

# Re-membering the Love Song: Ambivalence and Cohen's "Take This Waltz"

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After the opening four-measure instrumental lead of "Take This Waltz," we hear Cohen's voice, earthy, sometimes unbeautiful, with that lingering possibility of a sardonic undercurrent:

Now in Vienna there's ten pretty women. There's a shoulder  
where  
Death comes to cry. There's a lobby with nine hundred  
windows.  
There's a tree where the doves go to die.

Add to that voice — and its conspicuous hyperbole — the thumping insistence of a barrel-organ oom-pa-pa background, and you wonder what you might salvage, if there's anything to remain after the acid has pocked the surfaces here. Still, there's something disarmingly direct about this stylized waltz, something potent and compelling. It is, I would say, a *love* song. Or perhaps more accurately a love song from the other side: it doesn't pretend another Edenic beginning, but assumes — and even advertises — the borrowed nature of the lover's position, the conventions that make a love song possible. The necessary ambivalence, you might say, of the lover's stance in a textual/musical world which admits to its multiple layers of inscription.

In "Take This Waltz," Cohen — singer as lover — plays the potential of quotation, walks face-first into cliché, mines the written-over to release the sweet taste of after. He re-members the love song. And that remembering, curiously enough, is permeated — and *permitted* — by ambivalence, ambi-valence, the lure of more than one position at the same moment. Ambivalence rather than irony: not one thing understood to mean something else, but rather the irresolvable tension of more than one meaning signifying simultaneously.

Susan McClary points out that "meaning is not inherent in music, but neither is it in language; both are activities that are kept afloat only because communities of people invest in them, agree collectively that their signs serve as valid currency" (21). Cohen places before us, again and again, familiar currency, linguistic and musical. He begins, for instance, with a borrowed form: even if you don't quote a melody, you inherit certain formal specifications when you make a waltz, a three-beat measure most obviously, but also patterns of measure clustering, bass-line movement and chord progression. The three-beat measure is never in doubt in "Take This Waltz"; if anything, it is exaggerated by the heavy bass-line pluck on the first beat, the lighter chordal gestures which mark the latter two beats. But a three-beat measure isn't the only waltz prerequisite.

With its roots in the rustic Austrian *Liedler* (Machlis 533), you'd expect waltz measures to group by a powers-of-two logic. As Charles Hartman points out, "four-, eight-, or sixteen-measure sections . . . are the musical units most comfortable for Western audiences" (Hartman 102). The voice, as it enters, emphasizes a four-measure group corresponding with the textual line, "Now in Vienna there's ten pretty women"; ending the words on the third measure of four leaves the last (weak) pulse unvoiced but not unmarked. This pattern — three heavy pulses bracketed at the end by an unvoiced one — plays incessantly across the piece.

Both lyrics and measure clustering belie Cohen's presentation of this song in the liner notes as a series of paragraphs (Appendix I). What we *hear* are lines that group themselves into quatrains: the fourth phrase rhymes unambiguously with the second, and the tonality cadences sturdily on the tonic major.

Now in Vienna there's ten pretty women.  
There's a shoulder where Death comes to  
cry.  
There's a lobby with nine hundred windows.  
There's a tree where the doves go to die.

But the grouping after this first quatrain is harder to figure: there are six four-measure groups, two more than anticipated, and they settle irregularly. The chord progression might recommend an eight-measure grouping followed by a sixteen-measure grouping — not as even a distribution as the ear would anticipate, but not so awkward either — but the lyrics suggest a five line cluster, the fifth line rhyming with the second, with an unvoiced line trailing after.

There's a piece that was torn from the  
morning,  
and it hangs in the Gallery of Frost.  
Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay.  
Take this waltz, take this waltz,  
take this waltz with the clamp on its jaws.

Consistently, "Take This Waltz" will suggest certain structural symmetries we expect even without understanding what they are; it will suggest them and then wrench them slightly askew.

The refrain that follows —

This waltz, this waltz, this waltz, this  
waltz.  
With its very own breath of brandy and  
Death.  
Dragging its tail in the sea.

— is different again: a three-line grouping, for one thing. And the unvoiced punctuating pulse at the phrase-end that we've come to anticipate is absent here; the first two sentences of text completely fill out the four-pulse structure of the measure grouping. As well, the conspicuous internal rhyme in the second line — "With its very own *breath* of brandy and *Death*" — threatens to divide our dependable four-pulse line into two two-pulse lines. And oddly enough, the

*breath/death* rhyme is the *only* rhyme in this three-line text, which means that text gives over responsibility for closure to a somewhat less than substantial cadence on the tonic at the end of the third line. After this, we are presented with an abbreviated preparatory passage — only two measures — to open the next two verses. The refrain, then, in certain ways repeats more conspicuously the structural ambivalence of the verse: fourteen measures which should have been sixteen, an abbreviated closure, promise of predictability that won't quite play itself out.

