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UDC 821.111(71).09-1 Leonard C.
78.011.26

PROPHETIC ELEMENTS IN LEONARD COHEN'S POETRY AND MUSIC

Abstract: This paper focuses upon Leonard Cohen's religious experience and prophetic visions in his poem „Prayer of My Wild Grandfather", his songs „Story of Isaac", „The Future" and „First We Take Manhattan" and a short section from his novel *Beautiful Losers* beginning with the words: „God is Alive. Magic is Afoot". Cohen's passionate religious seeking is filtered through Judeo-Christian myths, stories and tradition. His understanding of biblical archetypes offers the finest example of his poetic and prophetic voice. His ability to uncover multiple layers of meaning enlivens his ambitions for a revolutionary change, often against the political conservatism and social repression. Cohen delineates the human nature in all its guises, from obscene and blasphemous to divine. He seeks and sees the face of his longing in the paradoxes of the modern world. It seems that he speaks for an entire generation of beaten victims, presenting a very bleak view of the future.

Key words: Leonard Cohen, religion, priest, prophet, God, future, apocalypse

Leonard Cohen has been a critically regarded poet of the sacred and profane. He hassteadily evaded precise classification by not fitting easily „into the categories of 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" (Scobie, 1993). „In the figure of Leonard Cohen, we see an artist remake his role and redirect the scope of his influence to the point of exhaustion, if not oblivion; an introspective artist who is at war with himself, with his work, and with the collective tradition he remains attached to, if only by an invisible thread" (Watson, on-line). Replacing his novels and poetry collections with albums, Cohen turns much of his attention to the world of popular music, still dealing with a very private and personal idiom in many of his songs. This readiness to take risks with his work has resulted in the „poet-songwriter achieving artistic longevity through his great power to move, and stir the very soul of the reader or listener. By interrogating the poetic energies of Cohen's poems, novels, and songs, one may see how an artist's progression can transcend formal barriers and aesthetic prejudices and still merit serious consideration as a modern poetic voice" (Watson, on-line). With his graceful wit and provocative irony, he announces that his ideas are too new for most of his audience, particularly those who are criticizing him. He points out that there is a shiftfrom the „world of the

golden-boy poet [to] the dung pile of the front-line writer".[1] Cohen's claim to new sounds, his manifesto for poetic transformation, is actually an attempt to move towards a more direct engagement with his own experience. Furthermore, he struggles to fuse his strong devotion toreligiosity, „ludicrous sexual and linguistic taboos" and his own concept of beastliness. He wants poetry to „shake people up, bloody their apathetic noses for them, disturb their complacencies" (Layton, 1971: 95), and therefore, he reacts against generally accepted forms and notions, being by turns self-effacing visionary and impudent cynic, pessimist-prophet and satirist-jester. For this reason, many reviewers praise his „outstanding poetic quality" and „gift for macabre ballad" that is evocative of Auden (Frye, 1975: 109–111), often commenting on his aptitude for „flashes of lyric powers… surely worthy of Blake and Smart" (Mandel, 1986: 137). Certain scholars see Cohen as „potentially the most important writer that Canadian poetry has produced since 1950 – not merely the most talented, but also… the most professionally committed to make the most of his talent" (Ruhlmann, on-line). Being the „voice of a new civilization", he attempts to come to terms with his artistic and religious inheritance. He draws on myths and tales, Biblical imagery and Jewish popular customs, Zen Buddhism philosophy and social-political state of Canada. He also identifies the holocaust as the „central psychic event in his life", claiming he has „never recovered" from its „illumination of human behavior" (Dorman and Rawlins, 1990: 66). He becomes aware ofmoral and spiritual decline, and therefore, he engages, as Pacey says, in „twin quests for God and sexual fulfillment" (Pacey, on-line). This combination of „piety and genital pleasures"[2] gives interest, meaning and direction to Cohen's world. Cohen himself has said that only two things interest him – women and God. Yet his idea is that to separate these two will be deleterious to both. If God is left out of sex, it becomes pornographic, and if sex is left out of God, it becomes self-righteous and pious.[3] This is a quality he sees not only in his own work but in all other works thatpropose an essence of simplicityas an instance of the beautiful.

