

Leonard Cohen -- Poet, Novelist and Pop Culture
Hero -- An Examination of the Artist, His Work
and the Media

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Abstract

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This thesis begins with the premise that there is a lack of a truly comprehensive analysis of Leonard Cohen's work. His poetry and novels have received critical attention from the literary critics and his songs have been given some attention by the pop culture critics; however, few critics, if any, have explored the many facets of Cohen's work using a systematic approach.

Through an examination of the persona, object and context of the poetry, novels and songs an overview of the thematic and stylistic evolution has been traced. The main focus of the thematic evolution centers around Cohen's concerns with the concepts of love, history and art. The stylistic evolution focuses upon Cohen's usage of different media for his expression.

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Chapter One

Critics and the Leonard Cohen Myth

Interviewer: I find it's sort of funny and sort of desecrating, and in a way delicate, nice that there are people who are going to do masters on you, they're going to do their theses on you and probably take you apart. How do you feel about that?

Cohen: I understand the phenomenon of masters theses and particularly the place I have now somehow in the cultural life of my country.

From offhand dismissal to careful consideration, from enthusiastic praise to blind veneration, the critical opinions surrounding Leonard Cohen have varied in scope and magnitude. Several reasons account for this: a controversial career that spans three decades having as its focal point the turbulent "late sixties"; an artistry which finds its expression developing through poetry, prose, song and music; a product which evolved from the written word to the vinyl, mass-produced LP record; and a career that drew (and still draws) admirers and critics of literature and pop culture -- not all of whom have proven themselves to be critically versatile.

Critics of literature have considered Cohen's work in the light of various literary traditions, its mythological framework, and its thematic development; critics of pop culture have considered Cohen's work in the light of popcult trends, its appeal, and its marketability. Yet, notwithstanding all this attention, Leonard Cohen, Canada's "poet-novelist become pop-culture-hero," still awaits the favour of a more comprehensive overview which would attempt to reconcile both.

approaches and deal with Leonard Cohen's phenomenon as one embracing both the literary and pop culture worlds.

Michael Gnarowski's Leonard Cohen: The Artist and his Critics attempts, with its wide-reaching editorial policy, to present the artist from the viewpoint of both pop and literary criticism. A critical anthology including reviews from The Village Voice and Gypsy should be seen as an innovative endeavor; yet, the burden of fabricating a total picture of the artist rests upon the reader. Before the trends in Cohen criticism are examined in more detail, it is important to draw further attention to Gnarowski's book. In his very short preface, the editor focuses on Cohen's development by emphasizing that the fifties serve as the earliest context within which Cohen can be placed. Gnarowski's emphasis on this formative period adds a new dimension to our perception of the artist. Let us not confuse, as many critics have, the idol of the sixties with the artist developing in "the middle nineteen fifties, that grey period of contemporary times...." ²

To call Andy Warhol a print-maker without opening a parenthesis to include his involvement with the cinema, rock music, painting, pop art and sculpture would reflect unforgivable narrow-mindedness. To qualify Michael Snow's involvement with the arts with only one of the following -- painter, sculptor, film-maker or musician -- could only point to an insensitive appreciation of the artist and his work, a dismissal of Snow's impressive exploration in the audio-visual realm of modern art. To call Leonard Cohen either a poet or a novelist, a song-writer or a singer, or even a popcult hero or a modern-day saint, would amount to

a view of the artist which would be incomplete. An understanding of Cohen and his work, much like one of Warhol, Snow and many others, is best achieved through the consideration of his total contribution.

The beat generation, with its new emphasis on self indulgence, was crucial to Cohen. Reminding the reader that Let Us Compare Mythologies was written in the same period as Jack Kerouac's On the Road, Gnarowski outlines the socio-political and cultural framework of the decade as: "a period now seen as having witnessed the beginnings and growth of a variety of forms of protest and disaffection, some which revealed themselves in overt social acts, while others were translated into literary action" ³ Cohen's contribution is not equated with that of Ginsberg or Kerouac; yet, his pursuit of the "new and promising cult of the personality" situates him comfortably in the context of the fifties. The sixties, however (Cohen's most productive period to date), saw the publication of four volumes of poetry and two novels, plus the release of two record albums. It is no wonder, considering his eminent and rapid rise to international fame, that the sixties almost always serve as the backdrop for the popular view of Cohen. However, with Gnarowski's distinction in mind and with the awareness of Cohen's publication of a volume of poetry accompanied by the release of four albums in the seventies, I shall attempt to present the artist as a person having a twenty-year career within which he explored the rhetoric of various media.

Literary critics, as previously mentioned, have sought various ways of apprehending Cohen's work. Cohen's romanticism, for example, has been

traced by Douglas Barbour, Sandra Djwa, Patricia Morley and George Woodcock. As early as 1968, Barbour suggested that Cohen's romanticism might be at the base of his success as a popular artist.

It is Cohen's conscious, almost mannerist, romanticism, which has made him a cult personality, but it has not harmed his best work, it has even, perhaps, given it its special, idiosyncratic lustre.⁴

It is difficult to say what elements truly make up the success of any artist; however, Barbour's observation is interesting in that he is the only critic to have speculated about the effect of Cohen's obvious romanticism on the audience of the sixties -- an audience which chose as its idols Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Simon and Garfunkel, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, to mention only a few.

George Woodcock sees Cohen's poetry as pointing to a form of stylistic and thematic consistency expected of the romantics.

The best of Cohen's poems are in fact lyrics that would have been successful in any genuinely romantic period -- the Elizabethan, the Blake-to-Byron age, the Decadence from Swinburne to Dowson.⁵

In the same article, "The Song of Sirens," Woodcock traces the development of Cohen's romantic conservatism. He starts his examination by pointing out that this trait seems to be inherent in Cohen's personality: "It is, of course, a romantic conservatism to which he by nature adheres, and it contains within it the decadence that is implicit in all romanticism."⁶ Woodcock sees Cohen's third volume of poems, Flowers for Hitler, as his "only real attempt to emerge from his romantic inner self and face the actual modern world," but he immediately emphasizes the poet's return to a more romantic poetry in his following publication.

After a careful examination of Cohen's romanticism in which various phases and manifestations are analysed, Woodcock interestingly concludes:

But his actual achievement is nothing more than the popularization of a conventionally romantic type of verse. 7

Like Woodcock, Djwa sees Cohen's romanticism in larger terms:

If Brown considers a Whitman or a Dos Passos improbable, a Canadian Genet, a Canadian Burroughs or a Gunter Grass is clearly beyond expectation. Yet it is in precisely this tradition, that of the contemporary Black Romantics as we might call them, that Leonard Cohen appears to belong. 8

But unlike Woodcock who traced Cohen's conventional romanticism, Djwa explores his romanticism as an "inversion of the traditional myth...."

For Cohen, as for Hitler, Burroughs, Grass and Selby, the old rules of religious rationality and romantic idealism exist to be questioned. The last twenty years have seen the codification of a new group of writers whose focus is on the disintegrative vision and it is in their footsteps that Cohen is following. 9

Placing Cohen in the tradition of Black Romanticism is a fascinating approach -- and it is my opinion that it is with the "disintegrative vision" aspect of Cohen's romanticism (rather than the syrupy variety suggested by Barbour) that the youths of the sixties identified.

Patricia Morley's attempt to define Cohen's romanticism is done primarily through the examination of "art and the artist" and their role within Cohen's prose: "The knowledge of strangerhood connotes the romantic archetype of the Outsider, which is the way Cohen sees the artist -- the nonconformist, the rebel, the suffering alien." 10 Of Cohen's first novel she writes:

The Favorite Game is romantic in structure, being basically a kunstlerroman (literally, artist novel), a type popular in German romanticism. It is a sub-species of the novel structured on the growth and education of the hero, one where the hero finally becomes an artist.¹¹

The most interesting aspect of Morley's article is the link she draws between the romanticized ideal of the artist and time.

Cohen's first novel is a classic of the type [kunstlerroman]. Its four books show the protagonist, Laurence Breavman, moving through childhood and adolescence into early maturity, guilt, and suffering. Its themes are not only love and loss, as George Robertson put it when the novel first came out, but the search for some area which transcends the losses which inevitably accompany living in time. The search involves the meaning of art and, more importantly, of the artist, who is involved in the losses of living as well as in the stasis of art. The novel explores the paradoxical unity of art and the artist, and of the human body and spirit.¹²

Later, she continues her analysis with the following observation:

George Robertson has suggested that Breavman's name is "presumably a pun on bereavement." Very good, but let's not stop there. Brief-man connotes man's participation in time and decay (including moral corruption: the sadistic streak in human nature is a recurrent motif), an impermanence which the novel contrasts with the permanence, the quick-freeze of art.¹³

In short, Cohen's romanticism has been seen as the primary element responsible for his position as a cult hero. A contrast has been established between his conservative romanticism (with emphasis on Cohen's popularization of the type) and his inversion of the traditional myth with affiliations similar to those of Sartre, Baudelaire, Miller, Burroughs and Selby. Also, his romanticism has been the subject of criticism in terms of a

German genre of literature which focuses on art and the artist.

These somewhat conflicting views are a mere indication of the greatly varying perceptions of Leonard Cohen and his work. Another group of critics, well represented by John Wain, Dennis Duffy and Burr Snider, has emphasized Cohen's modernism and has, in no way, attempted to place his work within a wider literary context -- except, perhaps, to mention the fact that we now live in an age of instant tradition which demands of its audience an "atuneness" to the immediate. Cohen appears, to this group of critics, as a writer who is "aggressively contemporary." 14

The emphasis on Cohen's modernism leads to interesting insights. Snider, in an attempt to pinpoint the reason for Cohen's success, puts forth the following suggestion:

In this McLuhanesque age of non-verbal communication there has to be some special reason why a Canadian poet who doesn't sing especially well makes it in the vulgar milieu of pop entertainment.

The reason might be that Leonard Cohen is one of the few able to put into words the emotions that drive and wound the children of Aquarius. 15

But, the words that seem to appeal to "the children of Aquarius" (as being a satisfactory depiction of their confused modern generation) lie subject to fierce remarks when placed in the hands of traditional critics.

Wain articulates this point of view in The New York Review of Books:

Mr. Cohen has a real theme, the frightening vacuum of modern Canada and the Canadian's uncertainty as to who he is and where his allegiances lie, both historically and in the present. The more's the pity that his complete assent to the contemporary modes of scrambled exposition and rhetorical free-association should make his very solid book seem like a flood of froth. 16

Cohen, with the poets Klein and Layton, is seen as creating a form of tradition in the history of Montreal Jewish poetry, as shown by Roberta Lyons in a thesis entitled "Jewish Poets from Montreal: Concepts of History in the Poetry of A.M. Klein, Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen." ¹⁷ Eve Desmolles, in an unpublished M.A. thesis, shows Cohen in his role as a prophet-like disturber of the comfortable, easy-minded devout and, in so doing, illustrates how he epitomizes the "three-fold vocation of man according to the Judeo-Christian tradition." ¹⁸ These more specialized efforts at trying to discern "tradition" in Cohen's work are included in this overview to show the broad spectrum of approaches which have been used.

The mythological framework is probably the element of greatest interest for Cohen's most serious critics: Milton Wilson and Desmond Pacey, as well as those previously mentioned -- Barbour, Djwa and Morley. It is the very perceptive Wilson who, in discussing Cohen's first book of poems, as early as 1957, writes:

But the archetypal poetic myth still awaits explanation, and one wonders if the best we can hope to find is an archetypal alphabet, out of which languages are born and die, subject as much to the whims of history as to poetic necessity. Perhaps Prometheus, Endymion and the Wandering Jew, the tree, the stone and the rose, aren't "necessarily" so. The key to all mythologies may lead to nothing but comparative mythology. ¹⁹

It is no wonder that mythology behind Cohen's work has attracted the attention of critics. As is indicated by the title of his first book of poems, Let Us Compare Mythologies, myths, new and old, are tools Cohen himself uses, expands, creates.

In an article entitled "The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen," Pacey sees the link between Cohen's two novels as being their mutual concern with myth and magic. Included by Pacey within the framework of Cohen's mythology are the poet's concerns for the movie as a contemporary form of magic, miracles, and games. The pursuit of the beauty of "sainthood" is presented as the mythic quest. Using this approach, Pacey concludes that Beautiful Losers is Cohen's "most impressive single achievement and in his opinion the most intricate, erudite and fascinating Canadian novel ever written."²⁰

Barbour sees Beautiful Losers as a work concerned with "a religious apocalyptic transformation of man," and within this context the female characters in the novel, Edith and Catherine, are seen as the embodiment of the goddess Isis: "The One Whose Names Cannot be Numbered" and who is endowed with "limitless powers of assimilation."²¹ Together with F, the narrator's friend-lover, they provide the required assistance to "I".

So it is only "I" who can eventually "make it." Exodus, moreover, is surely the right term here, for F is trying to force "I" away from ordinary humanity towards sainthood, which as a "remote human possibility," represents an extreme of human behaviour, towards which a journey, even a quest, must be made, and a dangerous one at that.²²

Barbour's view is that Cohen's outlook is one of overlapping conventional and personal mythologies. These exist in order to effect a breakdown of historical time, the tyranny of the cinema's restrictive 24 fps -- the traps of linearity. Time is the element against which the characters must struggle. It is the dragon of the mythic quest.

The old man breaks down the barriers of linear time in his final apotheosis for he has become

IF, an amalgam of both men, now becoming divine,
"a movie of Ray Charles." 23

Djwa expresses less satisfaction than other critics with Cohen's treatment of myth:

Cohen's successive books offer variations on a theme within other men's myths. This technique has the advantage of structural neatness and there are few Canadian readers who have not expressed delight at Cohen's technical virtuosity, but it has also the serious disadvantage of sacrificing organic growth and original discovery to a pre-determined formula.... Furthermore, because he is committed to a view of life and art which is that of religious aspiration followed by sexual inversion, Cohen is further limited in his presentation of experience and his delineation of character. 24

Using the term "myth as literary structure," she states that this quality mitigates against further development in his later work. Art made flesh, indeed, but according to Ms. Djwa, made at the cost of originality.

It is the magic of myth-making that captures the interest of Morley:

The youth, however, believes in his own version of work, namely, artistic creation. He roams the park at night in preparation for his vocation as poet: seeing, touching, smelling, thinking, turning his own life and that of others into myth. 25

Another preoccupation of the literary critics has been Cohen's thematic development. Desmond Pacey and Juan Rodriguez best exemplify this type of criticism. The technique used by both critics is similar: enumeration of works with brief summary description of the thematics. The following selections from Pacey's article well illustrate this approach.

In Let Us Compare Mythologies he was chiefly concerned with the similarities and differences between the Hebrew mythology of his family and the

Christian mythology of his environment.... The Spice Box of Earth (1961) reinforces the themes of religious and sexual affirmation... in Cohen's work... Flowers for Hitler (1964), at any rate in relation to Beautiful Losers, lies in its strenuous effort to broaden and deepen and ob-
jectify its author's interest and sympathies... 26

From Rodriguez, similar excerpts also illustrate this approach.

The themes that run through "Mythologies" spring forth from the poet's youth: his first "serious" brushes with love, nature, sex, religion.... "Spice Box" is best known for its love poems.... First came "Beautiful Losers," a smorgasbord of pop and Indian (Canadian) mythologies, and then "Parasites of Heaven" which brings down his verse to its most basic level.... Nevertheless, the prophet-hungry audience has proclaimed Cohen as Major Hero solely on the basis of his two records, both which are disappointing for a number of reasons.... 27

The most disturbing aspect of this type of criticism is its tendency to generalize and simplify. This approach has its valid points; however, Cohen -- the controversial artist -- suffers greatly from over-simplification.

The final group of literary critics is that group which has concentrated on Cohen's language and style. It is interesting to note that there, too, the critical opinions vary greatly. George Bowering's review "Inside Leonard Cohen" covers one angle, one perception of the artist's idiomatic and stylistic achievement prior to 1967.

I list some of the faults I see/hear:
Terrible adolescent effects and/or clichés....
Dependence on similes for making startling images.... The simile is the easier way to write, being a reason-oriented and self-indulgent practice more than a responsive one. This trick is probably why kids of all ages pick up on Cohen's poetry so easily.

Letting the will spin off surreal images,
rather than finding surreal images by putting
the will to sleep....

Cutting prose lines into sandwiches with
recurrent sentences to make the semblance of
lyric order....

Mock profundity....

Using the tricks of rhetoric (politician's
repeated syntax, e.g.) rather than the magic of
the cantor. 28

However, this is only one side of the many-faceted available inter-
pretations. Woodcock, writing about Cohen's conventionality in verse and
meter, stresses this trait in the poet's work:

Even if he has abandoned poetic diction in
the old sense, he maintains an incantatory
and self-conscious poetic tone. A high pro-
portion of poems at all periods are written
in regular or only slightly irregular meters,
and many of them have traditional rhyming
patterns. 29

He concludes that Cohen, though very romantic, is extremely successful in
his mastery of language and technique. Woodcock praises Cohen:

He is -- the first necessity -- a fine crafts-
man, in a somewhat decorative manner; he has a
sense of magic of sound in poetry, and he is adept
at handling the appropriate formulae to produce
the semblances of epiphanies. He has also that
Yeatsian sense of poetic propriety.... 30

Once again the critical opinion seems to fluctuate between appreciation
and disapproval of Cohen's artistic contribution.