The structural ambivalence is echoed by the more immediately perceptible tonal ambivalence: "Take This Waltz" can hardly resist the lure of its own relative minor, and constantly swings between major and minor modes. The introductory four measures are securely positioned in the major, and though the voice enters in that key, by midway through the first line it is sketching the possibilities of the relative minor (Figure 1). (I have, for ease of reading, transposed these passages up a semitone, and sketched in the bass-line movement; for clarification of labelling techniques, and concepts of tonality and chord function, see especially Piston, 47-63.) The

Figure 1 shows the first line of the song. The melody is in treble clef, and the bass line is in bass clef. The lyrics are "Now in Vienna there's ten pretty women." The chord progression is labeled as C: I and vi.

second phrase repeats the pattern, but strengthens the movement toward the minor sixth degree by suggesting its dominant function chord in the bass-line movement. The third and fourth lines of the first quatrain stubbornly banish any trace of the relative minor and stick to the unambiguous subdominant, dominant, and tonic chords. We enter the five-line patch of text, the first structural curiosity, securely in the minor, the first two phrases here both prolonging our exposure to the minor and solidifying it by exploring its subdominant function region (Figure 2)<sup>1</sup>. The shift to the

Figure 2 shows three lines of the song. The first line has lyrics "There's a piece that was torn from the morning, and it hangs in the Gallery of" and chord labels a: i, iv, and V/v. The second line has lyrics "Frost Ay, Ay, Ay, Take this waltz," and chord labels iv, VI, c: VI, I, and V/vi. The third line has lyrics "take this waltz, take this waltz with the clamp on its jaws." and chord labels vi, V/v, and IV.

Figure 2

subdominant of the major key at "Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay" is sudden and perhaps not altogether convincing; that line and the following wander through an odd progression that finally closes rather limply on a deceptive cadence to the subdominant. After this, we hear four measures unsubtly asserting the dominant of the major key in preparation for the second verse.

The refrain sits almost entirely in the minor. Almost entirely: the last line of text — the third group of measures — opens with a diminished chord which we hear as a member of the minor chordal family but is resolved to the major, however abruptly (Figure 3). Ten measures,

The image shows a musical score for the song "Take This Waltz" in 3/4 time. It consists of two systems of music. The first system has the lyrics: "This waltz, this waltz, this waltz, this waltz. With its very own breath of". The second system has the lyrics: "brandy and Death. Dragging its tail in the sea." Below the notes are chord symbols: "a: V i", "V i", "iv", "i", "vii°", "C: vii°", and "i".

Figure 3

then, in the minor, are followed by two in the major, and then by that two-measure tail that sketches the major tonic and dominant in preparation for the next set of verses.

An odd affair, really, this incessant hovering between major and minor, these links between patches of text which *assert* rather than *derive* a tonality. Cohen knows exactly what he's doing with "this waltz with the clamp on its jaws": he takes on a whole series of musical decisions that precede the making of his waltz, plays hard with and against the conventions which make our listening possible. If, for instance, we didn't find Vienna in the first line of the song, we would still recognize the Viennese heritage here, Strauss waltzes and the tradition of the lover's dance. And Cohen scores in the wheeze of the accordion, the pluck of the mandolin, conjuring the charm of another time, another place. The setting, I would argue, is critical to the functioning of "Take This Waltz": it positions the piece, acknowledges an ancestry. One of this song's delights is its directness of copy, the blatant waltz rhythm which refuses either decoration or disguise, the unapologetic instrumentation which recovers another tradition of folk-art music.

Directness of copy, simulation, borrowing. At what point does a borrowing either disappear into parrotry or transform itself into parody? Cohen, I think, conjures the old-world magic but doesn't assume its availability; he preserves the ambiguity of his musical choosing. "Take This Waltz" is not a homage, then, or not exactly. It is, rather, a recycling of other musical decisions. Quotation, and we hear not only the spectre of a calliope here; Cohen draws, in this piece, on musical stylings ranging from jazz to blues to gospel, gypsy to pop. This illustrates Barthes' notion of inter-text as "a *circular memory*" which asserts "the impossibility of living outside the

