership of the book, which

resulted in replacing the powerful confessional dedication to the communal past with a brief one to the personal present: “For Marianne” (Marianne Ihlen, Cohen’s love and muse of the time).

The last element of the prefatory complex is an epigraph in the exact sense of the word, a quotation from Primo Levi’s memoir *If This is a Man* (*Se questo è un uomo*, 1947; also known as *Survival in Auschwitz*):

If from the inside of the Lager, a message could have seeped out to free men, it would have been this: Take care not to suffer in your own homes what is inflicted on us here.

The epigraph works as a tuning fork that sets the poetic analogue of the musical “pure tone” for the whole work it precedes. By using this quotation, Cohen makes it clear that his poems are thematically universal and do not centre upon the historical event of the Holocaust; rather, they are devoted to human sufferings and the evil that causes them. The story of Cohen finding this epigraph indirectly confirms that his poetic imagination was largely stimulated by the ideas of the ubiquity of evil that were widely discussed in the media in early 1960s. There is evidence that Cohen obtained his epigraph not directly from Primo Levi’s book but through Al Alvarez’s article “The Concentration Camps” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1962. Jordan Berard has discovered striking substantiation in Cohen’s letter to his sister Esther. When Cohen was working on *Flowers for Hitler* in July 1963, he wrote to her:

Could you do me a favour? In one of your magazines, Atlantic or Harpers, there was an article on concentration camps. I don’t

know what month, but it was in your room when I was staying with you. In the piece there was a quote from one of the inmates, something like: ‘Take care that this does not happen in your homes.’ I’d like to have that exact quote and the speaker to use as the motto for OPIUM AND HITLER. (“Letter to Esther”)

The Cohen Papers at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library (University of Toronto) has this letter as well as the article in question, “The Concentration Camps” by Alvarez, cut out from the December 1962 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* and sent by Esther Cohen to her brother in response to his request (Berard 25-6). Furthermore, Berard proves that the quotation from Levi in Alvarez and the citation Cohen used for the epigraph coincide completely, which leaves little room for doubt: “‘In the middle of If This is a Man, the most moving of all the records of Auschwitz,’ Alvarez explains, ‘Primo Levi inserted a curious generalization. ‘If from the inside of the Lager, a message could have seeped out to free men, it would have been this: Take care not to suffer in your own homes what is inflicted on us here.’ Both Alvarez and Cohen use this quotation to evoke the idea of the banality of evil” (Berard 31). All of this points to the philosophical aspect of *Flowers for Hitler* as a book using the Holocaust as the highest known point of human evil to discuss evil as a phenomenon and building on Alvarez’s idea: “The more we know of the camps, the more they seem like a mirror thrust into our faces” (72).

The epigraph introduces the idea of evil being an ugly part of human nature that can reveal itself anywhere at any time. In an interview with Sandra Djwa Cohen explains his choice of the epigraph:

It's taking the mythology of the concentration camps and bringing it into the living room and saying, 'This is what we do to each other.' We outlaw genocide and concentration camps and gas and that, but if a man leaves his wife or they are cruel to each other, then that cruelty is going to find a manifestation if he has a political capacity; and he has. (Djwa "After the Wipe-Out" 8)

Although the comparison between the Holocaust and domestic violence might seem, using the word favoured by some critics of the book, flippant, it aims at explaining why the unthinkable horrors happened at all: if evil exists in everyone, everywhere, and infests everyday life, it can get out of control and take enormous proportions when given a chance. For that reason, "the banality of evil in all of its guises (genocide, domestic abuse, drug abuse, and adultery to name but a few) is the central theme of the entire work" (Berard 4). What the book is "about" is the poet's inner world and its response to the concept of evil in various manifestations. Concurrently, his intuitive ideas of time and history are revealed.

For a book with the name of a historical figure in the title, it would be unsurprising to contain poems devoted to actual characters of the past. Cohen upholds the titular topic by citing the names of Goebbels, Hitler, Eichmann, and personas from other epochs and countries, such as Queen Victoria and Kerensky. Those expecting literal exploration of historical themes related to these figures, however, get disappointed and frustrated, as Volkmann, who finds the poem "Goebbels Abandons His Novel And Joins the Party" "strangely surrealist" and having "no obvious references to the real Goebbels in it" (227). There are references, though, to the wrongdoings that turn a person into a

more nefarious version of himself: “He remembered perfectly / how he sprung / his father’s heart attack / and left his mother/ in a pit / memory white from loss of guilt.” The last phrase is of particular importance: “white” guiltless memory can lead to growing malevolence; it is a warning symptom.

Critics routinely call this poem “surreal” (Scobie, Volkmann), probably not being ready to recognize that it is, at least partially, self-reflexive and “flippantly” applies the contaminated name of a Nazi leader to the inner torments of the poet’s alter ego. The historical Goebbels was indeed an artistically failed author of poetry, plays, and a novel; he did abandon his activity as a writer to join the National Socialist Party. Goebbels’s relationships with women were fairly central to his life, and the influence of his wife was notorious. In Cohen’s poem, the distinction between the metaphorical Goebbels and the persona writing love poems, watching “swearing blonds,” contemplating marriage, dissecting his own memories and dreams, is intentionally blurred; the images of the harbour, ships, and sun call to mind the author’s stay on the Greek island of Hydra and the creative and personal struggles he had there. Suddenly “lustless as a wheel” and in crisis, the persona finds himself on the crossroad. He can turn productive and worthy or remain barren and go evil. The final lines are:

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

The persona is burning with “religious electric light” of inner energy, but it is “exlax” (as in laxative-induced), moronic, that of a loser. The Goebbels of the title, like his historical

namesake, “abandons his novel and joins the party,” allowing this “exlax light” to grow into vile fire, while the protagonist can still be saved from moral degradation. The name of a Nazi leader is used as an archetypal figure of an artistic failure replacing dissatisfaction and neurosis with hatred and evil. A similar effect occurs in “Police Gazette,” where an unfulfilled-to-be creative ambition is waiting to produce evil:

Hitler is alive.

He is fourteen years old.

He does not shave.

He wants to be an architect.

The “Goebbels” poem, which might seem superficial provides, nevertheless, an analysis of the human condition, as do other works in *Flowers for Hitler*. The author not so much explores the past as he examines a phenomenon that could arise at any point in history and, in Ondaatje’s words, does so by “making himself the sacrificial guinea pig, revealing the inherent evils in himself” (36). He is audacious enough to say that anyone, himself included, has a deeply dark side; he employs the much-hated names metaphorically, as objective correlatives for evil, as in “Hitler the Brain-Mole”:

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

No use to tell a man he’s a Jew

Carrying a similar message, though in a less shocking way, “All There Is To Know About Adolph [sic] Eichmann” enumerates the average, “medium” anthropological characteristics of a major Holocaust villain and makes the reader see the obvious:

“DISTINGUISHING FEATURES None.” The poem ends with sarcastic questions: “What did you expect? / Talons? / Oversize incisors? / Green saliva? / Madness?” Naturally, “no” would be everyone’s answer. The truth that Eichmann is physically indistinguishable from any other human being is easier to accept than the next logical step Cohen takes: other human beings are not radically different from Eichmann. Dreadful as it is, this point finds confirmation in reality, especially in media reports where shaken neighbours and relatives typically tell journalists what a “normal” person a campus shooter, a serial killer, or a terrorist was in everyday life. In a Swiftian manner, the poet puts a mirror of his “surrealist” imagery in front of humanity and gets lashed for that, being accused of bad taste and disrespect for the historical tragedy. Cohen exaggerates; not everyone is a potential mass murderer: goodness is as inherent to humanity as evil. The hyperbole, however, has a greater shock value, which helps Cohen develop and promote the idea of the banality of evil and, at least to some extent, “make clear for us Belsen.”

In the ballad “Opium and Hitler,” the two objects in the title turn into the means of getting numb and insensitive to anything but sex: “opium and Hitler let him sleep”; “[o]pium and Hitler / made him sure / the word was glass.” The lover belonging to a different race, though, is more effective than a “racial speech” by “the Leader” at the end of the poem: before the speech starts, racism is defeated, “disarmed” by “a festered kiss.” As in many other poems, sexual love is the focal point here and proves to be stronger than other forces, be it opium or the malevolent “Leader.” At the same time, Cohen refers to the notion of history and develops a parallel with drugs, emphasizing the seductive effect brought up earlier in “On Hearing a Name long Unspoken”:

History is a needle
 for putting men asleep³⁸
 anointed with the poison
 of all they want to keep

In “Opium and Hitler,” the poet resorts to the same metaphor: “He fumbled / for his history dose. / The sun came loose, / his woman close.” Throughout the book, history is not what the word usually means according to dictionaries and encyclopedias, not “the past considered as a whole”; instead of being something left behind, history surrounds the speaker. The past is still happening in his mind, as in the poem titled “Hitler”:

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.

In the next lines an unexpected turn occurs with figures of the past coming to life and interfering with the present:

Cadres of SS waken in our minds
 where they began before we ransomed them

³⁸Cohen often puts the words “history” and “sleep” in one sentence, though not necessarily in cause-and-effect conjunction, as in “The House,” where sleeping occurs within a dream and the “I” sees himself as a historian: “Last night I dreamed / you were Buddha’s wife / and I was a historian watching you sleep.” This fragment of the poem is self-parodied in *Beautiful Losers*, in “F.’s Invocation To History in the Middle Style,” as an anarchistic protest against reverence for history:

History is a Scabbie Point
 For Putting Cash to sleep
 Shooting up the Peanut Shit
 Of all we need to keep. (201)

to that actual empty realm we people
with the shadows that disturb our inward peace.

Ondaatje writes that “[o]ver half the poems in the book take place in the mind, deal with mental horror.” (38) This is hardly an overstatement, for no poem in the book “takes place” outside the mental world of the poet, which is natural for lyric poetry feeding on the author’s emotions and expressing his inner world rather than reflecting outward reality.

Cohen’s Holocaust poems, while nominally history-related, are general and ahistoric. His Hitler, Goebbels, or Eichmann, as well as other historical figures he mentions (Marco Polo, Queen Victoria, Kerensky, Lenin, Rockefeller), float throughout time, having no fixed position in it. They did not sink into the past completely, as history is not done with and is still alive. The poet’s unconventional concept of history was not overlooked by critics. Volkmann, for example, points to the book’s “rather transhistorical meaning” (226) and calls “Hitler the Brain Mole” in particular “strangely ahistoric” (227). The lyric “I” does not distinguish between the past and the present. This attitude undoubtedly reveals the poet’s own sense of time and history, at least, in the period of the 1960s, because a similar outlook saturates *Beautiful Losers* – the novel that appeared only two years after *Flowers for Hitler*. In “Queen Victoria and Me,” he addresses Queen Victoria as if she were his contemporary, “ahistorically” proclaiming: “The 20th century belongs to you and me.” He asks for her friendship, one solitary soul seeking consolation from another: “Queen Victoria / I am not much nourished by modern love / Will you come into my life / with your sorrow and your black carriages”; he talks to her in almost the same manner as “I” in *Beautiful Losers* talks to (and falls in love with) the

Western view of history as linear, teleological progression towards a more peaceful, rational state of civilization is [...] questioned” (234). Cohen is no believer in moral progress, emphasizing in “A Note On the Title” that as time passes, evil does not lessen but grows, sometimes literally. He develops this idea in “Police Gazette,” where the past is waiting to transform into an evil future: a fourteen-year old boy who “wants to be an architect” is to grow up and become Hitler.

Throughout the book, as in Cohen’s other works, the future rarely promises anything optimistic. “The New Step. A Ballet-Drama in One Act” might seem hopeful, since the title suggests moving forward and at the end the unhappy, insecure, “plain” and “ugly” girl Mary gains self-confidence, shaking off her obsequiousness towards the perfect beauty Diane. At the same time, Mary becomes vile and vindictive; she openly celebrates the fact that her friend’s fiancé Harry abandons Diane for “an invalid.” Diane’s dreamed future is ruined; Mary will thrive on the defeat of beauty. Knowing Cohen’s adoration of beauty, the ending where ugliness and mediocrity triumph over it can be neither positive nor hopeful. In “My Teacher is Dying,” various negative things, from small to important, are in progress: “my teacher is dying”; “Mountain Street is dying”; “[m]y radio is falling to pieces.” The future is hardly joyful as seen through the speaker’s eyes; his repetitious cries for a certain woman’s attention (“Martha talk to me”) read as a sign of desperation. Although the lyric “I” and Martha could get together, “marry [their] rooms,” the atmosphere of the poem does not allow any room for happiness ever after. In “To A Man Who Thinks He Is Making an Angel,” the first lines grimly advise against hoping for luck: “Drop the angel out of your silver spoon / You’ll never get it to your mouth.” In “Style,” nearly every sentence composed in the future tense carries a gloomy

message, such as a promise of cutting off family ties (“I will forget the grass of my mother’s lawn / I know I will / I will forget the old telephone number”); foreshadowing of destruction of the artistic self (“I will forget my style / I will have no style”); and the loss of creative integrity by whole nations (“America will have no style / Russia will have no style”). The only two hopeful statements (“Perhaps a mind will open in this world / perhaps a heart will catch rain”) are instantly corrected by a more pessimistic line following immediately: “Nothing will heal and nothing will freeze / but perhaps a heart will catch rain.” The future is uncertain for all things and creatures: “I don’t know what will become / of the mules with their lady eyes / or the old clear water / or the giant rooster.” The poem ends with an expression of the speaker’s anxiety in the face of the looming “external silence”: “(I am sleepy and frightened) / it makes toward me brothers.”

In “Montreal 1964,” a politically charged poem echoing the nationalist/separatist unrest in Quebec of the 1960s, both the country’s future and that of the poet’s lyric alter ego are deemed problematic:

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.

[...]

I dread the voice behind the flag I drew

on the blank sky

for my absolute poems will be crumpled

under a marble asylum

my absolute flight snarled like old fishing line:

What will I have in my head

to serve against logic brotherhood destiny?

Political prophecies become gloomier in the bitter “Cherry Orchards”:

Canada some wars are awaiting for you

some threats

some torn flags

[...]

mailboxes will explode

in the cherry orchards

The speaker of the poem continues: “From my deep café I survey the quiet snowfields [...] / looking for a moving speck / a troika perhaps / an exile / an icy prophet / an Indian resurrection / a burning weather station”; all these mean revolutionary changes that might be exciting but malevolent due to violence. Typically for the rebellious epoch, he envisions catastrophes awaiting the complacent bourgeois society that lives on “grandfather’s fat cheque.” He predicts its fall using Russian associations: a reference to Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* where the old order of things is on the brink of disappearance; an image of the “quiet snowfields” about to produce something unexpected; finally, a troika, the symbol of moving forward fast and freely across vast open spaces, such as the said snowfields. Cohen was obviously aware of the story of the Russian revolution; he uses the name of one of its figures, Kerensky, for another poem. The poet probably knew that the revolution was brutal, as seen from his choice of allusions. There is nothing optimistic in his picture of Canada’s future, and it is not by

chance that the last line of the poem brings together the words “freedom” and “death.” Overall, this and other “political” poems in the book (such as “Portrait of the City Hall” with the word “guilt” repeated seven times or “Business As Usual” with its criticism of Parliament with “no Opposition”) display a disturbed present and bleak future.

In “Winter Bulletin” the lyric “I,” having expressed an ironic satisfaction with his immediate past, speaks directly of his hopelessness about the future. He is sure he will repeat his mistakes, not achievements:

Not very carefully

I thought about the future

[...]

The future seemed unnecessarily black and strong

as if it had received my casual mistakes

through a carbon sheet

The only instance of a positive vision of time yet to come in the entire book is in the grotesque ballad “Nothing I Can Lose,” worthy of Cohen’s earlier mythology-laden works. The persona of the poem, a son of “a wizard, trickster, liar,” finds himself a “mile above Niagara Falls,” presumably tightrope walking, when he learns of his father’s death. The final quatrain of the ballad suggests that he hopes to surpass himself (and, by implication, his father) in the near future:

Tomorrow I’ll invent a trick

I do not know tonight,

the wind, the pole will tell me what

and the friendly blinding light.

This positive future that will outshine the present is ensured by the past, since the image of “the friendly blinding light” is built upon the father’s “best trick” with sunlight at the beginning of the poem. As in “Winter Bulletin,” it is the past that creates the future.

While the Holocaust and history-related poems are vague, “surrealistic,” general, and ahistoric, those pertaining to the personal story of the book’s lyric “I” (and the poet) appear as more precise, at times factographic (if this word can be applied to poetry), and often contain dates. The last attribute deserves special attention because indicating the date of a poem’s composition is highly uncharacteristic of Cohen’s first two books. *Flowers for Hitler*, in contrast, abounds with dated texts. There are three ways of placing a date on a poem. First, a date can be inserted in a title, for instance, “The Drawer’s Condition On November 28, 1961” or “Montreal 1964.” Second, a poem can be dated in the most traditional way – at the end, the date and place of composition being the final element closing the text, as in “The Only Tourist in Havana Turns His Thoughts Homeward” (Havana April 1961), “How the Winter Gets In” (Ways Mills November 1963), or “Island Bulletin” (July 4, 1963). Finally, a date can be put inside the text of a poem, as in “One of the Nights I Didn’t Kill Myself” (“I believe I believe / Thursday December 12th / is not the night”) or “Indictment of the Blue Hole,” a poem in the form of a diary entry. In the latter, the emotional experiences of one day are recorded through a series of sub-entries repeating the same date and, in two cases, specifying the time:

January 28 1962

You must have heard me tonight

I mentioned you 800 times

January 28 1962

My abandoned narcotics have
abandoned me

January 28 1962

7:30 must have dug its
pikes into your blue wrist

[...]

Is this all I give?

One lousy reprieve

at 2 in the morning?

This precision, almost a fixation, on exact moments in time and their connection to emotions is striking. Be it an artistic device or an imprint of the author's own life, this well-documented "inner history" contrasts the "ahistorical" approach to the events that happened in reality, though years ago to other people; while the personal past is distinct, a more general past appears non discrete. The self-analysis is precise and detailed, unlike the unfocused gaze at history, which is, after all, a distinguishing feature of lyric poetry.

The use of dates also demonstrates that the order of the works in the volume is not chronologic: the 1963 poems follow the 1964 poems; they, in turn, precede the 1961 poems. This disruption of chronology is intentional, the arrangement of poems following a logic that would deserve a separate analysis. It is clear, though, that the dates (and places) of composition, when provided, mark an occasion or a day of special significance in the poet's life. For example, while the other dated poems are scattered throughout the book, five of them form a cluster, being placed together and immediately following each other: "I Had It For a Moment," "Island Bulletin," "Independence," and "The House" are

all provided with one and the same date, July 4, 1963. “Order,” the fifth in the row, bears the date of August 6, 1963. What singles out these poems is the fact that they provide a precise day, not just a month and/or a year, which is a clear indication of that day having a particular significance in the poet’s life.⁴⁰ This date is a mark on the memory left for himself and, possibly, to those who share with him some private knowledge. Overall, the dates are instruments of memory, a part of the system of “elaborate mnemonic devices” (Wilson 21). If one presumes that the dates are authentic and accurate, they become a curious *bona fide* link between the real (biographic) author, the implied author, and the lyric “I.” They also reveal the author’s attitude to the book as a milestone in his life with some of his feelings and experiences of the period documented and sealed with exact dates. The book is more self-reflexive than concerned with actual history, and it is self-reflexiveness that sets the mood and themes for *Flowers for Hitler*.⁴¹

In contrast to Cohen’s first two books, *Flowers for Hitler* displays little interest in the biblical past. There are only two titles alluding to the Bible, “Leviathan” and “Lot.” In “Leviathan,” where the speaker describes his Boschian vision of horrors (“limbs, rumps, fetuses compose my mind”), the title reference is not to the biblical monster but to its representation in art: “It reels like Leviathan in oldtime cuts, / a nation writhing: /

⁴⁰ Scobie sees this attention to dates differently: “A whole group of poems [...] written on one day, July 4th 1963, flaunt the date as if to say; ‘Look, I didn’t revise them, I didn’t write them carefully and slowly, they just all came rushing out and I left them that way’” (45). It is hard to agree with his interpretation, knowing Cohen’s tendency to craft his poems carefully, going through numerous drafts.

⁴¹ “[T]he volume contains a number of self-reflexive poems [...] that serve as interpretive guides for the remainder of the poems. It is imperative for a comprehensive analysis of the book to understand that the themes and attitudes of these self-reflexive poems apply to the volume as a whole, not just to themselves. [...] That many critics have failed to read *Flowers for Hitler* through the lens of these self-reflexive poems partly explains their failure to find thematic unity in the book” (Berard 1-2).

mothers, statues, madonnas, ruins”; the terrible picture in the persona’s mind is lifted up from the time flow. It has no specific connection to the biblical story or any definite historical event (though the Holocaust could be implied by the context of the book). “Lot” draws on the image of losses the “I” mourns as he moves along his path: “Give me back my house / Give me back my young wife.” Unlike Lot in the Bible, he looks back and longs for his personal past (“Give me back my name / Give me back my childhood list”); no tribal or communal past is ever mentioned. The titular allusion is supported by the word “salt,” creating a connection with Lot’s wife who “looked back from behind him, and [...] became a pillar of salt” (Genesis 19:26). In Cohen’s poem the image is entirely different: “this soft total chant that drives my soul / like a spear of salt into the rock.” The biblical associations build up the conceit of a man longing for his losses, though the connection to the original is only superficial.

There are few other allusions to the Bible in *Flowers for Hitler*, and whenever the poet uses biblical references, their semantic links with the source of the quotations are not strong. In “Sick Alone,” “a squashed group / of bible animals lion child kitten” hardly has a symbolic meaning; rather, it is a realistic detail (possibly toys) in the roomscape where the speaker suffers from a heaving stomach. In “On The Sickness of My Love,” the poet mentions the dance of seven veils, which is, strictly speaking, not a biblical quotation but a later cultural construction associated with the biblical Salome; in the poem, it stands for a gesture of desperation and readiness to do whatever it takes to help the speaker’s sick lover: “Make her get up! / dance the seven veils!” Similarly, in “Nursery Rhyme” a biblical reference “Even if you are the Golden Calf / you are better than money / or government” is more a standard expression than an evocative allusion. A rare instance of

a biblical reference with considerable semantic weight occurs in “Why I Happen To Be Free”; the characters mentioned in the poem are presented as a part of the biblical past the poet culturally identifies with: “Time was our best men died / in error and enlightenment / Moses on the lookout / David in his house of blood.” All in all, in his third book Cohen abandons the extensive usage of the Bible and the legendary past of his distant ancestors as a source of imagery and an object of reflections.

Artistically, *Flowers for Hitler* is less connected to the past, too. Though the poet signed a letter to McClelland pertaining to the book “Leonard Cohen / The Jewish Keats,” in the volume itself he relies on contemporary trends in poetry more than on lessons from literary predecessors from previous epochs. When he mentions poets and writers, it is out of context of their creative achievements and often in connection with biographic details. For example, in “Indictment of the Blue Hole,” he enumerates various odd objects, “De Quincey hairnet” among them; De Quincey was one of the first authors both to demonize and to romanticize opium in his *Confessions of An English Opium Eater*, the main connection being his addiction to opium and Cohen’s own flirtation with the substance in the 1960s. In “Why I Happen to be Free” the poet mentions recently (in 1960) perished Albert Camus more as a cultural hero, along with biblical characters, than as a writer: “Time was our best men died / [...] Moses on the lookout / David in his house of blood / Camus beside the driver.” In the psychedelic “Congratulations” the sacred-mushroom-inspired speaker cites the name of Rimbaud in a non-literary context,⁴² merging exploration of space with that of time and mystified history:

⁴²Scobie argues that there is a deeper literary allusion, after all: “Rimbaud’s boat is of course the ‘bâteau ivre’ of his poems, drunk like the fraternity of Belsen, evoking the

Hey Marco Polo
 and you Arthur Rimbaud
 friends of the sailing craft
 examine our time's adventure
 the jeweled house of Dachau
 Belsen's drunk fraternity

Classical allusions in the book are rare. References to antiquity are limited to the title "Narcissus," Parthenon in "For Anyone Dressed in Marble," and occasional indirect hints. A title phrase "The Rest is Dross" is a self-ironic paraphrase of Shakespeare's "The rest is silence" in *Hamlet*, and Timon [of Athens] in "For My Old Layton" points to another Shakespearian play. "Cherry Orchards," of course, makes use of the name of Chekhov's most famous play. In some instances, Cohen employs traditional poetic forms, though not as often as in his previous two volumes. In *Flowers for Hitler*, there are several ballads written in rhymed quatrains and having a "plot," such as "Laundry" with typical ballad motives of love and violence or "Hydra 1963" with its marine romanticism. "For Anyone Dressed in Marble" is a near-perfect Shakespearean sonnet, composed in iambic pentameter and equipped with the proper rhyming scheme of three quatrains plus a couplet, and even the volta. Apart from a hint at the Holocaust ("Bred close to the ovens, he's burnt inside"), the sonnet is thematically traditional too, dealing with human moral deficiency. "The Pure List and The Commentary" is a two-part text consisting of a poem proper and an extensive ironic prose commentary. On the one hand, this form is undeniably experimental and non-traditional; on the other, its origin can be traced back to

whole tradition of the nineteenth-century French poets in the same way as the title of *Flowers for Hitler* evokes Baudelaire" (54).

T.S. Eliot's notorious notes, or self-commentary, to the first American edition of *The Waste Land* (1922) which made some obscure aspects of the work yet more unclear and eventually became a part of the poem's structure.

Despite his occasional glances at literary models of the past, Cohen becomes progressively more independent from them. He openly declares on the blurb his break from poetic traditions: "My sounds are too new." Being undoubtedly aware of more advanced European and American experimentations, he limits the scale of the book's novelty to Canadian literature: "Well, I say that there has never been a book like this, prose or poetry, written in Canada." In the book, he reveals some of the contemporary influences he experienced: Irving Layton, Alexander Trocchi,⁴³ and E.J. Pratt. The poems devoted to these authors use elements of their literary methods or/and magnified traits of their personalities inseparable from their poetic stance. In "For My Old Layton," for example, there are Layton-like irreverent comparisons ("His pain, unowned, he left / in paragraphs of love, hidden, like a cat leaves shit") and the Laytonian figure of a poet as a semi-mythical giant who "wore live snakes, weeds / for bracelets" when tired of the bourgeois townspeople throwing garbage at him. Cohen builds his poem on the lessons from Layton. As Scobie notes, "the image which Layton projects of himself in some of his poems [...] is here used as a starting-point for the portrayal of a character pursuing the career of a typical Cohen saint" (*Leonard Cohen* 60). In "Alexander Trocchi, Public

⁴³ Alexander Trocchi, "a tall, charismatic Scotsman of Italian descent, nine years Leonard's senior" was a peculiar figure Cohen befriended in New York in the late 1950s. In the early 1950s, during his stay in Paris, Trocchi "founded the literary magazine *Merlin*, published Sartre and Neruda, wrote pornographic novels and espoused his own Beat-meets-early-hippie interpretation of Situationism. An enthusiast for drugs, he turned his heroin addiction into Dadaist performance art" (Simmons 100). His psychedelic art works and risqué novels undoubtedly influenced *Flowers for Hitler* and also *Beautiful Losers*, where Trocchi could be one of the prototypes for the character F.

Junkie, Priez Pour Nous,” after a series of defiant images inspired by Trocchi’s personality, creative rebelliousness, and “bohemian flare” (Nadel *Various Positions* 101), the lyric “I” explicitly admits the “public junkie’s” artistic and personal impact: “Your purity drives me to work. / [...] You leave behind a fanatic / to answer RCMP questions.”⁴⁴ The poem “For E.J.P.” seems “much more apposite to Ezra [Pound] without the J.” (Scobie *Leonard Cohen* 60), and presents not a tribute but a declarative opposition to E.J. Pratt’s legacy; for instance, Cohen celebrates sensuality largely absent from Pratt’s poetry.⁴⁵ At the same time, the poet’s polished free verses could remind one of Pratt’s lines, only with markedly more modern diction.

No critic writing about *Flowers for Hitler* failed to comment on the author’s focus on style and artistic experimentations. In an early and pointedly favourable review Wilson asserts: “What the book is really about [...] is the problem of style, seen in the most literary and most unliterary senses of the word.” (21) Later, Ondaatje almost denigratingly states that Cohen’s “language is anti-poetic, realistic, blending in with everyday speech so that when read aloud they sound like the words of a demagogue. There are also numerous experiments with style” (43). Scobie underlines that Cohen’s declaration that he has no style and the attack on style in the eponymously titled poem only prove precisely that it is style that the poet works on in a book containing both anti-style poems and poems “far too well written” (*Leonard Cohen* 48); “the pose of having

⁴⁴ In 1961, Cohen was involved in his friends’ operation of smuggling Trocchi, whose passport had expired, through Canada to Scotland in order to save the man from serious trouble with the United States law (Simmons 100-101, Nadel *Various Positions* 100).

⁴⁵ “Pratt does make us hear the music of nature, [...] but he almost never lets us touch, taste, or smell, the senses often connected with feeling because of the physical contact involved” (Froese 21). In Cohen’s poem, on the contrary, there is a bodily touch between the speaker and nature, as in the line “I polished my tongue against the pumice moon.”

no style is itself a style” (*Leonard Cohen* 45). Simmons remarks: “Thematically, *Flowers for Hitler* was not entirely new for Leonard; there had been sex, violence, murder and the Holocaust in his first two books of poems,⁴⁶ as well as songs to lovers and celebrations of teachers and friends. What was different was its style. It was much less formal and its language freer and more contemporary” (121). Cohen forgoes poetic traditions and moves from “romantic lyricism to history in all of its horror” (Nadel *Various Positions* 121) and innovative (at least, for Canadian literature) literary forms. While thematically the poems remain self-reflexive or/and concerned with the past, the artistic vector turns away from tradition, pierces the present, and points at the future.

The subject of Jewish past and identity is not as accentuated in *Flowers for Hitler* as in the two previous volumes, though still ubiquitous, the Holocaust theme occupying the central place. The imagery in “It Uses Us!” demonstrates how, while “leaders” tend to disregard history and “deplore / the past,” for the speaker “boundaries disappear” and he associates himself with the victims:

In my own mirror
 their eyes beam at me:
 my face is theirs, my eyes
 burnt and free.

Although images connected to Jewish culture are not numerous, they still can be found in the book – a Chagallian reference to “rabbis green and red serving the sun like platters” (“Three Good Nights”) is one of them. There are, however, certain changes in the representation of Jews and Judaism in *Flowers for Hitler*: it becomes more aloof. In

⁴⁶Nadel, unlike Simmons, points to thematic novelty: “The book drew together a series of new and immediate themes: Hydra, history, and politics” (*Various Positions* 118).

“Why I Happen To Be Free,” Jews are mentioned on a par with Catholics, Buddhists, and Protestants; the persona dreams of his imagined dictatorship that would bring back order to the universe by punishing these religious groups for transgressions of their respective principles: “My new laws encourage not satori but perfection / at last at last / Jews who walk / too far on Sabbath / will be stoned.” “My Mentors,” in form reminiscent of “Song” (“My lover Peterson...”) from *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, goes farther and renders a confusion of religions and beliefs that are all interchangeable and unreliable: “My rabbi has a silver buddha, / my priest has a jade talisman. [...] / My rabbi, my priest stole their trinkets / from shelves in the holy of holies. / The trinkets cannot be eaten. / They wonder what to do with them.” The speaker’s personality is presented as more wholesome than any mentor’s teaching, and he makes them all, his rabbi, his priest, his doctor, and his zen master, “stand in the foul corner.” This new audacious attitude signals the poet’s spiritual crisis that found expression both in *Flowers for Hitler* and outside the book.

The line about “a Talmudic quarrel / with the Montreal Jewish community” in the poem “Winter Bulletin” indubitably refers to Cohen’s speech “Loneliness and History” delivered in December 1963 at the Montreal Jewish Public Library. The phrase “Talmudic quarrel” is ironic because in the speech itself Cohen confesses: “I know nothing about Talmud.” His core disagreement with the Montreal Jewish establishment was nevertheless of a spiritual nature. He starts off by declaring his identity and the intention to sort out his relationships with his Jewishness and the community: “I am afraid I am going to talk about myself. All of my best friends are Jews but I am the only Jew I know really well.” In the speech Cohen reprimanded the community for their contempt for Talmudic idealists, or “prophets,” “[b]ecause they were poor, because they

were refugees, because they brought a broken, failed European heart into this expensive synagogue, because they were shlemels, that is scholars.” Provokingly, and certainly speaking about himself, he proceeds: “The nominal community will continue to dismiss its writers and award them the title of a traitor. But the writers will continue to use the word ‘Jew’ in their poems and so will be bound in the fascination which the nominal community has for this word.” The poet claims that the community, preoccupied with earthly interests, has a “fossil of the original energy” and unthinkingly takes it for religion. He dwells upon Jewish history, the ancient Hebrews, and Moses who, as a prophet, was the first to feel “the distance growing between himself and community.” In the modern world, he construes, it is prophets (idealists, writers, scholars) who can fight the “hideous distortion of a supreme idea” and bring on refreshing changes; too bad the establishment does not realize that. Cohen’s “indictment made the front page of the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* with the headline POET-NOVELIST SAYS JUDAISM BETRAYED. The controversy was now national” (Simmons 123). *Flowers for Hitler* only expanded the gap between the Montreal Jewish community and Cohen. Unsurprisingly, a line in one of the poems runs: “I am alone. / Goodbye little Jewish soul” (“Governments Make me Lonely”). Still, the poet’s pose of a prophet is precisely Judaic. “I am a man of tradition,” pronounces the lyric “I” in “Island Bulletin” (though referring to a situation unrelated to matters of spirituality and identity). It is not by chance that in his controversial speech Cohen searches for the renewed “original energy” and “the supreme idea” of Judaism by talking about the past, by looking back at their source, and by citing Moses as the original prophet and first bearer of the burden of an idea the

community was not entirely ready for. Cohen's pose of poet-prophet is deeply rooted in this legendary Hebrew past.

The topic of the family past, prominent in earlier works, nearly fades away in *Flowers for Hitler* probably because it had found a profound expression in *The Favourite Game* (published the previous year) or because there was no immediate connection between the family history and the Holocaust. Yet, self-reflexiveness, at least in Cohen's case, is impossible without bringing in the theme of familial bonds and memories, his emotional necessities of the period in question:

Look through your grandmother's house again.

There is an heirloom somewhere.

("Heirloom")

All memories are "an heirloom" the present is based upon. The here and now is a continuation of an old dialogue, be the interlocutor imaginary/remembered or real:

My father used to remark,

doffing his miniature medals, that

there is a time that is ripe for

everything.⁴⁷ A little extravagant,

Dad, I guess, judging by values.

Oh well, he'd say, and the whole

world might have been the address.

("Propaganda")

⁴⁷"There is a time for everything" is a citation from Ecclesiastes 3:1.

Here, the author lends his own medal-decorated, imposing, Bible-quoting father to the speaker and gives him a chance to partake in a conversation not reconstructed but constructed, imagined, and then committed to memory.

A prose piece “Why Commands Are Obeyed” recounts an episode of a boy’s father testing his son’s courage by telling him that a “familiar room” with “Mother Goose wallpaper,” when in darkness, is full of danger. Twenty years later, the imaginary horror ricochets at the father, the son saying that the room is filled with “stinking relics” and that one of the father’s “young, hardly remembered legs is folded between the pillows of a chesterfield, decaying like food between teeth.” Memory and imagination bring the two together, “reconciled, as the old story unfolded”; having scared each other, they are finally even. The story that happened “*once upon a time*” repeats itself, now mostly in the son’s mind, because it is he who sees the past stuck in the ashtray and in the folds of furniture; it is his recollections that bring back the Mother Goose wallpaper going sinisterly black. It is hard to tell if the father is there or missing from the grown-up son’s reality, and all the embrace and reconciliation are nothing but a fantasy. The text participates in developing the main theme of the book, the omnipresence of evil and the mundane nature of cruelty. Although neither character is evil in “Why Commands Are Obeyed,” the fact that mutual love does not prevent psychological torture and emotional agony forms an even more poignant message.

Most attitudes of the “I,” and to a large extent of the poet himself, took shape under the influence of the family or through rejecting its values. In another prose text titled “The Project,” the persona is a young man presumably contaminated with a venereal disease, reluctantly working as a machine operator at a men’s clothing factory,

and having anarchic ideas of setting bourgeois houses on fire or spreading his infection around. The speaker is an imaginary character; he commits wild actions, such as instigating a workplace injury of an irksome foreman who embodies the “slavery” of the job at the factory; he dreams of causing fires and explosions, envisaging himself “mad,” “at the top of Mountain Royal impersonating Genghis Khan”; he starts the chain of passing on the disease – that is, sets off his evil “project.” All these reminiscences in all probability are the fantasies that would cross young Cohen’s mind at the period when he was compelled by his uncles to partake in the family business and reluctantly worked at the factory, diverted from his formation as a poet.⁴⁸ In “The Project,” the character replaces his spectacular but hardly realizable plan of unleashing his revenge on the city by an easier, “[l]ess dramatic,” strategy; he concludes: “But I have imagination.” So, apparently, does the author who makes use of the still-fresh memories about his fantasies and creates a well-crafted insight into a young rebellious mind. Within the context of the book, this “condensed short story” (Scobie *Leonard Cohen* 57) may be interpreted metaphorically: one gets a seed of evil in oneself and, being infected with it, becomes villainous: he is ready to spread the evil around, as widely as possible. This metaphorical reading provides a perfect illustration of the philosophical concept of the ubiquity of evil, explaining the mechanism of its dissemination. It echoes the confessional opening poem of *Flowers for Hitler*, “What I’m Doing Here” where the speaker says, in a *mea culpa* repetitive pattern: “I have lied”; “I have conspired against love”; “I have tortured.”

⁴⁸The tension with the family over young Cohen’s occupation is reflected in “Alexander Trocchi”: “I tend to get distracted / by hydrogen bombs, / by Uncle’s disapproval / of my treachery / to the men’s clothing industry.”

The same lyric “I” is capable of recalling his family members with a dose of affection, as in the lines from “Police Gazette” reminiscent of excerpts from Cohen’s prose featuring his grandfather:

My grandfather slams the silver goblet down.
 He clears a silence
 in the family talk
 to comment on the wine.

This fragment, written in the present tense, sounds like a description of a photograph or a film still; it creates a dignified portrait of the old man, despite the ironic discrepancy between the solemnity of the gesture and the occasion. In the same poem, there is Holocaust-related imagery; the speaker’s monologue at this point is reverent and full of semi-religious feelings: “I kiss the precious ashes / that fall from fiery flesh. / On these familiar shapes I lay my kisses down.” Family and personal matters get mixed with history in the mind of the anxious “I,” though parallels between them are obscure; the speaker appropriates and emotionally owns the past, both familial and historical. Thus, to him, the “precious ashes” are a part of his ancestry too; they are in his blood. Wilson shrewdly wrote in his review that “Cohen’s society is very close and ancestral: a continuity of family betrayals and renewals. His sense of time is equally intimate: history as notebook, diary, list of addresses. [...] his last place of meeting [is] the oven where all things melt or flake into one. A web of blood in a museum of relics in a fiery furnace” (20).

The past of the family and the “I” is naturally intertwined. In “The Telephone,” the opening line starts: “Mother, the telephone is ringing in the empty house.” The

unanswered phone call is a starting point for unfolding a chain of personal associations and memories. The old telephone makes a “rusty sound, if ringing had a colour” and, as no family life goes on in the old place any longer, it is unsuccessful “as if, whatever the message, it would be obsolete, / news already acted on, or ignored.” There is no one in the present to take the call, only the remnants or shadows of the past:

Answer the phone, dust

Answer the phone, plastic Message-Riter

Answer the phone, darlings who lived in the house

even before us

The speaker surmises, addressing his mother: “someone is trying to get through [...] to remind you of Daylight Saving Time [...] even though you’ve changed all the clocks you can reach.” Daylight Saving Time and changing clocks acquire a metaphoric meaning. Playing with time, advancing clocks forcefully creates an artificial break with the past which the speaker of the poem is lamenting. The lyric “I” suddenly begins addressing himself in the second person, looking at himself as a little boy from the distance provided by time. He describes a moment from his childhood that comes to life in his memory triggered by the “rusty sound” of the phone, vivid as a family amateur film, all in the present tense as if happening here and now:

You are a little boy

lying in bed in the early summer

the telephone is ringing

your parents are in the garden

and they rush to get it

before it wakes you up

Here and now, however, he is a different person, not a child under his parents' protection any more: "you: single, awake, contemptuous even of exile." Still, certain things in him are not subject to change: "you shall not alter your love / assailed as it is by your nature, your insight, / Time or the World." One's filial love does not sink into the past, on the contrary, it keeps the past alive and secures one "a hiding place," be it material as the old family house, or not, as memories.

"Front Lawn," the poem third from the end, expresses more nostalgia for childhood than any other work in the book. In a dream-like, cinematic sequence of images, pictures of the past follow each other: the snow falling over a penknife, "a movie in the fireplace," apples, the janitor's daughter in a childish sexual fantasy – all in the past tense. The next shot in this imaginary motion picture, after a quick unrealistic promise of the future ("I'll go back one day"), switches to the present tense, portraying decay: leaves falling over the speaker's "bow and arrow," "candy [...] going bad," "Boy Scout calendars [...] on fire"; the mother is "old." She laughs "her Danube laugh" – the adjective accentuates the past alive within the present through a geographically inaccurate but emotionally effective reference to her accent and the Central European origin she never left behind.⁴⁹ The final lines are full of bitterness: "Rust rust rust / in the engines of love and time" – notably, the word "rust" echoes the "rusty sound" of the old phone in "The Telephone," in effect creating tension between love that shall not be altered and the corrosive influence of passing years.

⁴⁹ Another source of the image may be the song "The Beautiful Blue Danube" with its European flavour; it is possible that Cohen's mother would sing it occasionally. In the unpublished novel *A Ballet of Lepers* the protagonist croons jokingly: "The Danube is blue –ue-ue ue."

Memory, though, does not get rusty and revives whatever needs or deserves to be revived. In “Millennium,” fragments of the speaker’s dialogues with his ailing arthritic grandmother and thoughts about pain and loneliness are interspersed with images of burning books, fire destroying “documents” of written memories. Miraculously, when he needs to get to the old lady, it is his own living memory, not a recorded one, that helps him find her, as he triumphantly and tautologically exclaims: “And suddenly I did! / I remembered it from memory!” Memory is exceedingly important for keeping in touch with the past. To one’s surprise, in a book where memory is so powerful a concept, the word itself is employed merely four times, and the verb “to remember” appears only in eight instances, while the use of its antonym, “to forget,” occurs fourteen times. It is no coincidence but insightful intuition that Wilson accentuates the word “forget” in his review by putting it in the stressed position at the end of a sentence, observing that in *Flowers for Hitler* Cohen is “taking a more searching and uncompromising look at the poetic substance that he exists on, at all the things that he can remember, imagine, absorb, separate, excrete, transmute, forget” (21).

This paradox of “forget” overpowering “memory” can be explained by the sentiment of universal fragility that pervades the book, and the poet’s *ubi sunt* mind-set. The poem “On Hearing a Name Long Unspoken,” for example, clearly manifests the *ubi sunt* outlook. From the first quatrain, the theme of transience becomes apparent. When events sink into the past, they start seeming unreal; the past that happened not “somewhere else” (*The Favourite Game* 122) but in the place shared by the speaker and his addressee (or is it himself?), feels alien when retold after even a short period of time:

Listen to the stories

men tell of last year
 that sound of other places
 though they happened here

Passing time has the same effect on people, including those who used to be important to the speaker:

Now a name that saved you
 has a foreign taste
 claims a foreign body
 froze in last year's waste

No material monuments can hold “what is living”; it ceases to exist, “yields its final whisper” when artificially perpetuated with the help of “letters raised in gilt.” The lyric “I,” as in classical developments of the idea of transience in poetry, sides and, to some extent, identifies himself with ephemeral, transitory objects:

I am with the falling snow
 falling in the seas
 [...]
 I am with the houses
 that wash away in rain
 and leave no teeth of pillars
 to rake them up again

Events, names, bodies, houses, and trees – they all are as impermanent as the snow “falling in the seas” that draws Villon’s *neiges d’antan* into the text’s semantic repertoire. Transient things can be preserved only through memory, in the context of the poem going

by the name of “knowing”: “but what you know you know.” The final quatrain solidifies this idea:

And knowing is enough
 for mountains such as these
 where nothing long remains
 houses walls or trees

In “On the Sickness of My Love,” the bodily beauty of the speaker’s beloved starts yielding to the work of time:

She is getting old.
 Her body tells her everything.
 She has put aside cosmetics.
 She is a prison of truth.

Unlike Ronsard in “Quand vous serez bien vieille”⁵⁰ or Corneille in “A la Marquise,” or any other poet who has ever asserted that verses could immortalize the fleeting beauty of women, Cohen’s self-ironic speaker does not believe in this magic – or in his capability of performing it:

Can’t I pretend
 she grows prettier?
 be a convict?
 Can’t my power fool me?

⁵⁰The following lines in “The Big World” come close to being a concise paraphrase of Ronsard’s famous sonnet:

And your curious life with me
 will be told so often
 that no one will believe
 you grew old

Can't I live in poems?

Hurry up! poems! lies!

Damn your weak music!

You've let arthritis in!

You're no poem

You're a visa.

“Sky” is a model example of Cohen’s expanding the *ubi sunt* topic. The poem is structured around a refrain “the great ones pass,” which creates a soothing repetitive rhythm and gives the impression of things going as they should, “the great ones” obeying the universal order of passing as opposed to staying:

they pass

like stars of different seasons

like meteors of different centuries

[...]

they pass one another

without touching without looking

needing only to know

the great ones pass

Farther into the book, the opening quatrain of “The Glass Dog” picks up on the image and continues the same idea of transience:

The sky is empty at last,

the stars stand for themselves,

heroes and their history passed
like talk on the wind, like bells.

Transience is the way of the world; by implication, the past stands closer to perfection than the deteriorating present and the perilous future. In *Flowers for Hitler*, Cohen as a “poet-prophet” demonstrates that evil is intrinsic to human nature, does not belong to a concrete period of history and intensifies with the passage of time, each next villain creating more horror than his predecessors. While poetry can allow itself to move forward through experiments, for an individual holding on to his memories of the past is instrumental for resisting the evanescence of existence.

4. “It’s time to end the signature I stretched from line to line”:

Revisiting the Past and Redefining the Poetic Self in *Parasites of Heaven*

“I think that book is closer to the first one [...] I just found myself in a different place, in a different sort of crisis.”

Leonard Cohen about *Parasites of Heaven*

Cohen’s fourth book of poetry, published in 1966, came out quietly to no public excitement or critical agitation. In his review George Bowering comments: “The newest book, *Parasites of Heaven*, is his least important, but in it one may find his greatest strengths as surely as his most obvious tricks and shortcuts” (71). Others were more straightforward in their judgment. Ondaatje calls the volume “a diverse collection of notebook poems and prose” (56), implying that the materials were put together without serious artistic consideration. Scobie adds: “Even Cohen’s greatest admirers will readily admit that *Parasites of Heaven* is a pretty bad book. Perhaps the kindest adjective that can be applied to it is ‘uneven’ [...] [it] does not have the coherence of purpose of any of Cohen’s other volumes” (*Leonard Cohen* 63). Decades later, in the “Summary” written for the Internet project *The Leonard Cohen Files* in 1997, he characterizes *Parasites of Heaven* as “[a] slight volume, published mainly to exploit Cohen’s growing reputation”; the book “lacks the cohesive vision of his earlier books, and is notable mainly for the first publication of several poems which would later be more fully realized as songs, especially *Suzanne*” (n. pag.).

Parasites of Heaven is more impressionistic, associative, or, to quote many critics' favourite words, "surreal" and "enigmatic" than previous works. The reader is invited to plunge deeper into the author's inner world, which not everyone readily appreciated. Ondaatje, for example, observes, comparing *Parasites of Heaven* with *Flowers for Hitler*: "The subject [...] has changed. There are few social poems; Cohen has turned inward and argues with himself." He finds that in this book "often the ideas are too private and submerged to make sense" (57); he reproaches Cohen for being too introverted and writes that the author's "mind sprays out freely, full of personal references and jokes" (58). Scobie considers the poet's focus on himself nearly offensive: "there is the almost arrogant assumption that the most obscure, arbitrary and bizarre concoctions of Leonard Cohen's subconscious will be of interest to the reader" (*Leonard Cohen* 69). His mind is turned inward to the point where he loses contact with the outside world and the reader's interest:

The main thematic preoccupation is [...] the subjective self. The outward-turning social concerns of *Flowers for Hitler* have dropped out of sight. [...] In many poems [...] the subject matter never becomes clear; the images are trapped entirely within Cohen's private and arbitrary associations. They illuminate nothing [...]; they merely play obfuscating games with words.
(*Leonard Cohen* 65)

Indeed, the poet's particular concentration on himself in *Parasites of Heaven* is too apparent to be missed. Even the cover of the first edition accentuates it: a large black-and-white, chiaroscuro photograph presents Cohen's aquiline profile emerging from deep

shadow, with his hand on the forehead in a gesture reminiscent of Rodin's "Thinker," eyes staring unseeingly into the darkness. The general impression is best expressed by the title Bowering appropriately gives his review: "Inside Leonard Cohen." Being himself a poet, Bowering understands and lucidly explains Cohen's self-absorption disapproved by other critics: "the reason for any confusion and blurring lies in the kind of thing Cohen is try[ing] to do. He is ultimate lyric man. That means that he shows any range of his discoveries, mundane to metaphysical, always through his consciousness of singular self" (71). Writing about themselves is exactly what lyric poets have done for centuries, as subjectivity and preoccupation with personal emotion constitute the essence of lyric poetry: "A reviewer in Toronto complained that the first person singular appears too often in Cohen's book. But that is not a valid objection concerning lyric poetry, whether Shakespeare's sonnets or Cohen's songs" (Bowering 71). Just as in "Loneliness and History" Cohen claimed that he was the only Jew he knew well enough, he is the only individual he knows best of all to analyze in depth and talk about in poems. Hence, it is only natural that the major theme is the poet himself: "The central figure is once more Cohen, studying the gap between himself and his pose as 'Leonard'" (Ondaatje 58).

