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Leonard Cohen: The Master's Voice Review Article

"Well, you burst on the scene already a legend",¹ someone wrote of Bob Dylan; as far as the pop music world was concerned, she could have been writing about Leonard Cohen. In Canada, in the early and mid-Sixties, Cohen's poems and prose were swallowed and regurgitated, like Dylan's in the States, by a fairly small group of devotees; they viewed Cohen as an artistic and sexual messiah, an irreverent prophet in a black leather sports jacket who transformed an otherwise unrefined world through an embrace of pain and a carefully-controlled poetic vision in which "everyone is seen in their 'condition of highest beauty'."² Dylan was an irreverent prophet too, though a more hirsute and political one; but when he decided to use an electric guitar and vocal backing in his songs, many of his followers deserted him, feeling betrayed. When Cohen went to Nashville the year before Dylan and put his poems on record, to the accompaniment of various instruments and voices, the ranks of the faithful swelled; the original disciples seemed pleased that The Word was being spread to a wider audience, and the acolytes were everywhere.³ After all, to emulate Cohen did not mean only to write like him (even if one was ultimately learning not to write like him) but also to bed lovely women in a similar fashion—to be, like Cohen, a phenomenal ladies' man as well: the Master's voice⁴ with the lights low and a bottle of wine somehow went further than an extract from *Spice-Box of Earth*.

For about three years (1967-1970), Cohen's musical stock was high in North America; he toured extensively and his albums did well on the sacrosanct Billboard charts. In the latter part of this period and into the early Seventies he was extremely popular in England and in Europe. His association with various and beautiful female singers, their recording of his songs, helped his legend grow. No ordinary entertainer, certainly no poet, and perhaps only Dylan could get away with what Cohen did once at the height of his fame: at a folk festival in Ontario the Master walked on stage, fumbled a little with his guitar, and announced that he couldn't play that night because his guitar didn't feel right. Then he walked off stage into the darkness. The audience was stunned at first, but they accepted such behaviour because it came from Leonard Cohen. The gesture and the response became part of the legend. Cohen's action, no matter if the guitar didn't feel right, was a calculated display of audience tuning. At about the same time, when he refused the Governor-General's Award for his *Selected Poems: 1956-1968* because his poems wouldn't "permit" an accep-

tance, the audience was tuned again; but some recognized such acts of life by the artist had been mirrored in his art years before when Lawrence Breavman attempted to remain the messiah through gesture and style.⁵ For most of the disciples, however, who seemed to age more quickly than the Master, to drift into steady employment and even into graduate schools, into life with one woman, whose poems, if they were still being written, ceased to be about sexual discovery and personal confession, it was comforting to know that the Master was in charge of the Wilderness, though now the vicarious rather than the emulated *cohen* or priest of pain and passion.

But the Master, it soon appeared, was neither immutable nor invulnerable. The refined beauty of his early art had already been replaced in part by the brilliant though savage extremities of *Beautiful Losers*. The embrace of pain began to supersede the analgesic of style, and Cohen began, more and more, to question his life at the top. In 1966 in *Parasites of Heaven* he could write, "I confess I meant to grow/ wings and lose my mind/ I confess that I've/ forgotten what for/ Why wings and a lost mind/ Love me because nothing happens".⁶ There were no books, only records, between 1968 and 1972 as Cohen pursued his recording and concert career. Then *The Energy of Slaves* was published in which Cohen, in a new, stark, and uncompromising poetic form examined his pop-hero existence and found it lacking. First of all, he recognized the distance he had travelled: "I'd like to read/ one of the poems/ that drove me into poetry/ I can't remember one line/ or where to look".⁷ Through the popularizing of his art "the Lord of Sorrows"⁸ found himself a weary denizen of a rootless territory rather than secure ruler of a self-sufficient kingdom. Cohen had always been ironic about his talents and accomplishments, but it was an irony that never undermined the Master's portrait or plan. In *The Favourite Game* Breavman mocked, but with a controlled and appealing mockery that does not finally disturb "the condition of highest beauty". However, in *The Energy of Slaves* the former high priest of pain and passion seems to become the self-lacerating, lonely monk of cynicism and lust: "the 15-year-old girls/ I wanted when I was 15/ I have them now/ it is very pleasant/ it is never too late/ I advise you all/ to become rich and famous".⁹ In this book the Master implies to his disciples that through the degeneration of his language and the desperation of his unrefined experience he has become someone ordinary, even someone to be despised. Yet in a sly way, and a way that is central to *Death Of A Lady's Man*, the book that will take him six more years to produce, Cohen plays on the undeniable fact that his disciples cannot accept him as ordinary, nor despise him, that by buying and reading his words they continue to grant him the status of Master. By debunking his own legend in *The Energy of Slaves*, Cohen, in a new language, is actually strengthening it. He is a Dorian Gray figure, able both to use and abuse his self-portrait:

I have no talent left
 I can't write a poem anymore
 You can call me Len or Lennie now
 like you always wanted

I guess I should pack it up
 but habits persist
 and women keep drawing me back into it
 Before you accuse me of boring you
 (your ultimate triumph and relief)
 remember that neither you nor me
 is fucking right now
 and once again you have enjoyed
 the company of my soul¹⁰

Death Of A Lady's Man continues this simultaneous tearing down and building up of the legend. In this book, in one set of poems and prose (usually on the left-hand side of each double page), the Master writes about his life, speaking especially of his relationship with one woman in Montreal and of the psychic damage they have done to one another. The language in these passages, with its attractive and evocative images and metaphors, is redolent of Breavman's destructive but poetically-refined words to Tamara in *The Favourite Game*. In this first novel, as in Cohen's earlier poems, form overrides content—*how* things are said is more important for the poet and the reader than *what* is being said:

'I'm sorry, Tamara. I want to touch people like a magician, to change them or hurt them, leave my brand, make them beautiful. I want to be the hypnotist who takes no chances of falling asleep himself. I want to kiss with one eye open . . . I know I never saw you. I blur everyone in my personal vision. I never get their own music.'¹¹

In *Death Of A Lady's Man* what is being said to the lady and what has happened to that hypnotist with his personal vision cannot be ignored, but in this first set of poems and prose language still controls truth, as in the poem "You Have No Form":

You have no form, you move among, yet do
 not move, the relics of exhausted thought
 of which you are not made, but which gave world to
 you, who are of nothing made, nothing wrought.
 There you long for one who is not me, O
 queen of no subject, newer than the morning,
 more antique than first seed dropped below
 the wash where you are called and Adam born.
 And here not your essence, not your absence
 weds the emptiness which is never me,
 though these motions and these formless events
 are preparation for humanity
 and I get up to love and eat and kill
 not by our own but by our married will.¹²

Here, though form no longer completely disguises content, there is a kind of balance achieved between the rhythms and evocations of poetic method on the

one hand and the harsher realities of poetic message on the other. However, this achievement of balance is not Cohen's ultimate intention in *Death Of A Lady's Man*; originally it might have been, as it formed the basis of his initial manuscript. In that manuscript (much of which went under the title *My Life In Art*) the above version of "You Have No Form" was, apparently, the only version. But in the revised and published manuscript Cohen derides and seems to destroy the equilibrium between form and content by rewriting the poem, by welding word and flesh together with undisguised brutality. Addressing the lady again, he says,

They should cast your cunt in chrome for the
radiator cap of a Buick.¹³

Here we have alliteration; we have metaphor; but this faceless woman who is dehumanized by a four-letter word, who is identified only by her sexual organ and by the figurative violence inflicted upon it, is no fiction—she is the poet's "wife" and is the brunt of an attack more personal and repellent than any Breavman directed against Tamara. The Master does not seem elevated now, but almost beneath respect, almost deranged in his invective. Over and over again in the poems and prose passages which Cohen offers as commentary upon the original artistic version or vision, he seems to demand that his disciples question, suspect, and, many times, dismiss the Master and The Word which are themselves attacked as brutally as the woman. But it is this incessant demand that results in a kind of control or an attempt at it.

We seem to be present at the destruction of the Master; but what really matter are the intentions of the attacking voice. Speaking, at one point, of the words of the original manuscript (the book within *Death Of A Lady's Man*), Cohen insists "There is no death in this book and therefore it is a lie."¹⁴ This is a statement in the light of which the whole of *Death Of A Lady's Man* should be considered. Having written an especially beautiful paean to people and experiences lost, the Master receives the scorn of the attacking voice: "When it comes to lamentations/ I prefer Aretha Franklin/ to, let's say, Leonard Cohen/ Needless to add, he hears a different drum".¹⁵ Now, this particular sarcasm (as with much of the sarcasm in the book) does not necessarily eliminate what the Master has previously said—the refining of experience through poetic form is still extremely attractive when Cohen wants it to be. What Cohen does, very skilfully, is to draw battle lines that do not allow him to lose the war. Either the reader remains attracted to the beauty of the original passage (entitled "The Other Village") and dismisses the attack, or else he is drawn by the tough cynicism and pop-star evocations of the revised version. But neither version has been written by Aretha Franklin, and one passage cannot be put aside without some committal to the other. However, the attack, in this case, is not especially forceful, and the self-mockery is appealing. What happens when the Master receives a no-holds-barred verbal assault?

