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Table of Contents

Self-Referential Aesthetics in the Art of Leonard Cohen

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ABSTRACT. On the assumption that Cohen's best poetry comes in his literary middle period, specifically *The Energy of Slaves* (1972) and *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978), I hypothesize that it is self-reference broadly conceived that elevates these works above the rest of his poetry. This account is confirmed by noteworthy middle- and late-period Cohen songs. I offer a threefold typology of Cohenesque self-reference: (1) *intratextual* (reflexive self-reference within a work), (2) *intertextual* (reference to a particular other work in the oeuvre), (3) *supratextual* (reference to multiple works in the oeuvre). Such devices enhance those works in which they appear (or otherwise fall within their self-referential scope) by offering a higher-order perspective that fosters better integration of elements within and suggested by those works. Self-reference can be gimmicky and therefore not a mark of artistic success, but it nonetheless adds appreciable significance to works that are good enough in other respects. Rather than a primary artistic virtue, then, self-reference is a secondary (or perquisite) virtue, as well as a pairing (or sharing) virtue vis-à-vis other works.

1. Introduction

The work of poet and singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen has been examined from a philosophical perspective and furthermore appears to merit such analysis (see e.g., Holt, 2014; Babich, 2016). Here I take Cohen's work as a case study in the aesthetics of self-reference broadly conceived. I argue that much of Cohen's best poetry is distinguished by "going meta" in some form and that such self-reference is, all else being equal, an artistic virtue. Such devices enhance those works in which they appear (or otherwise fall in their self-referential scope) by providing a perspective that fosters better integration of elements within and suggested by those

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works. Although going meta can be gimmicky and therefore not a mark of artistic success (e.g., breaking the fourth wall in some comedies), it nonetheless adds appreciable significance to works that are good enough in other respects. Rather than a primary/foundational artistic virtue, then, self-reference seems to be a secondary (or perquisite) virtue, as well as a pairing (or sharing) virtue vis-à-vis other works.

My starting assumption is that the height of Cohen's poetry occurs in his literary middle period, specifically the volumes *The Energy of Slaves* (1972) and *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978). As I see it, Cohen's early literary period comprises his first four books of original poetry, 1956–1966,[54] with the late period comprising his last three books of original poetry, 1984–2018. This periodization excludes two books of selected poems, 1968 and 1993, respectively, and assumes a plausible if not necessarily standard view of Cohen's career in poetry. It is also worth noting that Cohen's career in music begins on the cusp between the early and middle literary periods, and the middle-to-late period literary shift coincides with a change in Cohen's musical sensibilities from folk to popular music (from the early to middle periods of his music career). Notable songs from the middle and late periods of Cohen's music career confirm that the self-referentiality of the middle-period poetry is, all else being equal, an artistic virtue. This proposal will be subject to qualification and refinement given possible objections raised toward the end.

2. Self-Referential Types

One observes through careful reading that what distinguishes Cohen's best poetry from his early and late literary work is a notable tendency to go meta. Roughly, an artwork goes meta when it exhibits self-awareness or adopts a higher-order perspective, which I frame here as self-reference in a broad sense. It is this tendency toward self-reference broadly conceived that sets this phase apart from, and also elevates it above, the rest of Cohen's poetry.[55]

What I mean by self-reference broadly conceived includes not only the narrow, reflexive sense (a work referring to itself), but also intertextual reference to other works within the artist's oeuvre. In particular, I note a threefold typology of self-referential devices in

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[54] Cohen's two novels also fall in this literary early period.
[55] Later I will discuss a focused objection to this view.

Cohen's work: (1) *intratextual* self-reference (where a work refers to itself), (2) *intertextual* self-reference (where a work refers to a particular other work in the oeuvre), and (3) *supratextual* self-reference (where a work refers to multiple works in the oeuvre). Each of these self-referential types is characteristic of much of Cohen's middle-period poetry.

Before looking at particular examples, I will note that this typology excludes intertextual connections to other artists' work (e.g., "And maybe I had miles to drive / And promises to keep": an allusion to Frost), along with Cohen namechecking himself (e.g., "Sincerely, L. Cohen"). It also excludes simple meta-language (e.g., "But my darling says, 'Leonard, just let it go by'…"), even though meta-language is a form of going meta, and a familiar one in poetry with the words attributed to someone or—as with Keats's "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty…'"—some*thing*. Such devices merit investigation, of course, but they lie afield of the types of work-specific self-reference that concern me here.

