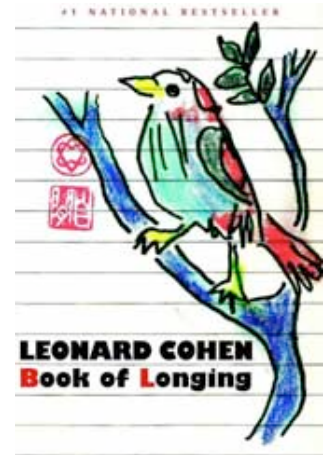


Book of Longing
Leonard Cohen

McClelland & Stewart: Toronto, 2007
240 pages
ISBN-10: 0-771022298
ISBN-13: 978-0771022296

Reviewed by Ewan Whyte



It is almost impossible to write about the poetry of Leonard Cohen without commenting on the popularity of his music, which is ubiquitous: his songs have been recorded over a thousand times since the late 1960s. However, there was a time when he was known (in Canada at least) as a poet and novelist, not as a musician, that was the mid to late sixties. He had written four books of poetry and both his novels, “The Favorite Game” and “Beautiful Losers” by 1966. And in 1967, the story goes; he went to New York City to try to make money from his music. The following year he was awarded the Governor General’s Literary Award for poetry for his *Selected Poems 1956-1968*. Along with Hubert Aquin, the winner for French language fiction that year, he refused the award (the only time it was declined). After this, his career has shifted more towards music. Cohen has since become a colossus as far as popularity is concerned, as well known as any living poet (with few exceptions—perhaps Yevtushenko in the Russian-speaking world). I doubt there is any other poet who has his ‘rock star’ status, let alone his potential readership.

Musician or not, Cohen has continued to publish over the years. *Book of Longing* is his eighth book of poetry, his fifth to appear since that pivotal year of 1968 and his first book since *Stranger Music* in 1993. At 240 pages and filled with many drawings by the author it is comparatively large for a single volume of poetry. It is clear from the dates at the end of some of the poems that this book has been years in the making, evidenced by a poem written on the Sinai Peninsula in 1973 but a large number were written during his five years living in a Buddhist environment on Mount Baldy in California in the late nineties.

Cohen has a tendency to write populist poetry which is sometimes influenced too much by his lyrics. It does not mean he is writing bad poetry, just that some poems here and there in this book sound like music lyrics. Take the sometimes clanky rhymes and a presentation of subject matter which are reminiscent of pop songs, as in “True Self”:

True Self, True Self

Has no will –
It's free from "kill"
or "Do not Kill"
but while I am
a novice still
I do embrace
with all my will
the first commitment
"do not Kill"

Because of his fame and reputation, some things Cohen says become poetry simply because he says them. (Of course, this brings to mind the old idea of drawing a frame around anything and it becomes art. Similarly, put Cohen on a stage and all he says is poetry). If an average guy were to say the following two-line poem it would not mean much at all. It would not even be memorable speech; it may be a fun observation at the end of an e-mail or letter but it certainly would not be poetry: "darling, I now have a butter dish/That is shaped like a cow." When Byron says "She walks in beauty like the night" it means a great deal because Byron says it. Knowing that he was slightly crippled, the beauty of a walking form is so much more poignant, as it was something he could never do. A remarkable intensity of feeling is conveyed in that line. Cohen, the distracted lover of gentleness and lyricism (and of many ephemeral relationships) can have this strange poetic capability too, as in the nine-word poem "The Sweetest Little Song": "You go your way/I'll go your way too."

He also has some unexpected reflections on poets and poetry. Is the sentiment from the following poem called "Thousands" genuine?

One out of thousands
Who are known,
Or who want to be known
As poets
Maybe one or two are genuine
And the rest are fakes,
Hanging around the sacred precincts
Trying to look like the real thing.
Needless to say
I am one of the fakes,
And this is my story.

Is he comparing himself to, say, Homer or Dante in his mind? Has he read too much Rilke that day and compared himself honestly to the point of despair? There is something almost unbelievable and tongue-in-cheek about this poem; though Cohen's recent public practice of Buddhist humility makes it commensurate to his current persona.

As such, there are many references and addresses to god: Cohen is now 74 and it seems, talks to god all the time, but in accordance to Jewish law, nowhere does he actually write 'God' he writes 'G-d' as in "Book of Longing":

I can't make the hills
The system is shot
I'm living on pills
For which I thank G-d

or “A Limited Degree”:

as soon as I understood
(even to a limited degree)
That this is G-d’s world
I began to lose weight
immediately
At this very moment
I am wearing
my hockey uniform
from sixth grade

Cohen often writes from a psychologically religious posture towards the world. It makes the line from Plato’s *Laws* come to mind “there is no man who in his youth having said there are no gods, continues through old age faithful to that conviction.” This practice of not saying the name of a god is originally from the Hieroglyphic stage of language (as Northrop Frye called it), where to say the name of a god could be a considerable disrespect, and where even knowing the name of god was to gain a possible approach to its divinity. It was also a means of gaining power over a god: it is no surprise that many ancient peoples, often under pain of death, were not allowed to reveal the name of their particular god. It is a source of psychological strength to hold such an outlook, that something is so powerful we should not name it. And Cohen, following the ancient tradition and keeping it current, does not even write the word.

He (Cohen that is and not god) is not a great poet overall but has moments of greatness in his poetry. The odd punctuation and capitalization in this book aside, *Book of Longing* is a very good book. For instance, here is a lovely short poem almost Zen-like in its painting of images:

The Beach at Kamini

The sailboats
the silver water
the crystals of salt
on her eyelashes
All the world
sudden and shining
the moment G-d
Turned you inward

Or there is his poem “Alexandra Leaving,” a variation of a Cavafy work, one of the best pieces included, which begins:

Suddenly the night has grown colder.
Some deity preparing to depart.
Alexandra hoisted on his shoulder,
they slip between the sentries of your heart.

Here he is, as always, authentic when he is using mythic themes. Poetically, he seems to have been permanently affected by his time in Greece. When writing this way his voice has much in common to the modern Greek (and to a lesser extent ancient Greek) poets like Odysseus Elytis and Constantine Cavafy. There is a simple and wonderful strength when

he writes in this immediate way for it is Cohen at his best.

Cohen was and is always, a poet of longing, though the nature of his longing has shifted. He used to seek the divine in the flesh (periodically interrupted by the divine) now he seeks the divine in the divine (interrupted now and then by the flesh).

Ewan Whyte is a writer and translator living in Toronto. He has written reviews for the Globe and Mail, Books in Canada and the Literary Review of Canada. He is the translator of Catullus: Lyric, Rude and Erotic (2004). His short stories, poetry, translations have been published in various literary journals and magazines and he has read his translations of Catullus on public radio throughout the United States. He is currently finishing a novel and translating the complete poetry of Horace.