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# Strange Bedfellows: Sacred and Profane Love in the Poetry of John Donne and Leonard Cohen

**by Kevin Flynn**

The insistent lyric "I" of John Donne's love poetry has led a number of critics to claim that his works are only remotely "about" love; or, as C. S. Lewis put it, the problem with Donne's love poetry is that "it largely omits the very thing that all the pother is about" (97). John Carey agrees: "In some respects, Donne isn't a love poet at all. The physical characteristics of the girl he's supposed to be talking about don't concern him. Nor does her personality: it is completely obliterated by Donne's" (9-10). The same might be said of Leonard Cohen's love poetry, which employs personae whose egoism and self-consciousness are reminiscent of Donne's self-centred lovers. The variability of these personae—ranging from comically impudent Lotharios to wounded suitors—frustrates attempts to discover a consistent philosophy of love in Donne's and Cohen's poetry. However, a comparative study of these figures, and their modes of expression, leads to a fuller understanding of each poet's conception of love. Through a process of distillation (to borrow one of Donne's favourite metaphors), we can extract from these different speakers' musings a common and essential basis of their love: a vision of ideal love that transgresses boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Comparing their methods for conducting this search illuminates their shared fascination with such transgression and, moreover, provides the basis for a nuanced understanding of each poet's vision of an ideal love that is a transcendent combination of divine love and secular experience.

Despite the four centuries that separate them, Donne and Cohen share a remarkably similar relationship to their respective worlds. Born into a prominent family in his religious community, each man was compelled to examine his faith in the light of atrocities committed against coreligionists during his lifetime. Donne, the descendant of no less pious a Catholic than Sir Thomas More, was painfully familiar with the persecution of Catholics in Elizabethan England, his brother having died in prison for harbouring a Catholic priest. Because practicing Catholics were driven underground by laws that prescribed punishments ranging from heavy fines and confisca-

tion of property to various tortures and "makeshift vivisection" (Carey 18), Donne attempted to strike a balance between his secular ambitions and his divine aspirations. His conversion to Anglicanism allowed him to return to the public life he craved, and his involvement in the Anglican ministry and eventual appointment as Dean of St. Paul's no doubt reassured him that, despite his apostasy, it was still possible for him to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. His decision, which "allowed him to affirm a basic religious view which was simultaneously this- and other-wordly, political and ecclesiastical, secular and sacred" (Jackson 96), embodies the same passion for integration evident in his poetry.

Certainly Donne's reluctant, almost compulsory, apostasy is to be distinguished from Cohen's embrace of Buddhism. Free from such compulsion, Cohen partakes of what Eli Mandel has called "Zen Judaism" ("Con Game" 52) and samples liberally from Christian mythology—especially Mariolatry—in his poetry and music. Cohen, who grew up in Montreal during the Second World War, had his own acquaintance with religious persecution and atrocity. The grandson of Lyon Cohen, a "leader of Jewry in Canada" (Dorman and Rawlins 17), Leonard Cohen enjoyed a Jewish upbringing that would have rendered the faraway horrors of the Holocaust painfully immediate. The most obvious textual evidence of the influence of the Holocaust on Cohen's imagination is his remythologization of Hitler, Goebbels, and Eichmann in *Flowers for Hitler*. But such influence must also be measured by the extent to which Cohen incorporates Jewish tradition into his work, culminating in his *Book of Mercy*, which he tellingly describes as "a book of prayer" and "a sacred kind of conversation," but also "a particular kind of love poem" (Sward and Smith 56). Although his subsequent *Book of Longing* inclines much more emphatically toward Buddhism, Cohen, like Donne, never fully abandoned his interest in his original faith model, and its promise of divine love. The significance of this shared experience is illuminated by Carey, who suggests the influence that Donne's troubled Catholicism may have had on his poetry: "Some readers may ask what [a discussion of Elizabethan Catholics' fear and isolation] has to do with Donne's poetry, but I imagine they will be few. It would be as reasonable to demand what the Nazi persecution of Jews had to do with a young Jewish writer in Germany in the 1930s" (18). Or, for that matter, with a Jewish youth growing up in Montreal during that time.

Were their poetic works devoted solely to the struggle to recover or maintain their faith traditions, much of the power of their poetry might be attributed to religious experience alone. There is also in their poetry, however, an abiding, sexually charged, interest in women: their bodies, their

moods, their touch. Deborah Larson, wary of the pitfalls of confusing poet and persona, warns that Donne's *Songs and Sonets* (and, presumably, his *Elegies*) "should be recognized as a group of mainly unrelated monologues, spoken by several varying and contradictory personae playing a number of roles" (14), as should Cohen's love poems. Stephen Scobie's reminder that "it would not greatly aid the reader of Cohen's work to follow all the details of his romantic entanglements" (*Leonard Cohen* xi) applies equally to Donne, whose reputation as "a great visitor of ladies," promulgated by Sir Richard Baker's *Chronicles of the Kings of England*, is as unsubstantiated as Cohen's has been publicized.

