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LEONARD COHEN AND THE ART OF BETRAYAL

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ABSTRACT

Most recent studies of Leonard Cohen have emphasized his spiritual journey, finding sources and influences in Zen, the Jewish Bible and particularly the mysticism of the Kabbalah. Having taken the spiritual road in a previous essay, I turn in Leonard Cohen and the Art of Betrayal to the other side of the coin. Cohen did not progress from the material to the spiritual. They are in a dialogical relationship throughout his career. When examined as text most Cohen lyrics are as complex as poetry, indeed many songs were also published as poems. As I trace the theme of betrayal other aspects of his lyrics, even the ones I examine, necessarily become background. There has been an almost obsessive interest in Cohen's personal life. I touch on it briefly, but emphasize Cohen's literary background. Cohen took great pains to separate his lyrics from an incident of origin. Most follow patterns set in the Romantic tradition, the confessional and dramatic lyric, the fragment, the dramatic monologue. The I who sings is a character, not the I who wrote the song. I trace the theme of betrayal, whether deliberate or circumstantial from divisions of the self, through his treatment of relationships (eros is his principal theme), through the betrayals of institutions, and finally his version of the perpetual Jewish quarrel with God.

Key words: Leonard Cohen, song lyrics, betrayal, eros, Romanticism, Judaism

I smile when I'm angry. / I cheat and I lie. / I do what I have to do/
To get by. / But I know what is wrong.
/ And I know what is right.
And I'll die for the truth/ In My Secret Life.

Leonard Cohen, "My Secret Life"
(2001)

Most recent studies of Cohen's work have concentrated on his spiritual journey with particular emphasis on the Jewish mysticism of the Kabbalah. But there is an element of skepticism that runs through his work along with themes of betrayal, failure, doubt that I want to trace in this essay starting with a brief account of his background and early influences on his work and following these more materialistic themes from the personal and erotic, through the betrayal of institutions and ending with final things, the tension between skepticism and the will to believe. The paradoxical claim in "My Secret Life" to be a cheat and a liar who will, nevertheless, die for the truth approximates the closed circle of the ancient Cretan Liar paradox: Epimenides says Cretans always lie; Epimenides is a Cretan, therefore, what? The paradox is a syllogism that precludes a conclusion. "The dealer wants you thinking / That its either black or white. / Thank G-d it's not that simple / In My Secret Life." Various forms of contradiction are a central feature of Cohen's poetics rooted in traumas that roiled beneath material comforts of his upbringing.

Cohen was born in 1934. His father had returned to Montreal from WWI with both medals and compromised health. Nathan died when Leonard was nine, leaving him the ostensible man of the house after the horror of an open coffin viewing and well before the manhood ritual of bar mitzvah. "One of my uncles took me aside. He told me that now I was the man of the house, that the women were my responsibility" ("Ceremonies," in Cohen, 2022, p. 169) A thread of martial imagery runs through his work regardless of topic. When he was eleven photographs of the Nazi death camps burned into his consciousness. Growing up he experienced a disjunction between that horror and the seemingly impervious conventions of the Montreal Jewish community along with the traditional Judaism he experienced in the synagogue where his paternal family had established pride of place before 1900. Although he drew on other faith traditions, primarily Christianity, Sufi Islam, and Zen Buddhism, Cohen's Jewish identity never wavered, but to him it meant bearing lonely witness. He took comfort in the domestic ritual practices of Judaism, but institutionally he thought the prophet had been exchanged for the priest. In a 1993 interview he said regarding his *Book of Mercy*: "I tried to make my tiny homage to a tradition that had been withheld not deliberately withheld, but had been lost to me, let's say, and lost to my own family practice" 383). When in his later years he returned to a more traditional religious practice he called it Biblical rather than any organized version of Judaism.

From his early twenties until he was sixty-five Cohen suffered from severe depression manifesting as mood swings and the cacophonous conflict of inner voices that he represented visually, with sardonic wit, as "The Background Singers." Sylvie Simmons asserts that Cohen inherited his mother's "depressive tendency" (2012, p. 70), but Masha's singing and her volatile personality also fed his artistic side.

Before anti-depressants got their turn, he self-medicated with most every drug available from alcohol to acid, from meth to mescaline. Drugs were a material counterpart to the spiritual searching that led him to Zen, Roshi's chilly monastery on Mount Baldy, and ordination as a monk. Cohen's transformation from author to troubadour coincided with the free love ethos of the counterculture. "If I have been untrue" he sings in "Bird on the Wire," "I hope you know that it was never to you" (1969). Freedom to reexperience the emotional rush of initial contact while maintaining a deeper relationship is a difficult straddle, all the more if the two impulses manifest different aspects of the self. Cohen spoke many times and in many ways about the impulse to turn down what he most desired when it was freely offered. It is no surprise that looking back on those days Cohen realized that wanting to overthrow the old forms, "but at the same time maintain the things that seemed to be nourishing" was impossible (Posner, 2020, p.210).

