"You Have Sweetened Your Word":
Sincerity and Prayer in Leonard Cohen's *Book of Mercy*

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Abstract

Book of Mercy (1984) occupies a central place in the career of Leonard Cohen, as comparison to a wide variety of Cohen "texts," from poetry, the novel and song to the personal interview and music video, reveals. Interviews and book reviews contemporary with *Book of Mercy* indicate that the latter contains a sincere message of faith and prophetic warning that Cohen publicly defends. Cohen's eclectic but reverent incorporation of language and ideas from Judaeo-Christian traditions of prayer and mysticism shows his regard for the sacred expression of his predecessors. As a result, *Book of Mercy* stands slightly apart from the rest of Cohen's *oeuvre*, yet it is not simply an anomaly. Instead, it forms an integral part of a prolonged narrative of spiritual desire that began in 1956 with Cohen's first book of poetry and has continued through to his latest album, *The Future* (1992) and a recent poem, "On the Path." *Book of Mercy* marked a renewed sense of artistic vocation and conviction in the work of Leonard Cohen that remains unshaken today.

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Book of Mercy (1984) occupe une place centrale dans la carrière de Leonard Cohen, comme le révèle la comparaison avec une grande variété de ses «textes»: poésie, roman et chanson ainsi qu'entretien particulier et vidéoclip. Des entrevues et des critiques de livres contemporains de *Book of Mercy* indiquent que ce livre contient un sincère message de foi et d'avertissement prophétique défendu publiquement par Cohen. Celui-ci incorpore de façon éclectique mais révérencieuse le langage et les idées des traditions judéo-chrétiennes de prière et de mysticisme. Il démontre ainsi son respect pour l'expression sacrée de ses prédécesseurs. *Book of Mercy* se situe donc un peu à l'écart de l'ensemble de l'oeuvre de Cohen sans toutefois être une simple anomalie. Il fait plutôt partie intégrante d'une longue narration sur le désir spirituel. Commencée en 1956 dans le premier livre de poésie de Cohen, cette narration s'est poursuivie jusqu'à son dernier album, *The Future* (1992), et son poème récent, «On the Path». *Book of Mercy* a marqué un sens renouvelé de vocation et de conviction artistiques dans l'oeuvre de Leonard Cohen qui demeure constant aujourd'hui.

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Introduction

Book of Mercy is a sincere, deeply religious work with a pivotal and idiosyncratic role in Leonard Cohen's career as a writer, since it calls into question simplistically "postmodern" readings of his writing and forces us to see his pre- and post-*Book of Mercy* works, despite their variety, in relation to a prolonged narrative of spiritual desire. Since the publication of his first book of poetry in 1956, Cohen has been engaged in what Louis Dudek calls "the search for the truth of his own being" (qtd. in Pearson 48). But Cohen has not limited his pursuit of truth to the medium of poetry; he has expressed his ideas and desires in novels, songs, videos and interviews. Yet Cohen's poetry and prose works receive relatively little critical attention. This neglect may indeed be, as Linda Hutcheon suggested in 1989, because "Cohen's success as a performer . . . has almost eclipsed his career as a poet and novelist" (*Fiction* 26). Cohen's self-promotion, however, and his enigmatic presence in numerous interviews, which draw at least as much public attention to Cohen the personality as to Cohen the artist, may simultaneously discourage academics from giving much serious thought to Cohen's writings. As a result, reviews, usually in newspapers and magazines, often provide the primary forum for criticism of Cohen's books, although there is an existing body of academic Cohen criticism in which all of the poetry and prose is examined, if only minimally in the case of some works.

The majority of critical response to Cohen's work, academic or otherwise, focuses on his second novel *Beautiful Losers* (1966), often on its "postmodern" aspects, while his other prose and poetry, particularly *Book of Mercy*, receives proportionately less attention. One of the most recent significant collections of Cohen criticism, *The Proceedings of the Leonard Cohen Conference* from *Canadian Poetry* 33 (1993), provides current support for this claim. The "On the

Novel" section of the conference proceedings contains three articles on *Beautiful Losers* but none on *The Favourite Game*; five articles are "On the Poetry"; *Book of Mercy*, however, is ignored except for brief mention in Stephen Scobie's keynote address to the conference.

Nevertheless some major themes and patterns useful to the reader of *Book of Mercy* emerge from individual critical works and the larger body of Cohen criticism. The romantic lyricism of Cohen's early poetry collections, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956) and *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961), and of his first novel, *The Favourite Game* (1963), as well as the obsessive focus on the self that is constant in Cohen's work from the beginning to the present, are recorded by Ondaatje, Scobie, Djwa and others. A focus on Romanticism in Cohen's earlier work shifts to a focus on postmodernism in his later work. Hutcheon, Scobie, Douglas Barbour and Clint Burnham emphasize the presence of the postmodern in Cohen's work from the mid-1960s. They trace the beginnings of postmodernism in Cohen (and in Canada) to *Beautiful Losers* and the earlier poetry of *Flowers For Hitler* (1964). These and other critics discuss postmodern elements in Cohen's works, including the juxtaposition of high and low culture--the "literary" and the "non-literary"--from the Bible to comic books; the writing process and the "text" itself as a subject of scrutiny; self-reflexivity; and narrative "intrusion" into the text or a shifting narrative voice. Eli Mandel discusses the postmodern element of the writer's struggle with artistic breakdown, a dominant motif in *The Energy of Slaves* (1972), while Ken Norris describes the fragmentation of narrative voice that occurs in *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978). Quite significantly, while Cohen's books from 1964 to 1978 are subject to a substantial amount of analysis as "postmodern" works, no critic of *Book of Mercy* (1984) has made even the slightest association between this volume and postmodernism. On the contrary, critics and reviewers,

including Mark Abley of *Maclean's*, observe the notable absence of "the self-conscious games of postmodernism" in *Book of Mercy*. This contrast between postmodern approaches to Cohen's work and the lack of such approaches to *Book of Mercy* shows the inapplicability of postmodern arguments to the latter work.

A specific element of Cohen's work that serves arguments for his postmodernism is the highly idiosyncratic "con." Many critics, Hutcheon and Mandel most notably, alert readers to the presence of the con in Cohen's work; they warn of his attempts to dupe readers in various ways, such as making ironic tongue-in-cheek statements that many readers erringly take seriously. Interviewers are frequently subject to the Cohen con and a number of them, including Pierre Berton and Stephen Williams, are highly wary of being conned. In his annotated bibliography of Cohen, Bruce Whiteman makes the presence or absence of the con a key emphasis in the summary descriptions of two interviews. Yet interviewers who spoke to Cohen at the time of *Book of Mercy*'s publication were very noticeably not subjected to the infamous con. While critics and reviewers of Cohen's pre- and post-1984 works often point out the presence of the con in them, those who examine *Book of Mercy* usually either make no mention of the con or point out its obvious absence from the volume. In many instances, the new catchwords for reviewers of *Book of Mercy* are "sincerity" (Graham 44) and "honesty" (Snider). Examples of the con in Cohen's pre- and post-*Book of Mercy* works and interviews will be relevant in Chapters One and Three, in order to emphasize its absence from *Book of Mercy* and contemporary interviews.

Further unifying patterns relevant to my discussion of *Book of Mercy* emerge in thematic criticism of individual works and of Cohen's *oeuvre* in general. Scobie has consistently remarked that Cohen is engaged in a search for identity. Cohen has taken on and then shed many masks or identities in a constant effort to

reinvent himself and prevent artistic stagnation. The many selves of Cohen, some of which are the mystic, stranger, lover and failed artist, are examined by a number of critics, including Ken Norris, and will be discussed further in Chapter Three, in an attempt to show how Cohen accepts and re-interprets the many selves that form his personality in *Book of Mercy*. Dennis Lee, Frank Davey and others emphasize the longing for unity and the desire to empty or annihilate the self in Cohen's work. Unity between humanity and nature, the spiritual and the sensual, and the individual's will and God's will are consistent Cohen themes that recur in *Book of Mercy*. History and politics, themes also present in the volume, are forces antagonistic to this desire for unity, and Cohen often condemns them. Such claims that specific motifs and patterns recur in Cohen's work suggest a general effort by critics to argue for the unity of Cohen's highly diverse *oeuvre*.

Yet critical reaction to *Book of Mercy*, Cohen's last published volume of all-original material--very slight, particularly when compared to extant criticism of *Beautiful Losers*--has been divided as to whether *Book of Mercy* furthers the unity of Cohen's *oeuvre* or stands against it. This is not surprising when one considers the confusion evident in reviewers' efforts just to define the book; *Book of Mercy* evades simple generic classification, as Cohen was well aware: "The publishers [McClelland and Stewart] don't know how to describe my new book" (qtd. in Halpern). *Book of Mercy* has been subject to mixed reviews from critics who have expressed irritation, boredom, pleasure and, not least of all, uncertainty concerning the worth and sincerity of an alternately introspective and evangelical Leonard Cohen prayer book. Some critics and reviewers, like Sheryl Halpern, argue that *Book of Mercy* is a work clearly distinct from other Cohen material for its psalm book format and straightforward tone, leading Linda Hutcheon to point out that "it is tempting to see *Book of Mercy* as a kind of 'sport' or aberration" (*Poetry* 51);

while others, like Loranne S. Dorman and Clive L. Rawlins, argue that it unifies and fulfills ideas presented in the rest of the *oeuvre* with its symbolic language and longing for unity. My own critical reaction to this debate, to be elaborated in Chapter Three, is an attempt to surmount the polarization of reaction to *Book of Mercy* as either an utterly unique anomaly that stands apart from Cohen's *oeuvre* or a "perfect fit" that is part of a natural progression toward spiritual fulfilment within the *oeuvre*. I wish to find a middle ground between these two perceptions of *Book of Mercy*, and I will argue that the volume brings a strong sense of coherence to the entire Cohen *oeuvre* while firmly establishing a new direction for the artist.

A significant part of this argument is my assertion that Cohen is sincere in *Book of Mercy*. While there is a purely conceptual level on which cynics may always argue that Cohen "conned us" again by pretending to write a sincere work and having it marketed as a sincere work, causing us naively to take it as such, arguments on this level cannot be proved either for or against Cohen's sincerity. Thus I will not make or counter such arguments. Instead, I will argue for the gravity, seriousness and consistency of tone both within *Book of Mercy*, and with the texts of Cohen and others; for, while Cohen's sincerity in writing *Book of Mercy* cannot be proved, his tone in the volume can be. I will attempt to establish the tone of sincerity in *Book of Mercy* throughout this thesis, but a brief summary of the history and discussion of sincerity will set the stage and illuminate these arguments to come.

The concept of sincerity in literature has a long history, its ongoing development spanning the corpus of Western literature. As Lionel Trilling points out in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, however, the word *sincerity* itself entered the English language only in the early sixteenth century, much later than it entered the

French language. The word "derived from the Latin word *sincerus* and first meant exactly what the Latin word means in its literal use--clean, or sound, or pure" (Trilling 12). *Sincerity* at first applied mainly to things but was soon applied metaphorically to persons. Sincere doctrine was doctrine that had not been tampered with, falsified or corrupted, while a sincere man's life was sound, pure, whole or "consistent in its virtuousness" (13). Then, reflecting a sixteenth-century preoccupation with truth and artifice, sincerity came to mean "the absence of dissimulation or feigning or pretence" (13). Plain speaking became an important issue in sixteenth-century England, as Shakespeare's *King Lear* reveals. Then, in the seventeenth century one who spoke the Word of God was perceived as a plain speaker (22).

At this time, the autobiography, particularly spiritual autobiography, in which religious experiences are recorded, emerged in England (23). John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), which I study in relation to *Book of Mercy* and religious tradition in Chapter Two, is a foremost example of seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography. Following this period, the genre of autobiography continued in an increasingly secular mode from the eighteenth century to the present. But, spiritual or secular in emphasis, Trilling points out that the purpose of the autobiography is "to enforce upon the reader the conclusion that the writer cannot in any respect be false to any man because he has been true to himself, as he was and is" (23). The glut of autobiographies on the market today, although their "sincerity" and truth are often questionable, attests to the continuing belief (or hope) that in an autobiography one is true to oneself.

A claim of factual truth is not always required for sincere expression, however; current use of the term sincerity "refers primarily to a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (Trilling 2). To be sincere, the writer must

truly feel what he or she writes; the writer must be true to him or herself, and factual inaccuracy does not prevent this truth. In *Literature and Sincerity*, Henri Peyre is quick to point out that factual truth is not a precondition for literary sincerity. He observes a number of factual exaggerations and inaccuracies in Rousseau's *Confessions* (1781) while effectively defending the sincerity of the work.

Hence, it is important to clarify different concepts of "truth" and properly place them in relation to sincerity. For Peyre, sincerity relies on an attempt to reveal greater, universal truths about humanity rather than smaller, factual truths. To him, a work filled with autobiographical fact is not necessarily sincere, while one in which autobiographical factual accuracy is not a concern may yet be sincere. Thus, when Cohen writes of the unity of a praying family in *Book of Mercy* (No. 25), it does not matter that this family is the fictional family of the psalmist rather than Cohen's own: the witness borne to the universal truth that prayer is a unifying force is sincere. As Trilling realizes, however, a sincere state of personal existence, in which one is false to no one by being true to oneself, "is not to be attained without the most arduous effort" (6). Cohen's effort to break out of his artistic silence in the mid-1980s with the yearning expression of *Book of Mercy* shows just how arduous the effort to speak and remain true to oneself can be.

In *Literature and Sincerity*, Peyre makes a comprehensive effort to study sincerity's place in literature, from the "Ancients" Ovid and Cicero, through figures of the Renaissance and the Romantic period, to the writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Baudelaire and Virginia Woolf. Peyre notes sincerity's function in various literary genres, namely introspective poetry, autobiographies, private diaries, memoirs and personal novels. Many of Cohen's

works, particularly *Book of Mercy*, as noted above, defy easy generic classification, and the volume fits none of Peyre's above named genre categories clearly. Yet while the genre of *Book of Mercy* is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, it may be noted here that the volume does fit, if loosely, into the category of "spiritual autobiography."

Even if we can assign *Book of Mercy* or any other work to the latter genre, however, establishing a writer's sincerity in such works remains a difficult task. Northrop Frye makes us aware of this point when he claims that while the writer can create the impression of sincerity or convey feelings and beliefs with a voice of sincerity in his or her work, such an impression does not guarantee a personal sincerity on the writer's part. One can write with sincerity without actually feeling it. Because of this truism Frye makes it clear that one must carefully distinguish literary sincerity from personal sincerity. Even the profession of personal sincerity cannot guarantee the writer's personal sincerity because, as Frye indicates, "the *profession* of personal sincerity is itself a literary convention" ("Nature" 45). Thus, while the doctrines of the impersonality of the artist and the poem's voice as that of persona rather than poet have alternately been credited and discredited in the twentieth century (Trilling 8), there is a happy medium to be found in the following viewpoint, particularly as regards *Book of Mercy*: that the persona should not be identified directly with the poet, but the identification of resemblances between ideas expressed directly by the poet through other means or texts (interviews and public statements) and indirectly through a poetic persona is acceptable, and may help to support a claim for a given work's "sincerity."

I will contend that, while the distinction between literary and personal sincerity is especially difficult to make with regard to Leonard Cohen and his work, personal sincerity on Cohen's part does permeate *Book of Mercy*. Cohen

speaks with evident sincerity through the persona of the psalmist, but, as noted above, such literary sincerity does not in itself guarantee personal sincerity on Cohen's part. A crucial part of my method, then, is that I go on to examine Cohen's personal comments, his adoption of ideas from religious tradition, and his other works in relation to *Book of Mercy*, in order to provide a defensible argument for Cohen's personal sincerity in the work. The relation of *Book of Mercy* to these other "texts" allows one to determine how closely the literary sincerity of the volume reflects personal sincerity on Cohen's part regarding the volume's issues and themes.

I take a three-pronged approach to consider *Book of Mercy*'s central place within Cohen's career as an artist. Cohen understands that "the writer's public image, whether deliberately created or not, *is* a text, and must be read as such," and he gave us a fragmented text to read alongside *Book of Mercy*, a text composed of interviews and other published statements (Scobie, "End(s)" 61). In Chapter One close study of *Book of Mercy* and of Cohen's comments to the media at the time of its publication shows a common sincerity and purpose in these "texts." Cohen's personal comments about religion and community and the prayers of *Book of Mercy* itself share an evangelical bent; in them Cohen urges individuals, peoples and nations to abandon selfish pursuits and renew a search for holiness through unity with others and with God.

A second chapter allows for an in-depth consideration of the relationship between *Book of Mercy* and the traditions of Judaeo-Christian prayer and mysticism. The intertexts of Jewish prayer, the Book of Psalms and John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* in *Book of Mercy*, as well as the incorporation of broad Judaeo-Christian mystical concepts into the text, reveal not only Cohen's eclectic approach to religious tradition but a profound reverence for

its many forms of expression. Cohen's thoughtful iteration of old and ancient sacred ideas and beliefs implies a desire to find a place for himself and his work in a centuries-old religious search for spiritual meaning.

A third and final chapter discusses *Book of Mercy*'s central place within Cohen's *oeuvre*. I examine Cohen's reshaping of ideas from earlier works in *Book of Mercy*, in order to show the new sense of authority and truthfulness that is present in this volume and the works that follow it. The strong, purposeful sounding of belief, pain and hope throughout *Book of Mercy* foreshadows the confidence that colours all subsequent works. While Cohen's post-*Book of Mercy* works can be ironic, solemn or humorous, and some even show a bit of the con, they never lose the sense of artistic conviction or prophetic mission that mark *Book of Mercy*.

These three approaches to *Book of Mercy*, while distinct from each other in their particular focus, are threaded together by many common ideas. In each chapter I closely examine *Book of Mercy* and its relationship to a particular body of "texts" and ideas: in Chapter One, the general "text" of Cohen's public image, which is composed primarily of the smaller texts of interviews, comments to reviewers and journalists; in Chapter Two, texts of the biblical Psalmist and John Donne, as well as that of the *Amidah*, and the principles of Judaeo-Christian mysticism; in Chapter Three, the texts of Cohen's *oeuvre*, pre-*Book of Mercy*, contemporary with and post-*Book of Mercy*, including prose, poetry, song, music video and interviews.

The relationship of these texts to *Book of Mercy* and their influence upon the volume--or in the case of the post-*Book of Mercy oeuvre*, the volume's influence on these works--show that the approaches of each chapter are united by an underlying focus on sincerity. Sincerity motivates Cohen in *Book of Mercy* and

in his interviews or comments about the volume. It also motivates Cohen's reformulation of the prayers of the biblical Psalmist and Donne in particular, and the Jewish and Christian people in general. The growth of sincere expression in the works of Cohen, outlined in the third chapter, emphasizes *Book of Mercy*'s pivotal role in the shaping of this pattern. Along with sincere expression comes a new self-assurance in Cohen that is marked by honest self-examination and a sense of prophetic mission. Cohen voices his strongly held beliefs in *Book of Mercy* and to interviewers and journalists. His fervent yearning for God in *Book of Mercy* and throughout his *oeuvre* indicates that Cohen has been engaged and continues to engage himself in a profound lifelong struggle between belief and doubt, despair and hope, and a fascinating search for a meaningful role for himself in the world, as a person and as an artist.

Chapter One:

Sincerity and Purpose: *Book of Mercy* and Leonard Cohen

Book of Mercy (1984) marks a radical shift for Cohen, from the ironic distance that is characteristic of his earlier work to the heartfelt sincerity in this volume. In *Book of Mercy* the line between literary and personal sincerity is blurred; the voice of the psalmist is closely aligned with Cohen's own voice. Contemporary critics, journalists and interviewers note the marked shift of voice in *Book of Mercy*. Those who speak to Cohen witness a change in his personal voice as he speaks with earnest concern about *Book of Mercy* and its public reception. Absent from *Book of Mercy* interviews is the enigmatic Cohen who attempts to confuse and frustrate the interviewer; Cohen is defensive and explanatory in his comments on the volume. Also reflected in both the text of *Book of Mercy* and Cohen's comments on it to interviewers is an evangelical purpose that is part of Cohen's newfound sincerity. Through these media Cohen calls for a return to spiritual values and prayer, and he condemns imperialism and oppression. Cohen calls for religious, social and political community within and among the different groups that make up the many religious, social and political communities of the world. Cohen also expresses concern for the individual's spiritual welfare when he affirms that God has mercy upon the sinner, and that one will achieve union with God if one seeks it with patience and a readiness to face obstacles, hardship and doubt.

In *Book of Mercy* variations between Cohen the author and the persona of the singer / psalmist are minimal. Cohen identifies strongly with what the persona says and agrees with the views expressed in *Book of Mercy*. Through all shifts of narrative perspective or address--from "I" to "we" to "he," for example--the narrator's tone is consistently sincere and free from irony. The focus on the self--

the "I"--in so many of the psalms in *Book of Mercy* necessitates Cohen's occasional adoption of a fictional counterpart through which he represents himself with the pronoun "he" instead of "I." Cohen may be the "he" who falls in Psalm 8. So too may he be the "he" who hides in his prayer (No. 11) and the "him" who calls to God (No. 40). In these psalms the author is suddenly and obviously distanced from the subject--the "he"--yet elsewhere in *Book of Mercy* Cohen blurs the distinction between "I" and "he" and "you" at times. Cohen also blurs the distinction between author and persona through frequent use of the pronoun "I" with biographical references that may or may not apply to Cohen. Significantly, personation and the use of third-person "characters" do not oppose sincerity in *Book of Mercy*; indeed, they fortify the sincerity of Cohen's text. Sentiments or views that may be difficult to express directly, such as one's own weakness, fear and spiritual yearnings, are expressed indirectly of a persona or a third-person character instead. Cohen needs the obvious distanciation of either the persona or the third-person character to express feelings close to his heart. While personal prayer is necessarily subjective, Cohen may wish to convey that the self-examination in *his* prayers is as objective and authentic as possible. This is crucial to Cohen's project of sincerity in *Book of Mercy* because, as Henri Peyre indicates, authenticity "is the twin brother of sincerity" (337). Yet even more important than a desire for objectivity, Cohen's use of a persona and a third-person fictional counterpart may be a necessary disguise without which he could not speak at all. Lionel Trilling supports this paradoxical conclusion regarding the relationship between persona and truth with quotations from Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche: "'Man is least himself,' Wilde said, 'when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth'" (119); and from Nietzsche Trilling adds, "Every profound spirit needs a mask" (119). Through the mask of the

persona and of third-person "characters" Cohen is able to express personal truths in *Book of Mercy*.

