

No. 33, Fall/Winter, 1993

# Canadian



# Poetry

**The Proceedings of the  
Leonard Cohen Conference**

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# Canadian Poetry

The Proceedings of the  
Leonard Cohen Conference

Red Deer College  
October 22-24, 1993

Edited by E.F. Dyck  
Assisted by Jim Scott, Peter Slade,  
and Birk Sproxton

No. 33, Fall/Winter, 1993



# Canadian Poetry

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## Cohen's Noos

by Fred Wah

Every morning, perhaps during breakfast, the muses dance for Zeus' *noos*, or to his *noos*. The *noos* they dance is the "news." They tell Zeus what's going on down there: what wild beast Nemesis has transformed herself into lately; is Hera jealous today; will Europe hang garlands on his horns today; where the hell is Hermes when you need him; and so forth. This isn't just Kant's filtration of the term into the "noumenous," though the root's there, in Greek. In the 19th century they rhymed it with "house"—*nous*. Bruno Snell roots the term to its Homeric (hence western and European) context:

*Noos* is akin to *noein* which means 'to realize', 'to see in its true colours'; and often it may be translated as 'to see'. . . . but it stands for a type of seeing which involves not merely visual activity but the mental act which goes with the vision. . . . it means to acquire a clear image of something. Hence the significance of *noos*. It is the mind as a recipient of clear images, or more briefly, the organ of clear images: *Il.* 16.688 'The *noos* of Zeus is ever stronger than that of men'. *Noos* is, as it were, the mental eye which exercises an unclouded vision. But given a slight shift which in Greek is easily managed, *noos* may come to denote the function rather than the organ. . . . the meaning 'mind' shades off into the notion of 'thinking'. . . . From here it is only a short step, and *noos* will signify also the individual act, the individual image, or the thought. We read, for instance, that someone thinks a *noos*. (13)

This is nitty-gritty cosmology and attention. When Leonard Cohen claims, "I am a hotel," he sets up the news of his world in a very particular, singular way. The Chelsea. New York. Maybe he picked up a copy of Lorca's *Poet in New York* in the late 50's. Maybe Irving Layton encouraged him to try his luck there. (Why Layton ran off from his own successful New York debut is still a mystery.) In any case, his world as a hotel: Nashville, Acapulco, Miami, Broadway, Manhattan, Havana, Nevada, Dachau, Eighth Avenue, Monte



Carlo, Paris, Edmonton, Hotel Discipline, Babylon, Jerusalem, Santa Monica, L.A., Rome, Vienna, Berlin—.

Three nights at the Hilton  
a girl with round buttocks  
suntanned and cheerful, fourteen, Athens  
(*Energy* 99)

Take this song and clumsy melody  
Keep me waiting in Room 801  
like you did that night when we were young  
(*Energy* 20)

This is the end of my life in art. At last I have found the woman I was looking for. It is summer. It is the summer I waited for. We are living in a suite on the fifth floor of the Château Marmont in Hollywood. She is as beautiful as Lili Marlene. . . . Even if she goes away I will say to myself, I have not been denied the full measure of beauty. I said that to myself in Holston, Arizona, in a bar across the street from our motel. . . .

(*Death* 190)

News of the fucking. Altars. Fucking. Solitude. Fucking. Order. Discipline. The mathematics of angels. Fucking. Body beautiful. The U.S.A. Fucking. All, and more, breakfast vectors on the radio reporting to us the news of the Poet's life configured, to be sure, by his Montreal-Jewish world view and his own little desire for a republic of anthems and miracles, the blinding glint of the compact disc of Western Civ.

Stranger music copyrights end of the band that wanders through the car's fm under an on-the-move cloudy foothills sky *ostranenie* the future torture servants have the code the black man's gone—there'll be *no* more dirty dancing Sunday school wasn't enough, that Italian suit you wear has pockets full of snuff all those "if you don'ts" they warned might still be sudden summer storms and if you are that stony stone that thinks it gets to watch the show alone then go to Granny's house and dial

a distant prairie station.

Somewhere in the American southwest between Sante Fe and Placitas, say, maybe somewhere outside of Tucson, the enemy-friend holes up and goes clear back to the land and lives off the



garden. We never get the song about the Toyota Land Cruiser. Instead, the train and Lili Marlene plot the transit gaze and horological axis via Berlin to Judas now in the seminal Sinai no raincoat, even blue, or bumper shoot required.

We're driving along the winding single-carriage road between Dunsyre and Carnwath in the Pentland Hills south of Edinburgh after leaving Little Sparta when a Royal Air-Force Phantom jet screams its black apocalyptic underbelly just above the roadside powerline. (First we take Glasgow . . . ) Guided not so much by this "signal in the heavens" or "the beauty of (such) weapons," we, Pauline and I, also seek to adjust our birthmarks, our skins, to the modulations of poetic order and disorder. The Scots poet's garden (Ian Hamilton Finlay's Stonypath) has just reconfigured for us the neo-classical. The republic and the faceless aftermath of World War 2 the "Terror" and the intent of revenge for skin and signal haze; this imprint is returning across a Jewish ocean. A violin made out of plywood or an aircraft carrier bird-feeder made out of marble are only transformative ideographs, names of fishing boats, path stones, or gods.

