

## STUDIES

**Late Style and Automortography in Leonard Cohen's Circle of Public Life****by Joel Deshaye**

Although it would be both politic and accurate to suggest, *pace* the title of Leonard Cohen's *Various Positions* (1984), that this poet, singer, songwriter, novelist and monk had many public lives, there is remarkable continuity in both his public persona and his work itself. Ira Nadel's biography of Cohen has the same title and, though it acknowledges that "his stylish, self-regarding abjection is present in virtually all that he writes" (2), it also repeats the conventional wisdom that Cohen's work "constantly reshapes itself" (4). He claims in the final book that he published while he was alive, *Book of Longing* (2006),<sup>1</sup> that he has had "many personalities" but also a "monotonous life" (182). In this essay, I am considering the bookends of Cohen's public life: a small number of his earliest poems compared to his latest poems and songs. I wonder primarily whether the self-consciously introductory gestures of his early work (Deshaye, *Metaphor* 115-116) are gesturing in the same way, toward self-deprecating yet self-promotional humility, in the late style and "automortography" (Kane 410) of *Book of Longing* and his final three albums, *Old Ideas* (2012), *Popular Problems* (2014), and *You Want It Darker* (2016). While *Book of Longing* was at the beginning of his long comeback following the theft of his savings, it was also the concentration of his reflections on aging and death (which, presumably, will continue in any posthumous book); "I am too old / to learn the names / of the new killers" (79), he writes. While he sang in 1992 that "I've seen the future, baby / it is murder" ("The Future"), his own destiny was to die of old age, with privilege, with the leisure to meditate on his own end for years. In 2012, he sang, "I got no future / I know my days are few" ("The Darkness"); in 2016, "I'm out of the game" ("You Want It Darker"). But the premise of this essay is that, just as in his very first book, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956), Cohen was always imagining himself on the way out the door with "tumours on [his] lips" (64).<sup>2</sup>

The spectre of cancer in such an early poem, the one entitled simply “Poem,” is an impulse to reflect on a concept that deserves much more attention than it gets, one that emerged from a dissertation and two related articles by Thomas H. Kane. The concept is “automortography,”<sup>3</sup> which I will relate to the better known concept of late style. Although I agree with Jeffrey Swinkin that a musician’s late style and late period should not be confused (287-288), they synchronize through Cohen’s automortography, where his self-fashioning as old and near death is a characteristic of style (his manner of expression) as much as it is a biographical fact of that period in his life. Because of the constraints of this relatively short essay, I will juxtapose Cohen’s late style with his early themes, if not exactly style, thereby glossing over—or circling around—his middle period and style, specifically the postmodernism of *Beautiful Losers* (1966) and *Death of a Lady’s Man* (1978). This omission might well be glaring, given that postmodernism is really *late* modernism, modernism’s late style (or perhaps off-modernism,<sup>4</sup> a term that rather usefully derails the term from a timeline). Placing modernism in the context of late style, Edward Said writes that “[m]odernism has come to seem paradoxically not so much a movement of the new as a movement of aging and ending, a sort of ‘Age masquerading as Juvenility,’ to quote Hardy in *Jude the Obscure*” (135). Postmodernism is even later, more aged, closer to the end, as it were, and more a “masquerade.” I agree completely with Linda Hutcheon’s identification of Cohen as a definitive postmodern writer in *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988), largely because his work to me is “fundamentally self-reflexive—in other words, art that is self-consciously art” (1), and because her concentration on irony as a postmodern mode, extending to *Irony’s Edge* (1994), is germane to Cohen’s ironic sense of self. I am also drawn toward her collaboration with her husband, Michael Hutcheon, in *Opera: The Art of Dying* (2004) because Cohen’s final albums have an operatic flair (without any operatic vocal technique from him) related to their death-related themes, but her earlier work is of course more pertinent. Rather than be drawn *in medias res* (into the middle of things), I want to focus on the last things and the first, because the timing of this essay invites questions about reappraisal in the wake of Cohen’s very recent death in late 2016.

The development of criticism on Cohen’s work began in earnest in the 1970s when his popularity as a musician had started turning listeners’ ears back to his work, but he had by then attracted the interest of readers and reviewers. He could thank, in part, his mentors Louis Dudek—who famously knighted him a poet in the hall of McGill University’s Arts

Building in 1956—and Irving Layton, both of whom helped to publicize Cohen’s early work. So did Michael Ondaatje. His short study, *Leonard Cohen* (1970), is perhaps the first to recognize that Cohen’s writing should be understood in the context of his celebrity; Cohen had already been the subject of a film, *Ladies and Gentlemen... Mr. Leonard Cohen* (Brittain and Owen, 1965). Ondaatje’s book was early and original, and it seems all the more influential now that Cohen has died. From his perspective on Cohen’s “pop-sainthood” (Ondaatje 59) and the related symbolic martyrdom, Ondaatje traces Cohen’s celebrity with a chalk outline, a morbidity shared with this essay. His celebrity and our responses to it are, in fact, significant to his late style. Alexandra Harrington explains in a different context<sup>5</sup> that

the phenomena of literary celebrity and late style can productively be considered in conjunction because they share a fundamental concern with authors as physical, bodied individuals... Late style describes the distinctive ways in which authors’ awareness of their bodily deterioration and mortality impacts upon their creative thinking and the aesthetics of the works they produce. (458)