There appears to be no point of general consensus amongst the
literary critics. Opinions vary according to critical interests and
approach. However, discrepancies in Cohen criticism are a reality
with which one must learn to deal. The literary criticism appears to
have its own set of rules; consequently, literary criticism has its own

impact on the literary world. Pop criticism, by comparison, produces a much more homogeneous perception of Cohen, which is not surprising, considering the clever manipulations of trend-setters, promoters and publicity agents.

Before the opinions of pop culture critics and reviewers are examined, certain distinctions must be made. First, pop criticism is mass oriented, intended to reach a wider public than literary criticism; second, pop criticism tends to deal with issues more superficially; third, the concerns of pop criticism are different -- they are oriented more towards "appeal" and "marketability"; and fourth, pop criticism focuses primarily on Cohen the singer, Cohen the pop-star. When these differences are considered, it becomes impossible to compare the two types of criticism. My examination of the popcult criticism shall be presented as another aspect -- not as the reverse or the antithesis -- of literary criticism.

If it is Cohen's poetry and prose that constitute the subject of literary criticism (although at times certain views reflect personal affinity or obvious antipathy), pop criticism openly deals as much with Cohen, the public personality, as with his art. As a public figure, he has been treated, for example, to a full page caricature by Aislin who portrays him as a suffering, very Jewish-looking Jesus Christ, hanging crucified from the Eiffel Tower.³¹ Countless photographs have appeared in newspapers and magazines, each contributing to an "image" of the poet in various phases of his "public development." Simple lines, extracted from interviews, are proclaimed as truisms by journalists.

Cohen is generally seen as an incurable lover, a lady's man, "an hallucinating acolyte," "a slaughtered lamb," "a beautiful creep,"³² -- the labels are innumerable. Everything -- from his interest in Zen to his preoccupation with diet -- has drawn attention. In short, Cohen is a noteworthy, newsworthy character. Cohen the superstar captures the imagination of both the press and the general audience.

Except for a few bad reviews, the singer and song-writer has been showered with astounding praise. Paul Nelson, for example, writes in Rolling Stone:

When I saw him recently at the Bottom Line in New York City, I was more convinced than ever of his greatness.³³

Larry Sloeman's opinion is no less impressive:

In this age of fiber glass, Cohen's work shines like a gem; he is truly a foreman of our workers in song.³⁴

Cohen's latest album, "Death of a Ladies' Man," has also attracted much attention.

The album instantly carved itself a niche as one of pop's boldest and most curious experiments; it is certainly the most unusual sounding vocal album in years.³⁵

The Los Angeles Times featured, just recently, an article by Robert Hilburn entitled: "1977 Music Roundup: The Top of the Pop." This reviewer placed Cohen's album as the best of the year. In another article he states:

Everything in "Ladies' Man" is done with an ear for intensity and nerve-end emotion rather than the safe, predigested qualities that are so praised these days by AM radio station programmers.

That's why the album has a far better chance of eventually being looked back upon as one of the classics of the 70's than of making the commercial top ten. 36

If this insight proves true, Cohen, for the second time, will have produced a landmark album: his first was The Songs of Leonard Cohen, which is undeniably a classic of the 1960's, and now, a decade later, comes the promise of new significance.

Cohen, the public personality, has also had his name linked with the cinema.

Robert Altman made a movie, McCabe and Mrs. Miller, based (Altman has told Cohen) on songs from Leonard Cohen's first two albums. 37

The Theatre de Lys has performed an off-Broadway production called Sisters of Mercy, described as a "musical journey into the words of Leonard Cohen." The Royal Winnipeg Ballet staged a performance based on the singer's work: The Shining People of Leonard Cohen. To add to all of this, there have been North American and European concert tours.

Leonard had just returned from a tour of Europe, thirty-eight concerts in forty-five days, including an outdoor performance in Paris in front of 130,000 people. He is a superstar in France.... His latest album, New Skin for the Old Ceremony, sold 250,000 copies in Europe in its first six weeks. 38

There have been films, rumours and myths, all pointing in the direction of superstardom. Later in this paper, I will examine in more detail the complex paths taken by Cohen to achieve his highly respected status.

It is difficult, on the basis of the above quotations, to establish the correlation existing between the pop-culture-hero and the poet-novelist. However, no matter how difficult it may seem to bridge this

gap, at this point in Cohen's career a more comprehensive analysis is an absolute imperative. The knowledge derived from the more specialized literary critics and the probing of pop criticism have helped in presenting facts of Cohen as a cult figure, but the criticism presented to us, at best, offers a fragmented view of the artist. In the following chapters I shall attempt to show the interrelationship among poet, novelist, song-writer, singer and pop-star. I shall attempt to trace patterns, artistic growth and change in writing style. I shall also examine the media (poetry, prose and songs) to show that the "pop-culture Cohen" is truly an outgrowth of the poet-novelist. If there is to be an understanding of the place Cohen now has in the cultural life of this country, it seems appropriate that a synthesis be made of the many roles he has played and continues to play.

Chapter Two

The Poet as Artist/Historian

In my journey, I know I am
somewhere beyond the travelling pack of poets
I am a man of tradition

Cohen's preoccupation with poetic expression has been constant from the very start of his career and, for this reason, it seems natural to trace his evolution or artistic growth using the chronology provided by the publication pattern. In this chapter I propose to examine the themes, style and language of the poetry, hoping to extract from it its characteristic elements. In my examination, I shall include appeal and marketing (the criteria of pop criticism) for it is absurd to think that poetry and literature in general are above and beyond such manipulation. Moreover, much of the available criticism deals with the artist on these very terms.

Cohen has published six volumes of poetry. His exploration of self-expression has carried him through several phases in which he preoccupied himself with numerous themes and techniques to present his material. The technique most frequently used by the poet is the juxtaposition of antinomies or polar opposites in order to create tension between the two interacting elements: the Cohen reader will readily identify the oppositions of the individual to society, the individual to the family, Judaism to Christianity. Under the headline of illusion and reality, further antinomies are presented: the opposition of the magic to the real, age to success, the "I" to the hero or the idealized projection of the self, harmony to chaos, freedom to death. More particular to Leonard Cohen is the juxtaposition of the following: violence and love, beauty and suffering,

the stranger and the lover, lust and guilt, sexuality and creativity. Each of the interacting elements enumerated above presents in itself a fascinating aspect of the man and his art; however, the central or fundamental dialectic within the body of Cohen's poetry is the incessant interplay of history and art.

Cohen's notions of history and art are not so conventional that they require no further elaboration. It must be emphasized, for example, that the poet sees little or no part of history as sacred, as beyond probing and poetic exploration. Within the conception of history, one must include Cohen's fascination with and usage of mythology (traditional and personal). One more distinction must be made: Cohen indulges freely in the destruction of linear time, frequently allowing disjointed fragments of present, past and future to coincide or intermingle. Cohen has fluctuated between a celebration of the supremacy of art -- to which everything must be sacrificed -- and a denial of its very existence. Within the definition of art the poet includes the poetic imagination and magic.

Eli Mandel, in an excellent article entitled "Cohen's Life as a Slave," presents a schematic way of tracing some of the major patterns in Cohen's work.

Three terms that can be used for convenience are "context", "persona", and "object", roughly corresponding to "field", "mode", and "tenor" in linguistics, or in less barbaric language, I suppose, "subject", "speaker", and "intention."

Having in this way defined his vocabulary and made explicit his method of approach, Mandel presents this concise, pertinent and innovative methodology:

The context of Cohen's first book, Let Us Compare Mythologies, is art; the persona, the artist; the object, vision or martyrdom. For his second book, The Spice-Box of Earth, the context is love; the persona, the lover; the object, purification or priesthood; with Flowers for Hitler, the songs, and to an extent Beautiful Losers, the context becomes history; the persona, the junkie; the object expiation.

Prefacing his remarks with an unnecessary apology, the critic concludes:

This is an admittedly awkward way of pointing to a development in which Cohen's highly literary and academic early poems are succeeded by his love lyrics, among them eight or ten of the finest in the language, which in turn give way to ironic fantasies that presage the bitter attack on both audience and art in The Energy of Slaves.

Using the guidelines provided by Mandel's schematic approach, I shall analyze, in greater detail, the "context," "persona," and "object" behind the individual volumes.

Cohen's first book was published by the McGill Poetry Series in 1956. The forty-five poems of Let Us Compare Mythologies (as is mentioned on the dust-jacket of the McClelland and Stewart reprint) were written between the ages of fifteen and twenty. It has been pointed out that this information serves as both praise and apology on behalf of the young poet. While Mandel, above, aptly describes the context of the book to be art, the persona to be the artist, and the object to be vision or martyrdom, one must not expect to find lengthy dissertations on the nature of poetry and art or, for that matter, notions pertaining to the function of aesthetics. Rather, the context is art in that Cohen's youthful poetic enthusiasm forces the reader into the search or quest of the poet.

Infatuated by the discovery of his creative powers, Cohen writes in "Pagans":

With all Greek heroes
swarming around my shoulders,
I perverted the Golem formula
and fashioned you from grass,
using oaths of cruel children
for my father's chant.
.....

Dear friend, I have searched all night
through each burnt paper,
but I fear I will never find
the formula to let you die.

It is in the creation of lovers, situations and myths that Cohen reveals his concern for art.

Cohen is away and writes me now, the young authentic;
writes and tells me of white Theodore, and Irwin who
sculptured us all in white marble.

In a poem entitled "Letter" Cohen starts exploring the many possibilities offered to him from his vantage point as a poet: "And I write this only to rob you." ⁵ I shall show later that the supremacy of this view-point becomes a major obsession as Cohen shifts his attention from a naive view of poetic creativity in his first book to a highly contrived exploration into the nature of art and the artist in The Energy of Slaves.

The persona of this volume has been described as the "artist"; however, Cohen never adopts an art-for-art's or poetry-for-poetry's sake attitude. Quite the contrary, the creative impulses and their translation into poetry almost always focus on the poet's search for identity. In a poem to Irving Layton, Cohen dismisses the idealistic positions of Nietzsche and Layton:

No answers in your delightful
zarathustrian tales ⁶

It is interesting to note that it is a chorus of invalid angels that are

their fists at Layton. No solutions are to be found in the notions of the Urbemensch and "heroic vitalism." Rather, identity is to be found in an embracing of the cult of the personality.

If I had a shining head
and people turned to stare at me
in the streetcars;
and I could stretch my body
through the bright water
and keep abreast of fish and water snakes;
if I could ruin my feathers
in flight before the sun;
do you think I would remain in this room,
reciting poems to you, 7

The young artist emerges because of his flirtations with the Judeo-Christian dilemma, fantasy, violence, evil and love.

When young the Christians told me
how we pinned Jesus
like a lovely butterfly against the wood,
and I wept beside paintings of Calvary
at velvet wounds
and delicate twisted feet. 8

The object or purpose of Let Us Compare Mythologies is undeniably "vision." This is achieved primarily through the search of self-knowledge and the poet's awareness of the world around him. In "Story" Cohen writes: "It is important to understand one's part in a legend." 9 Having been challenged to a comparison of mythologies, the reader is then led through the collection of Cohen's personal myths.

Already in his first book it is possible to discern some of the thematic preoccupations that manifest themselves throughout the entire body of Cohen's work. In "Halloween Poem" the poet makes his earliest pronouncement on evil as being inherent in all mankind, children included.

Unaware of a significant wind
and mad children igniting heaps of rattling leaves
and the desperate cry of desperate birds.

.....
It was a quarter to nine
when one bright youngster
incited the group to burn the frogs,
which they did at nine. 10

Allan Donaldson, in an early review of this book of poems, says that its greatest weakness is an overuse of images of sex and violence. 11
It is not surprising that such views were held in 1956, and with the knowledge of hindsight I shall elaborate at a later time upon the function of these images in contributing to Leonard Cohen's vision.

In "City Christ" Cohen calls for a new or contemporary religious focus:

He has returned from countless wars
Blinded and hopelessly lame
He endures the morning streetcars
And counts ages in a Peel Street room. 12

The new Christ is urban, forlorn, and not burdened with a complex public mythology.

Cohen prefaced Let Us Compare Mythologies with a quotation from William Faulkner's The Bear in which McCaslin well describes the predicament of the poet: "He had to talk about something." Cohen talks about himself -- a dominant idiosyncratic trait which appears constantly throughout his entire career to date. Also appearing in subsequent volumes are poems of love and celebration. "Song" and "Elegy" exemplify Cohen's early concern with love and beauty.

Milton Wilson perceptively points out that love may be the key to all mythologies. However, Wilson elaborates:

He can fall into the contemporary mythologizer's chief pitfall: that of taking the alphabet for the language, of attributing more power to his images than the context he provides can justify.... Although at certain moments Love may seem the key to all mythologies, Mr. Cohen has not given it a convincing image or an articulate voice. Perhaps the comparative mythology of his modern Egypt is not yet adequate for his Exodus, much less his Promised Land. Like some other Canadian poets, he is engaged in the struggle to turn what is given to modern man into a myth that is not just academic nostalgia or archetypal primitivism. 13

In a poem entitled "Ballad," Cohen creates a personal and contemporary myth out of the death of his "lady," a myth which far exceeds what Wilson calls "academic nostalgia" or "archetypal primitivism." A careful examination of this poem reveals several of Cohen's predominant concerns in Let Us Compare Mythologies.

My lady was found mutilated
in a Mountain Street boarding house.
My lady was a tall slender love,
like one of Tennyson's girls,
and you always imagined her erect on a thoroughbred
in someone's private forest.
But there she was,
naked on an old bed, knife slashes
across her breast, legs badly cut up:
Dead two days. 14

In the first two lines we are informed of the mutilation and of the Montreal location. Following this statement of fact are four lines typical of Cohen: a fantasy description of the woman loved -- tall and slender, she appeals to the poet's imagination. However, the imaginative focus is short-lived as the poet returns to an explicit description of the mutilation. In the last line Cohen relies on shock value: "Dead two days" conveys the atrocity of the murder in a simple, direct manner. The inter-

play of elements of fantasy and reality, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter is a most common occurrence in Cohen's poetry. In this way he creates the tension necessary for the impact of his poem. The second stanza starts with a direct focus on the poet himself: "They promised me an early conviction." Following this line is an enumeration of groups open to, or arousing, suspicion.

We will eavesdrop on the adolescents
examining pocket-book covers in drugstores.
We will note the broadest smiles at torture scenes
in movie houses,
We will watch the old men in Dominion Square
follow with their eyes
the secretaries from the Sun Life at five-thirty...

In Cohen's vision where even children are committed to an existence where violence plays an integral part, few are spared suspicion. The world in which we live encourages the violent nature in man. Books, films and everyday activity create an environment which the poet recognizes to be of influential value. But: "The man was not discovered./ There are so many cities!" The symbol of the city is quite consistent in Cohen's work. It is usually accompanied by an image of violence, destruction or damnation. "You All in White" portrays the city in the following terms: "The sky of the city/ is washed in the fire." ¹⁵ From the poem "Credo" we have similar lines: "The smell that burning cities give/ was in the air." ¹⁶ In "If it were Spring" the city once again becomes the centre around which revolves an aura of violence: "What language will the city hear/ because of your death." ¹⁷

Perhaps he came from Toronto, a half-crazed man
looking for some Sunday love;
or a vicious poet stranded too long in Winnipeg;

or a Nova Scotian fleeing from the rock and preachers...

The elements of black humour of which Cohen freely makes use, often reveal some dimension of his social criticism. In the case of this poem, adopting what Patricia Morley calls his immoral moralist stance (a stance which, in this case, can best be described as an awareness and dislike of the world around him, with some intention of changing the situation),¹⁸ Cohen draws on Canadian ethics and manifestations of their perversity embodied in clichéd examples: the half-crazed Toronto victim of puritanism, the prairie poet, the frustrated Nova Scotian. The element of humour does not alleviate the anxiety emitted by the poet; quite the contrary, it intensifies his desperation, makes explicit his belief in the existence of wide-spread evil.

The following stanza is transitional in that the poet once again returns to fantasy.

Everyone knew my lady
from the movies and art-galleries,
Body from Goldwyn. Botticelli had drawn her long limbs.
Rossetti the full mouth.
Ingres had coloured her skin.
She should not have walked so bravely
through the streets.
After all, that was the Marian year, the year
the rabbis emerged from their desert exile, the year
the people were inflamed by tooth-paste ads...