In "My Secret Life" (1977) the Cohen voice martial his army of inner selves to march across the borders only to conclude "I'm always alone / And my heart is like ice / And its crowded and cold / In My Secret Life". What happens to the heart is the central theme of Leonard Cohen's lyrics. His colophon represents it visually: a figure that combines intertwined hearts, the Star of David, yin and yang. Since his death in 2016, most commentary has stressed the aspirational, spiritual history of the heart with special attention to the Jewish mysticism of the Kabbalah. But the intertwining, twisted hearts imply a dialectic between the spiritual and material. Having been down the spiritual road myself, I will turn in this paper to the sensual and material because it remains in counter-point with the spiritual throughout.

Cohen's struggle with his conflicting mental voices influenced the structure of

his songs as much as the themes. Many contain multiple or even contradictory points of view within a single lyric. The “textual ‘othering’ of the self, produced by self-distancing repetitions” that Winifred Siemerling finds in the fiction and poetry Cohen wrote before he turned singer-songwriter permeates his later work (1994, p. 25). The experience and comprehension of a song varies with how it is taken in. A live performance is unique. It leaves no time for reflection, but it is supplemented by the singer’s body language and responses to the audience. On a recording, whether film of a performance, or music alone, the singer becomes an absent presence, a voice that can only repeat. Cohen’s songs are often multi-vocal, as if there were an inward struggle for control of the microphone, but he rarely marks the differences in performance or recording by having his background singers work in dialogue with him as he does in “Jazz Police” and “The Letters.” The song as written text becomes, effectively, a poem that can be contemplated word by word, passage by passage. There are some textual clues, line breaks, punctuation, and capitalizations for example, that we don’t hear. But even without such markers, implicit conflicting points of view emerge in the process of interpretation.

Cohen habitually crosses realms of discourse, blending the vocabularies of love and war, sacred and profane, lofty and quotidian. He makes use of figures of speech, but as often as not achieves his effects rhetorically through paradox, enigma, allusion and, like Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, inversion. “The Old Revolution,” for example, begins: “I finally broke into the prison, / I found my place in the chain. / Even damnation is poisoned with rainbows, / all the brave young men / they’re waiting now to see a signal / which some killer will be lighting for pay” (1969). The antitheses are clear, but the context remains enigmatic because the I and You of the

song are inconsistent, and reference to the inner and outer worlds unstable. The only fixed element is the chorus: “Into this furnace I ask you now to venture / You whom I cannot betray,” but each repetition is in a different context. An authoritative voice asking or demanding commitment or obedience appears in various guises throughout Cohen’s career. Of course, this “you” can also be heard as the singer’s address to the audience, and much depends on how we understand the promise never to betray.

In the Book of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are cast into the fiery furnace because they refused to bow to Nebuchadnezzar’s golden idol whenever they heard music. In the furnace a fourth figure, an emissary of God appears beside them, and the three emerge unscathed. In Blake this furnace becomes a symbol of the human body; the four figures the states of existence from the prison of solipsistic abstraction to the new Eden of the imagination. (Los, his artist figure, is a blacksmith. Frye, 1947, p. 272.) To venture into the furnace could be an existential leap of faith, the risk of fashioning a true, independent, or artistic, identity. “The furnace is the furnace of the self,” said Leonard. (Mus, 2020, p. 81)

The final stanza, however, makes a definite outward turn to address those in power who are “broken,” as implied by Cohen’s inversion of the Sufi parable of the Emperor and the Begging Bowl. The beggar insists that if the emperor gives, he must fill the bowl, but everything he pours in, all his wealth, falls through and vanishes while the bowl remains empty. The beggar has taught the now beggared Emperor that the ego’s desires are endless, a bottomless bowl that is never satisfied. Only when we realize that we ourselves are empty vessels can the spirit harmonize with all of creation, and ultimately, we are all beggars before God. Those who are “kings for the sake of their children’s story” are spiritually absent, so their lover

is just another possession. The idol's clay feet from the Book of Daniel becomes the hand of the lover objectified, returned to the material from which all flesh was made. By contrast, "True Love Leaves No Traces" (1997). Cohen creates a more coherent version of this same pattern of and inner and outer allegorical structure without a causal link in "The Traitor" by providing a narrative in which going through the motions of love in a love gone stale precludes a duty for action in the wider world where "the dreamers ride against the men of action" (1984).

Parallel narrations and such witty, verbal contradictions as "deeply unimpressed" are thought provoking, but the more subtle contradiction of apophasis conveys more emotion. "Your eyes are soft with sorrow, / Hey that's no way to say goodbye" ("Hey, That's No Way..." 1967). Of course, that is the way to say goodbye if separating from someone who still has a place in your heart. The denial of sorrow conveys the ache of a tender farewell more effectively than either direct statement or verbal juggling.

