

The Importance of Tradition: Sensual and Spiritual Aspects of Love According to the Medieval Andalusian Muslim Poets and the Occitan Troubadours in Contrast with the Contemporary Singer-Songwriter Leonard Cohen

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Abstract: The following essay focuses on the Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen who is believed to be one of the main representatives of the tradition of European love poetry as understood by the Anglo-American modernists of the 20th century Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Primarily, it focuses on the Sacred Feminine character as the main subject of the Occitan and Andalusian Medieval poetry and its reappearance in the song of Leonard Cohen. The paper also deals with literary contrasts and views tradition as an always-evolving phenomenon.

Key Words: Cohen, Troubadours, poetry, song, tradition

I. Tradition

The word tradition has a slightly different meaning when seen through the eyes of the Anglo-American modernist poets and literary critics such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. *Tradition*, in their view, does not mean a repetition of older works but something that could be characterised by the word “remake.” The artist, according to them, is a person who works with the same material as his predecessors, however, thanks to his gift and talent, embraces their works of art and builds upon them. His work then comes from the constant struggle with the work of his ancestors and the struggle to liberate himself from their influence:

T.S. Eliot: No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead (Eliot 1920: 44).

Tradition, according to Ezra Pound, does not bind us but gives us a great deal of freedom and beauty,⁴⁵ which indirectly says that tradition does not bind anyone to blindly imitate but to use new means of expression for the material that has been already used.

Cohen’s mentor Louis Dudek (1918 – 2001), the Canadian modernist poet and scholar, corresponded with Ezra Pound from 1949 and spread his ideas over the English Department at McGill University where Cohen studied. Cohen’s first book of poems, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956), was published as a first piece of the McGill Poetry Series directed by Dudek, who must have seen the young poet struggling with the Jewish literary tradition of his ancestors. However, Cohen’s scope was greater than that, as he revealed in a 1993 interview with Jim O’Brien from B-Side Magazine (UK):

The kind of training I had as a young writer, a young composer, made me very much aware of where I stood in a long line of singers or poets: musicians from the Troubadours; even before that, from Homer; and even before that, from Isaiah and King David; coming all the way down through the various strains into English literature; into poetry; into folk poetry like Robbie Burns; into folksingers like Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, and Woody Guthrie; and down to my own generation. I’ve always been aware of that tradition, and to be one of the figures that allows the tradition to continue is very gratifying (rpt. in Burger 2014: 361).

⁴⁵ “The tradition is a beauty which we preserve and not a set of fetters to bind us” (Pound 1963: 91). The tradition understood as such is the gate to freedom since it provides the distance needed to create a new work of art and ultimately spurs the artist to go beyond the limits of his expression.

II. Leonard Cohen in Contrast

The Anglo-American modernists regarded the poets of the Provença, particularly of the area stretching roughly from the area of the Atlantic coast in the southern border with Spain to Poitiers in the North and to the Valadas Occitanas within Italy, as the founders of the European love poetry. The Troubadours were writing in a common language accessible to the ordinary people while the world of their song was an invented myth of chivalrous knights and *fin'amor*, a phenomenon that has probably never existed in reality. Their poems seem to be portraying a spiritual experience through the means of secular expression in a diligent writing full of innuendos and verse and strophic perfections. The word *trobador* came either from the Arabic word *ṭaraba* (“to sing”) or from the Occitan word *trobar* (“to find”). We may call these poets the *singing wanderers*.

Both the Medieval Andalusian and the Occitan poetry drew heavily on the oral tradition of the East and especially on the character of King David who was described in the books of the Old Testament and Quran as an outstanding poet, accompanying his words with the harp.⁴⁶ He became the model of all the Medieval wandering poets as several of the illuminated manuscripts suggest, not only in the Mediterranean but also in England.⁴⁷

Neither has Leonard Cohen been spared from its influence. In an interview with Michael Krugman in 2001, he said: “I studied and was formed in this tradition that honoured the ancient idea of music being declaimed or chanted, of lyrics being declaimed or chanted to a rhythmic background” (rpt. in Burger 2014: 479). *Motz e son*, words and music, in fact have been always bound together as the main instruments of poetic expression since the time immemorial.

As for the ambiance of their songs, the cultural milieu of Medieval Andalusia and Occitania could be characterised as overtly liberal. Various religious, spiritual or mystical streams coming from the Orient were meeting at the court and shaped the poetry sprouting from the Celtic background, the Latin tradition of Ovid and Catullus, the folkloric tradition of the May song, Christian Medieval liturgy and perhaps even Neoplatonism. We should not forget that the Medieval Andalusia and Occitania were places in which three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam were meeting and at certain times

⁴⁶ See the Book of 1 Samuel 16:23, which says that David played to King Saul in order to soothe his nerves. The Muslims call the Book of Psalms *Zabur*, which means the book of songs. The Medieval and Renaissance iconography often portrays King David as playing the lute.