The three previous stanzas dealt with the murder in imaginative terms; however, their focus was primarily retributive. In the above stanza the poet returns to the creation and elaboration of his personal myth. It is not surprising to see how well Cohen uses, even at this early stage in his development, cinema and painting as the elements for his creativity.

blending together contemporary and classical approaches to myth-making.

We buried her in Spring-time.
The sparrows in the air
wept that we should hide with earth
the face of one so fair.

The flowers they were roses
and such sweet fragrance gave
that all my friends were lovers
and we danced upon her grave.

These lines occur at the end of the poem. The first five stanzas were written in free verse. The shift in style affects the tone of the poem by minimizing the horror of the Mountain Street murder. The conventionality of the two last stanzas adds a dimension of conservatism which greatly contrasts with the previous stanzas. Using this technique, Cohen emphasizes the dual nature of the event: first, the horrors of reality; second, the process of myth-making.

Cohen's second book, The Spice-Box of Earth, is equally if not more conventional in style and language than Let Us Compare Mythologies. Classical or academic references have been dropped. The stanza form occurs more frequently, and Cohen makes great use of end-rhyme as well. Musicality (foreshadowing Cohen's later development as a folk singer) is an important aspect of his second volume. Still, some critics see certain difficulties with the language of this second publication.

David Bromidge, reviewing Cohen's second book, writes:

A poet, if he wishes to keep his poems alive,
must watch closely for those words whose meanings
have decayed and drive them away from his work.
These words like "heart," ruined by bad poets and
successful song-writers, like "lovely" and "splendid,"

destroyed by the advertising media. Leonard Cohen is obviously aware of the obsolescence of "heart," for it can be no accident that it does not appear once. But other ruined words -- "beauty," "golden," and "glory," for example -- frequently recur. And when a poet as perceptive as Leonard Cohen uses these words and others of like ambiguity, there are grounds for belief in his partial lack of creating consciousness. But only partial. 19

It is not my concern to adjudicate over matters of "decayed" idiom; for the purpose of this analysis, Cohen's turn to greater simplicity is my greatest concern.

In comparison with those of his first book, the ideas presented in this volume are more complex. History becomes less prominent and serves an altogether different function: "History is on my side," Cohen declares in one of his poems, and it becomes obvious that it is the making of history, rather than reflecting about history, that concerns the poet of the early 1960's. Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Hebrew histories are replaced by the "immediate" doings of the poet, and obviously the immediate points to the love-lust phenomenon of this volume. In Mandel's words: the context is love; the persona, the lover.

The kind of love proclaimed by Cohen in this volume is distinct in nature. First, it is transitory. "As the Mist Leaves no Scar" typifies the impermanence of the love relationships encountered through The Spice-Box of Earth.

As many nights endure
Without a moon or star
So will we endure
When one is gone and far. 20

Other examples can be found in "The Flowers That I left in the Ground":

Who owns anything he has not made?
With your beauty I am as uninvolved
as with horses' manes and waterfalls. 21

Second, on many occasions, the poem presented is more a lust poem than a love poem. It is impossible to differentiate this group as Cohen himself sees lust as an essential aspect of love. Women are often reduced to sexual/poetic functions.

I live with the mortal ring
of flesh on flesh in dark 22

Third, love is made to stand in opposition to the poet's notions of saint-hood or holiness;

Battalions of the wretched,
wild with holy promises,
soon passed our sleeping place;
they ran among
the ferns and grass.
I had two thoughts:
to leave my love
and join their wandering,
join their holiness;
or take my love
to the city they had fled: 23

or, in the same vein but with an altogether different tone,

Do not come with me. When I stand alone
my voice sings out as though I did not own
my throat. Abelard proved how bright could be
the bed between the hermitage and nunnery. 24

The persona of The Spice-Box of Earth, the lover, is very much in keeping with his context. The fact that relationships are transitory allows the image of the stranger or traveller to emerge. In "Owning Everything" Cohen writes:

With your body and your speaking
you have spoken for everything,

robbed me of my strangerhood,
made me one
with the root and gull and stone,
and because I sleep so near to you
I cannot embrace
or have my private love with them. 25

The object, described by Mandel as purification or priesthood, finds its sources in many poems. The two final stanzas of "Twelve O'Clock Chant" show the object of this book particularly well:

I will starve till prophets find me,
I will bleed till angels bind me,
Still I sing till churches blind me,
Still I love till cog-wheels wind me.

Hold me hard light, soft light hold me,
Moonlight in your mountains fold me,
Sunlight in your tall waves scold me,
Ironlight in your wires shield me,
Deathlight in your darkness wield me. 26

Concern with purity can also be seen in "Lines From My Grandfather's Journal" where Cohen writes:

My poems and dictionaries were written at night
from my desk or bed. Let them cry loudly for life
at your hand. Let me be purified by their creation.
Challenge me with purity. 27

"You Have the Lovers" is in my opinion one of Leonard Cohen's finest poems. This poem illustrates particularly well the context, persona and object of the poet's second volume. Ondaatje mentions that in The Spice-Box of Earth "The lovers are devoid of faces and personality; they are just one body of flesh -- the new object of worship...." 28 In this way, The Spice-Box of Earth emphasizes not only the natural relationship between experience and art, but also the necessary relationship between experience and sex, art and religion.

You have the lovers,
they are nameless, their histories only for each other,
and you have the room, the bed and the windows.
Pretend it is a ritual.

The ritual as the amalgam of sex, religion, art and experience is an integral part of Cohen's vision in his second volume. "Celebration," an exquisitely delicate, erotic poem, transforms the act of fellatio into a ritual, which by far exceeds a simple or purely sexual vision.

I understand those Roman girls
who danced around a shaft of stone
and kissed it till the stone was warm.

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

Kneel till I topple to your back
with a groan, like those gods on the roof
that Samson pulled down. 29

Flesh as the "new object of worship," love-making as a ritual -- such are the new guide-lines to a vision which allows the reader to gain insight into the evolution of this volume's thematic core.

Unfurl the bed, bury the lovers, blacken the windows,
let them live in the house for a generation or two.
No one dares disturb them.
.....
You know they are not dead,
you can feel the presence of their intense love.

It is in the destruction of linear time -- the lovers are to remain undisturbed for a generation or two -- that Cohen shifts his vision of relationships from transience to eternity, accomplishing the same effect of immediacy, passion and lust.

In a direct address to yet another person in the poem, Cohen

reveals his clever craftsmanship and his new romantic ideology.

Your children grow up, they leave you,
they have become soldiers and riders.
Your mate dies after a life of service.
Who knows you? Who remembers you?
But in your house a ritual is in progress:
it is not finished: it needs more people.

Following these lines is a description of the ritual: an amazing portrayal of the slow, deliberate and silent act of love where the lovers are made to be the embodiment of pure lust in all its abstract splendour.

Their eyes are closed,
as tightly as if heavy coins of flesh lay on them.
Their lips are bruised with new and old bruises.
Her hair and his beard are hopelessly tangled.
When he puts his mouth against her shoulder
she is uncertain whether her shoulder
has given or received the kiss.
All her flesh is like a mouth.
He carries his fingers along her waist
and feels his own waist caressed.
She holds him closer and his own arms tighten around her.
She kisses the hand beside her mouth.

The confusion experienced by the lovers helps create what Ondaatje calls the "just one body of flesh." Through sex, the union of man and woman becomes so complete, that not only is individuality sacrificed but there occurs a transformation through a vision of complete unity. Cohen's focus on the entire body as essentially erogenous finds its culmination point in Beautiful Losers where F. declares: "Pricks and cunts have become monstrous! Down with genital imperialism! All flesh can come!" Don't you see what we have lost? Why have we abdicated so much pleasure to that which lives in our underwear? Orgasms in the shoulder!"³⁰

The last part of the poem describes the third person's entry into

the sacred ritual.

As you undress you sing out, and your voice is magnificent
because now you believe it is the first human voice
heard in that room.
The garments you let fall grow into vines.
You climb into bed and recover the flesh.
You close your eyes and allow them to be sewn shut.
You create an embrace and fall into it.

This passage reflects the notion of "voluntary loss of self for some higher cause,"³¹ a notion which must clearly be perceived for an understanding of Beautiful Losers. The loss or voluntary sacrifice of the self occurs when individuality is no longer seen as necessary for the survival of the ego. The ritual is seen as a cause greater than individuality. The body seen as the new object of worship modifies the traditional religious focus. The body's function has been reduced to the elaboration of a vision from which the poet draws freely for the creation of his art -- a celebration of total purification. Such is the nature of the necessary relationship between experience and sex, between art and religion.

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

Cohen declared of Flowers for Hitler on the dust-jacket:

This book moves me from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dung-pile of the front-line writer. I didn't plan it this way. I loved the tender notices Spice-Box got but they embarrassed me a little. Hitler won't get the same hospitality from the papers.... All I ask is that you put it in the hands of my generation and it will be recognized. 32

Flowers for Hitler can be seen as the outgrowth of what Cohen had called, in 1962, his new literary programme:

In 1962 at a conference of writers in Foster, Quebec, a gathering of a strange group called "English Writers of Quebec," Cohen, who had just won a CBC prize for a ms of poems entitled Opium for Hitler, an early version of the later Flowers for Hitler, announced his new literary programme: Henceforward, he told a startled group that included such imposing figures as the controversial poet Irving Layton, the critic Milton Wilson, the shy pornographer of the Eastern townships John Glassco, and a horde of shadowy luminaries -- poets and literati -- he would seek his audience in Playboy and Esquire.³³

The interplay of history and art emerges more obviously in this book than it had previously. "Through art -- the 'nests' of 'Elegy,' the 'kite' of Spice-Box, the 'butterflies' of Flowers for Hitler -- the poet attempts to reconcile the two," that is to say, the poetic and sexual and religious aspiration, and the process of disintegration. Djwa continues:

In Flowers for Hitler, Cohen takes the blackness of the human capacity for evil and from it attempts to extract the flowers of art. In this perspective, the poet emerges as a recorder: "neither/ father nor child/ but one who spins/ on an eternal unimportant loom/ patterns of war and grass/ which do not last the night."³⁴

Thematically central to Flowers for Hitler is Cohen's effort to "examine our time's adventure," an important line which occurs in "Congratulations." In "On Hearing a Name Long Unspoken" Cohen resumes his position on history:

History is a needle
for putting men to sleep
annointed with the poison
of all they want to keep³⁵

History is "Rust rust rust/ in the engines of love and time."³⁶

However, it is important not to equate history exclusively with the atrocity of World War Two and Hitler. To avoid the possibility of confusion, the author makes this note on the title:

A
while ago
this book would
have been called
Sunshine for Napoleon
and earlier still it
would have been
called
Walls for Genghis Khan 37

In "Portrait of City Hall" there is an attempt on the part of the poet to bring a guilty world to a recognition of itself.

The diamonds of guilt
The scrolls of guilt
The pillars of guilt
The colours of guilt
The flags of guilt
The gargoyles of guilt
The spikes of guilt 38

The emphasis on guilt in this poem and the display of an entire panorama of perverse human behavior in the collection undeniably make history the context of Flowers for Hitler.

Mandel describes the persona of this volume as the "junkie." I disagree with Mandel. Although the junkie has a place of prominence, it is impossible to dismiss the "white collar sadists," "the elected," "judges," and other members of the power structure. They are essential spokesmen for Cohen's message. For this reason, I prefer Djwa's distinction: the persona

of Flowers for Hitler is the "recorder."

To achieve the position of recorder, Cohen himself has undergone several transformations from his previous personae -- the artist and the lover. There occurs a shift from the celebrator to a position of double-bind -- the conflict of the hunter/ hunted. "I am with the hunters" writes Cohen,

hungry and shrewd
and I am with the hunted,³⁹
quick and soft and nude.

Slowly, but with astounding determination, he strips off layers of his old mythic self: "I also learned my lust/ was not so rare a masterpiece."⁴⁰ Moreover, he maintains: "no one can undo without destroying."⁴¹ His new laws "encourage/ not satori but perfection."⁴²

as I disgrace my style
as I coarsen my nature
as I invent jokes
as I pull up my garters
as I accept responsibility.

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.⁴³

"To bear upon the facts": that is the object of Flowers for Hitler, "Sunshine for Napoleon," "Walls for Genghis Khan." Seeing the book in this light, I must once again disagree with Mandel and substitute purification and discipline for expiation or redemption as the object of this truly significant collection of poems. In Cohen's own words:

"Your purity drives me to work." 44

The style and language of Flowers for Hitler, as is to be expected considering the shift in thematic preoccupation, have undergone noticeable transformation. Enumeration becomes a major technique, accomplishing the effect of compounding the triteness or atrocity of the subject matter.

The "I" plays a less important role -- although the reader is constantly made aware of his presence. Language is kept basic, straightforward communication being its fundamental purpose. Punctuation is minimal. Cohen's private universe unfolds and is revealed through the radio, phone-book, camera, creams and scissors and tubes, stock-reports, danger-reports, comic-book heroes, and fantasy world of the "Very Very Very Late Show." 45

In the face of the reality of history made by the powerful government people (as opposed to the lovers of The Spice-Box of Earth -- "their histories only for each other,") Cohen adopts a new position.

I saw men who loved their worldliness
even though they had looked through
big electric telescopes
they still thought their worldliness was serious
not just a hobby a taste a harmless affectation
they thought the cosmos listened
I was suddenly fearful
one of their obscure regulations
could separate us
I was ready to beg for mercy
Now I'm getting into humiliation 46

The first poem from Flowers for Hitler, "What I'm Doing Here," makes explicit Cohen's evolution from his second volume. Purification, previously a personal or individual task or quest, becomes in Cohen's third book an attempt to awaken collective consciousness. Using his own purification

as a given standard, the poet shifts his interests from his egocentric selfless spirituality to a notion of universal spirituality through purification.

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
Even without the mushroom cloud
still I would have hated 47.

In his shocking, direct style, Cohen confesses his betrayal of truth and love, makes explicit his indulgence in evil and accepts the responsibility for his own behaviour, above and beyond his awareness of the mushroom cloud.

Listen
I would have done the same thing
even if there were no death

The poet's betrayal, followed by his confession, implies an evolution on his behalf. However, we are not to equate confession with repentance. The confession motif, which appears quite consistently in the poet's work from the mid-sixties on, is a feature of his work by which both poet and audience are to reach an altered or greater state of awareness. Confession is not to be interpreted in accordance with Christian standards: the acknowledgement of one's sins or faults for the purpose of self improvement. Confession is a process by which the poet makes explicit his awareness, transcending the conventional dichotomy of good and evil.

I will not be held like a drunkard
under the cold tap of facts
I refuse the universal alibi

Cohen does not elaborate upon what constitutes the universal alibi

although, given the context, it is simple enough to speculate. A refusal of the universal alibi may be the refusal to acknowledge the cyclical repetitive nature of history. It may well represent the justification of one's own behaviour through the concept of human behaviour. Or still, it may stand for the collective unconscious.

Like an empty telephone booth passed at night
and remembered
like mirrors in a movie palace lobby consulted
only on the way out
like a nymphomaniac who binds a thousand
into a strange brotherhood
I wait
for each one of you to confess

The empty telephone booth, the movie palace mirror and the nymphomaniac are cryptic images and Cohen has often been criticized for his use of such imagery. They detract from the essence of the poem; however, Cohen attempts to create an atmosphere of desolation distorted by memory and time. When, in Parasites of Heaven, Cohen writes "It's time to be sweet again/ to the poor ladies and gentlemen,"⁴⁸ he is, in brief, conveying the purpose of this volume -- the presentation of a milder, gentler vision of reality. This fourth book of poems was published in 1966. By the mid-1960's, Cohen had moved from the ranks of the McGill or college poet -- Cohen is often described during this period as Dudek's brain-child -- to a place of prominence in Canadian letters. His popular image during this period, based on four books of poems, two novels, and an incredible amount of press coverage, is that of a Midas of literature smothered, so to speak, in a crazy rumour of glory. The press devours, Cohen acquiesces:

Writing, for Leonard Cohen, is that test of character that he approaches to reconfirm his worth, justify his existence; 1965 was a very bad year "I hated myself," he continued. "I said if I couldn't even write, it wasn't worth living." 49

The McClelland and Stewart reprint of Let Us Compare Mythologies, the publication of his second novel, and the new Parasites of Heaven guaranteed him, at least for the following few years, the attention worthy of his new and imposing position as a laureate of his generation. A quote from Robert Weaver in The Toronto Daily Star says it all : "Leonard Cohen has 'got it made' as a poet." 50

Mandel does not include Parasites of Heaven in his synthesis. This collection cannot be described as a volume of poems which lends itself easily to categorization. The book is retrospective in nature -- it includes poems written as early as 1957. There are, in fact, several poems written in the 1950's; however, most of the material belongs to the early or mid-1960's. There does not emerge a persona or context or even an object or purpose, yet the book proves to be extremely useful in tracing the evolution of themes and style. Titles have been dropped, even for those poems dated 1957, 1958 and 1959, although it was not the case with the poems of Let Us Compare Mythologies; nevertheless, the concerns of the poetry of that period are so characteristic and distinct, that comparison to the later work is facilitated by the regrouping.

