

## God Is Alive

Jeff Burger, ed., *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters*, Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014. 604pp.

I first saw Leonard Cohen in February 1967 at a reading he gave at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. I have no memory who organized the reading, but word had certainly gotten out. No room in the Arts building was deemed large enough—we were all shipped over to a large lecture hall in the foreign territory of the Sciences. By “we,” I mean the small number of students who had actually taken courses in Canadian literature, under the benevolently distant eyes of Donald Stephens, and who had some dim idea that Leonard Cohen was the hot young thing in eastern Canada. The living remnants of the Vancouver TISH poetry scene were not unduly impressed. But a large non-academic audience was clearly anticipated.

So Leonard bounded onto the stage—as I recall, he “bounded” even then, though nowadays he skips—carrying a guitar. What? Maybe some of us had heard Judy Collins sing his poems; maybe some more of us (especially me) were deep into Dylan; but none of us, in that Science hall, thought of Leonard Cohen as a singer. So he read a few poems, then picked up his guitar, strummed it somewhat basically, and began droning some lines about a woman called Suzanne.

Nothing in Canadian literature would ever be the same again.

At the end of the reading/performance, I stood in line for a signature. Ahead of me were a hundred melting teenagers clutching well-worn copies of *The Spice Box of Earth*. But I had a copy of the newly released, barely first-time read, *Beautiful Losers*. When I placed it in front of him, he did a quick double-take. “What’s *your* name?” he said. Which is how come I have (treasured to this day) a first-edition copy of *Beautiful Losers* inscribed “for Stephen love Leonard.”

That night, there was a party hosted by Seymour Mayne, a poet from Montreal then resident in Vancouver. I was invited; Leonard was there. All I remember is one moment, standing by the Kitsilano kitchen window with Seymour and Leonard; he shook his head slowly and said, “We are all mad people.” This line does not occur, though it very well could have, in the interview Cohen gave that same day, and which was published in the UBC student newspaper, *The Ubysey*, on February 3<sup>rd</sup>. It is the second interview republished in Jeff Burger’s meticulous collection. The interview was conducted by then graduate student at UBC, Sandra Djwa. With all due

respect to Djwa's multiple subsequent contributions to the study of Canadian literature, I hope she will not think it amiss if I flag this interview, for the quality both of its questions and of its answers, as one of her most enduring contributions to the field. In fifty years of interviews collected by Burger, it remains definitive.

And that day—the reading and the party—remained definitive for me. There is no use in expecting me to be “objective” about Leonard Cohen; for almost fifty years, he has been part of my daily imagination. His words and his music erupt in my mind at the most unexpected occasions. One moment I'll be watching Canadian football on TV, the next I'll be thinking “An Eskimo showed me a movie...”

I remember attending a concert in Toronto, during his first “comeback-after-financial-ruin” tour in 2008. Never have I been at a concert where the audience's love for the singer was so thick, so palpable. In a rare moment of quiet between songs, a woman's voice rang out: “I love you, Leonard!” Cohen paused just a moment, then took off his fedora, held it to his breast, bowed, and said, “I'm rather fond of you myself.” It was an old-fashioned gesture of courtesy, a matter of manners, yet it is also quintessential Cohen. Burger's collection prefixes each interview with an updated conversation with the interviewer, and what they all recall, without exception, is Cohen's courtesy. Deborah Sprague recalls Cohen as “one of the kindest, most welcoming, and genuinely involved musicians I'd encountered over the course of hundreds of such meetings.... When his then-publicist phoned later that day to say, ‘Mr. Cohen wanted me to tell you he enjoyed your time together—and that you are a gentle soul,’ I felt affirmed to the nth degree, paychecks and awards be damned” (249).

On the one hand, you can see this courtesy as an effective defence-mechanism: after I've been so nice to you, how can you possibly be nasty to me? (One suspects this tactic may have blunted any bite in several Cohen biographies.<sup>1</sup>) On the other hand, it affords even the most routine interviewer with a wealth and depth of answers.

Jeff Burger's *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen* is a great book. Not just for its diligent and quite remarkable scholarship—gathering all its sources, annotating all its texts—but in itself, as a book of wisdom. Of course it is somewhat repetitious—the same questions, the same answers—but you only notice that repetition if, like a tedious book-reviewer, you try to read it straight through. Read it some other way. Keep it by your bedside and read a few pages each night. (That is a typo I will leave—I meant to write “each night,” but “each night” is far more appropriate: these pages have power.)