infinite text" (*The Pleasure of the Text* 36). But circular memory is also not confined by where it's been, not destined to trace the same path over and over. So Cohen appropriates rather than effaces the conventions that name this territory. He doesn't skate across the three-beat structuring, for instance, or rescure the waltz in the uncharacteristic timbres of, say, the marimba or the trombone. Instead, he exaggerates, advertises his proximity to cliché. But he repeats without repeating: his instrumentation, for instance, carries the subtle trace of the synthetic, and his musical quotations are positioned in a way that makes them audible again, flexes their emotional muscle. Cohen understands the nature of the field he enters: Derrida describes it as *play*. The possibility of origin has vanished, and any gesture, any movement in such a field, is "the movement of *supplementarity*" (289). Cohen's gestures in "Take This Waltz," then, both draw on and comment on the infinite source texts that infiltrate this specific (musical and textual) event.

All of this is critical to the functioning of the song because the structure and setting are as engaged in the production of meaning as the text and the voice which delivers it. As Hartman argues,

in any song that uses the relation between words and notes to control the semantic and tonal development of meaning, the musical setting has an obviously dramatic function. It is an agent of voice: It characterizes the singer. (107)

*An agent of voice.* This is one of the ways a song differs radically from a poem: its voice is both implicit and explicit, both implied by the text and sounded by a body. Most song lyrics, especially popular song lyrics, relax the tension provoked by textual complexity and rely on the dramatic function of the music to provide energy and momentum. Because a text set to music is addressing the ear, it is likely to lean heavily on what the ear processes easily (rhyme and clear stanza form), making printed song lyrics seem "formally ponderous or naive" (Hartman 98).

But the lyrics of "Take This Waltz" are neither formally ponderous nor naive, and this is worth noting, especially since its source form, the waltz, is itself regular, folkish, even decorous. In Cohen's waltz, quatrains (disguised for the eye as paragraphs) spill over into quintets or abbreviate themselves into triplets, and rhymes — *frost/jaws*, *wrist/is* — often live on a slant. Cohen's lyrics "go well beyond the requirement that a song's words be ordered clearly enough for us to hear their orderliness" (Hartman 98). For one thing, they wield the expressive potential of the highly poeticized image: "a bed where the moon has been sweating," for instance, or "a garland of freshly-cut tears" are more richly evocative than you would anticipate from popular song lyrics. And at a couple of junctures, the surface meaning is further textured by pun (this is, after all, the ear's domain): we hear an equivocation hovering around *piece* in "There's a piece that was torn from the morning," and again around *waist* in "take this waltz, take its broken waist in your hand."

Textured language: "Take This Waltz" is unabashedly poetic, gorgeous and subtle. The careful attention to nuance, the obvious pleasure in evocative texting, introduces another layer of ambivalence into the complex of "Take This Waltz": the singer of this song is not simple, not simply a singer. Apparently a writer ghosts this singer, a

manifestation of lover at some remove from the Orphic chanteur who moves mountains by the power of his voice. After all, a song doesn't *need* such careful crafting: a voice alone might be adequate to rouse the pity of the underworld, the fury of the bacchae. But the language of "Take This Waltz" is far from extraneous. On the contrary, it introduces another active element into the cluster — the ambivalent cluster — which materializes, however tentatively, as the singing lover.

It's important to remember that "Take This Waltz" is a sung thing. Despite its poeticism, it never collapses into sentimentality or awkward over-earnestness, and this is largely because Cohen sings it. The song needs the grind of this voice, its earthy rawness, its edge of ironic intelligence. He sets the piece low in his register, which we decode as an expression of intimacy with perhaps a trace of resignation — the ambivalence again. He delivers many of the words with that characteristic fall-off that collapses song into speech. Cohen's stubbornly vernacular pronunciation consistently collides with — recontextualizes — the poetic diction of "Take This Waltz." He sings, "where the doves go ta die," "Ah'll never forgetcha, y'know." Or he sings as he speaks, speaks as he sings, for this piece remains at once a song and a poem: a song that won't be beautifully sung and a poem that refuses to be beautifully spoken. It is language with body attached. And this is part of the wonderful gratuity that song can insist on: Barthes writes that "as soon as it is musical, speech . . . is no longer linguistic but corporeal" (*The Responsibility of Forms* 306); a body intrudes into the delicately poetic textual world, creating the possibility for passion.

