Spirituality and Desire in Leonard Cohen's Songs and Poems

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Visions from the Tower of Song

Edited by

Peter Billingham

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This book is dedicated to the life, work and memory of Leonard Cohen (1934–2016).

“All men shall be sailors then – until the sea shall free them”.

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In remembrance and deep thankfulness of Leonard Cohen (1934-2016) who has sadly passed away as this book entered its very final stage of imminent publication

Shalom and 'Hallelujah'.

Peter Billingham
Chichester UK, November 11th 2016

AN INTRODUCTION: "THE ONLY WAY TO DEAL WITH THE AVALANCHE IS TO AVOID THE SNOW ALTOGETHER"

PETER BILLINGHAM

The genesis of this collection of essays in some ways has a very long lineage in terms of time and scale.

To begin in the beginning, I should say that that my deep admiration for and identification with the songs of Leonard Cohen began as a young man forty five years ago, swept up in the counter-cultural idealism and joyous hedonism of the late 1960s, turning a heady cartwheel into the early-mid 1970s. A 'hard rain' was clearly not only *going* to fall. It was indeed raging around us in an apocalyptic thunderstorm of angry social, cultural and political change. This tempest of Prospero proportions was drenching everyone and also everything once thought of as inviolable and unchangeable. As one Robert Zimmerman – echoing the words of a centuries-earlier radical Jewish poet-prophet – had warned all who had 'ears to hear', you didn't need 'The Weather Men' (a radical anarchist group active in the USA in that period) 'to know which way the wind blows'. An Old Testament aphorism thundered that 'the people without vision will perish'. It is precisely in this apostolic Judeo-Christian tradition of the revolutionary visionary that Leonard Cohen himself may be located. The title for this edited collection of essays deliberately and contemporaneously recognises that lineage of righteous judgment and warning. At the time of writing, our world is scarred by the dreadful and tragic images of mass migration from Syria and North Africa across deadly geographical and ideological oceans. The mass urbanisation of rapidly expanding cities and its concurrent cataclysm of social unrest and inequality constitute a contemporary, Breugel-esque 'Tower of Babel'. Strident voices of reaction, conservatism and xenophobia shout their own toxic judgment upon the poor and the dispossessed – and the *different*.

Now, as fifty years ago, Cohen foresaw ‘a mighty judgement coming’ upon the world. With characteristic and darkly gracious modesty, however, he offered an apologetic caveat ‘but I may be wrong.’ Cohen continues to try and explain his moral and existential uncertainty by explaining, ‘you see, you hear these funny voices in the Tower of Song.’

This mordant and self-critiquing irony and its concomitant, doubtful pessimism has always signalled a profound reluctance on Cohen’s part to engage in anything that might be defined as ideological certainty or faith. However, in what has become one of his best loved songs from his middle-later period, *Anthem*, Cohen distances himself from decades of dissolution and hedonism to get as close as he ever has to an unqualified expression of prophetic vision:

> I can’t run no more with that lawless crowd,
>
> While the leaders in high places say their prayers out loud.
>
> I’ve summoned up a thunder cloud – and they’re going to hear from me.

The more ardent and radical proselytes, some of whom in retrospect were perhaps that ‘lawless crowd’ who were the younger Cohen’s contemporaries, were visibly and markedly prophets-as-individuals. Che Guevara, Timothy Leary, RD Laing, Alan Ginsberg, Abbie Hoffman, Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison amongst many others exhorted us to empower ourselves as activists. How else would the ‘times that were changing’ be swiftly and radically enacted and achieved? Additionally however, as the Seventeenth Century non-conformist political-religious movements such as the Quakers, The Ranters and The Levellers had asserted, the revolution to turn the world upside down had to be achieved and realised collectively. The individual was in direct, interior and subjective communion with a God of the barricades. Conscience, conviction and transformative action was all. Not for them the authorised and often corrupt priests of the conventional Protestant and Catholic denominations. Rather, all individual activists and freedom fighters were in fact ‘a priesthood of all believers’. For Cohen, from the confused and contradictory ruminations on the possibilities of revolutionary change in his early *Field Commander Cohen* through to the much later fractured humility and self-questioning of *The Land of Plenty*, it’s as he says in the last track on his 2001 album co-written and co-produced with Sharon Robinson, *Ten New Songs*:

Don't really have the courage

To stand where I must stand.

Don't really have the temperament

To lend a helping hand.

Don't really know who sent me

To raise my voice and say

May the lights in The Land of Plenty

Shine on the truth someday.

