The Meanings of Zen Buddhism in Leonard Cohen's Poetry

Alan Bariman
Department of English, Faculty of Arts
McGill University, Montreal
April 2021

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores Buddhist ideas, images, and references in Leonard Cohen's poetry and affirms the lasting role of Buddhism in Cohen's works. The thesis begins by examining the connection between North American and Jewish relationships to Buddhism as they relate to Cohen's own historical context. Cohen's early works reveal his early Orientalism and the evolution of a cynical voice that will come to dominate Cohen's career. Addicted to the pleasures of celebrity, Cohen is sent into a deep depression that is only directly addressed by Sasaki Roshi, a Buddhist monk who eventually teaches Cohen about Buddhist discipline and philosophy in several poems in *Death of a Lady's Man*. Despite a disciplined return to Judaism in *Book of Mercy,* Buddhist references and ideas remain ubiquitous and essential in the volume. In the final period of Cohen's works, Buddhist training permanently alters Cohen's writing: cynical voices persist but are tempered by ideas of non-attachment and non-dualism that are of Buddhist origin.

Résumé

Cette thèse explore les idées, images et références bouddhistes dans la poésie de Leonard Cohen et affirme le rôle durable du bouddhisme dans les œuvres de Cohen. La thèse commence par examiner le lien entre les relations nord-américaines et juives avec le bouddhisme en ce qui concerne le contexte historique de Cohen. Les premières œuvres de Cohen révèlent son orientalisme précoce et l'évolution d'une voix cynique qui dominera la carrière de Cohen. Accro aux plaisirs de la célébrité, Cohen est plongé dans une profonde dépression qui n'est directement abordée que par Sasaki Roshi, un moine bouddhiste qui enseigne finalement à Cohen la discipline et la philosophie bouddhistes dans plusieurs poèmes de *Death of a Lady's Man*. Malgré un retour discipliné au judaïsme dans *Book of Mercy*, les références et les idées bouddhistes restent omniprésentes et essentielles dans le volume. Dans la dernière période des œuvres de Cohen, la formation bouddhiste modifie définitivement l'écriture de Cohen: les voix cyniques persistent, mais sont tempérées par des idées de non-attachement et de non-dualisme d'origine bouddhiste.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank two professors who have helped me on this journey to becoming a Master of Arts. Their wisdom, knowledge, and kindness have taught me things of immeasurable value that go beyond English, Canadian, and Jewish literature.

Professor Brian Trehearne from McGill University in Montreal is the highest example of a professional and esteemed academic whose attention to detail is (in my experience) unmatched in precision and quality. I am forever in his debt and will never forget his remarkable guidance or patience. I am lucky to have had him as my supervisor for this project.

Professor Norman Ravvin from Concordia University in Montreal first introduced me to Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* and Cohen scholarship more generally. His approach to lecturing and his focus on content and storytelling reminds me of how brilliant the human mind can be. It was not only an absolute pleasure to listen to him talk during my undergraduate years, but a real privilege to have had him as my undergraduate supervisor.

Introduction

Buddhism and Judaism in North America: The Contexts of Cohen's Buddhism

Leonard Cohen's Buddhism is complex, multi-faceted, and often discussed out of context—if not ignored. With few exceptions little has been said about the influence of Buddhism on Cohen's works and how someone like Cohen—a Jew from the wealthy borough of Westmount in Montreal—spent the better part of his life referencing and incorporating Buddhist ideas and concepts into his many different books and songs. This thesis seeks to understand those works primarily through portrayals of Buddhism in his poems and music (rarely focusing on biographical events) and acts as a spiritual parable of Cohen's Buddhism as he chose to express it. In the early years of his life, Cohen uses East Asian imagery in his poetry to Orientalize and exploit Eastern spirituality for his own artistic and controlling purposes. Cohen then actively confronts the Holocaust in his book of poetry *Flowers for Hitler* (1964), which leads him into a deep state of depression and nihilism. This period marks the emergence of a strong cynical voice in his works that, as I argue in my second and third chapters, is intimately tied to Cohen's struggle with and eventual adoption of Buddhism. The cynical voice—a voice that will never disappear from Cohen's works—is tempered in the later stage of Cohen's career by Buddhist discipline and the concept of Buddhist non-attachment. Buddhist ideas and references appear in all of Cohen's works following his extended stay at the Zen Centre on Mount Baldy in the 1970's. I hope to show that, once explained, Buddhist influences on Cohen's works, personal life, and thought are impossible to miss or ignore: Buddhist ideas inform the meaning and origin of Cohen's experiences with suffering and reveal what makes his works original and truthful in their exploration of suffering and desire.

Critics generally mention Cohen's Buddhism briefly, if at all, often implying that his engagement with it was passive and private. Other critics and biographers, like Ira Nadel and

Sylvie Simmons, point to *Book of Longing*'s original title, which was supposed to be called *The Collapse of Zen* (Nadel 273), as indication that Cohen's relationship with Buddhism was truly in a stage of "collapse" in the latter part of his career.[1] References to Buddhism appear only twice in Steven Scobie's collection of essays, *Intricate Preparations* (2000), once in Jarkko Arjatsalo's essay "Your Man Online" and once in Kevin Flynn's essay "Balanced on Wooden Stilts and Dancing: What Irving Layton Taught me About Leonard Cohen." Flynn's essay is also the only essay in the volume to mention Cohen's Buddhist mentor and friend, Joshu Sasaki Roshi (whom I will simply refer to as Roshi from this point on). This absence of Buddhism in the volume is quite ironic given that the book's front cover features a photograph of both Roshi and Cohen dressed in Buddhist garb. Two other volumes, an anthology edited by Chantal Ringuet called *Les revolutions de Leonard Cohen* (2016) and a book by Jacques Julien called *Leonard Cohen Seul l'amour* (2014), mention Cohen's Buddhism, but only in a cursory way. For these two Quebecois writers, Cohen's Buddhism serves an aesthetic role: to emphasize the Baudelairean "beaux tenebreux" (132) persona often attributed to Cohen's older, silent, dark, and meditative public image (largely popular in France). A quick MLA search[2] for the keywords "Leonard Cohen" and "Buddhism" reveals a total of three articles of Buddhist Cohen criticism—only one of which, Peter Jager's "From Roshi to Rashi: Leonard Cohen and Interfaith Dialogue," is relevant to this thesis. The trend is clear in academic circles: Cohen's Buddhism is rarely a central point of discussion.

Fully teasing Cohen's Buddhism out is understandably a challenging task for many scholars who are unfamiliar with the greater context of Buddhism in North America. The North American Buddhist context surrounding Cohen's early life has two major expressions: Buddhism

[1] Simmons further shows that Cohen's interest in disciplined Buddhist practice had already started to wane during the writing of *Book of Longing*: "during the many long hours Leonard sat in *zazen*, his mind would wander from the pain in his knees to the songs he was writing in his head, or even to sexual fantasies" (Simmons 409).
[2] This search occurred on March 24, 2021.

within the greater North American culture of the 1950's and 1960's (which Cohen was a part of) and North American Jewry's unique relationship to Buddhism. Both manifestations contextualize how an early Cohen likely saw and understood East Asian spirituality and how Buddhism's emphasis on suffering likely appealed to him. Cohen's ethno-religious background, as I argue, helps readers understand his later attraction to Buddhism and the Buddhist path towards alleviating suffering (or the Third Noble Truth, *nirodha*).[3] The aforementioned social forces in Cohen's life, those of Buddhism in North America and Jewish-Buddhist interaction, directly and indirectly define his meeting, experience, and engagement with Buddhism.

Zen in America first takes root after the second World War with the defeat of Japan. D.T. Suzuki, one of the founding figures of Zen Buddhism's transmission to the West, wrote books such as *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934) and *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1938), led discussion panels intended for intellectuals, and provided a forum for academic lectures that together helped foment an environment in which Buddhism could thrive in Western circles. He eventually received tenure at the university of Honolulu where he taught Zen Buddhist history, thought, and culture. At the same time, early post-war American adopters of Zen, such as Philip Kapleau, dedicated themselves to the study of Zen in Japan, remained in Japan (in contrast to Suzuki, who left) and eventually spread their knowledge of Zen Buddhism to America through their works—in the case of Kapleau, through the now canonized introductory book on Zen, *The Three Pillars of Zen*.[4] Kapleau represents a class of educated professional Americans (Kapleau was a lawyer) who took it upon themselves to learn about Buddhism at a time when a defeated

[3] Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Heart of Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation* details the Four Noble Truths (of which *nirodha* is the third).

[4] It is worth mentioning that several non-American academics, such as the German philosopher Eugen Herrigel, published works on Zen which also gained traction in American academic circles during this period of the 1950's—as was the case with Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1951).

Japan was particularly willing and open to sharing its culture and practices with the United States.

As both the Japanese and American forerunners of what would eventually become the "Zen Boom" of the 1950's met and discussed Japanese Buddhism (in the case of Suzuki and Kapleau, in Hawaii), so did many of the attendees and lecturers from those meetings swiftly move on to become major figures of the American Zen community. These people included the founders of the first Zen centers in America (in California and later in New York), the renowned psychoanalysts Erich Fromm and Karen Horney, famous composer John Cage, and other "integral authors" in the Zen community (Fields 196). Other notable adopters of Zen were the first wave of the Beat writers. Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Jack Kerouac were all "obsessed" with Zen Buddhism and encountered its core doctrines by reading about Suzuki's books in their respective public libraries (212)—except for Snyder who first encountered Buddhism in university and would only later read Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (213). While Cohen was not a Beat, he did associate with the movement and the counterculture of the 1960's which Buddhism had influenced greatly (Ringuet 118). Rick Fields writes in his narrative history of Buddhism in America, *When the Swans Came to the Lake,* that thirst for a genuine Zen Buddhist experience was great amongst the early Beats because, up to the post-war period, East Asia had kept its spiritual and religious secrets "hidden from the West" (214). It was this mysterious allure that artists like the Beats exploited. The 1950's, therefore, marks the beginning of a serious engagement between Zen Buddhism, American academia, and the arts: masters, students, academics, artists, and professionals all engaged with one another in order to share and expand their knowledge of Buddhism.

For the first time, Westerners and Americans could read about actual Zen thought, history, and practices from scholarly sources—and not poorly translated books that Orientalised the East

or offered poor interpretations of what a Buddhist faith might consist of. Such books, those that poorly portrayed the East or projected subconscious desires onto it,[5] certainly put into question the type of knowledge early readers unfamiliar with Suzuki's writings—such as a young Cohen of the 1950's—acquired. A young Cohen, like many North Americans growing up in the 1950's, would likely have based his opinions of Buddhism on an understanding of the East flooded with mystifying and Orientalised images and mottos containing little depth and little (if any) reference or citation. The works of Suzuki had not yet entered mainstream North American consciousness by Cohen's formative years, nor did they, as far as we know, make it onto Cohen's bookshelf. While no evidence of Cohen's engagement with Suzuki exists, what we do know is that Cohen was largely influenced by the modernist literary tradition, a tradition often recognized for its aestheticism, Orientalism, and reference to Buddhism. As will be explored in the first chapter, Cohen's early works suffer greatly from the same types of Orientalising problems that plagued the modernists. We can therefore see that the emerging culture of serious Buddhist engagement in North America, despite its appearance in the arts via the Beats, remained limited in its scope and accessibility and was largely invisible to people like Cohen until the 1960's.

The later half of the 1950's is integrally connected to the proliferation and spread of Buddhism in the 1960's, for which, methodological and doctrinal changes within the movement's leadership are to thank. Ginsberg and Kerouac are notable for moving Zen away from academia and instead emphasizing actual practice, which further popularized the movement. While Suzuki popularized the idea of *Satori* in the early 1950's, by the late 50's and early 60's, *zazen*, or the meditative practice of Zen, became the dominant Buddhist philosophy engaging the American popular imagination. The turn towards z*azen* highlights the depth and rapid development of Zen Buddhism in America during this period. The swift transformation of Zen from theory to practice

[5] Refer to Edward Said's *Orientalism* for more on this point. See page 25 for a detailed discussion of the role and function of Orientalism in Cohen's early works.

represents the actualization of genuine Buddhism and resonates with what Inazō Nitobe, a nineteenth century writer and philosopher, once said: that the whole of Zen is a "human effort to reach through meditation zones of thought beyond the range of verbal expression" (*Bushido* 7). The late 1950's and early 1960's also saw the works of talented orators and public speakers like Alan Watts, who "mediated between Zen Buddhism and Christianity" (Gez 48) and captured the popular imagination. Figures like Watts and the Beats created a bridge between the Western religious and philosophical experience and its Eastern counterpart that was easily accessible to a larger Western audience. The Beats, the emigrant monks, and orators like Watts are a link between the rigorous academic mindset of Suzuki and the 1950's, and the open and experimental hands-on practices that would radically popularize Zen in the 1960's.

The most astounding development of Zen Buddhism in America was the sheer popularity of the movement in the 1960's. However, this period also saw the introduction of false, vague, or misleading ideas of Buddhism in the counterculture—a culture Cohen engaged in with his questionable references to Buddhist talismans and statues in *Flowers for Hitler*'s (1964) "My Mentor" (discussed in Chapter One).[6] The 1960's saw a large influx of young Americans produce and consume media which involved uncanonical caricatures of Buddhism. Aesthetics deemed "psychedelic" were commonly linked together with pseudo-Buddhist imagery, so much so that according to Fields, popular artists, such as *Holding Company* and the *Grateful Dead,* commonly "include[d] Buddhist symbols and images" in their works (260).[7] Despite being rooted in falsehoods, these media brought new life to the ever-growing number of Zen communities rapidly spreading across America. Psychedelic drugs also played an important role in the

[6] Refer to page 34 for a detailed discussion of "My Mentor."

[7]The band Hapshash's 1967 "Save the Earth" poster is another prominent example of popular Buddhist imagery from this period. The poster features a circle of images depicting the cycle of life and death (*samsara*) with Buddha meditating at its center. Notably, popular art depicting Eastern spirituality during this period was not limited to Buddhism. The widely popular Jimi Hendrix album, *Axis: Bold as Love* featured a distinctively Hindu album cover with around twenty Hindu gods on its front, in one example.

movement and its mischaracterization of Buddhism, and drugs like LSD quickly became synonymous with meditation and Zen gatherings for the new adoptees of Buddhism.[8] In fact, according to Cohen's biographer, Ira Nadel, Cohen was introduced to Zen Buddhism by a friend who was part of an LSD-taking Zen-practicing circle (Nadel 171). Zen's rapid association with drugs was also in part thanks to several American academic research programs aimed at exploring the link between Buddhism and LSD. Notably, two Harvard professors of psychology, Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, wrote extensively on the connection between LSD and Eastern religion (Fields 249) and tested the drug on themselves—a decision that would eventually lead to their termination at Harvard. Allen Ginsberg also famously "volunteered to take a psychedelic drug that Stanford University was testing" (Morgan 164) which was likely LSD. The revelation of these experiments only further popularized a faulty conception of Zen Buddhism in the mainstream consciousness. The American perception of Buddhism was, by the 1960's, completely transformed from academic (Suzuki), to poetic (the Beats), and finally, to psychedelic.

The large influx of young people joining zendos and the proliferation of false Buddhist imagery created a schism between what Americans conceived Buddhism to be and what it actually was in practice. This resulted in strange anecdotes that underscored both Buddhism's need to adapt to American culture and how people with no background in Buddhism (like Cohen) found themselves in the lotus position in Zen monasteries. One particularly prominent example is that of the continuing stream of young and transient people attending *zazen* sessions, stoned, because they were told by figures of the counterculture that practicing meditation in zendos would increase the effects of their high (Fields 303). Unsure what to do, the monks in

[8] Fields provides many examples of cases involving early Zen students and LSD, beginning on page 303. Snyder is one example (among many) of a Beat who tried to convince people to use LSD during *zazen* in order to engage with Buddhist "wisdom and tradition." In his essay "Passage to India" Snyder wrote that "those who do not have the time or money to go to India or Japan" should instead take LSD (Fields 302).

America convened to discuss the matter. “It was impossible for any Roshi to ignore the question of LSD and its relationship to Buddhism” (301), as the visions brought forth by LSD were very similar to what Buddhist discipline and meditation were meant to invoke (302). The monks decided that LSD, while not entirely negative, was faulty, a *makyo,*[9] and that “the LSD experience was entirely distinct from Zen” (302). Nevertheless, other monks pointed out that “people who have started to come to the zendo from LSD experiences have shown an ability to get into good zazen very rapidly,” and (in some cases) allowed use of the drug. This example of adaptation to a new culture in a foreign land reveals Zen in North America, by the 1960’s, had moved away not only from the rigorous academic overanalyses of the 1950’s, but also away from its strict Soto and Rinzai origins. The movement had taken advantage of the counterculture by allowing a huge number of people to engage with and encounter actual Zen Buddhist thought under novel conditions—exactly as a later Cohen of the 1970’s would do.

The new monasteries that appeared as a consequence of Zen’s adaptation and success in America made way for eclectic Roshis who were often flexible on technical matters of Buddhist practice. Cohen’s Roshi, Joshu Sasaki, was already famous by the mid-sixties for Americanizing *koans*—the unique Japanese Zen practice of asking students paradoxical questions as part of their journey to enlightenment (Fields 298). Roshi asked riddles such as “How do you realize Buddha nature while driving a car?” in order to recontextualize basic *koans* in an accessible and familiar American milieu. As will be explored in Chapter Two, Roshi’s radical style of Zen greatly influenced a depressed and cynical Cohen who likely would not have benefited from Roshi’s flexible teachings had they not been adapted for North Americans. Cohen’s later works

[9] Kapleau defines *makyo* as “the phenomena—visions, hallucinations, fantasies, revelations, illusory sensations—which one practicing zazen is apt to experience at a particular stage in his sitting. *Ma* means ‘devil’ and *kyo* ‘the objective world.’ Hence makyo are the disturbing or ‘diabolical’ phenomena which appear to one during zazen. These phenomena are not inherently bad. They become a serious obstacle to practice only if one is ignorant of their true nature and is ensnared by them” (Kapleau 62).

involving Roshi all depend on the aforementioned broader context of Buddhism in North America: Roshi's teachings and methods are a clear consequence of Buddhism's proliferation and transformation during the period of the 1950's and 1960's.

The second major contextual point regarding North American Buddhism and Cohen pertains to Jewish engagement with Buddhism. The Jewish relationship to Buddhism is both historical and spiritual and is primarily concerned with questions of suffering and the alleviation of it. For many Jews, Buddhism, in part, is attractive because it is a system of practices that explicitly focuses on suffering while also promising to overcome it through discipline and "enlightenment." Rodger Kamenetz's book *The Jew in the Lotus* is a particularly interesting example of the cross-cultural Jewish-Buddhist meditation on suffering and identity. Kamenetz's book tells the story of a group of Jews (representing each major branch of Judaism) who are invited to explain their history and culture to the Dalai Lama, who seeks to learn about Jewish survival in exile. In the process of their exchange, the Jews begin to see their own Jewish identity through a Tibetan Buddhist lens and reconsider what Judaism means to them. Kamenetz explores his own identity by reflecting on historical tragedy and the Holocaust. One of his major realizations in the book is that, unlike Judaism, Buddhism does not attach itself to history and therefore does not bear the weight of it. For Kamenetz, a secular Jew who largely understands his Jewish identity through a history of suffering and persecution (and not religious practice), the revelation that it is possible to take a non-attached view of history, yet respect and bear it fully, frees him from the weight of his own people's suffering. His new frame of mind also allows him to explore other avenues of his Judaism that were, until his realization, inaccessible. This is not unlike what a later Cohen of the 1980's would go through, as Peter Jaeger has pointed out in his essay "From Roshi to Rashi: Leonard Cohen's Interfaith Dialogue."[10]

[10] See page 72 for a detailed discussion of Jaeger's essay.

Yonatan Gez argues that "It is often noted that the diffusion of Buddhism to the West has been especially attractive to individuals from Jewish backgrounds, and that the ratio of such members within Buddhist groups in the United States—and probably in other countries as well—is clearly beyond the proportion of Jews within the population at large" (Gez 45). About one third of converts to Buddhism before 1925 were Jewish (48), and about 10% to 30% of current American converts to Buddhism claim to have some relationship to Judaism (49). This phenomenon is so noticeable in the American Jewish community that a term emerged to define it: "Jubus" (or, Jewish-Buddhists). Apart from the Kaifeng Jews,[11] the period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries represents the earliest large-scale encounter between Jewish and Buddhist life on record. When Zen Buddhism arrived in America during the 1950's, its first monasteries were built where empty synagogues once stood (Fields 226). The Zen boom of the 1950's was also supported by notable Jewish individuals who funded Buddhist scholars and Roshis to come live in America. Cohen's Roshi, Joshu Sasaki, was persuaded to come to the U.S.A. by two Jews, "a Dr. Harmon and Gladys Weisberg, [who] had asked for a Zen teacher" (244).

