

# **Songs of Leonard Cohen: Postmodernity, The Victimary, Irony, A Blaze of Light**

**Ian Dennis**

**English Department**  
**University of Ottawa**  
**Ottawa, ON Canada, K1N 6N5**  
[idennis@uottawa.ca](mailto:idennis@uottawa.ca)

## **An Age of Song**

The 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Bob Dylan, but for many commentators the choice recognized, perhaps belatedly, a whole genre. And surely for at least a century, in reach, popularity, achievement, even sheer volume of production and reproduction, song has had claims to be amongst the most significant and influential of art-forms, in the West and ever more globally. Has any other been integrated more deeply into the life-narratives, aspirations and imaginings of so many, across so wide a spectrum of aesthetic sophistication? Brought so much comfort and release, been so loved? Only cinema might compare.

We should attend to this, to such a focalization of desire.[\[1\]](#) The present paper attempts to use the heuristic and insights of generative anthropology (GA) to better understand a few of the productions of one notable song-writer of our time. There are a number of reasons to single him out, amongst which is his distinctive negotiation of the popular to “high” art continuum, something this essay will try to explore. His songs are also less closely or permanently associated with his own recorded performances and stage persona, and have been sung and recorded widely, even in “definitive” versions by others, allowing us a clearer focus on the particulars of the works themselves. And it is finally the insights of these remarkable and widely performed songs, their gifts and revelations, that recommend them to us. They not only express the ethos of their time—apt vehicles as so many songs have been for the evolving desires and resentments of an era—but in their characteristic double vantage provide new understandings of the human scene itself.

## [\*\*“Avalanche”\[2\]\*\*](#)

### **I stepped into an avalanche**

It didn't pursue or overtake me, I met and entered it. But it *is* an avalanche, potent and destructive, a worldly force beyond me.

### **And it covered up my soul**

It buried, obliterated my previous spirituality, dominating me, carrying me along in its awful momentum, taking me over.

### **When I am not this hunchback that you see**

That you see now.

### **I sleep beneath the golden hill**

The Golden mountain of Buddhism, Mount Meru or Mount Sumeru in the northwest wild beyond Kashmir; in Buddhist and Hindu cosmology, the center of the physical, spiritual and metaphysical universes, round which the sun and the planets circle, the abode of Lord Brahma, at whose summit lies the gateway to the divine, a mountain like Dante's Mount Purgatory ... and were I not pursuing another mode of transcendence, I would be climbing it. But I sleep below it now. I do not ascend.

### **You who wish to conquer pain**

### **You must learn, learn to serve me well.**

I am your model, for the task of conquering pain, for the escape from desire, from subjection itself. I am the model for transcending other models, now that you see me, now that I have taken the hunchback form, stepped into the avalanche.

### **You strike my side by accident**

### **As you go down for your gold**

### **The cripple here that you clothe and feed**

### **Is neither starved nor cold;**

### **He does not ask for your company**

### **Here at the center, the center of the world**

Sacrifice is accidental now, this “spear of the age” in the side of this new Christ for whom I speak,[\*\*\[3\]\*\*](#) whose place I assume, random, accidental, the mere action of individual desire; you wound your models as you pursue, ever downwards, what you think are your interests.

But this supposed cripple at the center of the world—of whom and as whom I speak—is not the victim you imagine, nor does he need you or your desire; centrality itself is his now, is mine.

**When I am on a pedestal,  
You did not raise me there**

Your attention, your desire has no such power—I am autonomy, the power you long for...

**Your laws do not compel me  
To kneel grotesque and bare**

... for if I am here at the center of your attention, vividly kneeling, compelling your gaze with the nakedness of my sufferings, it is not through you, not through your commands, the seeming compulsion of your desires, the laws of desire itself

but because...

**I myself am the pedestal  
For this ugly hump at which you stare**

The hypnotic attractiveness of my mark of victimhood, capturing your eyes, compelling your stare, is not me myself, but that which that self supports, that crowns my power over you; because my identity is that pedestal, the altar upon which a new kind of sacrifice is made, the center at which all gaze.

**You who wish to conquer pain,  
You must learn what makes me kind;  
The crumbs of love which you offer me,  
They're the crumbs I've left behind**

My power transcends your gestures of pity, your condescending crumbs, and if you wish to understand what I model for you, how I am able so kindly to give you this, you must understand the source of my power.

Because...

**Your pain is no credential here,  
It's just the shadow, shadow of my wound**

Your suffering cannot compete with mine, it has no authenticity, no credential in this new situation of my dominance; it's mere imitation, a mere shadow of mine.

But even as I have been able to dominate you ...

**I have begun to long for you  
I who have no greed  
I have begun to ask for you  
I who have no need.**

For you see, I really am kind, in my absolute security; I am able to love you, I really can and do offer you the paradoxical tribute of my desire, the desire of the one who has no desire...

**You say you've gone away from me  
But I can feel you when you breathe**

You can't escape, you can't ignore what you know is the center, you can't spurn it or make your own. Your desire for it and for me is as basic to you as your breathing, your very life.

**Do not dress in rags for me  
I know you are not poor**

But nor can you attain it by doing what I did. Your imitations of my suffering betray your inauthenticity; don't even try, and ...

**Don't love me quite so fiercely now  
When you know that you are not sure**

Because you hear me, don't you? Don't try to make love do the work of imitation, the paradoxical work of desire. What you thought was love for me is undermined by your sense that you cannot ever truly rival me, your sense of your own weakening ambition, making you unsure of what you really feel about me, tilting you towards helpless resentment.

But...

**It is your turn beloved  
It is your flesh I wear**

... do *not* resent me. In your desire to have and be me was indeed hidden a desire to be beyond me, to triumph over me, to establish yourself at the center. But now you know you cannot do that, you have actually learned my lesson and your subjection to me is complete: you see me wearing your own flesh, being everything you want to be. But when you see that, when you have so completely become me,

then your turn has actually come, your turn to exert the power I taught you, the power I exerted as I taught you, to be me in your own flesh.

This difficult but suggestive song, that is, can be read as an account—early, even prophetic—of the advent of what generative anthropologists call “the victimary.” It’s a term with a particular valence in GA—although perhaps not entirely fixed in meaning even there, despite its frequent use—but echoed as well in various forms in the wider culture, especially towards the end of the twentieth century and into the new millennium.[\[4\]](#) The thematic connection in “Avalanche” seems so pointed, and the issue important, that a short digression to consider what’s at stake might be appropriate.

