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Jiří Měšic, *Leonard Cohen : the Modern Troubadour*

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REFERENCES

Jiří Měsíc, *Leonard Cohen, the Modern Troubadour*, Olomuc: Palacký University Press, 2020, 226 pages, ISBN: 978-80-244-5784-0

- 1 This short and elegant volume is an adapted version of a PhD thesis defended by its author at Palacký University in Olomuc (Czech republic) in 2016, with a preface by Leonard Cohen expert Alberto Manzano.
- 2 The main argument is clear, convincing and to the point: to inscribe Leonard Cohen in a tradition that stretches back to the twelfth- and thirteenth-century troubadours and their potential predecessors (the Andalusian Arab poets) and to examine how the singer avails himself of that tradition, merges it with other sources (mystical Judaism, the Sufi and, to a smaller extent in Měsíc's book, Zen) to create a poetry that sings and worships feminine figures that are both creatures of flesh and mental constructs and develops a theology of Love as a spiritual initiation that grants union with the divine in zones where the erotic and spiritual drives are undistinguishable. Although the book only marginally deals with issues of performance, it presents Cohen as a spiritual poet who disseminates his work through the personae of the troubadour and the prophet/priest.
- 3 In full accordance with the current trends of Cohenian scholarship, the thesis is in no way surprising, but Měsíc's very valuable originality is his thorough, precise and detailed scholarly knowledge of the troubadour history, his acute philological talents, his practice of original Provençal and Arabic texts that he compares to Cohen's songs in detailed readings of lyrics, and his precise knowledge of the mystical traditions of the three Abrahamic religions.

- 4 The demonstration, presented in short efficient chapters, is very well organized. In chapter 1, Měsíc locates himself in a conception of the tradition inherited from the high modernism of Pound and Eliot that posits (in Pound's words) that "all ages are contemporaneous" and considers that "tradition" is both a corpus of historically determined texts and an organic whole that remains operative and fresh, as it is constantly revived by modern authors with an intimate knowledge of the tradition. No contradiction therefore for Měsíc in being a "modern" troubadour, and the author is convincing in showing in this particular chapter that Cohen shared a suchlike conception of the tradition (inherited from his modernist mentors in the Anglophone literary scene of 1950s Montreal, that is also presented here). He is equally convincing throughout the volume in showing how Cohen always operated with a deep and very specific knowledge of the various cultural and mystical traditions that the author ascribes as influences (troubadour, Sufi, Mystical Judaism, alchemy).
- 5 What follows in chapter 2 is a detailed presentation of the various elements that constitute the troubadour vision and mythos: the worship and idealization of a feminine character by a male seeker, the ambivalence between human love and divine love, a conception of love as an initiatory process that is both an ordeal and a mystical experience, an ethics of love and code of behavior (*courtly love*) that includes persistence in pursuit of the loved object and the lover's absolute self-control (*mezura*). This mythos and conception of love is presented by Měsíc as a literary tradition, mystical system and later as a psychological metaphor for the divine union of man with his soul (seen in chapter 3 in the context of Jungian and neo-alchemical psychology).
- 6 As Měsíc proceeds in presenting the various aspects of the troubadour mythos, abundantly quoting from twelfth- and thirteenth-century *provençaux* poets, like Guillaume d'Aquitaine, Bernart de Ventadorn and Jaufré Rudel, Měsíc locates the thematic and conceptual resonances with Cohen's lyrics and establishes his main thesis: Cohen is a modern troubadour, with an insistence on the idea that his celebration of women and search of erotic partners is actually a search for a feminine principle that will unify the Self. He also examines—but sadly a little too quickly—some formal resonances (in song structure essentially) between Cohen's work and the *provençaux* poets and locates a common use of certain instruments (the oud).
- 7 The most interesting parts of the book and the core of Měsíc's thesis are three chapters that provide specific focuses on points that will interest all Cohen scholars and fans. They are respectively devoted to the centrality of the feminine and representation of the feminine concept [Chap. 3 "The Virgin as Main Subject of Song"], the specific conception of love as spiritual initiation that ensues [Chap. 6 "The Nature of Love in the Work of Leonard Cohen"], the connection of the above to Cohen's public persona as prophet and priest and his attempt at integrating those religious functions in a "catacomb religion" that borrows from the mystical traditions of the three Abrahamic religions [Chap. 7 "Leonard Cohen, the Priest of a Catacomb Religion"].
- 8 Chapter 2 thus isolates what Měsíc considers Cohen's "main subject": a relationship of desire with an idealized feminine figure that is paradoxically both an Eternal "Virgin" (that the Christian Virgin is an avatar of) that provides *joi* and an all-powerful Earth Goddess figure that turns all lovers into sons that must "die" when they become her lovers. The female partners of the troubadour are mediators to that mythical feminine power and eventually embody Jung's Anima—the feminine component of the soul—as sex becomes a spiritual activity where the troubadour finds unity for his divided soul. As he