Cohen was a highly regarded poet and novelist in Canada before deciding he could make a better living singing than he could writing books, and that popular culture was more central to contemporary life than Literature. His reading and study habits, however, were established when his ambitions were literary. In addition to the Bible and Jewish commentary he was influenced by, among many others, the older generation of Canadian poets (particularly Irving Layton), Lorca, Romanticism, the anti-bourgeois Beats for poetry, pot and Zen, Rumi, pre-Lacanian psychoanalysis, Marxism, androcentric sexual liberation as typified by Henry Miller, who anticipated Cohen's move to Hydra, the mystification of sex ala D. H. Lawrence, and the archetypal literary criticism of Northrop Frye, what Frye called the theory of myths. "I want to continue experimenting with the myth

applying it to contemporary life," said Cohen in 1956 (Cited in Nadel, 2009, p 46).

It was Frye who brought William Blake into the center of studies in Romanticism, and also, as it happens, wrote a positive review of *Let Us Compare Mythologies* Cohen's first book of verse. Cohen's lyrics refigure Romantic forms: the confessional and dramatic lyric, the fragment, the dramatic monologue, the dialectical voices and vivid abstract personages of Blake, the masks of Yeats. (His life-long friend the sculptor Morten Rosengarten made Cohen a life mask pictured in Mus, 2020, p. 19). "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul. For that called Body is a portion of the Soul discerned by the five senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age," wrote Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1967, p. 34). "I loved you for your body / there's a voice that sounds like God to me / declaring, declaring that your body's really you," sings Cohen in "Closing Time" (1979).

Cohen was not a song writer who made the occasional literary allusion. He was a fully formed author with a capacious memory whose reading was wide, deep, and fully assimilated. Cohen's allusions resonate more than the lyrics of a song require and consequently beyond what most singer songwriters aspire to. Canadian critics like Stephen Scobie who analyzed his transition from poetry and fiction to song in the 1970s stressed his literary genealogy in general, and his debt to Romanticism in particular, unlike many more recent critics from the world of popular music for whom his stint as a country-western Buckskin Boy takes precedence.

Cohen's biographers have a valid reason for tracing his lyrics back to the people or incidents that gave rise to them, but one function of Cohen's long process of composition, the many drafts of so many songs, was to get away from the incident, to transform the triggering event

into something universal, to mythologize it if you will. As Scobie noted, writers in the Romantic tradition may take the self for a subject, but that does not make them simply confessional artists. The key to understanding Cohen first widely popular song, "Suzanne," is not who Suzanne was and whatever their personal relationship may have been, but her apotheosis in the song from an individual to an embodiment of the eternal female fused in the syntax of the poem with "the lady of the harbour," the statue of Mary that crowns the sailor's church of Montreal, Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secour. It is Suzanne's love that offers Secour. The forsaken ascetic Jesus sinks beneath her wisdom like a stone only to return, of course, in other Cohen songs.

Cohen himself may be recognizable as a character in his songs, but as Scobie notes, "there is split between I who writes and the I who is written," and the same is true of those he sings about (cited in Mus, 2020, p. 68). The difference between the Maryanne of the songs and the woman herself may be as thin as the difference between the English pronunciation of her name in song and the proper Norwegian "Mariáhna" by which Cohen addressed her in life, but it is there. As his career advanced the characters in the songs grow increasingly abstract without losing the structure and emotion conveyed by the earlier, more referential work. The formal feature of the unstable "I" and inner division already noted, brings to mind the provocative remark of his older friend and champion Irving Leyton that "Leonard Cohen is a narcissist who hates himself" (In Granger, 2001 with Cohen's response). "Is That What You Wanted" (1974) is a dialogue between "I" who stays seventeen years old, and the aging you, the betrayer. The body itself is "a house haunted by two unholy ghosts, "the ghost of you and me" equally real, or unreal. The I in "Dress Rehearsal Rag" (1971) looks into the shaving mirror as he contemplates suicide while the voice of his reflection in the

mirror mocks his soaped-up Santa face. His veins may stand out like highways all along the wrist, but he doesn't cut, he's just the stand in stunt man. The fear of losing the self by total commitment, be it by suicide, belief, or love, runs like a thread throughout Cohen's work. By mid-career the pull of death becomes more like Thanatos, the obverse of Eros, the lure of death as going home as in "Night Comes On" (1984): "I needed so much / To have nothing to touch / I've always been greedy that way," but a series of voices, living and dead, urge him to go back to the world -- his mother, his father, his children, and finally the eternal feminine as muse who tells him "Go back, go back to the world." In old age, being half in love with easeful death gives way to its actual prospect: "Going home without my sorrow / Going home sometime tomorrow / Going home to where it's better than before" (2012).

Personal Betrayal

Eros was Cohen's obsessive theme.