So it was for that young man growing up into a stormy but wonderfully eclectic and transformative early adulthood. Like one of his beloved anti-heroes William Blake, he was open and receptive to visions of spiritual and political change. Let 'The Tigers of Wrath' be unleashed against injustice and oppression as so much political graffiti-wall-art urged at that time. Without transformative, sublime visions what change could be imagined and made real? The people without a vision would surely perish: materially and spiritually. Yet had he – I – the courage to make a meaningful stand? What kind of stand were we idealistic visionaries being called upon to make? The wars continued and the demonic shadows of Mai Lai and Charles Manson hovered and lowered.

Yet the songs of Leonard Cohen from that period were like the still small voice through which the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel believed he heard the voice of the Divine. Love songs. Quiet songs. Uncertain songs. Songs of longing. Songs of regret. Lovers as solitary and deeply reflective visionaries gazing upon the world from 'lonely wooden towers'. Yes, it was true on tracks such as *Field Commander Cohen* that there were clear references to post-revolutionary Cuba, with Cohen metaphorically dressed in a fictionalised, slightly sardonic guerrilla-activist *doppelganger* of himself. As Simon Barker observes in his intriguing and enigmatic discussion and analysis of the interplay of themes of desire and militarism in Cohen's output:

> Many of his songs are narratives set against war, or in which Cohen presents the first-person voice of a song as if that person was some kind of soldier. Thus, an element of militarism unites both the practical performances of the work – the staging of the concerts and the discipline of touring – and the imagination that is the *source* of the performances.

> Cohen's reputation rests largely upon his meditations on sexual desire and spirituality, yet images and parallels drawn from warfare clearly preoccupy him and frame or inform these central concerns.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding this Davidic (though surely not Messianic?) strand within the tapestry of Cohen's thematic strategies, there was a fundamental, deeply unsettling existential uncertainty for this sojourner. This post-modern Ancient Mariner, burdened with whatever unnameable guilt, is a traverser of seas where only drowning men could truly see a radicalised poet-revolutionary Jesus. This Jesus was no sanctimonious, stained-glass-windowed, perfect 'Saviour,' but rather an ontologically problematized outsider. Struggling for faith. Shipwrecked by desire and its immutable fathomless depths. This was not a faith of moral certainty or judgment. Neither was it about closeted membership of the smugly discriminating self-righteous. No. Whatever was the spirit of deeply sublime longing and poetry that infused Cohen as a post-modern, fractured mariner, it was so seductive and also prescient of some of the life-defining voyages that a young man from a parochial East Midlands town was yet to make. Voyages over life's beautiful yet cruel and potentially deadly emotional, spiritual, sexual and existential depths.

Cohen has spoken of this Dante-esque topography to so many fellow travellers across the intervening decades and some fifty years on through into the present:

> I fled to the edge
>
> Of the Mighty Sea of Sorrow
>
> Pursued by the riders
>
> Of a cruel and dark regime
>
> But the waters parted
>
> And my soul crossed over
>
> Out of Pharaoh's dream.

Taken from *Born in Chains*, a new song from Cohen's 2014 studio album *Popular Problems*, images resonate and abound of a 'sea of sorrow', 'waters parted' and spiritual release and liberation.

Cohen speaks to those for whom the promise and indeed necessity of external political, social and cultural change has always been secondary to,

or problematized by, the existential, internal, subjective struggle to survive. 'Everybody knows the boat is sinking. Everybody knows the captain lied' (*Everybody Knows*). Cohen was clearly in the first ten years of his role and identity as a poet-singer-songwriter enmeshed within and expressive of the turbulence of the Vietnam years, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, John and Robert Kennedy, George Jackson and Malcolm X and the murderous shootings of unarmed student demonstrators at Kent State University, Ohio. What was always present nevertheless and what has endured until his most recent studio album *Popular Problems* (2014) has been the soul, sentiment and sensitivity of the poet. There is a deeper poetry of unremitting and often traumatic honesty woven into the tapestry of all of his greatest and major songs and poems: a formidable oeuvre. As is discussed in more detail in my essay *Crosses, Nails and Lonely Wooden Towers* there is also, I believe, the omniscient *leitmotif* of 'The Wounded Man' in all of his most significant compositions. It is in tentative comradeship and encounter with Cohen, the poet-as-wounded man, that the seeds for my life-long engagement with his work were sown. It was out of the beautiful, if sometimes troubled, orchard of life, love and loss that grew from that planting that this book of essays has emerged – as well as the conference out of which the essays themselves evolved.

Another more prosaic factor which helped persuade me to conceive the one-day conference at the University of Winchester, UK, in November 2014 had been my involvement as a contributing essayist in a collection of conference papers organised and edited by my colleague and friend at the University of Westminster, London, Dr John Baker. He had organised a one day symposium on the songs of Nick Cave for which (even though, due to other commitments, I was unable to attend) he invited me to submit a proposal for the subsequent volume of essays published by Intellect Books in 2013, *The Art of Nick Cave*. I found this experience hugely stimulating. I especially enjoyed the challenge of finding a style and register in which to convert my deep liking for Cave's work into an essay form which would be informative and evidenced, whilst also communicating to an audience beyond the narrower remit of what can be a parochial academia.

