New Jerusalem Glowing
Songs and Poems of Leonard Cohen in a Kabbalistic Key

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In *Book of Mercy*, published in 1984, the Montréal Jewish poet, Leonard Cohen addressed his master:

> Sit down, Master, on the rude chair of praises, and rule my nervous heart with your great decrees of freedom. Out of time you have taken me to do my daily task. Out of mist and dust you have fashioned me to know the numberless worlds between the crown and the kingdom. In utter defeat I came to you and you received me with a sweetness I had not dared to remember. Tonight I come to you again, soiled by strategies and trapped in the loneliness of my tiny domain. Establish your law in this walled place. Let nine men come to lift me into their prayer so that I may whisper with them: Blessed be the name of the glory of the kingdom forever and forever.[1]

In this prayer, the poet offers us a way to the heart of the matter that I will discuss in this study, however feebly, the songs and poems of Leonard Cohen in the key of the symbolism of kabbalah, the occult oral tradition of Judaism purported to be ancient, but historically detectable (largely through textual evidence) from the late Middle Ages. To those even somewhat familiar with the background of the Canadian bard, the topic should not come as a surprise.[2]

1 Leonard Cohen, *Book of Mercy*, New York 1984, p. 16.

2 The original version of this study was delivered as a lecture at McGill University, October 18, 2001. As it happened, on October 16, Leonard Cohen conducted an on-line discussion. I was not able to log in during the time of the discussion as I was teaching, but I was able to send in my question ahead of time. When I returned from Montreal on the 19th of October, I discovered the following exchange on http://www.canoe.ca/JamChat/leonardcohen.html: Elliot: 'I am a professor of Jewish mysticism at NYU, and on Oct. 18th I will be delivering a lecture at McGill entitled 'New Jerusalem Glowing: The Songs of Leonard Cohen in a Kabbalistic Key'. I would like to take this unique opportunity to ask Mr. Cohen directly if he has studied kabbalah or hasidism, and if he acknowledges a direct influence of

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Cohen has openly acknowledged his indebtedness to the Jewish tradition and this has been well documented in the few scholarly studies dedicated to his literary corpus. It is necessary to note at the outset that Cohen's melodies occasionally betray the influence of Jewish music, especially chants and supplications, reflecting both Ashkenazic and Sephardic liturgical rites.[3] This in itself would prove to be a fascinating topic of study, but it is the language of Cohen's poetic vision that is our principal concern.

One thinks, for instance, of 'Who By Fire', a contemporary reworking of a medieval hymn included in the traditional Jewish prayer book for the High Holy Days, a solemn poem in which the poet depicts the drama of the divine judge inscribing and signing the fate of each person for the upcoming year. There is nothing especially mystical, let alone kabbalistic, about this song, but it clearly illustrates Cohen's deep connection to his Jewish roots, and particularly his fascination with matters pertaining to judgment and the handing down of sentences, a theme repeated in many poems and songs. Needless to say, Cohen transforms the traditional theological image by introducing a note of doubt, which is distinctive to the modern predicament, with the refrain that ends each stanza 'and who shall I say is calling?'[4] The original expresses no such ambivalence; the contemporary poet is not certain,

either of these spiritual disciplines on his work'. Leonard Cohen: 'Dear Professor Wolfson, Thank you for studying my lyrics in relation to the kabbalah. I have a very superficial knowledge of the matter but even by dipping into the many books, I have been deeply touched by what I read, and by my conversations with living Hasidic masters. The model of the Tree of Life and the activities and interactions of the sephirot has been especially influential. The idea of the in-breath to clear a space for the whole manifestation and the out-breath as the place of the manifestation, has of course been illumined by my studies with Roshi and his instructions in zen meditation. Please give my regards to the folks at McGill'.

3 In the recently released documentary 'I'm Your Man', directed by Lian Lunson, Cohen states explicitly that his interest in poetry was first inspired by listening to the chanting of Jewish prayers and to the recounting of bible stories in the synagogue. Apropos of this comment, it is also of interest to note that beneath a self-portrait contained in Leonard Cohen, *Book of Longing*, Toronto 2006, p. 36, the author has inserted the words לאל ברוך נעימות יתנו, which are derived from the *yoṣer* prayer for the Sabbath and holidays. David Boucher, *Dylan and Cohen: Poets of Rock and Roll*, New York 2004, p. 223, remarks that the melody of 'Who By Fire' is based on the chanting of the Jewish prayer on which it is based that Cohen heard in the synagogue as a boy.

4 Leonard Cohen, *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*, New York 1993, p. 207.

not in these times when judgment is conspicuous but the face of the judge not apparent.

As noted above, the particular focus of this essay is to pinpoint some affinities between the poetic lyric of Cohen and kabbalistic symbols. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to take note of the fact that his compositions reveal the effect of other religious traditions, including, most importantly, Christianity and Zen Buddhism.[5] It would take us too far afield to examine either of these influences appropriately, but it is obligatory nonetheless to say something of a preliminary nature with respect to each of these traditions, for the affinities I shall draw between Cohen and Jewish esotericism cannot be fully appreciated except against this eclectic background. Indeed, in my estimation, kabbalistic imagery provides a mechanism by which the poet both expands and constricts the boundaries of his Judaism vis-à-vis other traditions in an effort to legitimate the validity of the other on the basis of affirming the distinctiveness of his own cultural formation. Obviously, Cohen does not purport to be a scholar of religion, and yet through his literary prism he provides a comparativist approach that is committed to an individual path but also embracive of truth presumed to be universal.[6] In Cohen's opinion, as he enunciates in an interview conducted by Arthur Kurzweil in October 1994,[7] the 'messianic implication' of Judaism entails allegiance to both the distinctiveness of the Jewish tradition[8] and to the belief that all people 'are of a brotherhood under the Almighty'. He is highly critical of the ethnocentric tendency that would isolate Jews from other nations:

> The exclusive elements, the nominal elements, seem to be emphasized and a kind of scorn for the nations, for the goyim, a kind of exclusivity that I find wholly unacceptable and many young people I know find wholly unacceptable, is expressed. A confident people is not exclusive. A great religion affirms other religions. A great culture affirms other cultures. A

5 On the triangulation of Judaism, Christianity, and Zen Buddhism in Cohen's spiritual quest, see Boucher, *Dylan and Cohen*, pp. 219-231.

6 On Cohen's acceptance of religious diversity without denying a commitment to a particular path, see Boucher, *Dylan and Cohen*, p. 224.

7 Citations from Arthur Kurzweil and Pamela Roth, 'Leonard Cohen, *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*', *The Jewish Book News* Interview, available at http://www.serve.come/cpage/ Lcohen/interview/html.

8 Cohen's prideful loyalty to his Jewishness is expressed in an ironic fashion in 'Not a Jew' from the *Book of Longing*, p. 158: 'Anyone who says / I'm not a Jew / is not a Jew / I'm very sorry / but this decision / is final'.

> great nation affirms other nations. A great individual affirms other individuals, validates the beingness of others.[9]

To the extent that the 'messianic unfolding' has not been fostered, the 'tradition itself has betrayed the tradition'. Interestingly, Cohen explains the xenophobic proclivity in kabbalistic terms, that is, the denigration of others arises when the 'side of the tree' (a reference to the sefirotic structure) that is judgment is 'affirmed strongly' and the side of the 'mercy of the Lord is not affirmed'. In line with many kabbalists, Cohen's eschatological vision involves the overpowering of the left side of judgment by the right side of mercy.

Christ's Passion, Zen Awakening, Ascetic Yearning

Various symbols of Christian piety have fascinated Cohen through his life; indeed, he is acutely aware of the fact that Christianity has provided inspiration for his artistic expression. Let us recall his perspicacious quip concerning the citizens of Montréal in *Death of a Lady's Man* (1977): 'We who belong to this city have never left The Church'.[10] He then proceeds to chart, beginning with the Jews, all the different populations in Montréal that have been absorbed by and assimilated into the overbearing institution of Christianity. Subsequently, I shall take up the issue of incarnation, as it is not possible, in my opinion, to appreciate the kabbalistic resonances in Cohen without considering his complex fascination with this fundamental Christological creed. At the moment, we must focus our lens more narrowly on the impact of the Christian monastic ideal on the blend of eroticism and asceticism that characterizes Cohen's ever changing, yet distinctly recognizable, spiritual yearning.

The abstemious lifestyle has held sway over Cohen's thinking from early on, almost, one might say, as a form of seduction. In an interview with Michael Harris from 1969, Cohen remarked, 'I've always had an attraction to that

9 Compare Cohen's comments about the song 'Democracy', which is included on his 1992 album *The Future*, in the 'CBC Interview with Leonard Cohen: August 26, 1995', available at http://www.serve.com/cpage/LCohen/cbc.html: 'Democracy is the religion of the west and perhaps the greatest religion that the west has produced because it affirms other religions. Most religions have a lot of trouble affirming other religions. A great religion affirms other religions and a great culture affirms other cultures, and democracy is a faith, and it is an ideal and I think it is the greatest expression of western experience, this notion that there is a fraternity of men and women is a very, very high idea. It involves a deep, deep appetite that cannot be denied'.

10 Cited in *Stranger Music*, p. 265.

ascetic kind of life. Not because it's ascetic, but because it's *aesthetic*. I like bare rooms'.[11] More recently, in an interview with Karl Hesthamar from 2005, Cohen thus commented on his stay at the Mount Baldy Zen Center: 'And to work and to stand with those young men and women — I embrace the people who lead a life like that, it's very rigorous and it takes a lot of attention and devotion to lead that kind of life. And I love those kind of people, men and women, who lead that kind of life and still do, they're the closest people to me'.[12]

The aesthetic attraction to monastic abstinence of which Cohen speaks and the psychic regimen implied therein is attested in his writings as well. Consider, for instance, the poet's poignant expression of the desire to be dead to the world in 'Saint Catherine Street' included in his first collection of poems, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956): 'How may we be saints and live in golden coffins'. Later on in the poem the youthful bard wonders if the desire to terminate all desire by sacrificing oneself will be met: 'Will no one carve from our bodies a white cross / for a wind-torn mountain / or was that forsaken man's pain / enough to end all passion'.[13] In a brilliant twist of words, Cohen overturns the expected connotation of the word 'passion' in traditional Christian symbolism as referring to Christ's suffering death, and he playfully poses the possibility that there is no more need for ascetic martyrdom since the passion of Jesus, the 'forsaken man' (based on the language of Psalm 22:1, which is paraphrased in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34), was sufficient to end all passion.

In 'I Have Not Lingered in European Monasteries', from the collection *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961), Cohen boasts that he has not mastered the ascetic discipline rooted in suffering and denial of the world, but one senses that the poet is actually ambivalent about this non-achievement, speaking somewhat ironically when he concludes that he has not been unhappy for ten thousand

11 Michael Harris, 'An Interview with Leonard Cohen', *Duel* (Winter 1969), cited in Boucher, *Dylan and Cohen*, p. 226.

12 'Leonard Looks Back on the Past: Interview with Leonard Cohen by Karl Hesthamar', Los Angeles 2005, available at htttp://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/leonard2006.html. Toward the conclusion of the same interview, Cohen speaks of the peacefulness of ritual, of the relief when he does not have to improvise. The specific example he gives to illustrate the point is the Sabbath meal that he celebrates with his children and friends on Friday evening.

13 Cited from Leonard Cohen, *Selected Poems 1956-1968*, New York 1968, pp. 24-25.

years, that his bodily needs are met, and his work goes well.[14] Assuredly, there is irony here, for none of these ephemeral accomplishments amount to anything. What has one gained by meeting bodily needs and doing work well? In a second poem from this collection, simply entitled 'Song', Cohen recounts that when he is smitten with lust he 'repairs' to books in which 'men have written / of flesh forbid but fair'.

> But in these saintly stories
> Of gleaming thigh and breast
> Of sainthood and its glories
> Alas I find no rest.
> For at each body rare
> The saintly man disdains
> I stare O God I stare
> My heart is stained with stains

In the continuation, the poet acknowledges that he casts down the 'holy tomes' and gives in to temptation by leading the eye to gaze on naked girls combing their hair. 'Then each pain my hermits sing / Flies upward like a spark / I live with the mortal ring / Of flesh on flesh in dark'.[15] Giving in to desire is redemptive, for suffering is thereby liberated like a spark flying upward. But, with characteristic ironic twist, Cohen notes that the raising of the spark leaves in its wake darkness. Reversing the traditional kabbalistic trope of elevating the spark to restore the light to its divine source, an idea that became popular through Hasidic lore, undoubtedly known to Cohen, the lifting of the spark denotes succumbing to fleshly fervor.[16]

Along similar lines, in the poem 'The Pro', which is included in the 'Nashville Notebook of 1969', Cohen wrote of his 'stone ear' and his 'disposable Franciscan ambitions'.[17] I suggest these words ought to be read as well with a touch of irony. The Franciscan ambitions have had an enduring

14 Ibid., p. 45.
15 Ibid., p. 67.
16 Many scholars have written about the theme of uplifting the sparks in kabbalistic and Hasidic texts. For a representative sampling of relevant studies, see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York 1956, pp. 269, 280, 330, 346, and the useful summary account in Louis Jacobs, 'The Uplifting of Sparks in Later Jewish Mysticism', in *Jewish Spirituality From the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present*, edited by Arthur Green, New York 1987, pp. 99-126.
17 Cited in Ira B. Nadel, *Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen*, New York 1996, p. 167.

attraction for Cohen; one might even refer to celibate piety as an object of desire. In this regard, the poet is finely attuned to an insight regarding the erotic nature of asceticism, which implies the ascetic nature of eroticism, well attested in mystical texts: The strongest of desires may be the desire not to desire, the most seductive of pleasures the pleasure to have no pleasure.[18] Cohen confesses being afflicted with this hunger in 'The Night Comes On' from *Various Positions* (1984), 'I needed so much to have nothing to touch / I've always been greedy that way'.[19] And, in the album *Ten New Songs* (2001), we find the theme repeated in the refrain of 'You Have Loved Enough' as the aspiration to allow a love beyond physical appetite to master one's passion:

> And when the hunger for your touch
> Rises from the hunger,
> You whisper, 'You have loved enough,
> Now let me be the Lover'.[20]

Ira Nadel has written, 'At the core of Leonard Cohen's appeal is a poetics of survival, a means of confronting and transcending the darkness of self. Aiding his own survival has been a twenty-five-year involvement with Zen Buddhism. Judaism initiated Cohen's spiritual quest, but Buddhism has provided direction'.[21] Nadel argues, moreover, that what has especially attracted the melancholic Cohen to Zen practice is the emphasis on liberation through suffering and the discipline of non-attachment. Focusing on the seemingly contradictory phrase 'Tibetan Desire' used by Cohen in *Beautiful Losers* (1966), Nadel notes that, for Cohen, renunciation and longing complement each other.