Such an assault occurs in response to "The Asthmatic", a prose passage in which the Master addresses himself about the loss of his world of order and control and his resultant "breathless predicament". It is a monologue of sadness and attractive images, and it is true that "the condition of highest beauty" still exists in the face of loss. Then the attacking voice moves beyond sarcasm and seems to have no mercy:

These sinister rhythms betray the quack and we behold the subversive and imperial intention of a mind that wishes to enslave existence in the name of sweet salvation. Here is the old weapon disguised as charity, greed disguised as the usual prayer, and his trap of panic as an invitation to self-reform. I have begun to turn against this man and this book.¹⁶

The artist and his art are spat upon, no doubt about it. The fierceness of this attack is repeated throughout the book, the invective is unremitting; repeatedly, the refined, artistic version of things is assaulted, either directly, as in the above commentary, or through the reproduction of the notebook fragments which have been made over, on the facing page, into art. Though these words from the notebooks might appear, at first glance, to be more honest and unalloyed (feelings undisguised, as yet, by art), they, too, are meant to be suspect. The reader cannot finally believe in words that were written in "the suede-soft White Notebook of 1971", or in "a minuscule (3-1/2 x 2-1/4) Baberton Junior Notebook", or on "a sheet of the Robertson Parkway Ramada Inn stationery".¹⁷ Such extracts are presented as the tools of the Master, and this satire of the artist's first drafts means that he and they are not to be trusted. I would suggest, however, that here is the old weapon disguised as self-disgust; though the self-disgust might be sincere enough, we are still in the presence of the hypnotist who has not fallen asleep himself.

The vital thing for the disciple to realize, as he reels before the onslaught, suspecting finally the worth of his years of worship, is that "There is no death in this book". Despite the seeming evidence to the contrary, Leonard Cohen is alive and well and living in Montreal. He has written a book about the demise of a lady's man, about a poet who didn't quite succeed in one of the many roles he put on. But, in being able to write about this, in fact, in carefully constructing and delineating the demise as he has done, Cohen indicates that he himself is still the artist attempting to survive and control, even to triumph over, the conditions and failures of his life. He says about the woman, his "wife", whose relationship with him forms so much of the subject-matter of this book, that "She was the Magnum Opus of my middle age"¹⁸, and *Death Of A Lady's Man* is nothing more or less than an attempt at such an opus by Leonard Cohen at forty-four. The cynicism about art, the attacks on the artist, the insistence that the Master is not worth our time cannot erase the facts that Cohen himself still considers the production of a book to be important—and what a production with its gold-figured *conuunctio spirituum* on the dust cover—and the book important enough to dedicate to the memory of his mother. The voice that

denigrates and dismisses the Master is still the voice of Leonard Cohen who writes to be heard. And Leonard Cohen was never just this particular "lady's man" we see vilified in this book. "Against this death", as Irving Layton has written, "is the secret/ life/ of the imagination/ scheming freedom. . ."¹⁹; Leonard Cohen is scheming freedom, through his art, from one lady and from a life at the top that he has found lacking, but the Master isn't stepping down. When someone in the final pages of *Death Of A Lady's Man* says "Goodbye and goodbye and goodbye", don't worry, it isn't Leonard. Both he and the Master are still searching, as F. advocates in *Beautiful Losers*, for "the diamonds in the shit". This book, whatever it says, wants to cut glass.

NOTES

1. Joan Baez, "Diamonds and Rust", from the album *Diamonds & Rust* (A&M Records, Inc., 1975).
2. Michael Ondaatje, *Leonard Cohen* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. 26.
3. This comparison with Dylan is not spurious. Cohen himself makes it more than once. See *The Energy of Slaves*, p. 71 and *Death Of A Lady's Man*, p. 187.
4. Not just a pun on the famous R.C.A. logo. Listen to "The Master Song" on *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (Columbia Records, CBS Inc., 1967).
5. Leonard Cohen, *The Favourite Game* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. 102: "The world was being hoaxed by a disciplined melancholy. All the sketches made a virtue of longing . . . The whole enterprise of art was a calculated display of suffering."
6. Leonard Cohen, *Parasites of Heaven* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 15.
7. Leonard Cohen, *The Energy of Slaves* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 14.
8. Cohen didn't refer to himself this way until p. 107 of *Death Of A Lady's Man*.
9. *The Energy of Slaves*, p. 97.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
11. *The Favourite Game*, p. 101.
12. Leonard Cohen, *Death Of A Lady's Man* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), p. 100.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 129, 96, 127.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
19. Irving Layton, *Collected Poems* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), p. 107.