⁴⁷ See, for instance the Westminster Psalter (c. 1200) or the accompanying illustrations to *Cantigas de Santa Maria* which were written during the life of Alfonso X El Sabio (1221–1284).

coexisting in harmony with one another.

Leonard Cohen's work, since he was born Jewish, does not only contain strong echoes of the ancient Jewish religious literature but also of the Christian theme of the dying God, who became the personification of the suffering poet bemoaned by his mother/lover. Moreover, he often draws on the Sufi melodies and rituals⁴⁸ and quite naturally has a deep knowledge of the Abrahamic religions including their mystical streams like many of the Occitan and Andalusian poets.

Thematics

Altogether with the Arabic poets of al-Andalus, the Occitan Troubadours often used strong descriptions of carnal and spiritual love. In their poetry, the feminine character became a quasi-religious and sometimes wholly religious object. Their lyrics often describe a Divine Union with this character, which reminds us of the myth of the ancient Mother Goddess and her dying Son.

The Canadian critic, Northrop Frye noticed the above facts in Cohen's poetry too when he wrote a review on his first collection of poems *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956). He described Cohen's writing as follows:

[...] his chief interest, as indicated in his title, is mythopoeic. The mythologies are Jewish, Christian, and Hellenistic. The Christian myth is seen as an extension of the Jewish one, **its central hanged god in the tradition of the martyred Jew** (Frye 1971: 250).

Frye also noted that the central character of Cohen's poetry is the "**femme fatale**" (Frye 1971: 250), the Mother Goddess having two supplemental attributes — black/white — with the connotations of good and evil that it carries. Other critics such as Michael Ondaatje, a Canadian poet and scholar, wrote that "Cohen himself is the twentieth-century troubadour lover who in separation transforms his losses into ethereal images" (Ondaatje 1970: 21-22). Moreover, he also described Cohen as "the wandering saintly minstrel" (60).

III. The Divine Feminine: The Main Subject of the Song

The feminine character of the troubadour poetry is often anonymous, and, based on her qualities, seen as a divine, or semi-divine being. She was frequently described by the term *midon*, the word containing "the feminine version of 'my' (*mia*) and the masculine noun for 'lord' (*domnus*)" (Kehew 5). This invention aimed to protect her real identity, as well as

⁴⁸ See the songs: "Lover, Lover, Lover" (*New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, 1974) or "The Guests" (*Recent Songs*, 1979).

another figure of speech, *senhal*, which described the Lady in abstract terms, such as “Bon Vezi” (“Good Neighbour”), “Bels Vezers” (“Lovely View”), “Miels de Domna” (“Better than Woman”) or “Belhs Deportz” (“Lovely Pleasure”) in order to protect her real identity.⁴⁹

Senhal was called *kināya* in the Andalusian medieval poetry and the feminine character was often called *sayyidī* and *mawlāye* (Nykl 1946: 271), “My King” or “My Lord.”⁵⁰ Charles Cholakian claims that she was “idealised beyond all evaluative systems – Christian (‘crestina’), Jewish (‘Juzeva’) or Sarrasin (‘Sarrazina’)” (Cholakian 1990: 99).

Leonard Cohen has named several of his feminine characters in a similar way: “Winter Lady,” “Lady Midnight,” “Our Lady of Solitude,” or “The Darkness,” perhaps not to protect the Lady’s identity but to speak of the *feminine* element, to which he ascribes the qualities of coldness, solitude and darkness in spite of her resplendent appearance.

IV. Cohen and the Lady

Leonard Cohen in the beginning of his music career experienced an unrequited longing for Christa Päffgen (1938 – 1988), also known as “Nico.” Nico was idealised by Cohen and made a subject of his worship. A few poems in the last section of Cohen’s *Selected Poems 1956-1968*, speak of Nico whom he ardently pursued during her performances at that time. He says that Nico represented all the women he has ever wanted and since she was refusing him, the poet constructed a *goddess* / Feminine Ideal that subsequently appeared in his lyrics: “You do not have to love me / just because / you are all the women / I have ever wanted / I was born to follow you / every night” (*Selected Poems* 1968: 223). In other poems related to her, Cohen describes himself as a god in need to use the *goddess’s* body.⁵¹

Nico is the subject of other song lyrics such as: “Winter Lady;” “One of Us Cannot Be

⁴⁹ If the troubadour was of a higher social rank and there was no need to protect the Lady, her *senhal* was generally known (Chaytor 1990: 16). *Senhal* was required to have the same number of syllables as the original name. Its origins can be traced to the real names of Roman mistresses married to important personalities of the State used in the work of Latin Neoteric poets such as Catullus (Prokop 2001: 254). In Andalusia, they used the word *jari* (“my neighbour”), which has the same function as a *senhal* (Lu’lu’a 2013: 228).

⁵⁰ Magdaléna Vitásková, a Czech Arabic scholar confirms in our personal correspondence that *sayyidī* (سَيِّدِي) and *mawlāya* (مَوْلَايَ) mean “My Lord” and “My Master” respectively. While the first term is being used mainly among the **ancient Arab-Bedouin** peoples, the use of the second one often appears in the context of the Sufi literature.