Even if it seems best not to join George Wright in asking about the poems' personae, "In what sense are they Donne [or Cohen]?" (174), it remains fruitful to examine how both poets work out, through their ostensibly "unrelated monologues," a single, unified vision of love. And one fundamental basis of this vision is a sustained contemplation of the relationship between sacred and profane love, which leads both Donne and Cohen to articulate a fascination with a transgressive sensuality in which the spirit is awakened as the flesh is aroused. This general similarity is not, in itself, particularly remarkable; after all, literary conjunctions of sacred and profane love are legion. What makes Cohen and Donne worthy of comparative study is not so much what they do as how they do it. Beyond their biographical affinities, these two poets share a strikingly similar strategy for exploring the relationship between divine and secular love, a strategy that hinges on each of them having constructed personae whose interests intersect and inform one another to produce a powerful philosophy of love in his poetry. The expression of this philosophy reaches its culmination in Cohen's "Credo" and "You Have the Lovers" and Donne's "The Extasie" and "The Canonization," poems which, in their depictions of a glorious loss of self in the act of love, transgress borders between the body and the soul—and between the lovers' coupled bodies and souls—in service of the transcendent love toward which Donne and Cohen labour in their poetry.

In response to Wright's contention that Donne explores the nature of love through a composite speaker who is variously "irritated, soothed, baffled, and appalled by women, change, time, death, [and] by the nature of sublunary experience" (176), Lynn Taylor Novak argues that the vast majority of Donne's poetry contributes to no such collective investigation—or at least not a very fruitful one. At best, she writes, the musings of the individual speakers amount to "an exploration without discovery" (180). Only in the "isolated" examples of "The Canonization" and "The

Extasie" does she detect a cogent, coherent basis for what one might call Donne's philosophy of love (181). But her observation, intended as a criticism, actually proves complementary to Wright's analysis, and these two seemingly inconsonant opinions together suggest an illuminating strategy for reading Donne's love poetry.

Wright's emphasis on exploration, rather than discovery, reflects Donne's desire to study his composite lover's various and contradictory poses in many of his poems. If, as Novak contends, "The Canonization" and "The Extasie" are in some measure conclusive, it is clear that they are so precisely because they seek to resolve many of the tensions--between change and changelessness, body and soul, sacred and profane--that occupy the composite speaker of his love poetry, a self-divided figure who seemingly must choose between temporary physical love and everlasting spiritual life. These two poems stand at the centre of Donne's philosophy of love not merely because they reconcile the persona's conflicting desires and thus prepare him to suffer the trials of sublunary love. More significantly, they address the lover's concerns by describing an alternative, a vision of absolute physical and spiritual union that offers him the opportunity to transcend the limitations of space, time, and self. As their images of mutuality and fusion suggest, "The Extasie" and "The Canonization" are in some respects remedies for the self-division that plagues Donne's lover. If the lover's troubled attitudes toward earthly love motivate the exploration that Donne undertakes through his love poetry, then the apparent resolution of the lover's conflicted state in these two poems provides an important key to understanding Donne's philosophy of love.

The basis of this conflicted state, in both men's poems, is found in the lovers' troubled contemplations of permanence and mutability. Pained articulations of the inexorability of change are scattered throughout Cohen's poetry. The speaker of "The nightmares do not suddenly" (*Parasite of Heaven* 13) observes that

> Love wears out
> like overused mirrors unsilvering
> and parts of your faces
> make room for the wall behind.
> (7-10)

The erosion of love results in a loss of identity, figured in the wall's intrusion into the lover's reflection. "The Sparrow" (*Let Us Compare Mythologies* 22-23), through its interweaving of past, present, and present perfect voices, elaborates the theme of love's decay over time. In the recent winter

migration of these "traitor birds" (2), the lover is reminded of love's impermanence, of a future emptiness that he sees presently in "[…] the hollow nets [that] / sit like tumors or petrified blossoms / between the wire branches" (18-20). Like mechanical "wind-up birds" (8), his is a wind-up love, destined to slacken over time. As long as love is confined to the temporal plane, the lover will be afflicted with anxiety over its impermanence. The speaker of Donne's "A nocturnall upon S. *Lucies* day, Being the shortest day" also connects fears of love's impermanence to cycles of growth and decay. At a midnight vigil, mourning the death of his beloved at a time which "the yeares, and the days deep midnight is" (45), he slips into despair and nihilism as he realizes that all around him has shrunk to "nothingnesse" (17). Donne's lover sees that decadence permeates all things; however, even as he imagines the parched earth greedily draining the *aqua vitae* from all living things, he imagines that his condition is exceptional:

> The worlds whole sap is sunke:
> The generall balme th'hydroptique earth hath drunk,
> Whither, as to the beds-feet, life is shrunke,
> Dead and enterr'd; yet all these seem to laugh
> Compar'd with mee, who am their Epitaph.
>
> (5-9)

The earth, and lovers beside himself, can look forward to renewal of life and love at "the next world, that is, at the next Spring" (11); however, the only "next world" in which he can hope to renew his love is the afterlife, in which "shee enjoyes her long nights festival" (42). He exists in a kind of purgatory, unwilling to engage in the love he sees around him and unable to join his departed mistress. Like the earth on this day, he is suspended, and profoundly divided, between life and death because of his consciousness of mutability.

