LEONARD COHEN

A Personal Look

A. W. Purdy

WHEN LEONARD COHEN published *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, first volume of the McGill Poetry Series, 1956, his book was of such merit as to invite comparison with Birney's *David* and Irving Layton's first book, published in 1945. Now, a little more than eight years later, he has a fairly substantial body of work behind him: two more books of poetry and a first novel. An assessment of his work is long overdue, and with the publication of *Flowers for Hitler*, 1964, it becomes possible to take a look at the contemporary writer in relation to the past.

Cohen's first two books of poetry were, I think, absolutely conventional in metre and form. They gained distinction from other people's poems through a heavy sensuality, sometimes almost cloying, integral in nearly everything he wrote. As the title of his first book implies, comparative mythology, coeval social habit and mores were also included. Most avant-garde work south of the border seemed to have escaped his attention; or if it didn't, then he paid little heed. And English poetry in this day and age apparently has nothing to teach anyone.

For the last few years in this country there has been strong emphasis placed on such things as mythology and "archetypal myths", and whether it was Humpty-Dumpty who fell first or Adam. All of which seems rather a literary game to anyone who has to live in the world of now, go to work on a streetcar, say, and

eat jam sandwiches for lunch in a quiet factory-corner away from the machines.

But Cohen makes use of the Bible and fairy tales in his myths, suburban neighbours, his own grandparents, Jewish popular customs, almost anything that will make a poem. Insecurity is a prime factor, and much of his work conveys a strong feeling that the world as presently constituted is liable to fly apart any moment:

> If your neighbour disappears
> O if your neighbour disappears
> The quiet man who raked his lawn
> The girl who always took the sun
>
> Never mention it to your wife
> Never say at dinnertime
> Whatever happened to that man
> Who used to rake his lawn
>
> Never say to your daughter
> As you're walking home from church
> Funny thing about that girl
> I haven't seen her for a month

Which is perhaps modern archetypal. Of course husbands have always disappeared occasionally, and wives too have taken it on the lam for the quiet boredom of a lover in another town or street. Cohen means something a good deal more mysterious than that. By leaving it unnamed he manages to suggest the secret police, subterranean monsters and the lemmings' baptist instinct. All with a regular metric beat that blends casual after-dinner talk with the happenchance of human fatality.

As well, Cohen writes about sex; not the adolescent fumbling with a girl's bra-strap behind the closet door type either. Cohen's is a knowledgeable sex which explores the gamey musky-smelling post-coital bedroom world. No clinical nonsense either. Nor pregnancies. Romance rules supreme, and one measure of his success is that both Cohen's first two books sold out fairly quickly. But they are also good poems.

You could say that many of them expound the philosophy of meaninglessness very convincingly: i.e., they have an initial concrete incident or feeling, which is expressed so well that its magic drives any question of such things as meaning right out of your head. Take this passage:

My lover Peterson
He named me Goldenmouth
I changed him to a bird
And he migrated south

My lover Frederick
Wrote sonnets to my breast
I changed him to a horse
And he galloped west

My lover Levite
He named me Bitterfeast
I changed him to a serpent
And he wriggled east

It's rather Sitwellish. "The King of China's Daughter", or something like that. In other words it's an attitude and way of writing a good craftsman can easily employ, though perhaps not quite at will. You adopt, for a poem's purposes, a particular way of thinking or feeling, then write the poem. And if you believe this suspension of personal identity and belief is possible and desirable, then the poet is in large degree an actor who plays many parts; but an actor so skilful you can't always tell the difference between acting and fakery. For instance, "My lover Peterson". What does it mean? Nothing. But it's magic.

Think of all the young poets who burst suddenly on the not-so-astonished world. Rimbaud, Chatterton, even the young Dylan Thomas. Is Cohen at the age of 30 one of these? I think not. Though very definitely one could compare poems in this first book with the youthful Yeatsian romanticism of "I will arise and go now to Innisfree". Or the redolent Swinburne who wrote:

There lived a singer in France of old,
By the tideless, dolorous midland sea.
In a land of sand and ruin and gold
There shone one woman, and none but she.

Which is almost Cohen plus punctuation.