Or the ache and arch of Jean D'Arc's "rapture [sustained by] grief" (Abrioux 120), as the Scots poet would have it. Her pyre, fire, craves the solitude and pride of wood, which is never cold but warm and hard and ends up earth, charcoal, or smoke. Heroic (heroic) wood might have the depth of grain, or gravity, of birch or ash. See also Finlay's herm, "Bring Back the Birch," and the verbal, "To bring back." *Typos, topos, tropos* (Olson 158). Proto-Indo European *trep*. Trope. Tropic. Turn back. *Belladonna* nightshade atropine, or the *apotropaic Deo volente*: God willing.

Secret chord as the battle kings secret sword  
and the lip ablaze with truth to thread the earlier rhyme with proof  
either the word for horror or the word for glory  
good enough for Yaweh  
Hallelujah

If you're going to be the captain then you've got to report for duty. In Charles Olson's seminar on Contemporary Poetry at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1964, a drunken Gregory Corso keeps banging at the locked door to the classroom; he wants to be let in, he wants to be there.<sup>1</sup> Eventually Olson gives up arguing with him through the closed door and lets him into the room. Corso is all aswagger and tells Olson that he, Corso, is Captain



Poetry. Olson says to him, "Gregory, if that's true, then report for duty"! Corso saluted, sat down, and remained quiet for the rest of the seminar. The problem is to be proper. "The subjective as objective requires correct processing" was chalked on the blackboard. The roll of heaven's die to seven is a joke. The only decent place to stand is by a woman. The Saigon Tennessee Dachau Gethsemane dots to connect could become the stripes to salute. Boy Scouts—of America—indeed.

The Ziggurat gets windows. Rapunzel's room at the Chelsea overlooks the river. Twenty-seven. Just short of 28 angels is kind of risky; maybe the mathematics of song narrative is so serial that that's the moral order necessary to get to the "mighty judgement." The burning cross becomes the burning bridge, behind you after all. The constant train tracks too, where the "I" is the "us" in holocaust and "I Am a Hotel" turns into "I am caught in a tower," an archipelago of wrong rooms and wandering Gulags.

The tool engaged by the poetics in the intentional flaw of the Hopi blanket should be the "O" of surprise and fervour that the crack is the light, our disgraces our graces . . . our mistakes, stakes. 'Sixties Don Juan ethics still. Would all our anthems be such revelations. Would wars, doves, and refugees be the "O" of repetitive beginnings. Could the new syntax be the new government?<sup>2</sup> Could my "ing" be my "ang"?

He thinks the lull in Bye Baby Bunting is the wall left up when he leaves. She can't go, even though she knows the way. The real wall is whether or not she's even interested in this beast he's hunting. That's his little heart, too. But the story depends on kismet. Maybe if "luck" could be inside his body (proprioceptive) instead of just a charm he wears outside himself, around his neck, so to speak, he'd be less likely to lose it. Not "Lady Luck."

I keep looking for his jazz, kept waiting for it after *Beautiful Losers*, his possible poetics "spice" and limpid. Brawl, not. I open my *Spice Box of Earth* for the first time since, probably, 1969. The family poems are still there, red-ink titles like "Song for Abraham Klein," "The Priest Says Goodbye," "Out of the Land of Heaven," "I Have Not Lingered in European Monasteries," "Prayer for my Wild Grandfather," and a "Summer Haiku" (*Spice* 76) for Frank and Mary Scott that goes "Silence / and a deeper silence / when the crickets / hesitate." Definitely white Zen jazz. Al Cohn and Shorty Rogers, "East Coast West Coast." The drawings in the book and the



neat cut-out window on the cover showing his solemn eyes matched my copy of Heinrich Heine's *Bittersweet Poems* that I lost to an ex-girlfriend. But not just Europe. "He spent the last year on the shores of the Aegean Sea"—the World—even though, in 1961, "it's only in Montreal you can get beat up for wearing a beard," he says on the dustjacket. I only heard about him sporadically after that. It was *Flowers for Hitler* about 1965 in a reading in Buffalo that Robert Creeley had organized, through the Layton connection, I think. I sat beside Creeley at the reading and he dug it. Both he and Cohen shared the same cool; they even looked like one another, the same dark eyes, more striking because Creeley has only one. Both inveterate smokers. Cohen read a few poems and then took out his guitar. Folk songs. And not even Bob Dylan, either. In those days, there were only a few bare threads of Coltrane that trailed into Buffalo, a little Sun Ra, Beatles time, empty except for dancing. Unbroken until Miles' *In a Silent Way* and "Lay, Lady, Lay" at the end of the decade. *The Energy of Slaves* is early seventies. Looking at it now, I'd recommend it as good documentation of the "Suzanne Takes You Down" 'sixties. In one poem, Cohen outlines his *noos* at the time:

The poet is drunk  
He wonders what  
he will write next  
He has some notion of poetry  
girl's names and ages  
the weather in cities  
that's about it.