He wrote songs about the pursuit of love, but more often the story was about losing love or trying to regain a love betrayed. We are two stanzas into "I'm Your Man" (1988) with the singer promising to do anything the woman wants before we realize that the title should be "I Was Your Man"; that his promises of subservience are an effort win a woman back while papering over more angry or aggressive feelings. He calls the beast that won't go to sleep a dog, but he sounds a bit like a werewolf. "A man never got a woman back / Not by begging on his knees / Or I'd crawl to you baby / and I'd fall at your feet/ And I'd howl at your beauty / Like a dog in heat / And I'd claw at your heart /And I'd tear at your sheet / I'd' say please, please / I'm your man." In "The Smokey Life" (1979) the singer accepts his partner's freedom to choose another lover, conceding, like Robert

Browning's Andrea del Sarto, that her "feast of love" is elsewhere, while begging to be married one more night.

The motif of "The Cuckold's Song" in Cohen's second volume of verse, *The Spice Box of Earth*, goes "I repeat: the important thing is to cuckold Leonard Cohen. / I like that line because it's got my name in it" (1968, p.56). The poem anticipates "Famous Blue Raincoat" (1971) a song that works like one of those ambiguous gestalt images, duck or rabbit, lady or witch, depending on how we construe the lines. If we ignore the oddity of formally signing yourself L Cohen in a letter to your brother, even if "brother" is not understood literally, the speaker is thanking said brother for taking the trouble from his woman's eyes by having an affair with her. But is there any other man, any other than himself? Many literal candidates have been advanced, but it was Leonard himself who owned the torn Burberry and flirted with Scientology, so I am with those like Barrie Wexler who understand the speaker to have been cuckolded by a doppelgänger, the betrayer and the healer are different aspects of the same person (Posner, 2020, p.437. There is a symposium on "Raincoat" in Scobie, 2000, pp. 100-116).

The double relationship with "Jane" has the chiasmic structure of the uncanny, a potentially infinite recycling of subject and object. It is "produced by a self-love that is impossible to restrict, precisely because its origin is in a universal arrangement that can never be fully encountered *en face*; it is in a state of perpetual becoming and incompleteness" (Vardoulakis, 2006, p. 113). No matter how many trains you meet you can never come home with Lily Marlene because she is not the woman who might come back on the train, but the one the soldier must leave, hoping she will wait for his return. "Raincoat" does not end with "thanks for the trouble you took from her eyes"; it starts over with "Jane came by with a lock

of your hair." Cohen himself found a lack in the song: "That was one I thought was never finished," but he performed it regularly nevertheless (Zolo, 1992, p. 284).

The album *Death of a Ladies' Man* (1977) comes to grips with the downside of an open relationship that is deep enough to be part of one's identity. The album is notorious on the production side for bacchanalian sessions in Phil Spector's studio, and Cohen's ceding control of the final mix to Spector with results that most fans, critics, and Cohen himself disparaged. The lyrics are generally read in biographical terms as reflecting the end of his tempestuous relationship with Suzanne Elrod rather than a serious engagement with the issues they tackle. The first track, "True Love Leaves No Traces," sets the standard against which to measure the failures that follow. It is Cohen's most pristine expression of sexual love. "True love leaves no traces / If you and I are one / It's lost in our embraces / Like stars against the sun." It is unaltered even by absence (with a nod to Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,") "So will we endure / When one is gone and far." That song is immediately followed by its opposite. Instead of mutuality the question becomes one of need, mastery, ownership, and failure. "I needed you, I knew I was in danger/ of losing what I used to think was mine." Instead of a love that leaves no traces, we get the acrid, staining disinfectant: the sting of iodine, the reek of iodine, the fume of iodine: "Your sister fingers burned like iodine / And all my wanton lust was iodine / My masquerade of trust was iodine / And everywhere the flare of iodine" ("Iodine, 1977).

Cohen deals with the fear of losing one's identity in a truly committed relationship by what Freud would call a "humorous displacement," a genuinely comic song in jaunty country-western style based on the classic means of

identifying criminals, “Fingerprints” (1977). “Touched you once too often/ Now I don’t know who I am / My fingerprints were missing / When I wiped away the jam...Fingerprints, fingerprints / Where are you now my fingerprints?” If an open relationship preserves the self by refusing absolute commitment, what happens when the primary relationship goes bad? “We took ourselves to someone’s bed / And there we fell together / Quick as dogs and truly dead were we / And free as running water” (“I Left a Woman Waiting” 1977). And if, despite the claim to be mutually “free as running water,” possessiveness persists, and her freedom still feels like painful betrayal? You check into the “Paper Thin Hotel” (1977).

“Hotel” is a dramatic monologue of apophysis, an unwitting confession by denial. “I stood there with my ear against the wall / I was not seized by jealousy at all / In fact a burden lifted from my soul I learned that love was out of my control /...You ran your bath and you began to sing / I felt so good I couldn’t feel a thing.” The sex that Cohen can idolize as like a fertile river delta, “the cradle of the river and the seas,” having “knelt there at the delta, / at the alpha and omega, /... knelt there like one who believes” (“Light as a Breeze,” 1992) when imagined on the other side of the paper thin wall becomes an objectified porno personification, “The Woman With Her Legs Apart.”