But Cohen has other facets too. In one of them he creates his mythology from the Auschwitz furnaces, imbuing it with a peculiar and grotesquely modern sensitivity:

And at the hot ovens they
Cunningly managed a brief

Kiss before the soldier came
To knock out her golden teeth.

And in the furnace itself
As the flames flamed higher,
He tried to kiss her burning breasts
As she burned in the fire.

At this point I am aware of something common to much modern verse in Cohen. Not just disillusion and gamey decadence, but the present fact that all good things in life are done and past. A longing for what was, the sense of inadequacy in what is. One would think the ten-year-old yearned for his mother's breast, the adolescent for puberty, the stripling for renewed puppy love, and the only common denominator we all have is return to the womb fixations. The "fall" in other words. Once we were happy, now we are not. Rather ridiculous. Also completely ruinous for any possible present content.

Well, what does the reader want from a poem? Rather, what do I think he wants? Primarily, I suppose, to be entertained. And that involves tuning in on some emotion or feeling or discovery that is larger and more permanent than he is. Some flashing insight that adds a new perspective to living. Values also. And that is a great deal. Most of the time it's asking far too much.

Will you find any of these things in Cohen? Realities shoved from the periphery of your mind to forefront by the author. Not copy-book maxims, just real things and feelings.

Perhaps in Cohen's world the things he writes about exist, but only rarely do they touch on my personal existence. I admire the poems tremendously; they are the work of a master craftsman, who must simply be living in another time dimension than my own. I admire many of them as works of art I don't believe in. His figures swim dreamily through bedrooms, move out of Eden in slow motion, loll languorously on beaches of time. Slowly one of the inhabitants of this world lifts up, and says without much emotion: "Return to the past. Return to the past." Then he sinks back without a human grunt from the effort required to speak.

But that is one-sided, which I did not intend. There are also Cohen's magnificent incantatory effects. You can read many of his poems in your mind, and have the same bravura feeling as in Chesterton's "Lepanto". Some descriptions of unreal things are so vivid they can make you breathless with delight.

With *The Spice-Box of Earth*, 1961, Cohen brought to near perfection the techniques and rhythms of his first book. The "tone" seems a mixture of the Old Testament and, probably, other Jewish religious writings.

But I think this "tone" is important. Cohen rarely over-states or exaggerates. His emphasis is secured by under-emphasis, never finding it necessary to raise his voice. There is always a casual offhand prosody, which lends even his re-write job on the Bible the authority of someone present on the scene, and probably making notes behind his fig leaf.

> O Solomon, call away your spies.
> You remember the angels in that garden,
> After the man and woman had been expelled,
> Lying under the holy trees while their swords burnt out,
> And Eve was in some distant branches
> Calling for her lover, and doubled up in pain.

There is little intensity in this passage, or any of Cohen for that matter. The effect is achieved by a kind of remote sadness, the knowledge we all have that being human has pain for continuing counterpoint. Despite the instructions to Solomon, no positive note or clear meaning comes out of the poem. Of course you can ring in "The Fall" ad nauseam. Lost innocence, lost happiness, exhausted vitality. In fact this decadent feeling the poem generates in a reader is one of its attractions. And for Cohen to raise his voice in a shout, or to possess carefree feelings of more than momentary happiness would be the complete non sequitur.

However, what seem to be shortcomings in these poems are turned into positive virtues. Using the same tone and metre Cohen writes love poems which are probably the best ever written in this country. Image succeeds image in a flow natural as birdsong:

> Now
> I know why many men have stopped and wept
> Half-way between the loves they leave and seek,
> And wondered if travel leads them anywhere —
> Horizons keep the soft line of your cheek,
> The windy sky's a locket for your hair.

I think those last two lines are demonstrably perfect and inimitable. There are many others almost as good. Cohen subdues everything to his touch. Even

the zest and exuberance of, "Layton, when we dance our freilach" becomes something other than exuberance. The poem ends not unexpectedly on a quite different note: "we who dance so beautifully/though we know that freilachs end."

In another poem there is this wonderful passage:

> Is it the king
> who lies beside you listening?
> Is it Solomon or David
> or stuttering Charlemagne?
> Is that his crown
> in the suitcase beside your bed?

When anyone can write like that, it seems unjust to complain about anything.

