Philipp W. Rosemann
National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Leonard Cohen, philosopher[*]

In memory of my father,
Herwart Rosemann

I.
Introduction

Philosophy has a long-standing, albeit not uncontested, relationship with poetry. The origins of the Western philosophic tradition lie in its struggle to extricate itself slowly from *mythos*, that is to say, from poetic story-telling about the cosmos as the place where humans encounter the power of the gods. The English word 'myth', which carries connotations of fable and untruth, renders *mythos* only imperfectly. There was a point in history, a mere 3000 years or so ago, when *mythos* constituted the only access to truth; when there was no science about man and nature, but there were only stories attempting to make sense of reality by seeing it bathed in supernatural forces.

Philosophy was born from the endeavour to view reality in a different light, to explain nature in terms of itself—that is, naturally—rather than seeing the gods at work everywhere. The movement from story to science took many centuries (apart from never being complete), and scholars are still debating what prompted it. We do know that the so-called 'Greek miracle' occurred in connection with the advent of a new type of society, one in which absolute rule by a divine king who owned and commanded everything in his realm was replaced by more democratic structures. These led to the emergence of social spaces where political decisions, the administration of justice, economic exchange, and even religious practice were more open, being governed by objective laws to which everyone was equally subject. Now it was no longer any man's role to *be* the law, but it was every citizen's role to determine *what* the law was.[1] (That the citizens were few and the slaves many is worth

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[*] Revised version of the inaugural lecture that I delivered at Maynooth University on April 18, 2018.

[1] Jean-Pierre Vernant makes this argument in *The Origins of Greek Thought* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982).

remembering in this context, just as is the fact that women were excluded from active life in the *polis*.)

It is not a coincidence that Aristotle's famous term 'category' has judicial roots: *kategorein* meant 'to speak against someone before judges' before it assumed the philosophical sense of 'to affirm a predicate of something'. Just as the goal of judicial proceedings is to determine right and wrong objectively, without prejudice, so Aristotle's 'categories' are ways of speaking about reality, and to do so objectively—without story, without metaphor.

This brings us to the fundamental difference between story, or *mythos*, and philosophy. The power of story lies in the way in which it uses language polysemously, so that words acquire (or perhaps reflect) a mysterious depth. In ancient Greece, the paradigm of such polysemous speech was the oracle in Delphi, which responded to human questions regarding the future in notoriously ambiguous ways. Heraclitus famously wrote that 'the lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither says nor conceals: he indicates through signs.'[2] The distance, ontological as well as epistemological, between gods and humans did not permit the unmediated transmission of knowledge but required a veiled, oracular discourse. An interpretive effort thus became necessary which for the human recipients of the oracles was often a matter of life and death, triumph or tragedy. Thus, when King Croesus misread the oracle predicting the fall of a great empire, the war that he started with Cyrus of Persia led to his own downfall. Croesus was so blinded by his might that he did not reckon with the possibility that the empire whose collapse the oracle prophesied could be his own. In other words, Croesus did not know himself in his finitude, and that ignorance is what the oracle powerfully revealed. Perhaps, therefore, there was a genuinely religious impulse behind the oracle at Delphi; perhaps the oracle was less about predicting external events than about encouraging the human seekers of certitude regarding the future to first know themselves. In fact, ancient sources report that the adage 'Know thyself' was written at the entrance to the temple at Delphi.[3]

[2] "Ὁ ἄναξ οὗ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει" (fr. 22, B93 DK).

[3] My account of the oracle at Delphi is indebted to the excellent work of Julia Kindt, *Revisiting Delphi: Religion and Storytelling in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Also see her chapter, 'The Inspired Voice: Enigmatic Oracular Communication,' in *Mercury's Wings: Exploring Modes of Communication in the Ancient World*, ed. by Fred S. Naiden and Richard J. A. Talbert (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 211–28.

The relationship between oracle—polysemous language—and philosophy may therefore be quite complex; indeed, philosophy may have its own origins in the oracular discourse of Pythia, the priestess at the temple of Apollo in Delphi. Plato's Socrates certainly suggests as much in his self-defence before his Athenian judges.[4] These origins notwithstanding, philosophy increasingly sought to distance itself from divine stories. Plato subjects *mythos* to scathing critique in his *Republic*, and the works of his pupil Aristotle already breathe the sober air of syllogism and science (*episteme*). One could write the entire history of philosophy in the West as a history of philosophy's gradual emancipation from religious narratives, be they pagan, Jewish, Muslim, or Christian. This does not mean that philosophy is necessarily opposed to religion, as one can see in the many philosophers who have belonged to a religious tradition. Yet a philosopher is not satisfied with revealed stories about God or the gods; he seeks—take Thomas Aquinas as a Christian example—irrefutable, scientific proof that there is a God, that there is substance to the tales.