> Intensifying the need for denial is the determination to possess by pleasure what cannot be attained by sacrifice. The two forces interact rather than collide, creating a desperate synergy that drives his work. The spiritual feeds the physical; the physical nourishes the spiritual. Zen and passion are the twin points of this condition in which there are no victors.[22]

18 Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*, New York 2005, pp. 296-299. It is worth noting that in that discussion I cite two passages from the Rinzai Zen tradition.
19 *Stranger Music*, p. 345.
20 *Book of Longing*, p. 55.
21 Nadel, *Various Positions*, p. 4.
22 Ibid., p. 202.

I would not contest the main drift of this claim, but it strikes me that Cohen's poems and songs are infused with the mystical longing of the disconsolate self to be absorbed in the limitless expanse of infinite light, to be reintegrated into the one that encompasses and is within all things. This experience, a poetic viewpoint that shares a conceptual affinity with the underlying premise of philosophical idealism concerning the 'undifferentiated whole of experience',[23] can be framed in a Zen manner as waking up to the truth of the 'fundamental ground', the 'original Mind' in which all differentiation is overcome,[24] but it reflects as well the mystical asceticism that informed in varying degrees medieval Judaism and Christianity, a pious stance shaped by the oscillating allure and repulsion of the erotic. It is reasonable to say that, for Cohen, there is a convergence of the sacred and sexual in the mystical quest to be immersed in the whole, to lose consciousness in the embrace of the absolute,[25] and hence the 'spiritual feeds the physical' and the 'physical nourishes the spiritual', but I do not think it is accurate to assume that these forces merely 'interact' and never 'collide'. I would argue that on occasion there is collision in Cohen's poetic vision between carnal desire and religious craving. The poem 'Disturbed This Morning', which is included in the *Book of Longing* (2006), gives expression to this ongoing struggle in the poet's heart as it articulates straightforwardly the disturbance caused by the sudden desire to cohabit with a woman, 'to be inside / the only place / that has / no inside, / and no outside'.[26] These conflictual moments, moreover, indicate that Cohen has never fully relinquished the repository of theistic symbols (derived primarily from Judaism and Christianity) in his effort to describe the spiritual yearning for union.[27] In the final analysis, therefore, I concur with

23 Boucher, *Dylan and Cohen*, p. 229. The author correctly notes that Cohen's kinship with idealism should not be explained by his familiarity with the appropriate philosophical treatises, but rather by his practice and study of Zen Buddhism.

24 Kenneth Kraft, *Eloquent Zen: Daitō and Early Japanese Zen*, Honolulu 1992, p. 114.

25 Boucher, *Dylan and Cohen*, pp. 220, 229-230.

26 *Book of Longing*, p. 39. Consider as well the words that accompany the self-portrait reproduced in ibid., p. 207: 'still looking / at the girls / but there are / no girls / none at all / there is only / (this'll kill ya) / inner peace / & harmony'.

27 It is of interest to consider the poem 'When I Drink' in the *Book of Longing*, pp. 9-10, which describes in detail the gratification of physical desires that Cohen experienced together with Roshi, his Zen teacher. The main point of the poem

David Boucher who concludes that while Cohen adheres strongly to the belief that God's spirit permeates all things corporeal and thus he draws a close relationship 'between sex and religion, between the sacred and the profane', he has ultimately 'needed the discipline of religion to suppress the profane, to subdue and tame the demands of the flesh'.[28]

Here it is incumbent on me to digress momentarily to mention the comments on the relationship between Zen and Judaism made by Cohen in the Kurzweil interview to which I have already referred.[29] Cohen recounts that in response to a question posed by Allen Ginsberg, the famed beat poet who was a practitioner of Tibetan meditation based on the teaching of Chögyam Trungpa,[30] on the reconcilability of the two traditions, he proclaimed that he did not think the two were mutually exclusive. 'As I have received it from my teacher', a reference to Joshu Sasaki Roshi, 'there is no conflict because there is no prayerful worship and there is no discussion of a deity in Zen'.[31] Cohen

seems to be that carnal desires can be transformed into occasions for enlightenment through their realization rather than by their renunciation.

28 Boucher, *Dylan and Cohen*, p. 231. Confirmation of Boucher's observation is found in Cohen's own words in his interview with Hesthamar (reference supplied above, n. 12): 'You know, I really like that life, it's very regulated and it has some kind of a military crispness to it … the routine softens you, you stop thinking about yourself, your plans and you're too tired to accuse yourself of many things and you're not bright enough to think about the things around — you kind of smooth out'. Compare also the remarks of Cohen in 'Robert Hilburn Interviews Leonard Cohen: Telling It on the Mountain', *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday 24, 1995, available at http://www.serve.com/cpage/LCohen/hilburn.html: 'I was never interested in Buddhism. … I was never looking for a new religion. The religion I had was fine as far as I was concerned, but this particular kind of training interested me. … There was something very intriguing about the Zen training. It was very rigorous. We were like the Marines of the spiritual world'.

29 See above, n. 7.

30 Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography*, revised edition, London 2000, Index, s.v. Trungpa, Chögyam.

31 On the presumed compatibility between Zen meditation and the kabbalistic doctrine (promulgated especially by Luria and his disciples) of the dialectic of contraction and expansion, see the more recent comment made by Cohen in response to my query cited above, n. 2. See also Cohen's response to the question posed by Hesthamar (see above, n. 12) why he moved to the Zen monastery: 'I wasn't looking for a new religion, my own religion is just fine'. On Cohen's propensity to embrace Zen without relinquishing his Jewish identity, see the comments of Boucher, *Dylan and Cohen*, p. 225. Against this background it is of interest to consider the possible tension between Zen and Judaism suggested by

goes on to explain that insofar as the 'essence' of Zen is to become aware of the 'vast emptiness' at the core, the formlessness that is the source of all form, there is a 'boundless space for whatever mental construction you wish to establish'. Simply put, it is quintessentially Zen to embrace what is not Zen: the path that is no-path encompasses manifold paths and hence it can accommodate the beliefs and practices of other religious cultures including Judaism. According to Cohen's precise language, the Zen teaching regarding the inability to delimit the indivisible suchness 'is the purest expression of that reality that is expressed in the Shema – that there is only one thing going on and don't ever even suggest that there might be something else going on. There is an absolute unity that is manifesting itself on this plane and on all planes and nothing can compromise that. So Zen seems to be able to provide … a landscape on which Jewish practitioners can manifest their deepest appetites concerning the absolute'.

Cohen's own engagement with Zen has led him to the conclusion that the positing of a nameless and formless unity, the nothingness that is the suchness of (non)being, coincides with the monotheistic idea of one God as the ontic source of all reality. In the Kurzweil interview, Cohen went so far as to say that the 'old man' who has been his Zen teacher 'provided a space for me to do the kind of dance with the Lord that I couldn't find in other places'. We have no choice but to respect the integrity of Cohen's path and the sincerity of his belief in the compatibility of Zen and the 'victory of experience' that he associates with the 'biblical landscape' of traditional Jewish monotheism,[32] but from a scholarly perspective it must be said that the matter is more complex

Cohen's 'One of My Letters' in the *Book of Longing*, p. 5: 'I corresponded with a famous rabbi / but my teacher caught sight of one of my letters / and silenced me. / 'Dear Rabbi', I wrote him for the last time, / 'I do not have the authority or understanding / to speak of these matters. / I was just showing off. / Please forgive me. / Your Jewish brother, / Jikan Eliezer'.

32 The expressions 'biblical landscape' and 'victory of experience' are used by Cohen in the conclusion of the interview with Kurzweil; see reference above, n. 7. The privileging of the experiential is consistent with the emphasis on personal experience over study of canonical texts in Zen, and especially in the Rinzai sect to which Cohen's teacher belongs. One such rhetoric that captures the priority accorded the immediacy of experience over the mediation of study is the technique known as 'direct pointing' (*chih-chih*). See Dale S. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 91-94.

and problematic.[33] Basic to all forms of Buddhism is the law of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), that is, the principle that everything in the universe is co-arising and co-ceasing, that everything is interdependent, that nothing exists independently, that nothing has an enduring, fixed being,[34] whence follows both the epistemological insight that the discrete beings of our sentient experience are products of mental discrimination and the corresponding ontological claim that all things are without essence, that 'all phenomena', in the words of Nāgārjuna, the renowned Indian philosopher, 'are devoid of inherent existence and are empty'.[35] For Cohen, the quest for mystical union, which he refers to as 'an experience with the absolute', is not at variance with the enlightenment (*satori*) characteristic of the Zen tradition, the breaking of the bonds of conditional experience that results in confronting

33 In fairness to Cohen, it must be said that he does not approach these matters as a scholar but rather as one who is primarily interested in cultivating what may be called the absolute experience. In response to Kurzweil's musing that there seems to be no difference between a poem and a lyric, Cohen said, 'It is the life you want to lead. You can be the subject, and poetry can be the object. You can keep the subject/object relationship, and that's completely legitimate. It is the point of view of the scholar. But I wanted to live this world'. Notwithstanding Cohen's insistence of distinguishing the scholarly and experiential, his willingness to yoke together Zen and Judaism is comparable to the attempt of several theologians to juxtapose Buddhism and Christianity, an attempt that is justified on the basis of a metaphysical anti-realism or a meontology that emerges from the doctrine of emptiness that has figured prominently in Mahāyāna teaching in general and in the Zen tradition in particular. See, for instance, Donald W. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity*, New York 1991; Don Cuppit, *The Time Being*, London 1992; and discussion in John J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*, London 1997, pp. 222-223.

34 Masao Abe, *Zen and Comparative Studies*, edited by Steven Heine, Honolulu 1997, p. 4. For more detailed treatments, see Wright, *Philosophical Meditations*, pp. 1-19; Elizabeth Napper, *Dependent-Arising: A Tibetan Buddhist Interpretation of Mādhyamika Philosophy Emphasizing the Compatibility of Emptiness and Conventional Phenomena*, Boston 2003.

35 *Nāgārjuna's 'Seventy Stanzas': A Buddhist Psychology of Emptiness*, Translation and commentary by Venerable Geshe Sonam Rinchen, Venerable Tenzin Dorjee, and David Ross Komito, Ithaca 1987, p. 79. See also *Nāgārjuna, Mūlamadhyamakakārikā: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, Introduction, Sanskrit text, English translation and annotation by David J. Kalupahana, Albany 1986, pp. 67-68. On the synonymity of emptiness and dependent-arising, see Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, London 1993, pp. 161-173.

suchness (*tathatā*), which is to say, in accord with the paradox of Zen logic, based on the Mādhyamika (the Middle Way) of Mahāyāna Buddhism, confronting emptiness (*śunyatā*), realizing thereby that the time-bound cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*) and the timeless liberation therefrom (*nirvāna*) are one and the same.[36] The classical formulation of this dialectic is found in the *Heart Sūtra*: 'form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form'.[37] The identity of form and emptiness – an identity that exceeds the identity of identity and non-identity as the form of emptiness must itself be empty of form, but to be empty of form it must be valorized, at the very least linguistically, in the form of emptiness[38]–is implied as well in *The Lotus Sūtra*: 'But the Thus Come One knows that this is the Law of one form, one flavor, namely, the form of emancipation, the form of separation, the form of extinction, the form of ultimate nirvana, of constant tranquility and extinction, which in the end finds its destination in emptiness. The Buddha understands all this'.[39] 'There is nothing which exists inherently', wrote Nāgārjuna. 'Because all things are empty of inherent existence the peerless Tathāgata has shown the emptiness of inherent existence of dependent arising as the reality of all things'.[40]

Actualizing one's own buddahood by awakening to one's original nature is dependent on discerning that all nature, including buddha-nature, is empty of form.[41] As Bodhidharma, the fifth-century Indian Buddhist monk, credited with

36 On the paradoxical identification of emptiness and suchness in Buddhist thought, see Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, edited by William R. LaFleur, foreword by John Hick, Honolulu 1985, pp. 223-227; Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, pp. 218-219.

37 *Buddhist Wisdom Texts: The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra*, translated and explained by Edward Conze, London 1958, p. 81.

38 Wright, *Philosophical Meditations*, pp. 75-76.

39 *The Lotus Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson, New York 1993, p. 100. See Michael Pye, 'The Lotus Sūtra and the Essence of Mahāyāna', in *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast, Asian, Tibetan, Early Chinese*, edited by Takeuchi Yoshinori, in association with Jan Van Bragt, James W. Heisig, Joseph S. O'Leary, and Paul L. Swanson, New York 1993, pp. 173-174.

40 *Nāgārjuna's 'Seventy Stanzas*', p. 94.