Cohen employs personae frequently throughout his *oeuvre*; but while they often fortify the con or gamesmanship of Cohen in his other works, they fortify Cohen's sincerity in *Book of Mercy*. In her 1974 article "*Beautiful Losers*: All the Polarities" Linda Hutcheon notes the presence of a "deliberate 'con'" in the 1966 novel, "for Cohen admits he is never totally devoid of that" (43). The con is also evident in *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978), in which numerous conflicting personae undermine most possibilities of sincerity in the text. The writer of poetry and prose passages in this volume is subject to frequent and often harsh facing-page criticisms of his work from the persona of the commentator. The commentator is one of the divisions of the poet / author who, for example, responds to the writer's poem "O Wife Unmasked": "Claustrophobia! Bullshit! Air! Air! Give us air!" (129). The divided selves of *Lady's Man* place each other in an ironic and insincere light. In Psalm 8 of *Book of Mercy*, on the other hand, Cohen engages the third-person fictional counterpart to affirm the fall as a way toward God, and to praise God for protecting the falling:

> In the eyes of men he falls, and in his own eyes too. He falls from his high place, he trips on his achievement. He falls to you, he falls to know you. . . . But he falls radiantly toward the light to which he falls. . . . he falls into the sky, he falls into the light, none can hurt him as he falls. Blessed are you, shield of the falling. (No. 8)

Through the "he" of Psalm 11 Cohen reveals the value of private study and prayer, and the healing power of solitude:

> [H]e hid in the pages of Abraham. Like one newly circumcized, he hid himself away, he waited in the trust of healing. . . . he entered more deeply

> into his hiding. He asked for his heart to be focused toward the source of mercy, and he lifted up a corner, and he moved a millimetre forward under the shadow of the tabernacle of peace. (No. 11)

Solitude allows one the opportunity to focus clearly upon God and grow stronger in the knowledge of God's presence. In this case, Cohen's use of the third-person "character" allows him the necessary distance with which to address the personal issues of the fall and solitude; it does not undermine the personative "I" that is dominant elsewhere in the text.

Through the persona of the psalmist, Cohen gives witness to his own spiritual journey, avoiding facile didacticism through the exposition of his own deepest experiences. An important stage in this journey is reached when, alone, the psalmist truly yearns for God and makes an effort to abandon the cons of his life. In his journey the psalmist acknowledges his weakness, seeks God's forgiveness, and yearns for union with God: "Let me be with you again, absolute companion, let me study your ways which are just beyond the hope of evil. Seize my heart out of its fantasy, direct my heart from the fiction of secrecy, you who know the secrets of every heart, whose mercy is to be the secret of longing" (No. 28). He also asks that he may not again fall prey to the "strategies" (Nos. 1, 6) or "moves" (No. 35) and posturing or "self-descriptions" (No. 17) in which he has indulged for so many "wasted" "years" (No. 1). These games are the "membrane[s]" that distance him from God (No. 34). The psalmist repeatedly acknowledges that although "[i]t is all around me, the darkness," God is his "only shield" (No. 37). God protects him in the midst of the world's evil: "Everywhere the blades turn, in every thought the butchery, and it is raw where I wander; but you hide me in the shelter of your name, and you open the hardness to tears" (No. 41). In these passages, the psalmist prays for release from the con that is Cohen's

trademark; the words of the psalmist, therefore, provide evidence of Cohen's personal sincerity.

Quite distinct from the adoption of a persona or fictional counterpart, but equally important to Cohen, is the division of the self. In *Book of Mercy* the psalmist acknowledges the divided selves of the past in his life, as well as those self-divisions that persist in the present; he notes their importance in helping one move toward union with God on a spiritual journey. The psalmist yearns for an end to these self-divisions in a fullness and unity of self that occurs when he surrenders his will to God, who, in turn, shows mercy upon him: "O dead name that through your mercy speaks to the living name, mercy harkening to the will that is bent toward it, the will whose strength is its pledge to you--O name of love, draw down the blessing of completion on the man whom you have cut in half to know you" (No. 37). Now, for the most part, as the unnamed reviewer for *The Toronto Star* indicates: "[The poet's] self is no longer divided, he is filled with rapture" ("Old Hands"). It is evident from Psalm 37, however, that self-division is an important part of one's life; it is integral to Cohen's earnest quest for a final integration and emptying of the self in God.

Book reviewers, interviewers and critics note the sincerity of *Book of Mercy*, and many point out the absence of Cohen's con in the book. Two of the three quotations chosen to support *Book of Mercy* as back cover copy for the Canadian paperback edition emphasize the spiritual struggle in the book. Mark Abley of *Maclean's* finds "resplendent evidence of an arduous spiritual journey" and Norman Snider of *The Globe and Mail* witnesses "an eloquent victory of the human spirit in combat with itself." The third supporting quotation from Joseph Kertes in *Books in Canada* praises Cohen's spiritual wrestling as "[o]ne of the most honest and courageous attempts in Canadian writing to grapple with ultimate

truth" (22). The dust jacket of the hard cover edition and the back cover of the paperback edition highlight the "passionate human cry of a man to his maker," and thus claim for Cohen a sincere attempt to communicate with God. Certainly, one may argue that such quotations are merely a marketing ploy for an unusual book that is difficult to promote, yet it is noteworthy in itself that all of the above sources are concerned with the volume's sincerity.

Nonetheless, it is not only the sources specifically chosen for publication and marketing of *Book of Mercy* that argue for its sincere approach. Ron Graham, who delivers an unflattering review of the book in *Saturday Night*, states: "The sincerity of these 'contemporary psalms' is evident" (44). L. S. Dorman and C. L. Rawlins argue for *Book of Mercy*'s sincerity in *Leonard Cohen: Prophet of the Heart*, in which they agree with Howard Schwartz that Cohen "took the risky step of writing a book of modern psalms, many of which unabashedly address issues of spiritual and religious belief" (qtd. in Dorman 325). Sheryl Halpern, a reviewer who gives a less laudatory appraisal than Dorman and Rawlins, finds that *Book of Mercy* is sincere to a fault; she states that "it is too earnest--it needs a bit more in the way of fantasy, or humor, even black humor of poetry."[1] Linda Hutcheon, who has made a number of statements about irony and, as noted above, the con in Cohen's earlier work, observes their significant absence and Cohen's new direction in *Book of Mercy*:

> There has clearly been a change in Cohen's perspective. Gone is the irony that marked even his most serious moments. . . . The ironically juggled dualities of independence and attachment that underpinned all the previous work seem to be resolved into an acceptance of attachment, even a desiring of it. F.'s "connect nothing" [from *Beautiful Losers* (1966)] becomes a yearning for "absolute unity" (No. 20). (*Poetry* 50-51)

The lack of irony in *Book of Mercy* is of great importance to an argument for the work's sincerity. Henri Peyre links "the worship of sincerity" with "the consequent loss of irony" in literature (335). While it would be extreme to include Cohen among writers who "worship" sincerity, it is sensible to see a parallel between Peyre's finding and the loss of irony that is accompanied by Cohen's sincerity in *Book of Mercy*. Peyre claims that for Shelley and other poets of introspection--of whom Cohen is certainly one--"irony served as an antidote to their temptation of parading their sincerity" (142). With the exception of *Book of Mercy*, Cohen's use of irony in his work certainly prevents any overt display of sincerity. Conversely, the absence of irony in *Book of Mercy* allows for sincerity's ubiquitous presence in the volume.

Interestingly, the absence of irony and the presence of sincerity in *Book of Mercy* are also characteristic of Cohen's interviews about the book. The interviews serve as an excellent barometer of Cohen's change from earlier insincerity to the newfound sincerity of *Book of Mercy*. The tone of these interviews stands in strong contrast to the tone of earlier interviews on other subjects. Yet, while Cohen's comments may provide important insights into his various works, one should approach such external "information" warily. It is well known that Cohen often attempts to con his interviewers, to avoid direct answers to questions and to don various masks, such as Cohen the ladies' man or Cohen the outlaw. Michael Ondaatje correctly observes in his 1970 study of Cohen that "Cohen's interviews are a dangerous source. He seldom has much respect for the interviewer, and listening to a number of tapes I could find only two people, the poets Phyllis Webb and Eli Mandel, that he was straight with and who he was not trying to con" (3). In the 1965 documentary film *Ladies and Gentlemen . . . Mr. Leonard Cohen*, which contains footage of an interview of Cohen and Irving

Layton conducted by Pierre Berton, Cohen avoids Berton's attempts to get him to comment directly on his poetry. Cohen sidesteps Berton with the abrupt challenge: "I do the poetry, you do the commentary." In the next segment of the same film, when asked how he "made out" with Pierre Berton in the interview, Cohen remarks that "he really wanted me to cut my con out." Cohen is very aware of and deliberate in his con, and he has made many misleading, arrogant, and often contradictory, statements that frustrate interviewers and confuse, rather than enlighten, inquirers into Cohen's works.

When one is aware of such earlier examples of Cohen's con in interviews, one notes with great surprise the radical change in Cohen's tone in the articles and interviews concerned with *Book of Mercy*: Cohen apparently drops the con. A number of newspaper articles collected in the volume *Ecrivains anglo-québécois I: dossiers de presse: Leonard Cohen 1961-1985, Jack Kerouac 1967-1984* provide evidence of a new irony-free tone of humility and defensiveness in Cohen's discussion of *Book of Mercy*. It was perhaps the comments of one particular reviewer, Marianne Ackerman, that did the most to provoke Cohen's new defensiveness about what was then his latest book. In an early Montreal *Gazette* review of *Book of Mercy*, Ackerman was quick to note the serious tone of the new volume and the absence of a sexual quest, but she was highly cynical in her evaluation of Cohen's latest literary effort: ". . . Cohen has abandoned his search for the perfect female and the perfect description of her breasts. No more rapture. No more savage post-coital quips." Instead, by writing "50 austere prose poems, called contemporary psalms on the dust jacket, the bard of St. Dominique St. leaves behind the unmade beds that gave him so many good lines, to confront his maker." Cohen responded to Ackerman's article, yet it was not Ackerman's cynical dislike of *Book of Mercy* that provoked his response; it was in fact her claim that

"[Cohen's] god is an existential god, long since withdrawn from sight. Without capitalizing the divine pronoun, or characterizing the force behind creation, Cohen addresses his maker in absentia, and never imagines a reply." Ackerman's argument that God is not present in *Book of Mercy* is emphasized by her provocative remark: "*Book of Mercy* is less a spiritual testament than a statement of longing, a prayer of supplication uttered into the void." This attack challenged Cohen to respond.

Cohen countered Ackerman's remarks in Michael Mirolla's Montreal *Gazette* follow-up article published just under a month later. Mirolla, who spoke to Cohen, noted that "Cohen wants to make one thing clear--the book is not addressed to a god that doesn't exist, to a 'god in absentia,' as one review surmised. 'That was one particular prayer,' [Cohen] explains. 'The book is the result of my devotion to God and to a religious tradition. It came out of what I had been doing, out of a need within me.'" Cohen also emphasized this need to a reporter from *Now* magazine to whom he said: "I wrote [*Book of Mercy*] out of the deepest kind of urgency . . . I was lucky [that] I could find the language of prayer that ended my silence. In a sense it's a formal piece--they are psalms; it is prayerful expression . . ." (qtd. in Dorman 325). Cohen's tone in both statements seems sincere and completely devoid of irony. He was concerned that people take his latest work seriously as genuine prayer rather than as an expression of hopeless longing for an absent God. According to Sheryl Halpern's article from *The Catholic New Times* of 8 July 1984, headed "Cohen Calls Book 'An Address to God,'" Cohen "finds 'most ridiculous' the charge by one critic that his pieces are atheistic." He told Halpern: "'Asking to have your faith strengthened is in the tradition--'help thou my understanding.'" Cohen told Robert Sward and Pat Keeney Smith that *Book of Mercy* is "a sacred kind of conversation" (56). Not only does the God Cohen

prays to exist but He is merciful and answers Cohen's prayer, for as Cohen informed Halpern: "[T]here is mercy, there is a response to prayer." In fact, for Cohen "the writing of [*Book of Mercy*], in some ways, was the answer to the prayer" (qtd. in Mirolla).

Book of Mercy is personal prayer and as such it closes the gap opened by Northrop Frye between literary and personal sincerity. In the essay "Nature and Homer" Frye uses the example of the courtly love poet and his writing to illustrate this distinction:

> If a poet is really in love, his Muse may well desert him; if he is a Courtly Love poet writing sonnets to an aging and irascible duchess informing her that he is her devoted slave for life . . . which means, in terms of personal sincerity, that he wants a job tutoring her children--he may break out into passionate eloquence. It is not the experience of love but practice in writing love sonnets that releases the floods of poetic emotion. (44-45)

In other words, one may convey sincerity in writing without actually feeling it. Cohen's personal sincerity, though, unlike the courtly love poet's, is one with the literary sincerity of his personal prayers in *Book of Mercy*. Cohen's own feelings about God are expressed in the volume. While Cohen acknowledged the difficulty of classifying or reviewing such a "personal plea" (qtd. in Mirolla), he stated emphatically and unambiguously to all interviewers that *Book of Mercy* is prayer: "I mean it as a prayerbook. It's not meant to be poetry. It's an address to God, specifically . . . very much my prayerbook" (qtd. in Halpern). In discussion of the volume with Alan Twigg, Cohen claimed: "I began to have the courage to write down my prayers. . . . I found that the act of writing was the proper form for my prayer" (46). According to Cohen, *Book of Mercy* is sincere, heartfelt and truthful. Cohen told Halpern that the book is "the most intimate expression of the heart in a

condition of asking," and he assured Twigg: "But I know that the voice in the book is true. And I know that the book is true" (46). To Mirolla, Cohen insisted that *Book of Mercy* is genuine when he stated: "It's either inspired or it isn't; it either rings true or it doesn't. I think it does and that it's the real thing." Cohen made every effort to associate his personal beliefs with those expressed in the literary product that is *Book of Mercy*.

Cohen himself was clearly convinced of *Book of Mercy*'s truth, but he expressed an anxious concern that the public understand his work properly. This was quite a turnaround from the devil-may-care Cohen of 1978 who told interviewer Stephen Williams: "Some decades embrace your work, some decades repudiate it. Shakespeare was eclipsed for 200 years. Donne was eclipsed. Keats. It all goes up and down. The next century probably belongs to Raymond Souster" (54). Thirteen years after his encounter with a cynical Pierre Berton, Cohen prompted Williams to write: "I was prepared for a certain amount of the famous Cohen con, but this is too much. He'd just told me, in the same breath, he was and wasn't a poet, with a delivery W. C. Fields would have envied" (49). But in 1984, in a great reversal, Cohen went to great lengths to ensure that *Book of Mercy* was not interpreted by anyone, as *Death of a Lady's Man* was by Eli Mandel, as another "con." Mandel's perception of *Lady's Man* in his November 1978 review of the book is clear from its title "Leonard Cohen's Brilliant Con Game" (*Saturday Night* 51). In the review Mandel makes the blunt statement:

> Nothing is or could be innocent in the funereal world of Cohen's newest book. All contrived. All part of the longest continuing performance by a writer whose major task appears to be not simply deciding how long he can maintain public interest and by what new means, but defining the latest role in the long history of the deaths and resurrections of Leonard Cohen. (52)

Although Mandel's assessment of the book may well have amused Cohen, any similar judgments of *Book of Mercy* would not be welcomed. Rather, Cohen wanted the public to see the sincerity of the book.

The reader's interpretation of *Book of Mercy* as a work of sincere prayer relies partly on a perception of the work as private utterance and not public performance. If the reader feels that the prayers were written with a greater concern for public reception than private feeling, he or she may consider the prayers contrived and ostentatious displays of emotion. Thus, Cohen's concern that the reader would misinterpret *Book of Mercy* was evident in his reluctance to publish the work. Dorman and Rawlins point out that Cohen "admitted that he faltered in offering it for publication . . ." (329), and Cohen confessed to Mirolla: "I was worried from the beginning about publishing it, about making it public." The fact that Cohen ultimately did publish *Book of Mercy* implies that his desire to make public the truths he pondered privately in the volume outweighed his fears of misinterpretation.

The reasons Cohen gives for publishing his prayerbook reflect a sincerity of purpose in reaching others. Although Cohen told Sward and Smith that "the idea of a public . . . almost evaporated in the construction of [*Book of Mercy*]," he also made it clear that there was at least some portion of the public whom he wished to reach with his prayer (56). Cohen made statements to interviewers about his intended audience and what *Book of Mercy*'s function was to be for them. Cohen, by his own admission, wanted to reach those who truly needed the book, as he told Sward and Smith: "It really was meant for people like myself who could use it at a particular time" (56). Cohen also informed Sward and Smith that "*Book of Mercy* is a little book of prayer that is only valuable to someone who needs it at the time" (56). In part, Cohen published *Book of Mercy* to approve of prayer publicly, and

he indicated to Halpern: "Publishing a prayerbook is a curious activity but I wanted to affirm this activity." He believed in the sincere evangelical purpose of spreading his message of truth and affirmation to those who might need it.

Both *Book of Mercy* and contemporary interviews indicate that such a sense of evangelical purpose filled Cohen's mind in this part of his career. Sincerity was an integral part of Cohen's call for change, and Cohen addressed interviewers and readers with direct earnestness. In *Book of Mercy* Cohen addresses social issues with the sincere desire to speak to his generation, and he elaborated his views on these issues in interviews. Cohen spoke out against the spiritual vacuity of his age; he gave his unadulterated support for prayer writing and sharing, and the yearning for truth and the holy that seemed to be no longer fashionable. Cohen felt that *communal* prayer is a much neglected but important act that, as he told Twigg, must be recovered in our increasingly secular society: "Sophistication is the current style. . . . But the practice of religion, the gathering of people to articulate the burden of their predicament, those things are important, too" (46). In the first section of *Book of Mercy* Cohen emphasizes the importance of religious unity, in a specifically Jewish context, when the psalmist calls for the communal support of the *minyan*, a prayer group of ten men: "Let nine men come to lift me into their prayer so that I may whisper with them: Blessed be the name of the glory of the kingdom forever and forever" (No. 6). Jewish communal unity through prayer is also the focus of Psalm 15, in which the psalmist alludes to the Jewish 'standing prayer' of the *Amidah*:[2] "We *stand* in rags, we *beg* for tears to dissolve the immovable landmarks of hatred. How beautiful our *heritage*, to have *this way* of speaking to eternity . . ." (No. 15; emphasis added). Through the *Amidah*, the "solitude" of the individual is "surrounded, filled, and mastered by the Name" that unites individual with community, "all things . . . depending one upon the other"

(No. 15). With sincerity, and without irony, Cohen states that religious community strengthens the secular community in a harmonious interdependence under the guidance of God.

Cohen speaks for the Jewish community in a sincere effort to unite them under God's law, even in exile. In Psalm 13 Cohen looks to God's law as another source of Jewish communal unity. When the psalmist and his friend "lean toward each other over the table" and join together in a common purpose, they realize: "We are definitely interested; now we can get down to a Jew's business" (No. 13). This business is the covenant or agreement between the Jewish people and God: the Jews must study God's law and discover how best to ensure that its "supernal radiance" enlightens them (No. 13). If the psalmist and his friend make the workings of God's law known to the Jews, then they will be brought closer together as a community of God's people. Through the psalmist, Cohen delivers this earnest message to the reader.

Another facet of Cohen's evangelism, one that also reveals sincerity of purpose in *Book of Mercy*, is his contention that communities are strengthened when they unite with each other through similarities and common ground. In Psalm 25 the psalmist is in exile with his son "in a cave for many years, hiding from the Romans, the Christians, and the apostate Jews" (No. 25). The oppositional and exclusionary position of the Jews at the beginning of this psalm is soon overcome, however, as the singer and his son leave the cave, the singer's wife returns to him, and the couple begins to sell "bilingual editions of the Book of Psalms" (No. 25). The message of the Book of Psalms, the psalmist realizes, is not to be greedily coveted by the Jews or any other group but to be shared by all groups of people, as the inclusive bilingualism conveys. Instead of emphasizing differences between themselves and other groups the psalmist's united "family of

little families" emphasizes commonalities: "'After all,' we say, 'the Romans do not eat flesh torn from a living animal, and the Christians are a branch of the tree, and the apostate Jews are still embraced by the Word'" (No. 25). The Jews realize that they are still able to follow their own creeds, to "sing the time honoured songs" (No. 25). At the same time they are able to "compose new ones" that cry against barriers between peoples and nations, part of Cohen's call for community between different groups (No. 25).

The frustration of Psalm 27 is as sincere a part of Cohen's evangelical purpose as the optimism of Psalm 25; it is the sincere, open-faced expression of these feelings that gives Cohen's messages their power. The hopeful singing against the greed and capitalism of the late twentieth century in Psalm 25 becomes a thunderous judgment and condemnation of these forces in Psalm 27. The psalmist, in a rarely employed aggressive tone, raises his voice in anger to address the international / political scene he is faced with. He denounces the people, the "Church," "the revolt that calls itself Israel" and all nations as "thieves of holiness . . . at war with Mercy" (No. 27). Not only Israel, Russia and America but "every nation chosen to be a nation" is guilty of breaking the "Covenant" with God, of working for its own empowerment at the expense of others (No. 27). They are caught up in the "vehicle of nationhood," that dangerous nationalism of "scraps of destiny" by which each nation asserts its own vision of self-importance in the world (No. 27). To these nations the Psalmist cries: "[Y]ou do not wrestle with your angel"; he therein invokes Cohen's metaphor for sincere inquiry and self-questioning to decry the nations' failure to engage in such examination as they "dare to live without God" (No. 27). In Psalm 30 the psalmist's tone is also condemnatory and despairing of the self-absorbed nationalism in which God is forgotten. He laments: "And still we hear, If only this nation had a soul, or, let us

change the way we trade, or, Let us be proud of our region" (No. 30)--perhaps "a few jibes," as Ackerman suggests, at Canada's own nationalistic pretenses and pursuits. The emotional flux evident in Cohen's approach to the issues of community and nationalism indicates a sincere attempt on his part to express genuine, forthright and personal concern about them.

