

GENERATIONS PASS IN A PARAGRAPH*: LEONARD COHEN'S LATE WORK

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Abstract

This paper explores themes like aging and late-life creativity as reflected in the poetic world of Canadian song-writer Leonard Cohen (1934). In addition to analyzing biographical material such as recent interviews and documentaries, this paper will focus on how such themes are treated in his latest work, including the album *Popular Problems* (2014) and Cohen's latest poetry collection titled *Book of Longing* (2006).

Generazioni che scorrono in un paragrafo: le ultime opere di Leonard Cohen

Questo studio intende esplorare l'universo poetico del cantautore e poeta, Leonard Cohen (1934) alla luce delle sue produzioni musicali e letterarie più recenti che riflettono inevitabilmente una maturità non solo artistica ma anche 'biologica'. Si cercherà di tracciare lo sviluppo di specifiche tematiche nell'opera di questo autore alla luce del legame fra creatività e vecchiaia.

An iconic figure

The present paper aims to explore the complex issue of aging¹ in the latest work of Canadian poet, singer and songwriter Leonard Cohen², while at the

* «In the Bible generations pass in a paragraph, a betrayal is disposed of in a phrase, the creation of the world consumes a page [...] for my part I describe the whole orchard» (Cohen. *Parasites*: 22).

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¹ Edward Said's seminal work *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* has provided the theoretical framework within which I have attempted to identify traces of a late style in Cohen's most recent works. At the same time, Michael and Linda Hutcheon's essay "Late Style(s): the Ageism of the Singular" has proved to be an effective warning against the many risks involved in generalizing about late style(s), whereas Susan Sontag's essay "The Double Standard of Aging" has helped me reflect upon the different ways in which male aging (in this case Leonard Cohen's) is portrayed and presented by media.

² Leonard Norman Cohen was born into a wealthy and respected Jewish family in Montreal on 21st September 1934 (Ratcliffe 12).

same time it attempts to investigate the possible existence of a so-called late style characterizing his most recent production which includes a collection of poems, *Book of Longing*, and the studio album *Popular Problems*.

An iconic figure within the contemporary cultural landscape, Leonard Cohen's artistic career has amazingly spanned nearly fifty years. Since the publication of his first collection of poems, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, in 1956, and the subsequent release of his first album *Songs of Leonard Cohen* in 1967, he has aptly intertwined poems and songs, words and music, to depict a unique personal cosmos which eludes any given definition, but which is undeniably centered on the complexities and paradoxes of the human experience, whose quest for love and self-acceptance collides with its frailties and anguish. Few artists have been capable of making the «strange unity of flesh and mind» (Cohen. *Parasites*: 140) sound so appealing yet so disturbing the way Cohen has. And even fewer have managed to mingle the sacred with the tainted in such an uncompromising way, thus portraying «the most ugly, decadent, disjointed, sinister and threatening underlying realities, not as aspects of life, but present in all of life, the extraordinary in the ordinary, and, what is worst, the ordinariness of the extraordinary» (Boucher 163).

The «poet laureate of despair» (Worrall 1), as he has been often referred to, has charmed generations of readers and audiences who have empathized with his anguish, struggles and obsessions while diving into the poet's bottomless ocean, where his search for a lost divinity and guilt-ridden lust are the driving forces behind what can be defined as Cohen's extremely personal 'rituals of the Word', whether written or sung.

Cohen's fifty-year-long career, with its undeniable ups and downs and contradictions, has finally obliterated the rather diminishing and unforgiving label of «a temperamental romantic, affiliated with the young generation of feelings and flowers» (Dudek 114), as Louis Dudek criticized and quickly dismissed Cohen's rising popularity in the 1960s. It is no secret that such career has also been characterized by long silences and retreats, due to the clinical depression which has affected the Canadian artist much of his life together with a penchant for seclusion and privacy.

