Neurotic Affiliations: Klein, Layton, Cohen, and the Properties of Influence

by Michael Q. Abraham

> *I shouldn't be in Canada at all. Winter is all wrong for me. I belong beside the Mediterranean. My ancestors made a terrible mistake. But I have to keep coming back to Montreal to renew my neurotic affiliations.*
>
> —*Leonard Cohen,* The Spice-Box of Earth *(cover)*

Leonard Cohen is an enigmatic figure in Canadian letters. Through the course of nearly four decades of publishing, his muse has been a transient one, blurring the distinctions of genre, moving determinedly from poetry to prose to music, vaulting Cohen into international prominence in all three and allowing him to weave various and changing personae around himself. In attempting to analyze Cohen and his work, critics have examined a variety of possible influences on his evolving poetic vision. Stephen Scobie has written extensively on the influences of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, Sandra Djwa aligns Cohen with a somewhat twisted form of romanticism, and Michael Ondaatje affiliates him with everyone from James Joyce to Mickey Spillane. As can be seen from the epigraph of this essay, however, some of the strongest influences on Cohen lie much closer to home.

To characterize Leonard Cohen's poetic relationships with A.M. Klein and Irving Layton as mere "neurotic affiliations" may at first seem a spurious imputation. The term itself is enough to conjure up images of cowering weaklings and demented paranoics, characterizations decidedly unsuitable when speaking of Klein's eloquence or Layton's bombast. Nor are such representations adequate to describe Cohen's early poetry, in which he attempts to fuse the influences of Klein and Layton. Nevertheless, in attempting to ascertain precisely how Klein and Layton influenced Cohen—to assess the *properties* of each man's influence—the term "neurotic" is entirely appropriate. Indeed, it is in Cohen's agonized struggle to fuse the influences of two of his literary mentors that the impetus for much of his early poetry can be found. This exploration of Klein and Layton's influence on Cohen's literary genesis and evolution will extend from the publication of *Let Us Compare Mythologies* in 1956 to the publication of *Flowers for Hitler* in 1964. More specifically, the paper will examine *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961) as a distinctly transitional work in which Cohen acknowledges Klein's influence even as he is

preparing to renounce it. A requiem for his fallen teacher, the volume is also a manifesto for poetic transformation, a joyous dance with Layton's self-reliance. In attempting to reconcile the influences of his literary mentors, however, Cohen comes to realize the dangers implicit in such adherence. Fearing the loss of his own voice and expression, Cohen moves towards a more direct engagement with his own world and experience.

From the outset, the influencing agents are of two distinct natures. Klein's poetic development and output show a strong adherence to traditional poetic forms and themes. Intent on discovering the great secrets contained in the Bible, Klein views poetry as the artistic form most capable of attracting other mortals to a similar quest for knowledge. The power of words lies in their catalytic potential, their ability to provide a linking agent between ages and men. Attempting to provide understandable, contemporary versions of ancient messages, Klein's vision of the poet is more as a purveyor of inherited (and ultimately ineffable) wisdoms than a creator of them, more interpreter than prophet. It is through the accepted inheritance of tradition and genealogy that the source and purpose of poetry can be found. Influences, the messages which survive from generation to generation, are positive (Hermerén 42) and attractive forces, providing both a link to the past and a path for the future.

For Layton, however, influence is perhaps the most odious form of inspiration. Ironically, following "the soaring genius of Nietzsche" (*Waiting for the Messiah* 184), Layton is influenced to despise influence, holding that the mere survival of messages from generation to generation is no proof of their validity. On the contrary, mankind's inherent cruelty has seen to it that history's true lessons are forgotten. Influence finds its strongest manifestation in the "ludicrous sexual and linguistic taboos" that are designed to repress poetry's spontaneous and pure source—intuition (*Engagements* x-xiii). History's only positive lesson is its negative example. As such, mankind's only hope lies in a direct acknowledgement of and engagement with its own beastliness, not in reverence for ancient wisdoms. As Usher Caplan recounts Layton's view of Klein:

> Layton, who in his own career was seeking to cultivate a fearless Nietzschean persona, saw Klein as just the opposite; a man who was basically evading reality and who in his writings therefore "romanticizes the Jew, presents him as quaint and vanishing. The emotions he exploits are the minor ones—sentiment, disappointment, heartache. There is a backward-looking quality in his poetry."
>
> (209)

Thus, poetry is not the unifying force Klein imagined it to be, but rather "the most subversive force in the world...Good poetry shakes people up, bloodies their apathetic noses for them, disturbs their complacencies" (*Engagements* 95). For his part, Layton has made a career out of reacting against commonly accepted forms

and inspirations, even when such trends purport to be reactions themselves. Attempting to "fight the. . . general cultural shoddiness" (x) surrounding him, Layton is by turns spontaneous visionary and inflammatory cynic, nihilist-prophet and satirist-clown. In a strictly textual sense Cohen appears to move from a reliance on Klein's aestheticism, with its emphasis on poetic formalism and religious imagery, to the more decadent world of Layton. This progression from Klein to Layton to Cohen can be seen as dialectical: Klein's more positive thesis meets Layton's antithesis in Cohen's attempt at synthesis. Within that dialectical progression, however, is an increasingly "positive" influence with regard to Layton, in that Cohen's poetic focus and persona are in certain respects increasingly similar to Layton's, and a proportionate increase in "negative" influence with regard to Klein.

But the relationship of this Montreal trio extends far beyond the lines of their poems. Klein and Layton, though almost complete philosophical opposites, were close friends and admirers of each other's work. In Cohen's case, Klein was an important teacher and mentor. Even though Klein's career had effectively ended by the time Cohen's began, his example embodied the influences affecting the younger poet. As Cohen said in 1986:

> There was a line—there were different lines which I thought I inherited...the Jewish one, the Montreal Jewish one, the one that connected A.M. Klein to my grandfather and my own family, McGill University, and this consecrated expression of poetry. In A.M. Klein there were a lot of those lines that converged, so he was a very important figure to me, beyond the actual poem on the page.
>
> (qtd. in Benazon 44)

As for Layton, Cohen described their relationship as one of friendship rather than influence:

> I think I became friends with Irving Layton. . . and if he had exercised that master-student relationship. . . if Irving did in some secret part of his mind feel that he was giving me instruction, he did it in a most subtle and beautiful way. He did it as a friend, he never made me feel that I was sitting at his feet.
>
> (qtd. in Harris 95)

Within that friendship, however, Klein's presence was a strong one. As Cohen puts it: "Layton was [also] influenced by Klein's predicament. . . Layton and I have talked about Klein for hours and hours" (qtd. in Benazon 46).

With such close personal lives, Klein and Layton's biographical personalities were as likely to influence Cohen as their poems. As Jay Clayton describes such

relationships: "Influence depends on the lives of authors, and in our accounts of these lives, incident should illustrate character and character determine incident" (14). Klein's aestheticism—his persistent formalism and desire for beauty— found and manifested itself in a strong religious faith. When that faith was shattered by, among other factors, the revelations of the holocaust, Klein's previously noble search for beauty seemed irrelevant, mankind's apparently limitless cruelty having reduced it to an elaborate lie. By 1955, Klein's disillusion and despair had brought on a heavy silence. He ceased writing, indeed nearly ceased to speak, and descended into isolation and madness. Layton, on the other hand, responded to the same revelations with a very Nietzschean self-reliance. As Klein grew silent, Layton's shouts increased in volume. As Klein's faith weakened, Layton's egoism grew stronger. It wasn't beauty that had died in the ovens, Layton claimed, but God. Poetry now voiced the individual's will to power. For Cohen, each man's influence is contagious and incites imitation. In his desire to fashion his own reaction to the philosophical and epistemological vacuum that surrounds him, Cohen attempts to choose between the influences of his two mentors.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom asserts that a strong poet is born with the realization that:

> poetry [is]...both external and internal to himself...[which] begins a process that will end only when he has no more poetry in him, long after he has the power (or desire) to discover it outside himself again...the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of other selves. The poem is within him, yet he experiences the shame and splendour of being found by poems— great poems—outside him.
>
> (26)

Bloom's eloquent appraisal is both corroboration of and counterpoint to the central argument of this paper. From the earliest of his published works, it is clear that Cohen is painfully aware of the poetry which exists within him and without him. His desire to write is precipitated both by a desire to speak with a unique voice and a desire to imitate ancestral poets. In Cohen's early writings, an anxiety of influence is clearly present as he attempts to come to terms with his artistic and Jewish inheritance. Cohen's anxiety, however, stems from a source that is opposite to the one Bloom describes. Rather than fearing his own voice will be drowned by tendencies toward imitation, Cohen actively seeks the certainty and stability of influence.

Writing out of the desolation that follows the holocaust, Cohen struggles to discover meaning in an environment which has none. In *One Generation After* (1970), Elie Wiesel describes the unique brand of suffering that follows the holocaust. Asked to detail their experiences,

> The survivors were reticent, their answers vague. The subject: taboo. They

> remained silent...they feared being inadequate to the task, betraying a unique experience by burying it in worn-out phrases and images. They were afraid of saying what must not be said, of attempting to communicate with language what eludes language, of falling into the trap of easy half-truths...Sooner or later, every one of them was tempted to seal his lips and maintain absolute silence. So as to transmit a vision of the holocaust, in the manner of certain mystics, by withdrawing from words. Had all of them remained mute, their accumulated silences would have become unbearable: the impact would have deafened the world.
>
> (7-8)

Unlike his mentors, Cohen comes to manhood in the generation following the holocaust, a survivor in a world where survival is arbitrary rather than earned, where personality is less assumed than imposed. As his poetic career begins, Cohen does not fear the possible dominance of "other selves" or a potentially overwhelming influence. Rather, he fears the desolation of influence, its tragic obsolescence in a world that is ominously, terrifyingly new. After Auschwitz, Cohen fears an external silence will invade his internal world.