Intratextual examples tend to be relatively easy to spot, in part because they typically involve the straightforward self-referential use of indexical terms. Here are examples characteristic of Cohen's literary middle period:

> I threw open the shutters / light fell on this poem (1972, p. 2)
>
> If you ever read this / think of the man writing it (1972, p. 5)
>
> Poetry begun in this mood rarely succeeds (1972, p. 10)
>
> Leaning over his poem / from a standing position (1972, p. 46)
>
> This is a threat / Do you know what a threat is (1972, p. 54)
>
> I am punished when I do not work on this poem (1972, p. 87)
>
> The poet is drunk / he wonders what / he will write next / He has some notion of poetry (1972, p. 91)
>
> This is the poem we have been waiting for / …. / It is not inspired / It took days and days to write (1972, p. 106)
>
> Each man / has a way to betray / the revolution / This is mine (1972, p. 114)
>
> You can rip a heart out on this paragraph (1978, p. 50)
>
> You ask me how I write. This is how I write (1978, p. 74)
>
> This is the end of my life in art (1978, p. 190)[56]

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[56] Cohen's "Life in Art" is one of the more striking motifs in *Death of a Lady's Man*.

Although intertextual self-references appear elsewhere in Cohen's work, many of them occur in *Death of a Lady's Man*,[57] which largely consists of poems paired with "commentaries" as the book's central conceit. Several of the examples below, however, are found in the earlier book, *The Energy of Slaves*:

> I threw open the shutters: / light fell on these lines (1972, p. 3)[58]
>
> Marianne will remain / a beautiful and mysterious name (1972, p. 71)
>
> I blame it on me and Suzanne / the death of poetry (1972, p. 99)
>
> The violence of this paragraph is somewhat mitigated by the sense of nostalgia and loss in the last two lines (1978, p. 21, commenting on "Death to This Book", p. 20)[59]
>
> This is the work of a middle-class mind flirting with terrorism—not without a certain charm (1978, p. 25, commenting on "Our Government-in-Exile", p. 24)
>
> *This is the working of Mercy* (1978, p. 31, commenting on "The Window", p. 31; and p. 151, commenting on "The Sacrifice", p. 151)
>
> Who can go beyond the first four words? Who can hurry past the final six?... I consent to be profoundly touched by the exquisite accident of this paragraph (1978, p. 35, commenting on "My Wife and I", p. 34)
>
> In lines 15 and 16 he asks a question which he does not answer…. The poem begins to rot after the third line, maybe after the second… (1978, p. 39, commenting on "I Have Taken You", p. 38)
>
> *Did he 'jump literature ahead a few years'?* (1978, p. 43, commenting on "I Decided" ["I decided to jump literature ahead a few years"], p. 42)
>
> Is there a modern reader that can measure up to this page? (1978, p. 45, commenting on "The Beetle", p. 44)
>
> *Exposure to this page can induce a suffocating attack...* (1978, p. 65, commenting on "The Asthmatic", pp. 64–65)
>
> [H]e loosened these shining lines from a long dull confession… (1978, p. 163, commenting on "The Rebellion", p. 162)

Many of Cohen's supratextual self-references in the middle-period poetry comment on past works or contemporaneous poems contained in the same volume:

> Welcome to these lines (1972, p. 1)

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[57] The title *Death of a Lady's Man* playfully alludes to Cohen's similarly titled 1977 album *Death of a Ladies' Man*.

[58] These intratextually self-referential lines allude as variorum to the preceding poem en face.

[59] The "commentaries" in *Death of a Lady's Man* are given in italics, so preserved here.

You are a much finer person than I am / Your poetry is better too (1972, p. 29)

It turned out / that I was only a scribbler (1972, p. 33)

There is no one to show these poems to (1972, p. 43)

Thighs from my old poems / would help (1972, p. 44)

Perhaps it is because my music / does not sing for me (1972, p. 66)

when I am only print (1972, p. 75)

The poems don't love us anymore… they don't want to be poems (1972, p. 109)

Death to this book (1978, p. 20)

written in the margins of this and other pages (1978, p. 33, commenting on "Death of a Lady's Man", pp. 30–32)

There is no death in this book and therefore it is a lie (1978, p. 113, commenting on She Has Given Me the Bullet", p. 112)

I had high hopes for this book. I used to be thin, too (1978, p. 168)

Two standout examples illustrate just how rich self-referentiality can be. "Welcome to these lines" is the first line of the first poem of *The Energy of Slaves*. It is thus interpretable as welcoming the reader inter/supratextually to the rest of the book. But as the first line of a poem, it also welcomes the reader intratextually to the poem itself. Furthermore, much of the rest of the poem can be read, not just as poetic lines but also as pickup lines apropos of Cohen's ladies' man persona. This self-reference richly condenses a lot of meaning into a rather short space. Similarly rich is *Death of a Lady Man*'s "I had high hopes for this book. I used to be thin, too", occurring on page 168, far past what one would expect of a typical book of poetry. The suggested conceit here is that the book has become unwieldy, has "put on weight" like the then middle-aged Cohen himself, a hard "problem" in both cases—weight loss as editing, editing as weight loss.

