

*Leonard Cohen's Lives in Art:
The Story of the Artist in His Novels, Poems, and Songs*

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

August, 1996

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0-612-29547-8

Abstract

The concerns of the artist-figure are a central issue in the work of Leonard Cohen. His novels, poems, and songs, seen as a whole, form a portrait-of-the-artist. Cohen's artist-story is crafted with attention to the romantic tradition of the *Künstlerroman* but extends beyond an initial apprenticeship phase, the focus of the *Künstlerroman*, offering a more extensive exploration of the artistic vocation. The artist-figure, as he develops, encounters conflicts between his vocation and the demands of the outside world. Cohen's artist-figure endeavours both to make art and to self-create, and this creative impulse is simultaneously propelled and hindered by the romantic-love relationship, by the demands of an artist's role in the public sphere, by the aesthetic requirements of art itself, and by spiritual and religious issues. The last of these four concerns provides the artist-figure with a degree of lasting comfort through its mediation of some of the ongoing internal struggles of the artistic temperament. Cohen's portrait-of-the-artist attains a degree of depth and perspective by his own artistic persona's intrusion into his work, a persona he constructs in an ironic, self-conscious, and self-reflexive fashion.

Résumé

Les préoccupations du personnage-artiste représentent un point central des travaux de Leonard Cohen. Ses livres, poèmes et chansons constituent un portrait-de-l'artiste. L'histoire de la vie de l'artiste que raconte M. Cohen est partiellement fidèle à la tradition romantique du *Künstlerroman*. Par contre, cette histoire va outre la phase initiale d'apprentissage typique du *Künstlerroman*, et offre une exploration plus exhaustive de la vocation d'artiste. Le personnage-artiste, en se développant, rencontre des conflits entre sa vocation et les rigueurs du monde extérieur. Le personnage-artiste de M. Cohen s'efforce de créer l'art et à s'auto-crée. Cette pulsion créative est simultanément propulsée et gênée par la relation d'amour, par la demande du rôle de l'artiste dans la sphère du publique, par les exigences esthétiques de l'art et finalement par des questions de religion et de spiritualité. Ce dernier point pourvoie le personnage-artiste un certain réconfort lors de son questionnement perpétuel de son tempérament artistique. Le portrait-de-l'artiste de M. Cohen acquiert un niveau de complexité et de perspective grâce à l'infusion de l'image populaire de M. Cohen dans ses propres travaux, image qui est créée dans un style ironique et en connaissance et en référence de soi.

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Introduction

The fact that Leonard Cohen has attracted, not only significant critical commentary, but also massive popular attention, places him in a situation almost unique in Canadian letters. Aside from the qualitative merits of his work, the grand-scale focus upon Cohen is largely the result of his versatility with regards to expressive modes: his often prolific career, now into its fifth decade, has produced an extensive catalogue of writings in the genres of the novel, poetry, and song. This expressive flexibility has given Cohen a wide audience that extends beyond the circles of academics and writers, and into the more general sphere of "popular" culture. The effects of this extensive critical and popular attention have been significant on Cohen's artistic career: the worldly benefits of success have allowed Cohen great material freedom to live a grand-scale "life in art," especially by Canadian standards, and his ongoing creative documentation of the artist-life has accordingly been extensive and complex.¹ When viewed as an organic whole, Cohen's writings form a distinct "portrait-of-the-artist" which, to an extent, parallels stories of the artist crafted in the Romantic tradition of the *Künstlerroman*.

The substantial body of Cohen criticism, however, strives only infrequently to place Cohen's art within the context of Romanticism. While explicit references to the *Künstlerroman* are few within the body of discourse surrounding Cohen's work, critics and popular journalists have, at times, been keenly aware of the central place that the artist-figure occupies within Cohen's canon. The prominence of Cohen's own artistic

¹The term "life in art" is used several times by Cohen, most memorably in *Death of a Lady's Man*, to make reference to the artistic vocation. This phrase also helps form the appropriate title of Ira Nadel's 1994 biography of Cohen entitled *Leonard Cohen: A Life in Art*.

persona has served, not only to draw critical attention to issues of the artist in his work, but also to problematize the process of distinguishing Cohen, the writer, from the voices that speak and sing out in his writings. It is useful, for the sake of charting critical discussion of Cohen's work in general, and of his depiction of the artist-figure in particular, to subdivide critical response to Cohen's work into three distinct periods. The first of these periods begins with an initial response to Cohen's first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, published in 1956, and terminates before the flood of scholarly essays and popular press features that follow his landmark novel, *Beautiful Losers*, published in 1966. This first period possesses very little in the way of substantial criticism, and the majority of work done on Cohen in the first decade of his career takes the necessarily brief form of the book review. As Michael Gnarowski remarks, in the "Introduction" to *Leonard Cohen: The Artist and His Critics*, an important text which anthologizes early articles on Cohen, the critical attention afforded *Let Us Compare Mythologies* was made of "the usual scattering of cautious reviews" (2). One such review, "Turning New Leaves," was first published by Milton Wilson in 1957. While Wilson concedes that "Mr. Cohen knows how to turn a phrase," the general tone of the article is reserved, the reviewer holding back praise for the poet that he envisions Cohen might become: "if he ever really writes his Exodus it should be a tale worth reading" (15). Wilson's attitude is fairly typical of early responses to Cohen which tend to see the mythological content of the early poetry as somehow beyond the scope of Cohen's young and inexperienced poetic voice.² Wilson's anticipation of Cohen's possible writing of "his"

²-David Bromige shares Wilson's attitude in "The Lean and the Luscious" which examines Cohen's

own "Exodus" was prophetic: when, in later Cohen writings, the mythological content would become subservient both to a more personal vision, and to a foregrounded self-conscious and self-reflexive exploration of the artistic vocation, critics would become much less inhibited in their praise.

In 1963, Cohen published his first novel, *The Favourite Game*, which remains his one work that can, individually, most comfortably be labelled a portrait-of-the-artist. Ed Kleiman, in "Blossom Show" (1964), recognizes, among the many remarkable aspects of this autobiographical work, "the contest between the lover and the poet" that would prove to be a recurrent issue in Cohen's rendering of the artist-figure (19). The 1964 publication of Cohen's *Flowers for Hitler* solidified the concerns of the artist-figure as a central issue in his writing. Milton Wilson, in a 1964 review, recognizes Cohen's fulfilment of the poetic possibilities he had identified in his earlier review of *Let Us Compare Mythologies*: "Cohen is potentially the most important writer that Canadian poetry has produced since 1950—not merely the most talented, but also . . . the most professionally committed to making the most of his talent" (21). Wilson also recognizes that issues of the artist, with the appearance of *Flowers for Hitler*, become a predominant concern for Cohen: "the book is really about . . . the problem of style," argues Wilson, before hinting at the problem of distinguishing the author-artist from the speaker or narrator-artist, a problem that would concern many Cohen critics in the future: "it is useful to think of *Flowers for Hitler* as the author auditioning himself for all the parts in an unwritten play" (21).

second book, *The Spice-Box of Earth*, in a 1961 issue of *Canadian Literature*. Bromige suggests that "once Cohen has freed his sensibility from . . . 'the thick glove of words' he will be able to sing as few of his contemporaries can" (18).

The publication of *Beautiful Losers* in 1966 confirmed Cohen's stature as a major Canadian writer and accordingly initiated a second distinct phase in the development of Cohen criticism. The release of Cohen's first recording of songs, *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1967), brought to the forefront two distinct perspectives on Cohen's work. These two perspectives, each with their own respective critics, are differentiated, not by a diametrical opposition to one another, but rather by virtue of their differing assessments of what, in Cohen's work, were the primary issues requiring critical commentary. One critical point of view saw *Beautiful Losers* as a culminating point in a significant literary career and focused critical attention largely upon this complex work. Critics in this camp tended to ignore the songs and tended to structure their views of the early books of poetry, and of *The Favourite Game*, around the new centre of the Cohen canon: *Beautiful Losers*. Michael Ondaatje, in *Leonard Cohen* (1970), a short book that remains one of the best critical works on its subject, gives a chapter to each of Cohen's non-musical works published prior to 1967. Ondaatje calls *Beautiful Losers* "the most vivid, fascinating, and brave modern novel" he has read (45). He also reveals it to be "a powerful extension of several of the traits of Leonard Cohen that we have seen in the poetry up to now," thus emphasizing it to be the work that marks the culmination of Cohen's career (46). Most of the other critical articles on Cohen published during this period—including Linda Hutcheon's "Beautiful Losers: All the Polarities" (1974) and Stephen Scobie's "Magic Not Magicians" (1970)—and both of the larger scale book length treatments of Cohen—Patricia Morley's *The Immoral Moralists* (1972) and Dennis Lee's *Savage Fields*

(1977)—also place *Beautiful Losers*, either explicitly or by implication, at the centre of Cohen's literary career.³

A second trend in Cohen criticism to appear in the wake of *Beautiful Losers* shows very little concern with this novel at all. Some critics, most notably Louis Dudek and George Woodcock, were essentially concerned with the potential implications of Cohen's move to song-writing on his career as a poet. Dudek's criticism of Cohen's early poetry is certainly insightful, and generally positive in tone if cautious in diction.⁴ He objected, however, to a trend in Cohen's poetry that involved "the mixture of over-heated nostalgic romanticism and realistic disillusionment that never seem to fuse or come to a resolution" (154). And Dudek's disapproval of Cohen's song-writing is quite unambiguous, as an article he wrote for the *McGill Reporter* in 1967 reveals: "genuine artists of promise descend perforce to mere entertainment and become idols or celebrities, like Leonard Cohen, who was a fine poet before he 'gave all that up' to take the guitar" (8). Woodcock echoes these sentiments in a 1969 essay entitled "The Song of the Sirens": "Cohen's negative features as a poet emerge in his songs, and the consequence of his elevation to a pope . . . has already been a weakening of the poetry" (110). Frank Davey, in a 1969 article, "Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan: Poetry and the Popular Song," entered into the debate opposite Dudek and Woodcock, countering their statements with a view that

³Morley's book examines Cohen's writings alongside a more in-depth treatment of the works of Hugh MacLennan. Lee's work is an unconventional critical examination of both *Beautiful Losers* and Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*.

⁴Louis Dudek, himself an important influence on Cohen's writing, is largely responsible for the creation and success of the McGill Poetry Series which published Cohen's first book, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*.

"Cohen takes to the poem as popular song a scholarly precision of language and an obsession for external form" (112). In general, however, most Cohen scholars of the day tended to avoid the debate in orbit around Cohen's song-writing; in fact, they tended to avoid the songs altogether.

Both the critical trend that focused primarily upon *Beautiful Losers*, and the smaller critical circle involved in a debate about the relative merit of Cohen's song-writing, identified the significance of issues involving the artist-figure and Cohen's artistic persona. Morley's criticism is concerned with determining whether "Cohen's romantic portrait of the artist" is "'straight' or ironic" (73); Michael Ondaatje remarked, speaking of *Parasites of Heaven*, the 1966 book of poetry that followed *Beautiful Losers*, that "[t]he poems are only valid when they go hand in hand with the author . . . the invisible umbrella between Life and Art disappears" (56). Woodcock suggested that "it is necessary to distinguish between the man who writes the poems and the public *persona* . . . The distinction cannot be absolute. The two Cohens are each others' doubles . . ." (93).

While a subsequent identifiable phase in Cohen criticism would not put an end to the debates critics raised with regards to the artist-figure in Cohen's work, it nevertheless embodied a more balanced, though less prolifically articulated, critical perspective on Cohen than had previously been the case. Eli Mandel's 1977 essay, "Cohen's Life as Slave," and, more importantly, Stephen Scobie's study, *Leonard Cohen* (1978), mark the initiation of a third phase in Cohen criticism. Both Mandel and Scobie refuse to regard *Beautiful Losers* as a text with more authority than Cohen's other works; they offer studies of the full body of writings, and they draw from many sources in a relatively

balanced fashion. Scobie further displaces *Beautiful Losers* from a privileged place at the centre of the Cohen canon, not through any attack upon this work, which he praises, but rather by bringing other Cohen writings, most notably the songs, into the foreground as well. Scobie marks the formal end of the debate about the merits of the song-writing by negotiating a kind of critical truce; he argues that the songs ought not to be seen as bad poems but rather as works in a different genre with its own standards of excellence: "they are songs, not poems. There is a subtle but decisive distinction between a true song and a poem set to music" (127). Scobie's book accords ample space to each of Cohen's three expressive genres and would set the standard for much Cohen criticism to come. Since Scobie, *Beautiful Losers* remains the most written about Cohen work, but it is not nearly so overshadowing of the rest of the Cohen canon. Some of the most compelling recent Cohen articles—including Joan Crate's "The Mistress' Reply to the Poet" and Winfried Siemerling's "Interior Landscapes and the Public Realm: Contingent Meditations in a Speech and a Song by Leonard Cohen"—draw upon a wide variety of primary Cohen sources, both in terms of period and genre. These and other papers delivered at the 1993 *Leonard Cohen Conference* span Cohen's entire career to date and deal with the novels, the poetry, and the songs.⁵ Stephen Scobie's keynote address, published as "The Counterfeiter Begs Forgiveness: *Leonard Cohen* and Leonard Cohen," serves as a kind of update to his 1978 book. He remarks that "Cohen's work has suffered from a scandalous

⁵ Of the ten papers delivered at Red Deer College 1993, the proceedings of which are published in *Canadian Poetry* 33, three are almost explicitly about *Beautiful Losers*, five intermingle the songs and poems fairly freely, one is a general study surveying all genres, and one deals primarily with the Cohen persona.

lack of serious attention over the past decade or so" and goes on to explore the all but critically ignored *Death of a Lady's Man* alongside both *Book of Mercy*, and the most recent volumes of songs (7).

Cohen criticism since Scobie's book has held the issues of the artist to be a fairly constant if peripheral concern. Joan Crate, in "The Mistress' Reply to the Poet," suggests that women act as connections between Cohen's artist-figures and their aesthetic objects: "New women are constantly required to provide the path between the poet and his . . . art" (55). Ira Nadel, in *Leonard Cohen: A Life in Art* (1994), is, as the title of the book suggests, keenly aware that the artist-life lies at the centre of Cohen's artistic vision: "[a]rt, in any of its many expressions, provides for Cohen the means to confront and master his desires, weaknesses, and disappointments . . ." (12). And Winfried Siemerling devotes a lengthy chapter to Cohen in his 1994 book entitled *Discoveries of the Other: Alterity in the Work of Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, Michael Ondaatje, and Nicole Brossard*. Siemerling demonstrates, very convincingly, that concepts of "self and otherness" can be used to explore many of the intricacies of the artistic vocation (21).

There has, then, been some attempt by critics to explore the issues of the artist in the work of Leonard Cohen. There has not, however, despite the nearly ubiquitous presence of the artist-figure in Cohen's work, been any sustained critical examination of this essential aspect of his writings. Cohen's work, as a whole, forms a portrait-of-an-artist in the act of navigating the creative vocation, and Cohen's story of the artist bears many similarities to similar stories crafted in the Romantic tradition of the *Künstlerroman*. I do not wish to argue that Cohen deliberately strives to sustain an artist-story in direct

counterpoint to the *Künstlerroman* form; while it is highly probable that Cohen was keenly aware of the traditions of the Romantic artist-novel when he wrote his own artist-portrait. In *The Favourite Game*, I invoke the *Künstlerroman* primarily to provide a relevant framework within which the larger story of the artist, a story that runs through the entire Cohen canon, can be explored.

In his important work on the *Künstlerroman* tradition, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts* (1964), Maurice Beebe considers Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1795) to be the one work most "important in the founding of the portrait-of-the-artist novel" (33). Max Wundt isolates five characteristics of this novel which form the basis of artistic apprenticeship, including "the focus on inner life," "the striving for knowledge of the world," a "critical attitude toward the world," "presentation of individual development," and "colourful portrayal of life and the world," all prominent issues in Cohen's artist-story (qtd. in Shaffner 7). In the most general terms, we can define the *Künstlerroman* as the story of the education of the artist. It is important to remark, however, that the education of the artist in this tradition is usually limited to the events and lessons that precipitate an acceptance of the artistic vocation. The emphasis of the *Künstlerroman* is on *becoming* rather than *being* an artist, and, at the conclusion of the typical artist-novel, the protagonist in question has rarely become more than an apprentice.⁶ As Beebe puts it, "[i]n many artist-novels . . . the story [concludes with the hero not yet an accomplished

⁶James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* provides an excellent modern example of an artist-novel that terminates at the end of the initial apprenticeship phase in an artist's development. The portrait of David Canaan in Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*, and of Paul Tallard in Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* offer excellent examples in the Canadian tradition.

artist" (5). Cohen's body of writings, then, forms a kind of extended artist-novel that charts the initial phases of artistic apprenticeship before moving on to an exploration of the issues that arise in an artistic life that has progressed beyond an initial acceptance of its vocation. Martin Swales remarks that the artist-education-novel "has seen the artistic sensibility as one involving a whole set of epistemological problems that are not susceptible of easy, practical solutions" (68). Cohen's artist-story reflects this feature of the *Künstlerroman*: as Eli Mandel reveals, Cohen's "treatment of what . . . could be said to be the writer's problem, the difficulty of being a writer, remains one of the most scrupulous and uncompromising we possess" (124).

My study of the artist-figure in Cohen's work attempts to outline the artist-story as it is told through his novels, poems, and songs. I follow the artist-figure's development more or less chronologically, and I focus especially upon the vocational contradictions and conflicts that inform much of Cohen's art. Cohen's prominent public persona makes it especially difficult to separate his voice from the voices of the speakers in his writings. While I examine, essentially, the story of Cohen's artist-figures, and not the story of Leonard Cohen, I still permit biographical materials and my own speculations on Cohen's beliefs and intent to inform my discussion. There is, however, an important distinction to be made between author-artist and speaker-artist, and I strive to distinguish clearly, where possible, between the different artist-voices I discuss.

The phase of artistic apprenticeship, the specific postures in which Cohen casts the artist-apprentice, and the processes that govern the development of the artist-figure form the subject of my first chapter. I also explore the relationship of unequal power between

teacher and pupil which directs and shapes the nature of the apprentice's lessons. The entire artist-story exists in embryonic form in Cohen's portrait-of-the-apprentice, and I will try to show how depictions of the artist in the earliest phases of his development foreshadow the deeper probing of the conflicts inherent in the artistic vocation that become predominant later in the artist's career. I also suggest that the artist-life, for Cohen and his artist-figures, involves an initial acceptance and periodic reacceptance of the artistic vocation.

Chapter Two approaches Cohen's artist-figure in the context of the romantic love relationship. While Cohen's artist-figure both desires romantic connections with women and finds the act of desiring to be an impetus for creative output, he nevertheless finds the temporary fulfilment of desire that occurs through the attainment of love to be limiting to his creative powers. I explore Cohen's depiction of the incompatibility between art and love, especially in connection to the courtly love and neo-platonic traditions that Cohen uses as a framework for representations of the artist and his beloved. Cohen's artist-figure often values women more for their power to inspire art than for any inherent worth that they otherwise possess, and I attempt to determine the extent to which Cohen's representation of the artist-figure's treatment of women involves an ironic subversion.

Outside the boundaries of the love relationship there exists a social realm that Cohen's artist-figures confront in the pursuit of their vocation. My third chapter indicates areas of social concern expressed in Cohen's work and the degree to which the expression of these concerns is hindered by an artist-persona which is at once revolutionary and firmly fixated upon tradition. I explore the problems and contradictions that arise within the

artistic vocation when the artist-figure seeks to reconcile the aesthetic demands of his work with his role as social commentator, with the allurements of fame and fortune, and with the formation of a social conscience in general. I also examine the magnification and distortion of vocational problems and contradictions that arise when Cohen and his artist-figures represent the Holocaust.

Chapter Four concentrates upon some of the more inwardly articulated concerns of Cohen's artist-figures, and I propose that a probing of these concerns happens, most frequently, alongside a discussion of the concepts of martyrdom, duty, and sacrifice. I suggest that Cohen's artist-figure becomes a kind of martyr to his own art, forced to sacrifice a "normal" life for the sake of fulfilling his vocation. Cohen's artist-figure perceives that his vocation involves duty and sacrifice, and this sense of purpose both fuels the creative process and pushes the artist-figure to the "outside" of his community. The artist-figure finds himself in a situation where he either behaves as an outsider, becoming a kind of traitor to his society in the act of fulfilling his vocation, or succumbs to outside pressures, betraying his art. The concept of "style" in Cohen's writings forms a part of my discussion as it helps the artist-figure to move beyond some of the problems inherent in the creative vocation, problems which it simultaneously intensifies.

My final chapter examines the artist-figure in the spiritual and religious phase. A failed attempt to reconcile the conflicts of his vocation by other means leads Cohen's artist-figure to take a kind of refuge in God. I explore the various religious roles of spiritual-healer, guru, prophet, and priest as they are assumed by the artist-figure, and I attempt to reveal the ways that these roles problematize the artist-figure's calling. At the

same time, however, these spiritual and religious artist-roles provide the artist-figure with a degree of lasting peace, and help to negotiate a reconciliation in many of his vocational conflicts; I attempt to determine the degree to which this peace is illusory, and to distinguish the effects that this religious resolution has upon the creative output of the artist-figure.