In August 1943, writing in the pages of the influential Montreal literary magazine *First Statement*, Layton refers to the early ’forties as an age in transition, engaged in a movement away from the influences of the poets of the early and middle ’thirties. In a tone that suggests both eulogy and prophecy, Layton characterizes the "urgency and moral fervour that marked an important advance upon the poetry of the previous decade" as "a fusion between psycho-analysis and politics...[between] introversion and extroversion; Freud and Marx" (*Engagements* 10). Layton's words—written as World War II drew to a close, before the full and terrifying images of the holocaust had burned themselves into the world's psyche— are particularly striking in that, while remembering a political and poetical movement that has ceased to be relevant, Layton outlines the essential elements of a movement that is just beginning.

In explaining the fundamental aspects of the poetry of the early and middle ’thirties, Layton draws the distinction and the correlation between introversion and extroversion, between silence and voice. Layton's reference to Freud is an interesting and helpful one in this discussion. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud describes the neurotic link between introversion and extroversion in much the same way as Layton characterizes the attempt at poetic fusion present in the poetry of the ’thirties. Neuroticism, writes Freud, manifests itself both in prohibitive anxiety and in compulsive desire; in self-imposed solitude and obsessive action; in silence and in voice. Moreover, Freud contends that the tension between these two contrary influences, the simultaneous impulse to impose and contravene taboos, "stands at the centre of poetical interest" (24). The catalyst that fuses these two apparently divergent elements together is a strong and shared neuroticism, an anxiety that is alternately prohibitive and impulsive, fearful and joyous. On the one hand, the

neurotic may severely restrict all contact with people as a means of avoiding a painful or unpleasant impulse, while on the other, such "obsessive acts serve the impulse more and more and come nearer and nearer to the original and forbidden act" (42). Similarly, the neurotic's severing of contact (silence) or impulsive pursuit of it (voice) simultaneously inspires a strict aversion and an arcane envy in those who observe him:

> An individual who has violated a taboo becomes himself a taboo because he has the dangerous property of tempting others to follow his example. He arouses envy; why should he be allowed to do what is prohibited to others? He is therefore really contagious, in so far as every example incites to imitation.
>
> (45)

The duality inherent in neuroticism is inextricably linked to the concept of influence. Both conscious and unconscious, intentional and unintentional, influence determines our actions and inactions. Ultimately, the decision to act or not to act determines the nature of one's personality. That which is permissible is totem; that which is not is taboo. Unfortunately, although contravention of the taboo is unacceptable, it is never impossible. To paraphrase Freud, that which nobody wishes to do requires no prohibition. The individual must always choose between uncertainties. Neuroticism occupies the realm of indecision, the limbo between action and inaction; it is the anxiety of choice.

For the poet, action is voice, inaction is silence. Just as Wiesel's survivors are forced to choose between inevitably inadequate action (voice) and symbolic inaction (silence), so Cohen faces the problematic choice between the desolation of silence and "attempting to communicate with language what eludes language" (*One Generation After* 8). In Cohen's immediate sphere of influence, Klein and Layton each represent one side of the neuroticism which Freud describes. Klein is increasingly convinced of his own poetic inadequacy and is gradually silenced by revelations of man's audacious cruelty. Layton, for his part, is outraged to the point of a delirious liberation. The commandments, the taboos, have been irrevocably shattered. Now, anything is possible. It is this discrepancy which Cohen vainly attempts to reconcile in his early books.

The tension between silence and voice is a strong theme in Klein's 1944 collection, *Poems*, which begins with the psalm sequence "The Psalter of Avram Haktani." Despite the initial subterfuge of the title-pseudonym—"Avram Haktani" is Hebrew for Abraham Klein (Caplan 90)—the psalter is, from the outset, a frank and intensely personal exploration of both Klein's anxiety and his faith. The first psalm, in which Abraham "hearkened to a voice, and there was none" depicts an ominous silence in the heavens while, on earth, chaos reigns. The sequence ends, however, with the comforting "Psalm XXXVI: A Psalm Touching Genealogy" in which Klein asserts the stabilizing solidity of his ancestry and faith:

Not sole was I born, but entire genesis:
For to the fathers that begat me, this
Body is residence. Corpuscular,
They dwell in my veins, they eavesdrop at my ear,
They circle, as with Torahs, round my skull.
In exit and in entrance all day pull
The latches of my heart, descend and rise—
And there look generations through my eyes.
(*Collected Poems* 234)

The main body of the psalter consists of prayers against madness, guilt, faithlessness, and sin, but the final psalm portrays a Jewish inheritance which strengthens and stabilizes. Klein's personality is predetermined by the fathers that begat him, his path is foreordained. Thus, the optimistic vision of endurance which appears in "Psalm XXXVI" is counterbalance both to the bleak vision of "Psalm I" and to the thirty-five in between. Evidence of God and his promises lies in the community that surrounds the poet both presently and historically. Proof of redemption lies in the genealogy of faith, the divine "oneness" of persistently shared belief. It is this belief which promises to overcome the grim landscape threatening to close in upon him.

Klein drew his artistic focus from his influential ancestry and his poetic style from the pages of the Bible, a book he enthusiastically described as one in which all secrets could be uncovered: "History, anecdote, tale, genealogy, poetry, play, epigram—all are to be found in these pages. Well did the members of the Great Synagogue say when they did enjoin: 'Go over it and over it, for everything is in it!'" (*Literary Essays and Reviews* 130) As Gretl Fischer notes in describing this aspect of Klein's work: "Proof of God's existence [is] everywhere. . . [and] Klein embraces ecstatically the idea of the oneness and divinity of all creation"(38). But in "The Gesture of the Bible" (1948), Klein describes the Hebrew affinity for words as a compulsive, rather than divine, impulse:

> the whole vocabulary of the Bible is part of an attempt to escape from the aesthetic suppressions occasioned by the Second Commandment: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth"...But the soul, it would appear, hungers toward such creativity; where such creativity is impeded, frustration ensues. But frustration always seeks some way out. For the ancient Hebrew the way out of the prohibition of the Second Commandment was—to make images in words.
> (*Literary Essays and Reviews* 132)

That making images into words should be a way out of the commandment, a

circumvention of the taboo, is a sentiment strikingly reminiscent of Freud. The "frustration" of which Klein speaks is precisely the neurotic limbo that exists between action and inaction. Prohibited from revering actual images, the ancient Hebrews redirected their veneration into description and explanation. Reverence for images was replaced by reverence for language; words permitted freedom from the law of artistic silence. Thus writing, the most tangible form of language, imperfect and inadequate as it may be, is a liberating (and legal) action. It is only through words that a problematic world may be understood and explained. Only poets can bring meaning to events.

It is a bleaker vision, however, that prevails in Klein's final collection, *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (1948). In "The Cripples," Klein gazes with admiration and longing at the Catholic invalids attempting to climb the steps of the Oratoire de Saint-Joseph, fairly moaning: "I who in my own faith once had faith like this, / but have not now, am crippled more than they" (*Collected Poems* 298-99). In "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," the collection's concluding and defining poem, the formerly revered figure of the poet is missing and presumed dead. In "our real society," he "simply does not count," yet "shines / like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea" (330-35). Still the only figure capable of explaining the world around him, of making images into words, the poet is simply ignored by his fellows. Replete with warnings, he is no longer considered reliable, and no one will listen to him.

Such is Cohen's enigmatic inheritance: an almost genetic attachment to religion is coupled with the grim knowledge that recent events have crippled its reliability. Following the revelations of the holocaust, God's existence is very much in doubt. From the opening of *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, Klein's influence is manifested in elegiac, resigned tones and ominous, though ornate, images of disintegration. But "*beyond* the actual poem on the page" (Benazon 44), it is Klein's personal history, the "incident" of his tragic descent into silence, that influences Cohen. The guiding path of the Jewish inheritance has been reduced to the confines of stereotype and the deliberate and determined disintegration of individual personality.

Yearning for originality but frustrated by the crippling lack of a defining vision, Cohen feels his emancipation can only come through writing, through making images into words. As his poetic career begins, Cohen is actively "seeking a new law that prescribes. . . what words to say and no longer to say" (Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time* 16). In his autobiographical novel *The Favourite Game*, Cohen echoes Klein's sentiment in "The Gesture of the Bible" when he remarks: "writing is an essential part of the Jewish tradition and even the degraded contemporary situation cannot suppress it" (102). Even amidst the meaningless desolation of the holocaust, the simple need to write, to describe and explain the world as he sees it, is the strongest impetus behind Cohen's early writing. Lurking within that desire, however, is the uneasy fear that poetry has ceased to matter, that "Auschwitz, by definition, is beyond [his] vocabulary" (*Legends of Our Time* 19). In the midst of this dilemma, Cohen is determined to develop an artistic personality, an original and authentic poetic voice. In the middle of the chaos, however, he has still not decided

what to write about. First and foremost, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* is a comparison of dead certainties, a volume in which Cohen debates whether or not he can improve on silence.

