

You Can Call Me Lenny: Ira Nadel's *Leonard Cohen: A Life in Art*

Ira Nadel. *Leonard Cohen: A Life in Art*. Toronto: EWC Press, 1994.

The recent resurgence of academic and popular interest in Leonard Cohen insures that there is a significant market for a Cohen biography. Ira Nadel's *Leonard Cohen: A Life in Art* (1994) would seem at first glance to be a likely candidate to fill an existing literary-historical void. However, while Nadel's book includes several interesting anecdotes and a thorough chronology of Cohen's public life, it tends to regard Cohen with an uncritical eye. By trying to survey Cohen's entire life and its relation to his writing and music Nadel condenses and totalises an extremely heterogeneous body of work. Perhaps the distance necessary for such a long-range survey necessitates such over-simplification, yet Nadel's attempt to explore the union between Cohen's life and his art suffers precisely because of its too apparent clarity, its refusal to speculate on or to develop the complexities of Cohen's many sides. In choosing to re-hearse Cohen's music and writing by selecting and discussing previously elaborated themes and placing them in a biographical context, Nadel constructs a Cohen reminiscent of much of the thematic criticism dating from the 'sixties and 'seventies, rather than the more ambiguous figure that emerged out of the proceedings of the Leonard Cohen conference, published in *Canadian Poetry* 33 (1993). Ironically, the biography has none of the play that Nadel includes in his fictional interview with Cohen in that issue.

The main strength of this book is its collection of biographical and interpretive details, although many of these details have been elaborated more extensively by other writers. For example, compare Nadel's discussion of *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978), which he claims summarizes Cohen's "dual stance as a self-conscious romantic and a postmodern creator: the poet as both public artist and private lover" (105) with Linda Hutcheon's previous discussion of the same text, which she describes as growing from "dual stances of Romantic or postmodernist self awareness . . . the poet as public artist figure and the poet as private lover" (43). By placing information drawn from studies

and interviews by Sandra Djwa, Stephen Scobie, Louis Dudek and others into chronological order Nadel provides adequate background material for further study. However, his refusal to draw out the implications of his material make Cohen's life sketchy at best--a skeleton biography without flesh.

Very brief stories about Cohen's meetings with Montreal literary figures such as F.R. Scott, Louis Dudek and Irving Layton are interesting and important to his writing, but some of the other figures mentioned in passing are at least as intriguing, yet they are not discussed at any length. For example, Nadel writes that during Cohen's 1988 tour he was received by the president of Iceland and by Prince Charles in England. What did they discuss? Or were they just fans? Perhaps Charles, as the future head of the Church of England, wanted to ask the "singer / prophet" Cohen for some spiritual advice (let's hope so).

While one can only speculate on the content of these meetings and others which are mentioned in passing throughout the biography, Nadel refuses to situate Cohen's once seemingly radical stance in the context of a political era which thrives on commodified radicalisms (such as MTV and "alternative" music). Nadel writes: "political issues held Cohen's interest, as reflected in various poems and letters" (57), yet he fails to elaborate on why Cohen would refuse a Governor General's Award for poetry in 1969 because of his claim that "the poems themselves absolutely forbid it" (92), and then later accept a Governor General's Performing Arts award in 1993. The complex psychology motivating Cohen's self-construction as a public figure and his relationship with cultural institutions is reduced by Nadel to a facile warning that "one must always guard against the con" (105) when reading this highly enigmatic figure. Cohen's writing often shows an awareness that the line between artist and ad agency is difficult to draw, and to stress his writing as pure and free from market considerations is highly problematic; Nadel seems to ignore the layers of irony embedded in Cohen's cross over from "serious" poet to pop idol.