Knowing that 2014 would be Cohen's 80th birthday year and having been one of the many, many thousands who had attended two of the 'comeback' tours originating in London 2008, it was a combination of all of these factors that determined my commitment to a conference/symposium and to propose a follow-up publication. At this point I should express my

gratitude and appreciation to my publishers Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Their enthusiastic response to my original proposal for this book was both tangible and immensely encouraging. Victoria Carruthers has been a patient and supportive Editor throughout and I am very grateful for her belief in this project.

This collection covers an eclectic, diverse and stimulating range of academic discourse and professional creative practice. From the forensically Freudian analysis of Leighton Grist –

> If the relation of death and Godhead within "Who By Fire" and "If It Be Your Will" brings us back to "Going Home," then it can be noted, apropos of the latter, that within the dream symbolism outlined by Sigmund Freud, the provenance of which he referred to the cultural penetration of the likes of folklore, art, and religion, "'Departing' on a journey is one of the commonest and best authenticated symbols of death" (*Interpretation* 507).[4] Cohen's work as a whole, moreover, somewhat insistently calls to mind Freud's conceptualization of the death instinct.

– through to the quietly self-reflective reviews of their creative practice as film-maker, David Burden, and poet and novelist, Judy Waite, these visions from The Tower of Song gaze out upon and illuminate the emotionally, spiritually and psychologically layered topography of Cohen's song writing and poetry.

Dragan Todorovic offers a uniquely post-modern fusion of twentieth century war and conflict, centring upon the city of Belgrade. His *leitmotif* is of a complex evocation of popular song (*Lili Marlene*) with the sultry seductive promise of an unlikely 'Sister of Mercy' in the form of Marlene Dietrich. In his essay, it is not only the shoulder of a 'famous blue raincoat' that is torn and frayed. The possibility of the survival of cultural and political coherence and integrity and the problematic role of the post-modern artist-writer are hauntingly but unsentimentally communicated:

> In the same way that silence is a language on its own, the whole set of cultural codes can be built into a popular song, thus making it a statement even when it doesn't purport to be one. Recognising its own situation in the specific song, the audience responds by appointing it to sing as their representative. Songs speak for their audience, they shout, rebel, fight, conform, agree. Good songs are ambassadors of their aficionados. Good songs affirm their times.

Julian Stannard reminds the reader of the centrality of the paradox, and of the significance of the outsider-poet in Cohen as cultural icon and singer-

songwriter. The provocative neo-Romanticism of both Cohen's persona and his Bohemian, transgressive radicalism are embodied in Stannard's deftly ironic but apostolic empathy with his fellow poet:

> Cohen, almost parochial in the early years, writing out of a conservative, religious culture, was nevertheless creating an aesthetic *sui generis*, what might, perhaps, be called an anti-aesthetic, or anti-poetic, where the hieratic is both acknowledged and undercut – 'It doesn't matter which you heard, the holy, or the broken. Hallelujah' – an audaciousness in fact, a reluctance to provide easy balm, a battle with depression, a bleak unflinching (and cool) humour.

Rebekah Howes intriguingly applies a philosophical viewing frame of Hegelian dialectics in conjunction with the concept of the poet on the 'borderland' to present a significant, critical engagement with Cohen as a poet of the margins, embodying a problematized spirituality which:

> focuses on the nature of this borderland voice in the songs and writings of Leonard Cohen, with particular emphasis on the *Book of Mercy*. In them, I argue, we glimpse the labour of language to say something in and for the depths and struggles of human experience and self-examination. It is rare to find a songwriter able to do this in quite the way that Cohen does. For, as Lou Reed said, 'if we could all write songs like Leonard Cohen, we would'. Moreover, Cohen, like so many thinkers, writers, poets, composers, philosophers and theologians seeks a relation to truth in these struggles that has integrity in and as a 'way of life'.

Glenn Fosbraey offers in his essay a provocation to the assumptions in academic analysis and up-market music journalism of what he proposes as the barrier of biography in the discussion of a writer's work. Summoning up the spirit of Roland Barthes and his challenging, post-modern assertion of 'the death of the author', Fosbraey issues the following combative call-to-arms:

> If we take away knowledge of the writer's biography, and focus simply on what is coming out of the speakers or headphones, then what are we left with? What remains is how the lyrics, melodies, and instruments make us *feel* and *think*, and it is up to us to apply our existing experiences of music and life in general to the songs in order to generate our own 'meaning', and any interpretation, therefore, is the *right* interpretation, because there is nothing but the listener and the text. When it comes to critical analysis, then, it is important to sometimes take a step away from the familiarity of using biography as our starting point and to recreate, as accurately as possible, that experience where a listener has a CD, Vinyl, Mp3 etc. and nothing else but what is contained within.