Snow is falling.
There is a nude in my room.
She surveys the wine-coloured carpet.

She is eighteen.
She has straight hair.
She speaks no Montreal language.

She doesn't feel like sitting down.
She shows no gooseflesh.
We can hear the storm.

She is lighting a cigarette
from the gas range.
She holds back her long hair. 51

or from the same year -- 1958:

Ah, what were the names I gave you
before I learned all names the do-do way?
Darlin, Golden, Meadowheart 52

As Cohen's early romanticism loses its place to the soul-searching quest of the following decade, so do the poems of this volume. Cohen writes in a prose poem dated 1965: "Freedom lost its name to the style with which things happen." 53 In another prose poem the poet writes:

I tried to give more than my heart, I tried to
yield my loathing, my ambition, all my tiny sick-
nesses, I tried to give away a new desire which
I had hardly suspected but which was growing
violently in the mental sunlight, like a germ
culture suddenly surrounded by its own ideal
conditions. 54

Cohen traces for the reader the evolution of this complex period of his own development. Adopting a position of unusual modesty, he emphasizes the unfolding of his progress in another poem:

Today I know the only distance that I came was to
the threshold of my trophy room. Among the killing
instruments again I am further from sacrifice than
when I began. I do not stare or plead with passing
pilgrims there. I call it discipline but perhaps
it is fallen pride alone. 55

The later poems of this volume point to a period of crisis. Cohen writes "Poetry is no substitute for survival." 56 The poet projects himself onto the "emptiness of history." 57

Although this book is extremely grim as far as its themes are concerned, insights pinpointing the transition to Cohen as a pop-singer are nonetheless given some attention. Three of the poems are, in effect, songs from his first album, and Cohen himself comments on the transition.

He thought he knew, or he actually did know too much about singing to be a singer; and if there actually is such a condition, is anybody in it, and are sadists born there?

It is not a question mark, it is not an exclamation point, it is a full stop by the man who wrote Parasites of Heaven.⁵⁸

The full stop referred to is probably that period between 1966 and 1972, a significant period where Cohen published nothing except the twenty poems entitled "New Poems," described as: "sort of sandwiched in the back of the recent anthology."⁵⁹ An interesting aspect of this volume is that two and one half months after publication it had sold more than 20,000 copies," and as Time informs us: "Sales for the average collection rarely hit one-tenth that figure."⁶⁰ However, when one considers the silence of the poet, it must be remembered that it coincides with the period in which Cohen the pop-star is born and makes it in the milieu of pop entertainment. Although not publishing poetry, Cohen nonetheless released three albums during this same period.

At best, I have learned to consider the "New Poems" as a McClelland and Stewart marketing tactic to encourage sales and help promote the anthology. Not one poem stands out as a poem of significance on a literary level. On the other hand, the poems allow the reader to follow the pilgrim's progress. The poems reflect a greater tranquility. In "This

Is for You" Cohen writes: "and I move toward a love/ you have dreamed for me." ⁶¹ The emergence of the song-writer and pop-star is also documented: "I've sung to a thousand people/ and I've written a small new song/ I believe I will trust myself with the care of my soul." ⁶² However, there is no resolution of conflict in this grouping of poems, and Cohen admits that he is "thinking much more about suicide and money." ⁶³ Immediate salvation is not at hand:

MARITA
PLEASE FIND ME
I AM ALMOST 30 ⁶⁴

Since "New Poems" Cohen has published comparatively little poetry. To date, the Seventies have resulted in only one book-- The Energy of Slaves. However, Death of a Ladies' Man, which had been promised by the publicity machine as imminent since Spring 1977, is now rescheduled for Fall 1978. Mandel describes the published book in the following terms:

The context of The Energy of Slaves is audience and politics; the persona, slave; the object now appears, paradoxically, as mastery or freedom. ⁶⁵

But, Cohen warns the reader:

No instructions come
on how to read this
you would have to be
more beautiful than your father
and your mother
and you aren't ⁶⁶

The most distinctive characteristic of The Energy of Slaves is the required active participation on behalf of the "you" spoken to in the poems, henceforth referred to as "the audience." This volume of poems

demands the involvement of its audience, and in this way it differs significantly from Cohen's previous works which demanded only minimum participation. Cohen tells us: "This is a war. You are here to be destroyed." ⁶⁷ The poet's politics can be described as the stance of the modern artist.

Each man
has a way to betray
the revolution
This is mine ⁶⁸

In his betrayal, the poet exposes the dialectic, the two-fold nature of art: on the one hand, the making of art or the creative impulse; on the other, the inevitable sharing with an audience. The latter explains and justifies the context of the book -- the audience as subject, within the realm of a great debunking of art -- Cohen's politics of exposure.

First, the audience is seen as an integral part of the creative process:

This is the poem we have been waiting for
n'est-ce pas
Much returns to us when we read it
which we do over and over again
It is not inspired
It took days and days to write
You are a detail in it ⁶⁹

Second, the audience, at best, is reduced to a position of aesthetic or spiritual voyeurism:

Before you accuse me of boring you
(your ultimate triumph and relief)
remember that neither you or me
is fucking right now
and once again you have enjoyed
the company of my soul ⁷⁰

And third, Cohen sees the audience as employees:

I am one of the slaves
You are employees
That is why I hate your work 71

Here, Mandel's distinctions on art and slavery prove useful:

slavery is defined simply as art and addiction. Art is opposed to work, it is habit, need, no longer the romanticized purity, focus, and concentration of the Trocchi poem, but the routine dreariness of meaningless necessary repetition. 72

On one occasion, Cohen refers to the audience as "slaves."

Imperial and mysterious
my greed had made a slave of you 73

The audience becomes a slave when individuals have completed the poetic process by sharing the intimacy of the poet's creative impulse. But, this is a unique occurrence for, in general, the audience is perceived as having one "great envious heart." 74

The persona of this volume is the slave or artist. Upon a reader's careful examination, it becomes clear that the slave motif is not as explicit as one might expect, given the context; however, the omnipresence of the slave is undeniable. The root of Cohen's artistry is language:

We call it sunlight
or the dove
or a two twenty-two

It is my language
my cunt my slave 75

Cohen refers to his old slave's heart, possibly referring to his old romanticism. But, the poet is revolted. In the name of art, he has

sacrificed his strangerhood, made public his pain, alienated himself from his true loves. Lines like: " I have kept nothing for myself/ I have despised every honour" ⁷⁶ make explicit to the audience the "cost" of art for the artist. But, Cohen reassures us, he is, at all cost, an artist:

I was meant to be
the seed of your new society ⁷⁷

The poet's vantage point, described earlier in the context of Let Us Compare Mythologies, reaches, in this volume, immense proportions. In his first book, poetry and creativity allowed for insights that the poet used to his advantage in robbing originality or knowledge from his lover: "And I write this only to rob you." ⁷⁸ Years later, Cohen writes:

I made this song for thee
Lord of the World
who has everything in the world
except this song ⁷⁹

The poet asserts the supremacy of his art over the forces of the world.

Revenge, another recurrent motif, can be interpreted as an extended metaphor for exposure because, beyond doubt, Cohen exposes the creative process, the creative dilemma. In one poem Cohen adopts a new persona:

I am the angel of revenge
The flowers and the mountains
the milky afternoons of childhood
all innocent and abandoned forms
have designated me
the angel of revenge ⁸⁰

Both the slave and the angel of revenge accomplish the same function -- that of leading the audience into the complex machine of art.

It is at this point that much of the criticism of The Energy of Slaves

breaks down. Critics were all too eager to quote Cohen at his own word:

I have no talent left
I can't write a poem anymore
You can call me Len or Lennie now
like you always wanted 81

or any of the available variations:

I am no longer at my best practising
the craft of verse 82

The form of poetry
has been disgraced by many pious hands
That's why I can't write it any more 83

I suggest that this denial of talent or creative potential is a technique by which the poet or artist de-mythologizes himself. If art is to be exposed as a mere transaction between the artist and his public, if art is to be defined as a transaction between the "need" of the poet and the "greed" of the audience, then in keeping with this intention, the artist must be exposed as a liar, fraud and cheat (a reflection of his need or addiction), the audience as weak, ugly and contemptuous (as a reflection of its insatiability).

Although mastery and freedom are essential aspects of the object of The Energy of Slaves, truth appears to be more precise. Consider Cohen's last statement: this is not art (poetry) because I am not an artist (poet); however, through the intermediacy of an artefact (The Energy of Slaves) there occurs an interaction between "you" and "I." This is the essence of Cohen's last book. It is Cohen's way to "betray the revolution."

Pass by
this is no vision offered
this is the truth 84

to hurry from the page and leave the poet to himself, is to conform to, or accept a non-art, anti-literature attitude. The dialectic between expectation and fulfillment, between anticipated behaviour and possible execution, becomes the dilemma of the audience. Cohen betrays the revolution -- the burden of the creative process reaches fulfillment -- if and only when, we as readers have betrayed the poet, his art and ourselves.

The style of The Energy of Slaves, to say the least, is very distinct. Barbour remarks:

Cohen recognized that the "message" of his poetry was subtly altered by the style in which he presented it. Style, after all, creates content. As early as Flowers for Hitler, in 1964, he experimented with toughening his style. He has continued to do so, as his latest volume, The Energy of Slaves (1972), clearly shows. The poems of The Energy of Slaves violently reject the Romantic stance of the early books, but, for the most part, they lack the saving grace of audacious wit and humour. 86

In this manner Barbour points to the shift in style that occurs in Cohen's poetry with the publication of Flowers for Hitler. Cohen's "toughened style" translates itself into a poetry relying less frequently on poetic embellishment of idiom and metaphor. The simplification of both language and technique account for a certain crudeness in style which developed progressively and which results in the rather stark verse of The Energy of Slaves. But, Barbour reminds us, the close inter-relationship of style and content (I would not go so far as to maintain that the one creates the other) is made evident by an equivalent shift of emphasis in content.

Cohen's first two books were personal and romantic. The personae of his early work, the artist and the lover, were essentially conventional.

The "giver of names" of Let us Compare Mythologies and the "lover" of The Spice-Box of Earth who expounds theories of transient love/lust relationships (in the early 1960's) present no real departure from archetypal moulds. In this light, Flowers for Hitler becomes not only an experiment in the "toughening of style," but also a transition landmark where both form and content undergo significant transformation.

In Cohen's third book, the attempt to break away from romanticism produces a vision which goes far beyond the self. In the early period of his development the poet spoke of the I-artist and the I-lover. With Flowers for Hitler, the recorder, within the context of history, makes purification the object of his endeavours. However, this purification is a collective matter. The transition into a new phase is obvious when one compares the collective nature of the object or purpose of Flowers for Hitler to the object of The Spice-Box of Earth, which is also purification -- but romantic and individual in nature.

The artist is the persona of both his first and last books although, in the early seventies, the persona comes disguised as a slave, a tremendous difference from the youthful conjurer of Golems. The slave is an obviously more complex symbol for the artist, containing within it the ambiguities provided by a wider, less self-centered notion or perception. The artist of Let Us Compare Mythologies is name-giver, lover, myth-maker -- all expressing facets of the young poet's discovery of his new creative magic. The artist of The Energy of Slaves is far from being infatuated with new power; he is weary, bored, drained of all resources, alienated and, moreover, he has become the public property of a greedy audience.

This last group -- the greedy audience -- as we have seen, becomes the context of the volume as Cohen exposes the chemistry of the need/greed, poet/audience phenomenon. In this way, the more recent publication deals with art more extensively and in a less subjective manner.

The object or purpose of Let Us Compare Mythologies, vision, finally yields, in The Energy of Slaves, to self-proclaimed truth. The vision aspired to by the young poet was closely interwoven with notions of martyrdom. Martyrdom occurs as the result of tension created by the opposition of the poet's individuality to society through his family and Jewish background. Individuality is also proclaimed through the assertion of Cohen's mythology as it is woven into classical myth and legend. Fifteen years later, the object of vision is thoroughly denied by the poet. It is not vision that he seeks; it is truth that he proclaims. The early quest, centered around the self of the new or budding poet, is replaced by disturbing research into the nature of the artist's involvement with art, focusing primarily on the poet's sacrifice of privacy, the need to create, and suffering -- demands which conflict with the expectations of the audience for entertainment or enlightenment. In brief, the evolution from Let Us Compare Mythologies to The Energy of Slaves can be summed up thus: in the first book the poet invited his audience to a comparison of mythologies for the purpose of mutual enlightenment and insight; in his last book, denying his own talent or creativity, the poet attacks both the audience and the popular notions of art for their demands and false expectations. The intermediate phase, the dialectic between vision and truth, is presented by Cohen through his exploration of purification, both personal and collective.

Cohen is a traditional man, not a man of tradition. His concerns in matters of art and history are consistent throughout all of his poetry; however, Flowers for Hitler unmistakably stands out as a landmark volume, pointing in an obvious manner to a shift in position or preoccupation. In the following chapter I shall attempt to show, in my examination of The Favorite Game and Beautiful Losers, that there occurs an evolution of themes and style that coincides particularly well with the evolution of the ideas conceived in the poetry. In my examination of the prose, further distinctions and more subtle nuances within the poetry will be revealed and discussed.

Chapter Three

The Politics of Sainthood

My Bollandist friends [Bollandists are a group of Jesuits whose special task is to record all available information about saints in their great Acta Sanctorum] are the first to admit that there is more politics to the making of a saint than the innocently devout might think likely.¹

The Favorite Game was published in 1964, Beautiful Losers in 1966. The novels, then, as a facet of Cohen's artistry, as a dimension of his skill, are a mid-1960's occurrence. However, even if they represent a departure in style from the remainder of his work -- poetry and songs are more closely linked by form -- the content, beyond doubt, expresses concerns which are central to Cohen's message. Notwithstanding this difference in form, the methodology used for the examination of the poetry in Chapter Two proves applicable to the two novels. The persona of The Favorite Game is the artist-lover; the context is art; and the object, identity and celebration. The persona of Beautiful Losers is the beautiful loser; the context is magic; and the object, a remote human possibility, or sainthood.

The Favorite Game is most often perceived as autobiography. This popular view is considered an adequate reason, in this age where New Critical Theory abounds, to minimize serious criticism and overlook the intrinsic merit of the novel. Desmond Pacey and Patricia Morley appear to be the only serious critics of this novel. Morley's distinction, The Favorite Game as a kunstlerroman, has already been mentioned in the previous chapter: "The form reflects the romantic interest in the growth of the artist as an individual."² Seen in this light, the autobiographical

aspect of the novel becomes secondary to its form. Considering that the persona, context and object are woven into the structure, the inter-relation of form and content proves to be sufficient reason for serious criticism, notwithstanding the common apprehension about autobiography disguised as fiction.

Although we find the persona of The Favorite Game, the artist-lover, combines personae which Cohen had previously adopted in his first two volumes of poetry, there appears a major difference in their treatment. The poetry focuses on a presentation of facts, dimensions and aspects of either the artist or lover; the novel, because of its focus on growth and education, presents the artist-lover through a continuity of events. In fact, apart from the novel's emphasis on development and the handling of the artist-lover as a single entity, Cohen has not altered his basic vision: the artist is still very much the youthful enthusiastic conjurer; the lover remains the suffering stranger caught in a dilemma revolving around holiness and lust.

The nature of the artist-lover, treated as a single entity, is portrayed by Breavman. As a poet, he writes a poetry of celebration: he celebrates his loves. As a lover, he fully lives his loves: they inspire his poetry or art.

The artist and the lover are mutually dependent; however, at different times in the protagonist's development, either the artist or the lover attempts to assert his dominance or supremacy. Book I -- the period covering childhood to puberty -- makes, for obvious reasons, less of the formative development of the lover than of the artist. The artist is

born of his iconoclastic, rebellious, individualistic tendencies; whereas the lover is born of his natural, heterosexual impulses. Book II, on the other hand, focusing on Breavman's romantic vision of life and women (Norma, Lisa, Tamara, etc.) emphasizes the lover. It is not until Book III that the reader witnesses a full collaboration of the lover and the artist through Breavman's relation with Shell.

She learned quickly, but no woman is so beautiful
she will not want her beauty told again in rhyme. He
was a professional, he knew how to build a lover to
court her.

