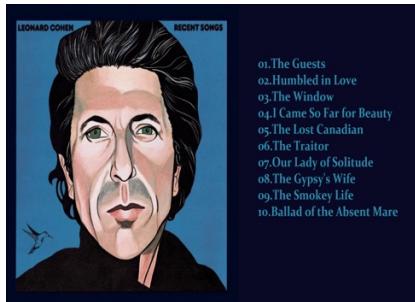


Reflecting on the Traitor's Way



The Traitor

*Now the Swan it floated on the English river
Ah the Rose of High Romance it opened wide
A sun-tanned woman yearned me through the summer
And the judges watched us from the other side*

*I told my mother "Mother I must leave you
Preserve my room but do not shed a tear
Should rumour of a shabby ending reach you
It was half my fault and half the atmosphere"*

*But the Rose I sickened with a scarlet fever
And the Swan I tempted with a sense of shame
She said at last I was her finest lover
And if she withered I would be to blame*

*The judges said you missed it by a fraction
Rise up and brace your troops for the attack
Ah the dreamers ride against the men of action
Oh see the men of action falling back*

*But I lingered on her thighs a fatal moment
I kissed her lips as though I thirsted still
My falsity had stung me like a hornet
The poison sank and it paralyzed my will*

*I could not move to warn all the younger soldiers
That they had been deserted from above
So on battlefields from here to Barcelona
I'm listed with the enemies of love*

*And long ago she said "I must be leaving,
Ah but keep my body here to lie upon
You can move it up and down and when I'm sleeping
Run some wire through that Rose and wind the Swan"*

*So daily I renew my idle duty
I touch her here and there, I know my place
I kiss her open mouth and I praise her beauty
And people call me traitor to my face*

- (L.C. from 'Recent Songs', 1979)



Last night, I listened to a downloaded copy of Leonard Cohen's '*Recent Songs*' for the first time in years. I have a particular attachment to some of that collection, in recalling the mood in which I first listened to that album in the early 1980s. My Zimbabwean neighbours at the time were remarkably tolerant of the racket of a cranked-up boombox and a half-drunk *mrungu* bellowing:

"Where, where, where—is my gypsy wife tonight?"

'*Gypsy Wife*' still worked its dark magic. The heart still swelled along with the violin and *oud* that backed the haunting lyric ("A ghost climbs on the table in a bridal negligee"). Yet it was not the sensuality of that song which highlighted last night's listening. It was another song on the album that really swept me away. '***The Traitor***' had hardly registered back in the 1980s. I could only guess that it had taken nearly two and a half decades for me to be ripe for it:

*Now the Swan it floated on the English river
Ah the Rose of High Romance it opened wide
A sun-tanned woman yearned me through the summer*

Overall, the lyrics of the '*The Traitor*' struck me as a '*Pilgrim's Progress*' in reverse. The seeker begins from a state of grace and descends through the Valley of Humiliation, the Slough of Despond to the Castle of Despair... Beginning from an idyll of innocence, the life-journey is marked by shirking of duty and betrayal of youthful ideals:

*.... I could not move to warn all the younger soldiers
That they had been deserted from above*

In the companionship of Hypocrisy, false pilgrim from the Land of Vainglory, the pathway to Celestial City is inexorably blocked:

*My falsity had stung me like a hornet
The poison sank and it paralyzed my will*

I had always assumed an autobiographical dimension in nearly all of Cohen's songs. While like John Bunyan's '*Christian*', the journeyer could be an everyman, the song seemed like an overview of a spiritual journey of the composer himself. In what manner, I wondered, did Cohen on the verge of mid-life regard himself a 'traitor'?

For clues, I still recall his 1966 novel, '*Beautiful Losers*', which I once studied. The primary narrator of that novel struggles to complete a treatise on Saint Kateri Tekakwitha against his own torments of the flesh. A key theme I took away was of the conflict between the pursuit of an otherworldly 'state of grace' and that of worldly ambition. The narrator's self-flagellations (often wildly humorous) intensity as his frustrations deepen. It is interesting that the novel was published soon before Cohen debuted as a song writer and performer.