Gez's research on the history of Jewish Buddhist relations suggests a possible range of explanations as to why Jews constituted a disproportionate number of Buddhist converts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, like Kamenetz, Gez argues that the Holocaust and a history of suffering are the primary motivators behind Jewish interest in Buddhism and conversion: there is a "general acknowledgement that the Holocaust was among the major

[11] The Kaifeng Jews are members of a small Jewish community in Kaifeng whose members had largely assimilated into Chinese society due to centuries of cultural suppression and intermarriage, while preserving some Jewish traditions and customs. They are believed to have settled in China around either the ninth century or the eleventh century, although the date is uncertain. Stephan Sharot's essay "The Kaifeng Jews: A Reconsideration of Acculturation and Assimilation in a Comparative Perspective" examines their history and asserts that their "long survival" through isolation and persecution is due to their strong "communal and congregational religion" (Sharot 2). They are a minor variant within the greater picture of Jewish-Buddhist relationships explored in this chapter.

driving forces for Jewish engagement with Buddhism" (Gez 45). For many secular Jews, the Holocaust signifies not only the physical destruction of their people, but a spiritual destruction of their identity. With about 80% of Europe's Jewish religious governance erased (56), a large vacuum of leadership emerged in the post-war period. Many surviving schools of Jewish thought spoke vehemently about "the Holocaust, the need for Israel and the suffering of their people" (57). For many secular American Jews, however, and particularly for the children of post-war Jewish immigrants, this revenge-fueled approach to history and trauma was an insufficient answer to their own questions about life and spirituality. Kamenetz expands on this by stating in his book that the "Jubus" later claimed a similar frustration with Jewish mysticism and Jewish religious inaccessibility: they "were sensing a major gap between theory and practice" in Jewish religious life (115). The failure of Jewish tradition to address contemporary problems of suffering constructively is exactly what Cohen in the late 1970's and particularly in *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978) experiences as he looks to his Judaism for answers during a failed marriage only to find little value in it.[12]

Two concepts in Buddhism that directly address the concept of suffering are *Dukka*, or "the first Noble Truth… that the fundamental truth of life is suffering" (Hanh 9) and *nirodha*, the third Noble Truth, that suffering can be alleviated by letting go of desires (*tanha*). *Dukka* and *nirodha* overlap with a Jewish interest in alleviating suffering and may appeal to Jewish sensibilities of historical persecution. Other Buddhist elements that appeal to Jewish sensibilities include what Gez suggests are Buddhist practices that help illuminate trauma and teach temperance and the overcoming of negative emotion. This would also mean that "Buddhism

[12] The marriage poems from *Death of a Lady's Man* are not discussed in this thesis. However, one need only refer to poems such as "This Marriage" and "O Wife Unmasked" with their clear allusions and references to the Bible and Jewish tradition to see how Jewish ritual and artifacts fail a distressed Cohen persona completely.

attracted Jews because it was non-dogmatic, rationalist, egalitarian, and therefore appeals to marginalized groups" (48). Gez states further that

> psychological research suggests that Buddhist principles such as the theory of causality (*karma*), the no-soul doctrine (Pali: *anatta*), observing the transient nature of all things (Pali: *anicca*) and universal interdependence are often mentioned as invaluable in establishing mental wellbeing. (59)[13]

Other theories credit Buddhism's peace activism in the 1960's as attracting a large number of Jews to Buddhism (60)—a theme echoed in Cohen's later works, and particularly in *Book of Mercy*, where a Cohen now experienced in Buddhist training writes in an unfamiliar voice of optimistic prayer. Regardless, what Gez and critics make plain is that for many Jews, Buddhism offers both a unique *language* and *method* of managing suffering.

Despite "leaving" Judaism for Buddhism or adopting a purely Buddhist lifestyle and identity, many Jews continue to practice the religion of their ancestors in some way or form after conversion. Leonard Cohen, is of course, a very notable and famous figure in this statistic. Cohen claimed in interviews that, as many Jews have also claimed, Buddhism helped him see his Judaism in a new way[14] and asserted that there is no challenge to having both faiths. Thich Nhat Hanh and other scholars point out that the Buddha "respected people's desire to practice their own faith" and that converts should "preserve [their] Judaism, Christian, or Muslim roots" (Hanh 169). We know Cohen took his Judaism seriously, because, despite Roshi's disapproving of a meeting between Cohen and a rabbi (regarding religious matters) Cohen chose to ignore Roshi and met with the Rabbi anyways (Gez 53). It is common for Buddhist monks to let converts confront or return to their original religions (Roberts 45), and Roshi's disapproval is odd in this

---

[13] Gez's claim regarding the psychological value of Buddhism is based on David Brazier's book *Zen Therapy,* and Kathleen H. Dockett's essay "Buddhist Empowerment: Individual, Organizational, and Societal Transformation."
[14] From "Interview with Leonard Cohen." *Front Row,* BBC Radio 4, 26 May 2008.

light. A large number of influential Jewish converts like Cohen claim that they are able to practice both religions without conflict: their Buddhism generally comes to complement their Judaism (Gez 54). Nicole Libin's research on Jewish-Buddhists in America also shows that the majority of Jewish Buddhists assert that "you can be Buddhist and Jewish at the same time" (Libin 11). Buddhism's spiritual flexibility provides an "alternative framework through which Jews could see their faith and the faith of others" (Gez 61). Even if a convert renounces Buddhism, such returning Jews usually find ways to "creatively incorporate" their Buddhist experiences and the awareness they have cultivated through meditation into their Jewish practice (54). They try, in the words of one such Jewish Buddhist, to "put on Tefillin [i.e. phylacteries] in a Zen way" (55). Cohen's works, as I will argue in the coming chapters, are an expression of this phenomenon: despite leaving monastic life in his later years, Buddhist influences and ideas continued to influence his writing.

Knowledge of Buddhism in North America and Jewish-Buddhist interaction are necessary precursors that reflect the narrative arc of Cohen's own life and works. The thesis' three chapters depict this arc with each chapter following a period of his creative output. Each chapter also makes a specific point about Cohen's works and their relation to Buddhism. This begins with an Orientalising period in his youth and ends with the tempering and softening of Cohen's darker and more cynical voices. Chapter One traces a line from the control obsessed period of Cohen's youth to a crisis in *Flowers for Hitler* that eventually leads to the development of a strong and nihilistic cynical voice. The chapter emphasizes Cohen's interest in the Far East, but equally shows that his understanding of it is corrupted by fantasy, illusion, and a desire to master the world through language. Cohen partakes of Orientalism in his early works—notably in the same spirit of the modernist style he tries to emulate—and exploits East Asian motifs, imagery, and spirituality. This comes to an end in *Flowers for Hitler* where Cohen actively

confronts the Holocaust and realizes that his Orientalism (and the modernist style) cannot properly address the depth of suffering that he, a now self-proclaimed moral poet, feels he must address. The themes of suffering and desire that emerge in these early volumes show that Cohen's concerns were, even before his formal engagement with Buddhism, of a Buddhist nature.

Chapter Two charts the spiritual collapse of the moral "front-line" poet from *Flowers for Hitler* and explores Cohen's darkest representations of depression, celebrity, and suicidality. As aforementioned, Cohen's cynical voice becomes a dominant force in the works of the 1970's. This voice is a major focus in the thesis, as its transformation in *Death of a Lady's Man* is the primary result of Buddhist training. After a decade of nihilism, Buddhist techniques introduced by Roshi, such as controlled breathing and *zazen*, scare the cynical voice, who, for the first time, shows signs of fear and weakness. This opportunity allows other Cohen voices (arguably other elements of Cohen's psyche) to express themselves without being criticized by the cynical voice. The link between Buddhist study and the decline of the cynical voice's power over other speakers is clear and is addressed explicitly in a range of poems discussed in the chapter.

The third chapter examines the role of Buddhism in Cohen's final works and the return of the cynical voice: a voice, however, that is now noticeably no longer nihilistic or suicidal. I argue that this new and calm cynical voice is largely the result of years of Buddhist discipline and of Cohen's integration of the Buddhist concepts of non-attachment, non-dualism, and non-linear time into his works. I challenge Peter Jaeger's claim that Buddhism's role in Cohen's works is limited to helping Cohen understand his Judaism and argue instead that Buddhist philosophy and perspectives are deeply imbedded in Cohen's works more generally—and not just concerning matters of Judaism. The chapter also explores Cohen's fading interest in Buddhist institutions and religious leadership. Nevertheless, I show that Roshi's teachings remain on Cohen's mind

and are essential components of Cohen's final works (which are *Book of Mercy*, *Stranger Music* and *Book of Longing*)[15] in that they approach problems of suffering and desire in a controlled and tempered manner that is reflective of Zen Buddhist training.

Cohen's confrontation and engagement with Buddhism did not happen in a vacuum. Cohen was influenced by two major social forces that guided and informed his early encounter with Buddhism: the American Counterculture and Jewish-Buddhist relationships. The American counterculture promoted false concepts and images of Buddhism in the popular mind which ironically promoted the study of Zen. The large introduction of students to newly established zendos also allowed a new and flexible school of Zen to manifest itself, which Cohen joined. The Jewish American context, of which Cohen is an inheritor, marks the second part of this introduction. Suffering and the Holocaust inform Cohen's works in the 1960's and, in conjunction with a brutal experience of celebrity, lead to his depression in the 1970's. Despite returning to Judaism quite strongly (as many Jewish Buddhists like him have done) in his final years and works, Cohen's Buddhism and the influence it has had on his works remains. The narrative of Cohen's life, in this respect, is an archetypical exposition of both the Buddhist-American story and the North American Jewish-Buddhist one as well.

[15] As will be discussed in the conclusion, *The Flame* is a hard book to incorporate as it was published posthumously. There are many Buddhist references and ideas to work through in it—ideas and references that I have meditated on for a long time. I have, however, chosen to omit *The Flame* in this thesis because I believe that *The Flame* does not represent Cohen's genuine vision. The book itself is a collection of three separate types of works (poems, songs, and fragments) that show little unity and were edited and selected by Cohen's son, Adam Cohen.

Chapter One

Orientalism and Control in Cohen's Early Works

East Asian references and Buddhist themes in Leonard Cohen's first two volumes of poetry are at best instrumentalized and orientalized. They underscore a period in which he expresses a belief in the power of poetic creation and a freedom to appropriate images from other mythologies. Cohen's early works show a desire to master language and control the world through poetry, an end which Orientalized images and (later in *Flowers for Hitler)* Buddhist references simplifying East Asian life and religion illustrate. In *The Spice-Box of Earth*, Orientalism is temporarily dropped (with the exception of "Summer Haiku") and is instead replaced with poems containing themes of suffering that correlate with pursuits of linguistic mastery. These early Buddhist themes from *The Spice-Box of Earth* explore desires associated with mastery and suffering and foreshadow actual Buddhist references that will later appear in *Flowers for Hitler*. At this time, Cohen also gives up his particular style of Modernist writing, one that had allowed him to freely de-contextualize the East Asian images in his poetry from their own history of (and association) with suffering. *Flowers for Hitler* and its demand for both serious introspection and an appreciation of the historical suffering of his own people in light of the Holocaust marks a turning point in Cohen's relationship to the East that has him move beyond youthful projects of mastery in an attempt to reconcile his relationship with Buddhism, suffering, and his ethical responsibility as a poet.

As a typical modernist project, and one concerned with mastery, Cohen's first collection of published poems, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, attempts to understand the world through juxtapositions of mythological traditions, cultures, and aesthetics. The volume reflects upon the achievements and shortcomings of several religious traditions, namely Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian, while playfully mocking them through a sometimes petty and vengeful voice.

Many of the poems are concerned with comparing ideas and symbols. Religion and identity relate to each other in ways that show an openness to varied spiritual experiences that would foreground Cohen's later interests in Buddhism. Christianity and Judaism often butt heads, such as in "For Wilf and His House" (*Mythologies* 2), where a young figure, recognizably like Cohen, is teased and mocked for his Jewish heritage, and "told… how [his people] pinned Jesus like a lovely butterfly on the wood / [as he later] … wept besides paintings of Calvary / and velvet wounds" (2) in Westmount. Unable to fight back from a minority position, the speaker of the poem reshapes his attacker's narrative through a superior command of language, undermining their accusations. Natalia Vesselova points out that in

> "For Wilf And His House," the enigmatic statement [of deicide] does not become clearer: essentially, in this text Cohen declares that a mythology does not represent true stories, but rather that it is a lie, an instrument of either accusation or defense, as in both the vulgar Christian version of Jews' responsibility for the death of Jesus and its bitter inversion in "For Wilf And His House."
>
> (Vesselova 22-23)

Language and the control of narrative allow the Cohen figure to assert his own power and control despite being an outsider. He does this by having the speaker turn his Christian persecutors' suppositions back onto themselves and by inverting the role of victim and victimizer. The speaker adopts a more aggressive tone when he openly challenges his tormentors in the final stanza, showing the reader that his mastery of language is not only a tool for defence, but aggression as well:

> So let us compare mythologies.
>
> I have learned my elaborate lie
>
> of soaring crosses and poisoned thorns

and how my fathers nailed him

like a bat against a barn… (*Mythologies* 3)

In instances such as these we hear a voice in *Let Us Compare Mythologies* and the early works that is obsessed with mastering language, controlling history through imagery, and asserting power over a world otherwise out of his control. "For Wilf and His House" is one early response to the anti-Semitic origins of Cohen's drive to master and control—a drive that is intrinsically linked to the Orientalism found in *Let Us Compare Mythologies* and his later interest in Buddhism.

While there is no explicit mention of Buddhism in Cohen's earliest writings, they nevertheless reveal how desperately Cohen required a Buddhist education to cope with the suffering inherent in a world driven by projects of control and mastery. The path towards a Buddhist solution to his preoccupation with control begins in the negative and with the instrumental use of East Asian references in his early works. References to Eastern spirituality tend to arise when a given character's control, or desire for control, is made explicit. In one example, Ira Nadel points to a young Cohen struggling with power and control in what he labels Cohen's earliest essay, "Murray Park 3 a.m." In it, a voice claims that he controls the park (a public space) and asserts "his control [over] floundering sailing vessels in the [Japanese] pond" (Nadel 24). He justifies his "possession" of the park by stating that "it is my domain and I love it best"—that is to say, that he loves it arrogantly and with supremacy, and that his love is better than anyone else's could be. The essay bears a remarkable resemblance to a passage in Cohen's first novel, *The Favorite Game*, where the protagonist, Breavman, meditates on that same park and states that "the park was his domain" (*Favorite Game* 69). The change in tense from the present simple to the simple past is notable because in changing tenses, the speaker objectifies the world around him, including himself. By changing the tense, the speaker also engages in a

more pronounced linguistic form of mastery that has him detach himself (grammatically) further from the park in order to assert his power over it. Breavman, like a younger Cohen, also assumes the role of the park's master by adopting similar responsibilities such as "visiting the Japanese pond to ensure the safety of the goldfish" (70). Cohen's expression of control (through language) attaches him to the park in an unhealthy and possessive way that will mirror his later Orientalism in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*.

According to Nadel's biography of Leonard Cohen, *Various Positions,* the earliest examples of Cohen's interest in the Far East occur at the age of fifteen where, at summer camp, he would "institute new games such as a haiku contest" (Nadel 25). That said, it is likely that Cohen encountered the *haiku* style earlier in life from his reading of Imagism and other poems by modernist figures like Ezra Pound. This early awareness of the *haiku* poetic form reveals that Cohen was comfortable borrowing imagery and styles from the East in order to pursue his own poetic desires. Other interests at the time noted by Nadel that reflect his attraction to opportunities of mastery and control were hypnotism, Jewish mysticism, and the music of popular fronts like "German anti-fascist songs, French partisan songs… Israeli pioneer songs… [and] Chinese resistance songs" (26). The East, at this point in Cohen's life, like hypnotism, mysticism, and revolutionary music, is little more than a colour on the palette of what would eventually become his first volume of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. This first volume "contains poems written largely when Cohen was between the ages of fifteen and twenty" (44) and therefore reflects the voice of a poet not yet fully in control of the ideas or consequences of the aesthetics he is appropriating. The speaker exhibits arrogance in many of the poems akin to that of a teenager, and like many teenagers, struggles with questions of mastery, sexuality, and an attraction to the unknown and exotic. As Nadel writes, "control was crucial for him [during this period], as it was in the production of his first book of poems and his first album" (Nadel 184).

Cohen's inclination to master the world of his youth with the help of language and through his use of East Asian imagery is, as Said implies in his canonical text *Orientalism*, a manifestation of the Orientalist mindset. Through the creation and manufacture of arts and literature, European artists, according to Said, attempted to master and marginalize peoples of the Orient (a stretch of land beginning in Morocco and ending in Japan) for their own, oftentimes colonial—but sometimes subversive, sexual, and taboo—purposes. Through the artificial creation and appropriation of other people's cultures and histories, the Orientalist artist erodes the identity of a subjected people by corrupting their cultural symbols, artifacts, narratives, and aesthetics in an attempt to master them. Said explains that this process of re-appropriation and decontextualization is a literary tradition as old as the West itself:

> Every writer [writing] on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient affiliates itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself. The ensemble of relationships between works, audiences, and some particular aspects of the Orient therefore constitutes an analyzable formation […] whose presence in time, in discourse, in institutions (schools, libraries, foreign services) gives it strength and authority… Orientalism is after all a system for citing works and authors. (Said 21, 24)

Cohen's turn toward a vague Orientalism in his youth functions as a socially acceptable avenue through which Cohen's own pursuits of mastery and control could be manifested in written and spoken language. The Orientalising process is particularly useful for Cohen because it depends on detaching and alienating a culture's history and symbols from their original source and meaning: "The Orient is watched… the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a

watcher, never involved, always detached" (Said 104). Detachment is an apt word to describe not only Orientalism more generally, but also an early Cohen's relationship to the East in his first volume of poetry. Unlike the works of, for example, the eight-century Chinese poet Wang Wei, Cohen's poetry lacks an appreciation for suffering. In Wei's "Watching a Farewell" an older speaker observes a youth "tak[ing] leave of his friends / Tears dried, he must catch up with his companions" and reflects that "I too, long ago, said goodbye to my family / and when I see this, my handkerchief is wet with tears" (*Three Tang Dynasty Poets* 16). The visceral suffering of the speaker and his meditation on inter-generational war offers not only historical context through which to understand suffering, but a constructive critique of human anguish within the context of empire (in this case, the Tang Dynasty). Cohen's instrumental use of Asian imagery in *Let Us Compare Mythologies* ignores any such ethical implications regarding suffering; the speakers in this volume exploit East Asian imagery in order to assert dominance and maintain control. The result of their struggles is a faulty attachment to power and a detachment from the suffering they allude to: both an attachment to power and a detachment from suffering further cast light on Cohen's eventual need for a Buddhist education as both ideas are uniquely prominent in Buddhist thought and study.

Let Us Compare Mythologies contains a range of instrumentalized East Asian images and references that do not show a nuanced understanding of the culture from which they originate; poems are often undermined by the different speaking voices' pettiness and playfulness, and lack an "ethical center"[16] from which to reference history or context. In *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, Eastern imagery makes its first appearance in "When This American Woman." The poem portrays an

> …American woman,

[16] This is Norman Ravvin's term. It originates from the essay "Writing Around the Holocaust: Uncovering the Ethical Centre of Leonard Cohen's Beautiful Losers" which is discussed on page 51.

whose thighs are bound in casual red cloth,

[who] comes thundering past my sitting-place,

like a forest-burning Mongol Tribe

…my eyes are burnt

for the embroidered Chinese girls,

already old,

and so small between the thin pines,

on these enormous landscapes. (*Mythologies* 17)

The destructive mass of the American woman, said to have the "forest-burning" power of "a Mongol tribe," is compared to the infinitely "enormous landscapes" of the speaker's view in which are hidden patterns of embroidered Chinese girls who can disappear as soon as you "turn your head." This early instance of Orientalism tries to juxtapose the ugliness of American grandiosity against the orderliness of a Chinese embroidery by contrasting the American woman's "thundering" presence to the faint and delicate Chinese phantoms of the speaker's landscape. One reading of the poem suggests that the speaker is gazing at the American woman's thighs and the embroidered Chinese women on her shirt. Such a reading both sexualizes the idea of China and turns China into a commercial entity in service of American consumerism. This motif of Chinese commerce in North America also appears in "Suzanne," where Suzanne's exotic tea "comes all the way from China," and later in "Daily Commerce" from *Death of a Lady's Man*, where a Chinese lady walks by a busy commercial street in Montreal. The trade relationship between China and America correlates with the American woman's relationship to the attractive and delicate Chinese women: both dealings echo the historic sacking and ravaging of China by a grotesque and unrefined group of people (at least according to Cohen's depiction of the American woman, who plays the role of a modern-day Mongol "sacking" China for its

cheap labour). If the Chinese girls, who are associated with beauty in the poem, are also "old," it is perhaps as a consequence of the Mongols' (which is to say the American woman's) assault which has made the Chinese women age prematurely. Cohen, through this subtle nod to Chinese history, projects his own—possibly aggressive and sexual—desire onto both the landscape he wishes to master and onto the women he entwines as pieces of his literary canvas. In doing this, the speaking voice exploits historic Chinese suffering for his own purposes and with complete indifference to the scope, nuance, and horror of the Mongol invasions and what they may mean from a Chinese historical and cultural perspective.