For these reasons, and because of my own interest in literary celebrity, I read much of the scholarship on Cohen—and his late style—through this lens, one that agrees with Harrington’s additional claim that late style is partly an attempt to control one’s posthumous reputation or legacy (459), which is germane to stars more than anyone, perhaps. Although Stephen Scobie’s monograph *Leonard Cohen* (1978) refuses to involve Cohen’s “public career” or “biography” (xi) in the study of his work, Michael Gnarowski’s 1976 edited collection includes a handful of essays in a section entitled “Cohen as Pop Artist” and several more under “Cohen as Literary Phenomenon.” Gnarowski’s selections show that reader-responses were attuned to Cohen’s career, including his music, by the time of the release of his first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, in 1967. Scobie’s much later and very different edited collection, *Intricate Preparations* (2000), admits essays on Cohen the socialite, Cohen the live performer, Cohen the star. Scobie even engages directly with fans, moderating an online forum. He announces his intention: “to represent the varied and paradoxical nature of Cohen’s reputation and reception” (*Intricate* 3) by not only critics but also fans. Since the turn of the millennium, some studies related to Cohen’s celebrity have appeared (Deshaye 2009, 2013; Ravvin 2007, 2010, 2016), as have studies of his poetry and music (Billingham, 2017; Flynn, 2010; Měšíc, 2016; Wolfson, 2006), but most of the work has been done on the

intractable *Beautiful Losers*, with explanations by Kit Dobson, Mark Migotti, Medrie Purdham, Sylvia Söderlind, and Robert David Stacey. Although the biography *I'm Your Man* (2012) by Sylvie Simmons partly fulfills the need for a near-total overview, now is the time for another book-length monograph—less biography, more critical study (which I would welcome from someone other than myself)—that could perform some of the functions of this essay but on a larger scale that includes everything between *Book of Longing* in 2006 and *You Want It Darker* in 2016.

Kane's work on automortography should have a place in that study. Whereas late style often represents death or deals with its concerns long before it is imminent, automortography is not about death as an abstraction. It is about death around the corner. It is therefore a specific type of memoir, one that divides life into periods and deals with primarily with the last of them. Kane explains that “[a]utomortography may be autobiography's kin, but it is more concerned with the *mort* of death than the *bio* of life” (“Mourning” 549):

Automortography, or the attempted representation of one's own death, describes the subject becoming an object (in the form of the corpse) and entails attempts by survivors to reanimate that subject through the object of the automortographic act. Like the aesthetic, which is ‘caught between subjectivity and objectivity,’ automortography enables the subject to fantasize about a posthumous objectification and [enables] the survivors to return, through melancholic sentiment and repetition, to that moment of fantasy. Because it is performative, the automortographic act is [also] akin to the aesthetic: its construction enables an emotional projection (by self and other) and ruminations on mortality and the intersection of identity and community. (“Mourning” 550)

Kane's explanation links the writer's morbid fantasy with the survivor's or reader's imagination of that fantasy. Partly because they're imagining the same thing, the reader can experience an identification with the writer—which is what happens almost any time someone reads. The same is true of the “reanimat[ion]” of any dead writer by the reader's act of reading. The difference, Kane implies, is the prophetic dimension of automortography. (Coincidentally, both Layton and Cohen had prophetic dimensions in their personas.) True, we're all going to die, but knowing death is imminent changes the thoughts and feelings that we have. The imminence is what Cohen, in an interview in late 2016, called “the emergency” (“Leonard”), and it is the writer's last chance to reflect on life and to influence interpretations of it.