The book's dedication, "For Irving Layton," points to reflections on poetry rather than family, cultural identity, or love. Layton is often seen as a father figure for Cohen, but this view is a simplification. Michael Q. Abraham characterizes Layton's influence on Cohen as not exclusive but counterbalanced by Klein's: "Klein's more positive thesis meets Layton's antithesis in Cohen's attempt of synthesis" (90). Joel Deshayé, though still using the words "mentor" and "apprentice," calls the relationships of the two poets "mutually promotional" (82); he defines them as a "poetic dialogue" (77) and "reciprocal

influence” (102). There is no doubt that Layton’s impact on Cohen is significant; Layton “brought politics to poetry and Cohen absorbed Layton’s stance in later works of his own, notably *Flowers for Hitler* and *Parasites of Heaven* [...] From Layton, Cohen learned to value the excesses of the Dionysian style, to accept the power of prophetic visions, and to extend the poetic to include the Judaic” (Nadel *Various Positions* 41). At the same time, Cohen asserted that when he “came of age, there were very few models around” (qtd. in Harris “Leonard Cohen” 27); he denied a “master-student relationship,” saying that “if Irving did in some secret part of his mind feel that he was giving me instruction, he did it in a most subtle and beautiful way. He did it as a friend, he never made me feel that I was sitting at his feet” (qtd. in Harris “Interview” 95). Elsewhere, he declares straightforwardly: “Irving Layton never took an avuncular or paternal position towards me”; moreover, his effect on the older poet was just as substantial: “it would be just as true to say that Cohen was Layton’s mentor, for Layton quickly absorbed and sometimes mimicked the younger poet’s sayings and lifestyle” (qtd. in Dayan 71). Whatever the case may be, any mention of Layton in Cohen’s works leads to a discussion of poetry, artistic matters, and creative self; his name in the dedication signals the reader: *Parasites of Heaven* is a book about poetry as much as it is about the poet.

Parasites of Heaven speaks of uncertainty, desolation, and a major crisis. Cohen seeks self-understanding by recapitulating what he has achieved and pondering if there are other roads to explore. He goes over his work of the previous years in a roll call of old poems in order to “redefine his past” (Nadel *Various Positions* 140) and complements them with newer materials to verify his creative power. The book combines items dating back as early as 1957 with the most recent ones written in 1966. The arrangement is non-

chronological; later and earlier works are mixed up, following logic different from the historical order. Cohen displays a need to indicate the year of composition, that is, to locate poems within his artistic career and personal history. Thirty-five out of fifty-eight texts are dated; three more have dates inside them. At the same time, the poems themselves are depersonalized – none of them has a title. In the table of contents they go by their first lines, a normal practice for lyric poetry but completely uncharacteristic for Cohen’s previous books. The absence of a title usually suggests that, for some reason, the author found it impossible to point to a singular theme dominating the semantic structure of the work. Before *Parasites of Heaven*, Cohen’s poems were consistently titled, even though in many cases the first line served double duty as a title, stressing its importance as the starting point of the text. This change of style is obvious and, without a doubt, meaningful. The lack of titles might be either a sign of further denunciation of “clear” poetry as opposed to “enigmatic” or a signal of artistic uncertainty.

The eccentric titular metaphor of the whole volume, *Parasites of Heaven*, gives unity to the assortment of untitled works. It has so far evaded interpretation, apart from occasional play on words.⁵¹ The origin of the book could help shed some light on it. The volume was put together on the idyllic Greek island of Hydra, where Cohen had spent several productive years and wrote *The Favourite Game*, *Flowers for Hitler*, and *Beautiful Losers*. In the sixties, its Mediterranean charm attracted various accomplished or aspiring poets, artists, and other creative types who formed a colony there. In 1966 Cohen, still thinking of Hydra as paradise, or “heaven,” saw its arty expatriate residents,

⁵¹ See, for example: “If ‘heaven’ is still present in the book, it is present in the occasional glimpses of Cohen’s true poetic power, but in too many of the poems Cohen is the parasite of his own ability” (Scobie *Leonard Cohen* 69).

including (or even especially) himself, as “parasites.” In fact, the phrase “Parasites of Heaven” can be seen as a topical synonym for “Beautiful Losers,” that is, a restatement of the same idea. This explanation, though not exhaustive, nevertheless allows understanding of the title as acutely self-deprecating, which by implication confirms that the book expresses the state of a crisis.

Published the same year as *Beautiful Losers*, *Parasites of Heaven* maintains some of the novel’s themes. It portrays tragically unfulfilled and self-destructive characters, expressing their dissatisfaction, frustration, and forced cynicism as well as the author’s empathy, which comes as no surprise since he considers himself one of them:

Then bear me to the shores
Of lakes we slept beside
Where I may lose with grace
The pine trees to the early mist
(“O love intrude into this strangerhood”)

Scobie makes a note of “loser” poems, observing that “[g]race for Cohen is always in the losing, the dissolution of identity” (*Leonard Cohen* 68). The idea of losing gracefully echoes both the short opening poem of the book that contains the phrase “Beautiful Losers” and the namesake novel itself. In the prose poem “I guess it’s time to say good-bye,” the speaker does the losing: “I told you where I’ve been and what I’ve lost and why.” In another piece, “Foreign God, reigning in earthly glory,” it is he who is to be lost; the text evokes *Beautiful Losers* in the line “We must be lost soon in the elementary kodak experiment” – here the reader recalls the scene at the end of the novel where a character gets lost, disappearing into the screen at the cinema.

Feeling losing and lost, the lyric “I” of the book is preoccupied, as in Cohen’s previous books, with remembering and forgetting. He orders himself: “listen so you’ll remember / just what it was you did” (“You know there was honey in my system”); he pleads, “Oh Steve, do you remember me?” (“I see you on a Greek mattress”). Even if the words “remember” and “forget” are absent, there are their substitutes, as in the lines “I’ve lost what all the leaves are called / Elm, Chestnut, Silver” (“Ah, what were the names I gave you”), where to lose effectively means to forget. The speaker sees himself as both a subject and an object of memory, sometimes even as a keepsake article; in his insolent speech addressed to God (“O God as I called you before”), he labels himself “a souvenir of creation.” The image of a kite, having migrated to Cohen’s fourth book from *The Spice-Box of Earth*, changes its connotations and joins the array of representations of memory.⁵² In “Clean as the grass from which,” a kite becomes a different kind of a metaphor, that for memory, making it physical and tangible: “I fold into a kite / the long evenings he scratched with experiments.”

In “I Met Doc Dog The Poker Hound,” memory affects a person’s appearance: the speaker’s face “get[s] sloppy / with a few old recollections” of the places he has visited. The lyric “I” has a whole “trophy room” of memory: “limbs and faces [are] arranged in this museum like hanging kitchen tools” (“Somewhere in my trophy room”); he says in the last lines of the poem that there is a place for him and his time there too, admitting that his present inevitably turns into the past and is ready to be committed to memory. Recalling means reclaiming, which can be painful and thus is not always welcome, as in

⁵²The meaning is not fixed, of course; a kite can still stand, unsurprisingly, for “the tension between limitation and freedom” (Abraham 109) as in “Here was the Harbour”, or attachment (“hovering like a twine-eating kite over hands that feed me” in “Found once again”).

the line “the empty dazzling mornings [...] forbid me to recall your name” (“Clean as the grass from which”). In the same poem, the phrase “with a picture of him / whom I could not be for long” the lyric “I” takes a look at himself doing various things in the past, “not wanting to return” to it but unable to stop fixating on it.

The theme of the past is omnipresent in *Parasites of Heaven*, though not in the same form as before. The accents have definitely changed. Any concern for the family past is absent. There is only one text, a prose piece “I wonder if my brother will ever read this,” which mentions a “brother” (probably corresponding to the poet’s cousin) and a childhood bond. It contains a brief recollection of a pastime the boys once had: “my brother and I used to cloud windowpanes with our breath so that we could draw on them with our fingers.” This memory, bearing a distant resemblance to children’s antics in *The Favourite Game*, is not the focal point of the work and is used as a metaphor for a futile occupation of the speaker who wishes he had the luxury “to leave things unsaid” and not to “implore the horizontal world with words and organizing metaphors.” With childhood windowpane drawings, “no one asks you to decide which of our efforts was the more significant.” As a grown-up, the speaker questions himself and is profoundly dissatisfied. He piles up negative constructions to describe his present and future: “I do not have their balance [...], I am not aimed at anything, I am not about to ascend toward my glory.” He casts a glance at the past not to find strength in the family ties but to see how unhappy he is in his “now.”

The focus on identity and the Jewish past is gone, too. There are no rabbis or Judaic rituals, no roaring prophets or dancing *Hasidim*. In the only poem in the entire

volume where the lyric “I” talks about his Jewishness, he questions the meaning of this affiliation and the deepness of the connection:

Claim me, blood, if you have a story
to tell with my Jewish face,
you are strong and holy still, only
speak, like the Zohar, of a carved-out place
into which I must pour myself like wine,
an emptiness of history which I must seize
and occupy, calm and full in this confine,
becoming clear ‘like good wine on its lees.’

He asks to be claimed precisely because he feels uprooted. He needs a spiritual call, no less than something as powerful as the esoteric *Zohar*, to explain to him the “emptiness of history” and restore the bond with his heritage. In the final line of the poem Cohen quotes the Bible, where Moab’s inner peace is described through a simile comparing him to wine staying on its dregs; Moab had never left his place and therefore remained true to himself.⁵³ The speaker believes that he is the exact opposite of Moab, devoid of serenity, his sense of belonging fractured. He longs to regain equanimity, but cannot fill the hollowness on his own. The “emptiness of history which I must seize” finds a semantic rhyme in the opening lines of another poem: “I’ve seen some lonely history / the heart cannot explore.” Elsewhere, in the prose piece “Somewhere in my trophy room,” the speaker reacts to a sound in empty rooms (which metaphorically represent memory) as if

⁵³“Moab hath been at ease from his youth, and he hath settled on his lees, and hath not been emptied from vessel to vessel, neither hath he gone into captivity: therefore his taste remained in him, and his scent is not changed” (Jeremiah 48:11).

he is disconnected from the past: “the brain responded, out of habit, weakly, as if thinking someone else’s history.”

History is missing from *Parasites of Heaven*; the theme of the Holocaust does not resurface. At one point it is introduced in “Clean as the grass from which,” where there are images of ashes, fire, and burning: “He was burned away from me / by needles by ashes”; “I bargain with the fire.” The poem is not, however, related to the Holocaust in any other way. In another instance, in the prose poem “Here was the market,” there are images that could be derived from Cohen’s previous volume. They serve to create a dark, impressive and “terrifying Bacon-like description of a slaughter house” (Ondaatje 57); butchers in the market are compared to barrack warders in a concentration camp: “The men who sold and hosed the hanging meat were wet and bloody, painted like meat themselves, they seemed not so much vendors as kapos, prison trustees, favourites of the slaughter house who had been spared for their capacity to work.” Although this hyperbolic imagery is worthy of *Flowers for Hitler*, it does not concern the horrors of the Holocaust. Instead, the reference serves to draw an emotionally charged picture and cast doubt on the privileged position of humans among other creatures; there is no history here.

No remarkable literary allusions appear in the book, as if Cohen has learned poetry lessons from his predecessors and become less interested in the literary past. There are a couple of indirect demonstrations of the classics’ influence, as in “Created fires I cannot love,” where the theme of the creator and the created, rhetorical questions, sonorous masculine rhymes within quatrains, and the general metrical pattern are reminiscent of William Blake’s “The Tyger.” Yet, examples like this are rare and not

self-evident. Although, in contrast with the defiant *Flowers for Hitler*, Cohen does return to some conventional forms, such as regular rhymes and formally recognizable ballads (“One night I burned the house I loved,” “I was standing on the stairs,” “I met a woman long ago”), he makes no direct references to traditional poetry and mentions no literary heavyweights.

Even biblical references are not numerous. There is a short prose poem where the Bible is talked about as a literary model possessing the qualities of succinctness and omniscience unattainable for the poet: “In the Bible generations pass in a paragraph, a betrayal is disposed of in a phrase, the creation of the world consumes a page. I could never pick the important dynasty out of a multitude. [...] Who can choose what olive tree the story will need to shade its lovers [...] For my part I describe the whole orchard.”⁵⁴ In another poem, “I am too loud when you are gone,” the speaker aims too high only to fall deep; he laments that his writings are unlikely to stand up against time since they cannot compare to the holy scriptures: “I am diminished, I peddle versions of Word / that don’t survive the tablets [sic] broken stone.” Occasionally, Cohen resorts to elements of the biblical style, as in his first two books. For example, in “Ah, what were the names I gave you” the lines “O come here you, thou / Bring all thy, bring all thine” with their pointedly archaic forms of address combined with themes of love, longing, and singing, typically for Cohen invoke the Song of Songs. The poem “When I hear you sing” addresses Solomon as a superior and more auspicious singer, and complains about loneliness, as the speaker, unlike the biblical poet, has no one to listen to him but God; in the poems “O God as I called you before” and “Created fires I cannot love,” he talks to God.

⁵⁴ This passage reverberated years later in the much-quoted line from “The Future”: “I am the little Jew who wrote the Bible.”

In several cases it is difficult to speculate whether a word or phrase contains an allusion or is semantically loaded by itself, as “the grass” in “Clean as the grass from which”: “Clean as the grass from which / the sun has burned the little dew / I come to this page.” Here, “the grass” as a component of a metaphoric simile involving the “I” calls to mind the famous quotation from Isaiah (and, as a consequence, from Whitman) used by Cohen several times in various works. At the same time, the context of natural imagery (the sun, the dew) encourages one to think that in this particular instance “the grass” means only grass, and the simile is built entirely upon a picture from nature without any other allusions involved. Likewise, it would be a stretch to assume that the mention of the river Nile in “I guess it’s time to say good-bye” (“we plunge in ancient whispers down some river like the Nile”) reaches out to connect with the biblical story of the Egyptian enslavement. The biblical past is not in the spotlight when it comes to *Parasites of Heaven*; it is the individual story of a “beautiful loser” that becomes the main focus.

The book renders a strong feeling that everything important has already occurred. In many poems, Cohen prefers to use the past tense, writing about people and events belonging to “then” as opposed to “now.” His ballads, characteristically for the genre in general, are structured in that way. The poem “I met a woman long ago” provides a typical example: its speaker first “met a woman long ago” and “met a girl across the sea”; he “knew a man who lost his mind,” “walked into a hospital,” “woke alone,” and did many other things. Towards the end of the account of his adventures, he says: “I was handsome, I was strong, / I knew the words of every song,” which implies that he does not possess these attributes any more. In the last line, the “teachers of the heart” – all those the speaker has met – tell him that he is not done with learning, that is, treading his

path: “Child, you’ve just begun.” The lyric “I” of the book does not share this conviction. “Have I dismissed myself?” he asks in “Here we are at the window.” In “For a long while I have been watching the city,” he speaks of a paradox between the state of his physical body and the state of mind:

The organism thrives, the skeleton lives,
has never lost its youth.
The notion of decay is my own secretion
which I stretch on every view⁵⁵

There are plentiful prose pieces and poems, especially ballads, rendering “stories” of something that came to an end (a butterfly killed, a goldfish that died, a car crash, a lover who has left) or talking about feelings in the past tense. Even when the present tense prevails, it is used as if the speaker tries to stop time, capturing it in works reminiscent of photographs or films. This technique is generally characteristic for Cohen as a relic of his interest in photography and cinema; it can be found, for example, in the two poems devoted to the same woman: “Suzanne wears a leather coat” (a portrait of the woman as a goddess) and “Suzanne takes you down” (the cinematically unfolding text that later became the famous song, “Suzanne.”) Another poem about an important person, a friend,⁵⁶ is also composed to resemble a picture, vivid and detailed, either taken in the past and now looked at or restored by memory: “I see you on a Greek mattress / reading the Book of Changes, Lebanese candy in the air. / [...] I see you cleaning your pipe [...] I

⁵⁵Elsewhere he solves this paradox by observing that no gap between the mind and body actually exists: “No disease or age makes the flesh unwind / but some strange unity of flesh and mind.”

⁵⁶The poem is addressed to Steve Sanfield, Cohen’s friend he met on Hydra in 1961; it was he who later introduced Cohen to his Buddhist mentor Roshi (Simmons 84).

see the plastic Evil eye / pinned to your underwear.” The poem “Snow is falling” is also one of Cohen’s perfect film-like works, providing a visual background and sounds, describing a girl’s appearance, gestures, and actions – all as the immediate present. At the same time, the poem has a date on it, and a remote one at that: 1958. The discrepancy between the overwhelming “now” of the text and the date that moves the poem back in time for nearly a decade from the current book creates a strong semantic effect of resurrecting the past.

Cohen’s awareness of time, his intense relationship with it, and his Faustian desire to capture moments of its incessant flow are revealed through his use of dates in the book. In “This morning I was dressed by the wind” the speaker relates his conversation with natural phenomena and a dwelling place (the sky, the forest, the village); in the landscape populated by personified objects, memory takes a material form, too, as the speaker’s “darling” washes her hair in “the water we caught last year” – a vague reference to the “same river” of Heraclitus. Having “caught” the water of yesteryear, the “I” makes an effort to preserve the point in time he talks about by putting a date on it in the final line: “it was the middle of September in 1965.”

Yet, the man has no power over time; it is time that appropriates the man: “My birthday travelled through me / like a thread goes through a bead.” The *ubi sunt* motif emerges in the penultimate poem, “I believe you heard your master sing,” where a woman is a reminder of her former self as a *femme fatale*: “Your love is some dust in an old man’s cuff”; “your thighs are a ruin.” The lyric “I” enumerates his friends who are either dead or changed from what they used to be and ranks himself among them, in the third person, because he has altered as well:

Nancy lies in London grass
 and George in Marco Polo's Pass
 Leonard hasn't been the same
 Since he wandered from his name

Tragically, all of them are “beautiful losers” (or “parasites of heaven”), with their aspirations unfulfilled and their dreams a matter of the past:

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

The graceful text “You are the Model” centres on an unbearably beautiful young blond dreaming of a career in Roger Vadim's films, of fame in the big world outside the “kindly foreign colony” of moderately known artists in the Aegean; it questions her ambitious dreams: “is Vadim on the way down, can any girl be discovered after Bardot?” Although the girl is youthful and perfect, the speaker cannot be sure of her bright future because the celebrated director might be already past his prime and the glorious phenomenon of Brigitte Bardot has already come about; therefore, decline is the next station. The same applies to other things, too. In “A cross didn't fall on me,” the lyric “I” quotes a French headline from a Montreal paper about an international diplomatic matter and emphasizes: “That was yesterday.” As for the present, he desperately pleads to his beloved in a refrain repeated seven times: “love me because nothing happens.” In the present, he has lost his purpose and even forgotten what meaning it had:

I confess I meant to grow

wings and lose my mind

I confess that I've

forgotten what for

The wings of the present moment, if there are any, are not mighty and beautiful. The ballad "One night I burned the house I loved" tells a story of (self)destruction which left the speaker ruined and equipped with nothing but imperfect remnants of the past that allow him to stay afloat:

Now I sail from sky to sky

And all the blackness sings

Against the boat that I have made

Of mutilated wings.

Mutilated wings, to use Cohen's metaphor, do not provide a solid support; disillusionment is imminent. "You know where I have been" first addresses those without experience from the mentor's position of a man with some accomplishments to his credit who warns the beginners:

You know where I have been

Why my knees are raw

I'd like to speak to you

Who will see what I saw

The next quatrain turns to other people, presumably critics, who were unforgiving witnesses of his flaws and fiascos:

Some men who saw me fall

Spread the news of failure

I want to speak to them

The dogs of literature

The poem ends with the speaker assuming a posture of humility, as if his prime is behind him; he invites others to pass him “proudly” as he has passed someone else. Despite the bitterness towards those who are quick to announce his failure, he seems to admit that he is to be passed because he has had his share of success.

In “What did I do with my breath,” the lyric “I” lists numerous questions about his past, from existential (“Did I know where I was?”) to mundane (“Did we have a dog?”), as if he remembers nothing and has to rediscover himself, his tastes, thoughts, and life in all the details. He tries to remember what he was before his memory was erased by the influence of other people (“was I a prince in Canada / in the days before I followed / you and one of my friends?”) and time (“Does time fumigate?”). He keeps looking back and does not notice the present. This situation finds most vivid expression in “Found once again shamelessly ignoring the swans.” The sad prose poem consists of an enormous, thirty-line compound sentence that creates a compelling *déjà-vu* effect through the incessant repetition of the phrase “found once again.” It renders the monotony of mostly disappointing experiences, where the future is foreseeable and solitary: “found once again cleansing my tongue of all possibilities, of all possibilities but my perfect one”; it remains unclear, however, if there is any chance for him to break free from the recurring cycle of the *déjà vu* he describes. He feels lost in front of the future: “How does it all continue?” and tragically unsure of himself.

The future, as represented in *Parasites of Heaven*, is uncertain. There are more questions about it than answers. In “Terribly awake I wait” the speaker asks: “Will you

return? / What constellation will you become?" He wonders if he will be able to see the beauty of his lover in the sky or have to succumb to desperation: "Or will I bind the roots / across my head and chest / and see the stars as heaven's warts / visiting the sinner's flesh?" In "Desperate sexual admirals," Cohen's "we" are as hopeless as Eliot's Hollow Men "leaning together"; any positive future is denied:

Lifetime staircase people
 we're drifting together
 There's nothing in store

Grammatically, the future tense in the book often occurs in negative constructions, such as "I believe the rain will not / make me feel like a feather" in "A cross didn't fall on me". The poem "I met Doc Dog The Poker Hound" talks about a future which did not happen. Doc Dog tells the speaker that "one of these days" he is going "to open up a cafeteria / that serves coffee in thin cups"; this business plan is never realized. The future of the conversation becomes the past of the speaker as he recalls the meeting:

Where the hell are you
 I've been here for twenty years
 and I've never heard of you again
 or your famous cafeteria

The dream that did not come true belongs to the character Doc Dog, not the "I"; still, the "I" witnesses another person's failed future and regrets it. He partially shares the fiasco: it is his unrealized future where there is no Doc Dog's café.

A "beautiful loser" has no future with a *femme fatale* "Miss Blood" in the prose piece "He was beautiful when he sat alone": "And you won't come back, you won't come

back to where you left me, and that's why you keep my number, so you don't dial it by mistake"; the romance is still-born. By contrast, the poem "In almond trees, lemon trees" is unexpectedly cheerful for the context of the book; it draws a bucolic scene of the speaker's lover surrounded by happy insects – butterflies, ants, and "wasps with yellow whiskers" – enjoying the remains of her food. The final lines paint an idyllic future: "We will feed you all my dears / this morning or in later years." The harmony, however, has a little flaw. Notably, what follows the conjunction "or" reveals a not-so-nice prospect and plants a seed of irony and doubt about the upcoming bliss. This uncertainty of prospects is not a random feeling; it fits well with the general impression the book creates, reflecting the author's mind-set of the period when it was published.

There is an important poem close to the end of the book that directly expresses anxiety as well as the sense of isolation and emptiness; it opens with a line playing with the Hebrew meaning of Cohen's name: "I'm a priest of God." A number of poems in *Parasites of Heaven* appeal to or argue with God. The speaker feels special and entitled, due to being "anointed"; he readily acquires a priestly pose on several occasions. This stance reflects the poet's own life-long attitude.⁵⁷ Here it would be reasonable to equate the author with his lyric "I." It is the poet who expresses doubts in himself, torturing him "now," tarnishing the conviction he had in the past:

I though[t] I was doing 100 other things

but I was a priest of God

⁵⁷ Cohen explains in a later (1993) interview with Arthur Kurzweil: "When they told me I was a Kohayn, I *believed* it. I didn't think this was some auxiliary information. I *believed*. I wanted to wear white clothes, and to go into the Holy of Holies, and to negotiate with the deepest resources of my soul. So I took the whole thing seriously. I was this little kid, and whatever they told me in these matters, it resonated" (Kurzweil n. pag.).

[...]
 I heard my voice tell the crowd
 that I was alone and a priest of God
 making me so empty
 that even now in 1966
 I'm not sure I'm a priest of God

The date inside the text demonstrates how recent the poem is and how relevant to the overall message of the book it appears, being yet another proof of a deep crisis involving personal and artistic doubts.

The special role of *Parasites of Heaven* was rightly described by Nadel: “The chief value of the collection is that it registers a shift in Cohen’s outlook from satisfaction to discontent with the isolation on Hydra” (*Various Positions* 140). Reading *Parasites of Heaven*, one cannot miss that it is punctuated by the phrase “good-bye,” as if the entire book were a prolonged valediction. The second text into the volume, following the short opening poem that reads almost like an epigraph, starts off with a leave-taking passage:

It’s not so hard to say goodbye. True, the mind bleeds a little, but if
 you don’t part your hair too deep nobody will mention it. And true,
 the ego aches like a tooth with sugar in it when it accepts at long
 last an alien perfection, but still the goodbyes will be made, and
 not from such a long way off as you thought.

This brooding farewell conveys a conscious decision to part with something essential that nevertheless must be severed from the speaker’s life. This speculation invites a question as to what exactly must be painfully but inevitably left behind. The answer comes from

analyzing the publication and reception history of *Parasites of Heaven* as well as from the poems comprising the book.

Simmons writes in her account of Cohen's life in the sixties: "He published a fourth volume of poetry in 1966, which made no impact on his bank balance. The poems in *Parasites of Heaven* – some dating back to the late fifties – were also about love, loneliness, and despair, but more conventional in structure than those of *Flowers for Hitler*" (144). Contemporary critics were ruthless and uncompromising in their judgment. Even Bowering disparages the majority of the texts in *Parasites of Heaven*: "The poetry goes sour often enough in this book to give the impression that we hold here a gathering of loose ends and leftovers to pad out the core of really good poetry written since *Flowers for Hitler*" (72). Later, Ondaatje further excoriates the volume: "[it] is a pot-pourri of ideas, themes, and styles. Some of the poems are dated as far back as 1955 or 1957 and are, judging by their quality, poems that were rejected from earlier books. *Parasites of Heaven* is not so much a good book of poems as an interesting portrait of a writer in preparation for a good book" (56), but his prediction was wrong. In 1966 there was no new book on the horizon. Instead, Cohen started saying his "good-byes" to poetry – at least, as he had composed it before.

In "Two went to sleep," the farewell is not related to poetry directly: "Goodnight my darling / as the dreams are waved goodbye"; still, the poem is about an imminent change because sleep in it turns into death. Two-thirds into the book, a prose poem starts with a valedictory sentence that evidently concerns writing: "I guess it's time to say goodbye to all the secret clubs I wanted to command, it's time to end the signature I

stretched from line to line.” In “You know there was honey in my system,” the lyric “I” addresses his critics:

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

Another poem, “These notebooks,” puts the feeling of exhaustion and artistic crisis straightforwardly:

These notebooks, these notebooks!
Poetry is no substitute for survival.
In the books beside my bed
I used up my will like an alphabet.

The sense of nearing the end of something, drawing to the close of a creative stage and a period in life, translates into a statement in the prose poem “He was beautiful when he sat alone”: “It is not a question mark, it is an exclamation point, it is a full stop by the man who wrote *Parasites of Heaven*.”

As his subsequent career demonstrated, Cohen had not drained his artistic potential. Yet, since the fourth book of poetry did not measure up either to critics’ or to his own expectations, his dissatisfaction was understandable; there were other practical factors as well: “Poetry expressed his longing and it nurtured him artistically, but it didn’t pay the bills. [...] The collection received mixed reviews and modest sales and Cohen contemplated another career” (Nadel *Various Positions* 140).

Parasites of Heaven reveals signs of an ongoing artistic transition on different levels. For example, a remarkable change in imagery is that in this book the diverse birds which populated Cohen's earlier volumes are almost entirely replaced by insects, the notable exception being seagulls, or "gulls." While peacocks, eagles, ravens and doves are biblical birds⁵⁸ as well as heavily loaded cultural symbols, the gulls flying across the pages of Cohen's fourth book seem to be primarily a realistic detail coming from his surroundings on Hydra as the most ubiquitous birds on the Aegean island.⁵⁹ The insects, regardless of their realistic or imaginative origin in the poems, do have a mythopoetic function. The choices made by the poet are hardly accidental: butterflies are traditional symbols of ephemerality of life and frailty of beauty; wasps stand, among other things, for the human psyche and communication; flies, crickets, ants, and moths, though all different archetypes, are, at least partially, chthonic animals, connected to the dark side of the world. The emergence of insects instead of birds in Cohen's poetry reveals both a melancholic state of mind and a transition from mythological images to a less "literary" and more subconscious, archetypal way of writing. The poems become "more personal, more like songs" (Simmons 144).

⁵⁸Compare, for example, Cohen's "O send out the raven ahead of the dove" ("Prayer for Messiah" in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*) and a passage from the Bible: "And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made. He sent out the raven, and it kept going and returning until the drying of the waters from upon the earth. And he sent out the dove from him to see whether the water had subsided from the face of the ground" (Genesis 8:6-8).

⁵⁹This observation does not exclude a possibility of contextual metaphoric meaning of the seagulls, such as representations of freedom.

Cohen's experiments in *Parasites of Heaven* involve prose poems⁶⁰ and "a few gestures towards the 'anti-poem' stance" (Scobie *Leonard Cohen* 65). At the same time, he rejects some of the things he has tried out in previous publications and returns to the mode of his early works,⁶¹ "with most of the poems being ballads or songs" (Ondaatje 57). This last point is of extreme importance because for the first time Cohen's poems were publicly acknowledged as potentially captivating songs. Nowadays, Bowering's appraisal reads like a prophecy: "There are some poems here that will always be among Cohen's best, and thus will be around for a long time". [...] ["Two went to sleep"] 'is composed beautifully (by) for the voice of incantation [...] and one better hears the whole poem and its resonances" (72). Scobie comes to the same conclusion. He definitely values Cohen's songs over the poems: "There are a number of formal experimentations in *Parasites of Heaven*, of which songs are the most notable. Apart from those which were finally recorded, there are a number of poems which appear to be failed or rejected songs [...] Other poems look like sketches or rehearsals for later songs" (*Leonard Cohen* 64). The unanimous verdict of critics was well grounded in the nature of Cohen's artistic development.

The lyric "I" of *Parasites of Heaven* declares his determination to regain himself after a presumable halt in pleasing the public with "honey":

⁶⁰ This experiment was deemed by critics as unsuccessful. See, for example: "Many of [prose poems] are similar in style to *Beautiful Losers*, but, deprived of the dramatic context of the novel, they stand rather shakily and pretentiously on their own" (Scobie *Leonard Cohen* 64).

⁶¹ "[T]he most obvious change of direction in *Parasites of Heaven*, when compared with *Flowers for Hitler*, is the style. *Flowers for Hitler* was a social and political book, mostly in free verse. The rhetorical language blended in with everyday speech, intentionally banal, direct, and unpoetic. The language of *Parasites of Heaven* moves back to the excessively poetic" (Ondaatje 57).

You know there was honey in my system
 but I filled a honey jar
 and I hid it with the moon and sun up there
 It's time to be sweet again
 to the poor ladies and gentlemen

The following lines could be interpreted as a resolution to go along with the emerging interest of the audience in songs rather than poems:⁶²

Now my horoscope is starving
 I've got to find that sticky jar
 You can wait for signals and comets
 I am going to follow the honey flies

On the one hand, the lyric hero of *Parasites of Heaven* is not overly eager to take up professional singing: “He thought he knew, or he actually did know too much about singing to be a singer” (“He was beautiful when he sat alone”). On the other, the author himself is not entirely the same person as the speaker; as Cohen admits in an interview, he “always felt more at home with musicians” and “like[s] to write songs and sing and that kind of stuff” (qtd. in Simmons 145). *Parasites of Heaven* contains precious seeds of his career as a songwriter and singer⁶³ and as a result becomes a milestone despite its lukewarm reception and lack of commercial success. The consequence is clear: “All the

⁶²Compare critical assessment: “of the few poems [...] which may be thought totally successful, a significant number have shown their best qualities in another medium, as songs. In their musical form, they have a firmness and clarity that is missing from the other poems in *Parasites of Heaven*.” (Scobie *Leonard Cohen* 64).

⁶³ “*Parasites of Heaven*, while it was generally treated by literary critics as an unsubstantial work, was significant for fans of Leonard’s music, as it included a number of his future songs: ‘Suzanne,’ ‘Master Song,’ ‘Teachers,’ ‘Avalanche’ and ‘Fingerprints’” (Simmons 144).

signs were pointing to music. In 1966 Leonard borrowed some money from his friend Robert Hershorn and set off to Nashville” (Simmons 145).

Parasites of Heaven expresses Cohen’s good-bye to his former artistic self and marks his transformation from a “literary” poet into a poet-songwriter, a fact not fully recognized by him at the time and therefore painful, but readily noticed by his critics. It reflects a massive change in his creative life. Consciously or not, Cohen reevaluates his individual past, his previous life as a poet and his works before entering a new stage in his career. He does not abandon “pure” poetry; the next book will follow shortly, tying loose ends, self-evaluating, and drawing conclusions but adding only a few new works, with the major focus on the author’s poetic past which he started revisiting in *Parasites of Heaven*.

5. “All this happened in the truth of time”:

Retrospectives and Perspectives in *Selected Poems 1956-1968*

“You carry your entire past in your body. It is the one who remembers when there was pain. When there was joy.”

Marianne Ihlen

Selected Poems 1956-1968 (1968), Cohen’s first retrospective collection, sums up his career as a poet from the debut to the verses written shortly before compiling the collection. Most selections were made not by Cohen himself but by Marianne Ihlen, his muse of many years (Nadel *Various Positions* 174); yet it would be hard to imagine the author not giving his seal of approval. The distribution of works from the four previous volumes is noteworthy: there are twenty-five poems from *Let Us Compare Mythologies*; thirty-four from *The Spice-Box of Earth*; fifty-five from *Flowers for Hitler*, and thirty-two from *Parasites of Heaven*. These figures reveal that Cohen still valued his controversial third book over the more successful first two, notwithstanding the critics’ judgment. Surprising as it may be, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, in spite of its triumphant past, received the least attention in the anthology, while the not-so-celebrated *Parasites of Heaven* occupied roughly the same place as the critically acclaimed *Spice-Box of Earth*. The poet had his own hierarchy of poems that did not necessarily coincide with outside opinions. *Selected Poems* was intended to reflect his own view of his past poetic achievements.

The book demonstrates other things too, such as the fact that Cohen's present situation is different. He is in a limbo, of sorts. On the one hand, in Devlin's phrasing, "[w]ords remained Cohen's main métier" (*In Every Style of Passion* 31). On the other, his success as a singer had already been born. Since his first significant appearance on stage at the Newport Folk Festival in 1967, he had come up with a well-received debut album. In Barbara Amiel's words, "[i]n 1967 Cohen released his first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, and a cult of international dimensions was established" (qtd. in Deshayé 96). This situation found a pictorial embodiment on the cover of the original publication of *Selected Poems* by McClelland and Stewart (a year later replicated by the Viking Press edition⁶⁴): it displays a photograph of Cohen's face in three different projections, staring in three directions but not directly at the viewer. This image is a suitable representation of a man at the crossroads who looks at the various options he has; it also reflects the three aspects of Cohen: poet, singer/musician, and private person expressing himself through whatever media he sees fitting.

The critical response to both paths Cohen was pursuing was mixed. For example, a 1969 review in *The Times Literary Supplement* calls Cohen "a vocalist of dubious attainments," "a novelist famous for the Danish vibrator and other fetching creations," and "a youngish poet" who, in the author's opinion, did not deserve being "lavishly treated by his British publishers"⁶⁵ (Anon. in Gnarowski 35). This review has a merciless but rather fair title: "In Haste." To be sure, *Selected Poems* was not created but put together: Cohen needed to remind the public about himself as a poet, an artist working

⁶⁴*Selected Poems* became Cohen's first book of poetry published in the United States.

⁶⁵ The edition in question is the 1969 British hardcover publication by Jonathan Cape Ltd (London) which followed the success of the Canadian and American editions.

with language as his primary material. His readers, tantalized by the break in his literary output, needed a new book too. Besides, there was the recently acquired audience of Cohen the singer who would be a good addition to his readership. As the ad for the album announced, “now there’s actually a demand up front for Leonard Cohen” (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 173). *Selected Poems* proved that the public would be interested even in a selection of previously known poems, with a small appendage of new works. Douglas Barbour declared the book “an absolute must for anyone who is interested in contemporary Canadian poetry and does not own any earlier Cohen books. The Cohen fan will already have it” (“Canadian Books” 568).

Both the publisher and the poet bet on Cohen’s growing popularity and won. A 1968 anonymous review in *Time* titled “Black Romanticism” quotes favourably Cohen’s achievements (*Beautiful Losers*, starring in a CBS documentary, the “sweetly eerie” song “Suzanne,” etc.) and admits that “[a]ll this has helped to sell his poetry,” meaning *Selected Poems*. The review provides an astounding proof of the book’s success: it “has sold more than 20,000 copies” in only two and a half months (Anon. in Gnarowski 36). Analyzing Cohen’s progress towards international fame, Deshayé describes the circumstances following the release of *Selected Poems* and specifically notes the effect the music had on the sales of the poetry: “Cohen arrived at a level of poetic celebrity that has probably been unmatched since. The peak of his celebrity, of course, was not strictly owing to his poems but also to his music” (96). A biographer confirms: “Leonard’s words, thanks to the publicity and sales of his first album, had now started to sell in previously unimaginable quantities” (Simmons 205).

Selected Poems was successful as “a timely overview of Cohen’s work” (Nadel *Various Positions* 173). At the same time, the volume indicated that, since he had been occupied with music, there was not enough material for a new volume as conceptual as the ones published before. One can speculate that the story of Cohen’s rejection of the Governor General’s Award for Poetry adjudged to him for *Selected Poems* is related to the nature of the book. The factual aspect of the incident involves a polite telegram (Cohen was out of the country at the moment) enunciating the poet’s refusal to accept the award with the famous statement: “I do sincerely thank all those concerned for their generous intention. Much in me strives for this honour but the poems themselves forbid it absolutely” (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 173). The motives, though, have never been disclosed. Nadel retells an anecdotal story of irate Mordecai Richler asking Cohen why he declined the award: “‘I don’t know’ was Cohen’s halting protest.” Since the poet had friends among the Quebec separatists and considered himself rather a Montrealer than a Canadian, he felt morally obliged not to accept a token of recognition from the Federal government (173). This justification of Cohen’s gesture is reasonable, although it leaves *Selected Poems* and its author’s artistic concerns out of the equation. The poet himself had no words of satisfaction for the book, unlike *Flowers for Hitler*, which he had so vehemently defended and brazenly praised. Cohen probably was not proud of *Selected Poems* and therefore uncomfortable with the award bestowed on it instead of the works he valued as superior achievements. Simmons comes to similar conclusions: “Whether he meant that he had written books more deserving of the award than this anthology or that his poems had had it with being judged by anyone but himself is open to debate” (223).

Whatever the author's opinion about *Selected Poems* might have been, the critics had their own say. Some, Ondaatje for example, disregarded the fact that *Selected Poems* included excerpts from earlier books and wrote only about the last section, "New Poems." Others read the anthology as a unity,⁶⁶ a complex whole encompassing old and new works. The anonymous author of "Black Romanticism" takes note of the tension between the past and the present that has always been characteristic of the poet:

In these poems, Cohen is the troubled free spirit, worrying the burdens of the past and uncomfortable in the mechanized present. He prowls through the blasted stumps of tradition looking for signs of regeneration but not really expecting to find them. His nostalgia and vain hope find expression in "Lines From My Grandfather's Journal." (Anon. in Gnarowski 36)

Barbour points to the stability of outlook over the time: "it is a fascinating book because it enables one to see that, despite many superficial changes, Cohen's vision, his essential poetic attitude, has remained constant" ("Canadian Books" 568). In a much later account Nadel, on the contrary, writes about the dynamics of the poet's mindset: "The collection reflected the changing focus of Cohen's writing, from his early concentration on religion and identity to a lyric celebration of love and then the pain of history and loss" (*Various Positions* 174). There is no contradiction between these two interpretations: while the centre of Cohen's artistic interest was shifting, his worldview retained a remarkable

⁶⁶Either the author or his editors made an effort to make the book's content look unified: to match selections from other books, the poems from *Parasites of Heaven*, previously all untitled, received formal titles made of their opening lines; so did the new poems.

constancy. In the twenty new poems published here, Cohen is still meditative about the past, unsure of the present, and apprehensive about the future.

The past in “New Poems” is not the same as in earlier works; it is almost entirely his personal one – not as a member of his family, a descendant of his ancestors, and a Jew, but as a man and a poet. The author’s focus on himself is neither new nor unexpected: “Cohen is once more his own hero” (Ondaatje 59). He only moves farther from the questions of history, belonging, and identity based on familial, communal, or ethnic past rather than his own. Although there is only one poem evoking childhood, there is no family on the background:

When I’m with you
 I want to be the kind of hero
 I wanted to be
 when I was seven years old
 a perfect man
 who kills
 (“The Reason I Write”)

The speaker recalls the ideal he used to have as a little boy that was formed, in all probability, by popular culture and comic books in particular with their “perfect” heroes possessing superpowers. The wish to be such a hero discloses the insecurity and vulnerability of the lyric “I” both as a child and as an adult. His present self easily connects to the person he was at seven, but omits the milieu.

No Holocaust-related statements or images appear in the “New Poems”; conceptualizing the unthinkable part of the historical past seems to have been set aside.

Other aspects of Jewish history are explicitly referred to only once, in “When I Meet You in the Small Streets”:

I walk through your Moorish eyes
 into sun and mathematics. I polish
 Holland diamonds, and deep into Russia
 I codify in one laser verse the haphazard
 numbers leaping from each triangular story

Here Cohen does something similar to his poem “Genius” from *The Spice-Box of Earth*: love yearning makes the lyric “I” evoke and impersonate various stereotypes of Jews. In the later poem, though, the stereotypes are strictly positive and historically accurate: they are a Sephardic mathematician enchanted with a Moorish girl somewhere in Medieval Spain; a seventeenth-century Amsterdam diamond polisher,⁶⁷ and a cabbalistic scholar occupied with the sacred mysteries of numerology in one of the Western corners of the Russian Empire, where Cohen’s own ancestors had lived.

The literary past is absent in “New Poems,” nor does the biblical past come into view, which is especially noticeable in contrast to the poems reprinted from previous books. Ondaatje remarks that in “New Poems” “[t]he only constant imagery is Biblical” (59). It is not biblical allusions that he means but frequent invocations of God and occasional traces of the biblical style. There are, along with words like “prophecy” and “apostles,” some lexical reminders of *Song of Songs* in “Calm, Alone, the Cedar Guitar”:

⁶⁷In confirmation of the historical accuracy of a Holland diamond polisher, see: “While Jews were chased from the catholic countries in the South of Europe, they were allowed to settle in Amsterdam and with the growth of Protestantism they were given opportunities to prosper. And while centuries ago Jews were not admitted to the guilds uniting craftsmen of one profession, diamond polishing has been one of the few professions left open to them” (Amsterdam.info n. pag.).

“I am here with sandalwood / and Patricia’s clove pomander”; there is Cohen’s habitual prophetic pose throughout the poems. As for direct references to the Bible, they are not easy to find, with the exception of the poem “You Live Like a God” where the lyric “I” tells an unidentified addressee (most probably, himself) that he is “reading the work / like a Book of Proverbs.” The mention of Book of Proverbs, or *Mishle Shlomoh*, allegedly written by King Solomon who is also the author of Song of Songs, demonstrates that this biblical character was at the time more important for the poet than David with whom he used to identify in early works. If the biblical imagery exists in “New Poems,” it is “on a personal, sensual level” (Ondaatje 59) and its presence is not as conspicuous as before.

These and other changes were caused by the influence of Cohen’s new career as a singer/songwriter. While authors of printed poetry write mostly for themselves and for individual readers determined to ponder over lines, see allusions, and decipher imagery, songwriters are public-oriented; lyrics should be more inclusive and easier for a wider audience to relate to. In poetry, Cohen could allow himself to be centred upon his own family past, his ethnic heritage, and the aspects of history he was particularly concerned with; he was able to play with intricate literary and biblical references as his artistic intentions demanded. As a songwriter, he had to become more of an everyman and focus on less specific issues and feelings, facilitating connection to the content of his texts for diverse listeners. The changes did not escape critical attention either when *Selected Poems* first appeared or later. Not everyone welcomed them; there were voices deeming the new poems as inferior, negatively affected by Cohen’s musical career: “Most of the recent poems [...] are not up to the earlier work. This is partly because Cohen no longer devotes most of his time and energy to poetry” (Barbour “Canadian Books” 568). Nadel

asserts that not only critics but also friends “felt that he had compromised his artistry by moving into music” (*Various Positions* 175).

Evaluative opinions aside, shifts in tone, imagery, language, and versification did take place. In Ondaatje’s words, the poems are written in a “gracious low-key tone” (60). Being less daring, these works are not lackluster: they demonstrate the adjustments Cohen’s style was undergoing in the new circumstances of poems becoming songs.⁶⁸ An ad for Cohen’s album drew the audience’s attention to the literary origin of the songs’ lyrics: “What makes Leonard Cohen a very different poet is that he turns his poetry into songs” (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 173). Although not every poem he had produced since his singing career began was destined to become a song, certain transformations in his artistic approach were inevitable. For example, in several texts the same lines are repeated two and more times, which occasionally occurs in poetry but is more characteristic of song lyrics. Scobie points out that the new works “are in fact very interesting, and quite distinctive in style” as well as “written in much simpler language” (*Leonard Cohen* 69). Ondaatje underscores the successful “diary style” in “New Poems,” along with the simplification/solidification of imagery, observing that Cohen “avoids the blunt weapons of surrealism and abstraction [...] The new poems are made up of strict concrete images, rather like Japanese poems in their quiet tone and their peculiar juxtapositions” (58). Other formal changes include “a looser, more conventional verse form – there is only one poem in quatrains – and there is a tendency towards a greater length than is usual for Cohen” (Scobie *Leonard Cohen* 70). George Woodcock explains

⁶⁸ This process was intuitive. The poet did not make any deliberate alterations: “Cohen explained that there was no difference between his poems and songs. ‘Some were songs first and some were poems first and some were first situations. All of my writing has guitars behind it, even the novels’” (Nadel *Various Positions* 175).

the peculiarities of Cohen's versification and their direct relation to songwriting as follows:

In the "New Poems" [...] the regularity of the structure is at least somewhat relaxed, but even here it is still tight enough to provide a regular incantatory beat, and the most elementary prosodic study reveals interesting recurrent phenomena, one of them a tendency to key the poem into a framework of six and seven syllable lines. [...] Cohen stands well within [the] limits [of traditional patterns], deliberately so, and his development into a song-writer has hardened his technical conservatism [because of the] conservative tastes of the masses [and] the comparatively few permutations of verbal structure which singable music allows. (153-154)

"New Poems" partially inherits motifs from the earlier books but changes the focus from the specific to the universal. Barbour, for instance, notes the array of themes such as "love, violence, martyrdom, sex, art, their intertwining in time with guilt" ("Canadian Books" 568). Scobie calls "New Poems" "personal" and, in contrast to *Parasites of Heaven*, "non-socially oriented" (*Leonard Cohen* 69), meaning that they are dedicated to the private feelings of a man instead of social and historical issues. Devlin makes a direct connection between Cohen's songs and the new poems, saying that the latter "provided as good a promotional package of Leonard's notions on loving and losing as most of the songs on the debut album" (*In Every Style of Passion* 31). Indeed, in "New Poems" Cohen concentrates on art and love. The speaker finds himself in the process of redefining his style and his creative self, while longing for love even if he has

already found it. Individual history and personal past serve as the point of reference; other aspects of time, the present and the future, are less reliable.