The imagery in “Light as a Breeze” approximates those double exposure photographs that merge the image of a flesh and blood woman into a landscape as if she were one with nature. It is a terrible imposition for a man to seek some form of salvation by projecting an abstract idea of Woman upon an actual human being. It may be that “like a blessing come from heaven / for something like a second / I was healed and my heart was at ease,” but such ease cannot be sustained, so “you turn in disgust / from your hatred and from

your love.” Cohen catches the evasion by substituting “love” for the obvious rhyme, “lust.” There is “blood on every bracelet” because these are the handcuffs pictured on the album cover of *The Future*, the man and woman locked in these roles. While performing alluring sexuality she is not dressed in “rags of light” (one reading of the garments God provided the fallen Adam and Eve as in “If It Be Your Will” 1984). Her reply is “Drink deeply, pilgrim / but don’t forget there’s still a woman / beneath this / resplendent chemise.”

As Cohen’s song writing career unfolded there were occasional retrospectives, but most of the commentary understandably went record by record, song by song. Now that we have Cohen’s work as a whole, we can see that he created something like an expressive taxonomy of what he called in “Travelling Light” (2016) “the me and you”: male hopes, fears, desires, attitudes, fetishizations and ideas about women, or Woman that range from idealizing, even idolizing, down to the obscene. In Cohen’s universe same sex desire remains at the margin. He did, however, make occasional efforts at balance (most notably in “Ballad of the Absent Mare,” 1979) and treating betrayal from the woman’s point of view as in “The Stranger Song” (1967) and “Why Don’t You Try,” (1974) by essentially reassigning a male default (“life is filled with many sweet companions, /many satisfying one-night stands”). It was not until he worked with his last long-term lover and artistic collaborator Anjani Thomas that he managed a song that could properly be called feminist. The woman of “Innermost Door” on Anjani’s 2006 album *Blue Alert* does not leave her man to get even, or find pleasure elsewhere, but to find herself. “If you come with me/ I’ll never begin/ We made us a home/ But the roof’s fallen in.” (Marcia Pally is exceptional in noting Anjani’s influence on Cohen’s art (2021, p. 110).

From *Dear Heather* (2004) through the posthumously released *You Want It Darker* (2016), the women in Cohen's songs become less individual and more like the dual aspects of Jung's Great Mother archetype, or the female aspect of deity. ("Our Lady of the Torah, who does not write history, but whose kind lips are the law of all activity" (*The Book of Longing*, section 17). The line between woman and muse becomes blurred. She may be lover, source of inspiration, mistress to his slave, even La Morte. "Winning you was easy / But darkness was the prize / ...I caught the darkness / Drinking from your cup / I said: Is this contagious / You said: Just drink it up" (2012).

Institutional Betrayal

Cohen's singing career began in the heyday of the protest song, but because his central subject is what happens to the heart rather than ideology or politics, the protest song was not his medium. But Cohen songs that have parallel private and public imagery contain aphoristic phrases that taken out of their context imply institutional betrayal. "You who build these altars now / to sacrifice these children, / You must not do it anymore. / A scheme is not a vision/ and you never have been tempted/ by a demon or a god." ("Story of Isaac," 1969). "I could not move to warn all the younger soldiers/ that they had been "deserted from above" ("The Traitor," 1984). "Ah there're shutting down the factory now/Just when all" the bills are due/ And the fields are under lock and key/ Tho' the rain and the sun come through" ("Coming Back to You," 1984). "I see the Ghost of Culture/ With numbers on his wrist" ("A Street," 2012).

It wasn't just his early awareness of the Holocaust that gave Cohen a sensitivity to the uses and abuses of power. His native Montreal was riven by ethnic, class, religious and language divisions, and

Cohen himself, a passerby mistaken for a football hooligan, was rabbit punched and arrested by a Montreal policeman, charged in juvenile court with resisting arrest and given a suspended sentence (Nadel 36). ("It's their ways to detain, their ways to disgrace / their knee in your balls and their fist in your face / . Yes, and long live the state by whomever it's made, / sir, I didn't see nothing, I was just getting home late" ("A Singer Must Die," 1974). Cohen's suspicion of governmental authority was confirmed as early as his trip to Cuba right after the revolution where he saw Yeats' grim dictum firsthand: "Hurrah for revolution and the cannon come again! / The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on" (Yeats, 309).

He predicted that President Kennedy's foreign policy would precipitate a proxy war with the Soviet Union, though he thought it would be fought in the Middle East, not Southeast Asia. Cohen was not one who believed that liberal democracy would take hold from East Germany to the Urals once the Berlin Wall came down. ("I think a lot of suffering will be the consequence of this wall coming down" (Zollo, 1992). The LA riots of 1992 were a neighborhood event, and he kept up with the news that came in through "that hopeless little screen" ("Democracy," 1992) but rarely directly referenced current events, and when he did he was not at his best. You needn't have seen the flaming towers and ash-covered office workers, heads down, trudging up town as I did to feel that to feel that "Did you go crazy / Or did you report / On that day/ On that day/ They wounded New York" is a non-sequitur in relation both to the rationale that "They hate us of old / Our women unveiled / Our slaves and our gold" and the horror of 9/11 itself "On That Day," 2004). As with his songs about relationships, he works best when he moves away from the specifics of a triggering event as in "Jazz Police," (1988).