Cohen earnestly expresses a wide range of emotions, then, through the psalmist's sincere cries for community and devotion to God. Psalm 32, for instance, begins with a tone of regret for past sins and builds toward hope that God is at last remembered by the ones who forgot him. In a communal cry of loss and "repentance" there is the realization that the way to God is still open: "We remember the containing word, the holy channels of commandment, and goodness waiting forever on the Path" (No. 32). Psalm 32 takes the national, linguistic and religious inclusivity of Psalm 25 (as above) a step further to universal inclusivity, that of humanity united in hope for God's merciful forgiveness. The "we" of this psalm erases all divisions--race, creed, nationality, language--that separate one person or group from another. "We" can all remember God; in our repentance we are all embraced by God's love. When Cohen told Halpern, "My vocabulary happens to be Jewish; God is not Jewish, help is not Jewish," he expressed the universal concern of community through the particular vocabulary of Jewish tradition. Cohen has revealed in this statement and in Psalms 25 and 32 that his sincerity is all-embracing. Community in all its forms is a cause that Cohen chooses to address ingenuously, thus giving his message a forceful impact not diffused by ambiguities.

While the concerns of community are addressed with sincerity in *Book of Mercy*, so too are the concerns of the individual yearning for unity with God. Cohen as individual, as "I," speaks of and for the concerns of the individual

through the persona of the psalmist. Alone, the psalmist questions himself or "wrestles with his angel" and makes his petition for forgiveness: "Where have I been? I gave the world to the Accuser. Where do I go? I go to ask pardon from the Most High" (No. 36). Through the psalmist Cohen shows the importance of honest self-evaluation, and he expresses a sincere desire for God's forgiveness.

Part of Cohen's honesty and sincerity, as expressed of the psalmist, may be traced in the progression from doubt to affirmation throughout *Book of Mercy*, which is by no means smooth or without regression into doubt and despair. The psalmist moves between different emotional states without any attempt to mask his feelings or to place them in an ironic light. Instead, he speaks his feelings without fear of revealing doubt or various changes of heart. His confidence is frequently shaken; fear and shame overcome him; anger and despair seize his heart. There are also moments of confident resolution, joy, and praise. Toward the end of the volume the psalmist enters a state of doubt: "Though I don't believe, I come to you now, and I lift my doubt to your mercy" (No. 36). Even as late in the book as Psalm 49 the psalmist laments his continued failings and fears that God will abandon him: "All my life is broken unto you, and all my glory soiled unto you. Do not let the spark of my soul go out in the even sadness. . . . Do not leave me where the sparks go out, and the jokes are told in the dark, and new things are called forth and appraised in the scale of the terror" (No. 49). This unsteady progression reflects the honest recording of a spiritual traveller's journey. In *Book of Mercy* Cohen gives a trustworthy account of a spiritual journey that is necessarily fraught with often unexpected pain, failure and despair. The spiritual traveller ultimately receives the greatest reward, unity with God, but only at great cost. Cohen's descriptions of both failure and triumph convince, and the psalmist's voice rings true.

Cohen's concern with the public perception of *Book of Mercy* was greater than it had ever been for any other work. An abundance of critical reference to the insincerity and gamesmanship of Cohen's previous work may have seemed a difficult stereotype for Cohen to shake, thereby resulting in his unprecedented efforts to convince reviewers and interviewers of *Book of Mercy*'s worth as a sincere prayer book. Cohen felt the need to show the value and purpose of modern prayer in a postmodern age, a work in which the ironic voice, when considered in light of Cohen's *oeuvre*, is noticeably absent. *Book of Mercy* is also set apart from the Cohen *oeuvre* by the presence of a more sincere, unified and stable voice with which Cohen addresses the subject matter of community and the individual quest for union with God. In the texts of both *Book of Mercy* and contemporary interviews, Cohen delivers messages of evangelical purpose. His words to the reader are candid and direct, and they are delivered in a consistently sincere tone. Cohen also views sincerity as the appropriate tone with which to address God: the psalmist prays to God with humble submission in *Book of Mercy*. Cohen writes prayers to a God in the existence of whom he has complete faith, and sends these prayers forth to a public that he hopes to reach and even to enlighten.

Notes

[1]A different idea about Cohen's earnestness in *Book of Mercy* is held by Marianne Ackerman of the Montreal *Gazette*. In the course of my research to date, Ackerman appears to be the only reviewer, interviewer or critic to subscribe to the view that Cohen is not completely sincere in this volume. She concludes her April 14, 1984 review of *Book of Mercy*: "But ultimately this atheist's prayer has nothing like the power of a lover's sigh. Beautiful, yes, but less sincere than: 'So long to Suzanne.'"

[2]For an earlier evocation of the *Amidah* in a work of which Cohen was almost certainly aware and that may have influenced Cohen in *Book of Mercy*, see A. M. Klein's "Stance of the Amidah"--a prayer of supplication and praise--contained in the "Gloss Hai" of his novel *The Second Scroll* (193-95). Further connections between *Book of Mercy* and the *Amidah* will be explored in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two:

The Mystical Prayer Book: *Book of Mercy* and Judaeo-Christian Tradition

As a volume of sincere prayer, *Book of Mercy* stands firmly within a Judaeo-Christian tradition of prayer and contains elements of both Jewish and Christian mysticism.[1] Structural and thematic links exist between *Book of Mercy* and the Book of Psalms. Such links also reveal common ground between *Book of Mercy* and the Jewish prayer, the *Amidah* or *Shemoneh Esreh*. The tradition of devotional prayer, particularly as exemplified by the Christian John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), similarly shares fundamental concepts with *Book of Mercy*. Judaeo-Christian principles of mysticism are also present in the volume. Evidence for the sincerity of *Book of Mercy* comes from the placement of the volume within, and not against or in parody of, these traditions. One must note, however, that while Cohen makes many connections between *Book of Mercy* and these traditions, he is never systematic in doing so. While, for example, some themes or forms are adapted from the Book of Psalms or the *Amidah*, others are ignored by Cohen; while certain patterns or principles are taken from devotional and mystical traditions, others are not. Cohen is eclectic and cannot be tied strictly to any single work, prayer or tradition as the sole inspiration behind *Book of Mercy*. He takes elements freely from all of the above sources and adapts them to suit his own personal project of sincerity.

This caveat aside, it is nonetheless evident that strong links exist between the Book of Psalms and *Book of Mercy*, links which reveal that the former is a source book for the latter. In 1990 Dorman and Rawlins emphasized the fact that Cohen's original title for *Book of Mercy* was "'A Book of Psalms'--the name of the manuscript first taken to his long-time publisher and friend, Jack McClelland (he still refers to it as such today . . .)" (323). As noted in Chapter One, Cohen makes

direct mention of the Psalter in Psalm 25, in which he indicates that the Book of Psalms contains a message for all to share. Leon Wieseltier made this outright connection when he described the Book of Psalms as the "model" for *Book of Mercy* (42). He pointed out that the prose poems of *Book of Mercy* "are uncanny in the precision with which they reproduce the cadences and the terribilities, the mixture of lowliness and illumination, of the Psalmist. These poems read weirdly like chapters of scripture; these verses are *verses*" (42). In plain language, both formally and thematically *Book of Mercy* is indebted to the Book of Psalms.

Wieseltier even made a direct connection between the biblical Psalmist and Cohen, "his modern Canadian son" (42). This link is one that Linda Hutcheon also made when she noted Cohen's debt to Jewish tradition: "In [*Book of Mercy*], however, it is the specifically Jewish tradition that is invoked through references to Israel, David, Bathsheba, Abraham, Ishmael, and Moses. Cohen reinvokes the meaning of his surname (priest), but this time to emphasize the singer / psalmist: he is a David figure" (*Poetry* 50).[2] In fact the intertext of Psalm 47 in the opening psalm of *Book of Mercy* is important because it reveals the connection Cohen makes between himself and the biblical Psalmist. In Psalm 47 the biblical Psalmist[3] announces with joy and vigour that the Lord is "a great King over all the earth" and "sitteth upon the throne of his holiness" (2, 8). Cohen enters the persona of the psalmist who speaks of his king, but this king is far more reluctant to take his place before him: "Slowly he yields. Haltingly he moves toward his throne" (No. 1). Cohen's psalmist is "a singer" as the biblical Psalmist was before him,[4] but he sings "in the lower choirs" (No. 1). Cohen is a modern psalmist who writes his own Psalter late in life, after many years are "wasted" in distance from God. Suitably for such a psalmist God comes before him slowly and thereby reflects Cohen's own uncertainty and self-doubt. Though Cohen's psalmist is less

assured than the Psalmist of Psalm 47, Cohen aligns himself with the Psalmist when he opens *Book of Mercy* with the account of the speaker's slow and humble rise out of silence and loss to assume for himself the role of singer / psalmist.

Cohen shares the "lowliness and illumination" of the Psalmist and similarly records his psalmist's experience of these different states (Wieseltier 42). These states are reflected in the various psalm types as designated by biblical scholars, and Cohen incorporates thematic and formal characteristics of these psalm types in *Book of Mercy*. For example, the "Individual Lament" psalm type--the type of most psalms in both the Book of Psalms and *Book of Mercy*--may often be broken down into five ordered structural components: an introduction (most often a cry to God), a lament or complaint, a confession of trust in God, a petition, and a declaration or vow of praise (*Study Bible* 455; see also Clifford 22: 6). Significantly, not all psalms of this type follow the formal structure rigorously, including Psalm 25, which is loosely structured (Clifford 22: 29). This last point is important because although Cohen incorporates formal elements of the psalm types within his own psalms, he also does not strictly adhere to formal patterns. Instead, Cohen selectively uses the basic forms of the psalms as they are appropriate to his own psalms in *Book of Mercy*.

Toward the end of the "Individual Lament" Psalm 25 the Psalmist, conscious of his sin and absorbed in his own pain, petitions God for help (*Study Bible* 455): "Turn thee unto me, and have mercy upon me; for I *am*[5] desolate and afflicted. The troubles of my heart are enlarged: *O* bring thou me out of my distresses. Look upon mine affliction and my pain; and forgive all my sins" (16-18). Cohen's psalmist likewise pleads for God's help in his suffering and weakness: "Help me in the rain, help me in the darkness, help me at my aimless table. Bend me down to the rain, and let the darkness speak to my heart" (No. 46).

Yet while the Psalmist adheres to structural order with his petition, Cohen's psalmist breaks with this order: his petition opens the psalm.

In these respective psalms, both psalmists look to God for help and then broaden their focus from the individual "me" to plead for communal redemption. The Psalmist concludes: "Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles" (25.22), while Cohen's psalmist concludes: "Let each man be sheltered in the fortress of your name. . . . Create the world again, and stand us up, as you did before, on the foundation of your light" (No. 46). Both psalms express communal need. Both psalms also break structural order because they end with another petition instead of with praise.

As the expressions of need of Cohen's psalmist are like the Psalmist's, so are his expressions of trust in God. Continuing with the above psalms, both expressions of trust sit between separate petitions to God, and both emphasize God's guidance. Earlier in Psalm 25 the Psalmist proclaims: "Good and upright *is* the Lord: therefore will he teach sinners in the way. The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way" (8-9). Cohen's psalmist voices confidence in God's help: "You draw back the heart that is spilled in the world, you establish the borders of pain. Your mercy you make known to those who know your name, and your healing is discovered beneath the lifted cry" (No. 46). God's guidance is certain even for the weak.

Another important element of any psalm of lament is the complaint against "'the wicked'" which Cohen engages in his own way in *Book of Mercy* (Clifford 22: 6). Clifford points out that in the complaint the psalmist makes his plight and his innocence known to God in an attempt to "move God to action" (6). The Psalmist does this in numerous examples, including Psalm 17, in which he is beset by "deadly enemies, *who* compass [him] about" but claims his own guiltlessness

(9). He has kept the ways of the law and informs God: "Thou hast proved mine heart; thou hast visited *me* in the night; thou hast tried me, *and* shalt find nothing: I am purposed *that* my mouth shall not transgress. Concerning the works of men, by the word of thy lips I have kept *me from* the paths of the destroyer" (17.5). After the Psalmist voices his predicament he calls God to defend him from his enemies, who are represented by the greedy lion: "Arise, O Lord, disappoint him, cast him down: deliver my soul from the wicked, *which is* thy sword . . ." (17.13). Cohen's psalmist, unlike this Psalmist, makes no such claims of innocence for himself in *Book of Mercy*. Instead, he is acutely aware of his sinfulness, like the Psalmist in Psalm 25 above. Speaking of himself in the third person in Psalm 22, Cohen's psalmist admits: "Your cunning charlatan is trying to whip up a frisson of grace. He wants a free ride and a little on the side. He has hid his shame under a tired animal gleam, and he pretends to be full of health" (No. 22). The psalmist does, however, claim innocence for his son, who is innocent in "the strength of his childhood" (No. 33). He asks God to protect his son despite his own sin: "You who question souls, and you to whom souls must answer, do not cut off the soul of my son on my account" (No. 33). Cohen's psalmist is aware of the enemies of his innocent son and asks God to protect him from them: "Rescue him from those who want him with no soul. . . . Let him see them withered in the light of your name. Let him see their dead kingdom from the mountain of your word" (No. 33). Both psalmists pray to God for protection from the foe, fearful but hopeful of divine assistance.

In Psalm 30 of *Book of Mercy* the enemies that the psalmist cries out against are not personal enemies but foes of humankind in general. He makes a heartfelt complaint against all enemies of goodness and significantly--especially in light of the emphasis that the psalmist places upon his own sinfulness--leaves open

the interpretation that he may be included among these "enemies of goodness." The psalmist uses ambiguous pronouns to describe these enemies and never places them in clear opposition to himself: "All trade in filth. . . . The bride and the bridegroom sink down to combine, and flesh is brought forth as if it were child. . . . They write and they weep as though evil were the miracle. . . . They leap on the hunchback with a knife, they tear at the young girl's halter, because there is no fence in their heart . . . " (No. 30). These "foes" do not keep themselves from sin because their conscience is not guided by the limits and laws of God.

While the psalmist's tone is clearly one of rage when he complains against the evil of these enemies, he does not call upon God to take vengeance against them or to wreak divine judgment upon them; the biblical Psalmist, however, does so against his enemies in a number of psalms. Yet Cohen's psalmist endorses divine judgment in Psalm 29: "Bless the one who judges you with his strap and his mercy, who covers with a million years of dust those who say, I have not sinned" (No. 29). Again, as in Psalm 30, the psalmist's ambiguous use of pronouns potentially places him among the judged. He similarly endorses God's judgment against the foes of the Jews in Psalm 18 with his warning: "[T]remble, you kings of certainty: your iron has become like glass, and the word has been uttered that will shatter it" (No. 18).

The psalmist's endorsement of divine judgment in these psalms places them alongside "the so-called imprecatory ('to call down a curse') psalms" of the Book of Psalms (*Study Bible* 456), yet such examples of imprecation in *Book of Mercy* are rare. Rather, as the latter volume's title indicates, Cohen's concern with divine mercy and forgiveness is greater than his concern with divine judgment and vengeance. In his psalmist's view God "judges the present with mercy" (No. 40), a

mercy that Cohen wishes to be able to show others, as indicated in his petition to God: "Grant me a forgiving sleep, and rest my enemy" (No. 39).

Cohen's psalmist, together with the biblical Psalmist, also seeks God's mercy and forgiveness for himself. The psalmists share a concern with illness, aging and death, and an anxiety over how one spends the short time of one's life on earth. The biblical Psalmist realizes his growing frailty and weakness and seeks a continued refuge from death (and from his enemies) in God: "Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth" (71.9). He asks God to renew his strength for a while longer with the promise that he will spend the remaining time he has to live giving praise and thanks to God:

> Now also when I am old and gray-headed, O God, forsake me not; until I have showed thy strength unto *this* generation, *and* thy power to every one *that* is to come. . . . Thou shalt increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side. I will also praise thee with the psaltery, *even* thy truth, O my God: unto thee will I sing with the harp, O thou Holy One of Israel. (71.18, 21-22)

For Cohen's psalmist, aging and the approach of death bring the fear that life has been wasted in sin and separation from God, as well as the confession of this sin and the hope that it is not yet too late for redemption: "We cry out for what we have lost, and we remember you again. . . . we remember, we recall a purpose. Could it be? we wonder. And here is death. Could it possibly be? And here is old age. And we never knew; we never stood up, and the good land was taken from us, and the sweet family was crushed" (No. 32). The psalmist regrets that a sense of purpose comes so late in life, but he is nonetheless filled with hope for redemption. He remembers the "goodness waiting forever on the Path" and sees the "men of courage strengthening themselves to kindle the lights of repentance"

(No. 32). Even in the psalmists' fears of old age, there is hope for God's saving grace.

The mortally ill Psalmist of Psalm 39 (Clifford 22: 43) likewise puts his hopes for redemption in God, as he acknowledges life's brevity: "Behold, thou hast made my days *as* a handbreadth; and mine age *is* as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state *is* altogether vanity. . . . And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope *is* in thee" (39.5, 7-8). Cohen's psalmist is also aware of the brevity of life and shares the biblical Psalmist's plea that God help him escape sin while he wonders at his own failures: "When will I cry out in gratitude? When will I sing to your mercy? Tomorrow is yours, the past is in debt, and death runs toward me with the soiled white flag of surrender. O draw me out of an easy skill into the art of the holy" (No. 24). The psalmist realizes that he cannot know the future, but he understands that his time will soon run out; thus he anxiously asks for God's help. The biblical Psalmist asks for God's grace and for relief from his suffering while he is still alive: " O spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence, and be no more" (39.13); in a similar plea, Cohen's psalmist petitions God: "Speak to your child of his healing, in this place where we are for a moment" (No. 24). An acute awareness of life's brevity lends a sense of urgency to the pleas of the psalmists.

In the latter psalm part of the psalmist's petition to God is to "count us back to the safety of your law . . ." (No. 24), which is just one example of his reverence for and love of God's law in *Book of Mercy*. Cohen's psalmist has an important precedent in the biblical Psalmist, who praises God's law extensively in an "anthology of poems" that together comprise Psalm 119, the "longest psalm in the Psalter" (Clifford 23: 58). For the Psalmist the law is foremost a source of "delight" that will bring salvation to all who love and follow it (119.16, 77, 174).

The law provides insight and guidance for those who obey it; sincere obedience of the law will keep its followers from sin: "Blessed *are* the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord. Blessed *are* they that keep his testimonies, *and that* seek him with the whole heart. They also do no iniquity: they walk in his ways" (119.1-3). Those who obey the law are happy because when they do so they obey God. Thus, the restrictions or limitations of the law, which one may view negatively as an arbitrary restraint of personal freedom, can be seen only positively by those who know that obedience to God is the way to happiness.

This positive view of the law and the limits it imposes colours Cohen's references to the law in *Book of Mercy*. For the psalmist the "Law" is "shining" (No. 7). His anguished struggle toward the achievement of this view and toward joyful obedience of the law is recorded in a number of psalms. In Psalm 5 the psalmist speaks in the third person as one who initially has a negative view of the law as an entity to which one must give token acknowledgment: "He fastened his collar to the darkness so he couldn't breathe, and he opened the book in anger to make his payment to the law" (No. 5). The asphyxiating collar provides a physical metaphor for the psalmist's closed view of the law as a restraining force and of the Torah as a limiting book. The psalmist realizes that it is only when he puts his complete faith in God and not "man" or "an angel" that obedience to the law will become pleasure and not suffering. He recounts: "An angel, who had no intrinsic authority, said, 'You have sealed every gate but this one; therefore, here is a little light commensurate with your little courage.' His shame climbed up itself to find a height from which to spill. Then there was a sweeter saying in a stiller voice: 'I do not put my trust in man, nor do I place reliance on an angel'" (No. 5). In the height of his shame the psalmist understands that God must be the source of his faith.

With this knowledge, he can announce: "Immediately the Torah sang to him" and rejoice in its wisdom (No. 5). The psalmist is secure in God's law.

The psalmist receives proper guidance in the law from his teacher who brings him in contact with the Torah. The teacher, according to the psalmist (an unwilling pupil), seems to misguide him at first: "My teacher gave me what I do not need, told me what I need not know" (No. 21). The psalmist's description of the teacher's guidance, however, though harsh, is positive: "He curled his fists and pounded me toward my proper shape" (No. 21). The teacher commits his final act of instruction only after the psalmist's attempts at "self-reform" fail: "When he was certain that I was incapable of self-reform, he flung me across the fence of the Torah" (No. 21). This last metaphor creates a particularly violent image that may initially seem negative, but I would argue that, in light of other references to "fences" and "the Torah" in *Book of Mercy*, it is more likely that this last metaphor is positive. In Psalm 14, the "fence of changing stars around [God's] wisdom" is a mutable, growing boundary that changes with one's increased experience and understanding of God's ways (No. 14). References to the Torah quoted above, including the aforementioned "Our Lady of the Torah . . . whose kind lips are the law of all activity" (No. 17), suggest that the limits forced upon the psalmist by his teacher in Psalm 21 are positive ones from which he will benefit and grow as he learns more of God's law. Cohen's psalmist learns from the law and delights in it as much as the biblical Psalmist does. The former proclaims: "Bless the Lord who has surrounded the traffic of human interest with the majesty of his law . . ." (No. 29) and "What love I have, your law is the source . . ." (No. 37). His faith in the law is strong and confident.

Those who obey the law live in joy, while those who disobey it cannot. Cohen's psalmist attacks Israel itself and "every nation chosen to be a nation" in

Psalm 27--an attack discussed in greater detail in Chapter One (see 25-26)--because of the nations' abuse of the law, which prompts him to cry out: "Therefore the lands belong to none of you, the borders do not hold, the Law will never serve the lawless" (No. 27). The nations must learn to obey God's law. On a much larger scale in the Book of Psalms, the Psalmist prefigures his descendant's insistence in *Book of Mercy* that the nations must subject themselves to God's law. A genuine concern with the fate of Israel, however, is shared by both psalmists. The national interest that dominates Books II and III of the Psalter (*Study Bible* 456) is addressed by Cohen--often in an international context--in Psalms 13, 18, 25, 27 and 30.[6]

Nations and individuals must obey God's law, according to the psalmists, because God's law is God's will. Clifford points out in his commentary to Psalm 19 that the Psalmist prays for openness to the law because "[t]he law is the will of the powerful Lord visible to the servants of that Lord" (22: 24). In a number of psalms the Psalmist joyfully proclaims the subordination of his own will to God's. For the Psalmist, God's will and law exist together as a source of happiness: "I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law *is* within my heart" (40.8). Both Psalms 1 and 112 are concerned with "willingly obeying the divine will" (Clifford 23: 54) and, notably, this obedience is achieved by one who delights both "in the law of the Lord" (1.2) and "in his commandments" (112.1), which is another word for God's laws (Clifford 23: 59). Accordingly, Cohen's psalmist is thankful for the "mercy harkening to the will that is bent toward it, the will whose strength is its pledge to you," because he believes that our will must be exercised in obedience to God's will, which is his law (No. 37). He shares the biblical Psalmist's sincere belief that the law is God's will as expressed for humanity's understanding. Also like the Psalmist, he wilfully--and paradoxically[7]--places God's will above his

own and resolutely surrenders himself to God: "If it be your will, accept the longing truth behind this wild activity. . . . Bind me to your will, bind me with these threads of sorrow, and gather me out of the afternoon where I have torn my soul on twenty monstrous altars, offering all things but myself" (No. 35).