The lyric “I” of “New Poems” has intense relationships with time. His own flesh becomes objectified and distant from him in terms of temporality, so that he is able to return to the pre-birth state and be reborn: “I visited my clay⁶⁹ / I visited my birth” (“This Is For You”). Furthermore, time and flesh are equal to each other or have ever been inseparable:

All this happened
in the truth of time
in the truth of flesh

In this light, the hierarchy of aspects of time remains generally the same as in the poet’s earlier works. The difference is that in “New Poems” there are occasional glimpses of hope for the future, though they take forms specific for Cohen – ones that normally would not be defined as evidence of positive thinking. In “This Is For You,” the speaker allows himself to imagine the possibility of growing old together with his beloved, but cancels it by his use of the past tense. The inclusive first person plural “we” in the phrase “when we were old” is telling, since it is unusual for a poet who most commonly uses the pronouns “I” and “you”:

This is for you
it is my full heart
it is the book I meant to read you

⁶⁹This biblical metaphor for God-made man’s flesh is another quotation Cohen derives from Isaiah: “But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Isaiah 64:8).

when we were old

There is a promising progress and the speaker moves forward: “and I move / with the energy of your prayer”; there is love on the horizon: “and I move toward a love / you have dreamed for me.”

Another flicker of hope for the time to come appears in “Edmonton, Alberta, December 1966, 4 A.M.” – the only poem with an exact time and date in “New Poems.” The focus is on a contemplative moment to be preserved in memory, taking place in a strange city far away from the addressee of the lyric monologue. This lonely moment is rendered as present, with only “the singing radiator, / the shadows of bridges on the ice / of the North Saskatchewan River” to keep company with the speaker. His relationships with the woman are unsettled; he does not remember when he stopped writing to her and talks to her in his imagination. Although there is a reason for him to be content with the immediate past, he feels awkward and belittles his achievements: “I’ve sung to a thousand people / and I’ve written a small new song.” Still, these accomplishments allow him to consider a positive future: “I believe I will trust myself with the care of my soul. / I hope you have money for the winter. / I’ll send you some as soon as I get paid.” Cautiously and hesitantly, a hopeful future comes into view in both spiritual and practical terms.

More often the lyric “I” is apprehensive about what is in store for him and the women he cares about. The poem “I Met You” starts off affirmatively, as the beloved causes the resurrection of the speaker’s feelings: “I met you / just after death / had become truly sweet.” He calls the twenty-four-year-old woman “Joan of Arc” (an image Cohen will later use in the famous song). Referring to a girl as Joan of Arc is ambiguous

to say the least. On the one hand, it brings in the image of the selfless heroine proclaimed a saint; on the other, the historical Joan did not even live to be twenty-four, having died at nineteen. She had to sacrifice herself and her end was tragic. The speaker evokes the unity of the heroine and God who summoned her, comparing the girl and himself to them: “you know I am a god / who needs to use your body.” This phrase is repeated twice, as if to express its two meanings, the spiritual and the erotic. The reader is left to guess if this suggestive parallel includes self-sacrifice as well and if the girl’s future could be disastrous due to this love. The final statement of the lyric “I” indirectly discloses his vision of his own future: “You are one of my last women.” By saying “*one of the last*,” he reveals that from the start he does not believe this love will last and that the girl would not be the one and only. Another aspect of this phrase, “one of *the last*,” shows that he does not envision a long life in front of him. Similarly, the lyric “I” has no faith in the continuation of the present passion throughout time in “It’s Just a City, Darling”: “If we are training each other for another love / what is it?” He is discontent with the present, unsure of love, and even more so of the future.

A sense of failure (“my truces have retired me”), self-consciousness, and uncertainty of the future manifest themselves in numerous questions in “The Broom is an Army of Straw”: “Beloved of war, / am I obedient to a tune? / Beloved of my injustice, / is there anything to be won?” The motif of failing permeates “New Poems,” which is hardly surprising; after all, a failure is synonymous with being a loser – an image and a concept so important for Cohen. In “Waiting to Tell the Doctor,” what the lyric “I” is going to do is to inform the doctor “that he failed / that I failed.” There is even a hint of suicide: “I should have dropped at Monte Carlo / in the little wishing well / they offer you

with the gun.” In another poem he is more straightforward, “thinking [...] about suicide and money” (“It Has Been Some Time”). The speaker becomes desperate because love is getting tarnished, “dull, milky and peculiar / like dimes that had been dipped / in mercury too long ago.” He suffers from emotional and sexual longing for a love that was not perfect anyway, craving what he fails to achieve. A comparable frustration is expressed in “It Has Been Some Time.” The title phrase continues in the first line to say that there has not been a woman’s perfume on the speaker’s skin for a while. Nevertheless, he finds the past more blissful than the present leading to a bleak future where love will not prevail:

I remember tonight
 how sweet I used to find it
 and tonight I’ve forgotten nothing
 of how little it means to me
 knowing in my heart
 we would never be lovers

If the speaker and the woman he addresses *are* lovers, then separation is inevitable: “we are pried apart / for every new experiment, as if simplicity / and good luck were not enough to build / a rainbow through gravity and mist” (“When I Meet You in the Small Streets”).

Several of the “New Poems” are devoted to love that has a past worthy of being remembered but no future. In “It’s Good To Sit with People,” the speaker recalls a gorgeous young girl yearning for a life of luxury and exploiting her beauty to get it. He evokes episodes of being with her; he remembers that they are no perfect match (“Your

mother telephoned me / she said I was too old for you / and I agreed”); and he ridicules himself (“I don’t think I ever told you / that I wanted to save the world”). He thinks of the past they shared: “you came to my room / one morning after a long time / because you said you loved me.” Despite her love and his affection, they can have no future because she has “plans for an exclusive pet shop in Paris,” not “the daily love.” The only thing he offers her in the touching last lines is consolation and comfort if she ever requires them: “Come to me if you grow old / come to me if you need coffee.” To the same result, a curious effect occurs in “Who Will Finally Say.” Grammatically, the poem is future-oriented: it contains a number of sentences in the future tense pertaining to the female addressee, her children, and the speaker’s potential rival; the speaker himself is excluded, since this grammatical future never applies to him. He feels forlorn: “I sing [...] / for all who do not need me.” In the final stanza, he tells his lover that when she is “torn” she can turn to him: “take down this book and find / your place in my head”; still, there is no future for them together in this picture.

The present is permeated with anxiety no less than the future. In “You Live Like a God,” the lyric “I” addresses himself as “you.” He questions his physical and spiritual self, feeling caught: “your body made of nets / my shadow⁷⁰ tangled in, / your voice perfect and imperfect.” He raises objections against his prophetic pose: “you honour your own god [...] but all I have is your religion of no promises / and monuments falling / like stars in the field.” This quasi-religion has no potential for the persona “reading the work / like a Book of Proverbs / no man will ever write for you.” Moreover, he has no

⁷⁰ The image of the “I” being a shadow “now” as opposed to “then” is not unique for this poem: “Now I am a shadow” is repeated twice in “This Is For You,” as a prayer or an incantation.

confidence in his voice in its both bodily and metaphorical aspects, referring to it disdainfully as “a discarded membrane / of the voice you use / to wrap your silence in.” Then the accuser and the accused suddenly change places, but the conversation does not become productive: “Even before I begin to answer you / I know you won’t be listening.” This intense self-questioning occurs in the present, sinking into the past without a record: “We’re together in a room, / it’s an evening in October, / no one is writing our history.”

Dissatisfaction with the present and a sense of being unfulfilled find reflection in “Aren’t You Tired,” particularly in the lines:

She sings alone
 To tell us all
 That we have not been found

This concise poem is a perfect match for another, even shorter one – the legendary “Marita”:

MARITA
 PLEASE FIND ME
 I AM ALMOST 30

In the book, the poem is printed in capital letters both to add, through this visual means, more emphasis to its simple phrasing and to denote its origin. “Marita” was first inscribed on a wall of a Montreal café on Mountain Street, known among the regulars as “Le Bistro” or “Le Bar Zinc,” where an artistic crowd gathered. In Le Bistro, Cohen tried to court Marita La Fleche, a dress-shop owner, and was rejected: “She patted the young poet on the head, and said, ‘Go on your way, young man and come back when you’re thirty’” (Nadel *Various Positions* 174). Later, he commemorated this episode with a poem and

wrote it on the wall. The real-life Marita did not “find” the poet; as for the text, it expresses the feeling of fleeting time and, as a consequence, longing; it disregards the present, which is quickly turning into the past and, with a degree of desperation, pleads for an improbable future promised by the evasive woman.

An attempt to experience the present in full occurs in “Calm, Alone, the Cedar Guitar,” a sketch in the present tense involving four of the five senses: smell (“sandalwood” and “clove pomander”); sight (“Thin snow carpets / on the roofs of Edmonton cars”); hearing (“the juke-box sings”), and touch (“In Terry’s Diner the counter man / plunges his tattoo in soapy water”). At the same time, the speaker himself is detached from the picture: he is an onlooker rather than a participant. Instead of participating in the present, he is making timeless things out of the material from the past: “I work to renew the style / which models the apostles / on these friends whom I have known.” The present provides the surrounding, while the past supplies the lyric “I” with inspiration.

As in Cohen’s earlier works, in “New Poems” the past is cherished probably because it is complete and incites neither desperation nor futile hopes. In “You Do Not Have to Love Me,” a moment of the past is presented as caught by memory like a fly in amber and rendered in the present tense, as if to make it more tangible: “I meet you at a table / I take your fist between my hands / in a solemn taxi.” It is in hindsight that the lyric “I” fully understands important things:

you shared your beauty
 this I only learned tonight
 as I recall the mirrors

you walked away from

True to this outlook, the lyric “I” advises his beloved to hold on to the past because it is the only thing one can be sure of: “Do not forget old friends / you knew long before I met you” (“Do Not Forget Old Friends”). He trusts in what has been solidified with time.

The general message of the “New Poems” is summed up in the opening lines of “He Studies to Describe”: “He studies to describe / the lover he cannot become / failing the wildest dreams of the mind / & settling for visions of God.” Both the author’s and the speaker’s artistic and amorous aspirations are intertwined, feeding one another; against this background, spiritual searching becomes a secondary concern.⁷¹ The “I” strives for the ability to describe perfect beauty and be a perfect lover, and suffers from not envisioning either desire fulfilled in the future. All these feelings expressed in poetry are deeply connected to the author’s own searchings and anxieties in the process of redefining himself artistically.

⁷¹ This change in priorities makes “New Poems” stand out in comparison to the earlier works. The readers seem to have appreciated it. Compare: “Critical praise for the book was strong in both Canada and the United States, although the love poetry rather than the spiritual searchings received the greatest attention” (Nadel *Various Positions* 175). When a reviewer writes that the protagonist of *Selected Poems* is “someone who has fled the old priesthood and has yet to find his own” (Anon. “Black Romanticism” in Gnarowski 36), he does so because he never singles out the new poems and covers the whole book.

CHAPTER II. PROSE LEFT IN THE PAST: UNPUBLISHED WORKS 1952-1960

“[E]tching in water, scribbling on wind”:

The Past and Memory in the Unpublished Prose

“The best prophet of the future is the past.”

Fortune cookie

The prose Cohen had been working on in 1952-1960 is kept among the Leonard Cohen Papers in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto, in Box 1 of the fourteen boxes comprising the archival collection of Cohen’s early works and pertaining materials (discards, galley sheets, jottings, page proofs, worksheets, newspaper clippings, reviews, drawings, and correspondence). The unpublished prose includes twelve well-developed, stylistically polished, entirely finished short stories, as well as several drafts and variants of these works. There are also numerous prose fragments, notebooks, and working pads in the other files of same box, along with an unpublished novel, *A Ballet of Lepers*.

The finished stories look as if they were prepared to be sent for an external reader’s perusal, some of the copies showing traces of once having been folded to fit into a standard envelope. The sheets are generally typed neatly, though with occasional misprints; they are almost all paginated, and the name of the author is usually placed on each page’s header; the word count is normally provided, typed in or handwritten in pen.

There is no addressee's destination indicated anywhere, but the author's own address is printed in the upper left corner of the first page of every story and then usually repeated on the last page after the word "End." In most cases, the date is not specified (the year 1956 marked in pencil on one of the two copies of the story named "Polly" and on "O.K. Herb, O.K. Flo" is a rare exception). Despite the lack of this information, an inquisitive researcher in need of an exact chronology of Cohen's early writings could establish the timeline based on the home addresses given by the author in correlation with the known biographical facts of his whereabouts at different times during his early years as a writer: on most of the stories, the address is that of his family house on Belmont Avenue or a rented apartment on Mountain Street in Montreal. On rare occasions, the author indicates other places of residence, such as Riverside Drive in New York and the island of Hydra in Greece.

The paper used by Cohen for many drafts and copies of the stories is worthy of note, being quite singular: the sheets are those of parchment-like thick cotton fiber paper, watermarked with a trademark sign "Eaton's Corrasable Bond USA Berkshire" and a crown placed within a circle in the centre of each leaf. This paper, produced in the 1950-60s, was covered with a special coat of glaze designed to make erasing mistakes easier and less visible, because only the coating would be eliminated, the paper surface remaining intact. This sort of paper must have been appealing for a beginning writer who typed out his works, including clean copies, himself, without help from professional typists.

The multiple drafts, untitled fragments, and assorted notes in the early prose box are not so neat typescripts on assorted paper: white, greenish, or yellowed by the passage of

time, with extensive corrections in pen and pencil. There is a notebook with a Greek text on the cover, clearly bought and used up on Hydra, containing six short handwritten chapters of a long story or a potential novel. Some fragments in the files of Box 1 are rough sketches, others seem complete enough to be able to pass for finished stories, but since there are no clean copies, the young writer must have been unsatisfied with those works and abandoned them at the draft stage. The amount of discarded pieces, as well as the corrections, variations of the same passages, and doodles on the margins provides an invaluable insight into Cohen's creative process. They serve as the evidence of his diligence as a writer, his unremitting self-discipline, and meticulous search for the right phrasing, for the most exact words.

Before Cohen set himself the task of completing a novel, he had been writing short stories for several years, from 1956 to 1960. They are largely focused on the characters' past or reminiscences and contemplations about a bygone time. Although the central events take place in the present, it is the past that motivates decisions and triggers actions. Memories of the past, immediate or distant, serve as the anchor in one's life, the foundation stone for one's feelings, and the basis for one's personal formation and self-identity. In the short stories, Cohen mainly concentrates on personal reminiscences of the characters and the meaning their past holds for them; he also inevitably touches upon the family past and the past of the Jewish people in both modern and biblical times. The way the prose is composed links it to the literary past and the cultural experience inherited by the author from his predecessors, namely, the themes and techniques developed by classical story-writers, such as Guy de Maupassant, Ernest Hemingway, O. Henry, and Thomas Mann.

One of these unpublished stories, “Saint Jig,” deals with an episode of the hero’s (unsuccessful) attempt to lose his virginity, complicated by the drama of insecurity due to a physical defect and by youthful maximalism as to sex and relationships. A relatively simple plot with an unexpected novelistic twist at the end unfolds through third-person narration and simple, dense, and understated Hemingwayesque dialogues, while the sexually explicit topic and a morally “good” prostitute as one of the characters are a reference to the works of de Maupassant.

In the story, a twenty-one year old man named Jig fails to “hook up” with girls because he is excessively shy and cannot subdue his anxiety over a disfigured hand which, he imagines, repulses females. He craves to lose his virginity at any cost, at the same time hating the idea of paying for sex as this does not agree with his moral standards and romantic vision. Jig’s friend Henry, though about the same age, is a more worldly person. When Jig firmly refuses to see a prostitute, Henry hatches a plan to hire one for him and ask her to pretend to be an ordinary girl who falls for Jig’s charm. A “pro” called Ramona, or Ray, agrees to play the role. All goes well until Henry receives a call from Jig ecstatically informing him about his getting engaged with his newly found love; naturally, he did not have sex with her because they will have plenty of time for that when they get married. Ramona cries, telling Henry she will return the money; Henry, alone in his room, stays perplexed at his failed plan, Jig’s “sainthood,” and the unpredictability of life.

The clean copy of “Saint Jig” is different from the draft which was evidently rejected by the author. Both versions start with the same phrase, “Well, what did you do next?” This reflects the temporal pattern often found in Cohen’s early poetry: “and then,”

“and next” – an account of events chronologically distant from the speaker which signals the author’s interest in the past as the root of what happens later. The main focus in the two variants of “Saint Jig” is, however, not the same. While in the final copy the sexually innocent young man and his emotional ordeal occupy the central place, in the draft, which contains abundant corrections, the story of Henry and Ramona the prostitute is in the foreground. As Jig is wailing about his inability to find a consenting girl, Henry recalls his own sexual initiation:

He thought back to his first episode that had been five years before, when he was sixteen. The girl was a pro, not very much older than he was, and just as frightened. The actual affair had lasted ten minutes but he remembered it detail for detail: the grief of her mouth, the reluctance of her fingers, the shame in her large amazed eyes. Afterward she had wept, confessing through her tears that this had been her first time [*she had done it* – Cohen’s correction in pencil] for money. He remembered her body turned away from him, a body not yet fully a woman’s, and he remembered kissing her shoulder like a genuine lover, and then bursting into tears himself. Ramona, that was the girl’s name. Five years ago. It seemed like an eternity.

Henry is completely carried away with the recollections; it requires an effort from his friend to bring him back to reality: “Jig was wavering his withered hand in front of Henry’s face. ‘Aren’t you listening to me, Hen?’” This scene did not make it to the final draft because Henry’s reminiscences foreshadow events entirely different from those in

the clean version. The recalled past affects the present of all three characters in the story. When Henry arrives at the club to find a suitable candidate to be hired as Jig's first "girlfriend," he meets a prostitute, seemingly in her thirties, who slightly stirs his memory: "There was something in her smile, something in the large eyes, a reticence, despite the traditional come-on, a reticence vaguely familiar. [...] 'Don't I know you from somewhere?' he said." The attentive reader cannot fail to notice the prostitute's "large eyes" – the same words used to describe the girl from the character's memory – and foreshadow the further turn of events. Indeed, "a little beat-up" "pro" proves to be the Ramona whom Henry had sex with when he was sixteen.

This surprising encounter with the past agitates the young man; he feels as if he suddenly gets back his former self, more tender and pure emotionally. For a moment, it feels almost like paradise regained, where a cynical womanizer and a prematurely fading vendor of love are again a boy and a girl:

Henry felt an excitement that he could not define. It was as though he were reaching back through time, reclaiming something that he thought had been irrevocably lost, but he didn't know what it was. He put his face close to hers and spoke so intensely that his voice surprised him. "Don't you remember me, Ramona? Five years ago. Don't you remember you cried; it was the first time that way for you and you cried?"

Ramona is affected by the unexpected meeting too, though it is more painful for her to return to her past: "He could see she was searching her memory, trying to review the

thousand faces that had lain beside her.”⁷² When she does recall, she undergoes a visible metamorphosis: “A softness that he had never forgotten returned, changing her face to a young girl’s. ‘Five years ago. I, yeah, I think I remember.’ [...] ‘Yeah, I think I remember. It was your first time too, wasn’t it?’” All of a sudden, she transforms from a “pro” into a woman and loses her ostentatious emotional indifference: “She tugged the front of her dress up a little, as if she was embarrassed.”

Henry, on the contrary, reverts to the present *status quo* and feels the distance between the past and the present: “Henry would like to reminisce, to recall the [*frightened* – Cohen’s correction in pencil] youth of five years before, and the frightened girl, to laugh about them and perhaps to drink a toast or two, but he thought suddenly of Jig and remembered the purpose of his mission.” The moment is gone; the acute emotional pain subsides as he remembers his immediate past (the plan to help a friend) and is ready to *laugh* at the earlier past instead of crying over it. When he ponders briefly whether he should hire another prostitute, it is due to instinctive possessiveness rather than tender feelings. Ramona, “disappointed as the tone of his voice changed from delight to business,” tries to behave professionally: “That’s right. I’m glad you remembered,” she says.

In the hotel room, where Henry wants Ramona to pose as a friend of his and relieve Jig of the burden of virginity, the flame sparkles with a renewed force. The magic word “remember,” so omnipresent in this draft version of the story, serves as a kindler:

⁷² This passage provides an early example of an image recurrent in Cohen’s works, a woman giving herself to large numbers of men. See, for instance, the lyric of “Everybody knows”: “Everybody / knows you’ve been discreet but there were so many / people you just had to meet without your clothes. And / everybody knows” (*Stranger Music* 361).

“I remember something else,” [Ramona] said very quietly. “I remember that you kissed my shoulder and I felt your tears on my skin.”

“Yes.” He wanted to hold her, to caress her, to tell her that he remembered everything, how she looked and spoke and wept those important five years ago, and how everything had changed so irrevocably, for him and for her. He was overwhelmed with nostalgia and passion. “I must go now.”

This passage demonstrates a sharp contrast between reason, represented by the two abrupt utterings Henry makes in direct speech, and the flow of memory-driven emotions rendered through a long halting quick-paced sentence in free indirect speech. Although Henry desperately longs for the past, he fights these feelings and tries to stick with the present:

He could hardly speak. He held her off a little and said, “Listen, Ramona, probably neither of us should be here right now. It’s not a good idea to go back in time, to relive what is already past. Nothing is going to be changed anyway. We are what we are, and no second chances.”

Memory, nevertheless, proves to be stronger than reason:

She heard nothing he said. She was remembering herself as a young girl, weeping with a young boy, the whole world ahead of them. They sank down on the bed together.

Jig enters the room unnoticed and leaves crestfallen. His little drama of insecurity and disenchantment stays in the background, remaining only a pretext for Henry and Ramona's passionate rendezvous with the past.

In the final version of the story there are no shared memories between Henry and Ramona. There are no intense emotions at all. Henry sympathizes with his suffering friend; plans for Jig's seduction by a "pro" posing as a girl with a casual attitude to sex; meets and hires Ramona, or Ray, previously unknown to him; quickly makes love to the prostitute before Jig arrives to the scene; later, back in his apartment, he receives the shocking news from Jig who stays true to his conviction that it is better to pay for love with a wedding ring than cold cash. Ramona's tears and her ardent promise to return Henry his expenses plant a hint that at the end of the story a whore is restored to virtue by a "saint" – the anecdotal narrative acquires elements of a parable, an effect reminiscent of O. Henry's tragicomic stories.⁷³ The name of the older character, Henry, may be a reference to "the American Maupassant," O. Henry, whose short stories were widely popular at the time of Cohen's youth, in particular, due to the anthology film *O. Henry's Full House* (1952) and the television series *The O. Henry Playhouse* (January to November 1957). Given that the name Jig reads as a mildly derogative designation for a Jew, the two characters, Henry and Jig, a mentor and a disciple, invite an interpretation of the story as a metaphor of a recognized writer tutoring a beginner (Cohen's *alter ego*), sexual experience standing for artistic training.

⁷³ Stéphane Laporte, a Montreal journalist, retells evidence from "a reliable source" ("d'une source sûre"), that Cohen displayed a special liking for O. Henry: "Le grand poète Leonard Cohen raffole des Oh Henry. Il les achète à son dépanneur au coin de Marie-Anne et Saint-Dominique. D'ailleurs le dépanneur n'en vendait pas et c'est Cohen qui a convaincu le propriétaire de s'en procurer qu'il puisse en acheter" (qtd. in Gélinas 57).

The episode contains a seed for *Beautiful Losers* in the form of a half-ironic, half-serious study of the concept of sainthood.⁷⁴ The eponymous character Jig complains to his more experienced friend: “I’m probably the only twenty-one year old virgin in history [...] They ought to canonize me. Saint Jig.” This joking self-pity of a young man who abhors his inadvertent purity is a far cry from a saintly attitude; at the same time, self-sacrificing and redeeming a “lost soul,” essential and recognizable attributes of a saint, are expected of a candidate for canonization.

In the draft version the past, memory, and their power over a person form the focal point of the story. Henry and Ramona run into each other on their anniversary, five years after they first met under unforgettable circumstances. They both have transformed from what they were. Ramona is a callous sex trade worker who looks ten years older than her real age. Henry, not a frightened teenager but a confident young man, has acquired a more skeptical attitude to sex and women. Both characters have changed for the worse. The accidental encounter and recollection of the shared past revive and rescue them from an emotional catatonia. The memory cleanses them; in the hotel room Ramona, in a symbolic gesture, takes off her heavy makeup and washes her face; drops of water on her eyelashes replay her tears of five years ago – she neither looks nor feels like a “pro” any more, just a woman on a date with a man. In the final copy of the story Henry lusts after Ramona because she is attractive and her services are already paid for; in the draft, he

⁷⁴ This is not the only connection between the story and the novel. For example, men’s friendship involving a mentor-disciple model to be developed on a more intricate level in *Beautiful Losers* between I and F. is also a key theme in “Saint Jig.” Henry, or Hen, is a more experienced man; he talks to Jig “paternally.” When Jig retells the details of his unsuccessful date, Henry decides to help him overcome his fear of girls. In the draft version, the mentor-disciple relationship between the friends is more accentuated. After the phrase “And then?” in the opening conversation, Henry’s patronizing attitude is evident as he “leaned forward like a teacher hearing the lessons of a dull but kind pupil.”

desires the beautiful representation of his own youth. By making love to her, he connects to the past and his better self, and so does she. Sex here rises to the symbolic level of a ritual, a quasi-religious ceremony that takes the characters away from the present. It is hardly by chance that Henry and Ramona “sank down” on the bed; the verb suggests they submerge below the surface of reality and are not seen or heard of again. It calls to mind the way the old man in the Epilogue of *Beautiful Losers* enters the screen in a movie theatre and disappears to reunite with something more important than the mere reality of the present.

While “Saint Jig” in some aspects prefigures *Beautiful Losers*, another unpublished narrative of the same period is a preliminary sketch for *The Favourite Game*. Its title on the first of the ten unpaginated pages reads as follows: “The Juke-Box Heart. Excerpt from a Journal by Leonard Cohen.” There is a note in red pencil on the back of the last page: “excerpt from journal defining Fav. [sic] Game.” Indeed, this piece portends the themes, style, and characters of the novel. There is a troubled relationship with the mother and a love that leads nowhere, leaving the narrator emotionally scarred; there are aimless wanderings along the streets of Montreal and a painful search for self-identity; there is a girl with hair red as melted brass in a foundry, and memories triggered (and represented) by various objects and details, such as red hairs in a lover’s forgotten brush or Montreal’s iron fences.

While both works are to a considerable extent autobiographical, the difference between the novel and the prose fragment lies in the figure of the narrator/central character. *The Favourite Game* is a third-person narrative; the protagonist’s name is Lawrence Breavman. It is presented as a novel, a work of fiction; the character’s name

emphasizes the difference between the hero and the author. The temporal distance separating the character (a young boy, then a teen, later an adolescent, living through the 1940s and 1950s) and the author, an already acclaimed poet in 1963, is large. He observes the young man with a naturally increased disparity.

In “The Juke-Box Heart,” the subtitle points to a confessional genre (“Journal”) and to the first-person narrator as “Leonard Cohen.” In the early sketch the author, confusingly for a potential reader, gives his prose piece a title denoting a documentary genre and narrates the events in the first person, as if the hero were himself, eliminating any visible barrier between Leonard Cohen featured in the text and Leonard Cohen composing it. To add to the muddle, the author inserts fragments of poems and descriptions of poems written by Cohen the protagonist. It goes without saying that a biographic, real-life author is never equivalent to his artistic recreation of himself, even if the latter goes by the same name and shares his life story. The existing reality is never identical to the represented one since no image can reproduce an object as it is. Cohen stressed in several interviews that he was not Lawrence Breavman. Neither was he the “Leonard Cohen” of the “Excerpt from a Journal,” whom he examines and “diagnoses” as the “Juke-Box Heart.” Cohen the author observes Cohen the narrator who analyzes Cohen the protagonist. This is especially evident when the narrator slips into third-person mode, imitating a film script: “Draw the camera back. Pan the air-field. Cohen is waving good-bye to one of his sharp women. He is indulging himself in a little harmless rhetoric. The plane disappears into the lead sky.”

There is more than one layer of recalled past: the narrator’s memories (journal notes) of himself as a young man who experienced, at some point, certain emotions; the

reminiscences of that young man about his teenage self who, in his turn, recalls the things he has read, dreamed of, heard about, or lived through. The time gap between the narrator (the “I” of the text) and the protagonist is minuscule, though he occasionally creates distance by using the third person to see the object of his reflections more clearly and to dull the pain evoked by the memory:

Back in his room Mariette is brought to him again. There are her sheets, there are red hairs in her brush. He finds the note written a day before. ‘You cannot have me now...’ He reads it over almost a dozen times, then he begins this entry in his erratic journal, feeling curiously at the very centre of things.

The narrator describes recent events as well as thoughts, observations, and emotions belonging to the not-so-remote past. A further sinking into the past reveals a memory of a memory and an exorcizing bitter farewell given to it:

Two hours of walking and my head was clear. I thought of dreams, manipulations for martyrdom, the tall exquisite women who are sad because they cannot love, their lips I crushed my lips against, and myself the moonlight sponge, the jukebox heart; I reviewed the impossible predicaments I created, the impossible girls I courted, the icy carcasses I caressed, the hate returned by tenderness to rot the heart – all these I applauded goodbye as a cheap burlesque audience applauds the last number, the puffing line of middle-aged floozies dancing backwards into the wings, with superficial nostalgia and real revulsion.

The narrator also recalls the long walks he used to have as a teenager (a personality still going through its formative stage), a dreamy adolescent who has developed into a brooding young poet suffering from his sensibility; the narrator scrutinizing them both. The age difference between the narrator and his teenage version is significant to the point of the former being unable to understand (or fully remember) the latter:

When I was about thirteen years old [...] I'd walk miles along Ste. Catherine St. [...]. I don't know what it was that drove me downtown two or three nights a week. There were often long dark blocks between the windows I loved. Walking them, hungry for the next array, I had a heroic vision of myself: I was a man in the middle-twenties, rain-coated, battered hat pulled low above intense eyes, a history of injustice in his heart, a face too noble for revenge, walking the night along some wet boulevard, followed by the sympathy of countless audiences. My creation was derived from the lonely investigations of private eyes into radio or movie crimes, family accounts of racial wandering, Bible glories of wilderness saints and hermits. My creation walked with the trace of smile on his Captain Marvel lips, he was a master of violence, but he dealt only in peace.

This passage reconstructs the cause of the later effect: the teenage character's imagination and the factors that have contributed to the formation of the protagonist's personality. It is worthy of note that the age of the narrator's younger self is given as "about thirteen,"

the time when a Jewish boy has his Bar Mitzvah and is no longer considered a child. The boy the narrator recalls is on the brink of adulthood, at least, according to Jewish law.

The teenager's recollected past, since he has very little of his own experience, consists of several components. First of all, it is a cultural memory accumulated by a person through the flow of information he or she is exposed to. It comprises the books read, the comics leafed through, the radio shows enjoyed, and the films watched. It is not by chance, for instance, that the boy's imagined future self is "rain-coated"⁷⁵ and wears a hat – the ubiquitous male hero from the films of the 1940s epitomized by Humphrey Bogart; a Captain Marvel touch to the image stresses the boy's youthful impressionability that creates a motley mixture of pop-culture icons.

Another component of the teenage protagonist's memory comes from a deeper past based on the experience of the Jewish people and memory passed down to him by his parents ("family accounts"); the history of Jewish people suffering exile, dispersal, and persecution is the source of the vague "history of injustice in his heart" mentioned in the excerpt. There is also a Christian religious memory introduced by the Francophone surrounding, the "saints⁷⁶ and hermits." The Wandering Jew, though not mentioned directly, stands behind the paradigm of the lonely men rambling in the darkness, conjured up by the boy on the basis of the compounded recollections.

⁷⁵ The raincoat in the early prose may be a precursor of the "famous blue raincoat." Cohen bought the garment from Burberry in London in 1959 before it became the subject of the eponymous poem/song years later. In 1975, commenting on the raincoat that inspired him, Cohen makes a remark that connects this clothing item to the notion of a "hero": "It hung more heroically when I took out the lining, and achieved glory when the frayed sleeves were repaired with a little leather" ("Some Notes on the Songs" 4). This ironic comment recalls the "rain-coated" heroic image from Bogart's films and Cohen's teenage fantasies.

⁷⁶ The theme of saints, though only a passing mention here, surfaces again and again in Cohen's work, building up to the culmination in *Beautiful Losers*.

The imagined future of the teenage protagonist has already become the past of the narrator before the reader's eyes. The "reality," compared to what the protagonist remembers about his boyish reveries, is far less romantic and heroic: "The thirteen-year-old's vision was as close to materialization as it had ever been and for the first time I knew that I hated it." The image of himself as a twenty-something, visualized by the thirteen-year-old, is mirrored by the twenty-something recalling and reconstructing himself as a thirteen-year-old. Both prove wrong because neither fantasy nor memory is ever accurate. While "Saint Jig" shows the power of memory, "The Juke-Box Heart" points to its unreliability. Being inaccurate is a lesser evil because the discrepancy between memory and reality can play dangerous jokes on one's life.

An unpublished seven-page prose piece under the working title⁷⁷ "Mister Euemer Episodes" focuses on a man who falls victim to his fascination with beauty and a fixation on the memory of his own forever gone boyhood grace. The story, told in the third person, has as its protagonist a character apparently older than the author; therefore, there is no temptation for the reader to draw parallels between Cohen and the protagonist. The older man's memory of lost youth is not the author's own but an imagined experience – a pure work of fiction and simultaneously an investigation into the power of obsession with the past.

Mister Euemer, a respectable married man, lives a peaceful ordinary life until he accidentally witnesses a young boys' game turning into a crime. From his window he watches two street urchins throw mud balls at passing cars; one of the cars loses its grip of the road, which results in an accident leaving the driver dead. The boys escape

⁷⁷ Put in square brackets on the first page of the manuscript.

unpunished. Next time Mister Euemer notices one of the boys on the street, he rushes out and blackmails him to make him go to Mister Euemer's apartment. The man gives the boy no explanation as to why he wants his company; the boy assumes the old rascal is a pedophile and prepares to render in kind (something he seems to have done before with other men). When Mister Euemer displays no interest in the boy's body and keeps talking instead, the latter is first puzzled, then relieved and, finally, empowered. The moment Mister Euemer's wife, who was out during the whole encounter, enters the apartment, the young rogue quickly gets naked and stages a convincingly sexual scene as a shocked Mister Euemer, in a panic, tries to force his clothes back on him. Mrs. Euemer, traumatized by what she has seen, runs away. The husband follows her, hoping to explain everything; she never completely buys his explanations and does not believe in his innocence. The boy, pleased with the prank and happy with the revenge, disappears from the picture.

The story, with a double misunderstanding in the plot combined with a disproportion between events and their repercussions is tragicomic and has a typical *schlimazel* as the eponymous character. What changes the balance and shifts it towards a tragedy are the motives behind Mister Euemer's actions and the feelings that drive him. While it is (mistakenly) clear to the thirteen-year-old street urchin why the older man drags him to his place, Mister Euemer himself "didn't know exactly what he wanted from the boy."

Contrary to what other characters in the story instantly believe, the attraction is not sexual. The boy's beauty fascinates Mister Euemer aesthetically at first sight and, more importantly, stirs his longing for his own distant childhood. While watching the boy

from the window, the man admires his every movement despite the fact that the young rascal's game, mud-throwing, is unsightly:

The blond boy poised with uplifted arm reminded Mister Euemer of one of the joyous figures behind Joseph in Fra Angelico's Marriage of the Virgin. [...] Mister Euemer was hardly aware that the child infuriated him. He was aware only of the child's beauty. 'You were as beautiful as he,' an inner voice told him dimly.

The protagonist recalls his young self and endows this idealized memory with grace and beauty. The omniscient author comments on the man's fantasies: "The child mirrored private longings and [Mister Euemer] didn't want to share the image [with his wife]." The reader then learns the reason why the man keeps his feelings to himself: Missis Euemer, as if having read his thoughts, reinstates the cruel truth with a realistic observation: "No one in your family ever looked that good. You aren't exactly the athletes of the world." Mister Euemer's imagination, however, persists, and the spell is not easy to break: "'You once moved as beautifully as he,' an inner voice dimly replied, giving no satisfaction." Even if the outer beauty was not something he possessed as a child, he refuses to deny the overall charm of the youth that once was his own.

Mister Euemer aspires to meet the boy because, as he unconsciously believes, that would bring him closer to his own inaccessible childhood. He wishes to reconnect with his past and tries to use the boy as a medium. The pair come to the Euemers' apartment; the man gives the boy some treats and starts talking to him. He goes on and on, unable to stop, while the boy gets bored, hoping to have some quick sex and be done with this bizarre stranger. The talker and the listener are totally disconnected because Mister

Euemer speaks to (as well as about) his own self as a child and not to the real person sitting in front of him, who has introduced himself as Star:

You know, Star, I did the same sort of things as you when I was a kid. And that's not as long ago as you might think." And then mister Euemer began to talk quickly and passionately about his childhood. A long story of caves and secret clubs, passwords and enemies, brave adventures, ingenious pranks, and dreams, dreams, dreams.

Mister Euemer fails to notice that Star does not display any interest in these recollections. For one thing, he is not the child Mister Euemer mistakes him for: his life experience includes filthy games (literally dirty, such as the one that caused a driver's death); perhaps petty crimes. He seems to be used to sexual abuse and does not mind exploiting other people's vices to his advantage. The life of a tough street kid could not be more different from meek and bookish Mister Euemer's childhood dreams, adventures, and secrets. The man gets fascinated with Star because of the boy's appearance but ignores the discrepancy between this beauty and the ugly street language or vile actions that reveal a non-angelic nature. Mister Euemer falls in love with a fantasy created by a combination of an image from the painting by Fra Angelico and the memory of his own idealized past projected onto Star.

This platonic unrequited love of an imaginative and impressionable man for a boy who epitomizes angelic beauty recalls Thomas Mann's novella "Death in Venice." On the one hand, the ordinary middle-class Mister Euemer is no Gustav Aschenbach, a wealthy man and famous writer; roguish Star is no innocent Tadzio. On the other hand,

the trajectories of love for a young boy leading an older man to his demise and several other aspects are strikingly similar. First of all, the name of the protagonist in Cohen's story contains a German reference. Euemer is an extremely rare, almost non-existent last name in North America (though it can be found in Germany). In addition to the vaguely German-sounding name, there is the association Mister Euemer makes between himself and the blond boy; this invites the suggestion that the man is also blond – a hint at a Germanic feature.

Although the name and the fair hair provide only a hazy allusion to “Death in Venice,” it is reinforced by the theme of art and imagination prominent in both Cohen's story and Thomas Mann's novella. The likeness between Star and a fair-haired young person in Fra Angelico's painting triggers Mister Euemer's fantasy; Aschenbach is struck by Tadzio's resemblance to a Greek sculpture. Cohen mentions that the protagonist reads a “Skira book,” which is a book on art. Skira World Publishing Company became famous in the 1950s for publications on visual arts with illustrated tables of unprecedented quality; in the same decade Skira released a multi-volume art history series. It must be a book from that series that Mister Euemer has; it prompts him with one of its illustrations to make the fatal comparison between a Fra Angelico character and the boy he sees from the window.

Aschenbach does not need any art book, having the whole of Venice in front of his eyes for inspiration. He notices “a long-haired boy of around fourteen,” roughly the same age as Mister Euemer's Star, and experiences an aesthetic *coup de foudre*:

Aschenbach noticed with astonishment the lad's perfect beauty. His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture – pale, with a

sweet reserve, with clustering honey-coloured ringlets, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity. Yet with all this chaste perfection of form it was of such unique personal charm that the observer thought he had never seen, either in nature or art, anything so utterly happy and consummate. (Mann 25)

Aschenbach falls prey to an artist's "treacherous proneness to side with the beauty that breaks hearts" (26). In both Cohen's and Mann's stories, the most attractive feature of the object of admiration is grace in his every movement: Tadzio "walked with extraordinary grace – the carriage of the body, the action of the knee, the way he set down his foot in its white shoe – it was all so light, it was at once dainty and proud"; Mister Euemer cannot take his eyes off the boy's graceful posture. Both men in their imagination put the beautiful boys on pedestals as near-divine creatures: Aschenbach is "startled at the godlike beauty of the human being" (28); Mister Euemer is struck with the angelic features of Star. With the powerful imagination of an artist, Mann's protagonist takes his adoration to the extreme:

The sight of this living figure, virginally pure and austere, with dripping locks, beautiful as a tender young god, emerging from the depths of sea and sky [...] conjured up mythologies, it was like a primeval legend, handed down from the beginning of time, of the birth of form, of the origin of the gods. (33)

Although Cohen's humble character does not go that far, he feels lost and confused when confronting the unreachable beauty embodied in flesh, incarnated in a young

troublemaker. Aschenbach notices “the final human touch” (31) – a capability to hate – in his “godlike” Tadzio, while Mister Euemer fails to see the obvious malice in Star.

Both boys, Star and Tadzio, are objects of admiration for their peers, not only for impressionable older men. In “Death in Venice,” Tadzio acts as a leader to a little gang of other kids building various sand constructions on the beach: “He directed the work by shouting and motioning with his head” (32), much as Star bosses around his accomplice during the mud-throwing game. In both stories, a beautiful boy has a friend who thinks he is special to him: what Jaschiu, a playmate, a “humble friend and vassal” is to Tadzio, the mudball-making companion is to Star. There is a sexual undercurrent in these relationships, though neither Mann nor Cohen provides more than a subtle trace of eroticism. Aschenbach’s love for Tadzio is more openly erotic: he admires the youth’s “head of Eros” (29) and other bodily perfections sensually as well as aesthetically. In Cohen’s story, Mister Euemer does not admit any erotic component in his fascination with the boy, though the author makes a couple of hints that are hard to misread. The way he watches the boy eating suggests a view more sensual than aesthetic: “Mister Euemer [...] loved to see the red tongue discover specs of candy on the red lips.” At the end of the story, when Star gets naked to embarrass Mister Euemer and to discredit him in front of his wife, the horrified victim of the prank still notices Star’s “blond pubic hair” – an undeniably sexual gaze, however accidental and brief.

Sexuality in both stories is complicated and subtle. Both Cohen and Mann intertwine eroticism and admiration for beauty; love for beauty *is* erotic, regardless of the object that ignites it. Mann’s idea of the interconnection between beauty and love clearly

derives from Plato⁷⁸. Aschenbach imitates Plato, producing his own monologue addressed to the imaginary Phaedrus, and formulates his postulate: “For you know that we poets cannot walk the way of beauty without Eros as our companion and guide” (70). For Cohen, this concept is of extreme importance too; it informs most, if not all, of his works. As in Mann, Cohen’s story has the unbearable and unattainable erotic love for beauty that leads to Mister Euemer’s “death” – if only, unlike Aschenbach’s, nothing more than the death of his honour and reputation in his wife’s eyes.

A big part of Mister Euemer’s drama lies in his desperate longing for the beauty and grace he believes he possessed in the past. This motif also has its parallels in “Death in Venice.” Aschenbach, feverishly in love with Tadzio, cannot help seeking the boy’s attention. Simultaneously, he realizes his own unattractiveness in contrast to the youth’s divine perfection: “he lingered a little time before the glass and looked at his own grey hair, his keen and weary face” (33). With that realization comes an unsuccessful attempt to reverse time and return to the past:

The presence of the youthful beauty that had bewitched him filled him with disgust of his own aging body; the sight of his own sharp features and grey hair plunged him in hopeless mortification; he made desperate efforts to recover the appearance and freshness of his youth and began paying frequent visits to the hotel barber. (67-68).

⁷⁸ “I had better say further that the irrational desire which overcomes the tendency of opinion towards right, and is led away to the enjoyment of beauty, and especially of personal beauty, by the desires which are her own kindred – that supreme desire, I say, which by leading conquers and by the force of passion is reinforced, from this very force, receiving a name, is called love” (Plato n. pag.).

Mister Euemer experiences similar feelings, though he does not try to regain his youth with any pathetic tricks. He is not as far-gone in his passion as Aschenbach, but he is also a simpler being, not as deeply self-reflective as the seasoned writer. Without understanding the causes of his ordeal, the protagonist of Cohen's story becomes a casualty of the deadly combination of erotically charged beauty and the irrevocability of youth that no man can have back, no matter how much he longs for it and how lovingly he remembers. Memory is an accomplice in his demise.

From the content of the Cohen Papers it becomes clear that "Mister Euemer Episodes" is a part of a never-completed series of stories featuring the eponymous character. There are only two more stories about Mister Euemer among Cohen's unpublished works. One of them, "The Shaving Ritual," is a prequel to "Mister Euemer Episodes" written, according to the date on one of the three slightly different, copies, in 1958.⁷⁹ "The Shaving Ritual" explores Mister Euemer's insecurities caused by his wife's obsessive hatred for anything hairy or prickly, be it a puppy, a cactus, or barely visible fluff on her own body. Unlike the character in "Mister Euemer Episodes" who gives the impression of a middle-aged person tired of his marriage, Mister Euemer in this story is a young newlywed passionately in love with his wife.

The events take place in the narrative past, traditionally used to tell a story and functionally similar to the present (an effect particularly noticeable when someone retells a plot, using the present tense). Memories, however, are central to the story because in his present Mister Eumer is preoccupied with remembering. The opening sentences introduce the main character at a certain moment of his life and inform the reader of his misery:

⁷⁹ One of these three copies bears a different title, "Barbers and Lovers," which seems less suitable and will not be used here to refer to the story.

Mister Euemer, rhymes with tumor, lay on his side of the great white bed, and with all his poor heart hated his sleeping wife who faintly snored a warm foot away. He frankly hoped that she would choke to death with the next heave of her formless, silk-covered bosom.

The cause of his unhappiness, the reader learns, is Missis Euemer's dislike of hair that has progressed into a neurotic fear and revulsion, disrupting the couple's sexual relationship. Mister Euemer's hatred for his wife is in fact frustration: she denies him sex until he shaves his body hair off, something he is reluctant to do.

Lying in bed beside his obsessively groomed wife, Mister Euemer thinks of all the warning signs he had ignored before the crisis broke out. He recalls his feelings and his wife's words from their first night; he brings back into his mind how her daily "shaving ritual" of removing body and facial hair (existing or imaginary) started, and how his attitude to this has changed from surprise to annoyance to a secret pleasure at participating in something perverted, "delicious, evil and dangerous, a black Mass which he recited in his mind while at work at the office." Thinking about the "shaving ritual" during his sleepless night, Mister Euemer goes one step back into the past and revives his recollections of other women he knew who had not been so fixated on hair removal. He thinks of his wife's reaction to his fond memory of their honeymoon which she found disgusting: " 'I remember on the cruise, how those hairs on your arm turned golden in the sunlight. It was really lovely.' 'Are you trying to make me sick?' she demanded."

At the same time, he remembers that "more than often he recalled her perfect, incredible body, so carefully attended, so lovingly prepared." This reminiscence reminds

him that he loves her despite her obsession, and that her “perversion” even spices up his feelings. This travel into the past, recent and more distant, makes Mister Euemer’s imagination spiral through a wide array of emotions and finally arrives at the point when his care for the masculinity represented by body hair becomes less important than his wife’s approval and acceptance. The story returns to exactly where it started: the first sentence is repeated word for word. Then comes a dramatic change, reflecting the shift in the character’s vision: “her bosom wasn’t formless at all. It was a beautiful landscape of ten thousand adorations.” Mister Euemer rushes to the bathroom and grabs a razor. His wife joins him and they shave each other, laugh, and happily make love right in the bathtub, covered with soap and blood from small cuts, looking “like crazy, writhing barber-poles.” The future looms as possibly menacing, as far as Mister Euemer can predict the progression of his beloved’s disruptive mania: “He buried his face in her fragrant [sic].⁸⁰ Perhaps for the last time, for what he knew.” The present of the characters proves to be dependent on memories and propelled by them. Memories and recollections in this story display their power, providing healing and relief to the couple’s relationship, while the future is uncertain.

The future appears unhappy in “Lullaby,” another contribution to the Mister Euemer cycle. The story is about a future that does not happen, however desired and dreamed of it is. As Mister Euemer learns that his wife is pregnant, he starts to fantasize about “himself as the father of many sons, the Moses of the new tribe, the almost barbaric founder of a proud dynasty.” In the “dreams of progeny,” he visualizes hyperbolic outcomes of his procreation: “ ‘My seed will be spread over the earth,’ he proclaimed in

⁸⁰ The noun after the adjective “fragrant” is absent in the manuscript.

the booming chambers of his imagination.” Happy and proud, he worries that the child might die or be snatched from his parents by someone’s villainous act. The way the character thinks of these catastrophes is as exaggerated and unrealistic as the dream of numerous “sons kneel[ing] for the paternal benediction,” and does not alert the reader about the child’s fate.

The expecting mother at first behaves as many pregnant women do, taking pleasure in her “growing.” She slightly surprises her husband by becoming “a slop” instead of the over-groomed and dirt-hating lady he has known, but Mister Euemer thinks this is normal in her position. He jokes that she is like a goddess who demands a human sacrifice “to appease [her] and win [her] favour.” The husband is in awe of the woman’s aura of power: “He knew who the conquerors and creators of the world were. And they weren’t men.”