However, Leonard Cohen has lately been experiencing a surprisingly renewed creative energy as he himself has pointed out while commenting on the making of his latest album *Popular Problems*: «some of them [the songs in the album] came together with shockingly alarming speed. Usually, I take a long, long time, partly because of an addiction to perfection, partly just sheer laziness» (quoted in Appleford 1). Forced into touring again because of financial difficulties³, the notably

³ Cohen was basically forced onto the stage again when in 2005 he discovered his former manager had robbed him of most of his savings (Worrall 1).

shy and reclusive Leonard Cohen, now well into his eighties, has become appreciative of the unique connection he has been able to establish with his audiences during live concerts.

In fact, in addition to a new album released in September 2014⁴, Cohen is still touring the world at the considerable age of eighty-three and apparently has no intention to stop⁵, thus becoming the epitome of artistic longevity, as many music critics have largely observed while praising his latest album. Among them Petridis's words are quite significant, when he states «few artists have continued writing and recording so late in their lives, and certainly no one as poetically gifted as Cohen has» (Petridis 2). The same critics have noticed the process of rejuvenation which has affected Cohen's creative output, at least as far as his music is concerned, in terms of quality as well as quantity. Some others, like Mike Powell, have even claimed that «his music over the years has been more exploratory than his writing» (Powell 2). Powell may have a point if we consider the fact that Cohen's latest collection of poems, *Book of Longing*, dates back to 2006, whereas he has released in a relatively short time span two new albums, *Old Ideas* and *Popular Problems* respectively in 2012 and 2014.

On the other hand, though, I would argue that *Book of Longing* stands out as a unique visual and written account of the artist's very personal journey through time and his own aging and maturity. The book was published after a considerably long period of silence, twenty years, which included Cohen's five-year retreat at Mount Baldy having become an ordained Rinzai Zen Buddhist monk, under the Dharma name of 'Jikan', meaning, ironically, 'the silent one'.

Getting old

But before attempting to identify Cohen's late style and his take on aging, it is necessary to tackle the complex issue of the definition of old age: in other words, as Michael and Linda Hutcheon have aptly put, «How old is old? Conceptions of old age vary with the time and place, the person, and the society» (Hutcheon 6). Significantly, our society's fear of aging combined with science's fierce attempts to prolong life expectancy of older adults have resulted in radical changes when it comes to our perception of old age and the process of aging; as Jason Karlawish has suggested, «our culture of aging is one of extremes. You are either healthy or executing vigorous efforts to build your

⁴ *Popular Problems* is Cohen's 13th studio album.

⁵ In a 2013 interview with his biographer Sylvie Simmons, Cohen claimed he had «no appetite for retirement» (3).

health account, or you are dying» (2). It seems the bar marking threshold of old age is being constantly raised: «Besides, isn't 75 the new 65? [...] is Mr. Cohen at 80 really 80?» (2), wonders MD Karlawish while commenting on Cohen's announcement of his rather provocative decision to start smoking again when he would turn eighty.

Hence, how old is 'old' for Leonard Cohen? Evidently the issue of Cohen's age and longevity, both biological and artistic, has appealed to the media: a quick look at some headlines will reveal their interest in the singer's old age: «Leonard Cohen on Longevity, Money, Poetry and Sandwiches (Edwards 1)»; «Leonard Cohen Turns 80 (Mitchell 1)»; «Leonard Cohen: an Octogenarian Rejuvenated» (Petridis 1). At the same time, one of the most recurrent questions Cohen has been asked in recent interviews concerns his relationship with mortality and his fear of death⁶. We can assume the Canadian singer who has defined himself 'an old man'⁷ in several occasions, has finally entered the realm of the elderly.

In terms of chronological age Cohen turned seventy in 2004 and two years later he published his latest collection of poems *Book of Longing*, which marked a turning point in the poet's exploration of maturity, aging and death, themes which are reflected in many poems of this collection.