Cohen's first poetry collection *Let Us Compare Mythologies* was published in 1956. This book with its indicative title engages thematic nuclei of Cohen's poems – passionate religious devotion, the presentation of personal history as the source of deterioration and disappointment, social and political criticism, love, sadness and hopelessness. In his second volume *The Spice Box of Earth* (1961) these themes are further explored. Again, the name of the book, which refers to the ornamental spice box used duringthe Jewish *Havdalah* ceremony that marks the end of the Sabbath, reveals spiritual ideas present in almost all the poems. Cohen's grandfather, Rabbi Solomon Klinitsky, a Torah scholar and linguist who had taught Cohen the mysteries of the Holy Scriptures since he was a child, was also his literary influence. *The Spice Box of Earth* includes a text called „Lines from My Grandfather's Journal" which represents one of the high points in Cohen's writing. It depicts an encounter between King David and Rabbi Judah Loew, widely known as the Maharal of Prague, combining biblical stories with

[1] Cohen writes it in the preface to the first edition of his third collection of poetry *Flowers for Hitler*.

[2] A commentator early in Cohen's career suggested that all his songs were about piety and sex.

[3] Leonard Cohen as told to Brian Cullman in „Sincerely, L. Cohen", *Details for Men* in January, 1993.

horrifying images of the concentration camps. This presence of the rabbi can be seen in many other poems as well, such as „Prayer of My Wild Grandfather" and „Isaiah", which is inspired by the prophet and his words of earnestness. Actually, in Cohen's biography *Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen* (1996), Ira Nadel observes: „The Book of Isaiah, with its combination of poetry and prose, punishment and redemption remained a lasting influence on Cohen's work, forming one of several core texts for his literary and theological development" (Nadel, 2007: 13). In „Prayer of My Wild Grandfather", the poet presents a very disturbing event in biblical history. He encapsulates his difficult relationship with God – a deleterious but an inevitable one, which revealed itself early on in the poet's work and has haunted him throughout his career. The culmination of this problematic relationship is the most evident in Cohen's nihilistic vision of „The Future" („Give me back the Berlin Wall/give me Stalin and St. Paul/Give me Christ or give me Hiroshima" (Cohen, 1993: 372)). „Prayer's" strongly unconsecrated sentiment is directly reexamined in „Story of Isaac", which is another example of the poet grappling with the fatalistic concept of surrendering to the will of God. Cohen's messianic childhood also provides significant insight into the poet's excessive concerns with legacy. His parents told him he was a descendent of Aaron, the high priest. „This is particularly interesting when considering the instrumental role given to prophetic imagery throughout his oeuvre: the wry 'golden voice' reference in 'Tower of Song', and 'golden chord' used in 'Hallelujah' (songs), not forgetting Cohen's persistent thematic engagement with the prophetic figure who embodies the notion of being born blind into a role, without say or choice" (Watson, on-line). In „Prayer of My Wild Grandfather", Cohen redefines the prophetic perspectiveso that God's power is described as nothing more than a bee sting. The speaker reprimands his inherited God from the position of a reluctant and anguished agnostic, refusing to be silent when it comes to dealing with serious issues. Furthermore,one has to bear in mind the terrible years of persecution and terror to which Jewish people have been exposed, the ghastly injustice that also violates the core of the poet's identity. The poet does not withhold himself but expresses his aggravation at a „God, God, God" who is „like a lost bee after pollen in the brain". Cohen's God seeks unconditional faith and blind loyalty, driving his absolute influence „through that sting in [the] brain". Cohen suggests that such seduction leads to the divided self and insanity in the mind of the believers until their „mind [is] made mad and honeycombed". For Cohen, this argument against a God and his unquestionable will represents a pure subversive image of madness. Also, he presents a dramatic revision of „The Binding of Isaac", a story from the Hebrew Bible in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah. In „Prayer" God offers no guidance in times of violence and horrors, and thus, the speaker can never regain his belief in God's divine love. In this poem, the poet is God's opponent, scolding his mercy and longing to release himself from his contaminating legacy. „'Prayer of My Wild Grandfather' is a brilliant example of the poet's highly contentious religious and spiritual stance, which permeates his oeuvre, and presents itself as one of the many fascinating dualities in the poet's voice" (Watson, on-line).