Writing in the inaugural issue of *Contact* in 1952, Louis Dudek bemoaned the apparent absence of young voices on the Canadian poetry scene. After suggesting possible reasons for this absence, Dudek concludes with a palpable incredulity: "The poet has more to say and understand today than he has ever had at any other time in history. Why are the young poets at a loss for words?" ("Où sont les jeunes" in *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada* 144). After four years *à la recherche des jeunes*, Dudek published *Let Us Compare Mythologies* as the first book in his "McGill Poetry Series," a showcase for young literary talent in and around Montreal. It was perhaps due to the dearth of young voices that Cohen's first volume was so well- received, establishing him as the so-called "golden-boy poet," a title he would do his best to relinquish in the years that followed. But Cohen's first volume is not the concrete "communication of something worth saying" that Dudek exhorted young poets to write. Rather, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* is an extended attempt to provide a spiritual and philosophical answer to Dudek's question: where *are* the young?

Conspicuous in the volume is "Halloween Poem," a casual description of the ritual torture of birds and frogs. The poem was published earlier in *CIV/n*, an influential Montreal literary magazine, bearing the longer title "An Halloween Poem to Delight My Younger Friends" and, perhaps more importantly, included Dudek's question as a parenthetic subtitle. Cohen's answer to the question "where are the young?" is a chaotic and unsettling one:

> I don't know where the children got the birds. Certainly, there are few around my house. Oh, there is the occasional sparrow or robin or wren, but these were big birds. There were several turns of parcel twine about each bird to secure its wings and feet. It was that particularly hard variety of twine that can't be pulled apart but requires a knife or scissors to be cut. I was so lost in the ritual that I'm not sure if it was seven or eight they burnt.
>
> (56)

One need not go far to draw a correlation between the enthusiastic cruelty of these children and the genocidal cruelty of some modern adults. Ritual, itself the manifestation of profound influence, takes the form of torture and cremation. The victims are the hitherto timeless images of creative, and thus poetic, freedom. Darker still, their murderers are Dudek's *les jeunes*, following the example set for them in the crematoria of Europe. Hitler's influence, it seems, has made *anything* possible.

The holocaust has proven that inherited values, the "seeds sown by earlier

generations," are no longer relevant. Cohen's generation is faced with the bitter realization that it is "possible to...begin one day to massacre men, women and children, without hesitation and without guilt...One's spiritual legacy provides no screen, ethical concepts offer no protection" (5). No absolutes remain. Nietzsche's cataclysmic statement has come true: God is dead. It is little wonder that Dudek's young people are at a loss for words: no adequate words remain. As Richard L. Rubenstein writes in *After Auschwitz*:

> we live in the time of the death of God...the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth has broken. We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources. After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God?
>
> (172)

Cohen himself has identified the holocaust as the "central psychic event in his life," saying he "never recovered" from its "illumination of human behaviour" (qtd. in Dorman 66). In his first volume, Cohen is painfully aware that there are no longer any spiritual laws to live by. While it is true that, as Desmond Pacey writes, Cohen engages in "twin quests for God and sexual fulfillment" ("The Phenomenon of Leonard Cohen" 74), he quickly discovers the gods are dead, the girls are unapproachable or unavailable, and chaos reigns. In such a milieu, Cohen betrays the dark fear that nothing he can say will make any difference, that his poetry no longer matters. And yet, as the epigraph from William Faulkner indicates, Cohen simply has to talk about something:

> "She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,"
> McCaslin said: "Forever wilt thou love, and she be
> fair."
> "He's talking about a girl," he said.
> "He had to talk about something," McCaslin said.
> (*Mythologies* 7)

In a world of dead gods and frustrated love, it is left to writing to "give interest, order, meaning and direction" (Pacey 74) to Cohen's world. As Sandra Djwa writes:

> Reading through Cohen's work we become aware of an unsatisfied search for an absolute. In his world there are no fixed values, spiritual or sensual, that stand beyond the transitory moment, and the moment itself, experience made myth, blends imperceptibly with other moments and other mythologies, so that in the shifting the values change, leaving only the value of experience made art.
>
> (94)

Despite Stephen Scobie's comment that Cohen's vision is so clear and confident

from the outset that *Mythologies* "shows [only] occasional signs of being a first book" (15), the volume's ultimate subject is precisely the poet's *lack* of confidence, the *absence* of a defining vision or influence that is sorely needed. As the title of the volume suggests, Cohen compares mythologies which were once absolutes, questions which were once answers. Deep within the neurotic vacuum that so complicates choice, he struggles to decide between the shattered influences that once defined him.

The same events that threaten to silence the younger generation, however, are perfect grist for Layton's philosophical mill. For Layton, there was no greater evidence of God's death than the holocaust, no better proof of God's former life than His tragic death. A devoted follower of Nietzsche, Layton would have corroborated Rubenstein's later assertion that "the time which Nietzsche's madman said was too far off has come upon us" (172). Like the wild-eyed madman in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*—who answers the question of "Where has God gone?" with "*We have killed him—you and I*. All of us are his murderers" (95)—Layton, himself "A quiet madman, never far from tears" (*Collected Poems* 121), insisted that man acknowledge his complicity in the world's horrors:

> Let us admit it openly: we were accomplices before the crime. We helped to arm Hitler, and Mussolini, and Hirohito, the unholy trinity...Directly or indirectly we connived at, encouraged and supported every one of Hitler's aggressions. With a wink and a nod and a final handclasp under the table, we assured Hitler that it was quite safe for him to rob and plunder his neighbours...Let us, I say, admit all this openly. For unless we do so, and unless we draw the proper conclusions from the facts, this frightful bloodletting will be a monstrous, unforgivable crime.
>
> (*Engagements* 18)

The passage bears the mark of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which God's presence or absence is not so important as man's savagery. With belief in God transformed into the retrospective stuff of myths, Zarathustra preaches the *übermensch*, or "Superman," who will take responsibility for his own actions. The Superman is he who overcomes his own beastliness, who quells the "all-too-human" instinct for cruelty and violence by admitting his affinity for it. As Layton would assert a year later in a review of Klein's *Poems*: "To know God truly, one must also have known Satan" (*Engagements* 152). Layton, like Nietzsche, exhorts humans to realize that they are capable of anything.

Nietzsche's influence on Layton is well-known. Two years before the publication of *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, his seminal poem "The Birth of Tragedy" borrowed its title and its theme of the correlation of life and death from Nietzsche's essay on the origin of art. "Orpheus," published the following year, deals subtly with Greek mythology and Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence. As Layton writes:

God was not Love nor Law,
God was the blood I saw,
The ever-flowing blood
Staining water and sod
(*Collected Poems* 152)

In examining Layton's "zarathustrian" influence on Cohen, it is significant that Cohen's inaugural book of poems also begins with an elegy for Orpheus. What is more, it is ironic that the birth of Cohen's poetic voice should be marked by an announcement of death. Cohen's inaugural poem is, so to speak, a birth of tragedy. Moreover, "Elegy" unites the Hebraic, Biblical romanticism of Klein with the Nietzschean nihilism of Layton—a bleak realization that life goes on though God is dead. As Cohen's first poem for Layton indicates, it is his mentor's "delightful / zarathustrian tales" ("To I.P.L.," in *Mythologies* 54) that fascinate him. While Norman Ravvin acknowledges Cohen's "fascination with a kind of Nietzschean self-realization" (23), he sees it as a distinctive characteristic of Cohen's 1966 novel, *Beautiful Losers*. Such an interest is clearly evident, however, from the first poem of Cohen's career.

Read in this Laytonic/Nietzschean light, Cohen's "Elegy" emerges as more than a simple lament or romantic vision. The poem begins with a god that is dead. Unlike Layton, who required the "ever-flowing blood / Staining water and sod" to realize both the past existence and the present absence of God, Cohen quickly asserts the pointlessness of looking into "brittle mountain streams," examining "angry rivers," or turning "the shore stones for his blood," for proof of God's passing: evidence is neither available or necessary (13). Scobie's reminder that Orpheus is "a seasonally dying god. . . who will rise again in the spring" (16) is well taken, but there are indications that a resurrected god will be fundamentally altered. Indeed, the god of the second half of the poem resembles Nietzsche's Superman more than Orpheus:

> In truth, man is a polluted river. One must be a sea, to receive a
> polluted river and not be defiled.
> Behold, I teach you the Superman: he is this sea; in him your great contempt can go under [*untergehen*].
> (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 42)

Like the Superman, Cohen's "rising" god is "in the warm salt ocean / He is descending through cliffs / Of slow green water." He is *untergehen*, or descending into the warmth of the sea. Furthermore, like the sea that receives the polluted stream of man, Cohen's god receives "the hovering coloured fish" who "Kiss his snow-bruised body / And build their secret nests / In his fluttering winding sheet."(13) Compare Cohen's image with the experience of Zarathustra:

> I sighed: then icy mist arose from me. My past broke open its graves, many a pain buried alive awoke: they had only been sleeping, concealed in

winding sheets.