Cohen's depiction of the artist-life is almost unique in its scope and complexity. The concerns of the artist are an essential aspect of most of the works penned in Cohen's long career, and his portrayal of the artist-life is rounded out by his decision to render it into manifest form in several genres. Cohen's own personal stature as a popular artist and a media star has meant that his artist-portrait incorporates a full range of emotions and postures, from those of the unrecognized artist to those of a star at the height of his fame and fortune. Cohen's popular significance has also meant that a study of the artist-figure in his work cannot help but involve an awareness of the man himself, and, while this can complicate critical attempts to arrive at a fixed portrait of his artist-figure, it simultaneously heightens his work's sense of both sincerity and irony, and lends the portrait a degree of depth and perspective.

Chapter One

Apprenticeship and the Process of Artistic Development

Leonard Cohen's literary preoccupation with the life of the artist is evident in his earliest writings. As Steven Scobie remarks of "Elegy," the opening poem in Cohen's *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, it "takes either great pretentiousness or great brilliance (or an outrageous combination of the two) for a young poet to proclaim himself as Orpheus in the first poem of his first book" (*Leonard Cohen* 15). Cohen's speaker's self-association with Orpheus, the quintessential singer-poet-artist-figure, provides the earliest indication of the central place that issues and concepts surrounding the artistic life will occupy in Cohen's literary career. I have already argued, in my Introduction, that Cohen's work as a whole can be viewed as a kind of extended artist-novel, as a story of the artist crafted with attention to the tradition of the *Künstlerroman*. While Cohen's work spans a half-century and explores a wide variety of ideas and issues, the concerns of the artist remain, nevertheless, a relatively constant point of reference in an otherwise diverse and complex body of work.

Cohen encapsulates, in his depiction of the apprenticeship experience, a promise of the full range of issues and conflicts that await the developing artist-figure. The apprenticeship phase in an artist-figure's life begins with the initial and uncompromised elation that his first creative pursuits provide, and culminates in an awareness that it is necessary for him to reconcile, personally, his powerful attraction to the power and magic of art with the concerns and limiting structures of the outside world. *The Favourite Game* is Cohen's work which most clearly falls into the tradition of the artist-novel, and this

novel portrays the life of an artist, Lawrence Breavman, as he moves through the first lessons in his life-long vocation. Scobie identifies that the "early roles" of "soldier, torturer," and "hypnotist . . . all lead towards Breavman's ultimate role as artist" (79). Breavman associates the power of art with magic, recognizing that the artist can achieve an intoxicating feeling of control through involvement in the creative vocation. Breavman reveals that he feels drawn to the artistic calling in an early interchange with Krantz: "there's something special about my voice . . . I can make things happen" (15). The attraction to power that Breavman senses is similar to that expressed by F. in *Beautiful Losers*: "I believed that I had conceived the vastest dream of my generation: I wanted to be a magician. That was my idea of glory" (207). And this impulse is the same one that awes the speaker in one of Cohen's earliest poems:

I heard of a man
 who says words so beautifully
 that if he only speaks their name
 women give themselves to him.
 If I am dumb beside your body
 while silence blossoms like tumours on our lips
 it is because I hear a man climb the stairs
 and clear his throat outside our door. ("Poem," *Let Us Compare Mythologies* 55)

The young artist, Breavman, envious of the power to manipulate the world through art, especially as it involves the potential to attract women, learns the secrets of hypnosis and

seduces the family maid with his new ability: "[h]e was dizzy with his new power. All her energy was at his disposal" (*Favourite Game* 53). Magic serves as a metaphor for the power of art, and, when a protagonist in Cohen's work uses magic to act in the world, we can usually be certain that our author is exploring issues involving artistic creation.

Breavman is elated, not just at the raw and adolescent sexuality of his encounter with the family maid, who under hypnosis fulfils his sexual demands, but also with the creative drive that the experience propels. The "energy" he feels from Heather is not at all unlike the "inspiration" an artist derives from his muse, who is both the source of his "energy" and the object he is trying to represent. Drunk with his new found artistic power, Breavman sets out to fulfil his vocation in the world, and at first this involves a series of selfish relationships with women who do not understand that his "love" is self-motivated: "Dearest Shell, if you let me I'd always keep you four hundred miles away and write you pretty poems and letters" (215).

Beyond his initial immersion in the power and magic of art, the apprentice discovers a world full of forces which complicate and problematize his vocation. Once Cohen's artist-figure comes to terms with his own power and displays a partial acceptance of his calling, he must then learn to negotiate between his artist-role and the world (1) as its concerns present themselves in romantic relationships, (2) in relation to the structures of society and social roles, (3) regarding the aesthetic requirements of art, and (4) with respect to spiritual and religious roles and issues. Each of these four crucial concerns has its roots in the very earliest phases of an artist's creative development, and we can see this

by examining these concerns in *The Favourite Game* where they are presented in embryonic form.

The problem of achieving harmony between the creative impulse and the love relationship is the most fully explored conflict in Cohen's first novel. Breavman learns, upon his seduction of Tamara, that his "life in art" will not always be easily reconciled with romantic relationships: "[h]e needed to put distance between himself and the hot room where he couldn't make things happen" (85). Breavman also feels the pressures of the social world on his private world of art: as Keith Garebian states, "Breavman is like Cohen in his pose as a romantic artist resisting the trammels of society" (29). Among these "trammels" Breavman counts the weight of history when he muses that "each day the father's gift grows heavier—history, bricks, monuments, the names of streets—tomorrow was already crushed!" (*Favourite Game* 138). The novel closes with a description of Lisa's "favourite game," the making of large imprints in drifts of snow with no visible signs of exit or entry; this can be seen as a metaphoric description of an artist's attempt to maintain a necessary personal distance from his art for aesthetic reasons (223). And, when Breavman's thoughts are expressed in a form which suggests prayer—"Thou. Help me to work. All the works of my hand belong to you"—we observe an early indication of the conflicts that will exist in Cohen's portrayal of the artist-figure in connection to God.

The conflicts and compromises inherent in the life of the artist-figure would be significant even if the essential vocational problem was merely one of reconciling a *united* self with the demands of outside influences. Throughout his development, however, Cohen's artist-figure is not only confronted with a division between himself and his world,

but also with a rift within himself. Maurice Beebe, in his extensive study of the artist-novel entitled *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce*, posits a theory of "the" artist's "Divided Self." Although the dichotomy of the self set up by Beebe loses a degree of accuracy in its quest for generalities, it nevertheless provides a useful model to explain the internal opposition within the artistic temperament as represented by Cohen: "an underlying assumption in the artist-novel is that creative man is a divided being, man *and* artist, a historic personage who merely serves as the medium through which the creative spirit manifests itself" (6). The internal conflict results from the fact that the two alter-egos named by Beebe, the "man" and the "artist," have conflicting desires and impulses. He explains that

[t]he man seeks personal fulfilment in experience, while the artist-self desires freedom from the demands of life . . . What I call the Sacred Fount tradition tends to equate art with experiences and assumes that the true artist is one who lives, not less, but more fully and intensely than others. Within this tradition art is essentially the re-creation of experience. The Ivory Tower tradition, on the other hand, exalts art above life and insists that the artist can make use of life only if he stands aloof . . . (13)

The apprenticeship phase, beyond initiating the artist-figure into an understanding of his creative powers, gives the apprentice his first glimpse of the conflicts that will sometimes cross him, and sometimes propel him, in his quest to master his vocation. The conflicts between the "man," who seeks out "experience," and the "artist-self," who strives to attain a degree of aloofness, rest at the centre of the most important vocational conflicts in the

life of Cohen's artist-figure. To understand the way these conflicts carry on a kind of ongoing dialogue within the artist-self necessitates a further probing of the concept of apprenticeship as Cohen presents it. While there is certainly a distinct apprenticeship phase at the beginning of the artist-figure's development, the concept of apprenticeship is closely related to Cohen's depiction of the process of artistic development in general. One might argue that the *Künstlerroman*, with its focus on becoming rather than being an artist, is not so much the story of the life of the artist as it is an articulation of the phase of artistic apprenticeship. In Cohen's work, the story of the process of artistic development extends beyond the traditional boundaries of the *Künstlerroman* and manifests itself as a series of related yet distinct periods of learning, as an acceptance and then a periodic re-acceptance of the artistic vocation. Egon Schwartz identifies this characteristic of the artist-story when he argues that the artist "vacillates again and again and has his relapses, so that one cannot speak of a straight-line development" (413). The life of the artist, then, is not one lesson, but rather a series of lessons. The successful mastery of each individual phase of development leads necessarily to an initiation into a new phase, each with its own set of teachers and lessons. So, while the phase of apprenticeship encompasses only the initial developmental stage in the life of Cohen's artist-figure, leading up to an initial acceptance of the creative calling, the process of artistic development leads the artist through several phases, each commencing with a "learning" period that is similar, but not identical, to the singularly occurring apprenticeship phase.

The protagonist in Cohen's song "Teachers" learns of the recurrent nature of an artist-figure's lessons: here, his "teachers," who do not always fully embrace their

instructive roles, include a "woman," "several girls," a "wise man," even the "Lord," yet at the song's conclusion we get a sense, from the desperate tone of the final verse, that the protagonist's "lessons" never end:

Teachers are my lessons done

I cannot do another one

They laughed and laughed and said

Well child, are your lessons done

Are your lessons done. (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*)

The lack of an interrogative punctuation mark in the final two lines indicates, without question, what the protagonist's immense difficulty in finding a "teacher of the heart" suggested all along: artists never stop being apprentices of one form or another.⁷

Sandra Djwa, identifying Cohen's process of artistic development, argues that "[i]n Cohen's work," the "possibility of a new revelation is specifically associated with the myth of descent culminating in the creation of art" (36). She further remarks upon the "cycles" and "move[ments] between extremes" that propel protagonists through Cohen's narratives, and thus make up the process of artistic growth (36). This process is not, then, a constant forward movement from innocence to enlightenment, from experience to representation, from apprenticeship to mastery. Rather, the artist makes a series of "descent[s]" into experience and follows each "descent" with a phase of creative output. In this sense, the life of the artist is a series of interrelated artist-stories which comprise a larger entity that

⁷Neither the version of this song published in *Stranger Music*, nor the version published in sheet music terminates with a question mark. When Cohen performs the song, on *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, the final line is sung as a statement, not a question.

might be called the "artistic vocation." In *Book of Mercy*, Cohen's narrator looks back upon his life of making art and reveals the spiral pattern of his creative enterprises:

When I left the king I began to rehearse what I would say to the world:
long rehearsals full of revisions, imaginary applause, humiliations, edicts of
revenge. I grew swollen as I conspired with my ambition, I struggled, I
expanded, and when the term was up, I gave birth to an ape. After some
small inevitable misunderstanding, the ape turned on me. Limping,
stumbling I fled back to the swept courtyards of the king. (2)

This passage reveals much about the process of artistic development through its depiction of how each new phase of artistic growth involves a struggle which gives rise to a creation—in this case an "ape"⁸ whose likeness to humankind also suggests the degree to which an artist's creation of art is self-creation—and how the completion of a phase of artistic output eventually leads to dissatisfaction, returning the artist-figure to a place where a new phase of the process might begin.

The process of artistic development is partly propelled by the teachers who offer the artist-figure knowledge through their lessons. The learning situation, however, is complicated by the fact that the world is full of false-gurus and self-motivated instructors: "Why don't you join the Rosicrucians they will give you back your hope," mocks the singer in "Dress Rehearsal Rag" (*Songs of Love and Hate*). The same search for a true teacher that perplexes the protagonist in "Teachers" haunts the artist-figure throughout his

⁸In "Master Song," Cohen's speaker hints that humankind is, perhaps, half-animal, half-divine when he evokes the image of "an ape with angel glands" (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*).

career. The speaker in "One of Us Cannot Be Wrong" discovers that teachers and their teachings are not always what they appear to be:

I heard of a saint who had loved you
 I studied all night in his school
 He taught that the duty of lovers
 is to tarnish the Golden Rule
 And just when I was sure
 that his teachings were pure
 he drowned himself in the pool . . . (*Stranger Music* 102)

The search, then, for a lasting guru whose lessons remain relevant is a vain one. The artist will have difficulty uncovering a series of beliefs, a "school" which never loses immediate personal significance. Each phase of development will require a new teacher, and teachers cannot always be trusted. As F. in *Beautiful Losers* reveals, despite the narrator's belief that F. can "teach . . . everything," (116) "[l]ike many teachers, a lot of the stuff I gave away was simply a burden I couldn't carry any longer" (188). It is not surprising, then, that many of the lessons in the life of the artist-figure are those gathered by individual experience without the mediation of a teacher, with no one but the self to act as a guide.

An important aspect of the artist-figure's apprenticeship is the process of self-awareness that comes about internally through the act of both meditation and artistic creation. Many of the lessons learned by the artist-figure appear to derive from a kind of internal dialogue that leads the artist-figure to a new understanding. In Cohen's writings, these internal dialogues often take the manifest form of a struggle within a single ego,

involving two or more distinct entities of unequal power. Usually the force of propulsion behind these struggles is a quest for some degree of enlightenment, or understanding, and a furthering of the artist-figure's vocation. These struggles, when expressed in a form that appears to be a dialogue between two egos, are often really outward articulations of internal conflicts in the mind of an artist-figure contemplating aspects of his vocation. As Winfried Siemerling suggests, "the 'I' of [Cohen's] texts, time and again, posits itself as its self and thus as object and as other" and "this thetic moment constitutes simultaneously a reflexive doubling" (*Discoveries of the Other* 24). Siemerling goes on to argue that the

concurrence of these seemingly opposed tendencies also propels the continual variation of Cohen's paradigmatic pairs, I and you, self and other, writer and reader, master and slave, pupil and teacher: as soon as they are posited, neither of these identities seems to remain in place for long. (27)

Given Siemerling's model, different identities comprising paradigmatic pairs can be seen as, not distinct individuals, but rather as competing psychological elements in the mind of a single artist-figure.

The ease with which dialogues between self and other straddle the boundary between the external world of communication and the internal world of the individual mind is evident in the structure of the many educational "conversations" between F. and the artist-figure narrator of *Beautiful Losers*. On one level, these dialogues are clearly taking place between two distinct individuals, one a teacher, one a pupil:

—Don't you want to hear what happened when I was a telephone?

—I do, but I don't want to beg. I have to beg you for every scrap of information about the world.

—But that's the only way you value it. When it falls on you from out of the trees you think it's rotten fruit. (40)

At the same time, however, all of the dialogues between the narrator and F. are memories being recounted by an artist-figure obsessed with history: "Why must I be lashed to the past by the words of a dead man? Why must I reproduce these conversations so painstakingly, letting not one comma alter the beat of our voices?" (42). Few if any of the conversations in *Beautiful Losers* tend to sound as people actually talk, whatever the narrator's insistence that he seeks to reproduce them accurately.⁹ This artificial sounding mode of discourse, coupled with the realization that all of the dialogues in the novel are artistic re-creations of situations involving long-dead participants, all of whom have had a significant and not entirely healthy impact on the narrator's psyche, might make one wonder how many of these conversations are "real" and how many are happening only in the narrator's mind.

We see another example of Siemerling's model in action, and of the internal process of the education of the artist externalized and personified, in Cohen's "Master Song." Here, the "I," the "you," and the "master" are constantly shifting positions so that one can never be entirely sure who is speaking to whom:

I believe you heard your master sing

⁹The form and tone of the conversations in *Beautiful Losers* are a lot like those of Socrates with his pupils in the writings of Plato. In many ways, then, the dialogues in *Beautiful Losers* can be seen as internal dialogues in the tradition of the Socratic method.

when I was sick in bed
 I believe that he told you everything
 that I keep locked away in my head
 Your master took you travelling
 at least that's what you said
 And now do you come back to bring
 your prisoner wine and bread? (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*)

How does the "master" know "everything" which is "locked away" in "I"'s head if the two are not, on some level, the same individual? The "you" in the song hears the "master sing" yet we assume that it is the "I" who is singing the song and we cannot help but associate him with the "master." And, if "you" brings "wine and bread" to the "prisoner" called "I," then one might assume that "you" is really a "master" also. Later in the song, "I" sings:

I loved your master perfectly
 I taught him all that he knew
 He was starving in some deep mystery
 Like a man who is sure what is true.

"I," then, clearly enjoys some degree of mastery over the "master" as he is the one doing the teaching. This song involves a quest for knowledge, for "what is true," and, in Cohen's lexicon, individuals who achieve this "remote human possibility," or "a kind of balance in the chaos of existence" are "saint[s]" (*Beautiful Losers* 121). The concept of sainthood in Cohen's work is relevant to a discussion of the artist-apprentice because the balance it represents is part of what the artist-figure seeks in his negotiation between his

vocation and the many aspects of the world. In the apprenticeship phase, the artist-figure is first alerted to the nature of his vocation which, to a great extent, involves the striving for and never attaining of the perfect "balance" of sainthood. Scobie argues that "the saint is always as close to the role of master as he is to that of slave, and the master or teacher has a role which prevents full self-destruction. He who exerts power over himself cannot himself be powerless" (*Leonard Cohen* 10). In other words, the song involves a quest for successful mediation between master and slave, for the achievement of a kind of balance in the vocational conflicts of the artist-figure that at once empower and oppress him, a quest for the condition of sainthood.¹⁰ Cohen acknowledges the paradoxical relationship of mutual dependence between master and slave in his poem, "Alone the Master and the Slave Embrace": "Alone the master and slave embrace . . . They know nothing of covenant or phoenix" (*The Spice-Box of Earth* 19). The condition of sainthood, a perhaps unattainable yet conceivable state of being, is where this constant power struggle achieves resolution. But the conflict can never be resolved and the condition of sainthood can only be dreamed of by the artist: "my two men / will dream this scene many times / between the times / they punish one another" (19).

An artist-figure cannot achieve sainthood because, as Scobie argues, "Cohen's saints must make their wills transparent to Nothing. The self is not sacrificed to some higher cause; the sacrifice of the self *is* the higher cause" (*Leonard Cohen* 10). To achieve the "remote human possibility" of sainthood and to silence the internal dialogue of the

¹⁰Cohen draws a clear link between the notion of sainthood and the apprenticeship and education of the artist in a lyric entitled, "One of Us Cannot Be Wrong." Here, the speaker announces, "I heard of a saint who had loved you / I studied all night in his school" (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*).

mind would be equal to a destruction of the self—one cannot be a saint and be entirely human simultaneously. A destruction of the self and a silencing of the internal dialogue of the artist-mind, even to achieve sainthood, means the end of art for the artist. The artist-figure, in one respect, wishes to silence the internal dialogues that form a significant part of his education. The apprentice thereby enters into a conflict in which he seeks to silence the very voices that both act as a kind of muse, and find representation in his art. The nature of the artistic vocation is such, however, that silence is not a permanent option.¹¹ "Master Song" and "Alone the Master and the Slave Embrace" are lyrics about internal struggles which both form part of the apprentice's education, and would be resolved in Cohen's view of sainthood. Thus, in achieving sainthood, Cohen's artist-figure would lose the subject he represents, and accordingly lose his art. An important aspect of the "divided self" of the artist-figure arises out of this predicament: through art, Cohen's narrators—and perhaps Cohen himself—reach toward a higher state, something approximating sainthood, a state where the conflicts articulated in songs like "Master Song" no longer burden the mind. But to achieve this state, by art or other means, necessarily entails an end of the artistic vocation, and an end of the artist.

Each new lesson in the ongoing apprenticeship of the artist involves a dialogue, be it internal, as in "Master Song," or external like the long discussions between Krantz and Breavman in *The Favourite Game*. At the end of each new phase in the development of the artist-figure, in the time between the end of old lessons and the commencement of new

¹¹As Cohen reveals in an interview recorded for *Songs from the Life of Leonard Cohen*, "the connection of language to survival is somehow very clear and acute."

ones, a kind of silence predominates, a temporary attainment of sainthood that, in lasting form, necessarily eludes the developing artist-figure.¹² In this state, the artist-figure is temporarily at peace and the competing selves in his divided being temporarily cease their conflict. But it is also in this state that the artist-figure falls into "silence" and feels a sense of creative death. In time, a new phase begins and the process starts anew. This temporary silence and the rebirth of the creative artist upon the arrival of new opposition is the subject of Cohen's prose poem entitled "I Like the Way You Opposed Me": "I like the way you opposed me when you thought I had fallen into silence . . . All this depended on a curious belief of yours that there was only one stage . . . And here I am again with the news of another freedom" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 108). Here, the alter-ego of the poem's primary speaker remarks, mockingly yet tellingly, "*It is pleasant to have him born again*"—emphasizing that the alter-ego requires the presence of the ego, for there can be no dialogue, no struggle, and hence no art, without both voices (109). The continuously re-initiated phases of learning in an artist-figure's development find a catalyst in this problem of silence. An artist strives for resolution of internal conflict, yet the achievement of such resolution, in the form of a kind of temporary sainthood, saps the creative energies which form the artistic identity, causing temporary silence, before propelling the artist-figure into a new phase of creative development.