There is considerable diversity of opinion amongst scholars using GA as to the relative power and extent of the victimary in the contemporary world—indeed this is probably the most pressing question now facing our scholarship, and one which requires fuller debate than it has thus far received. Still, there is basic agreement as to the reality of the phenomenon, and the broad usefulness of the GA heuristic for identifying and analyzing it. A couple of other principles are also widely shared. Firstly, the victimary is but one facet of a large and consequential historical development with origins in Christianity’s explicit centralization of the victim—its making the last first—from which a new ethics continues to emerge.[\[5\]](#) Secondly, but by the same token, the victimary—as opposed to victimhood *per se*—is a social phenomenon. One may quite properly speak of the victim of a flood, of a falling tree or bolt of lightning, or even of being born in the wrong place at the wrong time, but the victimary is a function of mediated desires, specifically desires for the centrality—the concentrated human attention—that victimhood of any kind increasingly generates.

The victimary, then, encompasses a broad range of behaviors—it might generally be considered an attitude, or posture. Those practicing it, whether fleetingly or habitually, seek centrality through victimhood, and do so deliberately or at least self-consciously: argue, bargain or perform for it, for the attention and desires of those around them.[\[6\]](#) To put it another way, the victimary is a variety of “feedback,” of the great mechanism, the very engine of market culture—the imitation and counter-imitation that René Girard called “internal mediation.”[\[7\]](#) All Christian-inflected or “modern” centrality being by definition desirable, even the centrality conferred by suffering feeds back mimetically into the behavior of those around its periphery, of those indeed who created it. Such behavior may aspire to the more secure centrality of a lost sacral order, but in its present historical context is ineluctably enmeshed in reciprocal effects.

The relevant ethical question for the epoch in which the victimary is

ascendant—and of course an extension of the question facing the GA community—is thus how to respond to its mimetic force, how to measure its claims on our own desires. How or when, on what grounds, are we to concede or resist victimary centrality? Or seek it ourselves. We may call this the question of authenticity.

The modifier “authentic” has tended in our era to be applied to behaviors in which we cannot detect deliberate attempts to attract our desires, “inauthentic” to those in which we can. We are able and indeed impelled to resist the latter, as rivalrous efforts to dupe us, to rob of us of our selves, our identities, our own centrality. Responding to the former, to what we deem authentic, we can at least imagine that we have made a choice, reflecting our own autonomous character and judgement, and that we are thus receiving something in return, if only a sense of our own virtue. Free or fair exchange is the foundational ethic of market life. The inauthentic seems to present a unilateral demand, the authentic to offer an exchange.

Victimary claims on centrality may, however, be sincere or indeed well-founded, even as they do detectably attempt to evoke specific responses. If centrality—sympathy, attention (not to mention attendant material benefits)—is to be granted to certain forms of suffering, misfortune or subjection-by-others, those who actively claim it may logically “deserve” it as much as those upon whom it has been bestowed without conscious effort on their own parts, those whom we do not perceive as “playing the victim card.” And surely justice itself must sometimes be claimed. Surely, even, long-harbored, deliberately nurtured resentment—resentment, the feeling of exclusion from centrality,[\[8\]](#) inevitable corollary of desire—even resentment may be justified in victims we ultimately decide to be legitimate.

So, there are other, more crucial measures of authenticity, as we must concede even in the teeth of our own resentments, the rising irritation we feel at the latest importunate claim, or indeed the experience of “guilt” which is perhaps the most inarguable token of a victim’s conquest of centrality. How and when did the asserted victimization come about? Was it really a victimization? If so, could the victim’s own actions have prevented it, and would it have been fair to expect such actions? What other claims to centrality deserve it as much, or more? And so forth. As these ethical struggles continue to play out, as such phrases as “through no fault of their own” or the “deserving poor” fade into the naivety of the cultural past, replaced by ever more expansive language and sophisticated argument, we need our deepest spirits, our best artists amongst them, to help us with the means to judge, to feel, even to act. Because our resentment is certainly real, a human fact not to be lightly dismissed. Only too prone to encouragement, it proliferates

ever more luxuriantly, equally well directed at putative victims or their presumptive human oppressors. And there are certainly artworks, popular artworks, ready and eager to help, offering denials and rationalizations, self-serving identifications, sectarian solidarities, moral triumphalism or mere distraction, and many another salve. But a better and deeper understanding of how these processes now work may offer more hope of preserving the ethical progress of the centuries since the rise of Christianity, progress that such mimetic effects, such feedback, might seem almost to obscure or threaten. And for this we require, if not High Art per se, let us say a higher art.[\[9\]](#)

“Avalanche” at least clearly understands the desires it dramatizes as reciprocal and mimetic. Its “I” and “you” openly compete for the status of victim, and one of them—the teacher, the model, **the hunchback**—wins that competition, it seems decisively. The desire of the other, the subject, is treated to merciless demystification—**do not dress in rags for me / I know you are not poor**—that masterfully imputes a core of inauthenticity.

But then that master, for his own part, has deliberately **stepped into** the onrushing historical **avalanche** of the victimary. This action seems even to have been the source of his power—apparently the standard of authenticity does not apply to *him*. The category itself seems only to function as a tool, a weapon even, in this context. If a self or identity is “a local monopoly of attention,”[\[10\]](#) the song dramatizes the paradoxical quality of the new human relationships that generate such sources of quasi-monopolistic power. The teacher not only discovers, but also explicitly initiates his listeners into a new praxis of identity, by which he himself has been formed. And before, just before, we might begin to resent his power, that self-proclaimed occupation of **the center of the world**, we become conscious of a second strain running through the song, of enigmatic humility, even love. The disciple is also the beloved, for whom the model **longs**, for whom he **asks**, although he claims no human **need**. From within his supposedly impermeable security, the model teaches a transcendence of and through his own modelling, a path through absolute abjection into an ultimate and apparently necessary intimacy, the very sharing of flesh, a proffered **turn** at the center. Certainty through uncertainty, victory through defeat, firstness from lastness, but in the specific terms of the victimary paradigm. **Love** from resentment. They are a “holon,”[\[11\]](#) a unity-in-rivalry, a very particularly obsessive pair of lovers. They, we, are in it together. We glimpse the final intensity of feedback, an oscillation, taking of turns, that is a new kind of identity itself.

