

The Counterfeiter Begs Forgiveness: *Leonard Cohen* and Leonard Cohen

by Stephen Scobie

Let me say at the outset how pleased and honoured I am to be giving a keynote address at this conference on Leonard Cohen. As I will be mentioning shortly, Cohen's work has suffered from a scandalous lack of serious attention over the past decade or so; and as far as I am aware, this is the first time that an academic institution in Canada has devoted a complete conference to him. So Red Deer College is to be especially congratulated on its initiative in so boldly venturing, like Star Trek, where no profs have gone before.

My credentials for giving this address could be quite variously defined. There is, for example, my first edition (by now rather tattered) of *Beautiful Losers*, which is signed "To Stephen, love Leonard"; or my extensive collection of bootleg audio and video tapes of Leonard Cohen doing everything from breaking down on a concert stage in Jerusalem to reading birthday greetings to viewers of British breakfast television — a collection which Red Deer College has prudently discouraged me from exhibiting. I could recall the evening when I sat through to the thirteenth encore performance of "Suzanne" at the Olympia Theatre in Paris in June 1976; or I could tell you about my network of strange friends who phone me up in the middle of the night to offer arcane pieces of Leonard Cohen information (for instance, I may well have been the first critic in Canada to know that he was going out with Rebecca de Mornay).

But I suspect that the main reason I was asked to give this address was, more mundanely, the critical writing I have done on Cohen over the past twenty years; and my main reason for accepting was the opportunity it gives me to re-visit and re-read some of that writing. So I must ask your indulgence if my remarks today sometimes take on a rather immodest character of compulsive self-referentiality.

My major work on Leonard Cohen is of course the book, enterprisingly entitled *Leonard Cohen*, which was published in the spring of 1978. Like most academic publications, it had been in the works for some time before that: Gary Geddes, the editor of the series Studies in Canadian Literature, had first commissioned it in 1973. As I recall, the bulk of the writing was completed in 1974-1975, but at some intervening stage the series itself switched publishers, from Copp Clark to Douglas & McIntyre, so publication was delayed. Part of my preparation for this address was to re-read that book, a task which I approached with some trepidation, not quite sure how I might react, now, to my twenty-year-old critical self. And this address is then offered as my response to that act of re-reading. In relation to the 1978 book, it stands in the position of a *supplement*. To explain exactly how I am using that word, let me briefly rehearse some things I have already said about Leonard Cohen, and *Leonard Cohen*.

Any critic who writes on a contemporary author must always live in fear of being instantly outdated; and, as I made final revisions on my manuscript in 1977, I was plagued by continuing reports and rumours of the impending publication of a major new book by Cohen, variously entitled *My Life in Art*, *The Woman Being Born*, or *Death of a Lady's Man*. In July 1977, I wrote to Cohen and asked him about the relationship among these titles; he replied:

Death of a Lady's Man derives from a longer book called *My Life in Art*, which I finished last year and decided not to publish. *The Woman Being Born* was the title of another manuscript and also an alternative title for both *My Life in Art* and *Death of a Lady's Man*.

Thus enlightened, I wrote in *Leonard Cohen* that "a large body of interlocking material is still coming together," and that for the Cohen of the 1970s the withdrawing of a manuscript from publication had become "a more significant gesture than publishing it" (155-56). So *Leonard Cohen* came out, in spring 1978, with these confident prognostications; and in fall 1978, Leonard Cohen published *Death of a Lady's Man*.

Let me state right here and now that it is my hope to be able to make history repeat itself. For the past few years, there has been much talk about a new volume of Leonard Cohen's selected or collected works, to include both poems and songs, about to be published. It has gone through at least two editors at McClelland & Stewart; recent articles promise it as coming out from Knopf under the title *Stranger Music*. At the time of submitting this essay to

Canadian Poetry, however, I have no word of a definite publication date. So, if the precedent holds up, by the time these words of mine appear in print, or are delivered to this conference, *Stranger Music* will also (I hope) be available, and my comments will again be instantly obsolete.