As her due date approaches, Mister Euemer’s wife gets restless, sad, and angry, no goddess anymore. While the man envisions his future as a happily married man, “a father of sons,” “teller of stories,” and “pal to his children,” the woman has a different picture of what awaits her; she comes to think that being a mother is a verdict that takes her life, youth, and the desirable future from her: “she wept for the youth she thought she had been cheated out of, and for the spires, towers, canals and hills she thought she would never see, and she wept secretly for the romances in obscure village inns she would never enjoy.” These thoughts obscure her reason so much that she tries, against all odds, to squeeze into her old clothes, though she “could hardly breathe” in them, in a futile attempt to return her pre-pregnant self. As Mister Euemer thinks with love, “A child will bind her to me forever,” his wife despairs: “The child will make me ugly and used

forever.” Their ideas of the future take opposite directions; as the couple embrace, they are “like a grotesque Janus statue” looking away from each other.

Before Mister Euemer’s wife goes into labour, he has a dream “of Germans impaling babies on their bayonets,” the first sign of the coming tragedy. The man consoles the woman whispering “Everything will be all right,” but if a mother starts hating her unborn child, this is not a valid prophecy. The bad dream turns out to be more compelling: the baby is stillborn. Missis Euemer has “a faint [...] smile of satisfaction”; Mister Euemer is devastated and beside himself with grief. He grabs the dead baby from the operating room and flees with him, finding a hiding place “in a dark closet among mops and pails.” The grieving father feels it his duty to pass on to the child all the experiences he should have lived through:

War and music and hunger and love. Good luck and bad luck. Years of weather and walking and living. The whole universe of knowledge and feeling. He must impart everything to the child. The responsibility was huge, crushing. Would he have time? Lullabies and myths crowded his mind and he thought he spoke them to the baby whom he rocked in his arms, but all his voice said was: “Be careful, be careful, be careful, be careful,” over and over.

The baby’s entire future is compressed into the one short hour Mister Euemer spends with him, but even this life occurs vicariously in the man’s imagination only. The baby’s future will never happen; neither will Mister Euemer’s as a father. Missis Euemer does not get her unwanted future, and there is little evidence that she will realize her dreams. At the end of the story, Mister Euemer does not consider the wife’s ill will the

cause of the baby's death, as he first thought; he comes back to her and sincerely declares his love. Yet, it is hard to imagine a "happily ever after" for the couple because the directions of their visions of the future are radically different and their hopes would not become true to their mutual satisfaction. It is only the past that holds the Euemers together and nourishes their fractured love.

The past mesmerizes Cohen's characters and makes them want to revisit it. The problem is that its influence on a person can cause damage by revealing its previously hidden sides. In "Signals," tender sadness over a lost love and happy memories about it turn unexpectedly into an acute pain as it becomes clear that the past was not idyllic. The protagonist, a young man called Lyon, tells his friend Fred the story of his "summer love" Judith who has recently got married. It is unknown whether the plot has any relation to Cohen's personal experiences, though the author establishes a subtle connection with the character by using a name borrowed from his own family – the first name of his paternal grandfather Lyon Cohen.

The protagonist asks Fred to drive him along the street where Judith lived; he longs to see the "window [he] used to watch." Although Lyon and Judith ended their relationship only a year ago, the characters' conversation resembles a discussion of a bygone era: "Too bad you never knew her," says Lyon; "She left before I came," replies Fred, and expresses his doubt if his friend was really in love with Judith, "considering the women [he has] gone through in the past year." Even Lyon's reaction to the news of Judith's marriage has sunk into the past: "Haven't we celebrated that tragedy already, Lyon? I recall at least ten toasts "drunk to her damnation."

The year that has passed since the lovers “just drifted apart” itself becomes a matter of recollections, filled with other encounters and events, yet the protagonist’s memory of the summer with Judith springs to life as he talks to Fred. He needs to see the light in her window he has not seen for a year. Lyon speaks of the happy things he remembers, describing the strong personality and beauty of the girl: “She laughed and you laughed and anyone who was around laughed. She wore what she wanted and she said what she wanted and still she was always a woman”; “I’ll just remember her coming down the stairs or climbing out of Lac Masson and brushing her hair in the sun.” He stubbornly cherishes every memory of Judith, though he admits that their romance had no future and its end was inevitable.

Later that night, the men visit another friend of the protagonist, Herson, an older man, a bohemian, and a heavy drinker. Lyon wants to see Herson because the latter knew Judith too and can be a medium for an emotional reconnection with her: “I want to talk to someone who knew her,” he explains. Fred, not looking forward to listening to more about Judith’s perfections, grumps that “[t]his has been Nostalgia Night all over America.” Indeed, the conversation at Herson’s revolves around Judith and her short-lived romantic affair with the young man. The host proposes a sarcastic toast to “the most beautiful summer lovers,” to “Lyon and Judith, [...] To their eternal memory.” By this phrase, “eternal memory,” he could mean something one would wish to keep and, more likely, a farewell to something that is not there any more (as in “eternal memory” of a dead person, a ritual formula pronounced at a wake). Herson starts to reproach Lyon passionately for not letting the feelings and memories go: “I’d have thought you would be

tired talking about her by this time. [...] After all, the thing only lasted a month. Lovely as it might have been, a brief summer love can't be mourned a lifetime."

The older man confesses that he understands Lyon, having once been like him: "sad old Herson too once loved a summertime away, when he was your age, young and easy and full of life." Herson envies the protagonist's youth and raw freshness of emotions, though at some point he tries to convince everyone, including himself, of his benevolence towards the young lovers because "it was [their] turn," their time to be in love. Slyly, over several shots of strong alcohol, as if to please the young friend, he recalls how Lyon and Judith used to come to Herson's place for their time together and how they had certain signals to get the girl out of her house at night while her parents were not suspecting a thing. Lyon "continue[s] enthusiastically," indulging in happy reminiscences, and gives away more and more details of the romance, of the girl's grace and the beauty of her letters. He dives deep into his memories and seems to be reliving the blissful moments of last summer. Herson brings him back to reality and discloses that he got letters from Judith, too. Moreover, he tells Lyon that Judith used to come to Herson's place "on alter[n]ate nights" to have sex with the old bohemian.

This revelation ruins the ideal picture of the past. Herson claims that this cruel act serves to help Lyon's "emerging from adolescence," while he himself transitions into middle age. The characters exchange points to the collision: "'I hate you, Herson,' [Lyon] said quietly. 'Soon you won't. Good night, gentlemen.'" The older man assumes the role of a mentor who shows young men love and life for what they are, but the driving force behind his actions is bitterness over the irrevocability of his own past; like Mister

Euemer, he mourns the youth that is gone. He admits his decaying condition and his envy:

Of course, my world is sordid. I'm middle aged and a hack writer so naturally my world is sordid. I don't have signals that bring naked girls to windows. I am not twenty with a manuscript of love lyrics. I am forty with a load of alcohol and a black-book of conquests.

The jealousy of what would never be his again crushes Herson. Even before his vindictive revelation, he ages in Lyon's eyes: "He had never looked so old to Lyon. Why, he must be forty-five, he thought suddenly." Time takes its toll on the man who is bitter about his past because it never turned into any bright future, and the present is "sordid." Lyon, on the contrary, does not start hating the past, still having beautiful memories: "He remembered the frozen waves of her intricate hair and the drops of water on her shoulders and more intimate things, such as the curve of her thigh and the mound of her stomach." Although these recollections are poisoned by "visions of enemy lovers," they still direct him to Judith's house to see, for the last time, if there is a light in her window. He repeats the ritual of using the signals that would draw her naked to the window last summer. The signals work, miraculously, and Lyon sees the naked figure of his former lover in the window. At the end, he feels embittered but at least he achieves something that is nearly impossible to have: for a moment, he has returned to the past and has taken another person there with him. The damaging force of the past is overcome by its healing power.

Another thing that the past and memories can do is to provide guidance in a present situation, as in "O.K. Herb, O.K. Flo." This story is written, uncharacteristically

for Cohen, mainly in the present tense, with an occasional narrative past that describes the same linear progression of events within one night in the narrator's life. The first few paragraphs register his perception of the streets of Montreal and his reflections while he is walking through the city. Then he arrives at his destination, a club called Shrine. This point in the story is marked with the word "now," indicating the turn from the narrator's ruminations to reality and from the predominant present tense to the narrative past: "Now I was at the corner of Victoria." In the lane near the club the narrator meets a drunken youngster, a freshman who has "celebrated" his election as Secretary of the Debating Society with the money his rich father gave him.⁸¹ The narrator shows compassion for the "poor kid" and in response gets an unsolicited gratuity, a ten-dollar bill. He understands that the boy gave him a ten by mistake, instead of a smaller sum, and tries to return the money. The "college kid" badly wants the bill back, but his pride makes him make a gesture and claim that there was no mistake.

In the club, the narrator, who is a poet, meets Herb, a jazzman, and the two have a discussion about morality in each other's art and the neglect artists suffer. The narrator looks at himself in the mirror and thinks of the reflection as "Portrait of the Poet Wasting his Time" – the thought occurring to him, as the reader notices, for the third time, but taking this clear shape only after talking to another suffering and unfulfilled artistic soul. After all, it was for calming down after a futile struggle with language that the poet went for his night stroll.

⁸¹ The figure of the young man might be the author's ironic doppelganger, a clinical look at his own pride and excitement when he became President of the Debating Union Society at McGill in 1954.

Apart from skepticism about the usefulness of his music, Herb has a personal drama. His former lover Flo, now married to another man, has started an affair with him again. Her husband became paralyzed due to a streetcar accident, and Flo needs Herb to cope with the emotional turmoil and sexual frustration. Herb, who has an air of cynicism, doubts his moral right to the woman. He gets drunk and falls asleep, though he should be on stage in a few minutes. Flo is appalled, feels neglected, and leaves with the poet. As he helps her go down the stairs, they both feel a momentous sexual attraction. The narrator anticipates taking the woman to his place when they suddenly hear the sounds of Herb's horn "coming through the night like a silver stab, [...] strong and humble and confident." The musician seems reborn: "He must've played like that a long time ago." Flo and the poet realize that Herb was only pretending to be dead drunk to give Flo "a chance of getting out of the situation." The woman suddenly recalls that he did a similar thing many years ago when he found a pretext to leave in the middle of undressing and did not come back for five hours, delaying their first night together and giving Flo, then a virgin, "a chance to get out." The poet asks the woman if she wants to go back to the club but she insists on staying with him. He senses her panic and self-loathing, as well as pride, that make her do what she does not want any more. Enchanted with her beauty, the narrator "would have taken her, desire or no," but a memory about "the puking kid and a ten dollar bill" stops him: "Look, Flo, don't be afraid of asking for something back. Especially something you let go by mistake." Flo returns to the club to her Herb, and the narrator dives into the city night "looking for a poem to put [him] to sleep."

It is not by chance that a remembered event saves the situation and prevents the "mess" in the characters' lives from becoming messier still. Everyone has cherished

memories, from a passionate love story or artistic success to “better days.” Throughout the story, the past serves as an anchor that keeps the poet, Flo, and Herb from straying too far from what they feel they should be doing. Herb evokes his youthful love for Flo and his past as a musician to commit a selfless act, to be reborn as an artist, and, ultimately, to win Flo back. Flo remembers Herb’s tactfulness during their first night and does not add weight to her moral burden of adultery by giving herself to someone she does not even love. The narrator recalls the “college kid” who suffered unnecessarily for the sake of his pride and does not allow Flo to fall into the same trap. He returns to what are his “own instructions” and what he attempted to shake off: writing poetry. The circular composition of the story brings the character back where he started his journey through the night, alone in the city, listening to it and struggling to convert what he hears into a new poem. It is memories and the ability to return that save the main characters from mistakes and allow them to stay true to their selves.

In Cohen’s stories, remembering an experience can hold more value than living through it. Events acquire more importance as the temporal distance between them and a person grows. This attitude is expressed in “Polly,” a story written, according to the date on the manuscript, in 1956. It presents reminiscences of an unnamed narrator about an episode from his childhood. The Polly of the title is a girl, three grades ahead of the eleven-year-old protagonist, who plays her wooden flute and whom he loves listening to. The flute lures the boy to Polly’s place as if the instrument were magical. Although the girl enjoys his fascination with her music, she makes him earn the pleasure of hearing it. She pretends she does not want to play for the listener and sets tasks for him to deserve a tune. Polly makes the boy collect exactly eighteen dandelions and tie them with a red

string. The day before, the task was to make somersaults and count how many of them it takes to get from one designated point to another. The boy himself feels that he cannot enjoy the music for free: “Some gift had to be made,” an almost religious offering to the musician. It happens that the boy’s schoolmate Sheila learns about Polly’s flute sessions and wants to go listen to the music too, even though she disapproves of Polly setting tasks to be “paid.” Polly seems angry, but is flattered to have a larger audience. In the cozy darkness of the garage where the “concert” takes place, Sheila kisses the boy on the cheek – as he thinks, under the influence of the unbearably beautiful music. The children keep coming to Polly’s garage regularly, and, as the narrator confesses, “[s]oon [he] hardly knew whether [he] came for the music or the secret embrace which the music and the darkness allowed.” After Polly catches them embracing, they start seeing each other without a third party present and, most importantly, without music. “It was not the same,” admits the narrator, “It seemed so pointless.” Remorseful, he returns to Polly, who suggests she teach him to play the flute.

On the manuscript of the story, across the footer of the last page, there is an intriguing handwritten inscription presumably made by the author: “When I think of this story I think of it being acted out by the adults grown from the children.” The phrase captures one of the essential themes of “Polly”: memory and the idyllic qualities of the past when any experience can be a paradise lost in its own right. The importance of remembering is brought up more than once in the story. At the beginning, Polly punishes the narrator for forgetting the details of the previous day’s task; then, she reproaches him for confusing the titles of pieces of music: “Can’t you remember anything?” The boy’s memory is not poor, it is selective: he might forget the number of somersaults or the

name of a song but remembers perfectly well the feelings he experienced and the circumstances that instigated them. The whole story is *what he remembers* as an adult. He describes a moment of listening to Polly's flute in the garage when he still had raindrops on his face and could smell oil and leaves and, of course, heard the tune; with all the senses involved, the boy never forgets what he felt, and is able to reconstruct the episode many years later. As a boy, he also enjoys recalling the past (at that point, recent): "I'll tell you anyway," I said, *happy to recall the experience* (my cursive - *NV*). [...] And I told her about the dandelions and the rain and the garage." Moreover, he tries to relive the bygone moment: "There was the same damp autumn smell and it brought back to me the afternoon two days past. I could hardly wait for music to begin. I wondered if it would be the same with Sheila there." Previously, he replies to Polly asking what music he would like to hear: "Same as yesterday." At the same time, the narrator realizes that when the present turns into the past it cannot be repeated: "I knew no afternoon we would ever spend would be as beautiful as this." The grown-up remembers the boy who in turn recalls an idyllic experience which will stay with him forever and will shape the adult capable of not treasuring remembered feelings.

Remembered emotions and sensations become life-changers in the story titled "Trade." Centred on the formation of the protagonist, it has an intricate temporal structure which can be described as a semi-closed spiral. It starts in the "now" of the central character, a boy looking for his father's car keys, while the third-person omniscient narration depicts his actions and emotional state of the moment in the narrative past tense:

Stealing down the stairs he didn't hate his father, creeping down the front hall at three in the morning Tony Francis didn't hate his father, sending out his hand like a hunting falcon onto the folds of the clothes closet he resented not his father or mother or childhood or schooling or even his own mistakes.

Then the narration takes one step into the past, explaining why Tony does not hate his father: the boy has been taught "sweet indifference" by his psychiatrist. It remains unclear why he could have felt any hatred at all.

Another step into the past, and the reader learns that the boy spent a month in hospital and has been treated in the doctor's office, the doctor's message being "what his father thought of him didn't matter, he had his life before him." The temporal spiral keeps unraveling, goes deeper into the past, and the narration clarifies the events preceding the treatment and why Tony needed it in the first place: "that was a good long time from the time the gardener had found him drunk and struggling in the front seat of the Olds, the garage door closed and the motor running, and had bullied Tony into the living-room saying 'Can't understand it, sir, fellow of sixteen with all the world to hope for.'" This is not the lowest temporal point in the story because it is still unknown what compelled the boy to attempt suicide. Notably, the gardener's adage about the possibilities lying ahead of Tony echoes the doctor's, but neither resonates with the boy because he does not envision his future himself.

The temporal spiral goes up, entering the phase when Tony meets a nineteen-year old beauty, Nancy, at the recreational therapy dances in the fancy mental hospital his parents have put him in after the suicidal incident. The impressionable youth falls in love

with the older girl and seeks her attention. After release from the hospital he has no chance to see her until they accidentally bump into each other in the lobby of a clinic. This event of the past is closer to the starting point of the story, explaining why Tony needs his father's car keys: to take Nancy for a ride. The boy thinks of what could happen if he is caught red-handed but dismisses his fear since stealing the car keys is "nothing compared to some of the things he had done" – recollections of past events support his determination.

The next coil of the temporal spiral goes farther up, beyond the starting point of the narration. Tony drives Nancy downtown, and they explore various places together. Nancy tells Tony that she has liked him from the start because he looks like Keats.⁸² She makes several seductive hints before saying openly that "she would [like to] be the sinful older woman in his life." Nancy's words provoke Tony's confession – a lapse into the past that finally elucidates the circumstances behind the suicide attempt and the "hatred" for his father: last winter his father gave Tony "a package of Sheiks" and sent the boy to a prostitute hired for him; Tony did go but hated it, also hating his father and himself – hence the attempt to commit suicide.

The young characters go to the Old Ruin on the slope of Mount Royal where they feel safe in proximity to their hospital, and Nancy, after an oration about the mental clinic being the heart of the city, gives Tony "an expert gift of mouth and tongue." The word "gift" in this episode is not a mere euphemism for a particular sexual act. Before performing, Nancy enunciates that the night is beautiful and the boy looks like Keats, so "she [is] going to do something for him that he might remember." Tony accepts the gift,

⁸² While Tony has never heard of Keats, the author has been compared to the Romanticist poet numerous times; the connection suggests an ironic self-reference on Cohen's part.

both “delighted and appalled” and, exactly as the girl predicted, “acquir[es] a new dimension of experience, *something he could keep*” [My italics – *NV*].

The sexual encounter does not bring the characters closer to each other: driving Nancy back, the boy feels “very isolated from her because of his new treasure.” The girl does not mind their alienation, and when they part she praises Tony, predicting that if he listened to his doctors he “would grow up to be a better animal than old Keats any time of the day.” Tony does not care if she is sincere or sarcastic because he is occupied with a change that occurred in him that night. He was cured, reconnected with himself and, unexpectedly, with his father as well, through “a strange and pleasant feeling of loyalty” and of being “dutiful”. The narration comes back to the same place where it started: the boy returning the car keys to his father’s pocket in the closet, only at a different point in time. The temporal spiral does not close because the “now” of the beginning is the past in regard to the ending, though the distance between them comprises merely a few hours. This short period proves sufficient to restore to health the boy’s mental and emotional state, for instead of something he struggled to forget (his visit to a prostitute), Tony gets a precious memory (the “gift” from Nancy): “As he climbed the stairs to his room he remembered himself flung against the slope of Mount Royal, the woman’s face in his lap.” This memory of the “new treasure” is going to be the foundation stone of his new self and his grown-up, man-to-man relationships with his father.

Cohen’s own personality-shaping “treasures” of memory and the ties between family members based on them acquire material representations in “My Sister’s Birthday,” a story with an autobiographic underlay. Two children, a nine-year-old boy and his thirteen-year-old sister are waiting for their father to come back from the hospital;

they are looking forward to their yearly routine of gathering plums from the plum-trees in front of the house:

When it was time, and only our father knew that time, when the plums were round and dusty, my sister and I would pluck them, standing on white step-ladders, while he supervised from a little way back, calling out when here and there we missed a cluster.

The plans of performing the long-anticipated plum-plucking ritual are cut short by the tragic news about their father's death, which Nursie breaks to the kids one morning after breakfast. It further upsets the children that the funeral must take place the next day which happens to be the girl's birthday.

The grim funeral rites follow, and the young characters see their father for the last time – in the coffin. At night, the boy decides to make up for his sister's spoiled birthday and climbs the plum tree, feeling in the darkness for the best plums. Then he takes the three precious fruits to the girl's room and presents her with this gift. The children lie "in silence, holding hands and marveling at the plums," crying over their father whom they will never see again, regretting that they have not wanted the coffin open when it was standing in the living-room for the whole morning before the burial; they missed the chance to have their father, albeit dead, with them for a few more hours.

The story is told in the first person, therefore it is not a chronicle of events but the narrator's recollection about his childhood trauma. There is a sizable time distance between the "I" telling the story and the boy in it. In fact, "My Sister's Birthday" is not so much about the children as the narrator's memories. It is not only the story of what happened once but of what he remembers about those events and the feelings of the boy

he once was. He recalls the lost expectations of plum-plucking when the three of them, the two siblings and their father, enjoyed the yearly routine and the time together. He calls to mind being desperate to save, at least partially, his sister's birthday: "I remember looking in the large dictionary for another word for 'happy,'" he says, since it was unthinkable to utter "happy birthday" on the day of the funeral.

The narrator's memory preserves various details, mostly unusual material objects that violently intruded into the habitual world of the family's daily life, such as the grained wood and brass handles of the coffin where their father was lying instead of his favourite chesterfield or the soaped mirrors looking "as if the glass had been afflicted suddenly by a strange, permanent summer frost." He recalls "the soft afternoon light [that] glimmered on [his] mother's black stockings and gave the mourners in the doorway a golden outline" and "a black swatch of cloth" he had to wear on the sleeve as a sign of mourning and was nervously afraid of losing during the ceremony. The narrator remembers how he made himself look at the dead body, taking in its appearance, the prayer-shawl, the unnaturally black mustache, and "striving to connect [it] with the man he knew." The best thing the boy can do to find a link with happier days when his father was alive is to look at the plum trees visible over the mourners' heads through the open door.

When the boy makes his night sally to get the plums, he is motivated not only by brotherly love for his sister and the sense of responsibility for her as the man of the house (the role imposed on him after the father's passing). He is driven by the need for normality, a wish for the order of things as they used to be. The plums are more than fruits and more than a make-up birthday gift: they represent the children's connection to

the father and each other, the memory of something now gone forever. The kids lie in bed admiring the three plums on the window-sill, “their shapes outlined against the bright night,” but think and talk about the last glimpses they had of their father. They look at the fruits and cry over the things that will never happen again, over their father they will see no more, the plums they will never pluck under his supervision, and their lives that are forever altered, the girl’s birthday becoming the day of the funeral. The narrator recalls himself being a boy who, at the age of nine, goes through grieving about the past and faces a future devoid of what he held dear.

A version of the same story titled “Ceremonies” starts with the negation of a possible future, or rather an assertion of impossibilities in the future: “I suppose I will never lead the ordered life my father led. And I’ll never live in the kind of the house he lived in, with its rituals, its dignity, the smell of polish.” Without any bitterness the narrator ruminates on his incompatibility with the material and immaterial inheritance, and reveals a fondness for the old family house he does not live in. In a matter-of-fact manner he recounts that he was nine when his father died. Then suddenly a shift in time occurs, moving the narrator from his present to his childhood, as if he were returning, if only in his imagination, to the events of the past: “*Now* [my italics – *NV*] it was in the middle of January, a deep snow over the city. Nursie told us the news.” From that point on, the narration generally follows that of “My Sister’s Birthday,” emphasizing the effect of the fateful day in the past on the present of the characters’ lives: “So my sister has a quiet birthday every year. I try to remember to send a card.”

In this variant of the story more attention is paid to the details of the burial and the commemorative reception back at the house. The narrator recalls his annoyance at the

“light-hearted atmosphere” among the relatives and friends of the family and his own unwilling participation in it. One of the recollections, the boy looking under his great-uncle’s beard and asking him about his lack of a tie, Cohen will use in the novel, *The Favourite Game* – an indication of the incident’s memorability. Another element of the episode, an uncle telling the boy about his new responsibilities as the man of the house, is developed into evidence of how the past affects the present and participates in the formation of one’s self, in particular, the origin of the sense of being a chosen one: “This made me proud. I felt like the consecrated young prince of some folk-beloved dynasty. [...] It’s strange, considering how far I’ve gone from them, that I still feel like that prince sometimes.”

In addition to the details the narrator of “My Sister’s Birthday” remembers, the narrator of “Ceremonies” recalls, with a magnifying vision of memory, “small plates flecked with crumbs and caraway seeds” and “the dishes with the gold pattern, thin ones you could see candlelight through” from the after-funeral reception. Another detail is the involuntary culture clash between Christian and Jewish traditions: a bouquet of yellow chrysanthemums with a “black-edged card” from a Christian friend, well-meaning but unaware of the norms of Judaism that do not involve flowers in the mourning rites. The chrysanthemums, however, affect the child protagonist of the story: “The flowers made me remember my sister’s birthday.” Unlike the boy in the other version of the story, in “Ceremonies” the brother does not act on his pity for the sister’s bad luck: “I didn’t devise some sweet gesture [...] I didn’t take a single chrysanthemum to give her or lay on her pillow.” A self-reflection from the perspective of the narrator’s present follows: “I had to wait years before I could get that maudlin.”

He gives no flowers and no plums to his sister. The siblings lie in the darkness and talk about their father, the girl repeating twice “We’ll never see him again.” The boy does not cry with his sister but feels proud of consoling her by reminding her of her birthday. There is no crisis and no resolution through a gift which reconciles, like the plums in “My Sister’s Birthday,” the father’s funeral and the girl’s birthday; there is no testimony of brotherly care and no material token of memory about the father as a reminder of the happy family past. The only thing that is left for the children is their common past and their bond based on memories.

The theme of familial past and the ties of blood cemented by memories is further developed in “A Hundred Suits From Russia.” In this story, the family history involves things larger than one’s self and personal reminiscences. For Cohen, the past of previous generations is an integral part of an individual, whether he readily admits or takes his time to accept it. “A Hundred Suits From Russia” is a dramatic episode from the life of a young poet who lives with his tired, neurotic mother and a grandfather suffering from senile dementia. The young man tries to concentrate on his creative work but is unable to do so due to the atmosphere in the house. The grandfather hardly recognizes his family members and cannot control his bodily functions. The old man has a fixed idea that his daughter and grandson have stolen one hundred suits he allegedly brought with him from Russia when immigrating to Canada. The suits are, of course, nothing more than a delusion of his impaired mind that makes him call his family “thieves and murderers.” As the grandfather’s condition deteriorates, bringing more strain on the protagonist’s mother, the young man insists on moving the old man to “the Home,” where he would be taken care of professionally. Under her son’s pressure, the mother reluctantly promises to call

the place and arrange everything. The poet goes out to calm his nerves; when he returns he finds his “Grampa” and mother in the kitchen drinking tea. The old man looks tranquil and happy; he starts singing “a beautiful tune without words and without personal misery, but filled with love, age and innocence.” The protagonist realizes that no call to “the Home” was made. The mother hastily reassures him that his granddad has promised to keep quiet and not interfere with the poet’s concentration. She tells him (or lies, as the son presumes) that the old man believes in his grandson’s future fame. Filled with love and the feeling of a family bond, the protagonist gives in. “He knew now that his grandfather would never leave the house.” Nothing will change, with the old man “banging his fist on the table seven times, one for each syllable [...] ‘One hundred suits from Russia.’”

The present in the story is filled with discontent and despair. The old man fights the imaginary enemies who have stolen his fictitious one hundred suits. The widowed woman, his daughter, feels betrayed and heartbroken, unable to accept the reality of her father’s dementia and the fact that he who used to be a venerable Talmudic scholar has lost all human dignity. “What have I got now?” she exclaims. The young poet is desperate about the situation at home and presumably unsatisfied with his creative work; he has no job and no means to support the family, “eating into the small capital” left by his late father. There is only one instant in the present that the protagonist, with a Faustian impulse, would like to seize and make last forever. As the grandfather is humming his tune over the tea, the young poet comes to an understanding of the importance of the moment, which is the climactic point of the story:

It's beautiful, the young man thought. It's more beautiful than anything I'll ever write. [Underlined in the manuscript – *NV*] He sat down beside the old man and touched his glass for the warmth. He wished that this moment in the warm kitchen with his mother and his grandfather and the melody and the tea and the beautiful bond of blood would never end.

The present is torturous for all the characters in the story. That moment of beauty, as seen by the protagonist, nevertheless has every chance to “never end,” having become the poet's memory.

The past in “A Hundred Suits From Russia” is epitomized in the imaginary suits the old man claims to have possessed once. For the grandfather and his daughter, everything was better back then both in their imagination and in reality. The grandfather's failed memory translates the grandeur of his past into the epic amount of suits and a gold watch he has never had but imagines stolen. Although he does not remember much of his life of respect and reverence as a prominent Talmudic scholar, he still knows he used to be an important person: “Who are you talking? Do you think I'm Shmeryl Beryl from the street? I had pupils. A hundred boys.” The grand number of “a hundred” might not be an exaggeration at all when he speaks about his disciples – unlike the suits. His voice is commanding: he shouts, he instructs, he speaks as if “addressing a congregation.” What remains from his bygone glory makes a pitiful contrast with his dysfunctional present state.

A great man he is not any more. Blissfully, he is unaware of that, and when he declares that he is left with nothing, it is the “stolen” suits he means, not his intellectual

abilities. His daughter, on the contrary, still bases her high esteem for the man on his former reputation. She reacts to a suggestion “to put him away” with indignation: “Put him away. Put my father away. I should put my father away. A great man I should put away. [...] People came from miles to hear him speak.” The greatness of her father’s past prevents the woman from understanding that it is all water under the bridge. She tells her son who raises the question of “the Home”: ““Of course they want him,’ she said. ‘A man like that. A Talmudist.’” The son is the only person in the household who sees the disrupted balance between the past and the present: too much admiration for the past leaves his mother helpless in front of the present. He replies with “sudden fury”: “What are you talking about? A Talmudist. Why don’t you face this? He’s crazy. Your father is crazy, mentally ill, senile dementia. It’s sad, but you got to stop fooling yourself.” While the old man’s drama lies in the loss of memory, his daughter’s problem is clinging to it.

The mother’s frustration is caused by the discrepancy between the disgraceful present state of her father and his greatness in the past; her father mythologizes the past he cannot remember. The young poet lives in the perturbing “now” and does not dwell on the family past too much; he contemplates the past and present of the neighbourhood instead: “He walked out on the street. The neighbourhood was changing. Mostly Germans and Hungarians now. The Jews are moving west. Westward ho [sic] the young doctors and accountants bore their families.” The Jewish past is being erased from this part of Montreal as the new generations settle elsewhere. The protagonist is stuck in the old house because he has no money and needs to take care of his fragile family, but there is more to it than this mundane reason: the grandfather, with his repetition of the title

phrase, does not allow the poet to forget where the family comes from and forbids him to break ties with history simply by moving forward.

The story has an open ending but the future for the characters seems bleak and uncertain. In the time coming, one can imagine the mother painfully caring for the ailing old man who can only become worse. The family will continue spending the inheritance. Despite the promise given to himself, the son is unlikely to start bringing home money any time soon. His struggle for literary recognition and financial stability might last for years without a guarantee of success; his works may remain unpublished, like the text where he is a character. It is the past that defines the family and the protagonist's self.

For Cohen, the past that feeds one's self-identity goes as far back as one is able to see. In the case of his Jewish characters (as well as in his own), the roots extend to the biblical past. This underlying connection to ancestors remains unnoticed or not given much thought to, until it unexpectedly comes to light, as in "David Who?" This short story is condensed from a previous version, "Dairy [sic! Author's misprint – *NV*] of a Young Montreal Lecher." There is a draft in the Cohen Papers that bears the evidence of heavy editing: crossing out phrases and paragraphs, adding sentences, replacing words, and eliminating characters. In both versions the narrator, a young reckless man with bohemian long hair, first gallantly but halfheartedly helps an old lady who fell on the ice, then attends an unsuccessful performance by his young cousin, and finally receives a lover in his bachelor's den, on the bed he proudly takes special care of. Throughout both stories, several characters point to his unacceptably overgrown hair. Towards the end, the lover tells him that he looks like David. "David who?" the narrator asks. "King David. Your hair," clarifies the woman. The young man takes these words as the biggest

compliment. When the lover leaves, he becomes agitated and decides to call his cousin (with possibly incestuous intentions) and to send a big Valentine card to the old lady he helped the day before.

The first variant of the story, "The Diary," is more focused on the narrator's "lechery." He parades his cynicism and speaks of "eating" women. He recalls a list of "yellow haired girls [he] happen[s] to have eaten," boasts of his hedonism, and dwells upon the advantages of being Jewish in Montreal: "In Montreal if you play your Semitism right you can do as great as a negro in Greenwich village. The Anglosaxons will flock to your bed. Your carpet will be strewn with their authentic costumes, plain skirts and camelhair coats. They are wild to defile themselves safely. A Montreal Jew is very safe."

This passage did not make it to the next variant of the story. In "David Who?" the narrator is still an imprudent hedonist who even has a little grow-op in his room but does not "play" his being Jewish and does not make seducing blond "Anglosaxon" girls his sport of choice. Although there are many other differences between the two versions, it is noteworthy that the sardonic comment on racism is left out. The narrator does not give much thought to his ethnicity and heritage until his lover remarks on his likeness to King David. The importance of this comparison is emphasized by the fact that a reference to it becomes the title of the story. The question "David who?" pulls in a range of attributes associated with King David: a skilled musician; a frail boy who triumphed over a giant; king of Israel; a shameless lecher, an abductor of Bathsheba and master of numerous concubines; a poet, the creator of the Psalms. The narrator looks like David in his lover's eyes because he is handsome, Jewish, and longhaired. He takes the compliment because

he has an ethnic connection with the biblical king, plays Bach on the guitar, indulgently loves women, and defies the “giant” of societal norms. Drawing no equality sign between the narrator and the author, it is nevertheless tempting to point to the fact that later in his life Cohen wrote his own book of psalms, *Book of Mercy*, as if in imitation of King David. The narrator of “David Who?” does not care much about the recent past that is not his own: “I read last Saturday’s newspaper. I was happy all that misery was safely in the past. Old earthquakes and withered crises disturbed me not at all.” The past that is not discussed but only hinted at, the biblical past, however, plays a far greater role: it nourishes his self-identity as a Jew, a disobedient youth, a creative individual, and even a womanizer.

A Ballet of Lepers, Cohen’s short early novel, exposes his vision of time and the aspects of temporality in relation to an individual. It is focused on a lonely character who longs for love. The unnamed thirty-five-year-old first-person narrator tells his story, occasionally apologizing for his confessions and expressing the hope that he has not bored the reader. He fears that if he loses the reader’s interest he will plunge into utter loneliness. “I was anonymous,” he says, and anonymous he remains for the reader. Neither his lover nor the other characters ever mention his name, which is one of the signs of his isolation and loneliness.

The story is told from the perspective of the narrator’s present; it is his recollection of the past: “When I look back on that period of my life which I am obliged to describe I see that I was infected by a kind of madness [...] I do not really want to understand it because by understanding it I will have to relive [it] and that I could not bear.” The temporal distance between the “now” and “then” is unknown; the reader

learns only that “[i]t is a long time since all this happened.” The narrator stresses his wish to recall the past as accurately as he can: “I want to record everything just as it happened, my feelings especially.” Despite the sadness of the story he relates, his attitude to “those days” of the past is positive: “Remember only one thing; they were ordered and happy.” From the perspective of the present, when he is presumably more lonely and gloomy, the past is his treasure: “Even now as I remember this period, I recall it as a glorious march among passionate men. I do not wish to recall it too intimately. I want always to be reminded of it, but not in detail, but rather like a gold blur somewhere in my history.”

Among the major themes of the narrative are: being disconnected from the past; remembering; fearing the future; and vainly trying to begin anew. The narrator has no family: his parents, immigrants from Europe, failed to have a fresh start: they “died of pain” after they had isolated themselves from the ties with the old country and never overcame the cultural barrier in Canada, being unable to master English well enough. They resolved to forget their native language as soon as they arrived, but instead of facilitating their integration this decision brought on their demise. They erased all memories of their previous life and guarded their son against contact with family history: the narrator says that his parents “didn’t like to involve [him] in anything that had to do with the past.” This mistake not only cost them their lives, but left their son longing for the ties of blood and love based on it.

When he unexpectedly learns that he has a grandfather who is coming to live with him, he never questions his ability to care for the old man and share with him the rented room and the little means he has. Having no family in the present, the narrator is eager to learn as much as possible about the past and enthusiastically listens to the grandfather’s

stories again and again: “Each word he said was important to me. In him were locked so many innocent secrets. I wanted him to continue speaking. Do you remember my father, do you remember him?” The old man recalls his son’s childhood in the old country and recounts bizarre stories about the “wild boy” which the narrator readily accepts as truth and does not mind hearing repeatedly. Through the grandfather, the speaker strives to get closer to his dead father and learn what kind of person he had been before isolating himself within the confinement of immigration. The old man speaking broken English and, on a celebratory occasion, making a toast “in his European language,” provides a bridge between the rootless protagonist and his ancestors of whom he has no knowledge as well as reminding him of his deceased mother and father. “How good it was to hear that heavy accent again,” the narrator says, obviously recalling his parents. In the presence of the grandfather, he gradually started to feel “the return of a deep family love, a bond joining the generations one to another.” To him, the “bond of blood seemed more important [...] than anything. The bond of family, the bond of love.”

When the protagonist and the grandfather meet, they need each other not only to be saved from loneliness but for another reason, too: the old man is glad to see a grandson and thus to fight his doubts that there is a future, while the young one feels blissful to be reassured that there was a past. The narrator traces the familial features in the grandfather’s appearance; he notes the “large round skull, the heavy hanging jaw, and even the shoulders, though now in ruin, suggesting that they had once been strong and straight.” He learns about a deeper layer of the past represented by the grandfather through his memories. The old man’s recollections, like his crumbling physique, embody the concept of *ubi sunt*: he tells the narrator that in the old country, in his native town he

was a rich man, a butcher; “no money now, poor, poor.” The speaker asks himself: “What happened to all his children? Death, decay, exile – I hardly know.” More than once the grandfather recalls a story from his younger days when he had fought the only man able to swim across a large lake to prove how strong he was though unable to swim that well; then, confused, he changes the story by saying “I swammed lake once,” adding the phrase valid for both versions of his memoir: “I can no more”; “Bad to be old. Forget everything.” Paradoxically, despite the forgetfulness, the only thing that he still has is his remembrance of the past: “Now I remember,” he instantly corrects himself.

Remembering represents a hope, however feeble, to safeguard the important things against the destructive force of time. The narrator’s lover, Marilyn, relies on remembering; she says, parting with the narrator: “Goodnight, remember I love you. Will you remember?” Although he replies, “of course, I will remember,” he does not mean it – at least, not in the sense of intending to cherish a memory of love. He does remember the episode itself and later retells it to the reader/addressee of his confession. The next day, as he lets her know about his decision to break off the betrothal, she pleads, “How can you forget me?” “I do not remember what she said,” the narrator admits in his “now.” In the episode from his life that constitutes the novel his battle with time is lost. “We are going down. This is the end. It is finished,” he concludes.

Although the narrator’s heritage is not directly identified, on the bases of the imagery he uses and religious references it is reasonable to believe that he is Jewish: he describes his landlady holding a “bottle of scotch like a precious scroll, dancing like a rabbi of some obscure happy sect”; he calls to mind a “memory of an old chapter and an old book, the words rolled before my mind like an opening scroll.” When he debates with

himself whether to marry or leave Marylin, he quotes a biblical commandment: “Let us say it came from memory, but stronger, more intense than any memory [...] [:] he shall take a virgin of his own people to his wife.” He retells Marylin’s monologues where the erotic mingles with the religious in a manner reminiscent of Song of Songs, with such images as lovers compared to “rose and lily,” “white birds,” and a pair of doves. In his isolation before and after the grandfather’s stay with him, he is disconnected both from his familial past and from the larger context of his ancestral heritage as well, which further contributes to his embitterment.

When the speaker refers to the communal past, his only (and certainly twisted) way to connect to it is through the idea of universal evil. Like Cohen himself does in *Flowers for Hitler*, the narrator dwells upon the mundane attitude to despicable horror adopted too quickly and easily: “bombs, auto accidents, concentration camp crematoria easily integrated in our memory”; he ruminates about the ubiquity of evil embedded in ordinary human beings:

it happened, just as Buchenwald happened, and Belsen and Auschwitz, and it will happen again. It will be planned and it will happen again, and we will discover the atrocities, the outrages and the humiliations, and we will say that it is the plan of a madman, the idea of a madman; but the madman is ourselves, the violent plans, the cruelties and indignities, they are all our own.

The notion that evil is intrinsic to human nature symbolically transfers the malice of mass murder from the past to the present and projects into the future. The moral torture of a

stranger, which the narrator plans and partially carries out, is a manifestation of this omnipresent evil.

The present depicted in the novel is unstable. From the point of view of temporality, it is the most vulnerable aspect of time; it does not last, promptly both sinking into the past and turning into the future, and therefore is hard to grasp: "I have long known that we are blind in the midst of an act. All wisdom is in anticipation." At the train station (itself symbolic of changes), the narrator observes how fleeting the present moment is: "Tomorrow the bickering and dissatisfaction could resume but tonight every man was being welcomed in his home." The speaker reasons that even making love does not provide a connection to another person and to the present, being a futile endeavour of "produc[ing] pleasurable but ephemeral sensations."

The future in the novel does not hold real possibilities. Marilyn is afraid of the passage of time and hurries to live her life: "We haven't the time to hurt each other, we're not children, we're growing old." She wants to escape time and dreams of a place where it has no power: "I am haunted by numberless islands, and many a Danaan shore, Where Time would surely forget us, and Sorrow come no more." The narrator foresees their parting in the middle of a seemingly happy relationship and believes that Marilyn overplays her love for him because of the instinctive knowledge of the finite nature of the affair: "She knew very well that sometime, sooner or later, we would have to part; weariness, boredom, they would part us." When the girl talks about the future, she sounds desperate, since this future is not going to happen: "We'll work together, we'll build something together she said. We'll make a lie of all the sad poems of betrayal and death."

The narrator is forlorn and hopeless as he contemplates mortality and the fast and destructive passage of time: “her thighs [...] so mortally made of flesh and bone and blood. I swear I could feel them dying under my mouth and hands.” The grandfather thinks of the future as bringing death, but only to himself: “Soon I will die, I am too old for everything. Too old for war and too old for women.” As for the narrator and Marylin, he evaluates their temporal possibilities more optimistically than they do: “They are young, they have so much future,” says the grandfather about the narrator and Marylin. As they announce their engagement, the narrator says, “It’s the beginning of my new life” without thinking so. He knows that there will be no future for them as a couple because he does not love the girl and is bracing himself to part from her. The reader knows that too, because, in the present of the speaker as he is telling the story, he is alone. When he thinks, from the informed position of the present, about his future-in-the-past, he wishes he could change the decisions he made at the moment that was to bring this future about: “Had I known at that moment [...] I would have quit that [...] room at once.”

Marylin wants to get married because she does not want to search for a man and to go through the stages of getting to know him: “I am too old to begin again.” The narrator, on the contrary, resolves to follow his grandfather’s advice and “finish” with her in order to begin again: “Finish. Begin again. Finish. Begin again.” This mantra, however, reads like a vicious circle which he will never be able to break, and he seems to be aware of the fact. New beginnings are acts of desperation; when he tells the wife of the strangers he hates, “You could begin again. You still have a life ahead of you,” he does not mean these words, because he thinks she is “old” and because he does not believe in successful new beginnings.

Throughout the novel, the narrator has a burning desire to connect to the past of his family. His need is met at the end with an ironical cruelty of fate, when he receives a thick envelope stuffed with family history in the form of letters, documents, and photographs; the problem is that he does not recognize any of the names or faces: the family is not his but someone else's; the old man who turns out to be not *his* grandfather, is taken away from him, both figuratively and literally. The grandfather himself, when his luggage is lost at the beginning of the narrative, symbolically loses his past and his identity, which he tries to reinvent, in vain, by starting a new life with a newly found grandson. At the end of the novel, the old man leaves with "his new victims" to have another fresh start which will in all probability be no success either because of his progressive disconnection and isolation.

Cohen's works that came after this batch of short stories and *A Ballet of Lepers*, including books of poetry and the novels, continue exploring the themes of relationships, family ties, the formation of an individual and the self-identity as a poet and a Jew, but above all the past and the manifold force of memory. As the personal, historical, literary, and biblical past, in various manifestations, provides the emotional foundation for the characters in prose and the lyric "I" in poetry, the unpublished early stories – the author's artistic past – feed his later activity and success as a writer.

CHAPTER III. THE MAN AND TIME: NOVELS OF THE 1960s

1. “When Wind and Hawk Encounter, What Remains to Keep?”

Material Representations of the Ethereal in *The Favourite Game*

“Every object is time, events, and people pressed into
a hard shape and destined to be stored among its peers.”

Mariam Petrosian

(*The House, Where...*)

Leonard Cohen’s *The Favourite Game* (1963), “a third novel disguised as a first novel,” as he wrote to Jack McClelland, takes the form of a typical *Bildungsroman* / *Künstlerroman* and follows its protagonist throughout his childhood and youth. The novel is written mainly in the third person, but the implied author is presumably the central character himself, Lawrence Breavman, recollecting his personal past years later. Though not an autobiography *per se*, *The Favourite Game* has numerous points of contact with Cohen’s own life and Breavman, by extension, shares some memories and techniques of recollecting with the author.⁸³ It is a distinctive feature of the novel that most

⁸³ Carmen Ellison elegantly explains the complex interplay between fictional and autobiographical in the novel, pointing to “a textual *scar* where the *word* of fiction is made the *flesh* of autobiography,” which allows reading *The Favourite Game* “as an autobiography about writing and a novel about autobiography – a telling of the self as a past-tense other” (66).

reminiscences are linked to particular material objects and retrieved from memory with their help.

The novel opens with a poem borrowed from *The Spice-Box of Earth* asserting the ethereal nature of memory:

As the mist leaves no scar
 On the dark green hill,
 So my body leaves no scar
 On you, nor ever will.

When wind and hawk encounter,
 What remains to keep?
 So you and I encounter
 Then turn, then fall to sleep.

As many nights endure
 Without a moon or star
 So will we endure
 When one is gone and far.

A material, bodily contact between lovers is likened to a collision between elements (water and earth in the form of mist and a hill), and an encounter of a bird and wind. In both cases, no physical traces could possibly be left as reminders of the meeting; therefore the lovers in the poem, once parted, have no tokens of the relationship. Their

recollections have nothing to hinge on and their separation has to be suffered without memories.

The novel that follows this poetic epigraph ironically contradicts its message completely. On the first page, actual wounds and scars are declared to be physical traces of big and small life events marking one's flesh and epitomizing the depths of memory, the novel's main subject. As Jenny L.M. Kerber writes, "the problem with Lawrence Breavman is that he cannot let go of anything" (53); in *The Favourite Game*, memory is never detached from the material. Various objects stand for certain moments or images of the past, serving as their representations in the character's present – that is, the time of recollecting. They function, to use T.S. Eliot's expression, as "objective correlatives," concrete evocations of vague and complex notions:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (Eliot 48)

Unlike Eliot's theory, Cohen's practice is less mechanical and associations between objects and emotions are not straightforward. Moreover, a connection can work in reverse order when an emotion triggers a recollection of a material object: "The early-morning buildings filled him with nostalgia and he couldn't understand it until he realized that they were exactly the colour of old tennis shoes" (85).

It is characteristic of *The Favourite Game* that the associations between things and emotions are aimed not at the reader but at both the protagonist and the implied author, an older version of Breavman who has composed the novel we are reading. He comes from behind the curtains only a few times. Once he calls the reader's attention to the protagonist's journal in the manner of an eighteenth-century omniscient narrator in conspiracy with his audience: "Now we must take a closer look at Breavman's journal" (209). In another instance, he lets himself be noticed by saying "Let us study one more shadow" (227); the voice of the implied author calculatingly distances himself from the character in time, examining the past from the perspective of a much later "now."

Among the landmarks of Breavman's formation as a writer scrutinized in the novel are emotional experiences, some of them cathartic, which are represented by material objects such as a girlfriend's earrings, a pet rat, a father's bow-tie, a viciously killed bull-frog, the mountain, Kleenex, the moon, an (objectified) woman's body, and many others. Most metaphors for recollections involve material imagery: memories are seen as "showing layers like a geologist's sample" (101). For an aspiring artist, memories are valuable as tools of his trade or the goods he can prepare for "sale": "Don't forget your salesman's bag of adventure samples" (102), says Breavman's imaginary interlocutor.

The opening sentence of the novel sets the pattern of recollecting people and feelings through material things representative of them: "Breavman knows a girl named Shell whose ears were pierced so she could wear the long filigree earrings" (9). This piece of jewelry becomes a synecdoche for the girl in Breavman's memory: "Your jade earring with the filigree silver. I pictured it on your ear. Then I pictured the side of your

head and the wind-paths of hair. Then your face. Finally all your beauty” (210). The moon does the trick as well: “The moon. Your eye keeps coming back to it as it would to a beautiful woman in a restaurant. He thought about Shell” (216).