In modernity, the emancipation of philosophy from religious discourse went much further, in that philosophers increasingly adopted a model of truth stemming from the natural sciences. The great metaphysical systems of the past could not be trusted, having led to nothing but contradiction and confusion. Philosophy needed to be founded again upon the sound basis of logic. In the twentieth century, the baton of philosophy as science has been taken up notably by analytic philosophy, which subjects all language to scientific critique. Terms that are polysemous, such as metaphorical language about God, are eliminated from the register of the philosopher, as are the non-scientific forms of reasoning which typically employ such terms, like rhetoric and narrative. Analytic philosophy takes the precision of modern mathematical science as its model, but what it gains in precision it loses in existential relevance. Analytic philosophy thus no longer attempts to answer the big questions of human existence, judging these questions to have no answers; indeed, judging them to be insufficiently precise, perhaps to be meaningless entirely.

At the same time, the counter-movement in contemporary philosophy—Continental philosophy—has seen a return to narrative and poetry as a means of philosophic expression. Convinced that philosophy has run its course, thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger have sought refuge in poetic forms of writing. For Nietzsche, all language is metaphorical, all truth is story, so that the task is not to replace story with science, but to tell the right stories. For

[4] For a detailed interpretation of the role of the oracle at Delphi in the *Apology*, see Kindt, *Revisiting Delphi*, chap. 4.

Heidegger, philosophy has been absorbed into the sciences; therefore, the only way to take up the 'task of thinking' in our day is to return to the fundamental wisdom that reveals itself in our own, albeit now debased, language. The poets, who remain attuned to the mystery of words, are therefore the real thinkers.

With that, we turn to a poem by Leonard Cohen.

II.

Steer Your Way

Steer your way past the ruins
Of the altar and the mall
Steer your way through the fables
Of creation and the fall
Steer your way past the palaces
That rise above the rot
Year by year
Month by month
Day by day
Thought by thought

Steer your heart past the truths
That you believed in yesterday
Such as fundamental goodness
And the wisdom of the way
Steer your heart, precious heart
Past the women whom you bought
Year by year
Month by month
Day by day
Thought by thought

Steer your way through the pain
That is far more real than you
That smashed the cosmic model

That blinded every view
And please don't make me go there
Though there be a god or not
Year by year
Month by month
Day by day
Thought by thought

They whisper still, the ancient stones
The blunted mountains weep
As he died to make men holy
Let us die to make things cheap
And say the Mea Culpa
Which you probably forgot
Year by year
Month by month
Day by day
Thought by thought

Steer your way, o my heart
Though I have no right to ask
To the one who was never
Never equal to the task
Who knows he's been convicted
Who knows he will be shot
Year by year
Month by month
Day by day
Thought by thought

They whisper still, the ancient stones
The blunted mountains weep
As he died to make men holy

Let us die to make things cheap
And say your Mea Culpa
Which you gradually forgot
Year by year
Month by month
Day by day
Thought by thought[5]

III.
Leonard Cohen, philosopher

Cohen published this poem[6] as part of the last album that he released, just about a month before his death in November, 2016. 'Steer Your Way' is the eighth track of the album, which he ironically entitled, *You Want It Darker*. Cohen was well-known for the melancholic bent of his work; the title promises his audience an exit exploring, one final time, the depressing aspects of life.

To whom is the album addressed? Who is the 'you' that appears in the title both of the album itself and of the song we are analysing here? Let us start with the natural assumption that Cohen is addressing the listener.

'Steer your way past the ruins | Of the altar and the mall'. The poem immediately opens on a disenchanted note, introducing us to a landscape of ruins. Both the altar and the mall have fallen into decay. The symbolism is not hard to read. The altar serves as the centre of divine worship, while the mall is the place where modern man worships consumption, together with the money that is necessary to indulge in it. God and mammon are old enemies; one may recall the passage in Luke where Jesus declares, 'No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon' (Luke 16:13; Douay-Rheims). The deep

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[5] Leonard Cohen, 'Steer Your Way', on the CD *You Want It Darker* (Sony, 2016).

[6] For Cohen's work, the terms 'poem' and 'song' are largely interchangeable, in that he composed many of his poems to be accompanied by music. In 1969, Cohen said to the *New York Times*, 'There is no difference between a poem and a song. Some were songs first and some were poems first and some were situations. All my writing has guitars behind it, even the novels' (quoted in Sylvie Simmons, *I'm Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen* [London: Jonathan Cape, 2012], p. 138).

incompatibility between the quest for God and the pursuit of material wealth—money in particular—has a structural reason: both God and money are perceived as providing ultimate satisfaction to all human striving, albeit for opposite reasons. God is believed to fulfil our desires because of the plenitude of his being, while money makes the same promise based on the very emptiness that allows it to purchase anything, including perhaps even love.[7]

Why have the altar and the mall fallen into ruin? Why have both disappointed us? Before we attempt to answer these questions philosophically, we should note that there is factual truth to Cohen's statement about the downfall of the altar and the mall. We are in Ireland in the year 2018. The Catholic Church has lost its authority to such a point that one of the country's leading theologians has published a book musing about the 'end of Irish Catholicism'.[8] The unprecedented crisis of the Church coincided—and there may have been more here than mere coincidence—with the rapid economic expansion that is known as the 'Celtic Tiger'. The Celtic Tiger, however, was quickly followed by a severe recession that plunged the country into despair, triggering a new wave of mass emigration.[9] Steering one's way past the ruins of the altar and the mall appears like a sensible course of action in the context of contemporary Ireland.