More resonant because of “the emergency” (a quotation to which I will return again), automortography is also an attempt to “scrip[t] the response of the posthumous audience” (Kane, “Mourning” 550). It is usually an attempt to create “melancholic sentiment.” Partly because the sentiment is also aesthetic, according to Kane, it must then be a source of pleasure, for example when we enjoy a sad movie, especially when we know the main character is going to die at the end. “Combining and literalizing two ideas from Roland Barthes, Kane implies that readers get more pleasure from a text if they know it is about the death of its author” (Deshaye, *Metaphor* 193). In interviews, Cohen has recalled his Zen master Joshu Sasaki, a.k.a. Roshi, advising him, “Leonard, you should write more sad” (e.g., Gilmore par. 39), and that line—“You should write more sad” (Cohen, *Stranger* 276)—appears in a sketch in the *Stranger Music* collection of 1993. To me, the sketch is more funny than sad, revealing Cohen’s affectionate teasing of Roshi and his English. Roshi (1907-2014) was a figure of age for Cohen and appears several times in *Book of Longing*, e.g., “Roshi at 89” (4), “When I Drink” (9), “Roshi” (16). Likewise was his other mentor, Irving Layton (1912-2006), who appears in an actual sketch in *Book of Longing* (one of its many pictures) alongside a poem in which Layton asks Cohen if he’s “sure / [he’s] doing the wrong thing” (87). These figures in decline are the rough drafts of automortography, or its murky mirrors if you will, because Roshi and Layton could be expected to die before the author, and they did.<sup>6</sup> Cohen’s quotation of their private aphorisms signals that he is their posthumous audience. *Book of Longing*, as a set of new poems and previously unpublished ones, resembles a back catalogue—a retrospective on old friends and old poems brought to life by memory. He comments self-reflexively on the timing, the lateness, the “Delay” of *Book of Longing*: “I don’t speak until the waters overflow...’ Thus I was able to delay this book well beyond / the end of the 20th century” (101). The “overflow” might be related to his own outpouring of grief for Layton, to whom the book is dedicated. At that phase in Cohen’s own aging, he appeared to be managing his own grief pre-emptively by writing about mentors near death, just as his late works encourage us to do with his own decline.

These old men also continue to serve as models for Cohen, a fact that—for me at least—alleviates some of the sadness behind their comic advice. The bittersweetness is not simply entertainment, for two reasons. First, it invites contemplation of the sublime of death (Kane, “Mourning” 557): the beauty and the terror of it. Second, as Immanuel Kant suggests, the terror must also elicit displeasure (Kane, “Mourning” 558). In the simplest terms, the displeasure is not wanting the singer to die, even if “the singer must

die,” as Cohen sang as early as 1974. Bill Coyle recounts that he feels “a terrifying poignancy in hearing Leonard Cohen singing words like” (n.p.) those of “If It Be Your Will,” from *Various Positions*, words that accept the will of God if God should wish the singer to be “still” or “speak no more.” Late in life, the theme of one’s own death becomes automortography, and its “terrifying poignancy” can no longer be described as a mere manipulation of the audience’s emotion or a clinical or theoretical abstraction of such emotion. It is our authentic response to an inevitable loss.

The problem is that many writers, Cohen included, might thematize death for years, living long in anticipation and meanwhile developing a late style—a style that exaggerates age and death before the actual emergency. Cohen is guilty of this exaggeration, no doubt, but he also defies some of the claims about late style, probably because he was practicing a late style for so long that he could avoid some of its troubles. Late style as a concept is much better known than automortography, having been theorized by canonical thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and Edward Said. As in “Delay” above, late style is partly about acting too late—coming late to the party, being an exile or outcast—but also *fashionably late*, an idiom that neither Adorno nor Said comment on as such.<sup>7</sup> Cohen luxuriates in this style of lateness in the second and fourth verses of “Slow,” the opening track on his penultimate album, *Popular Problems*:

It’s not because I’m old  
It’s not the life I led  
I always liked it slow  
That’s what my mama said

It’s not because I’m old  
And it’s not what dying does  
I always liked it slow  
Slow is in my blood

In a later verse, instead of “it’s not what dying does,” he sings, “It’s not because I’m dead.” “Slow” disavows aging and death, claiming instead what might be called a recursive appeal to youth and sex, not through *recursive* only as *repetitive* but as the Latin *recurrere*, which means “run back.” I would add that it relates to “circling back” to a childhood with “mama.” Ironically, the song is not about running, either, and Cohen’s extraordinarily gravelly voice and the appropriately slow tempo belie the negative assertions about age, in much the same way that they contradict assumptions about the sex lives of the elderly. The song’s position at the

beginning of the album contextualizes all the other “popular problems” alongside the fashionable lateness of Cohen’s personas and his late style. “Slow” is self-fashioning *par excellence*, whereby the irony of the singer’s assertions depends on the listener’s knowledge of Cohen’s own age, an age with related infirmities that he has “always liked.” Simmons agrees: “Leonard was always old” (522). His tactic is to suggest that he has always had late style, and though we should be wary of this claim—mainly because of its self-fashioning—I ultimately believe it.

Cohen’s proverbial old soul—the idea, however fanciful, that at the core of the self is a soul that unifies its potentialities—is one reason why he stands out in the theory of late style. Adorno’s “disaffected but rarely cynical” (Said 21) conception of impatient, resigned, near-death angst is much more negative than Said’s humanistic and even optimistic conception of productivity through late style, but Said agrees with Adorno that in lateness “[t]here is no transcendence or unity” (13). In regards to “unity,” I beg to differ, insofar as Cohen may serve as another paragon of late style. First, the unity can be the result of a “fusion of selves” (Deshaye 66) common to the experience of celebrity, when a star’s attempts to negotiate with fans through personas often ends with the star giving the fans some version of what they want. Quite explicitly, Cohen delivers with *You Want It Darker*. Second, in *Book of Longing*, he displays the cover image from *Book of Mercy* (1984), a vertical heart and upside-down heart superimposed on each other to create a star similar to the Star of David. In *Book of Longing*, he adds a caption, “Order of the Unified Heart,” with the Latin phrase *nihil obstat* over it as a banner. *Nihil obstat* means “no obstacle” or “nothing stands in the way,” suggesting that nothing stands in the way of the unified heart. Its “unity” can be discerned primarily when we compare alpha and omega, thereby realizing how persistent, how circular, Cohen’s themes were.