Cohen's *Book of Longing*

We may argue that Cohen's perception of the beginning of his own process of aging dates as far back as 1988, when at the age of fifty-four a relatively young Cohen sang these rather unexpected lines about himself in *Tower of Song*: «Well, my friends are gone and my hair is grey. I ache in the places where I used to play. And I'm crazy for love, but I'm not coming on»⁸. In a sense, these prophetic words seemed to hint at that very exact moment when we realize that our desires and appetite for life, and in Cohen's world such appetite often corresponds to sexual desire, do not coincide with the limited possibilities our aging bodies offer us. Significantly, in the *Book of Longing* the Canadian artist fully explores this clash between the carnal and the spiritual, whose chiaroscuro hues are dramatically enhanced by the aging process. The sense of the aging self and the obtrusive presence of death do permeate most poems of the collection, as Cohen himself has explained in an interview:

⁶ See for example, "Leonard Cohen on QTV.

⁷ «And the voice seemed to say to me you are an old man» these were Cohen's words during the Prince of Asturias Awards Ceremony in 2011.

⁸ From the album *I'm your Man*.

LC (Leonard Cohen): [...] and then we're stuck with this body, you know that, I mean, we're all dying of this incurable disease called age.

JB (Jeffery Brown): this sense of aging is in this book.

LC: Yes, definitely.

JB: Does that signify you are, in fact, feeling that?

LC: Oh, of course, sure. Of course you feel it, you know. My friend, Irving Layton, our greatest Canadian poet, he said, 'the inescapable lousiness of growing old' (Brown. PBS interview).

The juxtaposition of death and aging resulting in the troubling feeling of being, at least partially, already dead, is well illustrated by Cohen's sketches: significantly, one of the many portraits of himself includes the telling line «Vibrant, but dead» which sounds like a witty epitaph commenting on the artist's dissolving face⁹.



While confronting his aging self and the immediacy of death, Cohen offers the reader a book whose cohesive force is still love, both romantic and sexual, which unexpectedly becomes the place where age and death manifest themselves. Critics have agreed on the fact that Cohen has been probing the dangerous territory of human relationships, especially in terms of emotional and sexual confrontation between male and female, for the past fifty years: his poems

⁹ It is interesting to note that the use of colors in the original drawing is limited to the contouring lines: black and blue are employed to define the artist's face. The vibrancy of the blue lines seems to hint at the artist's inner vibrancy mentioned in the caption.

and songs have explored love and sexual desire always perceived as disruptive forces: «a dangerous arena [...] a ferocious activity resulting in countless defeats and exultations» (*QTV interview*). This ‘ferocious activity’ is still the core of Cohen’s poetic meditation, though it is transfigured and reinterpreted through the unsettling condition of being old.

Book of Longing chronicles the poet’s journey through maturity using both words and images, as the poet employs these two mediums in order to define, verbally and visually, his aging self in an effort to negotiate the new meaning attached to his changing identity.

The relevance given to the visual element, Cohen’s own drawings and sketches, characterizes a peculiar aspect of what could be defined as his late style: whereas the themes¹⁰ remain the same, the poet seeks new ways or modes of expression to convey a picture of that «interior landscape that has its own rules, its own mechanisms» (Cohen quoted in Boucher 162), since words alone do not seem to suffice. The function of the images transcends the mere decorative concern, as the book progresses, its true core is revealed in the alluring, provocative, subversive and often ironic interplay between the verbal and the visual: the use of visual poetry thus becoming a pivotal element of Cohen’s artistic discourse.

The visual poem “Dear Roshi” is highly illustrative in this regard: it marks the end of the first part of the book dedicated to the poet’s five-year experience as a Rinzai Zen Buddhist monk under the guidance of Zen Master Sasaki Roshi. The page layout juxtaposes the poem “Leaving Mt. Baldy” with “Dear Roshi” since they both focus on the poet’s farewell to monastic life, thereby offering two complementary explanations of the poet’s choice. The one given in the visual poem is witty, self-mocking and thought-provoking: the poem is presented as a scribbled note to his Master, in which the poet tells him he is giving up his spiritual commitment because of a woman:

Dear Roshi
 I’m sorry that I cannot
 help you now, because
 I met this woman.
 Please forgive my
 Selfishness (Cohen. *Book of Longing*: 22-23).

¹⁰ See David Boucher’s remarks on Cohen’s obsession with «the politics of the personal» (Boucher 139), together with sex and religion: «throughout Cohen’s work, from the early poems to his latest offerings two themes dominate with alacrity and in intricate entanglement: the quest for an elusive God and the search for respite or comfort in sexual fulfillment» (220).