Cohen discusses the importance of the will with interviewers Robert Sward and Pat Keeney Smith. He tells them that the distance between "our own will" and "a will that is behind all things" is what "creates the mystery that we call religion" (58). Thus, one who wishes to achieve union with God must strive to bridge this gap between one's own individual will and the will of God. This may be achieved when one eliminates one's own will or surrenders it to God. For Cohen the subordination of the will is necessary and a cause for joy, but it is also painful and difficult to attain. Accordingly, Sward and Smith's comment that while there is a "relative absence of will" in *Book of Mercy* one "needs a thread of will to pray" or to "write a psalm" prompts this response from Cohen:

> Somehow, in some way, we have to be a reflection of the will that is behind the whole mess. When you describe the outer husk of that will which is yours, which is your own tiny will--in all things mostly to succeed, to dominate, to influence, to be king--when that will under certain conditions destroys itself, we come into contact with another will which seems to be much more authentic. But to reach that authentic will, our little will has to undergo a lot of battering. (58)

This last sentence recalls the image of the psalmist's teacher pounding him toward his "proper shape" in Psalm 21, a painful but positive action. One must make God's will one's own and thus destroy the will "to be king" by admitting, like the psalmists, that God is our king and master. Cohen's psalmist shows a genuine concern for the relationship between his will and God's. He wishes to obey God

and shares the biblical Psalmist's belief that "the Lord will give grace and glory: no good *thing* will he withhold from them that walk uprightly" (84.11). Genuine submission to God's will is always rewarded.

The ideas and rhetoric common to the Book of Psalms and *Book of Mercy* reflect an equally shared sincerity of feeling and purpose in their psalms. When Cohen's psalmist cries to God, "I yearn for you" (No. 20), he echoes the heartfelt sentiment of the biblical Psalmist who proclaims, "My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God" (84.2). In the same vein, when the psalmists doubt and fear for their salvation they phrase their feelings in similarly anguished questions. The biblical Psalmist asks: "How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, *having* sorrow in my heart daily?" (13.1-2). The "how long" of the Psalmist becomes in *Book of Mercy*: "What must I do . . . to rescue hope from the scorn of my enemy?" (No. 20) and "Did we come for nothing?" (No. 17). The range and intensity of the biblical Psalmist's emotions are shared by Cohen's psalmist. Anguish, faith, assurance and anger are all sincerely expressed in the prayers of the psalmists. The expression of these emotions reflects their own private struggle toward God, as well as their attempts to understand God's ways, and to make them the focus of their lives through earnest prayers of petition, thanks and praise.

Cohen extends his appropriation of thematic and formal elements from the Book of Psalms to the *Amidah* or *Shemoneh Esreh*, the central Jewish prayer (Kirzner xvii). It will be observed that many of the elements common to the Book of Psalms and *Book of Mercy* are also shared with the *Amidah*. As indicated in Chapter One, Cohen's psalmist refers to the standing prayer of the *Amidah* as part of his "heritage" in Psalm 15. Sheryl Halpern, one of *Book of Mercy*'s reviewers,

claims that Cohen confirms similarities between the *Amidah* and *Book of Mercy* when she notes the presence of "passages reminiscent of the Amidah, the Selichot services--sources Cohen readily admits using." She also notes "an echo of the Amidah in Prayer 48--'Awaken me, Lord, from the dream of despair, and let me describe my sin'"--but does not trace a specific source within the *Amidah*. This psalm may have its "echoes" or sources in lines from the eleventh and fifth prayers of the *Amidah*, respectively titled "Restoration of Justice" and "The One Who Desires Repentance." Cohen's line, "Awaken me, Lord, from the dream of despair" (No. 48) is similar to the line, "And remove sorrow and groaning from us" in the eleventh *Amidah* prayer (qtd. in Kirzner 177); Cohen's line, "[L]et me describe my sin" (No. 48) is similar to the line, "[R]eturn us with complete repentance before You" in the fifth *Amidah* prayer (qtd. in Kirzner 97). The sincerity of repentance in the fifth prayer is shared equally by Cohen's psalmist who asks God to bring him into the service of goodness: "What I have not said, give me the courage to say. What I have not done, give me the will to do" (No. 48).

Halpern's quotation from Cohen's Psalm 43, "'Holy is your name, holy is your work, holy are the days that return to you,'" which, she notes, "rings with kedushas," reads with the same rhythm and language and effuses the same intensity of praise as "The Holy God," the third prayer of the *Amidah*: "You are holy, and Your Name is holy, and holy ones praise You every day, forever. Blessed are You, God, the holy God" (qtd. in Kirzner 81).[8] A close match to the phrase "holy ones praise You" is also found in Cohen's psalm: "Holy are the hands that are raised to you . . ." (No. 43).

One prominent motif common to the Book of Psalms, *Book of Mercy* and the *Amidah* is the symbolic shield with which God protects his people on earth.

The biblical Psalmist calls upon "O Lord our shield" (59.11) to protect the Jews from their enemies and confidently proclaims that "[God's] truth *shall be thy* shield and buckler" (91.4). God is similarly named as the "Shield of Abraham" in the title and in the first prayer of the *Amidah* (Kirzner 81); the Jews believe that God rescued Abraham from his persecutors (Kirzner 44). Cohen's use of the shield motif in *Book of Mercy* is complex, but the psalmist's petition to the "shield of Abraham" in Psalm 20 is directly traceable to the first prayer of the *Amidah*. The shield motif is also integral to further connections between *Book of Mercy* and the *Amidah*. God protects the psalmist and all sinners as the "shield of the falling" (No. 8)--a phrase that is closely aligned with the naming of God as the "Shield of our salvation" in the final prayer of the *Amidah* (qtd. in Kirzner 269). The psalmist cries out to God: "You are my only shield" (No. 37) and declares that God has "given each man a shield of loneliness" to ensure that he remembers God (No. 9). He also takes up "the two shields of bitterness and hope" in an effort to bring his will closer to God's (No. 4). According to the psalmist the shield sometimes causes pain, but ultimately it protects God's people. The cover of *Book of Mercy* reveals yet another use of the shield motif. Cohen appropriates the shield bearing the star of David for the cover, replacing the interlocked triangles with intertwined hearts of his own design (Dorman 320). Love and its uniting power are emphasized, and a symbol of Jewish tradition is literally reshaped to serve Cohen's interests.

While the shield symbolizes God's love and protection of humanity in the Book of Psalms, the *Amidah* and *Book of Mercy*, the name of "King" symbolizes God's sovereignty over humanity. To call God reverently by the name of "King," "Master," "Father" or any other title of power is to acknowledge God's greatness and to humble oneself, to subordinate one's will to God's. With such reverence

and humility in the *Amidah* God is called "King" (qtd. in Kirzner 41, 135, 243), "The Great, the Powerful, and the Awesome, most high God" (41), "Master" (65), "Father" (97, 111), "Redeemer" (125) and "Merciful One" (269). With the same reverence and humility in *Book of Mercy* the psalmist calls God "king" (Nos. 2, 20), "master" (Nos. 6, 7, 8), "Lord" (Nos. 23, 29, 48) and "Most High" (No. 36). One title alone is insufficient to emphasize God's greatness.

Cohen's psalmist believes that God is king over humanity in general and the Jewish people in particular. Just as the concerns of Jewish national interest that permeate the Book of Psalms are reflected in *Book of Mercy*, these concerns, as addressed in the *Amidah*, find their own form in Cohen's volume. The purpose of the tenth prayer in the *Amidah*, "The Ingathering of the Exiles," as the title makes clear, is to herald the moment when God "gathers in the scattered ones (the exiled) of His people Israel" (qtd. in Kirzner 161). The psalmist likewise heralds this "[i]ngathering" in Psalm 18. The psalmist joins his fellow "exiles" in the "incomprehensible affirmation" of their salvation and the inevitable end of their exile. This confidence in the Jews' reunion allows the psalmist to assert: "Take heart, you who were born in the captivity of a fixed predicament; and tremble you kings of certainty . . . " (No. 18). He also shares the hope that the Jews continue to flourish and experience God's salvation in new generations, as expressed in the fifteenth *Amidah* prayer: "Make the offspring of David, Your servant, sprout forth quickly, and raise his glory in Your salvation, because we hope for Your salvation all day. Blessed are You, God, who makes the glory of salvation flourish" (qtd. in Kirzner 233). The psalmist voices this hope of the exiles: "[W]e hope that the grandchildren will return to us. Our hope is in the distant seed" (No. 18). Future descendants' loyalty to the faith inspires Jews of the present with hope.

Additional evidence of Cohen's reverent response to the *Amidah* in *Book of Mercy* is the use of the blessing or benediction, an integral part of the *Amidah*. The formula of the benediction (*beracha*), often translated as "Blessed art Thou" or "Praised art Thou," is an expression of humility and respect; such an expression indicates that one acknowledges God's role "as the source of all blessing" and is ready to receive God's blessing (E. Klein 10). While the first *Amidah* prayer is the only one to begin and end with a benediction, every *Amidah* prayer ends with one (Kirzner 43). Examples of this convention include: "Blessed are You, God, Mainstay of, and Assurer to, the righteous" from the thirteenth prayer and "Blessed are You, God, who graciously grants discerning knowledge" from the seventh (qtd. in Kirzner 207, 89). The one who sincerely utters these blessings praises God and claims readiness to receive the blessings of humble righteousness and discerning knowledge. In *Book of Mercy* the psalmist is equally earnest in his benedictions. With humble praise he proclaims: "Blessed are you who speaks to the unworthy" at the end of Psalm 41 and "Blessed are you who hears the cry of each man's portion" in the middle of Psalm 44.

Consistent in his disregard for systems, Cohen does not make his private prayer formulaic by ending all of his psalms with benedictions. Instead, he places blessings in various parts of his psalms, beginning, middle and / or end, includes no benediction in a number of psalms and, in the case of Psalm 14, creates an entire series of benedictions. Cohen adds even more variety to his benedictions in *Book of Mercy* when he writes a slightly altered version of the formula: "Blessed be His name, whose glorious Kingdom is for ever and ever" (J. Cohen 13). This response after each blessing in the Temple liturgy of *Selichot* (penitential prayers) becomes: "Blessed be the name of the glory of the kingdom forever and forever" (No. 6) and "Blessed is the name of the glory of your kingdom forever and ever" in

Book of Mercy (No. 48). Cohen alters the formula slightly but retains the humble tone of these blessings.

Cohen's book thus stands firmly within the tradition of Jewish prayer, as the many connections between the Book of Psalms, the *Amidah* and *Book of Mercy* indicate. These connections include similar language and language rhythms; common concerns, such as God's protection of the individual and the community; an awareness of one's own sinfulness; and a hope for redemption in God's love and mercy. Important connections also exist, however, between Cohen's text and a Judaeo-Christian devotional tradition. Halpern quotes Cohen as saying that the spiritual journey he recounts in *Book of Mercy* is made "in the devotional tradition." Carl Dehne's claim in *The New Dictionary of Theology* that devotion is "readiness for service in obedience to the divine will" (283) reveals a key principle behind the "religious observances and forms of prayer or worship" of devotions (Zawilla 271). The psalmist's humble subordination to God's will in *Book of Mercy* has been demonstrated, but the volume has other connections with devotional tradition. Dehne provides an excellent summary of the structural and stylistic characteristics of devotions in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*:

> The devotional structure is circular or spiral. Connections are by association rather than according to logic. The devotions are shaped more like musing than like formal discourse; they are more like a conversation than a lecture. Devotions typically consist of a number of small, similar units frequently repeated. They are almost unvarying in form. (340)

Cohen incorporates these fundamental characteristics into *Book of Mercy* with the same eclecticism and anti-systematic nature that he incorporates characteristics of the Book of Psalms and the *Amidah*. Cohen's psalms avoid a linear progression,

and each instead repeats and returns to ideas. Psalm 48, for example, begins with the plea, "Awaken me, Lord, from the dream of despair," then pronounces the *Selichot* benediction "Blessed is the name . . ." as above, and then returns to the idea of the opening plea: "Bind me, intimate, bind me to your wakefulness" (No. 48). The psalms are filled with powerful symbolic and associative language, such as "the fence of the Torah" (No. 21), "the tree" (No. 25), "beams and paths and gates of return" (No. 29), "throne of unemployment" (No. 5), "the Path" (No. 32) and numerous other examples. An associative structure runs through Psalm 3 as a whole, in which a leaf, a veil and a wall represent successive layers that cover the soul: "I heard my soul singing behind a leaf, plucked the leaf, but then I heard it singing behind a veil. I tore the veil, but then I heard it singing behind a wall. I broke the wall, and I heard my soul singing against me" (No. 3). These suggestive symbols are used by Cohen to evoke the loneliness of one who must "study without a friend" (No. 3). The "voice" of *Book of Mercy* is one of private conversational musing before God in most psalms, although the aggressive outward address to "Israel, and you who call yourself Israel" in Psalm 27 provides a notable exception. Largely unvarying repetitions of similar word units or phrases are employed in different degrees in all psalms in the volume; these repetitions achieve rhetorical emphasis and draw the reader into the almost hypnotic rhythm of devotional prayer, as the first part of Psalm 39 shows:

> From you alone to you alone, everlasting to everlasting, all that is not you is suffering, all that is not you is solitude rehearsing the arguments of loss. All that is not you is the man collapsing against his own forehead, and the forehead crushes him. All that is not you goes out and out, gathering the voices of revenge, harvesting lost triumphs from the real and necessary defeat. (No. 39)

God is the beginning and the end of all things, the eternal or "everlasting" source from which all things come. Life is a cycle that begins and ends in God, "[f]rom you alone to you alone," a cycle that is reflected in the repetition. "All that is not" God works against life. The repeated "all that is not you" emphasizes the pain and chaos of life separated from God. Quite comprehensively, if sporadically, Cohen's psalms fulfill the characteristics of devotions that Dehne describes.

Within the Judaeo-Christian devotional tradition *Book of Mercy*, interestingly enough, displays a strong affinity of purpose with the Christian John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624). Yet Cohen's resistance to classification, structure and systematic organization in *Book of Mercy* might at first seem to place this work in opposition to Donne's highly structured *Devotions*. Kate Gartner Frost reveals in her study of the latter work that--among other structural forms--the devotions are divided into four sections based on the "thematic concern of assent to the divine will" and follow a linear progression from human frailty in the first devotion through to "the achievement of spiritual and physical health" in the final devotion (107). Each single devotion also "follows a pattern of assent on a small scale" (107). Each devotion is rigorously divided into a tripartite structure of meditation, expostulation and prayer. Frost even sketches elaborate but convincing numerological schemata for the *Devotions* and draws connections with systems of both Jewish and Christian numerical symbolism.[9] In *Book of Mercy*, however, Cohen does not follow any such elaborate schema.[10]

Despite the structural and systematic disparity between the two volumes a common purpose unites them, and many of the same ideas are engaged in each work. Both Donne and Cohen readily admit their sinfulness but also express a

confident belief in God's infinite mercy. Beginning from the meditation of the first devotion, Donne reveals his preoccupation with sin and the death it brings:

> O miserable condition of Man, which was not imprinted by *God*; who, as hee is *immortall* himselfe, had put a *coale*, a *beame* of *immortalitie* into us, which we might have blowen into a *flame*, but blew it out by our first sinne; wee beggard our selves by hearkening after false riches, and infatuated our selves by hearkening after false knowledge. So that now, we doe not onely die, but die upon the Rack, die by the torment of sicknesse . . . . (7)

As the biographer Izaak Walton indicates, Donne's grave physical illness inspired the composition of the *Devotions* (xxvi). The illness also provides the metaphor for Donne's sinfulness throughout the volume. The evocation of the fall of humanity in this passage is part of Donne's lesson that "the true means of ascending the ladder [toward divine love] is first downward . . . " (Frost 36). Thus, in the twelfth expostulation Donne concludes: "So that though our last act be an ascending to glory, (we shall ascend to the place of *Angels*) yet our first act is to goe the way of thy *Sonn, descending* . . . " (65; qtd. in Frost 141).

In *Book of Mercy* the psalmist does not share Donne's intense preoccupation with sin and death, but he does profess an acute awareness of his own sinfulness and sin's corrupting power: "[T]he exile closed around me. Then the punishment began; a small aimless misery, not in the heart, in the throat. . . . Then the fear of justice. Then, for the ten thousandth time, the reality of sin" (No. 7). The psalmist's evocation of his own fall into sinfulness, as previously noted and in the following passage, reveals that Cohen, like Donne, views the fall as a necessary step toward union with God: "He falls to you, he falls to know you" (No. 8). Future improvement is the hoped for change from present human imperfection in the *Devotions* and *Book of Mercy*.

Donne and Cohen are genuinely concerned that people open themselves to God's mercy. At the end of the first expostulation Donne professes: "*Every minute [God] renewes his mercy*, but wee *will not understand, lest that we should be converted, and he should heale us*" (9). Cohen's psalmist indicates the importance of an open cry to God: "Your mercy you make known to those who know your name, and your healing is discovered beneath the lifted cry" (No. 46). The language of this openness to God for Donne and Cohen is the language of "turning" toward God. In the third prayer Donne desires "[t]hat which way soever I turne, I may turne to thee . . ." (18), while the psalmist begins Psalm 42: "It is to you I turn" (No. 42). To turn toward God indicates a sincere longing to rise above sin and grow closer to God. When one is open to God, Donne and the psalmist are confident, God in his mercy will pour down forgiveness upon the sinner. Toward the end of the twenty-third and final expostulation Donne proclaims: "[F]or *as thy majestie, so is thy Mercie*, both *infinite*; and thou who hast commanded me *to pardon my brother seventy times seven*, hast limited thy selfe to no *Number*" (125-26). The psalmist can say with confidence to the "father of mercy" (No. 24): "I come to you for mercy and you hear my cry, and you shelter me in my portion, and you make my deeds a warning" (No. 44). He thus shows that God is always ready to listen to one who cries out for mercy.

While the messages of the *Devotions* and *Book of Mercy* are by all indications sincere, it is more debatable whether Donne and Cohen's publication of these personal prayers detracts from their sincerity. One may argue that personal, private prayer should be kept private in order to remain sincere, and that published prayers are contrived and, therefore, insincere. Cohen, as discussed in Chapter One, expressed to interviewers and book reviewers his worry over publishing *Book of Mercy* but strenuously defended the sincerity of this act. Cohen's concern that

others would think him insincere for publishing his private prayers is not new, however, as Donne's own statements in the eighth expostulation reveal:

> But let me stop, *my God*, and consider; will not this look like a piece of art, & cunning, to convey into the world an opinion, that I were more particularly in his care, then other men? And that heerein, in a shew of *humilitie*, and *thankefulnesse*, I magnifie my selfe more then there is cause? But let not that *jealousie* stopp mee, O God, but let me go forward in celebrating thy *mercy* exhibited by *him*. (43)

Donne anticipates that publication of the *Devotions* may be perceived by others as an act of artifice and vanity; he, therefore, circumvents these potential accusations with the argument--albeit a carefully crafted one--that others' jealousy must not stand in the way of his celebration of God's mercy.

Donne and Cohen also know that when they celebrate God's mercy they enact God's will. Donne subordinates himself to the supreme will of God because he knows that it is the source of all goodness, as he reveals in the twenty-first prayer: "Thy good purposes upon mee, I know, have their *determination* and *perfection*, in thy holy *will* upon mee . . ." (114-15). As a role model for this subordination Donne unsurprisingly chooses Christ who, as Donne indicates in the eleventh prayer, tells God: "*Yet not my will, but thine bee done*" (61). Cohen, in accordance with a Jewish standpoint, does not write of Christ in *Book of Mercy*; Cohen's psalmist directs his prayers to God.

Yet one cannot always subordinate one's will to God's no matter how hard one tries. Hence, there is a constant tension between spiritual and secular pursuits. Donne is acutely conscious of this tension and longs for its resolution but knows it cannot finally be resolved until death. He thus calmly embraces the "sleep" of death as the resolution of this tension and the moment of his union with God.

Donne affirms in the fifteenth expostulation that "this gentle *sleepe*, and rest of my *soule* betroths mee to thee, to whom I shall bee married *indissolubly*, though by this way of *dissolution*" (80). Donne's hopeful tone is reflected in the psalmist's tone of heartfelt yearning in *Book of Mercy*. The psalmist is confident that human will can become one with God's so that selfish secular concerns may become selfless spiritual ones: "Blessed is the Name that unifies demand, and changes the seeking into praise" (No. 47). This benediction indicates his openness and surrender to God's will. With hope that he may rise toward spiritual pursuits the psalmist petitions God: "Remove your creature's self-created world, and dwell in the days that are left to me" (No. 48) and "With these lips instruct my heart, and let fall into the world what is broken in the world. Lift me up to the wrestling of faith" (No. 49). From God only comes the strength to overcome a self-centred existence.

As self-conscious as the "I" is for Donne and Cohen, the ironic distance between the writer and the poetic "I" is blurred in the *Devotions* and *Book of Mercy*. Through self-examination Donne opens himself to God and achieves "a newly defined self which goes beyond the individual and the particular . . . " (Frost 76).[11] Cohen also achieves this "newly defined self," an ideal which he outlines in the post-*Book of Mercy* interview with Alan Twigg: "Just to define God specifically is a great mistake. It's better to have a kind of [religious] education that doesn't even mention God, that allows people to experience that absolute or the dissolution of the particular self" (43-44). Frank Davey realized in 1974 that "[t]he ultimate goal for Cohen is to annihilate one's own identity and gain the anonymity of sainthood" (*From There* 69); Cohen achieves this anonymity ten years later through the persona of the psalmist who surrenders himself to the power of the "Most High" in *Book of Mercy* (No. 36).

The fulfillment of this self-surrender for Donne and Cohen is union or oneness with God, a willingness to be absorbed into God's greater being. Donne expresses this union as the bread of life with which God nurtures us and for which he prays fervently in the twenty-first prayer: ". . . *O Lord*, continue to mee the *bread of life*; the *spirituall bread of life*, in a faithfull assurance in *thee*; the *sacramentall bread of life*, in a worthy receiving of *thee*; and the *more reall bread of life* in an everlasting *union to thee*" (115). The psalmist, using the third-person pronoun, expresses his own desire to return to the source of his being: "He asked for his heart to be focused toward the source of mercy . . . " (No. 11). God is for Cohen the "source of light" (No. 49), the "Lord of Unity" (No. 22) and the "king of absolute unity" (No. 20).

