

The Mistress' Reply to the Poet

by Joan Crate

In the tradition of the pastoral poet-lovers of sixteenth- and seventeenth century English verse, Leonard Cohen uses Woman as a means to explore his own exquisitely tortured self. Woman is Mistress; woman is physical presence, a place to plant his words around. But Cohen changes the convention somewhat, up/dates (rape)s it. In the twentieth century the poet-lover is not one who merely y/earns, who hangs his love outside the door of his mistress, who knocks with trepidation, begging en/trance. He is a break and enter artist. If there is any hanging to be done, it is the mistress the poet-lover will hang, though occasionally from a pedestal. Indeed, in Cohen's poems the Mistress often becomes sacrifice, though more often she is used as muse, her degradation relatively minor, and if not painless, frequently bloodless.

Yet, whatever the Mistress' rhyme or reason, whatever her sentence(s), Cohen's lover is victim, whether it is within the confines of the poem, or because she is denied identity as an individual human being. "I can't connect you / with anything but myself" ("It's just a city, Darling" *SP* 224). Woman is ex/tension of the poet-lover, phone line to the divine, usually plugged into by the penis.

Woman becomes the way to the truth and light, the means to an end, and often the end to the end, both because she is to be used sexually, and because she is to be used temporarily. New women are constantly required to provide the path between the poet and his h(a / o)llowed art. It is the poem that is sacred. The poet is Creator:

you know I am a god
who needs to use your body
who needs to use your body
to sing about beauty
in a way no one
has sung before
you are mine

you are one of my last women
("I met you" SP 227)

Woman's physical body is also a body of language the poet-lover uses to explore his own experience. (This is my body that I give up for you.)

But in Cohen's mythology, Woman is not saviour herself, not divine goddess of love. She is preferably beautiful and necessarily naked. She is skin, breasts, orifices. While she responds to the seeds of the lover's wisdom, his perfect poet's tongue, she does not re/act, does not re/create. Woman must be passive. She must not interrupt the sexual act(s) which stimulate, which ex/cite that solitary place within the poet-lover's temples, within the tower, from which The Word is ejaculated. "Kneel, love, a thousand feet below me, / so far I can barely see your hands and mouth / perform the ceremony" ("Celebration" SP 55).

In this poem, Woman blows man up, up. Her mouth shapes his mythology, transforms his gender, his genitals into "manhood like a sceptre." He is a king, a deity, crowned with an "amber jewel" which he kindly allows Woman to kiss. Man enters Woman, and ascends "like one of those gods on the roof." And Woman? Does man enter Woman enter paradise? Is a revelation at hand? A second coming? Does she, supine and speechless, silently pray, "My man, my Lord, My God!" before this resurrection?

No. Woman, verbally res/trained, remains firmly planted on the ground, on her knees, while she waits to be "blessed" with the glory of the coming of the Lord.

What a lot of hot air! We all know what happens next, and there's no poem written about that. The poet-lover deflates, descends into his fallen flesh, and writes a poem. Woman brushes her teeth, makes supper, does the laundry. ("My God!" she thinks to herself. "My Lord! Man, oh man!") It's the same old story, a(n unwritten) test/(l)ament to the endurance of Woman. She exhibits the patience of a saint as the poet discharges his virtues. ("What a prick," she mumbles between loads.)

The trouble is, in Co(he)n's poetry, the male poet-lover doesn't get it. No. That's not right. The poet-lover gets whatever he wants. What I mean is that he rejects any attempt on the part of the Mistress to establish a complete communion between the lovers, the miracle of love itself which must include the mind of the Mistress within her necessarily beautiful body. The poet-lover will

not acknowledge his mistreatment of the distressed Mistress, her anger. He constantly betrays her with a kiss. There is a laying upon of hands; there is a laying. But in Cohen's "love" poetry, there is no healing, no love:

When I had to say goodbye
You weren't there to find
You took my fingerprints away
So I would love your mind.

("Give me back my fingerprints" SP 211)

Of course, the male poet-lover cannot be manipulated in that way. He is above love with a woman, or at least a love that is not primarily physical. He *places* himself above all that, takes the missionary position, awaits a vision, that he *alone* can experience, some sort of miracle of the male mind which (unfortunately) must be reached through Woman:

He studies to describe
the lover he cannot become
failing the widest dreams of the mind
& settling for visions of God

The tatters of his discipline
have no beauty
that he can hold so easily
as your beauty

("He Studies to Describe" SP 239)

Oh, says Woman.

Wide dreams and visions of God is it now?