Since permanent sainthood, a kind of self-negation, is impossible for the artist-figure, self-creation and self-affirmation become an obvious alternative, and the

¹²In Chapter Five, I offer an analysis of "The Night Comes On" which, more than anything else, is a song about the fleeting nature of temporary sainthood.

apprentice, accordingly, launches himself upon a life-long career with his own artist-self at the centre of it. In this stance, Keith Garebian argues, "Cohen shows how an artist self-consciously creates his own myth" (29). Breavman writes a story in *The Favourite Game* in which the narrator states, that "[t]his is the only successful kind of sexual love: the love of the creator for his creation. In other words, the love of the creator for himself. This love can never change" (90). While the power and magic of art lure the apprentice into an initial acceptance of his vocation, the artist-figure eventually learns that his own creative powers are primarily directed towards the portrayal of his own contradictory and essentially tragic stance. This is perhaps the most important apprenticeship lesson for the artist-figure: he learns that his vocation does not always, or even usually, cast him in the role of magician and miracle-worker; conflicts in Cohen's life, like the tragedy of longing for sainthood and finding it unattainable, result in the artist-figure's self-affirmation often being, not celebratory, but quite the opposite: the most central issue is the artistic vocation of the artist-figure himself, and an ongoing depiction of his often contradictory and tragic education. The second verse of "Sisters of Mercy" illustrates an important lesson for the artist-figure, acting as a kind of meditative, internal, and self-centred dialogue about the vocational conflicts the artist-figure becomes aware of in his apprenticeship:

You who must leave everything
that you cannot control
It begins with your family
but soon it comes round to your soul
I've been where you're hanging

I think I can see how you're pinned

When you're not feeling holy

your loneliness tells you you've sinned. (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*)

This general dilemma, seeking but never attaining self-annihilation through sainthood, desiring the comfort of the "sisters" but needing to maintain "control" and keep connection to the world outside the dimly-lit hotel rooms of Cohen's novels and lyrics, casts the artist-figure in a tragic stance, making him the melancholy, pensive, and self-absorbed stereotype that, not only marks the change in the apprentice's countenance when he moves beyond his original infatuation with art's power and magic, but is also one aspect of the popular image of Cohen himself—Richard Goldstein observes in an article first published in *The Village Voice*, that "[Cohen] suffers gloriously in every couplet. Even his moments of ecstasy seem predicated on hours of refined despair. Leonard does not rant; he whispers hell and you must strain to hear his agony" (Gnarowski 41). Certainly it is true that Cohen and many of his speakers, for reasons I have described, self-create in the tragic mode.¹³ A passage from F.'s long letter shows this tragedy at its darkest:

I had an idea of what a man should look like, but it kept changing. I couldn't devote a lifetime to discovering the ideal physique. All I heard was pain, all I saw was mutilation. My needle was going so madly, sometimes I found I'd run the thread right through my own flesh and I was joined to one of my own grotesque creations—I'd rip us apart—and then I

¹³In *Songs from the Life of Leonard Cohen*, Cohen reveals that there is an inherent value in art that depicts personal tragedy: "everybody knows what it's like to crack up . . . I think we cherish that in our singers when they manifest those experiences in song."

heard my own voice howling with the others, and I knew that I was also truly part of the disaster. (*Beautiful Losers* 221)¹⁴

But as dark as these depictions of the artist-figure intermingling his own tragedy with the subjects he represents sometimes become, Cohen is perhaps at his best when, as Ondaatje suggests, "he is able to inject just the smallest touch of irony and self-consciousness of himself as a romantic, aware of his pose" (19). Cohen, demonstrating that irony becomes a powerful tool in combating the tragic stance of the artist figure, mocks the view of himself as a stereotypical tragic artist in the first line of "Heart With No Companion": he says, tongue in cheek, "I greet you from the other side of sorrow and despair / With a love so vast and shattered it will greet you everywhere" (*Various Positions*). This rendering of the "shattered" initial elation of Cohen's apprentices like Breavman embodies precisely the kind of self-aware, self-reflexive, even self-mocking humour that rounds out Cohen's view of the artist-figure. The process of never-ending development which often flirts with sainthood can seem tragic, but it is infused with an inherently comic component, much in the manner of the myth of Sisyphus. Eli Mandel suggests this kind of duality of tone in Cohen's writing when he states that his "art has the power to contain its own contradiction" (135). Cohen focuses upon the ironic and comic aspects of self-creation when he highlights the ease with which an artist can assume different poses at will:

If you want a boxer
I will step into the ring for you

¹⁴The image of the artist-figure as a maker of golems recurs often in Cohen's work. One of the most memorable examples of this motif is found in *Death of a Lady's Man*, and this example of golem-making forms part of my discussion in Chapter Two.

If you want a doctor
I'll examine every inch of you
If you want a driver climb inside
or if you want to take me for a ride
you know you can
I'm your man. (*I'm Your Man*)

The initial view of the artist-apprentice as a magician manipulating other forms becomes one of the maturing artist engaged primarily in the act of self-manipulation. The apprentice learns that he cannot stand with a "united" self above his subject and direct his creative powers endlessly towards the "other." The apprentice discovers that his essential pose will not be that of magician, but rather that of a master of disguise and escape artist, directing his talents inwardly in an attempt to navigate the complex terrain of his own vocation.

The process of artistic development is as much a product of an artist's own self-creation as it is the result of external forces. Although teachers, indeed all experience, may act as a catalyst to the process of development, ultimately some of this power resides within the artist himself who has the capacity to choose, to some degree, when and to whom he will apprentice himself. Also, this life-long process in the artist-figure is not one he is unconscious of—he can watch it occurring, he can reflect upon it, laugh about it, talk about it, make art about it. As the artist moves beyond his initial apprenticeship and enters into the conflicts of the artistic vocation beyond, the journey is both tragic and comic, both out-of-control and directed by the artist, both an internal and an external process.

Chapter Two

The Artist-figure in the Romantic Love Relationship

Once Cohen's artist-figure recognizes the inherently contradictory nature of his creative vocation, conflicts begin to arise between the artist-figure's own selfish vision, involving the need to come to terms with his own calling, and the mitigating forces of the outside world. The first and perhaps most dominant vocational conflict to arise in the world of Cohen's artist-figures exists between their own creative impulses, be they directed towards self-creation or towards external objects in which the self is reflected, and issues that involve the artist-figure's interaction with women, especially pertaining to the idea of romantic love. Cohen's narrator, in the opening chapters of *The Favourite Game*, invokes an image of womankind as both Eve and siren, and this evocation foreshadows the symbol of woman-as-temptress, who lures the artist away from his work in the very act of inspiring him, that comes to dominate the treatment of the love relationship in Cohen's writings: "He has followed her to precarious parts of the tree. 'Higher!' she demands. Even the apples are trembling. The sun catches her flute, turns the polished wood to a moment of chrome" (14). In "You begin to bore us," we are told "that the worst thing a woman could do was to take a man away from his work" (*Parasites of Heaven* 67). Cohen's artist-figures encounter severe difficulties maintaining a balance between the domestic life and the impulse of the artist to be free of commitment to love, active in his work, and in a position of superiority to his environment, which, in Cohen's view, must almost always be subjected in order to be represented artistically. Cohen's narrators tend, to a degree, to view women as links to a higher state of being in the

courtly-love and neo-platonic modes, both ideal depictions of love that indirectly offer the possibility of resolving vocational conflicts. Ultimately, however, this idealization of women as connections to the divine is undermined by the artist-figure's baser impulses, leading to unsatisfactory and fleeting relationships in the "everyday" world. These complications of the romantic love relationship lead one to question Cohen's depictions of women: is romantic love valuable in and of itself or is it merely an inspirational force behind the creative process? Do Cohen's artist-figures value women as individuals or do they relegate them to the position of aesthetic object and hence subject them to the artist's need to represent elements of his environment in fixed form? Does Cohen's artist-figure's understanding of ideal love entail a view of women-as-conquests, as mere apprenticeships in the life of the developing artist?

The fundamental conflict between art and love, in Cohen's work, can be seen in terms of Maurice Beebe's theory of "the Divided Self." While Beebe's division of the self into two mutually opposed elements is largely dualistic and reductive, it nevertheless provides a functional theory that aids in the exploration of the artist-figure's conflicts in the love relationship. The "Ivory Tower tradition," argues Beebe, "exalts art above life" and encourages the artist to stand "aloof." The "Sacred Fount tradition," on the other hand, "tends to equate art with experience" (13). Beebe further remarks that, "[i]n the portrait-of-the-artist novel the Sacred Fount theme is most often expressed in terms of the artist's relationship to women" (18). The central conflict, then, exists between the "man" who desires romantic love, and the "artist" who must attain the necessary distance from the world required to objectify it and represent it artistically. Cohen's writings, as in "I Knelt

Beside a Stream," are full of examples of women distracting men from their artist-self in the pursuit of its calling: "she suggested that I give up and worship her, which I did for ten years. Thus began the obscene silence of my career as a lady's man" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 11). To embrace romantic love, for Cohen's artist-figure, involves "giv[ing] up" the artistic vocation, abandoning the creative impulse, and falling into "obscene silence." The protagonist in "Stranger Song" foresees a loss of his creativity, or "will," should he succumb to love and the comfort it provides: "he'll say one day you caused his will to weaken with your love and warmth and shelter" (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*). Breavman, lying in bed beside Tamara, laments the "[m]iles he could never cover because he could never abandon this bed" (*The Favourite Game* 94). And one incarnation of artist in Cohen's work is called "traitor" because his willingness to allow "a suntanned woman" to "yaw[n] him through the summer" has "paralyzed" his "will" ("The Traitor," *Recent Songs*). Cohen's artist-figures, then, see the neglecting of art for the sake of romantic love as a betrayal of their artist-self, as a diversion from the true path of the artist.

On the simplest of levels, the perceived incompatibility between love and the creation of art makes some sense—the artist, obviously, cannot be entirely free to pursue creative enterprises when busy in the rituals of love. But, at the same time, romantic love forms a very large part of the subject matter for Cohen's artist-figures, and hence its influence on the artist cannot be entirely limiting. The inability of the artist-figure to reconcile his vocation with his human impulse towards union with another may stem partially from a misunderstanding articulated by Shaffner who argues that the artist-apprentice holds "a view of art solely as a . . . means to the unfolding of the personality"

(18). Beebe adds a further dimension to this exclusive view of art: "[t]o assume that creativity must be expended *either* in life *or* in art," as the theory of "the Divided Self" suggests, "often leads to a confusion between sex and art" (17). To get to the crux of this incompatibility between art and love, however, necessitates a further probing of the idea of romantic love, in relation to the artist-figure, as it is expressed in Cohen's work.

At first glance, the ideal love, for Cohen's artist-figure, takes the neo-platonic form of a heterosexualized version of the theories put forth by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*:

The man who has . . . directed his thoughts towards examples of beauty in due and orderly succession, will suddenly have revealed to him as he approaches the end of his initiation, a beauty whose nature is marvellous indeed, the final goal . . . of all his previous efforts. This beauty is . . . eternal . . . it neither undergoes any increase or diminution nor suffers any change. (93-94)

The neo-platonic idea of love views the courting of the virtuous female as the pursuit of higher being, as a seeking out of the divine. Janina Traxler offers a summary of courtly-love which is connected to neo-platonic precepts and is partly in line with Cohen's own attitude toward the ideal love relationship with women:

at the heart of courtly love are natural attraction for the beloved, a belief that the lover is unworthy of the beloved, and a tendency for the characterization of this love to rise above mere carnality to something more spiritual. We can add more concretely that such love is typically expressed in vocabulary which idealizes the beloved, often using religious

terminology to portray the beloved as a deity and the lover as supplicant . . .
 . . . (162)

On one level, Cohen's writings are full of examples which adhere largely to these traditional conventions. "Lady Midnight" is the story of a lover who asks his "Lady" to "unfold" him, as he is "dead" without her acceptance (*Songs from a Room*). Like the typical woman in the Petrarchan tradition—Charlene Diehl-Jones remarks that Cohen's works sometimes invoke the "world of the Petrarchan sonnet" (82)—she remains aloof, "scorn[ing]" her admirer, refusing to allow him to "use" her. The beloved holds the power in the relationship, forcing her lover to "knee[l] on the floor" and await her grace; her love is not there for the taking but rather is something the poet must "win" or "lose."

In "Suzanne," the final chorus presents a similar situation in which the lover is ready to "travel with her" once his "body" has been touched, not with her body, but "with her mind," suggesting that the attraction the lover feels for his beloved involves something more transcendental than mere physical desire (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*). But these examples, whatever their surface adherence to courtly and neo-platonic traditions, differ from the theoretical ideal in several distinct ways. Both Suzanne and Lady Midnight are, despite the implied transcendental aspects of their relationships with their artist-figure lovers, pursued at least as much as sex objects as they are as vehicles to a higher state of being. While "Suzanne" tails off with neo-platonic overtones, we nevertheless learn, in the first verse, that "you can spend the night beside her" (95). And the tone of "Lady Midnight" is more that of a lover pleading for sexual satisfaction—"I argued all night just like so many have before"—than it is one of a virtuous man seeking higher understanding

(141). In these instances, courtly and neo-platonic ideals are clearly being corrupted. One might argue that Cohen infuses his lyrics with sexuality, not so foregrounded in most of the writings of his medieval and renaissance counterparts, more due to his own modern sensibilities than to any attempt on his part to thwart tradition. This posture, on a reader's part, becomes uncomfortable, however, when one recognizes that a very large part of his writings on the subject of romantic love either deliberately ignores or actually mocks these same ideals.

The philosophy taught by F. in *Beautiful Losers* contradicts courtly and neo-platonic principles in just about every way imaginable—his notion of love is inspired by the flesh rather than by inner virtue: "We've got to learn to stop bravely at the surface. We've got to learn to love appearances" (4). F.'s philosophy, with its focus on the superficial and its Dionysian celebration of sensuality, runs counter to the concept of transcendence through the chaste appreciation of beauty by a courtier poet. In "Take This Waltz," Cohen deliberately mocks the Petrarchan tradition of listing off the virtuous attributes of the beloved when he compiles a poetic, but sexually suggestive, and perhaps even vulgar, list:

I want you, I want you, I want you

on a chair with a dead magazine.

In the cave at the tip of the lily,

in some hallway where love's never been.

On a bed where the moon has been sweating (*I'm Your Man*)

What these examples point to is a view of romantic love which is clearly inspired by a tradition with which it is simultaneously at odds. Clearly, the artist-figure in Cohen's work views women as a connection to a higher state, as a necessary pursuit, perhaps as a form of salvation: "MARITA / PLEASE FIND ME / I AM ALMOST 30" ("Marita," *Selected Poems* 239). However, at the same time as the artist-figure attempts to ride the vehicle of the beloved on a course to heaven, he begins to find the ride more fun than the destination: "Tonight will be fine, for a while," remarks one narrator more concerned with the pleasures love brings "tonight" than any promise of salvation tomorrow ("Tonight Will Be Fine," *Songs from a Room*). The lover in the neo-platonic or courtly tradition must value the ends of love more than the love itself, although, it could be argued, since the whole tradition is premised on the idea of never arriving at the final destination, then "getting there" is the focus of the courtly and neo-platonic tradition, also. In "Dance Me to the End of Love," the poet clearly keeps his destination in sight: "Dance me through the panic / 'till I'm gathered safely in . . . be my homeward dove" (*Various Positions*). At the same time, however, the poet finds himself getting caught up the sensuality of the dance: "Let me feel you moving / like they do in Babylon" (337).¹⁵ On one level, the artist appears simply to be confusing "sex and art," to re-invoke Beebe's suggestion. While the goal of the artist is, albeit unrealistically, the attainment of sainthood through his vocation, he cannot help entrapping himself in the sensual temptations that such a pursuit offers up

¹⁵In another song with a similar thrust, "Last Years Man," the speaker witnesses "a wedding that old families had contrived" between "Bethlehem the bride-groom" and "Babylon the bride." But the song redirects itself and becomes more sexually explicit when the speaker reveals that "Bethlehem inflamed us both like the shy one at some orgy" (*Songs of Love and Hate*).

along the way.¹⁶ He wants both the life-experience promised by the "Sacred Fount" and the aloofness and detachment he finds in the "Ivory Tower."

Joan Crate, in "The Mistress' Reply to the Poet," also views Cohen's love lyrics in terms of their recognition and perversion of neo-platonic and courtly ideals. She recognizes that Cohen's artist-figures occasionally regard women as a connection to the "divine" but this occurs in a manner which, in her view, is clearly not traditional:

"[w]oman is ex / tension of the poet-lover, phone line to the divine, usually plugged into by the penis" (55). While the tendency of Cohen's artist-figures to confuse the ends of love with the means of love is certainly part of the central core of their approach to romance in general, a clear articulation of the artist-figure's predicament in this situation necessitates a return to the concept of recurrent apprenticeship and the pursuit of sainthood. In the previous chapter, I argued that the achievement of the "remote human possibility" of sainthood would silence the primary internal conflicts of the artistic mind and result in a destruction of the self, stopping dead the catalyst of artistic creation, and hence the vocation of artist. In *Beautiful Losers*, Cohen's most complete articulation of the idea of sainthood, we uncover a crucial connection between this higher state and romantic love:

A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what this possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of

¹⁶When, in "I'm Your Man," the speaker pleads with his beloved to "climb inside" and let him "take [her] for a ride," one gets the sense that the destination of the proposed journey is *not* the transcendental realm of the neo-platonic forms.

a kind of balance in the chaos of existence . . . It is a kind of balance that is his glory. (121)

The immersion of the artist-figure in the energy of love is closely allied with the idea of sainthood.¹⁷ Just as the "silence" at the end of each phase of apprenticeship admits the artist to a sort of temporary sainthood, so does the participation of the artist-figure in the rituals of love. The kind of "balance" equated with sainthood is what the lover in the ideal neo-platonic or courtly romance desires. The "man," to borrow Beebe's term, thwarts his alter-ego, the "artist," and also seeks out this "balance." But the "artist" recognizes that a stable and "ideal" love relationship, the complete immersion in the energies of love, would be the equivalent of a sainthood which necessitates the death of the creative impulse. To be in love involves "silence," as the protagonist in "Death of a Lady's Man" has revealed, and art requires that the "silence" be broken. The artist, then, seeks out temporary love because this provides him with material that can be translated into an art object. He cannot, however, remain "in love" because love must be periodically abandoned in order for the artist to ascend the "Ivory Tower" and engage in the creative act. Fortunately, at least as far as the survival of the artist is concerned, sexual desire, which Cohen's artist figures rarely leave behind for more than a passing moment, can have the power to diffuse the pure "energy of love"—if the woman is viewed as a sex object, rather than a neo-platonic or courtly connection to the divine, then "ideal" love, at least in these traditional

¹⁷Joan of Arc's consumption by fire in the song bearing her name hints at the idea of sainthood being an immersion in the energies of love: "if he was fire, then she must be wood"; "myself I long for love and light / but must it come so cruel, must it be so bright" (*Songs of Love and Hate*).

terms, cannot be possible. This is not to say that ideal love cannot theoretically exist alongside sexual desire but only that it cannot be subjugated to sex.¹⁸ In virtually all of Cohen's love lyrics, as in examples such as "Lady Midnight" mentioned earlier, the sexual element, though often suppressed in part, has a tendency to emerge, at least enough to undermine the love ideal. This permits the artist to gain the necessary experience of love to fuel his creative output. But it also removes the possibility of Cohen's artist-figures ever entering into lasting union with a single beloved: as Crute observes, "[n]ew women are constantly required to provide the path between the poet and his . . . art" (55).