Once again the poet faces and meditates upon his endless struggle between the Body and the Soul, the carnal and the spiritual: the highly allusive woman portrayed by the artist's hand is a naked beauty reminiscent of Indian goddesses. As the image engages the reader's attention, it also enhances the metaphorical connection between words and their meaning through the exploitation of visual semantics.

Cohen's drawings disclose the significant predominance of two subjects which can be divided into two main groups: self-portraits and portraits of women, mostly women's bodies.

On the one hand, the large number of self-portraits reflects Cohen's «politics of the personal» (Boucher 139) and emphasizes the fact that Cohen's «vision is so self-centric that the other as individualized personality is eclipsed by his own» (202). On the other though, these self-portraits reveal the artist's preoccupation and obsession with the representation of the self through his own face. These images are almost caricatures of the artist's face, at times grotesque: dark, thick and forceful lines define the irregular and fragmented architecture of the poet's facial features suggesting the image of a face which is slowly decaying and melting away. Are the effects of the aging process taking their toll on the artist's vibrant vitality? Is the artist looking at his own face through the unforgiving mirror of time? Are these images nothing but Cohen's expressionistic reinterpretation of the aging self? Our poet offers no explanatory solution as usual: «the work itself, Cohen argued elsewhere, is beyond significance and meaning. [...] poetry is nevertheless an activity that is not merely summoned or invoked; it is not self-consciously premeditated, and the images present themselves as a consequence of the desperate and dismal lost battles of life» (Boucher 162).

The other large group of images comprises beautiful sketches and drawings of alluring female bodies and faces: there are no caricatures here, but intense and skillfully drawn representations of women, whose beauty, nudity, and sex appeal clearly hint at the possibility of fulfilling the poet's longing. We are not going to discuss women's role in Cohen's poetical universe, although as David Boucher has suggested «in Cohen's work women are so often the medium through which some sort of fulfillment is attained, whether sexual gratification or religion salvation, or both simultaneously» (Boucher 201). Thus, it cannot be denied that the choice of pictorial subjects of Cohen's drawings seems to reinforce such reading of the poet's relationship with females. In addition to this, it is also undeniable that the contemplation and description of the female body, whether through words or images, is to the artist a source of aesthetic pleasure.

The title itself, *Book of Longing*, focuses on yearning, desire and eroticism suggesting the fact the seventy-year-old man and artist still finds in his own

capacity of yearning the identifying element which validates him. But the fragility and contradictions of his aging body clash with its own necessity and ability to desire, in other words, to live fully¹¹. Cohen, now an old man, tackles with shrewd realism a very relevant aspect of aging sexuality, particularly male sexuality: he captures the contradictory and, at times, grotesque; dimension of his own sexual desire as an aging man. Such preoccupation is shamelessly unveiled in the poem “Disturbed this morning”:

Ah. That.
 That’s what I was so disturbed
 about this morning
 my desire has come back,
 and I want you again.
 I was doing so fine,
 I was above it all.
 The boys and the girls were beautiful
 and I was an old man, loving everyone.
 And now I want you again (Cohen. *Book of Longing*: 39).

Here is a baffling surprise for the poet: the discovery that at seventy he has not become the idealized version of the wise old bohemian he had imagined in his youth, such as in the 1956 poem “Les Vieux”¹² in which he depicted the romanticized and melancholic image of the old «public men of Montreal» (Cohen. *Let Us*: 69), inhabiting its parks.