“Jazz Police” is one of Cohen’s collage-like songs that works with odd or contradictory juxtapositions mixing the serious with the absurd. (For Cohen and visual art see Spear 2019, and Mus 2020 passim). At one time the song was even more outré than the recorded version. He came to regret recording the tamer version. Referring to a universal system of surveillance and enforcement as the Jazz Police sets the tone. Jazz features the maximum freedom for improvisation within a traditional structure. Insofar as the song has a message it is in the lines “Jesus taken serious by the many/ Jesus taken joyous by the few / “Jazz police are paid by J. Paul Getty / Jazzers paid by J. Paul Getty II.” Usually referred to as Getty Junior, J. Paul is Getty II here for the sake of the pun on too. The views of the father (“The meek shall inherit the Earth, but not its mineral rights”) may not have been those of the philanthropic son, but the funding is the same. In capitalism both jazz and anti-jazz surveillance and enforcement are supported by the same money. The chorus responds to the singer with an eerie verse echoing the Star Trek theme behind the good ship Enterprise (as noted by “Hartmut” <https://www.leonardcohenforum.com>). Their siren song tempts him to join the policing force. “Jazz police I think I’m falling, / I’m falling for you.” Yielding to the temptation to conform, even to be an enforcer like “that muscle down the street” means joining those who put turtles “on the fire / Guys like me are mad for turtle meat.” Barbequing turtles is a shocking image, particularly in a Buddhist context. The turtle is one of the four cardinal animal. It stands for the north, for winter and the transition to spring with the promise of reincarnation. The turtle was variously the first or an early incarnation of the Buddha, who sacrificed himself for mankind. In the South-East Asian version, the Tao Ruan Turtle grew huge on its island, but sailors shipwrecked there had

nothing to eat but each other, so the Turtle sacrificed itself that the people could eat, a version of communion. So putting turtles on the fire and sharing the meat is the rough equivalent of a Black Mass, the inversion of a sacrifice like that of Jesus whether taken “serious” or “joyous.”

Nothing in the stance of the singer, whether as victim of the Jazz Police or seduced to the other side, suggests that the seed of the song was banter with his 1979 band, Passenger. They called Cohen the jazz policeman not allowing them sneak augmented or diminished chords into his triads (presumably in the instrumental bridges). It became a cat and mouse game. With that origin in mind, traces in the song become clear, but they are far removed what the finished song is about. (For recollections by members of Passenger see Posner 221, pp. 262-288 passim. Cohen knew the troubled J Paul Getty III, but that has no bearing on the song).

Spiritual Betrayal

Cohen took pride in being a kohen, of priestly ancestry. The Bible, particularly Psalms and the Book of Isaiah, which as a boy he had studied line by line with his maternal grandfather Rabbi Solomon Klinitsky-Klein, form something like a verbal substratum in his work, or, if you will, a warp crossed by the weft of contemporary English and its referents to create his text, particularly in his prophetic mode (*textus* from Latin, *textere* to weave or braid). A single passage in “Democracy” (1992) has echoes of these verses: “Thy judgments are a great deep” thou shalt make them drink the river of thy pleasures (Psalm 36.6, 8). “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning (Ps 30:5) “Shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth in singing, ye mountains” (Is 44:23). “For I will pour water on him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground (Is 44:3). “The moon

and stars to rule by night” (Ps 136:9). “O baby, we’ll be making love again. / We’ll be going down so deep/ the river’s going to weep, and the mountain’s going to shout Amen! / It’s coming like the tidal flood / beneath the lunar sway.”

But the vocabulary of faith and prophecy that underlies so much of Cohen’s language is in tension with skepticism and the haunting question of what role art and religion might play after Auschwitz. “There is a mighty judgment coming” says the voice of the prophet. “But I might be wrong,” says the voice of the skeptic. (“Tower of Song,” (1988). Cohen comes closest to the referential side of the biblical prophecy in *The Future* (1992). “We asked for signs/ the signs were sent: the birth betrayed/ the marriage spent / Yeah the widowhood/ of every government --/ signs for all to see. I can’t run no more / with that lawless crowd / while killers in high places / say their prayers out loud. / But they have summoned up / a thundercloud / and they’re going to hear from me” (“Anthem”).