2. Hypothesis and Qualifications

Above I have limited myself to middle-period examples. But admittedly there are examples from the late early and early late periods as well. Cohen's last early-period book, *Parasites of Heaven* (1966), begins with the intertextual reference, "So you're the kind of vegetarian / that only eats roses / Is that what you mean / with your Beautiful Losers?" (p. 1). Similarly, we notice in *Book of Mercy* (1984) one or two supratextual psalms, as in "once again I am a singer

in the lower choirs, born fifty years ago to raise my voice this high, and no higher" (Psalm 1).[60] However, such exceptions are exceedingly rare and occur on the cusps of the middle period, thus foreshadowing and recalling, respectively, the chiefly middle-period self-referential tendency.

So qualified, my proposal is that what distinguishes Cohen's middle-period poetry in both the descriptive and the prescriptive sense—namely self-referentiality as discussed above—is, all else being equal, an artistic virtue. These types of self-reference are by no means unique to Cohen's work,[61] but that work nonetheless serves as a useful and suggestive case study. Such devices enhance the works in which they appear by providing a perspective that fosters better integration of elements within and suggested by those works. As a metaphor for this, take drawing in one-point perspective, which helps coordinate the appearance of different objects in the display so that they appear as a coherent set. In the same way, the self-referential devices (intra-, inter-, and supratextual) used by Cohen in his poetry, give a higher(-order) point of perspective on the lower elements, which become coordinated within the perspective's implicit framework. The line "This is mine" invites us to see the poem as a betrayal; "when I am only print" suggests that the work is less a product than the constituent substance of the poet himself; "I used to be thin, too" prompts us to consider the entire 216-page poetry book as flouting the minimalist cliché of the slim volume. Such added perspective helps to both integrate the work and enhance our aesthetic appreciation of it. If nothing else, an added perspective *on* the work in the case of self-reference is also an added element *of* the work and so correspondingly tends to enrich whatever appreciation we may have.

Let me be clear that my account does not imply that self-reference is a necessary virtue, that an artwork lacking self-referentiality is somehow flawed for that reason. There are, indeed, many effective poems in Cohen's own oeuvre, expressive and muted by turns, that do not employ the kind of device that typifies his middle-period work. It is, however, that very feature that serves to distinguish that work from the rest.

3. Examples from Cohen's Songs

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[60] This work is not paginated, thus the reference to psalm rather than page number.
[61] See various examples, for instance, throughout Holt (2017).

This account is confirmed by notable songs from the middle and late periods of Cohen's music career. Such self-reference will be less obvious because the musical elements of these artworks render them comparatively rich and thus facilitate appreciation without listeners needing to be as alert to any self-referential devices.

To begin with intratextual cases, "Take This Waltz" is a waltz (i.e., has a 3/4 time signature). More subtly, in "Ballad of the Absent Mare", just before the music fades out, we hear the lines "and they're gone like the smoke / and they're gone like this song" (Cohen, 2009, p. 23). The well-known "Hallelujah" lyrically describes its own underlying chord progression (in C, "the fourth [F], the fifth [G], the minor fall [Am], the major lift [F]").[62] Similarly, the repetition of "Hallelujah" in the chorus has at least a double meaning in both *depicting* and *affirming* the specific "Hallelujah" ending each verse (e.g., "from your lips she drew the Hallelujah" [Cohen 2009, p. 56]). No less remarkably, the later song "Almost Like the Blues" has a chord progression resembling but distinct from standard 12-bar blues (in the key of Dm, we get an Am instead of the expected A7). The song also repeats a short line at the end of each verse (the titular "It's almost like the blues") in contrast to the blues convention of repeating a long line at the beginning. Furthermore, this refrain is prefigured by backup singers vocalizing, somberly, "Woo-hoo", an interjection usually of joy rather than lament. In terms of content, throughout the song Cohen airs complaints either more or less tragic and depressing than those of conventional blues (with, for example, genocide at one extreme and bad reviews at the other). Thus, there are at least *four* respects in which "Almost Like the Blues" is almost like the blues.