41 Cohen seems to have been playing off this tradition in the final stanza of the poem 'My Mentors' from the collection *Flowers for Hitler* (1964), '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' (*Selected Poems*, p. 116). At a relatively early date, the young poet displayed an iconoclastic spirit, debunking

bringing Zen to China, put it: 'The Dharma Body is formless. Therefore, one sees it by no-seeing, Dharma is soundless. Therefore, one hears it by no-hearing. Insight does not have knowing. Therefore, one knows by no-knowing'.[42]

In a manner consonant with, though not identical to, the apophatic tradition attested in Western mysticism, rooted conceptually in Platonic metaphysics,[43] Bodhidharma presumes that given the formlessness of truth's body, seeing it comes by not seeing, hearing by not hearing, knowing by not knowing.[44] To discern the Buddha is to heed the dharma of no-mindedness,[45] to become

his four mentors, rabbi, priest, doctor, and zen master. In his sharp wit, Cohen informs us of a profound and ancient wisdom, no master is beyond rebuke, but, even more keenly, he has brilliantly turned the power hierarchy on its head by noting the folly of the master in worshipping the disciple. To avoid falling prey to this frailty, the master must lift the veil of being master. Cohen imparts this teaching as well in the verse from the song 'Teachers' on the album *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1968), which deftly catalogues the poet's search for a guru, the teacher of his heart, 'Follow me the wise man said / But he walked behind' (*Stranger Music*, p. 97). The true sage leads by following, a theme that was similarly expressed in the *Tao te Ching*, 'The Sage puts his own views behind / so ends up ahead' (*Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition*, translation and commentary by Jonathan Star, New York 2001, sec. 7, p. 20), a text that may very well have been a source for Cohen's own musing. For explicit evidence of Cohen's study of Chinese poets, see his 'A Note to the Chinese Reader', which he composed for the Chinese translation of *Beautiful Losers*, reprinted in *Book of Longing*, p. 196. The theme of leading by following is emphasized by Cohen in the Hesthamar interview (above n. 12) in response to the comment that most people do not want to be servants: 'They want to be bosses. Well, I found being a boss is not so much fun, there are times that you have to lead, but I'm talking about an interior position, even when you're leading to understand that the circumstances are predicting that you're going to respond, so you're going to respond anyway. So it's whether you're going to respond with a sense of surrender or resistance'.

42 Jeffrey L. Broughton, *The Bodhidharma Anthology: The Earliest Records of Zen*, Berkeley 1999, p. 15.

43 For representative studies, see Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God, Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, Louvain 1995; Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge 1995.

44 For a comparative analysis, see J. P. Williams, *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*, New York and Oxford 2000. See also Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, pp. 121-134.

45 For an elaborate analysis of this theme, see Daisetz T. Suzuki, *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind: The Significance of the Sūtra of Hui-Neng (Wei-Lang)*, edited by Christian Humphreys, London 1949. Suzuki's summation is worthy of citation:

enlightened in the way of detachment from all form even the form of buddhahood, to awaken to the fact that there is nothing to be awakened, to abide in the voidness of an abiding that is neither abiding nor nonabiding.[46] Liberation is attained when one realizes that all forms are illusions constructed by the mind.[47] The inevitable deduction to be made from this premise is that one must not fall prey to worshipping any form of the Buddha since all such forms are empty. 'Your mind is the buddha. Don't use a buddha to worship a buddha. Even if a buddha or bodhisattva should suddenly appear before you, there's no need for reverence. This mind of ours is empty and contains no such form'.[48] 'Seeking for Buddahood by rejecting sentient beings is like seeking for the echo by silencing the voice. Therefore, we know that delusion and

'The whole system of Zen discipline may thus be said to be nothing but a series of attempts to set us absolutely free from all forms of bondage. Even when we talk of 'seeing into one's self-nature', this seeing has also a binding effect on us if it is construed as having something in it specifically set up; that is, if the seeing is a specific state of consciousness. For this is the 'binding'. … So long as the seeing is something to see, it is not the real one; only when the seeing is no-seeing — that is, when the seeing is not a specific act of seeing into a definitely circumscribed state of consciousness — is it the 'seeing into one's self-nature'. Paradoxically stated, when seeing is no-seeing there is real seeing; when hearing is no-hearing there is real hearing. … When thus the seeing of self-nature has no reference to a specific state of consciousness, which can be logically or relatively defined as a something, the Zen masters designate it in negative terms and call it 'no-thought' or 'no-mind', *wu-nien* or *wu-hsin*. As it is 'no-thought' or 'no-mind', the seeing is really the seeing' (pp. 27-29).

46 *Bodhidharma Anthology*, pp. 16-17.

47 Ibid., p. 21.

48 *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*, translated with an introduction by Red Pine, New York 1987, p. 25. The theme is expressed in 'A Song on the View of Voidness' by Karma Trinley (1456-1539) in *Songs of Spiritual Experience: Tibetan Buddhist Poems of Insight and Awakening*, selected and translated by Thupten Jinpa and Jas Elsner, Boston and London 2000, p. 150. After having described the 'profound innermost secret' as the 'naked nonduality' that 'dawns within' through which the 'secret of samsara and nirvana is revealed', the poet asserts, 'I have beheld the face of the ordinary mind; / I have arrived at the view that is free of extremes; / even if the Buddha came in person now, / I have no queries that require his advice!' To be enlightened is to be awakened to the fact that the 'ordinary mind' is the 'transcendent mind unsullied by deliberation and correction' (p. 147), to behold therein the voidness of all being, the 'clear light' that is the 'natural pure space / free of the signs of being and nonbeing' (p. 148). The one to whom this secret has been disclosed has no need for the Buddha.

awakening are one road, that stupidity and wisdom are not different'.[49] This wisdom is implied in the saying attributed to Buddha, referred to by the honorific title 'Tathāgata', in the *Diamond Sūtra*, 'Those who know the discourse on dharma as like unto a raft, should forsake dharmas, still more so no-dharmas'.[50] The emptiness, which is the focal point of enlightenment, is situated between dharma and no-dharma, affirmation and negation, neither the one nor the other because it both is and is not one and the other. 'This dharma which the Tathagata has fully known or demonstrated — it cannot be grasped, it cannot be talked about, it is neither a dharma nor a no-dharma'.[51]

The same instruction figures prominently in some of the dicta attributed to ninth-century Rinzai Gigen, the father of the school of Zen to which Cohen's own master belongs:[52] 'Followers of the way, do not be deceived. In and out of the world there is not a thing that has a self-nature, nor a nature that is productive of a self. All is empty names, and the very letters of these names are also empty'.[53] To confuse the linguistic constructs with reality is a grave mistake that fails to take into account that the 'things' we name are in the realm of 'dependent change', and thus they are not real in themselves; they are likened to robes that one puts on and takes off. The subversive implications of Rinzai's teaching are drawn explicitly in other sayings transmitted in his name: 'There is no Buddha, no Dharma, no training and no realization. … If you turn to the outside, there is no Dharma; neither is there anything to be obtained from the inside. Rather than attaching yourselves to my words, better calm down and seek nothing further'.[54] 'There is no Buddha to seek, no Way to accomplish, no Dharma to be obtained. … Followers of the Way, the true Buddha has no shape, the true Way has no substance, the true Dharma has no form'.[55]

> One asked: 'What is the true Buddha, the true Dharma, the true Way? Please explain.
> The master said: 'What you call the Buddha, that is your heart in its purity. What you call the Dharma, that is your heart in its radiance. What you call

49 *Bodhidharma Anthology*, p. 14.
50 *Buddhist Wisdom Texts*, p. 34.
51 Ibid., p. 36.
52 For a brief account of this sect of Zen Buddhism, see *A History of Japenese Religion*, edited by Kazuo Kasahara, translated by Paul McCarthy ad Gaynor Sekimori, Tokyo 2001, pp. 227-244.
53 *The Zen Teaching of Rinzai*, translated by Irmgard Schloegl, Berkeley 1976, p. 38.
54 Ibid., pp. 44-45.
55 Ibid., p. 54.

> the Way, that is when in sheer light there is nowhere any obstruction. The three are one; but they are empty names and have no real existence. The man who has truly gone the Way keeps them ever present in his heart'.[56]

Zen masters, following the path laid out by exponents of Mahāyāna teaching, have long emphasized that the object of contemplation (*dhyāna*) is to focus on this emptiness, the non(being) that every (non)being is, to the point of attaining the meditative state of mental equipoise (*samādhi*),[57] the 'natural stillness and calm of man's original nonabiding mind'.[58] To cite another aphorism attributed to Rinzai, 'To attain is not to attain', that is to say, the Dharma is attained when one discerns that there is no Dharma to attain,[59] or, in the words of Chuang-tzu, 'obtain fish, discard trap', that is, as some Zen interpreters understood this Taoist slogan, once one has attained the goal of awakening, there is no longer any necessity to maintain the means.[60] 'Supreme Penetration', according to Rinzai, consists of understanding that 'the ten thousand things everywhere have no being of their own and have no form', and 'Surpassing Wisdom' entails that one no longer doubts anything since 'there is nothing to be attained'. When one is truly enlightened, one ascertains that even the 'Buddha has no need to become Buddha'.[61] The implications of Rinzai's paradoxical directive are drawn in another maxim: 'To seek the Buddha is to lose the Buddha. To seek the Way is to lose the Way. To seek the patriarchs is to lose the patriarchs. … Followers of the Way, even if you know how to explain and interpret a hundred volumes of Sutras and Treatises, better it is to be peaceful and a master who has nothing further to seek'.[62]

Awakening in Zen, therefore, which is based on a perspective that can be traced to the *Tao te Ching*,[63] is a process of self-depletion, stilling the restlessness of mind in the realization of the 'higher realm of true suchness' wherein 'there is neither self nor other'.[64] In this mindfulness, where word and concept fail, being and nonbeing are no longer discriminated. To quote Sosan,

56 Ibid., pp. 54-55.
57 For historical discussion of various meditational practices, including the one leading to the recognition that all things are empty, see Carl Bielefeldt, *Dogen's Manuals of Zen Meditation*, Berkeley 1988, pp. 84-85.
58 Ibid., p. 92, paraphrasing the words of Shen-hui.
59 *Zen Teaching of Rinzai*, pp. 55-56.
60 Dale, *Philosophical Meditations*, pp. 74-75.
61 *Zen Teaching of Rinzai*, pp. 57-58.
62 Ibid., pp. 61-62.
63 *Tao Te Ching*, sec. 16, p. 29.
64 *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, edited by Daisetz T. Suzuki, New York 1960, p. 81.

the third patriarch of Zen, 'The denying of reality is the asserting of it / And the asserting of emptiness is the denying of it / … What is is the same as what is not / What is not is the same as what is / … One in All / All in One'.[65] In the realization of oneness, oneness itself is overcome. 'When dualism does no more obtain, Oneness itself abides not'.[66] In the end, as in the beginning, and in every midpoint in between, there is nothing but the emptiness that is fully empty. Echoing the ancient Buddhist wisdom, Cohen writes in a poem entitled 'The Flow', 'You have been told to / 'go with the flow' / but as you know / from your studies, / there is no flow, / nor is there actually / any coming or going. / These are merely / helpful concepts / for the novice monk'.[67] With a somewhat more humorous touch, he encapsulates this gnōsis in the opening lines of the poem 'First of All', 'First of all nothing will happen / and a little later / nothing will happen again'.[68]

Needless to say, the issues I have touched upon could be greatly expanded, but for our purposes it is sufficient to draw the following conclusion from my brief summary: It is right to say that it is consistent with Zen to affirm the path that is not Zen as an expression of Zen, a mode of subversion, which perhaps finds its most striking formulation in the mandate to kill the Buddha, that is, even Buddha cannot be reified as a fixed object of veneration, an edict that may be traced to Mahāyāna sources as far back as Nāgārjuna: 'Those who develop mental fabrications with regard to the Buddha, / Who has gone beyond all fabrications, / As a consequence of those cognitive fabrications, / Fail to see the Tathāgata'.[69] The essence of the world, Nāgārjuna goes on to say, is the essence of the Tathāgata, but the Tathāgata has no essence, and hence the world has no essence. It follows, as Nāgārjuna wrote in another context, that one who 'is in harmony with emptiness is in harmony with all things'.[70] To detect the 'thusness' of all beings is to grasp the emptiness of everything whence flows the observation that 'From the buddhas above to the wriggling insects below there is nothing that is not another name for false thought'.[71]

65 Ibid., pp. 77, 81-82.
66 Ibid., p. 80.
67 *Book of Longing*, p. 194.
68 Ibid., p. 122.
69 *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, translation and commentary by Jay L. Garfield, New York and Oxford 1995, p. 62.
70 Cited in C. W. Huntington, JR. with Geshé Namgyal Wangchen, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika*, Honolulu 1989, p. 55.
71 *Bodhidharma Anthology*, p. 12.

Rinzai himself formulated a similar outlook: 'In the world and beyond the world, neither Buddha nor Dharma manifest themselves, nor do they disappear. Though things exist, they are only as names and words, sentences and catch phrases to attract little children; or expedient remedies for treating diseases, superficially revealed as names and places'.[72]

From this standpoint we must conclude that the belief in a personal deity to whom Jews have turned in reciting the Shema is, technically speaking, for a Zen practitioner attachment to illusory form, which is equivalent to ignorance and idolatry. This point, so elemental to Zen awakening, was articulated clearly by Bodhidharma: 'Why worship illusions born of the mind? Those who worship don't know, and those who know don't worship. … All appearances are illusions. Don't hold on to appearances'.[73] As Rinzai reportedly put it, 'If you seek Buddha in external forms, he would not be more than yourself'.[74] 'To see that the causal relations are empty, that the heart is empty, and that the Dharma is empty — and in one stroke decisively to cut it all off in order to transcend all, and to have nothing further to seek, this is burning the scriptures and statues'.[75] To achieve the state of knowing that there is nothing to know, to be conscious of the fact that there is nothing of which to be conscious, since, in the words of Hui-neng, 'From the first not a thing is',[76] means that all external forms, and this includes verbal and visual images, must be eradicated. It should be clear how this approach clashes with the theistic orientation that has informed traditional Jewish worship, including the recitation of the Shema, the declaration of Israel's belief in the one God who is creator of heaven and earth and the lord of all nations. While it is the case that aniconism is an indubitable aspect of Judaism, one would be hard-pressed to find a statement in the vast corpus of Jewish literature that would advocate the destruction of Scripture as an expression of recognizing ultimate truth. Furthermore, the steadfast rejection of iconic representations of God has actually enhanced the use of the imagination to configure the divine anthropomorphically, especially connected to prayer.