A similar instance of Orientalism occurs a few pages later in "Friends" (22), where two companions stand near a river like "two Chinese mystics in a swirl of landscape." The idea of being swirled up in nature is linked to the water that both characters eventually throw rocks into—the water's amorphism under the force of the rock is a Taoist image if there ever was one. The light and geometry that emerge out of their playfulness prompts the speaker to mythologize the experience, stating that: "perhaps it [the swimming animal the speaker briefly sees] was a water rat, perhaps a water snake, a small Welsh monster…" Again, the images are a mix of mythologies both Western and Eastern, used for purely aesthetic purposes and to further project themes of mastery through Oriental imagery. It is no mistake that the speaker calls Chen, his companion, "the young authentic," as it is a title which suggests he, the speaker, is the leader of the duo. Later in the poem the speaker, a Westerner, turns to Chen—a man with a notably Chinese name. Chen argues "with cool faith" while the narrator has "passion." They argue until they come to an agreement and part ways. In "Emotion East and West: Introduction to Comparative Philosophy" Joel Mark argues that in most cases, "the orientalist" views the West (or occident) as full of emotion and passion, while the East is said to have "abiding concerns" about the role of emotion in life and philosophy (Mark 8). These "abiding concerns" make the

East seem "passive" in comparison and explain the speaker's presumptions about Chen's temperament.

In the context of the *Tao Te Ching*, an ancient Taoist document, Mark's hypothesis regarding the differences between Eastern and Western temperaments from the perspective of an Orientalist fits the speaker's own instrumentalization of Chen and makes the water symbols of the poem stand out. In the *Tao Te Ching*, the element of "water is the highest good…because water excels in benefitting the myriad of creatures without contending with them… [water] comes close to *the way*" (*Tao Te Ching* 10). Water, among many things, is "the reason why the river and sea are able to be king of a hundred valleys" (71). It symbolizes what the Taoists call the Tao, which usually translates as *the way*. *The way* is a kind of oneness behind all existence; it is an absence and vacuum, but also active and creative; it is well exemplified by the "weakness" of water that conquers all things; it is perfect non-action and non-attachment. Water signifies how "the weak overcome the strong, and the submissive overcomes the hard" (83). The only appropriate method of working with water (or with anything, in fact) is to emulate *the way*: one must understand how something works and then act appropriately without desire or ego. Chen's characterization by passivity in the poem exposes Cohen's misunderstanding of what he has understood to be subservience and not the actual grounded philosophy of *the way,* a philosophy which only calls for passivity at opportune times. Cohen's understanding of Taoism lacks nuance and mistakenly depicts Chen as weak and submissive when his silence instead symbolizes a far greater philosophy of awareness and non-attachment that the poem and its speaker completely miss.

Cohen's relationship to Buddhism in his second book of poetry, *The Spice-Box of Earth,* subtly engages with themes of suffering, transience, and a sobering awareness of the Holocaust.

This second volume touches upon these themes without directly Orientalizing[17] or explicitly referring to Buddhist concepts. Nevertheless, the spiritual struggles that permeate the book are largely matters of Buddhist interest. In "If It Were Spring" (*Spice-Box* 6) a speaker explains that he must kill a man, a man he acquisitively calls "My victim," because life is intolerably full of suffering and because all he can "hear / [is] the irrefutable argument of hunger / whispered, spoken, shouted, / but never sung." He, the speaker, "will kill a man this week… [because it is an act of] mercy" (7) in a world defined by pain. Embedded in this poem is the Buddhist doctrine of the First Noble Truth, *duhkha*: that life is fundamentally based on suffering, distress, and a lack of peace. Cohen's solution to the problem of suffering here is to end it with death. Mastery and suffering again appear in "Owning Everything" (34) where the speaker shows his readers that in trying to own everything, and particularly a woman, the speaker creates a world where "nothing… responds" and where "owning everything, I have nowhere to go." The speaker makes it clear that his pursuit of sexual mastery is directly linked to his suffering and sense of entrapment. The following poem in the volume, "Song to Make Me Still" (36), is a response to the anxious voice depicted in "Owning Everything." What gives the speaker of "Song to Make Me Still" clarity of mind is his meditation on the infinite moments within linear time. More specifically, the speaker talks about "how many waves / easy after easy / on the one-way shore" there are, how there are alternative ways to see the moon and stars from space, and how "no one calls the crickets vain, / in their time / in their time." The emphasis on repetition and subjective time points to the ever-present moment in which the speaker takes refuge. This idea is best articulated through the concept of *kalopadhi*[18] in Buddhism, or the idea that all concepts of time are relative and comparable to an eternal present.

---

[17] "Summer Haiku" is one possible exception in the volume.

[18] Shoson Miyamoto's essay "Time and Eternity in Buddhism" explores the concept of time in Zen Buddhism and is discussed on page 88.

"Travel" (52) is an important poem and breakthrough instance of a voice seeking to quell his own suffering through some kind of mastery, discipline, or help from a tutor. This desire will set the stage for the eventual introduction of Joshu Sasaki Roshi, a Zen Buddhist master who appears in *Death of a Lady's Man* and who would spend the rest of his life as Cohen's close friend and mentor. "Travel" explicitly links mastery and suffering together when the speaker thinks about "where a master might instruct me how to plot / My life away from pain, to love alone / In the bruiseless embrace of stone and lake." In trying to get away from his pain, the speaker seeks the stability and "embrace of stone," but also the flexibility and force of water in a lake—perhaps another Taoist allusion. "Travel" also highlights a growing awareness of "overcoming pain" and transcending cycles of suffering—two major concerns for a later Cohen of the early 1970's. The speaker hopes that through travel, men like himself "half-way between the loves they [and the speaker] leave and seek," will break from their cyclical suffering. While not explicitly stated, the speaker is seeking what Buddhists call *nirvana* or transcendence from the cycles of life (and suffering). Cohen struggles with mastery, transience, and suffering in a way that Buddhist discipline is distinctly equipped to handle, and while no explicit reference to Buddhism exists in this second volume of poetry—with perhaps an accidental reference in "Summer Haiku" to the "deeper silence" of Zen meditation (69)—*The Spice-Box of Earth* marks Cohen's first explicit attempt to confront Buddhist themes that only a later formal and articulated engagement with Buddhism will address.

Cohen's first two volumes of poetry explore what the Buddhists call *Trivisah,* or *The Three Poisons,* or *Three Evil Paths,* or *The Three Unwholesome Roots*. These "poisons" which are said to be at the root of pain, are ignorance, attachment, and aversion. Despite a lack of explicit Buddhist engagement in the first volumes, the poisons offer a narrative arc through which to view Cohen's early development and interests. In *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, readers

are introduced to a petty speaker who carelessly exploits Orientalized imagery in order to control, seduce, or sexualize female interests. The motif of female seduction through the power of poetry represents Cohen's own ignorance (the first poison) regarding the moral responsibility of a "front-line" and ethically responsible poet,[19] and his untethered desire (the second poison) for women. The third poison of aversion, or *Dvesha,* (often described as a strong dislike or hatred) is Cohen's understandable response to the Holocaust and his general avoidance of it in his first two volumes of poetry. Poems that reference the Holocaust, such as "Lovers," appear in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, but are rare and lack the visceral force that Holocaust poems in *The Spice-Box of Earth,* and *Flowers for Hitler* successfully deliver.

In *The Spice-Box of Earth* Cohen confronts poems concerning the Holocaust inadvertently, such as in "I Have Two Bars of Soap."

> I have two bars of soap,
> The fragrance of almond,
> One for you and one for me.
> Draw the bath,
> We will wash each other…
>
> I have no money; I murdered the pharmacist.
> And here's a jar of oil, just like in the Bible…
> I have no money. I murdered the perfumer. (53)

The poem, like other Holocaust poems in the volume, stands out for its grotesqueness, but nevertheless fails to embody the horror of what is being implied by the speaker's actions—we as readers are shocked into a moral awareness by the speaker's failure to understand himself

[19] The stance of the "front line poet" refers to Cohen's adopted moral position as an ethical poet in *Flowers for Hitler*. See page 45 for a more complete discussion on the matter.

ethically but are never told why. “I Have Two Bars of Soap” avoids depicting the Holocaust explicitly, and only does so implicitly through the exposition of a speaker who washes himself with the soap of a murdered pharmacist and perfumer.[20] It is up to the reader to infer the context of the murder, as no clear reference to the Holocaust exists in the poem. This self-imposed limitation on what Cohen the poet is willing to tell readers stops him from addressing the Holocaust overtly in *The Spice-Box of Earth*: aversion, like ignorance and desire, becomes an impediment to the emerging front-line poet trying to find a morally grounded and ethical voice able to address suffering. Cohen the seducer, the master of words, who uses poetry to charm women, slowly breaks through his ignorance in *The Spice-Box of Earth* with poems like “I Have Two Bars of Soap” and overcomes his aversion completely in *Flowers for Hitler*, where the Holocaust is detailed with graphic imagery and language. *The Spice-Box of Earth* embodies a turning point in Cohen’s writing career that forces him to indirectly address his own struggle with the *Trivisah*, and meditate on questions of suffering, albeit without the proper Buddhist language to do so.

Flowers for Hitler marks a radical departure from Cohen’s earlier works in both its style, content, and purpose. In a letter to Jack McClelland (notably published on the back of the first edition of *Flowers for Hitler*) Cohen states that *Flowers for Hitler* “moves me from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dung pile of the front-line writer” and that he was ready to take on the role of the front-line poet and talk about the purpose of poetry after Auschwitz. Holocaust poems in *Flowers for Hitler* lack the subtlety of poems from previous volumes, such as “Lovers” (23) in *Let Us Compare Mythologies* or “I Have Two Bars of Soap” (53) from *The Spice-Box of Earth*. Poems in *Flowers for Hitler* often reference the grotesque directly, such as in “The True

[20] *Beautiful Losers,* released two years before *Flowers for Hitler,* contains a scene depicting a human-soap bath with soap made from victims of the Holocaust. The soap bars in “I Have Two Bars of Soap” are then, given Cohen’s later use of soap in *Beautiful Losers*, likely another reference to the Holocaust.

Desire" (*Flowers* 49) where "mutilated shapes" and a "yard of intestine" symbolize the joy of consuming food in the colonized South Asian region of the Ganges. Poems in this volume also directly address the Holocaust. "The Failure of a Secular Life" (41) references the "tongs" of a torturer from "Dachau" while "All There is to Know About Adolf Eichmann" (54) cruelly reminds readers that the architect of the Holocaust was a man like anyone else who did not have "talons" or "oversized incisors" as readers may imagine a monster of equal stature might possess. *Flowers for Hitler* also stands out for its wider adoption of the lyric, "I." Modernism, Cohen's dominant style of writing up to this point promotes detachment and the erasure of the authorial voice. Cohen, like his friend and fellow Canadian poet Irving Layton,[21] now chooses to abandon the detached and impersonal voice of modernism in order to personalize the content of his poems. The result is a dark meditation on suffering largely uttered by a cynical and critical voice which demands readers respond in a similar disgusted manner. Unlike earlier volumes, *Flowers for Hitler* forces readers to feel attached to and engaged with its contents. This is a complete turn from the detached voices of the earlier works and signals the beginning of Cohen's own cynicism and the cynical voices he talks through in his later works.

It is no coincidence that Buddhism makes its first appearance in Cohen's third volume of poetry, a book explicitly concerned with suffering and attachment. *Flowers for Hitler* shows signs of a slightly nuanced understanding of Buddhist themes and a new interest in Buddhist imagery. That said, the book persists here and there in instrumentalizing Asian analogies and imagery that simplify and Orientalise the East, such as in "Congratulations" (3), where "eating mushrooms" is said to be like visiting a "Japanese heaven" (whatever that means). In the second half of the volume, however, East Asian references take on a tone that mirrors the volume's

[21] Brian Trehearne argues in his book *The Montreal Forties* that Irving Layton (notably, a very close friend of Cohen's) pushes back against the impersonality of modernist style in his works by using the lyric "I." In doing this, Layton personalizes the contents of his poems and his depictions of the Holocaust (*Forties* 175).

overall shift in style: one that is darker, cynical, and more genuinely concerned with trauma, the morbid, and horror. Cohen's first two volumes attempt to playfully master the world through romantic language. This is done away with in *Flowers for Hitler* where readers are introduced to sinister stories of cruelty and pain and a highly cynical speaking voice. "My Mentor" (42) gives the reader an early glimpse into what will eventually become the standard cynical voice of Cohen's works in the 1970's. The speaking voice in *Flowers for Hitler* takes on the role of an iconoclast by replacing sacrosanct Jewish religious items with Buddhist or Hindu objects:

> My rabbi has a silver buddha,
> My priest has a jade talisman.
> My doctor sees a marvellous omen
> In our prolonged Indian summer.
>
> My rabbi, my priest stole their trinkets
> From shelves in the holy of holies.
> The trinkets cannot be eaten.
> They wonder what to do with them.
> …
> My zen master is a grand old fool.
> I caught him worshipping me yesterday,
> so I made him stand in a foul corner
> with my rabbi, my priest, and my doctor. (42)

In the spirit of comparing mythologies, but now in a voice of utter cynicism, the narrator for the first time expresses a great distrust about the possibilities of Zen and Eastern religion. The placement of Buddhist trinkets in the Holy of Holies, in one example, depicts a cheap and

ludicrous form of comparing mythologies. Unlike previous works, which romanticise Eastern imagery and thought, "My Mentor" clumps Buddhism and Zen Masters together with familiar spiritual figures, like rabbis and priests but has them all participate in meaningless cultural exchanges. In draining the "Zen Master" of his stature and mystique, and remixing his religious symbols (the silver Buddha and Jade talisman) with those of other spiritual communities, Cohen is undermining his previously Orientalised and romanticised depictions of the East by cynically de-mystifying them.

Mocking mythology and the notion that a far-off mystical East could contain answers to the problem of historical suffering is ubiquitous in *Flowers for Hitler*. In "Why I Happen to Be Free" (47) the narrator ironically points out that his "new laws encourage / not satori, but perfection." Making such a statement directly undermines the idea of *satori* and is related to the aforementioned cycle of love, despair, creativity, and desire that is most clearly articulated in "Travel" (*Spice-Box* 52). More specifically, the speaker ties his enlightenment to desire (an ironic and impossible feat) when he says that "forsaking the lovely girl / was not my idea / but she fell asleep in somebody's bed / now more than ever / I want enemies" (*Flowers* 47). Knowledge of *satori* implies Cohen's possible encounter with D.T. Suzuki's works—if not from reading about them,[22] then from the mainstream culture of the 1950's. Nevertheless, Cohen's direct references to Buddhism, be they terminology or imagery, reveal the voice of a highly cynical speaker no longer able to blindly find comfort in mythicized fantasies about the Far East and its surface-level promise of enlightenment. The cynical voice in *Flowers for Hitler* comes to regard the role of Orientalism in the early works as ersatz pseudo-wisdom. This evolution of the cynical voice, a voice that will only become more cynical as Cohen's musical career takes off, represents a

[22] See page 10 for more about *satori* and Suzuki.

turning away from Orientalism and towards a recognition that suffering is a reality that underlies all life, both in the East and West.

In “The House” (73) a speaking voice cares deeply about suffering but distances himself from the contents of his speech by downplaying his interest in a politically polarizing photograph and then sublimating his emotions into desire for a female love interest. In the second to last stanza, the speaker reflects upon “a monk… sitting in a fire / like that famous photograph.” The famous photograph in question is likely Malcom Browne’s “The Burning Monk,” an image in mass circulation by 1963, a year before *Flower for Hitler*’s publication. Thich Quang Duc, the monk in question, burnt himself in 1963 to protest the persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government. Despite the photo’s impact and the outburst of international condemnations that followed its circulation, the South Vietnamese government continued to persecute Buddhists. The monk’s story in “The House” is interrupted however by the thought of a flowery “gardenia in Sophie’s courtyard” and the image of a quiet domestic home protected from the outside world by its wealth. The juxtaposition between the quiet inside world of the house and the explosive political and war-torn world of Vietnam implies a gross ethical misstep on the speaker’s part, notably, his choice to distract himself from the outside world of pain by blinding himself with sexual desire instead of explicating the photograph clearly for readers. Just as the news of the burnt monk is quickly transmuted into sexual desire—the speaker claims that his female partner’s knowledge of the photo makes him “want her for ten minutes”—so is the outburst of international condemnation against the South Vietnamese government rapidly obfuscated by the luxuries of the home. This point of junction in “The House” between immeasurable suffering, political turmoil, and the pain of desire resonates with the overall theme of *Flowers for Hitler* while placing Buddhism at the center of these intersecting ideas. “The Burning Monk,” like earlier references to Zen masters and *satori*, betrays Cohen’s serious

developing interest in Buddhism and reveals that Quang Duc's suffering, no matter how much the speaker in "The House" may attempt to cover or downplay the event, is an incident that demands moral engagement and ethical judgment. Desire for sex becomes an immoral distraction from the suffering occurring overseas.

"The House" investigates the possibility of a more pronounced and nuanced relationship to Buddhist ideas that distinctly separates *Flowers for Hitler* from Cohen's earlier works. The final lines of "The House" have the narrator curtly state that he "attaches nothing" to the feelings, sensations, or experiences he has encountered at his domestic residence, a home adorned with "old furniture... [and a] black Venetian bed [that] stands on golden claws guarding the window" (73) that make the room radiate with beauty and wealth. References to *satori*, Buddhist trinkets, and Zen masters from the previous poems show that Buddhism is on Cohen's mind as he writes *Flowers for Hitler* and that a Buddhist concept such as non-attachment may slowly be finding a way to express itself. However, Buddhist references remain fundamentally cynical. By stating how "Last night I dreamed / you were Buddha's Wife," the speaker conflates Buddha with his love interest, therefore transforming Buddha into a sexual rival. By doing this, the speaker corrupts what the Buddha is meant to stand for, that is, a figure with no desires that is the epitome of non-attachment. Likewise, the speaker exercises a faulty detachment when confronted by the moral responsibility to action upon seeing the photo of "The Burning Monk." Both scenarios show a Cohen unable as yet to articulate Buddhist non-attachment, but nevertheless seeking a middle ground between the polarities of attachment and detachment.

If "My Mentor," "Why I Happen to Be Free," and "The House" offer glimpses into what a skeptical understanding of East Asian imagery and Buddhism may look like in *Flowers for Hitler*, then "For E.J. P." marks a turn towards understanding the danger of Orientalising,

objectifying, and romanticising the world without recognizing how pain and suffering underlie those same appropriated images. The poem opens with:

> I once believed a single line
> from a Chinese poem could change
> forever how blossoms fell
> and that the moon itself climbed on
> the grief of concise weeping men
> to journey over cups of wine (57)

These lines are an acknowledgment of both the failure of the Modernist mode, with its emphasis on impersonal detachment and minimalism, and the subsequent Orientalising aesthetics that now seem hollow and barren. The speaker understands that his former appropriation of the East weakened the power of his poetry, and that writing in such a mode fails to make any moral or ethical assertion about the world. When the speaker claims that he *used* to believe "Invasions were begun for crows / to pick at a skeleton / dynasties sown and spent / to serve the language of a fine lament" he is showing that something is wrong with simplifying the complexities of history (such as the metaphor of crows picking at skeletons and the violence that underlies cycling through dynasties) in order to "serve the language of… lament." Are the crows poets who feel they can master the world by comparing the mythologies of peoples who have gone through immense suffering? The feeling of having missed the mark, that all the beauty of Orientalized imagery is a façade for genuine historical suffering, resonates with the dominant atmosphere of the poem and makes sense of the poem's final line, that "something forgets us perfectly." That something is pain and suffering. Because that "something" is undefined in the poem, the reader—and perhaps the speaker too—is forced to reflect on having engaged with East Asian spirituality so frivolously. By asking "who can trace the canyoned paths / cattle have

carved out of time / wandering from meadowlands to feasts," the speaker shows that the aforementioned assumptions about language, Orientalism, and "once believ[ing] that a single line from a Chinese poem could change" the world, are fantasies that neglect historical suffering and context. The beautiful "autumn leaves" and Chinese imagery fade away as the reader realizes that the cattle of the canyon are possible symbols of living things consumed when poets write poetry—or, as another reading suggests, possibly the corpses of dead victims.[23] Cohen's personal confrontation with historical suffering leaves him poetically unable to work in the Orientalist mode as doing so removes the context, nuance, and tangible tie to suffering that a morally responsible poet must engage with to produce meaningful art.

Orientalism in the early works, and particularly in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, is tied to a pursuit of mastery and an underlying unease with lack of control. As Cohen begins to confront his own reality of suffering in *The Spice-Box of Earth* Orientalism fades away. Buddhist themes emerge during this period and Buddhist language and references make an explicit appearance in Cohen's third volume of poetry, *Flowers for Hitler*. *Flowers for Hitler* marks the beginning of a new approach to understanding the role of the poet and the limitations of Modernist style. Suffering and pain, hallmarks of the Holocaust and central themes in *Flowers for Hitler,* are fundamental to the Buddhist faith and as a result make a Buddhist education all the more necessary and pressing for Cohen's spiritual growth and mental health. The poems in *Flowers for Hitler* show signs of a more serious and meditated approach towards a genuine confrontation with Buddhism: Buddhist keywords, imagery, references, and concepts begin to appear, voiced by a cynical speaker. Cohen's speaking voices show great skepticism regarding his previous use of Oriental images which signals the decisive end to Cohen's romantic and exoticized allusions to East and South Asia. This period by no means signifies a deep or full transformation in

[23] It is worth noting that "between 1965 and 1968 he [Cohen] was a vegetarian" (Nadel 168). This helps make sense of the cattle-as-corpse reading of the poem.