Intertextual self-reference is comparatively rare in Cohen's songs, though there are a few noteworthy examples. The late-period "That Don't Make It Junk" includes the line "So I closed the Book of Longing", an apparent allusion to Cohen's *Book of Longing*. Similarly, "You Want It Darker" includes the refrain, "You want it darker / We kill the flame", an allusion to Cohen's last book, *The Flame*. What is particularly striking about these examples is that in contrast to typical cases they allude to *future* rather than past works: 2001's "That Don't Make It Junk" alludes to a 2006 book, 2016's "You Want It Darker" to a book published two years

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[62] This observation is hardly original. Compare with Babich (2016, p. 111), which gives the chord progression in G.

later. I call these *ex ante* allusions (Holt, 2015), that is, allusions before the fact.[63] One ineffective intertextual case comes in "You Got Me Singing", where a reference to "Hallelujah" comes off as more boastful and self-aggrandizing than subtle and self-referential, probably because it puts the spotlight on Cohen himself (as songwriter) rather than the song. To be effective, such devices must be used with greater skill and sensitivity, highlighting the art itself rather than the artist.

Some of Cohen's songs make supratextual self-reference across much of his earlier work and "life in art". In "A Singer Must Die" he apologizes ironically, "I'm sorry for smudging the air with my song" (2009, p. 10), where 'song' is meant with unique and multiple reference both literally and figuratively. In "Going Home" he refers to himself as a "lazy bastard", a purposefully lazy piece of writing evoking Cohen's use of lazy rhymes in many songs, as indeed almost all the rhymes are in that song. In "Tower of Song" he refers to future encounters with his work: "I'll be speaking to you sweetly from a window in the Tower of Song" (2009, p. 162). Indeed, his relationship to the song's central metaphor is an elaborate supratextual self-reference to Cohen's long musical career.

On that same album (*I'm Your Man*), not only does the first song, "First We Take Manhattan", announce its track position ("First…" is first), it begins with the lines "They sentenced me to twenty years of boredom / For trying to change the system from within" (2009, p. 53). As I read it, this is an elegant supratextual self-reference to Cohen's earlier music career. The twenty years of boredom begin in 1967 with *Songs of Leonard Cohen*; then, after those twenty years, he sings in 1988, "I'm coming now, I'm coming to reward them" (2009, p.53), as if *I'm Your Man* is the payoff. "[T]rying to change the system from within" suggests an attempt to make a different—a poet's—kind of music, the twenty-year sentence for this "crime" recalling the judicial imagery of "A Singer Must Die".

4. Objections and Replies

A number of objections to my account suggest themselves, and in response I will further develop that account in what seem to me several useful ways. Among various possible

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[63] The key assumption here is that the titles were not inspired *post facto* by the preceding works and that an artist can allude to their own envisioned or not-yet-finished works.

objections, I will address the following: (1) that my starting assumption is false, (2) that my examples are cherry-picked, (3) that my view implies an untenable hybrid view of songs, (4) that self-referentiality unduly limits interpretation, and (5) that self-reference is sometimes an artistic flaw rather than a virtue. I will tackle objection each in turn with corresponding responses.

First, one could reject my account by denying the assumption as to which poetry ranks as Cohen's best or my judgment about what distinguishes it. One could dismiss my judgment as mere personal preference rather than transpersonal taste, noting that it was Cohen's early-period work that secured his reputation as a poet, and that in my youth I myself judged this phase of Cohen's poetic output superior. Of course, the fact that Cohen's early accolades (e.g., winning Canada's Governor General's Award for his second book of poetry) hardly implies that that is his best work. There may be room for a notion of age-appropriate aesthetics here, but because in my more mature view it is the middle-period work that is best, this judgment would be more informed and better justified than that from the comparatively limited perspective of my youth.

Second, one could object that my examples are cherry-picked and therefore exemplary in neither sense—neither representative nor the best—of those works in which they appear. Indeed, self-reference appears in approximately 15% of the poems in *The Energy of Slaves*, and less than 50% of the poems in *Death of a Lady's Man*. However, self-reference can be overdone, and so it should not be expected to be too frequently employed. A close and considered reading of both these books should, I believe, convince the skeptic that self-referentiality occurs in many, though of course not all, of the best poems in these volumes. Most important, though, is the suggestion that self-referentiality is a *pairing* virtue, that a self-referential poem will often aesthetically enhance itself along with such other poems, if any, falling within its referential scope (in intertextual and supratextual self-reference). Likewise, it seems plausible that self-referentiality is also what may be called a *sharing* virtue, where self-referential poems collected in the same volume with non-self-referential poems may enhance the latter as a matter of contextual variety. Thus, one of the commentary poems in *Death of a Lady's Man* will enhance its object poem, and the variety of self-referential poems scattered throughout *The Energy of Slaves* will enhance the interpretive atmosphere of reading the rest of the book.

