

**The Strange Case of Leonard Cohen: ‘There is a crack in everything. That’s
how the light gets in.’¹**

Leonard Cohen has been a published and critically regarded poet for over fifty years, and a prolific recorded songwriter for over forty years (ca twelve poetry collections and sixteen albums). Despite his multifarious artistic endeavours, he has remained either a contentious figure for critical consideration or a neglected one. Cohen has continually evaded clear-cut classification by not fitting easily ‘into the categories of post-modern or the post-colonial; his obstinate Romanticism is seen as reactionary; and his treatment of women has been...an outright offence to feminist critics.’² In the figure of Leonard Cohen, we see an artist remake his role and redirect the scope of his influence to the point of exhaustion, if not oblivion; an introspective artist who is at war with himself, with his work, and with the collective tradition he remains attached to, if only by an invisible thread. Cohen’s self-effacing attitude towards himself as a writer was unlikely to inspire the confidence of his most devoted critics, especially when he replaced his poetry collections with albums, triggering anxieties of popularism and material preciousness in relation to poetic art. However, Cohen’s willingness to take real risks with his work, even at the expense of falling into cliché, bathos, banality, and critical obscurity, has paid off on countless occasions and resulted in the poet-songwriter achieving artistic longevity through his great power to move, and stir the very soul of the reader or listener. By interrogating the poetic energies of Cohen’s poems, novels, and songs, one may see how an artist’s progression can transcend formal barriers and aesthetic prejudices and still merit serious consideration as a modern poetic voice.

Leonard Cohen himself proclaimed, perhaps as all modern and post-modern artists shadowed by the literary giants Eliot and Pound might, that his sounds were too new for the majority of his audience, particularly those who were critiquing his work.

¹ Leonard Cohen, ‘Anthem’, in *Stranger Music, Selected Poems and Songs*, [abbr. *Stranger*] (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), p. 373

² Stephen Scobie, ‘The Counterfeiter Begs Forgiveness: *Leonard Cohen* and Leonard Cohen’, *Canadian Poetry Studies/Documents/Reviews*, Issue: No.33, Fall/Winter, 1993 <http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/cpjrnl/vol33/scobie.htm>, p. 4

Upon publication of his third volume *Flowers for Hitler*, 1964, which won the Quebec Literary Award despite the generally harsh reception it received, Cohen spoke out with surprising defiance, bearing not a shred of the deprecating tone usually adopted by the author in relation to his work. The back cover warned the reader: “This book moves me from the world of the golden boy poet into the dung pile of the front-line writer...Hitler won’t get the same hospitality from the papers” (as *Let Us Compare* and *Spice Box*³). “My sounds are too new,” Cohen boldly stated, with his familiar wry wit and provocative irony enlivening the dead cliché. “Therefore people will say: this is derivative, this is slight, his power has failed. Well, I say there has never been a book like this, prose or poetry, written in Canada.”⁴ There was definitely a shift from the “neo-romantic lyric sensibility” (Cohen) of his first two volumes and novel, to the far more politically engaged and provocative collection *Flowers for Hitler*, with its nationalistic verse, and obsessive focus on the Holocaust. Cohen’s claim to new sounds resonates with Mamet’s argument that insists American language must always reflect the contemporary cultural influences that cultivate its development, in order to keep it fresh and relevant. Just as the magnificence of the American language, ‘like that of the Hebrew of the Bible [both of which Cohen penetrated deeply] is punchy and to the point,’ so too should the poetry reflect this cultural sense of play, and become liberated from the Europhile tradition of being a “language of intellectuals.”⁵

In 1957, Leonard Cohen made his debut performance as a poet on *Six Montreal Poets*, reading from his first collection *Let us Compare Mythologies*, published the previous year. As the youngest poet of the ‘Six Montreal Poets’, which included his mentor Irving Layton, Cohen immediately engaged the energy of Canadian academics

³ Cohen refers to his first two volumes: *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, published in 1956 when twenty-two year old poet was still an undergraduate student, and *The Spice-Box of Earth*, published in 1961, which established him in the poetry circles of Canada

⁴ William Ruhlmann, ‘The Stranger Music of Leonard Cohen,’ *Goldmine*, Issue: February 19, 1993, accessible: <http://www.webheights.net/speakingcohen/gold1.htm>, pt. 1, p. 6

⁵ David Mamet, guest speaker for ‘The Alistair Cooke Memorial Lecture 2008’. The subject of the lecture is language. Broadcast on BBC Radio 4, November 18, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00fjf82>

who were largely in favour of what he was attempting to achieve in the field of prosody: a kind of reportage given from Montreal's minority perspective that spoke to the isolated and estranged everywhere.⁶ Many reviewers welcomed the 'excess of energy,' of his early collections, praised his 'outstanding poetic quality' and 'gift for macabre ballad' that was reminiscent of Auden,⁷ and frequently remarked on his aptitude for 'flashes of lyric powers...surely worthy of Blake and Smart.'⁸ Certain scholars regarded Cohen as 'potentially the most important writer that Canadian poetry has produced since 1950 – not merely the most talented, but also...the most professionally committed to make the most of his talent'⁹ after his literary predecessor and mentor, Irving Layton, who was active in the 1930-40s. *Six Montreal Poets* had demonstrated clearly that Cohen was seen as the most important young poet in Montreal a city, which at the time was "the most active centre of poetic writing and publication in the country" (Ruhlmann, pt. 1, p. 4).

Intent on transgressing the limited spectrum of Canada's avant-garde scene and achieving a wider international position, Cohen's poetry made the necessary leaps to establish connections with contemporaneous New York poets and San Francisco figures. When his *Poems 1956 – 1968* first appeared, Kenneth Rexroth, the mentor of the Beat Movement, wrote: 'Leonard Cohen's poetry and song constitute a big breakthrough...This is certainly the future of poetry...It is the voice of a new

⁶ In William Ruhlmann's 'The Stranger Music of Leonard Cohen' (*abbr.* Ruhlmann, footnoted on the previous page), Cohen expresses this sentiment: "...everybody feels like a minority there (in Montreal), the French because they're a minority in Canada, the English because they're a minority in Quebec and the Jews because they're a minority everywhere. pt. 1, p. 6.