The Cohen who emerges from the book is indeed a wise man: wise about himself, his relationships, his career, and his art. But he remains skeptical about his own ideas.<sup>2</sup> He likes to quote Irving Layton as saying, "Leonard's mind is unpolluted by a single idea" (266). "I don't have ideas," he himself says. "I get opinions,, but I'm not really attached to them. Most of them are tiresome" (266). This skepticism is not entirely borne out by the bulk of the book, which certainly contains many opinions and ideas, especially around the time of *The Future*, when he repeatedly insists that the Apocalypse has, in effect, already happened. What he does consistently reject is any analytical explanation of a song from an exterior perspective. "It is hard to step outside the center of a song when you've written it and explain it to anyone, including yourself. All you know as a writer, as an artist, or as someone who deals and manipulates symbols is whether it has an interior integrity" (69). Or more simply: "When I say that I don't have any ideas, it doesn't come to me in the form of an idea. It comes in the form of an image" (270).

And also in the form of a song—which then in turn becomes a performance. The "interior integrity" of which he speaks manifests itself on the concert stage, the venue on which Cohen, like Dylan, has relied more and more as his career has progressed. The interviews return again and again to the integrity of the performer, to the absolute demand for honesty. But this demand is always shadowed by the ever-present possibility of what Cohen calls "disgrace."

In a 1975 interview with the late Paul Williams, one of the key interviews in Burger's collection, Cohen expands on this topic: "For me, personally, [performing is] a kind of dangerous work.... I mean you can really be humiliated. There are other rewards and prizes that go with it...but also at the same time there is this continual threat and presence of your own disgrace" (93). And in 1993, in response to the question "Do you like performing?" he replied: "I like it when it goes well. I like it when I don't humiliate myself. I like it when I'm not ashamed of myself at the end of the evening. But you set yourself up for those disgraces and when you avoid them, you think that you still know how to do the step or you can still pull it off" (346). This awareness of disgrace is most visible in 1972, in the almost embarrassingly naked breakdowns recorded in Tony Palmer's film *Bird on the Wire* (which Cohen, interestingly and most unfairly, labels "a very bad movie" (352)) and on the album *Live Songs*, which contains one song explicitly given the title "A Disgrace." What did Cohen see as disgraceful about these performances? At times he had used his emotional nakedness as a way of controlling a crowd—just listen to his seduction and

# III

---

subdual of a fractious audience at the Isle of Wight in 1970. But 1972 was different. The possibility of disgrace was just that: that he was not in state of grace, but rather dis-grace, its active opposite.

And what *is* grace? For Cohen, something rare and fleeting, like the “escaped ski” in *Beautiful Losers*. In a 1984 interview with Robert Sward, he said “It’s very rarely that I find I’m in a condition of grace where there’s a kind of flow that is natural. I don’t inhabit that landscape too often” (167-8).

In recent years, it seems to me, he has inhabited that landscape more often on stage than on record. The last few albums, while consistently well crafted and often enjoyable, lack the verve and originality of his earlier work. The title *Old Ideas* may be intended ironically, but at times it is sadly literal. Some of the songs—such as the awful “Show Me The Place”—sound like poor parodies of Leonard Cohen. Yet when he skips on and off the stage, all is redeemed. Just as it was in that drab lecture hall at UBC in 1967—God is alive. Magic is afoot.

## Notes

- 1 There has been lately a plethora of Cohen biographies. The best is probably Sylvie Simmons’ *I’m Your Man*—and I say this, generously, despite the fact that her main mention of me (page 433) is wildly and totally inaccurate. She manages to make two major mistakes in one sentence, which does not exactly inspire confidence in her reliability. The most recent is *A Broken Hallelujah: Rock and Roll, Redemption, and the Life of Leonard Cohen*, by Liel Leibovitz, published by no less than W.W. Norton. Its first line is “This is not a biography of Leonard Cohen.” And indeed it is not, though it keeps on slipping back into looking like one. It’s the kind of book which invites damning with faint praise: “competent,” “likeable,” but never particularly original. Perhaps surprisingly for an American academic, its best chapter is on the Montreal poetry scene of the 1950s.
- 2 The problems of treating Leonard Cohen in terms of ideas are amply illustrated in the collection *Leonard Cohen and Philosophy: Various Positions*, edited by Jason Holt (Open Court). The “Philosophy and” formula proves deadly. Essay after essay serves up a lump of pre-digested philosophy, and then makes some tenuous and quite unilluminating connections to Cohen. “In the case of Cohen,” writes one contributor, “just how much philosophy do we need?” (128). To judge by this book, not very much.

Stephen Scobie