

Interior Landscapes and the Public Realm: Contingent Mediations in a Speech and a Song by Leonard Cohen

by Winfried Siemerling

After a considerable silence, Leonard Cohen reappeared, in '988, with a record called *I'm Your Man*. Jennifer Warnes had prepared the way with her beautiful, polished renderings of Cohen's songs on *Famous Blue Raincoat*. Now, Cohen's own voice could be heard again, as in the 'sixties, through open windows and in silent streets. The record, Cohen's first major success after all these years, opens with the song "First We Take Manhattan," and with ironically militant words that delineate, as so often in Cohen's work, a vague map with their pronouns. In opposition to an adverse "they," the subject "I" appears and seems to adumbrate the possibility of a new community:

They sentenced me to twenty years of boredom
for trying to change the system from within.
I'm coming now, I'm coming to reward them.
First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin.

But one may well wonder who "we" are supposed to be. While "they" may represent the forces of evil that the subject, marked by the first person singular, seems to face, the listener is left in doubt whether he or she belongs to the plural subject that is to take Manhattan and Berlin. This situation is further complicated by the appearance of several addressees that are marked by the pronoun "you," for instance when we hear the lines:

You loved me as a loser
but now you're worried that I just may win.
You know the way to stop me
but you don't have the discipline.

How are "we" to locate our own listening selves with respect to this form of address? Are "we" to think of ourselves as being on

the speaker's side? Are "we" addressed as his adversaries? If, as some theorists have suggested, we are hailed as listeners or readers to occupy certain subject positions, who is calling out to us? Is this, to use a formulation by Cohen, the "leader of a government-in-exile" (Interview 1990) who addresses us as his subjects, a voice that speaks for a group, or perhaps conveys a communal understanding like the priest that Cohen's name signifies literally in Hebrew (a fact Cohen sometimes alludes to)? Or do we face an elusive self that offers no identification, that mocks us from outside established or representable meaning, leaving us with the kind of unsolvable riddle that is meant to lead the student of Zen to enlightenment, a Koan? Are we being hailed by Koan/Cohen?

Leonard, of course, has often maintained the position that he has no position — or even, in a 1967 interview, that his strength is that he has no ideas ("After the Wipe-out, a Renewal" 8). In contrast to these refusals to embrace a circumscribed particular identity, or to subscribe to the shared tenets of a group, Cohen has commented in an interview in 1990 that "community is a lot more fragile than I understood then, and a lot more valuable, and to undertake the defense of a community is a high call, in no sense a betrayal of a personal destiny" (Interview 1990).

Here, he also elaborates on the notion of a government-in-exile as a mode of thought and a possible position from which to write:

I feel most comfortable when I think of myself as the leader of a government-in-exile. Sometimes I like to think of myself that way. It gives me a position that I can work from. It is not whether I take it seriously or not seriously, we are not speaking about a rational operation. It is just that one feels that one can embody the unspoken aspirations of both oneself and the people you know as somebody who takes responsibility for the predicament, and presents not a solution but an approach. That leads you to some interesting kinds of positions.

(Interview 1990)

But the kind of community implied — or even constituted — by the forms of poetic address that Cohen usually employs differs significantly from the accurate description that Anthony Cohen offers in his book *The Symbolic Construction of Community*:

The most striking feature of the symbolic construction of the community and its boundaries is its oppositional

character. The boundaries are relational rather than absolute; that is, they mark the community in relation to other communities. It has been suggested that all social identities, collective and individual, are constituted in this way. (58)

Leonard Cohen's texts, however, usually break down such boundaries of inside and outside. This phenomenon can be observed, for instance, in his unpublished novel "A Ballet of Lepers,"¹ in which he studies the promise and failure of self-constitution through exclusion of the other. But there is also the kind of doubleness of perspective that Homi K. Bhabha analyses in an essay in *Nation and Narration*. On the one hand, Bhabha describes a perspective that he calls "the pedagogical" (297), which takes a community — in this case, the nation — for granted as "an *a priori* historical presence, a pedagogical object" (299). These representations are interrupted, on the other hand, by a continual *performance* of narrative — the "'enunciatory' present" (299) in which *internal* differences come to the fore. Bhabha refers to this emergence as "the perplexity of the living in the midst of pedagogical representations of the fullness of life" (307). Bhabha thus shifts attention from the definition of the community with respect to the outside — which we have seen in Anthony Cohen — to the process of its internal becoming, the internal otherness and process of change in which community crosses the borders of what it has been, towards something that is not yet known. This internal "liminality," I think, constantly takes precedence, in Leonard Cohen's texts, over the intermittent construction of boundaries in the way described by Anthony Cohen.