Cohen's song, "Sisters of Mercy," embodies the passing nature of these relationships:

When I left they were sleeping, I hope you run into them soon
 Don't turn on the lights, you can read their address by the moon
 And you won't make me jealous if I hear that they sweetened your night
 We weren't lovers like that, and, besides, it would still be all right. (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*)

Ultimately, in Cohen's work, the needs of the "artist" come to supersede those of the "man." While this leads to never-ending creative output, it also leads to a potentially unsatisfying experience of love. A definite trend in Cohen's work views love as relatively devoid of value in itself, an idea which is exchanged for a perception of love as a source of artistic inspiration. This necessarily leads to a view of women, who are necessary participants in the love relationship and objects of the male-artist's desire, as subjects

¹⁸The possibility of ideal love existing alongside sexual desire is expressed in a lyric entitled, "Ain't No Cure For Love," in which the speaker informs his beloved, "I need to see you naked / both your body and your thought" (*I'm Your Man*).

awaiting the artist's creative whim to represent, rather than individuals of primary importance for their own inherent worth. In "Sisters of Mercy," the singer offers a view of women which values them for the artistic output they inspire: "they brought me their comfort / and later they brought me this song" (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*). This brief passage demonstrates, not only the way in which a period of ascent into "love" is followed by a distancing from the emotion and the production of an aesthetic object, but also that the "love" experience is judged significant, by Cohen's artist-figures, insofar as its result is a representation of the initial experience.¹⁹

In my first chapter I indicated that the magic and power of the artistic vocation initially attract Breavman to his calling. Similarly, although the prospect of love offered by women brings the artist-figure dangerously close to silence, if the artist, in the romantic situation, achieves a certain degree of power over the woman—and this situation stands in contradiction to the neo-platonic and courtly model where the woman maintains power over her lover—he can find his creative impulse inflated and encouraged. This is the case in Cohen's poem entitled "Celebration" which depicts the poet enjoying a sense of power when his "beloved" performs the act of oral sex upon him:

Kneel. love, a thousand feet below me,
so far I can barely see your mouth and hands
perform the ceremony,

¹⁹Cohen's song, "Ballad of the Absent Mare," portrays an artist-figure in the act of training and pursuing his "mare," which is clearly a female lover in metaphoric disguise. The song, on one level at least, portrays the struggle of the artist-figure to successfully represent his beloved artistically while she simultaneously inspires and eludes him.

Kneel till I topple to your back

with a groan (*The Spice-Box of Earth* 55)

In this complete inversion of neo-platonic and courtly principles, the artist equates himself with the "gods" and the woman, in turn, loses her significance as a connection to the divine. Attaining this power over the subject he represents removes any mention of love from the poem, except when it is used offhandedly as a patronizing means of addressing his sex partner, but provides the artist with an experience to represent artistically. As Crate remarks, "[w]e all know what happens next . . . [t]he poet-lover deflates, descends into his fallen flesh, and writes a poem" (56). In this lyric love loses any significance it might have had as a route to a transcendental plane of higher being—the transitory nature of the sex act stresses the temporary nature of the "ceremony" being experienced by the artist-lover. Aside from whatever pleasure the poet may have derived from the sex act itself, the experience's, and hence love's, only significance in this instance is as a catalyst to artistic expression. The potential of self-creation through love, insofar as it entails a desire to achieve higher states of existence, becomes self-affirmation and an impulse to engage in experience for its own sake, and for the sake of art. The woman in the love-story Breavman writes in *The Favourite Game* remarks that she "want[s] something different for [her and her lover]. You don't know the difference between creation and masturbation" (90-91). This same situation exists in "Celebration"; the artist seeks nothing "different" from his experience with the woman—he wants primarily to placate his desire for worldly things, to enjoy the physical pleasures of romance, and to please himself by satisfying the desire to discharge art objects. The artist-figure displays a kind of

narcissistic self-love by identifying himself and his creative potential, and not the woman, as the primary object of his desire. He wants to do as Breavman does and "kiss with one eye open," to witness himself, and not his partner, in the act of "love" (101): as Bruce Whiteman suggests, Cohen "use[s] women and violence as mirrors in which to observe the hidden processes of his own life . . ." (56). Crate argues that this impulse causes the artist-figure to "rejec[t] any attempt on the part of the Mistress to establish a complete communion between . . . lovers, the miracle of love itself which must include the mind of the Mistress within her necessarily beautiful body" (56-57). The act of love, for Cohen's artists, is not meant to achieve lasting "communion," but rather to provide the artist with an alternative view of himself which he can represent artistically, as part of his own self-creation.

One of the few places in Cohen's lyrics where this selfish intention does not seem foremost in the poet's mind occurs in "Waiting for the Miracle," where the poet announces to his beloved, "let's get married / we've been alone too long," suggesting that he seeks lasting union with the object of his affection (*The Future*). But this apparent departure from Cohen's usual depiction of the artist-figure in the love situation is quickly negated by the following lines: when the singer continues, "Let's be alone together / let's see if we're that strong," we realize that the speaker wishes to test himself and see how he performs in a love situation, to see if he is "strong" enough to see his "will" not "weaken with" the "love and warmth and shelter" of marriage. Here, the woman is the testing ground of the poet, a "clinic of thighs," as Michael Ondaatje puts it, "where the women are dangerously

similar" (13).²⁰ "True" union in love requires that love be valued for its own sake, that the beloved be desired, not only for her power to inspire, but also for her own worth. This may well be what the "man" desires, but what the "artist" requires again holds sway in the romantic situation at hand.

When the artist views love relationships as chiefly valuable in relation to their influence on his vocation, the women to whom he relates begin to lose importance as anything but experiences awaiting translation into art. The relegation of women to subjects for the artist's power of representation is prominent in a poem from *Flowers for Hitler* entitled "Laundry":

At last I saw her ugly
 Now I could not stay
 I made an X across her face
 But a sheet got in the way. (88)

Not only does the artist-figure's perception of "ugl[iness]" in the woman cause him to depart in an implied search for aesthetic objects more suitable as artistic subjects, but the act of making "an X across her face" is a deliberate reference to the subjection of the woman to the artist-figure's pen. The images of women a poet creates, since they are nothing more than aesthetic objects, pleasing or otherwise, can, when they do not suit the artist-figure's creative agenda, simply be crossed out like an unwanted word on a page—as

²⁰In "A Singer Must Die," the artist-figure's own attributes are hidden in the object of his sexual desire, a relatively "similar" woman to so many in the Cohen canon. He must test himself on her to discover himself: "my defenses are hid in the clothes of a woman I would like to forgive / in the rings of her silk, in the hinge of her thighs / where I have to go begging in beauty's disguise" (*New Skin for the Old Ceremony*).

Crate observes, "[i]n her simplest form, the mistress / muse serves as an *objet d'art*, visually pleasing, though otherwise uninvolving" (58). Breavman is disturbed when his women-as-aesthetic-objects cast off their "uninvolving" aspects and take on a more commanding role:

He was bothered by the knowledge that Shell was making real decisions, acting, changing her life. He wanted to watch her at rest. It involved him in the world of houses and traffic lights. She was becoming an authentic citizen, using his love for strength. (*The Favourite Game* 167)

Unlike the artist-figure in "Laundry," Breavman finds himself losing the power to "watch [Shell] at rest," to have power over his image of her and to subject her to the power of his pen. Once the artist-figure loses power in the romantic relationship, and the woman gains a large portion of the power he loses, the beloved has command and the artist-figure must skirt the entrapments of "love" to avoid the diffusion of his creative impulse. The artist-figure is more fulfilled when he maintains supreme power over the object he wishes to represent:

The reason I write
is to make something
as beautiful as you are
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. (*Stranger Music* 119)

This poem expresses the innate desire of the artist to capture objects of beauty in eternal form and thereby "escape time through the medium of his immortal art" (Beebe 12). The desire to capture the beauty of the beloved in the first half of the poem becomes strangely altered when the poet admits, in the second half, that the very act of adopting the role of artist as "hero" and capturing the beloved's beauty would somehow limit it, and thereby "kill" it. This poem embodies one aspect of the dilemma of the artist-figure in the love relationship: he at once wishes to use the magic and power of his vocation to celebrate the object of his attention but, at the same time, he must always fall short of achieving his goal. Interestingly, given this predicament, the artist still desires to "kill"—although, if the alternative to the creative impulse is immersion in love and the death of the creative self, the artist is, in all fairness, faced with a kill-or-be-killed situation.

It would be unfair to Cohen, however, not to acknowledge the irony inherent in these depictions of women subjected to the artistic will to represent. In the act of presenting artist-figures who selfishly subjugate women for their own art, Cohen makes them ironic by revealing, to the external observer, the negative implications of such an imbalance in the romantic love situation. This attempt at irony is apparent in a lyric like "Don't Go Home With Your Hard-on":

So I work in that same beauty salon
 I'm chained to the old masquerade
 The lipstick, the shadow, and the silicon

I follow my father's trade
 Don't go home with your hard-on
 It will only drive you insane
 You can't shake it or break it with your Motown
 You can't melt it down in the rain. (*Death of a Ladies' Man*)²¹

Here, the speaker's over-the-top neglect of the human worth of women makes it obvious that Cohen intends his artist-speaker, whose physical manipulation of women is reminiscent of experiments performed on Edith in *Beautiful Losers*, to implicate himself in a kind of wrong-doing.

Cohen's artist-figures, then, are not really involved in love relationships with women: they are involved in loving their own creative powers and their own images reflected in the women they create. As the narrator remarks in "Hurry to Your Dinner," in an apparently self-directed monologue, "[f]inish the feeble prayer . . . your golem duties to the woman being born" (*Lady's Man* 180). Here, the image of the woman in art becomes one in which she is nothing more than the handiwork of the artist-figure's own creative activities, and the artist-figure takes on the task of constructing a golem-woman from the disparate pieces of his art. The woman, as she is now the product of another's imaginative powers, becomes less an individual than a reflection of the artist who has created her. The evocation of the grotesque Frankenstein myth, of the creator and his "golem," would serve

²¹Cohen, in a similar fashion, tends to ironize by undercutting his own self-constructed stance as a "ladies' man": "I just got off here [in Hydra] and somebody spoke English and I rented a house for fourteen dollars a month. I met a girl and I stayed for eight or ten years. Yeah, [posing, smiling, and hamming up to the camera] that's the way it was in those days" (*Songs from the Life of Leonard Cohen*).

to support Crate's claim that "Leonard Cohen uses Woman as a means to explore his own exquisitely tortured self" (55). Indeed, the image of the golem, a monster created from pieces of flesh and other elements sewn together, says more about the troubled mental state of the narrator of *Death of a Lady's Man* than it does about anything else. Like the "king" in the poem "The Girl Toy," who commissions the construction of a golem for his own pleasures, the narrator of *Death of a Lady's Man* might only find romantic satisfaction with his manufactured lover if "[h]e didn't care if sometimes he tasted gold in her mouth / or cut his . . . lips on a jewelled eye" (*The Spice-Box of Earth* 48). This artificial golem-love is at the centre of romantic relationships that exist for art and not for love. The artist-figure in such relationships is not engaged in union with another—he is following a circular pattern in which he creates his lovers in accordance with his artistic needs, and then makes art based upon these relationships.

Despite some of the clearly misogynist trends in Cohen's writings, critics have responded to his artist-figure's representations of women with varying degrees of confrontation. None have been more offended than Dagmar de Venster in "Leonard Cohen's Women" when she argues that the woman in Leonard Cohen's work is "bitch, broad, slut, whore, shrew, easy piece, ape, trollop, vampire, witch, who is whammed, knocked up, lain, raped, screwed, fucked" (96). Scobie disagrees and is perhaps too defensive when he makes excuses for Cohen's depiction of women: "[i]t is true that Cohen seldom views a woman in any other role than as a passive fulfiller of sexual demands which are often extreme and bizarre; but it is equally true that he seldom regards other

men in any more favourable light" (*Leonard Cohen* 11).²² Crate comes closest to a moderate view when she states that while the woman "often becomes sacrifice . . . her degradation" is "relatively minor, and if not painless, frequently bloodless" (55).²³ While I would never suggest that Cohen endorses a generally "positive" view of women in his work, I would argue that his misogyny has less to do with any deliberate attack on women than it does with their necessary marginalization in a body of work with a different concern at its centre: the life of the male artist-figure and his own self-creation. As Scobie argues, "Cohen's vision is so completely self-centred that there is no room in it for *any* individualized personality, male or female, other than his own" (*Leonard Cohen* 11). While it is not always clear whether Cohen's work is the story of Cohen as an artist or of the story of the artist in general, his view of the work being "completely self-centred" is a sound one. Cohen's artist-figure's conquests of women, when viewed in the larger context of the artist theme and its centrality to the work in general, become incarnations of the recurrent phases of apprenticeship where they might otherwise be viewed primarily as direct violations of female dignity.

Clearly, Cohen's artist-figure places more value in art than he does in satisfactory relationships with women and, while he reaps the benefits of artistic production, he often suffers the consequences of loneliness and isolation—as the poet in "Queen Victoria and

²²While Scobie may be right in general terms, there are many examples of men in Cohen's writings who are anything but "passive fulfiller[s] of sexual demands." One such example is Krantz, in *The Favourite Game*, an individual in his own right, and an active and intelligent participant in his conversations with Breavman.

²³While Crate is right to point out that women are frequently sacrificed in Cohen's art, one ought to acknowledge that they often choose this sacrifice themselves, as in the case of Joan of Arc, whose sacrifice is not only "bloodless," but perhaps even glorious in its celebration of selflessness.

Me" remarks, "I'm not much nourished by modern love" (*Stranger Music* 60). Cohen insinuates that traditional courtly and neo-platonic modes provide a convenient aesthetic framework for depictions of the artist-figure in love. But these traditional modes also detract from an artist's power to self-create. The traditional impulse in Cohen inspires a degree of loyalty to traditional models while the needs of the modern artist-figure lead him to undermine and subvert tradition. The artistic vocation, in Cohen's work, condemns the artist-figure to an endless cycle which always ensures creativity but condemns the artist to a transient life with few lasting connections. What this means, ultimately, is that Cohen's artist-figure sacrifices love for a place in the "Tower of Song" and, while this brings a certain promise of immortality through art—"Everybody knows that you live forever when you've done a line or two" ("Everybody Knows")—it still does little to alleviate the loneliness that accompanies the life in art:

I said to Hank Williams, 'How lonely does it get?'

Hank Williams hasn't answered yet

but I hear him coughing all night long,

a hundred floors above me in the tower of song. ("Tower of Song," *I'm*

Your Man)

Chapter Three

The Artist-figure in the Social Realm

The artist-figure moves beyond the initial inner conflicts of his creative temperament through an acceptance of his artistic calling. Having attained this very limited degree of mastery, the artist-figure is drawn into new struggles as he strives to embrace his role of artist in the public world. Beyond the confines of the romantic love relationship, which usually involves the artist and a single beloved, there awaits a whole new series of challenges, a social environment, which confronts the artist-figure both with material to represent creatively, and with significant obstacles to the fulfilment of his calling. As the artist-figure enters the social realm, he will naturally find himself initially confronted with the most immediate and pragmatic concerns of the world, and this chapter focuses upon issues that involve the artist-figure's struggle to reconcile his art, and his impulse to self-create, with his role as a social and historical commentator, with the allurements of fame, and with the formation of a social conscience that is compatible with the artistic vocation in general. The essential vocational conflicts for the artist-figure in the social realm derive largely from an incompatibility between the artist-figure's vocational need to put selfish concerns first and the necessary selflessness demanded by social activism.

Cohen's own status as a popular culture icon of considerable significance problematizes any attempt by a reader to separate his life from the lives of the artists depicted in his works, the majority of which are typified by a fundamentally lyrical and personal thrust. Nowhere are such distinctions between author and poetic voice more

difficult to identify than in Cohen's writings about the artist-figure in the social realm. This problem arises from a reader's recognition, not only of the degree to which contemporary artists are judged by their responses to issues in the present-day world, but also of the degree to which Cohen's portrayals of artist-figures in the social realm are representative of the predicaments which he himself, as a socially significant artist, has encountered throughout the duration of his much publicized career.²⁴ Cohen critics have often attempted to demarcate the boundary between Cohen, the writer, and the various incarnations of his literary selves. Al Purdy draws a half distinction between Cohen and his poetic voices:

You adopt, for a poem's purposes, a particular way of thinking or feeling, then write the poem. And if you believe this suspension of personal identity and belief is possible and desirable, then the poet is in large degree an actor who plays many parts; but when an actor is so skilful, you can't always tell the difference between acting and fakery. (9)

Michael Ondaatje also recognizes that, while Cohen's writings are often articulations of clearly personal experiences and emotions, they are also often meant to document the lives of individuals who are largely fictional:

We have seen Cohen as the catalyst and major figure in the poems on himself and his friends and as the brains behind their transformations to

²⁴The number of works published on Cohen and his popular persona is substantial. While these works, at times, substitute excessive praise for quality scholarship, they are often quite valuable for the insights they give into Cohen, the "man." Two of the most noteworthy recent works include Dorman's and Rawlins' *Leonard Cohen: Prophet of the Heart* and Fournier's *Take This Waltz: A Celebration of Leonard Cohen*.

legend. But there are also poems that depict a totally mythic world where the personae (no matter how much they still sound like Cohen) are part of another era. (13)

As I have argued in my Introduction, the portrait-of-the-artist in Cohen's work is created in a largely self-conscious and self-reflexive manner. With regards to any incarnation of the artist-figure in Cohen's work, especially concerning the development of a public persona and social consciousness, the reader cannot help but feel the overbearing presence of Cohen himself—his fictional creations are so closely allied with well-known biographical facts. Cohen's life and social views must necessarily be taken into account as a factor in his presentations of the artist-figure, especially those touching issues involving an acceptance of fame and social responsibility in the context of the artistic vocation. For these reasons, my examination of the artist-figure in relation to the public realm will bring the person of Leonard Cohen into the discussion more prominently than in my discussion of other phases in the artist-figure's development.

The specific social concerns of Cohen's artist-figures are difficult to unite behind a general political philosophy. Like many of the poets, novelists, and song-writers of Cohen's day, his artist-figures often speak out as proponents of social change and ally themselves with distinctly liberal values. On the other hand, the same artist voices that champion these values tend to be staunch defenders of traditional beliefs and ideals. In one respect, these poetic voices declare themselves to be in favour of a departure from perceived injustices— "Everybody knows the deal is rotten: Old Black Joe's still picking cotton for your ribbons and bows" ("Everybody Knows," *I'm Your Man*). At the same

time, however, these voices reveal a profound sense of loss when they contemplate the costs of social revolution, as in poems like "Queen Victoria and Me," where the poet likens his outlook on the world to that of the Queen of England during the colonial period:

Queen Victoria . . .

Let us be two severe giants

(not less lonely for our partnership) . . .

who turn up unwelcome at every World's Fair

heavy with proverb and correction

confusing the star-dazed tourists

with our incomparable sense of loss. (*Flowers for Hitler* 105)²⁵

In this poem, the artist-figure's expression is metaphorically disguised as "proverb," evoking Biblical tradition, and the "discolour[ation]" of "test tubes," recalling the Victorian age of scientific discovery; both images are in sharp contrast to the more revolutionary acts of prophecy and soldiering performed by other of Cohen's artist-figures. The speaker in "Queen Victoria and Me" is not like the "star-dazed tourists" who see tradition and history as a monument. Rather, he still lives largely in history, and the age of radical social change makes him feel an "incomparable sense of loss."

It is not always necessary to leap from work to work to locate a conflicted stance within the social commentary of Cohen's artist-figures. A recent song, "Democracy,"

²⁵Cohen, in fact, entirely blurs the boundaries of social conscience by portraying Queen Victoria, not in her usual role of stern leader of an oppressive empire, but rather as a victim with a full range of human emotions. Here, the very social change that seeks to undo the wrongs of the past has created a new victim.

offers a brief survey of many of the things that made America "great," at once promoting social change, by revealing the ills of a sick society and announcing that "Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.," and mourning the loss of a better age (*The Future*). The speaker of the song envisions a kind of new "Democracy" emerging from, among other things, "the ashes of the gay." While this line at first appears to be making reference solely to the plight of the homosexual community in America in the age of A.I.D.S., one might also detect a kind of nostalgia for the "gay" social world of turn-of-the-century America, for parties like those made legendary in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald, for the American inner cities that bustled with optimism and excitement during the age of prohibition and industrial expansion and, after years of social decay (not to mention riots like those in Cohen's adopted home of Los Angeles), now lie in "ashes." A nostalgia for an era of optimism comes across in the verse which invokes the American culture of the mid-twentieth century. "It's coming from the silence / on the dock of the bay," is, in part, a reference to the hit song entitled "Dock of the Bay," where, appropriately a "silence" now prevails. The American car culture of the fifties is seen with a similar sense of nostalgia: the once "brave" and "bold . . . heart of Chevrolet" is now "battered," in a decaying America with its "wars against disorder" and "sirens night and day."

Often, Cohen's artist-figures show their liberal values by affirming social action to uplift the weaker elements in society: in "Please Don't Pass Me By," the speaker, who directly addresses his audience from a stage—"I see you sitting there deep in your velvet seats"—tells of the plight of a blind street-person in New York City, who wears a "cardboard placard" reading, "Please don't pass me by / I am blind as you can see / I've

been blinded totally / Please don't pass me by" (*Live Songs*). But for every plea by an artist-figure to right social wrongs, there is one, like that in "Disguises," which partly affirms the old order:

I am sorry that the rich man must go
and his house become a hospital.
I loved his wine, his contemptuous servants,
His ten-year-old ceremonies. (*Flowers for Hitler* 139)

Here, the speaker both reveals that he is an artist-figure and infuses his nostalgia with a sense of irony when he says of his memories, "[y]ou are all my comfort . . . as I disgrace my style" (141). Cohen's artist-figures are often highly ironic when they speak of tradition. This not only emphasizes their partly contradictory stance, but also reveals a general irony in the pose of the socially conscious artist-figure: the forms and experiences of the past are the very ones that the artist-figure redirects as a revolutionary at war with tradition.