In his subsequent work, the voice of humiliation in the narrator of ‘*Beautiful Losers*’ never entirely disappeared. In every album through the 1960s-1970s, intonations of beauty and mystery are juxtaposed with yelps of self-doubt and despair. The voice is heard in ‘*Songs of Love and Hate*’ (1971) and is particularly bitter in the ‘*New Skin for the Old Ceremony*’ (1974) album. In ‘*Field Commander Cohen*’, the mocker of self identifies as: ‘*the patron Saint of envy and the grocer of despair/ working for the Yankee Dollar...*’ In ‘*Is this what you wanted?*’ he tauntingly proclaims: ‘*You were Jesus Christ my Lord/ I was the money lender...*’

All such self-mockery seemed to fit the observation made of his earlier writings: that Cohen was not at peace in having succumbed to the seduction of fame.



Like many Canadians of my generation, I became a devotee of Saint Leonard from the first hearing ‘*Songs of Leonard Cohen*.’ Through the mid-1970s, I eagerly awaited the release of each of his albums.

I was never disappointed in his music until ‘*Death of a Ladies Man*’ (1977). The excuse that the nearly unlistenable record was to be blamed on producer, Phil Spector, was not supported by reports of Cohen’s willing participation in Spector’s crazed antics. A book of Cohen’s journal extracts of the same title was somewhat more palatable. Still, the poetry did not salvage the bitter prose. It seemed, at best, a mid-life lamentation of decline.

A few years earlier I had heard of Cohen’s military salutes in his concerts with a backup ensemble he referred to as “the army.” In first hearing ‘*New Skin for the Old Ceremony*’ around the same time I was curious about the prevalence of the imagery of warfare.

In ‘*Come on back to the War*’ he proclaims: “*I was so easy to defeat; I was so easy to control—I didn’t even know there was a war...*” In ‘*Lover, Lover, Lover*’ he urges: “*may the spirit this song become... a shield against the enemy*”.

I wondered whether “the enemy” in that song was only metaphorical. In an interview in the same vintage, Cohen was less cryptic:

“*War is wonderful... It’s so economical in terms of gesture and motion. Every single gesture is precise, every effort is at its maximum. Nobody goofs off.*” (‘*Zigzag magazine*’, 1974)

Yet more alarming was the report that during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Cohen had actually embedded with the Israeli Defense Forces. He had chiefly entertained troops but was photographed with General Ariel Sharon. So how could the great seeker of a state of grace justify drinking brandy with the later to be branded “butcher of Beirut”?

Cohen’s Jewish identity, of course, was always taken for granted. Moreover, from the beginning it was plain that Leonard, as captured in the words of one of his friends: “*...never met a religion that he didn’t like.*” It was well known that that he dabbled in everything from the kabbala to I-Ching; from astrology to scientology...

As for one who never met a religion he *liked*—I could still understand a sentimental attachment to a metaphorical Zion. In such regard, I respected the anti-Zionist Jewish sects as much as the Rastafarians of Jamaica. The latter cherish Ethiopia both as their presumed ancestral homeland and ‘promised land’ but never really expect to return there in a literal sense. I had liked to believe that Cohen operated in a similarly elevated spiritual plane. Was he really ‘above’ politics?



An article I stumbled across a few years ago featuring a conversation between Cohen and American publisher, Arthur Kurzweil, in 1994 offered hints on that question. I located the piece again this morning in preparing these reflections. Its title: *‘I’m the Little Jew Who Wrote the Bible’*, is taken from Cohen’s song *“The Future”* (1992) but offers a wry introduction to the broad discussion of the influence of religion in Cohen’s life and work.