Do you mean to tell me that you struggle to perfect insomnia; like Johnny Cash wear only black; refuse to laugh, to cut the grass, take out the garbage; won't cook dinner or get a real job (while all day long I take orders from any and everyone wearing a tie, meet your mother and her new shade of hair on my lunch break, after work take the kids to the dentist, to hockey, to ballet classes, bake for the bake sale, volunteer for the school "hot dog day" phoning committee, scour the Sally Ann for worn-to-your-specifications black turtlenecks, commit to memory fourteen different recipes for meatless lasagna), so you can sit on your (less than inspiring) ass and "settle for visions of God?"

Well, Sweetcheeks, perhaps you'll find your vision crushed under that tower of paper in the back closet you promised to clean out last

spring, settling into dust on the piano, appearing miraculously in grease on the oven door, forming from breadcrumbs on the cutting board, gurgling in the washer you don't know how to operate, growing in the green sludge at the bottom of the fridge, begging for euthanasia from the armpit of your favourite jacket.

But what I wanna know is what makes you so sure *she* wants to see *you*?

That is perhaps what the mistress in Cohen's poems might say if allowed to speak. However, for the most part, she is forced into silence. Only her naked, physical presence is motivating. She is muse and, although at times permitted movement, a/musing as object only, whether or not she objects.

In her simplest form, the mistress/muse serves as an *objet d'art*, visually pleasing, though otherwise uninvolved. "Snow is falling. / There is a nude in my room. / She surveys the wine coloured carpet" ("Snow is Falling" *SP* 201).

Like the pastoral mistress of earlier centuries, she becomes the centre of the poem, but unlike the mistress of olde, she is not longed for, lusted after. Cohen's mistresses, in fact, have all been had.

"She is lighting a cigarette / from the gas range. / She holds back her long hair" ("Snow is Falling" *SP* 201). Implicit in this action, more than in her nudity, is her sexual experience with the poet-lover. And yet, is she not pure as the city snow beyond the window? The fact that this Mistress-muse exhibits no damage suffered at the hands or words of the poet-lover makes her seem so.

Queen Victoria is another woman used as muse and left as w/hole. Her place in history and her evocative name with its "white lace" borders protect her from invasion by the poet-lover, though not from impropriety. She is referred to as "that slim unlovely virgin anyone would lay."

Queen Victoria
I'm not much nourished by modern love
Will you come into my life
with your sorrow and your black carriages
and your perfect memory.

("Queen Victoria and Me" *SP* 143)

As a "solitary mourner" she is muse manipulated into metaphor for the poet himself. She is a ruler used to measure the poet's "incomparable sense of loss." Then she is respectfully buried.

However, unlike the historical Queen Victoria, most of Cohen's Mistress-muses are merely mortal, and so must eventually fail. Age causes the muse to fail to stimulate the poet. She becomes damaged — damned/aged. Although several of Cohen's poems demonstrate that some disfigurement can be inspiring if administered by the hands of a man, that suffered at the hands of the clock is not:

She is getting old
Her body tells her everything.
She has put aside cosmetics
She is a prisoner of truth.

Make her get up!
Dance the seven veils!
Poems! Silence her body!
Make her friends of mirrors!
("On the Sickness of my Love" SP 113)

The poet's valour in the (lined) face of his aging Mistress-muse manages to sustain him through the poem, though he feels a stiffness in his pen rather than in his pants, where it belongs. It is time the Mistress is dis/missed:

Love wears out
like overused mirrors unsilvering
and parts of your faces
make room for the wall behind
("The Nightmares do not Suddenly" SP 181)

Conveniently, some Mistresses divine that they should leave once they are no longer a/mus(e)/ing, once they are used up:

I wanted you for your beauty
you gave me more than yourself
you shared your beauty
this I only learned tonight
as I recall the mirrors
you walked away from
after you had given them
whatever they claimed
for my initiation

Even in her absence, the Mistress-muse can be of service. Her physical beauty is evoked, its passing lamented. As long as memory serves, the dis/missed Mistress provides:

With Annie gone,
Whose eyes to compare
With the morning sun?

Not that I did compare,
But I do compare
Now that she's gone.

("For Anne" SP 68)

If the woman outstays her welcome, the ever-ingenious poet-lover can find ways to disfigure the figure that feeds his mind. There is a deluge of pain to inflict, everything from a slight maiming, "our stone fingernails / on another's beauty" ("It's Good To Sit With People" *SP* 237), to mutilation and murder:

. . . there she was naked
on an old bed, knife slashes
across her breasts, legs badly cut up:
Dead two days.

("Ballad" SP 26)

In this poem, the poet-(ex)-lover speculates on what type of man could do this to his "lady," concluding that it could have been any man stressed by the long, cruel landscape of Canada: "a half-crazed" Torontonion "looking for some Sunday love; / or a vicious poet stranded too long in Winnipeg." It seems even "the rocks and preachers" of Nova Scotia could cause a man to murder and mutilate Woman.