The loss of faith in religion and in the promises of prosperity is of course not merely an Irish phenomenon. At the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche gloomily diagnosed what he called the 'death of God'. Written in Nietzsche's poetic, polysemous style, the passages in his works that discuss God's demise are not easy to interpret. Most likely, Nietzsche did not mean to intimate that a God who once lived has reached the end of his existence, much like a finite creature that is subject to death. Rather, the philosopher expressed the sentiment that the space where we were once able to encounter the divine has closed. The world has become disenchanted as God, who was once omnipresent, has been

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[7] This is an argument that Georg Simmel develops in his *The Philosophy of Money*, 3rd ed., ed. David Frisby, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby from a first draft by Kaethe Mengelberg (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 236.

[8] See D. Vincent Twomey, S.V.D., *The End of Irish Catholicism?* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003). In 2017, the Jesuit journal *Studies* devoted an issue to reflection about Father Twomey's analyses in this book: *The Future of Irish Catholicism*, *Studies* vol. 106, no. 421 (Spring 2017).

[9] There are many studies devoted to the Celtic Tiger and its collapse; one of the best is Peader Kirby, *Celtic Tiger in Collapse: Explaining the Weaknesses of the Irish Model*, 2nd ed., International Political Economy Series (Houndmills, Hamps./New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

pushed to the edges of a world that we believe is intelligible in purely natural terms. We no longer pray for a good harvest but invest in fertilizers and pesticides; we do not hope for a better life in the hereafter but strive to make this life as pleasant as heaven; we do not allow ourselves to be surprised by the birth of a child but attempt to engineer the conditions in which human life comes to be. This is why God is 'dead': we ourselves have killed him, as Nietzsche declares in *The Gay Science*.[10]

If this interpretation is correct, then the death of God has everything to do with the technological and economic progress that gave rise to the industrial age and the globalized world which were beginning to take shape in the nineteenth century. As steam engines replaced the power of water and wind, railways rendered obsolete the horse and the carriage, telegraph lines superseded the human courier, and factories mechanized the production of goods and fundamentally altered the nature of labour, all this progress was accompanied by a sense of alienation which was unprecedented in its extent. It reverberated in movements as varied as Marxism, romanticism, Arts and Crafts, and even fascism—all attempts to restore a lost sense of harmony in social relations, with nature, with the products of one's labour, or with one's national culture. Not all of these movements are benign, and even the more benign ones may be nothing more than nostalgic denials of reality, so that there is good reason to steer one's way clear of them. As for the '*palaces that rise above the rot*', they belong to those who have not even understood that there is a crisis. The palaces are monuments to a decadent, superficial culture that does not grasp its own groundlessness.

So what is the alternative to this depressing situation? A return to a pre-modern type of society where traditional religion ensured communion between God and humans, guaranteeing social cohesion? This avenue is closed, as Cohen urges his listener: '*Steer your way through the fables | Of creation and the fall*'. Once we, as a civilization, have lost faith in the stories that underpin religious belief, so that these stories have become myths, any simple return to them becomes impossible. We know that God did not create the world in six days, but that the universe came into existence in a Big Bang that occurred some 13.8 billion years ago. Adam and Eve did not exist, and since they did not exist, they did not encounter God in a garden where a speaking snake plunged humanity into chaos by talking Eve into eating a forbidden fruit. All these are fables that we cannot help finding rather childish and amusing. They belong, it seems, to an earlier stage in the development of the human spirit.

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[10] One of the most profound reflections on the meaning of the 'death of God' in Nietzsche is Eugen Biser's book, *'Gott ist tot'. Nietzsches Destruktion des christlichen Bewußtseins* (Munich: Kösel, 1962).

The refrain that concludes the first stanza suggests that avoiding the false promises of the altar and the mall requires a sustained effort: '*Year by year | Month by month | Day by day | Thought by thought*'. We are not dealing with a general piece of advice; rather, every month, every day, every single thought needs to be shaped by the need to steer clear of the idols of religion and consumption. The matter requires an almost monastic devotion and discipline.

The second stanza reinforces the message of the first: '*Steer your heart past the truths | That you believed in yesterday | Such as fundamental goodness | And the wisdom of the way*'. One of the core beliefs of the three great Western religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—is that God is fundamentally good. This creates the need to explain evil away philosophically, that is to say, to grant it only a secondary and derivative existence. The standard solution is to define evil as a 'privation' of good. On this account good has absolute primacy, so that evil arises when goods become disordered. This account goes so far as to claim that evil cannot be pursued for its own sake, but only insofar as it takes the appearance of good. Eve, in our fairy tale from paradise, does not eat the fruit because she intends to offend God, but because the fruit looks tasty and the snake is able to dispel her concerns regarding the divine prohibition.

This account of evil was never easy to accept. Tell the family of a murder victim that the perpetrator of the crime was only pursuing a disordered good! Post-Holocaust, the privation theory of evil appears even more facile, if not offensive. Perhaps there is evil, radical evil, that cannot be reduced to some tragically misunderstood good. A Jew like Cohen, in particular, could be excused for having lost faith in fundamental goodness. References to the Holocaust abound in Cohen's oeuvre, which includes a poetry collection with the title, *Flowers for Hitler*.[11] The very first track of the album *You Want It Darker* contains lines that allude to the Holocaust, in which millions died, forsaken, it seems, by their God:

They're lining up the prisoners
And the guards are taking aim
I struggled with some demons
They were middle class and tame

[11] Leonard Cohen, *Flowers for Hitler* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964).