I am not suggesting that his late style was the same as his early style, or that he developed stylistically as a poet in lockstep with his singing and songwriting. We can argue whether a changing style necessitates changes in content that would impinge upon thematic consistency, and in fact Adorno alludes to this question when he implies that themes must relate to “technical” (565) matters or “the formal law” (564, 566) of late style. To some extent, I am linking style (technique, form) and content (theme) by identifying a circular pattern in Cohen’s work, which much of the rest of this essay will demonstrate; it is partly that authors in their late careers are often obsessed by their previous works (Nadel 76). To some extent, I am also side-stepping the thrust of the debate by focusing partly on the related

but distinct matter of Cohen's public persona, which is of course affected by his style—but also by his written or drawn self-portraits, mental images or actual pictures that theorize a self meant for the reader or audience. It is a cypher, an interpretive aid. Sandra Djwa's name for Cohen's public persona, "Black Romantic," is a helpful example—implying characteristics of neo-gothic fascination with death, residual self-destruction and Decadence, post-psychosis, jaded but youthful aestheticism—and she proposed this name as early as 1967.<sup>8</sup> As a Romantic, his muse was to some interpreters "clinical depression" (Brundage par. 4), and it is reflected in his craggy, sagging, hemorrhoidal face in the many computer-aided self-portraits in *Book of Longing*, portraits that seem to have been executed on a low-resolution drawing program from an obsolete computer—the obsolescence of the medium in sync with the weakening skin and muscle of the subject. At least in this case, form and content seem to align, to unify.

To respond to Adorno's and Said's commentary on unity (or its lack) in late style, I want to rely significantly on Ira Nadel's essay on late style in the work of Philip Roth, because Nadel asserts that his conclusions apply to Cohen as well as Roth ("Fate" 75), and because—as Cohen's first biographer—he knows Cohen's life and work so well. Echoing Adorno's refusal of "harmonious synthesis" (567) and Said's consequent shift of attention from "harmony and resolution" to "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" (7), Nadel explains that late style is "the work of an artist in late career that attempts to adjust to the continued and overwhelming recognition of irreconcilable, unmet artistic goals. The most important is... that one's late work is unable to join the intimate with the objective, the personal with the detached" ("Fate" 76). This claim seems to be proven in *Book of Longing* by the first stanza of "My Time," which affirms the Adorno-Said vision of the "unmet artistic goals" of late style:

My time is running out  
and still  
I have not sung  
the true song  
the great song (178)

It also seems to be proven by the frequent ironizing of Buddhist principles of "detach[ment]" in *Book of Longing*, especially in the many poems and images that suggest that the monk is still very much attached to sexual objects or "goals," e.g., "The Collapse of Zen" (19), "Early Morning at Mt. Baldy" (21), "The Cigarette Issue" (71), and others. Nadel explains further that "[o]bserving the unresolved tensions of one's late work (often the col-



lapse of the ideal of moral or artistic synthesis) is at the heart of the ‘late style’” (“Fate” 77). Cohen’s final works are certainly “observ[ant]” in this way, for examples in his self-reflections on his “unresolved [*sexual*] tension” that appears partly in his erotic visions of younger women, including line drawings of nudes that he juxtaposes with line drawings of his own aging face in *Book of Longing*.<sup>9</sup> The “difficulty” is that of aging, which Layton at the beginning of Cohen’s career described as “the inescapable lousiness of growing old” (79) in his elegy for his mother, “Keine Lazarovitch: 1870-1959” (1961). Unquestionably, Cohen’s late style is an attempt at coming to terms with “growing old” when sexual desire remains. Nadel’s emphasis, however, is on the “irreconcilable” nature of the writer’s goals, and I think that Cohen reconciled most of them long ago, including whatever sexual goals or conquests he might have had, or had in mind. The reconciliation appears partly in Cohen’s sense of humour, especially his self-deprecation. I have already mentioned that some of his late style is more funny than sad. Indeed, the line drawings of his own face may be interpreted as bathetic, as unintentionally funny, but he was joking about his age long before *Book of Longing*, as when he sings in “Tower of Song” (1988), “I ache in places where I used to play.” He was only in his fifties when he wrote that line, and he continued along those lines for another three decades. In contrast to Nadel, I argue that the “ideal of moral or artistic synthesis” is more manageable to Cohen and his late style than ever because, alongside his sense of humour, he treats paradox as a matter of fact. Consider *Book of Longing*:

An acquaintance told me  
that the great sage  
Nisargadatta Maharaj  
once offered him a cigarette,  
“Thank you, sir, but I don’t smoke.”  
“Don’t smoke?” said the master,  
“What’s life for?” (70; original indentation)

The paradox here includes life and death, because cigarettes are known to be deadly, and life is thought to be valuable, and yet “the great sage” seems to disregard both facts. Cohen, like this sage or “master,” treats paradox with a rhetorical question, the verbal equivalent of a wordless shrug, and indeed Nadel accounts for this possibility when he mentions the “clarity and simplicity” (“Fate” 77) of normalized contradiction.