The array of remembered objects makes thinking about the past more intense, the revived picture more vivid, every detail bringing the emotions once lived through closer to the person who revives them in his memory, be it Breavman calling to mind his childhood or the implied author recollecting Breavman’s memories. In this logic, remembering “Breavman’s green silk pants and Lisa’s yellow dress” (30) equals evoking a range of memories of the characters’ relationship, a material thing becoming an objective correlative of the emerging pubertal sexuality: “Do you remember my green pants?” Breavman asks his childhood sweetheart. “If you remembered what I remember...” (115). The green pants and the yellow dress forever belong to the protagonist’s precious imaginary stash. A living woman is represented by the synecdoche of her name: Breavman’s lover Marshell, cited in his memory by the short form of her name Shell, becomes a part of this memorabilia by analogy with a sea-shell or the shell of a tortoise in a child’s collection of “treasures.”

It is not only Breavman’s memory that feeds on the materiality of the past. Looking at Breavman, yet a stranger but an immediate attraction, Shell mentally refers to a particularly pretty garment she used to wear: “For some curious reason she remembered a certain dress she had worn when she was at school and wished vaguely to be wearing it or know where it was” (166). The past comes back in the form of a vast array of objects. Nothing is too trivial or unimportant: a mere lump of Kleenex acquires epic proportions when tucked into the boy’s shoes to make him seem taller on the dancing floor, especially

given that, according to the local rumour, a popular girl applies the same technique to her bra. Similarly, the Mountain⁸⁴ forces Breavman to think about his social stance and feel love-hatred for his family. A hill in a Montreal park reminds the character of his late father: “There was one black hill that seemed so connected to his father that he could hardly bear to look up at it as he came round and round, stumbling like a drunk. [...] Then an idea struck him – he had ancestors!” (198). Love and desire are transmitted to memory or conveniently evoked with the help of recollected beautiful body parts belonging to the beloved: “[T]he arms, the bosoms, the buttocks, O lovely catalogue!” (111); Breavman sees “Shell’s silhouette and his own,” in his mind’s eye, as “[a] card on his collector’s shelf. Could he enbalm her for easy reference?” (180). As Kerber notes, “Breavman is concerned with an artistic form of preservation that is able to render powerless the forces of mortal decay” (59). Transformation of a material object such as a female body into its “objective correlative” in art (a direct inversion of Eliot’s concept) allows insuring its conservation in time. Through a bank of various immaterial material items, recollected or imagined, the past becomes for Breavman, the implied author, and Cohen himself an object for scrutiny, exploration, and never-ending self-analysis as a man and a creative persona.

This paradigm can be traced in the most important friendship Breavman has: that with a fellow named Kranz. The pair grow up together and learn life’s first lessons side by side. In a way, they are each other’s doubles, like romantic and practical aspects of one personality. To a large extent, the memory of the relationship with Kranz has its material representation in a special object: a rat (13). Kranz lends Breavman his pet

⁸⁴ In Breavman’s mental topography it refers to Westmount, not Mount Royal.

which dies, along with another rat, as a result of negligence; Breavman takes the tiny bodies outside and covers them with snow. The boys have a fervent dispute about the situation, then fight and eventually make peace, obtaining new rats. The rat story turns into a model of their relationship over the years, repeating itself with slight variations as squabbles over moral issues or women. The dead rat becomes an embodiment of the sense of guilt over someone's death or loss mixed with other complex emotions. It echoes in the scene where Kranz and Breavman, driven by half-scientific, half-existential interest, dissect a bull-frog. Towards the end of the novel, in the episode of an accidental death of a child caused in some measure by Breavman's negligence, the little childhood drama acquires serious tragic proportions appropriate for the scale of adult responsibilities.

Having buried the rat in the snow, Breavman finds its skeleton in summer and lays it to rest "under the pansies, one of which his father took each morning for his buttonhole" (14). The snowy burial and the father's items of clothing form a whole cluster of material representations of childhood memories. When Breavman's father dies, the young boy witnesses the grim ritual of the funeral. It happens in winter and he sees "snow on the clothes of the men who brought [the coffin] into the house" (24); he remembers "dirty snow above the heads of the mourners" (25). Snow forms, as a consequence, a steady association with burial and grief in the protagonist's mind. He performs his own interment ceremony by laying to rest a tie – a metonymy for his father: "The day after the funeral Breavman split open one of his father's formal bow-ties and sewed in a message. He buried it in the garden, under the snow beside the fence where the neighbour's lilies-of-the-valley infiltrate" (27). The mention of flowers provides an

additional parallel with the burial of the rat, guilt and grief coming together. It is worthy of note that the tie episode is openly autobiographical, closely resembling the story of nine-year-old Cohen's burying a bow tie with a note in it after his father's death. The novel's implied author renders Breavman's reminiscence of the tie-burial incident while Cohen himself recollects his childhood grief and possibly finds closure by passing it on to a fictional character.⁸⁵

The ruptured tie has more than autobiographic significance behind it. In Jewish tradition, the rending of garments, *keriah*, is an obligatory part of mourning a deceased relative. Following the example of biblical characters tearing their clothing to express anguish at the news of death, a Jewish mourner, an *onen*, must rend a garment; in the contemporary world that can be, and often is, a tie. According to *Halakha*, the Judaic body of laws, the torn garment symbolizes the broken heart. Since the primary mourners are parents and children, there is a rabbinical elucidation of the custom of *keriah*, stating that it represents "the rending of the parent-child relationship, and confronts the mourner with the stabbing finality of this separation, expressed on his own clothes and on his own person for all to see" ("Keriah" n. pag.).

In the episode in question, however, there is no *keriah* as such. Young Breavman does not rend his own garment but mutilates a tie of the deceased. Being a pre-Bar Mitzvah boy (less than thirteen years old), he supposedly lacks full understanding of the notion of death. Therefore, the tradition does not require his own participation in *keriah*;

⁸⁵ As Cohen wrote to Jack McClelland in a letter pertaining to the autobiographical aspect of *The Favourite Game*, "Lawrence Breavman isn't me but we did a lot of the same things. But we reacted differently to them and so we became different men" (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 88). In this particular case of the tie-burial, though, the reaction of the author and his novel's protagonist are eerily identical.

a minor symbolic cut is usually done on a child's clothes by a grown-up family member. This formal tearing, if it was performed, leaves no trace in Breavman's memory, being not significant enough to be carried with him to adulthood. What stays instead is his ripping and burial of the father's tie. As explained by Geoffrey Gorer, the "destruction of the dead person's property or possessions" by mourners serves "as a sign of the pain which the dead have caused them. According to some psychoanalysts, this anger is a component of all mourning, and one of the main functions of the mourning process is to 'work through' and dissipate this anger in a symbolic and, to a great extent, unconscious fashion" (115). To deal with his grief, young Breavman needs to give it a material shape and intuitively finds the most appropriate item that brings together Jewish religious tradition and his private, custom-made ritual.

It is also stressed by Gorer that a deficiency of emotionally satisfying mourning in young persons creates "neurotic responses" and even seemingly "unmotivated destruction" (115-116) later in life. In the case of Breavman, his childhood comprehension of death is not sufficient for him to come to terms with the loss and with being fatherless as an adolescent; hence his neuroses, "desire for destruction" (Kerber 56), occasional violence (as in the bull-frog episode), and the seeming emotional callousness in love affairs. It would be safe to suggest, as Kerber does, that the name of the character, Breavman, is derived, by virtue of both phonetic and spelling similarity, from the word "bereaved" or "bereavement" (54). The death of his father remains the central event of the young man's life until another death occurs, that of an invalid child in his care in a summer camp. From the second close contact with death Breavman emerges suddenly matured and ready to become a writer. In this *Künstlerroman*, the proof of the

protagonist's creative self-realization beyond the narrative is the novel itself, presumably "written" by him; the novel he "authored" is centred on a youth suffering the loss of his father and coping with it through an array of interconnected memories.

In Breavman's mind, the image of his father is evoked through several material memorabilia, such as medals, fishing rods, and, most importantly, the aforementioned item of formal attire. It is a tie that Breavman focuses on while looking at the father's portrait: "A wine tie with a tiny, hard knot sprouts like a gargoyle" (26). It is a tie that distinguishes his father from the rest of the family: "Breavman [...] looked under his great-uncle's beard and asked him why he didn't wear a tie" (25). The absence of a tie from the uncle's costume seems to the boy evidence of insufficient respect and grief for the deceased. Years later, Breavman becomes an accidental onlooker of a murder in the New York subway. Gazing at the body, he keeps his mind on the dead man's recently polished shoes and "[t]he white-on-white tie nattily knotted" (150). Another tie that draws his attention soon after the episode is painted on a plaster bust standing in a window. Although at that moment Breavman thinks it does not "remind him of anything when he stare[s] on it" (152), the unclean look of the sculpture and a sudden association with the colour of "soiled therapeutic stockings" (152) make him feel the taste he has had in his mouth since throwing up at the thought of a dead man.

The plaster bust with its painted tie represents deterioration and death, it *is* a dead thing, a material manifestation of a previous dismal vision Breavman had: "It was not that things decay, that the works of men are ephemeral, he believed he saw deeper than that. The things themselves were decay, the works themselves were corruption, the monuments were *made* of worms" (138). The *ubi sunt* motif, inherently present

throughout the novel, becomes particularly prominent in this episode, and then resurfaces again through a direct quote from the iconic *ubi sunt* poem, François Villon's "Ballade des dames du temps jadis." Wandering at night through the streets of Montreal with his lover Patricia, Breavman exclaims: "Où sont les neiges?" (228), meaning Villon's refrain "*Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?*" As if fighting the transience of things, Breavman tries to reconnect to his "eighteen-year-old city" through a familiar iron fence, an old wall, and a "crazy filigree doorway" (228) – objects embodying memories of his youth; it comes as no surprise that some of these items are not there any more. Notably, it is mentioned twice within a few paragraphs that "[h]e was heading towards Côte des Neiges" (227 and 230). In the context of the episode the name of an uptown Montreal neighbourhood acquires a symbolic meaning. This Côte des Neiges, or "Snowy Hill," is not a geographic part of the city but a place where the Villonian *neiges d'antan* could be sought; Breavman is heading directly towards the past.

At the end of the novel, the significance of "the favourite game," the titular phrase and a childhood image of a girl named Bertha, which kept escaping Breavman's recollections, is finally revealed, both to the relieved protagonist and to the reader. It turns out that the game in question involves leaving imprints of bodies in the snow, making bizarre snow angels – that is, creating material shapes which stay in place for some time after the game itself becomes a memory. While Breavman connects his recollections to material representations in order to store them in his memory and retrieve as needed, Cohen's memories obtain a material shape too, taking the form of the novel.

2. “The earth is a province of Eternity”:

Temporality and Mythology in *Beautiful Losers*

“Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible.”

Mikhail Bakhtin

(“Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel”)

Beautiful Losers, Cohen’s second published novel (1966), exhibits a special concern for time, containing a multilevel system of temporal perspectives and their intersections. Dennis Duffy affirms that it “deals with two levels of time – the present and the distant past – which slowly come to a thematic intersection. That is, the events taking place in each time illuminate each other” (29). While the second part of this assertion is justifiable, the first one is highly arguable because the temporal characteristics of *Beautiful Losers* cannot be reduced to the intersection of the past and the present. According to Douglas Barbour, in the novel “time turns in upon itself, circles, and confuses us if we try to take the narrative, wherever it may be, in a linear fashion: this is not merely a story with confusing flashbacks!” (“Down With History” 140). Robert Stacey writes:

the text is flagrant in its disregard for logical causality [...]. It’s not that the action of *Beautiful Losers* is simply episodic or nonchronological (which it is) but that *time* ceases to serve as the basis of interrelations between events [...]: the narrative doesn’t develop, it occasionally explodes. And the detritus of such

explosions doesn't recede politely into the narrative past but blows about, peppering the story with the present tense that simply won't go away. In *Beautiful Losers*, time no longer contains the plot – or, put another way, the plot refuses to reproduce the logic of temporal succession. (218)

In Linda Hutcheon's view, "the essential unity of the work lies outside the temporal and spatial confines of plot and character" ("Beautiful Losers" 42). It also lies outside the boundaries of history and conventional temporality. Barbour rightfully observes that the events are "set in various times stretching from then into the vague future: a kind of sf novel, it extrapolates a remote temporal possibility." On the one hand, there are some indicative signs in the text which allow one to impose historical chronology on the action, such as "[t]he references to separatism in Québec [...] placed about 1964"; it means that "the finale could be sometime around 1970." On the other hand, "these count neither politically nor historically" (Barbour "Down With History" 139).

It is almost impossible to pinpoint the time of any occurrence in the temporal stratum of the present, of "reality," of the characters. It is specified that I writes "The History of Them All" in the treehouse in the autumn: "The Canadian summer passed like a Halloween mask, now the cold countryside day after day" (117); he reads the letter from F. presumably five years after the latter's death. The old man emerges from the treehouse in spring, as indicated in the first paragraph of the Epilogue. He has spent there an unknown amount of time which he cannot account for, asking himself "Years (?)" (247). "Years," however, could be a hyperbole, the "reality" involving only a few months between autumn and spring. The exact timing is of no importance; what matters is

mythical time, the cycle of death and resurrection, autumn and spring of nature and of the human spirit. It is not by chance that the description of spring as the setting for the character's revival opens the last part of the novel. Scobie points to the lack of linear development: "For most of the book, the situation is static, and even when a change of some sort occurs, the time sequence is deliberately distorted" (*Leonard Cohen* 96). This fluidity is displayed, among other things, through the instability of tenses, for example, when a character is unsure whether the past or the present tense is appropriate: "I am proud that Tekakwitha was or is a Mohawk" (14).

This peculiarity of *Beautiful Losers* can be explained by positing that everything in the novel, with the exception of Book Three (An Epilogue in the Third Person), is happening in I's head: "I see it so clearly now!" (65). A possible objection that in Book Two the one who does the narration is F. does not contradict this hypothesis because Book Two, as follows from its title ("A Long Letter from F."), is a letter; I reads it and the effect reveals itself in the Epilogue. To be more precise, we read the letter being (or having been) read by I. What happens in I's "now" while he is thinking about the past remains unclear. His consciousness is detached from the present: "What's it like outside? Is there any outside?" (42). His body retains a connection to "reality" through the torture of constipation and the pain from burned hands (67); "[t]here would be a mist of pain when he forgot *this* spring, as he must" (250). The confusion becomes especially evident in the mix-up of "then" and "now"; the history of the French colonizing Canada is related in the present tense, as if happening simultaneously to I's "present":

Here come the troops led by marquis de Tracy, lieutenant-general
of the armies of the king, here they come marching through the

snow, twelve hundred tall men, the famous regiment de Carignan.

The news travels down the icy banks of the Mohawk: the King of

France has touched the map with his white finger. (83)

The grammatical present of the description and the details such as “tall men” and “white finger” appear because I indeed sees it all by his mental vision, in his imagination, so these events belong to his present and not to the historical past. I is not a historian, contrary to popular opinion,⁸⁶ but rather a “carrier” of history who has it within him. Writing about F. in the *past* tense, he addresses the historical figure of Tekakwitha in the *present*. His mind produces a thread and a needle to “sew[...] the world together” (17), connecting “everything which has existed and does exist” (18). Due to the distortion of time and the simultaneity of events taking place in I’s head, the Mohawk saint is closer to the narrator in time than his late friend: for him, Tekakwitha is lifted up from the historical time flow and placed in the all-times-encompassing venue of his imagination. She accompanies him in his timeless present, while F. is a subject of memories and, subsequently, of the past: “How quickly they come and go, the memories of F., the nights of comradeship, the ladders we climbed and the happy views of simple human clockwork” (13).

The complex, unconventional temporality of the novel can be better understood with the help of the phenomenological concept of phenomenal time. Phenomenal time is qualitatively determined time, the time measured by the correlation between the events and processes that take place in it, and not by clock. It can appear both as monosubjective

⁸⁶ “I am a well-known folklorist, an authority on the A-----s” (4) is how the character introduces himself in the text. Numerous critics, however, prefer to call him a *historian*: see, for example, Adria, Djwa, Lebold, Siemerling, Wilkins and others.

(experienced by one person) and intersubjective (experienced by a certain number of people). Phenomenal time is filled with events and processes organized according to its two most important dimensions: simultaneity and temporal disparateness. In phenomenal time, as in physical time, there are a present, past and future. The present is characterized by what one is experiencing at the moment, though this present does not exist by itself, being integrated with the unified whole of time: “Both the phases of past time which we have already experienced and the phases of the approaching future appear in their intuitively qualitative determinations only in the area around the actual present moment” (Ingarden 106). In other words, the present moment is the reference point for the future and the past phases.

The temporal phases of the past are qualitatively determined and therefore appear as concrete phenomena because they have already been experienced, having once been the present phase. The temporal phases of the approaching future have not been experienced yet, in the imagination they have vaguely indicated qualities, which make them appear only as empty temporal schemata in real life; in a literary work, the anticipated future can, on the contrary, be qualitatively determined, though never becoming the present moment for the character and being already the past from the temporal perspective of the narrator/omniscient author. The character’s future belongs to the narrator’s past: he is already aware of the events, which means that they sink into the past from his temporal perspective. The present moment is “flowing” and always changing into the past, giving way to the new present. Another aspect to consider is the “double past”: the described events presenting themselves to the reader at the given moment are perceived as “new” and are followed by “the later” ones, while what was

already read about sinks into the past (becoming the “double past”). In this case, the events are seen from a significant temporal distance, remaining in the present of the narration, which does not coincide with the present of reading, although readers often identify it with their present.

Temporal perspectives are projected by the various temporal forms of the finite verbs which function as main or subordinate predicates. A literary work can be written in a various combination of tenses. In a prose narrative, situations and events are typically described in the past tense and the sentences uttered by the characters are written in the present. In *Beautiful Losers*, however, the choice of tenses is logically unpredictable, being caused by the characters’ complicated relations with temporality. In Cohen’s novel, there are several time layers, for the most part different levels of remembered time:

- Historical past (Catherine; colonization);
- Edith’s childhood;
- I and F’s childhood;
- I and F’s common adult past;
- F’s memories (within I’s memories);
- The present of narration (I’s present);
- F’s present of narration (within I’s past);
- I’s memories of his own feelings and dreams;
- The old man’s present (the omniscient author’s past);
- The omniscient author’s present.

In the conventional phenomenological picture of the relationships between different phases of time, the past can be “revived” in special acts of recollection and

sometimes supplemented with “new” details which escaped one’s attention while experiencing the moment in question as present. Through the process of recollection the past is not only apprehended but also “closed,” concluded under the perspective of what was experienced later and, being comprehended, eventually sinks deeper into the memory. In Cohen’s novel, this pattern is not applicable because nothing is “closed” and the events of the past are re-invented, proving the impotence of memory: F. demonstrates to I that many of the things he recalls he remembers wrong, as F. has deliberately preconfigured these false memories. In the “now,” I has to relive the events; instead of sinking deeper in time, the past becomes as actual as the experience of the present.

What happened once in the historical past or in I’s personal life enters his memories as a part of “the history of them all,” making him “the author of this history” (107) and a living museum preserving the history in his consciousness. Notably, the word “museum” appears here and there in I’s discourse: he sees himself as “an ignorant custodian who walked his days in a dream museum of self-pity” (27) and claims that “the National Museum needs” him (37); physically and symbolically, I’s constipation makes him “the sealed, dead, impervious museum of [his] appetite” (42). He speaks about the “[h]omage to the walls of crutches which are weed museums” (106) and about tramway conductors “patiently steering for seniority and retirement” while “all the streetcars are in museums” (117); as the continuation of the physical preservation of history and memory, I refers to himself as a reluctant “monument” to F. (43). I describes himself as “the man who can wait,” “the man who has a thousand years on his hands,” “who hates his memory and remembers everything” (108); even his medical condition of constipation is a part of this, however unwilling, ability to preserve the past, be it personal memories,

centuries old events or yesterday's food: "Saints and friends, help me out of History and Constipation," he exclaims (118).

Remembering/preserving the past is a key issue for him: "perishable sentiments I managed to preserve" (11); "as long as I, this book, or an eternal eye remembers" (17); "Oh! I remember!" (76); "I remember one night with F as he drove down the highway to Ottawa" (96); "I remember the evening very perfectly" (111); "I can reproduce it in my brain" (115); "I remember your annoying habit of looking over my shoulders as I studied" (141). It troubles him when memories become elusive, as in a long passage about forgetting that opens with the phrase "I forgot who I was" (40). He asks himself intensely: "Can I recall?" (73). The burden of memory and history deforms him: "What a hunchback History and the Past have made of your body, what a pitiful hunchback," remarks F. (142), making a Shakespearian allusion to Richard III, a scapegoat of English history who unknowingly had to take on himself the sins of the whole nation to make its redemption possible, not unlike I who, against his will, is prepared by F. to save Canada from, using James Joyce's words, "the nightmare of history."

It is under the influence of F.'s presence and actions in the Acropolis painting scene that I's memory clarifies. He complains, "I seemed to have forgotten everything I knew" (11). F. suggests, "Empty your memory and listen to the fire around you. Don't forget your memory, let it exist somewhere precious in all the colours that it needs but somewhere else, hoist your memory on the Ship of State like a pirate's sail, and aim yourself at the tinkly present. Do you know how to do this? [...] Fuck a saint" (12). F. does not value memory; to him, memory is a disaster: "I memorized it while looking over your shoulder in the library. Do you understand, now, that with my photographic memory

it would have been disastrous to hover too long beside your ear?" (209). F. chooses not to remember anything himself, despite his gift of photographic memory. Only one time in his "Long Letter" he says, "I remember a story you once told me" (195). Memory is the dubious prerogative of I whom F. addresses: "O friend, take my spirit hand and remember me" (201); "Do you remember the world at that time?" (173). Remembering and being remembered is, to F., the folly of the crowd ("Many of the staring crowd wanted to be remembered in the prayers of the departed girl," 221) or the object of irony ("Surely this is a diagram to be memorized on the cushion of your thumb," 206). His own position is clear: "Let it be our glory to forget the legends and watch the night emptily" (225).

I's relationship with time is important to him as a part of his character and a shaping force of his life: "I came home every night at Twenty to eleven, regular as Kant" (7). It is an atypical deviation from his usual timekeeping that, along with a delivery boy's mistaking the floors, prevented I from crushing his wife in the elevator shaft and receiving "the kind of lesson she meant" (7). The radio reminds him about "the dictatorship of time" (82) under which stories are told and, undoubtedly, lives are lived. I is precise in giving the details of the past, which consists of concrete time periods and dates, such as: "seventh year of marriage" (15); "twenty years ago" (17); "[i]t was here the girl drew water, each day, for nine years. [...] 3285 times you came to this old tree" (72); "I was loved in 1950" (27). He is also specific when speaking about the historical dates concerning Tekakwitha and the colonization of Canada.

The present becomes dear to I only when it sinks into the past. "Why is it that only now, years past, my prick rises up at the vision of her standing there?" he asks

himself desperately; the answer is obvious: it is his intrinsic characteristic that memory and the past are more precious and arousing for him than any moment of the present. “But I warn you, [...] a time will come when you’ll want nothing in the world but those aimless kisses” (27), F. says to I referring to the eroticism of memories which causes the latter worse pain than real failed intercourse did: “Her freakish nipples make me want to tear up my desk when I remember them which I do at this very instant” (27). As Ondaatje observes, I “is more aroused by Catherine or by the memory of a dead Edith than he is by the living Edith” (51).

I displays an apparent “inability to accept reality,” as in his unsuccessful attempt to write a coherent biography of Tekakwitha; “he keeps skipping from his historical sources while his narrative increasingly turns into the world of fantasy” (Lebold “Fragmentation” 149). This is another major difference between I and his mentor: “While F.’s letter is written in a logical manner (in spite of the incredible events), the Narrator’s section is packed with unordered interruption: stray images, sayings of F., odd facts about Indians, newspaper clippings, drug advertisements, comic books, childhood reminiscences. The Narrator collects all these facts and emotions but cannot fit them together” (Ondaatje 47). History, being an accumulation of facts,⁸⁷ does not provide a reliable ground for their systematization; mythology, in contrast, grants an ontological pattern where details do not need to be systematized.

⁸⁷ Compare: “In its commitment to reality, history is opposed to miracle and magic, both of which are interruptions of history, outbreaks of the sacred. Historical time is profane, it’s time of facts and events and functions in accumulation; the accumulation of all events is called history. Its linearity denies cyclic time, which feeds on recurrence rather than accumulation” (Lebold “Fragmentation” 149).

I is preoccupied with historical time and the past, while “salvation would be real only if he found it in the rituals of here and now, no matter how sleazy they seemed” (Lee 69); that is why F. does everything to bring him to the present. This present, however, is a mythical ever-present, the non-discrete time of eternity as opposed to hierarchal “connected” historical time against which F. alerts I: “Connect nothing!” (18). F. sees himself *sub specie aeternitatis*: “I feel I shall be doing this throughout eternity” (165); his “cryptic sayings [...] are handed down through time, across the barrier of death” (Hutcheon “The Poet” 9). F.’s own liberation from time and history allows him to heal I “of his physical and mental constipation” and eliminate the “barrier that separates reality and imagination, the past from the present” (Ondaatje 51). The old man in the third part of the novel becomes, as Siemerling writes, “the truly apocalyptic incarnation of ‘I’ and F. At the moment that can be interpreted as that of his real death as well, he enters a world in which normal concepts of temporal and spatial distinctions and of cognitive identity become inoperative” (*Discoveries of the Other* 51).⁸⁸ In the famous passage “God is alive. Magic is afoot,” F. pointedly refers to the divine dimension of non-historic time: “time itself [is] the Magic Length of God” (168). In the Epilogue, the old man does the job of forgetting, the opposite of I’s preoccupation with remembering in Book One: “he scraped his memory for an incident of his past with which to mythologize the change

⁸⁸ Barbour stresses the apotheosis of non-historical time over history: “The old man in Book Three does not know how long he has lived in the woods, but it’s been ‘Years’ [...] The old man, avatar of ‘our little exodus,’ no longer recognizes Time, so that Time, or at least Historical Time, ceases to function for him, and for the book, at that point. [...] History no longer dictates what he shall be: he can become a movie, and he does. The old man breaks down the barriers of linear time in his final apotheosis for he has become IF, an amalgam of both men, now becoming divine [...]. In the eye(s) of god, or Isis, all times are a single time, after all: this is what the saint learns perhaps, especially when listening to ‘ordinary eternal machinery’” (“Down With History” 140).

of the season, [...] and his pain was finding none. His memory represented no incident, it was all one incident, and it flowed too fast” (246); “he forgot *this* spring, as he must” (250); “[h]e forgot them as soon as he bought his ticket” (252). Memory is no longer important: “He committed the instructions to memory, where they merely became part of his game” (255).

A considerable part of the novel is devoted to seventeenth-century history, “with the invocation of Indian wars, Jesuit conversations and Indian life and mythology” and therefore “provides a fragmented pastiche of a historical novel,” as Christophe Lebold writes. He also quotes Hutcheon’s vision of the novel’s genre “with its re-writing of history and decoding of historical texts as an example of historiographical metafiction” which “questions the ‘knowability’ of history and problematises the relationship between history and story, foregrounding the inescapable fictional nature of all attempts at re-capturing the past” (“Canadian Matter” 164). This understanding of the novel contradicts its nature: Cohen does not demonstrate the fictional nature of historiography, on the contrary. His character gives the details of the historical past in the credible manner of a witness; any barriers between him and the historical past seem to be non-existent. I does not invent or re-write history, seeing it with his inner vision and bearing it within himself and renders it “as it is.” He is possessed by History as one might be possessed by demons, which can be seen from the grammatical structure of his discourse. The object of Cohen’s artistic meditation is undoubtedly Canadian history: “*Beautiful Losers* is, among other things, a historical novel [...]. But history is more than a collection of facts; more often than not, it’s a narrative wherein the facts are ordered to express a putatively truthful version of the past” (Stacey 219). The novel, at the same time, is not centred

upon the idea of creating a “version” of history according to a certain concept, at least not in the way described by Hutcheon. It is more historiographical mythology than historiographical metafiction; there is more ontology than historiography in it.

Barbour believes that *Beautiful Losers* attacks history; a paragraph of his article is titled “The Destruction of History”: “The liberal need to comprehend History makes the kind of connections F objects to, and *Beautiful Losers* is a sustained attack on History on his part, and Cohen’s as well [...]. History, and our awareness of Historical Time, boxes us, like “I” in his basement, and keeps us from living in the Eternal Present” (“Down With History” 137). F. attacks history because he is aware of its power; for this reason, he makes it his ultimate goal “to escape History and achieve Miracle, not to allow Miracle to be tamed and then claimed by History” (“Down With History” 139). It can be argued that the novel is not a work of historiographical metafiction but a hybrid of fiction and religious writing which has no established literary definition, the closest phenomenon probably being the mystical books by Carlos Castaneda.

The peculiarities that make *Beautiful Losers* different from the conventional novel, including its sophisticated temporal structure, are the result of Cohen’s mythological thinking characteristic of his artistic production regardless of genre. Marco Adria asserts that one of the features intrinsic to Cohen’s works, be it poetry, songs or novels, is “the motive of the suppression of time,” that is “an attempt to undermine or subvert the temporal dimension” (125). Cohen’s preoccupation with mythology (a-temporal by definition) leaves his texts “outside the boundaries of history” (125), as Adria demonstrates using the example of *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. The author’s “desire to break the constraints of a universe governed by time” is caused by his

“religious sensibility [...], since in the centre of his cosmology is Jehovah, the great ‘I am’, the one who exists outside the boundaries of time” (126).⁸⁹

Cohen’s inclination for a religious/mythological way of thinking reveals itself in *Beautiful Losers* at full strength, which accounts for its traits unusual in a conventional novel. *Beautiful Losers* presents a basic ontology, a mythological concept explaining the cause-and-effect mechanism of Canadian history and the possibility of salvation. Dennis Lee provides a convincing interpretation of Cohen’s mythology. In his view, in the novel “[t]he myth of Canadian history has a classic shape: a fall from grace, a period of exile, and a re-ascent to grace” (74). Lee’s interpretation gives the events and characters a remarkable twist. He sees Tekakwitha’s becoming a Christian as Canada’s original sin causing the fall responsible for the troubles of the country’s history: “[w]hen Catherine rejected sex [...] she was denying [...] the sexual energy which had meditated divine presence, the ‘old magic.’ Catherine’s virginity was an act of blasphemy” (65). The fall started the centuries-long cycle of victimization: “The English did to us what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us” (199).

Lee claims that F. is obsessed with “men’s incarceration in historical time, their exile from eternity” (67). F.’s interest in Tekakwitha’s story has nothing to do with the historical events *per se*; according to Lee’s interpretation, F. “identified Catherine Tekakwitha as the instigator of Canadian history, and the narrator as its terminal case. Exorcising history would be a matter of integrating world and earth in those two people”;

⁸⁹ Another explanation for Cohen’s “suppression of time” lies in the hippie culture of the 1960s, the audience of Cohen’s early songs: “the hippies were massively concerned with the attempt to subvert modern industrial time [...] They were preoccupied with the ‘now’ and with the attempt to change or halt that flow of time [...] They wanted to experience life not as a logic and rationality unfolding itself over time, but as an immediate richness occurring outside the dimension of time” (Paul Willis qtd. in Adria 126).

“unifying body and consciousness” through mixed techniques, including sex, would lead to the “end [of] the domination of History” (67) and the circle would be broken.⁹⁰ This is what induced F.’s notorious appeal “Fuck a saint” (*Beautiful Losers* 12). As Lee writes, though “[t]he mechanics of laying Saint Catherine were problematic [...] the meaning is not. If she stopped repressing her body’s sacred knowledge [and] becomes Kateri again – then the fall she initiated would be undone” (68). In this interpretation, F. is a self-appointed prophet. His name, although indicated with only one letter, is still a name; it has a range of meanings and open to various readings, the most evident being F(rancophone), or F(renchman) and F(ucker). Another possible understanding is conceived from his guiding function for I: F(ather), in the spiritual meaning of the word. In the mythological scheme of *Beautiful Losers*, I is a reluctant saviour obedient to F.’s will: “You ruin everything with your saintly pretension,” I tells F. (9); his exclamation “O F., is this the training you planned for me?” (102) brings to mind Christ calling his divine Father in the garden of Gethsemane.⁹¹ Above the two of them, Edith/Isis is the goddess who “*is* ‘all creation’” (73).

In an early interview Cohen says about *Beautiful Losers*: “I was writing a liturgy ... a great mad confessional prayer, but using all the techniques of the modern novel

⁹⁰ History is the barrier between I’s desire for Tekakwitha and the fulfillment of magic: “the project finds a considerable obstacle in history: St Catherine is dead and can’t be slept with. This explains why history is perceived by the characters as a hostile force working against their spiritual aspirations: history is a burden and a tyranny: the tyranny of facts. [...] In *Beautiful Losers*, the characters *desperately* (my italics – NV) cling to magical thought and a sacred perception of the universe” (Lebold “Fragmentation” 149). I’s craving for Tekakwitha dictates the need for apocalyptic events: “because the saint is dead the end of time would abolish the main obstacle between ‘I’ and the object of his desire: the historical distance” (Siemerling *Discoveries of the Other* 47).

⁹¹ “He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done” (Matthew 26: 42).

which was the discipline in which I was trained” (qtd. in Ondaatje 44). The structure of the novel is based on the sacred notion of the triad: it comprises three Books like the Bible consisting of three parts (Law, The Prophets and The Writings).⁹² Christian mythology and Holy Scriptures are another fundamental source: the three main characters of *Beautiful Losers* merging into one at the end form a blasphemous Holy Trinity; the three aspects of the female goddess, Isis/Edith/Catherine unify the mythology of the fragmented narrative. At one point the narration paraphrases an important quotation which summarizes the doctrine of Christianity: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). In *Beautiful Losers*, the passage about what a saint is runs as follows: “Something in him so loves the world that he gives himself to the laws of gravity and chance” (101).

The biblical/Christian aspect of the novel’s mythology makes Lebold treat I’s relationship with Tekakwitha as the quest for sainthood; from this perspective, the aim of “fucking the saint” means striving to achieve the same status: “beyond the sexually explicit and offensive content, what is at stake is communion, a Eucharist of the flesh. It implies, for the historian [for I – NV], becoming saint through contagion, as though sainthood was transmissible like smallpox. Beneath the sacrilege lies a programme [sic] of sexual liturgy” (“Fragmentation” 149). Lebold’s use of the word “liturgy” as a full synonym of Eucharist is questionable. It is even more incorrect to apply the words “communion” and “Eucharist” for the character’s presumably selfish wish to become a saint, because the meaning of Eucharist is the opposite of a selfish purpose: it “links

⁹² Hutcheon notes that Cohen’s novel is “both private and public in its scope” and “[i]n this double dimension, it is most like one particular work – the Bible” (“The Poet” 9).

heaven with earth, God with man, uniting them most intimately and keeping them thus united” (Pohle n. pag.). The direct translation of the Greek word “liturgy” is “public duty,” which is essentially what I, though against his will, is summoned to fulfill.

While the biblical/Christian system of notions is important, its role is not exclusive. *Beautiful Losers* is an amalgam of mythologies. For example, the triad of characters recalls the teaching of Nietzsche.⁹³ According to it, the three figures representing the best aspects of otherwise base human nature are Artist, Philosopher, and Saint. In Cohen’s novel, they correspond to I, F., and Edith/Catherine respectively. In Nietzsche’s vision, one has to die as a human to reawaken as an *Übermensch*; a similar thing happens to the characters of *Beautiful Losers* in the Epilogue.

While philosophic ideas belong to the array of “acquired tastes,” nothing influences a work of literature more than the writer’s own attributes. In the case of *Beautiful Losers*, it is the fact that its author is a poet first and foremost. As Hutcheon emphasizes, poets turned novelists, unlike “pure” novel writers, use symbolism and imagery in a specific “*structural*” way (“The Poet” 6). She claims that “[i]n lieu of traditional narrative structures, Cohen relies on mythic and imagistic patterns to balance out the [seeming] chaos of *Beautiful Losers*. Frye pointed out [...] that Cohen’s interests have been mythopoetic from the start” (“The Poet” 8). Cohen the composer also contributes to the peculiarities of *Beautiful Losers*, especially its dealing with time, because in music time is totally under the composer’s control. In the novel, as Adria notes, time is “made subordinate” and chronology deliberately distorted: “we must

⁹³ Lee spots the exact citations from *Twilight of the Idols* assigned to F. and points to a specific edition as their source (125). Cohen, though, does not directly follow the quoted ideas; he inverts Nietzsche, changing the claim “God is dead” into “God is alive.”

apprehend events of the novel much to the same way we would the motives of a piece of music” (Adria).

Beautiful Losers does not function as a conventional novel, invalidating any attempts to read and interpret it as such. There is no linearity because Cohen’s thinking in this book is not *logical*, but *mytho-logical*, the opposite of rational and linear. It is worthy of note that the last word of the novel is “the end”; one wonders what this word means beside the addressee’s “trip to the end” (260). It is the end of the story and the end of the book as an object with a distinct temporal dimension; it may also stand for the end of history and historical time, effectively surpassed and substituted by mythology and eternity.

CHAPTER IV. CRISES AND HOPES: POETRY OF THE 1970s

1. “[T]he spider web you see me through is the view I’ve always taken”:

The Present, the Past, and Poetry in *The Energy of Slaves*

“[W]hat alone matters are the memorable words you leave behind.”

Irving Layton

(Inscription on Cohen’s copy of *The Energy of Slaves*)

The Energy of Slaves came out in 1972 when Cohen had already become an acknowledged singer-songwriter with three popular albums released by Columbia Records. It had been four years since *Selected Poems 1956-1968* and six years since *Parasites of Heaven*, the last publication that was a conceptual poetic entity, not an anthology. As a work characterized by a tight semantic unity of its components, *The Energy of Slaves* marked Cohen’s return to his readers as a full-blown poet. Ironically, the communication they received from the poems was that the author considered himself a failure and could not write any more. His growing musical reputation did not seem to have given him self-confidence. On the contrary, in the new book “[i]nstead of displaying happiness in response to his success, Cohen appeared militant and suicidal” (Deshaye 96). Throughout *The Energy of Slaves*, he speaks about the loss of his voice. As Scobie elucidates, “[t]he ‘voice’ that Cohen lost was the confident, self-assured voice of his early writing, and its ‘loss’ has been reflected in an increasing hesitancy about publishing

anything at all, and, in the work that has appeared, in an apparent obsession with the pose of the anti-poet” (*Leonard Cohen* 154).

The Energy of Slaves marks another stage in Cohen’s artistic life. In Nadel’s words, it “was a difficult and troubling book that dramatically shifted from the mythology of *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, the romanticism of *The Spice-Box of Earth*, and the historical focus of *Flowers for Hitler* to a personal self-loathing and even a loathing of sex” (*Various Positions* 191). The poems are on average shorter than used to be typical for Cohen: a handful of them are from three to five lines long. They are economical in terms of form, and often read like notes or undated (with rare exceptions) diary entries. The focal point is mainly limited to poetry and sex; the dominating emotions are frustration and despair. Two years before, in 1970, Ondaatje proclaimed a verdict: “Cohen, not his poems has become the end product of his art” (60). Since it was not only one person who saw it that way, the poet must have been distraught, lashing at himself (and occasionally at critics and readers) in *The Energy of Slaves*. He analyzes the present state of things with bitterness and sarcasm.

The book is heavily metapoetic, often in a self-contemptuous mode. The speaker consistently complains that he has been deprived of his creative abilities; he is not, however, the same person as the author. The depowered poet is not Cohen; on the contrary – as Scobie rightly asserts, “The more Cohen protests that he cannot write poems any more, the less he is to be believed” (*Leonard Cohen* 159). Cohen made it clear in his interview with Paul Saltzman:

I’ve just written a book called *The Energy of Slaves* and in there I
say that I’m in pain [...] I don’t say it in those words because I

don't like those words, they don't represent the real situation. It took eighty poems to represent the situation of where I am right now. It's carefully worked on, you know. It's taken many years to write [...] and it's there [...] between hard covers. It's careful and controlled and it's what we call art. (qtd. in Simmons 254)

Decades later, the poet was not in the least ashamed of the book, despite all the negative criticism⁹⁴ it had received upon publication: “‘In many ways, I like that book the best of anything I’ve ever done,’ Cohen said in a 1993 interview, because it is one ‘of the strongest pieces that I’ve ever done’” (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 191). Although the poet’s appreciation of the book might be arguable, there are numerous gems in it, especially among the metapoetic works. For example, “Portrait of a Girl” is a sketch that describes the physique and the emotions of a female figure, along with the room she is sitting in. Towards the end of the poem, it turns out that the text is metapoetic and the sketch is an artistic exercise; the girl is imaginary: “Unfortunately I don't know who she is / or where she lives / or if indeed she lives at all. There is no information about this person / except in these lines.” In fact, all the artistic decisions about the volume are well-considered, beginning with the cover and the poems’ presentation on the page.

⁹⁴ See for example: “His poems [in *The Energy of Slaves*] have a randomness which betrays the lack of any sustained vision [...] Prosy, inexpert, un compelling, the poems get through love, loneliness, war, torture, self-doubt, poignant incidents, worldly wisdom, anger, regret, and so on and so forth, with the rapidity of a pulp-fiction writer thumbing through his file index cards” (“Along the Fingertip Trail” 10). Also: “If only the truisms and prosaic utterances had been compressed into thirty pages, if only discipline had been imposed and time taken—then something of the originality and spark of his novels (and indeed of his early poetry) might have come through. As it is we have merely the hasty jottings of a cult figure, dashed off—or so it would seem—between gigs and television interviews” (Robson 47).

The visual component acquires an importance unprecedented for his previous publications.⁹⁵ The grim ambiance of the book starts to form from the first glance. While the front cover is simple, white with black and golden letters for the title and the author's name respectively,⁹⁶ the back cover is more expressive. On it, a large, full-page grayish picture represents Cohen, in a white outfit, leaning against a tiled washroom wall. His gaze is wistful and his posture is relaxed, in an ostentatious way. His hair is buzz cut; one hand is placed on the belt, the other holds a cigarillo to his mouth. The rest of the body blends into the light-coloured wall so that the manly hairy arms and the dark eyes stand out. Cohen appears despondent and aloof; the impersonal, cold, unappealing background solidifies the impression. The photograph (taken by Suzanne Elrod) reflected the poet's emotional state of the time: next year, in 1973, he picked the same picture for the front sleeve of his album *Live Songs*. There is no dedication in the book, in contrast to the previous poetic volumes.⁹⁷ Indirectly, the author dedicated *The Energy of Slaves* to himself.

Another noticeable peculiarity which draws the reader's attention is the tiny black razorblades used to separate poems. One does not need much imagination to see that the poems are "cut off" from one another. The poet himself, when asked about the meaning

⁹⁵ One could object to this statement because in 1961 McClelland and Stewart published a lavishly and tastefully illustrated edition of *The Spice-Box of Earth*, designed by the celebrated Frank Newfeld. The visual decisions, however, were Newfeld's, not Cohen's, and did not represent the poet's artistic will.

⁹⁶ The design of the front cover is laconic, yet the font used for the title and the author's name has a touch of expressiveness: the curved letter "E" and the letter "A" with an additional left-pointing stroke on top evoke antiquity, namely, ancient Roman inscriptions carved on marble.

⁹⁷ *Selected Poems 1956-1968* has no formal dedication either, though the title (and the first line) of the opening poem in the section "New Poems" reads "This is For You," a formula perfectly suitable for the role.

of these pictographs, gives practical reasons: “The poems are untitled as I wrote them. We had to have some method of designating the beginning of one poem and designating the end of another” (qtd. in Devlin *Leonard Cohen* 48). Indeed, in *The Energy of Slaves* he abandoned once again the practice of using first lines as poems’ titles, and the number of properly titled texts in the book is extremely small. At the same time, the choice of a sign for dividing untitled poems is effective: a razorblade is not a random image. A critic shrewdly noted its symbolism used earlier in *Selected Poems*: “To use one of the images that recur in this collection, life is full of menacing razor blades” (Anon. in Gnarowski 37). Resurfacing in selections from early books, in the “New Poems” the image can be found in “You Live Like a God”: “Shaping your fingernails / with a razorblade.” *Parasites of Heaven* has razorblades too, in “Stars and stars and stars” in a relatively benign context (a wet tree is compared to “a curtain of razorblades”) and in “These notebooks, these notebooks!” within a harsh paradoxical metaphor “sawing up my heart with the blades.” In *The Energy of Slaves*, razorblades take a pictorial form and never appear as a word.⁹⁸ The razorblade icons add to the violent, aggressive tone of the book with its threats of killing and the motif of suicide, sometimes metaphoric (“I tried to set my throat on fire” in the poem “I could not wait for you”), sometimes literal: “His suicide was simply not a puzzle.” In the latter poem, the lyric “I” going by the author’s name tries on the role of the friend who killed himself: “Sing for him, Leonard, / your love of honey qualifies you / to wear his raincoat / and the stinging shaving lotion / for this purest

⁹⁸ There is another pictograph in *The Energy of Slaves*, a contour of New York’s skyline within the poem “Terez and Deanne” doubled with the word SKYLINE in bold letters. This deliberately simple schematic drawing illustrates a mock-boastful statement: “that is how great a poet I am / and artist too.” The technique of combining verbal and visual imagery is rooted in Cohen’s doodling on manuscripts as a part of the creative process; it will later find full expression in *Book of Longing*.

of occasions.” Suicide can be a fact or a prediction of the grim future for the speaker and the addressee: “You will commit suicide or become like me” (“This is a threat”).

The title of the book has the word “slaves” in plural, as a generalization; the poems refer, for the most part, to one slave only: the author’s *alter ego*. Although it goes without saying that the speaker is not identical to the poet, *The Energy of Slaves* is acutely confessional. Cohen admitted that he was concerned about the readers’ reaction to the volume since it was too personal: “I have the feeling that by making it public I may be making a mistake” (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 188). The raw emotions were caused by his tumultuous private life and too many expectations and obligations complicating Cohen’s career as an artist: the audience demanded new songs and concerts; according to a biographer, in the early 1970s “Columbia Records tugged on Leonard’s chain” (Simmons 256). He was put under pressure and not happy with that, as testified in the 1973 interview with Alastair Pirrie for *New Musical Express*, titled “Cohen Regrets”: “I’m no longer a free man; I’m an exploited man. Once, long ago, my songs were not sold; they found their way to people anyway” (n. pag.).

Throughout the book, there are two forms of slavery the lyric “I” talks about: love and art. In love, there is a fervent collision between lovers as they fight for dominance. The speaker humbly acknowledges that he is in subjection to a woman (a fusion of his lover and the Virgin Mary): “I was always a slave / play with me forever/ Mistress of the world” (“I wore a medal of the Virgin”); when he is in the presence of the beloved, he calls his heart that of an “old slave’s” (“She sat down at the piano”). In one poem the female figure is a merciless slave-owner: “She reserves a special contempt / For the slaves of her beauty (“There are no traitors among women”). In another, the speaker

predicts a reversal of fate: “One of these days / You will be the object / Of the contempt of slaves (“One of these days”). In “It is not to tell you anything” it is his turn to be a master: “my greed has made a slave of you,” and then audaciously refers to her as “my cunt / my slave” in “We call it sunlight.” In general, the semantic unity of the volume is remarkable. Even on the most superficial formal level the volume retains integrity: “The lack of individual titles on most of the poems [...] encourages a response to the book as a whole, as one long sequence of poems” (Scobie *Leonard Cohen* 157).

The poems could be written under diverse circumstances and have various women as subjects and addresses, but the totality of texts in the book reads like a novel about a frustrated poet in a turbulent love relationship with a beautiful unfaithful woman whom he periodically wants to kill but always sexually longs for. There is also a certain thematic continuity between *The Energy of Slaves* and the album Cohen released a year before under the telling title *Songs of Love and Hate* (1971).

Slavery in amorous relationships can be lifted when lovers make a truce, as in “I have been cruel to you” where the lyric “I” lets go of his habitual acrimony, “remembering our time last week / when slavery peeled from the world / like an old snakeskin / as we emerged [...] / hand in hand.” Another form of slavery, the artistic one, is more permanent, with no liberation in view. In one of the metapoetic texts the book abounds with, the speaker expresses his annoyance with this state of affairs, addressing his “masters” – presumably, readers, publishers, critics, music audiences, and record producers:

I am punished when I do not work on this poem
or when I try to invent something

I am one of the slaves

You are employees

That is why I hate your work

(“I am punished when I do not work on this poem”)

When artistic slavery is not mentioned directly, it is implied, as in “This is the poem we have been waiting for,” where the lyric “I” emphasizes that composing poetry is hard and painstaking work: “It is not inspired / It took days and days to write.”