In "Story of Isaac" we find another example of an artist-figure depicted, simultaneously, as a social revolutionary, and as an adherent to traditional beliefs and values. Here, the speaker makes an overt political statement when he says,

You who build these altars now
to sacrifice the children,
you must not do it any more.
A scheme is not a vision
and you never have been tempted

by a demon or a god. (*Songs from a Room*)

In a live performance of this song, in 1972, Cohen introduced the piece by announcing to the audience that "this is for those who would sacrifice one generation on behalf of another." perhaps wishing his song to offer commentary on the injustice of the Vietnam war, or any of the other numerous and highly charged political issues of the day (*Live Songs*). "Story of Isaac" casts its speaker, didactically, in the role of social revolutionary and creates a portrait-of-the-artist-as-social-reformer, as one who uses his art to bring about worldly change. But this is a role which Cohen's artist-figures, and indeed Cohen himself, never seem able to embrace comfortably. In "Story of Isaac," the speaker may propose a form of social change, but he does it through the use of a traditional biblical myth from *Genesis*. And the view of human nature put forth in the final stanza, despite the speaker's initial appeals to liberal values, is clearly right-wing in an individualistic sense:

When it all comes down to dust,
 I will kill you if I must
 I'll help you if I can.
 When it all comes down to dust,
 I will help you if I must
 I'll kill you if I can. (140)

The philosophical stance and traditional imagery of this lyric, whatever its ironic leanings, clearly reveal the poetic voice of the song, despite its revolutionary ideals, to be fixed in the same tradition of violence from which its revolutionary ideals depart.

Cohen's artist-figure, then, expresses an ambiguous attitude toward his role as a catalyst to social change. A major problem for the artist-figure is found in his attempt to achieve reconciliation between his own perceived need to comment on his social environment and his indebtedness and attachment to tradition, literary and otherwise. But the social view of Cohen, revealed through the varying stances of his artist-figures, creates an irreconcilable problem only if one adheres to the reductive political dichotomy of left versus right; as Cohen's artist-figures reveal, an understanding of social issues is not necessarily that simple. Both left and right form part of a larger social context and it is not necessarily important for an artist-figure to ally himself with either side. "Democracy" is the Cohen work that most fully embodies this social vision. On the one hand, the artist-prophet speaker acknowledges that, within a large social environment like America, "the machinery for change" requires a full "range" of ideas and beliefs; America's problem goes beyond politics, it involves a "spiritual thirst," and solutions should not be sought in the political arena alone:

It's coming to America first
 The cradle of the best and of the worst
 It's here they've got the range, and the machinery for change
 And it's here they've got the spiritual thirst. (*The Future*)

At the same time, however, this song expresses the idea that the appropriate stance for the artist-figure-as-social-commentator can be difficult to define. He can be at once "sentimental" and indebted to tradition, contemptuous of the world built on traditions of injustice and violence, and willing to admit complicity in the state of affairs at hand:

I'm sentimental, if you know what I mean
I love the country but I can't stand the scene
And I'm neither left or right, I'm just staying home tonight
Getting lost in that hopeless little screen. (*The Future*)

Despite having reached the peak of his popular success in a time when social change is a priority for many artists, Cohen refuses to let specific social concerns become the focal point of his artistic vision. Occasionally, his artist-figures *do* speak out about certain social issues, but a more significant focus of their art in the social realm is their revelation of a more universal truth about the society at large, without necessarily proposing a blueprint for change. The primary concern for Cohen's artist-figure in the social realm is not specific social issues, but rather the issue of being an artist and the successful navigation of the problems this stance presents for the artistic vocation.

One conflict that social activism creates for the artistic vocation is expressed by the artist-figure narrator in *Death of a Lady's Man* who reveals that, while he "wept for the injustice in the world," the same social revolution which seeks to undo this injustice has changed the role of the artist, perhaps for the worse (12):

The bombs, flame-throwers, and all the shit have destroyed more than just the trees and villages. They have also destroyed the stage. Did you think that your profession would escape the general destruction? There is no more stage. There are no more footlights. You are among the people. Then be modest. (197)

In the above passage, which contemplates the "destruction" of the "stage," the artist-speaker identifies an essential concern he encounters in the social sphere: the artist-figure, to be active in the public realm, must descend from the "Ivory Tower," to reinvoke Beebe's term, and join those who traditionally form his audience. While this immersion in the social realm brings the artist closer to his subject, it nevertheless removes a certain special status from his vocation. As Beebe remarks, "the artist [was] enabled to find an exalted position from which he could look *down* on society and to which readers could look *up* in search of truth and guidance. It is this which made the artist a hero . . ." (37). An artist who can no longer enjoy the "exalted position" of the stage loses the ability to ascend to a position of moral superiority over his audience and thereby achieve heroism. This kind of heroism is part of what draws the artist into an active social role. Heroism involves a recognition, on the part of the artist, that his heightened sense of creativity and communicative power carry with them a degree of social responsibility. As Victor Brombert argues in *The Hero in Literature*, "the hero . . . is the poetic projection of man as he unavoidably faces the meaning or lack of meaning of life" (12). An artist-as-hero, then, is faced with the difficult task of translating the largest concerns of humanity into terms which are socially significant; this is the manner in which the artist-figure offers "guidance."²⁶

Frank Davey argues that Cohen portrays the artist in a stance of "moral non-responsibility," but I would argue that Cohen's artist-figures are often greatly concerned

²⁶It is significant to note, however, the frequency with which Cohen satirizes social activists who offer "guidance." Consider the maniacal portrait of F. in *Beautiful Losers*, or the mad-prophet speaker in "The Future."

with attaining the heroic status that accompanies their important social role, and are keenly aware of their social responsibilities, as long as one does not define those responsibilities by requiring the artist-figure to take on the role of commentator on specific, temporally fixed, social issues. Cohen's artist-figure prefers to comment on larger, universal social themes. While the artist who confines himself to commentary on specific and exclusive social issues finds himself directing his creative energies entirely in an outward direction, the focus on universal themes permits the artist-figure to be more personally involved in his commentary and, when these themes are large enough, they contain sufficient room for the artist-figure to self-create alongside his social commentary. When the artist-figure directs his attention at universal issues, he often becomes involved in a personal and rhetorical battle with a history that restricts the romantic artist-role of moral crusader and revolutionary. Cohen's work abounds with images of history as a numbing force on human consciousness: "History is a needle / for putting men asleep" (*Flowers for Hitler* 27); "History has shown us how men love to muse and loaf and make love in places formerly the scene of much violent activity" (*Beautiful Losers* 53).²⁷ The artist who is attentive solely to mythologies of the past at the expense of the social issues of the present is seen as somehow anti-heroic: he must maintain a keen awareness of the past and simultaneously live in the present. As Cohen's poem "Independence" makes clear: "I thought that heroes meant us / I have been reading too much history . . . I think no one has ever slept but he / who gathers the past into stories" (*Flowers for Hitler* 100).

²⁷This is the impulse behind F.'s decision to purchase the factory in *Beautiful Losers* and turn it into a playground, of sorts.

Despite the irony that often surrounds their characterization, Cohen's artist-figures, in the metaphorical disguise of traditional men of action, including the role of soldier, are depicted in an heroic light: "Field Commander Cohen, he was our most important spy, wounded in the line of duty . . ." ("Field Commander Cohen," *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*). The contemporary artist-figure finds himself in a curious predicament: in order to be cast in the role of man of action, of hero, he must descend from his "exalted position" and engage his society on its own level, the only level extant after the "destruction" of the "stage." But to become a hero in this sense contradicts the traditional definition of "exalted" artist as hero put forth by Brombert. This inherent contradiction in the role of the socially conscious artist may explain why Cohen's artist-figures so often seem caught between the desire to participate in revolutionary activities and to honour tradition. Cohen's artist-figure cannot openly embrace the role of the revolutionary if that role is in conflict with what it traditionally means to be an artist. The second verse of "Field Commander Cohen," by means of yet another internal dialogue, reveals that the artist-figure's selfish needs and concerns put him in conflict with his social role:

I never asked but I heard you cast your lot along with the poor
 How come I overheard your prayer
 That you be this and nothing more:
 Some grateful, faithful woman's favourite singing millionaire
 The patron saint of envy and the grocer of despair
 Working for the Yankee dollar? (*New Skin for the Old Ceremony*)

Field Commander Cohen's cause as a champion of the "poor" is undermined when, inwardly, he longs for the traditional "exalted" position of the artist, even if, in this example, that heroic stance of the artist-figure is compromised by his desiring that "exalted" position for the material comforts it offers. Here, the revolutionary stance of the artist, and of Field Commander Cohen, is not only in conflict with the artist-figure's heroic impulse, but also with many of his more selfish desires.

A further complication in the life of the socially conscious artist is also related to an artist's tendency to place himself outside his environment. On an aesthetic level, the artist needs, at least to some degree, to place himself in a position of superiority to, or at least detachment from, his surroundings in order to represent them. As Beebe remarks, "[t]he ability to become detached is shared by artist-heroes" (8). Shaffner shows the developing artist to display a "self-reliance," and a "self-formation according to inner purpose" which emphasize the detached and individualistic tendencies of the artist-figure (18). In some Cohen passages, the voice speaks in a tone of detachment and superiority, indicating that it has performed social analysis, reached conclusions, and is ready to offer advice: "Why don't you come on back to the war? Don't be embarrassed. Why don't you come on back to the war? You can still get married" ("There is a War," *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*). A similarly authoritative and confident voice rings out in "What I'm Doing Here": after offering underhanded critiques of the world and its "mushroom cloud" and "atmosphere of torture," the speaker places himself in a position of moral superiority: "I wait / for each one of you to confess" (*Flowers for Hitler* 13). But this lyric also embodies the ambiguous stance of the poet in situations involving some attention to the

social conscience. On the one hand, the artist-figure immerses himself in the social environment of which he is a part, confessing his own guilt and complicity in the sins of the world. As Ondaatje argues, "Cohen shows us . . . evil by making himself the sacrificial guinea pig, revealing the inherent evils in himself" (36):

I do not know if the world has lied

I have lied

I do not know if the world has conspired against love

I have conspired against love

The atmosphere of torture is no comfort

I have tortured (*Flowers for Hitler* 13)

At the same time as the poet incriminates himself, however, he attempts to rise above the situation in which he is morally implicated in order to pass moral judgment. This difficult, almost schizophrenic, stance of the artist-figure in Cohen's work is articulated by Winfried Siemerling in *Discoveries of the Other*: the poet seeks "common ground and assures a communicable understanding inside a community" while, at the same time, the "function of the poet . . . would be to speak from outside the horizon of this knowledge and still be a part of it in a wider sense—to be the internal other of the communal self" (35). This model illustrates the predicament of so many of Cohen's artist-figures who are half inside and half outside their social environments: the apprentice lives in the world which hinders his acceptance of a unique calling; the artist in the romantic love relationship lives with a woman but finds that loving her hinders his creative processes; the artist with a social conscience must offer commentary, often critical, on the very world that makes his

vocation possible; the artist engaged in the creative process sacrifices his own present moment when involved in the act of recreating; and the artist that creates for God lives half in this world and half in the realm of gods and saints.

The artist-figure, in performing his social function, undermines his own position in the world and makes himself an outsider. Like the speaker in "Paper-Thin Hotel," who listens through the hotel "walls" to hear his beloved "making love" to another man, the artist-figure in society renders detached accounts of his environment translated through the mind and emotions of himself, mainstream-society's "other" (*Death of a Ladies' Man*). The account of the poet's eavesdropping in "Paper-Thin Hotel," reveals more about the poet's own inner world than it does about the activities in the adjacent room:

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 heard that love was out of my control. (*Death of a Ladies' Man*).

Cohen's artist-figures offer their most poignant descriptions of their social environment when they intermingle this kind of personal expression with outwardly directed commentary. The artist-figure needs to find personal relevance in his social commentary. When he finds this, he is not only true to his own vocation and self-creation, but also to his socially conscious art which, when fused with issues of personal relevance, attains a more involving mode of expression. There is a very strong sense of poetic self in Cohen's social commentaries, and one gets a strong impression of the personality of the voice behind the words. Cohen's song "The Future," for instance, creates a graphic critique of

the contemporary world by giving insights into the mind of the half-depraved / half-saint prophet figure who delivers the sermon:

Give me back my broken night
 my mirrored room, my secret life
 It's lonely here,
 there's no one left to torture. (*The Future*)

The speaker implicates himself in the world he condemns, not only revealing the complicity of the artist-figure in the sins of the society he is a part of, but also allowing the reader insight into the mind of a man driven half-mad by a world whose "future" is "murder."

The problems of the socially concerned artist-figure are compounded when Cohen's writings approach the subject of the Holocaust. Not only does this grand-scale tragedy burden the conscience of Cohen's artist-figures more than specific social issues, but it is also, because of its unparalleled scope, extremely difficult to represent artistically: it is too terrible to be contained in pre-existing metaphors. Nevertheless, this subject emerges repeatedly in Cohen's writings, and he devotes an entire book to the Holocaust: *Flowers for Hitler*. Norman Ravvin, in "Writing Around the Holocaust: Uncovering the Ethical Centre of *Beautiful Losers*," considers the Holocaust to lie at the ethical centre of Cohen's novel, which he claims offers the "suggestion that the outcome of any eroticized interest in victimization and the abuse of power must inevitably bring about total demoralization and spiritual death" (30). It is relatively simple to find reasons why Cohen might personally feel the need to explore the Holocaust in his work. This event might be difficult for any

poet living in the latter half of the twentieth-century to ignore entirely, especially if that poet, like Cohen, frequently ventures into a discussion of the ugliest side of human nature, hinted at by Ravvin. Also, Cohen may feel, as a Jewish poet, that he has some particular obligation to deal with this subject, especially considering its literary importance to his forerunners, most notably A. M. Klein, and to his close friend, Irving Layton, who would deal with the issue in his own poetry a few years after Cohen.

Cohen's treatment of the Holocaust, however, is anything but typical, and he mobilizes the ethical importance of this event to lend great depth to his probing of the darkest reaches of the human psyche, using the artist-figure as a vehicle for this exploration. Not surprisingly, Cohen's treatment of the Holocaust's profoundest themes, including horror, guilt, and social decay, occur alongside an ongoing concern with the issues of the artist-figure. Cohen uses the Holocaust to magnify the concerns of the artist, distorting them grotesquely, and making them larger than life. At times this has the effect of producing lyrics in which the grand-scale image of the Holocaust overshadows its accompanying subject; the Holocaust metaphor is so powerfully charged that the signifier can often eclipse the signified. Such is the case in "Poem" where images of "hot ovens" and the horror they evoke in one's historical consciousness clearly overshadow the lyric's love story of an artist-figure and a young woman:

During the first pogrom they
 Met behind the ruins of their homes—
 Sweet merchants trading: her love
 For a history full of poems

And in the furnace itself
 As the flames flamed higher,
 He tried to kiss her burning breasts
 As she burned in the fire. (*Let Us Compare Mythologies* 33)

More successful at depicting human situations not directly related to the Holocaust are poems which push the loaded Holocaust image into the background where it can comment less oppressively on the primary subject. In these instances, Cohen keeps explicit and graphic images from stealing too much attention away from the human situations they are helping to represent. In "The First Murder," we encounter a Holocaust poem in which the images are muted to permit much of the poem's "message" to be drawn by implication:

I've come home tired
 My boots are streaked with filth
 What good to preach
 it never happened
 to the bodies murdered in the field. (*Flowers for Hitler* 36)

On one level, this poem uses the psychological depiction of a Holocaust denier as a metaphor for the socially conscious artist questioning his vocation. The artist-figure in the public realm must "preach" to his crowd, and here the artist-figure muses over the value of such preaching. On the one hand, the speaker is questioning whether his social commentary has any real effect: "What good to preach"? At the same time, however, the speaker is justifying, to himself, both his own failure to "preach," and his indulgence in material comforts: "Tell the truth I've smoked myself / into love this innocent night." In

"Millennium," subtle Holocaust imagery is used to help represent the artist-figure's struggle to maintain an identity separate from his role of social commentator. The speaker remarks, in the opening lines of the poem, "This could be my little / book about love / if I wrote it," indicating the potential for crossover between the artist and the subject he represents (*Flowers for Hitler* 46). A passage later in the poem reveals that an artist's creations are representative, not only of his subject, but of himself as well: "Hours later I wondered / did she mean / don't mind *my* pain / or don't mind *her* pain?" The process of creation, for the artist-figure, involves constant second-guessing and an ongoing mediation between the self which is doing the representing, and the other which is being represented.

The Holocaust and its nearly limitless potential to encapsulate, in its powerful metaphors, almost any human theme, no matter how dark, gives Cohen a rich language for exploring the life of his artist-figure. If we agree with Whiteman that Cohen "use[s] . . . violence as" a "mirro[r] in which to observe the hidden processes of his own life," then the Holocaust is, no doubt, up to the task of reflecting themes of the largest magnitude. But Cohen's use of the Holocaust to explore the "hidden processes" of the artist-figure's "life" raises difficult ethical questions. As in the romantic love situation, where Cohen's artist-figure subjugates women to satisfy his creative needs, Cohen's treatment of the Holocaust could be said to exploit the victimization of others for the sake of fulfilling a tempting creative potential. The ethical stance of the socially conscious artist attempting to represent the Holocaust would be one of clear condemnation, a respect for facts, and a respect for the dead. But it is not always clear whom Cohen condemns in *Flowers for Hitler*, he fictionalizes his accounts very freely, and is more concerned, it might appear,

with exploring his subject for the sake of his own living, breathing artist-self than with the suffering of the millions of dead who provide him with a convenient backdrop for his story of the artist-life. Cohen faces the essential challenge of deciding whether to compromise "good" art for the sake of ethics, and he moves beyond this problem through his realization that the making of "good" art *is* the ethical choice. Cohen recognizes that a reader hardly need be told that the Holocaust was horrific both in its intent and in its scope: like his artist-figures, who eventually leave behind their role in the social realm for a more inner probing of their vocation and the nature of art—my subject for Chapter Four—Cohen puts art ahead of his role as social commentator, and, accordingly, he adds depth to the portrait of his artist-figure. Cohen, in his Holocaust poetry, does not restrict himself to an ethical depiction of the historical event and its surrounding implications; he feels free to fictionalize the Holocaust, to borrow its images and metaphors in his depiction of other situations, including many involving the artist-figure.

Despite the artist-figure's involvement with the grand-scale tragedy of the Holocaust, he is also willing to enter into the spotlight, or ascend the stage, for much less socially significant reasons. A less lofty, if not less powerful, allurements is that of fame and fortune.²⁸ Whereas the artist with a social conscience moves toward outward expression in the social realm primarily for the betterment of society, the artist who desires fame wishes his art to better his own stake in the world, to win him recognition, and to

²⁸A third, more cynical, possible reason for entering the public realm is revealed by Cohen in an interview: "In hindsight it seems like a mad decision that I was going to rectify my economic situation by becoming a singer" (*Songs from the Life of Leonard Cohen*).

raise him above society, not because he offers "truth and guidance," but because he is famous.

The attraction to fame, fortune, and power is a predominant theme in Cohen's rendering of the artist-figure. Breavman's early attraction to magic, art in disguise, comes about because of the power and fame such a career promises: "[h]e was dizzy with his new power" (*Favourite Game* 53). The narrator of *Beautiful Losers* also desires fame, power, and worldly recognition, at least until he realizes the effects they have upon F.:

I wanted to live in a folk song like Joe Hill. I wanted to weep for the innocent people my bomb would have to maim . . . I wanted to be against the rich . . . I wanted my face carried in Peking, a poem written down my shoulder . . . I wanted to confront the machines of Broadway. (24-25)²⁹

In "The Stranger Song," the artist-figure is envious of Joseph who, some might argue, stumbled into immense fame by chance: "Like any dealer he was / watching for the card that is so high and wild he'll never need to / deal another. He was just some Joseph looking for a manger" (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*). Cohen's artist-figure may see fame as an escape, as a way to somehow live above or beyond the predicaments of the artistic vocation. But whatever their reasons for desiring fame, Cohen's artist-figures eventually recognize that it has its negative side as well. "Chelsea Hotel" provides a vision of the

²⁹The artist-figure, in another passage later in this chapter from *Beautiful Losers*, reveals that he seeks popular-culture fame, the kind that a musical career would later bring to Cohen himself, with a clear reference to Bob Dylan: "I wanted to come out of a mining town with rude manners. I wanted to rush across America in a sealed train . . . the only white man whom the Negroes will accept at the treaty convention" (25).

famous artist which shows him distanced from the world, a member of a shrinking crowd, and caught up in the pursuit of sex and material possessions:

I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel

You were talking so brave and so sweet

Giving me head on the unmade bed

While the limousines waited in the street.