⁷ Northrop Frye, in a review of "Let Us Compare Mythologies", 1957, reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vo. 3, Carolyn Riley [ed.], (Gale Research Company, 1975), pp. 109 - 111

⁸ Eli Mandel, "Leonard Cohen's Brilliant Con Game," 1978, reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vo. 38, Daniel G. Marowski [ed.], (Gale Research Company, 1986), p. 137

⁹ William Ruhlmann, 'The Stranger Music of Leonard Cohen,' *Goldmine*, Issue: February 19, 1993, accessible: <http://www.webheights.net/speakingcohen/gold1.htm>, pt. 1, p. 6

civilisation.’¹⁰ Although he never performed in the U.S during this period, New American Poetry influenced Cohen across the border. Jack Kerouac’s poetry readings to Jazz accompaniment inspired Cohen to do the same thing in Canada (’57, ’58). In addition, NAP’s persistent preoccupation with the experimentation of open forms (Olson’s projective verse and Duncan’s “Opening of the Field”), with confessional, incantatory outbursts (Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’) and with the private introspection of the speaker’s autonomy (Dickinson’s singularity of voice), all resonant in Cohen’s style of poetics. *Beautiful Losers*, a surrealistic prose poem that intertwined three separate narratives, and adopted the form of a journalistic notebook, demonstrated the poet’s ability to meld intense physical prosaic exchanges, with tense metaphysical poems; its *pièce de résistance* was a 400-word mantra ‘Magic is Afoot’, which Buffy St. Marie later put to music in her 1969 album *Illuminations*. *Beautiful Losers* uses the ‘apparatus of the notebook collection (to) locate(s) the work in the modernist tradition of the poem in process and the forged documentary.’¹¹ Through such formal innovations Cohen was able to set up a dialogue that extended outside the perimeters of his insular and conservative cultural and literary heritage. Even as it pushed the writer further outside the mainstream of Canadian Literature, it gave him increasing European appeal.

Perhaps the newness Cohen sought - through his innovative imitations of the Jack Kerouac and Steve Allen performances for his Montreal audience or his highly dicey novel-poem, which one critic mistook for “Obscenity and Pornography”¹² - acted as the pre-requisite to his decisive shift into the medium of songwriting, where he could engage poetry as the ultimate performance. With its greater potentiality as an open form, enlivened artistically by the possibilities of collaboration, accompaniment, and

¹⁰ Laurence Coupe, *Beat Sound, Beat Vision: The Beat Spirit and Popular Song*, “‘Eco-Zen’, or ‘a heaven in a wild flower’...”, (MUP: Manchester, 2007), p. 182

¹¹ Eli Mandel, “Leonard Cohen’s Brilliant Game,” 1978, reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vo. 38, Daniel G. Marowski [ed.], (Gale Research Company, 1986), p. 137

¹² William Ruhlmann, ‘The Stranger Music of Leonard Cohen,’ *Goldmine*, Issue: February 19, 1993, accessible: <http://www.webheights.net/speakingcohen/gold1.htm>, pt. 1, p. 6

experiential consumption, the platform of song granted Cohen liberation from the literati's world of creative devourers, even if it did likewise incite their devouring energies against him (Blakean term). Mamet's notion that the true American songwriter has a greater poetic capacity to document the U.S.'s chequered past than the poet on the pedestal, seems in this instance one that could be applied to Cohen, who exchanged his typewriter for a guitar. The most favourable criticism of Cohen's poetry collections was already leaning towards dealing with the musicality of the poems – the ballad form, the lyrical brilliance, a poetic style that was termed "leaping poetry" by the mythopoetic poet Robert Bly.¹³ Following the ironical 'dwindling energy' of *The Energy of Slaves* collection, in which the poet acknowledged: 'I am no longer at my best practising/The craft of verse', James Healey argued that the cause of Cohen's poetic decline was not a reflection of his ability, but rather, his increased politicisation.¹⁴ In his critique of *The Energy of Slaves* volume, Healey regarded Cohen in the light of his dual-role of waning poet, and working songwriter. However, for Healey it was not simply a question of the latter damaging the credibility of the former. Commentating on the 'painful disappointment' of the collection, written by a poet who bears 'little resemblance to the Leonard Cohen who excited and rewarded readers years ago,' Healey finds Cohen's diminishing influence as a poet to be correlative to him gaining greater power as a songwriter to engage his audience through his language. As witnessed in this volume, when Cohen 'sacrifices his strongest weapon to wage a holy war: "I hate my music/I long for weapons,' his poetic power suffers, because as Healey notes, 'Cohen's music is his best weapon,' and his greatest tool for achieving a cultural currency. For Healey, interestingly, this volume represents a failure because of its desperate will to maintain presence in an artistic arena that Cohen had seemingly renounced and departed from.

¹³ Eli Mandel, "Leonard Cohen's Brilliant Con Game," 1978, reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vo. 38, Daniel G. Marowski [ed.], (Gale Research Company, 1986), p. 137

¹⁴ James Healey, in *Prairie Schooner* (University of Nebraska: U.S., 1973), p. 185, reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vo. 3, Carolyn Riley [ed.], (Gale Research Company, 1975), p. 111

What I find most compelling about Cohen as a writer, whether a poet, a novelist, or songwriter, is the way in which he makes creative use out of whatever material he finds to hand. This bricolage artist draws on Hellenistic myths, fairy tales, Biblical imagery (which he deems the universal language, one that speaks to us all), his inherited Jewish popular customs, adopted Zen Buddhism philosophy, suburban neighbours, grandparents, the social-political state of Canada, and the contemporary Montreal scene to forge a style simultaneously unique, and inclusive. To account for all the allusions in Cohen's work would be feat no less challenging than trying to categorise this multifarious writer. With Cohen, nothing is straightforward, amnesia is anathema for the poet, and contradiction his favourite friend. This paradoxical state seems to take root in the man himself, with his mentor pointing out that the very problem with Leonard Cohen is that he 'is a narcissist who hates himself'¹⁵ (Layton). You don't get much more problematic than that. Cohen embodies the writer as a challenger and the challenged. He combines unlikely or undesirable material to probe and question the reader/listener, at a time, when people wanted to leave the past in the past. And yet he undermines a clear stance by occupying two fields simultaneously (the nihilist and the spiritualist, the sincere and the cynic, the womaniser and the slave). Add to this his blatant blurring of the boundaries between the genres, and his alarming popularisation of poetry after being hailed as the "Golden Boy" of Canadian poetry, and one has to wonder whether the critics turned on Cohen for his dwindling poetic talent, or simply for his controversial poetic energy. Poets do not sing their poems in our current closed literary tradition, and songwriters do not write poetry. Even Dylan's songs, whose resounding lyrics possess strong poetic qualities, would not pass for poetry on the printed page. Thus, even as a songwriter, Cohen's craft is still one rooted in poetry, with songs like 'Hallelujah' and 'Democracy', both revised and edited from a potential eighty verses. While persistent themes reoccur in Cohen's poems, novels, songs, so that his entire oeuvre is like: "A hundred candle flames (which) echoed and re-echoed in a hundred pieces of silver

¹⁵ Kevin Flynn, "Balanced on Wooden Stilts and Dancing: What Irving Layton Taught Me about Leonard Cohen", in *Intricate Preparations, Writing Leonard Cohen*, Stephen Scobie [ed.], (Canada: ECW Press, 2000), p. 11

cutlery”¹⁶ (*Beautiful Losers*), nothing with this writer is clear-cut, and nothing can be taken for granted. Of course, that is not to say that Cohen is always successful in his prosodic test-runs, nor his attempts at formal innovations. However, this is a writer whose very disturbances make him as compelling as his successes, if not more so.