He thought poems made things happen. 3

At a later phase in the development of his relationship with Shell, Breavman introduces the concept of the self fragmented into the "master" and the "deputy" (the master is the artist and the deputy, the lover). When his relationship with Shell reaches a point of crisis, the harmony existing between the two selves is disrupted. Morley comments:

Breavman's love for Shell becomes a strong temptation to "join the world" and "be a citizen with a woman and a job." His struggle with this temptation is depicted as a struggle between himself as Artist and his deputy or double, the lover of Shell. The double is "a skillful product riveted with care, whom Breavman wouldn't have minded being himself.... The lover, being planned so well, had a life of his own and often left Breavman behind." In this comic inversion, Breavman thinks of his real self as the artist, and the ordinary man, Shell's lover, as his own artistic creation, a robot lover. Breavman is fully aware of the irony involved in his rejection of Shell. He sees his artist self as the lover or celebrant of all living things and of life itself. He believes he can create only in lonely freedom, and that he must shun the comfort of married love lest it put the "Breavman eye to sleep." 4

Although it is only in Book III that we witness the full collaboration of lover and artist, where they play an equally important part simultaneously, the remainder of the novel stresses their interdependency. It is in this way that the persona of Cohen's first novel is the artist-lover. The artist of Let Us Compare Mythologies is also, at times, lover; and the lover of The Spice-Box of Earth is at the best of times very, very preoccupied with himself as artist. The persona of Cohen's first novel differs from his previous personae in that the reader witnesses the unending dialectic between the artist and the lover. We are made aware of the process by which the lover stimulates the artist and by which the artist celebrates the lover -- we are made aware of the complicity of the master and the deputy.

Pacey writes:

The dust-jacket of The Favorite Game declares that "the favorite game itself is love." This seems to me a serious misreading of the novel. As I read it, and especially the final paragraph, the favorite game is to leave an impression on the snow, to leave behind one an interesting design and by extension I take this to include the novel itself, which is Cohen's design of his own early life, and by further extension of all artistic creation.⁵

The context of The Favorite Game might have been depicted as art-love if the deputy or lover did not play a secondary role by comparison with the master-artist. I agree with Pacey: it is faulty to assume that the favorite game is love. Pacey sees the favorite game as artistic creativity. In her discussion of George Robertson's interpretation of the favorite game,⁶ Morley mentions that

Robertson sees in the childish innocence and beauty of the image an emphasis on what the hero has lost. But Robertson believes that the image remains sentimental, for all its effectiveness, and he finds this disappointing.

Morley suggests, rather:

The childhood game is the novel's final metaphor for the stasis, the immortalizing permanence of art. The "blossom-like shapes with footprint stems" in the lovely white fields of snow, these shapes from which the children run away, are analogues for that important instant which the artist catches and shapes out of the constant flux of life.

I agree with the interpretations of both Pacey and Morley; however, by extension, I suggest that the favorite game can also be viewed as the interplay of the artist and the lover where the artist is given preferential treatment. The Favorite Game is a novel about the making of an artist, not the making of a lover; yet, the lover cannot be denied the importance of his role.

The context is art. "The most pervasive thematic motif in The Favorite Game is Breavman's conception of himself as a sort of magician, miracle-worker, or hypnotist." ⁷ These, of course, are metaphors for the artist, and Pacey is precise in observing the incessant recurrence. Book I and the incidents that it relates, from the moment where Bertha falls from the tree (attributed to Breavman's voice) up until the moment when he hypnotizes Heather, the maid, emphasize the power and control that the protagonist hopes to obtain once he has mastered his art. In the incident with Heather, the attempt to seduce her while under hypnosis allows Breavman to become an accomplished magician, marking at the same time the transition from puberty

into early manhood. "There was a new magician in the world." ⁸ With the awareness of this dimension of his new creative powers he becomes "intoxicated with relief, achievement, guilt, experience." ⁹ These are four key terms. Having become a magician -- or artist -- Breavman is described as drunk with relief. Henceforth the artist knows, for sure, that he "can make things happen." ¹⁰ This phrase occurs earlier in the novel as Breavman relates to Krantz that his voice is in some way responsible for Bertha's fall from the tree. Now, there are no longer any doubts about his power, and the protagonist's transition into early manhood occurs through the assertion of his magic based on his limited but nonetheless significant experiences. Although the sexual dimension of his encounter with Heather is illicit and it is achieved through surreptitious means, it is nonetheless acknowledged as valid experience. Guilt, however, surfaces in the panorama of emotions. Although the nature of his encounter with the maid somewhat explains this feeling, it is impossible to dismiss its overwhelming presence throughout the novel. Guilt usually triggers the mechanisms of conflict between the artist and the lover. In his relationship with Tamara, as is also the case with Shell, the loss of creative vitality is accompanied by an attempted assertion of Breavman's deputy over Breavman's master.

In Book IV, Breavman's encounter with the "half-nut, half-genius," ¹¹ Martin Stark, produces an inverse effect: the deputy is forsaken to the exploration of the master as Breavman becomes more profoundly aware of other dimensions of artistic creativity.

He reckoned that he had misinterpreted Martin's expression. It was not vacant terror but general wonder. He was a rarest creature, a blissful mad child. 12

Through Martin, Breavman becomes aware of the facet of creativity which is not inextricably entangled with love.

He had given himself to the firefly's crisis. The intervals became longer and longer between the cold flashes. It was Tinker Bell. Everybody had to believe in magic. Nobody believed in magic. He didn't believe in magic. Magic didn't believe in magic. Please don't die.

Both in the conflict created by the mutual interplay of the artist and the lover, and in moments where either artist or lover asserts his supremacy, Breavman becomes aware of guilt. The guilt helps recreate the equilibrium between the two conflicting yet complementary quests. This paradoxical dilemma is a direct result of the double nature of the persona. However, the structure of the novel as well as the narrative content emphasizes the fact that art is the context within which the persona functions. It is not a matter of coincidence that Breavman does not return to Shell to become "a citizen with a woman and a job."¹⁴ Nor is Breavman's encounter with Martin Stark, at the end of the novel, accidental. Breavman's refusal to allow his deputy to govern his future life and his fear of putting the "Breavman eye to sleep" explicitly emphasize the artistic dimension of the protagonist's quest. Breavman's encounter with the blissful mad child in Book IV implies a growth in the artist's creative consciousness which somewhat minimizes the function of the deputy. Having struggled with the dual nature of his personality within the quest for artistic creativity, Breavman discovers his path to self realization. Thus, identity becomes

the basic purpose of Cohen's first novel.

Breavman's dealings with identity are noteworthy. Even as a child, much is made of the apprehension of his individuality.

The Jews are the conscience of the world and the Breavmans are the conscience of the Jews. "And I am the conscience of the Breavmans." adds Laurence Breavman. ¹⁵

In his relationship with Krantz, the formative development of the idiosyncratic selves is documented as such:

Ten thousand conversations. Breavman remembers about eight thousand of them. Peculiarities, horrors, wonders. They are still having them. As they grew older, the horrors became mental; the peculiarities sexual, the wonders religious. ¹⁶

Even in this early stage of his development, sex and religion are closely linked. Cohen's fascination with horror, as has been shown in the poetry, is a dominant trait. The artist freely draws upon human cruelty to illustrate or even to create. Up until early adulthood Breavman sees himself as an artist in his role of outsider, "conscience" of his race and iconoclast. After his moderate but meaningful success as a poet, Breavman redefines himself in terms of his new perception of the artist. "He was a kind of Dylan Thomas, talent and behaviour modified for Canadian tastes." ¹⁷

Although Breavman is delighted by his success, he nonetheless observes the phenomenon with self-reflective irony: "The whole enterprise of art was a calculated display of suffering." ¹⁸ In one paragraph the hero elaborates:

Breavman, you're eligible for many diverse experiences in the best of all possible worlds. There are many beautiful poems which you will write and be praised for, many desolate days when you won't be able to lay pen to paper. There will be many cunts to lie in, different

colors of skin to kiss, various orgasms to encounter, and many nights you will walk out your lust, bitter and alone. There will be many heights of emotion, intense sunsets, exalting insights, creative pain, and many murderous plateaus of indifference where you won't even own your personal despair. There will be many good hands of power you can play with ruthlessness or benevolence, many vast skies to lie under and congratulate yourself on humility, many galley rides of suffocating slavery. This is what waits for you. 19

This passage reflects not only Breavman's sense of identity but it also reveals insights into the unfolding of Cohen's own personality and fate. The phrases "creative pain," "you won't even own your personal despair" and "suffocating slavery" are so very awesome when seen in the light of The Energy of Slaves, written and published nine years later. They are a haunting statement foreshadowing, all too clearly, the complex evolution of Mr. Cohen.

Although the title of Cohen's first novel and its reference to Breavman's favorite game has already been mentioned, I wish to draw attention, once again, to the final scene of the novel:

Breavman thought he'd just sit back and sip his Orange Crush. A memory hit him urgently and he asked a waitress for her pencil. On a napkin he wrote.... 20

Notwithstanding the implications of the novel's final metaphor, it must be noted -- and not one critic has done so -- that the final scene of the novel is one where we see the protagonist celebrating, creating, indulging in his art. It is the beauty of the image and not the fact that "a memory hit him urgently" (italics mine) that has captured the fascination of the critics. The emphasis on the urgency of his creative impulse cannot be stressed enough, for it is in the light that the artist-lover

best conveys, through the translation of his creative impulse into a celebration of his romantic vision, the art context of the novel. It is within this context of art that identity is most significantly elaborated. The artist, in his role of celebrant, compels me to include celebration as another aspect of The Favorite Game.

The Favorite Game, although described earlier in this chapter as a "mid-1960's occurrence," belongs, beyond doubt, to the early phase of Cohen's development as an artist. Like Let Us Compare Mythologies and The Spice-Box of Earth, the novel is personal and romantic. Art and history are both depicted in conventional ways, and Cohen relies greatly on poetic embellishment of idiom and metaphor. By comparison, Beautiful Losers, published only three years later, is very much a product or manifestation of the new concerns starting with the publication of Flowers for Hitler. First, Beautiful Losers is not romantic either in structure or in content; second, the novel fits well Barbour's description of a "toughened style," third, history becomes a more complex issue where linearity and factuality are often completely dismissed for fantasy and myth; and fourth, art manifests itself not only through the artist's concern with creativity but also through pop-culture tradition and contemporary "ready-made" mythology. However impressive the differences appear, it should not be assumed that the new focus in form and content does not find its sources in the early works. As it is emphasized in the previous chapter, Flowers for Hitler is transitional: it marks no new beginning, it merely accentuates aspects of the work previously existing in embryonic stages. The close association of religion

and sexual fulfillment, the quest motif, and the preoccupation with transformation or transfiguration have their origins in the very earliest work. Although the following distinction was elaborated by Pacey about The Favorite Game, its applicability is valuable in differentiating the nuances between the early work and the period which starts with Flowers for Hitler:

The author is still at the stage of recording rather than dominating and transforming reality. ²⁰

In the following words, Pacey traces some of the differences in Cohen's two novels:

Whereas Beautiful Losers is about a cast of characters none of whom bear much resemblance to Cohen himself or to members of his family and his friends, The Favorite Game is quite obviously autobiographical. Like Joyce's Portrait, it is a novel in the lyrical mode, whereas Beautiful Losers is much closer to the dramatic mode of Finnegan's Wake. ²¹

Pacey nonetheless insists on showing the interrelation of both novels:

There are other ways in which The Favorite Game is premonitory of Beautiful Losers -- the incidental comments on Canada, on Montreal, and on Jewish life and values; the humour; the alternation between tenderness and violence; the wavering between self-glorification and self-doubt; the hostile allusions to scientific achievement; the many ambivalent references to machinery; the stress on sexual ecstasy and especially upon oral forms of it and upon masturbation; the contempt for conventional bourgeois behavior and attitudes; recurrent images which give to the novel a poetic resonance; the emphasis on loneliness and nostalgia.... ²²

The persona of Beautiful Losers is the beautiful loser. It was the hero or protagonist of Cohen's first novel that was the speaker or the persona. With the publication of the second novel comes this major

difference: the persona is not to be found in the embodiment of one single entity; rather, the persona emerges as an archetype derived from the mutual and reciprocal action and influence of the novel's main cast of characters. The persona of Beautiful Losers is conceptual in nature and the elaboration of his conceptual framework must be sought within the lives and interaction of "I", F., Edith and, of course, Catherine Tekakwitha. Cohen's treatment of the persona has become progressively more complex: from a presentation of the artist and the lover to an amalgam of both, Cohen finally introduces a persona based on the many variables created by the complex interaction of his four central characters.

Although the main characters are original and varied, they are nonetheless held together by certain common denominators. The first is the fact that all four are orphans: "I" and F. share a history which dates back to their youth at the down town orphanage in Montreal; Edith's parents were killed in an avalanche; and Catherine's parents met their end in the plague of 1660. Morley points out that this shared trait creates: "another variant on the theme of isolation."²³ Second, the characters share each other: "I" and Edith are married; Edith and F. at different times have been lovers; and "I" and F. share homosexual experiences. Catherine Tekakwitha is part of the historical and spiritual quest of "I"; in his long letter F. admits: "I covet Catherine Tekakwitha now that I have followed her last year,"²⁴ and Edith's Indian origins and her invocation of Catherine after the rape illustrate the complexity of the network of overlapping connections. The third point shared by all characters is what Pacey calls "the voluntary loss of self for some higher cause."²⁵ Scobie writes in an article entitled

"Magic, not Magicians: Beautiful Losers and Story of O":

In Canadian Literature 34, Desmond Pacey writes of Beautiful Losers that its main theme is the "voluntary loss of self for some higher cause," while Sandra Djwa comments (somewhat disparagingly) that "I", in his final metamorphosis, "escapes from... the human predicament." Both these comments seem slightly to miss the point. Pacey's is true of the secondary characters, but for "I" himself there is no "higher" cause for which the self is lost" the cause is the loss of self, which may be viewed as an answer to, rather than an escape from, the human predicament. ²⁶

Although Scobie's point is well taken, I prefer Pacey's approach, for obviously Scobie sees little or no importance in the novel's last paragraph. Pacey elaborates on how and why he sees all four characters as involved in a similar process:

Catherine deliberately surrenders herself to be the Bridge of Christ, is canonized, and becomes a miraculous healer; Edith commits voluntary suicide to teach "I" a lesson which at first he ignores but which ultimately leads to his apotheosis;.... F. deliberately casts himself in the subordinate role of teacher and guide of "I" and shows him the way to the Promised land; "I" achieves final apotheosis and in the last paragraph of the novel is seen playing the role of Mediator between God and Man, or the Suffering Servant who has gone through agony to achieve compassion. ²⁷

The notion of voluntary loss of self becomes the agent by which all characters undergo transformation: Catherine Tekakwitha becomes a saint, F. and Edith, teachers, and "I" a mediator or servant. Transformation, then, is also a common trait.

On the basis of the above discussion, the persona of Beautiful Losers can be summarized thus : the beautiful loser is an egoless isolated individual who transforms him or herself with the guidance of teachers or teachings: "each of us the other's teacher." ²⁸ However, the persona of Beautiful Losers needs further clarification since it is presented through

four characters, each of whom exhibits an idiosyncratic trait. Catherine distinguished herself by her Christian spirituality and her dedication to God; Edith by her selflessness; F. by his transcendence of history; and, "I", amusingly enough, by his constipation.

Edith's selflessness is reflected by her suicide; the higher cause for which it is effectuated, as mentioned earlier, is the apotheosis of "I". Her tragic death is one of the first incidents related in the novel. Pacey, in seeing Edith's function as a variant on the Isis role, comments:

Once one becomes aware of Edith's role as Isis, many of the jigsaw pieces of the novel fall into significant patterns: it is in her Isis role of Universal Mother that Edith, with phenomenally large nipples, gives herself to "I" and F., comforts the stranger on the beach at Old Orchard, Maine, and even cradles the "famous head" of the presumably forgiven Hitler against her breast. By her voluntary suicide in the elevator shaft, Edith effects a restoration of her husband similar to Isis's restoration of Osiris. When we read the description of Edith's coating herself with "deep red greasy stuff" and saying to "I" "Let's be other people," we recall that one of Isis's roles was that of the bringerforth of the indwelling self, of the agent of miraculous transfiguration.²⁹

Edith makes, through the selflessness of her act, an impact which is concrete and tangible. She, in her own way, parallels Catherine Tekakwitha's influence; however, their realms of influence differ. Edith's realm is that of the physical or sexual; it is through her that "I" becomes aware that "All flesh can come."²⁹ and that all matter is holy. Catherine's realm is the religious or spiritual; in her adoption of the Christian faith and in her renunciation of the flesh,

she points to an alternative route in the quest for sainthood. Catherine's mystic vision is achieved in abnegation; Edith, "I", and F. accomplish the transfiguration by means of indulgence. The different approach to purity and vision is the higher cause of Catherine's quest in terms of its function within the narrative. Going back to Pacey's distinction, namely that all the women in the novel are essentially the same goddess, it becomes interesting to note, once again, the close link between sexual and religious aspirations as they are manifested in the two female characters. Catherine, or "She who, advancing, arranges the shadows neatly,"³⁰ is to the spirit what Edith, with the extraordinary nipples, is to the flesh. Barbour recognizes the validity of Pacey's scholarship concerning the function of Isis and attempts the following distinction: he suggests that at the end of the novel "I" and F. become the single, divine IF.³¹ However slight, the novel presents information which in some way validates Barbour's opinion. Before "he greedily reassembles himself into -- a movie of Ray Charles,"³² "I" is seen in the Main Shooting and Game Alley where he is described as having no thumb, a later peculiarity of F. F. says:

The thumb of my left hand was all that politics relieved me of (Mary Woolnd does not mind.) The thumb of my left hand is probably rotting this very moment on some downtown Montreal roof, or splinters of it in the soot of a tin chimney.³³

He is also mistaken for "the Terrorist Leader that escaped"³⁴ that same night. It is on these grounds that Barbour bases his observations. True, "I" has also appropriated F.'s style, but the regrouping of "I" and F. need not be stressed any more than the contribution of Catherine or Edith. Djwa offers yet another interpretation: in her reading of the

novel, it is F. who undergoes the final metamorphosis:

Cohen illustrates this process [the process of entropy] and then attempts to reverse it when the once glorious "F" disintegrates into a smelly old man but then escapes from the novel page (and, incidentally, the human predicament) by metamorphosing himself into a movie of Ray Charles. ³⁵

In my opinion, it is not IF or F. who undergoes transfiguration. It is "I" and "I" alone, through the guidance and the appropriation of the characteristic traits of all three characters. F., in his letter to "I", writes:

She was right. I was the Moses of our little exodus. I would never cross. My mountain might be very high but it rises from the desert. Let it suffice me. ³⁶

It is ironic, given as evidence his success in the final metamorphosis, that constipation is "I's" distinguishing feature; however, considering the nature of the scholar, constipation is a comic, yet most pertinent, metaphor for the slow growth and learning of "I" as well as for his loneliness and isolation.