(183)

As Zarathustra's "icy mist" awakens pain, so Cohen's Orpheus has a body "bruised" by snow. As Zarathustra's pains are concealed in winding sheets, so Cohen's "coloured fish" conceal themselves. Cohen's god is thus both Layton's Orpheus and Nietzsche's Superman united to create poetry. In these lines, the first that Cohen officially presents to the world, we see the embodiment of Layton's dominant theme, that "the poet's heart / Has nowhere counterpart / Which can celebrate / Love equally with Death / Yet by its pulsing bring / A music into everything" (*Collected Poems* 37).

As the volume continues, images of dead gods, be they actual saviours or deified myths, come thick and fast. In "For Wilf and his House," from which the volume takes its name, Cohen learns the "elaborate lie" of how his fathers killed Jesus and "nailed him / like a bat against a barn" (15). "Prayer for Messiah," rather than the plea for heavenly intervention one would expect from the Kleinian[1] title, is a guilt-ridden lament for a god: "his death on my breast is harder than stone" (18). "Rites" shows Cohen's father riddled with disease while spectating uncles promise an impossible recovery. "Saviours" is perhaps the bleakest listing of the dead, in which "all the saints and prophets / are nailed to stakes and desert trees" (65). In each poem, resurrection is promised, but seems a fool's game, this cyclical life holding only the promise of endless suffering and death, in which "the Kings and men of ages / with deathless words and singing harps / are exhumed to die again in the wilderness." Like Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence, "which postulates that everything that happens happens again and again forever" (Francis 281), the painful futility of repeated resurrection is evident in "Rededication," in which the coming of spring finds mankind "almost too tired to begin again / with miracles and leaves" (*Mythologies* 20). The reconstructed life of April, "like the building of cathedrals between wars," can only lead to October and repeated death. The future, like the past, is a resilient burden. A final and heroic death seems preferable, but is no longer possible:

> if I could ruin my feathers
> in flight before the sun;
> do you think I would remain in this room,
> reciting poems to you,
> and making outrageous dreams
> with the smallest movements of your mouth.
> ("These Heroics," 28)

In the present cycle of events, a pathetic messianic figure is "Blinded and hopelessly lame" (25), ignored by Peel Street passersby, while an elegant Satan thrives in the rich refuge of Westmount (51).

Consistent with the Laytonic/Nietzschean theme of death and eternal recurrence is "Prayer for Sunset," a poem that holds decidedly more than the "extraordinarily overstated images" Scobie attributes to Cohen's ostensibly deliberate "courting [of] the absurdities of excess" (24), and is more complex than Ondaatje allows when he decries its youthful lack of originality (7). As brutal as it is romantic, "Prayer for Sunset" manages to couple the simple elegance of sunset with the tragedy of violent death.

The link to Nietzsche lies in the philosopher's playful use of the word *untergehen* in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The word is used most often to represent the process of descending into one's self in order to rise over one's self: to "go under" in order to achieve the Superman. The word *untergehen* itself, however, has three meanings: to go under, to die, and to set (as of the sun). With what Cohen himself calls Layton's "zarathustrian" impulses in mind, it is interesting to note that "Prayer for Sunset" combines the three meanings, so important to Nietzsche, into one poem. The sun (a dominant mythological image in both Nietzsche and in Layton) "commit[s] its daily suicide" by setting, perishes by "going under" as "slowly, the sea consumes it" (41). Once again, the complex Nietzschean theme of eternal recurrence, with its possibilites for both boundless joy and prohibitive despair, the reconciliation of aspiration and disintegration (Djwa 99), is evoked in the simplest of images. The poem depicts a tragic death which holds both the promise of rebirth and, "tomorrow night," another death. Cohen's plaintive request for a "Joab" is a wistful reference to the commander of King David's army who, in vengeance for his brother's murder, slew David's nemesis and, ironically, was condemned by his master for it (2 Samuel 3:26-30). In Cohen's vision, the tragedy and necessity of this daily suicide is symbolized by Joab's heroic, but altogether fruitless, vengeance. Despite his futile prayer for a sun's avenger, there is no way to halt this cycle of life and death. With the death of God, it is as relentless as it is meaningless.

Layton's influence is also evident in a visceral urgency that pervades many of the poems and is no doubt, as Allan Donaldson derisively comments, to blame for a supposed "overuse of images of sex and violence" (11). The importance of these influences is particularly evident in "Poem" in which, in keeping with Faulkner's epigraph, the poet is talking to and about a girl:

> 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 tumors on our lips
> it is because I hear a man climb stairs
> and clear his throat outside our door.
>
> (55)

The anxiety of voice is here precipitated by the persuasive talents of another poet. The fearful silence that attends the rival's possible intrusion is coupled with a knowledge that silence is no match for a beautiful voice in the battle for love and happiness. Given the choice between the "tumors" of silence and words said beautifully, the woman is unlikely to choose the former. Throughout the collection, the world after Auschwitz—dominated by a silence exemplified by Klein—is viewed with nervous trepidation. "Poem" reveals reactive silence as a dangerous disease, but what is the alternative? To recall Rubenstein: with God dead, what is there for a young Jewish poet to talk about? The anxious silence which Cohen dreads is, as Freud describes it, a "neurotic anxiety...[which] corresponds to a libido which has been deflected from its object and has found no employment" (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 236).

Over half of the poems in *Let Us Compare Mythologies* depict encounters with women. In nearly every case, true union is frustrated, love has been deflected from its object and stands unemployed and melancholy. "The Song of the Hellenist" reveals a frustrated attempt at union between the poet and his Greek hosts. Steeped in reverence for their mythical gods, the poet feels "small and ugly" beside them, "blemishes on the pedestal" (16). Attempting to please, the poet self-consciously flatters, indulging stereotypes about Jews: "I made them laugh / when the child came in: / 'Come I need you for a Passover Cake.'" Yet, it is not feelings of inferiority, but rather, ingrained feelings of racial superiority which preclude union. Though beautiful and tempting, the Grecian women are taboo. Though desiring union with another culture, the poet painfully experiences the prohibition of his own prejudice, "thinking somehow they are unclean, / as scaleless fish." The realization is incredulous, yet it is irrefutable: "Dark women, soon I will not love you" (16).

The theme of deflected or frustrated love is continued in "Folk Song," in which the highly romantic commissioning of "a bottle / to keep your tears in" (29) is frustrated by a woman who cannot cry. In "Song," the poem that follows it, the woman cries, but unfortunately, her grief is precipitated by the poet's absence. The distance of death having kept him from the naked girl, the poet must be content to live only in her memory, mythically heroic. The turning point of "Summer Night" occurs when "the girl in my arms / broke suddenly away" (48), destroying the subtlety of romantic seduction and exposing the characters as "stupid" and "obvious." Even a house fly is closer to sexual fulfillment than is the young poet (60).

Of all the depictions of frustrated love in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, however, the most poignant and telling is "Lovers," a poem in which the sweet negotiations between love and poetry are first frustrated, then obliterated, by the sheer savagery of the holocaust:

> And at the hot ovens they
> Cunningly managed a brief

Kiss before the soldier came
To knock out her golden teeth.

And in the furnace itself
As the flames flamed higher,
He tried to kiss her burning breasts
As she burned in the fire.

Later he often wondered;
Was their barter completed?
While men around him plundered
And knew he had been cheated.
(33)

The bleak finality and almost unbearable sense of waste is particularly reminiscent of Klein's powerful "Psalm VI" in which the aspirations and talents of an entire race are, like Cohen's frustrated lovers, deprived of their rightful realization. Here, the themes of love and sex transcend the adolescent lust evident in many of the other poems, becoming the vital, and tragically unsuccessful, underpinnings of survival. Cheated out of the love due to him, the spared lover bitterly doubts the value of his "history- full of poems" (33). The true union of life and art now seems impossible.

Though rife with apocalyptic images of death, pain, and madness, it is Klein's influence that has the last word in *Mythologies*. In his 1944 poem "Psalm VI," it is clear that, despite the misery and suffering so pervasive in the contemporary world, God's vengeance is at hand:

The Lord looked down, and saw the cattle-cars:
Men ululating to a frozen land.
He saw a man tear at his flogged scars,
And saw a babe look for its blown-off hand.
Scholars, he saw, sniffing their bottled wars,
And doctors who had geniuses unmanned.
• • •
And the good Lord said nothing, but with a nod
Summoned the angels of Sodom down to earth.
(*Collected Poems* 213-14)

Moreover, the establishment of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948 was a source of great comfort for Klein. Indeed, Israel's independence, with its capital Jerusalem, is the focus of his 1951 novel *The Second Scroll*, and in his foreword to Moishe Dickstein's *From Palestine to Israel* (1951), Klein, with a cautious but nevertheless renewed optimism, attempts to reconcile the suffering of the Jewish race with its resilience:

"From Palestine to Israel"—one would say that that were no distance at

all, seeing that the second is geographically of the first; but what centuries, what eras of anguish and of hope, there lie between!...[following] the many who...came to a Jerusalem in which they found but ruins and the mourners of Zion...[this is] Jerusalem a- building, Zion consoled, and on the anniversary of National Independence its jubilant streets [are] joyous and celebrant!...Be praised Who has done these things!