¹⁶ Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers*, (London: Jonathon Cape, 1970), p. 97

I. PRAYER AS SACRIFICE

God, God, God, some one of my family
hated your love with such skill that you sang
to him, your private voice violating
his drum like a lost bee after pollen
in the brain. He gave you his children
opened on a table, and if a ram
ambled in the garden you whispered nothing
about that, nor held his killing hand.
It is no wonder fields and governments
rotted, for soon you gave him all your range,
drove all your love through that sting in his brain.
Nothing can flourish in your absence
except our faith that you are proved through him
who had his mind made mad and honey-combed.¹⁷

In 'Prayer of My Wild Grandfather' above, published in Cohen's second volume *The Spice Box of Earth*, the poet uses material from the "Binding" of Isaac to engage a very disturbing event in biblical history. It is an allegorical story of abuse on three accounts: of a man's faith in God, a father's love for his son, and of a child's trust in a parent. In his poetic critique of the episode, Cohen makes a searing commentary on the notion of legacy, which is passed on with an assumption of complicity binding the subsequent generations. The poem encapsulates the poet's persistently difficult relationship with God: an abusive but an inescapable one, which revealed itself early on in the poet's work, and has haunted him throughout his career. The culmination of this troubled relationship is given full range in Cohen's nihilistic vision of 'The Future' ("Give me back the Berlin Wall/give me Stalin and St. Paul/Give me Christ or give me Hiroshima"¹⁸). 'Prayer's' strongly sacrilegious sentiment is directly revisited in 'Story of

¹⁷ Leonard Cohen, *The Spice-Box Of Earth*, (London: Jonathon Cape, 1973), p. 82

¹⁸ Leonard Cohen, *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), p. 372

Isaac', which is another alarming example of the poet confronting the notion of being born into (spiritual) sacrifice and denied the right to choose what you inherit. Cohen's messianic childhood might provide an insight into the poet's preoccupation with legacy. At a very young age, his parents told him he was a descendent of the high priest Aaron.¹⁹ This is particularly interesting when considering the instrumental role given to prophetic imagery throughout his oeuvre: the wry 'golden voice' reference in 'Tower of Song', and 'golden chord' used in 'Hallelujah' (songs), not forgetting Cohen's persistent thematic engagement with the prophetic figure who embodies the notion of being born blind into a role, without say or choice. In 'Prayer of My Wild Grandfather', Cohen inverts the prophetic position so that the speaker holds greater authority over God, whose power by comparison is nothing more than a bee sting. Rather than symbolizing the redeemer who mediates between god and man to repair the rift (prophets Aaron and Jeremiah) the speaker rebukes his inherited God from the perspective of the anguished agnostic, who is still reeling from this originary tale of the most hateful love ('hated your love').

'Prayer' is a heavily concentrated poem, both in context and in depth of imagery, and marks Cohen as a poet who refuses to be silenced when it comes to tackling issues of serious weight, even if the roots of those issues penetrate deeper than the contemporary reader is prepared to go. For Cohen, 'It is no wonder fields and governments rotted' ('Prayer'), if one remembers the terrible crimes and awful injustices that are the very foundations of the Jewish religion, which continue to distort and deform history, and violate the core of the poet's identity. In the 'Binding of Isaac' (Book of Genesis), Abraham demanded no justification for God's request to slaughter his own child, and Cohen's voice both fills and questions this 'absence.' The probing stance, in which Cohen penetrates the unquestionable, and examines the sense of legacy that still haunts us today, would become a strong and idiosyncratic characteristic of his poetry. The poet neither holds his tongue, nor restrains himself on any account, counterbalancing his God who neither 'whispered nothing', 'nor held his killing hand'. Instead of silence, the speaker expresses his outrage at a 'God, God, God' who uses his 'private voice (to) violat(e)' the sacred bond of trust between a parent and child, and the silent believer and

¹⁹ *Leonard Cohen: Artist of Influence*, (UK: Filiquarian Publishing, 2008), p.5

his God. This perversion of the order, in which love becomes murder, faith becomes violence and trust becomes abuse is 'opened (up) on' the page like the offered victims through Cohen's loose iambic pentameter, so that the poem reads like an imprecation.

...He gave you his children
opened on a table, and if a ram ambled in the garden you whispered nothing
about that, nor held his killing hand.

The sting of the poem is delivered in the extended metaphor of God as a lost bee 'after pollen in the brain.' This busy God pierces the ear 'drum' of those resisting religious influence until even the non-believer has 'his mind made mad and honey-combed.' Cohen's particular outrage is directed at God's siren-like seduction of the agnostics, who rather 'hated your love with such a skill that you sang.' Cohen implies that Jews from his grandfather's generation were forced to have faith even though they resisted and fought, and this battle has been taken up by Cohen in his poetry. In 'Prayer' Cohen's God seeks unconditional faith, and works tirelessly to 'extract' proof of blind loyalty. However, this proof quickly becomes a powerful currency, which allows God to drive his *conditional* love (or rather influence) 'through that sting in (the) brain.' Cohen implies that the concentrated 'sting' of religious influence, like the sun intensified through a magnifying glass, causes madness and distortion in the mind of the believer, until their 'mind (is) made mad and honey-combed.' Cohen uses full-consonance rhyme ('mind made mad') to end the poem with the most "man-made" line, which implicitly supports Cohen's argument against a God constructed through Religion. Cohen uses this poetic device to mirror God's device – to make man's mind an instrument of Religious will, which for Cohen is an image of extreme madness.