analyses several Cohen songs, Měsíc finds explicit references to suchlike conceptions of feminine power in the lyrics and locates in them both the singer's tendency to transform feminine figures into idols and some degree of ambivalence towards the feminine principle that ranges from acknowledgement of the divine nature of all women, desire for and fear of the union with it, and frustration when the ritual fails. Chapter 4 ("Leonard Cohen, The Modern Troubadour") continues that exploration, focusing on some of Cohen's most famous songs ("Suzanne", "Chelsea Hotel"), relating them to the biographical figures that inspired them, but insisting that the female figure in the song is always in part a "mind construct" (103) that poetically manifests the Virgin principle and that sexual union in Cohen's work is inherently ambivalent: both channeling *joi* and potentially depriving the troubadour of the spiritual connection with the feminine figure.

- 9 Cohen's work appears only very marginally—two lines—in Chapter 5, a part devoted to the potential connections between *provençaux* poets and Mystical poets of Islamic Andalusia and seems more like an homage to Miri Měsíc's mentor (the great scholar Alois Richard Nikl, the proponent of the Arabic source), but the author points to separate work he has published on the Sufi influence in Cohen's work.
- 10 Chapter 6 is a fascinating close reading of a dozen important songs in the Cohenian cannon (among which "Lover, Lover, Lover", "Hallelujah" and "The Window") and a convincing analysis of how Cohen combines idioms and visions from the spiritual traditions of the Sufi, Zen, Mystical Judaism and troubadour-lore to come up with his own conception of love as a divine calling, where carnal love is just a step towards divine Love. The chapter also includes very interesting readings of several poems from Cohen's 1984 still neglected collection of Psalms *Book of Mercy*. Specific references are also made to the alchemical esoteric tradition of the early modern period (via an alchemical reference on one of Cohen's record covers). In this chapter, as elsewhere in the book, Cohen is shown as hanging between the ascetic method of actualizing union with God in solitude and attempts to do the same via sexual union with female mistresses and Měsíc concludes on similarities in trajectories between the lives of several well-known troubadours as they are known from the narrative of their lives (the *vidas*) and Cohen's trajectory from his early embrace of a life of desire to his well-known involvement with monasticism (in the Zen lineage of Joshu Sasaki Roshi).
- 11 The last chapter ("Leonard Cohen, the Priest of a Catacomb religion"), also published as a separate entity, turns to less original material: Cohen's reconfigurations of the spiritual functions of Judaism and his eventual combination of the roles of the prophet who interpellates the community and priest—a function codified in name, which he originally rejected until he had created his own poetic theology and that "catacomb religion" he mentions in an early interview which borrows from the mystical traditions of several religions and steers away from orthodox Judaism. This has been studied before, but Měsíc does a good job of painting Cohen's evolution, although it would have been a good idea to be more explicit in determining how exactly the reconfiguration of those spiritual functions is connected to the philosophy of Love and troubadour mysticism presented in the previous chapters.
- 12 The book on the whole is quite convincing and confirms what has been established already by many critics and scholars about Cohen as metaphysical poet and mystic, but the main new element is how Měsíc demonstrates the centrality of the troubadour heritage in Cohen's spiritual vision. All this makes for a fascinating journey—though the

writing style may be a little dry or stiff here and there—and we can now consider Cohen’s troubadour connection established with scientific accuracy, although Měšic’s claim that his book is “the first work” that “describes the literary foundations in which [Cohen’s] work is rooted” (208) may be a twee bit exaggerated.