Cohen's spiritual life—that will not occur until after a major struggle with depression and the writing of *Death of a Lady's Man*—but symbolizes an important inward turn: a turn towards the dark and morbid, and towards a recognition of life's suffering that only an interest in Buddhism and Buddhist training would be particularly apt to help him with.

Chapter Two

Cynicism and Buddhist Discipline in *Songs of Love and Hate, The Energy of Slaves,* and *Death of a Lady's Man*

The period following *Flowers for Hitler* marks the beginning of Cohen's darkest works. Each volume that emerges from this decade-long abyss is permeated by themes of uncontrolled desire, cruelty, cynicism, nihilism, despair, self-destructiveness, depression, and transgressive behaviour. The sense of responsibility which first appeared in the Holocaust poems of *Flowers for Hitler*, and the abandonment of those responsibilities and their subject matter in exchange for fame and sexual indulgences in this latter period, lead the speakers of *The Energy of Slaves, Death of a Lady's Man,* and the albums between them, to further engage in behaviour that lacks a moral or "ethical center." It is not until Cohen's representation of a more serious Zen Buddhist practice by the half-way point of *Death of a Lady's Man* that his growing despair, deteriorating mental health, and addiction to the pleasures of celebrity are addressed. Joshu Sasaki (Roshi) is presented at this time as a guiding figure who helps Cohen break from his obsessions with control. He introduces Cohen to traditional Zen practices like the *koan* and has him undergo intense moments of discipline and introspection. Cohen's willingness to allow Roshi into his life during a particularly strenuous period shows that Buddhist discipline was, at Cohen's lowest point, essential for both his mental and moral wellbeing and the development of different voices in his works.

While both *Flowers for Hitler* (1964) and *Parasites of Heaven* (1966) explore moments of deep cynicism and detachment from any tangible ethic or discipline—which is particularly shocking when there ought to be moral attachment and reflection on events such as the Holocaust—nowhere do the voices of Cohen's speakers express more nihilistic feelings of despair and pessimism than in the album *Songs of Love and Hate* (1971) and the book of poetry

The Energy of Slaves (1972). Both volumes contain moments of intense misery and hopelessness unlike any other sustained work in Cohen's oeuvre. The cynical voices in these volumes grow in power as Cohen's musical career and fame increase—which sends him spiraling downwards towards self-loathing, further cynicism, and moral paralysis. This bleak cycle of suffering (what we will later define as Buddhism's *samsara*)[24] plagues Cohen up until the introduction of Roshi and Zen discipline in *Death of a Lady's Man*.

Songs of Love and Hate opens with "Avalanche," a song depicting a speaker full of self-loathing and contempt for having "stepped into an avalanche" (*The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen* 20) of fame and greed. The poem portrays two figures (likely aspects of Cohen's psyche), an oppositional addressee that represents greed, capital, and fame and a speaking artist's voice who, by the song's end, becomes like the addressee in his greed and lust for fame. The speaking voice first attempts to remain unaffected by the addressee, as can be seen in several verses where the speaker rejects "the crumbs of love" that are offered to him. Nevertheless, the speaker eventually finds himself starting "to long for you" and the addressee's ability to "conquer pain" with the help of his fame and money. Cynical and beaten from this moral failing, the speaker is consumed by the "wound" of self-loathing for wanting gold, celebrity, adoring fans, and to be free of pain. This in turn, transforms the speaker into a slave and the "cripple here that you clothe and feed," whose misery is "this hunchback that you see." The speaker's suffering and steadfast assertion that, at first, he "has no greed" implies that he is being corrupted by desire: he is struggling against celebrity and a life of endless commodification, but inevitably failing. Despite resisting the addressee's enticements, the speaker eventually succumbs to his temptations and begins to long for the addressee's "golden hill" of fame and freedom from pain:

I have begun to long for you,

[24] Discussed in detail on page 67.

I who have no greed;

I have begun to ask for you,

I who have no need

By succumbing to the "gold" and vices of the "golden city," the speaker becomes ever more cynical and self-hating. In his self hatred, he desires the now "beloved" addressee's promise of gold and fame and adopts the addressee's' persona by "[wearing his] flesh" and pretending to embody the identity of a famed celebrity—an identity he clearly believes he should not personify. By the song's end, the listener has been confronted with the voice of a man who has given into the call of greed, ignored his inner conscience, given in to his desires, and masqueraded publicly as a genuine and moral artist when he knows that he (the speaker) is otherwise. In lying not only to himself but to the public, the speaker expresses guilt for devaluing art and for betraying the ethical consistency of his persona.

A similar scene of despair and greed occurs in "Dress Rehearsal Rag," where the speaker (now clearly suicidal) asks the despised celebrity persona aspect of himself, "where are you Golden Boy, where is your famous touch?" (46) while shaving in front of a mirror (an image that will later recur in *Death of a Lady's Man*'s "My Life in Art"). The suicidal speaker is unable to accept the fraudulent character he sees in himself and embodies his despair and guilt by attempting to end his life. As in "Avalanche," the speaker sees himself as acutely entangled with the source of his self-loathing—that is, the many desires that only fame and money can temporarily satisfy. Other better-known songs on the album, such as "Famous Blue Raincoat," do not explicitly talk about suicide, fraudulence, guilt, or depression, but imply that they are present in the speaker's experiences and can never be overcome. In the final verse of "Famous Blue Raincoat," the speaker, cynical and conflicted with himself, tells his addressee:

And what can I tell you my brother, my killer

What can I possibly say?

I guess that I miss you, I guess I forgive you

I'm glad you stood in my way

If you ever come by here, for Jane or for me

Well, your enemy is sleeping, and his woman is free (50)

The cynicism and pessimism of the earlier songs on this album help readers surmise that the speaker of "Famous Blue Raincoat" is contemptuous and unlikely genuinely forgiving the addressee. It is instead likely that the speaker is writing a passive aggressive suicide letter, as he asserts that he will be dead, or "sleeping," if the more famous version of himself ever comes back looking for him.

The evolution of the cynical voice in these works is best understood as an extension of what Sandra Wynand calls the voice of the guilt-driven post-war poet. As we saw in the previous chapter, in 1964, Cohen claimed to Jack McClelland that his third volume of poetry, *Flowers for Hitler,* "moves me from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dung pile of the front-line writer."[25] Wynand explains that Cohen's shift towards writing about the Holocaust is a rejection of Adorno's assertion that "it is impossible to write poems today… [because] to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Intricate Preparations* 208). With consideration to Adorno, Wynand suggests that "by becoming the subject in a work of art, the Holocaust is deprived of its horrifying singularity" (199). This implies that the only way for the poet to properly encapsulate the horrors of the Holocaust is to become "barbaric." As with "many members of the post-World

[25] This passage is part of a letter sent to Jack McClelland, Cohen's publisher, that was, as previously stated, printed on the back of the first edition of *Flowers for Hitler*. Michael Ondaatje's book "Leonard Cohen" claims that the passage is proof of a change in Cohen's perspective regarding his role as a poet: "The blurb antagonized an audience who were satisfied in being just entertained by Leonard Cohen. Reading the blurb they felt they should have been morally ravished… Cohen had stopped seeing the world totally as an arena of romance and myth. It is a world of evil in all its forms…he was now following a public rather than a private rhetoric" (Ondaatje 35-36).

War II generations who reached intellectual maturity after the war" (198), Cohen struggled as a poet to articulate the horrors of the Second World War and Holocaust. Cohen does, however, manage to encapsulate certain horrors of the Holocaust in *Flowers for Hitler* by (as Adorno asserted would be the case) taking on "barbaric" qualities in his poetry. Barbarism is not only an apt word for Cohen's imagery in *Flowers for Hitler*, but also for the actions and words of Cohen's cynical speakers during the period of *Songs of Love and Hate* and *The Energy of Slaves*. Cohen's engagement with the horrors and barbarisms of the Holocaust, and his failure to continue addressing them after becoming famous, are the catalysts that further accelerate his downwards spiral in the 1970's.

Cohen's multiple voices in *Flowers for Hitler* are symptomatic of the postwar ethical burden which, up until *Flowers for Hitler*, Cohen generally ignored—as many critics such as Michael Greenstein and Norman Ravvin have pointed out.[26] By splitting Cohen's personas into speakers and addressees and having them appear throughout his works during the period of *Songs of Love and Hate* and *The Energy of Slaves*, Cohen, as Wynyard explains,

> …is referring to a generational conflict… [and is] making a personal declaration of his function as a poet that is summarized in the golden-boy poet/front-line writer dichotomy. It is his self-conscious positioning of the artist as persona… (207)

By the time of *Songs of Love and Hate* and *The Energy of Slaves*, however, the front-line poet's mantle is discarded: lost in favour of the self-destructive voice of cynicism, power, celebrity,

[26] Greenstein's chapter, "Poetry After Auschwitz," from his book *Third Solitudes* shows that Cohen only truly engaged with the Holocaust explicitly in *Flowers for Hitler* and only after Layton's introduction of the lyric "I" in his poetry. Greenstein sees Cohen as a late addition to a tradition of poets from Montreal who confront the Holocaust in their works: "If Klein belongs to the first generation and Layton the second, then Leonard Cohen represents the third generation of Holocaust poets" (Greenstein 42). On the other hand, Ravvin suggests in an essay called "Imaginary Traditions: Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen and the Rest of the Montreal Poets" that there really is no continuity in this poetic line. Ravvin does, however, align with Greenstein in that he shows in his essay "Writing Around the Holocaust: Uncovering the Ethical Centre of Leonard Cohen's Beautiful Losers" that Cohen generally avoided writing directly about the Holocaust, choosing instead to write "around" it.

desire, and the ever-recurring motif of "gold." "Avalanche" and "Dress Rehearsal Rag" explore the defeat and corruption of the front-line Cohen poet at the hands of the famous/celebrity/golden-voiced addressee who proves stronger, more enticing, and more devouring in his desires than the voice of any moral or ethically concerned artist.

The voice of the celebrity in despair worsens in *The Energy of Slaves,* Cohen's darkest book of poetry, published a year after *Songs of Love and Hate.* The volume's fourth poem immediately presents an early example of a suicidal voice attempting to convince the reader that he is trustworthy because he "didn't kill [him]self / when things went wrong" (*Energy of Slaves* 12). As the volume progresses, however, this voice swiftly betrays the reader's trust. Words like "contempt" (17), "hideous" (19), "lost" (22) and "traitor" (23) begin to pepper the poems. By page 27[27] we hear the voice of a speaker completely engrossed in nihilism, who affirms his worldview by asserting that "I know there is no such thing / as hell or heaven." Themes of longing and greed are explicitly confronted on page 46, where the narrator promises a nameless female that

> If I could tell you
> the laws of my longing
> you would be here
> on behalf of your greed…
>
> And then something would happen
> that would crush us
> and free us

[27] While some poems from *The Energy of Slaves* would later receive titles in *Stranger Music* (1993), the original 1972 publication of *The Energy of Slaves* lacks chapter or poem titles to help with navigation. For this purpose, I have chosen to refer to poems by their page numbers or, occasionally, by their first line.

and destroy completely

whatever had been (46)

Death (in this case from being "crushed") and longing are entwined once again in these passages and made the objects of desire. As in *Songs of Love and Hate,* "46" explores the pessimistic cynical voice and its fixation on death as being linked to the frustrations of longing, greed, and sexual desire. The poem starting on page 80 ["I could not wait for you…"] touches upon the theme of suicide and desire again, this time portraying a voice that

…could not wait for you

to find me dead in a rented room

with sunglasses dusty

on the card table

So once again

I tried to set my throat on fire

This time in silence

And not thinking of you at all

(I had so much time to kill) (80)

The nature of the encounter is both sexual and ironic: ironic because of its playful but direly serious language. When the suicidal speaker talks about setting his throat on fire, he could easily be talking about suicide, or, as will later happen in *Death of Lady's Man*'s "My Life in Art," drinking himself to the point of death. The puns about time, "death," and "silence" (which culminate in the final line of "killing time") expose the cynical narrator's taste for dark irony and the possible pleasure he will derive from using his suicide room to shock a female visitor. Again, themes of longing and depression meet as the speaker continues to explore taboos concerning death at the expense of his own ever darkening voice and sense of self.

Until this point in the volume, the cynical sexual desires of Cohen's speakers are only mildly shocking, and fully within the realm of plausible adult desire (extreme as death wishes may be). This changes near the volume's end where, as Brian Trehearne has pointed out, expressions of pedophilia emerge and fuse with the cynical celebrity voice. On 91, this voice mockingly proposes substituting an adult lover with a child instead. The voice asks an unidentified addressee:

> Why did you spend
> Another night with her
> When you could have slept
> With Naked Jane
> Or bought yourself a twelve-year oriental girl
> Why don't they make Vietnam
> worth fighting for (91)

The enjambment at the end of the first line signals the act of prostitution, which is also implied through the word "spend[ing]" (a double pun). The speaker next recommends that the addressee spend time not with the "her" of the second line but with someone named "Naked Jane"—a name that suggests a burlesque showgirl and likely implies something more sinister, such as, perhaps, the presence of another child. The poem's second half overtly enjoins pedophilia on the addressee by advising him to have sex with a twelve-year-old Vietnamese girl. The jocular tone of the poem is disturbing particularly because of the last two lines, where the speaker attempts to justify his recommendation of pedophilia by suggesting that only the splendours of breaking the taboo of child prostitution could "make the Vietnam war / Worth fighting for." In suggesting that the twisted pleasures of sexual relations with a child are worth war itself, the cynical-celebrity voice is both asserting that the act of pedophilia is not only as powerful in its moral transgression

as war is, but that he, the voice of the cynic, is a slave to dark desires that transgress beyond other socially tolerated taboos.

As Trehearne has shown, other examples of pedophilic desires occur throughout *The Energy of Slaves* and are tied to a voice corrupted by celebrity. On 97, the cynical voice "advises" his readers to "become rich and famous," as this will allow them to sleep with the "15-year-old girls" of their adolescent dreams—girls he claims "he [now] has" (97). If "97" is to be taken seriously, which it should be despite its jocular tone, and when considered in conjunction with the poem on 91, this poem further shows how celebrity enables pedophilia and leads the speaker to destructive cycles of greed that end with serious and criminal transgressions and self-destruction. "99" contains the volume's last reference to pedophilia, where the cynical "poet…drunk" playfully remarks that the best inspiration for writing poetry is to spend "three nights at the Hilton / [with] a girl with round buttocks / suntanned and cheerful, fourteen, [in] Athens" (99). The treatment of pedophilia here, like the other poems, is commodified and uttered without ethical considerations. The pedophilia poems in *The Energy of Slaves* mark the lowest moral point in Cohen's career, making *The Energy of Slaves* the antithesis of *Flowers for Hitler*'s call for a front-line poet.

Trehearne points to the problem of the pedophilic voice in his essay "'Memory White from Loss of Guilt': Guilt and Detachment in the Early Cohen," where he argues that pedophilia's introduction in Cohen's early works (such as in *Beautiful Losers* and *Flowers for Hitler*) is another expression of the many Cohen personas' willful forgetting of history and "whitening" of memory through a false and unethical detachment. In detachment, as opposed to Buddhist non-attachment, one seeks to pacify oneself from the emotional and moral weight of ethical concerns, not, as non-attachment teaches, to distance and consider one's emotions simultaneously. Whitening, a metaphor for detachment borrowed from Cohen's poems, makes

sense of the cynical voice in the aforementioned "Avalanche," a voice that, having "stepped into an avalanche," is swept away by a whiteness that "covered up [his] soul." The image of being consumed by an avalanche is tied to forgetting the inner artist's genuine voice and the responsibilities of the front-line poet in the post-war period. The ethical failing of memory erasure is relevant to the pedophilic passages, as it contextualizes their frivolous tone. Trehearne avows that

> The [pedophilia] poems are largely without complexity. No amount of reading for irony, or emphasizing a given poem's critique of celebrity, or sorting out its self-alienated and doubled voicing, can offset the deep discomfort of reading such lines. ("Memory White" 36)

This shows that the voice of the cynical celebrity in the pedophilia poems is willing to "break… sexual taboos with such pleasure that [the author, Cohen himself] could not hear *content*" (37). Moral consciousness and critical substance are sorely lacking where they *ought* to appear. The convictions of the front-line writer form *Flowers for Hitler* are now forgotten, instead replaced with a speaker who fails in memory and hates himself for his blind immoral behaviour.

The pedophilia poems reflect a moment in history where the culture, particularly that of the 1960's and 1970's, greatly encouraged the breaking of social taboos.[28] Norman Ravvin's work on the "ethical center" of *Beautiful Losers* makes further sense of this claim: that a desire to break taboos by its very nature implies transgressing history and morality. Ravvin argues that

> Just as they [F. and Edith from Cohen's second novel, *Beautiful Losers*] are consistent in their avoidance of extended consideration of the encounter with Hitler, so critics tend to be in agreement that *Beautiful Losers* is a novel that portrays the urge to transcend the suffering of secular existence by way of a rather

[28] It is hard not to think of Roman Polanski's scandalous seduction of a 13-year-old at about this time.

> contradictory mixture of sexual excess, self-denial, and a taboo-bending recreation of religious experience through rites both sacred and profane. ("Writing Around the Holocaust" 25)

Both Trehearne and Ravvin highlight the risks Cohen takes when he writes in a voice of excess and emotional detachment by showing that different instances of detachment may trivialize serious crimes that ought instead to be treated with conscious reflection and ethical consideration. In *Beautiful Losers* that transgression is the voice that risks trivializing the Holocaust (as Ravvin suggests), and in *The Energy of Slaves* it is a voice that trivializes pedophilia—two sensitive taboos of the late 60's and 70's. It should come as no surprise then that Linda Hutcheon has claimed that *Beautiful Losers* "shares its themes and imagery" with *The Energy of Slaves* and that both represent "culminating points in Cohen's development" (Hutcheon 42) in their tendency to break boundaries and explore the taboo, the exploitative, and the criminal.

Despite attempts to "whiten" and erase the burden of morality, guilt remains a force in the volume that leads the speakers of *The Energy of Slaves* to depict suicidal imagery and moments of unbearable self-disgust. Motifs like being "crushed" imply that at some subconscious level, the speaker wishes to be punished for his transgressions. Cohen's failure to properly express moments of guilt (other than through suicidal imagery and moments of self loathing) is exactly what makes the crucial Buddhist concept of non-attachment so attractive. More specifically, as Trehearne remarks near the end of his essay,

> …guilt itself as a defining content of Cohen's vision waned dramatically after 1972—[it was] no doubt in part by virtue of his increasing attentiveness to Buddhist discipline, with its work against the faulty attachments of ego and libido… ("Memory White" 30)

The point at which moral guilt (despair, greed, cynicism and excess desire) and spiritual Buddhist discipline meet, while not yet fully articulated or anticipated in *The Energy of Slaves*, is the point at which the suicidal and pedophilic celebrity voice also begins to fade away in Cohen's works. The significant change in tone that would later develop in *Death of a Lady's Man,* a book which gives readers a first glimpse at what Buddhist discipline and training look like, signifies a change in the speaker's conceptualization of the world—one that highlights non-dualist and non-binary approaches to understanding oneself. The Buddhist solution for Cohen's guilt is, as Trehearne implies, the pursuit of "*non-attachment* to the illusions and desires of the ego" (16).

A slighting reference to Buddhist discipline, a discipline Cohen would later rely on to better his spiritual and mental health, and an early meeting on Mount Baldy (the location of the Zen monastery Cohen would later join) appear in *The Energy of Slaves*. On page 111, a speaker on vacation in Acapulco, tells his female companion in a condescending tone that there are monks on "Mount Baldy" (111) who are "shivering and farting in the moonlight" while he and she relax in the warm weather. He then, despite belittling them, tells his companion that "there are passages in their meditation / that treat our love and wish us well." The speaker's reference to the monks signifies an early engagement with Zen, that he has had contact with Zen by this point, that his first response to it is that of dismissal and mockery, and—despite remaining couched in the broader cynicism of *The Energy of Slaves*—that he has a dawning interest in Buddhism. The Cohen figure of this poem is, nevertheless, clearly in flight—running away from the monastery as fast as he can to the warm weather of Acapulco. "111," however, remains the only poem in *The Energy of Slaves* to constructively depict ideas of acceptance (the monks' "meditation" contains "passages" "that treat our love and wish us well"). The monks also portray a degree of non-attachment because they, according to the speaker, offer no rebuke. This reference to Mount Baldy and Buddhism exposes a brief and superficial engagement with actual

Buddhist discipline and hints at why a non-attached disposition will eventually challenge the cynical voice.