Death of a Lady's Man appeared, as you all know, in a very unusual format. There is what I must still call, with some hesitation, the "original" manuscript: a sequence of poems and prose-poems which had in fact got as far as page-proof stage the previous year. I have a copy of these galleys, which Cohen himself sent to me while I was finishing *Leonard Cohen*. But in the book's final form, most of these poems are accompanied by a second piece, bearing the same title, and often commenting in some way (complementary if not always complimentary) on the so-called "original." The reason that I hesitate to use words like "original" and "second" is that they presuppose a hierarchical ranking of the two pieces under each title. In an essay on *Death of a Lady's Man*, published as part of my 1989 book, *Signature Event Context*, I proposed to describe the additional sections as "supplements," setting that term within the context of its deconstructive use in the writings of Jacques Derrida. The supplement stands in a paradoxical relationship to its "original": it presupposes both that the original is complete in itself, a finished work to which any addition must come from the outside, as a supplement; and, simultaneously, that the original is *incomplete*, that it contains within itself an emptiness or lack which the supplement comes to fill. The idea of the supplement, that is, deconstructs the idea of any text being either "original" or "secondary." "One wishes to go back," Derrida writes, "*from the supplement to the source*: one must recognize that there is *a supplement at the source*" (304).

It is in this sense, then, that this essay should be seen as a "supplement" to the 1978 *Leonard Cohen*. On the one hand, it recognizes that the earlier book is complete in itself: that it stands, for better or for worse, as an expression of the kind of critical attitude towards Leonard Cohen that was possible in the mid-1970s. Reading that book now, and noting especially its relentlessly thematic nature, its devoted tracing of image-patterns, and its fastidious concern for evaluation (ticking off the good poems and the bad poems, the successes and the failures), I can see it as a cultural document of its time. Canadian criticism, circa 1974: after Atwood, before Davey; after New Criticism, before Deconstruction. And as such, if I may say so, it's not bad. I re-read it without embarrassment — with nothing more than a little gentle surprise at my youthful critical naiveté. It is complete in itself, and

anything I say about it now can only be added on from the outside.

On the other hand, and simultaneously, I see all kinds of gaps in it: things it did not say (or, to be fair, *could* not say, at that date), which I would now wish to add to it. The very fact that it never questions its own critical procedures, that it simply takes for granted certain ideological stances (everything from the value of close reading of texts through to its vaguely defined liberal humanism): that fact in itself opens up the gap in the book's own discourse which a later, more theoretically informed scepticism would fill with awkward and impolite questions. Cohen's own supplements, in *Death of a Lady's Man*, frequently assail the "original" texts. "*This is the work of a middle-class mind*," he tells us at one point; while at another he cries, "*Claustrophobia! Bullshit! Air! Air! Give us air!*" (25, 129). I might not go quite that far against myself, but I was tempted to use as an epigraph for this whole address Cohen's statement "*I have begun to turn against this man and against this book*" (65).

This lack of a theoretical dimension now seems to me the most serious shortcoming of *Leonard Cohen*, even allowing for the fact that it was written in the early seventies, before the concern for theory had been so thoroughly established in Canadian criticism. One might, then, have reasonably expected that Cohen criticism in Canada in the eighties and early nineties would have taken up theoretical issues, and posed some serious questions about such works as *Beautiful Losers* in the context of contemporary critical methodologies. Alas, the fact is that in the eighties and nineties "Cohen criticism in Canada" took up scarcely any issue at all; it hardly even existed.

In an excellent article entitled "The Stranger Music of Leonard Cohen," William Ruhlmann writes that, by the late seventies, "Cohen's reputation among literary critics and academics had simply evaporated since he had so long been identified as a songwriter and pop star" (19). There are some honourable exceptions to this rather devastating generalization: Linda Hutcheon's work on *Beautiful Losers*; an unduly neglected article by Ken Norris on *Death of a Lady's Man*; and Sylvia Söderlind's chapter, again on *Beautiful Losers*, in her book *Margin / Alias*. In the past few years, I have published three articles, exploring such notions as the supplement, the post-modern canon, and the problematics of performance in Cohen's work. But for the most part, Canadian critics in the past decade have simply ignored Leonard Cohen. A search of the CD-ROM MLA listings for Cohen since 1980 reveals more articles on his work published abroad (in

Sweden or in Yugoslavia) than in Canada. The list of titles for the papers at this conference more than doubles the Canadian bibliography.