- 13 There are a few shortcomings and blind spots in the book however. Perhaps too exclusively focused on locating in lyrics an archetypal content (the search of an eternal feminine and reunification of the soul with God) that is actually not too hard to find, Měšic defends the thesis of Cohen as troubadour (which I do not wish to contest) in a fashion that is perhaps too absolute and decontextualized.
- 14 The book’s title announces a “modern” troubadour, but the short chapter on modernity (chap. 5) seems somehow disappointing, despite its welcome conclusion that modernity enables Cohen to also make the “Virgin” the subject of hatred (109). What is not delivered is an adequate examination of how Cohen integrates in the troubadour spiritual system the modern features of existential despair, irony, self-consciousness and doubt, and how his lover personae are made to confront social relations and typologies of identities that are inherently modern and postmodern.
- 15 Of course, as an adaptation of a doctorate thesis, Měšic’s book is understandably focused on its central theme, but the author avoids to examine how Cohen constantly intertwines the central callings of carnal and spiritual Love with other themes and callings (travelling, failure and the calling of the abyss immediately come to mind) and how for example Cohen’s first trilogy of albums balances the quest for Love with an equally vivid phenomenology of despair: Cohen as existentialist troubadour.
- 16 As a Cohenian scholar myself, I believe that Leonard Cohen is never purely troubadour. He is existentialist troubadour in the late sixties, misogynistic *furioso* troubadour overcome by free-love in the mid-to-late seventies, Zen-inflected troubadour on *Recent Songs*, postmodern troubadour with a strong interest in the apocalypse in the late 1980s, ironic, self-deprecating troubadour most of the time, and an explicitly failed troubadour at many points in his career. And through six decades of troubadourship, Cohen seems more engaged with specific cultural circumstances than Měšic seems to allow for.
- 17 For example, the two records in Cohen’s production that are perhaps most gynophilic and most-evidently troubadour-like—*Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1968) and *I’m Your Man* (1988)—seem less concerned with simply re-establishing the troubadour mythos as with locating that mythos in very specific diegetic universes that will inflect the troubadour’s vision and practice of Love, evaluating what courtly love is still possible in the respective contexts of the post-existentialism and free-love of a late sixties metropolis (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*) and in that of a postmodern Los Angeles where the Real is replaced by the Spectacle and the war of sexes largely won by women (*I’m Your Man*).
- 18 Another point is that Měšic seems perhaps a little too much in awe of the troubadour meta-narrative [i.e. the worship of the feminine and the troubadour’s spiritual initiation through consumption of and consummation in Love]. He never really examines the ideological underpinnings of that mythos and seems convinced not only of its historical importance and its literary merits (he defines it, perhaps rightly so, as “the cornerstone of the development of English poetry” [26]), but also of its absolute

and universal validity as a spiritual system as well as of its desirableness as a code of ethics.

- 19 Although Měsíc mentions (in passing) the misogynist production of some troubadours, he never confronts the clear andro-centric bias at the heart of troubadour ideology and, as a result, never fully engages with Cohen's very marked interest in sexual politics.
- 20 This bias has three consequences: Měsíc sometimes overrates Cohen's adherence to the troubadour mythos and under-estimates the many ways in which Cohen interrogates and tests it, hunting for its blind spots and fault lines; he misses the extent to which the singer intertwines spiritual quest with a concrete engagement in a very political war of sexes; lastly, he misses (at least in part) the complexities of Cohen's identity games, neglecting for example the thousand ways in which the singer constantly deconstructs his image as ladies man, gnostic teacher of love (and indeed troubadour) via figures of cuckolds and losers, and the perpetual (and often comedic) dramatization of his "death [as] a ladies' man."
- 21 It would be easy to show the extent to which Cohen's 1970s output is largely devoted to what happens when rituals or worship and union (i.e. the "Old Ceremony") fail. *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978), a complex and dialogic collection of prose poems, chronicles how a husband, his wife and their multiple lovers desecrate Love (with many examples of real or phantasmatic profanations of a less-than-idealized female body described with an explicitness that forbids citing the texts here) while the 1972 collection *The Energy of Slaves* contains a very provocative and ironic inversion of Cohen's public persona as gynophilic troubadour into a lecherous, cynical and misogynist anti-poet. And of course, many 1970s songs are concerned-in echo with the poet's private life-with what happens when women of flesh and blood and mood become autonomous agents, seize the Logos and their own sexuality and refuse to be mediators of the Eternal Feminine, thus interfering with the troubadour's glorious spiritual project of union with the Anima. In a word, Cohen analyses what happens when the woman "talks back" to the troubadour (or "fucks back" at him). The record *Death of a Ladies Man* (1977) for example is a sustained (and at times hilarious) narrative of how the poet of Love utterly and unilaterally lost a very political war of sexes, with songs like "Memories" (the "blondest girl" denies the poet her naked body at Prom Ball), "Paper-Thin Hotel" (the narrator hears his wife copulate with a lover in the adjoining room) or the eponymous track (an unfaithful wife worships the troubadour, but only after he has hung himself).
- 22 So, beside the mystical pole of Cohen's involvement with troubadour-lore, comes this passionate analysis of what happens when sex is war, when women are free agents and, most interestingly, when the troubadour himself realizes the extent of his own masculinist positions. What happens is this recurrent "death of a ladies man" that Měsíc chooses to see only as a necessary step in an alchemical process for a rebirth in God, but that is actually a resolute, recurrent and often hilarious deconstruction by Cohen himself of his image as ladies man, troubadour and gnostic poet of Love. Hence, the dandy in cool shades who eats a banana on the cover of *I'm Your Man* (who deconstructs his masculinity via a phallic symbol), the man tied to a kitchen chair by a female lover who cuts his hair ("Hallelujah"), the man pursued by a vengeful woman with a voodoo doll who offers cactus to his girlfriends ("Tower of Song", "I Can't Forget"), the man who dreams of "crack and anal sex" ("The Future"). Troubadours with a twist so to speak. Or with a half-eaten banana.