However, Donne complicates matters because others of his personae welcome change, having recognized a flaw in the ideal of unchanging love: it precludes love's growth. Thus the speaker of "Lovers infinitenesse," having expended his Petrarchan currency of "[s]ighs, teares, and oathes" (5), asks that his mistress increase the return on his investment and not submit to other suitors "[w]hich have their stocks intire, and can in teares, / In sighs, in oathes, and in letters outbid [him]" (16-17). He desires, initially, to have "all" her love, but realizes that in receiving it he will be deprived of further reward:

> Yet I would not have all yet,
> Hee that hath all can have no more,
> And since my love doth every day admit
> New growth, thou shouldst have new rewards in store.
> (23-26)

The speaker of "Loves growth" similarly realizes that if his love partakes of the earth's corruption and must "endure / Vicissitude, and season, as the grasse" (3-4), it also partakes of the earth's cycles of renewal: "Me thinkes I lyed all winter, when I swore / My love was infinite, if spring make it more" (5-6). This speaker welcomes change. He is content that his secular love "not onely be no quintessence, / But mixt of all stuffes" (8-9) because, although (according to Neoplatonic conception) "the body is incapable of permanent fusion" (Guss 132), the fleeting sexual pleasure it can experience is preferable to the pleasures of "pure, and abstract" Neoplatonic love (11). His love here is "eminent" (15), having reached the point where, Donne's bawdy pun intended, it stands out: "Gentle love deeds, as blossomes on a bough, / From loves awakened roots do bud out now" (19-20). Sensibly, this lover disdains to engage in a love whose permanence might preclude such awakenings.

For Donne, the essence of ideal love lies in its harmonious integration of opposites, in the union of man and woman to form "one neutrall thing" ("Canonization" 25). As such, it patterns itself after God's divine love, which is manifested in His creation of lovers composed of mortal body and immortal soul. Human love, like the beings who enact it, can be complete only when it partakes equally of body and soul. Cohen appears to share this belief, and to undertake a similar strategy for expressing it. In his article on *Death of a Lady's Man*, Ken Norris examines Cohen's interest in "[t]he union of opposites—the male and the female, the self and the other, the sacred and the profane, or what Cohen refers to in one passage as 'what is holy and what is common'" (53). Like Donne, Cohen carefully weighs both the joys and the limitations of earthly love. Moreover, he allows the lover's self-division to slip away in two poems whose depictions of the possibility of effacing the boundaries between the spiritual and the erotic most fully articulate his vision of transcendent human love. In their attempts to heal the lover's self-division by disputing the rigid division between sacred and profane love, "Credo" and "You Have the Lovers" (*Spice Box* 25-26; 29-30) stand in the same relation to Cohen's poems as "The Extasie" and "The Canonization" stand to Donne's. Not content to portray the act of love as a simple union, he, like Donne, describes it as the absolute fusion of bodies and beings. As the boundaries between bodies

dissolve, so too does the lover's preoccupations with his or her own individuality and identity. When this occurs, the lover attains a state whose closest analogue, for both poets, is sainthood.

These affinities, however, accentuate one intriguing respect in which Cohen and Donne differ in their representations of sacred and profane love. For Donne, body and soul, two distinct entities, combine to play as equal and important a role in love as in worship. Cohen, on the other hand, denies altogether the distinction between body and soul—and, for that matter, between secular love and spiritual devotion. Ironically, this crucial difference is most evident in those poems that best demonstrate these poets' shared vision and method: Cohen's "You Have the Lovers" and "Credo," and Donne's "The Extasie" and "The Canonization."

Scobie makes this comparison himself when he remarks that the convention of using sacred and profane love as figures for one another "has been used from the Songs of Solomon to the 'Holy Sonnets' of John Donne" (*Leonard Cohen* 8). The sensual Mariolatry of Cohen's "All Summer Long" (*Lady's Man* 204) and the description of God's merciful caress in the seventh psalm of his *Book of Mercy* are not far removed from the rhetoric of Donne's Holy Sonnets XIV and XVIII, "Batter my heart, three person'd God" and "Show me deare Christ, thy spouse." However, as one might expect given the comparatively extravagant sensuality of Cohen's poetry, Cohen goes to greater lengths to depict a religion of the flesh than does Donne, who seems content not to stray too far from the Bible's use of fleshly metaphors for religious devotion. "Batter my heart" depicts an ecstatic and eternal union with God through images of physical love, but Donne's sonnet is more clever than it is sensual: "Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I / Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free, / nor ever chast, except you ravish mee" (12-14). The twin paradoxes of freedom through constraint and purity through ravishment are not extended to suggest a third, that being the possibility of expressing religious devotion through physical love. Similarly, "Show me dear Christ, thy spouse" plays upon apostolic references to the Church as Christ's spouse and images of amorous infidelity to represent lapses in faith, but it is in no way a sensual poem. Cohen's theology, on the other hand, is unrepentantly sensual. The description of stigmata in his "Ballad" beginning "He pulled a flower" (*Mythologies* 42-43) demonstrates the same fascination with flesh that is found throughout his love poetry:

> He dipped a flower
> into a wound
> and hoped that a garden

would grow in his hand.
(5-8)

"Prayer for Messiah" (*Mythologies* 18) effects a similar marriage of sensual and religious devotion through the vision of integration ("your eyes through my eyes shine") realized in its persona's physical contemplation of the Messiah:

O sing from your chains where you're chained in a cave
your eyes through my eyes shine brighter than love
your heart in my hand is heavy as lead
your blood on my arm is warm as a bird.
(13-16)

Although the title of the volume from which these two poems are taken invokes only a comparison of mythologies, Cohen's poetry generally depicts a coalescing of mythologies such as Christianity and Judaism, and not only with each other, but also with the sensual mythology of his age; Robert Boyers, a contemporary of Cohen's in the 1960s, argued that "[t]he body has become [...] that oracle wherein lies value and truth, and balm for the pains of consciousness" (37).