Popular art clears the road to imagined appropriation, or resentment at its imagined denial. Higher art defers such imaginations, creates a space of deferral in which deeper understandings may form. As befits its higher art, “Avalanche” offers but

hints, sketches—far from a full and workable program. By no means able, in themselves, to lift the living baby of human betterment safely from its victimary bathwater. But in a lesser singer, one marketing a more standard transgressive autonomy, the lesson would either have been embraced with triumphalist ferocity, or treated with sarcasm and denial. Hymns to the suffering self; sneers at broken pedestals, rejected gurus. In “Avalanche” the effect is of a tender and knowing irony. We may take this as a possible opening into more adequate ways of responding to the world-historical phenomenon the song so presciently announces.

### **Leonard Cohen**[\[12\]](#)

In 2016 we also lost Leonard Cohen.

The present essay reads the late Canadian singer and writer as indeed an ironist of the postmodern order—including the victimary, but encompassing also many other expressions of the ever-expanding market—and as an elegist for the order it supplants. Like many Romantic elegists—and we would claim Cohen for the Romantic tradition—he lamented the human costs of world-historical change in the name of earlier values, and bore witness both to such loss, and to the new ethical possibilities made visible by this tragically inflected dramatization of value. For better or worse—and of course one needn’t agree—he rejected the horizontal transactions of the market in the name of the verticality of Buddhist mountains and lonely wooden towers,[\[13\]](#) including a tower of song,[\[14\]](#) and was thus greeted as a prophet of spiritual value for modern life, a purveyor of marketable “alternative” lifestyles and, ultimately and in one of the strangest codas in the history of the art, the depressive singer of an astonishingly inclusive and multi-purpose

**hallelujah**[\[15\]](#) of response to the world he ostensibly rejected.

One key to the rhetoric of Cohen’s songs—and we will limit ourselves to them here—is their accommodation of postmodern trends even as they critique and resist them. They often deploy a not fully reliable first-person position—a dramatic irony of sorts. We hear voices that we understand to originate at some distance from the intelligence of the songs themselves. At times, self-mockery and self-pity slide into a kind of ironized victimary posturing that undermines itself, or perhaps we should say, protects itself against resentment. This is a more Romantic and perhaps more subtle procedure than that suggested by the “two audiences” theory of Shakespeare’s theatre advanced by Girard, even if it has broadly the same purpose.[\[16\]](#) Cohen, too, is a popular artist, at least in the songs, past master at voicing and flattering resentment, and if he half-inhabits such voices, it should not concern us—the shiver of ironic self-awareness is always there. If, as we say, most pop singers flaunt transgression, Cohen is clearly more haunted by *sin*—and this is rarer. As Eric Gans reminds us, all sins are derived from originary resentment of the

sacred center[17] and in Cohen we find this derivation rendered with a particular explicitness. That center, be it invested in human life or human sexuality, Cohen's singers repeatedly find themselves desecrating with their own unrestrained and unhallowed desires, their blind and sacrilegious violence, a process conveyed in a vocabulary that constantly and at times bewilderingly mixes the cool and the infernally hot, worldly slang and biblical religiosity. The voice that proclaims in tones at once prophetic and profoundly ignorant—"I have seen the future, brother, and it is murder"—can only conclude by again and again asking, "when they said, repent, I wonder what they meant?"[18]

A related device, whether or not such a voice is heard, is to hold up a contemporary posture or practice to injurious comparison with a biblical one, or at any rate one older and implicitly more genuine. And the paradigmatic practice, of course, is that which religions have always placed at the foundational center of social order, and which modern pseudo-religious centralities inauthentically mimic:

**You who build these altars now  
To sacrifice these children  
You must not do it any mor**  
....  
**You were not there before.**  
....  
**And if you call me brother now  
Forgive me if I ask  
"Just according to whose plan?"[19]**

In its various forms, the technique is in fact so integral to his art that the last line quoted might stand as an emblem or motto for all of Cohen, a master-phrase offered for life in our era, a talismanic defense against untethered mimeticism itself.

Romantic art, Gans has written, teaches us about the scene of origin,[20] the means by which, by ever again becoming human, we preserve ourselves as such.

### **First We Take Manhattan[21]**

In print, Leonard Cohen was originally known as a poet of the Holocaust, especially in Europe where his reputation in any of his genres has always been higher than in North America. He wrote of it before many others did, offered *Flowers for Hitler*[22] in darkly ironic terms, an early voice, once again, speaking into the interval of relative silence after 1945.

His aspirational revolutionary, too, asks us to

## See that line there moving through the station[23]

As Gans has insisted, the victimary age originates in the Holocaust. Its absolute asymmetry grounds and organizes the rising resentments of the postmodern era, “assimilates” them “to its unambiguous model.”[24]

The association thus anchors our revolutionary’s status, his authenticity.

### **I told you, I told you, I told you, I was one of those.**

And, especially in [the celebrated recording by Jennifer Warnes,\[25\]](#) there is an almost operatic scale and power here, opening onto the sorrows of history and eloquently voicing the imperative never again to be passive, to act, to resist.

But [Cohen’s own, slightly later version\[26\]](#) is less grand. The lines are sung not by the soloist or in a soaring voice like that of Warnes, but by a clattering, tinny chorus of female backup singers, whose pop pedigree is obvious. The effect is quite different, shocking even, particularly if one has known the song first from Warnes’ stately cover.

What is the complaint of this soi-disant victim, who is **one of those** blurry newsreel Jews boarding that train, as he tells us, and tells us, and tells us? He says he’s been sentenced to **“twenty years of boredom,”** the boredom of trying to work **within** the political and cultural mechanisms of the postwar Western order. He’d **love to live with** us, really he would... after all, he does desire us, **body** and soul, well, and our **clothes**. He’s **guided** not by ideas or dreams but by **the birthmark** of his own identity, by **the beauty of his weapons**—the aesthetic obviously precedes the functional in such an operation. This is end-of-history terrorism or revolutionism, with no serious goals, no new system to propose or impose. Yeah, we’ll **take Manhattan** ... the way a new fashion “takes” it. And as happens in a number of Cohen songs there is a punishing declension from the attractive opening posture, the defiance, the scornful superiority, down into goals and passions far more trivial. Really, it’s **the fashion business** that’s the problem, and if ever there was a revolutionary ripe for co-opting *into* that business it’s this guy—here Warnes’ [video,\[27\]](#) like so many music videos, is instructive, quite unable to grace its ostensibly serious content with anything more than dancing young people, garbed in the latest, posing as rebels or running victims. In Cohen’s lyric the final stages in this descent are, again somewhat typically, both incoherent and petty: oddly arbitrary mockery of flimsy consumer goods and adolescent-vengeful sneers at **Father’s Day**. These verses are notably omitted from Warnes’ version. This is the voice—one of Cohen’s most characteristic—of a shapeless resentful violence, arguably the same that has, since the song was recorded, struck out at Manhattan, or in some ways “taken” both it and Berlin. Listeners may decide for themselves

whether these erstwhile “**losers**” really have “**won**.”