And those were the reasons and that was New York

We were running for the money and the flesh

And that was called 'love' for the workers in song

Probably still is for those of them left. (*New Skin for the Old Ceremony*)³⁰

Here, the negative consequence of the pursuit of fame for its own sake is twofold: not only is the kind of life-style depicted in the song self-destructive (Cohen wrote the song to mark the death of his friend Janis Joplin), but it also leads the artist away from his vocation which demands that art not be viewed primarily as a means to material gain.

Just as, at one extreme, the artist transforms his concern with the social conscience into a form of heroism, so can the excessive pursuit of fame and power misdirect the artistic vocation and lead to a vision of the artist as tyrant and mad-man: Ondaatje argues that, while some of Cohen's "social poems" discuss "the wounded, or the mad, or the religious fanatic," other of his works transform these same figures into "heroes," and, I would argue, tyrants (15). In *Beautiful Losers*, F.'s madness stems largely from his

³⁰The loneliness of fame, here reserved for the "workers in song," is felt by another artist-speaker distanced from the world in the "Tower of Song": "I see you standing on the other side / I don't know how the river got so wide" (*I'm Your Man*).

excessive pursuit of power and control: as Scobie argues, "[p]olitics offers power, and power is always F.'s distraction" (112). F.'s political power is much the same as the control a famous artist might possess over his following, or the position of power an artist has over the subject he is submitting to his act of creative representation. And this kind of power is, indeed, almost magical. As F. states, "I lead men too easily: my fatal facility" (190). But fame and power for their own sake, as F. discovers, lead one down a false path. As Norman Ravvin suggests, "F. is a kind of puppetmaster" who eventually comes to "view his own commitment to politics and social transformation as a fraud . . ." (26).

Ultimately, Cohen's artist-figures fail to find their social posture an entirely comfortable one. And, although early on in the story of the artist the magic and power of art appear to the apprentice to be worthy in and of themselves, the eventual achievement of fame and social relevance, perhaps the logical end of the magic and power of art pushed to their extreme in the public realm, falls short of completely satisfying the artist-figure. In "Tower of Song," we catch a glimpse of an artist who has apparently achieved fame and social significance: "I was born like this, I had no choice. / I was born with the gift of a golden voice" (*I'm Your Man*). But despite his achievements, this same speaker focuses his primary attention upon his own advancing age—"My friends are gone and my hair is grey"—and the impending judgment that death, and not the world, will bring down—"there's a mighty judgment coming, but I may be wrong" (*I'm Your Man*). The profoundly spiritual and religious aspects of Cohen's work, the subject of Chapter Five, depart from the social themes which are firmly grounded in the pragmatic world. It is

God, I will argue, that Cohen's artist figure focuses upon when fame and worldly recognition cannot lift him high enough.

One lesson the artist must learn as part of the development of the social conscience, is that "self-development," as Beebe calls it, is "a necessary preliminary to the improvement of society" (37). The partial rejection of the social role of the artist in Cohen's work stems from a realization, by these artist-figures, that their own personal and artistic development must lead them to strike poses other than that of social commentator. The speakers in Cohen's work express their recognition of the limited value of art as social commentary through ironic statements which undercut the social role of the artist-self. As Ondaatje claims, "[i]t is only in the lyrics where" Cohen "is able to inject just the smallest touch of irony and self-consciousness of himself as a romantic, aware of his pose, that he is completely successful" (19). In "First We Take Manhattan," for instance, the artist-speaker, who "live[d] for music" and "tr[ie]d to change the system from within," can lash out against the superficial standards of society: "I don't like your fashion business, mister. I don't like these drugs that keep you thin," and a couple of lines later announce to his beloved, "I love your body and your spirit and your clothes" (*I'm Your Man*). In "Democracy" the speaker can launch a scathing critique on American society and at the same time diffuse the seriousness of his political commentary by announcing to his beloved, "Baby, we'll be making love again / We'll be going down so deep that the river's gonna weep / And the mountain's gonna shout 'Amen!'" (*The Future*).

The artist-figure in Cohen's work is never entirely comfortable or successful in his social role. While the developing artist might at first see fame and worldly recognition as

a final point of arrival in his process of learning, eventually these entrapments lose their charm. These same artist-figures eventually find that their art cannot achieve its fullest potential if it restricts itself to a discussion of social issues alone. In another phase, Cohen's artist-figure moves beyond the limiting public sphere, tempers his representations with a touch of humour and irony, recognizes that his life as social commentator was just another phase of apprenticeship, and moves on to a deeper contemplation and exploration of his vocation.

Chapter Four

The Artist-figure's Sense of Duty, Sacrifice, and Martyrdom

The artist who finds only partial fulfilment of his vocation in the outside world—in the romantic love relationship and in the broader social realm—will necessarily enter into a more personal probing of the nature of his vocation. Thus far, I have argued that the artistic life, in Cohen's view, involves living out an intense personal vocation in relation to the outside world which both propels and problematizes the individual concerns of the artist-figure. In Keith Garebian's view, *The Favourite Game*, Cohen's purest work in terms of its conformity to the traditions of the *Künstlerroman*, tells the story of the artist from the earliest phase of apprenticeship through to full manifestation in the social realm:

Breavman . . . celebrates life and art with voluptuous self-absorption. Possessed of the egotistical sublime, Breavman makes intensity a level of perfection, and his devotion to poetry and sex are manifestations of the intensity he seeks, beginning, of course, with himself, running into his women, and spilling into the society he so detests. (31)

The Favourite Game draws to a close before we can get a sense of the degree of fulfilment Breavman derives from his artistic stance in the world. My previous chapters have continued this story by showing other manifestations of the artist-figure in Cohen's work and demonstrating the degree to which the modern artist's role in the world is problematized by the very things he opposes, desires, and strives to represent. The conflicts inherent in the artistic vocation, however, extend beyond the dichotomy of the artist as individual versus the outside world: at least as significant are those conflicts which

are uncovered when one probes the more personal aspects of the artistic vocation, namely the concerns which come to the foreground when the artist attempts to reconcile his vocation with the aesthetic demands of his art. These vocational concerns include (1) the artist-figure's attempt to maintain his individuality when using traditional modes of expression, (2) the prominent concept of duty attached to the artistic vocation, (3) the necessity of sacrificing the present moment for the sake of creating art, (4) the personal cost of choosing a "life in art," and (5) the problem of style. While these concerns are, of course, not entirely divorced from the more external issues of the artistic stance, they are, nevertheless, more closely allied with an individual artist's attempt to harmonize his own sense of individuality with the demands of his vocation than they are with any form of mediation between the self and the external other.

Cohen's artist-figures explore these concerns of vocation most frequently alongside themes of martyrdom, duty, and sacrifice, all of which contribute to the notion of an artist-figure performing a kind of service through his art. Perhaps the most important form of "service" is that associated with martyrdom. Cohen's artist-figures, and sometimes the subjects they represent, become martyrs when they sacrifice a degree of individuality for the sake of conformity to the aesthetic requirements of art. There are different kinds of martyrs in Cohen's work, and the most pronounced dividing line between types can be drawn between others who are martyrs in the mind of the artist-figure, and artist-figures who themselves become martyrs. Cohen's early writings display a preoccupation with martyrs of the first variety who, usually, appear to represent some sort of ideal towards which the artist-figure strives. Catherine Tekakwitha, the only character in *Beautiful*

Losers who, on the surface, appears to go against the general trend of debasement and decay, provides one such example, and her journey towards a kind of twisted martyrdom, culminating in sainthood, preoccupies the novel's narrator, whose obsession for Catherine is matched in intensity only by her own obsessive self-punishment: "Is that what you cause me to feel Catherine Tekakwitha? But aren't you dead? How do I get close to a dead saint?" (122). The narrator's act of writing tells the story of Catherine Tekakwitha's martyrdom and is a conscious striving towards the mysteries that she represents: "I've come after you, Catherine Tekakwitha. I want to know what goes on under that rosy blanket . . . I fell in love with a religious picture of you" (3). Catherine's peculiar martyrdom serves, not only as a false-ideal for the novel's spiritually starved narrator, but also as a catalyst to the narrator's creation of an art object, and, in this sense, the heroine becomes a martyr to art. A less perverse expression of the same idea is expressed in "Joan of Arc," where the lover, who equates himself with "fire," longs for the higher ideals embodied by his beloved, the young woman:

"And who are you?" she sternly spoke,
to the one beneath the smoke.

"Why, I'm fire," he replied,

"And I love your solitude, I love your pride." (*Songs of Love and Hate*)

The speaker's intense quest for higher ideals, for "love and light," is the cause to which this incarnation of Joan of Arc is martyred, and she gives herself freely to be consumed by the poet, who creates a poem out of the experience:

It was deep into his fiery heart

he took the dust of Joan of Arc,
and then she clearly understood
if he was fire, oh, then she was wood.

On one level Cohen's artist-figures relate to these martyrs in much the same manner as they relate to women in the romantic love relationship. In Chapter Two I argued that the artist-figure desires the life offered by the love relationship, a life he cannot fully submit to because of its incompatibility with his artistic vocation. These female martyrs, then, can be seen as representative of a higher ideal sought by the poet. But to achieve martyrdom in the sense that these women do would be to attain final sainthood, and this, as I have argued, would mean the end of art for the artist. So, the artist can experience this form of martyrdom only second hand, but this necessary distance permits the survival of the artist and the creation of aesthetic objects.

The very fact, however, that Cohen's artist-figures must surrender, for the sake of art, their own chance to become martyrs to the cause of "love and light" shows that these same artist-figures are themselves making a kind of sacrifice. The willingness to make this sacrifice derives from the compelling sense of duty felt by the artist-figure, and the surrender of the self to a code of honour creates the second and more important kind of martyr in Cohen's work: the artist-figure as martyr to his own art. This second form of martyrdom is, however, more self-contradictory and complex than the kind displayed by Catherine Tekakwitha and Joan of Arc, who submit relatively unambiguously to their causes. When Cohen's artist-figures are depicted as martyrs, the concept of *duty* is frequently evoked, making the artist-figure a man of action, and rendering his form of

martyrdom less passive than that of the "other" martyrs. In the Christian lexicon, Cohen's artist-martyrs would be men of action and crusaders, where their subject-martyrs, like Joan of Arc, would adhere to their religious beliefs and suffer quietly in the face of opposition. The concept of duty allows these artist-figures to take on active roles, and to be cast in the metaphorical disguises of sons carrying on the obligations of the father, of soldiers fighting for a cause, and of prisoners defiant in the face of unjust punishment. These men of duty are bound by strict ceremonial codes of conduct, as the artist-figure is bound to the aesthetic requirements of art, and they are martyrs because they defend their vocation of artist, and commentator on society, in the face of opposition from the outside world. As Albert L. Guerard argues, "martyrs were such only because they differed from the majority, fought against the majority, and not seldom were crushed by the majority" (277).

The loyal son with a family tradition to protect is a recurrent motif in Cohen's writing. When this motif occurs, we can usually see it as representative of the artist's struggle to preserve the traditions which inform his art, and to defend his vocation against the many challenges he confronts, both from within and from outside. In "The Night Comes On," the artist's feeling of loyalty to his vocation is told through the story of a dying father pleading with his son to fight on and tell the "truth" about the enemy:³¹

There was this terrible sound and my father went down
with a terrible wound in his side.

³¹ As Cohen remarks in *Songs from the Life of Leonard Cohen*, the most "important" function of art is to "tell the truth."

He said, "Try to go on, take my books, take my gun
and remember, my son, how they lied." (*Various Positions*)

An early scene in *The Favourite Game* shows Breavman, the budding artist, cast in the role of a loyal son, and, when his father "pin[s]" the "medals . . . on Breavman's sweater," we again see familial and military images invoked to represent the way that the artistic vocation is a kind of "cause" (21). This "cause," however, is not always glamorous, and it is frequently one that the artist is at least partially unconscious of.³² Cohen reworks this scene from *The Favourite Game* in a later song entitled "The Captain," but, in this instance, the young artist receiving the "medals" is not as enthusiastic as Breavman:

The Captain called me to his bed, he fumbled for my hand.

"Take these silver bars," he said. "I'm giving you command."

"Command of what? There's no one here. There's only you and me.

All the rest are dead, or in retreat, or with the enemy." (*Various Positions*)

To some degree, then, Cohen's artist-figures, when cast in roles obligating them to defend tradition, become martyrs to a lost cause. This stance differs from those of the female martyrs who give themselves to the ambiguous higher cause of "love and light"—perhaps union with God or the attainment of an "ideal love"—and this difference is made plain in "Last Year's Man," in which the speaker, a soldier compelled by duty and an artist struggling with his own vocation (in the opening verse he sits at his desk with writer's block) can only stay with Joan of Arc for "a little while":

³²As the artist-figure in "The Captain" remarks, "I don't even know whose side we fought on, or what for" (*Various Positions*).

I met a lady, she was playing with her soldiers in the dark.

One by one, she had to tell them all that her name was Joan of Arc.

I was in that army, yes, I stayed a little while.

I want to thank you, Joan of Arc, for treating me so well. (*Songs of Love and Hate*)

And any that doubt the lack of glory associated with this second kind of martyrdom need only ponder the situation of the poet in "The Old Revolution" whose duty and social conscience compel him, after much effort and against his own desires, to become a prisoner so that he might represent the Holocaust aesthetically: "I finally broke into the prison . . . I can't pretend I still felt very much like singing / as they carried the bodies away" (*Songs from a Room*).

Cohen's artist-figures make a sacrifice by placing themselves, or allowing themselves to be placed, in a position where their vocation demands that they perform a kind of duty . This sacrifice entails a loss of freedom insofar as the artist must behave according to a certain code of honour.³³ It also means that the artist must sacrifice the "pure" immediate experience of the world for the sake of his art. Just as the poet in the romantic relationship cannot ever give himself fully to the experience if he is always attempting to translate the experience into an aesthetic object, so does the artist, with a duty to his vocation, necessarily change the nature of any experience he has when he sees

³³The artist-figure in "The Traitor," despite his being accused of betraying his fellows, upholds his honour and devotes himself to making artistic representations of his beloved, saying, "daily I renew my idle duty / . . . I praise her beauty / and people call me 'traitor' to my face" (*Recent Songs*).

it through the eyes of an outsider seeking something to represent artistically. Sandra Djwa argues that "Cohen's dominant theme" is "the relationship between experience and art, and more specifically the suggestion that the value of experience is to be found in the art or 'beauty' distilled from it . . ." (33). In this situation, the artist-figure necessarily becomes an outsider, a kind of martyr, who sacrifices, albeit to a limited degree, the present moment for the promise of the aesthetic object that the present moment might become. As Michael Ondaatje reveals, "the poet in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*," and, I would argue, in nearly all Cohen's writings, "presents himself as the translator, the magician, the maker of golems" (11). The poet in "I'd Like to Read" reveals the distance that his vocation has put between him and the world when he states, "Where are the poems / that led me away / from everything I loved" (*The Energy of Slaves* 15). Three poems from *The Spice-Box of Earth* emphasize the distance that grows between the artist and his immediate experience of world when he takes on the role of translator and outsider. In "The Flowers That I Left in the Ground," the speaker shows the way his own personal identity, his own "body," has become lost amid the poems he creates about his experiences: "Gold, ivory, flesh, love, God, blood, moon— / I have become the expert of the catalogue . . . my body has become a museum" (4-5). In "I Wonder How Many People in This City," the poet shows how the nature of the artistic vocation, and its insistence that the artist render experience into art, draws a distinction between the way the poet and other members of society experience the same events:

Late at night when I look out at the buildings

I swear I see a face in every window

looking back at me,
 and when I turn away
 I wonder how many go back to their desks
 and write this down. (11)

In "The Genius," the speaker, whom we might take to be an artist-figure because his willingness to shape-shift suggests one who plays roles either as fictional writer or actor—demonstrates that it is not only the present moment that the artist must sacrifice; even in the act of creating an aesthetic object, the poet must surrender his own sense of identity and take on the role of others. In this poem, the Jewish poet becomes an "apostate," a "banker," a "doctor," and a prisoner at "Dachau," taking on many roles, though always remaining a "jew" (78-79).³⁴ Martyrdom, for Cohen's artist-figures, involves complete immersion by the artist in a role that necessarily distances him from the world around him. Much in the manner of martyrs in the traditional sense, who are separated from their society by their willingness to sacrifice the self, the artist-figure, through adherence to vocational demands, puts himself in a position uncomfortably outside the social circle and finds himself making a sacrifice as well:

I don't believe you'd like it,
 You wouldn't like it here.
 There's not much entertainment
 And the judgments are severe. (*The Future*)

³⁴In the song, "I'm Your Man," Cohen's speaker approaches this theme and gives it a more comic rendering, offering to take on the various roles of "doctor," "boxer," "driver," and "father" (*I'm Your Man*).

Here, in "Waiting for the Miracle," Cohen offers a portrait-of-the-artist caught in the uncomfortable position that sacrifice brings about; the speaker is capable of heightened perception, yet bitter about both the harsh judgments of his society, and the loneliness and isolation of his vocation: "I waited half my life away."

As Patricia Morley points out, F., in *Beautiful Losers*, like so many of the artist-figures in Cohen's work, is "doomed to offend, to be misunderstood, and to participate in the very things he chooses to condemn" (95). The artist-figure's position of martyr to his own art places him necessarily in this position if he is seen as a kind of vessel through which externally originated creative impulses manifest themselves. In the act of becoming a vessel, the artist-figure himself can be contaminated by the creative impulses he channels. This idea comes across in a poem entitled, "You Tore Your Shirt":

You tore your shirt

To show me where

You had been hurt

I had to stare

I put my hand

On what I saw

I drew it back

It was a claw. (*Energy of Slaves* 45)

When the artist-figure brings his own powers of representation to another's suffering, as when he puts his "hand" on the wound in the poem, he somehow implicates himself in the situation and takes on some of the pain himself. In this poem, his own willingness to

represent another's suffering brings out an animalistic tendency in the artist-figure, and his human hand is appropriately transformed into a "claw."

Whatever the side-effects experienced by the artist-figure who acts as a vessel, this role remains an essential one in his life. Shaffner argues that the protagonist in the artist-story recognizes himself as a reflection of "the universal" aspects of human nature (18). Beebe argues that the view of the artist-figure as vessel for the channelling of universal experience into manifest form is a traditional feature of the *Künstlerroman*: "an underlying assumption in the artist-novel is that creative man is . . . a historic personage who merely serves as the medium through which the creative spirit manifests itself" (6). To become a vessel through which "creative spirit" can be moulded into an aesthetic object requires that the artist sacrifice a significant portion of his own individuality, immersing himself in the universal. This necessary sacrifice and surrender of individuality, however, is not always undesirable, as the narrator of *Beautiful Losers* reveals when he remarks upon the degree of distance that his vocation has put between himself and others:

Please make me empty, if I'm empty then I can receive, if I can receive it means it comes from somewhere outside of me, if it comes from outside of me I'm not alone! I cannot bear this loneliness. Above all it is loneliness. I don't want to be a star merely dying. Please let me be hungry, then I am not the dead center . . . (49)

This uncovers a significant conflict inherent in the lives of Cohen's artist-figures who simultaneously seek to assert their own individualities and seek respite from the responsibilities that accompany such assertions. I have argued that, in the romantic love

relationship, the artist both desires the comfort of the domestic lifestyle and avoids this same situation out of fear of the repercussions such a mode of being will have on his artistic production. A similar situation exists in terms of the artist's relationship to his own art: on the one hand, the poet values his vocation, his "life in art," above all else—we have seen that he will sacrifice his own domestic happiness and social position for the fulfilment of this calling. At the same time, however, the human impulses within the artist-figure lead him to seek out happiness in experiences he cannot fully experience because of the necessary distance that his calling puts between him and the world, creating a profound sense of "loneliness"; as the speaker reveals in "Here Was the Harbour," "[t]he sky does not care for this trait or that affliction, it wants the whole man lost in his story, abandoned in the mechanics of action, touching his fellows, leaving them . . ." (*Parasites of Heaven* 45).

To surrender one's own individuality to a higher cause, in this case art, requires that one sacrifice more than some abstract notion of identity. Cohen's writings repeatedly return to the theme of the artist at odds with himself over the nature of his vocation, and they offer a disturbing portrait of the psychological effects of such a contradictory state of being. Beebe hints at the kind of personal devastation that results from intense conflict between one's life in art and life in general: "When there is a war between art and life, one side may defeat the other, but the victory is usually pyrrhic" (66). We get an idea of these psychological conflicts, and of the loss of self and destruction of personal identity that accompanies them, from an appropriately entitled poem, "Disguises," wherein the artist-figure reveals what the lending of his creative powers for the sake of representing the

Holocaust has done to him:

You comfort me
 incorrigible betrayers of the self
 as I salute fashion
 and bring my mind
 like a promiscuous air-hostess
 handing out parachutes in a nose dive
 bring my butchered mind
 to bear upon the facts. (*Flowers for Hitler* 141)

The artist-figure's sense of well-being and individuality, in this poem, becomes corrupted in the act of representation. The strong sense of the "self" being "betray[ed]" in this lyric derives from the artist-figure's neglect of the vocational need to self-create: in becoming a vessel through which the Holocaust can be translated, the poet behaves as a "promiscuous air hostess," diffusing his sense of self rather than ameliorating it, getting caught up in the destructive nature of his subject rather than furthering the constructive vocational concerns of the self.