Scobie's emphasis on the fact that Cohen's religious feeling is infused with "sexual energy and emotion" (*Leonard Cohen* 8) downplays the extent to which the reverse is also true. Cohen blends sacred and profane mythologies in order to depict a sensuality that, like Donne's, is infused with spiritual energy and devotion. The state of "erotic grace" (3) depicted in "The Priest Says Goodbye" (*Spice-Box* 37-38), whose speaker has a vision of "lust burn[ing] like fire in a holy tree" (20), resurfaces in poems such as "Celebration" (*Spice-Box* 55), which employs the story of Samson and Delilah to express a sublime physical love in which ejaculation becomes the "blessing" received at the completion of a "ceremony" (6, 12). "Credo" and "You Have the Lovers" mark the culmination of the project carried out in these poems, both of them linking the sacred and the profane through an explicit appeal to orthodox mythology. "Credo" compares erotic and Judaic mythologies, portraying the lovers' encounter in an apocalyptic context by referring to the plagues visited upon Egypt by Yahweh. The lovers, sanctified by their "ordinary morning lust" (38), are not threatened by this retribution. And although the speaker is momentarily distracted by the swarms of locusts and "[b]atallions of the wretched, / wild with holy promises" that pass the couple's secluded bed of ferns (23-24), he rejects the notion that he must choose between his secular and spiritual

impulses when he can satisfy both in the act of love: "It is good to live between / a ruined house of bondage / and a holy promised land" (44-46). The act of love allows the speaker to move beyond the limitations bred of self-division, and to attain a transgressive vision of absolute integration.

Cohen's allusion to scripture in his erotic poems underscores his belief in the possibility of integrating the sacred and the profane. But as the example of "You Have the Lovers" demonstrates, Cohen need not refer directly to any identifiable theology in order to depict this integration. Here the erotic act becomes a religious ceremony in and of itself, without reference to an authoritative religious text. The poem's incantatory quality, its "delicate verbal mesmerism" (Barbour 147), enhances the solemnity of a ritual practiced by lovers who "slowly and deliberately and silently, / perform the act of love" (24-25). This ritual, like that of a conventional religion, offers its participants relief from the pain and loneliness of earthly existence through faith in an eternal ideal. By embracing a holistic sensuality (familiar to readers of Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*) the lovers reject the asceticism of "cutting the hair" (*Slaves* 34) and its "forms of discipline / rituals excluding cunt and wine" (2-3). Instead, they, like the lesbians of "What character could possibly engage my boredom" (*Slaves* 47), will engage in "perfect sweet rituals such as walking together at twilight smoking cigarillos past shadowy retired fishermen [...]." The mesmerizing tone and pacing with which Cohen describes the eternal kiss of "Slowly I Married Her" (*Lady's Man* 182) is echoed in "You Have the Lovers" to reinforce the timelessness of a love that is eternally "in progress: / it is not finished" (17-18). Moreover, as the poem's invitation to "you" suggests, participation in this celebration of sacred and profane love is not limited to a chosen people. When the door to the "lover's chamber" suddenly opens (19), it welcomes anyone who is willing to "create an embrace and fall into it" (50). But to do so, one must be willing to cross the threshold and enter the room, thereby accepting a transgressive model of love that denies boundaries between people, let alone between the sacred and the profane.

Given his vocation, it is not surprising that Donne should have a heightened sense of the time-dissolving power of ceremony and that he should also draw upon this in his efforts to blur the distinction between the spiritual and the material. He toys comically with this notion in the mock martyrdom of "The Flea," and more seriously in "The good-morrow," where, "[w]ith something akin to ritual, the man solemnises the lovers' passage from their former half-existence to the full life of their love [...]" (Pinka 109). Only when his love involves body and soul is the lover awakened to the possibility of attaining a gloriously unified experience. Like Cohen,

Donne describes "a union between lovers that is essentially communal, sacred, and religious in a certain sense, but neither Christian nor social" (Low 485). Thus, while "The Extasie" makes no explicit appeal to liturgy, it recalls in its methodical and reverential treatment of the lovers' union the erotic ceremony of "You Have the Lovers." And although "The Extasie" features a lover who is, like his counterpart in "The Canonization," obviously acquainted with arguments proclaiming the distinction between sacred and profane love, Donne succeeds in both poems in "at last transcending both sides of the argument in the conception of love as an eternal and universal 'pattern'" (Nye 351). Engaged in a heated debate with a critic who would rather "With wealth [his] state, [his] minde with Arts improve" (4), the speaker of "The Canonization" asserts that his love facilitates a kind of growth beyond anything his antagonist can imagine. This poem, like Cohen's "Credo," quashes the distinction between song of love and song of religious praise:

> ...if unfit for tombs and hearse
> Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse;
> And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,
> We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes;
> As well a well wrought urne becomes
> The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombes,
> And by these hymnes, all shall approve
> Us Canoniz'd for Love.
>
> (29-36)

The approval referred to here is much more than a casual endorsement of the lovers' union. Donne's real business is to suggest a formal rite of beatification that will confirm the "legend" (the account of the life of a saint) of these canonized lovers. Both poets thus portray the act of love as an amorous ritual that allows its participants to transcend the limitations of what Donne calls "[d]ull sublunary lovers love" ("A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" 13) by embracing the transgression of conventional boundaries between the sacred and the profane.

Like a conventional religious ceremony, the lovers' ritual is performed in a hallowed space in which they can celebrate and commune with the energy of love "beyond the contamination of the knowable" (Carey 130), an enclosure removed from a world where "Soldiers find warres, and Lawyers find out still / Litigious men" ("Canonization" 16-17). The images of enclosure in "The Canonization"—the sonnets' "pretty roomes" and "well wrought urne" in contrast to the more expansive "half-acre tombes" (32-

34)—allude to this sanctuary, and suggest something of its nature. For as the opposition of ornate urn and expansive tomb suggests, the experience of sublime love expands the boundaries of its intimate setting to near-infinite reaches. Like the stanzas of "The Canonization" themselves, the lovers' world is bounded only by love. And this love, Donne writes in "The good-morrow," "all love of other sights controules, / And makes one little roome, an everywhere" (10-11). The impudent lover in "The Sunne Rising" alludes to the paradoxical boundlessness of the lovers' enclosure in his invitation to the sun: "Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere; / This bed thy center is, these walls, thy spheare" (29-30). Still, the space is a sanctuary, and as such allows the lovers to remove themselves from the outside world. The totality of this removal is indicated by the fact that the lovers not only escape the concerns of the workaday world but also, in language that spoofs Petrarchan convention, disclaim any influence upon the world beyond their enclosure:

> Alas, alas, who's injur'd by my love?
> What merchants ships have my sighs drown'd?
> Who saies my tears have overflow'd this ground?
> When did my colds a forward spring remove?
> When did the heats which my veines fill
> Adde one more to the plaguie Bill?
> ("Canonization" 10-15)

There is a disturbing aspect, however, to this reclusiveness, because the denial of social responsibility it implies leans very near toward the amorality of Cohen's "Letter" (*Mythologies* 36):

> How you murdered your family
> means nothing to me
> as your mouth moves across my body
> [. . . . . .]
> I know that outside a war is raging
> that you issue orders
> that babies are smothered and generals beheaded
>
> but blood means nothing to me
> it does not disturb your flesh.
> (1-3, 10-14)

This aloofness is shared by the lover in "Credo," who proclaims it "good to hear / the larvae rumbling underground" (51-52), a statement that illu-

minates the potential implications of this seclusion in a "small oasis" (42) divorced from "That impoverished world / of boil-afflicted flesh / and rotting fields [...]," and safe from the coming swarms of locusts that those rumbling larvae presage (34-36). The lovers' sequestration is redeemed, however, by the nature of the love they share. What they safeguard in this sanctuary is not merely their love for one another, but indeed the very ideal of transcendent love itself, the "patterne" to which Donne refers in "The Canonization" (45).

The lovers' sanctuary, then, is not merely a retreat from a threateningly mundane world. For the lovers in "The Extasie" and "You Have the Lovers," whose fertile meeting places resemble the bed of ferns of which the lovers of "Credo" make an inviolable shelter, it is also, and more importantly, the space in which one experiences the ecstasy of transcendent love. In "The Extasie," as in "The good-morrow," physical union facilitates spiritual awakening. The lovers attain a state of grace that allows them to savour the pleasures of love beyond the bounds of time and space:

> Our soules, (which to advance their state,
> Were gone out,) hung 'twixt her, and mee.
> And whil'st our soules negotiate there,
> Wee like sepulchrall statues lay;
> All day, the same our postures were,
> And we said nothing, all the day.
> (15-20)

Donne's representation of this deathlike state is crucial to his conception of the roles of body and soul in this amorous ecstasy. He is fascinated, as Hughes attests, with "the mystery of the soul's literal ekstasis from the body either at death or in moments of what may be called television in life" (509). He generally believes that "[t]he natural and spiritual depend mutually on each other for their ultimate fulfilment, although that fulfilment can occur only at the end of time" (Mann, "Sacred and Profane" 536). In "The Extasie," the soul's eventual return "T'affections, and to faculties" (66) after its departure from the body at the moment of erotic death simulates the great event that will occur at "the end of time": the resurrection of the body and its reintegration with the soul on Judgement Day. Having granted the lovers their own private space, Donne also grants them their own private time, at the end of which they experience the "ultimate fulfilment" described by Mann. And lest the lovers' souls seem sentenced to a meagre existence once they have returned to their respective physical hosts, Donne affirms that this ecstasy changes the lovers as permanently as would death

and resurrection, and that their "new" souls (45), improved through their communion with one another, will endure "[s]mall change, when [they] are to bodies gone" (76). Although the sublime love Donne describes here is as fantastic as it is ecstatic, the poem's "final offhand invitation to the high-minded spectator works as a kind of challenge to the reader to accept it" (Graziani 136).