Of course, when Isaiah and the other biblical prophets speak, they prophesy as conduits, not individuals: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken” (Is 1:2). Cohen speaks from a place that Timothy Jackson calls “epistemic humility” (2014). He understands the lure and comfort of belief, and that the outcome can be beneficent or malevolent depending on the nature of the belief. What he can preach from his own heart is love, love that may begin with lover and family, but as Jesus preaches in the Sermon on the Mount, can extend outward even to one’s enemies: from birth, to marriage, to government. It is an ethic of love, not a theology; one that is endorsed by faith traditions, but not contingent upon belief in a transcendent deity. “Then every man of every clime / That prays in his distress / Prays to the human form divine / Love Mercy Pity

Peace / And all must love the human form, / In heathen, turk, or jew. / Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell / There God is dwelling too.” (“The Divine Image,” Blake, 1967, p. 12). Of course, this *Song of Innocence* has its counterpart in *Experience* where Mercy, Love, Pity and Peace are replaced by Cruelty, Jealousy, Terror and Secrecy. If, as many commentators have celebrated, it takes a Kabbalistic crack in everything for the light to get in, that everything is darkness.

Cohen’s disco barn dance “Closing Time” the song at the center of *The Future* is a surreal acid trip suspended between damnation and salvation: “it’s once for the devil and once for Christ.” It is simultaneously a Dionysian dance of life, and a dance of death to the devil’s traditional instrument the fiddle amid a bricolage of images. Here the conduit of the Holy Spirit is not a biblical prophet, but the angry old lady from a Wendy’s commercial on the phone denouncing the lack of substance in the burger of a rival franchise, yelling at the manager and then his boss “Where’s the beef.” “So we struggle and we stagger / down the snakes and up the ladder / to the tower where the blessed hours chime.” The Indian original of the didactic game Snakes and Ladders, borrowed by the British to teach morals to the young, was *moksha* (release of the cycle of re-birth) *patam* (in this context, map), a game of *karma* (fate or destiny) and *kama* (desire). The snakes represent vices; the ladders virtues. The snakes take you down to rebirth in a lower form. The apex of the top ladder leads out of the board and the cycle of rebirth into the dwelling of the gods, which Cohen turns into “the tower where the blessed hours chime.” “Tis the blessed hour of prayer, when the tempted and the tried / To the Savior who loves them their sorrow confide” says the Catholic hymn (Fanny Crosby, https://hymnary.org/text/tis_the_blessed_

hour_of_prayer). Montreal is proverbially the city of a hundred bell towers.

“I swear it happened just like this: / a sigh, a cry, a hungry kiss / the Gates of Love they budged an inch / I can’t say much has happened / since CLOSING TIME.” The gates of love come from *Much Ado About Nothing*. The deluded Claudio’s false accusation of fornication directed at his betrothed Hero causes her to fall into a dead faint. “Thou pure impiety and impious purity! / For thee I’ll lock up the gates of love” (Act 4:1, 105-6). The gates of love are not out there somewhere, but in the human heart. We can’t just take love in, we have to open inner gates and let our love out. Even if the gates only budged an inch, something got through.

The twelve repetitions of CLOSING TIME are picked up from the idiom of the publican who concludes the “Game of Chess” section in T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* -- four capitalized reminders to the ladies that the end has come, it is time to leave: “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME.” As for the “Awful Truth / which you can’t reveal to the Ears of Youth,” it remains unstated before “we’re busted in the blinding lights / of CLOSING TIME. Perhaps the blinding lights are electric, perhaps the white radiance of eternity.

Looking back on Cohen’s march that asserts “Democracy is coming to the U.S.A” (1992) -- provided our major social divisions are healed. It is clear our ship of state has yet to make it “Past the Reefs of Greed / Through the squalls of hate.” And as for “The Future,” we are all too familiar with the voice of narcissistic fascism demanding “absolute control” and absolutist certainties: “Give me back the Berlin wall / Give me Stalin and St Paul... Give me Christ / Or give me Hiroshima.” The countervailing assertion that “love’s the only engine of survival,” seems by comparison a small still voice indeed.

But perhaps the most heart-rending conflict for Cohen between hope and

disappointment involves Israel. At the onset of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when it seemed that Israel might indeed be overrun; with a potential second holocaust in the offing, diasporic Jews of every stripe felt the urge to help defend the Jewish state, and many, including Cohen, actually volunteered. Wielding nothing more deadly than a guitar, Cohen ventured nevertheless to the front lines and sang for the soldiers. A diary entry from that time takes us to the moral essence of Leonard Cohen: “Helicopter lands. In the great rush of wind soldiers rush to unload it. It is filled with wounded men... These are young Jews dying. Then someone tells me that these are Egyptian wounded. My relief amazes me. I hate this. I hate my relief. This cannot be forgiven. This is blood on your hands.” (Friedman, 2022, p. 1640) “Lover, Lover, Lover” (1974) was the song he was writing in the Saini, but when he recorded it the verse that specifically referenced Israeli soldiers was gone, perhaps because it didn’t really fit in the song. But many who were inspired at the time were turned off by the excision. For many liberal Jews of the immediate post-war generations, and I am one, Judaism was as much a humanistic ethic as a religion. We were committed to never again, to the defense of Israel, but still thought of a Jewish state in diasporic terms – that given the history of Anti-Semitism and memory of the Holocaust a Jewish state would not inflict on others what Jews had endured. But there is no reason that a Jewish state brought into being would be better or worse, more or less nationalistic, more or less factional, than any other.