A writer ghosts this singer, a singer ghosts this writer. Or perhaps more accurately, singers and writers ghost one another in "Take This Waltz." For the startlingly poetic material in the song is and isn't his: Cohen re-interprets Federico Lorca's "Little Viennese Waltz" (Appendix II). In Cohen's hands, Lorca's words shift and reconfigure: "There is a death for piano / that paints the little boys blue" becomes "There's a bar where the boys have stopped talking. They've been sentenced to death by the blues." A writer ghosts the writer who ghosts the singer of the love song here, for Cohen leans heavily on Lorca's text. But he isn't effecting a translation, a resetting of words across language gradients: Cohen's song, in a sense, understands every act of texting as a relational borrowing, a mining enterprise, a transformative press. "Take This Waltz" is Cohen's writing, in much the same way as "Little Viennese Waltz" (or, more precisely, "Peque駉 vals vien閟") is Lorca's: to write at all is to acknowledge the tradition into which one enters by that very gesture, the pre-written field. The failure of origin. The ambivalent positioning.

" 'Voice,' " Don Bialostosky writes, "is not so much a matter of how my language relates to me as it is a matter of how my language relates to your language and to the language of others you and I have heard address our topic" (Hartman 47). An *authentic* voice, then, "would be one that vitally and productively engaged those voices. It would be *authentically situated*" (Hartman 47). In "Take This Waltz," Cohen listens to Lorca, engages his language, the rarified textures of sorrow and irony and passion that inform his poem. He is not intent on effacing a prior speaker, on rewriting another's words into inaudibility. Where voice crosses the trackings of language, though,

this is what is so compelling about "Take This Waltz": Cohen's voice is *situated*, to press Bialostosky's word, situated in a corporeal body which commits itself, however ambivalently, to the performative possibilities that hover here. Cohen adds an edge that haunts the song. Because this singer's voice is delivering the praise that has long since been fossilized by convention:

There's a concert hall in Vienna where your mouth had a  
thousand  
reviews. There's a bar where the boys have stopped talking.  
They've been sentenced to death by the blues. Ah, but who is  
it  
climbs to your picture with a garland of freshly cut tears?

We could be in the world of the Petrarchan sonnet here, abject praise of the beloved, the lover's perpetual distance and grief. Still, there's more muscle in this lover (however layered, linguistically), more ironic distance: "And I'll see what you've chained to your sorrow, all your sheep and your lillies [sic] of snow." Not quite abjection, no, especially when rubbed by the growl of this voice. A growl that caresses, in its own whiskered way, an exquisite and somewhat broken Vienna, an exquisite and somewhat broken love.

But "Take This Waltz" doesn't simply repeat — with more earthy inflections — the love song tradition it inherits: "Take This Waltz" is also about itself, in a reflexive way, about its own metatextual (metamusical?) awareness. It's intriguing how "this waltz" assumes a body, a rather monstrous body, in the course of the song. It has a "clamp on its jaws," a "broken waist," "it's been dying for years." The refrain sketches out the metaphor most conspicuously:

This waltz, this waltz, this waltz, this waltz. With its  
very own  
breath of brandy and Death. Dragging its tail in the sea.

The waltz doesn't simply repeat the dream of a magical Vienna, the dream of a beautiful beloved; it understands its own role in the making of the dream. Each verse, then, each excursion into the territory already mapped by the conventions of love poetry (borrowed and reconstrued by Lorca, by Cohen), is interrupted by an increasingly defined expression of the thing it is. This waltz. Take this waltz. This waltz — "with its very own breath of brandy and Death" — is not always beautiful, is sometimes ungainly. It has quatrains which aren't, it has lurchingly abbreviated links. And still, it is itself, an embodied thing, a sung gift.

The second refrain is followed by an extended verse, not a quatrain and a quintet as the earlier verse structures have been, but two quatrains and a quintet: this section, it seems to me, names what is possible when the writer/singer has admitted the necessary ambivalence of the whole project:

And I'll dance with you in Vienna. I'll be wearing a river's  
disguise. The hyacinth wild on my shoulder, my mouth on the  
dew  
of your thighs. And I'll bury my soul in a scrapbook, with

the  
photographs there and the moss. And I'll kneel to the flood  
of  
your beauty, my cheap violin and my cross. And you'll carry  
me  
down on your dancing to the pools that you lift on your  
wrist.

Nothing conditional about this passage: it's situated in hope and decision, and both characters are positioned as lovers, engaged and corporeal. The "Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay" of the other verses is swallowed into a splendidly unguarded "O my love, o my love." And the gift, "this waltz," the gift is sung, is given: "Take this waltz, take this waltz. It's yours now. It's all that there is." This is not to suggest that somehow a blind and passionate love triumphs, but rather that the song, through its layers of singer/writer/lover, has fulfilled its own project, has made itself and given itself away with a free admission — painful and celebratory — "it's all that there is."