Nadel writes that the "change from poetry to songwriting was a move that saved Cohen's creative life" (88), largely because he only published a "limited number" of books between 1967 and 1993, as opposed to a large number of successful albums. This statement is puzzling because it ignores the possibility that Cohen may have published more poems if he had spent his energy slaving over a hot typewriter instead of a guitar. Moreover Nadel acknowledges that Cohen's later books "confirm the strong connection between his singing and his writing" (89). The separation of music and poetry in Nadel's account hinges on Cohen's popularity, his "unmusical but unique sound that has been surprisingly successful" (89). Behind this justification of Cohen's popularity is the

assumption that commercial success is to be equated with quality—an assumption that is highly debatable given the popularity of many recent performers. Another problem with this entertainment industry focus is organizational: the extensive lists of tour dates that run throughout the later part of the biography serve no purpose other than to demonstrate that Cohen is a travelling performer. We are provided with a few scant details of events that occurred along the way, but what actually occurred in Stockholm, Berlin, London, Boston, Brisbane, Sydney? The endless lists of cities would be better placed in an appendix or included in the chronology of Cohen's life at the back of the text, alongside its excellent discography.

Given the large wealth of critical material currently available on masculine desire, it is surprising that Nadel does not delve more deeply into Cohen's frequent representation of sexuality. For example, he writes that Cohen "has been absorbed by the effort to render desire through art," and that art "provides Cohen with a means to confront and master his desires" (12). However, Cohen's desire for mastery of art often spills over onto a desire for dominance of women, a problem which Nadel seems hesitant to investigate. As early as 1974 Tom Wayman reviewed *The Energy of Slaves* as a "collection of tedious male supremacy" built on a desire for "some sort of titillative mental thrill" (92-93). Wayman's critique of Cohen is not entirely unproblematic because of his assertion that one needs to speak of political issues in a purely rational and transparent language without vagueness or indeterminacy, but his analysis is significant inasmuch as it underscores Cohen's desire for an objectified image of woman. More recently, Nicole Markotic has analyzed the links between technology and masculine desire in *Beautiful Losers*, while Joan Crate has investigated Cohen's use of the image of woman as "phone line to the divine, usually plugged into by the penis" (55). Unlike these studies, however, Nadel's discussion of Cohen's desire skirts issues of patriarchal dominance by centring instead on his formal mastery, his desire to speak "with the exact precision with which you would check out a laundry list" (13), as well as his desire to unite with the divine through art. Nadel interprets the "System Theatre . . . scene of the frenzied eroticism of the telephone dance" in *Beautiful Losers* as a metaphor for the novel's "bursting, encyclopedic energy" (74-5), but fails to draw any implications about the novel's patriarchal assumptions of gendered power.

The biographical details in the text make more interesting reading than the criticism. We read that Cohen suffered severe health problems while he was completing *Beautiful Losers* due largely to the frenzied pace of writing in a drug induced state. We are given a "who's who" in Cohen's texts when Nadel matches characters from novels, poems and

songs with friends and family from Cohen's life. And we are provided with numerous amusing anecdotes about Cohen's life on the road and gossip about his relationships with other famous or notorious personalities. Yet when Nadel sets up his account as an attempt to explore the union between Cohen's life and his work (14), he enters into a specifically author-centred and thematic form of criticism, in which literature is limited to the expression of a single person's consciousness. While a literary biography is necessarily author-centred, I find it problematic to focus so closely on authorship when engaging in criticism. By interpreting Cohen's writing chiefly as a personal struggle with religious, aesthetic, and sexual themes, Nadel presents us with a Promethean figure who is only marginally tied to his social context. The biography does not shed any light on the reasons behind Cohen's vast popularity, except to state that Cohen's sensibility, "buttressed by his absorption with the erotic and the violent, found a devoted, nearly cult following that continues today" (85). By situating Cohen's writing as pre-existing an audience which "found" him, the text downplays the manner in which that audience "created" Cohen as a public figure, and the way in which Cohen's career may be read as one thread in a larger social fabric.