The Zen rejection of a personal deity as a false apperception akin to idolatry is for the pious Jew infidelity. One might counter that the synchronicity affirmed by Cohen between the attestation to God's oneness in Judaism and the

72 *Zen Teaching of Rinzai*, p. 58.
73 *Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*, pp. 26-27.
74 *Zen Teaching of Rinzai*, p. 54.
75 Ibid., p. 60.
76 Cited and explicated in Suzuki, *Doctrine of No-Mind*, pp. 24-26.

affirmation of the unity of all things in Zen is tenable if we assume a mystical interpretation of the former, but even in this case I am not entirely sure that we cross over to the same shore of mindfulness, or mindlessness as the case may be,[77] wherein conditional forms are unconditionally discarded. Kabbalists have repeatedly emphasized that there is no way to contemplate that which thought cannot contemplate but through the point of thought that extends limitlessly to the infinite beyond thought; the visualization of that which has no form is achieved by means of the form of the formless that renders all form formless, just as the silence of the ineffable is preserved through the vocalization of its epithet.[78] As Gershom Scholem rightly observed, the kabbalists did not only display courage in employing bold anthropomorphic images to describe God, but they 'were also inspired by the certainty with which, in the course of comparing the theory of emanation with the mystical linguistic theory of the name of God, they grasped the imagelessness which, as a great modern thinker put it, is the refuge of all images'.[79] The modern thinker to whom Scholem referred is Walter Benjamin who wrote of the 'blissful yearning that has already crossed the threshold of image and possession, and knows only the power of the name — the power from which the loved one lives, is transformed, ages, rejuvenates itself, and, imageless, is the refuge of all images'.[80] What is most significant for our purposes is the fact that Scholem gave expression to the dialectical relationship that pertains between imagelessness and the image.[81] Kabbalistic literature, and Hasidic texts based

77 See the comprehensive and philosophically sophisticated analysis in Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem*, La Salle 1986.

78 This matter has been a leitmotif of many of my studies including *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton 1994.

79 Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel, edited and revised by Jonathan Chipman, New York 1991, p. 55.

80 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1999, p. 269.

81 For a more elaborate discussion, which includes the texts of Scholem and Benjamin cited in this study, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 122-125. For an illuminating study of this theme in Taoism and Zen Buddhism, see Toshihiko Izutsu, 'Between Image and No-Image', *Eranos Jahrbuch* 48 (1979), pp. 427-461, reprinted in idem, *On Images: Far Eastern Ways of Thinking*, Dallas 1981, pp. 3-37.

thereon, do proffer an ideal of oneness beyond duality that may accommodate the Zen perspective, but the without-limit that transcends all delimitation cannot be revealed except through the veil of theistic images even if the intent of the images is to pont past themselves to that which has no image, the void 'where thinking never attains' and the 'imagination fails to measure'.[82] As Cohen himself puts it in the *Book of Mercy*, in language that resounds with kabbalistic symbolism, 'You have led me safely to this night, you gave me a crown of darkness and light, and tears to greet my enemy. Who can tell of your glory, who can number your forms, who dares expound the interior life of God?'[83] There is no way to depict the divine glory but through the innumerable forms of the formless one, the garments by which the unseen is manifest in the hiddenness of its disclosure. The paradox of the truth of the veil unveiled in the veil of truth is articulated with more precision in the poem 'You Are Right, Sahara', included in the *Book of Longing*: 'There are no mists, or veils, or distances. But the mist is surrounded by a mist; and the veil is hidden behind a veil; and the distance continually draws away from the distance. That is why there are no mists, or veils, or distances'.[84] We can speak of the removal of all barriers once we realize that the greatest of barriers is to speak of the removal of all barriers. The supreme veil is to think that one can see without a veil. When this is understood, the veil may be discarded.[85]

Mending the Fracture and the Flowering of the Luminous Dark

In Cohen's lyric, desire for union is coupled with the realization that unity cannot be attained fully in this world, a realm of fleeting shadow and broken vow. Assuredly, this vision is luminously dark, and with justification Cohen has been called the 'Black Romantic' and his poetic deportment described as a celebration of pain.[86] Though these characterizations are surely valid, it seems the overall portrait is one-sided, for it fails to capture the dialectical entwining of darkness and light that marks the distinctive turn of his path. Fervently attuned to fracture, Cohen nevertheless upholds the possibility of mending; indeed, the latter is possible only to the degree that one accepts the former. Hope flings from the depth of hopelessness, a sentiment that has shaped the

82 *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, p. 81.
83 *Book of Mercy*, p. 21.
84 *Book of Longing*, p. 44.
85 For a more elaborate discussion, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 220-233.
86 Stephen Scobie, *Leonard Cohen*, Vancouver 1978, p. 4.

existential predicament and historical exigency of Jews through the ages. Surely, we may assume that Cohen's personal battle with melancholy is entangled with the privileged place that suffering occupies in the formation of Jewish identity,[87] but it is also true that the affirmation of suffering inherent in all conditioned existence (*saṃkhāra-dukkha*) lies at the foundation of the Buddhist worldview, going back to the transforming experience of Gotama Buddha, which inspired what became known as the four noble truths.[88] It is reasonable to conjecture that in this matter the Jewish and Buddhist attitudes to suffering, bracketing the differences between them, have merged together to shape Cohen's idiosyncratic perspective. Particularly interesting in this regard is a comment in the Hesthamar interview in which one can discern a critique of a simplistic exposé of the Buddhist doctrine from a standpoint that is closer to the cadence of suffering inflected in a Jewish pitch: 'The religious promise is very cruel — that if you get enlightened you can live without suffering. And that's very cruel, because no one can live without suffering, there are just too many things that happen in life to ever present that guarantee, regardless of how rigorous the religious discipline is. It doesn't matter how advanced or fulfilled or enlightened an individual is, it will never be free of the sorrows and the pains of the moment'.[89] For Cohen, hardship is itself a religious asset, as it may serve as the catalyst for the alchemical conversion of dark into light. The charge is elegantly expressed by Cohen in the dirge-like 'Dance Me to the End of Love' from *Various Positions*, 'Raise a tent of shelter now / though every thread is torn'.[90] Tattered threads notwithstanding, a tent of shelter must be raised; precisely when the threads are torn — an image that perhaps is meant to bring to mind the ritual gesture of tearing one's garment that marks mourning the death of a loved one in Jewish tradition — is the need for shelter more pressing.

87 Needless to say, there are numerous studies on aspects of suffering in different periods of Jewish history. For a representative anthology of philosophical approaches, see *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, edited by Shalom Carmy, Northvale 1999.

88 Govind Chandra Pande, 'The Message of Gotama Buddha and Its Earliest Interpretations', in *Buddhist Spirituality*, pp. 3-5; Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 140-141.

89 See website reference above, n. 12.

90 *Stranger Music*, p. 337.

In the song 'Anthem' on *The Future* (1992), Cohen reiterates the point when he insists, 'There is a crack in everything / That's how the light get in'.[91] In the Kurzweil interview, Cohen agreed to the conjecture that these lines convey a 'Jewish idea'. To be more precise, the image of light peering through the crack reflects the kabbalistic notion of the breaking of the vessels promulgated by Isaac Luria and his disciples. Briefly put, according to Lurianic mythology, the cataclysmic break within the godhead facilitated the dissemination of light, the scattering of sparks in the world of particularity.[92] A resonance of this theme can also be detected in the lines from 'Heart With No Companion', another song on *Various Positions*: 'I greet you from the other side / Of sorrow and despair / With a love so vast and shattered / It will reach you everywhere'.[93] The image of the 'other side of sorrow and despair' corresponds to the zoharic notion of the demonic force, which is called *siṭra aḥra*, literally, the 'other side', the place of grief and suffering.[94] Only one standing in darkness can apprehend the light. Influenced by Luria's teaching that the vessels were broken on account of the abundance of light, Cohen speaks of the shattering being caused by the vastness of love. And just as Luria maintained that sparks of light remained attached to the shards of the broken vessels, so Cohen affirms that a residual of love is found everywhere awaiting redemption and restoration.

In support of my interpretation, I note that elsewhere Cohen expressed the matter utilizing the technical terminology of Lurianic kabbalah combined with the affirmation of language as the creative potency, which is germane to the diverse forms of Jewish mystical speculation:

> This is the language of love, but the language spoken in the lower worlds, among the citizens of the broken vessels. Nevertheless, wheels appear and turn, and creatures are moved from here to there. It is a garbled language, the letters weak and badly formed, the parchments stained with excrement; however, we are certain, there is no doubt that it derives from the great

91 Ibid., p. 373.

92 A number of scholars have written about the Lurianic myth. Suffice it to note the discussion in Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 265-268.

93 Cited from http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com.

94 Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 177-178; idem, *Mystical Shape*, pp. 73-87; and Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, Oxford 1989, pp. 448-546.

> formula of letters, formed by a voice, impressed upon the air, and set in the mouth in five places, namely: male and female, created He them.[95]

The language of love is a language spoken in the lower worlds, the domain of broken vessels, a language that is garbled, the letters weak and badly formed, the parchment stained with excrement. Yet, there is language, which is to say, the possibility of movement, the potential for relationship, the urge to connect and communicate, no matter how imperfect. The defective language in the fractured world derives from the 'great formula of letters', an aboriginal language, as it were, which Cohen describes by paraphrasing a passage from *Sefer Yeṣirah*, the ancient work of Jewish cosmology: 'Twenty-two foundational letters: Three mothers, seven doubles, and twelve simples, are engraved in the voice, hewn in the spirit, and set in the mouth in five places'.[96] Departing from the text, Cohen glosses the 'five places' in the mouth with a reference to the verse 'male and female, He created them', which in the Hebrew text consists of four words *zakhar u-neqevah bara otam* (Gen. 1:27).[97] Mathematical discrepancies aside, what is significant is that Cohen interprets the Jewish mystical notion of the formation of language in terms of the biblical ideal of the androgynous nature of humanity. Through this exegetical strategy he is able to conceive of the higher language as marking the union of male and female and thereby provide the mechanism by which the language of love that is characteristic of this broken world will be redeemed.

The poetic space that Cohen occupies lingers betwixt the effluence of love and the fracturing of the vessel, the ecstasy of union and the anguish of rupture. In the poem 'Credo' from *The Spice-Box of Earth*, Cohen expressed the matter by way of the myth that has informed the collective Jewish memory through the centuries: 'It is good to live between / a ruined house of bondage / and a

95 Cited in Harry Rasky, *The Song of Leonard Cohen: Portrait of a Poet, A Friendship and a Film*, Oakville, Ontario 2001, p. 60. I am grateful to Hazel Field who not only drew my attention to this book but bestowed upon me a copy as a gift.

96 I translate from the version of the text established in Ithamar Gruenwald, 'A Preliminary Critical Edition of Sefer Yeṣira', *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971), p. 147.

97 To be sure, in some passages from *Sefer Yeṣirah* gender attributes are applied to the Hebrew letters, but not in the manner set out by Cohen, that is, there is no text that links the letters to the creation of Adam as male and female. In later kabbalistic literature, this theme is attested. See Elliot R. Wolfson, 'Letter Symbolism and Anthropomorphic Imagery in the Zohar', *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 8 (1989), pp. 147-181, esp. 160-161, 173-174 (Hebrew).

holy promised land'.[98] In these lines, Cohen achieves perfect poetic balance by juxtaposing the ruined house of bondage to the holy promised land. Pining for the promised land cannot be envisioned except from the ruins of destruction. Who can genuinely expect to be restored but one acutely aware of being dislodged? From this broken place poetic inspiration wells forth.[99] In a poem entitled 'Ballad', which is included in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, Cohen places this mind-set in the mouth of the 'hanging man', an obvious allusion to the crucified Jesus, addressing the man who comes to the cross and dips a flower in the wound:

> Will petals find roots
> in the wounds where I bleed?
> Will minstrels learn songs
> from a tongue which is torn
> and sick be made whole
> through rents in my skin?[100]

It is plausible that the Jewish poet identified with the man hanging on the cross and was thus expressing his own emotions through the voice of Jesus. The gift of the poem is the flower that takes root in the wound, the song that issues from the tongue that is torn, the healing that is facilitated by the rents of the skin. For the moment I shall bracket the implicit identification of the poet with Jesus and simply note that poetic inspiration pulsates from the puncture in the fabric of being. In the Judaically inspired 'Hallelujah' on *Various Positions*, Cohen intones, 'There's a blaze of light in every word; / it doesn't matter which you heard, / the holy, or the broken Hallelujah!'[101] In these words, I detect a theme that is central to Hasidic lore, based on earlier kabbalistic sources, concerning

98 *Selected Poems*, p. 49.

99 The restlessness of the poetic calling is addressed by Cohen in his admission to Kari Hesthamar (see above, n. 12): 'I was always escaping; a large part of my life was escaping. Whatever it was, even if the situation looked good I had to escape, because it didn't look good to me. … I had to continually escape from the situation I was in, because it didn't feel good, so I guess kids and other people close to me suffered because I was always leaving. Not for very long, but I was always trying to get away'. When asked by the interviewer why this was so, Cohen responded: 'Just the wind, just driven. Sometimes painful to break away, sometimes easy, but I always had to leave in some kind of way'. Without ignoring the particular circumstances of Cohen's life to account for this incessant need to flee, I submit that is also indicative of the diasporic Jewish experience.

100 *Selected Poems*, p. 22.