Through descriptions of self-surrender to God and a willingness to be absorbed into God's greater being, the *Devotions* and *Book of Mercy* lend themselves to interpretation not only as books of devotional prayer but as works of mysticism. Evidence for the sincerity of *Book of Mercy* becomes visible, as the above discussion indicates, when it is recast as a mystical text. While study of the *Devotions* as a mystical text is minimal and will not be pursued further in this paper, *Book of Mercy* can be placed within a broad mystical tradition that integrates elements specific to Jewish mysticism, as well as more general elements common to Jewish and other mystical traditions, including Christian mysticism. In the comprehensive study, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom G. Scholem draws clear distinctions between Christian and Jewish mysticism:

> The particular aspects of Christian mysticism, which are connected with the person of the Saviour and mediator between God and man, the mystical interpretation of the Passion of Christ, which is repeated in the personal experience of the individual--all this is foreign to Judaism, and also to its

> mystics. Their ideas proceed from the concepts and values peculiar to Judaism, that is to say, above all from the belief in the Unity of God and the meaning of His revelation as laid down in the Torah, the sacred law. (10)

Book of Mercy is aligned with Jewish mystical tradition by these distinctive characteristics, and it is set apart from Christian mysticism's naturally Christ-centered focus; yet other characteristics, not specifically Jewish, link *Book of Mercy* to a more inclusive definition of mysticism. Scholem indicates that mysticism in general, which "proceeds to merge the self into a higher union," also "postulates self-knowledge . . . as the surest way to God who reveals Himself in the depths of the self" (18). The quest for spiritual union of the self with a higher power through self-knowledge is a goal common to many different mystical traditions, including Christian mysticism. This latter tradition is exemplified by the anonymously written Christian mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which prescribes a rigorous program of self-examination and preparation for union with God. Likewise, in *Book of Mercy* the psalmist explores the self and lays it openly before God, even showing his moments of greatest doubt: "In my own eyes I disgraced myself for trusting you, against all evidence, against the prevailing winds of horror, over the bully's laughter, the torturer's loyalty, the sweet questions of the sly" (No. 12).

While the above evidence indicates that *Book of Mercy* need not only be considered a Jewish mystical text, it nonetheless contains characteristics peculiar to Jewish mysticism. Scholem notes that Kabbalists--students of the Hebraic mystical system known as the Kabbalah--have a "metaphysically positive attitude towards language as God's own instrument" (15). Cohen shares the Kabbalistic belief that "[s]peech reaches God because it comes from God" and that "[a]ll creation . . . is from the point of view of God, nothing but an expression of His

hidden self that begins and ends by giving itself a name, the holy name of God, the perpetual act of creation" (Scholem 17). Cohen admits to Sward and Smith: "Yes, that's always touched me, the capacity to create the world through speech, and my world is created that way. It's only by naming the thing that it becomes a reality" (57). Sward and Smith point out that "[o]ne sees the importance of naming in *Book of Mercy* . . ." (57), and in Psalm 15 the psalmist describes "the Name" as the source "from which all things arise in splendour, depending one upon the other" (No. 15). For Cohen, naming is creation, not merely the description of creation.

In *Book of Mercy* there is evidence that Cohen also embraces the Kabbalistic doctrine of *tikkun*, popularized by the renowned sixteenth-century Safed mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria (J. Cohen 64-65). In *A. M. Klein: The Story of the Poet*[12] Zailig Pollock states that "the Kabbalah developed a theory of Creation, according to which God, conceived of as *Ayin*, or 'Nothing,' because he is beyond human apprehension, makes himself known through a process of emanation or unfolding, known as *atzilut*" (211-12). Jeffrey M. Cohen summarizes this theory as follows:

> [A]t the very dawn of the creative process, the *Sefirot* (creative emanations, or self-extensions, from the essence of God) were too potent to be contained within their vessels, which were similarly made of spiritual light. What ensued was a cataclysmic *shevirat ha-keilim*, 'breaking of the vessels,' which caused a spillage of primary divine substance [that of *Adam Kadmon* or Primordial Man (Pollock 212)] to become diffused and strewn over the cosmos.
>
> The fissure in the divine composition--referred to as the separation of The Holy One and His *Shekinah*--can only be repaired, and God made 'whole,' by the process of *tikkun*. This is achieved by man performing to

> the full his sacred task of redeeming all evil in the world, through Torah, *mitzvot*,[13] and prayer. Every manifestation of good and every act of vanquishing evil sends back to the heavenly source some of those rays of spiritual light that were lost to God's being at the dawn of creativity. (66)

In *Book of Mercy* the psalmist longs for the restoration of the broken vessels and the "re-membering" of the body of the Primordial Man. When these events take place God will achieve perfect union with his creation and the process of *tikkun* will be completed. The psalmist heralds the moment of this union with God with great power and emotion:

> Bless the Lord, O my soul, cry out toward his mercy, cry out with tears and song and every instrument, stretch yourself toward the undivided glory which he established merely as his footstool, when he created forever, and he made it-is-finished, and he signed the foundations of unity, and polished the atoms of love to shine back beams and paths and gates of return. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Bless his name forever. (No. 29)

While the psalmist does not actually engage in the process of *tikkun*, he celebrates its ultimate result: complete, universal unity with God, the mystic's highest aspiration.

Like the Kabbalists, the psalmist willingly lets his soul descend "into the depths of Nothing," since he knows it is the only way to "encounter the Divine" (Scholem 25). The Nothing or *Ayin*, though beyond our apprehension, is not negation but in fact "is more real than all other reality" (Scholem 25). The psalmist is genuinely fearful but, believing in the Divine, he prepares his soul to embrace the Nothing: "Tremble, my soul . . . before the furnace of light in which you are formed and to which you return, until the time when he suspends his light and withdraws into himself, and there is no world, and there is no soul anywhere"

(No. 29). The psalmist is confident that in death he will experience a reality greater than that of life on earth.

Book of Mercy, then, is a work of prayer that aims toward the ultimate goal of bringing the psalmist in particular and humanity in general closer to God. Cohen directs the psalmist's prayer toward this goal by drawing on a diverse religious tradition with a complete sincerity of purpose, humility under influence, and freedom from parody or irony. Through *Book of Mercy* Cohen participates in the sacred literary traditions of the Book of Psalms, the *Amidah*, and devotional and mystical literature in a way that is always reverent. Like the biblical Psalmist, Cohen's psalmist displays a full and often shifting range of human emotions to suit the issues he addresses: hope and doubt, love and anger are all expressed openly and without guise. Both psalmists express with equal fervour their beliefs and concerns regarding God's relationship to humanity. Cohen's psalmist makes proclamations of trust in God's judgment, mercy and forgiveness, he questions his suffering and laments his own sinfulness, and he cries out against personal foes and general foes of humanity with the same searching concern of the biblical Psalmist. *Book of Mercy* contains the same urgent pleas for God's mercy and protection and the same heartfelt praise as the *Amidah*. As John Donne surrenders his will to God in the *Devotions*, Cohen's psalmist does so in *Book of Mercy*, with complete confidence in God's mercy and goodness, regardless of his own sinfulness. Cohen also takes up the mystical quest for union with God in earnest. The psalmist seeks ways to eliminate his selfish, secular pursuits so that he may empty himself out to God. Significantly, in all of Cohen's adaptations of religious traditions, he retains the integrity and the sense of purpose of them all, namely, to bring humanity closer to God. More important than establishing his eclectic adaptation of religious traditions, Cohen's personal expression of sacred principles

and beliefs reveals his earnest wish to join the ranks of Jews and non-Jews alike who, throughout history, have searched deeply for spiritual meaning. *Book of Mercy*, a truthful testament of Cohen's spiritual search, serves as a spiritual centre or reference point from which to examine the rest of his *oeuvre*.

Notes

[1]Although Zen Buddhism is another tradition that Cohen has no doubt been influenced by and is worth exploring, *Book of Mercy*'s relationship to this tradition will not be explored in this paper in order to maintain a clear and consistent focus on *Book of Mercy*'s relationship to Judaeo-Christian tradition.

[2]While David is "the typical Israelite" (Clifford 22: 7) and is therefore a type of the Psalmist, critics attribute only seventy-three (just under half) of the psalms to David, while the remainder are attributed to various other authors that include Asaph, Solomon and Moses (*Study Bible* 455).

[3]Although Psalm 47 is actually attributed to the sons of Korah and not to David, I will continue with the designation "the Psalmist" for the sake of clarity.

[4]Music is integral to the Book of Psalms: "The Psalms were set to the accompaniment of stringed instruments and served as the Temple hymnbook and devotional guide for the Jewish people. . . . The Septuagint uses the Greek word *Psalmoi* as its title for this book, meaning poems sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments" (*Study Bible* 455).

[5]Italics in all quotations from the Book of Psalms are in accordance with the Authorized Version of the King James Bible and indicate words added to the translation for clarity (Finbow).

[6]See Chapter One for further discussion of these psalms.

[7]Linda Hutcheon notes this paradox in Cohen's work: "[T]he dissolution of the self in Cohen's poetry is always expressed by a voice that suggests a potent sense of self" (*Poetry* 43). When the psalmist empties himself out and submits his will to God he necessarily asserts the potency of his own will. He tries to make his will one with God's; if he succeeds, he enacts his will properly in concert with God's.

[8]For anyone familiar with the *Amidah*, the presence of *kedushas* or *kedushshas*--literally holiness--in Psalm 43 of *Book of Mercy* provides an obvious parallel between this psalm and the third prayer of the *Amidah*. In the *Jewish Encyclopedia* Lewis N. Dembitz describes the connection between the *kedushsha* and this third prayer (463):

> The third benediction of the 'Amidah is called "Holiness of the Name" . . . , to distinguish it from "Holiness of the Day," the benediction which refers to the Sabbath or a festival; but "Kedushsha" in popular speech means the body of the Third Benediction, as recited aloud by the reader in the 'Amidah, with the responses in which the congregation joins. Of responses there are at least three: (1) "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa.vi.3); (2) "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place" (Ezek.iii.12); (3) "The Lord shall reign for ever, even thy God, O Zion, unto all generations. Praise ye the Lord" (Ps.cxlvi.10).

[9]See Frost 124-60 and 167 for a highly detailed study of numerological symbolism in Donne's *Devotions*.

[10]In fact the only notable or convincing numerical correspondences in *Book of Mercy* are those that centre on the number 50. This is the number of psalms in the volume and was Cohen's age in the year of its publication, 1984 (Dorman 324). Fifty is also the total number of days that the Israelites of the Book of Exodus wandered in the wilderness (forty-nine) plus the fiftieth day at Sinai on which "they received the divine revelation, not least the word of mercy to forgive and restore" (Dorman 323). Dorman and Rawlins convincingly argue that Cohen wrote fifty psalms in *Book of Mercy* to create a record of his own wandering in the wilderness and his efforts to escape "from enslavement" and return to God. See

their pages 323-24 for further discussion of numerical correspondence in *Book of Mercy*.

[11]Frost takes up the issue of Donne's "literary self-consciousness" in the *Devotions* in a way relevant not only to this work but to *Book of Mercy*, if we look at the latter in some degree as a Jewish counterpart to Donne's Christian spiritual autobiography:

> Thus Donne certainly is, in the words of Joan Webber, 'vastly and precisely interested in himself,' and justifiably so. But I question whether his literary self-consciousness is really 'a peculiarly seventeenth-century phenomenon.' Rather, it is an artistic pose as old as Paul or for that matter, Hezekiah [whom Donne mentions in the *Devotions*]. The blurring of the boundary between art and life certainly occurs with Augustine and Dante, and almost obsessively so with Petrarch. That this highly artificial self, at the same time intimate and formally structured, should be both private and public is neither a contradiction nor an indication of bad taste: It is a necessary requirement of Christian spiritual autobiography. (76-77)

Most of the comments here apply to *Book of Mercy*. Cohen's psalmist, even when he submits his will to God, is self-obsessed. The personae of singer, psalmist, husband, father and priest all have potential autobiographical links with Cohen and thus blur the line between art and life. Cohen's psalms, like Donne's *Devotions*, are intimate and formally structured, private and public. The artificial construction of the psalms--as opposed to an unedited spontaneity of composition--does not make either the *Devotions* or *Book of Mercy* any less sincere than a spontaneous, uncrafted prayer.

[12]Although the result of the process of *tikkun* is appreciated in *Book of Mercy*, Pollock argues that the entire process is important to all of A. M. Klein's

work: it is a central element in his unchanging poetic "vision of the One in the Many" (3).

[13]According to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* a *mitzvot* is "a commandment, precept, or religious duty" (162).

Chapter Three:

Book of Mercy and the *Oeuvre* of Leonard Cohen

Book of Mercy (1984) takes a central place in Cohen's *oeuvre* because it casts new light on his career as a whole. With the publication of *Book of Mercy*, one could see Cohen's earlier work, in particular the 1966 novel *Beautiful Losers*, from a different perspective. The emptiness and darkness that many critics see in the novel are heightened when contrasted with the fulfillment and light of *Book of Mercy*. The latter work contains a completion and unity that fulfills the incompleteness and isolation of the former. *Book of Mercy* has also been viewed effectively by Stephen Scobie and Linda Hutcheon as the final volume of a trilogy that includes *The Energy of Slaves* (1972) and *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978). In *Book of Mercy* Cohen recasts ideas that develop in these works; the volume therefore marks a sense of completion, through a retrospection or overview, of Cohen's thought to that point. Further, certain works appearing between 1978 and 1983 hint at the new direction that Cohen's thought will take in *Book of Mercy*. Finally, works contemporary with and post-*Book of Mercy* both reflect a strong continuity with *Book of Mercy* and its ideas, and show that this volume marks the beginning of a new confidence in Cohen's work.

In *Book of Mercy* the psalmist achieves the fulfillment and completion that F., Edith and the unnamed narrator are unable to achieve in *Beautiful Losers*. The latter are unable to find enduring satisfaction in prayer because they have no God to pray to. Cohen's psalmist does, however, and looks straight to God for meaning and self-understanding through prayer in *Book of Mercy*. While characters in *Beautiful Losers* chase after false and empty ecstasies that include sexual excess and drug use, the psalmist discards these false ecstasies in *Book of Mercy* for the genuine ecstasy of union with God. Whatever ecstasy is sought, however, in both

Book of Mercy and *Beautiful Losers* the pursuit of ecstasy is linked with the desire to annihilate the self. Yet *Book of Mercy* helps us to see that this quest, which is a source of hope and transcendence in this volume, is a darker force in *Beautiful Losers*. The desire for self-loss is paradoxical when put alongside the overwhelmingly hurtful despair that must inevitably overcome those for whom God is not there to absorb the surrendered self. The characters of *Beautiful Losers*, particularly F., cynical, insincere and hopeless, come to understand that the annihilation of the self without belief in God or a benevolent Other in the universe must result in one's own madness or destruction.

In *Beautiful Losers*, F. and the narrator--the latter to be named "I" (Scobie, *Magic* 107)--yearn for relief from their suffering and struggle toward the sacred through prayer. F., "I"'s friend, mentor, and self-appointed teacher, writes his greatest prayer in a long letter to "I." Stan Dragland describes this prayer, the prose-poem "God is alive. Magic is Afoot," as "the statement of faith that F. calls 'the sweet burden of my argument'" (Afterword 264). In this prayer, F. leaps "beyond faith in human creative capacity to the divine source of it all" (Afterword 264). F. proclaims that God is alive but juxtaposes his proclamations with accounts of the naysayers who claim that God is dead:

> God is alive. Magic is afoot. . . . God never died. God was ruler though his funeral lengthened. . . . Though his death was published round and round the world the heart did not believe. . . . Many weak men lied. They came to God in secret and though they left him nourished they would not tell who healed. Though mountains danced before them they said that God was dead. Though his shrouds were hoisted the naked God did live. This I mean to whisper to my mind. This I mean to laugh with in my mind. (167-68)

It seems that F., recording his final words of wisdom as he languishes in a mental hospital, attempts to convince himself and "I" of God's existence when he recounts this prayer. F. wrestles with the doubt and belief that struggle for control in his mind; he wishes to laugh in the comfort of God's existence but knows that it is too late for him to believe. Although F. intuits the truth of God's existence, he cannot bring himself to accept it fully. This inability to believe is the crux of F.'s suffering and causes him pain that he admits he cannot overcome: "Dear Father, accept this confession: we did not train ourselves to Receive because we believed there wasn't Anything to Receive and we could not endure with this Belief" (190). The past tense of this confession suggests that F. has finally attained a new belief in a greater Other, but this belief comes too late to overcome his despair. Instead, F. hopes that "I" will go beyond his despair to embrace and preach the truth that F. at last realizes. F.'s words to "I" indicate F.'s own doubt and his hopes for his friend: "The truth should make me strong. I pray you, dear friend, interpret me, go beyond me. I know now that I am a hopeless case. Go forth, teach the world what I meant to be" (169). When F. asks "I": "Are you disarmed and empty, an instrument of Grace?," he does so in the hope that "I" will open himself to God (163). F.'s hopes for contentment in God's existence are placed with the narrator: F. hopes that "I" will teach his message of belief to the world.

Like F., however, "I" struggles with doubt. "I" also shares F.'s yearning for relief from suffering and emptiness. One of "I"'s early efforts to pray is heartfelt, tortured, and filled with a desperate desire for hope:

> I Am Trying To Know You In The Kitchen Where I Sit. I Fear My Small Heart. . . . O God, I Believe Your Morning Is Perfect. Nothing Will Happen Incompletely. O God, I Am Alone In The Desire Of My Education But A Greater Desire Must Be Lodged With You. I Am A Creature In

> Your Morning Writing A Lot Of Words Beginning With Capitals. Seven-Thirty In The Ruin Of My Prayer. . . . We Are All Of Us Tormented With Your Glory. . . . Be With Me As I Lose The Crumbs Of Grace. (57-58)

Like F., "I" addresses God doubtfully in his prayer. While F. tries to create God's gift of grace "to prove that Grace existed," "I" loses what small crumbs of grace he has (190). Any hope "I" may have of believing in God slips away as he utters his cynical and despairing prayer. Mental disarray is strongly evident in another of "I"'s prayers which begins: "Dear God, It Is Three In The Morning. Aimless Cloudy Semen Becomes Transparent. Is The Church Mad At Me? Please Let Me Work" (66). The random subject matter of this prayer suggests that "I"'s mind is unfocused and clouded with doubt. When he asks: "May I Pray At All?" his doubt is evident: for him there may be no God and, if so, his prayers are empty (96). With great frustration "I" asks F.: "Why couldn't you say to me what the Blessed Virgin said to the peasant girl Catherine Labouré on an ordinary street, Rue du Bac, in 18-something: 'Grace will be showered on all who ask for it with faith and fervour'" (132-33). "I" yearns for a reason to believe in God but comes up against much doubt. His faith is weak, making it difficult for him to open himself to God.

Like F. and "I" in *Beautiful Losers*, the psalmist struggles with doubt and faith in *Book of Mercy*, but the latter shows faith in God while the former consistently express doubt. When the psalmist admits to God that "[y]our cunning charlatan is trying to whip up a frisson of grace" (No. 22), he admits moments of doubt similar to those of "I" and F., who tried to create or held only "crumbs of grace." The psalmist begs God: "Help me in the rain, help me in the darkness, help me at my aimless table" (No. 46). Yet, his prayers are said with a faith that overcomes doubt. The psalmist humbly and sincerely prays to a God in whose existence and benevolence he places great confidence. In this same psalm he

affirms God's love for him: "You draw back the heart that is spilled in the world, you establish the borders of pain. Your mercy you make known to those who know your name, and your healing is discovered beneath the lifted cry" (No. 46). The psalmist does have moments of doubt, but even his doubt is offered to God: "Though I don't believe, I come to you now, and I lift my doubt to your mercy" (No. 36). He asks God to help him remain steadfast in his hope: "O shield of Abraham, affirm my hopefulness" (No. 20). The psalmist's belief in God as the source of his salvation is made clear in many of the psalms in *Book of Mercy*, including Psalm 44: "I come to you for mercy and you hear my cry, and you shelter me in my portion, and you make my deeds a warning. Blessed are you who hears the cry of each man's portion." In *Book of Mercy*, the psalmist's moments of doubt are overshadowed by greater feelings of faith and hope.

The psalmist's faith in God in *Book of Mercy* and the faithlessness of characters in *Beautiful Losers* influence efforts in both volumes to attain ecstasy in a desire for self-annihilation. Self-annihilation is desirable for the psalmist because God is there to absorb the emptied self; the psalmist believes that the emptied self will be absorbed into God's being. On the other hand, F. and Edith, as unbelievers, seek self-annihilation as a way to attain the ecstasy and forget the hope that is absent from their everyday lives. Nicole Markotic accurately observes that the characters of *Beautiful Losers* "all fail (beautifully) in their attempts to follow the paths of excess . . ." (33). I would argue that they fail because the paths are circular: they lead only back to the self, not away from the self and to God. It is because of these failures that the characters attempt again and again through various excesses to achieve an ecstatic self-annihilation. In the novel, Edith--"I"'s wife and F.'s lover--and F. make repeated attempts to annihilate the self through ecstatic union with each other, since they cannot unite with God. Edith and F.

make a unique but pitiful attempt to attain religious ecstasy when they inject themselves with a mixture of two types of holy water: water (as they inform "I") from the seventeenth-century Mohawk saint Catherine Tekakwitha's spring and water ostensibly from the "Miraculous Fountain at Lourdes" (115). The effect of this mixture for F. and Edith is apparently comparable to the ecstatic experience of Catherine Tekakwitha at a feast, during which her spilled wine miraculously and mysteriously covered everyone and everything around her in its purple hue (103-104): the story of the feast is the only explanation that Edith--with F.'s agreement--gives "I" about the injections' effects. Such an experience, while intense, could not bring any lasting hope or contentment to Edith and F. The lack of hope is soon evident in Edith, whose subsequent demise is noted by "I": "A week later she was under the elevator, a 'suicide'" (116). Religious ecstasy without faith drives Edith to despair and self-destruction instead of self-annihilation. In life, Edith fails to attain an anonymous ecstasy that lastingly eliminates the "particular self" (see pages 84 to 86 below for further discussion of this term). She thus realizes that death is the only way that she, an unbeliever, can finally eliminate selfhood; the extreme act of suicide is therefore a "successful" means to this end.