The same declension, the final randomness of the targets, the pettiness of resentful passions, is even more vivid in “**Everybody Knows.**”[\[28\]](#) This very popular song is perhaps Cohen’s best flattery of those passions. What **everybody knows** is of course common cynicism, the posture of superiority to the desires or hopes of others that confers or promises to confer model status in a competitive market. (The contrasting strategy of optimistic belief, of trust, is not unheard of and not without power, but much harder to pull off and thus much less, well, common.) The song alternates between the big issues, the ostensibly serious objects of resentment, **the poor stay poor**, **Old Black Joe still pickin’ cotton**, and the cheapest of cheap shots, sneering at the benighted bourgeois Other and her **long-stem rose** and so forth. The darker expectations of infidelity—**faithful... except for a night or two**—are of course prophylactic and the cynical “lover” can and regularly does take protective comfort here, the imagination of the worst reduced to a commonplace knowingness, a cool superiority. And besides, **everybody knows** painful fantasies are somehow the truth, even when they’re not.

But if everybody really does know these things, what kinds of purposes are served by (so insistently) saying so? Cohen certainly doesn’t risk anything close to an implicit suggestion that **the poor** are not all staying poor, or even that **Old Black Joe**’s condition might have improved a bit. The song instead invites us to sing—or sneer—along, and as we do, in its monotony, its self-satisfaction, to experience, some of us anyway, from a slight and slightly uncomfortable distance, the pleasures of our own cynicism.

**It’s now or never ... it’s me or you.** Says who? **According to whose plan?** Who, finally, are we imitating? When a Romantic ironist reminds one so many times of what **everybody knows**, is it advisable to be quite so hasty to know the same things?

And then, as the irony must of course work both ways, does everybody actually know, or believe, that **the Plague is coming?** Is everybody, or anybody, really quite ready to **take one last look at this Sacred Heart / Before it blows?** Like so many Cohen songs, “**Everybody Knows**” doesn’t quite stay in the place it begins. Maybe nobody knows what **everybody knows**.

### **No Cure for Love**[\[29\]](#)

Another thing **everybody knows** is that heterosexual love is an **artefact of the past**, indeed that such love is, in terms Generative Anthropologists ought to relish, a **dead scene**. Of course, there are still such couples, but they no longer command centrality, prey perhaps to what Gans describes as “the postmodern suspicion of

sexual difference as ... the original sin of humanity.”[\[30\]](#) Their obsolete bed is itself the outmoded public scene, its **meter** needle dipping towards zero. Undoubtedly, the advent of the market era has changed the experience of gender, a formerly sacred category of difference, now cut loose and subject to the pervading forces of imitative desire and rivalry, the no-holds-barred struggles for identity and transcendence. In this context we might pause at Cohen’s poignant early image of **Joan of Arc**,[\[31\]](#) riding through **this dark and smoky night**, with her plaintive, **I’m tired of the war / I want the kind of work I had before**. That traditional work is gone, though, the bridal whiteness, the swollen belly of pregnancy replaced by another, more troubling “**appetite**.” For all the sympathy, indeed, the pity mixed with desire that saturates this memorable song, there is something rather merciless in its diagnosis.

Joan of Arc’s glorious donning of the armor of masculinity to make **war** on the erstwhile or ostensible restrictions of gender, is subverted into another kind of **wedding**, her proto-feminist victimization sexualized, indeed, hetero-normalized. To abandon her previous vocation, ride to battle **without a man to get her through** the **night** is not, it seems, to reject or transcend a sexual identity, but only to take on a new and more demanding masculine lover, indeed another kind of husband. The song is finally about the violence of that war, of the fire through which it seeks to purify our motives. If this is the new ground for the interaction of women and men, it asks, and if we will nonetheless still **long for love** with each other, for the **light** we bring to each other, **must it come so cruel, must it be so bright?** The answer—**I saw her wince, I saw her cry**, but also, **I saw the glory in her eye**—is that, apparently, yes, it must. The melodramatic stage we surround and upon which we behold what Gans describes as the “romantic equivalent of tragedy ... the victimization of a superior individual who is in at least unconscious complicity with the operation,”[\[32\]](#) this new site of sacrifice, this new centrality, to which Joan has voluntarily **come riding**, even if no price is too high to pay for its glory, is a very bright, very hot place indeed. And very unfree. He will *not* **make his body cold. He is fire** and she therefore **must be wood**, no less than once she was destined to wear something white.

**Ain’t no cure for** that, for gender difference, or for sexual love in any of its forms. Cohen’s songs ever and again rebuke the assumption of freedom or even fulfillment in love, rebuke or qualify the forms of transcendence love might seem to offer. For Cohen, as just about everyone has noticed, the sacred and sexuality are always connected, which is to say that complete sexual fulfillment is as impossible as being God, or simultaneously appropriating and worshipping the object at the center of the scene. Here again is the folly and failure of a secular society, but instead of fiery prophetic utterance or bitter irony, this time we have a sweetly sad and comforting country song.[\[33\]](#)

**The rocket ships are climbin'... the doctors workin' day and night.** Still, there's **no cure** and the song smiles now at the culture that seems to think there could be—therapies of every kind, gender erasure, social engineering—because **nothing's pure enough to be a cure for love**: love is the sacred, and the gap between it and us can never be bridged. Once we understand this, then the crucial, the redemptive truth is that "**I don't need to be forgiven, for loving you so much.**" Where there's no cure, there's no crime, a proposition, needless to say, unlikely to be taken much to heart in the victimary dispensation of sexuality, where crimes and cures are both essential.

Desire, to put it all another way, dissolves identity. And sexual desire, proportionate to its strength, most efficiently. What does it mean to say to a woman, "**I'm your man?**"[\[34\]](#)

The leading general prescription for success in the market world is, simply put: be cool. We should avoid the biographical here, but it's hard to resist the anecdote that has Cohen, in New York City, scrawling on a restaurant placemat, **KILL COOL!**[\[35\]](#) To be cool is to avoid betraying desire, so as to be its object. To be cool is to have a secure identity that resists the mimetic buffeting of the market. Desire for oneself attracts desire, subjects others, from the fastness of identity. But of course to do this all the time is monstrous. Or impossible. "**I'm Your Man**" enacts a canny compromise with desire—how it's sort-of cool to admit one is not.