Cohen also employs “slavery” as a political notion, meaning that the social structure is prefigured by those in power who keep everyone else as mere slaves: “Your party did not win / It's the old arrangement / the old party / the one that deals in slavery (“War is no longer needed”). In these circumstances, the bitterness of losers and desperation of slaves can translate into rebelliousness and violence: “Thoughts of rebellion / Thoughts of injustice [...] / Walther PPK-S / Serial No. 115142 / stolen from one slave by another” (“Each day he lugged”); “tell me who to kill / cries the slave in my heart” (“I don't know what happens”). The speaker warns with the opening lines of a poem: “Any system you contrive without us / will be brought down,” and then repeats this threat twice more within the text. On the next page, in the adjacent poem, he draws back: “Each man / has a way to betray / the revolution / This is mine”; he is not the man for any figurative or literal barricades, having other concerns besides fighting. These two poems work well together, creating the effect of self-irony as well as sarcasm towards sonorous political declarations that can be so easily “betrayed.” It is not by chance that the poet gets sarcastic speaking about any politicized issues. As Scobie explains, “Cohen has never put any faith in political systems; the political feeling here is an aspect of

Cohen's personal disgust rather than a genuine commitment to any revolutionary cause" (*Leonard Cohen* 161).

Politics, wars, and racial problems all divert attention from love and jealousy in "I don't want you to know who I am": "that's none of your business now / now that you've got 'Vietnam' and the 'blacks.'" The speaker gets progressively cynical about it: "Why don't they make Vietnam / worth fighting for?" ("Why did you spend"). Politics interferes not only with love but also with his wishes and artistic decisions for poems: "None of these items can appear / for political reasons," he complains in "The progress of my style." The lyric "I" needs to be left alone and prays: "Keep me out of politics" ("I wore a medal of the Virgin"); elsewhere, he scornfully utters: "let politics go hang" ("Crying, Come Back, Hero"). To deal with political issues, Cohen employs satire, as in "The killers that run":

I for one
prefer the rule
of our native killers
I am convinced
the foreign killer
will kill more of us
than the old familiar killer does

His humour is nevertheless dark, and he gets sarcastic as he concludes that "the killers on either side" will continue "gaily / quite unchecked / until everyone is dead" – the future is murder, as in the later song, "The Future." It comes as no surprise that the motifs of war, violence, torture, revenge, and murder run consistently throughout the book.

Annoyed with politics, frustrated as an artist in his metapoetic poems, unhappy as a lover – this is the portrait of the lyric “I” in the present. The lyric “I” in *The Energy of Slaves* is profoundly discontent. He reports of political losing (“your party did not win” in “War is no longer needed”) and losing as a lover (“I am ugly in my own eyes / for not winning you” in “Whenever I happen to see you”); he is deeply embittered: “I am the ghost of Joan of Arc / and I am bitter bitter / in the consequence of voices” (“There is no end to my hatred”). The failure on all fronts makes him harsh: “my / unceasing struggle for fame and money, my lies, the lies I / tell you in order to trick and eventually humiliate you” (“The silly girl, the silly girl”). He is not only unhappy with himself but also resentful of his contemporaries: “I had to contend / with all the flabby liars / of the Aquarian Age” (“How we loved you”).

In the ballad-like “I sit with the old men,” the unhappy present of the speaker caught in a love triangle deprives the trees in his courtyard of their magic allure: he still enjoys their company but “they no longer rule the world.” In another poem, he talks with wry humour about daisies destroyed by the summer heat, “[t]heir skeletons” looking “like scrap and junk” (“I walk through the old yellow sunlight”). The depowered trees and withered flowers in the speaker’s yard are as drained as he is and metaphorically represent his emotional state. The disillusioned lyric “I” notes failure everywhere. His disenchantment with a woman he used to covet turns into cynicism, and he declares her a loser: “We no longer wish to learn / what you know how to do / There is no envy left.” Her present has gone wrong, and he is cruel enough to tell her so: “You can no longer control the ones you love / Are you happy now that no one wants to undress you” (“The silly girl, the silly girl”). The speaker addresses someone who is in a mess: “in your

deepest heart / you thought you were better / Now what can you do” (“I can’t believe”). The whole world is in turmoil and state of war; the reality is brutal and merciless: “Men and women are killed / right in front of the baby,” so no wonder the speaker’s wife “sees the world clearly and [...] goes crazy” (“Every time my wife has a baby”).

The main concern, though, is that in the present the lyric “I”’s love life is in shambles and his artistic ambitions are unfulfilled. In “Beauty Speaks in The Third Act,” he addresses himself in the second person, as if observing the situation from a distance:

And so your purpose failed
 you could not hear high music
 your mistress fell into a trance
 of everyday behaviour

While his woman is “in a trance,” the women he is longing for are unattainable. The fiasco of love is named candidly as the lyric “I” renders his unsuccessful courtship of “that exquisite spoiled princess in the palace of my failure” (“What character could possibly engage my boredom”). Love causes anguish which can turn deadly: “I am dying / because you have not / died for me” (“I am dying”). His sexual longing gets intense to the degree of anger and aggression in “You are almost always with someone else,” but that leads nowhere – he still speaks of his “miserable ‘sex life’” (“Over there”).

The most excruciating despair experienced by the lyric “I” in the present is provoked by his malfunction as a poet: “This is my voice / but I am only whispering” (“This is my voice”). In numerous metapoetic poems, he complains of losing his power in comparison to the past and having only “that shabby little laboratory called my talent” (“I walk through the old yellow sunlight”). In “I dress in black,” the “I” (and the implied

author) is protective of his text and threatens those who “unseal” it; at the same time, he tells the readers that the work is unworthy of attention and thanks them for saving him shame: “bless your eyes / who hurry from this page / Put a green-eyed man / out of his misery and rage.” He denies himself the title of a poet:

I've lost my pride
 I'm not proud any longer
 It turned out that
 I was only a scribbler
 (“Listening to her song”)

The speaker indulges in self-deprecation and asserts sarcastically that now when he “ha[s] no talent left” and “can’t write a poem anymore,” poetry itself is not the end but merely the means:

I guess I should pack it up
 but habits persist
 and women keep driving me back into it
 (“I have no talent left”)

He further picks up on this idea but develops it in a yet more pessimistic direction, as his success as a lover is in decline too:

I am no longer at my best practicing
 the craft of verse
 I do better
 in the cloakroom with Sara
 But even in this alternate realm

I am no longer at my best

The speaker's relationships with women and poetry go hand in hand, even on the lexical level, as becomes particularly evident in "The poems don't love us anymore," where all the imagery is based on the personification of poems as creatures having physical bodies as well as an independent will, and capable of feeling:

The poems don't love us anymore
 they don't want to love us
 they don't want to be poems
 Do not summon us, they say
 We can't help you any longer

The poems take their leave and perish since they are nonviable on their own:

I see them sometimes
 half-rotted half-born
 surrounding a muscle
 like a rolled-up sleeve

One of the most important metapoetic works devoted to the dissatisfying present state of affairs is "The Progress of My Style," where the speaker has forsaken his poetic ambitions and blames some adversaries, presumably fellow poets or critics:

My inspiration failed
 I abandoned the great plan
 Among other things
 I got wiped out
 by several charismatic holy men

The word “progress” in the title is used ironically because it is decay that the speaker describes. In his dismal present, he wishes for the things from the past (his friends, the café where they used to gather, “[t]hings from my old poems”), but they are out of his reach. The friends would be of no help anyway because the life of a poet is a “solitary adventure” (“Leaning over his poem”). Loneliness is a poet’s destiny:

There is no one
to show these poems to
Do not call a friend to witness
what you must do alone
(“There is no one”)

Discontented with his artistic faculty, the lyric “I” projects his despair on poetry *per se*, suggesting that it is in crisis and thus justifying himself. The idea is expanded in “The form of poetry”:

The form of poetry
has been disgraced by many pious hands
That’s why I can’t write it anymore
I couldn’t take the company

He asserts “the death of poetry” (though it remains unclear whether this refers to poetry in general or just his own). The speaker is sad about “high-minded persons / who wish to be known as poets” degrading themselves by “speak[ing] out against free love.”⁹⁹ As for

⁹⁹ The lyric “I” might be meaning himself too, because at least once in the book he opposes the free love concept: “I know it’s 1967 / but are you sleeping have you slept / with any of my friends” (“I know there’s no such thing”).

himself, there is no recognition from the public: “The whole world told me / to shut up and go home.” The failure makes him think that if he is not good enough with words he deserves annihilation:

You who knew very well you could fuck anyone
but couldn't think of a beautiful way to put it
you'll look fine with your throat cut

A similar motif appears in several other poems, “There is no one” among them: “This is war / You are here to be destroyed.” Poetry, like war, is a serious matter of ending up with the shield or on the shield. Apparently, here the boundary between the lyric “I,” the implied author, and the poet himself gets blurred. It must be the texts like this that prompt Simmons: “*The Energy of Slaves* has a [...] brutal honesty. Revisiting it today, it almost reads like punk poetry” (256).¹⁰⁰

The speaker pursues the career of a songwriter: “Perhaps you can detect / that I still try for music / idle music for the very idle” (“The Progress of My Style”). To his dismay, this path brings him no artistic satisfaction:

I put aside every ornament
of my voice
I heard myself
forsaking beauty
and shame drove out

¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Cohen and punk poets of the 1970s, such as Patti Smith, are related through the Beatniks; it comes as little surprise that in a book full of frustrations Cohen occasionally displays some features similar to the anarchic and provocative punk poetry: accentuated formal simplicity, repetition of short lines and interjections, strong language, and gross imagery, all serving to express the underlying sarcasm and harsh emotions, for example, in such poems as “The Event” or “Jelly.”

the appetite for music

(“Listening to her song”)

Like poetry, music (personified as an uncooperative living creature in “Perhaps it is because my music”) causes frustration and the destructive mood: “Perhaps it is because my music / does not sing for me / I hate my music / I long for weapons.”

The lyric “I” is self-ironic and jokes about the results he has achieved – as superficial, for example, as being able to get the fifteen-year-old girls he wanted when he was fifteen himself (“the 15-year-old girls”). In his “now,” he sees himself an overall failure and prays, if not begs, for an escape from his misery and the satisfaction of his longing:

Good father, since I am now broken down, no leader

of the borning world, no saint for those in pain,

no singer, no musician, no master of anything, no

friend to my friends, no lover to those who love me

[...]

show me the way now, tonight, to possess what

I long for

(“How We Used to Approach *The Book of Changes*: 1966”)

In “Cutting the hair,” the lyric “I” turns from a philanderer and pleasure-seeker into a near-hermit, accepting (or enforcing on himself) various “forms of discipline,” such as shunning drinking and sex and, as the first line entails, “cutting the hair” – a gesture that reminds one of the author’s portrait on the back cover of the book and establishes a connection between Cohen and the hero of *The Energy of Slaves*.

It would be untrue to assert that there are no poems in the volume representing the present in a favourable light. There are a few texts showing the lyric “I” as close to happiness as he gets. He seems to be happy when he is alone, isolated from the big-city life, and working on his poetry. For instance, “I try to keep in touch wherever I am” is a rumination in the present tense and about the present, in a peaceful “cabin in Tennessee.” The speaker is tranquil but busy: “my work calls to me / sweet as the sound of the creek”; he lets go of his bitterness and the memory that might be painful, “almost ready to forgive” his lover. Another rare moment of complacency and contentment with the present occurs in “It gets dark at four o’clock now,” which records the exact time and reads like a diary entry; it registers the surrounding details, such as “The windshield [...] filled with night and cold / the motor running for the heater’s sake,” creating the effect of immediate presence at the scene where the lovers finally forgive each other. The closing line offers a happy ending: “At last I can feel the element of welcome in our kisses.” The positive present, though with a touch of irony and sadness, can be seen in “O darling (as we used to say)”: “I’m glad we ran off together / We are not exactly young / but there is still some pleasure / to be squeezed from these leather bags.”

“Picture of the Artist and His Room” is reassuring as it focuses not on a failure or the lack of inspiration but on the self-discipline and perseverance art demands from the artist:

He might be waiting for an ambulance,
 a naked woman, or the Seraphim
 of God. But he’s not. He’s going to get up
 and paint his room at midnight with himself

in the corner saying, This is myself.

This is the bed. This is the plastic cup.

I am one, I am welcome, like the chair,

the table, any of the objects there.

Complacency in *The Energy of Slaves* is nevertheless extremely fragile. A peaceful creative moment described in the present tense in the epistle-like “I think it is safe to tell you” turns out to be illusory and untrue to the less idyllic reality. It starts off pleasingly:

I think it is safe to tell you where I
am. I’m writing at the old kitchen table
listening to Bach, looking at the sky
and then down at this page

Then the speaker proceeds to the distressing metaphor of “tiny gods of unemployment who guide [his] curious career” and do other unpleasant things – they “decompose song before [his] eyes,” and so on. Finally, he makes a confession:

So I see it is not safe at all.

I am not sitting at the old table.

I did not come home. I am not fair and tall.

The present is bleak and filled with weariness, after all. The conclusive poem in the volume speaks, among other things, about the generation’s sobering up from the 1960s. Its first line reads as follows: “There is nothing here.” Describing *The Energy of Slaves* as a collection of anti-poems, Scobie remarks that for Cohen “[m]uch of the book is an attempt to reject his past” (*Leonard Cohen* 159). By that he means the poet’s “rejection of his old roles,” his previous image as the “golden-boy poet,” and his earlier style. What

Cohen does not discard, however, is his general attitude to the past as a more valued aspect of time than the present and the future. Even though the poet would probably have difficulty agreeing with this statement in real life (and he did in some interviews), the poems speak for themselves and reveal the hierarchy of values that exists outside the author's rational control.

The literary past in the form of allusions, though not as prominent as in Cohen's earlier books, returns in *The Energy of Slaves*. In an interview given to Kari Hesthamar for the Norwegian Radio in 2005, the poet explains how important the literary past has always been for him:

So, there was never any ambiguity or difficult decision about what I wanted to be. And it was a writer not in the popular culture; on the contrary, it was a writer to writers that were already dead. The writers I was writing for and the audience I was writing for, was not a popular audience. I was writing for William Butler Yeats, I wouldn't say Shakespeare, because I never really enjoyed Shakespeare, but there were other poets that I was writing for that were dead. (n. pag.)

Thirty-three years before that conversation, he makes a similar statement in *The Energy of Slaves* by mentioning "the books / in which I am listed / among the dead and future Dylans"¹⁰¹ ("I walk through the old yellow sunlight"). Before the volume received its

¹⁰¹ Meaning Dylan Thomas as a composite figure of a poet, though the plural form implies a reference to Bob Dylan as well.

final title it had been called differently, *Songs of Disobedience*¹⁰² – an instantly recognizable allusion to one of the “dead writers,” William Blake, with his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. In a short poem “Over there,” Cohen repeats the effect employed by T.S. Eliot in the penultimate stanza of “The Hollow Men” which, after the line “Falls a Shadow,” contains only stubs of phrases, as if the shadow had fallen on them and covered the rest. In Cohen’s poem, a vertical gap between the lines visually resembles the figurative abyss of despair the lyric “I” is falling into:

Over there a little altar
 Over there one city or another
 Over there your miserable “sex life”
 Spare us the details

Finally, there are allusions to classical literary genres. For example, the title “Beauty Speaks in the Third Act” refers to the conventions of drama as an art form. Several poems are proper ballads composed in rhymed quatrains and containing a dark “story” told in the past tense; they can have elements of magic, as in “You tore your shirt” where the “you” suddenly displays a claw, or develop the “plot” in the present against the background of an imaginary metaphorical kingdom, as “Song for My Assassin.”

The biblical past is also revisited in the volume, however passingly, as in “The Ark you are building/ in your yard.” The special role of the Bible is acknowledged in the poignant phrase “the Bible poisoned my love” (“I don’t know what happens”). The title theme of slavery unavoidably leads to the biblical subject of the enslavement in Egypt

¹⁰² See: “Originally titled ‘Songs of Disobedience,’ which he had previously submitted and then withdrawn from his publisher, he retitled and reworked the manuscript as the *Energy of Slaves*” (Nadel *Various Positions* 188).

and Cohen's Jewish heritage. "Each day he lugged" brings it up: "he perceived that he laboured / as his fathers did / on someone else's pyramid." The Egyptian imagery is endorsed by the next poem, "The Scorpion," biblical in tone and solemnly addressing the "rare and perfect creature" (possibly a metaphor for anguish) in terms of quasi-religious worship.

The biblical allusions are semantically connected with the pose occasionally taken by the speaker as a *kohein*, a priest, the chosen one, as in the lines "Sometimes I remember / that I have been chosen / to perfect all men" ("Sometimes I remember"). A priest and a poet in this context are the same:

I make this song for thee
 Lord of the World
 who has everything in the world
 except this song

Singing to God, offering Him a song is a deeply rooted Jewish concept that involves the idea of man's individual relationship with God. Here Cohen obliquely discloses that his connection to the traditional Jewish outlook and his cultural heritage are as strong as ever. Curiously, one of the most popular and best-loved works in *The Energy of Slaves*, "Love is a fire," seems to have a link to the iconic Yiddish folk song "Tumbalayke," since the poem's opening lines coincide with a phrase from the song rhythmically and are highly reminiscent of it lexically: Cohen's words "Love is a fire / It burns everyone" read suggestively similar to the Yiddish verse "Liebeh ken brenen un nit oyfern" ("Love can burn without going out"), another Judaic allusion prompted by childhood/family memories. The poet's mother reportedly had a habit of singing her "old country" songs at

home. Given that she came exactly from the region of the former Russian empire where “Tumbalayke” had originated in the obscure past and had been widely sung,¹⁰³ the parallel between the lines in the poem and in the song is plausible.

It is the mother herself, perhaps, who makes a brief appearance in “Why is it I have nothing to say to you” where the reader takes guesses as to the identity of the woman “careful on the ice / on Ave de l’Esplanade” in Montreal; one could form speculations pointing to the poet’s mother on the basis of such clues as the phrase “Russian princess / in 1920 furs” and “You were extremely fragile / in your hold on beauty,” consistent with her “Russian” origin and character. If this is the case, the poem expresses a man’s attempt to break free from another “slave-owner” in life: his mother. Apart from this debatable image, there are no other references to the familial past in the book. The theme of relatively recent Jewish history, and the Holocaust specifically, is entirely absent.¹⁰⁴

The Energy of Slaves is deeply personal, though not inconsiderate of the outer world and the recently ended era. Among the latest poems, Cohen places one that mentions the Cuban revolution; the text was written, according to the date on it, in the

¹⁰³ The first printed record of “Tumbalayke” as a recognized folklore classic came out in 1923 in Berlin, in *Jüdische Liebeslieder*, a collection of East European Jewish folk songs compiled by Arno Nadel, a musicologist, poet, composer, and artist (who later perished in Auschwitz).

¹⁰⁴ There are images in the book alluding to the Second World War, but they are only distantly related to the topic of history. In one case, the poet exploits visuals from war documentaries for the purpose of expressiveness. The picture he creates deals with “heart-shaped leaves,” “brave green hearts” that “would be stenciled on the fuselage / instead of / swastikas and the rising sun” if the café where the speaker is sitting “became a World War Two fighter plane” (“Poetry begun in this mood rarely succeeds”). Another instance is the lines in the poem “There is nothing here”: “A Nazi war criminal / visited us last night / a very old man / in a silk parachute.” This grotesque image reminds the reader of *Flowers for Hitler* without having a message of historical memory.

middle of the action – in Havana in 1961 – to the accompaniment of “the firereels of Cuba where I did not kill the man” (“It is a trust to me”). The self-reflexive poem serves as a reminder of what the 1960s were like. There are also poems commenting on contemporary politics and on the poet’s generation. The title “How We Used To Approach *The Book of Changes*: 1966,” for example, testifies about the taste for Oriental wisdom widely acquired in the 1960s. “There is nothing here” reads like tabulated results of the period the generation has lived through. Cohen observes the dry residue of the revolutionary decade in the lives of people, including himself, who had matured by 1972 and are not as reckless any longer:

We have abandoned free love
 and we have established the capital penalty
 for certain crimes
 There is no longer static between men and women
 Our hospitality is simple and formal
 we use no intoxicants
 We salute those who come and go
 We are naked with our friends¹⁰⁵

In *The Energy of Slaves* the personal story occupies the central place in the range of themes concerning the past. In the opening poem, “Welcome to these lines,” the lyric “I” addresses a reader he has a common past with (presumably, a former lover) and

¹⁰⁵ This line has connection to a real-life episode from the time when Cohen was staying close to nature, in a remote cabin in Tennessee with a creek and a forest nearby. His friends would come to see him. One of them, Bill Donovan, recalls: “Leonard opened the door and he’s stark naked.” The poet welcomed his guests, “offered them tea and declined a joint,” staying naked throughout the visit (Simmons 221).

reminds her of their early days. The message concerning the speaker's attitude to the past and the present is peculiar: at first, he states that "[t]here is a war on," but then idealizes the present moment in advance, saying that it will acquire true value from a temporal distance when it sinks into the past; the present is war-like and lonely only until it becomes the past,

until the times change
and those who have been betrayed
come back like pilgrims to this moment
when we did not yield
and call the darkness poetry

In "This is the only poem," the speaker disagrees with those looking back too intensely ("others seem to think / the past can guide them"), but it is exactly what he himself does, saying that his attitudes in the past allowed him to become what he is – "the only one" who can write this poem:

I didn't kill myself
when things went wrong
I didn't turn
to drugs or teaching
I tried to sleep
but when I couldn't sleep
I learned to write
I learned to write

The past is evasive and out of command, as one cannot return to it; there are important things that the speaker wants to recall but is unable to, and this unattainableness feeds his longing:

I'd like to read
 one of the poems
 that drove me into poetry
 I can't remember one line
 or where to look

Among the surreal, mythological imagery of “My skin is made of stars” the speaker, who turns into a dwarf, wishes to free himself from his dependence on the past with someone’s aid; in order to help, that person should be free of it himself:

I want to tell my past to a doctor
 but I want to tell it to a doctor
 who does not love the past

The past gets hold of a man and stays with him, whether he wants it or not. The lyric “I” tells the woman he used to know: “[k]eep me waiting in Room 801 / like you did that night when we were young” (“It takes a long time to see you Terez”); his memory preserves even the hotel room number from years ago. In a reminiscence of another lover in “I perceived the outline of your breasts,” he compares the marks left by her breasts to “deep fossil shells / which remained all night long and probably forever” – indeed, they stay preserved in his memory. He recognizes the bodily perfection of a woman in the hindsight when she “walked away,” as if she got more beautiful as she disappeared into the past, making the man regret not having fallen in love with her (“I did not know”). The

speaker recalls with mild humour and describes in the past tense a short-lived but joyful dalliance he had in New York in “a happy hotel room at the Chelsea” (“Valentina gave me four months”).

The past is benign; it must be for this reason that the *ubi sunt* motif is not prominent in *The Energy of Slaves*. Its traces resurface twice. In “The Progress of My Style,” the lyric “I” regrets the beauty his addressee lost as she turned thirty and “indulges” himself in reviving her former splendor in his memory. The other instance occurs in the ballad-like “I left a woman waiting,” where the speaker bluntly declares that both he and the woman have surrendered to the work of time:

I met her sometime later
 she said, Your eyes are dead
 What happened to you, lover
 [...]

 I told her rather cruelly
 Whatever happened to my eyes
 happened to your beauty

In “You want me at all times,” the speaker enumerates the elements that comprise his personality but annoy his woman because she wants him without them all. On his list, there are various abstract and concrete items, such as his “prophet’s mantle,” “jelly girls,” “loneliness,” “love for trees,” “ocean hut,” “promise to animals,” and, unsurprisingly, “memory,” as memory is one of the most fundamental things that make up his self. The images Cohen creates writing about memory and remembering or forgetting are inventive and expressive, as in the metaphor likening memory to the yellow pages (“I was rambling

through the yellow pages / of my old slave's heart" in "She sat down at the piano") or in the periphrasis turning a forgetful girl into "Virgin of Amnesia" ("Did you ever moan beneath me").

There is a cluster of poems in the book all having the same place and date on them: New York, 1967. The four poems¹⁰⁶ form a mini-cycle that, like in a time capsule, preserves the emotions from the poet's New York period of the 1960s and celebrates them in 1972. These are not the only works from an earlier time included in the book, but the fact that they are grouped together marks them as special memories informing the present. The effect created by them is that whatever the present is like, the lyric "I" always has his past as his "kingdom": "the girls have forgotten you / Marianne will remain"; "all the curious landscapes / which you surrendered / are still your own" ("Welcome home").

"It was a while ago" sums up the hero's and the author's vision of the three aspects of time. In the past, "a while ago,"

I was still
the sweetest singer I could imagine

The present is dark both in the figurative and literal sense:

It's too dark in here
the light isn't any good

The future is unpromising for the speaker as a poet, though poetry can still be an instrument of seduction:

nobody's gonna notice

¹⁰⁶ They are "The Ark you're building"; "What has taken place in your body and your head"; "I let your mind enter me," and "Welcome home."

if I never write again
 except that incredible
 natural blonde over there

The future in *The Energy of Slaves* is never promising; that is, it promises nothing agreeable. In “Poetry begun in this mood rarely succeeds,” according to the opening line, a poem is predestined to be no good as soon as it is started; the artist is hopeless both in creative and private life, planning to leave his lover; things will get even worse later because the requital is inevitable:

we have little hope
 for his art or his evening
 He will probably have to
 buy an airplane ticket to Montreal
 and sleep one night
 with the mistress
 he plans to abandon
 I'll get the bill for it all
 in the middle of the winter

The speaker not only dismisses a poem before finishing it; he foresees longing for a girl before parting with her: “Moan for me as I will moan for you my love / as I will moan for thee” (“It takes a long time to see you Terez”). He has no prospect of being with the woman he cares for: “You will never feel me leading you / Forever I escape your homage” (“I try to keep in touch wherever I am”). What he sees in the future is old age and death, though he thinks that memory will be preserved (and worthy of a museum): “I

will grow old / the photograph will age / I will die /the photograph enter a museum” (“I will grow old”). He self-ironically expresses doubts about his artistic potential:

The poet is drunk
 He wonders what
 he will write next
 He has some notion of poetry
 girl’s [sic] names and ages
 the weather in cities
 that’s about it
 (“The poet is drunk”)

Indeed, what comes next is a “miracle” sexual encounter, not a bout of poetic inspiration, which only confirms his worries.

The lyric “I” is so desperate that he becomes aggressive and prophesizes revenge. To some, it will come from fate: “This is a threat / [...] You will commit suicide / or become like me” (“This is a threat”). Others will undergo the retaliation of their slaves and “will not talk so easily / about our freedom and our love” and “will refrain from offering [...] solutions” (“One of these days”). Selfish people “who own men and women [...] meant to be lovers” will never be absolved: “we will not pardon you / for wasting our bodies and time” (“To the men and women”). The zeugma in the last line, “wasting body and time,” equals body to time (and vice versa), demonstrating how aware Cohen is of the interconnection of the two that makes the future so fearsome.

The only thing capable of fighting the passage of time and bodily decline is art. Despite his constant complaints about the loss of creative power throughout the book, the

lyric “I” believes in the ancient postulate of *vita brevis, ars longa* and thinks that his poetry is more durable than himself:

It is not to tell you anything
but to live forever
that I write this
 (“It is not to tell you anything ”)

In “Dipped myself in a future night,” with the opening line pointing to the future, the speaker promises himself a compensation his poetry will one day gain for him, even though time will have claimed his body by then: “I will have an unborn woman / when I am only print.”

To use the immortalizing power of poetry, Cohen establishes a connection between the speaker/implicit author and the reader by addressing the latter directly. He makes the two each other’s collaborators because the author is the reader’s deputy, and the author’s work can last only if someone reads it: “If you ever read this / think of the man writing it / he hated the world on your behalf” (“All men delight you”). The attitude is not necessarily friendly; for instance, in “For a long time” tersely telling a grim tale of misery and murder, the speaker dismisses the reader like a nosy bystander who witnesses a tragedy: “Pass by / this is no vision offered / this is his truth.” Elsewhere, he demonstrates his stance on criticism:

Do you like this song?
I wrote it in a mood
that I would never
be seen dead in.

Put your chair
 where your mouth is,
 and I welcome your opinion
 (“You provide the furniture”)

In other poems the speaker/IMPLIED author becomes antagonistic towards the audience. In “I have no talent left” he invites them to revel in his failure by using the crony form of the name Cohen himself has always hated and shunned: “You can call me Len or Lennie now / like you always wanted”; the loss of self-respect makes him allow the vile familiarity. In the same text, the speaker appears defensive and aggressive simultaneously, saying to the reader that even if the poem is no good, it still has forced them to have each other’s company for a while, and in the end it is the reader who derives enjoyment from it:

Before you accuse me of boring you
 (your ultimate triumph and relief)
 remember [...]
 once again you have enjoyed
 the company of my soul

Interestingly, there is nevertheless an unbreakable connection between the “I” and the “you,” as the time of the speaker and the reader he addresses, their “now,” coincide – unlike the time of the actual author and reader who are divided by an untraversable temporal gap. Cohen plays a similar trick with time in “I threw open shutters,” in the line “light fell on this poem”: the demonstrative pronoun “this” serves as a point of reference for the speaker who had it in front of him as he “threw open the shutters” and the reader

who is looking at it; thus, one is dragged from one's "now" as a reader into the speaker's moment in the past. It works the other way too: the speaker travels to his future by entering the reader's present. Poetry provides a bridge between the past and the present; it allows the poet to perforate the boundaries of time and to withstand its domination.

2. “Because you have begun to worship time”:

Metapoetic and Temporal Self-Analysis in *Death of a Lady’s Man*

“If I could get out of the way, through death or through time, this book will be seen more clearly.”

Leonard Cohen about *Death of a Lady’s Man*

Death of a Lady’s Man, published in 1978, is Cohen’s most metapoetic and self-reflexive book. It has no unified speaker or single implied author. Along with the “I” of poems and prose pieces, there are several personas judging these works and commenting on them in “the concert of voices” (Norris 52). The history of the volume’s composition sets the book apart. To produce it, the poet merged together at least three manuscripts, each initially intended for a separate publication. The typescripts of the draft withdrawn by Cohen and the late or final draft with authorial editing, contained in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library collection, clearly demonstrate a vast discrepancy between the initial version of the book and its final form. It is obvious that the final version resulted from extensive additions from notebooks illuminating poems and commenting on them.

The page proofs withdrawn by the author from publication have one hundred and twenty-eight shorter poems with pen or felt-tip pen check-marks or x-marks next to most of them, indicating the intended changes. The structure of these proofs is remarkably different from the final draft and the published book: there are mostly short texts, both verse and prose, all self-sufficient and not interconnected as commentaries on each other, as in the published *Death of a Lady’s Man*. The book’s practice of repeated titles is

extremely rare. There is also no play with typesetting, which is so prominent in the final book. Interestingly, on the cover of the presumably final draft the title is corrected by hand, the word *Lady's* being changed to the plural, "*Ladies*," which did not make it to the published variant.

This complicated story is summed up and (relatively) clarified in Cohen's letter in response to Scobie's question about "the impending publication of a major new book": "*Death of a Lady's Man* derives from a longer book called *My Life in Art*, which I finished last year and decided not to publish. *The Woman Being Born* was the title of another manuscript and also an alternative title for both *My Life in Art* and *Death of a Lad's Man*" (qtd. in Scobie "Counterfeiter" 8). The manuscript of the new work was submitted to McClelland and Stewart, then withdrawn, reworked, and resubmitted more than once; it took about two years for the final version to come out. One of the variants was called *The Final Revision of My Life In Art*, though it was only an intermediate draft. Jack McClelland was worried about Cohen's numerous reconsiderations and additions: "He says he is writing a 90-page commentary on the book itself. What ever [sic] that means" (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 221). A biographer recounts the poet's intentions: "He wanted to [...] 'confront the book,' to get back through it page by page, and write his reaction to what he read" (Simmons 311). To create the final version, the author added twice as much material as in the originally submitted work, and it was these extra texts that gave the volume its multilayered quality and the metapoetic depth. Cohen's self-analysis as a writer had never been so scrupulous.

At the same time, the author distances himself from the book. His portrait is nowhere to be found; instead, there is a medieval woodcut borrowed from the alchemical

tract *Rosarium Philosophorum* (1550).¹⁰⁷ The picture, symbolically representing, as the blurb informs us, “the *coniunctio spirituum*, or the spiritual union of the male and the female principle,” is placed on the front and back cover as well as on the title page and on the page following the closing text. Cohen refused to use his photograph for the promotional campaign: “He did not want to flaunt the personal aspect” (Nadel *Various Positions* 223). There is a personal touch in the prefatory complex, though, as the work is dedicated “to Masha Cohen / the memory of my mother.” The poet’s mother had died shortly before the book was published, and the dedication inadvertently supported the theme of death in the title.

The title almost coincides with the name given to Cohen’s album that came out a year before in 1977. The titular phrase is repeated with a slight variation. While the album released in the unfortunate collaboration with Phil Spector¹⁰⁸ was called *Death of a Ladies’ Man*, with the possessive noun in the plural form, the book’s title has the same word in the singular: *Death of a Lady’s Man*. This confusing discrepancy can be explained by the different content and different purposes of the two. The album is intended for the public sphere of Cohen the singer who “belongs” to the plurality of women in his audience; there is also a hint at the persona of a womanizer. The book, in contrast, is built around the concept and the story of marriage, where the singularity of the “Lady” is self-evident. The marriage itself stands for more than just matrimony; as

¹⁰⁷ The same image had decorated the sleeve of Cohen’s 1973 album *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*; with his choice of the cover illustration for the new book the poet “thought [he]’d confuse the public as much as [he] has confused [him]self” (qtd. in Simmons 311); the picture suited the content so perfectly that he saw no other option.

¹⁰⁸ Due to the producer’s dictatorial decisions on artistic matters, *Death of a Ladies’ Man* is “probably the least favourably received of all of Cohen’s albums (and the one that initially Cohen himself seemed to reject)” (Young 125).

Norris rightly asserts, it is “a central metaphor that extends outward to other interrelationships: the poet ‘married’ to his life in art, the poem “married” to its commentary, a possible implied marriage of the reader to the text” (53). Therefore, the title of the book not only pronounces a verdict on marital relationships, but also suggests a metapoetic assessment of the author’s past artistic career: “Although the title [...] implies the existence of one major thematic strain, the work’s structure is really dual from the start” (Hutcheon *Leonard Cohen* 28).

Unlike Cohen’s previous publications, the genre of *Death of a Lady’s Man* evades definition; no wonder that the author’s idea for the promotional slogan involved the words “A CURIOUS BOOK” (Nadel *Various Positions* 222). Norris explains the dilemma:

It is not really a collection of poetry, although its primary text consists of poems and prose poems. Although the book tells a story (in a somewhat non-linear fashion) it falls outside the designation of being a novel. In its pairing of text with commentary it is stylistically reminiscent of Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* and the Chinese *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes* (52).

The structure Norris compares to *La Vita Nuova* and *I Ching* involves the two-part configuration of most texts. Eighty-three of the totality of ninety-six poems in verse or in prose are followed by a short or extensive commentary, the metapoetic addition that doubled the size of the volume. The commentaries or, in Scobie’s term, supplements¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ “I proposed to describe the additional sections as ‘supplements,’ setting that term within the context of its deconstructive use in the writings of Jacques Derrida. The supplement stands in a paradoxical relationship to its ‘original’: it presupposes both that the original is complete in itself, a finished work to which any addition must come from the outside, as a supplement; and, simultaneously, that the original is *incomplete*, that it

can also take the form of prose pieces or poems; they have the same titles as their preceding entries and are marked out by another typesetting convention: italics. Through these commentaries the book discusses itself by explaining the circumstances that prompted a poem, providing its different version, displaying a relevant diary entry, or criticizing the work or the author.

This dual structure is an effective instrument that serves to express the poetic self-awareness and to account for artistic and personal contradictions. As Norris writes, “Because of the interplay between text and commentary, the book is continually ‘healing itself’ of the defects of its rhetoric or conceptual framework. The book constantly proclaims, and thereby transcends, its own limitations; it is a text that is at war and at peace with itself” (53-54). There is a continuous dialogue within the book; what is more, the dual structure draws the readers deeper into the text, inviting them to linger on a poem and reconsider it on perusal of the commentary. The commentator, who speaks in the first-person singular or plural alternately, invites the readers’ collaboration. While the “I” of the commentaries in *Death of a Lady’s Man*, as noted by Hutcheon, is reminiscent of the mentoring figure from *Beautiful Losers*, being a metatextual “F.-like voice” (28), the first-person plural “We” has an extratextual meaning: it “implicates the reader and perhaps even forestalls our objections” (Hutcheon *Leonard Cohen* 29).

It is not by chance that the commentaries indicate their origin as borrowed from notebooks, journal entries, and, most importantly, from “the original manuscript of *My*

contains within itself an emptiness or lack which the supplement comes to fill. The idea of the supplement, that is, deconstructs the idea of any text being either ‘original’ or ‘secondary’” (Scobie “The Counterfeitor” 9).

Life in Art" (163)¹¹⁰ or the "pages of the *Final Revision of My Life in Art*" (169). *Death of a Lady's Man* not only reevaluates "the monastery of marriage" (153), but also revisits the author's artistic past, his "life in art," in a sort of fragmented autobiography. Various images, themes, and allusions from Cohen's previous books reappear in this new volume. There are birds, doves in particular (116, 126, 151, etc.), reminiscent of *Let Us Compare Mythologies*,¹¹¹ and a kite (46) from *The Spice-Box of Earth*; there are insects (crickets, butterflies) from *Parasites of Heaven*; there are razorblades (54), as if from *The Energy of Slaves*.

In several instances, the Holocaust references, no matter how passing, take one back to *Flowers for Hitler*: "smoky holocaust" (30); "Hitler's table talk" (52); "what I dare not say about Dachau" (136); in addition, one of the two direct mentions of poets of the past is that of Rimbaud (121), as in the poem "Congratulations" from the same book. There is a poem titled "You Have No Form" (100), written, ironically, in the fixed form of a sonnet, like some of Cohen's youthful works. The style of "Sacrifice" (151), being notably similar to Donne in its combination of metaphysics and unabashed sexuality, recalls "The Fly" from *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. The literary genre of the ballad, so prominent in the poet's first two books, manifests itself in *Death of a Lady's Man* several times, for example, in the eponymous poem constructed as a proper ballad (30-32). "Now I Come Before You" is a mystical ballad-like poem in the manner of Yeats, with a commentary confirming that it "was written [...] using some ruined conventions" which the implied author "was able to restore" (159). Another ballad, "If I Am Not Her

¹¹⁰ All references here and further on in this section are given to pages, not titles, since in *Death of a Lady's Man* a title usually belongs to more than one text.

¹¹¹ The image of a dove does not have the same meaning here, as it refers, in most cases, to the New Testament, not to the Hebrew Bible, as in Cohen's earlier books.

Servant,” with such images as an overthrown kingdom, a dead woman in a burned palace, and the speaker as her servant/slave (205), brings to mind the poems from *Let Us Compare Mythologies* and *The Spice-Box of Earth*: both abound in similar imagery.

The themes and images of Cohen’s novels are implicitly present in *Death of a Lady’s Man* too. Hutcheon observes that “*Death of a Lady’s Man* could almost be the book a Lawrence Breavman would write upon the breakup of a major love relationship” (Hutcheon *Leonard Cohen* 27); to confirm this hypothetical “authorship,” the speaker of the book mentions Breavman’s friend Kranz (188) as his own acquaintance. *Beautiful Losers* resurfaces through the aggressive sexuality and occasional anarchic rhetoric. Rebellion and verbal violence reminiscent of both the novel and *The Energy of Slaves* appear in the angry politicized prose poem “Our Government-in-Exile”: “Our fury will unfurl. Our fury will uncoil. [...] I think we are going to win. The fucking ass-holes are going to get it too. They hate us. I’ll live to see them gaping at their lives in utter disbelief” (24). The commentary invites a further comparison with *Beautiful Losers*: “*This is the work of a middle-class mind flirting with terrorism – not without a certain charm*” (25). The speaker of the poem and the “he” of the commentary, “*a familiar figure in the revolutionary cafés of pre-Independence Montreal,*” is remarkably akin to the novel’s character F.

Biblical allusions characteristic of the previous books (with the exception of the immediately preceding one, *The Energy of Slaves*), make a noteworthy comeback in *Death of a Lady’s Man*. The Bible itself is mentioned a couple of times: “Near the beginning of the Bible I am told how to build the Altar” (50); “Not by the Bible” (62). In the poetic commentary “The Transmission” there is a sequence of biblical references,

including “Noah’s raven,” “Samson’s heart,” “David’s giant,” and “the form of desire / received from Solomon” (185). The images of “feathered shield” and “feathered helmet” (12) allude to the Book of Psalms and the protection of God promised there: “He shall cover thee with his feathers” (Psalms 91:4).

At some points Cohen calls in his own past that becomes indistinguishable from the speaker’s. In “Another Family” he revives the memories of his childhood, with details coming from his personal biography: “I have already / begun to forget, it is not hatred anymore, it is / the old childhood, my father’s heart attack, / and long instructions about my buttons and my shoes” (60). Elsewhere, another childhood memory comes up: “I can think about my loyal dog buried in the snow” (58) – the line refers to the snowstorm death of Tinkie, the Scottish terrier Cohen as a boy had for many years and has never forgotten.¹¹² The author recalls “the music in my mother’s wrist” and, addressing himself in the second person, “your childhood plan” that “[y]ou can resume” (58). Cohen mentions people who were important in his life, such as [Mort] Rosengarten and [Robert] Hershorn (186), the former being his childhood companion and the prototype of Kranz, the latter a close friend, dead by the time the book was published. Naturally, there is Irving Layton in the contexts of poetic excellence (“How can you concern yourself with these things while Layton and I are alive?” 25), and private life (“Irving and Aviva in Toronto,” 188); there are reminiscences of the time spent with the Zen master Roshi, drinking Courvoisier and talking poetry (171) or giving a lesson in mental concentration (193).

¹¹² “Tinkie disappeared in a snowstorm [...] and was found dead under a neighbor’s porch next spring. The dog had been one of Cohen’s closest childhood companions; Cohen still keeps a picture of Tinkie in his Los Angeles home” (Nadel *Various Positions* 16).

These glimpses of the past, remote or not so distant, allow the temporal distance necessary for the present self-analysis Cohen is occupied with in *Death of a Lady's Man*. Interestingly, the central female figure of the book, with her protean identity of the wife, Lilith, a quasi-Shakespearean “dark companion,” and the muse, has the least connection to real life, so that the actual woman behind that imagery can hardly be seen through the metaphors of the text. The reason for this effect could be that artistic concerns, after all, overshadow private ones in the volume. In Hutcheon’s words, “what becomes clear in the textual self-consciousness [...] is that the author’s obsession is not with Leonard Cohen the person so much as with Leonard Cohen the creator” (*Leonard Cohen* 31).

The whole device of commentaries serves to examine the implied author’s past self as if it were another person who composed the book. As Norris writes, “The commentaries in the book are written ‘years later’ as Cohen points out several times in his commentary to ‘The Unclean Start.’ The original text is being judged and evaluated by a later self” (54). The situation is essentially foretold in the symbolic lines of “Angelica” (91):

I will have to come back
 A million years later
 With the scalp of my old life
 Hanging from one hand

Numerous times Cohen supplies the commentaries with detailed accounts of what diary entries, notebooks, or parts of manuscripts they are derived from, when and where these particular bits of text were written. If the precise information is impossible to retrieve, the author/speaker/commentator still tries to be as accurate as he can. For

example, the commentary to the opening prose poem, “I Knelt Beside a Stream,” informs the reader that “[t]his curious paragraph is obviously distilled from a longer undated journal entry probably written during the spring or summer of 1975” (12). One and the same commentary can consist of notes from different years in the past, documenting the development of a process; in case of “The Dream,” it is the disintegration of his marriage throughout the years, different reactions to the same incident commented upon in the Notebooks of 1975 and 1977 and then again in a Diary Tape of 1978 (103).

The prose piece “The Drawing” makes the commentator quote poems referring to the titular drawing which were written down on “*the corrasable pages of August 1976,*” on “*a sheet of the Robertson Parkway Ramada Inn stationary,*” and finally in “*the small Montreal notebook of 1954*” (127). It is remarkable that the poetic fragments presented in the commentary go deeper in time, as the author/commentator retraces his thoughts about the drawing. “Traditional Training and Service” has as many as four commentaries. The first one is undated; the second comprises three poems written, according to the provided information, in Kingston, Ontario in 1973, in Athens in 1975, and in Los Angeles in the same year. Finally, the third and most sexually charged commentary is marked as written in the Zen monastery on “Mt. Baldy, Calif., 1976” (156). This distribution of dates and places demonstrates how much thought, spread over time and space, was given to the ruminations about “the working of Marriage” in the initial poem.

“I’m Glad I am Drunk” has a commentary starting with the phrase: “*This is preceded by the following entry in the Brentwood Journal of 1977*” (179); the entry begins giving the details of a psychoactive drug the speaker took at nine in the morning. Thus, the journal entry places a date and time on the poem itself and clarifies for the

reader in what physical and mental state the text was composed. This preserved moment demonstrates the speaker's attention to the various stages of anguish he went through in the past. Another text, "I Think You Like it Raw," is followed by a statement: "That was the night of July 26, 1972. / You deceived me that night in your disguise of peace" (152). This date does not come from a notebook or a journal, which means that the event was so important that years later the speaker still keeps it in his memory as a milestone in the story of the relationship. Towards the end of the volume, the poem "Everything That Is Unengaged" has a short comment dated with an exact instance not in the past but in the future: "Nuit Magique, Montreal, 1978" – that is, the Christmas night of the same year when the book was published in the fall. The date appears as a dramatic counterpoint to the poem and the whole book. Peace prevails:

the petals of
tomorrow morning's morning glory
illuminate the corners
of my useless days
My wife returns
On the boat of our mistakes
We meet beneath
The Bridge of Sighs
The age returns
when we did make
a unity of various desires

At this point, the readers already know that no such future is going to transpire: the title of the book has told that. As Norris observes, “We know that the marriage is over; in that sense the ‘lady’s man,’ the husband, has died” (59). The ending of the poem, however, suggests that in the future of the *Nuit Magique*, when the marriage is finished, the “I” recalls the precious past that cannot be taken away, no matter what the present is like and what the future promises to be: “that would not decline / even through the gravities / of distance hate & jealousy” (195).

The speaker’s bond to his Jewish identity in *Death of a Lady’s Man* is in a critical condition, in contrast to the previous works where he is proud, loving, and nostalgic about his heritage and feels a deep connection to it. Here, he accuses himself, “You forgot your noble birth” (165). The theme of the forefathers comes up in the context of a petty domestic quarrel: “Your ancestors. My ancestors” (54). A legendary image from the ancient mysticism is used in a phrase speaking of boredom: “o golem of service and monotony” (153); the mysticism itself appears dead: “How does the humiliated spirit find its way out of the dead Kabala?” (61). A quotation from “*the twenty-third verse of the third chapter of Pirke Aboth (Sayings of the Fathers), a short tractate of the Mishmah [sic],*”¹¹³ containing Rabbi Eleazar Hisma’s words on the necessity of offering of birds and purification of women (presumably after childbirth), causes the dismissive remark of the speaker who calls the citation “*the infuriating presumptions of the Rabbi*” (114-115). One of the poems makes clear that the most basic aspects of Jewish life have now become neglected: “The kitchen was once beautiful. Sabbath observed” (54). The speaker is not going to Israel “to defend his country” (89) and “stop Egypt’s bullet” (54), as he

¹¹³ Cohen misspells the *Mishna* here.

tells a fellow traveler on a ship and cries to his wife during a heated argument. Moreover, he self-ironically admits that he stands no chance of being accepted as a proper Jew: *“Your sideburns will grow long and curl at length but the Jews will still despise you”* (149).

The present of the book’s “I”/protagonist/IMPLIED author is miserable. He is unhappy with all aspects of his life: personal, spiritual, and artistic. In the prose poem “Your moment Now,” he tries to pull himself together: “This is your moment now. [...] Here you are again, little priest. Bring your heart back to its place” (14). He has no success; the commentary starts off: *“But did he bring the ‘heart back to its peace?’ We hardly think so. We would say rather that he scattered the heart and made everyone uncomfortable.”* Then the initial text is inversed in order to get “a more salutary effect,” though it is still full of discontent and ends with the words declaring the verdict: “This is your moment now” (15).

At times there is an impression that the present is not as bad. For example, the opening lines of “The Radio” read: “Put on the radio. Light up a cigarette. You are a normal citizen”; a seemingly serene picture of the present follows. The end of the text, in contrast, is not complacent: “No cigarette? No radio? No adult at command of his career? Just the frightened creature with nothing to teach?” (132). “The Jelly” is another rare poem where the “now” appears relatively peaceful and has a touch of hope. One of the things that contribute to the contentedness is memory: “I will never forget you. It is years and I have not forgotten the kisses of our mouth” (98). The tranquil mood is destroyed by a mocking poem provided as a commentary. In “The Photograph,” a happy present moment captured in the sketch of a cheerful photo shoot among the daisies is undermined

with a grim prediction of the future: “One day we will go back to that creek in Tennessee / and she will shoot me with a .22” (56) Later, in “She Has Given Me the Bullet,” she does shoot him but, as the commentary states, “*There is the rotting and the hatred and the ambition but there is no death*” (113). This outcome is even worse: the misery continues, and there is no end to the painful relationship.