This lack of contextual analysis is nowhere more evident than in Nadel's consideration of Cohen's *Book of Mercy* (1984), which he describes as a "publicly unexpected shift into prayer, mysticism, and religion" (121). Nadel's statement is puzzling because Cohen has been concerned with these themes since his earliest published writing; *Book of Mercy* may shift in tone significantly from his previous book, *Death of a Lady's Man*, but it continues his exploration of the spiritual problems that have consumed him from *Let Us Compare Mythologies* in 1956 up to and including *Death of a Lady's Man*. Nadel takes Cohen's words about *Book of Mercy* at face value: "[w]e're such a hip age. Nobody wants to affirm these realities. It doesn't go with your sunglasses" (123). Yet by contextualizing the book exclusively as the result of a moment of religious renewal in Cohen's life, Nadel decontextualizes it from numerous other discourses with which it engages. For instance, Nadel does not acknowledge how friendly this text of modern psalms and lyric prayers is to new religious discourses ranging from the New Age movement to various types of contemporary religious fundamentalism, religions which were growing steadily during the hey-day of the Reagan era when *Book of Mercy* was published. What are the links between Cohen's biography and the specific ideologies which inform his work? For Nadel, *Book of Mercy* articulates a "spiritual and moral renewal" (124) and a personal return to Judaism, but by limiting Cohen's writing to an expression of his individual religious life he overlooks the cultural background on which the text is

built.

Leonard Cohen: A Life in Art will please readers who are interested in literary gossip or music industry "rock talk," but it will likely disappoint readers who desire a more thorough interaction between biography and interpretation. Yet both types of reader may find food for thought in the photograph of the middle aged Cohen reproduced in famous blue-tones on the book's cover: he looks remarkably relaxed for a man who claims to have seen the future baby and its murder. It seems that for Nadel this particular life in art has a happy ending.

Notes

1. There have been at least two albums of material written by Cohen and recorded by other artists in the last five years. Red Deer College's *Leonard Cohen Conference* was held in October, 1993, the proceedings of which are published in *Canadian Poetry* 33 (1993).
2. Nadel makes a similar assertion by comparing language to a "transparent medium" (76); he writes that in *Beautiful Losers* Cohen establishes the "purity of language" (76).
3. A passage taken from *Death of a Lady's Man*.
4. One such discourse is the book's engagement with other faiths such as Islam and Christianity. Cohen places a poem blessing "Ishmael . . . traditionally considered the father of the Arab nation" (14) close to the centre of Book I of *Book of Mercy*; this placement is not arbitrary since many of the poems are based on Biblical form, where images of central importance are often situated at or near the centre of a poem. A similar structure occurs at the centre of Book II, where the narrator speaks beside "a church where we were struck to prove some point on Christmas Eve" (38); the setting is metonymic of the Christian persecution of Judaism. In the poem which immediately follows, however, the narrator petitions "Mercy" for grace: "Grant me a forgiving sleep, and rest my enemy" (39). Poems 38 and 39 are closely bound together, since the request for the ability to forgive in the second poem addresses the injustice described in the first poem. When placed at the centre of Book II, these two poems reinforce the inter-faith challenge that is expressed in the the central chiasmic structure of Book I. See Joel Rosenberg's "Biblical Narrative" in *Back to the Sources* (1984) for a detailed discussion of Biblical chiasmic composition.

Works Cited

Cohen, Leonard. *Beautiful Losers*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966.

———. *Book Of Mercy*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985.

———. *Death of a Lady's Man*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978.

———. *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1956.

Crate, Joan. "The Mistress' Reply to the Poet." *Canadian Poetry* 33, 1993.

Dyck, E.F. ed. *The Proceedings of the Leonard Cohen Conference*, Red Deer College, October 22-23, 1993.

Canadian Poetry 33, 1993.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Leonard Cohen (1934 -)." *Canadian Writers and Their Works*. Ed. Robert Lecker, Jack David, and Ellen Quigly. Vol. 10. Toronto: ECW P, 1989. 25-65.

Markotic, Nicole. "The Telephone Dance & Mechanical Ecstasy in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*." *Canadian Poetry* 33, 1993.

Nadel, Ira. *Leonard Cohen: A Life in Art*. Toronto: ECW P, 1994.

Rosenberg, Joel. "Biblical Narrative." *Back to the Sources*. Ed. Barry W. Holtz. New York: Summit Books, 1984. 33-81.

Wayman, Tom. "Cohen's Women." *Canadian Literature* 60 (1974): 89-93.

Peter Jaeger