In *Jews and Words*, Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger address the well-known passage in the Mishna on the creation, “that whoever destroys a single soul [nefesh], it counts as if he destroyed a full world; and whoever saves one soul, it counts as if he saved a full world.” They point out that later in the Talmud this passage narrows to “a single soul of Israel”

(2012, p.p. 176). Cohen was on the side of the universal version. A great religion *affirms* other religions. A great culture *affirms* other cultures. A great nation *affirms* other nations. A great individual *affirms* other individuals” (Kurzweil, 1993, p. 388).

“They’re lining up the prisoners / And the guards are taking aim / I struggled with some demons / Thy were middle-class and tame / I didn’t know I had permission / To murder and to maim / You want it darker” (2016, my italics). As I read these lines from Cohen’s final album, I feel the tension between the diasporic ideal of being Jewish and Jewishness and an us versus them identity reified by Jews acting as agents of a state. Cohen loved performing for a Jewish audience, loved performing in Israel, but tried on his 2009 tour to arrange a parallel show in Ramallah with all proceeds to go to a peace and reconciliation fund, a gesture foiled by boycott politics (Liebovitz, 2014, pp. 239-246). In “Going Home” (2012) he pictures himself from the transcendental position of the voice that inspires writing: “I love to speak with Leonard / He’s a sportsman and a shepherd / He’s a lazy bastard living in a suit.” But when he reviews his life in “There for You” (2004) as an agent of that power -- “Eating food / And drinking wine A body that I thought was mine” -- he is “Dressed as Arab / Dressed as Jew.”

The most direct expression of Cohen’s feelings of betrayal are expressed in “Never Mind” (2014) a reimagining of that song of the anti-Nazi resistance, “The Partisan,” from this second album, *Songs from a Room*. He is now the resister in hiding betrayed by a nameless you. “I could not kill / The way you kill / I could not hate / I tried I failed. / You turned me in / At least you tried / You side with them / Whom you despise / This was your heart/ This swarm of flies / This was once your mouth / This bowl of lies.” But most of Cohen’s later songs are dialogic as he reconsiders in more abstract terms the drivers of his

art: woman as lover, inspiration, muse; the order of the soul versus materialism; the Jew’s perpetual quarrel with God, whether he is there or, as Feuerbach would have it, the spiritual essence of humankind projected and objectified. The spiritual thirst is real even “though he knows he’s really nothing / But the brief elaboration of a tube” -- the shape of the earliest complex form of life. (“Going Home,” 2012). The implication of that biological elaboration is in “Puppets,” a poem from *The Book of Longing* (2006) brought into his final album in which human beings are driven by forces below the level of consciousness. “Puppet Presidents command / Puppet troops to burn the land”... Puppet me and puppet you/ Puppet German and puppet Jew.”) He even comes to grips with his objectification of women. “I’m sorry for the ghost I made you be/ Only one of us was real – and that was me” (“Treaty, 2016))”

The second stanza of “You Want It Darker” rewrites the Kaddish, the prayer that asserts the absolute sovereignty of God, even as we mourn the dead. It continues in what may be the closest English meter can approximate to Aramaic phrases from the prayer – not translation, but some counterpoint perhaps -- which becomes an utterance of a deeply felt, profound confusion or mystery as to the how and why of the human condition if under God.

“Magnified and sanctified” (*Yitgaddal veyitqaddash*)

“Be thy Holy Name.

“Vilified and crucified” (*Behayeikhon uvyomeikhon, your lifetime, your days*)

“In the human frame

A million candles burning

“For the love that never came” (*Uvhaye dekhoh Yisrael, for the lifetimes of Israel*).

“You want it darker” (*Verevah vehatzala, relief and salvation*).

“We kill the flame” (*V'imru amane*, and say amen). (adapted from Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaddish>)

The refrain is “Hineni Heneni / I’m ready, my Lord.” “I am a man of unclean lips,” said Isaiah to the seraphim, who then touched his lips and purged his sin, so when the Lord asked for a messenger, he could say Hineni, send me (Is 6:5-8). As Aubrey Glazer notes, “in this openness to becoming, all broken prayers here merge” (2017). The word with which Isaiah accepted his prophetic mission became Leonard Cohen’s acceptance of his end, and a fitting epitaph.

Coda

My original intention was to conclude with a return to Blake and say in a spirit of hope vis-à-vis the various positions Cohen voiced in his lyrics that “without contraries there is no progression” (1965, p. 34). But as I write these words the long-predicted migrations triggered by changes in the climate and attendant unrest are pushing against national borders, Ukraine, the country where my grandparents were born, is under assault by the Vlad Tepes or our days, and the Middle East is awash in blood. I can’t get past Cohen’s prophecy: “Get ready for the future: / It is murder” (1992).

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