How can I begin anything new with all of yesterday in me? The hater of history crouched over the immaculate bowl. How can I prove the body is on my side? Is my stomach an enemy? The chronic loser at morning roulette plans his suicide: a leap into the St. Lawrence weighted with a sealed bowel. What good are movies? I am too heavy for music. I am invisible if I leave no daily evidence. Old food is poison, and the sacks leak. Unlock me! Exhausted Houdini! Lost ordinary magic! . . . 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. ³⁷

As "I" proceeds, the preoccupation with constipation diminishes, and towards the end of the novel he is described as a filthy stinking mess. During his final stay in F.'s treehouse he stops defecating altogether since he has

stopped eating. Both these functions illustrate a breakthrough in his loneliness.

He did not know how long he had lived there, and he wondered why he no longer fouled the shack with excrement, but he didn't wonder very hard. ³⁸

F.'s most distinguishing feature is his transcendence of history. It would prove fascinating to extract all of F.'s teachings in order to analyse his philosophy in isolation from the rest of the novel; however, even a brief list conveys F.'s importance and significance as a teacher: "We've got to learn to stop bravely at the surface"; ³⁹ "Never overlook the obvious"; ⁴⁰ "Games are nature's most beautiful creation"; ⁴¹ "Of all the laws which bind us to the past, the names of things are the most severe"; ⁴² "I was tired. I was sick of the inevitable. I tried to slip out of History"; ⁴³ "History ties the shoelaces of a people's destiny and the march is on"; ⁴⁴ "I want History to jump on Canada's spine with sharp skates"; ⁴⁵ "It is my intention to relieve you of your final burden: the useless History under which you suffer in such confusion"; ⁴⁶ and "we do not own our history" ⁴⁷ to mention only a very few. In addition to the previous list the crucial "Connect Nothing!" must be included as it is the most concise and relevant principle underlying F.'s moral wisdom.

Connect nothing: F. shouted. Place things side by side on your favorite table, if you must, but connect nothing. ⁴⁸

"I", the constipated maker and recorder of history, is also a hater of history. "I do not want to write this History." ⁴⁹ says "I". "Saints and friends, help me out of History and Constipation." ⁵⁰ In fact, throughout

the entire novel, that is precisely what "I's" friends accomplish. "Who are the Beautiful Losers?" asks Morley. To this she replies:

The four main characters of the novel, certainly. And the rest of us too, for Cohen's losers become a metaphor for the human condition, the "poor men, poor men, such as we" of the novel's closing paragraph. To live is to fail, as the novel reminds us, without tears. Life is a beautiful failure, an ironic success. 51

Mandel, as it has previously been noted, mentioned that "with Flowers for Hitler, the songs, and to an extent [*italics mine*] Beautiful Losers, the context becomes history." 52 As I read Beautiful Losers, magic is the context.

My dear friend, take my spirit hand.
I am going to show you everything happening.
That is as far as I can take you. I cannot bring you into the middle of action. My hope is that I have prepared you for this pilgrimage. I didn't suspect the pettiness of my dream. I believed that I had conceived the vastest dream of my generation: I wanted to be a magician. That was my idea of glory. Here is a plea based on my whole experience: do not be a magician, be magic. 53

Several other quotations substantiate this view. F. writes:

I wanted your confusion to be a butterfly net for magic. I saw ecstasy without fun and vice versa. I saw things change their nature by a mere intensification of their properties. I wanted to discredit training for the sake of purer prayer. I held things back from you because I wished you things greater than my systems conceived. I saw wounds pulling oars without becoming muscles. 54

or:

This I mean my mind to serve till service is but Magic moving through the world, and mind itself is Magic coursing through the flesh, and the flesh itself is Magic dancing on a clock and time itself the Magic Length of God. 55

In the passage which starts with

God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is alive. Magic
is afoot. God is afoot. Magic is alive. Alive is
afoot. Magic never died. 56

F. relates his credo as it pertains to magic, exposes its importance, significance and function within the process of transformation or transfiguration. Mandel simply states that history is, to an extent, the context of Beautiful Losers; I suggest, rather, that magic is the context within which history plays an extensive role: to become magic one must transcend history. When we look at the apotheosis of "I" as he greedily reassembles himself into a movie, the link between history and art, once again, becomes evident. Having been relieved of his burden of history, "I" surmounts or overcomes the restrictive linearity of the twenty-four frames per second:

Now he understood as much as he needed. The movie was invisible to him. His eyes were blinking at the same rate as the shutter in the projector, times per second [sic], and therefore the screen was merely black. It was automatic.... For the first time in his life the old man relaxed totally.

--No sir. You can't change your seat again.

Oops, where's he gone? That's funny. Hmmm:

The old man smiled as the flashlight beam went through him. 57

"I" reassembles himself into a movie or art through "the intensification of his properties." He has become magic. "Magic is no instrument. Magic is the end." 58 and the destruction of time and history is the process by which the end is achieved.

The Indians believe that before the spirit body undergoes its long journey homeward, the dead man must face Oscotarach.

Beside the path there is a bark hut. In the hut lives Oscotarach, the Head-Piercer, I will stand beneath him and he will remove the brain from my skull. This he does to all the skulls which pass by. 59

F., in his outspoken role of teacher, accomplishes the same function as the Huron mythological figure. In one of his many monologues "I" asks:

--F.: Why did you lead me here?

And do I hear an answer? Is this treehouse the hut of Oscotarach? F., are you the Head-Piercer? I did not know the operation was so long and clumsy. Raise the blunt tomahawk and try once more. Poke the stone spoon among the cerebral porridge. Does the moonlight want to get into my skull? Do the sparkling alleys of the icy sky want to stream through my eyeholes? F., were you the Head-Piercer, who left his hut and applied to the public ward in pursuit of his own operation? Or are you still with me, and is the surgery deep in progress? 60 :

To these questions "I" receives an answer, sixty pages later in the novel.

F. answers "I's" questions in his letter, even though there was no apparent communication between them in the interim. The following quotation shows F.'s care and concern, even in his absence.

Ask yourself. Perhaps the treehouse where you suffer is the hut of Oscotarach. You did not know the operation was so long and clumsy. Again and again the blunt tomahawk pokes among the porridge. The moonlight wants to get into your skull. The sparkling alleys of the icy sky want to stream through your eyeholes. The winter night air which seems like "diamonds held in solution," it wants to flood the empty bowl.

Ask yourself. Was I your Oscotarach? I pray that I was. The surgery is deep in progress, darling. I am with you. 61

Oscotarach is a metaphor for the function of purification: "the necessary preparation for immortality." 62 Thus, the immortality of magic and the immortality of art are made to stand in opposition to "the old scab of

history." 63

What is a saint? A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. 64

To convey the concept of the remote human possibility is the object of Beautiful Losers. "It is impossible to say what that possibility is," says "I" in the midst of his dilemma. By the end of the novel a reader can make the following assumption: a saint is "magic" achieved through the voluntary loss of self for the purpose of immortality. Stephen Scobie shows us the validity and complexity of the novel's object or purpose. He compares Beautiful Losers with Story of O:

both describe, and perhaps endorse, a principle directly counter to those outlined above, namely, the deliberate attempt to destroy one's own individuality. Part of the profoundly disturbing impact of both books is due to the fact that they do strike at such basic preconceptions of our cultural orientation; and the books are even more disturbing in that they treat the theme directly in connection with what is still the uneasiest of our social taboos, sex. 65

To this latest distinction I wish to add that the theme of destruction of one's individuality is also treated in connection with our apprehension of history and art. History and art are not social taboos. Still, they are notions which are fully marked by conventional definition. The object of the novel compels us to reconsider the following: do not be a magician, be magic; do not record or make history, transcend it; do not become an artist, become art; do not proclaim your individuality, sacrifice it for a higher cause.

Our society has assumed that any answer to "the human predicament" must start with the individual's acceptance of the responsibility of his own individuality. The protagonists of these two novels, Beautiful

Losers and Story of O respond by annihilating that responsibility. The artist's response is to present these "remote human possibilities," and to invite the reader to re-examine his basic pre-suppositions, to question the unquestionable. 66

The evolution from the first to the second novel appears as such: the persona of The Favorite Game is a romantic archetype, presented in a relatively simple, direct manner, whereas the persona of Beautiful Losers is conceptual in nature and is presented through several characters. The context of the first novel, art, is presented in conjunction with the persona's definition of himself as a lover; however, both form and content emphasize the artistic dimension as the essence of the novel's subject. In Beautiful Losers, magic, also a metaphor for art, stresses not the process, as was the case with The Favorite Game, but the end-product itself. The object of identity and celebration finally results, in Beautiful Losers, in a denial of identity for sainthood or immortality. In structure, The Favorite Game was described as a romantic kunstlerroman. Its symbols and motifs functioned within a simple network. By comparison, Beautiful Losers is infinitely more complex both in structure and symbolism. The following quotation is long; however, it best summarizes the complexity of Cohen's second novel.

Rather than deal further with the minor themes of the novel, I should like now to say something about its technique. In structure it resembles a symbolic poem: it is divided into the traditional three parts, and its parts are woven together by recurrent thematic motifs and thematic images or symbols. Among the motifs are references to "I's" constipation (a symbol of the self locked in upon itself), to his masturbation (a symbol of his lonely self-absorption and self-indulgence), to games (symbols of life as free choice),

to radio music and radio serials (symbols of attempts to reach contact with some outside force or message); to baptism (symbol of purification and the entry into a new life), and above all to movies, film, cinemas and film-stars (symbols, as we have seen, of contemporary magic and escape from this world).

Pacey proceeds in his analysis:

Among the thematic images are the blanket or veil (symbol of mystery and the hoped-for apocalypse), birch and pine trees (symbol of natural growth, beauty, and the fragrance of natural things), rivers, springs and pools (symbols of purification and divine grace), birds (symbols of the ingression of the divine upon the human), altars and temples (symbols of worship, aspiration and sacrifice), stars (associated with Isis and symbols of divine perfection and protection), the elevator (an ambivalent symbol, suggesting both the ascent to heaven and the descent into hell), mountains (symbols of contemplation and detached wisdom), machinery (another ambivalent symbol, suggesting the "eternal machinery" of cosmic process and the destructive machinery of warfare and greed), the necklace (symbol of multiplicity in unity, the many in the one), crystals, snowflakes and the rainbow pictures seen through them (symbolic of divine order, intricacy and vision), soap and especially F.'s "soap collection" (symbols of purification through suffering), rockets, firecrackers, and "fiery journeys" (symbols of the attempt to penetrate the veil of heaven), fishes (symbols of Christ and of divine grace), candy (symbol of pleasure and perhaps of God's mercy), the factory which is converted into a playground (symbol of the transfiguration of labour into play, as in the last stanza of Yeat's "Among Schoolchildren").

After this truly amazing compilation and elaboration, Pacey concludes:

Each of these motifs or images recurs frequently, and in each case the symbolic suggestion is intended: the result is a novel more intricately interwoven than any Canadian novel of my experience. ⁶⁷

With the above quotation in mind, John Wain's review of Beautiful Losers entitled "Making it New" now seems unspeakably silly. Claiming

that the novel reflects "the frightening vacuum of modern Canada" Nain refers to Cohen's style as "scrambled exposition." ⁶⁸ Nothing more need be added concerning short-sighted reviewers.

As previously mentioned, The Favorite Game belongs to the early period of Cohen's development, and because of its astounding differences, Beautiful Losers must be seen as an outgrowth of what appears to be a second phase. As with Flowers for Hitler, the break away from romanticism produces a vision which goes far beyond the self. The work is marked by a forceful attempt to dominate reality. The second novel is definitely characterized by its attempt to move into areas of greater abstraction, and art is finally perceived as an all-demanding, all-encompassing notion to which even the self must be sacrificed. During this second phase Cohen portrays the artist as "magic." This focus emphasizes the end-product as opposed to the process, and this portrayal is definitely marked by a positive outlook on the phenomenon of art. By the early 1970's, with the publication of The Energy of Slaves, Cohen's view of the artist has once again undergone transformation. By seeing the artist as a slave Cohen shifts his outlook from a positive view to a more negative perspective. There appear, then, on the basis of the above observation, to be three distinct phases in the development of Leonard Cohen and his work: the first phase is characterized by its spontaneity and naiveté; the second phase is marked by the deliberate attempt to go beyond or transcend the conventional notions of art and history; and the third phase, by the bitter denial of the existence of art and the artist and the almost complete dismissal of the function of history.

It must be mentioned that all three phases are marked by Cohen's personal quest for "sainthood." It is also interesting to note that it is in between the phase marked by the artist-magician and the phase characterized by the artist-slave that Cohen becomes internationally known and successful as a pop-star in the music world. If indeed there is more politics to the making of a saint than the innocently devout might think likely, one need only turn to Cohen. In the following chapter it is Cohen the singer-entertainer-musician who will be examined. By turning my attention to yet another facet of Leonard Cohen, artist, I hope to show the interrelationship among all the forms of expression explored by Cohen.

Chapter Four

Towards Romantic Maturity

"And I forget, a lot had to do with poverty. I mean I was writing books (two novels and four volumes of poetry) and they were being very well received ... and that sort of thing, but I found it was very difficult to pay my grocery bill. I said, like it's really happening. I'm starving. I've got beautiful reviews for all my books, and you know, I'm very well thought of in tiny circles that know me, but like ... I'm really starving. So then I started bringing some songs together. And it really changed my whole scene." 1

In this fourth chapter I change my focus from Cohen the man-of-literature to Cohen the singer-musician-song-writer. As was stated earlier, the reason for this shift of emphasis is that an understanding of Leonard Cohen and his work is best achieved through the consideration of his total contribution. The inclusion of songs in a literature research paper may seem unusual; however, Frank Davey reminds us:

The close relationship between poetry and music scarcely needs to be argued. Both are aural modes which employ rhythm, rime, and pitch as major devices; to these the one adds linguistic meaning, connotation, and various traditional figures, and the other can add, at least in theory, all of these plus harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration techniques. In English the two are closely bound historically. Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry seems certainly to have been read or chanted to a harpist's accompaniment; the verb used in *Beowulf* for such a performance, the Finn episode, is *singan*, to sing, and the noun *gyd*, song. A major source of the lyric tradition in English poetry is the song of the troubadours. 2

Considering the above quotation, it seems almost inappropriate that literary criticism, as a general rule, does not include Cohen's songs within its concerns. There are, in some cases, brief mentions or tangential re-

ferences; yet most critics, even those who focus specifically on the poetry, tend to overlook or dismiss the songs completely. Cohen has his own explanation for the phenomenon:

I seem to be caught in the critical establishment between two critical houses. On one side, the literary people are very resentful that I have made money in the rock world. This suggests to them somehow that I have sold out.³

Cohen's explanation, based on resentment about financial success, seems to me somewhat simplistic. Media usage, audience appeal and audience response, marketing and publicity are equally determining factors which have coloured the perception of Leonard Cohen in the eyes of the literary establishment. Moreover, one cannot dismiss the possibility that the songs have only temporarily been neglected, overlooked as they endure the test of time in this age of the ten top hits a week, fifty-two weeks a year. Nor is it only the literary people who can be accused of short-sightedness:

... on the other side, a lot of people in the rock establishment, in their articles I notice that they always suggest that I don't know anything about music, that my tunes are very limited, as if I couldn't work in an augmented chord if I really thought it was needed. And that my voice is very thin, as if we were still in the days of Caruso or something. They apply standards to me that they've never applied to other singers in the field.⁴

Cohen's predicament, although delicate, is hardly unique: to the names of Warhol and Snow mentioned in Chapter One, others can be added. If some critics are left perplexed by the combination of poet, novelist, song-writer, singer and musician, one must stop and consider, amongst others: Count Alfred Korzybski, general semanticist with a background in education and medicine; Mstislav Rostropovich, conductor and virtuoso cellist; Gregory Bateson,

anthropologist and epistemologist who has also done work in psychiatry and genetics; Boris Vian, jazz-musician, song-writer, mathematician, novelist and translator; Lewis Carroll, novelist, photographer and mathematician.