Death of a Lady's Man (1978) is, after *The Energy of Slaves,* one of Cohen's most serious and introspective books of poetry. Buddhist study is not apparent in the first half of *Death of a Lady's Man*, however, it is nevertheless vaguely implied by several speaking voices. Throughout the text, the different personas' understanding of Eastern religion and thought is unclear: it is vague at times, Orientalised as in earlier works, and escapist, but at other times it is very serious and well informed. Poems such as "The Event" and "Daily Commerce" portray two examples of the volume's ambiguous treatment of Asians and Asian spirituality. In the two works, a nameless Chinese girl is monitored from afar and desired by an onlooking speaker as he meditates on how he "will never fuck" her (*Death of a Lady's Man* 96). This allusion to the pedophilic episode of 91 in *The Energy of Slaves* is simultaneously the beginning of Buddhist discipline in the speaker's deliberate detachment of the Chinese woman. In "Daily Commerce" the speaker watches the Chinese woman walk by a busy Montreal street from his balcony and bemoans the fact that he is "nothing to her." He later meditates (in the commentary portion of the poem) [29] on the fact that "the Chinese girl [remains] unmolested [as] her life turns out okay without me / my dark erection unmanifested" (175). Objectifying this nameless Chinese woman by projecting his conception of virtue onto her future mystifies and Orientalises her and is reminiscent of Cohen's controlling use of Eastern imagery in the earlier works. Nevertheless, the speaker's acknowledgment that she has autonomy and sovereignty over her own life and that her self-determination is something the speaker will never get to experience complicates the Orientalist reading. Despite maintaining an oracular power over her, the speaker abstains from using her as another exotic sexual toy for his poetry, signifying what may be the beginnings of a respectful

[29] Most poems in *Death of a Lady's Man* are followed by a commentary (or commentaries) about the poem proper.

conception of Asian individuals arising from the introduction of Zen Buddhist discipline into his life. For the first time, there is a recognition of a life and story that is beyond him, beyond his mastery of language, and beyond his pointless desire.

Signs of a more genuine understanding of Zen (as opposed to vague Eastern references) appear in two Buddhist poems called "The Beetle" and later more distinctly in "The Asthmatic." In "The Beetle" (44) a voice, which we will call the master's voice, talks about a beetle that "was given" to "you," a voiceless addressee, in order that "you" may crawl towards "your pain" and by doing so, overcome the desire to destroy. The effect of placing power in the addressee's hands by "let[ing] you come in …let[ing] you come near" is cleansing and allows the addressee to reconsider his role as someone able to *choose* between crushing that which is below him (the beetle) or remaining passive. The master's voice warns that "tears will help you" overcome the urge to destroy and asserts that "your" crying is an experience of "mercy" and not of cynicism or nihilism. The distinction between mercy and nihilism is made by the addressee's decision to not "crush" the beetle and instead to let it be "a companion for you" in the room; the act of not crushing the beetle is therefore a symbol of tolerance and humility on the addressee's part, which the master praises. The master's role as a mentor is implied when he asks if "you [have] seized an image of me?" and in the tone of his discourse. Unlike earlier teacher figures in Cohen's works, there is no judgmental accusation in the master's words, only firm support and assurance. The relationship between the speaker and master is one of friendship, one where the master asks the addressee to "stay with me"[30] and shows that "an oath of friendship" exists "between you and your beetle... [that] came to your lips." It is telling that the master's voice says that "you are the beetle I do not crush…" Just as the addressee of the poem does not crush his beetle out of mercy, so does the master not crush his own beetle, the pupil, and in that shows his student that there is

[30] This line was removed in the *Stranger Music* version of the poem.

indeed a way to break out of the self-destructive cycle of mastery and control: that is, by instructing while choosing to not crush others.

The speaker is either the Judeo-Christian God or Roshi. Despite this ambiguity, what is important for readers to see is that for the first time in Cohen's works we are introduced to an outside figure whose guidance is gentler, nurturing, jocular, and companionate.[31] Nowhere in "The Beetle" do we hear the cynical celebrity voice of *The Energy of Slaves* or the vitriolic scorn of the divorce poems that take up the greater bulk of *Death of a Lady's Man.* Indeed, the imagery and language of "The Beetle" may be contrasted with many works in *The Energy of Slaves*. The language of "crushing" in the poem echoes poem "46" in *The Energy of Slaves,* where we hear the speaker say that "something would happen / that would crush us / and free us / and destroy us completely." In "The Beetle" the addressee, now in charge of the beetle's wellbeing, chooses *not* to crush the beetle, but to protect it. The impulse for self-annihilation and the destruction of others is not only avoided, but is directly corrected through the speaker / master's guidance. It is the addressee's choice to protect the beetle that introduces a new perspective to the volume: one that is becoming aware of the ethical gravity and responsibility of power, one that is moved by empathy, and one that acknowledges the suffering of others.

"The Beetle" is a complete leveling of the power dynamics between Cohen's earlier works and the East. Gone are instances of girls being taken advantage of by the cynical celebrity voice (such as in "91" in *The Energy of Slaves*), or of Chinese women being assaulted by Mongols (such as in "This American Woman" from *Let Us Compare Mythologies*). The erasure of the controlling voice signifies a radical change in how the cynical celebrity voice sees both himself and the "others" of his poetry. The master / slave relationship of the earlier works is

[31] Guiding figures such as Krantz from *The Favorite Game* and "F." from *Beautiful Losers* have played a similarly important role in the lives of Breavman and "I." (each novel's respective protagonist). However, neither role model was able to have such power over his subject as Roshi has. Krantz is too much Breavman's equal, and "F." lacks the empathy and compassion required to guide "I." beyond "F."'s own egotism.

transformed into a master / pupil relationship, and the illusion of mastery is taken away from the celebrity figure who has now become an attentive and reflective pupil. The relationship between female victims and the pedophilic voice is also inverted; the master in "The Beetle" "prepares" a clean room for his guests, both the addressee and the beetle, whereas the speaker of "80" in *Energy of Slaves* imagines leaving his dead body "in a rented room" for the unidentified addressee to find. In the commentary poem for "The Beetle," a second voice that is not the cynic's reflects on the contents of "The Beetle" and asks if "there is a modern reader that could measure up to this page?... In all the scriptures of the West, has God ever spoken so gently?" The sought-after acceptance hinted at in the Mount Baldy poem of *The Energy of Slaves* finds its voice in this passage, where the judgmental theology of the Western tradition is replaced by the firm guidance of a spiritual and merciful master. Cohen's experiences on Mount Baldy are also connected to "The Beetle" as, in the commentary, it is through *zazen*, or "sitting still for two hours in a cabin on a mountain… [that] the [speaker hears] crickets give a pulse to the night" and the possibility of "there [being] a wall in Los Angeles on which such a beetle could appear" (45).

Another poem from the second half of the book, "The Asthmatic," is the first instance of Cohen's exploration of a concrete and tangible Zen Buddhist training: the practice of concentrated breathing. Phillip Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen*, a canonical text in academic and Western Zen studies, gives great importance to the power of breathing and its central role in Zen Buddhist discipline and training:

> Zazen practice for the student begins with counting the inhalations and exhalations… the blissful state which flows from concentration on the breath and the value of breathing in terms of spiritual development are lucidly set forth [in *Foundation of Tibetan Mysticism*]: 'From this state of perfect mental and physical equilibrium and its resulting inner harmony grows that serenity and happiness

> which fills the whole body with a feeling of supreme bliss like the refreshing coolness of a spring that penetrates the entire water of a mountain lake.' (Kapleau 12)

The addressed "you" of the "The Asthmatic" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 64) tries to use controlled breathing to counteract the extreme anxiety he undergoes throughout the poem, but clearly fails as he constantly "cannot breathe." This motif is revisited throughout the poem at moments of intense anxiety, such as when the speaker—the Zen master—asserts that the addressee [cannot breathe] because you let the world come between you and me… [and] because of an idea of the calm breath." In both these instances the master shows that the addressee's binary approach to thinking is at the root of his suffering. Between the many recitations of the master's "you cannot breathe" in the poem are passages that explore the psychic paralysis that arises from desire and longing—sources of anxiety that the Zen master diagnoses in each line. The central concerns of each utterance pertain to vanity, women, control and fears of death:

> You cannot breathe. Because you have begun to worship time… You cannot breathe. Because this world is yours and it's not yours… You cannot breathe. Because you want to choose the way…You cannot breathe… Because you will never have the beautiful one… Because you love conquering… You cannot breathe…. Because you have a God of justice. You cannot breathe. Because justice is immediate and flawless…You cannot breathe. (64-65)

Several existential fears can be derived from the above lines, all of which have to do with delusions of mastery and self-control. In consideration to the Judaic "God of justice" that is "flawless," many of the concerns elucidated by the Zen master, such as worries about the addressee's own mortality, the eternal struggle of "conquering" women, and even breathing itself, can (unlike God) never be mastered and therefore invoke anxiety and asthma. Asthma is,

of course, the central metaphor of the poem: it symbolizes how spiritual vacuity and attachments are to well-being as asthma is to good breathing. The critique of desire and suffering are interlinked here in a way that is distinctly Buddhist: until the addressee can recognize that his own attachments are faulty (as the speaker constantly prompts him to do) he will fail at controlled breathing and remain in a state of anxiety.

Strikingly, the commentary section of the "The Asthmatic" introduces a cynical voice that attempts to undermine the volume's writer, or the "man and… his book" (65), by scorning said writer's efforts of confronting his own suffering and growth. The cynic first points out that the Zen master's instructions in "The Asthmatic" "can induce a suffocating attack in those who are prone to express the condition of profound indecision" and that such anxiety "betrays" the addressee's supposed "subversive and imperial intention of a mind that wishes to enslave existence in the name of sweet salvation." Ironically, the cynical voice attempts to undermine the addressee of his power because, for the first time, it is the cynical voice who feels threatened. The reference to breathing techniques and the cynic's aggressive reaction to the failed *zazen* suggest that the addressee's engagement with Zen training is genuine and meaningful. This is further evidenced by the fact that, despite failing to follow the Zen master's breathing instructions correctly, the addressee is not rejected, but instead corrected. Such a moment of mentorship and guidance is the trigger that calls the cynical voice to action because (as we will again see in later poems) Zen training and its emphasis on non-binary modes of thought disempowers the cynical voice who very much depends on dualisms to deconstruct and criticize the world.

By the last sections of *Death of a Lady's Man* we are more explicitly introduced to Roshi—a generic and honorary Zen Buddhist title that has various meanings, but is most commonly used to refer to a learned or respected master and teacher. Roshi's influence as a

figure who guides from the shadows is hinted at throughout the volume, such as in "The Beetle," where it can be assumed that the beetle is linked to Roshi's Buddhist training or that he is the poem's speaker, and in the case of "The Asthmatic," where controlled breathing is a Zen technique likely passed on to the speaker by Roshi. Roshi makes an appearance explicitly in the volume twice (he likely speaks unannounced elsewhere in the volume, however). Each of his appearances signifies a major encounter that is representative of genuine Buddhist discipline and training. These scenes are accompanied by moments that depict different Cohen personas experiencing impactful emotional responses to Roshi's Zen riddles, or, as they are traditionally called in Zen studies, *koans*. Roshi guides the different Cohen figures by offering them introspection and a mirror to the self through the very indirect method of *koan* questions—questions that generally focus on matters outside the realm of morality. This training is a representation of *dokusan*, or "going alone to the teacher" (Kapleau 14), and is a Zen practice where students are sat together in a room until a Zen master (usually in a separate room) beckons them individually with the ringing of a bell.[32] The student is then given a *koan* riddle to meditate on or answer. Both "The Beetle" and "The Asthmatic" depict variations on this type of training.

In "Formal in His Thought of Her" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 170) the persona of the golden-boy poet from Cohen's earlier works, stuck in a cycle of women, fame, depression, and artistic production, is depicted from the perspective of an anonymous cynical speaker. The voice of the speaker fixates on his analysis of this ladies' man/golden-boy persona and mockingly points out that the writer "will never have" an anonymous (or idealized) "woman" as he is stuck "listening… to the crickets [as] his clocks [go] in and out of sync." The speaker then quickly shows that the writer is "formal in his thought of her" and asserts that now "she does not

[32] Kapleau discusses the rules and expectations of *dokusan* in *The Three Pillars of Zen* (Kapleau 14-15) and emphasizes how important *dokusan* is for practitioners of the Rinzai school. The Rinzai school is one of two remaining branches of Zen and is the branch which Roshi's zendo was (in its own way) associated with. *Dokusan* also occurs in another poem in this volume, "Formal in His Thought of Her" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 170).

overwhelm him with her absence / She does not keep him raw as she did once." Unlike the desire for the anonymous Chinese girl in "The Event" and "Daily Commerce," the non-attachment expressed by the speaking voice on behalf of the writer is robust and final in its choice; there is no sexual imagery lingering, or verbose claims about knowing anyone's future. The cynical speaker then offers to confront the writer's "pain" with alcohol, a substance that can cloud judgment, detach the writer falsely from his suffering, and make him indifferent (a destructive form of detachment); the offer is, however, rejected. For the first time, the reader is presented with a figure who is more concerned with existential symbols (the crickets and clocks) than he is with women. This troubles the speaker, who in defiance, pulls "us" (the readers) away from the student with the same promise of alcohol that was earlier rejected.

> He is as tired of his longing as her absence
> and so are we. Let's go drink
> and leave him to his altars and his incense and his crickets
> and his clocks going in and out of sync.

These lines depict the writer, now a practiser of Zen discipline, attempting to integrate his "longing." In expressing his tiredness of "longing" the speaking voice shows that the writer is attempting to remove himself from his own cycle of suffering by isolating the source of his pain and incorporating it constructively into his life. His success is unclear, however, as the cynic's voice lingers on by the end of the poem. This inward-looking moment concerning the speaker and writer marks a major shift in the volume's Zen poems and Cohen's use of cynical voices. For the first time, the cynic acts defensively, not so much lambasting the writer, but mocking him in order to protect his own fragile ego and ignore the possibility that the writer is experiencing genuine growth that may strengthen him against further manipulations at the hands of the cynical voice.

It is at this point that Roshi appears for the first time in the volume, in the accompanying commentary of "Formal in His Thought of Her," where he pours the Cohen figure a drink.[33] In this passage we see Roshi undermine the cynical Cohen figure without being forceful. The alcohol is a recurring motif symbolizing the cynical Cohen figure's desperation. Roshi asks the Cohen figure to write a poem about crickets, to which the Cohen figure says he already has. Roshi then constructs two separate poems at the Cohen figure's instigation, one in which the cricket has a "cricket girlfriend" (170) and another in which the cricket is alone, seeking a lover. The Cohen figure shows overt preference for the first poem by saying "That's pretty good, Roshi," and disdain for the second poem by saying "I don't like that one." The final Roshi poem depicts the cricket as alone but not lonely (a koan like description of someone unattached to love but non-attached about it), as it "is with" an undefined "you." The Cohen figure rejects this poem too, and a silence ensues. Roshi then says "Yah Kone…You should write more sad," which likely pushes the Cohen figure to think about his own cricket-like relationship to art and women.

The Cohen narrator's definitive rejection of the third Roshi poem exposes the power of the *koan* technique, as this rejection, unlike the second one, bears far more emotional weight and gravity because of the ensuing silence. When Roshi concludes that the Cohen figure should "write more sad" he is using an adapted *koan* to try and guide the Cohen figure past his stymied logic. Asking a Cohen figure to write "more sad" is, given the context of Cohen's works, like asking the colour blue to be more blue: the absurdity and profundity of the request acts as a *koan* by forcing the Cohen figure to think laterally. Notably, after these three judgmental remarks, the Cohen figure has no answer for Roshi. As aforementioned, *koans* are specifically designed to present the student with amoral questions that force students to think with ingenuity and originality. This is best seen in "The End of My Life in Art" (193) where Roshi explicitly asks

[33] Notably, this poem was renamed "Roshi" in *Stranger Music* in order to make Roshi the prominent figure of the poem. This is discussed on page 79.

the Cohen figure to consider his depression as a "particular trance… he [Roshi] demonstrated the particular trance by the question: What is the source of this world?" The mix of metaphor and ambiguity in "Formal in His Thought of Her" (170) and its subsequent riddle to "write more sad" allows the Cohen persona to see himself as similar to the cricket, which he was not able to do as of the third poem; this insight indicates a genuine and powerful experience with the *koan* method. Unlike previous poems, the narrating Cohen voice that rejects Roshi's poems, is utterly silenced; through Roshi's storytelling and mimicry, the Cohen figure is stifled and left reflecting on the root of his desires.

"My Life in Art" (190) is a pivotal moment in the volume illustrating a desperate Cohen speaker on the verge of suicide who then seeks out Roshi for guidance. As the speaker in "My Life in Art" struggles with his depression, he contemplates ending his life in a similar alcohol induced trance that echoes the self-destructive celebrity voice's depression in *Songs of Love and Hate* and *The Energy of Slaves*. Similar to the speaker in "Dress Rehearsal Rag," the speaker in "My Life in Art" considers using a razor to kill himself (another motif in Cohen's mid-career oeuvre) and talks to himself in the mirror, this time, however, asking if there will be "a man in the mirror to whisper courage when I shave and to tell me once again about the noble ones who conquered all of this" (192). This passage can be read optimistically: that Cohen is overcoming his urge to suicide. However, it can equally be said that "the noble ones" he seeks in his monologue are the ones who have successfully committed suicide. The word fear explicitly appears several times in the poem, first when the speaker asserts that "I am frightened. I don't know why. Yesterday I was so frightened that I could hardly hand a Red Needle to a monk on Mt. Baldy" and later when he describes himself as "the forty-year-old artist, famous, happy, frightened" (191). It is at this point of fear, one where a suicidal speaker contemplates ending his

life, that the Cohen figure immediately seeks the help of Roshi—a meeting which takes place in the poem's commentary.

Roshi uses an altered *koan* method once again during his second appearance, in the commentary to "The End of My Life in Art,"[34] in order to influence the Cohen figure's self-awareness. Roshi is introduced "hanging from a branch by his teeth"—a clear reference to a thirteenth-century *koan* by the Buddhist master Wumen from *The Gateless Gate,* in which a monk is asked a question as he is hanging from a tree by his teeth (*The Gateless Gate* 31). This most important of poems in *Death of a Lady's Man* stands out as it, firstly, shows Cohen's esoteric knowledge of an ancient *koan*, and secondly, depicts the Cohen figure seeing beyond his own self-destructive pattern of thoughts for the first time. After "the moronic frivolity and despair of hours in the mirror" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 193), which are clearly those described in poem proper, the Cohen figure is unable to resist laughing at the sight of his Zen master playing Cohen's own guitar while he (Roshi) hangs on to a branch by his teeth. Mirrors are an important motif that Cohen uses to represent both his suicidal voice and Roshi's guidance. Roshi's mirroring has the opposite effect of the mirrors that surround the suicidal Cohen personas: instead of promoting suicidality, Roshi shows Cohen versions of himself meant to help him understand his self image, and his thought patterns. At different moments, Roshi becomes a mirror by mimicking the Cohen figure's guitar playing, by cooking food for him, and—as he does in "Formal in His Thought of Her"— by writing Cohen a poem. Roshi's puzzling techniques are like *koans*: Roshi's absurd behaviour is in itself a question which the Cohen figure must contemplate in silence.

Roshi's approach to the *koan* and his role as a guiding figure moves Cohen to self-reflection and introspection. In response to Roshi's advice that one must "destroy particular self

[34] Later retitled "Roshi Again" in *Stranger Music*.

and absolute appears," the speaker notes that "he [Roshi] spoke to me gently. I waited for a rebuke. It didn't come. I waited because there is a rebuke in every other voice but his. He rang the bell. I bowed and left" (193). Eugen Herrigel notes in his classic Zen studies book *Zen in the Art of Archery* that the role of the Roshi is to guide the student, not shame him. The master is supposed to be a father figure who adapts to his students and does all he can to bring out their inner *Buddha Nature* so that they can excel at their practice of, in Herrigel's case, archery (Herrigel 55-57). In the second half of "The End of my Life in Art," the speaker, now returned to Roshi "after several disagreeable hours in the mirror" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 193), sees that his master "hung from the branch again… [he is now] look[ing] down fearfully. He was afraid of falling." There is something utterly frightening in this moment for the speaker, who internalizes his master's fear, seeing it become his own; Roshi forces the speaker to see himself as a man hanging on to his guitar (a metaphor for his celebrity) while hanging on by his teeth and about to fall to his death. Here, having watched Roshi mimic his guitar playing, the speaker comes to the realization that he is the one hanging from the branch and that it is he who is locked in a cycle of fear and desire for fame that is symbolically framed by Roshi's performance. His obsession with fame and desire has him clinging to life by his teeth. The Cohen figure seems to have achieved a serious form of clarity—albeit through an entirely negative experience. The "despair" which so many of the earlier works are concerned with is finally visible to the speaker who now sits outside of this one particular cycle of suffering. Roshi's act, in its subtlety and absurdity, conveys a message to Cohen that allows him to see himself as separate from his toxic attachments to fame.