Cohen's retelling of the sacrifice argues that the sacrifice symbolically existed in the horror and violence of the request itself. Whether acted out or prevented, the children of the Jewish religion were symbolically slain, and this legacy has since outlived its original context, bleeding through into modern day Islam and Hinduism. In *Beautiful*

Losers, Cohen allegorizes legacy as the contaminating ‘whale-shaped stain’ (p. 97), which engulfs all that it comes into contact with. For the speaker, God ‘whispered nothing...nor held his killing hand’ (‘Prayer’), which is a dramatic revision of the original tale, and refers to God’s pervasive absence in times of violence, with the divine neither stilling the killing hand, nor offering guidance amidst the horrors. Thus, God’s request paradoxically embodies how God’s voice, (divine love) was ‘lost’ forever for the speaker, an innocence which he can never regain despite writing an entire collection of poetic prayer in supplication of God’s mercy or forgiveness (*Book of Mercy*). ‘Prayer of My Wild Grandfather’ is a brilliant example of the poet’s highly contentious religious and spiritual stance, which permeates his oeuvre, and presents itself as one of the many fascinating dualities in the poet’s voice. In this poem, he is God’s opponent, berating his inherited complicity, and longing to wash away the contaminating stain of his legacy. However, we will also see the poet equally commanding in his role as God’s exponent, exemplified in ‘Magic is Afoot’ (*Beautiful Losers*), in which the enthused poet acts as mouthpiece for the divine, and demonstrates how his voice can be a vehicle for both antithetical sentiments.

II. THE MOCK BALLAD

For at each body rare
 The saintly man distains
 I stare O God I stare
 My heart is stained with stains

(‘Song’ verse III, *Spice*, p. 70)

Another disturbing feature of Cohen’s poetry, particularly in the earlier work, is the way he uses the mock-ballad to make a mockery of himself (as poet), his prosody, and the relationship between the two. The ballad (which comes from *ballare*, the Italian for ‘to dance’) and derives from song and folk traditions, is already a mock poetic form, ‘naughty and nautical, crude and carefree’²⁰ in nature. However, Cohen chooses to write the mock-ballad to make a double mockery of the pre-Raphaelite Romanticism that the sixties aesthetic had adopted. In *The Spice Box of Earth* Cohen titles six of his poems using the word ‘Song’. Not all of these take the ballad form, but those that do are macabre, sinister, or misogynistic in tone. Particularly intriguing is ‘Song’, (*Spice*, p. 70) an erotic, mock-solemn ballad, which stands as a maelstrom of ridicule that leaves neither the field of poetry, nor Cohen’s position within it, untouched. Cohen’s assumes the voice of a boisterous speaker to tell the reader a roguish tale of fleshly desires and forbidden pleasures, using the jaunty rhythm, the alternating rhyme, and conventional metre for ballad (tetrametre and trimetre) to send up the mock-solemn tone into one of roaring parody. As the ballad is a perfect example of accentual verse (where the stresses rule) Cohen’s regular iambics work here to imitate the throbbing lust, coursing through the speaker’s veins as he reads of: ‘**Gleaming thigh and breast**’ and watches the ‘**naked girls with silver combs.**’ The heavily stressed lines work to exaggerate the violent force that refuses to let the speaker ‘rest’ to the point of absurdity. Cohen’s ‘Song’ certainly

²⁰ Stephen Fry, *The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within*, (London: Arrow, 2005) p. 192

provides the antidote to for the, desperately sincere, Yeatsian voice expressed in 'As the Mist Leaves no Scar' (*Spice*, verse I, p. 64). In this early elegy, the speaker's romanticisation of love verges on bathos:

As the mist leaves no scar
On the dark green hill,
So my body leaves no scar
On you, nor ever will.

In 'Mist', a poem that appears only a few pages before the ballad, we hear the poet engage an entirely different position on love to such a degree that it evokes comedy in its triteness. The speaker in 'As the Mist Leave no Scar' longs for a love to lose himself in, imagining an intermingling of the lovers' spirits that permits both parties to permeate the other without fear of emotional scarring. 'Mist' reveals the poet at his most self-deceptive, and 'Song' acts to shatter the twofold romantic illusion: the one Cohen holds of himself and the one we hold of the poet. The ceremonial picture of love, which the elegiac 'Mist' exemplifies, is one often committed to page by the poet as evidence of his most desperate illusionary yearnings. Cohen's mock-ballad offers the antithesis to this. By exaggerating, the lust-driven voice of 'Song', which is gratified only by 'Flesh on flesh in dark', the poet ridicules his poetic sentiment, in favour of deprecating this 'body rare.' Thus, Cohen is mocking his own self-deceptive act, which would have him and us believe that there is still a place in modern poetry for monochrome romantic expressions. Instead, in 'Song', his inner cynic, undermines this former sentiment as a fine performance by the poet, and exposes the fraudulency of the "other" speaker. Adding salt to the wound, Cohen also criticises the modern introspective perspective, which himself often adopts, 'so alone, angst-ridden and disconnected' (Fry, *Ode*, p. 199). By using the ballad's traditionally authorless voice, Cohen forges an anti-confessional style that cheapens the introspective perspective and ridicules the modern obsession with one's own psychology, navel, and autonomy. Cohen also soils his own inherited imagery and iconography of medieval Juedo-Christian nobility and saintly pride, and ridicules the validity of the 'saintly' voice by reducing the 'saintly stories' to bawdy tales of closeted

lust, guilty perversion and voyeurism. Cohen's role is comparable to Shakespeare archetypal fool, who through mockery reveals hidden depth and truth. Cohen uses toilet humour to reveal the considerable cracks in his former self-deceptive romanticisation, which the wise fool acknowledges is impossible to uphold and live by. Instead of longing after a perfect love that will 'leave(s) no scar,' he admits the many imperfections when it comes to matters of the heart: 'My heart is stained with stains.' Underneath the crude forms of humour that the ballad form embodies, Cohen acknowledges how impossible standards set one up to be disappointment and to fail, both in religious and spiritual fulfilment, as well as in personal relationships.