The Favourite Game, a novel, appeared in 1963. As first novels go (and most of them don't stay around long), it was a decided success. This one tells the story of Laurence Breavman, Montreal poet, child voyeur, adolescent in a world without fixed values. Breavman is a child when the novel opens, and a child still when it closes — though by this time he is presumably permitted to vote. The book traces his sexual initiation all the way from Montreal to New York. At the end Breavman is still being initiated into something or other. If not, then sexual retardation lasts quite a long time.

In any formal sense the novel has no plot. Time passes, of course. Breavman becomes older, his experiment with being alive more complicated. He is passed like a basketball from girl friend to girl friend (euphemisms for bedmates), arrives finally at his Great Love, and predictably forsakes her in the end. For permanence in anything is anathema to our boy. Remember please, he is a writer.

If the above seems to indicate I disliked Cohen's novel, then appearances are misleading. I read it first last year, and again for the purposes of this review. Without a plot, without any "message" or insight into what it's like to be an ordinary human being and not Laurence Breavman, the book held me interested, if not spellbound, on both readings. The reason: reality seeps through somehow, with convincing detail and dialogue.

What Cohen's poetry lacks is found here in large measure. *The Favourite Game* is rich in humour, zest for living, the sort of febrile intensity a moth who lives less than 24 hours might have; also, the continual sense of Breavman watching himself watching himself, which is, I think, a characteristic of most writers. From every corner of the room, ceiling and floor, Breavman watches himself,

because he wants to write it all down later. He wants to say what it was like to be uniquely himself, and yet to be Everyman as well.

Coitus interruptus and a handy night light. In the case of women writers, a ballpoint pen that writes upside down. Sex for the sake of love, but it turns out to be just sex. (And what's wrong with that?) Living as an experiment, an adventure, as many separate adventures without permanence. Breavman as the iconoclast, searching for a Colossus of Rhodes he can't destroy. For if he can destroy the thing or the emotion, then it wasn't real — it never happened. Well, what did happen? As it turns out, only what was written down on paper.

Cohen has, in this book, developed the technique which will enable him to write other and better novels. This one is not a failure, but is badly flawed in that it seems to tail off at the end without saying anything very convincingly. Not that I mean a moral should be pointed or a tale adorned. But no one will care very much that Breavman will never return to his Great Love. He becomes suddenly rather a cardboard figure. He was created in the author's mind, and in some important way seems to be there still, not working very hard at getting out and being Laurence Breavman.

But *The Favourite Game* is an interesting novel, up to this point. What it says about being alive is its own parable, never stated explicitly. Much of the dialogue sounds like tape-recorder stuff. On this evidence, it can hardly be doubted that Cohen is a novelist possessing much more than mere "promise".

If Dylan Thomas had lived longer than his 39 years he would have found it necessary to change. He was at a dead end, with exaggeration piled on exaggeration. But Jeffers, with his nihilistic view of mankind, lived long into his seventies and didn't change. Neither did A. E. Housman and his hopeless view of human life.

With *Flowers for Hitler* (McClelland & Stewart, cloth, $4.50, paper, $2.50) Leonard Cohen recognizes the necessity to get away from his sensuous unrealistic parables and flesh fantasies. Cohen does change.

But the change has puzzled me somewhat. I've asked everyone I know who's interested in poetry what they think of *Flowers for Hitler*, and why. Some shared my own small puzzlements. The answers I got boiled down to equal approval and dislike. None thought the book outstanding, and some thought it pretty undistinguished.

Cohen quotes Carlo Levi before the poems begin: "If from the inside of the Lager, a message could have seeped out to free men, it would have been this: Take care not to suffer in your own homes what is inflicted on us here." This presages the communal guilt theme of the book.

But there are other motifs. Personal dissatisfaction with the world Cohen never made. Guilt plus erotica. Obsession with drugs. Two Cuban poems, one of which suggests the future death of Fidel Castro in chilling fashion.

Several themes. But none come through as over-riding strengths that make the book a consistent whole, as Cohen undoubtedly wished. Not that they should necessarily; for life is a pot-pourri, a grab bag of seemingly unrelated things. But lacking thematic consistency, the poems do not accurately portray reality either. They seem playful exercises, poems for the sake of poems. Hitler and the communal guilt ploy seem to me like the talk of a good conversationalist who had to say something, whether it was real or not.