(8)

Just as Klein's "The Psalter of Avram Haktani" cuts an anxious path through threatening territory, so *Let Us Compare Mythologies* emerges as a journey through possibility and probability in a milieu which is increasingly uncertain. And just as Klein, at least momentarily, gleans from Israel's independence a renewed faith in the beliefs of his fathers, Cohen also turns to a painful history for comfort. In "Exodus," Cohen juxtaposes the cruelty and punishment of ancient Egyptian pharaohs with the modern and more telling image of "numbers / burnt on our brothers wrists" and ends with the comforting promise of redemption:

And let this comfort you:
though no great fish came
to spit your drowning boys on dry land,
and no pillar of light illumined a road back
through the failing water,
still these uncommitted bodies
dried the swamp towards Jerusalem,
and your widows and sweethearts along the shore
wept a prayer which found our God.

(68)

Though a volume that depicts suffering, anxiety, and guilt, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* concludes with an indisputable admission of faith and optimism. Though God is dead, he shall rise again to punish the wicked and avenge the faithful. In "Beside the Shepherd," the volume's concluding poem, the coming of the messiah is, though long overdue, not met with tremendous surprise: "Well finally it has happened" (70). Although providing few answers to Cohen's spiritual dilemma, his first volume's comparison of mythologies concludes with a vision of optimism and renewed faith. Cohen's anxiety, like that of his mentor Klein, is debilitating but curable, frustrating but temporary. As the concluding poems in *Mythologies* reveal, the inexplicable suffering of the modern world is a test of faith, a purifying experience that will revive God from His death-like slumber. In Cohen's next volume, however, such religious stoicism is undermined by Layton's cynical irony, which posits that "the Messiah will only come to earth when every inch of ground under our feet is red with the blood we have ourselves spilled: a point of last judgment which will already have taken us beyond any Messiah's redemption" (Trehearne, "Introduction" xxvii).

Despite the success of *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, it was five years before *The Spice-Box of Earth* appeared. The reasons for the extended silence are not immediately clear, but *The Favourite Game* provides some strong clues. Reflecting on his first book of poems, Cohen's protagonist, Lawrence Breavman, describes the age in which he lives with a cynical bitterness:

> The world was being hoaxed by a disciplined melancholy. All the sketches made a virtue of longing. All that was necessary to be loved widely was to publish one's anxieties. The whole enterprise of art was a calculated display of suffering.
>
> (102)

From such a description, it seems clear that Cohen was unwilling to engage himself any further in the adolescent angst which characterized his first book. Such displays of suffering, no matter how well-intentioned, had become so popular that they had lost all meaning. In what Michael Ondaatje calls "a more professional and less varied book" (15), Cohen sought to blend the romantic imagery of *Let Us Compare Mythologies* with a more identifiable vision. As such, *The Spice-Box of Earth* contains some poems reminiscent of what has been, and others eerily prophetic of what is to come, in Cohen's poetic vision.

Despite its hostile undertones, undertones which caused Ondaatje to refer to it as a volume which "is far nastier and far more frightening" (21) than the later *Flowers for Hitler*, *The Spice-Box of Earth* shows a heightened confidence on the part of its author. The opening poem, "A Kite is a Victim" shows the poet enjoying more control than ever before. In contrast to the uncertainty so prevalent in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, the kite is a clear metaphor for the tension between limitation and freedom. From the first line of the poem, Cohen masterfully fuses images of restriction and liberation: the kite is "a victim you are sure of," a "trained falcon," "a fish you have already caught," and most tellingly, "the last poem you've written." The majestic falcon has had its freedom trained out of it. The fish still swims but only while the fisherman plays him. Although the poet's work is eventually set free, the poet himself is not: "you don't let it go / until someone finds you / something else to do" (*Spice-Box* 1). The creative tension between desired freedom and necessary stricture is even more apparent in the book's concluding poem, "Lines from My Grandfather's Journal":

> The language in which I was trained: spoken in despair
> of priestliness.
> This is not meant for any pulpit, not for men to chant
> or tell their children. Not beautiful enough.
> But perhaps this can suggest a passion. Perhaps this
> passion could be brought to clarify, make more radiant,
> the standing Law.
> Let judges secretly despair of justice: their verdicts

will be more acute. Let generals secretly despair of
triumph: killing will be defamed. Let priests secretly
despair of faith: their compassion will be true. *It is the
tension… .*

(90; italics mine)

A gentle manifesto, "Lines from My Grandfather's Journal" attempts to explain the necessity of a purifying conflict. Just as the judges, the generals, and the priests, find their most perfect manifestation in the flames of passion and uncertainty, so, it stands to reason, the poet must find his voice amidst the threat of silence. As Cohen characterizes the potential vacuum in which he lives: "Desolation means no angels to wrestle...Desolation means no comparisons..." (92-93). Though words may be inadequate, "not beautiful enough" for pulpits or chants, their only alternative is a potentially murderous silence. Like the kite that "pulls / gentle enough to call you master, / strong enough to cal1 you fool" (1), the poet's voice must be controlled even as it is set free. Completely unbridled, he risks being incomprehensible; controlled too tightly, he risks not being heard. In either case, silence, or "desolation," is the inevitable result. Once again, if desolation is to be avoided, the threat of silence must be dared: one must struggle with the angel to maintain any hope for redemption. The experience of artistic creativity becomes a compromise between an unattainable ideal and an unacceptable nullity, an essential comparison of, and struggle between, opposite visions. It is the tension between these elements, the link between the silent poet and the liberated and liberating poem, that urges Cohen in a particular direction, "knowing that truth lies neither in the one nor the other but in the ceaseless movement between the two" (Starobinski 13).

An attempt to break the silence of desolation, *The Spice-Box of Earth* is, like its predecessor, a book of comparisons. Present again is "the romantic view of the artist as prophet, priest, and magician" (Morley 73), but while *Let Us Compare Mythologies* can be seen as a canvassing of available influences, *The Spice-Box of Earth* is a more mature attempt to choose among them, showing a heightened determination to find his own way out of his neurotic limbo. In "I Have Not Lingered in European Monasteries," one of the volume's most anthologized poems, traditionally romantic images of poetic inspiration are rejected even as they are indulged. The poem concludes with an image of insipid happiness, seemingly content but devoid of exhilaration:

I have not been unhappy for ten thousand years.
During the day I laugh and during the night I sleep.
My favourite cooks prepare my meals,
my body cleans and repairs itself,
and all my work goes well.
(23)

Essentially, the poem is a catalogue of renunciation. The speaker describes in eloquent detail everything he has not accomplished. Similarly, each ideal image in

The Spice-Box of Earth is countered with a negative vision: Cohen is mourner and murderer, cuckold and lover, resident and traveller, priest and apostate. Dedicated to the memory of his paternal grandmother and his maternal grandfather, *The Spice-Box of Earth* contains numerous poems that bear the elegiac tones of Klein. Indeed, two of the volume's best poems are "To a Teacher" and "Song for Abraham Klein," both elegies for Klein's silenced voice. Even as it is a melancholy requiem, however, *The Spice-Box of Earth* is also an aggressive manifesto for poetic transformation, a decidedly Laytonic attempt to move in a particular poetic direction. Ironically, the nature of Layton's influence on Cohen is like that of Nietzsche on Layton: the master influences the pupil to reject influence. Attempting to be completely original, to find his own poetic path, Cohen looks to Layton for guidance.

Klein's influence is quickly evident in "After the Sabbath Prayers." The poem bemoans the passing of religious miracles, leaving the awestruck speaker "in darkness, / Hands pocketed against the flies and cold" (2). The persona in "After the Sabbath Prayers" encounters a theological quandary like the one that pervades *Mythologies*. The Baal Shem's butterfly has emerged from its chrysalis to do "its glory in the sun" but, after the prayers have ended, faces a quick and final death. Longing for the stability of faith, the speaker is painfully aware of its inevitable passing.

But while the Hebraic romanticism that pervades "After the Sabbath Prayers" shows the mourning melancholy of Klein, the Rabelaisian wit (Morley 73) that flavours "Inquiry into the Nature of Cruelty" is strongly reminiscent of Layton. The image of the dying butterfly, the evidence of God's glory, is imbued with a more sinister quality. Renouncing the romanticism that attended the butterfly's death, Cohen downgrades the image of the glorious butterfly to that of an inglorious moth, and the persona from butterfly's mourner to moth's murderer, drowning it in his own urine. The same impassive, yet powerful, acknowledgement of cruelty is evident in such early Layton poems as "Therapy," in which the persona, after murdering a badger with an axe, declares himself "strong enough for God and Man" (*Collected Poems* 43) Once again, the Nietzschean imperative of acknowledging one's own savage power is played out in deterministic action. This determined movement from inactive witness to active murderer is a striking one, characterizing the transition—from Klein's elegiac resignation to Layton's bawdy irreverence—occurring in Cohen's book.

A similar conflict is evident between "There Are Some Men" and "If It Were Spring." In the former, it is abundantly clear that Cohen, in Klein's tradition, views his role as poet as that of mourning witness. As Freud explains: "mourning loves to preoccupy itself with the deceased, to elaborate his memory, and preserve it for the longest possible time" (*Totem and Taboo* 77). Fearing the void of mortality, Cohen remedies the "mighty," yet ultimately disrespectful, silence of an unnamed friend by naming a mountain after him. Though Cohen resists romanticism by insisting his action is not "a mourning-song / but only a naming of this mountain / on which I

walk" (*Spice-Box* 9) the poem provides a subtle requiem in the place of an unjust silence.