I didn't know I had permission to murder and to maim
You want it darker

And, in next stanza:

A million candles burning for the love that never came
You want it darker
We kill the flame[12]

The truths that we believed in yesterday include not only Western forms of religion, but Eastern ones as well. '*Wisdom of the way*' must be a reference to Taoism, although Cohen was more familiar with Buddhism, which he studied seriously over decades, even joining a Buddhist monastery in the 1990s. He immersed himself into Hinduism at around the same time, travelling repeatedly to Mumbai to attend the *satsangs* of a Hindu sage.

The second part of the stanza echoes another theme from the first stanza, namely, the mistaken belief that the pursuit of money provides an alternative to the religious quest. If God's help never came to the millions who perished in the Holocaust, the promise of his love may be unreal. At least I can buy a woman and enjoy her love for the night! Or can I? '*Steer your heart, precious heart | Past the women whom you bought*' suggests that this, too, is an illusion. The poem does not provide an explanation. It may be obvious that love is not for sale.

Note the introduction of the notion of the heart in the second stanza. If in the first stanza, the poet urges his listener to steer his or her way past the ruins of the altar and the mall, in the second he speaks to the listener's heart, even his 'precious heart'. The heart is a universal human symbol of affection and love. Situated between the brain and the stomach, the heart symbolizes the place in-between reason and desire where human beings take the fundamental decisions regarding the direction of their lives. Putting one's heart into a task means to take it really seriously, with passion and devotion. One can be opened-hearted, or one's heart can be 'bent back into itself' (*cor curvatum in se ipsum*), according to a famous

[12] Leonard Cohen, 'You Want It Darker', first track on the CD *You Want It Darker* (Sony, 2016). Cohen originally dedicated his third poem collection, *Flowers for Hitler*, to the 'Dachau generation' but the dedication was removed when his publisher objected. See Simmons, *I'm Your Man*, p. 116.

expression that is often attributed to Augustine.[13] One can even be heartless, lacking compassion and love altogether. It is of existential significance, then, in what direction a human being steers his or her heart. Finally, let us note the description of the heart as 'precious'. The term carries a subtle Catholic connotation that is hardly accidental, as Cohen was deeply familiar with the language and symbols of Catholic devotion. He does, however, not employ the adjective 'precious' exactly as one would expect in a religious context. For it is usually Jesus' blood that is described as 'precious' rather than his heart, which is more commonly associated with the attribute 'sacred'. The religious allusion is odd and appears somewhat out of place in the context of the first two stanzas, with their disillusioned stance towards religion.

In the third stanza, Cohen's message of despair becomes ever more insistent: '*Steer your way through the pain | That is far more real than you | That smashed the cosmic model | That blinded every view*'. The question here is no longer whether one believes the narratives on which religion is based, or whether catastrophes of evil and suffering make it impossible to accept the idea of a fundamentally good creator. These are still relatively abstract matters. Pain is not abstract, and most of us have experienced it in more or less severe forms. Pain cuts to the very bone. It is real, 'far more real than you'. Philosophers have toyed with the idea that all of reality, including one's own existence, could be just a dream. Pain reminds us of the vacuousness of such thought experiments. Pain is what Jean-Luc Marion has termed a 'saturated phenomenon'. By this term the French philosopher means an experience that shatters our horizons of understanding, forcing us to reconfigure our patterns of comprehension around a new reality to which we have been subjected.[14] In Cohen's words, pain smashes the cosmic model, blinding every view. It also forces us into a different attitude towards the world. In the beginning of the poem, we encounter a person who is asked to steer his or her way past cultural decay and past beliefs now recognised to be inadequate. The mood is sad, to be sure, but also assertive. The things left behind are decadent, childish, immature. The experience of pain changes this mood. We cannot avoid pain, cannot master it, which Cohen expresses by pointing to the fact that it is not something we can steer 'past', but only 'through'. Then the voice changes, as suddenly the speaker himself enters into the poem,

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[13] The phrase *cor curvatum in se ipsum* does not, in this form, occur in Augustine's writings, although the idea is certainly there.

[14] See Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

with a pleading voice: '*and please don't make me go there*'. The self-confidence and certainty of judgement that characterized the first two stanzas have vanished. At just this point, God, who we thought was dead, makes a reappearance, albeit a very tentative one: '*Though there be a god or not*'.