Before her death, Edith and F. also attempt to achieve the annihilation of the self through the ecstasies of sexual excess. Rather than seek union with God, they seek union with each other through sex since "the only union modern man [the unbeliever] recognizes is a union of the flesh" (Wain 25). F. and Edith lose themselves in the ecstasy of the "Telephone Dance" through which, as F. describes: "We became telephones!" (33). F. and Edith are united in ecstasy when they suck each other's fingers, stick them in each other's ears and kiss on the lips like friends (30). F. makes it clear to "I" that Edith and F. "lose themselves" in this union that is both sexual and communicative:

> We dug our index fingers in each other's ears. I won't deny the sexual implications. You are ready to face them now. All parts of the body are erotogenic. . . . Down with genital imperialism! All flesh can come! . . . Orgasms in the shoulder! Knees going off like firecrackers! Hair in motion! And not only caresses leading us into the nourishing anonymity of the climax, not only sucking and wet tubes, but wind and conversation and a beautiful pair of gloves, fingers blushing! (34-35)

Even beyond the loss of self through the anonymity of orgasm, F. reaches toward union through communication in the unspoken "conversation" between Edith and himself. F. says: "I *became* a telephone. Edith was the electrical conversation that went through me" (35). What Edith and F. feel / hear in the unspoken conversation is "ordinary eternal machinery," which is a metaphor for divinity in general, if not God in particular (35). Yet, although F. claims that his divine "conversation" with Edith "was the most beautiful thing I have ever felt" (36), the ecstasy apparently could not sustain either one of them in their desire for self-annihilation.

Like the "Telephone Dance," Edith and F.'s experience with the Danish Vibrator is only a temporary, empty ecstasy, in which the attainment of divinity (or at least the illusion of such attainment) cannot be sustained. They lose themselves, this time in separate sexual ecstasy, when they individually sate themselves with this autonomous, mechanical sex toy. F. describes the Danish Vibrator by its initials, *D. V.*, and thereby invites Desmond Pacey's observation that *D. V.* may be associated with "the surrender to God's will" (92); as Scobie makes clear, *D. V.* stands for the Latin phrase *deo volente* ("if God is willing") ("Magic" 108). This word play points to its parody of divine content. When F. realizes that the *D. V.* eventually "*learned to feed itself*" and watches with Edith as

it goes out into the world, he realizes that it becomes a type of parodic deity, a God of sterile lust let loose (190-91). But this God, appearing in the mechanized and sterile form of the Danish Vibrator, is a force of division, not union; F. agrees with Edith that their separate experiences with the Danish Vibrator were "beautiful," but the two are nonetheless separate selves, isolated from one another (192). They unite with the machine and not each other. F.'s comment to Edith after this incident reveals his own sense of emptiness: "Oh, Edith, something is beginning in my heart, a whisper of rare love, but I will never be able to fulfill it. It is my prayer that your husband will" (193). F., hopeless, and aware of the futility of their efforts to unite through sex, can only hope that, somehow, "I" will be able to attain a satisfactory and lasting state of "rare love."

F. realizes that the annihilation of the self, without God or a cosmic Other to surrender the self to, is destructive. Therefore F., like Edith, is not afraid to enact his own destruction. F.'s unbelief and the accompanying frustration lead to a suicide plan and, apparently, to madness. F. spends five years in a mental hospital and writes his final letter to "I" from its "Occupational Therapy Room" (155). Aware of his hopelessness, F. plans to end his life in a final ecstatic act of political fanaticism. F.'s plan, described to "I," is to blow himself up with the symbolic "statue of Queen Victoria on the north side of Sherbrooke Street" (143). Although F.'s plot fails, and he is incarcerated in a mental hospital for his attempt, this suicide mission reflects F.'s desire to bring together and unite with his political followers. Suicide is perhaps an attractive option for those who discover that all forms of ecstasy are short-lived, and who have no hope for a greater permanent ecstasy in union with God. For such an individual union with others is always followed by loneliness: there is no cosmic Other to sustain the individual in solitude.

In *Book of Mercy*, the psalmist acknowledges his own misdirected attempts to attain ecstasy outside of God. Previous efforts to annihilate the self without surrendering to God are now a source of great regret for him since he experiences the joy of willful self-surrender to God in this volume. The psalmist expresses the regret: "I allowed myself to be crushed by ignorance" and admits: "Much time, years were wasted in such a minor mode" (No. 1). He confesses to being "soiled by strategies" (No. 6) and alludes to his futile attempts to attain empty sexual ecstasy: "I pushed my body from one city to another, one rooftop to another, to see a woman bathing. I heard myself grunt. I saw my fingers glisten" (No. 7). The psalmist is animal-like and obsessive in this description of a sexual quest for an ecstasy that he realizes could never fulfill him. Such a quest is self-centred and therefore meaningless. The "light of hunted pleasure" is "thin" and cannot compare to the light of joy the psalmist feels in God's presence (No. 24).

The psalmist is thus compelled to admit his substitution of sexual pursuits for the pursuit of God. He confesses: "I turned you to desire. You saw me touch myself" (No. 35). These pursuits are misguided and sterile, spiritually and physically, as the last sentence implies. This admission, when considered in comparison with *Beautiful Losers*, recalls the empty onanism of F. and "I" as they travel to Ottawa for F.'s first parliamentary speech (97-100), as well as Edith and F.'s experience with the Danish Vibrator. Linda Hutcheon points out that in *Beautiful Losers* "all of the sex is deliberately sterile (mechanical, oral, anal) . . ." (*Fiction* 42). The sterility of the novel stands in strong contrast to the fertility that is so important to the psalmist in *Book of Mercy*. There is frequent mention of a son and daughter in the psalms, and the birth of children, particularly grandchildren, is a blessing that gives witness to continued fertility. In Psalm 25 the psalmist recalls: "[My son] married a beautiful girl, the daughter of one of our

benefactors . . . and they were blessed with children" (No. 25). Likewise he states: "[My daughter] married a goldsmith, a maker of ceremonial objects, bore children, and deepened the happiness of her parents. Every so often we gather at midnight before the Wall, our family of little families" (No. 25). In this psalm, the family is a source of fertility, united by blood and the worship of God at "the Wall." For the psalmist, hope rests in a fertility rooted in love and unity: "[W]e hope that the grandchildren will return to us. Our hope is in the distant seed" (No. 18). Fertility brings one closer to God when sex is combined with love and is part of a surrender to the will of God, not merely a selfish act.

Even Catherine Tekakwitha, the seventeenth-century Mohawk saint who does achieve ecstatic union with God during her short life, necessarily dies young and remains sterile, like Edith after her. Markotic describes the connection between Catherine and Edith: "Both women attempt to control their bodies; one in order to transcend the sexual, one in the hope of realizing a sexual completion. Both women suffer pain, and then die, easier able to determine their deaths than their own sexuality" (37). Tekakwitha, like Edith, and unlike the psalmist in *Book of Mercy*, is unable to reconcile sex with a positive and willful surrender to God. There is, however, an erotic component to the self-flagellation with which Catherine attempts to curb her sexual impulses. The "circles" that Catherine imagines a young suitor "would force through the lips of her cunt, the circles of her breasts pressed flat under him" (*Losers* 53), are replaced in reality by the "circles" of the "whips and knotted thongs" that burn her breasts and crotch (53-54). There is also a strong parallel between her violent whipping and the self-destructiveness of Edith and F., which also has an erotic component, as noted already in this chapter. Nonetheless, of the characters in *Beautiful Losers*, only Catherine Tekakwitha is able to lose herself in an ecstasy of contentment and

hopeful surrender to God. She is content because she surrenders herself to God in the firm belief that God will absorb her emptied self. She receives general absolution and the body of Christ from a Jesuit priest before her death and dies in prayer. Three centuries later, F. laments that no one recorded her final utterances when he realizes that she was closer than anyone to the perfect union, union with God and Creation in the Name: "But why didn't you record the exact sounds she made? She was playing with the Name, she was mastering the good Name, she was grafting all the fallen branches to the living Tree" (223).[1]

The Name that Catherine was mastering, the source of unity for all God's Creation, is a source of comfort for the psalmist in *Book of Mercy*: "My soul finds its place in the Name, and my soul finds its ease in the embrace of the Name . . . . Blessed is the Name which is the safety of the soul, the spine and the shield of the innermost man, and the health of the innermost breath" (No. 47). Until the psalmist found the comfort of the Name, he "could not find shelter for [his] soul," but instead "struggled with shapes and with numbers . . . " (No. 47). Peace and rest come from the unity that the psalmist finds. He affirms his unity with God, a unity that God's mercy and love allow: "I end the day in mercy that I wasted in despair. . . . Bind me, ease of my heart, bind me to your love. . . . And you say, I am in this heart, I and my name are here" (No. 41). The psalmist and Tekakwitha are able to "lose themselves" in unity with God, a unity that eludes F. and Edith. The failure of F. and Edith in their quest to empty themselves without God, and the success of Catherine Tekakwitha in her quest to empty herself into God, are underscored in *Book of Mercy* by the success of the psalmist in emptying himself into the loving God who absorbs him. *Book of Mercy* confirms the futility of all attempts to annihilate the self that are made without the desire to achieve unity with the greater being of God.

Aside from simply emphasizing the sense of waste and spiritual aimlessness present in *Beautiful Losers*--prevalent elements that could be noted without reference to subsequent Cohen texts--*Book of Mercy* causes the reader to perceive the earlier novel differently as a whole. Cohen's "new" text (*Book of Mercy*) completely changes the reader's interpretation of his "old" text(s) (*Beautiful Losers*), according to the sense of T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and of Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*. In the following passage Eliot effectively argues for the influence of the new work of art upon the old:

> [W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and that is conformity between the old and the new. (38-39)

Thus, *Book of Mercy* causes a shift in the proportions and values of each work of Cohen's in the *oeuvre* as a whole. Perceptions of *Beautiful Losers* are altered and supplemented in order to accommodate the new ideas generated in *Book of Mercy*. In this argument, *Beautiful Losers* and *Book of Mercy* may be seen together as two integral components of a mystical journey that Cohen has recorded. As an earlier part of this journey, *Beautiful Losers*, in light of *Book of Mercy*, looks like the "dark night of the soul" through which most mystics and saints (St. John of the Cross, for example, the most well-known proponent of this metaphor) must pass

before they repent and seek illumination and eternal union with the Godhead. A "re-reading" of *Beautiful Losers* in relation to *Book of Mercy* contrasts the latter volume, as Cohen's fullest literary record of faith and spiritual fulfillment, with the former, as Cohen's fullest literary record of cynicism and spiritual thirst.

While Cohen explores the struggle toward belief in and union with God in *Beautiful Losers* and describes the fulfillment of this struggle in *Book of Mercy*, the progression toward such fulfillment is not entirely contained within these two volumes. The progress of Cohen's ideas on prayer, union, God, the self and selves may also be traced from *The Energy of Slaves* (1972) through *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978), to *Book of Mercy* (1984). Ideas explored in the first two volumes are expanded, resolved and recast in *Book of Mercy*. In this way, the above volumes form a trilogy, an idea put forth by both Stephen Scobie and Linda Hutcheon. Scobie describes these volumes as "the major trilogy of Cohen's self-deconstruction" ("Counterfeiter" 13), while Hutcheon argues that these volumes have in common "the thematic stress on the difficulties and failures of both aesthetic expression and human emotion . . ." (*Poetry* 25).

In *The Energy of Slaves*, according to Scobie, "[Cohen's] prayers have been debased . . . " (*Cohen* 161). In "animalistic terms" he expresses his desire for women (*Cohen* 161). In the poem "Whenever I happen to see you . . . " the poet admits: "I have often prayed for you / like this / Let me have her" (*Slaves* 106). In "How we used to approach *The Book of Changes*: 1966" the poet utters a similar prayer: "[G]ive her to me and let me be for a moment in this miserable and bewildering wretchedness, a happy animal" (*Slaves* 65; qtd. in Scobie, *Cohen* 161). The poet, who acknowledges that "only my greed remains to me," prays for a woman to give him temporary relief from the overwhelming pain of life (*Slaves* 65).

The poet / speaker also admits that his prayer is one of animal greed in *Death of a Lady's Man*. In "Another Room" he repeats the prayer: "Let me have her" from *The Energy of Slaves* (22). "The Asthmatic," according to the voice of the commentator, is "greed disguised as the usual prayer . . . " (*Death* 65). Cohen fully develops the cynicism toward prayer in this volume. The poem "The Next One," in which the speaker describes an encounter with "a girl and a poet," contains the following affirmation of prayer's negative effect: "The poet gave me back my spirit / which I had lost in prayer" (92). Prayer destroys one's passion instead of serving as a vehicle for the expression of passion as it does in *Book of Mercy*. In the same way that the above pieces reveal an early shaping of Cohen's approach to prayer, so does part of the commentary to "The Drawing," ostensibly "from the small Montreal notebook of 1954":

> Perfect my twisted ways
> one cries at last at last one cries
> when neighbours do not matter
> or the love one sleeps beside
>
> One cries at last his faith hewn down
> by partial journeys into love
> O ruins of blind enterprise
> O coward shortened pilgrimage (*Lady's Man* 127)

These verses suggest that Cohen's prayers continue to be negative or cynical cries of anguish. These cries seem to show genuine yearning for help, but they are, again, directed without hope or a belief that there is a God to hear them.

Book of Mercy marks the turning away from this negative attitude toward prayer. In this volume, Cohen makes prayer the medium and theme becomes

form: spirited, heartfelt prayer is uttered by the psalmist with an unshaken belief in God and God's mercy. Prayer, for the psalmist, specifically within the Jewish tradition, is a "way of speaking to eternity" that is beautiful and cherished (No. 15). The psalmist still admits his weaknesses in these prayers, but these admissions are made within a context of belief and hope, not doubt and despair: "I cry from my defeat and you straighten my thought. It is your name that makes the cry a healing, it is your mercy that guards the heart in the panic of yes and no" (No. 44). The psalmist is aware of his shortcomings but perceives prayer as a way to ask God's help in overcoming them.

A similar progression in the trilogy from cynical doubt to genuine belief may be traced regarding love and unity in Creation. The poet delivers a harsh verdict on the effects of love in the world in this untitled poem from *The Energy of Slaves*:

> Love is a fire
> It burns everyone
> It disfigures everyone
> It is the world's excuse
> for being ugly (105)

The world is united by love, but only in pain and ugliness. Unity is again the bitterly parodic subject of the following piece:

> One of the lizards
> was blowing bubbles
> as it did pushups on the tree trunk
> I did pushups this morning
> on the carpet
> and I blew bubbles of Bazooka

last night in the car
I believe the mystics are right
when they say we are all One (123)

The absurd humour of this poem is matched only by the cynicism of the final two lines; the mystic belief in the unity of the world's creatures is mocked.

The speakers continue to attack the notion of unity in *Death of a Lady's Man* but also show the beginnings of a true yearning for this unity--between men and women, and between God and humanity--if not any belief in its possibility. In the commentary to "The Good Fight," the speaker states that men and women "are each other's Mystery" and asks with concern: "When will we collaborate again, men and women, to establish a measure for our mighty and different energies?" (115). Resolution is possible only with the realization of the Lord's unity in the world, yet even this realization is undercut: "When Jerusalem has been dissolved the Temple will arise in every heart where men will study the art of naming and women will focus the powers of life and death, all in the great clarity of understanding that the Lord is One. This is the disgusting thrust of a Sunday school mind" (115). The unity of men and women taking their appropriate roles in the world is, as the last line indicates, scornfully rejected by the speaker. The speaker is less cynical in "The Centres," however, when he records that God gives destruction and punishment an equal place with creation and reward in the world's unity. After describing his own appetite for destruction and the wind's destruction of a poppy, the speaker concludes: "*Worship me here*, says the Lord two years later. *My world is one*" (208). In *Death of a Lady's Man*, various personae present different--but largely negative--views of unity in Creation, but the very presence of these concerns in the volume indicates that unity is becoming an important issue for Cohen.

Unity is also an important issue in *Book of Mercy*, in which, however, rejection of the concept becomes acceptance. The psalmist fervently longs and prays for unity for members of his family, and for men and women, all in God. The psalmist prays that his son may be allowed to unite with God, asking: "[D]o not cut off the soul of my son on my account. Let the strength of his childhood lead him to you, and the joy of his body stand him upright in your eyes" (No. 33). The assignment of women and men to separate roles, which, according to the psalmist, God wills, is no longer "the disgusting thrust of a Sunday school mind" (*Lady's Man* 115). Instead, accepting a role with dignity reflects a clear understanding of God's judgment. The psalmist, who initially laments that he is "estranged" from his sister because of their separate roles in society (No. 23), realizes with assurance that they are actually united in the Lord when they each do God's work in their own way: "Suddenly the judgment was clear. Let your sister, with her towers and gardens, praise the incomparable handiwork of the Lord, but you are pledged to the breath of the Name. Each of you in your proper place" (No. 23). The unity of the "family of little families" in Psalm 25, mentioned above in the discussion of *Beautiful Losers* (see pages 73-74 above), also emphasizes the psalmist's belief in unity. Unity on earth is a sign of the higher unity of God. God is "king of absolute unity," a final unity in which there are no more divisions in the world or between God's creatures (No. 20).

The yearning for unity in the trilogy is complemented by Cohen's increasing awareness in each volume that art and the many selves that the artist creates, whether deliberately or unintentionally, are causes of disunity. The selves or masks--the personae--of Cohen the artist separate him from others, from himself and from God. In *The Energy of Slaves*, Cohen shows that he is aware of various

masks that the artist puts on, masks that serve only to give the illusion of self-revelation:

> Over there a little altar
> Over there one city or another
> Over there your miserable 'sex life'
> Spare us the details
> You hide behind your nakedness
> When you are bold enough
> You impose it like a bad government (57)

The "altar" at which the priest-poet prays, the cities that the stranger-poet wanders through and the "miserable 'sex life'" that the failed Lothario-poet experiences are masks, not revelations. Through his address to the second-person "character," Cohen shows that the "nakedness" of the poet who pretends to expose himself through art is merely another mask that he hides behind. Here, Cohen's brutal honesty is yet *another* mask (although honesty does not mask but, rather, reveals Cohen in *Book of Mercy*). In *The Energy of Slaves* the artist creates multiple selves in his or her art, under which any possible "true self" is buried. Cohen categorically rejects the many selves or masks of the poet: ". . . I am now broken down, no leader of the borning world, no saint for those in pain, no singer, no musician, no master of anything, no friend to my friends, no lover to those who love me" (65; qtd. in Scobie, *Cohen* 158). Scobie describes the impact of this passage: "It would be difficult to envisage a more concise and comprehensive rejection of his old roles" (*Cohen* 158). This rejection is paradoxical, however, because as much as Cohen may condemn the masks of the poet, he cannot escape them. In this volume Cohen paradoxically dons the mask of the anti-poet in an effort to voice his rejection of masks. Whether Cohen's anti-poems are

"deliberately bad" or "rhetorically impressive" they are completely under Cohen's "aesthetic control" (Scobie, *Cohen* 159). Through the persona of the anti-poet Cohen puts aside his old selves--the lover, the singer--and pushes against the boundaries of his previous poetry to make a new mask out of self-loathing and self-disgust.

Cohen's concern with the artist's masks or selves becomes even more complex and paradoxical in *Death of a Lady's Man*. In this volume, as in *The Energy of Slaves*, it is clear that Cohen is well aware of the many masks he has worn, the many personae he has created. In "The Price of This Book" one such persona states: "I need [your money] to keep my different lives apart" (168). This ironic statement indicates that the speaker needs the profits from this book, his art, to prevent a single "true self" from emerging out of the multiple selves he has created through his art. Many of these selves, mentioned in *The Energy of Slaves*, appear throughout *Death of a Lady's Man*, as Ken Norris points out: "A number of personas pass before us and speak their piece: Cohen the pop star, Cohen the failed artist, Cohen the revolutionary, Cohen the husband, Cohen the religious seeker" (54). Cohen approaches these personae with a cynical sense of their failure and thereby rejects them. The adjective "failed" seems appropriate to describe all of these personae, not only that of the artist. The persona of the religious seeker, for instance, is a failure. In "I Should Not Say You" the speaker states the importance of the Name in a rhythmic prose style similar to that of *Book of Mercy*, but he concludes the piece with a rejection of the Name:

> Without the Name the wind is a babble, the flowers are a jargon of longing. Without the Name I am a funeral in the garden. Waiting for the next girl. Waiting for the next prize. Without the Name sealed in my heart I am ashamed. It is not sealed. I am ashamed. Without the Name I bear

> false witness to the glory. Then I am this false witness. Then let me continue. (63)

The speaker expresses a desire to "continue" his life in the absence of the Name. He will not waste time in regret that the Name is not in his heart, and thus fails as a religious seeker.

These failed personae or "images of self" are examples of the particular self that Cohen knows one must eradicate in order to attain the absolute self. The need for this eradication is what the speaker of "The End of My Life in Art" learns from his mentor Roshi: "Destroy particular self and absolute appears" (*Lady's Man* 193). The particular self is a dependence on earthly things and is marked by fear without faith. Cohen records this insight in the speaker's observation of Roshi hanging from a branch: "He hung from the branch again. He looked down fearfully. He was afraid of falling. He was afraid of dying. He was depending on the branch and on his teeth. This is the particular self" (193). When one is wrapped up in the concerns of the particular self, one is too distracted to achieve the absolute self.[2]

In *Death of a Lady's Man* no absolute self rises above the particular selves that mask it; Cohen makes no attempt to eliminate the many particular selves that appear in the volume. Particular, conflicting selves or "images of self" are established and there is no "revelation of the absolute"; there is never "a true self revealed" (Norris 54). As Scobie suggests, "the speaking voice of 'Leonard Cohen' assumes too many contradictory positions ever to be assimilated back into any coherent picture of a unified self" ("Counterfeiter" 14). Even the particular self of the author is divided and masked by the voice of the commentator, which alternates between extremes of subjectivity and objectivity within a role that is ostensibly an objective one. The reader can never be certain how closely the "self"

of the commentator is supposed to be associated with the "self" of the author. This is especially clear in the poem "Final Examination" and its commentary: "Leonard" is described in the poem while his death is examined in the commentary. The reader must wonder whose voice is being assumed in these passages when the commentator admits: "I swear to the police that I have appeared, and do appear, as one of his [Leonard's] voices" (212). Cohen is aware of the many selves in *Death of a Lady's Man* but perhaps even he can't keep track of them all.