But while "There Are Some Men" depicts a tender generosity on the part of the poet, that vision is sharply contrasted in "If It Were Spring," a dark depiction of delusional self-aggrandizement. In it, the poet does not remember death through his poetry, but causes death for his poetry. Rather than composing an elegy, he contemplates killing for one:

> If it were Spring
> and I killed a man,
> I would change him to leaves
> and hang him from a tree (6)

In many ways, the poem is reminiscent of Layton's "Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom" in which the poet, a buffoon-king, romanticizes the beating he has given his wife:

> And I who gave my Kate a blackened eye
> Did to its vivid changing colours
> Make up an incredible musical scale.
> (*Collected Poems* 36)

For all its exaltation, "Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom" seems to contain an implicit warning against "the rhetoric, the trick of lying / All poets pick up sooner or later." Freedom, the prerequisite to all joy and, according to Layton, the result of poetry, can also be the source of corruption and hypocrisy:

> There is nothing inherently good or bad in power. It is not power that corrupts, but the misuse and misdirection of it...Power and health are synonymous. Power is energy, the ability to act, to get things done. In our civilization...the healthiest elements...can translate power into freedom, a pre-condition it should be recognized of creativity. Their freedom, however, is the enslavement of the rest of us.
> ("Shaw, Pound and Poetry" in Collins 208-9)

Cohen's poem is "about the poet's power over his material. . . [in which] he creates beauty by bringing something to death" (Scobie 28) but is also a satirical investigation of the hypocrisy therein. There is something obscene about making suffering and death the inspiration for art and beauty. In the guise of creative freedom, the poet contorts savagery into beauty, murder into mercy:

> Everywhere I see
> the world waiting you,
> the pens raised, walls prepared,
> hands hung above the strings and keys.

Through the guise of art, the hostile murderer is transformed into a tender mourner, ghoulish scavengers become gentle artists. Poetry, being "freedom," voices the individual's unique will to power. As such, it can be used either to reveal the truth or evade it. Just as Layton, again advocating "the steady gaze of Nietzsche whose vision...never flinched from reality" (Francis 285), warns against poetry's power to romanticize or obscure that reality (Caplan 285), so Cohen warns not only the reader [*caveat lector*],[2] but also the writer, of the potential deception. Once again, it is the tension between silence and voice, between complete control and unbridled freedom, that emerges as the essence of art.

Cohen addresses the conflict between silence and voice more succinctly in the epigrammatic "Gift." In it, Cohen responds directly to Klein's silent, rather than poetic, influence as he writes:

> You tell me that silence
> is nearer to peace than poems
> but if for my gift
> I brought you silence
> (for I know silence)
> you would say
> *This is not silence*
> *this is another poem*
> and you would hand it back to me.
> (3)

The gentle wit of the poem reveals a much more mature poet, as Cohen states in nine lines what had troubled him so deeply in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. While Scobie is correct in his appraisal that "Cohen seems to acknowledge [the] inevitability [of voice] in an ironic way: whatever he says will be accepted as a poem; even silence may be" (29), the poem has more to do with the creation of poetry than the negation of silence. For the poet, life depends on the power of words, on the messages people give to one another. The words may inevitably be imperfect, but are the best (and only) weapon against loneliness and death. As in Klein's 1940 poem of the same name, it is the poet and his words that allow heritage to be remembered, that link people to their communities and their Lord:

> I will stitch it with letters of flame,
> With square characters:
> His name, and his father's name;
> And beneath it some terse
> Scriptural verse
>
> Yea, singing the sweet liturgy,
> He'll snare its gold cord,

Remembering me, even me,
In the breath of his word,
In the sight of the Lord.
(*Collected Poems* 160)

The magic of words is in their reciprocity: be they spoken or written, words are ultimately the domain of both speaker and listener, writer and reader. More than anything, it is voice, "the breath of the word," which links people to one another and to God. Silence, though quiet, cannot be shared and therefore brings not peace but a suffering isolation. In this sense, Klein's descent into the abyss of madness is a clear and painful example of the nullity that true silence can bring. Indeed, Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," with its image of the silenced poet, was originally titled "Portrait of the Poet as a Nobody" (Caplan 181). The silent poet "gives" nothing and therefore is no poet.

Just as the "gift" of silence proves to be an illusion, the apparent peace that exists in the silence of "Summer Haiku"— "Silence / and a deeper silence / when the crickets hesitate" (77)—is undercut by the ominous associations of "To a Teacher." There is a tender and delightful irony in "Summer Haiku," as the song of the crickets is at first mistaken for silence. It is only when they "hesitate" that the vacuum, or "deeper silence," can be apprehended. The deeper silence, however, holds the promise of nullity in "To a Teacher," as the poet's mentor is shown "Hurt once and for all into silence," the result of "A long pain ending without a song to prove it" (22). While Scobie fails to identify the influential teacher in Cohen's poem, refusing even to commit to whether the teacher is male or female (40), the poem is almost certainly a requiem for Klein. More significantly, it is clear that Klein's influence has inspired an almost unbearable awe in his pupil, causing Cohen to ask:

Who could stand beside you so close to Eden,
when you glinted in every eye the held-high razor,
shivering every ram and son.
(22)

Similarly, Cohen's poem betrays the anxiety that his teacher's song will suffer the same fate as that of the crickets in "Summer Haiku." Ignored by most, the teacher "rests" as the crickets "hesitate," his lesson lost in the "deeper" silence of madness. As such, the teacher's influence is simultaneously threatening and attractive, at once the promise of Eden and the looney-bin. Later in *The Spice-Box of Earth*, the more explicit "Song for Abraham Klein" holds the same theme as "To a Teacher," as Klein's silence is the result of the fact that "He sang and nothing changed / Though many heard the song" (74).

Despite its more enigmatic title, however, it is "To a Teacher" that is the more personal of Cohen's poems for Klein. The poem's final stanza reveals the tension between fear and determination that epitomizes the poetic struggle between silence and voice. Faced with Klein's terrifying and tragic example, Cohen nonetheless

affirms the necessity of voice, taking up the burden his mentor can no longer bear:

> Let me cry Help beside you, Teacher.
> I have entered under this dark roof
> as fearlessly as an honoured son
> enters his father's house. (22)

The scene itself is strikingly reminiscent of Klein's 1929 poem "Haunted House," in which the burdens of influence— history, tradition, genealogy—are potentially overwhelming:

> There is nothing here for thought.
> Silence nullifies the sane.
> And dust settles on the brain.
> Here is naught.
> (*Collected Poems* 23)

The "house" that Cohen enters is perhaps one Klein describes in the line "Life is a haunted house, haunted by fictions" (24). As in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, Cohen acknowledges the burden of influence, the anxiety of defining beliefs made fictions, but is determined to continue his search for truth armed only with his powerful, yet imperfect, words.

Cohen's search for truth, an odyssey which is attractive but anxiety-ridden, manifests itself in an examination of the conflict between action and inaction, and ultimately between silence and voice. In "The Priest Says Goodbye"—"one of the frequent allusions to the name 'Cohen' meaning 'priest'" (Scobie 42)—romantic, but apathetic, inaction has caused passion to become commonplace. In the absence of suffering and uncertainty, art and poetry cease to be vital, tumbling into mediocrity and irrelevance:

> And what of art? When passion dies
> friendship hovers round our flesh like flies,
> and we name beautiful the smells
> that corpses give and immortelles. (42)

As in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the only way to be authentic, to achieve the "originality. . .[that is] the only true sign of an author's genius" (Clayton 5), the poet/priest must "say goodbye" to all he has ever known. In order to achieve his own voice, he must try and separate himself from all influences, must dare the silence and travel on alone:

> Do not come with me. When I stand alone
> my voice sings out as though I did not own
> my throat. (42)

It is only when the artist "stands alone" outside the limitations of influence that his

voice can truly be his own. As Jean Starobinski writes in *The Living Eye*: "in spite of our desire to drown in the vital depths of the work, we are obliged to stand at a distance if we are to speak at all" (12). In order to speak with a unique voice, the artist must distance himself in order to maintain a tangible proximity from his subject. At the same time, if he is to speak at all, the artist can never entirely detach himself from the influence of his subject without becoming incomprehensible. Indeed, the priest's song is so "original" as to be unfamiliar. As though he does not own his own throat, he fails to recognize what is his own voice, unadulterated by influence. In order to be recognized, to be *understood*, the priest needs *familiarity*, the structure of a defining influence. In short, he needs others to be himself.

In his self- imposed exile, Cohen—the priest whose natural language is prayer[3]—engages the conflict between silence and voice in order to achieve an authentic and original purity, a conflict in which "neither the vertigo of distance nor that of proximity is to be rejected" (Starobinski 13). As he writes in "Lines from My Grandfather's Journal," originality is achieved through the indulgence, not the rejection, of influence: "Prayer makes speech a ceremony. To observe this ritual in the absence of arks, altars, a listening sky: this is a rich discipline" (*Spice-Box* 94). The suitable response to the neurotic world that exists between the contrary influences of silence and voice is thus a determined assertion of his own personality within a milieu which threatens to crush it. It requires a steadfast discipline, the determined adoption of a road that will lead to originality and genius: "At certain crossroads we will win / the harvest of our discipline" (42).