What are the causes of this recent neglect? Answering that question in detail might in itself produce a fascinating study of Canadian culture in the past decade; but very briefly, I would suggest two major reasons. Firstly, Cohen's work has increasingly (though I think mistakenly) been seen as outside the mainstream of "Canadian literature" in this period. He does not fit easily into the categories of the post-modern or the post-colonial; his obstinate Romanticism is seen as reactionary; and his treatment of women has been a persistent embarrassment, or outright offence, to feminist critics. In other words, many of his readers have taken at face value the deeply ironic words of his self-dismissal in "Death of a Lady's Man": "His muscles they were numbered / and his style was obsolete The art of longing's over / and it's never coming back" (30-31).

A second reason for Cohen's neglect is, more straightforwardly, academic snobbery. Many critics still have a great deal of trouble dealing with Leonard Cohen as the writer and performer of popular songs. The medium is seen as beneath the dignity of criticism; you're supposed to study poetry, not sing along with it. Even the work I cited above, by Hutcheon, Norris, and Söderlind, continues to deal with the books, not the albums. One result is that most of the worthwhile writing on Cohen in the past decade has occurred outside the limits of conventional "literary criticism." For instance, I cited above an article by William Ruhlmann, one of the most detailed, accurate, and intelligent accounts of Cohen's career ever published. But it did not appear in any academic journal; it comes from the February 19, 1993 issue of *Goldmine: The Collector's Record & Compact Disc Marketplace*, a journal largely devoted to advertisements for second-hand and out-of-print recordings. Similarly, if I were asked to recommend the best television interview ever conducted with Leonard Cohen, I would point to a remarkable, hour-and-a-half long conversation with Cohen and Irving Layton, recorded in October 1991, and broadcast neither on CBC nor on any educational station, but rather on the Much Music pop video channel in Toronto.

Of course, much of this material amounts to little more than personality profiles, the by-product of the publicity machine which churns out Leonard Cohen interviews at regular five-year intervals to accompany each new album. Thus, for instance, an article in *Detail: for Men* (January 1993) begins with the following

anguished anecdote:

"It's terrible," moans a New York record producer.

"Whenever I go off to see Leonard in L.A., we wind up at these dark, wood-paneled bars where beautiful women come over and sit down by him, one after another. They don't even know who he is, but somehow they're fascinated. I'm twenty years younger. They tell me, 'Hmmm, nice ponytail,' then ignore me the rest of the night. They'll just look at him and ask if they can stay for a while. And he'll smile and say, 'I don't mind, darlin'.' It's terrible." (Cullman 101)

At its best, such attention produces pieces as insightful and thoughtful as Ian Pearson's "Growing Old Disgracefully" in the March 1993 *Saturday Night*; at its worst, it produces the inanities of Lorraine Dorman and Clive Rawlins' fan biography, *Leonard Cohen: Prophet of the Heart*.

What much of this material suggests, however, is the degree to which Leonard Cohen's projected public image — "Singer as Lover," in the words of the title of this conference — has become inseparable from his work. In *Leonard Cohen*, I attempted to keep biographical reference to a bare minimum, and to maintain what I now see as a naive separation between the man and the work. I still believe that the appeal to biographical information as a criterion of interpretive validity is facile and dangerous (Dorman and Rawlins are ample proof of that), and that in some Barthesian sense the author is indeed "dead." But if he is dead as authority, as source, then he is very much alive *as text*. Indeed, we must read "Leonard Cohen" — the figure who sits in that Los Angeles bar, or who appears on the *Tonight* show with Jay Leno, or who accepts the Juno award for Best Male Vocalist in Canada, or who declares on his album covers his love for both the Biblical and the non-Biblical Rebecca — we must read that figure very much as text, as part of the work, perhaps indeed as the *centre* of the work.