Bhabha thus also invites us to pay close attention to the community as an ongoing event *in language*. Emile Benveniste has suggested that subjectivity in language is closely related to the functioning of pronouns, linguistic shifters that are empty of lexically defined meaning and thus offer a considerable mobility. In this perspective, the first person singular, the "I," marks the subject and its semantic movement in language (see Benveniste 223-30). If Benedict Anderson's dictum that "communities are to be distinguished . . . by the style in which they are imagined" (15) is applied to the realm of communal subjectivity in language, the first person plural, the "we," becomes of particular interest, especially in its interplay with the "I" and the "you." Cohen, of course, has usually refused to represent the beliefs of a particular group; but he has also continued to call a community into being — although it can hardly be thought of as the kind of "pedagogical object" often

envisioned by didactic intentions.

While Cohen's work has certainly changed over time, I think that he has maintained, in his texts, a somewhat paradoxical but consistent position on the mediation between interior landscapes and the public realm. One could say that address functions in Cohen's language to draw the subject away from essentially defined positions, from identities that can be treated as given objects of thought — or from the *a priori*s of the pedagogical. If there is a position to be conveyed, in other words, Cohen's forms of address prevent us, as he put it in a text I will examine in a moment, "[from] mistak[ing] the cast off shell with the swift changing thing that shed it" ("Loneliness and History" b).² Once a situation has left the unknowable openness of unpredictable experience behind and becomes amenable to conceptualization, it passes into the domain of historical representations. Martin Buber, for instance, suggests that formulated objecthood is connected with the past. In *I and Thou*, Buber thus distinguishes between two "basic words" (which are actually pairs of words) that mark two different modes of experience as present and past; the first is I-You, the second is I-It (53). I-It belongs to the sphere of experience that is able to formulate an object, but, Buber says, "objects consist in having been" (64). The I-You is relational, and exists only as present. I think this sense of the present is operative, more often than not, in the relationship between a speaker and the addressee that becomes dominant in Cohen's work at some point in the 'sixties. As soon as language has outlined the identity of both a speaking self and an addressed other, this formulated relationship becomes "the cast off shell" left behind by the moment of speech. The "swift changing thing that shed" its form in the protocols of language, always eluding efforts to catch magically its presence, has already hurried on and escaped objecthood that is amenable to formulation. Language here seems to remain, to use F.'s self-characterization in *Beautiful Losers*, "the Moses of our little exodus," pointing to a promised land where we must go without it. The words in F.'s long letter to his student and reader, the unnamed subject "I," typically point beyond themselves to a reality that remains unnamed: "That is as far as I can take you. I cannot bring you into the middle of action. My hope is that I have prepared *you* for this pilgrimage" (175).

Is there a point of view that can be shared, that would allow for a communal experience, for the creation of a community? Is there a place "we" are offered by Cohen's texts? The question of identification has been debated, of course, in particular in the

context of *Beautiful Losers* (Scobie 125, Hutcheon 27). Not only F. and Catherine Tekakwitha, but the "I" at the beginning and at the end are as much in question as "we," as the ones spoken to, who would be united in a community of shared understanding and point of view. One of the voices in Cohen's *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978) expresses a Brechtian, virulent refusal of identification, if in a highly ironic and somewhat rude language:

The transmission is weakest in those passages where the reader is swept along in the story and the insights and the flow of events. We know what is best for this type of person who will put his arm into this pile of shit. His greed must be blocked at every turn.(184)

Who is this voice, withholding our sameness and identification, simultaneously alienating the reader and yet including "us" in an ironic "we"?