III. COHEN'S "LEAPING POETRY"

Leonard Cohen as a novelist is no less contentious, challenging or uncompromising, and no more conventional or comfortable to deal with. *Beautiful Losers*, published in 1966, was Cohen's last piece of classifiable poetry before he began setting his poems to music. The novel is an overwhelming mosaic of prose, poetry, dialogue, and prayer, and an interweaving of three spiralling narratives. It references Jewish customs, popular culture (and in particular 'Ray Charles'), Canadian colonialism, allegories of Jewish, Christian, and Native American identity, and includes explicit sexual content reminiscent of 'Celebration'²¹. Its publication immediately attracted a wide critical reception, and was seriously reviewed in the both *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New York Review of Books*'. At best it was a humanist liturgy which allegorised "the history and political destiny of the Canadian nation: of its successive conquests (mirrored in the deaths of the Indian, Edith, and then of the Frenchman, F.), and perhaps also its future fate (turning into American fiction)."²² At worst, it was reviewed simply as a "tirade of obscene poetry". In fact, at best and worst, it was the perfect exemplar of Cohen's style as a bricolage poet, borrowing material from wherever he could and attempting to find thematic coherence in the formally chaotic. *Beautiful Losers*, so rich in tone and texture, verged on being indigestible as a novel-length surrealistic prose poem of dense thematic resonance. The broken-down, fragmentary novel form encourages the reader to take the material out of its context, to consider the pieces as artistically worthy in their own right. A prime example of this is the wonderfully stirring passage 'Magic is Afoot' (p. 156 – 158), which epitomises a strong instance of Cohen's "leaping poetry" and his exceptionalism as a writer. Cohen proves that passages of *Beautiful Losers* are rich and rare as prosodic experiments even when separated from the whole.

²¹ Cohen's poem about fellatio "Celebration" (*Spice-box*, p. 63), which compares the orgasm to Samson's destruction of the temple.

²² Linda Hutcheon, "Caveat Lector: The Early Postmodernism of Leonard Cohen." *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Studies in Canadian Literature. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988, pp. 28 - 9

‘Old friend, you may kneel as you read this, for now I come to the sweet burden of my argument. I did not know what I had to tell you, but now I know. I did not know what I wanted to proclaim, but now I am sure. All my speeches were preface to this, all my exercises but a clearing of the throat. I confess I tortured you but only to draw your attention to this. I confess I betrayed you but only to tap your shoulder. In our kisses and sucks, this, ancient darling, I meant to whisper.’ (p. 156)

This passage references itself as both psalm and sermon. Cohen emphasises the dual-potentiality of poetry and prayer, illuminating both the poetic nature of prayer and the prayerful nature of poetry. The speaker draws on two oral roles inherent in his legacy: the Jewish cantor (hazzan), who became the singer extraordinaire of the Jewish people, celebrating the melodic and aesthetic quality of prayer through beautiful poetic extrapolations, and the enthused seer or prophet (specifically the broken-hearted prophet Jeremiah). The speaker supplicates us to ‘kneel as (we) read this’, as if preparing us to witness a ceremony on the page, or to hear a prophecy of great import and illumined meaning. Cohen is setting himself up to the great poetic task, arguing (ironically) that all his other poems ‘were preface to this, all (his) exercises but a clearing of the throat’ while simultaneously setting up his reader to participate in his incantation, (like the modern Jewish audience that moved from passive listening to active participation.) The speaker’s proclamation also strongly alludes to the prophetic role, specifically to that of the anguished, tortured, introspective prophet Jeremiah, who struggled with the responsibility of turning man to God. His declaimed lament, the Book of Jeremiah, revealed how he physically and emotionally experienced his prophecies: “Are not all my words as fire, sayeth the LORD, and a hammer that shatters rock”. Cohen’s preface acknowledges the responsibility as a paradoxical ‘sweet burden’, as the prophet has both ‘sweet’ access to the divine nectar, and the ‘burden(some)’ task/responsibility of being the public mouthpiece for the ‘private voice’ (‘Prayer’) ‘to whisper’ through (‘Magic’). The ‘sweet’ reference also extends the running metaphor used in the early poem, ‘Prayer of My Wild Grandfather.’ In this prayerful expression, Cohen reverses the relationship so that the prophet is the bee extracting the sweet nectar from God, which he then must deliver to the listener’s ear.

‘God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is afoot. Magic is alive. Alive is afoot. Magic never died. God never sickened. Many poor men lied. Many sick men lied. Magic never weakened. Magic never hid. Magic always ruled. God is afoot. God never died...’ (*Beautiful*, p. 157)

As either prophet or cantor, the implication is clear; Cohen is writing as the poet enthused, as if a God-force is working through him and he is the very instrument to communicate its message. Cohen’s prayer is not for the literary closed reading, but like ‘Howl’, Cohen’s incantation relies on the vocal inflections, the rhythms of speech, the building pace, for the musicality of the songful prayer to burst out in the reading. ‘Magic is Afoot’ is completely dependent on rhetorical repetition for its power in delivery, and delivery of its power (rhetorical repetition by inversion or chiasmus, which is the very lifeblood of this poem). Cohen makes use of a variety of rhetorical techniques of repetition, using epanodos for the poem’s backbone to recapitulate the main theme ‘God is alive. Magic is afoot’. Additionally anaphora is used for emphasis and antimetabole is used to reinterpret the sense of the preceding lines.²³ Collectively these techniques effectively build and rebuild the message, giving the impression that it is not the words per se but the intention (God’s voice) behind them that holds the real source of magic. ‘Magic is no instrument. Magic is the end.’ For this poem to work, Cohen has to make repetition as invisible and pervasive as the magic that he is an instrument of, symbolically making his craft into ‘an empty palm’ to receive. Ironically, (but most appropriately) through Cohen’s effusive use of repetition, the technique disappears to the eye and works on the ear in a way that conveys the ubiquitous nature/wonder of magic. This is combined with an abundant use of all different types of rhyme – assonance, half-rhyme, partial-consonance, full-consonance, with a scarce use of full rhyme because of characteristic indiscretion. Cohen uses full rhyme at marked intervals, exercising enough control to draw out a subtle ebbing and flowing effect that is not self-conscious. The rest of the rhymes encourage the pace of the reading, yoking the lines together, to work towards a

²³ **Anaphora:** Rhetorical or poetic repetition of the first word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses or stanzas, **Antimetabole:** Rhetorical repetition by inversion and *chiasmus* q.v. – e.g. ‘I pretty and my saying apt? or ‘I apt and my saying pretty?’ (Fry, pp. 330 - 331)

seamless progression line-by-line that guides the reader's voice in finding the pace, until it leaps off the page. The passages of emphatic repetition are interspersed with poetic variation, where the poet uses running lines with longer syllabic words, and fewer poetic devices. This works to build the core point gradually, and effectively, with Cohen clearly drawing on the established traditions of oratory. 'Magic', is used twenty-eight times, almost twice times as many as 'God', which appears sixteen times, and through their effusive use Cohen implies that to the inspired, these words represent a constant source of unbridled energy, worthy of Blake's statement: 'The Cistern contains, the fountain overflows. One thought fills immensity.'²⁴ When acting under inspiration in a symbiotic relationship with the divine, one can point to that immensity, that 'Magic Length of God' (p. 158), which appropriately ends the poem.