From this point onwards the suicidal, nihilistically cynical, and despairing voice never returns as a powerful speaker in Cohen's works. "How to Speak Poetry" is one example of a changed speaker and his take on poetry and performance. In the poem, the concept of non-

attachment is expressed through commentary on modes and methods of speaking poetry. The narrator uses the example of

> …the word butterfly. To use this word it is not necessary to make the voice weigh less than an ounce or equip it with small dusty wings. It is not necessary to invent a sunny day or a field of daffodils. It is not necessary to be in love or to be in love with butterflies. The word butterfly is not a real butterfly. If you confuse the two items people have the right to laugh at you. Do not make so much of the word… The word butterfly is merely data. (196)

This passage signifies the speaking voice's understanding that one need not live an experience to create art out of it, or more specifically, that faulty attachments to words and images, as is seen in Cohen's use of control in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, are a source of longing, pain, and egotism. Just as one need not be locked in a cycle of despair and desire to understand or produce genuine art, so does the speaking voice realize that words are not themselves real, but only symbols. This is made explicit when the speaking voice asks the addressee to "Never act out words. Never try to leave the floor when you talk about flying." In this moment the speaker is encouraging non-attachment to language. He is not indifferent to words but recognizes them for what they are and treats them as such. They are coins, counters, markers; they are *not* the world, people, lovers, or war victims. The singer who loves the power of words is playing with illusions and by extension is damaging the real world. This realization marks a major leap from Cohen's earlier Modernist, aestheticizing and Orientalising habits, to a more nuanced understanding of language and imagery informed by his experiences with Zen and Roshi.

Part of the speaker's role in "How to Speak Poetry" is to confront the cynical figures of previous poems. He says as much when he addresses the cynic by saying that "If ambition and the hunger for applause have driven you to speak about love you should learn how to do it

without disgracing yourself or the material" (196). Through a Zen-like discipline the speaker is able to find his voice and restrain himself from the world of dark desires and celebrity by choosing to "respect the privacy of the material" and show "discipline… not [to] violate." The speaker rejects the fantasy of the cynic's greed, as "It cannot promote your reputation for sensitivity. You are not a stud. You are not a killer lady. All this junk about the gangsters of love" (197-198). The speaker instead proposes that they (both the speaker and the addressed cynic) now become "students of discipline," that they "should not act out words [as] words die when you act them out, they wither, and we are left with nothing but your ambition" (198). In the last section of the poem the narrator considers the importance of integrating the cynic—who is now weak, tired, and defeated, but open to instruction—by stating that a good poet must "avoid the flourish…Do not be afraid to be weak…Do not be ashamed to be tired…now come into my arms. You are the image of beauty." The speaker's embrace of weakness is reminiscent of the master's call to mercy in "The Beetle." For the first time we see the speaker preach Zen discipline and hear a voice, a unified Cohen speaker signaled by two Cohen figures falling into one another's arms, express self-love, mercy, and acceptance with confidence. In showing that he, the complete speaker, can separate himself from the pleasure and power of his own language—which is to say his desire for control—the non-attached voice of the speaker is positive and fully engaged with an ethical awareness oriented towards optimism and the good.

The speaker's instructions for an exit from the cycle of suffering, something that arguably happens at the end of "How to Speak Poetry," is best understood through the concept of *samsara*, which is the Buddhist term for cycles of suffering (or more specifically, life and death). Alan Watts's *The Way of Zen* defines *samsara* as "the everlasting Round of birth-and-death… which goes on and on for as long as a man tries in any way whatsoever to grasp at his own life" (Watts 45):

> For the one that has self knowledge, there is no duality between self and world…objects are relational, like two sides of a coin, so that when one pursues the other retreats. This is why the egocentric attempt to dominate the world, to bring as much of the world as possible under the control of the ego, has only to proceed for a little while before it raises the difficulty of the ego's controlling self… Thus the desire for perfect control, of the environment and of oneself, is based on a profound mistrust of the controller… From it therefore arises a futile grasping or controlling of life which is pure self-frustration, and the pattern of life which follows is the vicious circle which in Hinduism and Buddhism is called *samsara*, the Round of birth-and-death. (48)

Watts gives us a language to understand Cohen's interest in Buddhism. The pursuit of control itself causes a cycle of suffering—the same cycle, I believe, that I showed in Cohen's earlier works. What makes Buddhism so appealing to Cohen is that it offers the promise of release from *samsara*. Notably, Cohen's turn towards God in *Book of Mercy* and *The Flame* can also be read as a consequence of having relinquished control through Buddhist discipline; giving up the "desire for perfect control" makes way for accepting God, or as Watts puts it, "the controller." In the most meaningful Buddhist moments in *Death of a Lady's Man*, Roshi or some other guiding figure persuades Cohen to break the self-destructive cycles of celebrity, desire, and lust. Zen Buddhist training, therefore, attempts to steer the Cohen figure out of his despair by offering him tangible methods through which to remove himself from the destructive patterns of his controlling desires.

Cohen's works of the early seventies explore themes of despair and guilt for failing to live up to the responsibilities of the front-line poet and a frustration with being unable to exit self-destructive patterns of perverse desire. These feelings worsen in *The Energy of Slaves*,

where the voice of a corrupted and cynical speaker dominates the volume. Zen Buddhist training, which we glimpse in *Death of a Lady's Man*, changes the later poems by giving the Cohen speaker tools (such as breathing techniques and *koan* riddles) with which to address his own problems regarding guilt, suffering, and attachment. Through Roshi's mentorship Cohen is able to begin pursuing non-attachment which not only helps him discard the Orientalist mode of writing found in his first three books, but also makes him (through his personas) less aware of his own anxious thoughts. This allows him to remove himself from a pattern of cyclic suffering—for a while. By the end of *Death of a Lady's Man*, the final volume of this period, the speaker returns to cynicism, albeit with far less vitriol, and with a tone that seems almost playful. "Final Examination" (212) has a speaker "hobbling with his love" towards death in what is both a cynical take on life, but also a deeply comedic and calm one as well. It is a voice that will dominate Cohen's later works and is, as its placement in *Death of a Lady's Man* suggests, the product of Buddhist training.

Chapter Three

Towards a Non-Attached Cynicism: Buddhist Resonances

Buddhist discipline remains visible in the post-*Book of Mercy* works and is most pronounced in the speaking voices of *Book of Longing.* The speakers in *Book of Longing*, despite their restored cynicism after the language of prayer in *Book of Mercy*, exhibit patience and calm unlike any other cynical voice found in earlier works. The reappearance of the cynical voice in *Book of Longing* and the near-complete absence of explicit Buddhist references in *Book of Mercy* have led many critics to ignore the role of Buddhism in Cohen's life completely. Peter Jaeger is an exception to the above rule. He argues that Buddhism's role in Cohen's final works is temporary and primarily there to guide Cohen towards a renewal of his Judaism. I argue that Buddhism is far deeper than Jaeger suggests and that Buddhist ideas remain perpetually at play in Cohen's final works. From there, I move on to *Stranger Music* where I show that every Buddhist poem from *Death of a Lady's Man* was carefully selected to be included in the anthology—they are, however, edited. These edits highlight Cohen's awareness of Buddhism in the period of the early 1990's and suggest that Buddhism's portrayal and presence in the revised poems was essential. The final section of the chapter looks at *Book of Longing* and the return of the cynical voice. Unlike the cynical voice of the 1970's, readers are shown a persona that is tempered and controlled in his cynicism. This transformation of the cynical voice is a direct consequence of Cohen's integration of Buddhist concepts like non-attachment, non-binary thought, and non-linear time into his writing. Buddhist training tempers the cynical voice of Cohen's later works, which allows other more balanced voices to express themselves: it gives them grounds to mock, contemplate, and interpret the world through a genuine lens of discipline informed by many years of meditation on the nature of suffering, isolation, time, and desire. The cynical voice of the later works is, unlike the earlier cynical voices of *Energy of Slaves* and

Death of a Lady's Man, able to experience joy, playfulness, and meaning: the cynical voice's transformation represents a distinct and powerful element of Cohen's writing style that is intrinsically tied to Buddhism.

Book of Mercy, released six years after *Death of a Lady's Man* and during Cohen's study under Roshi on Mount Baldy in California, is a strange book that is peculiarly optimistic, full of prayer and, of all Cohen's works, least presents the recurring cynical persona or any Buddhist and East Asian references. This is, however, not to say that Buddhism or the cynical voice are completely absent from the volume: Buddhism and cynicism appear during moments that explore ideas of non-dualism. The opening poem in *Book of Mercy*, later renamed "I Stopped to Listen" in *Stranger Music*, begins with the lines

> I stopped to listen, but he did not come. I began again with a sense of loss. As this sense deepened I heard him again. I stopped stopping and I stopped starting, and I allowed myself to be crushed by ignorance. This was a strategy, and didn't work at all. Much time, years were wasted in such a minor mode. I bargain now. (*Book of Mercy* "1") [35]

These first lines suggest the speaker is aware of his own dualistic thought process (he "began" and "stopped" and so on). Dualistic thinking is shunned in Buddhist philosophy, and many of the great Zen masters wrote about overcoming worldviews which divide reality into subject/object relationships such as that of the speaker.[36] The speaker then asserts that his dualistic thinking "allow[s him] to be crushed by ignorance," not unlike the crushing of previous speakers from "The Beetle" and poem "46" in *The Energy of Slaves*. The speaker's realization that his thoughts,

---

[35] The poems in *Book of Mercy* are not titled, but instead numbered.

[36] These concepts are spoken about at length in *The Gateless Gate* (a thirteenth-century Zen text) and the writings of many Zen masters such as Shi-en, Dokyo, Dõgen, Saigyo, Chomei, and Kenko, who often talk about the "trap" of dualistic subject/object thinking. Reference to these Zen masters can be found in the bibliography under *Three Japanese Buddhist Monks* (Kenko), *Writing from the Zen Masters* (Huikai), *The Essential Dõgen* (Dõgen), and *A Cup of Sake Beneath the Cherry Tree* (Kenko).

or more specifically the cycle his thoughts recur in, “didn’t work at all” allows him to reflect on the “years that were wasted in such a minor mode.” I believe this mention of failure is a reference to the cynical and nihilistic voices found in *The Energy of Slaves* and *Death of a Lady’s Man*. Instead of resorting to nihilism and cynicism, the speaker of *Book of Mercy,* through his reflecting Buddhist wisdom concerning non-dualism, realizes that he can “bargain” and negotiate with himself and with reality. “Bargain[ing]” also allows the God-like figure being addressed in the poem to “move towards his [rightful] throne.” As a volume, *Book of Mercy* is largely concerned with Cohen’s Judaism and is the only book in Cohen’s oeuvre to focus on it so heavily. Nevertheless, this rare Buddhist reference in *Book of Mercy* show us that key moments of Buddhist philosophy and experience penetrate the surface of the text. Buddhism plays an essential role in convincing Cohen that differing philosophies of the universe that would otherwise put a Buddhist worldview at odds with a Jewish one can co-exist through the act of bargaining and non-absolute, non-dualistic thought.

Peter Jaeger’s essay “From Roshi to Rashi: Leonard Cohen’s Interfaith Dialogue” argues that Cohen’s Buddhism is secondary to his Judaism and largely rejected in *Book of Mercy*. In the essay, he claims that “even though the text [*Book of Mercy*] includes allusions to Zen... the text is primarily oriented by references to the Jewish tradition” (422). This is argued through an interpretation of poem 21 (in conjunction with other sparse Zen references in *Book of Mercy*) where the struggle between master and speaker is seen as a catalyst for the speaking voice to move towards a deeper understanding of his Judaism. The student in one instance accuses the teacher (likely a rare reference in *Book of Mercy* to Cohen’s Zen mentor, Roshi, as both the teacher and Roshi teach through contradictions) of snake-oil salesmanship when he states that “at a high price he [Roshi] sold me water beside the river.” When confronted by the speaker, “he [Roshi] puked in disgust when I swelled without filling. He sank his tiger teeth into everything of

mine that I refused to claim... when he was certain that I was incapable of self-reform, he flung me across the fence of the Torah." As a volume of poetry largely concerned with Jewish identity and Jewish themes, the appearance of Roshi and his emphasis on pushing Cohen closer to Judaism signifies, as Jaeger claims, an important interaction between both faiths. For Jaeger, Cohen's training and Buddhist lifestyle are important because they are experiences which *push* Cohen (just as Roshi flings the speaker) to engage in a serious interfaith dialogue between Buddhism and Judaism that primarily moves Cohen closer to Judaism. According to Jaeger, Cohen does this by rejecting the Zen wisdom sought in *Death of a Lady's Man* (particularly the *koan* method) by the time of *Book of Mercy*.

> Instead of employing indeterminate Zen-like riddles as a means to break down rational consciousness and gain spiritual enlightenment, Cohen's next book of poems, the *Book of Mercy* (1984), represents spirituality as a pattern of sin, repentance, and hoped-for blessing.... Although *Book of Mercy*'s largely Judaeo-Christian perspective abandons the juxtaposition of mutually contradictory passages that puzzle the reader with undecidable meanings – the Zen 'great death' of Cohen's previous book – oblique references to Zen remain embedded in this later text. (424)

This "embedded" Buddhism, therefore, remains present in the text only to *move* Cohen towards his Jewish identity.

> Cohen's prophetic desire for social justice, voiced in the language of the Hebrew Bible, seems far more politically critical than his Zen-based paradoxes and koan-like poetry... the result is a greater stress on social critique and a movement beyond the personal, self-absorbed expression. (430)

For Jaeger, Cohen abandons the "self-absorbed expression" of Buddhism and its *koans* as part of his move towards Judaism. Buddhism for Jaeger, therefore, only serves a limited and secondary purpose in Cohen's life and works.

Jaeger's assertion that Buddhism is fundamentally only present to enhance Cohen's relationship to Judaism fails to show how Buddhist ideas interact with Judaism in *continuous* ways that transcend their limited reference in *Book of Mercy*. The struggle between master and student in poem "21" does not conclude with a rejection of Buddhism in favour of Judaism. The poem's profoundly ambiguous reference to being "flung across the fence of the Torah" instead shows how, through Roshi, Buddhism is *capable* of changing the student's perspective—in this one case, to help him better understand his Judaism. When the speaker of "21" refers to earlier poems from *Death of a Lady's Man*, he asserts that Roshi "referred me to the crickets" (a reference to "Formal in His Thought of Her" among other *Death of a Lady's Man* poems and earlier poems from *The Spice-Box of Earth*).[37] This reference implies that the speaking voice is reflecting on his adoption of Zen Buddhist practice and what it means to him. From the beginning of the poem to its end, Buddhism is in dialogue with the speaker's Judaism, just as it is with the speaker's identity more generally. The misguided hostility uttered by the speaker shows that Roshi's role is that of a contradictory mentor who is, despite the speaker's anger, able to realign and orient the speaker towards renegotiating his own identity. The language of barriers, including that of flinging the speaker across "the fence of the Torah" is a familiar motif in Zen Buddhism and is reminiscent of the *The Gateless Gate,* where notions of metaphorically passing through unpassable barriers (as *koans* are meant to help one do) play a central role. The metaphor highlights the non-dualistic and alogical wisdom of Zen that, ironically (given Jaeger's claims

[37] In *Death of a Lady's Man* crickets also appear in the commentary to "The Promise," and in "The Night I Joined." In *The Spice-Box of Earth* crickets appear in "Song to Make Me Still" within—as I argue in my first chapter—a Buddhist context that will foreshadow Cohen's later interest in a Buddhist philosophy of time.

about Cohen abandoning Zen methods like the *koan*), is exactly what helps the speaker engage with his Jewish identity more productively. While non-binary thought is at the root of the speaker's engagement with Judaism, Buddhism in *Book of Mercy* is far deeper than Jaeger suggests and is *not solely* there to serve the single purpose of moving Cohen towards Judaism.

Poem "12," or as it is later called in *Stranger Music* and *Fifteen Poems*, "I Draw Aside the Curtain," is a unique and peculiar example of a deeply cynical and nihilistic voice (reminiscent of previous cynical voices from *The Energy of Slaves* and *Death of a Lady's Man*) who confronts and implores a Roshi-like figure to help him. The vitriol of the speaker's words is unmatched by any other speaker in *Book of Mercy*. His cynicism, as the poem's later title implies, unmasks a rotten and meaningless understanding of life and existence. Lines such as "the sweet questions of the sly," "swim through the blood, father of mercy" and "broadcast your light through the apple of pain" imply that behind every cynical word that the speaker utters in his poems is a sinister reality enforced by a cruel universe (or God). The speaker then suddenly asks for help from a Roshi-like figure, whom he calls "O magnet of the falling cherry petals," so that the figure will "direct me out of this" suffering and nihilism. The voice begs the figure, likely Roshi (given the East Asian imagery used to describe him), to "make a truce between my disgust and the impeccable landscape of fields and milky towns… [and] Crush my swollen smallness, infiltrate my shame." These lines further show that Buddhism is in *constant* dialogue with the speaker's identity, as they suggest that it is with the help of Roshi that the speaker is able to "make truce" between conflicting worldviews and overcome his impulse to be consumed by the nihilistic cynicism of his relationship to Judaism and its disturbing "father of mercy" swimming "through the blood." The use of the word "crush" also appears in Buddhist poems from *Death of a Lady's Man*, such as in "The Beetle" and "Formal in His Thought of Her"—among other poems from other volumes including poem "1" of *Book of Mercy*. "I Draw Aside

the Curtain" is a rare example of a poem that directly explores a confrontation between two visions of religious wisdom that the speaker is unable to live up to. By the end of the poem, the speaker, talking to a God-like figure, states that "I have driven a wedge into your world, fallen on both sides of it… count me back to your mercy." The cynic's reliance on dualism, or as he calls it, a "wedge [in the] world," fails to help him understand God and the universe: only Buddhism's non-dualism can help him. Together, poems "1" and "12" show readers that Buddhism and Buddhist ideas are an integral part of the larger project that is *Book of Mercy* and that its inclusion signals Buddhism's necessary role in Cohen's development as an artist and a person—and not solely as a vehicle to move him closer to Judaism. Buddhism is far from "oblique" (Jaeger 424): *Book of Merc*y's poems are a project of fusion between Buddhist ideas and Jewish language.

Cohen's following books, *Stranger Music* and *Book of Longing* (as well as the posthumous collection *The Flame*) all contain strong Buddhist references. *Stranger Music* is particularly interesting because the anthology contains reworked and edited poems from *Death of a Lady's Man* which alter Roshi's role as mentor into a father-like icon and rewrites the language of the cynical voice in order to make it sound more controlled and tempered. Robert De Young is one critic who inadvertently points towards these changes in his essay "'My Black Pages': Reconsidering *Death of a Lady's Man* and *Death of a Ladies' Man*" when he claims that

> *Death of a Lady's Man* arguably has been accorded an extraordinary level of attention by Cohen... Even as recently as 1993, during preparations for the publication of the anthology called *Stranger Music,* Cohen returned yet again [to edit] the text... Cohen himself regards *Death of a Lady's Man* as an important literary enterprise and one worthy of his—and our—continued attention. (*Intricate Preparations* 126-127)

Yet-De Young and other critics are silent on the question of why Cohen returns to the *Death of a Lady's Man* poems so eagerly in *Stranger Music*. Little has been said, as far as I am aware, about the alterations made to Buddhist passages in the text.

Common edits include the changing of poem titles, the removal of commentary, changing some commentaries into primary poems, and the removal of certain passages. Unlike the original text, the commentary poems are explicitly called commentaries in *Stranger Music*. The commentary poems no longer predictably follow the primary poems and only occasionally appear; large sections of "The Marriage," a poem that is particularly brutal and cynical, are missing; emphasis on the word "have," which is underlined in the original commentary to "Another Room" (*Stranger Music* 225), is no longer underlined in *Stranger Music* (this makes the woman's accusations against the speaker in the poem—that of having "disturbed [her] heart"—less pointed). Generally, most of these adjustments have to do with self-censorship and a lightening of both the different speaking voices' vitriolic and possessive language and their disposition towards suicide. In the revised commentary on "Death to This Book" (224) the cynical commentator's question, "Does he really wish to negate his life and work?", is completely cut out. Ironically, the paragraph maintains its assertion that the writer "did not quarrel with his voices... which should not be confused with an Eastern trance," when it is clear that the writer did indeed "quarrel" with the cynical voice by rewriting parts of the poem. This shows that for *Stranger Music,* Cohen chooses to limit the cynical voice's presence and instead maintain a slightly more optimistic tone cultivated by Zen. The common re-arrangement of words and removal of deeply critical and uncertain voices shows that an older Cohen was concerned with muting darker representations of the cynical speakers in such a way as to

partially mask the radical cynicism and the suicidal depression that fueled his writing during the period of *Death of a Lady's Man*.[38]

Of these edits, the most relevant to our purposes are the ones linked to Zen Buddhism and Roshi. Notably, all the important Zen poems in *Death of a Lady's Man* are kept in *Stranger Music*: "The Beetle," "The Asthmatic," the commentary on "The Rose" (renamed "Not Going Back"—its previous status as commentary obscured), "Formal in His Thought of Her" (renamed "Roshi"), and the commentary to "The End of My Life in Art" (renamed "Roshi Again"), which confusingly also replaces the original poem's title from *Death of a Lady's Man*, "My Life in Art," with "The End of My Life in Art*."* The detail and thought put into the selection and modification of the poems related to Buddhism show that Buddhism, during this period of the early 1990's, continued to influence Cohen's artistic production. "The Beetle" and "The Asthmatic" (discussed above on pages 55 and 57 respectively) remain largely untouched. The only minor changes in the text are the removal of the line "stay with me" and the replacement of the word God in "The Beetle" with the reverential spelling of "G-d" in *Stranger Music*—a choice that notably emphasizes Cohen's return to Judaism during the writing of *Book of Mercy*. The inclusion of all the Buddhist poems is important because they revisit key moments in *Death of a Lady's Man* where a speaker engages with his own existential anxiety through the help of Buddhist meditation and Roshi: this revisitation manifests through mentorship and the letting go of egotistical control in "The Beetle," and by confronting anxiety through self-awareness and controlled breathing in "The Asthmatic."