I think Eli Mandel pointed in the right direction when he suggested that the publication of *Flowers for Hitler* (1964) marked the beginning of a "murderously ambiguous seduction/repulsion pattern" mediated by the mode of address (126), coinciding with Cohen's shift to the context of history (127). A good example of Mandel's point can be found in the opening poem of that volume, programmatically entitled, "What I'm Doing Here." The poetic voice first refuses previous communal identifications, then calls upon the addressee to join a new community, yet ultimately refuses any positive identity. At the end of *Beautiful Losers*, we are similarly welcomed into a strange community with a voice that nevertheless claims an irreducible non-identity. A disappearing "I," forever *not having been grasped*, both greets and teases "you," using as addressee a linguistic shifter that is heavily overdetermined in the context of the novel:

Welcome to you who read me today. Welcome to you who put my heart down. Welcome to you, darling and friend, who miss me forever in your trip to the end. (260)

While some of Cohen's most fascinating variations on the relationship between self, other, reading, and address can be found in *Death of a Lady's Man*, I will here go briefly through a much earlier text that is also of considerable interest. I shall do so in order to explore where Cohen's voice is coming from, and what it seems to indicate about the manifold but fragile mediations between an "I" and a "we" in Cohen's work, that relationship we also encounter, again, in "First We Take Manhattan."

Cohen has discussed the relationship between "I" and "we" explicitly in "Loneliness and History" — which we have in the form of an unpublished manuscript for a speech that he gave in 1964. Cohen here situates the possibility of poetic speech on the boundary line between community and an unknown outside. "The human race needs more traitors" (I), begins one of the fragments (paginated in Roman numerals), which turns out to be a poet's defense against a reader (probably after an attack on *Flowers for Hitler*, published in 1964). Cohen seeks to dismantle the logic of self and other that is turned against him: "But when he called me traitor he meant that I had joined another side. If he had read the book he would know that there are no sides for me" (I). Cohen develops the relationship between poetic speech and its addressee, first, as a displacement of the poet from his community and, second, as an interesting redefinition of the term "community" itself. Although the poet becomes the "nominal" community's other even in the sense of being a scapegoat, both are not only divided, but also linked as each one's other in their reference to a common ideal.

Cohen engages his audience by using the Montreal Jewish community as an example. He positions A.M. Klein in a pattern of community and leader, the latter being divided internally by an opposition between *priest* and *prophet*. For Cohen, Klein's eventual silence is the consequence of his attempt to speak both as a prophet *to*, and as a priest *for*, the community. In this text, Cohen locates the opposition between the first-person "I" and plural "we" as the line of exile from which poetry (and thus Cohen himself) can speak after Klein: "I remember A.M. Klein speaking, whose poems disturbed me because at certain crucial moments in them he used the word 'we' instead of the word 'I' " (1). The identification of the individual with the community, Klein's "we," obliges the poet to represent a cause at odds with a form of speech marked by incompleteness.

On the other hand, Cohen suggests that Klein's poems offer a space for dialogue when the speaker does not seek to convey certainties of community and faith, but rather places himself in the face of an unknown, even multiple and overwhelming other, in this case between madness and the uncertain support of God:

[B]ut when he is true to his terror, then he sings, when he begs God to keep 'the golden dome' [sic] his mind safe from disease, offering as sacrificial payment his limbs, his body's health — then he sings out of the terror which makes a man lively and comfortless Then he is alone

and I believe him. Then there is no room for "we" and if I want to join him, if, even, I want to greet him, I must make my own loneliness. (1-2)³

In Cohen's account, Klein had agreed to speak on behalf of a community which had abandoned its founding openness to a prophetic instance. Klein's eventual break-down and ensuing silence are seen as a consequence of the exiled position imposed upon him as a poet by his community, and his willingness to administer as "priest" a communal self in which poetic speech had been moved from the centre to a margin that implies loneliness:

Klein chose to be a priest though it was as a prophet that we needed him, as a prophet he needed us and he needed himself And now we have his silence. (2-5)

In Cohen's interpretation, Klein's silence becomes the sign of an exile it did not speak in order not to betray a community under pressure. But Cohen insists on leaving that space "so as to produce those values for which the square was invented to enclose + protect" (6), and on following those who "ventured into loneliness" (e).