These selves, which owe a debt to Irving Layton's concept of the "murdered selves," a Nietzschean formulation in which one grows and casts off selves constantly,[3] are ultimately mistaken versions of the self that must be shed in *Book of Mercy* to make way for a new self that has not yet been born. Striving to be free from falsehood and self-deception, this self can only be fully realized with God's help and mercy. This new self is humble and self-deprecating before God and asks for God's mercy; the power of transformation is God's and not the poet's. In *Book of Mercy* Cohen eliminates many of the competing voices of the particular selves and achieves what is, for the most part, the single voice of a unified self. Scobie notes the difference between Cohen's last two published volumes: "In contrast to the multiple voices and tones of *Death of a Lady's Man*, *Book of Mercy* is obsessively singular in voice, and entirely consistent in tone" ("Counterfeiter" 14). While Scobie is right to note a shift *toward* univocality in *Book of Mercy* from the multivocality of *Death of a Lady's Man*, he does not take into account the different voices of first- and third-person pronoun speakers, and the wide range of tones--anger, fear, righteousness, contentment and praise--that are present in the later work. The presence of a largely unified self does, however, set *Book of Mercy* apart from the first two volumes of the "trilogy." In *Book of Mercy* the

psalmist acknowledges the many particular failed selves that he has created, as the speakers of *The Energy of Slaves* and *Death of a Lady's Man* do; he rejects them, however, without letting them assert themselves. Scobie points out that Cohen discards the particular selves of "minor singers" and "second-rate priests" (No. 17; qtd. in "Counterfeiter" 15) and reminds us that "Cohen . . . means priest" (15). Through the persona of the psalmist Cohen also discards the "cunning charlatan" who "is trying to whip up a frisson of grace" (No. 22). This charlatan may be the lazy and selfish poet or artist who "thoroughly document[s]" the "muffled cry of his heart" and who "wants a free ride and a little on the side" (No. 22). The psalmist has been the charlatan, but he does not continue to play the role in *Book of Mercy*.

Cohen does not always discard these particular selves in *Book of Mercy*, however, but sometimes redirects their focus onto God. Cohen records God's embrace of the failed husband or lover who is left by his beloved; the psalmist imagines that God tells him "*it is you who have hidden yourself*" and instructs him: "*Clear me in your troubled heart*" (No. 34). The psalmist realizes that God will embrace his many selves or roles if he can unite them in the single purpose of loving God. Thus, the psalmist, whether as husband, father or artist, finds inner peace and becomes one unified and absolute self[4] when he is "pledged to the breath of the Name" (No. 23). God must be the focus of each person's life, no matter what roles he or she plays, because "all that is not you is suffering, all that is not you is solitude rehearsing the arguments of loss. All that is not you is the man collapsing against his own forehead, and the forehead crushes him" (No. 39). Without God one is alone, crushed in the solipsism of a closed life; but when one discovers a purpose in devotion to God, the heart is eased. One's different roles may therefore serve as a unifying, rather than divisive, force in one's life.

Although the multiple selves become part of a more unified self in *Book of Mercy*, one should naturally consider whether this sincere self of the psalmist who yearns for God is merely another mask of Cohen's, another self to be discarded eventually like any other. Yet this question is best illuminated when considered, not with regard to the "trilogy," but in light of Cohen's work shortly following *Death of a Lady's Man*, and his work contemporary with and post-*Book of Mercy*. Hutcheon observes that Cohen's songs from the time of *Book of Mercy*'s publication and since indicate a return to the irony that is dropped in *Book of Mercy*, and they therefore make it "tempting to see *Book of Mercy* as a kind of 'sport' or aberration" (*Poetry* 51). Are there any works that share the sincere approach of *Book of Mercy*? While there are no other full volumes of new material to consider, some previously unpublished poetry is contained in Cohen's most recent collection, *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs* (1993) and in *Writing Away: The PEN Canada Travel Anthology* (1994). In the former volume, fortunately, the previously unpublished poems are individually dated in the "Uncollected Poems" section, making chronological readings easier. Cohen's last four albums, released between 1979 and 1992, and the music video *I Am a Hotel* (1984), also come within the scope of this discussion. From study of these various works in relation to *Book of Mercy* I have concluded that *Book of Mercy* heralds the refinement of a new world vision for Cohen, in which he accepts God and himself without regret or anguish. In these works Cohen no longer doubts himself or his right to speak, either playfully or seriously, regardless of the chaos around him, and no matter how flawed his message may be.

A number of images and themes that are developed in *Book of Mercy*, some of which are employed cynically or ironically in *Beautiful Losers*, *The Energy of Slaves* and *Death of a Lady's Man*, are employed without cynicism or irony as

early as 1978, the latter volume's year of publication. Evidence from pieces of this period supports the argument that Cohen's approach to sincerity begins in the six years preceding the publication of *Book of Mercy*. Ideas presented at this time are the first indicators of the change of voice that Cohen will undergo in *Book of Mercy*. The uncollected poem "Every Pebble," from 1978, indicates a new turning of the will toward God, a sense of purpose in earnestly fulfilling God's will. In the fourth stanza the speaker realizes in a dream that his spiritual sanctuary in God begins in the physical world. When he directs his acts on earth toward God, he dwells within God's home:

> I dreamed that I was given song
> to be my only proof
> that my true dwelling place with you
> has neither ground nor roof
> nor windows to look out of, Lord
> nor mirrors to look in
> nor singing to be out of it
> nor dying to begin (*Stranger* 399-400)

The speaker understands from his dream that he does not have to die or yearn for death to become close to God. He can grow closer to God simply by living in and singing of God's world. The next stanza, the only one italicized in the poem, seems to contain God's response to the speaker. God, addressing the speaker as a "child," urges him to live simply and expresses joy at his realization that he is loved by God with all of Creation:

> *. . . do not strive so hard to climb*
> *from what is sound and deep*
> *I love the dream that you've begun*

beneath my evergreen
I love the pebble and the sun
and all that's in between (400)

The speaker gains inner peace from God's message and can live simply in the truth of God's love. The profundity of God's love is simple and all-embracing: the speaker knows that God accepts him in his imperfection. He can thus announce with confidence: "I offer up these shabby days that fray before your sight" (400). The offering of the imperfect and the everyday is a worthy offering that God lovingly accepts.

God's acceptance of the imperfect is a fundamental belief of the psalmist in *Book of Mercy*. With the same peace of mind he realizes that God loves the simple as well as the learned: "The meditations of the great are above me, and the entwining of the letters is beyond my skill. I cannot climb down to the vehicles of holiness, and my dreams do not ascend. But you have taught the heart to search itself in simple ways, with broom and rag, and you do not abandon my heart to the dust" (No. 44). God does not demand complex, intellectual "reachings" toward God or self-examinations; to search one's heart with the "broom and rag" of mundane thoughts or prayers is enough. The psalmist knows that as long as he truly yearns for God in his heart, God will embrace him.

A necessary condition for such thoughtful self-examination and yearning for God is solitude, which is another concept that Cohen begins to develop prior to *Book of Mercy*. Cohen emphasizes the importance of solitude as a source of healing in the song "Our Lady of Solitude" from the album *Recent Songs* (1979) and the 1981 poem "A Deep Happiness" from *Stranger Music*. In the song, Cohen thanks the "Queen of Solitude" "[f]or keeping me so close to thee / While so many, oh so many stood apart" (qtd. in *Stranger* 301). She has comforted Cohen and

protected his soul from injury with her embrace: "All summer long she touched me / She gathered in my soul / From many a thorn, from many a thicket" (301). Solitude is necessary because it allows one to contemplate and seek meaning in his or her pain and joy. One does not experience these emotions blindly without learning from them. In "A Deep Happiness" the "truth of solitude" is the source of happiness. The speaker knows that this solitude, this "loneliness will bring you home" to peace and joy (*Stranger* 398).

In *Book of Mercy* Cohen develops the concept of solitude further, describing it as a necessary condition for those who wish to unite their will with God's. The psalmist is grateful for his solitude because it brings him closer to God, and he devotes Psalm 9 to giving thanks for God's gift of loneliness:

> Blessed are you who has given each man a shield of loneliness so that he cannot forget you. You are the truth of loneliness, and only your name addresses it. Strengthen my loneliness that I may be healed in your name, which is beyond all consolations that are uttered on this earth. Only in your name can I stand the rush of time, only when this loneliness is yours can I lift my sins toward your mercy. (No. 9)

In the contemplation that solitude permits, one may be healed and consoled in the remembrance of God's mercy, and one may offer oneself to God in the quiet of prayer. The psalmist understands that loneliness reminds him of his incompleteness and therefore causes him to seek this completeness in union with God. His loneliness is relieved by the knowledge that it may be offered, along with his sins and imperfections, to God.

Through his writing Cohen tells us that God loves us in both our goodness and weakness. God wants us simply to believe in this love and to praise Creation. One should not waste time seeking proof of God's existence because it is found

everywhere in the forms of Creation. In 1983, only a year before the publication of *Book of Mercy*, Cohen wrote the poem "The Embrace," which he describes cynically in another piece from that year, "Fragment From a Journal," as having "four stanzas of eight lines each, which certified that I received the Holy Spirit, attained to a deep enlightenment, circumcised my soul with the Wine of Love, and 'accustomed myself to the clemency of the Lord'" (*Stranger* 386). Both "The Embrace" and "Fragment" are included in *Stranger Music*, but the pieces are physically separated from each other by five other poems. This separation, together with the addition to "The Embrace" of a fifth stanza of four lines beyond the original "four stanzas," implies perhaps that "The Embrace" had been rewritten and reconceived; "The Embrace" in present form is not undercut by Cohen's cynical view of the original poem in "Fragment." But beyond these tentative arguments, "The Embrace" in present form contains the sincerity of purpose that permeates *Book of Mercy*. The poet informs us that God embraces us and forgives our sins, but not with the cold distance of a king who forgives an inferior subject: "there is no king to pardon you; / his mercy is more intimate" (*Stranger* 396). As part of God's Creation we are at one with God, and we experience the intimacy of a God whose life force fills the universe: "He does not stand before you; / he does not dwell within; / this passion has no point of view, / it is the heart of everything" (396). Attempts to quantify God or to make God into a symbol for one's beliefs are meaningless; God is one with all of Creation: all we need do is praise it. Thus, God's embrace comes when our "faith objective fails" and we no longer "need these Roman nails" of Christ's suffering to prove that God loves us (396). Instead, we should see the world itself as proof of God's existence and love for us. Cohen thus concludes "The Embrace":

But when you rise from his embrace

I trust you will be strong and free
and tell no tales about his face,
and praise Creation joyously. (397)

One who attains union with God should not try to prove to others that God exists by describing a mystical experience of Christ or of God. Rather, one should set an example of faith and praise for others to follow.

The psalmist sets such an example of faith and praise, of course, throughout *Book of Mercy*. The psalmist never tries to provide factual evidence of God's existence. Instead, he shows his faith through his praise of God and Creation: "Holy is your name, holy is your work, holy are the days that return to you. . . . Holy are the hands that are raised to you, and the weeping that is wept to you. . . . Holy, and shining with a great light, is every living thing, established in this world and covered with time, until your name is praised forever" (No. 43). The psalmist's praise is his prayer and the sign of his belief that all people and all things are united with God. Images and themes of sincerity and love of God, spread disparately and at times ambiguously over various works from 1978 to 1983, come together in the voice of the psalmist in *Book of Mercy*.

Further connections exist between *Book of Mercy* and another Cohen work of 1984, the album *Various Positions*. That the work is contemporary with *Book of Mercy* makes it of particular interest in efforts to determine the place of *Book of Mercy* within Cohen's *oeuvre*. Robert Sward and Pat Keeney Smith hoped that Cohen himself would draw parallels between *Book of Mercy* and this album but they received--perhaps unsurprisingly--little concrete analysis from him. Cohen said vaguely that "the songs are related, of course. Everybody's work is all of one piece, but *Book of Mercy* is somehow to one side" (56). Just how much *Book of Mercy* is "to one side" is an issue that has been taken up by Stephen Scobie and

Leon Wieseltier in separate articles from 1993. Both critics single out "If It Be Your Will," from *Various Positions*, as a song that shares the simplicity and emotion of *Book of Mercy*. Wieseltier states that the song is "a brilliantly simple prayer for the serenity that obedience brings" (43), while Scobie asserts: "Unsurprisingly, since it is also dated 1984, this is of Cohen's songs the one that comes closest to the mode of prayer evident in *Book of Mercy*. The address is absolutely pure in its simplicity and intensity . . ." ("Counterfeiter" 18-19). Cohen's singing voice is humble and peaceful, qualities that the song's words reflect. The first verse reveals Cohen's obedience to God and the complete submission of his will to God's:

> If it be your will
> that I speak no more,
> and my voice be still
> as it was before;
> I will speak no more,
> I shall abide until
> I am spoken for,
> if it be your will. (qtd. in *Stranger* 343)

Cohen's voice and words are devoid of irony in this piece, and Cohen gives his complete devotion to God.

The psalmist's surrender of his will to God in *Book of Mercy* is similarly complete and heartfelt.[5] He admits: "I searched among the words for words that would not bend the will away from you" (No. 4), and thereby shows his desire to fulfill God's will in the language, poetry, and song that are at his disposal. Cohen establishes a direct link between *Book of Mercy* and "If It Be Your Will" when the psalmist utters this song title as a phrase in Psalm 35, in a surrender of his will to

God's. This parallel between the two works reveals that while *Book of Mercy* certainly holds a unique place in Cohen's career, it should not be narrowly categorized as a sincere "aberration" from an otherwise broadly ironic oeuvre (Hutcheon, *Poetry* 51). There is sincerity in works of Cohen's other than *Book of Mercy*.

Another song from *Various Positions*, "Hallelujah," strengthens the latter claim, although this piece is somewhat different from "If It Be Your Will." In the former song some of the characteristic Cohen irony is mixed with the devotion of *Book of Mercy*. This hymn is, as Wieseltier described it, "a wryer sort of contemporary psalm with an unforgettable chorus. Only Cohen would rhyme 'Hallelujah' with 'What's it to ya?'" (43). The song is wry and complex: a sado-masochistic sex theme is evident in the second verse, in which a Samson-like doubter is overcome by his lust for a woman:

> Your faith was strong but you needed proof.
> You saw her bathing on the roof;
> her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you.
> She tied you to a kitchen chair
> she broke your throne, she cut your hair,
> and from your lips she drew the Hallelujah! (qtd. in *Stranger* 347)

This ironic, "coerced" "Hallelujah!" provides an interesting perspective from which to listen to the humble but confident "Hallelujah!" of the fourth verse:

> I did my best; it wasn't much.
> I couldn't feel, so I learned to touch.
> I told the truth, I didn't come to fool you.
> And even though it all went wrong,
> I'll stand before the Lord of Song

with nothing on my lips but Hallelujah! (347)

Both Cohen's words and tone here are unaffected, and he praises God with simple but strong devotion. More importantly, this verse reveals a fundamental quality of the "new Cohen voice" that was first hinted at in 1978 in "Every Pebble" (recall page 89 above: "I offer up these shabby days that fray before your sight" [qtd. in *Stranger* 400]) and then consolidated in *Book of Mercy*. This quality is, namely, a willingness to offer one's praise, one's everyday existence and even one's imperfections up to God without self-disparagement, and with a firm belief that God will accept these offerings. Cohen's confidence in the worthiness of the imperfect offering is even more strongly evident in these lines from "Hallelujah": "There's a blaze of light in every word; / it doesn't matter which you heard, / the holy or the *broken* Hallelujah!" (347; emphasis added).

Cohen's next album *I'm Your Man* (1988), a work quite different from *Various Positions*, might seem to show that by the late 1980s Cohen has completely left behind the non-ironic, devotional mood of *Book of Mercy*, yet Cohen's self-assurance lends this album a sincerity that is not lessened by its constant irony. Cohen reprises one of his favourite roles, the lover, in the title track and in "Ain't No Cure For Love," and now, in his mid-fifties, creates the new self of the "durable hipster" who playfully mocks his own physical and mental decay (Pearson 46). In "I Can't Forget" Cohen faces ageing with self-reflexive irony and humorous self-parody:

I stumbled out of bed.
I got ready for the struggle.
I smoked a cigarette,
and I tightened up my gut.
I said, This can't be me,

must be my double.
And I can't forget
I can't forget
I can't forget
but I don't remember what. (qtd. in *Stranger* 359)

The weight is starting to show and the memory is slipping, but Cohen is not afraid to exploit this new role. In another song from this album, the ageing singer of "The Tower of Song" laments: "My friends are gone and my hair is grey. / I ache in the places where I used to play" (qtd. in *Stranger* 363). Cohen parodies himself as lover and in the following much-quoted lines, mocks his role as singer: "I was born like this, I had no choice. / I was born with the gift of a golden voice" (363). The sincerity and humour of these songs comes from Cohen's self-acceptance--which reflects a continuity between "Every Pebble," "If It Be Your Will" and "Hallelujah," *Book of Mercy* and these songs. In *I'm Your Man* Cohen has the ability to take a "tongue-in-cheek" look at himself without disgust or self-reproach: he is content with his imperfect offerings and makes them without pain.

On his most recent album, *The Future* (1992), Cohen's vision, while at moments highly ironic and resigned, and at other moments very dark and nihilistic, is also accepting and self-accepting. Two particular songs from this album fulfill what Scobie calls its "cosmic pessimism," delivering a slick and ironic message of death and destruction ("Counterfeiter" 17). In "Waiting for the Miracle" Cohen's message of resignation is surrounded by "an aura of slickness" ("Counterfeiter" 17):

Nothing left to do
when you're begging for a crumb.
Nothing left to do

when you've got to go on waiting,

waiting for the miracle to come. (qtd. in *Stranger* 381, 382)

In this song there is more resignation than anguish in Cohen's voice, contrary to the serious tone that may seem more apt for such dark lyrics. There is also, however, a tone of acceptance in Cohen's voice that indicates that he has made his peace with the world's imperfection. In the album's title track Cohen announces with cool irony: "Get ready for the future: it is murder" (qtd. in *Stranger* 371). But the words of "The Future" are dark and they contain a nihilistic undercurrent, revealed in the sixth verse:

Give me back the Berlin Wall

give me Stalin and St. Paul

Give me Christ

or give me Hiroshima (372)

In the fifth verse Cohen predicts that the "breaking / of the ancient western code" will bring destruction into the world on a massive and personal scale not yet experienced (371). Hence Cohen's initially surprising "nostalgic yearning" for the oppression of the Cold War, nuclear destruction, and, perhaps, the religious conflict centred around Christ and St. Paul. Even the oppression and suffering caused by these events in history cannot match the destruction to come in the future. Yet with all of this nihilism, there is also a sense of acceptance not present in much of Cohen's earlier work. The future holds destruction, confusion and lawlessness, but the upbeat tune of the chorus undercuts its promise of chaos:[6]

Things are going to slide in all directions

Won't be nothing

Nothing you can measure any more

The blizzard of the world

has crossed the threshold

and it has overturned

the order of the soul (370)

Cohen now knows there is an "order of the soul," even if humankind foolishly destroys it. He will face the future squarely, however gloomy it promises to be. Similarly, in "Democracy," Cohen faces the harsh realities of the present with an undying hope that a more "real" or equality-based form of democracy will replace the systematic suffering, isolation and oppression that passes for democracy today:

From the wars against disorder,

from the sirens night and day,

from the fires of the homeless,

from the ashes of the gay:

Democracy is coming to the U. S. A. (qtd. in *Stranger* 367)

Although Cohen feels that democracy "ain't exactly real, / or it's real, but it ain't exactly there," in the final verse he is "still holding up this little wild bouquet: Democracy is coming to the U. S. A." (367, 369). Even facing "disorder" there is hope. In *The Future* Cohen is a prophet who serves God, not only by predicting the future, but by interpreting the world around him. Cohen puts forth his views of society with a clear sense of his role as interpreter. Like the psalmist in *Book of Mercy*, another servant of God, he accepts his role as "a singer in the lower choirs" who knows he was meant "to raise [his] voice this high, and no higher" (No. 1).

In *Book of Mercy*, however, there is no place for such irony in Cohen's pessimism. The slick, ironic pessimism of *The Future* runs counter to the straightforward, angry pessimism of Cohen's attack on the nations in *Book of Mercy*. Cohen's statements of pessimism and despair are filled only with a clear tone of disgust and bitterness: "All trade in filth, carry their filth one to another, all

walk the streets as though the ground did not recoil, all stretch their necks to bite the air, as though the breath had not withdrawn. . . . They write and they weep, as though evil were the miracle" (No. 30). Given words only, without any vocal interpretation, there is no ironic undercutting of Cohen's harsh message. The words do not seem to allow any ironic interpretation, as they do in *The Future*.

Another song from *The Future*, "Anthem," reveals a further continuity in Cohen's vision of self-acceptance, but now more in the unaffected and straightforward vein of "If It Be Your Will" and *Book of Mercy*. The voice of "Anthem" is one of contentment, as Wieseltier observes:

> [I]ts chorus, behind which a gospel choir is opulently deployed, is "Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." On the page the words seem a tiny bit trite. On the record, they are the sound of grown-up solace, of spiritualized patience, of quotidian valour. (43-44)

Cohen sings of an inner peace that he has reached and that he hopes others can reach; he accepts himself in his imperfection. He recaptures the assurance, expressed in "Every Pebble," that the imperfect offering is worthy. When the psalmist says to God in *Book of Mercy*: "Let me raise the brokenness to you, to the world where the breaking is for love" (No. 49), he expresses his wish to offer his imperfect self up to God. In "Anthem," Cohen is confident that this offering is acceptable. This confidence recalls Cohen's acceptance of the "broken Hallelujah" (see page 95 above) in "Hallelujah" (qtd. in *Stranger* 347); it also shows, therefore, a strong continuity in Cohen's work from 1984 to 1992.