⁵¹ See for instance other works from the collection *Selected Poems*: “I Met You” (227); “You Live Like a God” (229-230); “Aren’t You Tired” (230); “It Has Been Some Time” (229-230); “She Sings So Nice” (231); “Who Will Finally Say” (234); “Waiting to Tell the Doctor” (234).

Wrong;” “Last Year’s Man;” “Joan of Arc;” “Take This Longing.” Possibly she appears also in the song “Memories” in which she is described “as the tallest and the blondest girl.”



Figure I. Nico. © Photo by Paul Morrissey, 1966.

The frequent imagery of the Feminine ideal in the Andalusian and Occitan Medieval poetry is the blonde/white girl. For instance, the poet Ibn Haiyun who flourished in the 12th century wrote in his poem “Moles” about a radiant girl who keeps disappearing. This poem suggests that the feminine presence in the world of song is ephemeral. “My white, my shining girl, / As pretty as a pearl; / When I woo her dearly / She melts away, or nearly” (Arberry 2000: 9).

V. The Lady as a mind construct

The earliest troubadour, Guillem de Peiteus, Duke of Aquitaine (c. 1071 – 1126) tells us that he does not know the woman's appearance. This suggests that the Lady was a mind construct, as illustrated in the poem beginning with words "Feraï un vers de dreyt nien:"

Anc non la vi et am la fort,	Though I've not seen her, my love is strong;
Anc no n'aic dreyt no no-m fes tort;	Not seeing her, I'm scarce undone;
Quan non la vey, be m'en deport	She never did me right or wrong
...	...
No sai lo luec ves en s'esta,	As for her homeland, I don't know
Si es en pueg ho es en pla	Whether she's from the hill or plain ⁵²

Another troubadour, Bertran de Born (1159-1215) composed the feminine character out of various women from whom he borrows a quality or a specific trait:

Irai per tot achaptan	I will go out a-searching,
De chascuna un bel semblan	Culling from each a fair trait
Per far domna soisseubuda,	To make me a borrowed lady
Tro vos mi siatz renduda.	Till I again find you ready.

This approach resembles Cohen (quoted above) with regard to Nico: "you are all the women / I have ever wanted" by which he indirectly proves that he combines the features of the best women he has seen in order to make an exquisite feminine character.

Another poet Gui d'Ussel (fl. 1195–1209) wrote about the feminine Ideal: "vos passatz sobre tot pensamen" which could be translated as "you are better than all the ideal images".⁵³

VI. Suzanne

The greatest portrayal of the feminine ideal by Leonard Cohen comes from the first song in his first album *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1964). Suzanne, according to its Hebrew etymology, means *lily* (*shoshana*), which suggests whiteness, beauty and purity.

In the song by Cohen, she evokes an enchantress who is leading a resisting man to her place near the river: the source of the feminine power. Cohen does not sing only about Suzanne Vaillancourt, the wife of his friend who invited him for a cup of tea, but also about

⁵² Translated by W.D. Snodgrass (Kehew 2005: 25-27).

⁵³ The whole poem can be read in Nelli, René, and René Lavaud. *Les Troubadours: L'œuvre poétique*. Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 2000. (120-121).

the statue of the Virgin Mary on the Chapelle Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours which observes the harbour at St. Lawrence River in Montreal.



Figure II. The Star of the Sea. © Photo by Robert Brown, 2008.

In spite of his initial hesitation, he yields to her power: “And you want to travel with her / you want to travel blind / and you know that she will trust you / for you’ve touched her perfect body / with your mind.”

The second stanza of the song portrays a lonely figure of Christ who is looking from his “lonely” wooden tower, perhaps also on the St. Lawrence River. The chorus is almost the same, although with one difference, that it is Christ who touches the singer’s perfect body with his mind: “And you want to travel with him / And you want to travel blind / And you think maybe you’ll trust him / For he’s touched your perfect body / with his mind.”

To summarise, the first stanza speaks about the man touching Suzanne’s perfect body

with his mind, while the second stanza speaks about Christ who touches the singer's "perfect" body with his mind. This mental "seizure" of Suzanne had therefore prepared the singer to receive the love of Christ.

After such a cross-encounter, the seeker is again led by Suzanne to the river and she shows him little things "among garbage and the flowers" while "the Sun pours down like honey / on our Lady of the Harbour" – the statue. Finally it is her who also touches his perfect body with her mind. Which suggest the union between the singer, the Virgin and Christ.

Northrop Frye concluded his review in 1956 with these words: "No other Canadian poet known to me is doing anything like this, and I hope to see more of it" (Frye 1970: 250). And I would like to add that exploring the field of the Occitan and Andalusian poetry will bring the same concepts to the fore since they seem to be at the base of our literary work as well as probing the most profound layers of our beings.

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