Fosbraey's approach embodies an implicit and editorially intended self-reflexive interrogation of the possibilities and relative limitations in the analysis and discussion of an author such as Cohen. Of course, Barthes' approach does not in any reductive way deny notions of the 'autobiographical'. Rather, central to this post-structural methodology is a crucially necessary re-examination of how the phenomenology of 'presence' and 'absence' functions as a post-modern dialectic in the discussion of and engagement with Cohen's poetry and songs.

This segues interestingly and in an illuminating way into the analysis and discussion offered in this editor's contributory essay:

> One might observe that another *leitmotif*, that of *The Drowning Man*, is also another predominant serofin of the meta-mask of *The Wounded Man*. Cohen's narrator alter-ego in *A Thousand Kisses Deep* lives his 'life as if it's real', a powerful and potent post-modern metaphor of performed identity. Expressing as he did in *Suzanne* of his symbolic Christ that 'only drowning men can see him', Cohen himself consents to 'be wrecked' as a profound metaphor of desire as loss as death. A death that might liberate.

From this interpretative perspective, those autobiographical elements from Cohen's documented life which are relevant are viewed as idiomatic and emblematic, not only of subjective conflicts experienced by Cohen but also – from a cultural materialist, neo-Marxist reading – as being in dialectical conflict with wider, tragic historical events.

Finally and appropriately we have Sylvie Simmons' rare and relatively unique access to Leonard Cohen through her researching of material for her critically acclaimed biography *I'm Your Man*. What better way to close this Introduction than with the following short extract from her generous contribution to both the original conference and this collection? Presenting previously unpublished material, Simmons offers us a glimpse, a fragment shifting in the autumn shadows of a pear tree in Cohen's garden, of a reticent but great artist, who is reluctant to be asked to talk about the meanings within his work:

> For some time now, Cohen has been declining requests for interviews. Although he's made an exception for his biographer, it's still evident that he'd much prefer a conversation to questions. Particularly questions which might require him to decode the writing and composing process. Or to examine his motives. Or questions about his past or, heaven forefend, future.

Something of this same spirit but also of the gracious appreciation characteristic of Cohen is expressed in the following e-mail message sent by his manager Robert Kory on his behalf just prior to the November 2014 conference:

Peter

Leonard wishes you well and is delighted to hear that Sylvie Simmons will be joining you at your conference and celebration. Regrettably, I must advise that Leonard will be unable to participate. I am sure you can appreciate the number of requests that he receives for communications of all types. Email, Skype, Facetime, the recent birthday and album release have only made matters worse. The only way to deal with the avalanche is avoid the snow altogether. Thanks in advance for understanding and please forgive our limitations. Please give Sylvie our regards.

Kind regards,
Robert

In conclusion, *Visions from The Tower of Song* is like a multi-faceted prism which offers complementary slivers of light which illuminate some of the central and beguiling thematic and authorial strategies in Cohen's writing. These essays and reflections do not seek or presume to either 'explain' Cohen's writing or to superimpose 'meanings' upon them like a footprint marking the sand. Rather, I hope that they might be imagined as windows in the tower from which one can bring one's own experiences and feelings of Cohen's songs and poetry into creative conjunction with the shared landscape they reveal.

I am grateful to all of my contributors and I feel particularly pleased and proud that Cohen's official, award-winning biographer, the journalist, novelist and song writer Sylvie Simmons, has offered a unique, first-hand account and reflection upon her meeting with him. I was able to raise the funds to bring her across to Winchester from her San Francisco home to be our conference Keynote Speaker. Her beautifully expressive solo rendition of Cohen's *Famous Blue Raincoat*, accompanied only by the plaintive vulnerability of her ukulele, will long be remembered by all who were present that day.

Now, I must conclude and leave you to the many and varied pleasures of this collection. 'I'm wanted at the traffic-jam. They're saving me a seat. I'm what I am, and what I am, is back on Boogie Street.'