„Story of Isaac", one of Cohen's new incarnation songs, revives the biblical story used in his early poem, „Prayer of My Wild Grandfather", and enhances the

poet's disquieting engagement with themes of brutality and abuse. In the song, the boy's bedroom „door it opened slowly" (Cohen, 1993: 139), depicting Cohen's artistic intention to open the door to disturbing issues which were still taboo at that time. It is not explicitly clear whether Cohen refers to child molestation but „through his uncompromising critique of those prophetic 'schemes' disguised as 'visions' and taken up by religious 'vultures', the poet implies that he [is] able to see or sense something in the originary tale that represent[s] a harbinger for the parent/child bond to be permanently disrupted" (Watson, on-line). The innocence and helplessness of Isaac contraststhe power of his father who „stood so tall above [him]" (Cohen, 1993: 139), not being his protector but a distant stranger with a cold voice. The father's eyes, „shining" like „his axe … made of gold" (Cohen, 1993: 139), illustrate the blind faith and heaven-sent madness of „honeycombed" mind. From the nine-year-old Isaac's perspective the „lake [appears like] a lady's mirror" (Cohen, 1993: 139) and the „eagle" is mistaken for a „vulture", indicating, once again, the incapability of the child to understand the bleak reality of his killer disguised as his guardian. „Cohen shows us how this symbol of salvation, redemption and resurrection (both eagle and God) can, with a simple trick of the light, be grossly distorted into a scavenger preying on the 'hunted'" (Watson, on-line). Regarding this song, it seems that Cohen's repudiation is greater than we might assume and the very line, „man of peace, man of war", supports this argument, criticizing hypocrisy and vanity at large. As a set pair „Song of Isaac" and „Prayer of My Wild Grandfather" intensify Cohen's artistic standpoint and his commentary on all historical and religious shackles. Cohen deplores the abuse of power, adopting an all-embracing view about the inherited duality of existence. However, he further extends this idea by illustrating how society and its institutions, particularly organized religion, ultimately corrupt the purity of the individual.

The images of coarseness, a stunning vision of the apocalypse, are also revealed in Cohen's ninth album, *The Future* (1992), which is rhetorical in its effects, both verbal and musical, and artful in the layers of its (post)modern parody. Here, especially in the first song of the album, „The Future", the categories of the self and consciousness gradually lose their meaning, as Cohen's vision develops, „Things are gonna slide in all directions" (Cohen, 1993: 372). He incorporates the Judeo-Christian elements, relating the notion of apocalypse to the Book of Revelation, and thus, presenting himself as a prophet. Whereas John the Apostle, the author of Revelation, declares divine judgment and emphasizes the triumph of good, the Kingdom of God, the speaker refers to murder and complete destruction. However, for Cohen, who has been influenced by Buddhist thought as well, this destruction is the only possible way to reach the truth. From such a perspective, there is no everlasting or abiding essence in living beings, there is no real distinction between man and God. Therefore, the apocalypse merely reveals the unity of the world. The speaker purports to be the „little Jew who wrote the Bible" (Cohen, 1993: 372) by which he means that humanity has created this holy book and that the „landscape we inhabit is a biblical one and of our own making. Organized religions, he suggests, serve a useful purpose in providing real solace for millions of people. From within