The problem a writer (a singer, a lover) faces, finally, is a problem of sincerity: how to speak all over again what has been written or sung or spoken to death. By building in the tension of ambivalence, Cohen establishes a degree of reflexivity — irony, parody, subtlety, extravagance — that can give credibility to the what of what's spoken. Not mindless repetition, but intentional, considered reaching into territories already charted, already written by named and nameless individuals who participate in the accretion of convention. Cohen isn't shy to engage what is already there; he has abandoned the dream of the first speaking. His cagey construction of a proclaiming self as an ambivalent nexus of singer and speaker, person and tradition, reconfigures the supplementarity of what's proclaimed as a celebration of unspoken possibilities.

Song has much to teach us about reading text, because song insists, song *demonstrates*, that meaning doesn't inhere ultimately in text, but in the interplay of the spoken and the speaking, text and tone. Cohen re-members the love song, the *love song*, by performing the ambivalence of its multiple voicings, its polyphonic traces of supplementarity, by reading contingency with his body.

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## Appendix I

Leonard Cohen, "Take This Waltz"

Now in Vienna there are [there's] ten pretty women. There's a shoulder where Death comes to cry. There's a lobby with nine hundred windows. There's a tree where the doves go to die. There's a piece that was torn from the morning, and it hangs in the Gallery of Frost. Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay. Take this waltz, take this waltz, take this waltz with the clamp on its jaws.

I want you, I want you, I want you on a chair with a dead magazine. In the cave at the tip of the lilly [sic], in some hallway where love's never been. On a bed where the moon has been sweating, in a cry filled



with footsteps and sand. *Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay.* Take this waltz, take this waltz, take its broken waist in your hand.

This waltz, this waltz, this waltz, this waltz. With its very own breath of brandy and Death. Dragging its tail in the sea.

There's a concert hall in Vienna where your mouth had a thousand reviews. There's a bar where the boys have stopped talking. They've been sentenced to death by the blues. Ah, but who is it climbs to your picture with a garland of freshly cut tears? *Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay.* Take this waltz, take this waltz, take this waltz, it's been dying for years.

There's an attic where children are playing, where I've got to lie down with you soon, in a dream of Hungarian lanterns, in the mist of some sweet afternoon. And I'll see what you've chained to your sorrow, all your sheep and your lillies [sic] of snow. *Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay.* Take this waltz. Take this waltz with its "I'll never forget you, you know!"

And I'll dance with you in Vienna. I'll be wearing a river's disguise. The hyacinth wild on my shoulder, my mouth on the dew of your thighs. And I'll bury my soul in a scrapbook, with the photographs there, and the moss. And I'll yield to the flood of your beauty, my cheap violin and my cross. And you'll carry me down on your dancing to the pools that you lift on your wrist. O my love, o my love. Take this waltz, take this waltz. It's yours now. It's all that there is.

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## Appendix II

Federico García Lorca, "Little Viennese Waltz"

In Vienna there are ten little girls,  
a shoulder for death to cry on,  
and a forest of dried pigeons.  
There is a fragment of tomorrow  
in the museum of winter frost.  
There is a thousand-windowed dance hall.

*Ay, ay, ay, ay!*  
Take this close-mouthed waltz.

Little waltz, little waltz, little waltz,  
of itself, of death, and of brandy  
that dips its tail in the sea.

I love you, I love you, I love you,  
with the armchair and the book of death,  
down the melancholy hallway,  
in the iris's darkened garret,  
in our bed that was once the moon's bed,  
and in that dance the turtle dreamed of.

*Ay, ay, ay, ay!*  
Take this broken-waisted waltz.

In Vienna there are four mirrors  
in which your mouth and the echoes play.  
There is a death for piano  
that paints the little boys blue.  
There are beggars on the roof.

There are fresh garlands of tears.

*Aye [sic], ay, ay, ay!*  
Take this waltz that dies in my arms.

Because I love you, I love you, my love,  
in the attic where the children play,  
dreaming ancient lights of Hungary  
through the noise, the balmy afternoon,  
seeing sheep and irises of snow  
through the dark silence of your forehead.

*Ay, ay, ay, ay!*  
Take this "I will always love you" waltz.

In Vienna I will dance with you  
in a costume with  
a river's head.  
See how the hyacinths line my banks!  
I will leave my mouth between your legs,  
my soul in photographs and lilies,  
and in the dark wake of your footsteps,  
my love, my love, I will have to leave  
violin and grave, the waltzing ribbons.

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#### Notes

1. Two corrections to the scores illustrated here could not be incorporated into the figures as printed: in Figure 2, "c: VI" should read "C: IV" and in Figure 3, "a: V" should read "a: V6".  
[\[back\]](#)

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