To remember contradiction as a norm, to remember the longevity of paradox in Cohen’s work, we can reflect upon how one of the first poems

in *Let Us Compare Mythologies* “announces... Cohen’s presence on the scene” (Deshaye, *Metaphor* 115); it serves as our introduction to him—a self-presentation. The following is the full text of “Poem.”

I heard of a man  
who says words so beautifully  
that if he only speaks their name  
women give themselves to him.

If I am dumb beside your body  
while silence blossoms like tumours on our lips  
it is because I hear a man climb stairs  
and clear his throat outside our door. (64)

Contrary to earlier interpretations, it may be argued that the two men in the poem are in fact the same man, “a split subject” (Deshaye, *Metaphor* 115) composed of a poet and a singer, and the singer is the one “who says words so beautifully... and clear[s] his throat.” The paradox is that one person can unify the various positions: poet, singer, etc. Cohen nevertheless will adjust the emphasis; in “Poem” he signals the ouster of the poet and even the symbolic death of the poet and possibly his lover, because their “silence blossoms like tumours.” It is “the structural myth [in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*]... of the death of the poet-god Orpheus and the possibility of his resurrection in art” (Djwa 98), in this case music. Sometime before 1978, Cohen himself said, “I never really considered myself a poet. A poet is something that is dead” (qtd. in Scobie, *Leonard* x). Cohen was probably not attempting to predict his death from cancer in “Poem,” and anyway that’s an easy prediction for many of us; nor am I insisting that the “silence” anticipates his Buddhist name, Jikan, which means “Silent One” (Michaelson par. 1). Rather, I want to suggest that Cohen was, from the start, imagining his way out the “door” *in sync with* the way in. The door revolves. Death has always been subject matter for him. The very first poem in his very first book was entitled “Elegy,” and an elegy is a poem about death. His original creation of self and his first self-presentation was elegiac, elegantly morbid.<sup>10</sup>

The “split subject” of *Let Us Compare Mythologies* remains with Cohen throughout his work, especially when he names himself and plays with the fuzzy distinctions between his public and private personas and his private self. As he wrote about his death late in life, he reflected on the supremacy of his mortality and his private life over his public persona and public life. This imagining of death as a constant companion—another ver-

sion of himself—reflects Harrington’s view that “the impostor who usurps the image of a famous person is an oblique expression of... fear about the false image that can be created by others after death, and of the loss of control over self-representation that death will bring” (498). Attempting to control his posthumous reputation, Cohen does not reject the unwelcome “impostor” but appears to welcome him; it is the control afforded by hospitality, a Derridean *hostipitality*, a carefully dispensed hostility against a fearsome guest outside “our door.” In defiance of his own fame, but paradoxically to acknowledge that it would live longer than he would, Cohen returns to the theme of uneasy welcoming and hospitality in “Going Home” on *Old Ideas*:

I love to speak with Leonard  
he’s a sportsman and a shepherd  
he’s a lazy bastard living in a suit.  
But he does say what I tell him  
even though it isn’t welcome  
he just doesn’t have the freedom to refuse.  
He will speak these words of wisdom  
like a sage, a man of vision  
though he knows he’s really nothing  
but the brief elaboration of a tube.

Here again we see the split subject of Cohen’s private and public personas: the one that must accept that he is “nothing / but the brief elaboration of a tube” and the one—the ambiguous one, perhaps Death incarnate (given voice by Cohen here)—that controls the other who “doesn’t have the freedom to refuse.” Whether Cohen’s private self commanded his public persona or vice versa will always be a question. That the “tube” should imply a circle is yet another sign of resolution to the paradox of multiple selves; the container of those selves here is the gut, by definition the most visceral of the body’s parts.

There is a related and intriguing example of circularity in Cohen’s final book. Reviewing *Book of Longing*, Norm Ravvin notices that “somehow the cadences and wit have become more predictable” (“Leonard” 40), and I agree; they often demonstrate something like the repetitive and “student-like” (Said) or “primitive” (Adorno qtd. in Said 10) motifs that Adorno found in the final masterpieces of Ludwig van Beethoven. The predictability is partly in how the book and Cohen’s later songs evoke the simplicity of the circle. In the titular poem, he writes

I followed the course  
From chaos to art  
Desire the horse  
Depression the cart

The pattern and patter of these lines should be totally familiar to anyone who has listened to Cohen's late albums.<sup>11</sup> They are perfect quatrains, here in dimeter: two accents in each line. These lines play on the expression "putting the cart before the horse" to imply that depression came before desire for the speaker, a Freudian paradox that has less to do with human psychology than "the course" of Cohen's career. The question of which came first is fundamentally circular, a figure also implied by the chiasmus or crossing pattern that here associates "art" and "desire" and becomes the spokes in a wheel—a symbol of controlled movement quite different from the "chaos" of a "horse" on the loose. (If the identification of chiasmus seems too close to the text, remember that a "course," in the sense of a race track for horses, is usually circular, and that "the cart" already evokes the image of the wheel. The aforementioned Star of David creates a similar crossing, yet circular, pattern.) Simply stated, depression and death are there at the start, in a coherent relationship with their manifestations at the end.