I want to turn now to what is most obviously missing from my 1978 book, namely, the work Cohen himself has produced in the years *since* 1978. In the time at my disposal, I can do no more than offer a very brief summary; and I want to concentrate precisely on this problematical figure of Cohen-as-author, and on the ways it is projected in the books and in the songs.

Already in 1978, I had noted that Cohen's record *as a writer*, in terms of book publication, showed a drastic change from the

confident productivity of his early career. This crisis has certainly continued, and has become even more marked in the 1980s and 1990s. In the fifteen years since *Death of a Lady's Man*, Cohen has published only one book: the 1984 volume of prose-poems, *Book of Mercy*. Even the long-promised *Stranger Music*, when and if it appears, will do little to change this situation, since it will consist mainly of previously published material. As a writer, Cohen is in some danger of disappearing altogether.

In the longer retrospect, it now seems to me that this is a crisis, in Cohen's conception of himself as a writer, which can be traced at least as far back as *Flowers for Hitler*. (*Beautiful Losers*, in this sense, is the aberration, at least in style, if not in its ideas.) The extravagant gestures against beauty in *Flowers for Hitler*; the casual, fragmentary, and indeed parasitical nature of *Parasites of Heaven*; the brevity of the 1968 "New Poems" — all these lead into what I would now see as the major trilogy of Cohen's self-deconstruction: *The Energy of Slaves*, *Death of a Lady's Man*, and *Book of Mercy*. What is most interesting about each of these three books is not so much any individual poems in them, nor even their thematic statements (on politics, religion, or the problems of modern marriage), but rather the overall stance of each book: the position each one envisages for the increasingly problematic figure of "the author."

The Energy of Slaves carries out a frontal assault: "I have no talent left / I can't write a poem anymore You can call me Len or Lennie now / like you always wanted" (112). In *Leonard Cohen*, I described this as one of Cohen's periodic flirtations with the paradoxical pose of the anti-poet; I may subconsciously have wanted to dismiss it as a passing phase, a delayed case of poetic acne. But I now see it as not passing at all: it *is* Cohen's assumed position on his own writing, and both *Death of a Lady's Man* and *Book of Mercy*, in their rather different ways, take the same stand. What is at stake is not simply an anti-Romantic pose, or a perverse exaltation of ugliness as a kind of beauty: what Cohen is doing is carrying out a total destruction — or, more accurately (in a word I could not have used in 1974), a deconstruction — of the figure of the poet as a unified source of utterance and meaning.

In *Death of a Lady's Man*, this deconstruction is carried out by the very structure of the book: by its double voicing, by its supplementarity. There is a bewildering variety of tones in the book: it is by turns tender, sarcastic, despairing, angry, satiric, self-loathing, humorous, erotic, pathetic, prosaic, visionary, absurd, sublime. In the same way that the book provides an indiscriminate

variety of women's names as its potential addressees, so the speaking voice of "Leonard Cohen" assumes too many contradictory positions ever to be assimilated back into any coherent picture of a unified self. There is no source: as Derrida says, at the source there is only a supplement.

Book of Mercy, strangely, achieves the same end through entirely opposite means. In contrast to the multiple voices and tones of *Death of a Lady's Man*, *Book of Mercy* is obsessively singular in voice, and entirely consistent in tone. But it is, precisely, a book of prayer: it may present a unified authorial position, but that is, by definition, a position from which any sense of self-centredness has been emptied out. In prayer, the speaker steps aside from himself; he defers himself, endlessly, to the Other. The Other here is the divinity, the godhead, the teacher, the addressee. But the paradox persists: God may be an image of the source (creation, Genesis), but in prayer God is silent; He is the one spoken to, not the originator of speech. Each partner in this transaction, the man praying and the God prayed to, defers to the other, and neither of them is originary. Again, at the source there is only a supplement.

Take as an example of this stance section 17 of *Book of Mercy*:

Did we come for nothing?