That the road is not an easy one is acknowledged in "Poem to Detain Me," the poem following the priest's epic farewell and, as its title suggests, a poem that should give one pause. While "The Priest Says Goodbye" regards the impending departure with little or no trepidation, "A Poem to Detain Me" examines the painful possibilities of such a long and challenging journey. Thick with suffering and remorse, the priest seems skeptical not of the success of his enterprise, but of its eventual value. Now that the journey is underway, it is doubtful whether it will ever end:

> I'm heading for another border,
> my scrapbooks stuffed with murder
> & a crazy rumour of glory
> whispering through the wires of my spine.
> (44)

The glory which was to be "the harvest of our discipline" has become "a crazy rumour." While originality and genius may be found on the road, contentment and satisfaction cannot be apprehended. Implicit in the poem is the painful realization that art, while capable of satisfying and sustaining its audience, cannot do the same for its creator:

> O you will be listening for music

while I turn on a spit of song;
you will increase your love
while I experiment with pain;
while others amputate their limbs
you will master a ballet-step
away from voluntary gangrene.
(44)

It is only in the tension between a diseased silence and a healthy voice that original inspiration can be achieved. Originality, the stuff of unique personality, necessarily isolates its creator. Before experience can be transformed into art, the artist must dare it alone, separated from the comforting influences that will dull its impact. As such, the artist must "travel," must continue to assert his own originality by moving away from the influences that threaten to categorize him, yet he must remain "close by but beyond possession, perfectly absent" (Starobinski 29).

The persona of the travelling stranger is increasingly evident in Cohen's later works, and "The Priest Says Goodbye" and "A Poem to Detain Me" emerge as symbiotic poems that capture the dilemma of the creative experience. The themes that they suggest, however, are summed up in the appropriately titled "Travel," in which the decision to leave everything one knows is inevitable and necessary:

Lost in the fields of your hair I was never lost
Enough to lose a way I had to take;
Breathless beside your body I could not exhaust
The will that forbid me contract, vow,
Or promise, and often while you slept
I looked in awe beyond your beauty. (57)

Struggling to explain his infidelity, he alludes to "a way I had to take," an unending journey that defies explanation. While ultimately purifying, the journey is uncertain and difficult:

I know why many men have stopped and wept
Half-way between the loves they leave and seek,
And wondered if travel leads them anywhere.

It is just such a neurotic limbo, the world "half-way between" repressive guilt and aggressive ambition that pervades Cohen's early work. Anxious that his path may not be the right one, he is nonetheless determined to travel it to the end. Badly shaken by the events that silenced Klein, the stunning cruelty that transformed faith into fiction, Cohen seems determined to follow Layton's lead, and attempt to "make clear for us...the utter wickedness of Nazism" (*Engagements* 104), to "estimate [his] distance from the Belsen heap" (*Spice-Box* 93), and dare the silence that threatens individual personality.

The most telling indication of the direction Cohen's journey is about to take comes in the poems that bring *The Spice-Box of Earth* to a close. Read in order, they reveal a distinct movement out of the world of "neurotic affiliations" to one of determined defiance. In "Last Dance at the Four Penny," Cohen dances a traditional Jewish "freilach" with Layton. Celebration is evident, but with a winsome finality. Boisterous in celebration, Layton and Cohen eagerly indulge tradition, resurrecting ancient rabbis and revelling in delicious quarrels about the sound of the Ineffable Name. Alas, the momentary indulgence is merely a prelude to surrender:

> As for the cynical,
> such as we were yesterday,
> let them step with us or rot
> in their logical shrouds.
> We've raised a bright white flag,
> and here's our battered fathers' cup of wine,
> and now is music
> until morning and the morning prayers
> lay us down again,
> we who dance so beautifully
> though we know that freilachs end. (72)

The end of the freilach marks Cohen's imminent poetic departure. The dance is a traditional one, but is also final. The dancers are no longer Jews destined to rot in the logical shrouds of a decaying tradition. Following "Last Dance at the Four Penny" is the resonant "Song for Abraham Klein" in which Klein's collapse corresponds with the decay of traditional Jewish symbols. The sabbath and the "Sabbath Bride" have "departed," the candles are "black and cold," God and his commandments have been "abandoned," and the sustaining "bread" of his religious psalms has turned to mould (74). In both poems, reverence for Jewish tradition and personality is paramount, but undercut by the regretful knowledge that they have been battered almost beyond recognition. Still inextricably connected to the Jewish tradition, Cohen dances a final freilach with someone of similar experience. As the freilach ends, Cohen is both advocate and antagonist, priest and apostate.

In "Out of the Land of Heaven," Cohen again indulges the metaphoric richness of Klein, celebrating his religion and identity as one of the chosen people:

> Out of the land of heaven
> Down comes the warm Sabbath sun
> Into the spice-box of earth.
> The queen will make every Jew her lover.
> (79)

Here, the inheritance of the Hebrew nation is vast and glorious. The powerfully romantic image of the sun exists only for the Sabbath, its sole purpose to link the Jew directly to his rightful place in the land of heaven and his deserving position as

the chosen mate of its Queen. Fittingly, the Rabbi provides the marriage ring and performs the ceremony:

> Down go his hands
> Into the spice-box of earth,
> And there he finds the fragrant sun
> For a wedding-ring,
> And draws her wedding-finger through.
> (79)

Rife with the message of hope and celebration, "Out of the Land of Heaven" exalts the Jew, through a vision which is self-consciously Jewish, as blessed. As aggressive as it is sensuous, the poem urges a spiritual union of religion and identity through an affirmation of the Jewish tradition (Scobie 41).

The traditional vision of promise and redemption is certainly a consummation devoutly to be wished, but like the disintegrating icons that dominate "Last Dance at the Four Penny" and "Song for Abraham Klein," the sustaining love of the Sabbath Queen is no longer a feasible aspiration. Klein's religious influence, so strong in "Out of the Land of Heaven," is quickly undercut by "Absurd Prayer," a poem that bears Layton's satirical edge:

> I disdain God's suffering.
> Men command sufficient pain.
> I'll keep to my tomb
> Though the Messiah come.
> (81)

Despite the title, the poem is obviously not a prayer, but an assertion that prayer itself has become absurd. Though comforting in their idealism, persistent invocations to the land of heaven have proved to be fruitless. Indeed, the earthly results of prayer have been the opposite of what they promised. Rather than being the chosen people, filling their mouths with good bread and happy songs, the Jews have become the target of mankind's cruelty, stereotyped as at once aggressively evil and neurotically passive. In "The Genius," a bleak listing of various Jewish stereotypes, Cohen portrays himself as a master-magician; a contortionist able to twist his poetic sensibilities into suitable stereotypes. With bitterness and evident self-loathing, Cohen affirms not only his ability, but his apparent willingness, to engage in such stereotypical role-playing. But it is in such role-playing that individual personality becomes mired, and it is only through the loss of personality that people can be victimized with impunity. The poem culminates with the inevitable result of such systematic destruction of personality:

> For you
> I will be a Dachau jew
> and lie down in lime

with twisted limbs
and bloated pain
no mind can understand.
(87)

Using a tone similar to the poetic bombast of "If It Were Spring," "The Genius" appears to be another expression of the poet's power over his material. The final image, however, reveals a much darker moral. Though he is "The Genius" capable of being anything he wishes to be, Cohen's adherence to an irrelevant tradition is now reductive. In the painful image that ends the poem, he ceases to be the master of his own work, his ability and genius victimized by preconceived notions of his Jewish identity. The passive acceptance of influence (in the form of stereotype) implicit in the constant repetition of "For you / I will..." leads inevitably to the final, desolate image of pain and death. The title now ironic, "The Genius" no more, the poet seems more tragic puppet than powerful prophet.

Despite an apparent longing for the strength and stability of the Jewish tradition, Cohen is faced with a desolation which is decidedly unheroic and unbiblical, a desolation no amount of prayer can redeem. Expressing but one portion of the Jewish inheritance, one fragrant corner of the spice-box, "Out of the Land of Heaven" leaves the vision incomplete. It is not surprising that the rabbi, upon delving into the spice-box, should select such a positive image. For the generation after the holocaust, however, the rabbi's image derives from a "tradition composed of the exuviae of visions" which must be resisted even as it is revered: "It is like the garbage river through a city. Beautiful by day and beautiful by night, but always unfit for bathing" (*Spice-Box* 94). The spice-box of earth, like the collection that bears its name, contains a darker side. Attempting to eschew the confines of tradition, to abandon the limits of influence, Cohen assumes a defiant anti- poetic stance, moving "from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dung pile of the front-line writer" (*Flowers for Hitler*, cover). Faced with the glorious, but dead, vision of "Out of the Land of Heaven" and the darkly threatening, but present, vision of "The Genius," Cohen chooses the dark, exploring Jewish victimization and alienation rather than tradition. As he writes in the final stages of "Lines from My Grandfather's Journal:"

> It is painful to recall a past intensity, to estimate your
> distance from the Belsen heap, to make your peace
> with numbers. Just to get up each morning is to make a
> kind of peace. . .
>
> • • •
>
> Let me refuse solutions, refuse to be comforted. . .
> (93)

In refusing solutions, Cohen attempts to renounce the influences of his mentors. Although he adopts a tone similar to Layton's, his affiliations lie more with Layton's vituperative rage than his personal style. Even as he borrows Layton's angry and

horrific vision, Cohen attempts to reject his mentor's bombastic persona. Unlike Layton, Cohen is not seeking personal joy and power, but rather a full engagement with a "bloated pain / no mind can understand." Ironically, Cohen's attempt to reject Layton's influence and develop his own voice is itself the result of Layton's influence. For the sake of originality, the salvaging of his own personality, Cohen, like Layton, attempts to reject influence and embrace intuition. Taking Klein's despairing silence as a dire warning, Cohen is determined to become, like Layton, "vigorously a poet of this world and its crude mechanisms of pleasure and pain" (Trehearne, "Introduction" xvii). Just as Layton follows Nietzsche by attempting not to follow him, so Cohen embraces his mentor's influence by attempting to reject it.