Even the surviving con or gamesmanship in Cohen's work, which also reveals a continuity from 1984 to 1992, shows the influence of *Book of Mercy*'s confident vision. Cohen's video production *I Am a Hotel*, aired on the CBC less

than a month after the publication of *Book of Mercy*, strongly indicates that he has not abandoned the gamesmanship of his earlier work. In the video, according to Toronto *Globe and Mail* writer Liam Lacey, the plot "revolves around Cohen as the 'spirit of the hotel' and the guests, 'each of whom has a story.'" This project has prompted Linda Hutcheon's accurate retrospective observation in 1992 that Cohen's "old desire to shock, to play, to 'con,' is still strong and appealing as his first video, *I Am a Hotel* (1984), suggested" (*Poetry* 23). Cohen gives older and newer songs a playful reinterpretation in the growing medium of music video. Similarly, in *The Future* Cohen is confident and playful in his con games. In "Closing Time" he observes matter-of-factly that "the Holy Spirit's crying, 'Where's the beef?'" and that his companion "is a hundred but she's wearing something tight" (qtd. in *Stranger* 378, 379). In "The Future" arrogance is tempered by a humorous self-reflexive parody:

> Give me absolute control
> over every living soul
> And lie beside me, baby,
> that's an order! (qtd. in *Stranger* 370)

Leonard Cohen of 1992 is able to smile at the younger Cohen of 1970 who told Susan Lumsden in seriousness: "I want to take over the unconditional leadership of the world, I want to lead the world to a new sensibility . . ." (73). In another example of gamesmanship from "The Future," Cohen takes on the lofty role of the biblical prophet who has "seen the nations rise and fall", but he describes himself cynically and with dark humour as "the little jew / who wrote the bible" (qtd. in *Stranger* 370). The pretension of Cohen's con is superseded by its irony, and the cynicism of his con is overshadowed by his confident assertion of the prophetic role.

The sense of acceptance in *Book of Mercy*, "Anthem" and other works discussed above is evident in another poem published two years after the release of *The Future*. This poem, "On the Path," and the prose-poem "Robert Appears Again" are found in *Writing Away: The PEN Canada Travel Anthology* (1994). These poems seem to be the only published works by Cohen that do not appear in any Cohen collection or on any Cohen album. While the poems, unfortunately, are not dated by Cohen, I believe that "On the Path" may be dated at probably no earlier than 1992. The biographical references of the poem, shown in the following passage, are the basis for this dating:

> On the path of loneliness
> I came to the place of song
> and tarried there
> for half my life
> Now I leave my guitar and my keyboards
> my drawings and my poems
> my new Turkish carpets
> my few friends and sex companions
> and I stumble out
> on the path of loneliness (qtd. in Rooke 55)

Although one cannot discount Cohen's use of the poetic persona in this piece, the biographical connection between the poem's musical references and Cohen's own musical career--which has spanned about half of Cohen's life by 1992--provides convincing evidence to suggest that it is Cohen who leaves the world of music behind; hence my argument that the poem was written post-*The Future*. According to Cohen, and as earlier discussion has revealed, the path of loneliness does not lead to despair or ruin but to happiness and God. Therefore, to abandon

everything to seek this path is a positive action. Unlike the consciously self-parodic "durable hipster" of *I'm Your Man*'s "I Can't Forget" and "The Tower of Song," however, Cohen examines himself with humorless irony (Pearson 46). In the remainder of the poem Cohen makes peace with himself and his past and humbly asks God to come to him in his decay:

> I am old but I have no regrets
> not one
> though I am angry and alone
> and filled with fear and desire
> Bend down to me
> from your mist and vines
> O high one, long-fingered
> and deep-seeing
> Bend down to this sack of poison
> and rotting teeth
> and press your lips to the light of my heart (55)

Cohen yearns for union with God as the psalmist does so fervently and devotedly in *Book of Mercy*. Cohen has written a poem in which, like *Book of Mercy*, the postmodern angst and self-loathing of *The Energy of Slaves* is completely absent. With "no regrets" Cohen accepts himself and his life as they are.

When one is able to view Cohen's entire *oeuvre* in this retrospective light, a case may be made for *Book of Mercy*'s central place within it. Earlier works lead, however circuitously, to *Book of Mercy*. Ideas contained in these works are given a new form in *Book of Mercy*, or they are rejected. Works dated from the same time or after *Book of Mercy* show either a strong, non-ironic reiteration of ideas from this volume, an ironic return to the con or gamesmanship of earlier works, or

in some cases, both. Yet, whatever approach Cohen takes in these works, he speaks with a surer sense of purpose, a more confident feeling of artistic vocation. Self-doubt in earlier works has been replaced by self-assurance in later ones. Cohen sincerely believes in the validity of the "imperfect offering," and no amount of irony or game playing can lessen the impact of this belief on his works. As Cohen's output steadily decreases it is uncertain what the tone of his next work, if indeed such a work is forthcoming, will be. His straightforwardness and sincerity in *Book of Mercy* shocked readers used to the ambiguities and con games of the earlier Cohen; the undisguised honesty of later pieces such as "Anthem" and "On the Path" continues to surprise. Thus, the "sincere Cohen" may seem to be the anomaly of the many selves of Cohen; and yet, this sincere self has maintained a prominent place in Cohen's *oeuvre* since the mid-1980s. It appears that, as long as he continues to create, the *yearning* for sincerity will not disappear from the works of Leonard Cohen.

Notes

[1]The "living Tree" most likely refers to the Tree of Life, a Kabbalistic symbol of unity. Patricia A. Morley states: "The living, all-embracing tree is a favourite metaphor in the cabala . . . " (*Moralists* 89).

[2]Cohen is also aware, however, that the attainment of the absolute self, because it requires the destruction of the personae that make up the particular self, includes the destruction of the artist. A notable text-commentary pairing helps to make this point. Significantly, of the text and accompanying commentary pairings in the volume, only one pair does not share the same title. The commentary to "My Life in Art," in which the speaker notes Roshi's realization "Destroy particular self and absolute appears," does not share the title of the text (193). Instead, the commentary is titled "The End of My Life in Art," implying a correlation between the destruction of the particular self and the end of the speaker's life as an artist.

[3]For excellent studies of Layton's use of the idea of overcoming the self and other Nietzschean concepts, see: "Layton and Nietzsche" by Wynne Francis, in *Canadian Literature* 67 (1976): 39-52; and "Layton, Nietzsche and Overcoming" by Kurt Van Wilt, in *Essays on Canadian Writing* 10 (1978): 19-42.

[4]With further relevance to the absolute self, particularly as regards the last two volumes of the "trilogy," Cohen expounds on the concept in an interview with Alan Twigg, published in 1988, but taken from interviews conducted in 1979, 1984 and 1985:

> The [particular] self we have is just the result of a question. The question is who am I? So we invent a self, a personality. We sustain it, we create rules for it. When you stop asking those questions in those moments of grace, as soon as the question is not asked and the dilemma is dissolved or

> abandoned, then the true self or absolute self rushes in. That's our real nourishment. (43)

Cohen equates the true self with the absolute self and indicates that it is the only self that is free from the constraints of our own questions, dilemmas and inventions. As Cohen no doubt realizes, the "moments of grace" when the absolute self "rushes in" are few and fleeting. The rest of the time we must deal with the various personalities or roles that we take on in the everyday world.

[5]For further discussion of the will in *Book of Mercy*, see pages 41 to 43 of Chapter Two.

[6]In a *Saturday Night* article of March 1993, Ian Pearson records Cohen's remarks on the mixture of dark message and upbeat tune in *The Future*'s title track: "'I don't think you can divorce the fact it's a hot little track and you can dance with "The Future,"' [Cohen] advises. 'If you couldn't, I think it would be really dismal'" (48).

Conclusion:

On the Path

Sincerity permeates each prayer in *Book of Mercy*, in which Cohen makes heartfelt and provocative comments that signal a personal concern with the issues of nationalism, world conflict, imperialism, religious and secular community, family unity and the unity of the individual with God. In this volume Cohen is driven by the need to fulfil an evangelical purpose, and he chooses sincerity, rather than irony, as the ideal tone in which to undertake this enterprise. Cohen's new voice of sincerity and forthrightness seems to reflect an attempt to cultivate the reader's belief in his credibility as a serious social commentator. Cohen wanted his views and his calls for change to be taken seriously. The public expression of his views in the essentially private medium of personal prayer made Cohen vulnerable to public disparagement or dismissal of *Book of Mercy* as yet another insincere mask; and Cohen's vulnerability may explain why *Book of Mercy* is the only work that he has been openly defensive about in interviews. In the case of this book, more than any other, the possibility that his ideas would be disregarded or misunderstood caused Cohen to show an unusually marked concern that *Book of Mercy* be understood properly by the reader. Even Cohen's discussion of the volume is sincere; it is free of the ironies, the ambiguities and the enigmatic statements--the con--of earlier Cohen interviews. Cohen wants the public to see *Book of Mercy* as a contemporary engagement of timeless, universal concerns, expressed in the style of the ancient religious traditions from which Cohen draws.

In *Book of Mercy*, Cohen draws on a wide range of sources within the Judaeo-Christian traditions of prayer and mysticism, including the Book of Psalms, the central Jewish prayer the *Amidah* or *Shemoneh Esreh*, and John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. These works and traditions are

employed variably, as they suit Cohen's needs and the form or theme of each prayer. In all instances of such incorporation, however, Cohen preserves the integrity and sincerity of the sources from which he draws. Doubt and frustration, as well as confidence and serenity, are expressed with as much intensity in *Book of Mercy* as they are in the Book of Psalms. The penitent and praising voice that gives life to the *Amidah* exudes a communal spirit that Cohen longs for in his prayers. A feeling of personal wretchedness combined with a firm belief in God's mercy and forgiveness provides a common bond between the tortured but faithful spirits of Donne and Cohen. The ultimate mystical goal of union with God through self-knowledge and a surrender of the will to God is one that Cohen yearns and strives for with a fervour equal to that of the ancient Jewish or the fourteenth-century Christian mystics.

Book of Mercy is at the same time pained and joyous; it is self-examination and mystical prayer. The Cohen con, the gamesmanship and the irony are notably absent in this volume. The non-ironic and open-faced sincerity of *Book of Mercy* makes it the only work in Cohen's *oeuvre*--book, album or video--in which ideas are expressed in an unambiguous, straightforward manner. Here Cohen wrestles with his angel, but the wrestling continues in the works that follow *Book of Mercy*. Whether Cohen examines his relationship to God in "Hallelujah" or "If It Be Your Will"; takes a humorous look at himself in *I'm Your Man*; resumes the con of earlier work in *I Am A Hotel* or *The Future*; or takes on the role of "spin doctor for the Apocalypse" in *The Future* (qtd. in Nadel, "Ten or More" 119), he examines himself and his place in society as a man and an artist with ruthless scrutiny. Cohen accepts all facets of himself and confidently asserts his right to speak out as an artist, no matter how imperfectly he may do so.

One may still not be fully certain why Cohen would suddenly feel the need to write and publish a volume of sincere prayer, but biographical information at least provides a context for these actions. In two Cohen biographies Ira B. Nadel effectively argues that *Book of Mercy* came out of a period of "renewal" begun in the late 1970s and of "reassessment" extending "roughly from 1980 to 1984" (*Cohen: A Life* 118). Nadel notes that the late 1970s began a period of isolation for Cohen: his mother Masha had recently died (118), and his companion Suzanne Elrod left him, taking their two children, Adam and Lorca, with her to France, beginning a custody battle that would last from 1978 to 1984 (Nadel, *Various* 230). Cohen spent more time with his Zen master Roshi and deepened his long term involvement in Buddhism (*Cohen: A Life* 118). He also "began to study the Talmud at this time, always traveling with a copy of the text. It became a source of spiritual sustenance, always with him when he visited his children" (*Various* 230). After touring to support his 1979 album *Recent Songs*, Cohen lived between Hydra, New York, Montreal and Los Angeles, removed from the "public spotlight" until the publication of *Book of Mercy* and the release of the album *Various Positions* in 1984. The coinciding isolation of Cohen from both his family and the public eye created a "down time" in which he could think deeply about his identity as a son, husband and father; as a writer, performer and student of Zen Buddhism; and perhaps most importantly to the composition of *Book of Mercy*, as a Jew. Nadel points out that Cohen regularly attended synagogue while writing *Book of Mercy*, thus becoming "a more devout Jew" (*Cohen: A Life* 123).

But during his lonely period of reassessment Cohen was at a crossroads; he felt trapped in an artistic silence, unsure of how he could speak again with confidence. In answer to Alan Twigg's question about the circumstances that generated *Book of Mercy*, Cohen replied: "Silence. I was silenced in all areas. I couldn't move. I

was up against the wall. It was the only way I could penetrate through my predicament. I could pick up my guitar and sing but I couldn't locate my voice" (45). Cohen did eventually find a way in which he could end his silence and speak with artistic confidence, and that was through the language of sincere prayer, rooted firmly in Jewish tradition: "'It came from an intense desire to speak in that way,'" [Cohen] said of [*Book of Mercy*'s] odd form, 'And you don't speak in that way unless you feel truly cornered, unless you feel truly desperate and you feel urgency in your life. . . . I also wanted to affirm the traditions I had inherited'" (qtd. in Nadel, *Various* 238). Prayer was perhaps the only way that Cohen could make sense of the recent tragedy and turmoil of his life. Prayer may have been the only medium in which Cohen could escape the disenchantment with himself that is so evident in *The Energy of Slaves* and *Death of a Lady's Man*. As discussed above in Chapter Three and in this conclusion, prayer has certainly provided Cohen with the sense of artistic conviction that allowed him to confidently return to the characteristic irony and con of his earlier work when he so desired.

But Cohen's newfound sincerity, if it can be trusted, is the undoing of contemporary critics who would rely upon a postmodern critical apparatus to engage *Book of Mercy*, a text that is not postmodern, as opposed to many of Cohen's other works, which fit well within postmodern parameters. *Beautiful Losers*, in particular, is considered an exemplary postmodern text by a number of critics. As early as 1974 Douglas Barbour described the novel as "a most contemporary, post-Modern work . . . " (146). Taking this idea even further, Linda Hutcheon, in *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, claimed, as Clint Burnham observed, that *Beautiful Losers* is "Canada's first postmodern novel" (Burnham 65; see Hutcheon 14, 26-44). Burnham also argued for the recognition of postmodernism in Cohen's poetry,

claiming that "the postmodern qualities of Cohen's poetry, and specifically *Flowers for Hitler*, have yet to be recognized" (65). Yet, prior to Burnham's comment, Stephen Scobie expressed such recognition:

> *Flowers for Hitler* is, in its strange and excessive way, the first Canadian gesture towards postmodernism. Rejecting the modernist ideal of the well-made, formally complete poem, Cohen presented poems which were deliberately ugly, unfinished, and jarring in tone, accompanied on the page by revisions, deletions, and crude little drawings. (*End(s)* 65)

The prayers of *Book of Mercy* do not possess most of the above characteristics: each prayer is a self-contained and complete entity (a modern quality), written in a very rhythmical and carefully structured syntax, and each prayer has a generally consistent tone (although it is true that Cohen's tone is quite jarring in a number of prayers in which he expresses anger or frustration). Other postmodern characteristics or catchwords, including "Play," "Anarchy," "Antithesis," "Against Interpretation" and "Irony," as described by Ihab Hassan in *A Postmodern Reader*, may be applied successfully to *Beautiful Losers* and *Flowers for Hitler* but not to *Book of Mercy* (280-81). While the latter partakes of modern technique, as a book of sincere prayer it contains a form of expression that predates postmodern critical approaches. Cohen fully realized the harsh reception *Book of Mercy* was open to when he informed Doug Fetherling in a 1984 interview that the book may be "'offensive' to those who have 'too deep an investment in modernism'" (qtd. in Hutcheon, *Poetry* 25). The book's simplicity--and its lack of duplicity (it is free from ambiguity, double meaning)--may in fact have provoked critics to dismiss the work because it is not complex enough or because, as Cohen observed to Alan Twigg: "Sophistication is the current style" (46). An interest in the sophisticated

may explain, in part, why little attention is devoted to *Book of Mercy* in the corpus of Cohen criticism.

Much Cohen criticism has been made from a "postmodern" point of view and a great amount of critical interest in Cohen stems from the application of postmodernist concepts to his works. But *Book of Mercy* is a volume of serious prayers in which Cohen yearns for synthesis between himself God. Prayer, when sincere and not cynical or parodic, resists any kind of postmodern description or categorization. Yearning, hopeful and heartfelt prayer, free from mockery, derision and an underlying ironic despair, is a genre with which the postmodern criticism of the late twentieth-century is unprepared to cope. There are no hidden layers or double meanings to be rooted out; the prayers of *Book of Mercy*, apart from their many nuances, always speak to the fundamental need for unity with God, and their formal unity reflects this. The reader cannot participate in or "co-create" this text (as Linda Hutcheon insists we can "co-create" *Beautiful Losers* [*Postmodern* 27]): *Book of Mercy* is dominated by Cohen's own private utterings to God, as expressed through the persona of the psalmist. Finally, within *Book of Mercy* there is no self-consciousness about its own status as prayer or as language because this status is not questioned by Cohen.

Generally, discussion of sincerity in *Book of Mercy* and the role of sincerity versus the con in Cohen's *oeuvre* provides a useful example of the influence of an artist's later work upon his or her earlier work; our perceptions of the *oeuvre* develop and change with each new work. One may also see how emphasis on a particular work within an artist's *oeuvre* can affect our views of the artist's other works, either before, contemporary with or after that particular work's creation. The discussions presented in the preceding chapters show different ways to argue for the sincerity of an artist's work, as well as the inherent difficulties and potential

counter-arguments that stand against such arguments. One is led to conclude that sincerity is still an issue of importance today, even, and perhaps especially, in a postmodern age.

The assignment of *Book of Mercy* to a central place in Cohen's *oeuvre* and to a firm, contemporary place within ancient devotional and mystical traditions is important, not only in reference to *Book of Mercy*, but in reference to all of Cohen's work, his interviews and his life in general. Through the many genres in which he has wrought his art Cohen has created a lifelong narrative of spiritual desire: one that he has been documenting with various degrees of intensity since the publication of his first volume of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, in 1956. It is with *Book of Mercy* in mind that I feel most confident in asserting that Cohen's spiritual desire is the impetus behind many other facets of his life and work, before and after *Book of Mercy*, including explorations of love and sex, counter-culture, history, the function of myth, and the role of the artist. Cohen's enduring desire for spiritual fulfillment is evident in his most recent songs and poems and, as Nadel observes in 1996, in his continuing practice of Zen and Judaism (*Various* 275). *Book of Mercy* and songs such as "If It Be Your Will" and "Anthem" show us that since 1984 Cohen has been unafraid, and will likely remain unafraid, to address the very personal issue of his relationship to God straightforwardly, without a constant reliance on the disguises of irony and cynicism.

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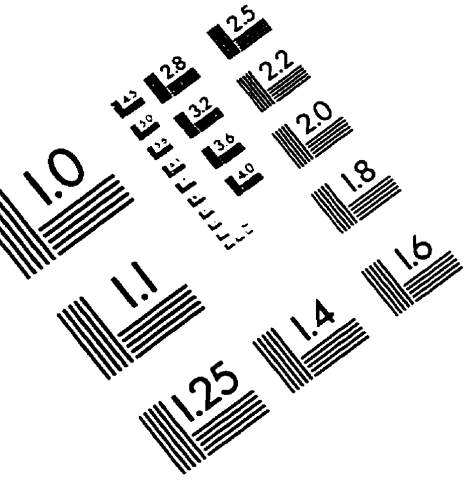

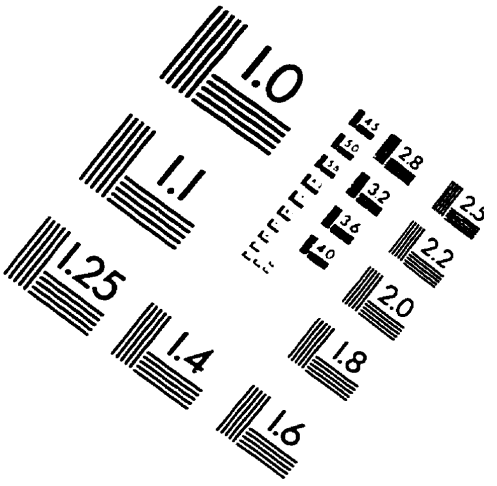

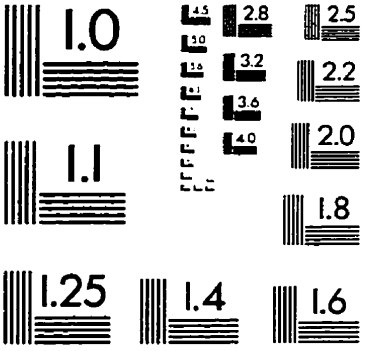

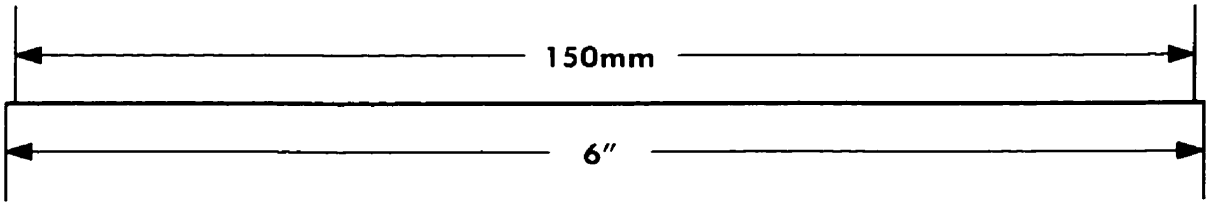

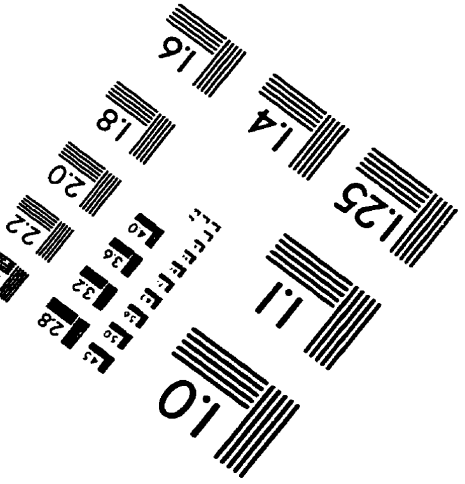

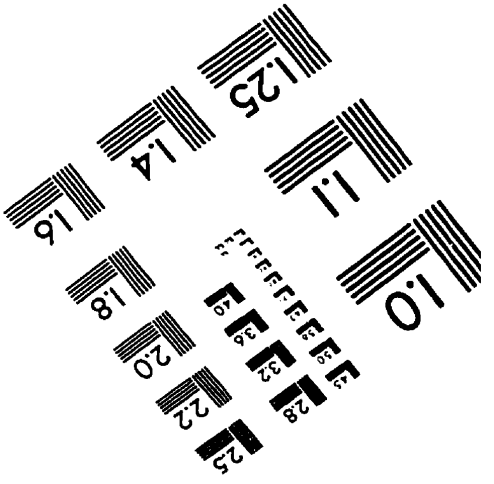

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