- 23 This leads to one last point of criticism. An impressive scholar and extraordinary philologist, Měsíc sometimes neglects tonalities and it seems to me he sometimes takes Cohen's work a twee bit too seriously, neglecting Cohen's fundamental commitment to irony and double toning. It is true that in the current canonization of Cohen as a spiritual poet—an enterprise in which I happily participate—the temptation is indeed strong to leave aside the comedic aspect of Cohen's work and, as a result, to neglect the part that humor, irony and self-deprecation play in the poet's uninterrupted dialogues with women and God and indeed in his spiritual vision at large.
- 24 Obsessed with the “deeper meaning” of songs, and understandably desirous to illustrate his thesis, Měsíc sometimes strives to unearth in the lyrics the hidden or implicit narrative of spiritual quest. This often means using an allegorical method that neglects mode and tone. The analysis of the song “Joan of Arc” (153-155) is a good case in point. In falsely naïve fashion, the song—a pastiche of medieval ballads—narrates how the saint in a(r)mour was tricked into Love by Fire and realized too late that “if he was Fire, then she must be Wood.” For Měsíc, the song is (predictably) an allegory: Joan is the troubadour's soul, the fire is God and the song the presentation of a spiritual system and that is that. Which of course makes sense and cannot be contested, but what about tonality? The song is lyrical, ironic and it is a short suspense-filled medieval thriller in which a naïve little saint is tricked into Love by an evil Fire. It has a waltz melody that Cohen deliberately sings out-of-tune to make us hear, beside a deep theology of love, everything that is lethal and twisted in games of love. And at some level, it's just a little song that goes *la-la-la*.
- 25 Although Cohen was plagued in his life by recurrent depression, his work was a place where he never failed to *play*, and, as his career proceeded, that sense of playfulness and irony became a central feature of his spiritual proposal. The poet's deepening involvement with Zen after the 1970s increased his sense of the fundamental insubstantiality of all absolute positions and irony increasingly became a spiritual tool to “make light” of things. It seems to me that Měsíc sometimes neglects this humor and he probably under-estimates Cohen's ability to see his own spiritual and erotic quests from an ironic distance. In Cohen's late career in particular, there is this constant reminder that all positions and beliefs and identities must regularly be dissolved—and that includes Cohen's own adherence to his own theology of Love, to his own multiple identities, including that of the troubadour.
- 26 From his first book of poems *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956) to his 1984 record *Various Positions*, Cohen had always insisted on the necessity to multiply visions, outlooks and positions, which is why he was also keen to always show at least two (contradictory) faces at once: a melancholic and a joker, a spiritual master, an ironic crooner and a beautiful loser, a troubadour and a non-troubadour, a lover of women, a lover of God and an enemy of both, a worshipper of sunbeams and atoms (as Měsíc shows in a brilliant analysis of “Love Itself,” 157-158), but never simply or absolutely a troubadour.
- 27 So, to conclude, I unreservedly recommend *Leonard Cohen, the Modern Troubadour*. The book is, I think, an important contribution to the exploration of Cohen as syncretic mystic and of his entanglement of the themes of erotic and spiritual love. More than that, the book is indispensable to anyone who wishes to understand the intricacies of Cohen's connection with the troubadours and for me it is especially fascinating on Cohen's involvement with the Sufis. Although Měsíc is perhaps a little short on everything that makes Cohen a “modern” troubadour (irony, self-consciousness,

irreverence, ambiguous tonalities), his volume is a must-read for any Leonard Cohen fan and scholar.

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