What at first glance appears to be a serious omission on the part of the literary critics -- seeing that our lyric tradition has as a major source the songs of the troubadours -- becomes, under careful examination, a much more complex issue. It is not so much out of neglect or disregard, as out of sheer difficulty in dealing critically with multi-disciplinary phenomena, that the songs have been isolated and perceived as existing almost independently from the remainder of Cohen's work. We live in an age of hyphenated specialties. An optimistic critic might interpret this phenomenon as a sign of a return to the quest of the Renaissance Man; however, the realistic critic soon becomes aware of certain difficulties. The criteria of one discipline, for example, might not be applicable in another, or the critical methodology used in one field might not find its equivalent in another. In the particular case of Cohen, his songs, unlike the poems, have no recognized critical literary tradition or methodology to substantiate an approach. To compensate for this lack, I propose the following: I shall examine some of the songs in order to extract from them the thematic core of Cohen's vision as it is revealed through this medium. Albums will be treated as collections of songs in much the same way as The Spice-Box of Earth and The Energy of Slaves, for example, were considered collections of poems, even if the albums do not always have the thematic coherence and neatness of the volumes. As I shall show later, this is compensated for by the

greater, more intense thematic focus of the albums. An album can also be viewed as a unit since it has the advantage or benefit of a date or time-period around which revolve the concerns of the artist. Also, it would be ludicrous to assume that the songs of any album are a mere haphazard, random collection under a specific title. Further, my approach to the criticism of the songs partakes in a tradition-of-sorts within pop-culture criticism. Finally, I shall attempt to draw links between the concerns of the poet-novelist and the concerns of the song-writer, using those aspects of Cohen's work which have already been discussed.

Cohen has his own views about his multi-disciplinarian self.

"Do the songs and poems ... clearly differentiate themselves for you?"

Paul Williams asked Cohen in a 1975 interview.

"Very rarely one crosses into the other realm. But the songs are by and large designed as songs, and the poems designed as poems."

"Do you prefer to write songs or poems?"

"It depends on what part is being operative. Of course it's wonderful to write a song, I mean there is nothing like a song, and you sing it to your woman, or to your friend, and then you sing it in front of an audience and you record it. I mean it has an amazing thrust. And a poem, it waits on the page, and it moves in a much more secret way through the world. And that also is... Well, they each have their own way to travel." 5

Cohen claims that his poetry and songs are conceived differently, and as he recognizes in the above quotation, it is the "amazing thrust" that defines the potential of a song and differentiates it from the "much more secret way" that a poem survives in the public imagination.

"To what extent ... are you conscious of yourself as a novelist?"

"Well I've never been intimidated by form.... What we call a novel, that is, a book of prose where there are characters and developments and changes and situations, that's always excited me, because in a sense it is the heavyweight arena. I like it -- it frightens me, from that point of view -- because of the regime that is involved in novel writing. I can't be on the move, it needs a desk, it needs a room and a typewriter, a regime. And I like that very much." 6

Cohen's main attribute as a successful writer, accounting for his flexibility and for the fact that he is not intimidated by form, is his knowledge of "what part is being operative." Cohen's sensitivity, with regards to the phenomenon of audience, is most acute, as he has well shown with The Energy of Slaves. Cohen has also demonstrated that he is capable of moving from the relative thematic simplicity of the poetry to the complexity of the novels to accommodate the form which he chooses for expression. With these two distinctions in mind, it could hardly be expected that Cohen provide his new audience, sought within the music-listening world, with variations on the theme of voluntary loss of self. The new medium could hardly endorse or support themes of such intellectual intricacy as the destruction of one's own individuality. Thematically, the 1960's are marked by concerns, in song, which translate themselves into either of two general themes: love, the great pre-occupation of all times; and social protest, inspired by the growing dissatisfaction of the younger generation of the "peace-love" era. Viewed in retrospect, the now very clichéd term "peace-love" synthesizes well the entire decade, not only musically, but ideologically as well. The social protest element of songs occurred through appeals to break down the system as in

Joan Baez's stand against the Viet Nam War, Bob Dylan's cry for civil rights, and the advocacy of radical mysticism by the Beatles. However progressive the social concerns of the music of the period appeared, as a general rule the songs remained elementary, even simplistic. Much of Leonard Cohen's significance as a pop-singer lies in the fact that to this basic concern with love, he contributed a vision which focuses on the dilemma of mature relationships between men and women which by far exceeds the trite I want you, I need you, I love you of the pop-culture industry.

Cohen's love songs are characterized by the usage of the Cohen archetypal lover: the travelling stranger. The travelling stranger can best be described by his incessant wandering, his constant desire and need to explore and learn from the world around him. He is a character of strong moral determination who is often willing to sacrifice his love in order to fulfill his yearnings. In "Songs of Leonard Cohen" (1969) the travelling stranger emerges from such songs as "Suzanne,"⁷ "Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye," and "So Long Marianne." In the first song, the archetypal hero is marked by his characteristic quest: "And you want to travel with her/ And you want to travel blind."⁸ Although he is, at best, a travelling stranger, he is nonetheless capable of a significant love relationship. In "Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye" the hero adopts a position of honesty and, in the face of a changing relationship, once again seeks his freedom through departure.

It's just the way it changes
Like the shoreline and the sea.
But let's not talk of love or chains
And things we can't untie,
Your eyes are filled with sorrow,
Hey, that's no way to say goodbye.⁹

The predicament of the near loss of strangerhood is elaborated in "So Long, Marianne."

Well, you know that I love to live with you
But you make me forget so very much
I forget to pray for the angel
And then the angels forget to pray for us. 10

For the travelling stranger, love is not the motive for the quest; rather, love is presented as "a desirable escape from the ordeal of existence." 11

The central preoccupation of the stranger is identity. His wanderings are neither a manifestation of his lust nor a result of his need for emotional fulfillment. The incessant traveller seeks self knowledge through a variety of experiences. In one significant verse of "Stories of the Street" the following lines occur:

And if by chance I wake at night
And ask you who I am
O'Take me to the slaughter house
I will wait there with the lamb. 12

Cohen's credo -- know thyself -- is crucial not only to the poetry and novels, but to the songs as well. It is in his quest for self definition and identity that the travelling stranger accepts the solace of temporary love relationships.

Davey has pointed out that Cohen has concentrated not only on the elaboration of his male hero:

In "Winter Lady" and "Sister of Mercy" Cohen presents the female counterpart to the "stranger." This counterpart also has her freedom; she has not sold out to the easy life of guaranteed possession offered by marriage. Aloof, independent, choosy this "traveling Tady" gives an affection which Cohen feels should be far more to a man than a paper contract. In "Sisters of Mercy" this woman waits to refresh the

questing stranger, ministering to his tiredness
without plotting for his being. ¹³

To the travelling stranger and the travelling lady, Cohen presents antitheses. The stranger of "The Stranger Song" is not the questing stranger of the archetype; quite the contrary, he is "reaching for the sky just to surrender." His strangerhood is an alibi, for in reality he is depicted as a dealer and "Like any dealer, he was watching for the card/ that is so high and wild/ He'll never need to deal another." ¹⁴ Like the travelling stranger, the dealer seeks those elements in life which would fulfill his manhood, but unlike the lover of "Suzanne" who seeks solace through a reciprocated relationship which touches on both mind and spirit, the dealer is searching for total fulfillment through love. The antithesis of the travelling lady appears throughout the entire work; however, she is given a place of prominence in "Songs of Love and Hate" (1971). In "Sing Another Song, Boys" this woman-temptress is given the following characteristics: "She hails him," "She tempts him," "She spies him," "She wants to be his woman." Cohen concludes:

But let's leave these lovers wondering
Why they cannot have each other
And let's sing another song, boys
This one has grown old and bitter. ¹⁵

In his later albums, Cohen has not altered the make-up or function of his personae; however, their predicament reflects a significant development in the writer's conception of love where lonesome hero and heroine play out their lives. With the release of "New Skin for the Old Ceremony" (1975) Cohen presents the phenomenon of love relationships between men and women as a war-

Leonard Cohen is still as romantic -- it's romantic (and accurate) to see the relationship between the sexes as a war -- as he was when he first appeared on the American musical scene. But his romanticism has matured. 16

"Leaving Greensleeves" presents a situation where man and woman choose to depart at the same time. In this version of the love conflict, it is with ease that both the lovers take leave, rather than with the sorrow or impatience of the early songs.

I sang my song I told my lies
To lie between your matchless thighs
And ain't it fine and ain't it wise
To finally end our exercise
Then I saw you naked in the early dawn
Oh I hoped you would be someone new
I reached for you but you were gone
So lady I'm going too
•Greensleeves you're all alone
The leaves have fallen the men are gone
Leaving the Lady Greensleeves 17

In "Death of a Ladies' Man" and more specifically in "I Left A Woman Waiting" Cohen presents freedom not merely as a desirable quality of any relationship, but as a necessary premise.

I left a woman waiting
I met her some time later
.....
We took ourselves to someone's bed
And there we fell together
.....
Free as running water
Free as you and me
The way it's got to be
The way it's got to be, lover 18

In "Paper-thin Hotel" Cohen achieves a radical departure from his early pattern. In his first songs, the departure of a lover was a function of his or her own personal desire to remain in control both of personal growth and of

the relationship. In Cohen's last album, there is the realization that love is beyond the control or manipulation of lovers.

The walls of this hotel are paper-thin
Last night I heard you making love to him
The struggle mouth to mouth
The grunts of unity when he came in
I stood there with my ear against the wall
I was not seized by jealousy at all
In fact a burden lifted from my soul
I learned that love was out of my control 19

The characteristics of the hero and the heroine elaborated above are the characteristics of what has been called, in previous chapters, the persona or speaker. The personae of the songs, then, are the travelling stranger and the travelling lady. To remain consistent with the methodology, the context of the songs is undeniably Cohen's vision of love. Like the personae of the songs, the context undergoes several modifications in the course of a decade. In the early albums the premise of the love relationships, as well exemplified by "Suzanne," is an acknowledgement of an implicit, eternal link between men and women, not a transaction between a man and a woman. It is precisely this awareness which accounts for the following lines in the song:

And you want to travel with her
And you want to travel blind
And you know that she will trust you
For you've touched her perfect body
with your mind

Although the song has a romantic resonance similar to the tone of The Spice-Box of Earth, the meeting of body and mind is a new element in the love concerns of Cohen. In his second volume of poems the preoccupation with love was totally physical:

I live with the mortal ring
of flesh on flesh in dark 20

"As your experience with Suzanne deepens," writes Davey, "you will want not only to travel blind with her but also to walk upon the water with dead Jesus." ²² Thus, in the second verse of the song, focusing on Jesus, it would seem that Cohen is attempting to show that the same mental and physical trust and reciprocity are required of man and Jesus for spiritual fulfillment as they are required of man and woman for a love encounter. However, in the line "He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone," Cohen emphasizes the greater value and significance of his encounter with Suzanne. Suzanne has a wisdom more profound than that of Christ. She is truly a savior of men.

The jacket design of "Songs of Leonard Cohen" features a painting called the "Anima Sola."

The picture on the back is a Mexican religious picture called "Anima Sola", the lonely spirit or the lonely soul. It is the triumph of the spirit over matter. The spirit being that beautiful woman breaking out of chains and fire and prison. ²³

It is not the struggle of the artist and the lover that Cohen's vision in song relates: it is the struggle of the spirit and the flesh to coexist within a love relationship. Eve Desmolles, writing about the dust jacket of a later album in her thesis, "Biblical Symbolism and Spiritual Issues in Leonard Cohen's Poetical Work," says

"New Skin for the Old Ceremony" is illustrated by the 16th century plate "Rosarium Philosopharum" by Arnold of Villanora in which the lovers represent the perfect solution of opposites in the first water. [sic]. ²⁴

This fifth album includes a song where the lovers are completely defined by the fact that they are opposites. In "Is This What You Wanted" Cohen writes:

You were the promised dawn, I was the morning after
 You were Jesus Christ my lord, I was the money lender
 You were the sensitive woman, I was the Very Reverend Freud

 You got old and wrinkled, I stayed seventeen
 You lusted after so many, I lay here with one 25
 You defied your solitude, I came through alone

In short, the love phenomenon of the albums undergoes a transformation from a vision of struggle, both of the spirit and the flesh, to a vision of love where both parties involved create a unity through a regrouping of their antinomial traits. However, Cohen goes beyond this awareness and finally he concludes that above and beyond total complementarity, love has a force of its own beyond the control or manipulation of lovers. On the basis of this evolution in the conception of love, the notion of strangerhood plays a less important role and the eternal travellers are less often trapped by the inevitability of unworthy or greedy encounters. The element of threat decreases proportionally with the growing self-assurance of the lovers.

Writing of Cohen's first twenty songs, Davey comments on what he perceives to be the quest of the persona of the first two albums.

He abandons real loves, real heroes, to follow society's broad highway to mediocrity, vulgarity, self-indulgence, and anonymity. Especially here in this song "Love Tries to Call You by Your Name" it is self-indulgence which betrays the individual away from the difficulties of one's own fulfillment and into the easy chains of conformity. 26

Although the premise of Davey's observation is debatable -- I am not at all convinced that it is society's broad highway to mediocrity and vulgarity that is sought by the perpetual travellers of the songs -- the self-indulgent nature of Cohen's personae is undeniable. However, when one examines the persona of "Death of a Ladies' Man" and more specifically his awareness

that love is out of his control, it becomes obvious that not all self-indulgence is destructive.

The cuckold motif is very strong in all of Cohen's work. The cheated lover of "The Cuckold's Song" in The Spice-Box of Earth, the predicament of "I" in Beautiful Losers, the straits of the prisoner in the "Master Song" of Cohen's first album all point to the difficulty of a weak male ego in accepting the defeat of a prematurely terminated or an unnecessarily tried love relationship. Already with "Songs of Leonard Cohen" a minimizing of this threat is traceable. "Famous Blue Raincoat" treats the cuckold phenomenon in a significantly different, mature way.

And what can I tell you my brother, my killer
What can I possibly say
I guess I will miss you, I guess I' [sic] forgive you
I'm glad you stood in my way.
If ever you come by here for Jane or for me
Tho' your enemy is sleeping his woman is free
Yes, thanks for the trouble you took from her eyes
I thought it was there for good so I never tried. 27

The ties of possessiveness are broken. Notwithstanding the difficulties, both man and woman are free. This is by far one of the most refreshing views of people -- male and female -- that this song offers. Cohen's treatment of the cuckold in The Spice-Box of Earth was elaborated as such:

I'm still sort of a friend,
I'm still sort of a lover.
But not for long:
that's why I'm telling this to the two of you.
The fact is I'm turning to gold, turning to gold.
It's a long process, they say,
it happens in stages.
This is to inform you that I've already turned to clay. 28

Rather than allow solidification through the transformation of his weak, defeated ego into clay and gold, rather than grieve over sexual betrayal, the persona of "Famous Blue Raincoat" adopts a new position. He rejoices in the fact that a man, other than himself, was capable of relieving the troubled look from his woman's eyes. Cohen introduces in this song a persona mature enough to recognize and thank his rival, accept his lover's freedom. This attitude is the intermediary phase in the evolution of the concept of love which finally results in the understanding that love has a thrust of its own.

In keeping with the tradition from which he emerges, Cohen has not written and sung exclusively about love; he has also included songs marked by social commentary. In the poetry and the novels, Cohen manifested his preoccupation with history through an exploration of its significance, relativity and impact upon the psyche of the artist-lover. This same concern with history, using the medium of the popular song, becomes translated into a vision "of a society in imminent collapse because of the greed and lust of its members."²⁹ Whereas, in the literature, the concept of history was thoroughly elaborated within Cohen's personal attempt to break down the linearity of time and relieve man of his burden of history, Cohen's songs simplify this undertaking by focusing on current social dilemmas. "Songs From a Room" (1969), Cohen's second album, stresses almost exclusively this dimension of the writer's vision. Of this album Cohen says:

The second album was largely unloved as I can see it from people's reactions. It was very bleak and wiped out. The voice in it has much despair and pain in the sound of the thing. And I think it's an

accurate reflection of where the singer was... at the time. But as I believe that a general wipe-out is imminent and that many people will be undergoing the same kind of breakdown that the singer underwent, the record will become more meaningful as more people crack up. ³⁰

The most striking song on this album is "Seems So Long Ago, Nancy." The lyrics show particularly well Cohen's belief of that time and his concerns with social contradictions:

It seems so long ago
Nancy was alone
A forty-five beside her head
an open telephone
We told you she was beautiful
we told her she was free
But none of us would meet her in
the House of Mystery
the House of Mystery ³¹

Nancy, a free, young, feminine spirit, becomes in this album the ultimate victim of the social scheme.