Overtly the song is about how desire *trumps* identity, channeling it into the myriad forms of a longing only too unstable, unable finally to know the shape of its own intent. But surely a true, a unitary self, once revealed, heroically maintained, is what's rewarded in the manner most commensurate, with female sexual attention! Well, "**I'm Your Man**" tells us, believing *that*, a man will spend a lot of nights alone.

It's a song of sly irony, of course. The malleability produced by desire is a knowing sort of joke for the initiated. Don't let's kid ourselves, ladies, that you are attracted by essences or their recognizable opposites. Masked and unmasked are *not* meaningful categories; there *are* no essences or clever subversions of them either, nothing men should simply be or simply are. There's only desire: what the goddess wants, she'll get ... and *that's* why men are the way, the various ways, they are.

And were they not, were you to insist upon sincerity, you'd see quite another kind of spectacle, rather less pleasing: panting, **howling**, groveling, abject—**a dog in heat**—oh no, unclothed uncool desire is not a pretty thing. But he's **your man** too.

Knowing this, of course, overstating it for effect, is at once to join the **everybody knows** crowd and at the same time to patch up a kind of humility, offer another of

the many apologies for sexual misconduct that litter Cohen's songs. Or it's to make an almost passive-aggressive concession of subjection and weakness. That's also in Cohen—one remembers the cuckolded narrator of the **Famous Blue Raincoat**,[\[36\]](#) self-lacerating, still desiring, forgiving, helplessly obsessed. But at "**I'm Your Man**" we smile, knowingly, even ruefully, holding off the danger of this particular contagion, holding it at a sufficient distance.

## **Democracy is Coming**

Firstly and throughout, "**Democracy**"[\[37\]](#) is an incongruous catalogue, implying a characteristically serio-comical set of questions. Most obviously, what *is* this thing we call **democracy**, that isn't **exactly real**, or **real but not exactly there**, that's always **coming**, always imminent, but has never arrived? And why on earth do we think we want it?

Missing, of course, are any of the characteristics usually associated with the ideology or mode of governance, aspirational or not: representation, voting, popular will or at least consent, accountability. And so on. Missing, too, most of the ways **the U.S.A.** has usually imagined and praised itself, entrepreneurial, freedom-loving and dynamic, fair-minded, independent. All that.

[The song as Cohen recorded it](#),[\[38\]](#) though, starts as marching music with a rattling military drumbeat, then settles into something pulsing, rising, anthem-like, that reinforces the periodic grammar of the lyric, together conveying a strong sense of the impending, the potent, hopeful and (surely) inevitable. The content of that lyric, however, is nothing like that of any normal anthem and in another variant on the now familiar Cohen procedure the song triggers an initial or easily accessible emotion or expectation—the promise of pop—which then subtly or insidiously leads those who feel it into unfamiliar and uneasy-making higher-art territory—if they attend, that is, to the details as they accumulate. (Details that include, musically, the squawking—mocking?—little squibs of mouth organ, accenting, or is it commenting on that onward march.) Here, though, that initial emotion and the ironical or complicating refraction continue in a canny balance to the end. The song, to put it the other way, somehow, convincingly, stretches itself a remarkable way along the popular-high art continuum.

Generative anthropologists will note **the staggering account / Of the Sermon on the Mount** amongst the sources of **democracy**, buffered again, protected from resentment, by the mediation of a voice of postmodern obliviousness, of one who can't **pretend to understand it at all**. To that first-person witness, too, the Christian source is only one item on the list, a list chanted out in the apparent belief that somehow, for all their incommensurable confusion, their violence and despair,

all these things are signs, portents, causes even of the longed-for fulfillment.

Reference is made to Otis Redding 's “The Dock of the Bay”[\[39\]](#), an eloquent soul-song of hopelessness and waste, of waiting, watching endlessly in loneliness. A salute is offered to the **battered heart of Chevrolet**, the once mighty brand humbled by its competitors in countries where the desires it fed have spread—Chevy the most democratic, perhaps, of the great American auto-makers, mass-producer of the people's car, the automotive average, finally, the mediocre, the inadequate.[\[40\]](#) The crushed rebellion in **Tiananmen Square**, the hobo **fires of the homeless**, incinerated **gay** people, a cacophony of **sirens**, of riot and **disorder** and domestic **war**—all in the same, incongruously inspirational mode. Is it that with so much that is bleak, defeated, almost unbearable, that revolution, apocalypse even, *must* be upon us? Is this the rending pain of birth and transformation? Or are we to savor a final irony, a satire even, at the expense of a stubbornly blind American exceptionalism that imagines in even its most egregious failures the last, best hope of mankind?

The song certainly expresses a bottom-up vision, without a theory, not driven by the exchanges of the global, liberal-democratic elites, but not by resentments of them either—its voice signals no appetite for taking **Manhattan** or **Berlin**, nor any of the pessimism or superiority that smugly recites what **everybody knows**. Indeed, this singer, from the midst of his catalogue of miseries, bursts into what sounds in context like hopelessly naïve anticipation, that somehow from all this

**... we'll be making love again  
We'll be going down so deep  
The River's going to weep  
And the mountain's going to shout Amen**

In the more limited sense, this presumably expresses (or ironizes) the common hope that freed from their previous roles and differences the sexes will experience a renewed erotic energy, the love of equals. But the **amorous array** in which **Democracy** will arrive is clearly more than that. Do suffering and desire, thwarted or deferred desire itself, then, drive democratic change?

Or is such desire itself democracy? Because surely the common element in such closely juxtaposed phenomena as a **spiritual thirst** and **broken families** is desire unmoored from its traditional, indeed its ancient “sacrificial” restraints. Whence, of course, the gender role release that produces the **homicidal bitchin** in the **kitchens**—the demotic version, or consequence, of **Joan**'s high-toned ride to **war**. Whence also the many struggles for new forms of exchange, and the anger and violence consequent on all such dissolutions of sacred differences, the throwing of

more and more of the erstwhile certainties of human experience into rivalry and competition, into the restless mediations of the market. Small wonder that **the ship of state** of the leading market nation must navigate **shores of need, reefs of greed**, through **squalls of hate**. That **hate** burned the homosexuals. To that **need** the newly visible legions of **the lonely** bear witness. (Another, [even more famous song](#)<sup>[41]</sup> asked where *they* all come from, and in its own way, “**Democracy**” provides an answer, or a list of them.) As to **greed**, Cohen himself, in an earlier, less ironic phase, as a sort of poet laureate to the “me generation,” was wide-eyed:

**I saw a beggar leaning on his wooden crutch  
He said to me, “you must not ask for so much.”  
And a pretty woman leaning in her darkened door,  
She cried to me, “Hey, why not ask for more?”**<sup>[42]</sup>

By the time he sings “**Democracy**,” it seems some of the reasons **why not** have been hoving into view, no doubt personally, but also from the bridge of that **ship**. Apparently, though, there’s no turning back. These waters must be navigated, we must ride this **tidal flood**. **Democracy is coming**.