This is not an affirmation of God's existence. Yet by exposing him or her to the reality of helplessness, the experience of pain has opened the subject's heart. As Cohen wrote in one of his early novels, *Beautiful Losers*, perhaps one needs to be broken and empty to receive: 'Please make me empty, if I'm empty then I can receive, if I can receive it means it comes from somewhere outside of me, if it comes from outside of me I'm not alone!'[15]

The movement of the first three stanzas comes to a temporary halt in the fourth. Instead of repeating the injunction to keep moving, to 'steer your way', its first verses invite the listener to pay attention to the soft voice of whispering stones and weeping mountains: '*They whisper still, the ancient stones / The blunted mountains weep*'. The subject's own pain, which was the theme of the previous stanza, has rendered him or her sensitive to the suffering of others. The pain in question here has a cosmic dimension, concerning not human beings and animals, who are capable of expressing themselves in audible words or at least screams, but the inanimate world of rocks and stones, which seems to be mute. It is not mute to the poet. If we have ears to listen, Cohen tells us, we will hear the weeping of the blunted mountains that have been raped by strip mining, a practice in which entire mountaintops are removed to expose layers of coal for industrial exploitation.[16]

In the next lines, the poem, which opened on a mood of disenchantment with religious wisdom, takes an astonishing turn: '*As he died to make men holy / Let us die to make things cheap / And say the Mea Culpa / Which you probably forgot*'. All of a sudden, we find ourselves transposed into a Christian, indeed Catholic world, conjured up by a Jewish poet who, a couple of stanzas ago, urged us to steer clear of traditional religion. What has happened?

The answer must lie in the reality of suffering. The pain that 'smashed the cosmic model' has not only had the negative effect of 'blinding every view', although facilely optimistic views of reality have collapsed under its weight; it has also turned the depressed,

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[15] Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 39.

[16] Eric Reece offers a fine literary description of strip mining in his essay, 'Death of a Mountain: Radical Strip Mining and the Leveling of Appalachia', *Harper's Magazine* (April 2005): 41–60.

self-absorbed subject of the first two stanzas into an empathetic listener to cosmic suffering. That cosmic suffering finds its paradigmatic expression in the crucified Christ, the one who 'died to make men holy'.[17] Since Cohen draws on Christian symbolism from his earliest writings and throughout his oeuvre, it is not surprising to find such themes recurring in his final album. Nonetheless, it may be wise to refrain from projecting a complete Christian soteriology into Cohen's poem, tempting as it is to do so. For Jesus enters Cohen's song second-hand, as it were. The lines, 'As he died to make men holy | Let us die to make things cheap' parody a famous American patriotic song, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, which views the fight for freedom in the Civil War in analogy to God's fight to liberate us from sin: 'As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free'.[18] We no longer die for such noble causes. Our response to Jesus' suffering for salvation is woefully inadequate, as we invest shallow consumerism with all the pathos of a struggle over life and death. 'We die to make things cheap', first perhaps in the sense in which we offhandedly use a phrase like, 'I'd die for a cold Coke'; in other words, we eagerly enter into the race of ever increasing consumption. At the same time, 'we die to make thing cheap' may carry a darker message: we are headed towards a trivial death as a consequence of shallow consumerism. This line, then, also hearkens back to the weeping mountains from the previous stanza. The cosmic havoc that our greed is wreaking on the environment will ultimately turn on us; indeed, we all know that we are already living its consequences. Yet we continue to build palaces that rise above the rot, to return to the phrase from the first stanza. We are unrepentant, since we have forgotten the meaning of guilt. But guilty we are.

In order to determine what Cohen has in mind in speaking of 'the Mea Culpa', it may be useful to remind ourselves of the prayer in which the phrase *mea culpa* occurs, the Confiteor, especially since Cohen surmises that we 'probably forgot' it: 'I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault': *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*.

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[17] In an interview that he gave the *New York Times* in 1968, Cohen said of the Cross, 'The crucifixion will again be understood as a universal symbol, not just as an experiment in sadism or masochism or arrogance' (quoted in Simmons, *I'm Your Man*, p. 187).

[18] I owe this reference to my colleague Anthony O'Farrell, professor emeritus of Mathematics at Maynooth University.

Sin is an old-fashioned topic. No one likes to talk about it, not even the Church. Sometimes, one has the impression that the Church prefers to forget the inconvenient details that come with belief in a crucified God. Not so the Jewish Leonard Cohen. In this particular poem, 'Steer Your Way', the message of sin is unambiguous, occurring in the only stanza that is repeated. What is more ambiguous is the victim of our faults. Against whom or what have we sinned? Is it God, is it our neighbour? The only answer that the poem suggests comes in the line we already know, 'The blunted mountains weep'. We have sinned cosmically, against all of nature.

While this understanding of sin is very contemporary, resonating as it does with current environmental concerns, it also happens to be authentically Jewish. In the 'fable' about the fall that occurs in the Old Testament, Adam and Eve's transgression of God's commandment leads to alienation on a cosmic scale, not just between humanity and the creator. Genesis tells us that the offspring of the serpent will forever live in enmity with Eve's children (3:15); Eve will experience pain in childbirth, and thus alienation from her own body (perhaps even from her children); she will be subordinate to Adam, even though God made her from Adam's own flesh and bones (3:16); finally, Adam's relationship to the earth will be disrupted, as he will have to toil amidst 'thorns and thistles' to extract a livelihood from the soil (3:17–19). Adam therefore will no longer be allowed to dwell in the beautiful garden of paradise, where God, man, and nature co-existed in harmony (3:23–24).[19]

So, to return to Cohen's song, the blunted mountains that weep are indicative of much more than environmental degradation, serious as that is in itself. When the natural environment becomes mere resource for relentless consumption, then—as Martin Heidegger famously pointed out—we are not far from reducing human beings themselves to mere resources: to workers and consumers who are ultimately nothing but fodder for an ever-expanding economic and technological machine.[20] Not to mention the fact that it is always the poorest and most disadvantaged members of the human family who will pay the steepest price for our rapaciousness.