The present of the speaker as an artist is equally unsatisfactory. He complains that he “[l]ost [his] voice in New York City / never heard it again after sixty-seven” (187). He tells himself in “How to speak poetry” that he has to face his artistic impotence: “Do not pretend that you are a beloved singer with a vast loyal audience which has followed the ups and downs of your life to this very moment” (197). The commentator adds, “*Never let him sing again*” (199). If changes occur, they are only for the worse, as in “The Change”: “You took away my music. You set me here with blunted tongue to listen only. [...] You were so beautiful as a song. You are so ugly as a god” (18). Close to the end of the book, the key piece “My Life in Art” exposes the speaker’s confusion with the present state of things: “This is the end of my life in art”; “I am frightened and tired” (190); “I am old enough to be ruined” (191); “My life in art closing down”; “my devotions begin to embarrass me. She should grow tired of them soon”; “She will not have the child” (191).

The present unhappiness reveals itself on both symbolic and mundane levels. The “I” has a vision of the ultimate man and woman suffering and separated: “Adam and Eve hang from a thorn, back to back. I want them to face each other” (76). Then, he observes his daily habits: “I eat too much when I am with her. I become obscure” (77). Flowers, symbolic and realistic alike, reflect the desperate state of things by starting to die: “The

Rose begins to disincorporate” (121); “The centres of daisies have begun to fall apart” (208). The speaker gets desperate, “finding only putrescence and decay” (127) in the present. He sees himself as a living dead: “You are a dead man / [...] dead with hope / dead with spring” (137). “This Wretch” of a person lives through his present feeding on the memories of the past, limited by the loss of love to symbolic necrophilia: “*I’m fucking the dead people now*” (176); “I took a ghost to bed” (162).

It is not only flowers that have yielded to decay. People who used to be beautiful and strong have lost it by now too. “It would be cruel to tell you that you are not prettier than your sister anymore [...] Friends that are dead or broken [...] I had such strength when you were beautiful” (40). *Where is your beauty now, Lord of Sorrows?*” (107), the “I” asks himself. The commentary to “My Wife and I,” a poem depicting an episode of happy marital love, asks in the classical *ubi sunt* mode from the perspective of the commentator’s present: “*Where is she now? Where are these flannel pyjamas? Where is your tenderness to Woman and to God?*” (35). Bliss and tenderness have sunk into the past. In the present, it is only a poem about it that brings satisfaction, though in the creative sphere, too, there is a disparity between what the “I” used to be and what he is “now,” with “high hopes” unfulfilled (168), as in “The Price of This Book.”

From the point of view of the speaker’s “now,” the value of the past goes up. “The Café,” a sketch in the present tense, portrays the lonely speaker at “the cracked marble table” (16) looking at a brown-haired girl he wants to talk to. It is followed by a commentary written from the perspective of a significant temporal distance, drawing the information from old notebooks. For the commentator, the instance captured in the poem belongs to the past; years have passed, and the café is no longer there: “*I discovered that*

it had been demolished and the marble tabletops thrown into the harbour.” The girl, who “*was thin then, is now a skeleton. Her sleeveless summer frock is for sale*”; the only thing to be seen where the café once was is “*some ghostly shapes*” (17). The text has a clear *ubi sunt* connotation. The seemingly durable marble is gone, as is the brunette’s beauty; the moment of existence reproduced in the poem, not perceived as a happy one back then, has acquired the appeal of the past irrevocably lost to the power of time.

Happy reminiscences of the past involve lovers’ harmony, now gone: “All summer long she touched me / gathering in my soul” (204). “The Old Days” points to the erotic nostalgia through the mythologized figures of a palace-dwelling beautiful woman and the speaker who has “an unaccustomed pleasure” in his miserable present, living “on the crumbs of love” and raving about “the old days” (80). The past appears to have been glorious; now the speaker is “dead with the longing / to shine again / in details of the past” (137). In “Death to This Book” a cursing, angry and aggressive speaker longs for his former self, wanting to return to it: “me thin again in my blue raincoat” (20); in “Another Room,” he extends his wish of regaining the past beyond the physical: “Perhaps I can become a poet again” (22). Alas, he deceives himself, as the past artistic grandeur is arguable. The “I” does not spare himself irony: “if only we could get him back on amphetamine when he wrote like an angel” (160); “All this looked a lot more interesting ten years ago on acid, when I addressed the daisies in a style made popular by St. Francis” (124).

In *Death of a Lady’s Man* the past is a shaky foundation. In “This Marriage,” the presumably happy marital past is questioned: “You don’t know anything about me. You never did. Not in the beginning. Not now” (54). Moreover, this past incorporates ugly

quarrels between the spouses, as in “This Marriage” or “The Unclean Start.” An ironic ballad from a 1972 journal attaches an unfavourable adjective to the word “past”: “There is a happy ending / to all the bloody past” (145). In the long prayer “I Should Not Say You,” the speaker cannot be protected from the present “terror” “by ghosts” or “by shadows” (62) of the past perhaps because they have never been mighty enough.

Despite the occasional questioning of the past and the speaker’s inability to seek strength there, the hierarchy of the aspects of time in *Death of a Lady’s Man* for the most part follows Cohen’s typical pattern, as can be seen, for example, in “The Visit,” where the present displays an ugly squabble; the past is centred on passion (“I followed you to the fire”), and the future promises unforgiveness: “I won’t forget it. You are not harmless” (146). Throughout the book, the “I” finds himself moving “further and further from the voice, deeper and deeper in the Exile” (143) from the empowered self in the past to the bleak future.

The future in the book is deemed pessimistic on various levels, starting with its grammatical manifestation. In “The Asthmatic,” the speaker addresses himself in a series of negative constructions: “You cannot breathe [...] [b]ecause you will not overthrow your life”; “Because you will never have the beautiful one”; “Because you will not sail into the small harbour and enter the village”; “Because your sorrow will not return to its birthplace”; “Because you will not address me as an equal” (64). Elsewhere, the commentator joins in the despondency: “*I will be never again the cup of your need*” (67). When it comes to a possible romance, the prospect is immediately cut short, as in “Your Moment Now”: “Looks like we won’t / be making love at all / [...] Looks like we won’t / be meeting” (14). The same impossibility of a romance applies to the future in the past in

“The Event,” where the speaker ogles a Chinese girl: “We would never fuck. / We would never speak. / We would never meet” (96). The “I” is equally pessimistic about another man’s chances with a woman: “I am certain he will never have her” (170).

Like a romance, a family life has no happy potential. “The House” draws a gloomy picture: “The wife in your arms will die. The child on your knees will be cut down. [...] We huff and we puff and we blow the house down” (52). This negativity is counterbalanced by the commentary saying that the house is still standing, but the context of the book gives the reader a clear understanding that the family is doomed and its future is hopeless. Towards the end of the book, the speaker indulges in a fantasy of the family surviving the crisis and gathering in a garden: “One of these days [...] we’ll lie beside the shed mingling our conversation with the soft round noise of the neighbour’s doves. Adam’s father will be feeling better. So will Adam’s mother. [...] We’d weep over the story you could tell about us” (209). This description of a dreamlike peaceful future has an aftertaste of bitterness because it will never come true.

As hopelessness dominates in personal life, the public sphere has no positive future either. The persona of “A Working Man” utters: “The ones like me will win” (82); no social changes, however, are possible. The commentator crudely cuts off any chance: “*don’t try to threaten us with hints of a New Order. [We] have already overthrown the World and shoved it back up your asshole exactly the same as it was before*” (83). Violence and death define the future: “Let’s ask the soldier for a song. [...] He’ll be dead soon” (84).

Almost any hope the “I” has is short-lived. The fantasy that the forgiveness he longs for will come and the prayer will be answered (107) has no feeling of certainty to it.

In “It’s Probably Spring” the speaker hopes against hope that spring might help to disregard all things ugly, to bring forgiveness, and to reopen possibilities; the metapoetic commentary that follows effectively destroys all hope by criticizing the text as an untouching work of a poet who deserves being disqualified (59). Unexpectedly, it is the existential “terror” that might save the protagonist/IMPLIED author from utter catastrophe. He directly addresses the reader in “The Price of this Book,” saying that he has no option but to ask for money “to keep my different lives apart. Otherwise I will be crushed when they join, and I will end my life in art, which a terror will not let me do” (168). In this metapoetic remark, there is a glimpse of hope that art in general and the book we are reading will make a future for him.

There is a catch, of course. The speaker pushes himself to act fast, no matter in what sphere of life or how big or small the goal is. He commands himself: “Hurry to [...] [i]nvent your song. Invent your power. [...] Hurry to your destiny.” The reason for this haste is simple: “Time is like an arrow” (180); it progresses at high speed. The last poem, “The Final Examination,” is written from the perspective of the future turned into present. The “I” here is different from the “Leonard” of the book; he speaks years later after the “story” of “Leonard”’s anguish over the relationship with the “dark companion.” This “I,” ninety years old now, speaks of a happy ending of sorts: in that future, “Leonard” has survived and “can still be seen / hobbling with his love” (212). In the commentary to the poem there is a phrase “*His death belongs to future*” (212). On the one hand, it asserts that the protagonist/IMPLIED author is not dead yet, which is an optimistic ending for a book of torment and occasional suicidal thoughts; on the other hand, it cannot fail to indicate that the future guarantees death.

With the miserable present, the problematic past, and the gloomy future, there is a hope that comes from the book itself: a metapoetic hope in *ars longa*, in the power of writing that is above time. This idea is underscored in the fragments from the “Final Revision of My Life in Art” manuscript: “It will become clear that I am the stylist of my era [...] I did not quarrel with my voices. I took it down out of air. This is called work by those who know” (21). The “I” claims: “I decided to jump literature ahead a few years” (42). The commentator confirms this statement: “*There is a new freedom here [...] There is also a willing sense of responsibility and manliness such as we do not find among the current and endless repetitions of stale dada-ist re-discovery. These are guidelines here that will take us well into the two-thousands*” (43). Given that Cohen’s art did make it well into the twenty-first century, the prophecy can be safely marked as accurate.

Finally, there is another hope that comes from the trust in God who lifts one up from the flow of time. In the prayer-like prose piece “I Should Not Say You,” the speaker obsessively talks about the Name: “Give my heart ease in the presence of the Name,” he pleads; “Protect me in the terror of your absent Name” (62). He shuffles various notions that will not safeguard him and concludes that it is only the Name (standing for God, whose name, in the Judaic tradition, should not be mentioned) that can shield him. Humbled and ashamed by the fact that the Name “is not sealed” in his heart, he nevertheless asks God to let him continue (63). Earlier on, he remarks, “I am judged [...] with mercy” (36). Then, the idea reappears twice more as two identical commentaries to different poems: “This is the working of Mercy” (131, 151). This hope for help and protection will be realized six years later in the form of a new book appropriately titled *Book of Mercy*.

CHAPTER V. ON THE ROAD TO FINDING PEACE: POETRY 1984-2006

1. “From You alone to You alone, everlasting to everlasting”:

Religious Tradition, Memory and Time in *Book of Mercy*

“You can’t use your past as an alibi.”

Leonard Cohen

(Interview with Christian Fevret)

Book of Mercy was published in 1984, the year Cohen turned fifty; it correspondingly consisted of fifty pieces with numbers instead of titles. A re-evaluation of the author’s life as a man, an artist, and a bearer of a religious tradition, it was Cohen’s most personal work, composed essentially for himself. He confesses in his interview with Robert Sward that he had no target audience in mind when he was working on it: “when we write [...] we always have an idea of the public. [...] The public almost evaporated in the construction of that book” (qtd. in Sward 28). In the same conversation he says that it felt odd to share something so private with his readers: “It is that curious thing: a private book that has a public possibility” (qtd. in Sward 31). The circumstances that led to the creation of *Book of Mercy* were dramatic, as they involved another artistic crisis the poet prayed to end and turmoil in his life following separation from the mother of his children. He believed that a certain part of his life was over and he was “overthrowing [his] past” (qtd. in Benazon 54-55).

Book of Mercy resulted from these internal processes: “you are thrown back into a kind of silence until you can make contact with another authentic thrust of your being” (qtd. in Sward 31). Cohen might be “overthrowing” his personal past as a man and an artist, but he sought consolation, reassurance, and guidance in the past he inherited by returning to the religious practice of Judaism.¹¹⁴ The new work was the reply to his prayer that came in the fitting form of prayers: “It came from an intense desire to speak that way [...] And you don’t speak that way unless you feel truly cornered” (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 238). Moreover, writing a book like that was the only option the poet felt he had: “there are times when you find yourself with your back against the wall and silenced and the only way you can speak, the only kind of language you can use, is that language of prayer” (qtd. in Devlin *Leonard Cohen* 48). The poet wrote down his prayers, “the act of writing” itself being a form of prayer (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 237).

To those familiar with Cohen and his writings, the fact of his composing a book of high religious intensity was no surprise, because, as Dennis Lee says, “the prayerful quality of what he was doing had in some ways always been there” (qtd. in Simmons 330). The author himself credited another person for the concentrated spirituality of his new publication: the dedication is “for my teacher,” the dedicatee being Cohen’s Zen mentor Joshu Sasaki Roshi who, as the poet explained in numerous interviews, did not make him a Buddhist but taught him meditation and helped him find the path back to

¹¹⁴ “I started studying Judaism in a more or less deliberate way. This would be late, around ’75-’76 [...] I began practicing within my own terms, leading what I could understand of as Jewish life, given my circumstances. I began saying morning prayers, putting on *tefillin*, I began to practice. [...] *Book of Mercy* came out of that period” (qtd. in Benazon 53).

being an observant Jew. Deeper understanding of Jewish prayers was a part of this self-rediscovery, and the volume appeared as its outcome. The focal point of the book's design was the unified heart, an emblem Cohen had developed as his spiritual signature.¹¹⁵ The author's image was modestly absent from the cover, appearing only on the endpaper along with an extremely short two-line biography.

Before settling on the title *Book of Mercy*, Cohen came up with such variants as *The Name* and *The Shield* (Nadel *Various Positions* 238); then, the choice was between *The Book of Mercy* and *Book of Mercy*. Cohen finally dropped the article because, as Dennis Lee recalls, he did not want the title to sound “definitive” or as “a book in the Bible” (Simmons 331). For the texts comprising the volume the poet preferred to forgo titles and followed “the Old Testament practice of numbering rather than titling the psalms” (Nadel *Various Positions* 238). In both cases the artistic choices are made with regard to biblical stylistics. Cohen himself said about the work: “I [...] wanted to affirm the traditions I had inherited” (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 238).

The book begins and ends with the notion of loss. In the opening prayer the speaker recounts his previous life as “[m]uch time, years [...] wasted in such a minor mode.” Although he pins his hopes on God, the first feeling is that of loss: “I stopped to listen, but he did not come. I began again with a sense of loss.” He tells his story of

¹¹⁵The unified heart has implied Jewish symbolism, combining Cohen's own design and the traditional Star of David: “This is my colophon. The two hearts are intertwined in the same way two triangles are intertwined in a Magen David. I never knew this existed until I designed it. When I was reading a book by Gershom Sholem [a Kabbalah scholar], he curiously enough happened to describe a synagogue, I think 8th century in Asia Minor. And he just happened to mention that there were two hearts interlocked on one of the walls. So I don't know” (qtd. in Kurzweil 31). The sign is also “a version of the yin and yang, or any of those symbols that incorporate the polarities and try and reconcile the differences” (qtd. in Simmons 332).

persevering with prayer to no avail: “As this sense deepened I heard him again. I stopped stopping and I stopped starting, and I allowed myself to be crushed by ignorance. This was a strategy, and didn’t work at all.” The past was no success and the present offers no consolation. The future is vague because it depends on whether the plea is answered, and the speaker has nothing to support his appeal: “I bargain now. I offer buttons for his love. I beg for mercy.” The divine king “slowly [...] yields,” allows the claimant into his court, and lets him find his place in it: “once again I am a singer in the lower choirs, born fifty years ago to raise my voice this high, and no higher” (#1). A spiritual journey follows, encompassing the rest of the book. Towards the end, though, in # 41, the “I” cries out: “I forgot your name and I am lost”; the final prayer starts off with the words: “I lost my way, I forgot to call on your name” (#50), as if the speaker has made a full circle and come to the same misery as at the beginning. At this point, the crucial difference between the “I” of the book and its author, both implied and actual, becomes obvious: while the speaker returns to his despair, the author has turned his anguish and the sense of being lost into the text we are reading. He has been productive, not fruitless. The critics did not leave the achievement unnoticed: “A courageous book? Yes. An outrageous book? Yes. A book of integrity? Yes. To write prayers today which are authentic and not the pious banalities of the moral majority requires courage, integrity, and talent” (Barbour *A Comprehensive* 19).

In *Book of Mercy* Cohen goes back, more fully than ever, to his heritage. He turns to the Jewish past of biblical times; he alludes to the Torah, Judaic religious traditions and rituals, and rabbinical writings; he appropriates the biblical style and the language of prayer. It is this legacy that saves the hero in his darkest moments: “Immediately the

Torah sang to him, and touched his hair, and for a moment, as a gift to serve his oldest memory, he wore the weightless crown, the crown that lifts the weight away, he wore it till his heart could say, ‘How precious is the heritage!’” (#5). By birthright, the hero of the book has a bond with God and the ability to address him. Genuine pride mixes with self-irony as he exclaims, “How beautiful our heritage, to have this way of speaking to eternity” (#15). The return to the tradition is similar to homecoming; it is restorative to the soul: “he hid in the pages of Abraham. Like one newly circumcised, he hid himself away, he waited in the trust of healing” (#7). The story of Abraham is that of the foundation of the Israelites and the formation of their special relationship with God; “Hiding in the pages of Abraham” means going all the way to the roots in search of one’s religious self. As Abraham was the first man to be circumcised by God’s order to establish the covenant between man and God, so the metaphoric circumcision mentioned here stands for the connection reestablished between the speaker and the Almighty, as the former returns to his roots; it is not by chance that among many periphrastic ways of addressing God he chooses the expression “Shield of Abraham” (#17).

The “I” makes himself comfortable within the tradition he has rediscovered, with irony paralleling a sit-down in a Montreal smoked meat place to a sitting of the ancient Israel religious court Sanhedrin (or *synedrion*):

Now, we can order a meat sandwich for the protein, or we can take our places in the Sanhedrin and determine what is to be done with those great cubes of diamond that our teacher Moses shouldered down the mountain.” The irony is mostly aimed at the speaker himself: “We are definitely interested; now we can get down to a

Jew's business. (# 13)

The "Jew's business" is, as the reader finds out, the ups-and-downs of spiritual search, the study and adoration of the Word, and haggling with God along with praising Him.

The speaker takes on the rituals and is willing to follow them, from observing the Sabbath ("Let me deep into your Sabbath," #5) to participating as the tenth man in the collective prayer of the *minyan* ("Let nine men come to lift me into their prayer so that I may whisper with them," #6). Some daily rituals demand the skills and knowledge he has not kept up with, and he mocks his own awkwardness as that of a "[m]onkey struggling with the black tefillin straps" (#22).¹¹⁶ He salutes his religious rebirth as a Jew but is aware of perils that might come with it, as "[t]he tradition devoured its children" (#35). From time to time, he is rebellious against the pressure of the past and the multi-millennial history the tradition puts on him¹¹⁷: "I wait for you, king of the dead, here in this garden where you placed me, beside the poisonous grass, miasmal homesteads, black Hebrew gibberish of pruned grapevines" (#12).

Nevertheless, *Book of Mercy* takes full religious and artistic advantage of the Judaic heritage. It alludes to episodes from biblical history, such as the Egyptian enslavement (the Pharaoh in #5 and Egypt in #17) or the story of King David and Bathsheba (in #7 and #20). In #25, it tells a metaphoric story of a word-studying family

¹¹⁶ This image corresponds to Cohen's initial uneasiness with resuming full-scale religious practice: "And I had been interested, but I never really led a formal Orthodox life. And I felt the appetite, I felt, 'What is this tefillin?' I inherited my grandfather's tefillin. I had the bag. And I wondered, 'What is this? What is this thing? What are these morning prayers?'" And I began to look into them, and to study them, and to say them and to try to penetrate them. And to try to make sense of them, in the deepest way" (qtd. in Kurzweil 20).

¹¹⁷ Compare: "when you penetrate the world of Jewish scholarship which is unbroken for about 3,000 years [...] you realize you're dealing with a tradition that is overwhelming" (Cohen qtd. in Benazon 52).

from the times about two millennia ago, when the Jews who retained their traditional beliefs had to hide from the Romans, the Christians, and “the apostate Jews”; the prose narrative ends with a bitter song containing the line “Jerusalem has been destroyed.” The tradition of adoration of the Word, though, has not been destroyed, as the speaker demonstrates: “You let me sing [...]. You hid me in the mountain of your word” (#19). In this respect, the “I” and the author merge almost entirely because for Cohen the creative power of the word is immense and has a divine origin: “I always felt that the world was created through words, through speech in our tradition, and I’ve always seen the enormous light in charged speech” (qtd. in Sward 29).¹¹⁸ The name of God is the ultimate word to be revered and praised; the speaker adheres to the ancient practice in numerous utterances throughout the book, such as “your name is the foundation of the night” (#42), “My soul finds its place in the Name” (#47), and “your name unifies the heart” (#50).

Other aspects of the Judaic tradition used in *Book of Mercy* as a source of its poetics are rabbinical writings and Jewish folklore. For instance, the phrase “apes come down from the Tower of Babel, but in my heart an ape sees the beauty bathing” (#20) alludes to an apocryphal interpretation of the biblical story which asserts that some builders of the Tower of Babel turned into apes. The poet resorts to traditional imagery, such as the vision of the divine court in #1 or a vision about rescuing the angel of song in #4. Numerous passages are reminiscent of the *Aggadah* with its allegoric tales, as in the

¹¹⁸ In the same interview, Cohen says that as a poet he has a sparkle of that power: “that’s always touched me, the capacity to create the world through speech, and my world is created that way. It’s only by naming the thing that it becomes a reality. [...] Everything is going through speech [...] I know it’s a very old-fashioned idea and not popular today, but the kind of speech designed to last forever has always attracted me” (qtd. in Sward 29).

parable where the “I” gives birth to an ape (the image standing for his artistic output), then suffers from his grotesque offspring, while the divine king deems him responsible: ““Where is your ape? The king demanded. ‘Bring me your ape’”(#2). Another parable appears in #26, where a dancer emerges from a man’s flesh; there is also the one about the teacher who gave his disciple what the latter did not ask for. In the same tale, Cohen resorts to the expression “he flung me across the fence of the Torah” (#21), meaning that the “I” was thrust into working out the Torah for himself. The allegory comes from rabbinical writings: according to a Talmudic claim, there is a protecting fence around the Torah created with the oral law, giving the interpretative authority exclusively to rabbis. An occasional question-and-answer structure, as seen, for instance, in # 36, appeals both to the Judaic tradition of religious disputes and to the folkloric mode of riddles and replies: “Where have I been? I gave the world to the Accuser. Where do I go? I go to ask for pardon from the Most High.” The elements of style in some texts imitate rabbinical homiletic writings, as do the repetitious parallel constructions in another parable:

I heard my soul singing behind a leaf, plucked the leaf, but then I heard it singing behind a veil. I tore the veil, but then I heard it singing behind a wall. I broke the wall, and I heard my soul singing against me. I built up the wall, mended the curtain, but I could not put back the leaf. I held it in my hand and I heard my soul singing mightily against me. This is what it’s like to study without a friend. (#3)

This piece is also notable for the separation of man and his soul, which occurs in many Jewish legends, as well as for the final didactic remark about the disadvantage of

studying alone, which alludes to the way of learning in a yeshiva traditionally done *b'chavruta*, that is, in pairs with a study partner.

The speaker of the book borrows biblical rhetoric and uses it extensively, for example: “Here the destruction is subtle, and there the body is torn. Here the breaking is perceived, and there the dead unaware carry their putrid remains” (#30). In this piece, Cohen speaks the prophetic language and creates the image of a prophet seeing the true state of affairs and the depth of the human predicament. The prophetic figure of the “I” recalls the poet’s speech “Loneliness and History” delivered decades before, where he values prophets over priests and reproaches the Jewish community of Montreal for underestimating them. As the author of *Book of Mercy*, Cohen himself assumes a prophetic rather than a priestly pose: “As a prophet, Cohen is a visionary in his writing [...] he expresses a direct connection to G-d and serves the deity rather than the community” (Dayan 83).

Cohen has never regarded *Book of Mercy* as a poetic volume, indicating its difference from his other works:¹¹⁹ “No, it’s not poetry, it’s prayer, it’s prayer, psalms” (qtd. in Devlin *Leonard Cohen* 48). The form of the texts comprising the book confirms that; as Simmons points out, “[t]he pieces are written with the rhythm, tonality, and the implied music of psalms” (332). When the book came out Cohen made a statement that the work was based on his religious education, heritage, and the tradition: “I wasn’t trying to invent a literary form. These were petitions and I had been educated to speak as concisely and formally as possible when approaching the King” (qtd. in Devlin *Leonard*

¹¹⁹ “*Book of Mercy* is a secret book for me. It’s something I never considered, although it has an organic place, I guess, among the things I’ve done. It’s a book of prayer and it is a sacred kind of conversation [...]. Everybody’s work is one piece, but *Book of Mercy* is somehow to one side” (qtd. in Sward 27).

Cohen 48). He quotes and appropriates prayers and prayer formulas, making them an organic part of his text, as the phrase “if it be your will” (“If it be your will, accept the longing truth beneath this wild activity” in #35). Borrowed from a repentance prayer,¹²⁰ it will later also appear in the song having these words for the title.

An interviewer rightly suggested that the book was the literal realization of the line from “Lines from My Grandfather’s Journal” saying “prayer is my natural language,” and that the poet indeed “found [his] natural language in *Book of Mercy*. And of course a psalm is also a song” (Sward 28). The “I” at some point directly associates himself with King David, the biblical composer of psalms. The speaker uses the first-person pronoun while alluding to the story of David’s lawless love for Bathsheba whom he first saw naked from the roof of his palace: “I pushed my body from one city to another, one rooftop to another, to see a woman bathing” (#7). Thus, the collection of what the publisher and the critics defined as “contemporary psalms” (Barbour *A Comprehensive* 19) is implicitly presented as the work by a contemporary King David. The poet, whether consciously or not, tries on this role as he looks back at the past, at his heritage, to redefine himself in the present.¹²¹

¹²⁰ The citation, according to Nadel, comes from “a phrase from the Kol Nidre Service on Yom Kippur eve where, just before the listing of sins, the petitioner cries, ‘May it therefore be Your will Lord our God, and God of our Fathers, to forgive all of our sins, to pardon all our iniquities, to grant us atonement for all our transgressions’” (*Various Positions* 239).

¹²¹ While Cohen was modest about *Book of Mercy*, calling it “a little book of prayer that is only valuable to someone who needs it at the time” (qtd. in Sward 28), there is a Jewish religious leader who considers this work to have liturgical value: “We have a liturgical tradition in Judaism where great Jewish poets wrote poetry and then they incorporated it into the prayer book – they didn’t try to write prayers – and I think Leonard is actually the greatest liturgist alive today. I read his poems aloud at high holidays, from *Book of Mercy*. I think *Book of Mercy* should be in our prayer book” (Rabbi Mordecai Finley qtd. in Simmons 333).

The past Cohen evokes is not limited to the common Jewish religious inheritance. He has his own reminiscences that have defined his personal spirituality, for example, the close contact with Christianity he had as a Montrealer. As a child, he was exposed not only to Judaism, but, through his Irish nanny, to Catholicism as well, and acquired a positive view to it.¹²² This peculiarity brings into *Book of Mercy* a prayer formula coinciding with a line from “Magnificat” (“Holy is your name,” #43), and the image of “Our Lady of the Torah, who does not write history” (#17) – “a reflection of his continuing fascination with Catholic Maryology [sic] and the figure of the Great Goddess behind it” (Barbour *A Comprehensive* 20). Some spiritual passages in the book could have been written by a Christian visionary; they remind the reader of medieval saintly writings.

The poet’s family past, too, is summoned in *Book of Mercy*. The form of the book was probably prompted by family memories, such as the one Cohen shared in his talk with Michael Benazon: “We were sitting there in that third row in the Shaar Hashomayim. [...] there was the Prayer Book in front of me, and it was fascinating” (qtd. in Benazon 51).¹²³ The family members haunt the pages. The phrase “you bound my arm with my grandfather’s strength” (#19) on the symbolic level refers to the speaker’s presumably wise and stoic ancestry. Simultaneously, the image calls to mind both of

¹²² Cohen calls Christianity “the great missionary arm of Judaism” and emphasizes: “I saw this as absolutely within my tradition, nothing foreign to me” (qtd. in Benazon 47).

¹²³ Cohen talks extensively about his childhood religious experience in the interview with Kurzweil. See for example: “When I read the Psalms or when they lift up the Torah, “*Etz chayim hi l'mah chazikim bah* [“It is a tree of life for those who grasp it.”] [...] I wanted to be that one who lifted up the Torah. [...] I wanted to wear white clothes, and to go into the Holy of Holies, and to negotiate with the deepest resources of my soul.” (18-19).

Cohen's grandfathers, one a pillar of the community and a founder of a synagogue, the other a religious scholar of immense knowledge and remarkable perseverance in his work. A piece recounting, in the past tense, the speaker's visit to his sister (#23) contains the spiritual lesson of humility he received. In the only piece in the entire volume written in rhymed prose (as opposed to the others which can be defined as prose poems), the speaker appeals to the memory of his father and mother, first in the figurative plural, meaning ancestors, then in a more literal and intimate singular: "As my fathers wrote, as my mothers spoke, to be so blessed as to know your name. [...] To have this work, to fill this line, to be so blessed for my mother's sake, for my father's wine" (#38). The text is specifically marked with rhymes to stand out against the background of prose. Since another important figure in the poem, that of the "teacher," bears the name of Roshi ("Rashi"), Cohen's real-life mentor, it would be reasonable to suggest that the poet merges with his lyric "I" in this work, so the father and mother are his own and the memory is personal.

The hierarchy of the aspects of time in *Book of Mercy* differs from Cohen's other works except one: *Beautiful Losers*. In the novel, time is not historical but mythological; it does not correspond to the conventional notions of temporality. A similar effect occurs in Cohen's "psalms," where the past, present, and future are not those of daily life. When talking to God, the speaker is lifted out of time and finds himself in the zone where eternity rules: "Out of time you have taken me to do my daily task" (#6); "all my time your just dominion" (#39); "your name is the sweetness of time" (#31).

In one of the pieces the speaker narrates his allegorical autobiography, telling the story of sin, misery, and longing. Along with that, there is the ideal mythologized past

that he does not own: “Then the Law shining, then the memory of what was, too far, too clean to be grasped.” In the present, his soul is separated from his body, though not by death. He appeals to God: “Form me again with the utterance and open my mouth with your praise. There is no life but in affirming you, no world to walk on but the one which you create” (#7). The temporality is abstract here, and all the events occur within a zone where time is irrelevant, despite such seemingly chronological markers as “then” and “midnight.” The arrangement of existence in the book is not historical but mythological: “Time will be measured from mother to child, from father to son” (#24).

The individual past of the “I” is unworthy and sinful. He pleads guilty, confessing allegorically that he “received the living waters and [...] held them in a stagnant pool” (#33). The unhappiness he experienced was deserved through his ignorance of God and spiritual passivity: “And we never knew; we never stood up, and the good land was taken from us, and the sweet family was crushed” (#32). The destruction of that past was brought on by God’s will in response to its erroneousness: “[t]he ruins signal [His] power” (#46). The speaker’s attitude to the personal past is not wistful or contemplative, as it is everywhere else in Cohen’s writing; he wants to be cleansed from it, pleading God: “Remove your creature’s self-created world” (#48). The “I” speaks of himself as “[h]aving lost [his] way” and “wasted [his] days” (#45); his only hope is God’s mercy.

In spite of the negative view of the past, memory and remembering have a redemptive value because the act of remembering brings forth repentance and makes one think of God:

We cry out for what we have lost, and we remember you again
[...] we remember, we recall the purpose [...] We remember, we

cry out to return our soul. [...] We remember the containing word,
the holy channels of commandment, and the goodness waiting
forever in the Path. (#32)

Even when cleansed from the past and renewed through divine mercy, the speaker wishes to keep his memory intact and asks in his prayer: “Lift me up with a new heart, with an old memory, for my father’s sake, for the sake of your name” (#24).

The present which the “I” is experiencing appears miserable. He refers to it as “the swell of suffering” (#41) and “the dream of despair” (#48), asserting that he is surrounded by darkness (#37). There is a full realization of the fleeting nature of life and of the present as the “place where we are for a moment” (#24). The speaker expresses his gratitude to God who “who judges the present with mercy” (#40) and gives strength to “stand in the rush of time” (#9). While the present is dismal, there is the danger of becoming self-satisfied and therefore corrupt. The possibility makes the “I” anxious, and he begs God to equip him with the sobering force of memory: “Overthrow this even terror with a sweet remembrance: when I was with you, when my soul delighted you, when I was what you wanted” (#31). The fleeting nature of life has a logical continuation in a bleak vision of the future. The “I” is unsure if he will ever experience peace and unification of his body and soul: “When will I cry out in gratitude?” (#24). Otherwise, the future is clear: “And here is death. [...] And here is old age” (#32). His trust in God makes the future less abominable: “I do not fear as you gather up my days” (#31), says the speaker because he believes that everything passes but God.

Throughout *Book of Mercy*, the Judaic religious tradition, memory, and the communal/family past provide strength and inspiration. As for the individual past, it is

erroneous and sinful; the present is dark, and the future is marked with the imminence of death: “Tomorrow is yours, the past is in debt, and death runs toward me with the soiled white flag of surrender” (#24). The hope the “I” has is purely metaphysical and placed on God’s mercy; this hope involves nothing else but God’s will that exists outside the time flow in timeless infinity. Man is a part of this timelessness too, because, as Cohen says about the essence of the book, “Somehow, in some way, we have to be a reflection of the will that is behind the whole mess” (qtd. in Sward 30).

2. “I dreamed that I was given song to be my only proof”:

Summing It Up in *Stranger Music*

“Do you understand poetry? ... I don’t, and that’s why I don’t like it. ... In a song, however, words are much easier to comprehend. Poems for songs must be written in a different way.”

A LiveJournal blogger

In the 1990s, Cohen is tallying up the total of his career. A famous singer/songwriter and a poet past the peak of his popularity, with the last book published a decade ago, he reemerges on the literary scene with the four-hundred-page *Stranger Music*.¹²⁴ This book is profoundly dissimilar from his earlier publications; as advertised in the blurb, it “brings together for the first time a comprehensive selection of Leonard Cohen’s song lyrics and his poetry, including some poems not previously published.” The collection includes an assortment of poems from all of his preceding books of poetry, eleven unpublished poems, selections of songs from most of his albums, and even excerpts from his novel *Beautiful Losers*, which safely pass for prose poetry. The new book has the aura of the “collected works”¹²⁵ of a poet who is more concerned with what

¹²⁴ Tim Footman comments on the role of this publication: “*Stranger Music* ... offered an excellent introduction to any newcomers, many of whom had little idea that [Cohen] had an identity outside the music business” (138).

¹²⁵ Cohen himself preferred the word “selected”: “I tried to eliminate poems that suffered from those youthful obscurities and rambling intoxications of language, poems that really didn’t stand up. I wanted my better poems to be around. What is here are the poems that

he has done than what is ahead of him. It is not even Cohen himself who compiled the volume: Nancy Bacal, his life-long friend, gets credit as the person who “made the selection with the assistance of Rebecca De Mornay and the author,” as the latter writes in “A Note on the Text.”

It may seem surprising that having previously published eight books of poetry which are model examples of the conceptual author’s will,¹²⁶ Cohen let other people, however close to him, assemble a volume representative of his whole career. Simmons provides the explanation that the amount of work to be done to create a large-scale retrospective was too vast: “Sorting through stacks of material, trying every method he could conceive of to arrange his work, he had compiled three books – one small, one medium, one large – and abandoned all three. [...] Leonard asked his friend Nancy Bacal if she could help.” Then Simmons quotes Bacal herself: “He had been sitting with a huge pile of poems and lyrics for months, years [...] It was a life’s work, overwhelming, impossible for him to get to. So we took a very esoteric route. We wanted only to use the poems that were more current and sparse, more elliptical than the younger man’s voice” (393). At some point, Rebecca de Mornay, Cohen’s partner at the time, made some suggestions accepted by both Bacal and the poet. Cohen’s reappraisal of his past self and the words put together by his younger version took a painful turn: along with making selections, he started to rewrite his poems, partially out of perfectionism and partially

survived my scrutiny. In any case, it’s selected poems, not collected poems” (qtd. in Nadel *Various Positions* 267).

¹²⁶ Although the early books were influenced by Cohen’s poetic mentors and Marianne Ihler took part in making choices for *Selected Poems 1956-68*, Cohen’s authorial preferences still played the main role. Therefore, all his publications before *Stranger Music* fall into the category of the *book of poems* as a genre, that is, a large cyclical form comprised of semantically interconnected poems united and put in a certain order by the author and published as a separate conceptual unit (Fomenko 6; 12).

because they no longer exactly corresponded with his outlook. In a way, it was an attempt to change the past: not an easy task. Bacal testifies: “I remember the agony he was in. He faxed changes till the last minute. I am sure the editors at the publishing company were going mad” (qtd. in Simmons 394). The result of these efforts had a mixed critical reception: “Presented as a definitive collection (and certainly the most complete text available of Cohen's poetry and songs), this is also in some ways his oddest, quirkiest book. Edited by committee, it offers drastic re-writes of many poems [...] An essential book, but not nearly as authoritative or definitive as it might seem” (Scobie “Stranger Music” n. pag).

The cover of the anthology has a large photograph of the author, suit-clad, sitting in the lotus position, slightly bent forward and to his left side, with one hand touching the ground, the other placed on a leg, the eyes cast down and hidden from the viewer. The chiaroscuro effect presents Cohen's figure as a diagonally placed dark shape against the shadowy gray emptiness of the background; the light accentuates one side of the head. The general impression is a deeply contemplative mood, as if the poet were tired of the world and concentrating on his introspective thoughts, unaware of his surroundings or indifferent to them. This image, though picked not by Cohen but by the publisher, reflects the anthology as the summary of a long life's work of a poet who had been progressively private and reclusive from the audience. Since the book was intended as summing up the author's career, the publisher “was pushing [Cohen] for an autobiographical essay. [...] Cohen [...] refused, choosing to keep the book clean, free from any introductory declaration” because he saw the book itself “as a sort of poetic autobiography” (Nadel *Various Positions* 266).

Working on the manuscript, Cohen changed lines, dropped images, added titles. Most importantly, he mixed up poems and song lyrics within the book. The poet looked back at his lore and, as appears from the editing strategies of *Stranger Music*, found there isomorphic texts called either songs or poems. He did not distinguish between them and made a point of mixing selections from albums and books without giving the reader any indication whether the source was literary or musical.¹²⁷ That brings up a question: how are poems different from lyrics if they can be both printed in a book and performed as songs?¹²⁸ Cohen answered this query more than once in various interviews. For example, here is what he tells Jeffrey Brown for PBS in 2006, concentrating on the notions of time and tempo:

A poem has a certain – a different time. For instance, a poem is a very private experience, and it doesn't have a driving tempo. In other words, you know, you can go back and forward; you can come back; you can linger. You know, it's a completely different time reference. Whereas a song, you know, you've got a tempo. You know, you've got something that is moving swiftly. You can't stop it, you know? And it's designed to move swiftly from, you know, mouth to mouth, heart to heart, where a poem really speaks to something that has no time and that is – it's a completely different perception.

¹²⁷ Most probably, because *sapienti sat* – it is unlikely that a reader of Cohen's poetry would be unfamiliar with his musical albums. Besides, there is a list of books and records by Cohen provided by the publisher before the title page of *Stranger Music*.

¹²⁸ Since this analysis is focused on literary material, the musical aspect of songs as synthetic texts is deliberately left out. A musicologist, though, could make a valuable contribution to Cohen studies by analyzing the interaction between words and music.

The boundary between poetry and songs is, nevertheless, not so strict. The phenomenon of poetry intended for singing can be explained by the special role music acquired when recording and playback became easier and cheaper and, in effect, more accessible and increasingly ubiquitous. Words sung to music appeal to wider audiences than printed ones; memorable tunes and the charismatic voices of singers add to the allure. Nowadays song has virtually replaced poetry, feeding the emotional needs of the general public who are inseparable from their favourite recordings in the latest technological form. Synthetic texts consisting of words and music brought poetry closer to both poetry lovers and unlikely consumers of literature. This trend can also be seen as the realization of Ezra Pound's prophecy made in the times when words had drifted far from music: according to him, poetry was to return to its musical roots, otherwise it would not survive.¹²⁹ Cohen's work with words and music became a vivid manifestation of the tendency; as he comments on his singing in a 1967 interview, "poets see it as the popularization of poetry" (qtd. in Djwa "After the Wipe-Out" 8).

The authors who combined the roles of singers, poets, and composers brought poems to the attention of both those who appreciated the literary aspect and those who sought lighter entertainment. In France this trend is represented by such singing poets as Jacques Brel, George Brassens, and Serge Gainsbourg, to mention only a few stellar names; in the Anglophone world, music prevailed over the verbal aspect, and the tendency to mix tunes and full-scale poetry did not become as strong. As a matter of fact, the figures generally designated as "folk singers" (a misleading and vague term) can be

¹²⁹ Pound declared in his *ABC of Reading*: "poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music" (14).

sophisticated musicians and performers but seldom poets *per se*; their lyrics have little artistic value if separated from the music. Cohen, who started his career as a poet and has never stopped being one, represents that rare breed of authors whose lyrics and poetry are almost completely interchangeable; many of his songs have an independent life as poems while poems, *vice versa*, can be (and are) organically set to music.¹³⁰ Nigel Williamson affirms: “He is actually a poet putting poems to music rather than a songwriter writing songs [...] [Cohen] is not a child of the rock-n-roll epoch” (*The Early Years* n. pag.). John Simon, the producer of Cohen’s first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, points out that with Cohen it is the poetic quality of his songs that sets him apart: “I felt that I was working with a poet who set his words to song” (*The Early Years* n. pag.). Thus, Cohen can be seen as reverting to a past tradition of the poet-troubadour (or a more archaic past when poetry originated from song) rather than yielding to the pressures of the contemporary world.

As a poem transforms into a song, it undergoes a number of metamorphoses, adapting to the new circumstances of its existence. At the same time, the term “poem” denotes a literary text that nevertheless has the ability to transgress boundaries between the printed form and a live performance or a recording without losing its own artistic value, independently from the song’s music component (unlike song lyrics that cannot

¹³⁰ *Beautiful Losers* has an epigraph borrowed from a song, which connects the notions of a poet and a singer, a poem and a song. The source of the epigraph is deliberately stressed: “Somebody said lift that bale – Ray Charles singing ‘Ol’ Man River.” This epigraph and the ending of the novel form a circular composition, when on the last page the character merges with Ray Charles whom he sees on screen. Numerous interpretations agree on the symbolic role of Ray Charles’s blindness as a reference to Homer and its significance as an indication of blurred boundaries between poetry and singing, a phenomenon powerfully revealed in *Stranger Music*.

usually stand the test of appearing on a book page). This is precisely the case with Cohen's poems. Even a cursory look at *Stranger Music* confirms this observation.

The volume differs from other books of Cohen's poetry in many ways. The most outstanding feature of this collection is that the author deliberately and declaratively mixes up poems not only old and new, but also those existing in printed form only with those doubling as verbal constituents of songs. In the title, the word "music" cries for attention: absent from the titles of the poet's other books and even musical albums, it appears on the cover of a work that unites the poems *per se* and the poems he sings. It is noteworthy that music in the title is defined as "stranger," that is, both "out of the ordinary" and "less familiar." This play on words aims at creating a wider meaning for the word "music" and making it a near-synonym of creative activity and art. This title emphasizes the syncretism of word and music as the original nature of poetry.

The book has the subtitle *Selected Poems and Songs*, which seems to differentiate between songs and poems, but in fact the reader can hardly notice any distinction. Rather, the subtitle points to the genesis of the texts (some written to exist in written form while others were initially created to be set to music) and to the fact that a number of them have another life in recordings and concerts. Without a previous knowledge of the corresponding tunes and without Cohen's voice singing in one's memory, one can be easily misled and interpret the group of texts designated as "songs" in the same vein as Blake's or Whitman's non-musical poems titled "Songs." Following this convention in his poetry, Cohen routinely uses the word "song" in its literal, musical meaning in the titles of his albums: *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1967), *Songs From A Room* (1969), *Songs*

of Love and Hate (1971), *Live Songs* (1972), *Recent Songs* (1979), and, finally, *Ten New Songs* (2001).

A difference between poems and poem-songs still exists. In comparison with traditional written poetry, the formal changes that occur to a poem intended for singing affect mostly the size (it cannot be excessively long¹³¹) and the advanced elements of the text: the title, the subtitle, the dedication, and the epigraph, comprising the prefatory complex. It would be technically problematic to preserve such elements while performing the text accompanied by music, as a song. Another distinction between songs and poems is that no song goes title-less, while poems can be untitled. In *Energy of Slaves*, for example, the majority of poems have no titles;¹³² the author, however, gives them titles as he incorporates the old texts into *Stranger Music*. In this book he seeks homogeneity of poems, irrespective of their origin as literary texts or those for singing: they all have titles.

Like Cohen's other books of poetry, *Stranger Music* has a dedication, conceptual and laconic: "To Adam and Lorca." Outside the biographical context, it refers to the Biblical Adam and a Spaniard Federico García Lorca, a model poetic figure with a romantic and tragic halo. In reality, these names belong to Cohen's son and daughter. The name of the poet's firstborn was not randomly chosen: "Adam" in Hebrew means "man"; both the concept of a Man and the biblical Adam are among the central elements of Talmudic teaching and an important part of Cohen's own intricate personal mythological

¹³¹ Although some of Cohen's lyrics, such as "Master Song" or "Democracy," take up slightly over two pages when printed, this is not enough to qualify them as longer poems.

¹³² Cohen remarks in "A Note on the Text" that "[a]ll but three of the poems selected for this edition were originally untitled" and that "in sections of this book, certain poem titles and texts have been altered from their original publication."

vision. His daughter's name has an artistic significance: Federico García Lorca, as Cohen repeatedly confesses, influenced him more than any other poet¹³³ with his imagery, surrealism, personality, and political views; it was in pursuit of Lorca's ghost that Cohen bought his first guitar, briefly studied at Columbia University, and made a trip to Cuba. Famously, "Take This Waltz" is a free rendering of the Spanish poet's "Little Viennese Waltz," and "The Faithless Wife" is a translation of Lorca's poem from his cycle *Romancero Gitano*. Cohen told an interviewer why he named his daughter after the Spanish poet: "She's a lovely creature, and very inventive. She really deserves the name" (qtd. in De Lisle n. pag.). This explanation does not clarify much, apart from confirming the fact that Lorca is important for Cohen on a deeply private level. Lorca in the dedication of *Stranger Music*, then, is both Cohen's daughter and, through her, her namesake, the Spanish poet. This ambiguity makes the dedication both personal and metapoetic.

There are no epigraphs in *Stranger Music*. This telling absence has a simple explanation: an epigraph cannot survive if a poem functions as song. An epigraph would demand a commentary to accompany the song each time it is performed, which would inconvenience even a poet/singer like Cohen who always talks to his public from stage. For the same reason, in *Stranger Music* the poems intended for singing, and the other poems along with them, contain no indication of when and where they were composed (with the exception of the poems where these text elements merge with the title). *Stranger Music* is arranged chronologically and follows the timeline of Cohen's creative activity. The poems not previously included in any collections, "Uncollected Poems,"

¹³³ See for example: "At fourteen years of age, I realized that in order to define the words "purity" and "poetry," I could go to Lorca" (qtd. in Fabra n. pag.).

stand out as they are supplied with titles as well as dates and places of composition. It is this information that provides the context for the poems existing outside of the larger context of a book or an album.

Like the “New Poems” in *Selected Poems 1956-1968*, the eleven “Uncollected Poems” comprise the final section of *Stranger Music*. They consist of poetic texts *per se*, not song lyrics. Their dates vary from 1980 to 1987, with a single poem from 1978. The arrangement is not chronological: for example, the poem marked as written in 1978 is placed between a 1981 poem and one composed in 1985. The range of places where the works were composed is wide: from Jemez Spring in New Mexico to Paris, from the old haunts like Hydra and New York to Rousillon in Provence and the Mt. Baldy Buddhist retreat; the only old work, the 1978 one, was created in Montreal. The dates and places make the poems grounded in time, belonging to a concrete moment of the poet’s life and preserving a particular state of mind or emotion experienced then and there.