Third, in trying to confirm my hypothesis about Cohen's poetry by examining his songs, I seem to be smuggling in an illicit hybrid account of songs whereby they are conceived in terms of a simplistic "Music + Lyrics" formula, ignoring that it is how the two function together, not as a simple aggregate, that accounts for the aesthetics of song (e.g., Bicknell 2015, pp. 16–20). My analysis, in other words, seems to imply a misguided ontology of songs. However, even if a hybrid model fails as an ontological account of songs, there are compelling reasons for embracing critical and creative song hybridity. We can account for the failure of some songs to work in terms of poor lyrics that undermine the melody or, in other cases, clumsy melody that undermines the lyrics. Likewise, the critical/creative hybrid view respects the fact that in much song writing, music are lyrics are created by different artists. Great singer-songwriter that he was, Cohen himself sometimes collaborated in this way, even on some of his signature songs.[64] Such hybridity does not imply that a song's aesthetic value is somehow reducible to that of the music and lyrics considered separately.

Fourth, one concern about the aesthetic rewards of the higher-order perspective afforded by self-reference broadly conceived is that it appears to lock one's interpretation in step with the artist's intentions, which limits interpretive freedom. To return to an earlier example, "So you're the kind of vegetarian / that only eats roses" appears to enjoin us to view *Beautiful Losers* from that perspective—and no other, even if other readings help us better integrate and appreciate the diverse and difficult elements of this experimental novel. However, where such self-reference frames a work from an artist's comparatively "narrow" perspective, this need not imply that we are beholden to that perspective.[65] In other words, through self-reference we are not enjoined but rather *invited* to see a work not exclusively but *inclusively* from a certain meta-perspective. This opens up rather than closing off interpretive possibilities. In terms of the metaphor mentioned earlier, whereas self-reference invites us to view the elements within and suggested by a poem from a "one-point perspective", this does not rule out also or alternatively viewing it from, as it were, a "zero-point perspective" without such constraints. This tension between interpretive closure and interpretive openness as aesthetic desiderata implies at worst competing virtues, at best complementary ones.

Fifth, it might seem that self-referentiality cannot be an artistic virtue as I champion it

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[64] The signature song "Everybody Knows", for instance, was cowritten with Sharon Robinson.
[65] For critical discussion of intentionalist interpretation, see Holt (2002).

because sometimes such devices are gimmicky and can detract from a work, in silly comedies that break the fourth wall, for instance (as in *Top Secret* when the leads turn to the audience after the line, "It all sounds like some bad movie"). When self-reference does aesthetically enhance a work, therefore, it seemingly must be in virtue of something other than simple self-reference. However, what may appear to be silly self-reference in such cases might also be perfectly genre-appropriate, with corresponding negative judgments indicative of little more than genre or style prejudice. Either way, this objection motivates a distinction between primary and secondary artistic virtues, where primary virtues stand on their own and secondary virtues rely on primary virtues. (Primary artistic virtues might include skillful execution, expressiveness, etc.) Self-referentiality in an artwork is, all else being equal, a secondary or perquisite artistic virtue, insofar as the work must also exhibit other artistic virtues if self-referentiality is to rank as a virtue rather than a gimmick. Self-reference alone cannot carry a poem.

5. Conclusion

I began by assuming the truth of my considered judgment that Leonard Cohen's poetry peaks in his literary middle period, observing that this work is distinguished by certain kinds of self-reference: intratextual, intertextual, and supratextual. Such devices aesthetically enhance the works in which they appear by providing a meta-perspective fostering better integration of elements within and suggested by those works. This hypothesis was confirmed by notable songs from Cohen's middle and late music career, subject to refinement and qualification in light of several possible objections. Self-referentiality is an artistic virtue, though neither a necessary nor a sufficient one. As this case study of Cohen's work suggests, self-reference is a secondary or perquisite artistic virtue in works that are of sufficient quality in other respects as well, along with being a pairing or sharing virtue vis-à-vis other works. Further examination of other artworks, especially in other artforms, would help determine whether this as-yet tentative generalization can be sufficiently strengthened.

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