‘EVEN DAMNATION IS POISONED WITH RAINBOWS’: CONFLICT AND MEMORY IN *HAMLET* AND ‘THE OLD REVOLUTION’

SIMON BARKER

Some forty years on from recording and performing a cluster of songs often associated with the waste yet also perhaps the aesthetics of the Vietnam War, Leonard Cohen undertook a new international tour. It started modestly in Canada at Fredericton, New Brunswick, in May 2008, and was apparently accompanied at first by apprehension and uncertainty on the part of Cohen and everyone involved. Although to many of his admirers Cohen had never gone away, the tour must be regarded as one of the most successful ‘come-backs’ of any contemporary recording artist. The success of Cohen’s return to live performance required levels of organisation and routine that were extraordinary; it was as if the sequence of concerts was some kind of military campaign or a ‘tour of duty’. Sylvie Simmons describes the apparatus demanded, especially in the early weeks of the tour, as a prerequisite for the effective execution of such an ambitious and extended operation:

> In the beginning, this kind of military precision and discipline, leaving nothing to chance, knowing what was going to happen and when, was the only way that someone so anxious about performing was going to be able to do it after so long away.[1]

This association between militarism, performance and the role of the singer and poet is not new. Simmons reminds us that during the troubled tour of 1970, Cohen was dressed in a khaki safari suit, ‘a quixotic General Patton leading his ragtag army’.[2] As the tour progressed through Europe, across to the United States, and back to France, the band had taken on an official name, ‘The Army’, with its next ‘campaign’ the celebrated Isle of Wight Festival in Britain in late August.[3]

The twenty-first century concerts produced reviews and new interpretations of Cohen's work which were transmitted back and forth across the web as the tour advanced. One concern in these interpretations, and in the more formal 'literary criticism' of Cohen's work over many years, is the frequency with which he has included in his poems and songs some quite extraordinary visions of military conflict. Many of his songs are narratives set against war, or in which Cohen presents the first-person voice of a song as if that person was some kind of soldier. Thus, an element of militarism unites both the practical performances of the work – the staging of the concerts and the discipline of touring – and the imagination that is the *source* of the performances. Cohen's reputation rests largely upon his meditations on sexual desire and spirituality, yet images and parallels drawn from warfare clearly preoccupy him and frame or inform these central concerns. David Boucher, in his *Dylan and Cohen: Poets of Rock and Roll*, has remarked that:

> Themes and images of war surface in all sorts of contexts in the writings of Leonard Cohen. […] The images of war are sometimes invoked in a literal, but not representational, sense, as in 'The Partisan' and 'Song of Isaac,' or metaphorically to characterize human relationships, as in 'There is a War,' or as an allegory for liberation, as in 'First We Take Manhattan.' 'Story of Isaac,' for example, was introduced by Cohen as about the sacrifice of one generation by another. Although it is not immediately apparent, it is also an anti-Vietnam War protest.[4]

This chapter addresses one song that exhibits these military allusions in a particularly concentrated form. 'The Old Revolution', from *Songs From a Room* (1969), has defied interpretation (and performance itself) in a way quite unlike the rest of Cohen's canon. With respect to both its military content and the difficulty of critical interpretation, I should like to argue that the song shares territory with William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a similarly challenging piece of work from the turn of the seventeenth century.

This is not to say that *Hamlet* is a direct source for 'The Old Revolution', although it could be. Leonard Cohen may not have read *Hamlet*, although he probably has. Indeed, if one were to look for inspiration for this and other songs with overtones of militarism, sacrifice and visions of consumption by fire, then a more direct correspondence might be found with Arthur Rimbaud's *Une Saison en Enfer* of 1873. A popular new translation by Wallace Fowlie, *A Season in Hell*, was published in Chicago in 1966 and the temptation to see a correspondence between the work of the two writers is almost irresistible.[5] Yet, as we shall see, there

are inter-textual similarities between Cohen's song and Shakespeare's enduring play which are equally alluring. These parallels invite a critical approach that allows Cohen's song to illuminate Shakespeare's play and *vice-versa* without suggesting any direct attribution or sense of influence between the two writers. Dependent as Shakespeare was on innumerable sources, unless the 'Tower of Song' has a metaphysical dimension that we do not yet understand, Cohen could not have been a direct influence on Shakespeare. Yet to hold one piece in the light of the other illuminates the work of two writers who have clearly been influenced, in their times, by their times' preoccupation with warfare, the role of the soldier, and various shades of military identity as some kind of moral ideal.

A book from 2009 contains a hundred of Cohen's lyrics, introduced by Graham Vickers and with annotations on the lyrics themselves by Maurice Ratcliff. In *The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen*, the reader may search for confident interpretative assertions. For example, whilst eschewing David Boucher's direct correspondence with Vietnam, 'The Story of Isaac' from the album *Songs from a Room* of 1969 is made meaningful, and therefore secure, in terms of the counter-culture associated with reactions to the war in the United States and beyond:

> Based on the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, this song […] reflects the contemporary conflict between the emerging counter-culture, with its demands for social and sexual freedom, and the hide-bound traditions of mainstream North American culture. Cohen nails his colours firmly to the counter-culture mast.[6]

Interestingly, this brief critical interpretation itself depends upon a kind of military imagery as Cohen 'nails his colours firmly to the mast'. Given this, one might expect here, and in other interpretations of Cohen's lyrics, some clear guidelines when it comes to the overtly warlike lyrics of 'The Old Revolution', also from *Songs from a Room*.