101 *Stranger Music*, p. 347.

the infusion of light in language; each letter (needless to say, in the Jewish texts, the point is restricted to Hebrew) is an ark that contains the spark of divine luminescence. In a manner consonant with mystics who have the capacity to extend the boundary of tradition without breaking it, Cohen draws the logical conclusion: If God's light is truly in every word, then there is no difference between the holy and broken gesticulation. The latter may be the more profound acclamation of worship.[102] In the beautifully melodic 'If It Be Your Will' from the same album, Cohen similarly demarcates the place of brokenness as the fount of all prayer:

> If it be your will
> that a voice be true
> from this broken hill
> I will sing to you
> From this broken hill
> all your praises they shall ring
> if it be your will
> to let me sing[103]

In *Book of Mercy*, we happen upon the same motif: 'You have sweetened your word on my lips. … You placed me in this mystery and you let me sing … You led me to this field where I can dance with a broken knee'.[104] I note, parenthetically, that in the interview with Kurzweil, Cohen made the following comment: 'It was only after studying with my old Zen teacher for many years, when I broke my knees and I couldn't practice in the mediation hall, that I began practicing Judaism'. Perhaps the reference to dancing in the field with a broken knee in *Book of Mercy* should be decoded as a hint to this actual event in Cohen's spiritual odyssey. Be that as it may, the main issue is that, for Cohen, poeticizing takes shape within the matrix of suffering. I cite again from the *Book of Mercy*: 'Broadcast your light through the apple of pain, radiant one, sourceless, source of light. … Broken in the unemployment of my soul, I have driven a wedge into your world, fallen on both sides of it. Count me back to your mercy with the measures of a bitter song, and do not separate me from my tears'.[105] Cohen does not ask to be released from his pain; quite the

102 See the comments of Cohen on the song 'Hallelujah' in 'A Master's Reflections on His Music', *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 1995, paraphrased in Boucher, *Dylan and Cohen*, p. 227.
103 *Stranger Music*, p. 343.
104 *Book of Mercy*, p. 21.
105 Ibid., p. 26.

contrary, he insists that he not be separated from his tears, for the tears are the rungs on the ladder that lead to compassion and light. 'You let me sing, you lifted me up, you gave my soul a beam to travel on', Cohen expresses his gratitude to God, 'You gave the injury a tongue to heal itself'.[106] The healing comes not in the suppression or eradication of infliction, but in the agony that trickles from its core. 'Blessed are you who speaks from the darkness, who gives form to desolation, You draw back the heart that is spilled in the world, you establish the borders of pain. Your mercy you make known to those who know your name, and your healing is discovered beneath the lifted cry. … The ruins signal your power; by your hand it is broken down, and all things crack that your throne be restored to the heart'.[107] Cohen would assent to the teaching ascribed to Naḥman of Bratslav that the supplications and prayers in Psalms were composed by King David from a broken heart; the brokenness of the heart is a fracture in the edifice, a fissure that facilitates an awakening to return, the impetus to pray. It is an obligation to be joyous constantly, but it is also necessary to set aside some time to speak to God directly from the depth of the broken heart.[108] 'Blessed are you, who open a gate in every moment, to enter in truth or tarry in hell. Let me be with you again, let me put this away, you who wait beside me, who have broken down your world to gather hearts'.[109]

According to another passage from *Book of Mercy*, the Accuser, that is, Satan, is described as having neither song nor tears.[110] How curious! The ontic

106 Ibid., p. 39.

107 Ibid., p. 95.

108 *Hishtappekhut ha-Nefesh*, Jerusalem 1978, p. 29. See ibid., p. 57: 'A broken heart and sadness are not one general matter, for the broken heart is in the heart and sadness is from the spleen, and this is the other side, and the blessed holy One hates it. The broken heart, however, is beloved before the blessed holy One and it is very precious in his eyes, blessed be he. It would be good for a person to have a broken heart all day, but people, according to their nature, cannot accomplish this for they may come to sadness from a broken heart, God forbid, and this is entirely forbidden to man. Thus it is necessary to designate a time during the day for the heart to be broken, that is, to be alone and to break his heart before him, blessed be he, but the rest of the day he should be joyous'. The latter passage is derived from *Siḥot ha-Ran*, New York 1972, sec. 41, pp. 27-28. On the broken heart in Naḥman's thinking, see Elliot R. Wolfson, 'The Cut That Binds: Time, Memory, and the Ascetic Impulse', in *God's Voice from the Void: Old and New Studies in Bratslav Hasidism*, edited by Shaul Magid, Albany 2002, pp. 112-115.

109 *Book of Mercy*, pp. 59-60.

110 Ibid., p. 75.

source of misfortune, the Accuser, the force of impurity who stands in the place that God is not named,[111] has no tears, for weeping, in fact, belongs to the side of holiness and joy. 'I cry from my defeat and you straighten my thought. It is your name that makes the cry a healing, it is your mercy that guards the heart in the panic of yes and no'.[112] The one who has no tears to weep has no song to sing. Between desolation and elation is the still-point where the poet finds his footing. It is especially with respect to this matter that I consider 'mystical' an apt term to characterize Cohen's poiesis, for, in my opinion, the repeated emphasis on union on the part of the mystically inclined bespeaks a fervent awareness of fragmentation, displacement, alienation.

Holy Eroticism and Poetic Rectification

Another dimension prevalent in Cohen's poetic comportment, which has great affinity with reports of mystical experience, is the erotic dimension of the quest to be joined with God, a theme I have already mentioned. Scobie correctly noted that the 'real dynamic' of Cohen's religious feelings 'lies in their identification with sexual energy and emotion'.[113] Following in the footsteps of many poets, sages, and visionaries from diverse traditions, Cohen portrays the sexual in religious imagery and the religious in sexual imagery. Any attempt to separate the two conflicts with the root experience that has shaped Cohen's spiritual aesthetic; he is, in his own words, the 'poet of the two great intimacies'.[114] 'Religion is my favorite hobby', he said in an interview conducted in November 1998. 'It's deep and voluptuous — a pure delight. Nothing is comparable to the delight you get from this activity. Apart, obviously, from courting. If you are a young man, that is the more amusing activity'.[115]

In the poem 'Out of the Land of Heaven' from *The Spice-Box of Earth*, which is dedicated to Chagall, Cohen employs the kabbalistic image of the

111 Ibid., p. 87.
112 Ibid., p. 91.
113 *Leonard Cohen*, p. 8. See above, n. 22.
114 From *Death of a Lady's Man* reprinted in *Stranger Music*, p. 230.
115 Eleana Cornelli, 'The Virtueless Monk', *La Nazione* (Florence), November 25, 1998, also cited in Juan Rodriguez, 'Zen Robes Retired as Singer Turns 65', *The Montreal Gazette*, Sept. 18, 1999.

Sabbath Queen mating with the Jewish male on Friday evening[116] to illustrate the eroticism of mystical union:

> Out of the land of heaven
> Down comes the warm Sabbath sun
> Into the spice-box of earth.
> The Queen will make every Jew her lover.
> In a white silk coat
> Our rabbi dances up the street …
> And who waits for him
> On a throne at the end of the street
> But the Sabbath Queen.
> Down go his hands
> Into the spice-box of earth,
> And there he finds the fragrant sun
> For a wedding ring,
> And draws her wedding finger through.[117]

The theme of union is presented melodramatically in the forlorn lyric of 'Joan of Arc' from the album *Songs of Love and Hate* (1971), a song that recounts the dialogue between the fabled heroine[118] and God:

> 'Then fire, make your body cold,
> I'm going to give you mine to hold'.
> And saying this she climbed inside
> to be his one, to be his only bride.
> And deep into his fiery heart
> he took the dust of Joan of Arc,
> and high above the wedding guests
> he hung the ashes of her wedding dress.
> It was deep into his fiery heart
> he took the dust of Joan of Arc,
> and then she clearly understood
> if he was fire, oh, then she must be wood.
> *I saw her wince, I saw her cry,*

116 Regarding this theme, see Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, translated by Ralph Manheim, New York 1969, pp. 139-145; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 438-439, 1226-1227; Elliot K. Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah*, Albany 1989, pp. 115-116, 292-293.

117 *Selected Poems*, p. 71.

118 For an illuminating study, see Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism*, Berkeley 1981.

I saw the glory in her eye.
Myself, I long for love and light,
but must it come so cruel, must it be so bright?[119]

The union of Joan of Arc and God results in the overcoming of difference, the reintegration of woman in man, which is imaged as the burning of wood in fire, the transmutation of desire to dust. In the mind's eye, it is possible to distinguish fire and wood, but in the moment of smoldering there is no way to separate them. Similarly, in the bond of mystical union, lover and beloved cannot be differentiated. I would suggest that, in line with a long-standing tradition in mystical thought, Joan of Arc symbolically represents the soul, which is feminized in relation to the male deity. I note, parenthetically, that in the poem 'I Met You' from the collection *New Poems* (1968), Cohen paints himself as a god in relation to Joan of Arc who is in need of using her body to sing in an unprecedented way about beauty.[120] In this case, the poet assumes the role of masculine deity in relation to the female lover. Closer to the gender dynamic operative in the song 'Joan of Arc' is the comment of Cohen in *The Energy of Slaves* (1972), 'I am the ghost of Joan of Arc', that is, the poet identifies with the martyred female saint. By utilizing this figure to exemplify the lust for union, Cohen touches on another theme well attested in mystical texts, to wit, the nexus of martyrdom, asceticism, and eroticism.[121] Mystically oriented souls from time immemorial have demarcated the limit of love for God in the laying of one's life on the line, the suffering of eros even unto death, which is movingly illustrated by Cohen in the image of the ashes of the wedding dress hung like a relic above the guests invited to celebrate the matrimonial ceremony. Read from the vantage point of the mundane, this would seem to convey a bitter irony, the nuptials transposed into a funeral, but when looked at from a transcendent perspective, there is no irony at all. Can love be more consummate than in the consumption of the lover in the heart of the beloved? Is there an image more arresting than that of the wood burning in the flame?

The image of the martyred saint is an adequate symbol for mystical union as it communicates the idea of self-annihilation. Richard C. Zaehner, a

119 *Stranger Music*, pp. 147-148.

120 *Selected Poems*, p. 227.

121 I have explored the complex of these themes in 'Martyrdom, Eroticism, and Asceticism in Twelfth-Century Ashkenazi Piety', *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe*, edited by John Van Engen and Michael Signer, Notre Dame 2001, pp. 171-220.

twentieth-century scholar on comparative mysticism, emotively described the point in his account of the culminating stage of mystical union in which the male mystic is enveloped and penetrated by the spirit of God. Reflecting the typically androcentric perspective that informs the literary accounts of the predominantly male Christian mystics he studied, Zaehner describes the soul of the mystic in relation to the divine as the bride who passively receives from the masculine potency of God. The soul recognizes its 'essential femininity' in relation to God, for in her receptivity, she is annihilated, which serves for Zaehner as a paradigm of the mystical union whereby the autonomy of self is negated in the absorption of the soul in the oneness of being. Zaehner remarks that in this state the soul of the mystic, limited in his remarks to the male, is comparable to a 'virgin who falls violently in love and desires nothing so much as to be 'ravished', 'annihilated', and 'assimilated' into the beloved. There is no point at all in blinking the fact that the raptures of the theistic mystic are closely akin to the transports of sexual union, the soul playing the part of the female and God appearing as the male'.[122] Here is not the place to analyze Zaehner's position critically. What is crucial for me is that he has formulated the unitive experience in terms that help illumine Cohen's account of Joan of Arc.

Scobie has argued that 'Cohen's saints must make their wills transparent to Nothing. The self is not sacrificed to some higher cause; the sacrifice of self *is* the higher cause'.[123] This presentation, however, is not dialectical enough to capture the paradoxical tension of Cohen's thinking. Clearly, the traditional belief in a transcendent God is problematic. More recently, Cohen is at greater ease speaking of God in theistic imagery, but even in earlier and more irreverent works, he is not a nihilist or agnostic. On the contrary, Cohen has known all along that the ray of faith can only shine in and through the cloud of doubt. The inseparability of the two is pointedly expressed in 'Heart With No Companion', from *Various Positions*, 'Though your promise count for nothing / You must keep it nonetheless'.[124] Can doubt be expressed more devastatingly than in the resignation that one's promise counts for nothing? Even so, the promise must be kept, and therein rests the unshakeable belief coiled in the heart of unbelief. For Cohen, the pledge that seems most futile is the one that must be most diligently upheld, as it is precisely the promise that

122 Richard C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience*, Oxford 1957, p. 151.

123 *Leonard Cohen*, p. 10.

124 Cited from http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com.

counts for nothing, the end of the rope, we might say, that fastens one most resolutely to God. As Cohen puts it in the *Book of Mercy*:

> Open Me, O heart of truth, hollow out the stone, let your Bride fulfill this loneliness. I have no other hope, no other moves. This is my offering of incense. This is what I wish to burn, my darkness with no blemish, my ignorance with no flaw. Bind me to your will, bind me with these threads of sorrow, and gather me out of the afternoon where I have torn my soul on twenty monstrous altars, offering all things but myself.[125]

Against this background we can better understand a significant component of the mystical dimension of Cohen's writings. The yearning for absorption of self in a greater being stands as a real possibility even if the cord that ties one to that being is despondency. In another song, 'Ballad of the Absent Mare', from *Recent Songs* (1979), Cohen describes the union of self and God by the image of a cowboy riding his horse. One should not be thrown by the use of this seemingly prosaic image to relate such a sublime matter. The poem embodies an astute mystical sensibility as the poet articulates the unification of male and female through the much older motif of the rider being saddled to the horse, a metaphor utilized by mystical poets throughout history.[126]

> And the world is sweet and the world is wide
> and she's there where the light and the darkness divide
> and the steam's coming off her, she's huge and she's shy
> and she steps on the moon when she paws at the sky
> And she comes to his hand but she's not really tame
> She longs to be lost and he longs for the same
> and she'll bolt and she'll plunge through the first open pass
> to roll and to feed in the sweet mountain grass
> Or she'll make a break for the high plateau

125 *Book of Mercy*, p. 73.