Cohen returned to sing "Seems So Long Ago, Nancy." He explained that he wasn't sure if he could remember the song. Nancy's spirit was clear enough, but they hadn't done it in a long time. For help he invoked her memory by telling her story. They knew one another in Canada, long years ago. In 1961. Before there was a Woodstock Nation or hip newspapers. When to be strange was to be on your own. Nancy's father was an important judge, but she lived near the street. Her friends told her she was free. "She slept with everyone. Everyone. She had a child, but it was taken away. So she shot herself in the bathroom." ³²

In this version of the conflict, the "House of Mystery" -- Nancy's realm -- is made to stand in opposition to her father's "House of Honesty." However, the irony of the label is significant in that it is in the name of honesty that Nancy's freedom and beauty are destroyed. She is the antithesis of the

triumph of the spirit of the "Anima Sola." She is a victim of the triumph of matter over spirit.

When confronted with the confused values of our society, Cohen turns to his heroes and saints. Yet, within this dark vision, even they have no solutions and offer no solace. In "Priests" Cohen writes:

The simple life of heroes
And the twisted life of saints
They just confuse the sunny calendar
With their red and golden paints
With their red and golden paints. 33

Originally recorded on his second album, Cohen introduces "Story of Isaac" on his album entitled "Live Songs" (1973). "This is a song called 'Story of Isaac' and it's about those who would sacrifice one generation on behalf of another." 34 In this song Cohen emphasizes the social dilemma by turning to biblical lore. It is in this song that the writer most clearly emphasizes his belief in "the imminent wipe-out." Cohen differentiates between vision and scheme, and it is the author's view that modern man is a victim of scheme.

You who build the altars now
To sacrifice these children
You must not do it any more.

A scheme is not a vision
And you never have been tempted
By a demon or a god. 35 (italics mine)

Most of the album stresses the notion of conflict, and this is a radical departure from the complex, elaborate and mature vision of love in "Songs of Leonard Cohen." This element of conflict in many ways explains why "Songs From a Room" was largely unloved. As a result Cohen lost several fans and the critics were mercilessly unsympathetic. With the realization

that his audience preferred his romantic rather than his apocalyptic vision, Cohen sings in his third album entitled "Songs of Love and Hate":

The rain falls down
on last years [sic] man
An hour has gone by
and he has not moved his hand.

But ev'rything will happen
if he only gives his word
The lovers will rise up
and the mountains touch the ground.

But the sky is like a skin
for a drum I'll never mend
And all the rain falls down and end
on the works of last years [sic] man. 36

Though Cohen refuses to be "last years man," he does not abandon either his romantic or his apocalyptic vision. It is not, however, until the release of "New Skin for the Old Ceremony" that he successfully combines the romantic and social visions within the same album. In "A Singer Must Die" Cohen sets up an imaginary trial for himself which is marked by amazing threads of mockery and self awareness.

Now the court room is quiet
But who will confess it
Is it true you betrayed us? The answer is yes
Then read me the list of the crimes that are mine
I will ask for the mercy that you love to decline
And all the ladies go moist and the judge has no choice
A singer must die for the lie in his voice

And I thank you for doing your duty
You keepers of Truth you guardians of Beauty
Your vision was right, my vision was wrong
I'm sorry for smudging the air with my song (la, la, la...) 37

In the final lines of the song Cohen concludes: "Then long live the state, by whoever it's made/Sir, I didn't see nothing I was just getting home late."

The betrayal motif of The Energy of Slaves revolved around the artist's con-

ception of artistic creativity. In this song, betrayal is the crime, not of the artist, but of the lover. The "keepers of Truth" and "the guardians of Beauty" stand in opposition to the singer and his vision of love. It is with sharp irony that truth and beauty are "kept" and "guarded." Cohen's mock-trial stresses his vision of himself as an iconoclastic lover whose values clash with those of the establishment or "the state, by whoever it's made." It is only when one examines the songs as well as the poetry that it becomes possible to discern the fact that betrayal functions both in the realms of love and art. The lover and the artist, in forcing the audience to reconsider the basic presuppositions and preconceptions of love and art, confess to having betrayed the conventional, accepted norms. In so doing, the artist-lover contrasts his own visions with those of the world around him. The betrayal motif functions as a technique by which a re-evaluation or re-consideration becomes an absolute imperative. Seen in the light of what Cohen was attempting in Beautiful Losers -- namely, the inciting of the audience to become magic, not magicians, the advocating of a transcendence of history as opposed to a mere recording, and the reconsidering of the function of individuality -- it becomes clear that Cohen attempts to reformulate the notion of love through the songs as he had done with the concept of history in his second novel, and with the popular notion of art in his last volume of poems.

In "Field Commander Cohen" the song-writer successfully blends his social consciousness with his personal notions of love; moreover, in keeping with his vision of poetic art in The Energy of Slaves, conflict is made to be the pivot around which his themes revolve.

Field Commander Cohen he was our most important spy
 Wounded in the line of duty
 Parachuting acid into diplomatic cocktail parties
 Urging Fidel Castro to abandon fields and castles
 Leave it all and like a man come back to nothing special
 Such as waiting rooms, ticket lines, and silver bullet suicides
 And messianic ocean tides
 And racial roller coaster rides
 And other forms of boredom advertised as poetry

 Lover, come and lie with me, if lover is who you are
 And be your sweetest self a while, until I ask for more my child
 Then let your other selves be rung
 Yet, let them manifest and come
 'Til every taste is on the tongue 'til love is pierced
 And love is hung, and every kind of freedom done
 Then oh my love oh my love... 38

This song illustrates particularly well the fact that Cohen's songs are not loosely or randomly thrown together. The images of the waiting rooms, ticket lines, suicides, ocean tides and roller coaster rides create, within the song, a forceful, dynamic contrast to what Cohen refers to as "other forms of boredom advertised as poetry." Cohen emphasizes the contrast in order to allow the listener to gain insight into the creative process of the poet. Carried away by the magic of his images, the poet forces the audience to become aware of the poetry involved in his statement. Specifically, Cohen is saying that his social awareness finds its expression through his art. The use of the word "boredom" may be disquieting; however, it closely parallels Cohen's denial of art in The Energy of Slaves. Later in the song, as Cohen shifts his vision of himself from the social rebel and ironic poet to a vision of himself as lover, the song undergoes noticeable transformation. Rather than indulge in a clever enumeration of striking images, Cohen shifts his poetic preoccupation to a depiction of his feelings of love, where sound plays the role that images previously played. With end rhyme and assonance the poet song-writer exhibits his

lyric talent. Without doubt, this song, as most if not all of Cohen's songs, qualifies as poetic art -- poetry accompanied by music.

Although conflict is crucial in all those aspects dealt with in the schg, the last line creates a resolution through an anticipation or promise of fulfillment. Resolution occurs, not through changes in the Castro regime, not through art, but through love and freedom.

The love context of the albums differs significantly from the love context of the early poetry and the first novel in that the tension created in the tormented vision of the song-writer is a direct result of the confrontation of his personal ideology concerning the notion of love with those notions accepted and proclaimed by society. In Let Us Compare Mythologies, The Spice-Box of Earth and The Favorite Game, the tension was a product of a more internalized dilemma between the "self" as artist and the "self" as lover. The struggle of the songs might be depicted, not as a confrontation between the master (artist) and the deputy (lover), but as a confrontation between the deputy and his external reality or environment. Within the internalized struggle of the artist-lover of the early literature, women held a "functional" but relatively unimportant role. With Beautiful Losers, even if Edith and Catherine were given a part of greater importance, still the roles they played were undercut by their function as Mother Earth or Isis. It is only with the songs that women emerge as individuals with personal quests -- the premise being that there can be no free men unless there are free women. In a personal interview with Cohen, he confided: "Before a woman can be born, the Ladies' Man must die."³⁹ In short, Cohen's vision in song is one which tends towards romantic maturity.

The purpose or object of the poetry has been described using terms such as vision, purification, expiation and truth. Identity and celebration, sainthood or the remote human possibility were the labels used in describing the object of the two novels. To identify the object of the songs, two methods of approach are possible. First, arguing on behalf of pop criticism, the object of Cohen's songs is entertainment; second, arguing on behalf of literary criticism, the persona and context of the songs point towards an object which centers around romantic growth and maturity. Since it is the purpose of this paper to reconcile the two approaches, and because the one does not exclude the other, I suggest that the object of the songs is Cohen's attempt to convey his romantic vision through popular entertainment. The notion that the entertainment aspect of the songs demeans the poetic or aesthetic value is not valid when one examines the evolution of the theme of love as a central concern in Cohen's work. The social dimension of Cohen's vision in song further invalidates this misconception since the social aspect of his work not only ties in well with the concerns of the younger generation, but evolves and stems from prior concerns both in the poetry and the novels. On the other hand, to overlook the entertainment value of the songs seems to me a serious misreading of this dimension of Cohen's work. I view the object of the songs in terms of the sophistication of their messages compared to those of other pop-singers. Cohen blends the art form of popular music with poetry. By simplifying his visions of both love and society, Cohen has communicated his insights and perceptions to an audience which by far exceeds the read-

ing public. It is with fastidious artistic integrity that Cohen refuses to compromise his high standards with regards to language and imagery; however, with due consideration of his audience in the pop entertainment world, Cohen simplifies his vision by minimizing the thematic interconnections between the artist and the lover in order to convey his perceptions to larger audiences.

Cohen's vision in song is revealed not only through the albums but also through performance. The song-writer musician is also a performer. If, in Cohen's own words, poetry is characterized "by its secret movement through the world," songs by their "thrusts," and novels by their "discipline," performing, then, is marked by tension.

"But performing has a more immediate danger?"

"Yeah, performing. I mean you can really be humiliated. There are other rewards and prizes that go with it -- you can come out with a sense of glory, girls might fall in love with you, they might be paying you well, all the possibilities of corruption and material gain and self congratulations are present -- but also at the same time there is the continual threat and presence of your own disgrace." 41

Cohen, as a sensitive artist who emerged from the relatively conservative world of letters, is confronted not only with the immediate dangers of performing, but also by the incessant threat of pop music administration. The difficulties Cohen faced with John Simon (the producer of "Songs of Leonard Cohen") and with Phil Spector (the producer of his latest album, "Death of a Ladies' Man") well show this threat. However, the artist continues to evolve and produce, notwithstanding the continual challenges.

On another level, it is interesting to observe the musical progression of the albums. His first two releases were musically simple, highlighting Cohen himself who is accompanied by his six-string guitar with only occasional use of orchestration. By the early 1970's, "fortunately arranged through the good offices of Bob Johnson,"⁴¹ there occurred an association between Leonard Cohen and the backup musicians, The Army. Jack Hafferkamp describes their contribution to Cohen's songs in the following words:

They provide just the right musical superstructure for his songs. Expertly but not overpoweringly they give his ideas a range and versatility his previous records have lacked.⁴²

By the mid-1970's, with "New Skin for the Old Ceremony" Cohen presented to his audience a musical product which is described by Larry Shoeman as "a monumental album, a sacramental spew, a vital, tender weapon";⁴³ this album is technically and musically outstanding and the finished product can be compared on both these levels to that of any other major artist of the recording industry. In his last album, through his association with Phil Spector (who is exclusively responsible for the music and for the mixing), Cohen achieves a completely different style.

The current release, Death of a Ladies' Man, however is quite another sound compared to Cohen's previous work and has been both damned and praised by the press -- and criticised by Cohen himself. He is most upset by the lurking "spectre" of Phil Spector, his infamous collaborator and the producer of the record. Although philosophical about Spector's complete take-over of production, Cohen concedes that he was angry about his partner's tyrannical mix of the album's tracks (in secret) and calls them a "failure from the point of view of accessibility."⁴⁴

The most meaningful aspect of the musical dimension of "Death of a Ladies' Man" is Cohen's deliberate association with Spector (famous for the "Spector Wall of Sound" -- a technique made popular in the early 1960's which dramatically changed the pop music sound -- which literally creates a wall of sound upon which is overlaid, in the final mixing of the album, the voice of the singer). By this association Cohen sought to create a totally novel effect. There are more backup musicians than Cohen ever used before and several backup vocals for sound reinforcement as well, among them Bob Dylan and Allan Ginsberg. If the lyrics of Cohen's songs over the past decade point towards romantic maturity, then the music tends towards greater sophistication with greater reliance upon studio electronics. The musical progression parallels the thematic evolution as both move into areas of greater sophistication and maturity.

Chapter Five

"The Knowledge of Strangerhood"

"Caveat Emptor"

Leonard Cohen is an artist who has adopted various personae. Between 1956 and 1964 he established his reputation on the basis of his explorations in the realm of poetry. By the mid-1960's, to this already complex and fascinating persona, he added that of prose-writer or novelist. Later still in that same decade, as well as poet-novelist, Cohen became a songwriter singer, performer. Cohen's overall persona has become progressively more complex.

Cohen, as a poet, evolved from his position of conservative romanticism in the first two volumes to a preoccupation with greater social concern in Flowers for Hitler. Cohen's romanticism of the 1950's and early 1960's is well explained by Gnarowski's distinction that the artist's formative period can be traced to the "beat generation" and the all-important attention they attached to personality. Cohen has made of his romantic self an idiosyncratic trait which, even today, serves the purpose of "trademark." To this primary concern with the self, Cohen added a social dimension which is also a reflection of the times which inspired the work. The growing dissatisfaction of the "hip" generation of the 1960's, the overt protest against war and social injustice, cannot be dismissed as a context for Cohen's transitional Flowers for Hitler. With the publication of The Energy of Slaves the early poetic concerns are translated into a probing or challenging of the art-form itself. Unfortunately no such term as the convenient "beat" or "hip" yet exists to summarize the orientation of the 1970's; however, Cohen's last book of poems truly belongs to that period of art-history which is now giving birth to artifacts which transcend all labels. Cristo's

efforts to remove art from the hands of art galleries, as well exemplified by his controversial twenty-four and a half mile "Running Fence," is one of a thousand available parallels in the art world. It truly appears to be a characteristic of our modern times, that the artists test and challenge the limitations of established art-forms. Cohen's latest poems, where he himself insists that what appears in verse-form on the printed page is not poetry, belong, in spirit, to the same period as John Lennon and the Plastic Ono Band's inclusion of a deliberate two minutes of silence on an album of rock music.

Cohen, as a novelist, has also moved from a romantic preoccupation with the self in The Favorite Game to areas of greater abstraction in Beautiful Losers. With only three years between the two novels, the evolution must be seen as radical and significant. Although the object of Beautiful Losers is hardly as intricate as The Energy of Slaves, still, in the fact that the tortured protagonist of the novel escapes, at the end of the story, from all the limitations of time and space, and from the novel as well, Cohen's second novel must be seen as an early attempt to challenge the limitations of the novel-form. After all, few characters in literature, let alone Canadian literature, escape from man's predicament to become, within the story, a mediator between Man and God.

As is to be expected, given the manifestation of Cohen's romanticism as a point of departure for his poems and his novels, the early songs are also characterized by their romantic focus. Cohen's challenge to the popular song to serve as a medium for the expression of his outlook is not as direct as his questioning of the premises of poetry and prose; however,

the lyrics often emphasize the struggle between the artist's individuality and the society within which he must live and create.

Morley, in her article on The Favorite Game, perceptively points out:

It's right there: "the knowledge of strangerhood" connotes the romantic archetype of the Outsider, which is the way Cohen sees the artist -- the non-conformist, the rebel, the suffering alien. 1

In my examination of Cohen, the artist -- in his personae of poet, novelist, and song-writer and singer -- emerges as the archetypal Outsider. The iconoclastic artist challenges himself, the world around him, and finally his own art. Growth and change in writing style occur as the artist explores his medium for expression and as the non-conformist, rebel and suffering alien progresses from a gentle comparison of mythologies to a defiant invitation to reconsider our basic preconceptions of love, art and history.

Cohen's well-calculated and well-articulated rebellion against the self, the world, and art is in itself a valid reason why he is entitled to a place of significance in the world of contemporary art. However, the self-reflective artist goes beyond his personal struggle and sometimes entices, sometimes forces, his audience to examine not only his vision but their own as well. We as public or audience are, at best, that reality against which the artist struggles. Cohen's contribution to the world of the arts can be viewed as a meta-statement about the inter-relationship among the artist, his work, his media and his audience:

In the Canadian Film Board movie, Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen, you wrote something on the wall while you were sitting in the bathtub."

"Caveat Emptor, or buyer beware. I think it's good advice. Especially these days. Not specifically from me, but...umm...I let anybody judge me by the severest terms they choose....I simply think that on both sides of the underground railway there is a lot of occasion to exercise our skepticism." 2

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