---

[38] Nadel cites a letter from Roshi (sent during the period of *Death of a Lady's Man*) to Cohen asking Cohen to "give up performing and touring and come to the desert to write for two years" (Nadel 204). Cohen, "tempted," turns Roshi down because he felt going to the monastery would weaken his poetry and that he needed to have a "bleak" disposition to write well. As Nadel puts it, "Despite Cohen's ongoing and serious doubts, an inner confidence or artistic vanity surfaced… Cohen was again returning to the inescapable theme of life versus art. One of the attractions of art was that it is equated with Sex. Marriage is death" (204). Cohen was therefore aware of his own self-destructive habits and chose to continue feeding them in order to produce art during the writing period of *Death of a Lady's Man*.

Other Buddhist poems remain unedited except for their titles. One example is the commentary to "Formal in His Thought of Her" now renamed "Roshi." The poem, "Roshi," is preceded by "The Price of This Book" (as it is in the original text of *Death of a Lady's Man*), which is a poem concerned with suicide and artistic production. References in the latter to being "crushed" by a "terror that will not let me… end my life in art" if the speaker does not "keep [his] different lives apart" refer to images of crushing in "The Beetle," earlier works from *The Energy of Slaves*, and recently, poems 1 and 12 from *Book of Mercy*.[39] The inclusion of this suicidal voice, one actively considering ending "his life in art," is important for two reasons: first because this voice is largely removed in *Stranger Music*, and second because the following poem, "Roshi," explicitly addresses the fears and anxiety experienced by the speaker. By renaming the poem "Roshi" (instead of keeping its original title, "Formal in His Thought of Her") Cohen is signaling to his readers that this important exchange between student and Buddhist mentor[40] is not about women (as the original title suggests) but about Roshi's role as a father figure and guide who can calm the speaker down and have him confront his own fears and suicidal thoughts. Through the title's revision, the poem becomes an honorific portrait of Roshi where readers are admitted into the privacy of Cohen and Roshi's personal friendship.

The most significant change in the Zen poems occurs in the commentary on "The Rose," or as it is called in *Stranger Music, "*Not Going Back*"* (264). In the original poem of "The Rose" from *Death of a Lady's Man*, the speaker uses the metaphor of a rose to depict contact with genuine art and beauty. In the original commentary to "The Rose," a cynical voice claims that the earlier speaker of the poem proper has been "weakened by Zen meditation and a faultless woman" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 121) and that it is that weakness which "allows The Rose to

[39] Variations of the word "crushing" seem to appear during moments of anxiety that are later associated with Buddhism. "Crushing" is a word that somehow signifies Buddhist consciousness rising in Cohen even before his formal introduction to Buddhism (such as in "Songs of Love and Hate" and *The Energy of Slaves*).
[40] The exchange that occurs in the commentary of "Formal in His Thought of Her" is discussed on page 62.

manifest." The cynical voice, the one that frames the poem in the original *Death of a Lady's Man* text, is completely gone in *Stranger Music*. His absence masks the cycle of creative suffering that is depicted in the original poem. What readers are instead left with in *Stranger Music* is the product alone of "the Rose," which is to say, the beautiful poem left in the center of the text. The many hours of painful Zen meditation and suffering are gone. The missing sections also contain a reference to Mount Baldy, which, now gone in *Stranger Music*, obfuscates the cynical speaker's beliefs about Buddhism, which were (at the time of its writing) condescending and dismissive. As a selection, the poems of *Stranger Music* strongly enforce the idea that Buddhism is lasting and is a necessary part of what *Death of a Lady's Man* meant to a Cohen of the early 1990's.

Unlike *Book of Mercy*, or *Stranger Music, Book of Longing*, produced twenty-two years after *Book of Mercy*, is full of references to Buddhism and Roshi's role as a mentor that explore a new relationship to Buddhism unlike that of any previous work. The volume addresses themes of time, non-attachment, and release from cycles of suffering, that are distinctly Buddhist. The volume also stands out for the return of the cynical voice, this time, however, as a voice that is, in its essence, calmly non-attached. Non-attachment, as Elizabeth Harris points out in her essay "Detachment and Compassion in Early Buddhism," is different from attachment or detachment in that it is a halfway point between the two states of awareness: "the… word 'non-attachment' suggests a way of looking at both [good and bad]" (3). Non-attachment, however, is not indifference. The non-attached individual pursues what is called *brahmavihara* (Hanh 169), which is the cultivating of a sense of kindness towards others, a compassion for the world, and the ability to hold to the world without preferences for certain people over others. Non-attachment is also called *upeksha* and "means equanimity… non-discrimination, ever mindedness, and letting go." According to Hanh, a non-attached point of view is like being on

top of a mountain: you are "able to look over the whole situation, not bound by one side or the other… People who do not understand Buddhism sometimes think that *upeksha* means indifference, but true equanimity is neither cold nor indifferent" (174). The cynical voice of *Book of Longing* arguably exemplifies these traits, avoiding cold and indifferent judgements directed towards others while nevertheless preserving his cynical demeanor. Japanese Zen Buddhist literature has a long history of great Buddhist masters with peculiar characters. Saigyo, Yoshida Kenko, Wumen Huikai, and Unmon Bun'en (a Chinese Zen Buddhist) express the full gamut of human personalities ranging from kind, to meditative, to eclectic, and sometimes even abusive.[41] What their range of personalities suggests is that it is quite acceptable to portray seemingly incompatible character traits (such as being simultaneously non-attached and cynical) while maintaining *brahmavihara*.

Non-attachment manifests itself in the cynical voice of many poems in *Book of Longing*. In "Roshi at 89" (4) the cynical voice venerates Roshi and his "making war on Nothing," which is to say on the Buddhist idea of *mu.*[42] This ironic yet bold praise parallels other rebellious qualities that the speaking voice attaches to Roshi, such as Roshi's willingness to fight off death by "living with the living," his wanting "another drink" despite Zen Buddhism's prohibition on drinking, and Roshi's "making war on peace" despite being a Buddhist Monk. Unlike the earlier works, where a cynical voice would completely dismiss or undermine a life lesson in wisdom or morality—often defaulting to a pessimistic or suicidal deduction about the cosmos—the voice in this poem is able to accept Roshi while being aware of Roshi's contradictions, and without showing signs of anger or deep pessimism. The poem's speaker exemplifies non-attached

[41] These Zen masters are mostly found in *The Gateless Gate* but are also referenced in the bibliography under *Three Japanese Buddhist Monks* (Kenko), *Writing from the Zen Masters* (Huikai), *The Essential Dõgen* (Dõgen), and *A Cup of Sake Beneath the Cherry Tree* (Kenko).

[42] *Mu* is often translated as nothingness and is similar to *the way* in Taoism. Kapleau defines *mu* as the force that has taken "first rank among koans for over a thousand years… [because] mu holds itself coldly aloof from both the intellect and the imagination" (Kapleau 95).

cynicism in *Book of Longing* and does so by adopting a non-dualist view of his mentor's contradictory behaviour.

In "One of My Letters" (120) a similarly non-attached cynical voice asks that his rabbi "please forgive me" for speaking nonsense. The voice then signs off by writing: "Your Jewish brother / Jikan Eliezer." The irony of the poem is that Cohen addresses a Jewish religious figure using his Buddhist name, Jikan, alongside his Hebrew name, Eliezer. Here again we see a cynical voice make fun of religious institutions, in this case not through the mocking of Roshi's un-monk-like behaviour, but through mocking the absurdity of writing to a rabbi as a Jewish Buddhist. However, as in the previous example, this new cynical voice also highlights important truths: that Jewish-Buddhists ("Jubus") are plentiful, that Cohen has established an interfaith dialogue between the two religions, and that, despite being ironic and funny, it is possible to have both a Buddhist and Jewish identity that is contradictory (in another example of non-dualism), yet as constructive as a *koan*. Both "Roshi at 89" and "One of My Letters" contain moments of skepticism which give readers the opportunity to clearly see spiritual figures for what they are without attacking them—something an earlier cynical voice from the 1970's surely would have done brutally and without sympathy and as was done in "Formal in His Thought of Her" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 121). Instead of coldly dismissing these figures, we are shown a middle ground, one where the cynical voice points towards a greater understanding and a gratitude for experience while still mocking circumstance, roles, and the incongruity of religious leadership more generally.

In "The Collapse of Zen"—a notable poem as it was originally supposed to be *Book of Longing*'s original title—the speaker asks his audience "why should I want to be enlightened?"

after he "wedges his face into that place,"[43] which is to say, when there is the temptation of sex and female beauty. The cynical voice asks a range of serious questions that, on the surface, appear to undermine the speaker's pursuit of Zen:

> Why should I want to be enlightened?
> was there some world I failed to embrace?
> some bone I didn't steal? …
>
> when I can dribble over all the universes
> and undress a woman without touching her…
> why should I shiver on the alter of enlightenment?
> why should I want to smile forever? (19)

The speaker's power to pursue his desires is clear and convincing. Yet despite his freedom to do so, he chooses to reflect on how the above questions influence his life. Later in the poem the speaker asks himself how can he trust in Jesus when

> …the helpless are shit on again
> and the tender blooming nipple of mankind
> is caught in the pincers
> of power and muscle and money

Ironically, the cynic's questions are what free him from the trap of despair. Each meditation tempers the cynical voice by suggesting that there is always another answer or approach, and that a monastic life that rejects these questions is, as the poem's title suggests, unacceptable. By the

[43] This is an interesting use of the word "wedge" that is reminiscent of poem 12 from *Book of Mercy* and the cynical speaker who claims he has "driven a wedge into your [God's] world." It implies a forced dualism that comes off as ironic in this poem. The speaker's wedge is now explicitly associated with sexuality, and only possibly with God.

poem's closure, we see that Zen will always come and go, but that does not mean that the speaker's total Zen affiliation collapses; as the stanzas add up we readers hear over and over again how much the speaker wants enlightenment. The poem leaves us with the urgency of spiritual inquiry, and not the "wedge" of the speaker's sexual and secular desires.

The speaker expresses his newfound thoughts in "Leaving Mount Baldy" (22), where he recognizes that he "had no gift / for Spiritual Matters" and leaves the Zen Buddhist institution behind. He is immediately bombarded by "angry questions" from practitioners of Buddhism and other people about "The Ultimate Reality," which surprisingly does not antagonize the speaker. He instead laughs in the final line about how angry everyone is because they "don't like / to see old Jikan smoking." The speaker's treatment of the audience here is radically different from earlier instances where Cohen directly addresses the public. Take for example, poem "115" from *The Energy of Slaves*. In it, a cynical speaker rages at an addressee, stating that "I had to contend / with all the flabby liars [that is to say, his audience] / of the Aquarian Age" (*Energy of Slaves* 116). The speaker's tone in *Book of Longing'*s "The Ultimate Reality," however, is soft and implies a non-attached response to his audience. In the spirit of *brahmavihara,* he adopts a disposition of goodwill and good intent instead of responding with negative emotions like anger or depression. The speaker's words also mirror those of the classic Zen monks who, when faced with conflict or unanswerable questions, would often shrug, be silent, and smile. Both "The Collapse of Zen" and "Leaving Mount Baldy" depict a speaker who has power over his mind and approaches both existential and social hardships with a calm and confident Buddhist temperament.

"Early Questions" (*Book of Longing* 45) is a reflection on the speaker's initial response to Roshi's teachings—one made at the ironic distance of decades. The speaker meditates on the reason he is locked in thought on Mt. Baldy, "while I sit on the floor twisted into the Lotus

Position (which is not meant for North Americans)" listening to Roshi open a "discourse" on "The Source of All Things." Among other questions, the speaking voice asks himself why Roshi "command[s] us to talk, but then talk[s] instead?" in what is another critical representation of life on Mount Baldy. The final paragraph of the poem shows that the cynical voice is far from completely pessimistic, however. In it, he answers his own question and notably does not dismiss his own criticism. He instead offers a separate point of view that willingly acknowledges Roshi's positive influences. The answer is this:

> It is because a bell has summoned me to your room, it is because I am speechless in the honour of your company, it is because I am reeling in the fragrance of some unutterable hospitality, it is because I have forgotten all my questions, that I throw myself to the floor, and vanish into yours. (45)

This experience can best be called sublime. In articulating a response that contains words such as "speechless," "honour," "unutterable hospitality" and "vanish," the speaker shows that his training and time with Roshi are separate from all other things. The speaker has seen, felt, and attained something unique; he has (in retrospect) begun the journey of Buddhist training, mentorship, and discipline, which together will radically change the cynical speaker's disposition from nihilistic to playfully cynical. By ending the poem in this tone, and with these images, the speaker fully answers his own earlier doubts and disgruntlement: *this* feeling is why he is there, and it is enough.

Recognizing old habits that encouraged suffering appears in several other poems such as "On the Path" (120), and "Looking Through My Dreams." In "On the Path," a speaker shows that he is aware of how the cycle of artistic production and suffering dangerously fuels his works. The voice of "On the Path" is calm, not suicidal, and instead serious, accepting, and radically non-dualistic. The speaker accepts his own "rotting teeth" and his mortality. The

Buddhist frame of mind, *brahmavihara*, allows the speaker to separate himself from the things that used to worry him and allows him to let go of his anxieties and age in peace. Just as in "Leaving Mount Baldy," where the speaker chooses to react kindly to negative criticism, so in "On the Path" does the speaker accept his present reality optimistically as he "stumble[s] out again / on the path of loneliness… [with] no regrets / not one." Despite being littered with lines suggesting potential regrets, the speaker, through non-dualism, feels none.

"Looking Through My Dreams" (179) depicts a speaker thanking his "teachers" while reflecting on how he, "…for 30 years…kept coming back" to monastic life. The poem strongly suggests that the speaker finds solace in his old age and in the end of his cyclic life of artistic production when he says that "the ashes have fallen away at last / exactly where they are supposed to"—a possible reference to Cohen's famous quotation about how "poetry is just the evidence of life. If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash."[44] The lines in "Looking Through my Dreams," that "It's [Cohen's dream] merely a song / Merely a prayer," suggest song and prayer have become one (no longer separated by a dualistic view of his own poetry), and that, despite being anchored down "to the bottom of the sea," as the speaker claims to be, he is in a way free from the cycles of suffering that used to plague him.

Cycles of suffering and non-attachment are often tied to reflection and the concept of time in *Book of Longing*. "Traveling Light #31"[45] (*Book of Longing* 149), a possible reference to Cohen's poem "Travel" (*Spice-Box of Earth* 52) from *Spice-Box of Earth*, reminds us that travel has always been an important element of the speaker's cycle of artistic production. However, unlike the original "Travel," which suggests that the speaker and the woman he addresses are slaves to travel and desire, the voice of "Traveling Light #31" is at ease during his travels.

---

[44] This line is taken from the back of the DVD cover of *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man*, directed by Lian Lunson.
[45] It is worth noting that another version of the poem was later released as a song called "Traveling Light" on the album "You Want it Darker." It is also likely that "Traveling Light #31" is a precursor text to that song.

It's lovely here

So far away

I couldn't take

Another day

The songs won't come

But if they did

I'd go back home

So G-d forbid (149)

Traveling is "lovely" because it takes him "away" from his problems and, unlike earlier depictions of artistic production, does not perpetuate a cycle of suffering such as the one seen in "Travel." The speaker's tone and words are mellow, but resilient. Unlike the original "Travel"[46] which depicts "many men who [have] stopped and wept… wonder[ing] if travel leads them anywhere" (*Spice-Box of Earth* 52), the speaker of "Traveling Light #31" feels he is "not alone / I've met a few / Who were traveling" (*Book of Longing* 49) and does not pity himself or his fellow travelers. A reflection on the experience of past travel and how that knowledge has radically changed over time not only links together the concepts of time and the breaking of cycles but shows how the speaker is aware of the cycle which used to plague him earlier in his life. Like previous poems, "Traveling Light #31" explores a non-attached cynical voice who is able to meditate on, in this case, his past troubles while "traveling" without resentment or ill will.

Time takes on a distinctly Buddhist character in *Book of Longing* that is unique and unlike Cohen's earlier representations of time from *Let Us Compare Mythologies* and other early works. Cohen's portrayal of time in *Book of Longing* mirrors Buddhist philosophy primarily in

[46] For a full discussion on "Travel," see page 31.

its fusion of the past, present, and future. According to Shoson Miyamoto, a Zen philosopher and academic, Buddhist conceptions of time can be traced back to the Sanskrit language.

> To introduce the theory of time in Buddhism, let us refer to the Sanskrit and Pali words signifying "time."…*Samaya* [one Sanskrit word for time] means a coming together, meeting, contract, agreement, opportunity, appointed time or proper time… it is the word samaya—coming together—which is most frequently employed in the Buddhist scriptures. For instance, almost all of the sutras begin with the word [*Samaya*]." (Miyamoto 118)

These are the linguistic roots that connect Buddhist thought to the concept of an eternal present. Miyamoto goes on to describe the various schools of Buddhist thought on time—be they Theravada, Abhidharmist, Pali, or Mahayana—but shows that many schools rejected the idea of linear time, and instead "emphasized the 'present' or 'now' in life and ignored the past and future" (119). Zen Buddhism falls within this non-linear idea of time. Miyamoto cites a poem by the seventeenth-century Zen master Shojo Rouin to further show how, for the Zen Masters, the Zen Buddhist perspective on time was enmeshed in their art: "Just think of present things, The past cannot return, Tomorrow is hidden from us" (122). Zen Buddhist practice itself encourages meditation on the nature of time and, as Miyamoto explains,

> From the attainment of *arhatship* down to the satori of Zen and the single moment of the faith-experience of Shinran (1173-1262), there is no kind of religious time which is not centered upon this first great attainment of Nirvana. This is also true of the Buddhist concept of eternity. (121)

These lines suggest that all reality is tied to *nirvana* and that all human consciousness eternally exists from a present point (called *kalopadhi*). By focusing on Zen Buddhist ideas of time in *Book of Longing,* Cohen addresses the past and future from a present state that helps him let go

of particular cycles of suffering that appear regularly throughout his earlier works. This letting go of cycles of suffering notably relates to control and celebrity, but more importantly, to the relationship between himself and his now departed mother.

The Buddhist conceptualization of time and the present play an important role in two of *Book of Longing*'s three poems concerning Cohen's mother. The first poem, "I Miss My Mother" (*Book of Longing* 72), deals with yearning for a lost past while reflecting on the speaker's mother's past words about the future. In this poem the speaker imagines "bringing [his mom] to India [to] buy [her] Gold and jewels" and then reminisces about how "she was right about everything / Including my foolish guitar." Both the speaker's desire to share his present experiences in India with his mother and to let her know that his present life is just as she had predicted highlights the temporal unity of Zen that Miyamoto alludes to. The final lines, that his mother "would pat my little head / and bless my dirty song," mirror the Buddhist vision of time and show how past and future always merge into the present—in this case, the speaker's youth in Westmount is merged with his present career as a songwriter. Despite the dislocated temporality of the poem (the speaker reflects on a past figure who predicts the future while talking from the present) the speaker ties all his feelings and frames of time into a single moment that addresses his mother's timeless presence and his role as her son.

In the last poem addressed to the speaker's mother, "My Mother is Not Dead" (139), the Buddhist narrative of metempsychosis[47] is undermined. A voice cynically attacks Buddhist ideas of rebirth by immediately relinquishing all feeling for his dead mother because she "isn't really

[47] Rebirth plays a central role in many Buddhist sects including Zen Buddhism. According to Kapleau, Zen rebirth works around an idea of "various strata of heavens" (Kapleau 68) but is not debated vehemently in Zen circles. Perhaps the most famous depiction of a Buddhist afterlife and the cycle of rebirth is detailed in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which we know, according to Nadel (Nadel 212), Cohen read. In it, one must pass through different stages of death (called *bardos*) before achieving *nirvana*. One's rebirth and re-entry into *samsara* is dependant on which *bardo* one fails.

dead," because she will be reborn somewhere else and as something else. The voice exclaims that

> My Mother isn't really dead.
>
> Neither is yours.
>
> I'm so happy for you…
>
> Do you see the insects?
>
> One of them was once your dog.
>
> But do not try to pet the ant…
>
> The tree is trying to touch me.
>
> It used to be an afternoon.
>
> Mother, Mother.
>
> I don't have to miss you anymore. (139)

As with other poems that attack elements of Buddhist dogma, "My Mother is Not Dead" is a cynical rejection of Buddhist rebirth and its inherent logic. The poem—and the logic it is mocking—perverts memories of the past by undermining the significance of his mother's unique and particular life. We can then conclude that cynicism is an important element in the speaker's struggle to overcome his mother's latent presence. Also implied in the poem is an acknowledgment of the universality of present time. The speaker can (falsely) relieve himself of grief because his mother is already reborn: if time and the universe are one single point, then his mother is already everything, the trees, the dog, and the insect. Despite the poem's cynical rejection of the dogmatic idea that there is no point in mourning the dead because they are already part of an eternal cycle of life and death—which is really a single point in time—Cohen's inclusion of the poem suggests that, while he may disagree with a Buddhist interpretation of life and death (choosing instead to grieve in a way that particularizes her

memory as a Jewish or Christian would do) he still uses a Buddhist understanding of time to address his loss and help him understand his longing for, and desire to be held by his mother.