The spectator's presence is this poem is particularly noteworthy, for it signals a rare intrusion into Donne's lovers' sanctuary, normally composed of "a lover, his mistress, and the private world they inhabit together" (Low 474). But the lover welcomes this intrusion because, despite the intimacy of his encounter with his beloved, he longs to impart the joy of his ecstatic love to anyone who might "thence a new concoction take, / And part farre purer then he came" (27-28). As comparison with Donne's Holy Sonnet XVIII ("Showe me deare Christ, thy spouse") suggests, love, in "The Extasie," possesses the same capacity to engage seemingly infinite numbers of participants in its transformative riturals as does religion:

> Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights,
> And let myne amorous soule court thy mild Dove,
> Who is most trew, and pleasing to thee, then
> When she'is embraced and open to most men.
> (11-14)

Similarly, "You Have the Lovers" portrays a sublime love that, because it knows no limits, cannot confine its felicity to just two lovers: "it needs more people" (18). The lover in this poem seems to agree with the licentious speaker of Donne's "Confined Love" that "Good is not good, unless / A thousand it possesse, / But doth wast with greedinesse"(19-21). Gazing upon the jumbled mass of lovers who populate the room in Cohen's poem, "You" finally understand their ideal union and join the "multitudes" (52) in this sublime act of physical love, surrendering to the "surreal pornography" of the scene (Ondaatje 22):

> You stand beside the bed, weeping with happiness,
> you carefully peel away the sheets
> from the slow-moving bodies.
> Your eyes are filled with tears, you barely make out the lovers.
> As you undress you sing out, and your voice is magnificent.
> (40-44)

"You Have the Lovers" portrays a rapturous act of love that equals its counterpart in "The Extasie." Certainly the lover's spontaneous singing is suggestive of glossolalia, the ecstatic utterances described also by the speaker of Cohen's "The Priest Says Goodbye," who, inspired by the "absolute ballet" of lovers' bodies, "sings out as though [he] did not own / [his] throat" (8, 22-23). The lovers return, in the poem, to a blessed nascent state in a chamber that has become "a dense garden, / full of colours, smells, sounds you have never known" ("Lovers" 20-21). The inhabitants of this second Eden join with the lovers in Donne's poems in celebrating the inclusiveness of this transgressive communion with transcendent love.

In Cohen's and Donne's shared vision, true amorous ecstasy is the result of a selfless physical consummation that dissolves all boundaries between lovers. A less permanent manifestation of this mutuality and communality is found in Cohen's "I Have Taken You" (*Lady's Man* 38), whose speaker describes a physical encounter during which "[nothing] was withheld / All was generosity and true appetite" (9-10). Unfortunately, the lover's fear that he will lose his lady causes him to lash out at her, thereby revealing his lack of faith in the possibility of mutuality:

> I wait for you to damage my appetite
> so I can be something more
> than a hungry man
> waiting for a feast
> with someone less hungry than he is.
> (24-28)

This lack of faith, the inability to surrender to an ideal, prevents this lover from experiencing the joy demonstrated in "You Have the Lovers," the joy of letting go of one's jealously guarded personal identity (figured in the removal of clothing) and joining bodies that melt together to form "just one body of flesh—the new object of worship—rich, democratic, and eternal" (Ondaatje 22). The synaesthetic sensuality of Cohen's poem enables the others to luxuriate in a timeless fusion of bodies and identities:

> When he puts his mouth against her shoulder
> she is uncertain whether her shoulder
> has given or received the kiss.
> All her flesh is like a mouth.
> He carries his fingers along her waist
> and feels his own waist caressed.
> She holds him closer and his own arms tighten around her.

She kisses the hand beside her mouth.
It is his hand or her hand, it hardly matters,
there are so many more kisses.
(30-39)

Scobie justly calls this vision of physical integration Cohen's "ultimate statement of the sainthood achieved through love" (*Leonard Cohen* 38), and Donne's vision of sainthood in "The Canonization" is contingent on a similar coalescing of lovers' bodies. Donne makes use of an appropriately transcendent figure to represent the product of this interpenetration:

The Phoenix ridle hath more wit
By us, we two being one, are it.
So to one neutrall thing both sexes fit,
Wee dye and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.
(23-27)

This image of reincarnation is reminiscent of the mystical transformation of the resurrected lovers in "The Extasie," who "participate in and contribute to God's sustaining love for all" (Mann, "Sacred and Profane" 535). But the precise nature of this transformation is, Donne admits, "Mysterious." It may, in fact, defy "complete and simultaneous grasp by mental conception and verbal language" (McCanles 70). Donne seems convinced, however, that the ecstatic love that "[i]nteranimates two soules," and "mixt soules doth mixe again / And makes both one, each this and that" ("Extasie" 42, 35-36), is initiated by the physical union of the lovers' bodies:

Our hands were firmely cimented
With a fast balme, which thence did spring,
Our eye-beames twisted, and did thred
Our eyes, upon one double string.
(5-8)

A similar image of fusion appears in Donne's Elegie XII, though with none of the pretensions to transcendence found in "The Extasie":

First let our eyes be rivited quite through
Our turning brains, and both our lips grow to:
Let our armes clasp like Ivy, and our fear
Freese us together, that we may stick here.
(57-60)

In "The Dissolution," however, Donne presents a lover who believes that physical union allows him somehow to absorb his beloved's essence, thereby increasing his capacity to love her even after death:

> My body then doth hers involve,
> And those things whereof I consist, hereby
> In me abundant grow, and burdenous,
> And nourish not, but smother.
> [. . . . . .]
> This death, hath with my store
> My use encreas'd
> And so my soule more earnestly releas'd,
> Will outstrip hers; as bullets flowen before
> A latter bullet may o'rtake, the pouder
> Being more.
> (5-8, 20-24)

The speaker here does not simply claim that his soul is superior to his lady's; indeed, the pride with which he proclaims himself and his beloved to be "mutuall Elements to us, / And made of one another" (3-4) renders such an interpretation untenable. His statement should instead be read as a reflection of his belief that his soul's love for her, though facilitated by their physical union, surpasses his body's love for her and prevents him from moving beyond her, allowing him instead to be reunited with her eternally. The difference between "The Dissolution" and "The Extasie" is that while the former transposes souls' love to the spiritual realm, the latter roots it firmly in the physical world. Despite his contention that the union of souls in "The Extasie" is an "accidental accompaniment" rather than a "necessary condition" of the union of bodies, A.J. Smith admits that if total physical integration of the lovers does not occur, "the new single soul suffers a mutilating deprivation" (62). The "abler soul" created during this ecstasy must return to the lovers' slackened bodies and tie again "That subtile knot, which makes us man" if the lovers' transcendent union is to be complete ("Extasie" 43, 64). After all, as the lover in "Loves growth" attests,

> Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use
> To say, which have no Mistresse but their Muse,
> But as all else, being elemented too,
> Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.
> (11-14)

Both poets, then, employ images of absolute physical fusion in their visions of transcendent love. But as the example of "The Extasie" suggests, Donne seems much more convinced of the need to overcome a dualism of body and soul—the dualism of "Aire and Angels"—than does Cohen. The division of "The Extasie" into three clearly discernible parts may provide a formal parallel for Donne's own uncertainties, if not for the "considerable incoherence of [his] philosophy of love" (Warren 472). The first part (1-12) depicts the union of bodies; the second part (13-48) the union of souls; and the third part (49-76) the reunion of bodies with that "abler soule." This tripartite division emphasizes not only the integration of body and soul, however, but also Donne's troubled awareness of the possible distinction between the two. Critical responses to this apparent awareness have ranged from efforts to stress Donne's endorsement of "the abandonment of the body" in ecstatic love (Gardner, "Argument" 243) to Pierre Legouis's provocative suggestion that "The Extasie" depicts "the highflown hypocritical arguments which a scholastic Don Juan might use to seduce a weak-headed woman" (Potter 253). Gardner and Legouis lend authority to a rift between spirituality and materiality that Donne clearly strives to heal in his poetry. He attempts to resolve not only the division between the sacred and the profane, but also the self-division that restricts the joys of his composite lover. Donne does not deny in "The Extasie" and "The Canonization" that distinctions between body and soul exist so much as he argues that these distinctions can be overcome through faith in, and enactment of, an absolute and eternal lovers' union.

Cohen, on the other hand, insists that the spiritual and the material are indistinguishable in the act of love. For his sainted lovers, body and soul are essentially identical, and this identity is most powerfully expressed in the act of love. Though a famously unreliable source of insight into his own work, Cohen does elucidate this vision of sublime eroticism in a 1993 CBC Radio interview: "In the sweaty, passionate, filthy embrace there is […] no difference, […] no separation, between the spiritual and the profane […]" (Buissaillon). In the song "Closing Time," set in an apocalyptic singles bar whose last call rings out like the trumpet of Judgement Day, Cohen creates a lover who hears "a voice that sounds like God to [him] / declaring that your body's really you"—a sentiment also expressed by the despairing speaker of Donne's Elegie XI, who believes that "forme gives being" (76). Lest such declarations seem to privilege the physical over the spiritual, it should be noted that the speaker of "Closing Time," like his counterpart in "Credo," is situated at the midpoint dividing the sacred and the profane, and thus partakes equally of both. He experiences "something in between"

freedom and death—between "the Devil and [...] Christ"—that reveals the distinction between body and soul to be, as Scobie says, "illusory" (*Leonard Cohen* 33). The speaker of "Song—When with lust I am smitten" (*Spice-Box* 62) possesses the attitudes that typify Cohen's self-divided persona. Anxious to experience the physical joys of "flesh on flesh in dark" (20), this religious hermit is tortured by texts that tell

> [...] saintly stories
> Of gleaming thigh and breast
> [. . . . . .]
> For at each body rare
> The saintly man disdains.
> (5-6, 9-10)

Unable to reconcile his libidinal urges with his liturgical instructions, he becomes obsessed with the division between saint and lover. This failure to understand the equivalence of sexuality and spirituality prevents him, and the rest of Cohen's self-divided lovers, from ascending to that state of mystical erotic grace attained by the lovers in "Credo" and "You Have the Lovers."