Here's what Cohen says of his poems on the cover: "This book moves me from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dungpile of the front-line writer. I didn't plan it this way. I loved the tender notices *Spice-Box* got but they embarrassed me a little. *Hitler* won't get the same hospitality from the papers. My sounds are too new, therefore people will say: this is derivative, this is slight, his power has failed. Well, I say there has never been a book like this, prose or poetry, written in Canada. All I ask is that you put it in the hands of my generation and it will be recognized."

Let's assume that the claims Cohen makes for his new book are sincere, dubious as that may seem. The bit about the "golden-boy poet" and "dung pile of the front-line writer" I choose to ignore, for it seems gratuitous ego and sales come-on. But are Cohen's sounds new? (By sounds I take it he means his idioms, tone, and contemporary speech rhythms.) In other words, has Cohen effected a revolution in prosody, written something so startling that time is required before his innovations are recognized? Has he done that?

No.

I agree there has never been a book like *Flowers for Hitler* published in Canada. Cohen is an individual poet, possessing his own strong merit and equally indubitable weaknesses. But even so there are traces of other people's influence. Laurence Hope's *Indian Love Lyrics*, surprisingly enough. Some of the Elizabethans. Donne's "Sweetest love I do not go" — cf. *The Favourite Game*. Waller's "On a Girdle". Swinburne with arthritis. Dowson's "Cynara" even.

But I'm not very fond of that favourite game. Cohen has come swimming out

of all such traces of other poets, emerges as himself. And re. the dust jacket blurb, I don't want to fall into the trap of treating an author's ad agency gabblings as important. Only poems are. And pretentiousness aside, there are a few things in *Hitler* which I value:

> I once believed a single line
> in a Chinese poem could change
> forever how blossoms fell
> and that the moon itself climbed on
> the grief of concise weeping men
> to journey over cups of wine

Of course that is the "old" Cohen. Here is the guilty "new" Cohen:

> I do not know if the world has lied
> I have lied
> I do not know if the world has conspired against love
> I have conspired against love
> The atmosphere of torture is no comfort
> I have tortured
> Even without the mushroom cloud
> still I would have hated

And so on. He ends the poem: "I wait/for each one of you to confess." Well, he's gonna have to wait a long time. Liars, torturers and conspirators don't confess by reason of such poems as this one. And the life Cohen portrays in his poems has to be unreal by my personal standards.

Sure, I've done all the things he says he's done. But I'm not personally preoccupied with guilt, and I think few people are or should be. Life being lived now, and personal change more important than morbid preoccupation with past imperfections, I feel no particular urge to confess anything; though in a sense I suppose I have, in the first sentence of this paragraph. What then IS important in poetry and life?

Well, much of the time being alive at all has puzzled me. What am I going to do with my awareness, the mixed curse and blessing of sentience? Yes, live — it includes things I haven't even thought of yet. It also includes the various dictionary emotions, including a negligible amount of guilt. What then is important?

Perhaps to take a new and searching look at people, re-defining what they are as against what they were previously thought to be. Man himself is the unknown animal. We know more about nuclear physics, crop rotation and fertilizers than

we do about our own nature and potentialities. As well, we might look for a new road on which mankind can travel. The one he's on now appears to be heading straight for The Bomb. Science, politics, philosophy and something like religion are all mixed in with the new poetry.

Those are grandiose things of course. Has Cohen discovered any new roads, or should I expect him to discover them? That question too is theatric, perhaps ill-considered. Well then, is he living now, asking the questions we all ask ourselves, making discoveries about himself, explaining the scope and nature of what a human being might be? Sometimes he is.

But I'm no longer puzzled about Cohen. He has changed, veered at a sharp angle from his previous work, struck off in another direction entirely. For the "now" poet is an exploding self, whom critics cannot predict, nor can the poet himself. Where he is going he does not know exactly, and where he has been he can only remember imperfectly. He inhabits language as well as the world, infuses words with something of his own questioning stance, his own black depression and joyous life.

One can only guess where Cohen is going now. But when I see the human confusion and uncertainty of his last book, I have hope it may be terra incognita where he is going. With a ballpoint pen. And may survive there and map the territory.