Cohen's message as *The Spice-Box of Earth* closes is clearly concerned with the disintegration of individual personality. A Freudian analysis reveals that personality is the result of external influences, of messages that enable the receiver to make decisions that ultimately characterize his or her behaviour. At the same time, influence holds the threat of repression, an overwhelming force that precludes personal action and voice. Thus, influence creates personality even as it threatens to destroy it. Cohen's early poems show a distinctly neurotic indecision whether to retreat into silence or lash out in voice. By the time he writes "The Genius," however, he asserts that stereotyping is an escalating attempt to undermine individual personality and contribute to its decline. Stereotyping, then, is an artificial influence; an attempt to categorize people according to criteria that are necessarily superficial, yet sufficiently aggressive to command submission. The complete marginalization of a people is, in effect, the imposition of an ethnic taboo. The Jews themselves become taboo persons (indeed cease to be persons) through the systematic degradation of their personalities. The negative images persistently attributed to them are an attempt to influence their personalities through an enforced submission to stereotyping. In Cohen's pursuit of this idea, the concentration camps become a powerful and concrete symbol of imposed influence.

Cohen begins *Flowers for Hitler* with an epigraph from Primo Levi's stunning first book *If This Is a Man* (unfortunately retitled *Survival in Auschwitz* for the English translation), which locates the tragedy of the holocaust more in the survivors than in the murdered, more in the saved than the drowned. The quotation that Cohen uses is Levi's explication of that tragedy:

> we have learnt that our personality is fragile, that it is much more in danger than our life; and the old wise ones, instead of warning us 'remember that you must die,' would have done better to remind us of this great danger that threatens us. *If from inside the Lager, a message could have seeped out to free men, it would have been this: take care not to suffer in your own homes what is inflicted on us here.* (Levi 55; italics mine)

It is precisely that "message from inside the Lager" that concerns Cohen as *The*

Spice-Box of Earth closes and *Flowers for Hitler* begins. The decline of personality which Levi warns against, and which manifested itself in Klein's submission to silence, is what Cohen, like Layton, so aggressively attempts to avoid.

The publication of *Flowers for Hitler* established Cohen's new direction. As he writes in the preface to the first edition:

> This book moves me from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dung pile of the front-line writer...I loved the tender notices *Spice-Box* got but they embarrassed me a little. *Hitler* won't get the same hospitality from the papers. My sounds are too new, therefore people will say: this is derivative, this is slight, his power has failed. Well, I say that there has never been a book like this, prose or poetry, written in Canada. All I ask is that you put it in the hands of my generation and it will be recognized.
>
> (*Flowers* cover)

Indeed, *Flowers for Hitler* contains little of the fragile eloquence that epitomized the "golden-boy poet." Containing terse and violent anti-poetry, a so-called "Ballet-Drama in One Act," and sporadic drawings by the poet, *Flowers for Hitler* holds a more direct fascination with pain, disease, and death. Suffering and finality are handled with a casualness so disarming as to be satirical. The established monsters of recent Jewish history are minimized: Hitler becomes "normal," Eichmann becomes "medium" (66) and Goebbels actually begins to resemble Cohen. While Cohen's declared intention is to provide a voice for his generation and create a new direction for art, however, it is ironic that, while proclaiming a distinctive movement outward, the focus of his poetry and prose turns persistently inward. A determined attempt to salvage his own personality and artistic voice, Cohen's aggressive defiance in *Flowers for Hitler* is like that of Elie Wiesel's Just Man who, having attempted to warn men of their wickedness, realizes:

> In the beginning, I thought I could change man. Today, I know I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent man from ultimately changing me.
>
> (*One Generation After* 72)

The transition over, the new road begun, Cohen abandons his early fixations with poetic alchemy and magic. No longer willing to be stereotyped as Jewish, as a poet, or as a Jewish-poet, Cohen claims to be attempting to move beyond influence to a more direct engagement, anti-stylistic, with his own world and experience.

For all his claims of originality, however, the tone of Cohen's preface and new volume seems like an imitation of Layton. One year before the publication of *Flowers for Hitler*, Layton described the changing role of the poet in contemporary society:

> What must concern the artist today, above all, is the organized nature of twentieth-century wickedness...There is a frightful stink in the souls of all men and women living today...with [Auschwitz] man touched the infiniteness of evil—and survived! The stink in his soul is not only that of burning flesh, of decomposing bones. It is also the stink of self-guilt. At last he knows the truth about himself and of what he's capable (*Engagements* 106-7).

In "What I'm Doing Here," the first poem in *Flowers for Hitler*, Cohen nonetheless appears to make good on his promise to "refuse all solutions...refuse to be comforted:"

> I do not know if the world has lied
> I have lied
> I do not know if the world has conspired against love
> I have conspired against love
> the atmosphere of torture is no comfort
> I have tortured
> I refuse the universal alibi
>
> • • •
>
> I refuse the universal alibi
>
> (13)

Using the same assertive tone of "If It Were Spring" and "The Genius" to starkly admit his complicity in mankind's apathetic cruelty, to acknowledge "the truth about himself and of what he's capable," Cohen then urges the rest of the world to admit to the stink of self-guilt: "I wait / for each one of you to confess". The message that the Germans attempted to obliterate in the camps, "the evil tidings of what man's presumption made of man in Auschwitz" (Levi 55), is the very message that Cohen here hopes to elicit. In an honest attempt to salvage his own personality, Cohen actively contravenes the limits of Judaism and of art. In "Style," the volume's stand-out poem, Cohen claims to renounce all his influences, promising:

> I will forget the grass of my mother's lawn
> I know I will
> I will forget the old telephone number
> Fitzroy seven eight two oh
> I will forget my style
> I will have no style (28)

Cohen's rejection of "style" is a conscious attempt to ease the burden of influence. Style is, after all, the *result* of influence. Influence, for its part, carries the threat of repression as "a silence develops for every style"(28). Aggressively imposed influence *convinces*; it silences thought by closing minds. In the midst of an apparently cynical fatalism, Cohen desperately hopes that "Perhaps a mind will open in this world / perhaps a heart will catch rain" (28). The appeal to an apathetic world

for sympathy and for action is outwardly modest but couched in urgency.

In attempting to renounce influence and be anti-stylistic, however, Cohen moves, consciously and inevitably—as the similarity of his new voice to that of Layton's foreword indicates—towards another style. An attempt to deny all influence in the name of originality, *Flowers for Hitler* is inevitably tied closely to the influences it is designed to reject, as "the pose of having no style is itself a style" (Scobie 45). While influence threatens original thought, it is a necessary component of understanding. Communication requires a shared structure, a "style" that holds some relation to the world to which it speaks. As such, Cohen's determined rejection of "style" is also a satiric acknowledgement of its necessity. To write in an original fashion, Cohen must forget his style; in order to be understood by others, however, he must adopt a style that is somehow familiar. He must be derivative in order to be original. Feigning a rejection of influence, he adopts a pose made popular by Layton. This is similar to Wynne Francis' appraisal of the (anti) influential relationship between Layton and Nietzsche:

> Nietzsche did not want disciples; he provided no dogma or system which "followers" might lean on. Zarathustra taught the over-coming of the self, the glorification of the moment; the affirmation of life through all eternity. A true Dionysian is on his own: he must assert his joy in his own individual existence with all that that entails of cosmic dialectics, history, heredity, environment and personal attributes. Thus, though much in Layton becomes clearer through an understanding of his Nietzschism, his talent and originality derive from a combination of sources unique to him.
>
> (285-6)

Similarly, in order to engage his own world and experience, Cohen "follows" Layton by pretending to reject him. In order to avoid the abyss of silence that swallowed Klein, Cohen must use his voice, must provide "an answer to the ovens. Any answer" (*Spice-Box* 89). In order to attempt a suitable answer to the holocaust, however, he must affiliate himself with Layton's aggressive rage, an intuitive identification which also threatens the development of his own voice and personality. Aware of the paradox of his new "anti-stylistic" style, Cohen, in *Flowers for Hitler*, commits himself to his new pose, and determinedly transfers his affiliations from a neurotic indecision to a decisive anger.

Notes

1. See Klein, "Messiah." *Collected Poems* 37. [back]
2. See Hutcheon 37: "Cohen has never…been totally devoid of the ‘con.’" [back]

3. See *The Spice-Box of Earth* 89: "It is strange that even now prayer is my natural language… ." [back]

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