The 'magic' in Cohen's poem is in how he uses this 'exercise' to demonstrate the seductive power of the voice to 'command' the page, and then disappear, much like the God of 'Prayer' who commanded Abraham and then 'whispered nothing.' 'Magic is Alive' is a powerful example of Cohen crossing genres in multiple ways. It is a psalm-poem that celebrates the vocal qualities of songful prayer, yet it is formally disguised as a passage in the *Beautiful Losers*, which in turn is a prose poem disguised as a novel. If we cannot take its form for granted, can we at least take refuge in the reverence of its tone? Cohen adds another layer to his poem and a greater depth to his enthused speaker by suggesting an ironic reading of the line: 'All my speeches were preface to this, all my exercises but a clearing of the throat'. Cohen has established in ('Prayer') his distrust in the voice that assumes omnipotence, and so both pokes fun at his earlier tone of defiance, while also implying a wry critique of the poet (as prophet or high priest) who assumes the absolutist role, and takes their word as gospel, revelling in his/her own literary blessedness, or vain self-admiration. Through his enlightened speaker, Cohen deflates the self-important attitude and the vanity that proclaims: "This is *the* speech" worth listening to, the word worth hearing. The speaker prepares the reader to participate in the masterful poetic sermon and yet if we listen closely we can hear chimes of Cohen's scepticism

²⁴ William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven Hell', in *Blake: Complete Writings, with variant readings*, Geoffrey Keynes [ed.], "Proverbs of Hell", p. 151

lurking behind his mighty proclamation (similar to “there’s a mighty judgement coming, but I may be wrong.”) Cohen’s psalm becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy not just as an exercise in itself, but also as perhaps the most significant move of Cohen yet: the continuation of the poet’s voice off the page. Whether knowingly or not Cohen alludes to his past ‘speeches’ (versifications) as prerequisites to his most creative exercise yet, namely his ‘clearing of the throat’ (readiness to sing). “You’d have thought, then, after 10 years of publishing, it would have launched Cohen on a career as a successful novelist. Instead, its reception prompted him to decide to change professions” (Ruhmann, pt. 1, p. 7).

IV. 'SONG OF ISAAC'

'The door it opened slowly,
my father he came in;
I was nine years old.
And he stood so tall above me,
his blue eyes they were shining
and his voice was very cold.
He said, "I've had a vision
and you know I'm strong and holy
I must do what I've been told."
(*Stranger*, p. 139)

'Story of Isaac', one of the first songs in Cohen's new incarnation, revisits the archetypal biblical story used in his early poem, 'Prayer of My Wild Grandfather', and extends the poet's disturbing thematic engagement with the model story of originary abuse. Cohen adopts the perspective of a young Isaac to twist the story into one unconsciously charged with suggestions of child molestation. In 'Story of Isaac' the boy's bedroom 'door [it] opened slowly', mirroring what Cohen was doing artistically with the song, opening the door to troubling issues at a time when paedophilia was still totally taboo. Whether Cohen consciously meant to disturb the paradigm with the weight of this controversial accusation (that Abraham's treatment of Isaac sowed the seeds for parental abuse), is not explicitly clear. However, through his uncompromising critique of those prophetic 'schemes' disguised as 'visions' and taken up by religious 'vultures', the poet implies that he was able to see or sense something in the originary tale that represented a harbinger for the parent/child bond to be permanently disrupted. The vision of Isaac embodies the innocent perspective, which becomes distorted by gross perversion of power and position. In 'Story of Isaac' Cohen creatively engages this perversion by using a disembodied shift from the child's voice to Cohen's own, in verse three - four. The child looking up to his father who, 'stood so tall above (him)', sees not a benevolent guardian, but a distant stranger bearing down upon him: his 'eyes...shining', his

‘voice...cold’, like one possessed. Cohen uses this strange figure to embody the demonic private breach of power behind closed doors. The father’s eyes, ‘shining’ inhumanly like the ‘Gold’ ‘axe’ he carries, symbolise the blind faith and prophetic madness of ‘honey-combed’ mind. In ‘Story of Isaac’, the archetypal imagery lacks the poetic depth of ‘Prayer’, in which the poet developed an elaborate extended metaphor (God as ‘bee’) to mirror the complexity of religious faith. However, considering that the retelling of the story is initially from the nine-year-old Isaac’s perspective it is perfectly fitting for Cohen to use naïve and child-like imagery, and rhyme. This child-like lens through which the ‘lake (appeared) like a lady’s mirror’ and the ‘eagle’ appeared like a ‘vulture’, reveals the innocent’s ability to only probe so far, and reminds us that the parent’s role is precisely to help guide their child safely towards greater wisdom. The child mistakes the two birds, the scavenger for the protector, implying that a pure vision is unable to detect or imagine the dark reality of his killer disguised as his protector. Cohen shows us how this symbol of salvation, redemption and resurrection (both eagle and God) can, with a simple trick of the light, be grossly distorted into a scavenger preying on the ‘hunted.’ With this striking image, Cohen implies that strongest lights can also cast the longest shadows. What is interesting about this song is that Cohen’s repudiation is wider than perhaps we might expect. The line, ‘man of peace, man of war’, opens up this argument to a critique of vanity at large, which at the time, was too uncomfortable for the carefree, anti-war sixties era to acknowledge.

This song is scanable as a poem, especially in the context of *The Stranger Music* anthology, which purposely blurs the lines between the genres, with little distinction made between the poems, songs and novel excerpts, daring us to allow each piece (straight poetry or not) to speak for itself on an aesthetic level without our formal prejudices or preconceptions. ‘Story of Isaac’ was first released by Judy Collins in 1968, *Who Knows Where The Time Goes*, and appeared on Cohen’s second album, with an ending that differed from Collins’ version and used a clever metathesis to critique both ‘man of peace, (and) man of war’:

When it all comes down to dust,

I will kill you if I must,

I will help you if I can.

When it all comes down to dust,

I will help you if I must,

I will kill you if I can.