We thought we were summoned, the aging head-waiters, the minor singers, the second-rate priests. But we couldn't escape into these self-descriptions, nor lose ourselves in the atlas of coming and going. Our prayer is like gossip, our work like burning grass. The teacher is pushed over, the bird-watcher makes a noise, and the madman dares himself to be born into the question of who he is. Let the light catch the thread from which the man is hanging. Heal him inside the wind, wrap the wind around his broken ribs, you who know where Egypt was, and for whom he rehearses these sorrows, Our Lady of the Torah, who does not write history, but whose kind lips are the law of all activity. How strangely you prepare his soul. The heretic lies down beside the connoisseur of form, the creature of desire sits on a silver ring, the counterfeiter begs forgiveness from the better counterfeiter, the Angel of Darkness explains the difference between a palace and a cave — O bridge of silk, O single strand of spittle glistening, a hair of possibility, and nothing works, nothing works but You.

All possible identities are posited only to be discarded: "minor

singers, "second-rate priests" (the name Cohen, remember, means "priest"). Identity is something that only the madman dares. Identity is false, is faked: and when the counterfeiter begs forgiveness, it is not from the originator of any genuine currency, but rather from "the better counterfeiter," the more skilled artificer of deception. What is left is the address to "a hair of possibility" (recalling the definition of a saint, in *Beautiful Losers*, as "someone who has achieved a remote human possibility" [95]). And if "nothing works," then perhaps that phrase can be taken positively: it is only nothing, only vacancy, which *does* work. Or: "nothing works but You" — and that "You" is pure address, an emptying of the pronoun, nothing but the attitude and verbal gesture of prayer. Prayer itself is not a stable, achieved position, but rather something ephemeral, transitory: "Our prayer is like gossip, our work like burning grass."

The authorial stance of *Book of Mercy*, then, is fully as paradoxical as that of *Death of a Lady's Man*. Cohen presents images of beauty and humility; the language is fuller, richer, more assured than in either of the previous two books. But none of this restores "the poet" to the authority or dignity so confidently attributed to him in, say, *The Spice-Box of Earth*. The poet here is set aside; he is simply the vessel of prayer.

This crisis in Cohen's conception of himself as a writer had been given eloquent and paradoxical expression in *The Energy of Slaves*:

I make this song for thee
Lord of the World
who has everything in the world
except this song.(40)

But this poem, of course, refers to song — and everything I have been saying about Cohen as a writer takes on a different aspect when we turn to Leonard Cohen as a singer and song-writer.

During these years in which Cohen's productivity as a writer of poetry or prose has been in crisis, he has shown no signs of any similar crisis in his conception of himself as a song-writer. Here, his output has been slow but steady, with albums appearing at almost monotonously regular intervals: *Death of a Ladies' Man* (1977); *Recent Songs* (1979); *Various Positions* (1984); *I'm Your Man* (1988); *The Future* (1992). The total output is still fairly small — the number of original songs on these five albums put together would not amount to the equivalent of one slim volume of

poetry — but this may at least in part be attributed to Cohen's perfectionism. Each of these songs goes through dozens, if not hundreds of versions: a striking scene in Adrienne Clarkson's CBC documentary on Cohen shows him flipping through a complete notebook consisting of nothing but variant versions of his Lorca translation "Take This Waltz." Cohen himself is fond of repeating an anecdote about his meeting Bob Dylan at some point in the mid-eighties. Dylan asked Cohen how long it had taken him to write the song "Hallelujah" (a song, incidentally, which Dylan himself performed in concert in 1988, at the Montreal Forum), and Cohen, somewhat shame-facedly, replied "Two or three years." Then Cohen, politely, asked Dylan how long it had taken him to write "I and I," and Dylan replied, "Oh, about fifteen minutes." What is at stake here is not quality ("I and I" is a greater, deeper song even than "Hallelujah"), but rather a mode of composition — one is tempted to say, a mode of being. Cohen works on his songs with slow, deliberate care; Dylan's genius, by all accounts, is a far more mercurial, hit-and-miss affair. What remains true is that, if Dylan is, *sui generis*, the greatest song-writer of the age, Leonard Cohen is still the *only* name that can seriously be mentioned in the same breath.