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[19] I offer a fuller discussion of the narrative from Genesis in my book, *Charred Root of Meaning: Continuity, Transgression, and the Other in Christian Tradition*, Interventions (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2018), pp. 166–73.

[20] See Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', trans. William Lovitt, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1977), pp. 307–41

We move on to the next stanza. The addressee of the imperative to steer one's way has changed. In the opening lines of the poem, the person thus enjoined was a general 'you'. In the second stanza, Cohen more precisely directed his admonition to the other's heart. Now, in the fourth stanza, we find the poet speaking to his own heart: '*Steer your way, o my heart*'. It turns out, then, that the poet is engaged in an exercise of shaping himself, of shaping his own heart, just as much as he is attempting to shape the path of his audience—year by year, month by month, day by day, thought by thought. The shaping is very gentle. The heart is not something that can be bullied into submission, especially in relation to the most existential questions it faces. Even asking the heart to move in a certain direction may be too much: '*Though I have no right to ask*'. The tentativeness of the request is all the more justified once we consider where Cohen wants his heart to go, namely, to a loser, to pain and defeat: '*To the one who was never | Never equal to the task | Who knows he's been convicted | Who knows he will be shot*'.

Jesus has proven unable 'to make men holy'; certainly the vast majority of them are not. Cohen states his regret regarding Jesus' failure in another song from the album *You Want It Darker*:

Seemed the better way
When first I heard him speak
Now it's much too late
To turn the other cheek
Sounded like the truth
Seemed the better way
Sounded like the truth
But it's not the truth today[21]

It makes sense that Cohen declares he has no right to direct his heart to such a loser, someone '*[w]ho knows he's been convicted | Who knows he will be shot*'. But that is nonetheless the direction he recommends. To resolve the paradox, it would be easy to command the resources of Christian theology and explain that, of course, Jesus was not ultimately a loser because his sacrifice secured our salvation. He was God and won. While this explanation is not wrong, it

[21] Leonard Cohen, 'It Seemed the Better Way', seventh track on the CD *You Want It Darker* (Sony, 2016).

is facile because it does not correspond to what Cohen says. There undoubtedly is a Christian dimension to his poem, but this dimension is not easy to capture with the categories of traditional orthodoxy. This leaves us some large philosophical and theological questions to wrestle with.

IV.
The Craziness of Leonard Cohen

The second part of the poem, with its allusions and references to traditional Christian themes, does not annul the first, in which we are asked to steer our hearts past the truths that we 'believed in yesterday', and to leave behind 'the fables of creation and the fall'. The second part does not annul the first because Cohen was explicit, throughout his oeuvre and including this particular album, that his piety was not of a traditional kind. He longed to be a believer, even a Christian, but he could not, in honesty, go down this path. There are several reasons for this situation, not the least significant of them being that Cohen was Jewish. He was so Jewish that the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Lord Sacks, devoted a homily to the album that we are considering here, pointing up its deep roots in the Hebrew Bible, the rabbinical commentary tradition, and Jewish liturgy.[22] Yet Cohen's Judaism was no less broken than his Christianity. Both faiths for him were 'mythologies', as he already declared in the title of his first collection of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*.[23] The Jewish intellectual Leon Wieseltier recognised this brokenness when he admitted in *The New York Times*, 'Leonard wrote and sung often about God, but I am not sure what he meant by it.'[24]

Here is a tentative answer to Wieseltier's perplexity: by God Cohen meant a person liberating the world, including him, from the loneliness of suffering. That the Christian God is a God who, unlike the Lord of the Hebrew Bible, submitted himself to the pain of the world rendered him deeply attractive to Cohen. Cohen was not put off by what a famous

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[22] To be more precise, Lord Sacks's homily is devoted to the first track, 'You Want It Darker'. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s3kQSZ_Qxk, accessed March 27, 2018. Lord Sacks's remarks are insightful and moving, but he ends up downplaying Cohen's religious doubts.

[23] See Leonard Cohen, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, McGill Poetry Series 1 (Toronto: Contact Press, 1956).

[24] Leon Wieseltier, 'My Friend Leonard Cohen: Darkness and Praise', *The New York Times* (November 14, 2016), https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/14/opinion/my-friend-leonard-cohen-darkness-and-praise.html, accessed March 27, 2018.

passage in the First Letter to the Corinthians calls the ‘foolishness of the Cross’ (1 Cor. 1:18–28), that is to say, the crazy notion that God could be subject to the worst kind of suffering and death. In fact, Cohen liked crazy people—in particular if they were female.