Cohen uses chiasmus to cross the sense of the diametrical opposites 'kill' and 'help.' This extends the 'vulture' and 'eagle' dialogue, and makes a powerfully ambivalent statement that provides no easy solution or way out (not a welcome message to the Counterculture at the time). In her version, Collins cut out this verse entirely and sung her own words: 'And may I never learn to scorn/The body out of chaos born/The woman and the man' (Ruhlmann, pt. 2, p. 1). At the time, Collins' version implied that the poet had toned down his lyric to soften its initial critical reception. However, this was, rather more disturbingly, an instance of ideological bowdlerizing on Collins' part. Collins' censored the risky sentiment of the song and safely diffused the rhetorical climax to suit the anti-military, pacifist movement of the late sixties. This deliberately went against Cohen's intentional depth of meaning. Speaking on the era, Cohen remarks, how a counterbalancing lyric like: 'I will help you if I must, I will kill you if I can', 'which doesn't buy the side of peace, and it doesn't buy the side of war' was too challenging for the sixties generation that desperately want to break with the past. With 'Story of Isaac', Cohen articulates how 'the embrace is wider...(and) the repudiation is wider than Judy Collins was ready to acknowledge at that point' (Ruhlmann, pt. 2, p. 1).

As a set pair 'Prayer of My Wild Grandfather' and 'Song of Isaac' help to build up a strong picture of Cohen's artistic edginess, during a period when the sixties counterculture wanted to free itself from all karmic shackles. The poet spoke out against a history of unspeakable horrors hid behind hypocrisy and silence, at a time when the hippy movement was in full swing, and wanted to magically recreate history, not painfully revisit it. Even by America's much more liberal standards, Cohen was publicising and engaging material that was totally taboo, publishing a book addressed to

the holocaust (*Flowers for Hitler*), and a novel that tackled the Canada's oppressive colonisation, which he compared to the U.S and Mexico (*Beautiful Losers*). This might help to account for why Cohen was never popular in the states (the song 'Democracy' sealed that deal). However, for conservative colonial Canada, which by the U.S. standards was far more censorious, the poet was becoming far too penetrating to tolerate. *Flower for Hitler* exemplified the shadowy position occupied by Cohen on most subjects. In 'Prayer' and 'Story' he condemns the abuse of power, and the bloodshed one sanctifies with their legacy, and yet he is specifically 'not anti-military.' This is clearly indicated with 'Isaac's' original ending and supported by war songs: 'The Partisan' and 'A Bunch Of Lonesome Heroes', which Cohen specifically wrote for the army. Cohen's contentious, anti-categorical stance is further illuminated in the poem 'On Hearing a Name Long Unspoken' (*Flowers for Hitler*):

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

The poet uses polyptoton, a type of cross-meaning, to argue rhetorically for the likeness between two apparent opposites (the 'hunters' and the 'hunted'), engaging the Jungian concept of the conjunction of opposites that can be applied to all of humanity. On a social level, by crossing this line, the artist opens himself up to a wider perspective, tonal richness, and a greater capacity to tap in to the social, intellectual, political, and spiritual currents of his day. On a political level, this was a symbolic line of separation he inherited from growing up in a country linguistically divided on itself, where English were the hunters, and the French were the hunted. "The English did to us what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us" (*Beautiful Losers*, p. 199). In this triangular tension, both Anglophones and Francophones are

simultaneously victims and oppressors, while the Indians are simply victims, and the Americans are simply oppressors. According to this logic, the poet suggests that behind this apparent opposition of 'hunted' and 'hunters', 'oppressor' and 'victim', 'these two figures are bound by their double-edged positions as oppressors and victims and the relationship to loss that these entail' (Intricate Prep., p. 24). However, I think Cohen goes further still. The poet echoes the Old Testament in adopting an all-encompassing view about the inherent duality of existence. However, he further extends this philosophy by illuminating how the darkest shades of humanity also have the greatest potentiality for the light.

V. FAMOUS BLUE RAINCOAT

It's four in the morning, the end of December. I'm writing you
now just to see if you're better. New York is cold but I like where
I'm living. There's music on Clinton Street all through the evening.
(*Stranger*, p. 153)

This ballad is more poem than it is song, more letter than it is poem, more song than it is letter. 'Famous Blue Raincoat' revisits and reinterprets the bizarre and mysterious relationship triangle of *Beautiful Losers*, setting the relationship in a personal context. Cohen uses the three symbolically orphaned characters to interrogate the speaker's divided self, the 'I' and 'You', and the universal wife 'Jane' who in reality is 'nobody's wife'. 'Famous Blue Raincoat' is a musicalized version of a letter-ballad, in which Cohen uses traditional metre to imply that it can stand up as a poem on the page, and given its intimacy of tone and disclosure, that a silent reading might be preferable. In the first half of each three stanzas/verse, Cohen uses an anapaestic metre, characteristically fast moving, evoking something of a gallop, and usually unsuitable to contemplative poetry (which of course it isn't, but remember who we're dealing with here). Cohen lulls the galloping effect produced by the metre by alternating between iambic and trochaic substitutions used at the beginning of each line, which stagger the metrical flow and make it read more naturally. The metre is irregular and ranges from five to seven stresses per line, which also tones down the emphatic rhythmical properties of the anapaest and works in favour of a poetic reading. However, while the substitutions and inversions are perfectly valid, and even preferable in poetry, the metre breaks down all together at points, with no discernible strong stress-pattern, arguing the case for its 'reading' as a song, rather than poem. With this fact established (that it functions better as a song), one can still appreciate the brilliance of Cohen's ability to yoke together corresponding words through a variety of rhyme techniques, particularly by considering the portion written in straight anapaestic metre (with its accented syllables). This works unconsciously on the listener's ear, but is much easier to pick out with the eye. Cohen delivers a fine example of this delicate poetic craftwork, in the first line: "It's four in the

morning the end of December'. Here, 'four' and 'morn' [morning] are the first two strong feet in the anapaests, and mirror each other in assonance, while 'end' and 'cem' [December] are the subsequent two stresses, which is also a perfect use of assonant rhyme. Moreover, Cohen neither has to wrench the anapaestic rhythm to achieve this effect, nor does he disrupt the syntax or sublimate the message. Cohen uses italics on the page to signify the dialogic division between 'You' and 'I' and reveal temporal shifts that move from past to present to future, mirroring the voice-over division. The detached or disembodied perspective, which can: '*see you (himself) there with a rose in your teeth, one more thin gypsy thief. Well, I see Jane's awake. She sends her regards*', counteracts the immediate and clouded introspection of 'I', and this duality works nicely on the page. For all its poetic qualities, 'Famous Blue Raincoat' is still not a poem. However, by putting it to music, Cohen demonstrates his artistry in using other frameworks to enhance the poetic potential of his lyrics.