These five records are, it must be admitted, very uneven in quality. *Death of a Ladies' Man*, with its suicidal Phil Spector production, is a curiosity: flashes of brilliance submerged in floods of banality. It still holds its pleasures (especially "Iodine" and "Memories"), but they are few and perverse. *Recent Songs* is only slightly less eccentric, and I confess it is not an album I go back to often; nor, to judge from his song selection on the last two concert tours, does Leonard. At this point — early 1980s — it might well have been arguable that Cohen's song-writing was stuck in an impasse just as serious as his poetry's. In 1984, the American arm of CBS Records even refused to release *Various Positions*.

For many critics, the turning point comes in 1987-1988, with the release of Jennifer Warnes' album of cover versions, *Famous Blue Raincoat* (widely and affectionately known as "Jenny Sings Lenny"), and then the triumph of Cohen's own *I'm Your Man* (which outsold Michael Jackson on the Norwegian hit-parade). Leonard Cohen, they said, was "back." For some of us, of course, he had never been away. (And let me confess to the slightly heretical viewpoint that "Jenny Sings Lenny" is a rather bland album, which smoothes out too many of the songs' rough edges. As far as cover versions go, I prefer the flamboyant craziness of Nick Cave's version of "Tower of Song" on *I'm Your Fan*.)

If there is a turning point, I would argue that it came earlier, with *Various Positions* — which, despite the low esteem in which it was held by CBS, seems to me Cohen's greatest album of the decade, and one of the best albums of his whole career. In *Leonard Cohen*, I argued that the best album of the earlier phase was *Songs from a Room*, because of its greater purity, simplicity, and integration of Cohen's voice, with all its limitations, into the music. I would make a similar argument for *Various Positions*. The later albums — *I'm Your Man* and *The Future* — are more spectacular, more rhetorical in their effects both verbal and musical, more mannered, more devious in the layers of their post-modern parody. The cynicism of *I'm Your Man* and the cosmic pessimism of *The Future* are both infected, not only by an aura of slickness ("I've seen the future, baby, it is murder" may be true, but it is also a bit too *easy*), but also by an ironic self-consciousness of their own slickness. Many of the songs on these later albums seem like knowing self-parody. (The weakest ones, like "Waiting for the Miracle," seem like *unknowing* self-parody.) *I'm Your Man* especially is a tremendously sophisticated record: almost, in the sense of a previous fin-de-siècle, a *decadent* record. It is aimed, precisely, at the cities it proposes to "take," Manhattan and Berlin. The Manhattan of the 1980s; the Berlin of the 1930s.

In contrast, *Various Positions* plays its self-abnegation straight. Consider the contrast between "Give me crack and anal sex / Take the only tree that's left / And stuff it up the hole in your culture" ("The Future") and "I don't claim to be guilty / Guilty's too grand" ("The Law"). On *Various Positions*, neither the words nor the voice strain for effect. A song like "The Captain" is full of an irony more bitter and complex than "The Future" ever achieves, yet Cohen is content to sing it to a jaunty little country-and-western tune which quietly undercuts all possibility of pretension. But let me concentrate on just one song, which I hope will bring together several of the points I have been circling around in this discussion:

If it be your will
That I speak no more
And my voice be still
As it was before
 I will speak no more
 I shall abide until
 I am spoken for
If it be your will

If it be your will
That a voice be true

From this broken hill
I will sing to you
 From this broken hill
 All your praises they shall ring
 If it be your will
To let me sing

If it be your will
If there is a choice
Let the rivers fill
Let the hills rejoice
 Let your mercy spill
 On all these burning hearts in hell
 If it be your will
To make us well

And draw us near
And bind us tight
All your children here
In their rags of light
 In our rags of light
 All dressed to kill
 And end this night
If it be your will
If it be your will

Unsurprisingly, since it is also dated 1984, this is of all Cohen's songs the one that comes closest to the mode of prayer evident in *Book of Mercy*. The address is absolutely pure in its simplicity and intensity; the poet's personality is emptied out, and the singer's will becomes transparent to that other, higher will. "Leonard Cohen" — the media personality, the singer as lover, the post-modern satirist of *The Future* — has all but disappeared.