What does it mean to be crazy? A crazy person is someone whose conduct is unable to be comprehended by means of the normal categories of reason. Likewise, a crazy event goes beyond the boundaries of our usual expectations. The Cross is foolish, crazy in a sense, because the unspeakable suffering that it inflicts is meant to break the victim physically and mentally.[25] Moreover, the Cross confounds all normal definitions of divinity. Indeed, any form of intense suffering can render rationality mute, reducing those subject to it to moaning and screaming. Earlier on, we employed Marion’s notion of the ‘saturated phenomenon’ to discuss the effects that suffering produces in a human being. The poet, of course, uses different language, speaking of the way in which pain ‘smashed the cosmic model’ and ‘blinded every view’ rather than talking about saturated phenomena.

Not every saturated phenomenon is painful and unpleasant; far from it. One of the most important such phenomena is love. Love has the power to create a new world for those in love with each other, whereas the absence of love can make a world collapse—as those well know who suffer from depression, like Leonard Cohen. One of the songs on the album *You Want It Darker* begins with the following stanza:

If the sun would lose its light
And we lived an endless night
And there was nothing left
That you could feel
That’s how it would be
What my life would seem to me
If I didn’t have your love
To make it real[26]

[25] For a brief account of the Roman practice of crucifixion, one may read Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

[26] Leonard Cohen, ‘If I Didn’t Have Your Love’, fifth track on the CD *You Want It Darker* (Sony, 2016).

Suffering and love have this in common, that they break the hard shell, so to speak, of human subjectivity. As Stephen Scobie writes in his excellent study of Cohen's early work, 'love can only enter the world once it has accepted the essential conditions of destruction and loss. Love is only for the broken, the maimed, the outcasts, the beautiful losers'.[27] Suffering and love are therefore surprisingly close to each other: no one suffers more than a disappointed lover. In another sense, however, they are opposed: pain has the sufferer long for peace, whereas love grants that peace.

To this crazy dynamic much of Leonard Cohen's oeuvre is devoted, namely, to the relationship between suffering and love, and to the symbolic place where these two realities intersect in 'the one who died to make men holy'. To render this point clearer, let us listen to another song, or at least to its opening stanza. The song is the famous 'Suzanne':

Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river
You can hear the boats go by
You can spend the night beside her
And you know that she's half crazy
But that's why you want to be there
And she feeds you tea and oranges
That come all the way from China
And just when you mean to tell her
That you have no love to give her
Then she gets you on her wavelength
And she lets the river answer
That you've always been her lover
And you want to travel with her
And you want to travel blind
And you know that she will trust you
For you've touched her perfect body with your mind.[28]

[27] Stephen Scobie, *Leonard Cohen*, Studies in Canadian Literature 12 (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1978), p. 14.

[28] Leonard Cohen, *The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen* (London: Omnibus Press, 2009), p. 124.

Here the motives which we have been discussing all come together. Suzanne is attractive because she is 'half crazy'. She is an exotic woman who serves you 'tea and oranges that have come all the way from China'. (China carried quite a different symbolic power in the sixties than it does today!) Suzanne opens you to longing for love, but you are unable to produce that love, to generate it from within. You do not 'have it in you', as we say. Suzanne saves you from that longing, giving you as a gift the love which you yourself crave to give. Let us throw into relief the precise dynamic that Cohen is capturing in these lines. The poet is not depicting a situation in which half-crazy Suzanne reciprocates a man's love, and then allows him to consummate that love physically. Line three is clear about a night being spent 'beside her', and the last line of the stanza reinforces the same point: the woman's 'perfect body' has been touched only with the 'mind'. Suzanne therefore is the active partner in this relationship, as the love that the man wishes he had for Suzanne is received from her in order that he may be able to return it. The man is the passive pole in this dynamic, all longing and receptivity.[29]

Suzanne lets the river say that 'you've always been her lover'. The speaking river recalls the weeping mountains from 'Steer Your Way'. Like suffering, love has a cosmic dimension. And just as the poet who knows the reality of pain becomes able to hear the weeping of the blunted mountains, so Suzanne's overflowing love lets her communicate through rivers.

Furthermore, the certainty of being able to love makes reason superfluous, so that 'you want to travel blind'. Remember the pain 'that blinded every view': it is clear here that the blindness induced by love is not same as the blindness produced by pain. Yet both transcend our rational horizons. It would be normal to expect the poet to say that Suzanne's love gives you the trust necessary to travel with her blind. Again, however, the dynamic is different: 'And you know that she will trust you'. Suzanne is the one to extend the gift of trust, which her lover gratefully receives.

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[29] It is therefore difficult to agree with Stephen Scobie that 'Cohen seldom views a woman in any other role than as a passive fulfiller of sexual demands which are often extreme and bizarre' (*Leonard Cohen*, p. 11). On the contrary, in 'Suzanne' the woman serves to symbolize the saint, or even the divine (as Scobie himself notes ibid., pp. 134–36). In 'Steer Your Way', Cohen associates the whispering mountains with the feminine, in the only stanzas where he does not sing in a monotone and is accompanied by soft female voices in the background. I owe this observation to my colleague Alison Hood of the Maynooth Department of Music.