The monotonous melody of 'Famous Blue Raincoat' and 'inevitability of each successive note'²⁵, rather than obscuring or distracting away from the addresser's message, ironically works to communicate a greater depth of meaning to the letter. The slow dirge-like pace of the song is the perfect compliment to the letter-ballad form, the anapaestic metre, and the speaker's disclosure of personal content. The words are painfully poured out one by one in the verses, with no melodic escape in sight. The chorus, which moves us to C major, provides the crack of light to raise the listener out of the gloom, the 'flake of life' to sustain their attention. The melodic monotony and torturous down-tempo pace of 'Famous Blue Raincoat' purposefully inverts the (slow) relish with which one might savour every word of a personal memoir, so that the letter, rather than a blessing, becomes a curse upon the listener. Through the melodic structure and delivery, Cohen turns the letter against the listener, who, after the first couple of notes, feels complicit with the content. Both the narrow melodic progression (in minor key) and Cohen's anti-melodic voice, acts to stifle the anapaest's characteristic gallop, which sounds too frivolous and free when read out-loud. The anapaestic meter is still

²⁵ Jim Devlin, "Famous Blue Raincoat: A Symposium" in *Intricate Preparations, Writing Leonard Cohen*, Stephen Scobie [ed.], (Canada: ECW Press, 2000), p. 101

present but Cohen deadens its jaunty nature to work in favour of the letter's sentiment. This imbues the song with a dark, downbeat, pulsing rhythm that lurks in the background and at a distance, almost undetectable to the ear. Cohen's own voice as a singer enhances the tonal complexity, and further blurs the distinction between the letter's content and the true meaning that has not been fully disclosed to us. The singer's voice is both dark and grave with a hidden depth of resonance, and yet truthful in linguistic purity. When the speaker asks: 'What can I tell you my brother my killer what can I possibly say?' the listener is led instinctively by the deadened metre and the dry voice to probe the issue further. Is it with the voice of a 'brother' or a 'killer' that Cohen speaks to us from? Cohen's voice that both assumes intimacy and simultaneously repels it, leads us blindly through this personal and yet impersonal memoir, and the listener can neither escape the speaker, nor ever trust the voice that guides them at such a disturbing distance. Is this the speaker as prophet, leading the victim to its slaughter? Cohen sets up his end-note to deliver the fatal blow to the listener; an anti-climatic denouement that denies us satisfaction of our curiosity, offering instead 'a flake of (his) life' in the signature: "Sincerely L. Cohen". Yet strangely this 'flake' *does* offer us something more valuable than closure.

VI. THE STILL VOICE

Cohen's introspective dialogue makes for an intriguing study of the speaker's psyche, revealing both the poet and singer's ambivalence towards his own authentic voice and his voice as "speaker". For 'L. Cohen', the voice is the bridge that connects the man with the poet and the poems with the songs. In poetry, one discusses the speaker's "voice" rather than the actual, authentic voice of the poet. In songwriting, the voice delivers with assumed authenticity the words of the songwriter, but these words are rarely measured or studied for their command of poetics. Cohen, using his own voice with its diverse palette of idiosyncrasies and contradictory traits, attempts to forge a bridge between the written and sung word. He achieves this by revealing a musicality and vivacity in his poems that effectively elevate them off the page, and by sustaining a poetic depth to the speaker in his songs. Even when the speaker paradoxically acknowledges that silence is perhaps the greatest expression.

If it be your will
That I speak no more,
And my voice be still
As it was before;
I will speak no more,
I shall abide until
I am spoken for
If it be your will.
(‘If it be your will’, *Stranger*, p. 323)

I was born like this I had no choice.
I was born with the gift of a golden voice
and twenty-seven angels from the great beyond,
they tied to me to this table right here in the tower of song.
(‘Tower of Song’, *Stranger*, p. 363)

Cohen's voice, which ranges from a multiplicity of voices to the silence of one, is both his greatest weapon and his greatest enemy. On the one hand, he wryly acknowledges his 'gift of a golden voice', which in reality sounds anything but golden to the ear. However, while Cohen is on the one hand sending himself up, this statement has in fact proved strangely prophetic, both in the context of poetry and song. As a songwriter, Cohen does occupy a place in the 'Tower of Song', having been inaugurated into the Canadian songwriter's Hall of Fame and Music Hall of Fame, and most recently, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He may consider himself a 'hundred floors below' Hank Williams, but his songwriting has become part of the fabric of popular music and his poetry part of that tower. So on this occasion his irony fails him, and his voice serves his will, a will that he feels 'tied' to by the threat of extinction. 'If it be your will' encapsulates this legacy that Cohen feels tied to, and engages with the phrase "a still voice is heard" from the High Holiday liturgy of the *Un'taneh Tokef* prayer.²⁶ Jewish music, oratory, and particularly "the voice" itself has survived despite the dispersion of Jews and the great number of forces threatening its extinction. Cohen inherited a culture ingrained with the threat of losing this unique voice, a threat that lives in both the voice of the poet and songwriter. Cohen often undergoes a castration of his own voice by placing 'the hands of peace around (his) throat' ('Peace', *Stranger*, p. 395), sacrificing his word in favour of silence. The raped voice of Isaac, who did not have a say, the 'still' voice of Abraham, who did not have a question, the 'private voice' of God, 'violating (the) drum' without an answer, all symbolise a loss or violation of voice that has haunted Cohen ever since. In God's original will Isaac's throat was to be slit, and in 'If it be Your Will' Cohen offers up his own voice to be sacrificed if his silence will speak (fill) greater volumes.

²⁶ Dr. Scott Sokol, "A Voice Still Heard: The Role of the Cantor Today", (Hebrew College Today, 2002)
http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Prayer/Synagogue_and_Religious_Leaders/What_is_a_Cantor/The_New_Cantor.shtml

VII. COHEN'S SIGNATURE

What makes Cohen a rare poetic voice today is the depth of his disturbing vision, his resistance to easy answers, and his continual challenging of conventions: poetic, personal, and societal. As we have seen above, Cohen draws on a rich poetic and prophetic heritage largely abandoned in the modern era, and searches for a commonality of tongue that both whispers in the ear of the individual, and addresses the communal. At the same time, he challenges the authenticity and authority of his own voice, undermining and unsettling the very certainties that he is trying to grasp. It is not by covering the cracks in this imperfect world and in his imperfect poetry that Cohen makes his poems and songs shine “like the few fragments from another culture” (Ruhlmann, pt. 1, p. 13). It is by celebrating the flawed nature of both his poetry and his own humanness that Leonard Cohen reminds the reader that: “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” For a writer to be able freely to engage his imperfections is a success in itself, but for a writer to make creative use of this weakness, and ironically acknowledge it as his strongest tool, is precisely what gives literature its life, poetry its pulse, and song its signature, ‘sincerely L. Cohen.’

Ring the bells that still can ring.

Forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That’s how the light gets in.

(Anthem)

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