> I finally broke into the prison
> I found my place in the chain
> Even damnation is poisoned with rainbows
> All the brave young men
> They're waiting now to see a signal
> which some killer will be lighting for pay
>
> Into this furnace I ask you now to venture
> you whom I cannot betray

I fought in the old revolution
On the side of the ghost and the King
Of course I was very young
and I thought that we were winning
I can't pretend I still feel very much like singing
as they carry the bodies away

Into this furnace I ask you now to venture
you whom I cannot betray

Lately you've started to stutter
as though you have nothing to say
To all of my architects let me be traitor
Now let me say I myself gave the order
to sleep and to search and to destroy

Into this furnace I ask you now to venture
you whom I cannot betray

Yes, you who are broken by power
You who are absent all day
You who are kings for the sake of your children's story
The hand of your beggar is burdened down with money
The hand of your lover is clay

Into this furnace I ask you now to venture
you whom I cannot betray.[7]

The enquiring reader, however, searches in vain for an interpretation of these words in *The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen*. Maurice Ratcliff's annotation is, to continue the military theme, something of an interpretative 'retreat' and the implication is that Cohen has himself surrendered to his own opacity by denying the song the credibility live performance encourages.

> This song […] uses political language but does not address social themes. But, although the song feels chock full of meaning, it is not clear what exactly it does address. That Cohen has not played the song live since its release suggests that its ambiguity has strayed over the boundary into imprecision, that the poet has indeed 'started to stutter …'[8]

This retreat and sense of denial, it seems to me, is not good enough, and especially in a book published simultaneously in London, New York, Paris, Sydney, Berlin, Madrid and Tokyo, with an extensive and expectant readership clearly in mind. So it is in order to help avoid an outright

surrender to ambiguity and imprecision that I turn to *Hamlet*, since war and memory are issues which Shakespeare and Cohen seem equally concerned to explore.

A map of the relationship between military conflict and memory would cover an area the size of the literary canon itself. In the West, it would extend from the stories recorded by Homer and Virgil to the expanding body of writing about the recent turmoil in Iraq and Afghanistan.[9] Critics involved in 'overviews' of literary traditions speak with little hesitation of war as a universal, even defining, component of cultural agency – and are frequently moved to describe the aesthetics involved in war narratives by reference to desire.

In many literary traditions, and most obviously in the Troy narratives with their accounts of chivalry and conquest, war is the result of sexual desire and the possession of women. In almost all war narratives, there is a corresponding desire to 'perform' according to a military ethic and a distilled sense of masculinity which is both sexual and gendered: war determines man and man determines woman, in a violent, correcting guarantee of roles.

In my own work, I have tried to present Shakespeare's theatre as a kind of moral laboratory for conducting experiments in the ethics of war. Shakespeare was at home in the business of warfare at a pivotal time in the consolidation of the early modern European states. England, as elsewhere, was establishing new codes of militarism and masculinity as a response to evolving geopolitical opportunities for colonisation, the need for domestic policing of its citizens, and advancing technological innovation in weaponry.[10] Eschewing the earlier 'art' of war in favour of a science of arms (although the terms co-exist in the period), one form of desire might be said to be that which was channelled into the concept of a uniformity of purpose and practice in the increasingly professional armies of the modern state. Although the post-Renaissance states managed to secure such uniformity to a significant and lasting extent - in terms of discipline, the subjugation of the individual to the corps, competing regimental histories, and uniforms themselves - there was still a place in human conflict for individual heroes and their stories. These narratives were preserved as models of desire for those in the military profession, in the sense that there was a need to 'live up to' fictional or semi-mythical 'historical' figures from the past. The paradox, of the collective that subsumes, yet depends on, the individual, mediated by the desire to *emulate* the model individual in pursuit of the collective military ideal, has remained at the heart of

military institutions from ancient times to our own. And that image emerges from the military institution into wider, civilian arenas and into other cultural spheres. Occasionally, for example, the paradox is eased by notions of government leadership, a fictive parallel drawn from the hierarchy of the very state that funds, organises and directs the military institution. This is apparent in the sense of the non-combatant ‘Commander-in-Chief’ in the American presidential model, or the identification of royal individuals as leading members of the military in many European constitutional monarchies and especially in the UK. However, these are the more ceremonial displays of an equation between militarism and subjectivity that is continually played out in the day-to-day procedures of those involved in military conflict.

Leonard Cohen wrote in the 1960s of partisans, soldier lovers, and military nihilism in an understated but nonetheless apparent context of Vietnam. Shakespeare, equally obliquely, spoke of the militarised environment of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, with its Spanish and Irish campaigns and its military polemicists’ demands for a technically and ideologically robust professional standing army.