Of course other artists and other singers have borne witness to such things. But few have done so with as clear a recognition of the paradoxes inherent to the process, of the prices to be paid—product, to note it again, of Cohen’s ironical vision, his historical, elegiac awareness and Romantic-conservative posture.

It’s tempting to see that posture revealed with more than usual openness in the voice of the final stanza of “**Democracy**.”

**I’m sentimental if you know what I mean  
I love the country but I can’t stand the scene**

He would not be the first or last Romantic to lament the loss of grace that accompanies these transformations, as the aesthetic of the public scene dissolves into a multitude of lonely communions with various objects of desire—many of them projected on **that hopeless little screen**. These motions of desire a more explicitly cultural or religious conservative would brand “deviated transcendence.”<sup>[43]</sup> But such a lament is not the whole story here, or even as much of it as was told in most of the songs discussed above. As we note, there is a persisting balance, a complex mixture of tones. The singing voice really imagines no transcendence at all, no celebrity. **I’m junk** he rather startlingly claims, but with no whiff at all of the passive aggressive or victimary in his voice. Because he is also **sturdy and stubborn**—in a wonderfully “metaphysical” conceit, worthy of a postmodern Donne or Herbert<sup>[44]</sup>—like a plastic **garbage bag** that won’t break

down and return into the soil again. Yes, **democracy** is synthetic, not organic, indeed stubbornly inauthentic, consumerist, doggedly shallow. It cannot finally be imagined, cannot be achieved, only striven and longed for. Although the **bouquet** held up for it here is small enough, the gesture laced with various ironies, the song still does move with a kind of faith that something really **is coming**, fed by our desires; that our despair, our anger, even our **hopeless** passivity feeds it; that there is a redemptive power in suffering and failure themselves that might still be imagined as a politics—an affirmative one, and too universal to be truly victimary—if not quite as what it once was, a religion.

## **Hallelujah**

More completely than any of Cohen's other songs, "**Hallelujah**"[\[45\]](#) has escaped the orbit of its original recording and performer, indeed become a veritable "standard," spangling across our skies now in a thousand versions, and to as many purposes.[\[46\]](#) Here, in the imaginations of its many performers and audiences as much as in that of its composer, the popular and high impulses are surely comprehended. Records and live performances in styles and modes beyond counting, plus parodies thereof, TV hospital dramas and talent competitions, movies, benefit telethons, Olympic Games ceremonies, orchestral concerts, satirical sketches, weddings, church and synagogue services....[\[47\]](#) This is a phenomenon of great interest, suggesting intersections, commonalities of desire, potentially more significant than the generic, political or other distinctions that usually organize our understanding of how artworks influence or express our culture. Such polymorphousness also helps define our interpretative challenge, especially given that the song itself is far from stable in form. Accounts differ as to how many verses were ultimately composed for it,[\[48\]](#) and its myriad performances vary widely in their selection of those lyrics. Still, most performers do choose from [seven stanzas](#)[\[49\]](#). The order of performance varies, although the first two are fairly constant.

Of course, the astonishing range of affects and meanings the song seems to have supported might suggest another Cohenesque irony of incomprehension, acted out now not just by a first-person voice but by the legions of those singing along in the world the song has conquered. Verses of defeat, of painfully, intimately explicit sexual longing and loss—and a chorus of apparently religious uplift. One might adopt the approach reputedly taken in some churches, of singing out in hopeful tones the repeated word of the latter, and merely humming the former.[\[50\]](#) Or, one may risk becoming a further victim of that irony, by seeing if GA can offer any interpretative purchase.

## **All I ever learned from love**

## **Is how to shoot somebody who outdrew ya.**

They'll do that, outdraw you, the somebodies who attract your desire more than you do theirs. But how to bring them down or to heel? How not to be subjected by them, how to give up or conceal that desire so as to subject *them* to *you*? All he's consciously **learned**, in short, are the techniques of rivalrous power. And thus of losing love. And isn't this the most characteristic maneuver of the market world, the refusal of obeisance to the sacred in favor of competition, of autonomy, of victory in rivalry?

The whole song is about the *loss* of power, though, the **thrones** of self-possession **broken**, romantics, for their trouble, **tied to kitchen chairs**, undergoing the fate of Samson. For all their love and art, like David, held to account by the inexorable laws of possession and desire. God, who'll punish **the baffled king** for adulterously appropriating the woman he saw by **moonlight**—no, God *doesn't really care for* the **music** of seduction, or the seductions of **music**. Whatever we think we have learned, our little maneuvers, will not be enough.

We will know loss. **I remember when I moved in you.** The association of sacred and sexual is too close here even to be called metaphor or metonym—almost unbearably close. The lover, the woman, *is* God, who can **show us what's going on down** here in the genitive “**below**;” when she or He chooses to, can draw from us as well the orgasmic **hallelujah**.[\[51\]](#) And then take it away again, [\[52\]](#) leaving us only to **remember** that state of unfallen blessedness, the presence of a sacred in which we had no choice but to believe, when our every **breath** helplessly paid it homage.

But what is suffered is never, finally, solitude, and the song insistently affirms, for all its horrors, the life of the couple, lovers: not **your brother love** but **that other love**.[\[53\]](#) I may have **lived alone before I knew ya**, but, **hallelujah**, I did **know ya**. For that knowledge, even and especially that biblical “knowing,” there is **nothing on** the song’s **tongue but hallelujah**. Defeat in this crucial context is better than victory, as victory is aloneness, and aloneness is worse; those who are defeated have escaped the struggles of the market—those who win are alone, gunfighters with only the dead for partners. **A broken and yes a lonely hallelujah** is still the one we sing out of the experience of sacred and sexual love. Loneliness is not solitude, loneliness is shared, can only be known through love and thus loss. Or loss, and thus love.