126 It is possible that Cohen has been influenced especially by the delineation of the ten bulls traceable to the twelfth-century Chinese master Kakuan. See Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings*, Rutland, Vermont 1977, p. 166: 'The bull is the eternal principle of life, truth in action. The ten bulls represent ten sequent steps in the realization of one's true nature'. The narrative depicting the ten steps covers the search for the bull, discovering his footprints, perceiving the bull, catching the bull, taming the bull, riding the bull home, the bull transcended, both bull and self transcended, reaching the source, being in the world. The last step is described in more detail as the condition of humility and contrition, to walk in the world barefooted, naked of breast, garbed in ragged clothes, dust-laden (see p. 186).

where there's nothing above and there's nothing below
And it's time for their burden, it's time for the whip
Will she walk through the flame, can he shoot from the hip
So he binds himself to the galloping mare
and she binds herself to the rider there
and there is no space but there's left and right
and there is no time but there's day and night
And he leans on her neck and he whispers low
Whither thou goest I will go
And they turn as one and they head for the plain
no need for the whip, no need for the rein
Now the clasp of this union, who fastens it tight
who snaps it asunder the very next night?
Some say the rider, some say the mare
some say love's like the smoke, beyond all repair[127]

Note that the poet does not rest easy in the union, but somewhat wistfully concludes on a note of disruption, a severance of the bond, love disappearing like the smoke that is beyond repair. We would do well to read the last word as re/pair, that is, the repair to which the poet alludes would consist of repairing rider and mare, male and female, but this union cannot endure in the world of separation. The song terminates with a beautifully expressed plea for resignation that resonates with ancient Chinese wisdom, to take hold one must let go:

But my darling says, Leonard, just let it go by,
That old silhouette on the great Western sky
So I pick out a tune and they move right along
and they're gone like the smoke, they're gone like this song[128]

The song is both image and mirror — the ephemerality of union described in the song is compared in the end to the fading of the song. Indeed, the song is writ in the shadow of drifting, in the trace of vanishing, 'gone like the smoke', 'gone like this song'. In the chorus to 'Boogie Street' from *Ten New Songs*, Cohen once again expresses this motif:

O Crown of Light, O Darkened One,
I never thought we'd meet.
You kiss my lips, and then it's done:

127 *Stranger Music*, pp. 308-309.
128 Ibid., p. 309.

I'm back on Boogie Street.[129]

It goes without saying that 'Boogie Street', is not a particular place, but a figurative representation of the physical world of pleasure where one drinks wine, smokes cigarettes, enjoys the beauty of the river and waterfall, pursues love relationships in which one is made and unmade. There is, however, the possibility of being temporarily removed from this state of temporality by experiencing transcendence without any mediation. Cohen portrays this experience as being kissed on the lips by the 'crown of light', which is the 'darkened one'. I surmise that the paradoxical characterization of God is drawn from, or, at the very least, is an interesting analogue to, the widespread account of the first of the *sefirot* in kabbalistic lore as the primordial light so bright that it glistens in the radiance of its darkness. The poet attests to the immediacy of the experience, it is something spontaneous and unexpected, 'I never thought we'd meet', but once the bond is made, it is immediately undone, and he ends up back on Boogie Street. Poetic utterance, therefore, is on a par with mystical experience, which, as a number of scholars have noted, is fleeting, momentary, persisting as that which is persistently passing.

Repentance and the Piety of Self-abnegation

The desire to unite with the divine source is also expressed by Cohen in terms of the kabbalistic understanding of the traditional idea of *teshuvah*, repentance, in the song 'Coming Back to You' from *Various Positions*.[130] It has been argued that this is a love ballad in which the poet expresses his longing to reunite with his earthly beloved despite her transgressions.[131] I would counter, however, that the poet is addressing God, although it would not be unreasonable to assume that there is an allusion to a personal relationship as well; quite the contrary, this is likely insofar as the erotic and the spiritual are intertwined in the poet's imagination, as I have already noted. The coming back of which he speaks refers to *teshuvah*, a turning-round on the path, re/turning to where one has always never been. This interpretation best accounts for the reference to judgment in the following stanza:

129 *Book of Longing*, p. 64.

130 On the kabbalistic understanding of *teshuvah*, see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 1499-1510; Elliot R. Wolfson, 'Fore/giveness On the Way: Nesting in the Womb of Response', *Graven Images: Studies in Culture, Law, and the Sacred* 4 (1998), pp. 153-169; Shimon Shokek, *Kabbalah and the Art of Being*, London and New York 2001, pp. 127-147.

131 Nadel, *Various Positions*, p. 240.

> They're handing down my sentence now,
> and I know what I must do:
> another mile of silence while I'm
> *coming back to you*
> There are many in your life
> and many still to be.
> Since you are a shining light,
> there's many that you'll see.
> But I have to deal with envy
> when you choose the precious few
> who've left their pride on the other side of
> *coming* back *to you*[132]

To return to God one must first yield to the judgment, a submission that Cohen delineates in a manner that may seem at first blush to be distinctively un-Jewish, to walk in silence. Perhaps a touch of Zen influence may be detected here — silently heeding the whirl of the karmic wheel in an effort to be liberated from its spin[133] — but the language of judgment, the handing down of the sentence, points to a Jewish milieu. Strictly speaking, a Zen Buddhist cannot accept the discourse of divine judgment cast in personalistic terms. Walking in silence figuratively expresses the pietistic ideal of contrition, which is the necessary prerequisite for acquiescence to and concurrence with the divine will. As it happens, the last song on the album is 'If It Be Your Will' to which I have already made reference. In this beautifully lyrical plea, Cohen expresses his unconditional willingness to be the vessel in the hands of God (who is not mentioned explicitly but who is plainly addressed in the second person). If God wills the singer to be silent, he will still his voice; if, however, God wills the singer to sing, then he will offer his song from the 'broken hill', the place whence all praises of God are offered.[134] Again, we see that, for the poet, God is to be approached from the site of brokenness — this is the mystical secret of repentance, returning to the peak of light from the pit of darkness.

In the *Book of Mercy*, Cohen directly affirms the traditional Jewish ideal: 'And here and there, among the seventy tongues and the hundred darknesses —

132 *Stranger Music*, p. 339.

133 In this connection, it is of interest to note that Cohen's dharma name is Jikan, which means the 'silent one'. On the rhetoric of silence in Zen training, see Dale, *Philosophical Meditations*, pp. 94-96.

134 *Stranger Music*, p. 343.

something, something shining, men of courage strengthening themselves to kindle the lights of repentance'.[135] 'Though I scorched away the tears of return in the forced light of victory, your rebuke still comforts me, you signify yourself among the dangers. Saying, *Use this fear to know me, fix this exile toward my return*'.[136] The reprimand of God serves a positive role as it affords one the opportunity to dwell in the 'low-built shelter of repentance',[137] that is, a shelter that is built from being humbled in love. Pridefulness is the greatest obstacle on the path. In calamitous terms, Cohen notes, 'When the heart grins at itself, the world is destroyed. And I am found alone with the husks and the shells. Then the dangerous moment comes: I am too great to ask for help'.[138] In good rabbinic fashion, Cohen speaks of conceit destroying the world, a moral decay that is more devastating than physical demolition, a desolation that leaves one scampering about the ruins, portrayed in the language employed by kabbalists to designate the demonic force, 'husks' and 'shells'. The way to repentance is through shattering the shell of arrogance, which is fostered by contritely accepting the judgment of God. A response of this sort is found in Jewish texts, especially ethical works that betray the impact of kabbalistic doctrine. Without negating the more conventional understanding of repentance, predicated on the theistic conception of reward and punishment, kabbalists proffered a symbolic understanding that is close in temperament to the idea expressed by Cohen. To repent is to go back to the womb, to return to the mother, to be restored to the 'faint silent voice', *qol demamah daqqah* (1 Kings 19:12), the muffled speech that is the origin and destination of prayer, the language beyond language.[139] The turning-back begins with the humble acceptance of one's sentence, a compliance facilitated by a breaking of haughtiness, the primary husk of the 'other side'. Sadly, in a world impelled by egoism and self-centeredness, acts of contrition will be misconstrued by those who are envious of the 'chosen few' that have made their way back to God.

The return to God, therefore, is predicated on abnegation of the will, a theme well attested in religious traditions but especially eminent in mystical devotional treatises. In the poem 'Claim Me, Blood, If You Have a Story', included in *Parasites of Heaven* (1966), Cohen expresses the ideal of self-annihilation in an image that is central to kabbalistic lore:

135 *Book of Mercy*, p. 68.
136 Ibid., pp. 71-72.
137 Ibid., p. 33.
138 Ibid., pp. 65-66.
139 Wolfson, 'Fore/giveness On the Way'.

> Claim me, blood, if you have a story
> to tell with my Jewish face,
> you are strong and holy still, only
> speak, like the Zohar, of a carved-out place
> into which I must pour out myself like wine,
> an emptiness of history which I must seize
> and occupy, calm and full in this confine,
> becoming clear 'like good wine on its lees'.[140]

The negation of the will is delineated here as the pouring of oneself like wine into the space engraved by the narrative that is dictated by the blood of Cohen's Jewish heritage. Cohen artfully plays here with images of blood and wine, undoubtedly meant to call to mind the Eucharistic transubstantiation of the Paschal wine into the blood of Christ. By evoking the blood, perhaps also an allusion to the covenant of circumcision, Cohen lays claim to his Jewish past, seizing the 'emptiness of history', becoming clear like wine that one spills into a vacant place. The poetic articulation of this matter is described by the term *zohar*, the 'splendour', the name assigned to the main anthology of medieval kabbalah based on the apocalyptic promise 'the enlightened will shine like the splendour of the firmament' (Daniel 12:11). I do not pretend to comprehend fully the use of this image in this context, but it seems that Cohen is proposing that the kabbalistic text affirms the notion of speaking of a place that is carved and into which the blood of the self will be poured like wine. That is to say, the Zohar offers the poet a model of mystical renunciation to be emulated in his own poetic composition.

Interestingly, in a more current poem 'Takanawa Prince Hotel Bar', included in the *Book of Longing* (2006), Cohen is more explicit in his use of the image of circumcision to articulate the sacrifice of self entailed in the act of writing poetry:

> Slipping down into the Pure Land
> into the Awakened State of Drunk
> into the furnace blue Heart of the
> one one one true Allah the Beloved
> Companion of Dangerous Moods —
> Slipping down into the 27 Hells
> of my own religion my own sweet
> dark religion of drunk religion
> my bended knee of Poetry my robes

140 *Selected Poems*, p. 203.

my bowl my scourge of Poetry
my final circumcision after
the circumcision of the flesh
and the circumcision of the heart
and the circumcision of the yearning
to Return to be Redeemed
to be Washed to be Forgiven Again
the Final Circumcision the Final
and Great Circumcision —
Broken down awhile
and cowarding
in the blasting rays
of Hideous Enlightenment
but now finally surrendered to the Great
Resignation of Poetry
And not the kind of Wise Experience
or the false kisses of Competitive
Insight, but my own sweet dark
religion of poetry my booby prize
my sandals and my shameful prayer
my invisible Mexican candle
my useless oils to clean the house
and remove my rival's spell
on my girlfriend's memory —
O Poetry my Final Circumcision[141]

This poem is a collage of symbols from the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist traditions that Cohen has pieced together in order to elucidate his own brand of religious reverie. In the playful manner of subtle inversion that is emblematic of his spiritual predilection, perhaps enhanced by the Zen penchant for paradoxical reversal, the experience of enlightenment is characterized as the Pure Land, an image derived from a particular school of Buddhism,[142]

141 *Book of Longing*, pp. 31-32.

142 To cite several representative studies: Kenneth K. Tanaka, *The Dawn of Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Doctrine: Ching-ying Hui-Yüan's Commentary on the Visualization Sutra*, Albany 1990; Roger J. Corless, 'Pure Land Piety', in *Buddhist Spirituality*, pp. 242-271; *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light — Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutras*, Introductions and English Translation by Luis O. Gōmez, Honolulu 1996; *A History of Japenese Religion*, pp. 114-129; Mark L. Blum, *The Origins and*

which is identified further as an awakened state of drunkenness — the term 'awakened' is the literal meaning of the title *buddha*, which is from the word *bodhi*, 'awakening' or 'enlightenment'. The intoxicated wakefulness is related, moreover, to the 'furnace blue Heart' of Allah, tellingly designated the 'Companion of Dangerous Moods', and to the twenty-seven hells of the poet's own religion, a motif that may have been lifted from the cosmological scheme sketched in the first book of Blake's *Milton*.[143] Cohen goes on to describe his own 'dark religion of drunken religion' as the 'bended knee of Poetry', an image that combines a gesture of prayer with poetic artistry. As we shall see in the succeeding section, in Cohen's imagination, there is an intrinsic nexus between these two activities. What is important to note here is that in this context the poiesis of prayer is troped as the 'final circumcision' that comes after the 'circumcision of the flesh', the 'circumcision of the heart', and the 'circumcision of the yearning'. Remaining true to the view suggested by the biblical books of Deuteronomy (30:6) and Jeremiah (4:4), Cohen distinguishes circumcision of the heart and circumcision of the flesh, and we can even say that he accords a higher status to the former, but his language clearly indicates that he does not accept the Christian belief (following Paul) that circumcision of the heart (eventually identified as the rite of baptism) replaces circumcision of the flesh (Romans 4:4). In addition to the two circumcisions enunciated by Scripture, Cohen mentions circumcision of the yearning, which, we may hypothesize, refers to the ascetic taming of carnal passion.[144] Beyond that level

Development of Pure Land Buddhism: A Study and Translation of Gyōnen's Jōdo Hōmon Genrushō, Oxford 2002.

143 *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, Newly Revised Edition, Edited by David V. Erdman, Commentary by Harold Bloom, Berkeley 1982, p. 110: 'The Mundane Shell, is a vast Concave Earth: an immense / Hardend shadow of all things upon our Vegetated Earth / Enlarg'd into dimension & deform'd into indefinite space, / In Twenty-seven Heavens and all their Hells'.

144 It is important to note that one of the leading rationales offered by Jewish sages, including kabbalists, to explain circumcision of the flesh was that it weakened the male sexual drive. On the link between the rite of circumcision and sexual renunciation, see primary and secondary sources cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 486 n. 184. The modern reverberation of this theme (especially conspicuous in Freud and his many interpreters) is the connection made between castration and circumcision. See Wolfson, op. cit., p. 485 n. 173. Perhaps it would be of interest to the reader to note that in my study 'The Cut That Binds', which analyzes the theme of ascetic eroticism linked symbolically to circumcision as it is explicated in the thought of Naḥman of Bratslav, I begin with a citation from Cohen's 'The Night Comes On', 'I needed so much to have nothing to touch / I've

is the 'final' and 'great' circumcision, the 'Return to be Redeemed / to be Washed to be Forgiven Again'. We may speculate that this final circumcision corresponds to the act of repentance, *teshuvah*, discussed above. By surrendering to the 'Great Resignation of Poetry', Cohen's 'own sweet dark religion of poetry', the poet induces the turning-back, the redemption of spirit, purified by the waters of forgiveness, the giving-before that engenders the offering of song.