By placing a fixed date on a poem as if it were a journal entry, Cohen reveals his metapoetic interest in time, as in “Fragment From a Journal,” the only prose piece in this section of *Stranger Music*. This text is humorous, self-ironic (mocking spiritual searchings and the prophetic pose characteristic of Cohen), and metapoetic (dealing with the process and purposes of composing poetry). It has a detailed account of a remembered event committed to a journal for preservation. The simulated journal entry unfolds four layers of the past. First, it is a moment that occurred some time ago, in the unidentified past, early in the morning when “[i]t was still dark” and the speaker “began writing a metaphysical song called “Letter to the Christians,” where he “attempted to exaggerate [his] own religious experience and invalidate everyone else’s.” Next, there is

a point in time “several days later” when he finishes his work. After that comes the afternoon when the “I” presents his exercise in spiritual writing to his friend Anthony and they “ha[ve] a good laugh” about it. Finally, “[a] few minutes later Anthony produce[s] a reply” that parodically continues the “song,” advising the speaker to turn from “the Grace” to “the Lace,” which the latter does, picking up a girl and seducing her with his poetic lines.

The “song” composed by the speaker of “Fragment From a Journal” appears in the “Uncollected Poems” as a separate item, recognizable by one of the “four stanzas of eight lines each” quoted by the “I” to Anthony. “The Embrace,” the poem containing that stanza, is made up of four strophes, each comprising eight lines rhymed most traditionally *abab* with an additional quatrain at the end. The poem recalls the formal aspects of Romantic poetry; it contains the biblical allusions to the serpent and the dove and the New Testament references, largely reminding the reader of *Let Us Compare Mythologies* and its flirtation with Christian imagery. Both works, the prose piece and the poem, are marked as written on Hydra in 1983, which further validates “Fragment From a Journal” as the “actual” story of the poem. It is of little artistic importance whether this connection between the two texts provides a true account or not; Cohen supplies a poem with a “story,” meticulously, step by step throughout time, restoring the “circumstances” of its composition, critical reception by a fellow poet (Anthony), and the public response (the girl on the beach). “Fragment From a Journal” can be interpreted as a deeply self-ironic metaphorical representation of Cohen’s career as a poet; in this case, the account of the events leading to the final goal (“seducing” the audience) acquires an additional meaning, and the poet’s attention to its temporal stages becomes especially justified.

Another poem interweaving the themes of poetry and time is “Every Pebble,” a text from the 1970s that found its way into the section of *Stranger Music* comprised of more recent works. It is reminiscent of Cohen’s first publications because it reveals his apprenticeship to the Romanticists and Yeats, due to its regular stanzas and neat, often exact rhymes; there are inversions and archaisms, as well as a mystical ballad-like “story” and pantheistic imagery. The subject itself, the unity of all creations and the conversation of a poet with the Creator within the “song [he] placed / upon [his] creature’s tongue,” sounds archaic, being derived from traditional poetry of previous epochs. This sort of traditionalism is bold for a modern poet in the context where the classical poetic techniques tend to be seen as dated. Cohen is unafraid of sounding old-fashioned: for him, artistic precision and the philosophical depth of the past retain perfection and remain the model to follow. The representation of the aspects of time in the poem embodies typical Cohen’s vision: the days of the speaker’s present are, as he humbly says, “shabby”; his future is unknown but impregnated with death; only something that has already existed before now will survive: the song.

The notion of *vita brevis, ars longa* expressed in the final lines of “Every Pebble” explains the familiarity of the speaker’s addressing a cultural icon of medieval India in “On Seeing Kabir’s Poems On Her Dressing Table”: “Kabir, you old braggart / you have put them all to sleep.” It reads as if the lyric “I” were neglecting the distance of time and treating Kabir as a fellow-poet (who, like Cohen, was a master of spiritual poetry and the author of songs). If poetry is lifted up from the time flow, time does not stand between the poets.

In some instances, time does not appear fluid. In “To a Fellow Student,” it does not bring any changes and seems immobile: the central figure in the poem, the addressee, stays unaltered throughout the years. The person is referred to both in the past and present tenses, in parallel descriptions:

I thought about you a lot.
 I still do.
 You sat still,
 your hands clasped on your lap
 like a schoolchild.
 [...]
 I saw you today
 sitting in the same way,
 the same tears on your cheeks,
 as if you had not moved
 in all these years

This sense of constancy could be prompted by the qualities of the individual portrayed here and the circumstances implied, but there is also a strong possibility of the influence of the Buddhist perspective that rejects the idea of the continuous flow of time. In other texts in “Uncollected Poems,” Cohen is faithful to his usual Western and, more specifically, Jewish outlook and attitude to time. Even “Peace,” the text composed on Mount Baldy during the poet’s routine stay with his Zen spiritual teacher Roshi, suggests fluidity of time (through a rapid switch between the tenses) and self-ironic discontent with the present: “peace / the hands of peace around my throat.”

For a moment, both the present and the future are uncharacteristically positive in “A Deep Happiness,” which starts with the lines “A deep happiness / has seized me” and ends with the encouraging statement giving hope both to the speaker and to the sea anemone he addresses: “your heart is like mine – / your loneliness will bring you home.” In “My Honour,” the present again appears grim and depressive, filled with love despair and self-denigration:

My honour is in bad shape.
 I'm crawling at a woman's feet.
 She doesn't give an inch.
 [...]
 I'm not even a Zen Master.
 I'm this man in a blue summer suit.

Beside his unimportance in the eyes of the woman, the speaker is concerned about his age; the figure denoting the age and therefore reminding of the merciless passage of time worries him more than the outward signs of how old he is: “I look good for fifty-two / but fifty-two is fifty-two.” The lyric “I” is acutely aware of the present imminently turning into the past, which is not a bad thing because in the “now” he is suffering, and only the thought of its eventual passing helps him to live through it. When the speaker imagines the future, he thinks of his present in terms of the past. Having been left behind, it will become more bearable:

I'll rise up and say
I loved you better than you loved me
 [...]

and I'll remember today,
 the day when I was that asshole in a blue summer suit
 who couldn't take it any longer.

Most often in “Uncollected Poems,” Cohen looks back at the past. The experimental text “When Even The” is anagrammatic, consisting of stubs of sentences and unfinished phrases. As a consequence, the initial impression is that it would be no easy task to extract its temporal structure; further analysis shows that the poem is, though in its bizarre way, descriptive and utilizes mostly the present tense, for example: “But the. / And the. / It's enough to. / Soldiers don't. / Prisoners don't.” The speaker experiences doubt, as seen through the numerous conditional expressions: “If I could. / If once more” and “When even. / When even the”; “Even if. / Even if the.” The future tense shows up in a pessimistic context, along with the notions of mortality and decay: “Years will. / Death will. / [...] / They never will. / [...] Rotten as. / Who does not. / Who never will.” The last section of the poem contains skeletons of conditional sentences. They are, either evidently or implicitly, in the past tense and express a regret about something that the lyric “I,” despite his willingness and the defiant attitude, never had a chance to do: “If I could. / When the. / Then I. / Even if. / Even when. / I would.” This final performance of the past conditionals in the stub sentences makes the whole poem a memory of the circumstances surrounding something that did not happen.

In contrast, the memory in “Paris Models” reconstructs an event that did occur, and an enjoyable one at that: the lyric “I”'s excursion into the backstage world of a fashion photo shoot. He recalls that, dazzled with the beauty of the models casually changing, flashing their body parts, eating, getting ready, he “was happy” and “privileged

/ to have attended a ceremony / usually restricted to professionals.” The cheerful bustle, rendered with a lot of mundane details (towels, paper plates), is a magical ceremony with such elements as the “miracle of the balloon”; both on the site and in the poem, “the magic of womanhood / had worked again.” This text is a sketch that describes a happy experience and saves it from disappearing in time with the embalming help of the past tense and the preserving power of poetry.

“Days of Kindness,” the closing poem of “Uncollected Poems” and of the whole volume, leaves an aftertaste of peacefulness, though Cohen’s hierarchy of the aspects of time does not undergo radical changes here. The lyric “I” introspectively recounts his feelings. He is content with his present (“You can read by moonlight / You can read on the terrace”), because its best qualities are comparable to the past: “You can see a face / as you saw it when you were young.” He gets nostalgic for the idyllic time gone, recalling the details: “There was good light then / oil lamps and candles / and those little flames / that floated on a cork in olive oil.” His past stays with him forever; it even nests in his body, as he reveals in a physiological metaphor: “What I loved in my old life / I haven’t forgotten / it lives in my spine.” For him, “a loving memory” is an absolute value, and he prays that “the precious ones” from the past have it too.

Stranger Music is “a massive record of the poet’s imaginative journey,” as a line from a *Toronto Star* review on the blurb enunciates; it is a journey through the past and a retrospective look at the achievements, demonstrating what remained important for Cohen in terms of themes and attitudes. The table of contents reveals the comparative evaluation of the poetic publications from nearly four decades. Only eight poems come from the first book despite the definitive role of *Let Us Compare Mythologies* in the

author's formation as a poet and individual; the exploration of traditions in *The Spice-Box of Earth* contributes twenty-two poems. *Flowers for Hitler*, the book conceptualizing history and the past as frames for understanding human nature, deserves a wider selection of twenty-eight works, while the intermediate assessment of accomplishments (deemed as failures) in *Parasites of Heaven* is considered of least significance and provides a mere five items. Six texts are chosen from *Selected Poems 1956-1968*, itself an assemblage of selections; they represent its section comprising the twenty "New Poems." *The Energy of Slaves*, which explores the relationships between time and poetry, receives a disproportional amount of attention: it supplies *Stranger Music* with forty pieces. *Death of a Lady's Man*, a dark metapoetic volume with the most distinctive account of Cohen's vision of the aspects of time in relation to himself as a man and poet, contributes an astounding number of seventy-one texts, both poems and commentaries to them. The timeless prayer book occupied with eternity, *Book of Mercy*, participates in the collection with twenty-one entries, nearly half of its own contents. This distribution of attention to the previous poetic output exposes Cohen's continuous concentration on topics concerning temporality in relation to an individual and poetry.

3. “Sorrow is the time to begin[,] Longing is the place to rejoice”:

Making Peace with Time in *Book of Longing*

“The passage of time in and through individuals
is the most fundamental motion in them.”

Irwin C. Lieb

(*Past, Present, and Future*)

“How would you write your own biography?

— Cautiously, but with pictures, song,
and purity – with as little straight text as possible.”

Ira Nadel

(“Ten or More Questions I *Should* Have Asked Leonard Cohen”)

Book of Longing appeared in 2006. It took such a long time to be finished that in Cohen’s close circle the work earned the nickname *Book of Prolonging* (Simmons 454). “I was able to delay this book well beyond / the end of the 20th century,” Cohen admits in the poem “Delay.” The year of the publication turned out to be appropriate, as it was exactly fifty years since the poet’s first book came out. The length of *Book of Longing* surpasses Cohen’s previous poetic volumes,¹³⁴ with its two-hundred-and-thirty pages containing a hundred and fifty poems interposed with black-and-white reproductions of the poet’s drawings (some of them recurring) and facsimiles of handwritten texts. All the poems are titled, except the fragments inlaid in the illustrations. The design of the book

¹³⁴ Apart from *Stranger Music*, which is not a book of poetry but a compilation of selections from previous books and song albums and therefore large in size.

follows the pattern introduced in *Death of a Lady's Man*: the same picture (in this case, a songbird perched on a tree branch) appears on the dust jacket, then on the title page, and finally after the last poem. The photograph of the author, a grainy picture taken by his daughter Lorca, is placed on the back of the dust jacket; there is a woman playing a keyboard in the foreground, with the poet sitting farther from the viewer and listening to her. This image reflects one of the book's peculiarities: although the world, as is natural for lyric poetry, is shown through the lenses of the "I"'s perception, the latter is not entirely focused on himself. For instance, he brings someone else into the equation when addressing either his muse or his *alter ego* in "The Letters": "Begin your letter to / The one who's coming next."

With *Book of Longing*, Cohen returns to the reader of his poetry twenty-two years after *Book of Mercy*. It is not by chance that coming back is one of the important themes here. The author descends, physically and spiritually, from Mount Baldy where he has spent twelve years as a Buddhist monk. He writes in "Leaving Mt. Baldy": "I came down from the mountain / after many years of study / and rigorous practice." A page is turned. The "I" of the poem enters the highway traffic to go back, to move forward. Another poem about coming back to everyday human life has become iconic: "I'm back on Boogie Street" ("Boogie Street").¹³⁵ The return occurs on many levels: the "I" regains himself as an artist and a man; he swaps meditations for creativity; he gets back his sexuality ("my desire has come back, / and I want you again" in "Disturbed This

¹³⁵ "Boogie Street to me was that street of work and desire, the ordinary life and also the place we live in most of the time [...] [W]e all hope for those heavenly moments, which we get in those embraces and those sudden perceptions of beauty and sensations of pleasure, but we're immediately returned to Boogie Street" (Cohen qtd. in Johnson n. pag.).

Morning”). The speaker in “Food Tastes Good” is fasting in order to reclaim his thinner self “so G-d can love [him] / as He did before.” The things and places the “I” revisits welcome him, as does the “Dusko’s” in “Dusko’s Taverna 1967”: when the speaker returns to it, it is still there and still as it used to be, unlike the café turned to ruins since his last call in “The Cafe” from *Death of a Lady’s Man*.

The return is, in a way, a new start that the lyric “I” makes regardless of his age: in “How Could I Have Doubted,” a lamentation about having grown old ends with the lines: “I am in love again / I can live like this.” The word “again” is tellingly repeated as many as forty-four times throughout the book. The speaker expects “to be Forgiven Again” (“Takanawa Prince Hotel Bar”); he prophesies that “[t]he family will appear again” (“Moving Into A Period”); he is ready to be “beginning again” a series of transformations (“You Are Right, Sahara”). He tells a woman “I found you again” (“Now in My Room”). Another woman’s “first commitments” are “tangible again” (“Alexandra Leaving”). Different figures in the book are “back in town again” (“Lorca Lives”) or “on the cross again” (“If I Could Help You”). Nothing is final: “it will happen to us again” (“First of All”). The most evocative expression of never ending and ever reoccurring are probably the lines “I finish my work / until it starts again” (“There Is A Moment”).

To start afresh, one goes through a rebirth; “I think in order to survive one must be reborn,” Cohen once told an interviewer (Fevret n. pag). The themes of resurrection and transformation in a repetitive cycle are closely connected to the return and the renewal. The idea of the cyclical moving of a person and things in time is prompted by the Buddhist concepts of the Wheel of Samsara and the continual repetitiveness of existence. In some instances, the cycles of rebirth amalgamate with the notion of

resurrection, as in “To A Young Nun”: “Your turn to die for love. / My turn to resurrect.” At times, the changes deviate from the logic of the Samsara and are not cyclical but teleological: in “You Are Right, Sahara” there is a symbolic story of a figure that undergoes a series of transformations, from The Traveler into The Wanderer, then into The One Who Lost, after that into The Seeker; from The Seeker, into The Passionate Lover and into The Beggar; then into The Wretch, who, in his turn, becomes The One Who Must Be Sacrificed and The Resurrected One. The chain of transformations ends with The One Who Has Transcended The Great Distance of Mist and Veils. In this guise, he or she is ready for love. These transformations ending with love demonstrate a positive dynamic, while in Cohen’s earlier books metamorphoses lead usually to something disagreeable.

Throughout the book, the speaker/IMPLIED author/Cohen himself keeps expressing gratitude: to God, to Roshi, to women, to various “Teachers.” He thanks God for being alive: “This morning I woke up again / I thank my Lord for that” (“The Drunk Is Gender-Free”). He is grateful for the emotions he experiences: “[I] whisper here/ my gratitude / for every tear / of restless mood” (“All My News”). “Thank you, Beloved!” he says, as he is about to make a fresh start outside Mount Baldy (“Leaving Mt. Baldy”). His sense of gratitude stretches to God and to a waitress indiscriminately: “Thank You Ruler of the World / Thank You for calling me Honey” (“Opened My Eyes”). He is thankful to the females who share bodily pleasures with him (“I’ll thank Her for Her Charity” in “My Baby Wasn’t There”; “Thank you for your courtesy” in “Inside Our Love”). He is equally, if not more, appreciative of a woman who has kept distant: “I thank you / for the ponderous songs / I brought to completion / instead of ---ing you / more often” (“The

Mist of Pornography”). The thankfulness involves both the first-person singular and first-person plural: “I bow my head in gratitude” (“Dear Diary”); “We kneel in gratitude” (“Your Relentless Appetite for New Perspectives”). Gratitude is omnipresent and never-ending: “A Sense Of Gratitude / Enlivens Every Move / You Make” (“A Life Of Errands”). Gratefulness permeating the volume demonstrates a radical change from the tendency to complain that manifests itself in Cohen’s earlier works. This difference is closely connected to another disparity: the lyric “I” is no longer discontented with the present.

One of the poems about the present has the revealing title “The Luckiest Man In the World.” Its speaker has stopped suffering and started to get pleasure from living: “I sobered up. I faced my misery. [...] G-d, your life is interesting, I never stopped saying. I never stopped shaking my head in convivial disbelief. [...] I’m the luckiest man in the world.” While in Cohen’s previous books the lyric “I” was worn out by despair in his present, in *Book of Longing* the speaker is satisfied with what he has. In “Other Writers,” he asserts, however jokingly, that he is more fortunate than others: his friend Steve Sanfield “is a great haiku master” and his teacher Roshi deals with cosmic matters, but the “I” can receive a sexual favour from a young woman. He brags: “I’ve got to tell you, friends, / I prefer my stuff to theirs.” The speaker enjoys his life here and now; he loves the “sweetness of this very morning” and feels “free at last” in “The Mist of Pornography.” He is “thirsty every day” and “very happy” that his lover provides him wine to satisfy the thirst (“The Drunk Is Gender-Free”). At the same time, he does not need to drink to be happy: “I’m sober but / I like to fly,” he says in “All My News.” “The Paris Sky” radiates the speaker’s self-assurance and contentedness with the present.

All the joy and feeling at ease with the “now” does not come from a change of circumstances. “[M]y heart is broken as usual,” the lyric “I” assures the reader in “The Collapse of Zen,” but he does not seem bothered by his broken heart. He has remedies for that: “effortless forgetting” and a woman. In the face of an erotic moment in the present, the past and the future become irrelevant, as in “The Collapse of Zen”: “Have I forgotten yesterday’s mosquito / or tomorrow’s hungry ghost?” A moment of freedom has the same effect, making the speaker ask himself rhetorical questions undermining the value of the past: “Did I leave something out? / Was there some world I failed to embrace? / Some bone I didn’t steal?”

The lyric “I” discloses that he has reached emotional equilibrium, and nothing causes pain large enough to dent it. He is now capable of parting with a woman without suffering: “I’ll be asleep / whether you love me or not” (“This Is It”). He has acquired the sense of unification with the world including people, animals, and trees (“When I Drink”). In “Roshi,” the speaker finds himself “barking with the dog / or bending with the irises” for the teacher. Balance prevails in the world as he perceives it, so “[t]here’s no one going to Heaven / and there’s no one left in Hell” (“Roshi at 89”). In “Historic Claremont Village,” the speaker reflects on his “serene expression” and concludes that it is the change of attitude that has given it to him: “I must have done my time / reflecting on the bullshit.”

The present is not all bright and cheerful, of course. For example, in “S.O.S. 1995,” it is negative: “The atrocities over there, / the interior paralysis over here [...] You are clamped down. / You are being bred for pain.” The speaker, though, does not allow the anger to prevail over him. In “Lovesick Monk,” although he describes the

present as dreary (“it’s dismal here”), there is no anguish in his words. Similarly, a hand-written poem or the caption for a self-portrait (174) affirms the refusal to suffer: the “I” is “stunned,” “swollen with care and anxiety,” “useless, old and full of grief” – “but still not suffering.” Now that he has refused to take his sufferings overly seriously and acquired a different attitude, he is liberated and his path to God has become easier: “[i]t’s fun to run to heaven / When you’re off the beaten track” (“The Drunk Is Gender-Free”). In “A Promise,” the speaker defiantly claims: “I will never / return / the Holy Grail,” which presumably implies that he has come into possession of the universal object of longing and is at last content.

The future in *Book of Longing* has also lost the negativity of Cohen’s previous publications. In the eponymous first poem in the volume, “The Book of Longing,” the author proclaims the coming birth of a female figure who is both the Woman¹³⁶ and the muse. Her coming in the future will fix the order of things:

Then she will be born
 To someone like you
 What no one has done
 She’ll continue to do

For himself, he sees the future as peaceful: “I’ll close my eyes and smile [...] I’ll create the cosmos / by myself / [...] I’ll broadcast my affection” (“This Isn’t China”). There are few negative grammatical constructions in the future tense throughout the book. On the contrary, it abounds in such phrases as “will learn,” “will cherish” (“All My News”). There are positive expectations in “My Baby Wasn’t There”: “She’ll be there today”;

¹³⁶ The concept of the Woman dates back to *The Woman Being Born*, Cohen’s unpublished manuscript from the late 1970s.

“She’ll greet me with a Smile”; even the comical self-irony in the last line (“And then I’ll limp away”) does not destroy the happy anticipation.

There are expressions of possibilities in the time to come, if not for the speaker himself, then for someone else. He is encouraging about the future: “but in the future / some may find / what might be used / to change a mind”; “And no one has / to be afraid / when on this Path / the deal is made” (“All My News”). The speaker promises emotional peace and homecoming to a woman, saying that “many years later / she will remember / sitting with an old man / [...] that transparency / will lead her home” (“Her Friend”). “I know the important moments / are on their way” (“The Darkness Enters”), the lyric “I” declares without specifying if these moments are happy or ominous. It is true that “Moving Into a Period” predicts “a period of bewilderment, a curious moment in which people find light in the midst of despair, and vertigo at the summit of their hopes,” and religious confusion. The prophecy, however, seems to be self-ironic (“I will be wearing white clothes, as usual”), and probably should not be taken at its disturbing face value. On the global scale, the future is hopeful: “this will reverse the effect of the world’s mad plunge into suffering” (“The Great Event”).

In “A Life Of Errands,” the poem about getting old, after the phrase “If You Are Lucky You Will Grow Old,” appears to be the key explanation for the radical change of mood in comparison with the author’s earlier poetry: “In Spite Of The Ache / In Your Heart” about the failed search for the Girl and unfulfilled enlightenment, “A Certain Cheerfulness / Will Begin To / Arise Out Of Your Crushed / Hopes And Intentions.” Trite as it sounds, age brings acceptance of one’s self. The “I”’s outlook becomes more tranquil and accepting of the things to come. The future is not so cheerful in “Laughter In

the Pantheon,” where the speaker has to admit: “I won’t be staying / here for long / You won’t be either”; this statement, philosophical and calm, contains no bitterness. The speaker professes stoicism: “the heart will not retreat” (“Ten Thousand Kisses Deep”). Another source of the positive vision is the conviction that the poet’s book has its own promising future, separate from the author’s; he can follow its lead: “O speak to me / From places / You will find / Go little book / Invite me there” (“Go Little Book”).

The past never stops playing an essential role in Cohen’s poetry, and *Book of Longing* is no exception. For example, the past is the measurement standard in the poem “Much Later” (which, in ironic contrast to its title, comes from a much earlier period, being dated 1978). The speaker confesses that he verifies the present with the past: “I measure myself once more / against the high sweet standards / of my youth.” The speaker presents his concise autobiography in “The Great Divide,” characterizing the past unfavourably, as “a blind and broken time” when “kindness was forbidden,” explaining his choice to try “to hitch a ride / From acid to religion.” It is important, though, that finally his “punishment was lifted.” He looks back at the past without wanting to go back because in the present his “punishment” is gone. What happened in the past stays there: “everything is covered with dust”; “no one is allowed to cry out” (“Separated”); “you need not pick / the ancient lock” (“All My News”). In contrast with the painstaking preservation of memories in earlier books, now the speaker lets them slip away: “I took pills for my memory / but I could not stop it / from erasing” (“What Baffled Me”). The book is certainly not devoid of memories. In “The Party Was Over Then Too,” the “I” recalls: “When I was about fifteen / I followed a beautiful girl / into the Communist Party of Canada.” He did not get the girl; she became a rich lawyer’s wife, betraying her

comrade's ideals. The memory is slightly sad, but ironic and not bitter, because that brief episode later helped the "I" to understand himself.

Unsurprisingly, given the title, there is a touch of nostalgia in *Book of Longing*. In "The Best," the speaker yearns for his city of birth and his past there, when everything was as it should be and the loved ones were closer to him: "I died when I left Montreal"; "When I lived in Montreal / I knew what to wear / I had old clothes / and old friends / and my dog had been dead / for only ten or fifteen years." There are memories about Layton, to whom the volume is dedicated; they are presented in two poems, "Layton's Question" and "Irving And Me At The Hospital," where Cohen tenderly recollects how no discord could spoil their attitude to each other: "We never had much interest / In who was right or wrong."

Memories about the dead and, to quote Lucian, *dialogi mortuorum* occupy a prominent place in the book. The poet makes a catalogue of his losses:

My father died when I was nine
 my mother when I was forty-six
 In between, my dog and several friends
 Recently, more friends
 real friends
 uncles and aunts
 many acquaintances
 And then there's Sheila
 ("Do You Really Remember")

Although he never forgets these shadows of the past, his thoughts about them are filled with sadness but not acute pain. They stay with the speaker without drawing him back into the bygone times. For example, with the girl Shirley, in the text named after her, he goes back to the past when she was alive, but in the end he remains in the present. “Stanzas for H.M.” is dedicated to the poet’s old friend Henry Moscovitch who died two years before the publication of *Book of Longing*, the same Henry who appears in “Montreal Afternoon.” The author addresses “H.M.” in the heroic manner of neo-classical poetry as “unbroken stone / of Sinai’s heart,” “our greatest poet until now unknown.” He thanks him; he asks him for forgiveness for “the clumsy antique tone” of the poem, inlaying the high style with elements of friendly banter. The “Stanzas” mourn a friend, but not in a grave way, commemorating him good-humouredly with a metapoetic text. In “Robert Appears Again,” the “I” speaks to the ghost of his other friend after taking a twenty-year-old “half-tab of speed” he has accidentally found, returning to the old habits and an old friendship: “It couldn’t possibly work after all this time, but here we are, talking again.” As the effect of the drug wears off, the “I” comes back to the present, alone.

The reason for the speaker not being consumed with the past is the concept of reincarnation that is expressed in “My Mother Is Not Dead”:

My mother isn’t really dead.

Neither is yours.

[...]

Don’t worry about any of your relatives

Do you see the insects?

One of them was once your dog.

[...]

Mother, mother,

I don't have to miss you any more.

It is worthy of note that in the book this poem is accompanied with a picture where a caption reads: "Will return."

The author's mother is a great exception in the thoughtful sadness about the dead. Although the anguish over her loss seems lessened in the poem cited above, the focus is still on the pain. While in the previous books Cohen was more preoccupied with his father, in *Book of Longing* the mother comes to the foreground; three poems are devoted specifically to her, and she appears prominently in several more. The speaker/implied author/Cohen grieves about her death to the point of an improper statement (and quickly corrects himself): "better than my mother / is your mother / who is still alive / while mine / is not alive / but what am I saying! / forgive me mother" ("Better"). He travels in his imagination all the way back in time to her escape from the old country. His recollection of her memories, now from the point of view of a grown man who is protective of his mother, is compassionate and loving: "my poor little mother / who had slipped out of Lithuania / with two frozen apples / and a bandana full of monopoly money" ("The Party Was Over Then Too"). Another poem declares in the title: "I Miss My Mother." The son thinks of how he could have shown her India, bought her jewelry, watched her reaction to the exotic country, had she been alive. From the perspective of his present, he acknowledges how right she was "about everything / Including my foolish guitar" and longs for her to "pat [his] little head" and sanctify his "dirty song" with her blessing. In

“My Mother Asleep,” he remembers his mother falling asleep “at a theatre in Athens / thirty / thirty-five years ago” and articulates a reproach from the present to the past self: “I was young / I hadn’t had my children / I didn’t know how far away / your love could be / I didn’t know / how tired you could get.” The mother is the only loss the lyric “I” not only recalls but brings into his present.

The past is paradoxically closer to the lyric “I” than it used to be when he was younger, and it remains “perfect.” In spite of the losses and disappointments, the speaker/implicit author/Cohen holds no regrets about it, which is specifically emphasized throughout the book by numerous repetitions of the idea: “I am not allowed / A trace of regret” (“The Book of Longing”); “I am old but I have no regrets / not one” (“On the Path”); “Now that I am dying / I don’t regret / A single step” (“His Master’s Voice”); “Fortunately / there is no Space / for Regret” (“The Best”). The past eases its power over the “I” as it turns into “the story” that from now on has its independent existence in the form of poetry: “The story told / With facts and lies / You own the world / So never mind” (“Never Mind”).

The literary past is ubiquitous in *Book of Longing*. Cohen mentions Dylan Thomas and Hemingway. The poem “The Faithless Wife,” as the subtitle explains, is a loose translation from Lorca, and “Alexandra Leaving” is written after Cavafi. An allusion to *Moby Dick* occurs in the prose piece “Something From The Early Seventies”: “art dealer, call him Ahab.” In “Dear Diary,” the “I” enumerates monumental literary works such as Hammurabi’s Code, Upanishads, the Conference of the Birds, the Epic of Gilgamesh, and the Sagas of Iceland as the points of reference for the merits of his journal. As it has always been in Cohen’s poetry, his background as a disciple of

Romanticism is particularly noticeable: there are many ballads with the traditional alternate rhyme scheme; the poem “Nightingale” is a model Romantic poem, and “the realm of the Grecian Urn” (“Something From The Early Seventies”) alluding to Keats reminds the reader of the influence Keats had on Cohen’s youthful works. Paying tribute to the musical sphere of his creative activity, Cohen mentions Edith Piaf (“You’d Sing Too”) and praises Ray Charles as “the singer I would never be” (“Much Later”).

Cohen pays as much attention as ever (if not more) to his identity and the Jewish past, to Judaic themes and images, biblical, rabbinical, historical, and prophetic. When using biblical allusions, he stays faithful to his favourite images, such as the bathing Bathsheba turning into the plural “women bathing / in the stream / and combing their hair / on the roof” (“This Isn’t China”). Another preferred biblical hero of Cohen’s is Moses, who appears in “The Story Thus Far”: “The hammers fell on infants everywhere but I was saved on a river in the beautiful autumn land of Egypt.” The poet mentions, though in passing, Song of Songs in “Dear Diary” as one of the rivals for his writings. He confirms his sense of belonging in various ways; for example, he changes the spelling of the word “God” which even in the prayerful *Book of Mercy* was still written in the secular manner. In *Book of Longing*, Cohen assumes the traditional Judaic avoidance of writing the word in full and omits the middle letter: G-d. He also piously makes elliptical the spelling of all profanities, including the innocuous word “sex” (spelt as “s---x”). This seemingly insignificant decision reveals how Cohen’s “impassioned religious seeking [is] filtered through Jewish vocabulary, stories, and ideas” (Arnoff n. pag.).

The theme of the Holocaust resurfaces in *Book of Longing* once again. In an old work “Good Germans” (1973), the “I” accuses his unnamed interlocutor who introduced

his father as a fascist and his mother as a whore: “your folks they’re just Good Germans / but you, you’re Hitler Youth.” At one point the speaker takes history to a personal level: “You delivered my uncle and my auntie to the Nazis,” he accuses France in “Why I love France.” Another poem, on the contrary, develops the image of the participants of the historical horror, and all other people too, as impersonal marionettes on the scene of the global puppet theatre: “German puppets / burnt the Jews / Jewish puppets / did not choose” [...] “Puppet me and / puppet you / Puppet German / puppet Jew” (“Puppets”).

The lyric “I”’s self-identity in the book is undeniably Jewish. His acquaintance, a Greek cross-maker on Hydra, calls him “Leonardos / my Hebrew friend” (“The Cross”). One of the poems forbids any discussion of the matter: “Anyone who says / I’m not a Jew / is not a Jew / I’m very sorry / but this decision / is final” (“Not A Jew”). The poet’s point expressed in other poems is that one’s identity is not limited by birthright; it is wider than that. Although he has always recognized himself as a Jew, he has an identity transcending limits of blood and religion. In “One of My Letters,” the speaker/author signs his message to “a famous rabbi” as “Your Jewish brother, / Jikan Eliezer,” combining Cohen’s real-life designation as a Buddhist monk and his Jewish first name. Holding dear the concept of reincarnations and having spent over a decade in a Buddhist monastery, he nevertheless has a high respect for his “aristocratic pedigree” (“The Mist of Pornography”) as one of the *Kohein* priestly lineage, though he deems it “failed” in his case. He remembers the “wisdom that / my parents spoke” (“All My News”), and rejoices as “the sound of clarinets / from a wandering klezmer / ensemble” distracts him from a “cheerless meditation” (“First of All”): this music speaks to him in the voice of Jewish tradition.

The concept of longing itself might have Judaic roots. Stephen Hazan Arnoff in his insightful review of *Book of Longing* finds a connection between Cohen's work and the notion of Jewish exile:

archetypal Jewish notions of seeking harmony in spite of exile—longing for Jerusalem or Zion, courting the Divine Presence traditionally known as the *Shekhina*, or pangs of and for the Messiah—all tie into longing that began with the national heartbreak of the broken Temple. The destruction of the Temple, first in 586 BCE by the Babylonians and again in 70 CE by the Romans, was a defining moment in the history of Jewish exile and longing. The Temple had been the literal and figurative heart of religious practice and imagination in the formative period of Judaism. As Cohen writes in “By the Rivers Dark,” paraphrasing the most famous scene of biblical homesickness: “By the rivers dark / I wandered on / I lived my life / In Babylon. (Arnoff n. pag.)

Cohen's lyric “I” tries on an iconic Judaic image of a man reverentially bent over a text: “I know that my life's work is to be that man, who / leans over a white tablet humbled in his constant and signifying love for you” (“There Is a Moment”). It is intentionally unclear if by saying “you” he addresses a woman or God. Commenting on this mix-up, Arnoff recalls the “elusive bride of Sabbath evening prayers” and “human love as worldly manifestation of seeking the divine” as in the metaphor of the Song of Songs; he asserts that “[c]onfusing and fusing woman with God and God with self and self with

everything, Cohen gives both thanks and witness to the spiritual magic and divine presence” (Arnoff n. pag.).

In “Montreal Afternoon,” writing poetry is likened to praying: “Henry and I / cover our heads / and write a few poems / The prayer book is open / The radio is playing.” The men cover their heads as if for prayer, even though their activity is accompanied by the profane sounds of radio. The parallel is reinforced by the image of “Rabbi Zerkin [...] speeding / toward us [...] with the woolen prayer-shawls.” The “I”’s friend Henry predicts that one day both of them will start working on books of rabbinical wisdom, interpretations of the Torah: “In the year / sixteen hundred thousand / two hundred and twenty-nine / you will begin a commentary / on the Chumash / and in the year fourteen thousand / four hundred and forty-three / I will begin a commentary / on the Chumash.” On the one hand, the absurd chronology makes this vision unlikely to come true; on the other, it clearly demonstrates the standards by which the characters measure themselves, as well as the depth of the Jewish identity that allows them to set such goals as interpreting the sacred writings. This poem provides proof that Arnoff has a point when he suggests: “if any contemporary popular artist merits credit for reinventing sacred text it is Leonard Cohen.” The poet is a “sensitive, engaged transformer of the Jewish canon, enlivening Jewish myths and themes in the shadows where secular and spiritual experience meet” (Arnoff n. pag.). He creates a bridge between the past, the present, and possibly the future, since poetry is designed to last in time.

In *Book of Longing* Cohen displays a penchant for providing the exact indications of time, be it dates placed after or within poems or diary-like inscriptions on the drawings. There are such titles as “Dusko’s Taverna 1967” and “S.O.S. 1995.” Numerous

poems have an indication of when and where they were composed (in many cases, on Mount Baldy in the late 1990s; one time it is “Early Morning At Mt. Baldy”). In “There Is A Moment,” the “I” informs the reader: “It is eight twenty-seven in the evening”; “Alarm awakened me at 2:30 a.m.” he writes, documenting his ceremony of dressing and a morning erection. Some texts provide the age of the author or another person at the moment of their composition, such as the title “Roshi at 89” (dated “Mt. Baldy, 1996”) or a line in “Historic Claremont Village” (March 2, 1997) where the “I” reminds himself: “You are sixty-two.” The self-portraits scattered here and there among the poems also have dates on them; they act as diary entries, documenting the moments in the past and the places where they were drawn: “September 2nd 2003” (62); “November 12, 1991 Los Angeles, California” (112); “Hotel Kemps Corner Rm 215 1/9/03” (117). The most interesting of these is the caption “Angry at 11 p.m.,” which fixes the time when an emotion was experienced.

In addition, Cohen uses indications of time in a way he rarely did before. He employs hyperbolic numbers (and occasional litotes): “the ten thousand nights / I spent alone” (“Titles”); “I have a thousand years to tell you” (“The Mist of Pornography”); “the world’s mad plunge into suffering for the last 200 million / years” (“The Great Event”); “plunge you into silence / for a million years” (“First of All”); “the tiny horror / of the last million years” (“The Unbecoming”). Along with these conventional hyperboles, there are absurd indications of time, such as “the year / sixteen hundred thousand / two hundred and twenty-nine” (“Montreal Afternoon”). Time in the book expands and contracts, from seconds (“For less than a second / Our lives will collide in “The Book of Longing”) to thousands and millions of years (“we lived a thousand years in one” in “Half the World”).

The attitude to time in *Book of Longing* is personal, with the speaker “kneeling down / Beside the appalling heap / Of days and nights / And patting the newest seconds / On to it / As if it were / A child’s sandcastle” (“Even Some Of My Own”). Time appears both as an abstract notion and as a “character” who influences the life of “I”; it dictates to the speaker his actions and decisions: “Then suddenly / You know / The time / You get dressed / You go home / You light up / You get married” (“My Life in Robes”). Time reminds him that his task is not complete: “My time is running out / And still I have not sung” (“My Time”); it courteously liberates the lyric “I” from the earthly desires tormenting him: “How sweet time feels / when it’s too late” (“Sweet Time”). When the process goes too far, it leads to annihilation: “How sweetly time / disposes of us” (“To A Young Nun”). As “time itself unwind[s]” (“The Faith”), it can become destructive: “Puppet time / dismantles them” (“Puppets”). The poet uses a personification to tame time: “and time comes down / like the smallest pet of G-d / to lick our fingers / as we sleep” (“The Mist of Pornography”). Surprisingly, time never scares him, and his tone as he writes about it is always tranquil, even when he wishes to “breach / the walls of time” standing between him and the future, to touch “the ones to come” (“All My News”). The explanation could be probably found on the picture of a wristwatch close to the end of the volume with its inscription: “I copied time / I knew I was a fiction.” The drawing further provides a statement that reads as if it were a motto translated from an ancient dead language: “Moving back / or going forward / I encountered no obstacles” (223). In other words, the speaker of the book moves freely in time. He has made peace with it.

The opening poem, “The Book of Longing,” provides the summary of the lyric “I”’s life and artistic career. The past he lived through could be occasionally rough, but it

still led to creative self-realization and self-fulfillment, to art: “I followed the course / From chaos to art / Desire the horse / Depression the cart.” In the present, he regrets nothing; he is “not allowed / a trace of regret.” The future he foresees is positive: “She’ll step on the path / she’ll see what I mean”; “I know she is coming.” The longing, which is the essence of the book, is not a destructive emotion but a creative one, because it merges with the anticipation of carrying on (for the author) and aesthetic pleasure from the poems (for the reader). The final poem of the book, “The Flood,” marked as having been written in 1973 on Sinai, is literally a message from the past: to the author from his younger self and to the reader from a different epoch, as a prophecy that still is to come true. Despite being over three decades old, the poem fits well into the context of *Book of Longing* with its assertion of a positive spiritual future: “The body will drown / And the soul will break loose.” It is noteworthy that the indication of the place where this closing text was composed is symbolic. Mount Sinai is the place where God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, so it stands for the ultimate Law; Sinai represents renewal and, by extension, symbolizes the fulfillment of longing. Thus, the book starts and ends with rejections of despair and with open perspectives on creative and spiritual possibilities in the future.

Book of Longing, a tight-knit entity with its beginning, middle, and end, crowns Cohen’s efforts, throughout his career, to present not mere collections of poetry but books as conceptual units, where all the items are semantically linked and work together to achieve a common goal. It must be for this reason that the poet had difficulties with self-anthologizing and required external help to compile *Selected Poems 1956-68* and *Stranger Music*. In *Book of Longing*, as in any book of poetry, some poems are

artistically superior to others, but the weaker ones can contain a couple of lines or images that add another dimension to the volume as a whole and provide a bridge between the preceding and the following texts. The main objective of lyric poetry is to share the author's feelings and stir emotions in the reader; if the latter happens to wince at an imperfect poem, it creates a background for the better ones to stand out more prominently, contributing to the range of sensations and the overall *plaisir du texte*.

The conceptual quality of *Book of Longing* evaded the critics who have reviewed it. For example, Todd Swift, as an anthologist who is used to handpicking the best items, fails to comprehend the point completely.¹³⁷ Despite his professed respect for Cohen, he regrets that the author has not “pared [the book] down to what is best, even exemplary, in the poet” (Swift n. pag.). The reviewer complains about the size of the publication and the fact that it contains visual elements along with the poems: “The currently appropriate way to present a collection of poems is to edit them down, so that, in fact, the reader has maybe 40 or 60 of the best to read. What is less common is to present over 200 pages of poems, notes, scribbles, doodles, and drawings, which come across a little like the diary of a rock star” (Swift n. pag.). The abundance of the pictorial pieces, however, signals how up-to-date Cohen is with contemporary art forms, notwithstanding his penchant for ballads and occasional nods to the Romanticists. The poet partakes in the vital twentieth-century tendency in poetry of borrowing artistic means from other arts. One of the vectors of this trend involves using visual images together with, or even instead of, verbal

¹³⁷See: “I want to read the ten or twelve poems that the poet (or editor) thinks, or knows, are lightning in a bottle. *Book of Longing* is a very good poetry book; and then there are the other 150 pages. [...] There are around fifteen excellent poems here, ones which rank among his best, which any future anthologist or editor will need to consider when putting together the definitive Cohen Selected” (Swift n. pag.).

ones; another employs sound effects when combinations of sounds express meaning without any literal signification. The two phenomena have been named visual poetry (to be mainly consumed with eyes) and sound poetry (existing only when read aloud and experienced through hearing). Between these extremes, there are the conventional written poetry and the poetry intended for singing. With visual elements mingled with verbal texts,¹³⁸ experimental and highly traditional poems as well as with song lyrics which effectively work as poems, Cohen's latest book covers the major poetic tendencies that defined the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium. It comes as a proof of his conviction that poetry can resist the no longer fearsome flow of time.

¹³⁸ Cohen has always been aware of the synthetic nature of his art: "My painting and my singing are the same thing," he said in a 1967 interview (Djwa "After the Wipe-Out" 8).

CONCLUSION

Leonard Cohen has been wearing many hats (both literally and figuratively) throughout his long career; however, he never was a systematic thinker concerned with philosophical matters. He is not one of those writers who provide rationalized illuminations of their views on fundamental questions of being. Yet Cohen certainly has an individual attitude to various phenomena, such as faith, language, existence, ethics, mind, and, without doubt, time and its aspects. Since there is no Cohen's philosophy of time as a sequentially presented set of ideas, it is evasive and can only be pinpointed through textual analysis and then put together in an explanatory, rather than formulating, way.

The present analysis of the body of Cohen's work reveals that his attitude to time has a clear stratification. His outlook has always been focused on the past; he saw the present as unsatisfactory, the future as uncertain and menacing, even destructive. This attitude has its roots in Cohen's heritage and the notions instilled in him through communication with his maternal grandfather, through religious education, and a special interest in the Book of Isaiah. According to the traditional Judaic worldview, the past is more valuable than the present as the passage of time takes one further from the most significant moment in history, when Moses received the Law from God on Mount Sinai. The present with all its hardships is to be tolerated while waiting for the end of days and the coming of the Messiah, accompanied by the destruction of the world as we know it. Cohen, consciously or not, adheres to this attitude towards the aspects of time in his prose and poetry, spreading his apocalyptic outlook to all spheres of being.

Nevertheless, there is a clear dynamic in the attitude to time and its aspects in Cohen's work. While in his early books he sorts things out with the past, the present, and the future, in *Beautiful Losers* he resorts to non-discrete mythical time with no chronology. Then, in *Death of A Lady's Man*, he expresses his hope to enter timelessness through art or to be lifted up from the flow of time by God. In *Book of Mercy*, he delves into mythical time again, though in its other – divine – dimension. The apocalyptic view stops being the source of melancholy and hopelessness, as the general message is Cohen's rediscovered trust in God and therefore the acceptance of the passage of time. After having reviewed his artistic past in *Stranger Music*, Cohen finds balance between the outer world and himself in *Book of Longing* and makes peace with time: his vision of all three aspects of time is generally serene and devoid of anguish. There is no radical change in the writer's concept of the past from *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956) to *Book of Longing* (2006), just as his attitude toward love, according to Nadel, "has remained consistent throughout his life" (*Various Positions* 29); the bitterness about the present and the future, however, subsides. It seems that age makes him more complacent about the passage of time; while he is most nostalgic in his youthful works, in later ones the nostalgia is progressively ironic and less melancholic. It is also important to note that throughout Cohen's writings there is no significant change of approach towards his heritage. From the earliest works on, he remains both ironic and romantic about it, preserving a deep sense of belonging. If he strays away from the related themes in *The Energy of Slaves* and *Death of a Lady's Man*, it is mostly due to the major changes in his career and personal life, which inevitably made him focus on things other than his background. In those books, though, he still lets his identity resurface through specific

Biblical allusions and diction, as well as references to his family and even to Jewish folklore.

There is a sharp contrast between Cohen's philosophy of time and preoccupation with the past in his art and the lack of interest in the subject he proclaims in his recent interviews. Since the 1990s, the writer has started to complain, in his usual ironic manner, about his poor memory and deny being in any way connected to the past: "I don't seem capable of remembering, of relating to the events of my past. Even to use the words "my past" is an idea which is totally strange to me. I don't have the sensation of possessing a past, one can say there is no past." Strikingly, he does not stop after rejecting the past but continues developing the idea. The enthusiastic denunciation of bonds with the past reveals that the matter, at least, has been given some thought. Cohen asserts, "My memory is gone" (Fevret n. pag.); yet, answering the next question, he contradicts himself: it turns out that he is capable of remembering episodes, friends, and emotions from his early years. If he means that his recollections lack precision and clarity, there are images he conjures up with ease indicative of the presence of the past below the surface level of memory where it seems to be absent. Simultaneously, with the phrase "there is no past" he transfers it to the sphere of non-chronological mythical time.

In the same interview, Cohen specifically underscores that his former self is gone and forgotten; he does not remember him:

I don't have the slightest memory of another being alive during those years, a being who got up in the morning, who had ideas, feelings, aspirations, ambitions, deceptions, strategies... Since I am a seasoned novelist I could probably create such an individual but

it would be fiction. And it is definitely fiction. [...] He is not a part of my life. (qtd. in Fevret n. pag.)

This figure unfamiliar to the writer in his “now” is, however, well-preserved and available for assessment as the implied author of his early works; his imagery, preferred themes, vocabulary, poetic techniques, and other artistic choices expose the range of his views and concerns. Art did the trick the younger Cohen wrote about: it has safeguarded the otherwise fleeting moments of life from the flow of time.

In 2005, Cohen repeats to a Norwegian journalist Kari Hesthamar: “My memory is not so good [...] I hardly remember anything from the past, so that’s made me a very unsentimental person.” He finds this condition advantageous: “I’ve been blessed with amnesia.” The conversation does not confirm his words about having no memories, good or bad. When asked about his life on Hydra in the 1960s, he recalls a sensation of his suntanned body getting on a boat: “that’s a feeling I remember very very accurately.” Cohen replies to a question about the smell on Hydra: “My mind doesn’t go to that... like Proust or somebody like that. I don’t remember anything”; nevertheless, the next thing he utters is an account of smells of charcoal and laundry. When in the course of the interview the journalist points to his ability to recall things in detail, he replies, “I’m just performing, darling” (Hesthamar n. pag.).

He might be performing for his interlocutor, but he is also playing the part of an aging man with weakened memory – a persona he self-ironically assumes. In these and other, more recent interviews, Cohen dutifully responds to questions about the past and sometimes, as if he has forgotten that he “has no memory,” expands on people, events and circumstances of bygone times; he speaks of the present and the life he is having at

the moment but avoids discussions of the future, either in a negative or positive light. As an artist whose career is ongoing, he may still surprise his readers as he has surprised his audience with the latest world tours. The future remains out of his focus; time is without end.

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Box 1

Unpublished prose fragments;

unpublished short stories;

The Ballet of Lepers (unpublished novel).

Box 8a

Notebook containing preliminary drafts of prose and poetry;

“Trade” (short story).

Box 9

“Loneliness and History” – manuscript of speech.

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