‘The Old Revolution’ stands out for its apparent allusions to *Hamlet* and it was this song that was being discussed on the internet, refreshed by the context of Iraq and Afghanistan. Recorded during the height of the Vietnam conflict, ‘The Old Revolution’ links images with an apparently Shakespearean derivation to contemporary military jargon (‘to sleep and to search and to destroy’) in order to evoke the ‘furnace’ of war, but also, very clearly, war’s heroic aesthetics.

Cohen’s verse may seem obscure, or mystifying, although in some respects no more so than the text of *Hamlet*; yet therein may be the attraction of both compositions, set against war but unwilling to speak directly of the context that may give them meaning. Cohen is concerned with a slippage between the authoritative ‘I’ that searches and destroys, and that which is subject to the narrative of the ghostly king, and reluctant to sing over the bodies which represent the real carnage of war. The desire to fulfil a role and finish a story is exactly that of Hamlet at the end of Shakespeare’s play. It is a desire taken up, as we shall see, by his friend Horatio, and only achieved, albeit in a casual and chaotic way, by Hamlet’s desire to reproduce himself as Fortinbras, his military *doppelgänger*.

The revelation of Hamlet's other self to those who survive the carnage comes only at the end of the play, so it is to this that we must turn first. *Hamlet* includes what some audience members in the years leading up to the death of Queen Elizabeth may have considered one of the most astonishing representations of warfare in the whole of the unfolding Shakespearean canon. Shakespeare's audiences may indeed have been absorbed by the idea of a second Spanish Armada, and they were certainly able to witness the effects of Elizabeth's Irish campaigns in the spectacle of gangs of miserable and diseased soldiers in the streets of London. Had they the mind to, they could also have read about warfare in the many books and pamphlets listed by M. J. D. Cockle in his early twentieth-century compendium of such material, available from the printing houses established in the area around St Paul's.[11] Those who had studied or heard of this material would know of its insistence upon the qualities that were desired in defining the soldier, the ideal relationship between the military and the sovereign, and the way that warfare could be justified in the name of God and the state.

Although the scene is sometimes omitted in performances, *Hamlet* concludes with the arrival of a figure that embodies some of these desirable qualities, entirely recognisable to those who had read the contemporary military theory. However, such is the burden of the play's tragic dimension, centred on the figure of Hamlet himself, that the very end of the play may be overshadowed. Hamlet's final words ('The rest is silence'), leaving aside the 'O, O, O, O' that persists in many editions (from the First Folio), offer a convenient and memorable point of closure, supported by Horatio's affecting:

> Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince.
> Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.
>
> (Act 5, scene 2)

These words, and the sheer number of poisoned and lacerated bodies left on the stage, the result of the narrative of 'carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts', the 'accidental judgements', and the 'casual slaughters' (Act 5, scene 2) that Horatio promises to record as a tale for posterity may represent 'the end of the play' in the memories of those who see it. Denmark has become a slaughterhouse. The bodies on stage include those of Claudius and Gertrude, as well as Laertes and Hamlet himself. From earlier in the play there is Old King Hamlet (albeit as a ghost) as well as Polonius and Ophelia. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. For many, then, this extremely high level of carnage undoubtedly

characterizes the play, just as it should seem a source of horror for those (very much still alive) who come upon the scene from elsewhere. These figures (ambassadors, soldiers and Prince Fortinbras himself) ought to be attuned to human frailty and bloodletting, but they recoil in horror from what they find at Elsinore. Yet the manner in which the dead are addressed and physically removed from the stage makes for a curious reflection upon the attitudes to war that are represented by the figure of Fortinbras. The final moments of *Hamlet* are worth looking at in some detail because they represent the consummation of a form of desire that runs parallel to that more usually associated with Hamlet, that of his relationship with his mother.

Hamlet is dead, Horatio has summoned the angels, but that is not quite the end of the play. Suddenly, an odd kind of competition momentarily arises between Horatio and the newly arrived Fortinbras over what to do with the bodies. It is not entirely a question of ownership, but it has something to do with the men's authority in the hierarchy of those who are left alive to reflect on the slaughter in Denmark and to consider the future. Horatio is the local man and has much to tell, fulfilling Hamlet's desire for his story to be told after his death. Although they are dead, he is protective of those who will feature in his narrative. Fortinbras, on the other hand, is the outsider, and we cannot be entirely sure of his motives and plans. Determined to get the record straight, Horatio firmly denies the Ambassador's claim that Claudius (or is it Hamlet?) commanded the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, an important correction since someone's reputation is at stake. He then advises a public display of the bodies:

> He never gave commandment for their death.
> But since so jump upon this bloody question
> You from the Polack wars, and you from England,
> Are here arrived, give order that these bodies
> High on a stage be placèd to the view;
> And let me speak to th' yet unknowing world
> How these things came about.
>
> (Act 5, scene 2)