The violence in the poem is increased once the "lady" is safely disposed of. With her slashed and stinking, irrevocably dead and buried, men are no longer murder suspects, but instead her "lovers" who celebrate her death by dancing "upon her grave." No use crying over spilled blood. Instead it is used to dip the pen into. Woman is slashed and sacrificed for the poet-lover's art.

Woman considers
that perhaps she is better off left for dead.

She's had it with serving as lover, loving server, as mother, other, art object, and al(1)ways as muse. She is encouraged by Queen

Victoria's parting shot at the poet-lover, reaffirms "We are not a/muse!"

Woman refuses
to be refuse,
the fuse the poet plugs in
that sparks his mind,
the old bump and grind
that gets his poetry machine working.

She's sick and tired of being nothing more than a gadget that joins him to himself, a quick screw, a coupling available in any hardware store, any Montreal magazine stand, any L.A. cafe, any bar at closing time.

No! she says. Go fly a kite (*a victim you are sure of!*)
Conversely, she wants to jerk off by herself, become the (*cordless*) moon, sway seas, beat blood into a fiery froth against temple doors. Break them down.

(Oh, there is a rising tide!) Or so she's heard.

Woman will no longer toe the line, longs to leave the line behind (*oh please baby please baby please*), anything that connects her to him, to his song, the bars he pushes her behind, the thin sheets on which he lays her, the small sounds he names her:

lady/lover/nude/she/

He is always trying to frame her, contain her, beat her black and white, to prey/pray on her:

*the reason I write . . . is to make
something as beautiful as you*

The lines! Was he born with them tripping his tongue? Are they re/corded in woods, pulled at urinals, found wound around seats in porn theatres? Are the words discerned in old records played backwards at midnight, heard in the twang of a steel guitar on Country and Western radio stations on Hank Williams' birthday? Are they chained to letters, chiselled in ice cubes, mounted in galleries?

She has to know. She has to learn how to defy the lie, how to trip the poet-lover up in his own tangle, how to rope him, reel him in, render him tender, then eat him for breakfast.

She must learn to live without him.

She discovers what women without men do.

They walk in moonlight with their neighbours, buy dogs that have none of their last lover's bad habits. They light candles and sing when it's nobody's birthday, paint their bedrooms fuschia.

Saturday mornings, they draw their children into bed with them, open a crisp reader and unlock a door of sound in each letter of the alphabet, disregarding the man who ponders his gaunt shadow in the corner of the page, deftly turn it.

Annoyed with dictionary definitions, women without men redefine, re-invent desire, de-sire; they *make* love. Once a week they go for lunch with women friends, and flirt scandalously with the waiter, list one by one the pleasures of chocolate, indulge in it. Women without men forget how to cook and why, lose the time, linger over wine, and after the third glass believe the beads of saliva between their teeth are diamonds.

They cut their tongues on laughter.

When planning their next week, women without men notice that their social calendars have never been so full. They happily tick off meetings, mother-son banquets, and fortieth birthday parties without so much as a wince. In moments of premenstrual depression, they invite their best friends over for herbal tea, and tell jokes:

Why do women have poor spatial perception?

— Because for most of their adult lives they've been told that this big is six inches.

Why do men have penises?

— So that women will talk to them.

Women without men read the books they've been buying for the last three years, listen to the music *they* like. They find that now they are no longer forced to endure Sunday afternoon gladiators; they, nevertheless, occasionally tune in to catch a superb gluteus maximus flex in spandex football pants.

Women without men laugh, cry; they find themselves created in man's absence. They think perhaps they have never been so happy.

And yet, some, in that moment between the switching off of the bedside lamp and a dream soliloquy undisturbed by snoring, yearn.

In that light-split second, they believe in what they have learned is not believable. They pine for its very incompleteness, its impossibility, a so long longing for love that never lasts long.

This is their greatest imperfection, a void they must avoid considering, true love (the poem unwritten).

And so Woman writes. In her creat(ed/ive) lov(e)scape, she is partner-explorer, poet-lover (though she is not sure if her male counterpart can *begin* to conceive. And if so, can he deliver?)

She will meet him half way, tell him:

We have crossed borders to reach each other
and lost territories chafe our touch.
I offer you my provision of small, hardened hope
and for me you execute a dance of graceful hate.
This is all we have —
stale gift, cold sacrifice —
flopping like dying fish on a barren shore.

With hungry mouths
we pray
for the miracle of multiplication.

Perhaps a miracle *is* possible. Perhaps a miracle is at hand. It seems that as the poet-lover ages, he grows kinder. Woman listens to the tune he's whistling now: (It has possibilities.)

Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.

You can add up the parts
but you won't have the sum
You can strike up the march,
there is no drum
Every heart
to love will come
but like a refugee.

("Anthem" The Future)

Woman counts out her loaves and fishes, considers waiting for

Man with a tray of sandwiches. (But he'd better hurry. She hasn't got eternity.)

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