Cohen spoke in detail of his family history from their eastern European roots to genteel Westmount in Montreal. Grandson of an esteemed scholar of the *Torah*, he said that that his observance of his conservative Jewish traditions has grown stronger with his advancing years. The fact that his surname translates from Hebrew as ‘priest’, seemed to him both an honour and an obligation.

He also told Kurzweil that his roundabout journey back to closer observance of his Jewish heritage came through Zen Buddhism. At the time of the interview, he has apparently just completed monastic training in California. Of his Zen ‘Roshi’, [teacher] he said: *“Zen, or at least the lineage of this particular teacher, seems to be able to provide a landscape where Jewish practitioners can manifest their deepest appetites concerning the absolute.”*

In Cohen’s only reference to politics in the interview, he joked that his brief ideological infatuations ranged: *“...from the Communist party to the Republican Party... to delusions of myself as the High Priest rebuilding the Temple.”*

Since the conversation about a common Jewish heritage largely remained on a lofty plain, there was no discussion of the relationship of the diaspora to the state of Israel. There was neither any comment on the moral crises arising from political Zionism. Certainly, there was no mention of Cohen’s volunteer stint with the IDF.

Even with that let-down, I was touched by Cohen’s affirmation that: *‘The absolute demand, from moment to moment, that we not violate the birthright and the position that we have as human beings’...*

I took that as his acknowledgement of having failed at times to honour his birthright. That clue helped in better understanding *‘the Traitor’*.



*'The judges said you missed it by a fraction
Rise up and brace your troops for the attack'
'Ah the dreamers ride against the men of action
O, see the men of action falling back'*

In circling towards the personal relevance of the song, the allegorical battle is particularly striking. Along with the suggestions of a '*Pilgrim's Progress*', the foregoing verses bring to mind the ancient parable from '*Bhagavad Gita*'—at least the easy-English version of it once read in a Hari Krishna pamphlet.

The episode begins *in medias res*, with the warrior Arjuna on the brink of war, mired in self-doubt and despair. Then Lord Krishna intercedes—engaging Arjuna in a conversation about '*dharma*' [right conduct, obligation]. Reassured of his sacred duty, the warrior picks up his bow...

In '*the Traitor*', there was no divine intercession. The critical moment is missed. The hope of glory withers in disgrace. Yet if only in self-mockery, the failed warrior goes through the motions of 'duty' ...

*So daily I renew my idle duty
I touch her here and there, I know my place
I kiss her open mouth and I praise her beauty
And people call me traitor to my face*

'*The Traitor*' seems to reflect something of the brutal honesty with which so many of us in middle age tend to take measure of our lives. Yet there is little consolation in simply knowing that one is not alone in feeling one's remaining vitality draining away in work that is not of the heart. Lest we forget the most damning of treacheries—'*The Traitor*' gives a shocking reminder. What ought to haunt us far more than the betrayal of youthful ambitions is the failure in the obligations of the present.

So, on that note I ask myself: would I rather be a failed poet or a failed father? Would I rather take a final breath in regret or in gratitude? Such rhetorical questions require no hesitation for response.



After a long absence from my playlists, I have been listening again to Cohen. Being unfamiliar with that last three of his releases, I have a lot of catching up to do. I cannot deny that we would vehemently disagree in our politics. Yet I have renewed respect for a man who so honourably raised himself above middle-aged despair. After a dark period, he seemingly seized his sacred duty and wrote some of his finest songs.

Were it not for his steeping himself in the religion of his forebears he could not have written songs of such psalmic power as: '*If it be your will*', '*Night Comes On*' or '*Anthem*'. He must surely be grateful that his tradition nurtured his best work. In his old age, he certainly deserves the peace in knowing that he has masterfully succeeded in his calling no less honourably than did his scholarly grandfather in his.

So it was that earlier this morning I found myself humming the melody of one of the favourite songs of a 16-year-old stranger who once wailed along with his record player from behind his locked bedroom door:

"You held onto me like I was a crucifix, as we went reeling through the dark ..."

So long, Marianne— and thank you, Lenny— with all sincerity...

2006, November