The piety of self-abnegation as the prerequisite for the poeticizing of prayer, the hollowing out of self to become a hallow vessel, is the key theme that marks Cohen's indebtedness to Jewish mysticism, albeit enhanced by Zen meditation. The next song that I shall analyze, 'The Window' from *Recent Songs*, expresses this kabbalistic piety in stunning fashion, shaped by an interesting intermingling of Jewish and Christian symbols, an amalgamation that is characteristic of the kabbalistic orientation in its genealogical foundation. The first stanza reads:

> Why do you stand by the window
> abandoned to beauty and pride?
> the thorn of the night in your bosom,
> the spear of the age in your side;
> lost in the rages of fragrance,
> lost in the rags of remorse,
> lost in the waves of a sickness
> that loosens the high silver nerves.[145]

The window, I propose, is symbolic of the soul, which is described in the chorus as a 'tangle of matter and ghost', the 'darling of angels, demons and saints / and the whole broken-hearted host'.[146] The figurative representation of the soul as a window indicates that it is the opening that allows one to see beyond but also within oneself; indeed, to see beyond, one must look within, a basic tenet of mystical piety. Introspection begins by taking hold of one's failings, discerning that one is 'abandoned to beauty and pride', the folly of flesh that lures one onto an errant path. Passion has left its imprint on the soul, inflicting it with the 'thorn of the night' and piercing it with the 'spear of the age', the 'rages of fragrance' giving way to the 'rags of remorse'. Yet, the pain

always been greedy that way'. The meaning I ascribed to these words, and hence the reason I chose them as the epigraph, seems to have been more fully articulated in Cohen's 'Takanawa Prince Hotel Bar'.

145 *Stranger Music*, p. 299.

146 Ibid.

that is consequent to the pleasure has a positive impact on the sojourner who has gone astray, for the 'waves of a sickness' loosen the 'high silver nerves'. In this excruciating image, Cohen relates that suffering below triggers a reaction above, which is described more extensively in the second stanza:

> Come forth from the cloud of unknowing
> And kiss the cheek of the moon;
> the New Jerusalem glowing,
> why tarry all night in the ruin?
> And leave no word of discomfort,
> and leave no observer to mourn,
> but climb on your tears and be silent
> like the rose on its ladder of thorns.[147]

To depict the second stage of the mystical journey, Cohen utilizes several standard images. The remorse on the part of the soul that has been ravaged by flames of desire initiates a reaction in the heavenly realm, which Cohen conveys in the language of the thirteenth-century anonymous Christian mystical work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a locution that denotes that one cannot know God except through unknowing, the *via negativa*, as it is known to philosophers and historians of religion.[148] We are not told who it is that comes forth from the cloud, but we can surmise that it is the soul. And what does the soul do when it emerges from the place of ignorance? It kisses the cheek of the moon. Are we to imagine the moon is the physical lunar disk or is it to be taken symbolically? The answer is in the next line, which provided the title for this essay, 'New Jerusalem glowing'. The image of New Jerusalem is derived from the book of Revelation where it is the name of the bride of Christ (21:9-27). I propose that the identification of the moon and New Jerusalem stems from a synthesis of Christian apocalyptic imagery and kabbalistic symbolism. That is, in the traditional kabbalah, the moon and Jerusalem are epithets of the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence, which is the bride of the Holy

147 Here I have followed the original wording as it appears on the album.

148 Concerning this classic work of medieval Christian apophatic mysticism, see, for instance, William Johnston, *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*, Foreword by Thomas Merton, New York 1967, pp. 31-65; John P. H. Clark, 'The Cloud of Unknowing', in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, edited by Paul Szarmach, Albany 1984, pp. 273-291; Turner, *Darkness of God*, pp. 186-210.

One. In my opinion, Cohen has unwittingly recovered an archaic Jewish esoteric belief connected to the Christological image.[149]

The soul is thus described as coming forth out of learned ignorance to kiss the moon, which is the New Jerusalem, the bride of Christ. The contact between the soul and the feminine glory results in the alleviation of suffering, the elimination of every 'word of discomfort', leaving 'no observer to mourn'. Ever faithful to the pious calling of pain, however, Cohen portrays the soul's ascent to silence as climbing on its tears as the rose mounts its ladder of thorns. The ascent culminates with the annihilation of self, a mystical ideal elaborated in the last stanza:

> Then lay your rose on the fire;
> the fire give up to the sun;
> the sun give over to splendour
> in the arms of the High Holy One;
> for the Holy One dreams of a letter,
> Dreams of a letter's death —
> oh bless the continuous stutter
> of the word being made into flesh.[150]

As in 'Joan of Arc', the poet utilizes the image of fire to convey the texture of the unitive experience. We are to suppose that the rose is completely consumed in the flame, a symbol utilized through the generations by mystics in an effort

149 I note, parenthetically, that in the version of this song included in *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*, published in 1993, p. 299, Cohen changed these lines to 'the code of solitude broken / why tarry confused and alone?' Perhaps the modification was triggered by the poet's awareness that the original wording reflected the negative stereotype of Jews as tarrying about stubbornly in the ruins even as the New Jerusalem was already available. Cohen's return to his childhood heritage may have sensitized him to the anti-Jewish prejudice underlying the initial phrasing and the implied substitution of the symbolic for the physical. Compare, however, the following remark of Cohen in the 'CBC Interview with Leonard Cohen' (above, n. 9): 'So, the Book of Revelations, is a kind of manual. It's wonderful poetry and it's wonderful revelation and it certainly does fulfill the great characteristics of charged writing by pulling the rug under you, and you are in a new world, and there is a new Jerusalem, and you are ready to embrace the notion of newness and rebirth of a new cosmos, and it invites you to unfold that reality in your own heart and in your own life, that dissolving of time'. In an expanded version of this study, which I hope to publish as a book, I intend to analyze more closely the role of time in Cohen's spiritual poetics.

150 *Stranger Music*, p. 299.

to convey the erotic consummation of their spiritual yearning.[151] Moreover, the act of laying the rose in the fire sets off a chain of events that are represented by a mixture of kabbalistic and Christological elements, which, in my mind, supports the point I made above regarding the synchronicity of these two worldviews in the mind of Cohen. The rose laid on the fire gives way to the sun, and the sun to the splendour in the arms of the Holy One. We have come upon the word 'splendour' before, albeit in the Hebrew *zohar*, in the poem 'Claim Me, Blood, If You Have a Story', where the term denotes the treatise that bears this title. In 'The Window', by contrast, 'splendour' refers to a luminous potency in the hands of God that is a counterpart to the earthly sun. In traditional kabbalistic symbolism, *zohar* is a key theosophic term that refers to the array of the ten *sefirot*, but primarily it is attributed to either *Tif'eret*, the sixth potency, or to *Yesod*, the ninth.[152] Inasmuch as *Tif'eret* is also identified as the Holy One, it is plausible that this is the intent of Cohen's language. With the elevation of light from fire to sun and thence to splendour, we progress to the ultimate secret, the Holy One dreaming of the letter's death, of the word being made into flesh. Needless to say, Cohen is drawing on the Christological mystery of faith, the incarnation of God in human form, first enunciated in the prologue to the Gospel of John, a paradox that is most apparent in the death of Jesus on the cross. Significantly, Cohen applies to Jesus the description 'continuous stutterer', which brings to mind the characterization of Moses as one of 'impeded speech' (Exodus 6:30). By joining together depictions of Moses and Jesus, Cohen apparently intended to forge a syncretistic image that trespasses the more conventional boundaries separating the two faith communities, a tendency that I mark as distinctive (though certainly not exclusive) to the kabbalistic orientation.

A sustained fascination with Jesus runs its course through the terrain of Cohen's works from 'Suzanne' on *Songs of Leonard Cohen* ('And Jesus was a sailor / when he walked upon the water / and he spent a long time watching / from his lonely wooden tower / and when he knew for certain / only drowning men could see him / he said All men will be sailors then / until the sea shall free them / but he himself was broken / long before the sky was open / forsaken, almost human / he sank beneath your wisdom like a stone')[153] to 'The Captain' on *Various Positions* ('Complain, complain, that's all you've done / ever since we lost / if it's not the Crucifixion / then it's the Holocaust / May

151 For instance, see Barbara Seward, *The Symbolic Rose*, New York 1960.
152 Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 388-391.
153 *Stranger Music*, p. 95.

Christ have mercy on your soul / for making such a joke / amid these hearts that burned like coal / and flesh that rose like smoke')[154] to 'The Land of Plenty' on *Ten New Songs* ('For the Christ who has not risen / From the caverns of the heart').[155] What is noteworthy, however, about the Christ imagery in 'The Window' is the way it is fused with kabbalistic symbols in the effort to express the mystical annihilation of self and the theological mystery of incarnation. The ascent of the mystic as the rose rising in fire to the splendour, the flesh becoming word, one might say, inversely mirrors the descent of the word becoming flesh. This, too, is a well attested motif in Christian contemplative practice, the possibility of the soul merging with God is dependent on the humbling of self, which parallels the emptying of the divine, based on Philippians 2:3-8. In this text, a nexus is already established between humility and incarnation, but with the later development of the monastic ideal, the humility is linked more particularly with ascetic renunciation. To deny the physical is an emulation of incarnation: God becoming a body is an act of suffering and delimitation that is imitated when one breaks one's own embodiment. It is particularly through humbling oneself, therefore, that the soul participates in the mystery: Just as Jesus emptied himself by assuming incarnate form, so one becomes divine by emptying oneself. The debasement of the elevated Christ in the human body makes possible the elevation of the human body in the debased Christ. Cohen avoids overdoing the Christological references, but there is little doubt that he is drawing explicitly from this reservoir of symbols.[156] The splendour of God descending to become flesh parallels the poet ascending on his tears to silence. For Cohen, this is true prayer, the fount of poetry and the pulse of song.

I will conclude this section with a brief analysis of the prose piece 'Moving Into a Period' included in the *Book of Longing*, in which one can detect a similar confluence of Christian and kabbalistic symbols: 'But there will be a Cross, a sign, that some will understand; a secret meeting, a warning, a Jerusalem hidden in Jerusalem. I will be wearing white clothes, as usual, and I will enter The Innermost Place as I have done generation upon generation, to entreat, to plead, to justify. I will enter the chamber of the Bride and the Bridegroom, and no one will follow me'.[157] The 'sign' that portends the place

154 Ibid., p. 341.

155 Cited from http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com.

156 Compare the language in 'There Is a Moment', in *Book of Longing*, p. 145: 'G-d lies down next to His lamb / so the creature can / gather itself'.

157 *Book of Longing*, p. 34.

of a 'secret meeting' is the Cross, a sign that only 'some will understand', a qualification that is to be expected since the matter being imparted is esoteric, and thus the secret is a 'warning', a marker that keeps the unworthy out even as it allows the worthy in. The Cross demarcates the point of crossing, a spot shrouded in secrecy, the intersection of the two Jerusalems, 'Jerusalem hidden in Jerusalem', that is, the heavenly Jerusalem — a term that Cohen would apply equally to the *Shekhinah* and to the bride of Christ — that is concealed within the earthly Jerusalem. The place of entry to this clandestine location, the opening to the opening, is the 'Innermost Place', the Holy of Holies,[158] which Cohen understood in a decidedly kabbalistic fashion as the chamber where Bridegroom and Bride, the male and female potencies of the Godhead, *Tif'eret* (or *Yesod*) and *Malkhut*, are united,[159] a theme also known from the gnostic *Gospel of Philip*.[160] I think it reasonable to suppose that the poet's own entrance into this space should be interpreted as a form of spiritual coitus. Support for this claim may be elicited from Cohen's reference to wearing white clothes. On the most basic level, this is to be explained by the fact that Cohen is of a priestly lineage, the historical fact in virtue of which he is accorded (at least metaphorically) access to the innermost compartment of the Temple

158 On the Holy of Holies as a symbolic circumlocution for the female genitals in zoharic kabbalah, see Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, translated by Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, Penina Peli, Albany 1993, p. 65; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism*, Albany 1995, p. 225 n. 152; idem, 'Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and the Ritual of Androgynisation', *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6 (1997), p. 320 n. 60; Daniel Abrams, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature: Embodied Forms of Love and Sexuality in the Divine Feminine*, Jerusalem 2004, pp. 46-49, 54, 57, 114-115 (Hebrew).

159 The kabbalistic symbolism builds on the tradition transmitted in the name of R. Qaṭina in the Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 54a, that the cherubim surrounding the Ark in the Holy of Holies were male and female, sometimes embracing and other times separated (see also Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra* 99a). For discussion of the theosophic interpretation of the rabbinic tradition concerning the androgynous nature of the cherubim, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven 1988, pp. 130-134; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 67-71; Charles Mopsik, *Sex of the Soul: The Vicissitudes of Sexual Difference in Kabbalah*, edited with a foreword by Daniel Abrams, Los Angeles 2005, pp. 109 and 130. On the Temple as the model for 'topoeroticism', that is, the place in which the erotic event unfolds, with special emphasis on the Holy of Holies in rabbinic and gnostic texts, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, New Haven 2005, pp. 33-34.

160 See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 165-166, and other scholarly discussions cited on pp. 437 n. 15 and 498 n. 98.

where the sacred union takes place. As Cohen remarked in the Kurzweil interview, 'When they told me I was a Kohen, I believed it. … I wanted to wear white clothes and go into the Holy of Holies and negotiate with the deepest resources of my soul'. The comments of Cohen indicate that he is well acquainted with the rabbinic tradition that the high priest was clad in white garments (*bigdei lavan*) when he entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement.[161] On the more figurative level, the specified attire symbolizes the internal purity that is necessary for one to enter into the zone of holy coupling, and may even suggest apotheosis or angelification insofar as celestial beings, including the divine glory, angelic intermediaries, the transfigured Jesus, and righteous saints in the hereafter, were thought to be clothed in white clothing.[162] In that location, moreover, the priest-poet can fulfill his unique responsibility of pleading with God, of uttering prayers of entreaty, of justifying the ways of heaven on earth and the ways of earth in heaven. The donning of the white clothes and the consequent erotic experience of entering the Holy of Holies cannot be severed from what Cohen upholds as the ethical-pietistic import of the poetic vocation. In 'The Collapse of Zen', a poem included in the *Book of Longing*, Cohen returns to this thematic complex, but deflected through the image of the suffering Christ:

> 'When Jesus loves me so much that blood comes out of his heart
> and I climb a metal ladder
> into the hole in his bosom
> which is caused by sorrow as big as China
> and I enter the innermost room wearing white clothes
> and I entreat and I plead:
> 'Not this one, Sir. Not that one, Sir. I beg you, Sir'.[163]

Untimely Prayer and the Time of Poiesis

We are now prepared to return to the passage from *Book of Mercy* with which I began the essay. In these words, it will be recalled, Cohen characterizes prayer from the vantage point of longing, a yearning to call upon the transcendent, designated by the traditional patriarchal symbol 'master'. The Jewish framing of this desire is manifestly evident from the last line where Cohen expresses

161 *Tosefta*, *Yoma* 4:6; Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 60a.