Buddhist ideas and references remain a major motif in the post-*Book of Mercy* period. Many Buddhist ideas are primarily expressed though a new and tempered cynical voice that largely defines how Buddhism is read in *Book of Longing*. Years of Roshi's mentorship and Zen Buddhist discipline allow Cohen to think and write in reference to Buddhist philosophy, as can be seen when he addresses conceptions of time, cycles of suffering, and dualistic thought. These same lessons also push Cohen away from monastic life and allow him to pioneer his own spiritual world, one that is nurtured by his time in the monastery, but not limited to it. With the help of Roshi, Cohen also finds a way to assimilate his Judaism into a more universal framework that, like his relationship to Buddhism, rejects dogmatic power structures and instead seeks deeper meaning through meditation and constructive criticism that is also free to be cynical. Buddhism's impact on the later works is also felt in Cohen's overcoming of seeming contradictions, like that of living a Jewish and Buddhist life. Cohen is perhaps best known as a poet and songwriter with the ability to blend contradictions together—or as he puts it, to merge the "holy and the broken"—which reflects how ideas like *koan*s and the Buddhist belief in the universality of all things have inspired his works and outlook. Buddhism is therefore not something to be ignored in Cohen's life and works. It must be recognized as a major influence on his writing during the latter part of his career.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored Buddhist ideas, images, and references in Cohen's poetry in the hopes of making a consistent argument about the lasting role of Buddhism in Cohen's works. The thesis begins by examining the connection between North American and Jewish American relationships to Buddhism as they relate to Cohen's own context. From there, it shows that a young Cohen, seeking power and control through language and poetry, Orientalises and borrows from the modernist literary style to write in a detached manner that does not honour or properly contextualize East Asian or Buddhist themes and ideas. Cohen's intermittent use of a cynical and malevolent voice in earlier works becomes prominent and central to his writing once he confronts the Holocaust and writes about the destruction of his own people in *Flowers for Hitler*. The moral and emotional detachment uttered by the cynical voices of these texts is exacerbated in the consequent period of Cohen's career, one defined by his growing fame as a musician and his personal lust for power, women, and control. Consumed by cynicism, the Cohen personas in *Energy of Slaves* and *Death of a Lady's Man* pursue material pleasures (sometimes even pedophilia) that leave them miserable and locked in cycles of suffering and depression. A resolution to these cycles of suffering is hinted at through Cohen's formal engagement with Zen Buddhism and with the help of his newly found mentor, Roshi, who appears briefly in *Death of a Lady's Man*. After a decade of nihilism, Buddhist techniques introduced by Roshi, such as controlled breathing and *zazen*, scare the cynical voice, who, for the first time, shows signs of worry and weakness. This opportunity allows other Cohen voices (arguably other elements of Cohen's psyche) to express themselves without being criticized by the cynical voice. Cohen's next book, *Book of Mercy*, notably lacks a strong cynical voice and instead contains speakers concerned with prayer and mercy. *Book of Longing*, depicts a new and tempered cynical speaker who, despite his cynicism, is able to show empathy, understanding, and patience. The story of

Buddhism in Cohen's works, from his earliest poems to his final ones, reveals that Buddhism is an essential component of his art despite its sometimes conflicting manifestations.

The Flame, edited after Cohen's death by his son, Adam Cohen, contains works never intended for publication. The volume, however, includes important reminders that Buddhism is omnipresent in Cohen's final works and a significant element of his creative process. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the book, the fragments[48] and poems in the volume were not finalized by the author and have not been worked through in such a manner as to make possible a final and consistent argument about the volume's Buddhism. This is not to say that comments about Buddhism are rare in *The Flame*: Cohen makes strong gestures towards the Zen canon with his inclusion of references to *The Gateless Gate*, the "Zen Caveats" (*The Flame* 56), and the infamous Zen Buddhist monk Ikyo (75). As in *Book of Longing*, Cohen also employs the tempered cynical voice to express his non-binary opinions on matters relating to Zen and memories of Roshi. Some of the fragments (such as the fragment on page 256) are explicitly concerned with Buddhism's role in Cohen's artistic life, but, as aforementioned, feel incomplete: the volume's organization and narrative do not reflect the unity of past works. I have not included *The Flame* in this thesis because I feel that the book should be read with skepticism and with knowledge that we are not truly taking in Cohen's last works as he would have liked us to.

While this thesis hopes to make sense of Buddhism in Cohen's works it is by no means final in its analysis. Differing interpretations concerning Cohen's understanding of Buddhism can be interpolated from his writings and life. The most obvious contention relates to Cohen's great disdain for monastic life in the final works and the fact that he eventually left monastic life completely. Poems, references, and fragments depicting this departure are plentiful. *The Flame* is particularly full of these dismissive moments, though I would argue that each of those moments

[48] The fragments are untitled loose writings collected after Cohen's death. They are not named or numbered.

is complex, multifaceted, and not to be taken at face value. Cohen's relationship to Buddhism in these final works is non-dualistic and, therefore, the tension found in these later "parting" works may be read as both simultaneously contentious and liberating. As this thesis shows, there really is no need to treat Cohen's Buddhism dualistically. To assume that Cohen's departure from the monastery signifies a departure from Buddhism more broadly is to fail to see how a non-dualistic view of spirituality permits varying forms of religious expression to exist side by side—as they do in Cohen's poetry.

A second alternative argument about Cohen's Buddhism has to do with the depth and nature of his Buddhist practice. Astute readers and fans will know that Cohen's religious and spiritual life was anything but stable in the period prior to *Book of Mercy*. Cohen began as a poet known for "comparing mythologies" and appropriating Christian imagery, and started including references to various spiritual and religious groups in his poetry and songs. In "Famous Blue Raincoat," one of the poem's speakers refers to Scientology (which Cohen briefly engaged with [Nadel 160]); Cohen befriended and followed an Indian Guru (Ramesh Balsekar) in the 1980's whom he references in *Book of Longing* (which notably takes place after his mentorship under Roshi); and two Cohen critics, Jack Watson and Joseph Jarab, claim Cohen had a passing interest in Sufi Islam. Dallying with many faiths reminds readers that the North American Buddhist context of Cohen's Zen practice was popularly suffused with false depictions of Buddhism. While there is no strong evidence to suggest that Cohen's relationship to Buddhism mirrored the fraudulent history of Buddhist portrayal in North America, or that his engagement with multiple spiritual systems weakened his relationship to Buddhism, it is certainly possible to argue that Cohen's Buddhism was distorted by shallow and false popular tropes. Cohen's spiritual world has also been called New Age, as Sappho Balfour shows in in her Master's Thesis "No Fixed Address: Locating Leonard Cohen in Western Religious/Spiritual Culture." It is therefore

possible to assume that Cohen's Buddhism, to some degree, is a New Age fashion—possibly shallow and transient in its relation to spirituality. I would, however, contend that, as other critics like Francis Mus have shown, Cohen's urge to hide much of his Buddhism indicates that Buddhism was deeply meaningful to him.[49] Buddhist discipline is explicit in Cohen's works, Buddhist ideas remain an important inspiration throughout Cohen's books, and Cohen himself spent decades in relative isolation on Mount Baldy with Roshi practicing a form of Zen. Together, these points show a lasting dedication to Buddhism.

Cynicism and the cynical voices of Cohen's works play a central role in this thesis' explanation of the relationship between Buddhist discipline and changes in Cohen's writing—notably, changes in the later cynical speakers in *Book of Longing*. A skeptical reader could argue that the relaxed and "wise" cynical voice of the later works is not the product of Buddhist training, but simply of Cohen's physical age. Many poems in *Book of Longing* and *The Flame* explicitly discuss the experience of ageing. In the thesis, I point to poems linking age and Buddhism (such as "On the Path" [*Book of Longing* 120]),[50] to show that Buddhism is, for the speakers of Cohen's poems, an important part of understanding age and time. The final poem in *Death of a Lady's Man*, "Final Examination" (*Death of a Lady's Man* 212), marks the first instance of the seemingly new tempered and cynical voice. This voice appears after the volume's Buddhist poems and the cautiously optimistic "How to Speak Poetry" (196). I suggest therefore that the tempered cynical voice is more likely connected to Buddhist discipline and experience to a far greater degree than to the ageing process. "Final Examination" was published long before

[49] In Francis Mus' *Demons of Leonard Cohen*, Mus argues that Buddhism was so important in Cohen's life that Cohen actively chose not to talk about his Buddhism publicly. Mus cites a phone call between Sylvie Simmons and himself, and an interview by Mikal Gilmore to show how "[Cohen] could not really talk about what happened" (Mus 201) on "Mount Baldy," "because it's personal. I [Cohen] don't want to see it all in print" (Gilmore 366).
[50] Discussed on page 85.

Cohen's concentrated meditations on age and appears directly after Cohen's Buddhist encounters at around the age of forty-four.

A last noteworthy criticism of Cohen's Buddhism considers the role and guidance of Roshi. In an interview for National Public Radio, Cohen asserted that "as I've often said, if he [Roshi] had been a teacher of, you know, physics in Heidelberg, I would've learned German and studied physics in Heidelberg" (Gross). This fleeting comment highlights the incredible influence Roshi had on Cohen which, as I have shown, is visible in many of Cohen's poems. The comment also undermines Cohen's relationship to Buddhism. Strong voices depicting either a master or God appear in Cohen's poetry from the earliest stages of his writing. A skeptical reader could assert that Cohen's Buddhism has more to do with following a particular leader's guidance than it does with Cohen's own interest in Buddhist spirituality. This predisposition towards following strong leaders becomes even more problematic if we consider the allegations and testimonies levelled against Roshi during the final years of his life, as Cohen chose to defend Roshi absolutely. Eric Lerner, a close friend of Cohen who lived on Mount Baldy with both Cohen and Roshi, remembers how Roshi would often drink at inappropriate times. Both Roshi's drinking and his eclectic behaviour put into question the genuine nature of his Buddhist training. As I have shown, however, Cohen juggles with Roshi's conduct in complex and non-dualistic ways that represent a deeper Buddhist learning. Of all Cohen's gurus, only Roshi resonates throughout Cohen's later works as someone close and cherished. Roshi's character is a consequence of his own Buddhist training and life and should not be separated from his personality and mentoring style: if the methodology of this thesis helps explore Cohen's view and depiction of Roshi in his works, then we, as *readers* of Cohen, should deal only with Roshi as Cohen depicted by him.

While we lack a critical body of work exploring Cohen's relationship to Buddhism, I hope that this discussion can help scholars see how important Buddhist ideas like non-dualism and non-attachment are to Cohen: they are as much a part of his life as they are his art. Scholars should further explore Cohen's Buddhism with the same non-dualistic approach that Cohen used to engage with Buddhism in his own works. Such a project would better clarify Buddhism's role in not only Cohen's oeuvre, but also his life. Many important questions remain unanswered, such as: What do Buddhists think of Cohen? Another broader question is: What does it mean that Cohen's works are so indebted to a Zen Buddhist discipline? As I have argued, it could mean many things, but what it certainly shows is that Zen Buddhist practice not only influenced Cohen's art but gave him a working language through which to understand himself and his struggles.

Bibliography

Primary Texts (Leonard Cohen)

Cohen, Leonard. *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. 1956. McClelland & Stewart, 2006.

—. *The Spice-Box of Earth*. 1961. McClelland & Stewart, 2018.

—. *Flowers for Hitler*. 1964. McClelland & Stewart, 2018.

—. *Parasites of Heaven.* 1966. McClelland & Stewart, 2018.

—. *Energy of Slaves*. McClelland & Stewart, 1972.

—. *Death of a Lady's Man*. McClelland & Stewart, 1978.

—. *Book of Mercy*. 1984. McClelland & Stewart, 2010.

—. *Stranger Music*. McClelland & Stewart, 1993.

—. *God is Alive Magic is Afoot*. Stoddart, 2000.

—. *Book of Longing.* McClelland & Stewart, 2009.

—. *The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen*. Omnibus Press, 2009.

—. *Beautiful Losers / The Favourite Game*. McClelland & Stewart, 2009.

—. *The Flame: Poems and Selections from Notebooks*. McClelland & Stewart, 2018.

Cohen Criticism & Biography

Balfour, Sappho M. *No Fixed Address: Locating Leonard Cohen in Western Religious/Spiritual Culture*. 1998. University of Calgary, Masters Thesis.

Brusq, Armelle, director. *Leonard Cohen: Printemps 96.* Performances by Leonard Cohen, Raffi Hakopian. Les Films du paradoxe, 1996.

Gilmore, Mikal. 2008. *Stories Done: Writings on the 1960s and its Discontents*. New York: Free Press.

Green, Robert. “Teaching Zen’s Ten Oxherding Pictures through Leonard Cohen’s ‘Ballad of the Absent Mare’.” *AsiaNetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts,* vol. 24, no. 1, 2017. pp. 29-58.

Greenstein, Michael. *Third Solitudes: Tradition and Discontinuity in Jewish-Canadian Literature*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989.

Gross, Terry. “Leonard Cohen On Poetry, Music and Why He Left the Zen Monastery.” *National Public Radio*, October 2016, https://www.npr.org/2016/10/21/498810429/leonard-cohen-on-poetry-music-and-why-he-left-the-zen-monastery. Accessed April 2021.

Hutcheon, Linda. “Beautiful Losers: All the Polarities.” *Lakehead University Review.* Vol. 6, no. 2, 1974.

Jaeger, Peter. “From Roshi to Rashi: Leonard Cohen and Interfaith Dialogue.” *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion. Ed. Mark Knight. Routledge, 2016.*

Jařab, Josef. “Leonard Cohen: The Modern Troubadour.” *The American & British Studies Journal*, vol. 9, 2016, pp. 134-146.

Julien, Jacques. *Leonard Cohen Seul l’amour*. Les Editions Triptyque, 2014.

Lawson, Mark. Interview with Leonard Cohen. *Front Row,* BBC Radio 4, 26 May 2008. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00bfsbn. Accessed April 2021.

Lerner, Eric. *Matters of Vital Interest*. Da Capo Publishing, 2018.

Lunson, Lian, director. *Leonard Cohen: I’m Your Man*. Performances by Leonard Cohen, Bono, Rufus Wainwright. Lionsgate, 2005.

Markotic, Nicole. “The Telephone Dance & Mechanical Ecstasy in Leonard Cohen’s Beautiful Losers.” *Canadian Poetry*, vol. 33, 1993. pp. 32-33.

Mus, Francis. *The Demons of Leonard Cohen*. University of Ottawa Press, 2020.

Nadel, Ira. *Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen*. Pantheon Books, 1996.

Ondaatje, Michael. *Leonard Cohen*. McClelland & Stewart, 1970.

Ravvin, Norman. "Writing Around the Holocaust: Uncovering the Ethical Centre of Leonard Cohen's Beautiful Losers." *House of Words: Jewish Writing, Identity, and Memory.* McGill-Queen's, 1997.

—. "Imaginary Traditions: Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen and the Rest of the Montreal Poets." *Language Acts: Anglo-Québec Poetry, 1976 to the 21st Century*. Véhicule Press, 2007.

Ringuet, Chantal, and Gérard Rabinovich. (Ed.). *Les révolutions de Leonard Cohen*. Presses de L'Université du Quebec, 2016.

Scobie, Stephen. (Ed.) *Intricate Preparations: Writing Leonard Cohen*. Essays on Canadian Writing Press, 2000.

Simmons, Sylvie. *I'm Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen*. Random House, 2012.

Stacey, Robert David. "'Mad Translation in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* and Douglas Glover's *Elle*'." *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 40, no. 2–3, 2014, pp. 173–97.

Trehearne, Brian. "'Memory White from Loss of Guilt': Guilt and Detachment in the Early Cohen." Forthcoming in *The Contemporary Leonard Cohen: Response, Reappraisal, Rediscovery.* Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier UP, expected 2021.

Vesselova, Natalia. "*The Past Is Perfect": Leonard Cohen's Philosophy of Time*. 2014. University of Ottawa, PhD dissertation. University of Ottawa Online Archives, https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/31065/1/Vesselova_Natalia_2014_thesis.pdf

Vitello, Paul. "Joshu Sasaki, 107, Tainted Zen Master." *The New York Times*, August 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/05/us/joshu-sasaki-a-zen-master-tarnished-by-abuse-claims-dies-at-107.html#:~:text=Sasaki%2C%20accusing%20him%20 of%20engaging, and %20 at%20his%20retreat%20camps. Accessed April 2021.

Watson, Jon Wesley Jack. “The Occult Liturgy of Leonard Cohen.” Library and Archives Canada / Bibliothèque Et Archives Canada, 2013.

Primary Texts (Religion, Philosophy, Fiction & Poetry from South and East Asia)

Bashō, Matsuo. *Lips too Chilled.* 1702. Translated by Lucien Stryk. Penguin, 2015.

Confucius. *The First Ten Books*. Penguin, 2005.

Dõgen, Eihei. Levitt, Peter, and Tanahashi, Kazukai (Ed.). *The Essential Dõgen: Writings from the Great Zen Master*. Shambhala, 2013.

Hearn, Lafcadio. *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*. 1904. Tuttle Publishing, 2005.

Huikai, Wumen. Yamada, Koun (Ed.). *The Gateless Gate: The Classic Book of Zen Koans.* Wisdom Publications. 2004.

—, et al. *Writings from The Zen Masters.* Penguin, 2009.

Kenko, Yoshida. *A Cup of Sake Beneath the Cherry Trees*. 1332. Translated by Meredith McKinney. Penguin, 2015.

—, et al. *Three Japanese Buddhist Monks*. Translated by Meredith McKinney. Penguin, 2020.

Nitobe, Inagõ. *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*. 1900. Penguin, 2020.

Tzu, Lao. *Tao Te Ching*. Penguin, 2009.

Wei, Wang, et al. *Three Tang Dynasty Poets*. 761. Translated by G.W. Robinson and Arthur Cooper. Penguin, 2015.

The I Ching or Book of Changes. 1950. Translated by Richard Wilhelm. Power Press, 1994.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead. Translated by W.Y. Evans-Wentz. Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2018.

Buddhist Criticism & History

Fields, Rick. *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America.* Shambhala, 1992.

Gard, Richard A. (Ed.). *Buddhism*. George Braziller Publishing, 1962.

Hanh, Thich Nhat. 1998. *The Heart of Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation*. Harmony Books, 2015.

Harris, Elizabeth. "Detachment and Compassion in Early Buddhism." *Buddhist Publication Society* Publication No. 141, 1997.

Haubner, Jack. *Zen Confidential: Confessions of a Wayward Monk.* Shambhala, 2013.

Herrigel, Eugen. *Zen in the Art of Archery*. 1953. Vintage, 1989.

Lopes Jr., Donald. *Prisoners of Shangri-La*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Kapleau, Philip. 1965. *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment.* Anchor Books, 2000.

Marks, Joel. "Emotion East and West: Introduction to a Comparative Philosophy." *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 41, no. 1, 1991, pp. 1–30.

Miyamoto, Shoson. "Time and Eternity in Buddhism." *Journal of Bible and Religion*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1959, pp. 118–126.

Morgan, Bill. *The Typewriter Is Holy: The Complete, Uncensored History of the Beat Generation*. Atria Books, 2010.

Prentiss, Chris. *Zen and the Art of Happiness*. Power Press, 2006.

Roberts, Michelle Voss. "Religious Belonging and the Multiple." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2010, p. 43.

Watts, Alan W. *The Way of Zen.* 1957. Vintage, 1999.

Jewish-Buddhist Criticism

Gez, Yonatan N. "The Phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists in Light of the History of Jewish Suffering." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2011, pp. 44–68.

Kamenetz, Rodger. *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India*. Harperone, 2007.

Libin, Nicole. "The Choosing People: Constructing Jewish Buddhist Identity in America." PhD thesis. Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Calgary, 2009.

Sharot, Stephen. "The Kaifeng Jews: A Reconsideration of Acculturation and Assimilation in a Comparative Perspective." *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2007, pp. 179–203.

Tatz, Akiva. *Letters to a Buddhist Jew*. Targum Press, 2006.

Modernism & Orientalism

Eliot, T.S. *The Complete Poems & Plays*. 1969. Faber and Faber, 2004.

Minear, Richard H. "Orientalism and the Study of Japan." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3, May 1980, pp. 507–17.

Pound, Ezra. *Make it New: Essays.* London, 1935.

Rodrigues, C. and Garratt, C. *Introducing Modernism: A Graphic Guide*. Icon Books, 2012.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. 1978. Penguin, 1996.

Trehearne, Brian. *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition*. University of Toronto Press, 1999.

Weintraub, William. *City Unique: Montreal Days and Nights in the 1940s and '50s.* McClelland & Shuster, 1996.