these religions they provide comfort, but in relation to each other they are antagonistic. They act like territorial states, and Cohen thinks this sinful" (Boucher, 2005: 229). For this reason, Cohen seems to embody simultaneously the perspectives of humanity, God and Satan („Give me absolute control/over every living soul" (Cohen, 1993: 372)), creating the same apocalyptical chaos described in the chorus, and, at the same time, stating that love is the only means to salvation. The speaker deconstructs the past, present and future. Is the future distinguishable from the present? The lines „I've seen the future/it is murder" (Cohen, 1993: 372) underscore this question. The future is characterized by the union of opposites and our understanding of it is determined by our consciousness, not by intrinsic properties of reality. This idea is particularly important in the Buddhist tradition. From the Buddhist perspective, this life, this world is an illusion, joy and sufferings are unreal, all human experience is intangible. Cohen's vision of the apocalypse can be compared to the experience of Nirvana. Cohen assumes the role of a seeker – hurt, vindictive, prophetic, obsessed with beauty and salvation. He comments on the spiritual turmoil that dwells within the human soul, the present-day society and its lack of ability to grasp the moment and make changes for the future. It seems that humanity is in a state of confusion, brimming with tension and conflict as well as resorting to isolation and intolerance. However, this conditionurges, in terms of biblical prophecy, persistence, reformation and hope in the face of grim prospects.

Cohen repeatedly addresses questions concerning the approaching apocalypse – this obsession culminates in one of his best albums, *I'm Your Man* (1988). The first track on this album, „First We Take Manhattan", announces, in spite of the enthusiastic proclamations of the end of the Cold War, harmful intensification of political events. Again, Cohen's depression takes on geopolitical proportions, underlining the presently occurring de-liberalization of the world and its false optimism. These powerful insights are grounded in a „mosaic of religion" and subordinated to an eschatological and messianic consciousness. The sense of confronting a decadent culture pervades the „taking" of Manhattan and Berlin. Also, Cohen himself describes his lyrics' true focus:

> „…there is some kind of secret life we lead in which we imagine ourselves changing things, not violently, maybe gracefully, maybe elegantly in a very imaginative way and with a shake of the hand. The song speaks of longing for change, impatience with the way things are, a longing for significance; we deal in the purest burning logic of longing" (Nadel, 2007: 248).

He expresses his frustration with the system as well as his jubilation each time he anticipates changing the political and cultural narrative through the song's mantra. Cohen's ironically militant words adumbrate, as so often in his work, the possibility of a new self. The poet-prophet's speech confounds and even negates the given horizon that names the self: „They sentenced me to twenty years of boredom/ for trying to change the system within/I'm coming now, I'm coming to reward them/ First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin" (Cohen, 1993: 351). Yet, the poetic voice of this kind strives to be a prophet who conquers the cosmopolitan realm.

Moreover, Cohen suggests that „that part of ourselves that diminished that voice … was demanding a spiritual aspect to our lives … We gave that aspect of ourselves that was hungry some kind of perverse and obscene charity. We made him into an organ grinder … We gave that part of us a monkey and a plywood violin, so that it would screech away and amuse us with its antics".[4] Through the „ambiguous seduction/repulsion pattern", Cohen invites us to witness this internal drama and own the speaker's earlier self. He says that „[his] song [is] really political, a certain demented … manifesto, which addresses a constituency that really exists in the world, which cannot be defined by left or right, that is a radical perspective of a great many people, internationally, who feel that there is no … political expression that represents us, that the language, the rhetoric of politics today has become so divorced from anybody's feelings and heart that it invites a new and radical rhetoric which in a kind of humorous and demented and serious way [he] touch[es] upon in 'First We Take Manhattan'".[5] He withstands the zeitgeist of the 1980s and 1990s, pointing to his struggle with the future and the gradual growth of extremism in everybody's mind. According to his comments, Cohen remains a fervent prophet, the „Moses of our little exodus", a bard who captures the spirit of his time.