There is no reconciliation, though, no communion ....

**You say I took the name in vain  
I don't even know the name**

## **But if I did, well really, what's it to you?**

.... except at the very most basic level of human exchange, with our God, our sacred, each other.

**There's a blaze of light in every word  
It doesn't matter which you heard  
The holy or the broken Hallelujah**

We would not be the first to suggest that these lines, and especially the first quoted just above, are the core of the song[54]—or a privileged version of it—and even of Cohen's art. But has anyone expressed more beautifully what we may also take to be the core of GA? **It doesn't matter which you heard** because signification itself, that **blaze of light**, matters more than significance.

"The language of faith," Gans tells us, "is ostensive before it is declarative. It points to and affirms the center, before it can assert anything concerning its existence, and the *words* of a credo are less important than the 'profession of faith' they underwrite."[\[55\]](#)

The much-loved chorus finally reconciles through the single medium of the word itself, one word, **Hallelujah**, the sacred substitute for the lost or inaccessible object. It performs the redemptive deferral of longing, recovers and remembers the lost felicity that Romanticism always laments, the unmediated communion with the object of desire, a condition of life itself become this word, where the sexual act and the life of the word were and are one, where God was and is with us, and **our every breath a Hallelujah**.

## **Notes**

[\[1\]](#) There has been a rich vein of GA-inflected critical writing on cinema and of course literature, but with the notable exception of Matthew Schneider's work on the Beatles, very little as yet about song. See Matthew Schneider, *The Long and Winding Road from Blake to the Beatles*, Nineteenth Century Major Lives and Letters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[\[2\]](#) Leonard Cohen performing "[Avalanche](#)": YouTube, uploaded by Ben M. on December 8, 2010, <https://youtu.be/SQe88ybEle8>. Lyrics published in *Leonard Cohen, Songs of Love and Hate* [monograph], (London: Wise Pubs, 1972). See also "Avalanche," *Songs of Love and Hate* (New York: Columbia, 1971).

[\[3\]](#) "Why do you stand by the window / Abandoned to beauty and pride/ The thorn of the night in your bosom / The spear of the age in your side". Leonard Cohen,

"The Window," *Recent Songs* (Columbia, 1979).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxNUFwWFm-g>

[4] "White males and Zionists feel victimized on campus. Christians feel oppressed by the courts. Women feel victimized in tech. The working class feels victimized everywhere. Even Taylor Swift seems to feel victimized by celebrity." Influential *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, even as he reports on something he seems to believe is new, attributes such feelings to eternal "human nature" and advises, in effect, that we all just say "no" to such perennial urges to resentment. David Brooks, "In Praise of Equipoise" [opinion] *The New York Times*, September 1, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2wWEK7h>

[5] For a brief account of the whole process, with particular focus on the pivot into modernity during the Romantic era, see Eric Gans, "The Victim as Subject: The Esthetico-Ethical System of Rousseau's *Rêveries*," *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (Spring 1982), 3-31.

[6] We are indebted here to a definition recently offered by Chris Fleming: "The 'victimary' is the self-conscious use of moral progress to feed one's own resentments." (Personal Communication, August 30, 2017.)

[7] "We shall speak of *external mediation* when the distance is sufficient to eliminate contact between the two spheres of *possibilities* of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centers. We shall speak of *internal mediation* when this same distance is sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less profoundly." René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Translated by Yvonne Freccero, Johns Hopkins, 1965, 1990, p. 9.

[8] Eric Gans: "Resentment ... is the sentiment of exclusion from the center where significance is generated." <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw286/>

[9] The present author has offered ways to try to measure the "Popular/High Art Continuum" in an earlier article in this journal. See "Reflections on the Popular / High Art Continuum: Seven Small Essays, Ventures, Somewhat in the Original French Sense of the Word *essai*," *Anthropoetics* XX, no. 1, Fall 2014, <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2001/2001dennis/>

[10] Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*, Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 128.

[11] The term proposed by Jean-Michel Oughourlian to reflect "interindividual psychology" and the "constant interaction between the self and the other." *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis*, translated

by Eugene Webb, Stanford University Press, 1991, pp. 16-17.

[12] Websites devoted to Cohen include [leonardcohen.com](http://leonardcohen.com) (the official site) and [leonardcohenfiles.com](http://leonardcohenfiles.com). Lyrics are also available from Leonard Cohen, *The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen: Enhanced Edition* (Omnibus Press, 2011), and from various other sites, including [AZLyrics](http://azlyrics.com). In the present paper directly quoted words from the songs are presented in **bold**.

[13] Leonard Cohen, "Suzanne," *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (Columbia Records, 1967). The tower in question, from which Jesus "spent a long time watching," is clearly the cross.

[14] Leonard Cohen, "Tower of Song," *I'm Your Man* [studio album] (Columbia Records, 1988).

[15] Leonard Cohen, "Hallelujah," *Various Positions* (Columbia Records, 1984)

[16] "Shakespeare deliberately resorts to the power of scapegoating. . . . During much of his career, he combined two plays in one, deliberately channelling different segments of his audience towards two different interpretations . . . : a sacrificial explanation for the groundlings . . . and a nonsacrificial, mimetic one for those in the galleries." René Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*, Gracewing, 2000, p. 6.

[17] Gans, "Sin and Resentment," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* no. 457 (Saturday, March 29, 2014, <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw457/>)

[18] Leonard Cohen, "The Future," *The Future* (Columbia Records, 1992)

[19] Leonard Cohen, "Story of Isaac," *Songs from a Room* (Columbia Records, 1969)

[20] *Originary Thinking*, p. 170.

[21] Leonard Cohen, "First We Take Manhattan," *I'm Your Man* (Columbia, 1988).

[22] Leonard Cohen, *Flowers for Hitler* [monograph] (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975).

[23] Leonard Cohen, "First We Take Manhattan," *I'm Your Man* (Columbia, 1988)

[24] Gans, "The Ethical Mission of GA," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* no. 38 (Saturday, April 13, 1996), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw38/>

[25] Jennifer Warnes performing "First We Take Manhattan" posted on YouTube by Mark Gough on October 29, 2010 : <https://youtu.be/8uy7Zb5C-XU> . Jennifer Warnes,

“First We Take Manhattan,” *Famous Blue Raincoat* [LP] (1986)

[26]“Leonard Cohen’s official video for ‘First We Take Manhattan,’” (Sony Music Entertainment, Inc., 1988), published on YouTube by LeonardCohenVEVO on May 9, 2011, [https://youtu.be/JTTC\\_fD598A](https://youtu.be/JTTC_fD598A).