‘Suzanne’ is one of Cohen’s most famous poems. We all know that the next stanza, which we are not able to examine here, abruptly turns to Jesus: ‘And Jesus was a sailor […].’[30] In this context, it would be worthwhile to study another recurrent theme in Cohen’s work, namely, the way in which in the poet’s imagination human and divine love are intertwined, mirroring each other. Cohen stands in the tradition of the *Song of Songs* here, but this is a topic for another time. Let us only note that Cohen is not morbidly attracted to Jesus merely as a symbol of suffering, as the loser who knew ‘he’d been convicted’ and was ‘never never equal to the task’ of making men holy. The poet also views him as the powerful lover who can give us the love that we long to give.

V.
Anatheism

So, given the strong Christian resonances in Cohen’s work, we are once again confronted with the question of the poet’s religious ‘commitments’. Don’t we deserve certainty regarding these matters of the heart?

To attempt to answer this question would be to approach Cohen through the lens of traditional religion. At this point, it should be clear, however, that the poet’s religious quest remained open-ended. To be sure, it would be possible to adduce further evidence for Cohen’s profound Christian sensibilities and the pervasiveness of Jewish motives throughout his work. In a longer, more detailed treatment, we would also need to consider a dimension that has not received enough attention in this lecture, namely, Cohen’s debts to Buddhist and Hindu thought. It is equally evident, however, that Cohen was unwilling or, indeed, unable to give his unambiguous adherence to any one of these religious traditions. He remained a doubter. In his final album he still is not sure ‘if there be a god or not’.[31]

Cohen’s oeuvre, then, hovers somewhere in a space between Judaism and Christianity, between Abrahamic monotheism and Asian religions, indeed between theism and atheism. Cohen’s religious ambiguity has nothing to do with an eclecticism that picks

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[30] Let us note in passing the persistence of certain metaphors in Cohen’s oeuvre. Jesus the sailor who helps us navigate the waters of life finds an echo in the notion of the ‘steering’ of the heart.

[31] Only a very superficial reader can miss the many expressions of religious doubt in Cohen’s oeuvre. There are such readers. For an unfortunate example, see Mary Anne O’Neil, ‘Leonard Cohen, Singer of the Bible’, *CrossCurrents*, 65:1 (March 2015), 91–99.

from different traditions whatever it finds agreeable in order to provide the self some spiritual comfort. Rather, Cohen takes each of the traditions seriously, immersing himself into their writings and practices. Dismissing none of them, he does not attempt to produce a hasty synthesis either.[32] In this way, the poet opens up a space to consider anew the great religious questions. I would like to suggest that Cohen's approach to religion and to religious doubt makes him the poet for our time—even the poet for contemporary Ireland.[33]

In Ireland, as in the Western world more generally, religious certainty is a matter of the past. The 'death of God' of which Nietzsche spoke is different from a simple loss of faith. As already indicated, the death of God means the loss of the cultural space where God was able to appear. The divine can speak to us only if we have ears to hear. But the world has become very noisy.

The large existential questions, however, have not disappeared. They are the questions that Cohen raises again and again throughout his work, with an almost monotonous insistence. These questions have to do with pain and suffering—not only physical pain, but also the suffering that stems from the inability to know what our existence is all about: Where have we come from? Where are we going to? Is there a meaning to this game of life and death? Our civilization has developed many ways to keep us from asking these questions, whether they are drowned out by constant distraction or repressed by medicalization. For, someone who asks these questions too insistently is quickly qualified as crazy, in need of medication to rebalance the brain. It is not surprising, against this background, that Cohen loved performing in mental hospitals, where he found a sympathetic audience for his songs.[34]

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[32] Alasdair MacIntryre's notion of the 'second first language' well describes Cohen's ability to immerse himself into different religious traditions, especially Judaism and Catholic Christianity. He spoke both fluently, as it were, and just as a fluent speaker of two 'mother tongues' knows about these languages, Cohen realized that Judaism and Christianity each possesses an integrity and logic of its own. The encounter—the translation, in MacIntyre's terminology—happens in the space between them, and not as a result of some hasty synthesis. See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p. 364.

[33] Lord Sacks has spoken of Leonard Cohen as having composed 'the song for our time' (at the beginning of the homily referred to in note 19 above). The rabbi had in mind the first track from the album *You Want It Darker*, which he interpreted from an orthodox Jewish perspective. I am taking this idea in a different direction.

[34] On Cohen's predilection for performances in mental hospitals, one may read Simmons, *I'm Your Man*, pp. 223–27. Simmons writes, 'People who were mentally damaged seemed to make Leonard and his songs feel at home' (p. 226).

Cohen invites us to have the courage to be crazy, to make ourselves vulnerable by asking these deep and difficult questions. If we do so, there is no guarantee of receiving an answer. Yet a space will open where we will encounter others who, equally crazy, are on the same wavelength. In this space, we may even hear whispering mountains and speaking rivers. Finally, this is the space where we may once again be able to meet a God who understands our suffering. A contemporary Irish philosopher, Richard Kearney, has even given this space a term: he has called it 'anatheism'. Anatheism, according to Kearney, transcends the division between theism and atheism, designating the 'instant of reckoning' where we are confronted with the choice between them.[35] Approached in this way, the current religious and economic situation in Ireland presents an opportunity to recover a sense of the fundamental human questions which in the past may have received answers that were too easy.

[35] Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*, Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 7.