Leonard Cohen as a novelist is no less controversial, challenging or uncompromising and no more conventional or acceptable to deal with. *Beautiful Losers* (1966) is Cohen's second novel which precedes his career as a singer-songwriter. The novel is the most complete and disturbing summation of Cohen's early ideas and obsessions. It is an overwhelming combination of prose, poetry and prayer which integrates three separate narratives. Visionary and obscene, it merges history, sex, politics and religion into the „apparatus of the notebook collection to locate the work in the modernist tradition of the poem in process and the forged documentary" (Mandel, 1986: 137). The quest for God and sexual fulfillment is exhorted by the awareness of the individual's vulnerability, by an agonizing feeling of being alone.

> „Old friend, you may kneel as you read this, for now I come to the sweet burden of my argument. I did not know what I had to tell you, but now I know. I did not know what I wanted to proclaim, but now I am sure. All my speeches were preface to this, all my exercises but a clearing of the throat. I confess I tortured you but only to draw your attention to this. I confess I betrayed you but only to tap your shoulder. In our kisses and sucks, this, ancient darling, I meant to whisper" (Cohen, 1970: 156).

This passage resembles both psalm and sermon. Cohen refers to the perpetual duality of poetry and prayer, pointing out the poetic nature of prayer and the prayerful nature of poetry. Moreover, he uses his inherent legacy, acting like a chazzan, a Jewish cantor who leads the congregation in prayer along with the rabbi, and Jeremiah, the prophet of the broken heart. The speaker implores us to „kneel as [we] read this" as if we are to witness a preeminent ceremony and to hear the great truth. Cohen

[4] This was a part of Leonard Cohen's personal interview with Winfried Siemerling in 1990, North York.

[5] *Ibid.*

ironically claims that all his other poems „were preface to this, all [his] exercises but a clearing a throat“ while, at the same time, he calls for participation in his continuing incarnation. He also identifies with the grievous, contemplative prophet Jeremiah, whose calling was primarily to the nation of Judah, urging the people to repent from their sins and return to God. These references expand the running metaphor used in the previous poem, „Prayer of My Wild Grandfather“, indicating the onerous task of being the public mouthpiece for the „private voice“.

> „God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is alive. Magic is afoot. Alive is afoot. Magic never died. God never sickened. Many poor men lied. Many sick men lied. Magic never weakened. Magic never hid. Magic always ruled. God is afoot. God never died…“ (Cohen, 1970: 157).

Cohen tunes himself as if he is God's musical instrument, „meld[ing]intense physical prosaic exchanges, with tense metaphysical poems“ (Watson, on-line). „Magic is Afoot“, an elevating poem/mantra, explores the real meaning of Magic and God. It is dependent on a variety of rhetorical techniques of repetition for its power in delivery. „Magic is no instrument. Magic is the end“, Cohen indicates that these words are a constant source of unrestrained energy, evoking Blake's statement: „The cistern contains, the fountain overflows. One thought fills immensity“ (Blake, 1969: 151). This symbiotic relationship with the divine enhances that immensity, that the „magic length of God“ which properly ends the mantra. „The 'magic' in Cohen's poem is in how he uses this 'exercise' to demonstrate the seductive power of the voice to 'command' the page, and then disappear, much like the God of 'Prayer' who commanded Abraham and then 'whispered nothing'“ (Watson, on-line). Nevertheless, the speaker instructs the reader to participate in the poetic sermon which gradually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, „the continuation of the poet's voice off the page“ (Watson, on-line).

Cohen's understanding of religious matters, the charming and evocative beauty of his art, has the dimension of someone who has explored various states and levels of spiritual consciousness personally, and therefore, has been engaged in the essential element of the traditional mystic path. From the very beginning, his works have proposed that the tribulations which ruin what he calls „the inner country“ of the psyche are interwoven with a greater moral malady. He views the social disruption as a collective mental state which commands the poet to envision new ways of knowing and perceiving. Searching for a universal language that addresses both the individual and communal, Cohen, at the same time, questions the authenticity and authority of his own voice, undermining the certainties he is trying to grasp. Despite his legendary self-absorption, he manages to avoid the solipsistic conclusions. It seems that his creativity resides in the depth and richness of his fascinating and disturbing visions, his constant challenging of conventions – social, political, cultural. His mythologies, cadences and diction reveal his obsessive study of the Bible and his poetic apprenticeship. He draws on a prophetic heritage, his deep Jewish sensibility and his exuberant use of Christian imagery, underlining his delightfully heretical religiosity. Although the sacred and morally ambiguous