Another conflict that makes the artist-figure a martyr is that existing between the artistic life and the secular life. The artist-figure becomes a martyr to art when he surrenders the chance to have a secular life in order to pursue the artistic vocation. Cohen's most famous rendering of this sacrifice of secular life is put forth in a song called "A Singer Must Die." Here, the poet is persecuted for the sake of his art: "A singer must die for the lie in his voice" (*New Skin for the Old Ceremony*). If the use of the word "lie"

is taken at face value, then the artist-figure becomes one whose own identity will "die" if he "lie[s]," or if he is untrue to his vocation—this makes him a prisoner to his own vocation, sacrificing his freedom for art. If we acknowledge the irony with which Cohen writes this same line, then we might picture the phrase, "[a] singer must die," as the judgment passed by the self-appointed and authoritarian "keepers of Truth," and "guardians of Beauty."³⁵ In this case, what is really being said is that the "singer must die," or become a martyr because his vocation requires that he tell the truth to those who believe he is "smudging the air with [his] song." In the latter case, the artist who tells the truth is viewed as a kind of traitor by those who do not appreciate the perspective that his distance from the world allows him: "Is it true you betrayed us? The answer is yes." In fulfilling the vocation of the artist, the artist-figure is cast in the role of "traitor" to the secular world. The concept of betrayal is an important one in Cohen's work, especially in a discussion of duty and sacrifice, where the concept of loyalty is incompletely defined without a recognition of its antithesis. It is interesting to note that, as frequently as Cohen's artist-figures are cast in the role of men of duty, they are also cast in the role of traitor. As Winfried Siemerling argues, Cohen's writing views the traitor as a kind of mediator between the social community at large, and things outside that community:

The traitor is a crosser of boundaries who delivers a person, a value, or information from the inside to the outside. In Cohen's perspective . . . this

³⁵Cohen has always been bothered by those who insist upon "speaking widely" about the faults they perceive in his music. He argues that there is no inherent "truth" about what makes music good, and no standard of "beauty" that is universal in the musical realm. It is all a "matter of taste" (*Songs from the Life of Leonard Cohen*).

disruptive resident alien . . . is both a marginalized member of the community and a beneficent agent who brings in the possibility of an unknown, emergent other self. (32)

This is the view taken by the speaker in "The Traitor" who is cast as a mediator between the soldiers on the front and the high command: "I could not move to warn all the younger soldiers that they had been deserted from above . . ." (*Recent Songs*). The artist-figure, then, is caught in a double-bind: if he should tell the truth, and act as mediator between the established secular world and his outside perspective, then he is seen as a traitor by the very establishment he is trying to inform, and thereby challenge, with his art; at the same time, however, this mediation is what artists *do*, and to do anything else but translate one's perspective into art would in turn make the artist traitor to his own vocation.

In many ways, the story of the artist, as told by Cohen's writings, is the story of trying to move beyond this contradiction, to find a place where the artist does not have to be traitor. The brief respites that the artist-figure finds from this dilemma—in the initial power and magic of art, in love, in fame and fortune—all prove to be transitory and ultimately unfulfilling. The one constant which the artist possesses throughout these phases is his style. The speaker in Cohen's poem, "Style," both fears and hopes that he will "forget" his "style," an idea he repeats many times throughout the poem. The artist-figure fears the loss of "style" because he can often use "style" to fight the loss of identity that comes about as a result of his martyrdom to art. Stephen Scobie makes this point in *Leonard Cohen* when he argues that "the theme of loss of personality is projected in terms of what appears to be a very strong personality and ego, that of the artist himself" (11).

Assertion of individual style in situations where the artist is acting as a vessel permits one to negate partially the diffusion of personal identity that accompanies this act; the artist may unwillingly be drawn into discourse on a particular subject, but he might still, by means of his style, stamp his own individuality on each creation. Eli Mandel emphasizes the importance of style for Cohen when he suggests that Cohen's writing embodies "the victory of style over vision" (124). Style permits the artist a degree of autonomy even in situations where he is martyr to a cause, bound by duty, or bearing the burden of sacrifice. Similarly, when the need to represent artistically forces the artist to live partially outside of the present moment, style can have a compensatory effect. Even if the artist-figure was not entirely "there" in the initial experience, his representation of an event, moderated by his style, can place him more fully in the moment, which through art can be re-experienced as the present. At the same time, however, the artist-figure hopes he will "forget" his "style." As the poem argues, "a silence develops for every style," suggesting that the artist-figure who focuses too microscopically upon his own method and form will encounter serious vocational difficulties. The same "style" which offers the possibility of preserving artistic individuality can also become monolithic, impersonal, and capable of absorbing the individuality of the artist into itself.

Cohen's writings are keenly aware of the power of style to manoeuvre around some of the contradictions of the artist life, contradictions that Cohen himself, no doubt, is aware of. The power of style to get beyond the loss of identity that occurs when the artist becomes a martyr to art may be behind much of the posturing in Cohen's work, which is full of smoky hotel-rooms, one night stands, and other clichéd but alluring poses struck by

the artist-figure. At the same time, the limiting aspects of style may form part of the reason why Cohen's writing has difficulty escaping these same postures. Garebian identifies this posturing as an "artist self-consciously creat[ing] his own myth" (29). Indeed, as much as Cohen's works talk about the loss of self that comes about through art, they also assert and mythologize the artist at work behind the poem. "Last Year's Man" offers an excellent example of this: the first and last verses frame the lyric with an image of a struggling artist at his writing table—"an hour has gone by now and he has not moved his hand / But everything will happen if he only gives the word"—while the intermediate verses tell a different story, perhaps a story by the "Last Year's Man" (*Songs of Love and Hate*). By presenting images of the artist-figure at work, even of a struggling artist-figure or one caught in contradictions, some of the identity of the artist, lost among his works which mix his identity with the things he represents, is re-established in the story of the artist-figure as a whole. But this is a small victory in the larger struggle to set to rest the conflicts that go on both inside and outside the artist-figure who must constantly reaccept a problematic vocation.

Chapter Five

The Artist-figure and the Spiritual and Religious Experience

Spiritual and religious issues are present, if not predominant, in every phase of Cohen's artist-figure's development. Outside the various developmental stages described in my previous chapters, stages in which the artist-figure strives to come to terms both with the social world and with himself, there exists a phase where spiritual and religious issues become the artist-figure's central concern. As the artist-figure strives to come to terms with God, who may be the his last hope in his struggle to mediate the conflicts inherent in his vocation, he characteristically finds himself confronting difficult internal and external problems. At the same time, however, Cohen's writings suggest that the pursuit of God, or a higher spiritual being, provides a sort of refuge for the artist-figure. While the artist-figure in the spiritual and religious phase does not find any easy resolution to the conflicts inherent in his vocation, he finds, nevertheless, in devotion to spiritual ideals, a permanent mode of being that allows him to reconcile some of the conflicts which have refused to be easily reconciled in the previous phases of his development.

Concern for God does not descend upon the artist-figure suddenly or by chance. Although spiritual and religious matters do not become the primary focus of Cohen's writings until late in his career—Cohen's *Book of Mercy*, published in 1984, is his first book in which spiritual and religious issues are the focal point—these issues, nevertheless, involve the artist-figure from the beginning of his vocation. In *The Favourite Game*, the death of Breavman's father can be seen as the event which finally starts the young artist in conscious pursuit of his calling. The narrator of this novel introduces the essential

connection that will exist between the artistic vocation and religious issues when he informs us that Breavman's "father's death gave him a touch of mystery, contact with the unknown. He could speak with extra authority on God and Hell": this is ironic considering that Breavman, as an artist, is only at the very beginning of his career and has no real sense of the conflicts that will accompany his spiritual and religious roles (27). Cohen's earliest published work, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, is loaded with religious images, and one poem in particular, "Prayer for Messiah," shows the connection between an artist and God: "your eyes through my eyes shine brighter than love / your blood in my ballad collapses the grave" (18).³⁶ This poem provides an early lyrical indication of a concept that, in Cohen's view, is an essential part of the artist's relationship with God: it evokes the image of the artist as a vessel for divine inspiration, as one who uses his artistic talents to express divine truth.

In Cohen's early writings, as in the early stages of the artist-figure's development, the "power" of God, or at least the kind of intangible energy that propels art, is equated with "magic." Beyond the apprenticeship phase of the artist-life, this same "power" is more clearly articulated as divine in origin—it is more closely associated with God. In what is probably the most famous passage from *Beautiful Losers*, Cohen hints at this connection between God and magic: "God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is afoot. Magic is alive" (197). Many critics have remarked that God and magic are closely allied in Cohen's writings, though none have remarked that the move

³⁶Cohen's song, "You Know Who I Am," blurs the boundaries between God and the artist-figure making the two seem one and the same: "You know who I am / You've stared at the sun / Well, I am the one who loves changing from nothing to one" (*Songs from a Room*).

from apprenticeship to maturity parallels an artist's recognition that magic is really divine in origin. Scobie argues that "[t]he stem of all religious systems—that which, within the system, is not classifiable or reducible to dogma—is Magic" (105). Linda Hutcheon, in "The Poet as Novelist," suggests that Cohen offers "a tracing of the relationship between the mysteries of magic and those of religion . . ." (7). Scobie and Hutcheon appear to argue that Cohen's work opposes magic to religion in a dualistic relationship and then attempts to negotiate some form of relationship between them. Rather, I would argue, Cohen's artist-figure always perceives some kind of higher power that informs, directs, and propels his art. In the early stages of the artist-life this power is called "magic"—one need only recall Breavman's flirtations with hypnosis and contrast this to a later Cohen passage, from *Book of Mercy*, to reveal that the artist-figure's interpretation of the "power" that informs art has shifted from magic to God. In Breavman's case, the artist-figure believes he is a magician mysteriously, but by virtue of his own abilities, acting as a channel for some higher energy: "there's something special about my voice . . . I can make things happen" (*Favourite Game* 15). In the case of *Book of Mercy*, a more mature artist-voice attributes the power of artistic creation, not to the conscious effort of the artist-figure to channel creative energy and perform magic, but rather to God:

Reluctantly the angels grant me another permission to sing. In a transition so delicate it cannot be marked, the court is established on beams of golden symmetry, and once again I am a singer in the lower choirs, born fifty years ago to raise my voice this high, and no higher. (1)

In the spiritual and religious phase, the artist-figure is freed from a certain degree of responsibility through the recognition that his creative impulse derives, not from an internal affinity with magic, but rather from the externally originated grace of God.

The fact that Cohen's artist-figures move beyond their early interpretation of "power" as "magic" is made evident when the development of these same figures involves them taking on an assortment of spiritual and religious roles: the artist as spiritual-healer, as guru, as prophet, as priest. Cohen's work sees the pursuit of the artistic vocation as very similar to the fulfilment of holy orders, of one sort or another, and the artist-figure is very frequently represented by these religious personae. Ultimately, the adoption of religious roles by the artist-figure, or at least the artist-figure's recognition that these religious roles have a power to clarify his own creative vocation, leads him to a kind of refuge in God. At the same time, however, these religious roles, like so many of the other roles taken on by the artist-figure, create problems which must be negotiated in an artist's articulation of his calling.

The role of artist-as-spiritual-healer is rarely made explicit, but the implied power of art to heal is nearly ubiquitous in Cohen's work. Of the few Cohen lyrics that talk openly of art as a form of healing, the song "Minute Prologue" is perhaps the most obvious:

I've been listening to all the dissension.

I've been listening to all the pain.

And I feel that no matter what I do for you,

It's going to come back again.

But I think that I can heal it

I think that I can heal it with this song. (*Live Songs*)

The power of art to heal, stated openly in this song, comes across by implication in so many other Cohen lyrics. There are those that attempt to heal the wounds caused by soured emotional relationships between two people—as in "Hey That's No Way to Say Goodbye" and "So Long, Marianne"—and there are lyrics which function as a sort of meditative self-healing, as in "Ain't No Cure for Love":

I don't need to be forgiven for loving you so much.

It's written in the scriptures, it's written there in blood.

I even heard the angels declare it from above:

There ain't no cure . . . for love. (*I'm Your Man*)

Cohen's artist-figures find in art a sort of cathartic healing; art is the means by which the pain of experience is exorcised. But the very act of making art to diffuse suffering means that the artist must focus all his attention *on* suffering, and this can create complications: one artist-figure's immersion into the horrors of the Holocaust creates an aversion within him to his own act of representing: "I can't pretend I still feel very much like singing / As they carry the bodies away . . ." ("The Old Revolution," *Songs from a Room*). The artist who attempts to act as a healer for a sick society must, to some degree, like Christ, take on that sickness himself in order to understand it fully enough to represent it in his art. To accept the spiritual role of healer, then, involves suffering and sacrifice on the part of the artist-figure.

Another significant, if not unproblematic, incarnation of the spiritual and religiously directed artist is that of religious teacher or guru. To a degree, it is in this role that the artist-figure sees his role of apprentice reversed—instead of seeking out teachers he now begins to teach. The artist-as-guru, however, is not simply a teacher who instructs the apprentice in the ways of the creative vocation: he uses the skills of his trade to teach spiritual and religious wisdom to the world. One Cohen passage, from *Book of Mercy*, reads like a piece of religious instruction:

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 This is what it's like to study without a friend. (3)

The guru that the apprentice becomes in his later stages of development, the guru that finds expression in Cohen's later works, should not be confused with F., the mad-guru of *Beautiful Losers*. The disproportionate amount of critical attention accorded this novel has meant that F. has come to be seen as a central religious figure in Cohen's writing. The guru-figure which emerges in Cohen's later career bears very little resemblance to F. who is a false-guru, or perhaps a typical guru and therefore false, choosing to empower himself rather than to enlighten others—as Scobie argues, "power is always F.'s distraction" (112). The guru-figure in *Book of Mercy* embodies a different ideal from that of F., choosing to gently guide his reader into a deeper understanding of spirituality rather than to torture his initiate, both for the sake of enlightenment and for his own pleasure. But this same guru is

himself still searching, and he finds his own role as guru-artist to be problematic—"Who can tell of your glory, who can number your forms, who dares expound the interior life of God?" (10). However sincere the guru figure may be, however deep his devotion to spiritual and religious ideals, he still feels anxiety, not only because he believes expressing "truth" about God may be somehow taboo, but also because he wonders if his creative powers are up to the task: as the narrator of *Beautiful Losers* muses, "I Do Not Think It Behooves Me To Describe Your World" (68).³⁷

When Cohen's artist-figure takes on the role of prophet, we see the issues involving God and artistic representation articulated most completely. Like the guru, the prophet figure in Cohen can be either half-deranged, or clear-minded and spiritually focused. The kind of prophecy F. expounds is representative of the first type:

I saw a king without dominion. I saw a gun bleeding. I saw the prince of Paradise Forgotten. I saw a pimpled movie star. I saw a racing hearse. I saw the New Jew. I saw popular lame storm troopers I saw fire curing headaches I saw ecstasy without fun and vice versa. (*Beautiful Losers* 202)

The truths in F.'s prophecies are buried beneath a thick layer of deliberate deceptions and nonsensical utterings. His mad prophecies are like those of the speaker in "The Future" whose prophecy about "the breaking of the ancient western code" loses a degree of

³⁷The submissive artist voice in this passage provides an interesting contrast to a poem I explored in Chapter Two, "The Reason I Write." In the present example, the artist-figure does not feel he is worthy to describe God's world. In "The Reason I Write," the speaker dreams of being a "perfect man who kills," of capturing God's world in his own art, for his own pleasure.

credibility when we recognize that our prophet's implied connection to the divine is corrupted by his subversive physical desires: "It's lonely here, there's no one left to torture / Give me crack and anal sex" (*The Future*). A more credible prophetic voice speaks in "Democracy" where the speaker, although implicating himself in the ills of society, makes clear and direct comments and predictions about his environment: "It's coming to America first. The cradle of the best and of the worst. It's here they've got the range, and the machinery for change, and it's here they've got the spiritual thirst" (*The Future* 367). Still further from the stance of deranged self-empowerment embodied by pseudo-prophets like F., and more dependent upon God's grace for the gift of prophecy, is the prophet in "If It Be Your Will." Here, the artist-figure recognizes that all of his inspiration and all of his art derives from God, and that God has complete power over when and how that power is used.³⁸

If it be your will that a voice be true,
 From this broken hill I will sing to you.
 From this broken hill, all your praises they shall ring
 If it be your will to let me sing. (*Various Positions*)

In this instance, the artist-prophet submits entirely to God and accepts his role as vessel for God's "will." To "sing" and make art is inalienably bound to the notion of singing God's "praises."

³⁸Cohen ironically plays on this idea of God having complete power over the artist in a passage which jokingly empowers himself: "I was born like this, I had no choice / I was born with the gift of a golden voice / And twenty-seven angels from the great beyond / They tied me to a table right here in the tower of song" ("Tower of Song," *I'm Your Man*).

An ideal yet problematic stance for Cohen's artist-figures-as-prophets involves surrendering a degree of individual freedom for the sake of becoming a conductive vessel for divine inspiration and prophecy. As the artist-figure speaker reveals in "I Should Not Say You," his "heart longs to be a chamber for the Name" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 62). Another piece in the same book shows that having the "Name" in the "heart" involves becoming a kind of "translator" for God's wisdom: "Among these few that I have offered there is my own, the heart of a translator who has tried to render into common usage the high commands of pure energy, who has not denied his own inclination to obey" (51). The artist-prophet has the difficult task of using his art to put into "common usage," to translate into clear artistic representations, the "high commands of pure energy," or divine "truths" which tend to resist easy encapsulation in manifest form. This role brings the artist closer to God, and thus to a certain degree of comfort, but at the same time the role of prophet marginalizes the artist-figure, pushing him to the fringe of his society. As Siemerling argues,

[t]he prophet is . . . the instituting other of a communal self This figure moves towards an ambiguous outsideness that disrupts the community as it is known, by calling for a different community that is not symmetrically opposed to the old one, but that emerges by displacing it. ("Interior Landscapes" 96)³⁹

³⁹The sense of a new prophecy "displacing" the "old one" comes across in "The Future" which predicts "the breaking of the ancient western code" and "your private life will suddenly explode" (*The Future*).

For the prophet, then, the movement towards the comfort of God involves, to a degree, a movement away from another kind of comfort which acceptance by one's society offers.

The priest role is intimately related to the vocation of Cohen's artist-figures. These artist-priests act as interpreters and evangelists of God's word, as leaders in religious celebration and keepers of holy-rituals, and as mediators between God and humanity—they are, in every way, in the service of their community. Much like prophets, priests are involved in the act of bringing God's word to the world—"cohan," interestingly, is the Hebrew word for "priest." They are, in effect, translators—as the speaker in "Your Moment Now" says, "Here you are again, little priest . . . I give you the knowledge to distinguish between what is holy and what is common" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 15). The artist, regardless of the degree of his focus upon spiritual and religious issues, is a priest in this sense: his task is to locate the most significant, the most "holy" aspects of human experience, and to refine them into an aesthetic object that can be experienced by others, regardless of their own capacity to draw distinctions between the "holy" and the "common." The artist-priest translates the word of God, filters it through his style, and presents it to those who depend upon him for higher knowledge. The speaker in "Owning Everything" emphasizes the role of artist-priest as translator:

For your sake I will praise the moon
 tell the colour of the river,
 find new words for the agony
 and ecstasy of gulls. (*Spice Box* 34)

This same speaker recognizes that, while devotion to God involves a limiting of one's artistic freedom—God becoming the only suitable subject of discourse—there is a universal component to this monocular focus as well that extends the boundaries of artistic freedom. As the speaker says,

I will not leave you
 Only strangers travel
 Owning everything,
 I have nowhere to go. (35)⁴⁰

The vocation of priest puts the artist in close connection with God's world, and thus the source of his inspiration; God himself, can be seen in all things, giving the artist limitless potential for creative activity. As long as the artist remains sufficiently concerned with spiritual and religious matters he has this potential before him. But the realities of the artist-life, as I have been arguing all along, present a variety of other issues which distract even the most attentive and devoted artist-priest from the divine source of his creative power.