[27] Jennifer Warnes performing “First We Take Manhattan” posted on YouTube by Dave Joern on January 25, 2012, <https://youtu.be/W0rZ2CPCYBQ> . Jennifer Warnes, “First We Take Manhattan,” *Famous Blue Raincoat* [sound recording] (Toronto: Attic and Los Angeles: Cypress Records, 1986).

[28] Everybody Knows,” *I’m Your Man* (Columbia Records, 1988). Leonard Cohen’s official video for his live performance of “Everybody Knows” (Sony Music Entertainment, 2014) published on YouTube by LeonardCohenVEVO on November 12, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IfmiKnZi3E>

[29]Leonard Cohen, “Ain’t No cure for Love,” *I’m Your Man* [studio album] (Columbia Records, 1988).

[30] Gans, “Virtues Old and New: Toward an Analysis of Victimocracy,” *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* no. 459 (Saturday, April 12, 2014),  
<http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw459/>

[31] Leonard Cohen, “Joan of Arc,” *Songs of Love and Hate* (Columbia Records, 1971). Cohen performs “Joan of Arc (Live at Québec City Soundcheck, 2012),” LeonardCohenVEVO, YouTube, published on April 27, 2015,  
<https://youtu.be/drqgPNNv3K8> .

[32] *Originary Thinking*, p. 169.

[33]Leonard Cohen, “Ain’t No Cure for Love,” *I’m Your Man* [studio album] (Columbia Records, 1988)

[34] Leonard Cohen, “I’m Your Man,” *I’m Your Man* (Columbia, 1988). Cohen’s official audio for “I’m Your Man,” LeonardCohenVEVO, YouTube, published on November 18, 2014: <https://youtu.be/-MIR6tFh8Gs> . Official video for his live performance of “I’m Your Man,” (Sony Music Entertainment, 2014): LeonardCohenVEVO, published on YouTube by LeonardCohenVEVO on December 2, 2014, <https://youtu.be/YuCpTi0EtbU>. See page for lyrics.

[35] Quotation attributed to Leonard Cohen and cited to David Sprague, “Leonard Cohen and the Death of Cool,” *Your Flesh* magazine, 1992 posted on Concentric: Leonard Cohen Considered by DrHGUY on December 29, 2015,

<https://cohencentric.com/2015/12/29/the-notion-of-cool-has-been-destroying-the-heart-for-years-leonard-cohen-1992/>

[36] Leonard Cohen, “Famous Blue Raincoat,” *Songs of Love and Hate* (Columbia Records, 1971). Cohen performing [“Famous Blue Raincoat”](#) (Sony Music, 2014) published on YouTube by LeonardCohenVEVO on November 18, 2014: <https://youtu.be/ohk3DP5fMCg> .

[37] Leonard Cohen, “Democracy,” *The Future* (Columbia Records, 1992).

[38] Leonard Cohen performing “Democracy” [music video] (Sony Music Entertainment, Inc., 1992), LeonardCohenVEVO, YouTube, published on March 10, 2010, <https://youtu.be/DU-RuR-qO4Y> .

[39] Official video for (Sittin’ On) “The Dock Of The Bay” by Otis Redding, published on YouTube by Rhino on November 20, 2012, <https://youtu.be/rTVjnBo96Ug> .

[40] To be fair, maybe Chevrolet still shows some of that bravery and boldness, as its hybrid Volt sails successfully enough on into 21<sup>st</sup>-century markets: <http://www.hybridcars.com/top-selling-chevy-volt-crosses-100000-us-sales-milestone/>

[41] The Beatles performing “Eleanor Rigby” [digital release music video celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Revolver* (Calderstone Productions Limited (a division of Universal Music Group) / Apple Corps Ltd. / Subafilms Ltd., 2015, TheBeatlesVEVO, YouTube, published on August 12, 2016.

[42] Leonard Cohen, “Bird on the Wire,” *Songs from a Room* (Columbia Records, 1969).

[43] See Girard’s “Conclusion” to *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, page 294 and elsewhere.

[44] “Metaphysical Poets,” *Wikipedia*, September 26, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphysical\\_poets](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphysical_poets)

[45] Leonard Cohen, “Hallelujah,” *Various Positions* (Columbia Records, 1984).

[46] See Alan Light’s “Introduction” to *The Holy and The Broken: Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley and the Unlikely Ascent of ‘Hallelujah’*, Atria Books, 2012. This work as a whole is a valuable source of information and co-ordinates for the most notable performances and recordings of the song.

[47] A few examples. Perhaps the most influential recorded performance, indeed one that may have kept the song alive, was that of Jeff Buckley in 1994: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8AWFf7EAc4>. At the Olympics: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcOQSk\\_cMO0&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcOQSk_cMO0&feature=youtu.be). In a TV hospital (featuring another influential performance, by Rufus Wainwright): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Or-D-8lbprQ>. With entirely new, conventionally religious lyrics: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNZK7DantOk&feature=youtu.be>. And a (more deliberate or self-conscious) parody: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRmxdu4oGWA&feature=youtu.be>. Many more can be found with a simple search, or by referencing Light.

[48] Cohen himself suggested as many as eighty. Light, p. 3.

[49] These lyrics are available in various places and somewhat different forms. The versions provided in *The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen* (see above) differ in some relatively minor details from those frequently performed by others. See also Light, pp. ix-x. Finally, there is no stable or definitive text here—that is, of the “standard” itself. The lines quoted in the body of the present essay are taken from frequently performed versions, including those of Cohen himself, and are at least representative.

[50] Light, pp. 181-82.

[51] The connection of chorus to climax has been made by a number of observers. See Light, pp. vii, xxiv.

[52] And why? As the title song in Cohen’s impressive final album has it, as yet another blind, suffering, resentful voice addresses its God, it can only be because **You want it darker**. “Leonard Cohen’s official audio for ‘You Want It Darker’ (feat. Cantor Gideon Y. Zelermeyer” by Leonard Cohen, published on YouTube by LeonardCohenVEVO on September 21, 2016, <https://youtu.be/v0nmHymgM7Y>

[53] “Ain’t No Cure for Love,” *Wikipedia*, February 15, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ain%27t\\_No\\_Cure\\_for\\_Love&oldid=765573957](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ain%27t_No_Cure_for_Love&oldid=765573957).

[54] Light, p. 24.

[55] Gans, “Virtues Old and New,” <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw459/>