162 Daniel 7:9; 1 Enoch 14:20; Testament of Levi 8:2; Matthew 17:2, 28;3; Mark 9:3, 16:4; Luke 9:29; John 20:12; Acts 1:10; Revelation 3:4-5, 4:4, 6:11, 7:9, 13-14, 15:6, 19:8, 14.

163 *Book of Longing*, pp. 19-20.

the wish to be lifted up by nine other men so that he can join them (an obvious reference to the rabbinic idea of a quorum of ten men, the *minyan*, required for public worship) to whisper 'Blessed be the name of the glory of the kingdom forever and forever', the liturgical utterance that is said in a murmur after the confession of God's unity in the Shema is recited out loud.[164] The 'rude chair' upon which Cohen invites the master to sit is made up of the praises the poet offers. In consonance with an idea articulated by kabbalists, but expressed in a much older form of Jewish mystical piety, singing of praises to God both prepares the throne and represents its constitution. To utter praise, to sing the song, this is the 'daily task'. Cohen also tells us that the accomplishment of this task requires that one be taken out of time. But what is in the character of prayer that makes it untimely? Should one not wish of prayer that it always be timely? What use is untimely prayer?

In the continuation, Cohen implicitly takes up these issues by informing us about the mechanics of this daily task: 'Out of mist and dust you have fashioned me to know the numberless worlds between the crown and the kingdom'. Song making, *poiesis*, the crafting of poems, flows from this gnōsis, this knowledge of numberless worlds stretching between the crown and the kingdom. One not versed in kabbalah is not at a total loss. The language is familiar enough that there is a way to proceed even if one is clueless about the meaning of the passage. I contend, however, that there is something very specific, indeed quite technical, to which Cohen refers. He is alluding to the kabbalistic doctrine of ten *sefirot*, the luminous emanations of the divine that are configured in human imagination. In the standard terminology propagated by kabbalists, the first of the *sefirot* is called *Keter*, 'crown', and the tenth *Malkhut*, 'kingdom'. The 'numberless worlds' to which Cohen makes reference appear to be the potencies situated between *Keter* and *Malkhut*. The poet tells us that he has been fashioned by his master to know these worlds. The river of song surges from the wellspring of this thought.

To contemplate the worlds is equivalent to envisioning the multiple forms through which the formless takes shape. The process of representation in the imagination proceeds along two primary and inseparable channels, the visual and auditory, the dark-light of the infinite fracturing into a rainbow of color, the silence of the ineffable reverberating in a cacophony of sound. I do not think it is inaccurate to say that, for the kabbalist, contemplative visualization is the 'daily task' of which Cohen writes, a mission that may likewise be called

164 Babylonian Talmud, *Pesaḥim* 56a.

worship, for prayer in the most profound sense relates to forming an image of that which has no image, bestowing a name on that which has no name.[165] Worship, understood kabbalistically, is an expression of poiesis, the art of form-making.

I must restrain myself from elucidating the intricacies that lie behind these words since a turn in that direction would entrap us in a thicket of distinctions and clarifications from which there likely would be no escape. For our purposes, what is important to underscore is that the meditational practice that has informed the poetic calling of kabbalists involves the ascription of imaginal forms to the formless, the anthropomorphic configuration of the invisible, which is at the same time the attribution of the name to the nameless. Analogously, the words of Cohen situate the duty of worship in the poetic imagining of the attributes of the master from the crown on top to the kingdom at the bottom. To be sure, the traditional motif is altered in the hands of the contemporary poet and singer, but his indebtedness to the tradition, no matter how broken, is beyond question. In the song 'Love Itself' from *Ten New Songs*, Cohen drones in a voice filled with religious fervor:

> In streams of light I clearly saw
> The dust you seldom see,
> Out of which the Nameless makes
> A Name for one like me.[166]

In the continuation, the poet speaks of the passing of love, the despair of desire, a familiar theme that he has chronicled since the beginning of his literary career. He does not try to hold on to the love that flees through the 'open door'. There is release in the escaping, holding-on by letting-go:

> Then I came back from where I'd been
> My room, it looked the same —
> But there was nothing left between
> The Nameless and the Name.[167]

The flight of love can educate us in the way of enlightenment: One returns to one's place and, on the surface, everything looks the same, but when gazed upon from a more nuanced perspective, the multiplicity of things in the world

165 See Elliot R. Wolfson, 'Iconic Visualization and the Imaginal Body of God: The Role of Intention in the Rabbinic Conception of Prayer', *Modern Theology* 12 (1996), pp. 137-162.

166 *Book of Longing*, p. 54.

167 Ibid.

of particularity is overcome in the oneness of being, and all names are absorbed in the nondifferentiation of the nameless.

To be so absorbed has been the unending pursuit of Montréal's 'poet laureate of pessimism',[168] the 'little Jew who wrote the bible', as Cohen described himself in 'The Future'.[169] Entreating the divine to carry his soul beyond the world of wanton lust to the pure land of bliss has been a mainstay of Cohen's poetic spirit, his songs issuing from the seemingly insatiable desire to triumph over desire. As he puts it in 'The Night Comes On', in language that calls to mind the kabbalistic symbol of *Shekhinah*, the feminine presence, the portal through which one must pass on the way back to the womb:

> Now I look for her always; I'm lost in this calling;
> I'm tied to the threads of some prayer.
> Saying, 'When will she summon me, when will she come to me,
> what must I do to prepare?' —
> Then she bends to my longing, like a willow, like a fountain,
> she stands in the luminous air.
> And the night comes on, and it's very calm,
> I lie in her arms, she says, '*When I'm gone*
> *I'll be yours, yours for a song*'.[170]

168 The expression is used by Nadel, *Various Positions*, p. 1.

169 *Stranger Music*, p. 371.

170 Ibid., p. 346. The erotic overtones of the mystical experience of union with the feminine presence of the divine are also quite obvious in Cohen's 'Our Lady of Solitude' from *Recent Songs* (printed in *Stranger Music*, p. 301), an experience that is framed in the scriptuiral idiom of knowing the other 'face to face'. I hope to elaborate on this critically important facet of Cohen's spiritual intuition in the expanded version of this study. It is worth noting here, however, Cohen's comment in the 'CBC Interview with Leonard Cohen' (above, n. 9): 'I've always loved the virgin and the actual experience of the female form rising from the mists of your own heart and embracing you and giving you for a moment the consolumentum, the kiss of peace that's part of an experience that is very deep. I've always felt close to this figure, Mary or the virigin or the queen of solitude'. The possibility that the final locution in this litany of images may designate the *Shekhinah* is enhanced in the continuation of the interview where Cohen comments on the description of the female persona in 'Our Lady of Solitude' as the 'vessel of the whole wide world / Mistress, oh mistress of us all': 'That's in the cabalistic viewpoint, that's the second letter of the alphabet, the open letter which is the cup of the seed from which the world manifests'. Cohen is alluding to the pervasive kabbalistic explanation of the letter *beit* as the *bayit*, the house or opening of the world, the female receptacle that receives the seminal fluid from the male potency

The poet acknowledges that he is searching always for the female beloved, the object of his spiritual passion. The quest is propelled by his calling, being bound to the 'threads of some prayer'. The presence of the other bends to his longing and then the night comes on, the mystical darkness into which the mind has passed in rising above the physical world. In this moment of repose, the bittersweet quality of Cohen's vision comes into clear view: the female beloved can be possessed only after she is gone, and the possession takes the form of offering a song. To create that bond, the poet must return to the realm of contingency, the place of affliction and wandering. As the song concludes,

> And the night comes on, and it's very calm;
> I want to cross over; I want to go home,
> but she says, '*Go back, go back to the world*'.[171]

Crowned with the light of darkness, adorned with the joy of suffering, Cohen has selflessly bequeathed poetic gifts from the wholeness of the 'broken heart' that agonizingly harbors the 'joyous word'.[172] For Cohen, the inscripting of poems and songs has been a spiritual practice, a sacramental ritual,[173] affording him the possibility of prevailing over the metaphysical torment of existence, the tear in the cloak of being, which he has felt so intensely on the psychological and emotional plane. With regard to this matter, the line between traditions is blurred in the poet's mind. Thus, in the poem 'Even Some of My Own', Cohen transgressively juxtaposes the most sacred oath proclaimed by Catholics, the most solemn pledge uttered by Jews, and his own lyrical creations: 'Operate on the heart / With proven songs / Such as Ave Marie / And Kol Nidre / Even some of my own'.[174]

Significantly, in *Death of a Lady's Man*, Cohen expressed the desire for deliverance through artistic creativity in an image used by kabbalists to converse about the experience of communion with God: 'My heart longs to be a chamber for the Name … Without the Name the wind is babble, the flowers are a jargon for longing … Without the Name sealed in my heart I am

whence creation evolves. It is reasonable to conclude that, for Cohen, the 'Queen of Solitude' denotes the *Shekhinah*, which he identifies as well as the Virgin Mary. Here, then, is another illustration of Cohen's penchant to weave together Christian and kabbalistic imagery in a seamless web.

171 Ibid.

172 *Book of Mercy*, p. 79.

173 Nadel, *Various Positions*, p. 5.

174 *Book of Longing*, p. 166.

ashamed'.[175] Years later, in *Book of Mercy*, Cohen formulated the same posture in language that resonates with another precept of rabbinic and kabbalistic theology concerning the fusion of divine attributes, 'Kindle the darkness of my calling, let me cry to the one who judges the heart in justice and mercy. Arouse my heart again with the limitless breath you breathe into me, arouse the secret from obscurity'.[176] Between compassion and judgment, freedom and death, the prospect of breathing a poem is perpetually reborn, illumining the secret of prayer from the shadows of gloom. If song represents the possibility of redemption, exile is the lack of song. In 'By the Rivers Dark' on *Ten New Songs*, Cohen expresses the matter through the ancient prophetic image that begins Psalm 137, 'By the rivers of Babylon / there we sat / sat and wept / as we thought of Zion'. In its original setting, Babylon is a specific geographical locality, but it also symbolic of ungodly power and carnal pursuits, an image developed further in the Apocalypse of John where Babylon is referred to as the 'great, mother of harlots' (17:5). In several of his songs,[177] and in at least one poem,[178] Cohen invokes the symbol of Babylon to represent the temptation of physical pleasure that must be surmounted. What is especially interesting

175 Cited in Nadel, op. cit., p. 209. It is of interest to note here that the Tetragrammaton written in Hebrew characters is found in the self-portrait reproduced in the *Book of Longing*, p. 200. Beneath the name are the words 'grateful of course', which stand in marked contrast to the comments above it, 'worried of course / defeated of course / old of course'. Cohen's mystical piety is well captured by the link he establishes between the name and a sense of appreciation. Along similar lines, see his response in the Hesthamar interview (above n. 12): 'I feel tremendously relieved that I'm not worried about my happiness. … But what I am so happy about is that the background of distress and discomfort has evaporated … before it was all one piece, it was very dark. … And by the grace of God, that feeling has evaporated, so that I can feel real sorrow now, it's not the sorrow that emerges from the sorrow, it's not just the melancholy that emerges from the melancholy'.

176 *Book of Mercy*, p. 60.

177 'Last Year's Man' on *Songs of Love and Hate*: 'Babylon the bride / Great Babylon was naked;' 'Is This What You Wanted' on *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* in *Stranger Music*, p. 203: 'You were the Whore and the Beast of Babylon'; and 'Dance Me to the End of Love' on *Various Positions*, op. cit., p. 337: 'Let me see your beauty / when the witnesses are gone / Let me see you moving / like they do in Babylon'.

178 'Foreign God, Reigning in Earthly Glory…' from *Parasites in Heaven*, reprinted in *Selected Poems*, p. 213: 'Foreign God, reigning in earthly glory between the Godless God and this greedy telescope of mine: touch my hidden jelly muscle, ring me with some power, I must conquer Babylon and New York'.

about the use of the scriptural symbol in the new song is the equation that Cohen makes between Babylon and the absence of song.

> By the rivers dark
> I wandered on.
> I lived my life
> in Babylon.
> And I did forget
> My holy song
> And I had no strength
> In Babylon.

In the darkness of oblivion, the poet has forgotten his song. Yet, as one should expect from this consummate master of misery, precisely where the ground of hope seems desiccated does hope spring forth:

> By the rivers dark,
> In a wounded dawn,
> I live my life
> In Babylon.
> Though I take my song
> From a withered limb,
> Both song and tree,
> They sing for him.
> Be the truth unsaid
> And the blessing gone,
> If I forget
> My Babylon.

Reversing the words of the psalmist, the poet perceives the difficulty stemming not from forgetting Jerusalem (Psalm 137:5), but in failing to remember Babylon. If the cleft of forgetfulness is forgotten, there can be no memory, and no truth can be uttered, no blessing bestowed. Only when one reaches the limit of oblivion can one begin to remember, and rivers dark shall flood into oceans bright. Rising on the wings of this faith, we can lend our voices to what is perhaps the paramount kabbalistic declaration declaimed by this most inspiring and humble of contemporary Jewish poets:

> Ring the bells that still can ring.
> Forget your perfect offering.
> There is a crack in everything.
> That's how the light gets in.[179]

179 *Stranger Music*, p. 373.