Frank Davey argues, in *From There to Here*, that "[a]ll of Cohen's writing has argued for the importance of reducing life to ceremony" (68). While Davey's statement is far too definite, and I would not agree that Cohen seeks to "reduc[e]" life in any respect, there is quite clearly a focus in Cohen's writing upon "ceremony." Contrary to Davey, I would argue that Cohen, rather than "reducing," often tends to raise "life" to the higher

⁴⁰It is interesting to note, given the Romantic origins of the *Künstlerroman*, that this view of God as universally apparent in all things is essentially a Romantic stance, like that expressed in Wordsworth's "Imitations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood."

level of "ceremony," even celebration. In this sense, Cohen's artist-figure becomes a priest of the ordinary who takes the everyday experience and celebrates it through his art, heightening the importance of small things: "she feeds you tea and oranges that come all the way from China" ("Suzanne," *Songs of Leonard Cohen*). An obvious example is the poem "Celebration," where the act of oral-sex becomes something associated with the "gods" (*Spice Box* 55). Cohen's artist-figures celebrate the ritual and ceremony in all things: Chapter Two revealed the way courtly and neo-platonic traditions become central to any courtship by an artist of a beloved; Chapter Four offered a demonstration of the ways in which Cohen uses figures, like soldiers, who are bound by strict ceremonial codes of conduct, to present metaphorical depictions of the artist-figure in relation to his work. With regards to the spiritual and religious aspects of the artist-life, we see Cohen's artist-figures demonstrate their preoccupation with ceremony and ritual through their frequent use of the prayer form. "Who By Fire" is an excellent example, its repetitive, formal structure and subject matter suggesting prayer—on the jacket to his album "The Best of Leonard Cohen," Cohen reveals that this song "is based on a prayer recited on the Day of Atonement":

Who by fire? Who by water?

Who in the sunshine? Who in the night time?

Who by high ordeal? Who by common trial?

Who in your merry, merry, month of May?

Who by very slow decay?

And who shall I say is calling? (*New Skin for the Old Ceremony*)

Traditionally, the priest is one who mediates between God and humanity. The priest assists individuals in the pursuit of God, allowing them deeper spiritual understanding than they would otherwise attain. Curiously, this religious role of the priest within the community places the artist-priest, almost paradoxically, in opposition to the artist-prophet—as F. says, "a diet of paradox fattens the ironist not the psalmist" (*Beautiful Losers* 204). Siemerling states that "the prophet is the exiled figure closest to the unknown outside," and "the priest administers the community's established ways of experiencing and dealing with this outside" ("Interior Landscapes" 95). The artist-figure in Cohen's work takes on both the role of priest and the role of prophet and is thereby caught up in another contradiction. Should the artist behave as prophet and use art based on spiritual insight to encourage his community to reform, to move closer to God? Or should the artist behave as priest and affirm the experiences of the community the prophet seeks to change, offering comfort through his celebration of what is ordinary and accepted? Which of these contradictory roles does the artist-guru affirm in his teachings? And, given the problematic and contradictory stance of the spiritually and religiously inclined artist-figure, will his art not suffer by his affirmation of society and thereby lose much of its power to heal?

It may appear, then, that the artist-figure's movement into a phase of spiritual and religious awareness does little more than complicate a vocation already deeply problematic. It is true that the artist roles associated with God present difficult challenges. But it is also clear that Cohen's artist-figures, and indeed Cohen himself, draw a significant degree of comfort from their acceptance of an artistic vocation which is inseparable from a

relationship with God. While religion is no easy fix for the artist-figure, an acceptance of God does much to help him move beyond the vocational conflicts that I have described from my first chapter. The narrator in *Book of Mercy* suggests that God can satisfy what art alone cannot when he says, "[a]fter searching among the words, and never finding ease, I went to you, and asked you to gladden my heart" (4). God is seen, by the artist-figure, as a place of refuge when art fails to satisfy, or when the artistic life becomes too difficult, or when the creative vocation becomes too lonely: "In utter defeat I came to you and you received me with a sweetness I had not dared to remember. Tonight I come to you again, soiled by strategies and trapped in the loneliness of my tiny domain" (6). In parts of *Book of Mercy*, a comfortable surrender to God is seen in direct antithesis to struggling for and never attaining the active artistic life:

My soul finds its place in the Name, and my soul finds its ease in the embrace of the Name. I struggled with shapes and with numbers, and I carved with blade and brain to make a place, but I could not find a shelter for my soul. Blessed is the Name which is the safety of the soul . . . I search the words that attend your mercy. (47)

Sandra Djwa argued, nearly twenty years before *Book of Mercy* was published, that "[r]eading through Leonard Cohen's work we become made aware of an unsatisfied search for the absolute. In his world there are no fixed values, spiritual or sensual, that stand beyond the transitory moment . . ." (94). It might appear, then, that this "unsatisfied search" that Djwa identifies in Cohen's early work begins to find satisfaction in *Book of Mercy*. The poet's obvious faith in the "Name" and his apparently wholehearted

willingness to give himself to God suggest a belief in something "absolute," a higher realm of "fixed values." There are, however, several problems that arise out of the apparent acceptance, by the artist-figure, of a spiritual and religious absolute in *Book of Mercy*.

When reading Leonard Cohen, a reader is constantly on the lookout for lies, bluffs, and jokes. Cohen's irony is nearly omnipresent, and his capacity for "putting us on" is legendary. How do we read *Book of Mercy*, then? Should it be seen as a legitimate statement about the life of the artist-figure finding resolution in league with God? The text is clearly less ironic than any other Cohen novel, book of poems, or suite of songs. The tone of the text is sincere and almost entirely devoid of ironic undercutting, tongue-in-cheek posturing, and offhanded attempts at humour. There is a sense of unity of voice in the work that distinguishes it from books like *Death of a Lady's Man*, or *Beautiful Losers*, in which several voices compete for supremacy, constantly undermining each other's authority. For these reasons, I believe that *Book of Mercy* ought to be read as a "straight" text which, despite its rich layers of imagery, can be judged at face value. *Book of Mercy* is a profound expression of the suffering of the artist-figure, and an honest articulation of the "mercy" and comfort shown by God to those who bring their pain to him. But this does not necessarily mark the terminal point in the development of the artist.

Book of Mercy must be read in the context of Cohen's other works which surround it. *Various Positions*, an album released the same year as *Book of Mercy*, carries on a kind of inter-textual dialogue with it. Many of the doubts which are subsumed in a greater faith in God in *Book of Mercy* find outward articulation in songs like "The Night Comes On." Here, the speaker admits that his immersion in religion comes about, at least

partially, out of a feeling of entrapment, and suggests that the comfort of this religious experience is only temporary:

We were locked in this kitchen. I took to religion,
 I wondered how long she would stay.
 I needed so much to have nothing to touch,
 I've always been greedy that way. (*Various Positions*)

The artist-narrator of *Book of Mercy* finds God a comfort in the night and finds temporary sanctuary from the world in this spiritual realm: "Your name is the sweetness of time, and you carry me close into the night, speaking consolations, drawing down lights from the sky, saying, See how the night has no terror for one who remembers the Name" (31). But the speaker in "The Night Comes On" does not find permanent comfort in this night, offering a different version of the same experience: "And the night came on, it was very calm, I wanted the night to go on and on, but she said 'Go back, go back to the world'" (*Various Positions*). For an artist, true fulfilment cannot be found in a religious experience which compromises the creative vocation by focusing it entirely upon a God who demands only "praise" in exchange for comfort. The religious experience articulated in *Book of Mercy* is largely a passing one, another escape from the vocation of the artist, more significant perhaps, but not entirely unlike that of the narrator in *Death of a Lady's Man* who chose to "give up and worship" a woman "for ten years" (11). At the same time, however, this religious experience has a significant and lasting effect upon the artist who re-enters the world with a new found sense of spirituality.

These observations are affirmed by Cohen's most recent set of lyrics, *The Future*, which portray the artist-figure re-entering the world after a period of immersion in religion. The gist of Cohen's writing here is still profoundly religious, even visionary, but it is simultaneously grounded firmly in "the world" that the artist is extolled to return to in "The Night Comes On." In "Closing Time," the speaker shows that the artist-as-prophet stance can be coupled with personal, worldly concerns. In this lyric, "closing time" is occurring on at least three levels simultaneously: it is "closing time" in a bar where there has been "drinking" and "dancing" and an exchange of "Johnny-Walker wisdom"; it is "closing time" in a relationship that has been compromised by "the winds of change and the weeds of sex"; and it is "closing time" for Western society, suggests the artist-prophet, with a reference to being "busted in the blinding light" perhaps indicative of a nuclear holocaust (*The Future*). And the sense of humour that Cohen all but abandons in *Book of Mercy* returns unmistakably in *The Future*. Alongside the visions of Armageddon, Cohen's artist-prophets affirm their own humanity, not by declaring their short-comings and proposing surrender to an almighty deity, but rather by standing at centre stage replete with all their imperfections:

I'm stubborn as those garbage bags
 that time cannot decay,
 I'm junk, but I'm still holding up
 this little wild bouquet.

Democracy is coming to the U. S. A. (*The Future*)

But the most telling evidence that Cohen's artist-figures have made some degree of peace with their vocation comes across in "Anthem." This song, as the title suggests, is an uplifting piece affirming the value of imperfect human sacrifice both in spiritual and religious matters, and in art:

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in. (*The Future*)

The perfect artistic creation or masterpiece sought and never found in the earlier journeys of the artist-figure, the perfect religious sacrifice sought by the artist-figure through surrender to God, no longer remains a point of fixation. The artist-figure, through an acceptance of human imperfection in "Anthem," can now, to a large degree, have both art and God in his life, or, perhaps more importantly, he can now have something more than art in his life. The only resolution of the conflicts of the artist-figure's vocation lies in his recognition of its contradictory nature. If the artist-figure accepts both that his human imperfections will prevent him from ever achieving permanent sainthood or union with God, and that his "life in art" will inevitably lead him occasionally away from the comforts of the world, then he might achieve a limited but lasting peace.

A Speculative Conclusion

Cohen's work as a whole, as I have attempted to demonstrate, tells the story of the artist-figure, beginning with the traditional romantic artist-story of the *Künstlerroman*, and then extending that story beyond the phase of apprenticeship. As the career of Cohen's artist-figure expands beyond an initial acceptance of his calling, a myriad of difficult vocational conflicts preoccupy him, and these conflicts are accordingly reflected in his creative endeavours. The artist-figure's struggle to reconcile the problems inherent in his calling manifests itself in his romantic relationships, which are unstable because the creative life is at odds with permanent attainment of "ideal" love; in the public realm, the artist-figure is confronted with an incompatibility between the aesthetic requirements of his art, and the traditional stance of the socially-conscious artist; the artist-figure, in an attempt to maintain a sense of duty to his own creative talents, sacrifices his own pragmatic situation in the world, and thereby becomes a kind of martyr to art; failing to reconcile his vocational conflicts in any of these developmental phases, Cohen's artist-figure turns to God, and, in so doing, takes on a variety of spiritual and religious roles which both further complicate his struggle, and lead him to a kind of lasting peace.

The importance of issues surrounding the artistic vocation in Cohen's work is difficult to over-stress. I would not want to argue, however, that the artist-story is Cohen's sole literary preoccupation: the fact that so small a quantity of Cohen criticism to date has focused on the artist-figure testifies to the reality that Cohen's body of work is diverse and provides a variety of worthwhile critical focal points. While many of Cohen's individual writings do not deal primarily with the artistic vocation, it is, however,

important to recognize that such writings are usually included in volumes which hold a significant place in Cohen's larger artist-story: Milton Wilson, for example, argues that *Flowers for Hitler* is a book about "the problem of style," and, if we agree with him, then we ought to acknowledge that individual poems in this book, poems not directly concerned with the development of the artist-figure, occur in a context where an important phase in the artist-story is being explored (21). And, while an awareness of the development of the artist-figure may not be necessary for an understanding of individual works by Cohen, such an awareness can go a long way towards contextualizing such works which, perhaps due largely to the personal and lyrical thrust of Cohen's work in general, can tend to leave a reader wanting more specific information on the man and the vision behind the words on the page.⁴¹ If we step back further from individual works themselves and recognize, as obvious as it may seem, that they are works by an artist who, both in the creative act and in life itself, embodies the struggle of the artist-figure, then we might recognize that individual Cohen works, whatever their core preoccupation, are part of an even larger, overarching artist-story.

At this point it becomes necessary to come to terms with the troublesome and ambiguous connection between Cohen and his artist-figure voices. In my Introduction, I stated that my focus was essentially upon the story of Cohen's artist-figures, and not upon the story of their creator. In retrospect, I realize that I have, to a large degree, inadvertently told the story of Leonard Cohen as an artist as well. It is difficult, in the

⁴¹This is especially true in a book like Cohen's *Parasites of Heaven*, of which Ondaatje writes, saying, "[t]he poems are only valid when they go hand in hand with the author" (56).

critical examination of any piece of literature, to negotiate the now clichéd relationship between author and speaker. This problem is compounded, in an examination of Cohen's writings, not only because the development of the artist-figure is a unifying issue in his work, but also because Cohen himself has manufactured an overbearing artist-figure persona, and has persistently acted out this persona in a self-conscious and self-reflexive manner.

Leonard Cohen examines the conflicts of the artistic vocation on a very personal level. On one level, these conflicts are explored in a very serious manner, both in his life and in his art. It could be argued that the construction and enactment of the Cohen persona is Leonard Cohen's finest masterpiece—it is certainly his most visible and ongoing, still a work in progress. His literary representations of the artist-figure are, to a large extent, merely extensions of his life work, his "life in art." Cohen's artist-figures are a convenient way to explore his personal vocation; they are mirrors in which he can see his own persona reflected, and they are incarnations of the possibilities too glorious or too horrific to be enacted either on the stage of the concert hall, or at the podium in a university amphitheatre. Cohen cannot, himself, accompany a choir of heavenly angels, as his speaker does in "Ain't No Cure For Love," or become a murderer and torturer like his alter-egos in *Flowers for Hitler*. Cohen's artist-figures allow him to live vicariously, or by proxy, to have many "lives in art."

The depiction of the artist-life, with all its extreme ranges of emotion, can easily become maudlin, melodramatic, and receptive to parodic interpretation. Cohen's sincere and immediate articulation of an individual's struggles with the artistic vocation can make

a reader or listener cringe and draw back in discomfort, so willing is Cohen to display blunt emotions, visceral urges, and carnal desires. Cohen gets around this problem, not with the mitigating forces of euphemism, but rather with a unique and ironic undercutting of his own self-construction that, ironically, strengthens rather than weakens the plausibility and appropriateness of his pose. The weakness of his earliest poems, like many of those in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, lies in their refusal to question the authority of their stance and the endurance of their point of view. It seems as though Cohen needed to move beyond the initial phases of his career, to see his own artist-persona evolve, in order to recognize that the vocation of the artist is transient in nature, and that change is often the impetus for creative productivity. The photograph of Cohen on the cover of his 1988 album, *I'm Your Man*, embodies a more mature and ironic awareness of the artistic stance. Here, Cohen stands rigidly with a serious expression, dressed in an expensive black and grey pinstriped suit, dark-sunglasses covering his eyes, his left-hand in his pocket, his right hand holding a half-eaten banana. He is at once the popular harbinger of the new age and a kind of comic "ape," as ready to admit his own human imperfections as he is to offer divine prophecy.

The process of artistic-development, for Cohen's artist-figure, began with a phase of apprenticeship and has, to date, progressed as far as a re-entry into the world after a period of immersion in spirituality and religion. Recent events in Cohen's life may help one to anticipate future developments in his depiction of the artist-figure and his vocation. As Ann Diamond reports, in a recent issue of the *Montreal Mirror*, Cohen, on the ninth of August 1996, became a "fully ordained Japanese Zen monk" (10). At first this might

suggest that Cohen has moved beyond the "life in art" and passed to new, more intense, religious phase where the artistic vocation is superseded by a spiritual one. "From now on," reports Diamond, "he'll be known as 'Jikan,' a dharma name meaning 'Silent One'" (10). Should we mark the end of the career of Leonard Cohen as an artist? The irony in his choice of name would suggest that such an epitaph might be premature. Diamond offers some speculation on what Cohen's new religious commitment might mean for his art:

Where this will leave his work is not clear: it will be interesting to see if he decides to sing about the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Five Buddhist Precepts, which include a vow to refrain from sexual misconduct. (10)

Cohen's artist-figures have demonstrated that temporary diversions from the outward enactment of the creative vocation are to be expected. *Death of a Lady's Man* depicts the temporarily waylaid artist in a love relationship, and *Book of Mercy* marked a retreat into religion which was followed by a re-entry into a more public sphere. If and how Cohen will depict this new Zen spirituality in his work remains unclear. But if we assume that this new spiritual experience will eventually lead Cohen to a new phase of creative activity, as one might expect it will, then his artist-figure will more than likely again reinvent himself, and the artist-story will have another chapter.

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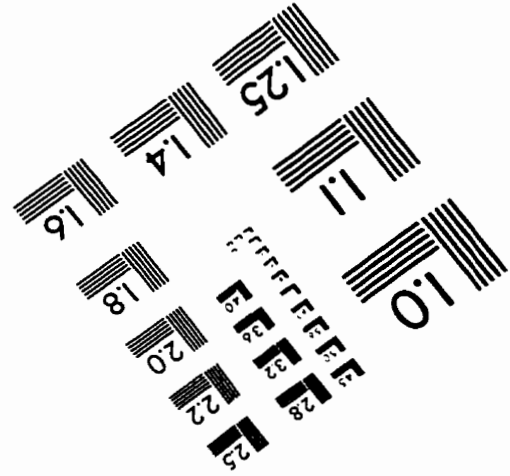
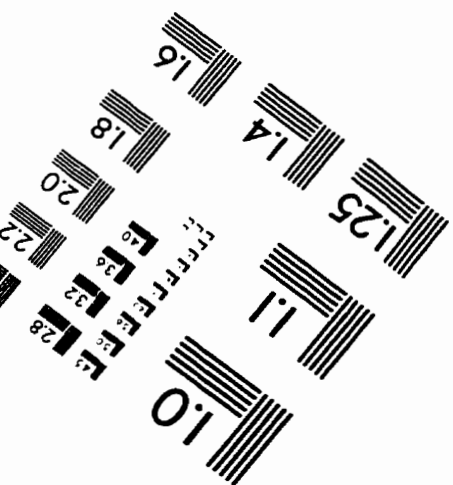
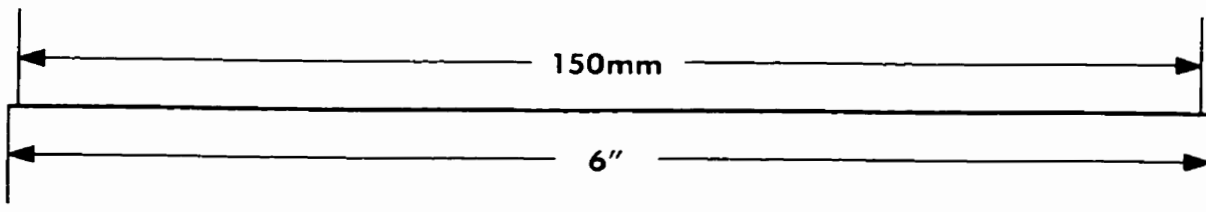
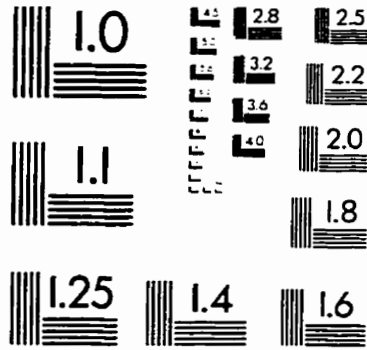
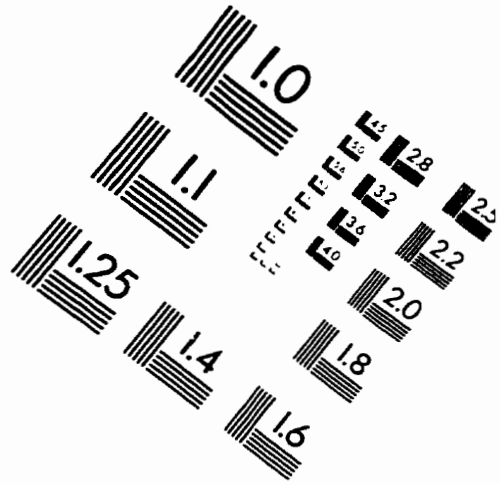
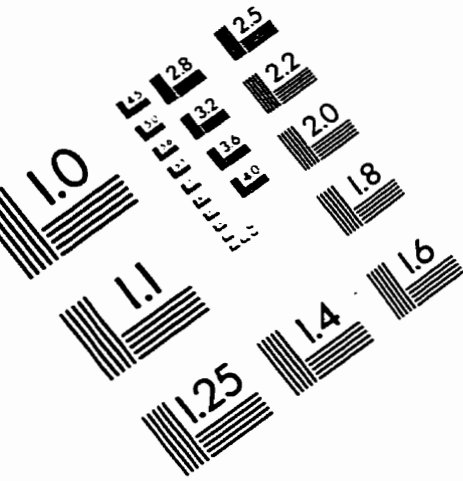
⁴²This index includes all primary texts (those written by Cohen) that are discussed in this thesis. Entries are listed under the title of individual novels, poems, songs, and video sources. Titles of albums or volumes of poetry do *not* appear except when such works are discussed in their entirety.

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