(*Energy* 99)

Still no jazz through the 'eighties—though maybe he's the jazzier in "The Jazz Police"—and now, with "The Future," the closest we get might be "Tacoma Trailer," a kind of Twin Peaksian ballad that I'd love to see Keith Jarrett cross-examine with something further back in the throat. Why?

Maybe *duende*? I don't think so, but he's tried. Must have heard it somewhere, perhaps some late night bar song in *joual*, some spine-tingling guttural incanted at the synagogue. I suspect he read about it, somehow got turned on to a copy of the 1955 Grove Press edition of Lorca's *Poet in New York*. The first of the two waltzes ("Flight From New York [Two Waltzes Toward Civilization]") is "Little Viennese Waltz," which, basically, Cohen homolinguistically



translates. (See Cage's note on syntax in this paper.) He would have had it, *Poet in New York*; we all have over the past 35 years. The tracks are there throughout the book, not only in that poem. Lorca's essay on the *duende* is there too. But Lorca's *duende* is "a power and not a behaviour, it is a struggle and not a concept" ("Theory" 91). *Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay*. This waltz, this waltz, this waltz, this waltz. The poems of solitude and death, the crucifixion, the "Jewish Cemetery," love and panorama, New York the vortex of civilization. Cohen, more North American, leaves out the negroes. The darkness he catalogues is more double-U-double-U two. He turns it into angels, all shine, no struggle. His nymphs gyrate in support on stage, background to the popular L.A.-New York-Vienna-Athens jet-set intelligentsia. He should listen to Lorca. He should kick them out "and conquer his awe of the fragrance of the violets that breathe from the poetry of the eighteenth century, or of the great telescope in whose lenses the Muse dozes off, sick of limits" (*Poet* 156). But he has at least listened for it, and the violins and the 3/4 time are more than enough to polarize me in the arms of seduction.

Asia.

... tea and oranges  
that come all the way from China.  
(*Selected* 209)

Toss out the fake Jap silence.  
(*Flowers* 33)

So the Chinese girl is unmolested  
and her life turns out okay without me,  
my dark erection unmanifested  
except within the pants of poesy.  
(*Death* 175)

The cover photo on the Spector collaboration is "by an anonymous roving photographer at a forgotten Polynesian restaurant, l to r: Eva LaPierre, L.C., Suzanne" (liner notes). Record plural: "Death of a Ladies' Man"; maybe only because of the photo. Book and poem singular: "Death of a Lady's Man." Stephen Scobie envelopes his review of the book in 1979 with precision: "University of Alberta Examination Booklet." He axes the record as "chain gang songs" and, in his own poetic response, nails Cohen's *noos* with this stanza:



Leonard what is this shit  
a perpetual diary  
locked with a golden clasp  
oh yes, and a silver pin  
which has been mislaid  
(abandon the pun)  
out there on St. Catherine's highway.

Except, in Cohen's poem, it's St. Francis, and he fingers Master Church and the religious mafia. And there's an edit from "show" in the song to "teach" in the poem. The solitude of stasis and order where no birds talk back. In this one the holocaust is "smoky." A "railway track" and a "tavern parliament" continue to set the historical political scene. The "frame of mind," back then, is old enough to be "oriental" instead of "asian." Prayers and invitations, Scobie aptly concludes.

Insert Berlin's "I'll be loving you always." Endless. Heroic. The metaphors, emblematic parachutes of a world free-floating in that old eternal breeze, civilization and meaning. "Sail on, sail on," he says, "O mighty Ship of State!" A large billboard takes up almost the full view from the window of my hotel just off Yonge Street; a shoulders-up photo of Stompin' Tom Connors, advertising nothing more, paradoxically, than himself. He doesn't seem to catch Cohen's irony:

If you don't believe your country  
should come before yourself,  
you can better serve your country  
by living somewhere else.  
(*Believe in Your Country*)

I wrote that quote in my notebook underneath, for some reason, a yellow sticky that says: "Wittgenstein—about that which one cannot speak, one must keep silent." What's also needed within the medallion of belief Cohen toys with and Stompin' Tom endorses, is some tactic of parenthesis. Perhaps something organic like the wind-blown and rotting wooden fence-post and stile at Finlay's Stonypath: "Thesis Fence / Antithesis Gate."

## Notes

- 1 Charles Olson's seminars in Contemporary Poetry and in Mythology at the State University of New York at Buffalo, 1964-1965.
- 2 "Syntax, according to Norman O. Brown, is the arrangement of the army. As we move away from it, we demilitarize language. This demilitarization of language is conducted in many ways: a single language is pulverized; the boundaries between two or more languages are crossed; elements not strictly linguistic (graphical, musical) are introduced; etc. Translation becomes, if not impossible, unnecessary" (John Cage, *M* qtd. in Kostelanetz 262).

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