The love imagined in these poems is not, despite Charles Mitchell's commentary on "The Extasie," "a taking and a using of the other for selfish interest" (96); in fact, it is quite the opposite. The very basis of the love described by Donne and Cohen is self*less*ness, for only by transcending the limits of their own identities can the lovers finally escape the self-division that binds them to temporal pain and the agonized hope for spiritual relief. For Donne, as for Cohen, "The ultimate goal [...] is to annihilate one's own identity and gain the anonymity of sainthood" (Davey 69). Only those lovers willing to abandon self-interest and dedicate themselves to an ideal and eternal love are able to attain this paradoxical anonymity and its attendant pleasures. When the lovers shed their clothing and identity to join the "hopelessly tangled" multitudes of "You Have the Lovers" (29), or contribute to the creation of "one neutrall thing" ("Canonization" 25), they demonstrate that they are worthy of a transformation not only of body, but of spirit, and are thus granted an absolute unity of experience that has its roots in earthly love but reaches to spiritual heights. The desire to transgress boundaries between sacred and profane love is thus as fundamentally inextricable from Donne's and Cohen's visions of love as the lovers in their poems are from one another.

As their mutual preoccupation with breaching physical and conceptual boundaries suggests, Donne and Cohen adopt transgressivity as a govern-

ing principle in their love poems. In Cohen's case this choice may be accounted for, at least in part, by his postmodernism. If, as Linda Hutcheon suggests, postmodern texts concern themselves with conducting "explorations of (and against) borders and boundaries" (78), then Cohen's work is, in at least this sense, fundamentally postmodern. From his earliest published work to the present, Cohen's aesthetic has been based on the belief that we can "compare mythologies," do away with restrictive paradigms that assert distinctions not only between cultures and religions, but also between such concepts as the sacred and the profane, the violent and the beautiful, and so forth. This belief leads Cohen, in turn, to a consideration of genre and convention, so that the personae of his ballads transgress the rules of courtly love by infusing them with the raw vigor of a violent eroticism expressed through a raunchy diction. His poetry's obscenity "has its own insights to convey—antidotes [...] for the deception of rational discourse" (Arn 162), and might be considered a simple postmodern gesture of the "ex-centric" sort championed by Hutcheon (4). But the comparison to Donne suggests that there is more going on in Cohen's poems than just this. Donne's poetry features the same playful obscenity that we find in Cohen's, presumably inspired by something other than postmodernism. In addition, Carey's description of the personae of Donne's *Elegies* offers a possible explanation for Donne's similar interest in the "ex-centric":

> He survives on the fringes of society, a master of back stairs and side alleys, hard-up, outcast, victorious. It was a fantasy life which had magnetic appeal for a young man who could see that English society had closed its ranks against those of his Faith.
>
> (19)

Reminded that Cohen spent his formative years practicing Judaism in a predominantly Catholic city, one might be tempted to attribute his fascination with strangerhood to an impulse similar to the one Carey describes here. Of course, neither man was willing to remain marginal to the society in which he lived. Whereas Cohen was able to overcome his own sense of cultural marginality through a feat of the imagination, exploring the ways in which the boundaries between mythologies such as Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism could be transgressed and parlaying his talents into a successful recording career, Donne was able to overcome his own marginality only through a remarkable personal transgression: his apostasy. Having convinced himself that there were ways other than Catholic worship to attain everlasting life, Donne conducts in his poetry an exploration of other, more earthly, methods of experiencing the divine.

Although the foregoing similarities might suggest an influence of one poet upon another, this essay has occupied itself instead with articulating a confluence, a coming together of two imaginations around a single alluring idea: a model of love that erases the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Granted, we know that Cohen did read Donne, at the very least, as both a high-school and university student (Dorman and Rawlins 31, 46), and his early poem "The Fly" seems a clear echo of Donne's "The Flea" in its speaker's envy of the boldness of an insect that moves across his beloved's thighs. It seems more useful, however, to think about how, having struck upon a common idea, they came to quite divergent conclusions. What ultimately distinguishes Donne and Cohen, and their respective models of transgression, is that each imagines this transgression occurring in a different direction. Whereas Donne's obsession with death and his insistence on bodily resurrection suggest his desire to move from the material plane to the spiritual one, Cohen's desire to wrestle an angel down in "Dead Song" is bred not of a desire to ascend Jacob's ladder, but rather to declare his "love-soaked bed" a sort of heaven on earth (2). As their respective vocations suggest, Donne was a man of the spirit who could not wrest himself from the grasp of the fleshly, material world; Cohen, a man of the flesh who cannot wrest himself from thoughts of the spiritual. Their complementary depictions of spiritual and material yearnings provide us a valuable means of understanding their similar models of transgressive love, and a fascinating basis for contemplating the force and resonance of an idea so powerful that it unites a Renaissance cleric and a twentieth-century Canadian troubadour.

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