Having thus read Klein's predicament, Cohen constructs, in this text from 1964, the possibility of poetic speech as the emphatic acceptance of an outsider position. This marginality nevertheless has a close connection with a community which is still *its* other. Exile, for Cohen, signifies a paradoxically central possibility. Writers will not repeat Klein's path:

They will prefer exile, the dialogue of exile, a dialogue which seems to be very one sided [sic], but which is still the old rich dialogue between the prophet and the priest, and the larger idea of community includes both of the parties. The nominal community will continue to dismiss its writers and award them the title of traitor. (5-6)

The traitor is a crosser of boundaries who delivers a person or a value from the inside of a community to the outside. In Cohen's perspective, however, this disruptive resident alien is also a beneficent agent who reverses the trade, and brings in the possibility of an unknown, emergent other self. He offers an energy that will save the community from the fossilizing power of its instituted self.

The decisive intersection appears here as the dialogue between

the traitor-prophet and the priest; if the prophet is the exiled figure closest to the unknown outside, the priest administers the community's established ways of experiencing and of dealing with this outside, and contains the unknown in a protocol. The space *between* these two moments of understanding, as a language of emergence and of the unknown that does not destroy it *as* unknown, surfaces in Cohen's text as an energy he calls "idea."

Whereas "idea is the Birth Notice and Obituary of creation" and "the language of energy" (e), its trajectory as an unchanging form through time necessitates failure. The double — and strictly speaking forever incomplete — movement of seeking to express the unknown in the horizon of the known cannot be repeated in the same way without becoming its opposite, the moment of creation turning into object.

History is viewed here as the negative consequence of an almost impossibly brief coincidence. Cohen perceives of an ideal moment when prophet and priest are combined in one person and one moment. From this intersection between two perspectives, Cohen would like to speak:

Some moment in time, very brief, there must have been, among the ancient Hebrews, men who were both prophet + priest in the same office. I tease my imagination when I try to conceive of the energy of that combination.(c)

After that brief moment, the priest's language administers history and becomes "the description of the path of an idea" (a). While the prophet must seek to convey an idea in a communally accepted and understood language that implies a "we," and thus live with a priestly functioning that threatens him *qua* prophet, his openness to innovation marks an antagonism with priest and community:

The priest is the archetype of the community which the original idea called into being. The community is marked with fossils of the original energy, and convinced that only adherence to the original forms of the idea can rejuvenate it The prophet, on the other hand, continues to pursue the idea as it changes forms, trying never to mistake the cast off shell with the swift changing thing that shed it. He follows it into the regions of danger, so that he comes alone, and by his nature becomes unwelcome to the community. The community is a museum of the old form and dedicated to it, and changes very slowly . . . (a-b)

The prophet is thus the instituting other of a communal self. Community and self are the institutions left behind by a willingness to venture beyond the given.⁴ This figure moves towards an ambiguous outsidership that disrupts the community as it is known, by calling for a different community that is not symmetrically opposed to the old one, but that emerges by displacing it.

The poet-prophet's speech breaks the given horizon that names a community's self. Yet ultimately poetic voice of this kind will try to have it both ways: to be a priest comprehended by the community *and* to be a prophet who breaks the communal rule, and thus to combine the communication with an unknown other with the priest's address to the community.

And who, then, is the "I" in "First We take Manhattan" who claims to speak — apparently so unlike the poet we have encountered in "Loneliness and History" — *for* a community, *for* a "we" that would be united by a common understanding and a common motivation to take over the cosmopolitan realm? And more specifically, what place is given to the listening subject, and who addresses us in that peculiar stanza omitted by Jennifer Warnes?

I thank you for those items that you sent me,
the monkey and the plywood violin.
I practiced every night, now I'm ready.
First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin.

Cohen has suggested that "all the personages or the characters in the songs [are] part of the same landscape, the interior landscape" (Interview 1990). The sender of the ominous items would have been "that part of ourselves that diminished that voice that . . . was demanding a spiritual aspect to our lives We gave that aspect of ourselves that was hungry some kind of perverse and obscene charity. We made him into an organ grinder We gave that part of us a monkey and a plywood violin, so that it would screech away and amuse us with its antics" (Interview 1990).