Cohen's final album, too, can be interpreted as both an introduction and a farewell—a full circle, if you will. On the title track of *You Want It Darker*, Cohen intones the Hebrew word *hineni*, which means "here I am." It is a self-presentation like that of "Poem." It might be the lowest note Cohen ever sang or said; Coyle writes of Cohen's voice: "Just when you think it can't get any deeper than it has, it does" (n.p.). Asked at a press conference about the inspiration for this Hebrew word, Cohen said, "I don't really know the genesis, the origin." He was being disingenuous; his much earlier song "The Story of Isaac" (1969) is about God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and, in the Torah, Abraham answers with the word *hineni*.<sup>12</sup> At the press conference when Cohen mentioned "the emergency," he said—more fully but no less cryptically—that a part of our nature is "to offer oneself at the moment, at the critical moment, when the emergency becomes articulate." I heard his son Adam Cohen say on CBC Radio (though I forget the details of the program) that his father was ill and in pain when the album was being completed, and so I infer that the elder Cohen was referring to "the emergency" of his health, and perhaps he was even imagining himself "offer[ing]" himself in place of his own son, who was beside him at the press conference. In the song, he follows *hineni*, "here I am," with the spoken phrase, "I'm ready, my Lord."<sup>13</sup> The song

repeatedly suggests that the singer knows that his death is imminent. The song presents Cohen to God, and it involves religion not only thematically. At the end of the song, Cohen is joined by his own Montreal synagogue's cantor, Gideon Zelermeyer. Zelermeyer sings "hineni" with a seemingly improvised and absolutely evocative Middle Eastern melody. The cantor's signing at the end is meaningful because of its position *at the end*: one's self-presentation usually happens at the beginning. As Robert Everett-Green reported in *The Globe and Mail* when the album was released, Cohen appeared to be trying to complete a circle. The cantor quoted an email that he received from Cohen: "I'm looking for the sound of the synagogue cantor and choir of my youth" (qtd. in Everett-Green R1). The choir also appears in the song, but at the beginning, symbolizing a movement throughout the song from youth to old age and death.

That this movement goes back at least as far as *Old Ideas* is demonstrated in Simmons' biography, when she quotes Cohen as saying to her, "My mind is not given to philosophy, it's given to a kind of prayer, a kind of work. But mostly it's about that problem of getting back to the key I started off in" (513). On this occasion, he was talking mainly about the compositional challenge of arranging chord progressions in a song, but the title *Old Ideas* suggests that "the key" is also one of the "old ideas," not simply "old" because the singer is old, but "old" because it's old to him, because it reaches into the past. Reach far enough and the idea is young again.

These unities of death and life, and youth and old age, might ultimately be religious, "a kind of prayer." More specifically, they can be attributed to a blend of Zen Buddhism and Judaism, and, by extension from Judaism, Christianity. According to Elliot R. Wolfson, one principle of Zen is "the inability to delimit the indivisible suchness" (112), and he quotes an interview in which Cohen himself explains "the indivisible suchness" in Jewish terms as

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. (qtd. in Wolfson 112)

This principle might be more familiar as oneness or union, which is the focus of Wolfson's long exegesis of Cohen's poems and songs; Wolfson

refers to “the law of dependent origination (*prañīyasamutpāda*), 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” (113). He ultimately includes Cohen’s three major religious influences in that oneness and interdependence, and indeed *Let Us Compare Mythologies* has a “Prayer for Messiah” that proves an early influence of Christian ideas too: “your eyes through my eyes shine brighter than love / your blood in my ballad collapses the grave” (20). “As Adorno said about Beethoven, late style does not admit the definitive cadences of death; instead, death appears in a refracted mode, as irony” (Said 24). Although the tone of “Prayer for Messiah” is more incantatory than ironic, it has structural irony: *Let Us Compare Mythologies* ends with “Beside the Shepherd,” where “news of the Messiah” (79) is forgotten in the quotidian details of waking up from a dream of being godly. Cohen appropriates the power of resurrection—God’s power—as the balladeer’s power, but the ballads end too. At the press conference for *You Want It Darker*, secretly knowing that he was dying, he made a joke about being ready to die and about being prone to exaggeration, then said, “I intend to live forever.” Even if the poet cannot perform such a transformation of death into life, the ironic circle is a unity.