All but. For even in the purity of this song, there are a couple of twists: and they relate to the question of *voice*. "If it be your will / That I speak no more / And my voice be still" The most obvious paradox is that this prayer is itself articulated in a voice that is not still, not silenced; we are still hearing the voice that submits itself to the possibility of not being heard. "If it be your will / That a voice be true" Voice is the traditional guarantee of truth; we say of young artists that they have found their own voice, that the voice rings true. Voice is also (and here I would invoke the whole Derridean argument from *Of Grammatology*) the philosophical sign of presence, the guarantee of a singular, unproblematical authority: authority of the author, presence of the

performer, coherence of the self. "Leonard Cohen," as the adverts for his concerts say, "Live. On stage. In person."

Yet the song does not simply assert the truth of the voice; in at least three ways, it deconstructs that notion (and thus, in Derridean terms, it reinscribes *voice* as *writing*). Firstly, the truth of the voice, like the very possibility of there being a voice, is presented as dependent on the will of the Other. The truth of what Cohen sings is not grounded in the claims of his own personality; he does not speak but is "spoken for." Only in the will of the Other can the voice become the voice of the self.

Secondly, the voice itself is divided — for the whole song is sung, on the album, as a duet with Jennifer Warnes. Lenny sings Jenny. Cohen's records have always been full of self-referential jokes about his own voice, of which the best-known is in "Tower of Song": "I was born like this, I had no choice / I was born with the gift of a golden voice." "Only in Canada," he said at the Juno awards, "only in Canada could I have won the award for Best Male *Vocalist*." In the most recent records, one of the registers of post-modern irony is the deepening of the voice, down to the outrageous bass growl which opens "The Future." But "If It Be Your Will" performs the same problematising of the voice more subtly, simply by allowing the grace-notes of Jennifer Warnes' descant to double and echo the song's declaration of the singularity of the voice. "I am spoken for" — and sung for, too.

Thirdly, there is the very fact that what we hear is a recording. In very obvious ways, recording takes voice into the conditions of writing: absence, iterability, death. A recording (even in the paradoxical case of a recording of a "live" concert) always takes place in the absence of the singer — as I have just played for you Leonard Cohen's voice, here in this hall where we all are focussing on his present absence. That absence allows for iterability: the recording can be played again and again, can be cited, can be electronically sampled, can be forged, can be grafted, can be ignored, can be memorized, can be sung along to, can be disseminated into every context of our listening experience. On the occasion of his inauguration into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame, Leonard Cohen thanked

those of you who have welcomed my tunes into your lives, into your kitchens when you're doing the dishes, into your bedrooms when you are courting and conceiving, into those nights of loss and bewilderment, into those aimless places of the heart which only a song

seems to be able to enter.

But absence and iterability are also the conditions of death. If the recorded song can be played and replayed independent of the presence of the singer, then it necessarily involves the possibility, indeed the inevitability, of its being played after the singer's death. Every recording inscribes this possibility as necessity: "a singer must die," sang Leonard Cohen in 1974, "for the lie in his voice." Hence the fascination of the recordings of the great dead singers: Presley, Hendrix, Joplin (Janis, for whom Cohen wrote the greatest of all pop elegies, "Chelsea Hotel"). Hence also the twist, in "If It Be Your Will," on the phrase "dressed to kill." Annihilating himself before the will of the Other, Cohen announces that he is "dressed to kill" (all in black, or charcoal grey, in the dim-lit corners of a Los Angeles bar), dressed and addressed, to kill himself, to kill the singer, to kill the voice. Which is what he does, still, each time he steps on stage, takes up the microphone, and sings (in the words of the song which he has consistently used as the opener for all his concerts in 1993), "Dance me to the end of love."

There, at the end of love, is the lover as singer, singer as lover: not Leonard Cohen, not any figure of "Leonard Cohen," but the problematic, vacant, discontinuous, non-authorial "author" who for the past two decades has repeatedly emptied himself out in front of us: Len, or Lennie now, like we always wanted.

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