Whoever has been ridiculed or rejected here is seen by Cohen as an aspect of an internalized drama. As so often in Cohen's work, we are invited to own the speaker's disowned, earlier self. Through the ambiguous, overdetermined "you" that is addressed by the speaking subject, we are drawn into the song's split community in the kind of "ambiguous seduction/repulsion pattern" mediated by

the mode of address that Eli Mandel has spoken of. After we have been positioned with that part of the self that has insulted the speaking "I" by offering it the paraphernalia of a clown, we are presented with the community of a "we" that would take over the cultural metropolis. But what has happened to Cohen's earlier refusal, in 1964, to speak *for* — rather than *to* — a group? What has become of his rejection of the divisions between "us" and "them"? The ironic tone of the song perhaps takes care of that question to some extent; but I think that the group that "we" are invited to be a part of is also the community in a wider sense that Cohen spoke of in "Loneliness and History." We are offered a kind of "identity" that marks a distance from a defined cultural community, but one that also comes with its own, built-in resistance to identity and definition. Cohen's song voices a difference that cannot refer to representations of a readily defined counter-community, but has to rely on performance and the "enunciatory present" to articulate its own emergence.

Asked to speak about the first person plural, the "we" in "First We Take Manhattan," Cohen suggests that indeed he is speaking *for* a group. But listen to his words:

My song was really political, a certain demented . . . manifesto, which addresses a constituency that really exists in the world, which cannot be defined by left or right, that is a radical perspective of a great many people, internationally, who feel that there is no . . . political expression that represents us, that the language, the rhetoric of politics today has become so divorced from anybody's feelings and heart that it invites a new and radical rhetoric which in a kind of humorous and demented and serious way I touch upon in "First We Take Manhattan." (Interview 1990)

According to this comment, the "I" in "First We Take Manhattan" remains a prophet of the "we," a prophet who will not cross into that land himself, who remains the "Moses of our little exodus." Cohen does not even claim to have actually used that "new and radical rhetoric." He says he has "touched" upon this language in his song. And listen to his adjectives here: a "rhetoric which in a kind of humorous and demented and serious way I touch upon in 'First We Take Manhattan.' "

And yet, despite the lack of a pedagogical counter-language that might tell us who "we" are and address us as subjects securely located in a communal understanding, there is, despite all the irony,

that old, paradoxical, serious position that Cohen has maintained, as I have suggested, throughout the years. The language that could be used to voice a genuine present, to voice a difference and internal outsidedness to objecthood, is always on the point of becoming objectified itself, of becoming history, of becoming Buber's I-It, or Bhabha's *a priori* of the pedagogical. The place where the internal difference emerges seems — at least for Cohen — to remain different from a communal subjecthood that is amenable to given definitions or an essence.

Compared with the communal certainties of the pedagogical, one could say that this place of instituting performance both necessary for cultural emergence and difficult to defend against the more programmatic needs of the public realm, continually creating and questioning communal subjecthood, is a relatively lonely position. At least this is one way of thinking about the place that Cohen's last song on *I'm Your Man* names in its title, "The Tower of Song." From here, the speaker tells us: "I've asked Hank Williams, how lonely does it get," only to report: "Hank Williams hasn't answered yet." But the place of song, outside an already secured knowledge of who "we" are, is characterized here as a difference that will not go away, giving voice to an outsidedness that continues internally:

. . . but you'll be hearing from me, baby, long after I'm gone.
I'll be speaking to you sweetly from a window in the tower of song.

Notes

1. "A Ballet of Lepers," Leonard Cohen Papers. Manuscript Collection 122, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, Box 1. [\[back\]](#)
2. In his pagination of this manuscript, Cohen uses letters as well as Roman and Arabic numerals. [\[back\]](#)
3. The reference here is to the line, "But touch not, Lord, the golden bowl!" in Klein's "Psalm XXII: A Prayer of Abraham, Against Madness" (*The Collected Poems of A.M. Klein* 223). [\[back\]](#)
4. I am drawing here on Wlad Godzich's comments on Samuel Weber's *Institution and Interpretation*. Comparing the

foundational moments of institutions to the individual blindness that Paul de Man has shown to enable new insights, Godzich observes that Samuel Weber "differentiates between institutional functioning on the one hand . . . and instituting on the other, which is precisely what thought is engaged in when it proceeds blindly, in de Man's sense, to cut a path where none had been traced before" ("Afterword" 155-56). [\[back\]](#)

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