Stepping back, circling back again to think of Cohen’s life and work, I am struck by two descriptions of Adorno by Said in *On Late Style* that apply so well. Said thought that Adorno embodied late style. He describes him as “an aging but mentally agile European man of culture who is absolutely not given to ascetic serenity or mellow maturity” (22). Although Cohen was Canadian, he had a Jewish Montrealer’s old-world charm and developed a related public persona from the Europop of *I’m Your Man* (1988) and *The Future* (1992) onward. Although he was a monk who *was* eventually “given to ascetic serenity,” the impish sexuality of *Book of Longing* cannot be described as “mellow maturity,” so he shares that with Adorno. Said also describes Adorno as “a special twentieth-century type, the out-of-his-time late-nineteenth-century disappointed or disillusioned romantic who exists almost ecstatically detached from, yet in a kind of complicity with, new and monstrous forms—fascism, anti-Semitism, totalitarianism, and bureaucracy” (23). Cohen could *almost* be an ideal reflection in his upper-managerial suits, with his iron-fisted voice, and through his channelling of both the pragmatists and the idealists, the victimized and the “middle class and tame” (“You Want It Darker”). The quality that is missing in these descriptions of Adorno, the quality that sets Cohen apart, is his sometimes gentle, sometimes acidic sense of humour,

which is the technique that expresses so much of his “serenity” and so much of the circular, recursive irony of his late style.

The music critic Mikal Gilmore has a story from 1988 about Cohen’s ironically morbid serenity or composure, one that serves in conclusion to exemplify this style:

I met with Cohen at his hotel, just off Central Park [in New York]. It was a sweltering afternoon, but Cohen was in a chalk-striped double-breasted suit. We talked for hours. He addressed the foreboding in his new music—scarier, more outward-directed than anything he’d done before, but also full of dark humor. He talked of an apocalyptic scenario that had befallen humanity—a plague, a bomb, the decline of our political systems—even if humanity had not yet realized it. At one point he stood up, slipped off his pants and folded them neatly over the back of another chair. It was a sensible thing to do. It was such a hot day; why wrinkle the slacks to a nice suit? Cohen kept on his jacket and tie, his socks, shoes and blue-and-white-lined boxer shorts as he sat back down.

There was a knock. “Excuse me,” said Cohen. He rose and pulled his slacks back on, opened the door and signed for a cold soda he’d ordered for me. He handed me the drink, took his slacks off and folded them again. He flashed a warm smile. I realized I had just been given an example of how one behaves with poise, even while contemplating the end of days. (par. 35-36)

This “poise” is, to me, one of the other through-lines in Cohen’s late career, and, though it might not describe him during the breakdowns of the 1970s, it seems right even when he was a wide-eyed young man in the film *Ladies and Gentlemen... Mr. Leonard Cohen*.<sup>14</sup> It is crucial not only to the “end of days” but *his* end of days. The scene of Cohen’s removing his pants in front of a journalist in a hotel room is also a perfect example of Cohen’s ironic and darkly comic awareness of the twin demands on his public persona and private life.

For a celebrity, outside of politics and civics, what is a public life? It is more than days—years—far longer than fifteen minutes of fame. However “bodied” a star is, a public life is an out of body experience: in public, the living can see themselves from the outside as if their lives were a scrapbook of broadcasts. It can be narrated to the minute, even to the point of approaching death: a public death. Leo Braudy reflects on doublings such as a public life/death as if he were commenting on late style: “the most implacable rival for early success, undercutting every achievement, is not really another person but an aspect, higher or lower, of oneself — one’s own sense of the compromises and self-warpings that ambition and the urge for recognition entail” (qtd. in Harrington 495). For the late style of a

public life, the “rival” is death, but it does not appear to have been “undercutting” Cohen. He integrated public death into his public life, just as he integrated his public and private selves. A public life is the paradox of a critical distance from which to see only a mask, only a persona, that resembles the person you have become. This is another unity, which Cohen understood as well as anyone, and it too is at the heart of the reconciliations of Cohen’s late style and his protracted automortography. By writing about his own death during the emergency of cancer, he appeals to his public, his fans, who have been a factor of his public life that was inescapable, except perhaps during his years in Greece or at the monastery on Mt. Baldy. Another dimension of his appeal is familiarity; his readers recognize the themes of his late style from the earliest moments in his career as a poet. Although his style truly varied, a unity emerges at the end of his career that is not merely the projection of a reader or listener who wants closure. He repeatedly calls attention to the paradoxes and ironies and potentials of unity, of “the Unified Heart,” in *Book of Longing* and in songs such as “You Want It Darker,” “Slow,” and “Going Home.” Defying our understanding of late style’s irresolution, he deepens its irony by drawing a circle that rationalizes his variations as a surprising consistency and even a control over death.