Horatio's suggestion that the loss of so many may be in part mitigated by their serving some didactic purpose, the bodies displayed as an exemplification of past wrongs, seems to correspond with the highest ideals of the tragic form. The use of the word 'unknowing' acknowledges the fact that there is an audience in Denmark ready to learn of the particular circumstances and events of the story. Horatio invites the idea that the whole sequence of the action, once properly told, will serve as a

parable on human behaviour that will add to the common good. For a moment, one feels the playhouse charged with the moral force of Greek tragedy, the action reaching out across the *orchestra* to embrace a civic audience in a conditioning or corrective way. The play (or at least its story) will start again but this time with Horatio's interpretation of events and the wisdom of hindsight. Fortinbras seems to have read about the poetics of tragedy and says of Horatio's promised account 'Let us haste to hear it'; the business of tragedy is to evoke pity and terror, from which we learn to reform our ways.

Yet the bodies remain, and what happens to them arrests the flow of the tragic formula. It also seals for Hamlet a posterity based upon his desired military 'other' – a wish-fulfilment associated with expectations raised earlier in the play in Act IV, when he is enraptured by the tale told by The Captain of the actions of Prince Fortinbras, a scene to which we shall return. Fortinbras agrees that Hamlet's body should be borne to the stage just as Horatio has suggested. I should note that it is 'body' in one variant of the text and 'bodies' in others. Yet, this order, the first he gives with his new authority in Denmark, seems quite extraordinary in terms of the ceremony that is to accompany the elevation and display of Hamlet's corpse:

> Let four captains
> Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
> For he was likely, had he been put on,
> To have proved most royally; and for his passage,
> The soldiers' music and the rites of war
> Speak loudly for him.
> Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this
> Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
> Go, bid the soldiers shoot.
>
> (Act 5, scene 2)

This would have been a perfectly understandable piece of stage business in the open space of an Elizabethan theatre. It avoids leaving so many 'dead' actors on stage in full view of the audience, awaiting their 'resurrection', and already anxious for refreshment across at the Mermaid Inn. In many tragedies directions of some kind are given for the removal of bodies. So in *Hamlet* either all the bodies, or simply Hamlet's remains, are carried from the stage, the action rehearsed in Cohen's song.

However, only Hamlet is to receive the extraordinary accolade of a military escort (with officers as bearers) and the soldiers' music, the volley

of shots. And perhaps there are other unspecified ‘rites of war’ that would have been familiar to Elizabethan audiences; the soldiers present may offer some kind of salute or lower their arms in tribute. The question arises as to quite why Hamlet receives this treatment and it is one worth exploring given the nature of the play, the times, and the atmosphere of war in Shakespeare’s London. One explanation may be that since, as Fortinbras observes, the whole scene looks like a battlefield, its victims should be treated appropriately as some species of paramilitary. Perhaps Fortinbras, who tells of his sorrow, treats everyone he feels sympathy for as though they had been soldiers. Yet if this were the case then such dignity in death would have been extended to other parties in the casual slaughter of which he has yet to hear detail. In matters of degree, the corpses include royalty, and a soldier is supposed to honour even his enemy’s dead. Yet Hamlet is singled out for special treatment. Perhaps it is because he is a prince who has died young and wastefully, and this is Norway’s version of the state funeral. What seems more likely is that Fortinbras really considers Hamlet to be a kind of quasi-soldier. If this is the case then a number of issues arise that reflect upon the figures of Fortinbras and Hamlet, and upon the presentation of militarism in the whole play. The desire here is to inhabit the normative military ideal – and an ideal of masculinity that will leave Prince Hamlet at one with his dead father (rather than remembered for his desire for his mother) in the same way that Fortinbras has carried through his father’s zeal for conquest.

Fortinbras facilitates the end of the play and allows a channelling of all that has happened through his person and into the future. Like everyone else, he will hear Horatio’s story, but what is more important he will assert his ‘rights of memory’ in Denmark. Someone needs to get a grip, and if the military theorists’ ideals are accepted in their approach to diplomacy and their values adopted in terms of the desired military leader, then Fortinbras fits the bill. Yet in terms of how the play has proceeded, Fortinbras is an unknown figure; his reputation depends almost entirely upon an identity derived from his decision to go to war over ‘an eggshell’ as we have already learned in Act Four. The fact that he orders military rites for Hamlet’s ‘passage’ to the ‘platform’ invites the audience to consider that Fortinbras may well be about to establish a new order in Demark, but it will be one framed by his own line of work and his military values. Fortinbras obviously links royalty with militarism alone; he states that Hamlet, had he ‘been put on’, would have ‘proved most royally’ and would, presumably, have even more fully absorbed and demonstrated the values associated with a soldier.