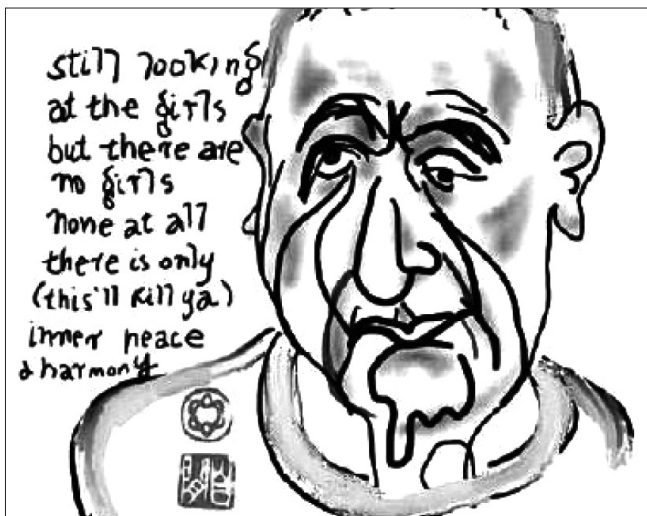
In another poem, “Sorrows of the Elderly”, Cohen continues his perusal of the paradoxical relation between sexuality and old age, while a quite telling charcoal sketch of a tantalizing woman’s back reinforces the message conveyed by the poem. At the same time the playful sound pattern of the lines recalling a nursery rhyme contrasts with the naked-and bitter-truth expressed by the words:

The old are kind
 The young are hot.
 Love may be blind.
 Desire is not (Cohen. *Book of Longing*: 171).

¹¹ See Dr. Karlawish’s keen observation when commenting Cohen’s plan to start smoking again: «Mr. Cohen’s plan presents a provocative question: when should we set aside a life lived for the future, and, instead, embrace the pleasures of the present?» (1).

¹² From his first poetry collection *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. It is worth noting the choice of French title to the poem “Les Vieux”, thus suggesting an enticing atmosphere reminiscent of French chansonniers or even Jacques Prevert’s poems.

However, the 'rejuvenated' seventy-year-old Cohen tries not to take himself too seriously, as he strives to be loyal to his motto: «self investigation without self indulgence» (Cohen. *QTV interview*). And the sketch entitled "The Evening in the Hotel" clearly suggests such attitude: the poet's wrinkled face stares at the reader while a caption, whose language is reminiscent of Bukowski's colloquial tone, dispenses the grotesque truth: «still looking/ at the girls/ but there are no girls/ none at all/ there is only (this'll kill ya)/ inner peace & harmony» (Cohen. *Book of Longing*: 207).



A sense of ending

But *Book of Longing* is not only about aging, women and desire: together with Cohen's most recent records *Old Ideas* (2012) and *Popular Problems* (2014), it also offers the reader a profound and lucid meditation on mortality and human frailty, particularly when confronting death. All these works are endowed with a «backward-looking glance» (Updike 3) which filters the poet's experiences and enhances his awareness of the immediacy of death as he sings «going home without my sorrow/ going home sometime tomorrow/ going home to where it's better than before» (Cohen. *Going Home*¹³) and «In places deep/ with roots entwined/ I live the life/ I left behind» (Cohen. *Nevermind*¹⁴). The clock is ticking and the poet has to face those dreaded «preliminaries of death» (Cohen. *QTV interview*), the fear of which permeates not only his poetic cosmos but everyday life as well. Cohen's baritone voice conveys the feeling of life 'folding

¹³ From the album *Old Ideas* (2012).

¹⁴ From the album *Popular Problems* (2014).

in' while at the same time it provides an answer to a pivotal question: «How real is death to those who still live?» (Updike 11). Cohen seems to suggest death is a presence as real as his own insatiable appetite for life; however, the poet surprises the reader hinting at the possibility that at last Eros and Thanatos can be unexpectedly reconciled:

Now that my mission
Has come to its end: [...]
The Body I chased
It chased me as well
My longing's a place
My dying a sail (*Book of Longing*: 68).

To conclude, although it is clearly impossible to 'pinpoint' the exact moment when an artist's old age and/or old style begin, Cohen's *Book of Longing* and latest records do mark a turning point in the development of his late style for they represent a deep exploration the artist's confrontation with aging and death. At the same time, Cohen experiments with form¹⁵ as he tries to convey his own understanding of what it means to be old: his works suggest the possibility of a reconciliation of the Self whose fragmentation becomes the place where the carnal and the spiritual finally meet.

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¹⁵ In terms of images (*Book of Longing*) and sound (*Popular Problems*).

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