### Notes

- 1 On Oct. 6, 2017, while this essay was under review, national and international media reported that Cohen will publish a book of poetry posthumously. *The Flame* is planned for October, 2018, shortly before the two-year anniversary of his death. Alison Flood (whose news item I chose because the title signals the late style of a book “Finished Days before His Death”) paraphrases Cohen’s manager, Robert Kory, who said that *The Flame* was “a key ambition for the singer-songwriter at the end of his life” (Flood par. 4). These terms support my view in this essay that Cohen’s late style involved successfully completing final projects rather than lamenting impossibilities.
- 2 The exemplar might be the song “Who by Fire” from the 1974 album *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, a song in which Cohen catalogues ways to die: by fire, water, trial, slow decay, barbiturate, something blunt, etc. Elliot R. Wolfson explains the song as “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” (104). “Fate” may be the future-oriented religious meaning, but the song also records all manner of *past* deaths, implying another sort of past-and-future continuity or circularity.
- 3 A related word has been in circulation far longer: “autobituary,” which does not appear in *The Oxford English Dictionary* but which can be traced back at least as far as the title of *The Autobituary of a West Pointer* (1882), a comical and illustrated book by the obviously pseudonymous Dum John. Various sketches in Mark Twain’s autobiography follow the precedent of this *Autobituary*.
- 4 The term is Svetlana Boym’s: “Instead of being antimodern or postmodern, it seems



- more important to revisit this unfinished critical project of modernity, based on an alternative understanding of temporality, not as a teleology of progress or transcendence but as a superimposition and coexistence of heterogeneous times.... Some of the meanings of the adverb *off* relevant to this discussion include: 'aside' and 'offstage,' 'extending and branching out from,' 'somewhat crazy and eccentric' (off-kilter), 'absent or away from work or duty,' 'off-key,' 'offbeat,' 'occasionally off-color but not offcast' (30).
- 5 Harrington describes Anna Akhmatova's *Poem without a Hero* (1940-1966), whose characters include "K., a popular celebrity-hero, and N., the usurping imposter whose ruthless, uncontrolled ambition and envy lead him to assume K.'s identity" (494). The parallels here to Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* and to Stephen Scobie's theory of the fused initials of the name "IF" in this novel are striking.
  - 6 Cohen ironizes this expectation in "The Wind Moves" in *Book of Longing*, which ends: "*Dear Roshi / I am dead now / I died before you / just as you predicted / in the early 70s*" (170). Remarkably, Roshi lived to be well over 100 (Simmons 524) and died only a couple of years before Cohen.
  - 7 See Michael Wood's introduction to Said's book for the connotations and idioms of lateness.
  - 8 The Hutcheons explain that an eighteenth-century "eroticization of death" became the nineteenth-century Romantic "aestheticization of death"(3), and we still see these perspectives in Cohen, at least if we consider his juxtapositions of sex and death to be erotic, given that he suggests that a coming death prevents him from fulfilling sexual desires; and aesthetic, given that he demonstrates a view of the beautiful and the true in *Beautiful Losers* that includes ugliness and fantasy.
  - 9 If these juxtapositions seem lecherous, they should also demonstrate Cohen's self-consciousness about his provocations and his late style. Said wonders about the aptness of late style, or "*timeliness*, by which I mean that what is appropriate to early life is not appropriate for later stages, and vice versa" (5). The objectified women align, too, with the subject-object fusion of the automortographic body before it becomes a corpse. One of Said's first comments about late style is that "[t]he relationship between bodily condition and aesthetic style seems at first to be a subject so irrelevant and perhaps even trivial by comparison with the momentousness of life, mortality, medical science, and health, as to be quickly dismissed" (3); however, Cohen's wizenning body is precisely the point, the object, of his late style. Notably, Cohen included drawings in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, too, including a female nude.
  - 10 Slightly later, in *The Spice-box of Earth*, he wrote that "It is good to live between / a ruined house of bondage / and a holy promised land" (qtd. in Wolfson 125-126). The circularity or unity is there again as an existence "between" things, a balance, a juggler's performance of figure eights.
  - 11 Notably, he had experimented with a sing-song structure that seems like "Book of Longing" even in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, where "Prayer for Messiah" begins with this quatrain: "His blood on my arm is warm as a bird / his heart in my hand is heavy as lead / his eyes through my eyes shine brighter than love / O send out the raven ahead of the dove" (20).
  - 12 At the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures (ACQL 2017) conference at which a version of this essay was presented (27 May 2017), Rainer Maria Koepl presented a paper on "The Story of Isaac" and, during the question period, explained Cohen's reference to "the genesis."
  - 13 Shortly after the death of Gord Downey of The Tragically Hip on October 17, 2017, the first release from his posthumous album was played on the radio. Just before the song begins, the recording engineer (it seems) asks Downey, "Are you ready?" In a low, tired voice choked with emotions—sorrow, resentment, defiance—Downey says, "No." The song begins anyway. The Tragically Hip's *In Violet Light* (2002) has one called "Are

You Ready?”, but this earlier song is about being ready to love, not die.

- 14 Somewhat differently, Jesse Kornbluth on the *Rolling Stone* blog writes that “[t]he refusal to speed—the pathological unwillingness to write a song that rips you out of your chair—is the through-line of Cohen’s career” (par. 6). Certainly this is true of a song such as “Slow.”

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