pursuit preoccupies him, he also concentrates on the global themes. He sounds like an Old Testament prophet, writhing in the throes of a societal breakdown. He brings the news of degradation, dishonor and death. His commentary is filled with vivid images of war and upheaval, often with strong pacifist or revolutionary implications. His prophecy is of impending doom, his vision ranges from the pure religious to the political, always resulting in the same – destruction and irreversible chaos. He bitterly derides those who „sacrifice one generation on behalf of another", reconsidering his lifelong faith in the transforming power of visionary contemplation and his earlier doubts about the healing potential of social changes. In the midst of all this decadence and darkness, Cohen flares a light of hope, claiming that the only thing which is left, in the place of true spiritual intimacy with God, is the search for the higher truth. This quest for spiritual grace represents Cohen's attempt to deconstruct the romantic vision that people have of God; Cohen's deity is not the supreme father – it is imperfect, oblivious and sometimes even powerless. He finds the self to be the more of mysterious force in the world, and thus, he opposes the idea of the omnipresent God that is apparently within everything. Therefore, his focus is on esoteric mystical experience rather than exoteric ideas and beliefs. Exploring the transcendence and awakening of the soul, he offers an insight and guidance into the deep truths of his real being. The creation of these interior spaces becomes his major concern and such an examination of God and the selfexemplifies, once again, the basis of his various philosophies. The final conclusion Cohen draws from this questioning is an acceptance of the „elaborate lie" that elucidates the violence of life and death. However, there is his growing need to avoid this violence. For this reason, Cohen creates his own world dominated by spirituality in which he turns into a Messiah-like figure, controlling his destiny and distinctive genius. Following the journey into his personal „underworld", he appears to have returned with his pristine visions but he is still unable to confront the harshness of reality. His visions are governed by the sense of numbness and Cohen himself is imprisoned in a state of limbo. He maintains a continuous process of negation of all forms, systems and beliefs which are in themselves „static", and thereby, contrary to life. Being concerned with the eternal moment of consciousness, he feels no allegiance to a particular self-conception and exhibits a variety of contradictory traits. He projects his religious feelings onto his work and investigates their role in the construction or deconstruction of identity. Also, he cries out in hopeful expectation that his prophetic voice will be laid down at the feet of the Voice upon whom he waits. Calling throughout for God to join us in the horrors of the world, he concludes that the self emerges from the bitterness of our circumstance; Cohen's whole picture of contemporary chaos is presented in the increasing indication of moral and spiritual disintegration which actually becomes a part of our prayer. Cohen is in search of the „parable that gives the meaning to our deepest hunger". For him, this is where religious traditions fit. He argues that suffering and death are inevitable realities of the human condition; these are the places where we make our own mental constructs. However, he admonishes his readers that these are only his personal experiences and that they should not blindly accept them.

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PROROČKI ELEMENTI U POEZIJI I MUZICI LENARDA KOENA

Rezime: U ovom radu razmatraju se proročke vizije i religijsko iskustvo Lenarda Koena u njegovim pesmama „Prayer of My Wild Grandfather“, „Story of Isaac“, „The Future“ i „First We Take Manhattan“, kao i odlomak iz njegovog romana *Divni gubitnici* koji počinje rečima: „Bog je živ. Magija je u toku“. Koenovo strastveno duhovno traganje predstavljeno je kroz judeohrišćanske mitove, priče i tradiciju. Njegovo poimanje biblijskih arhetipova prikazuje se kroz njegovo najfinije poetsko i proročko umeće. Njegov talenat da uoči višeslojnost značenja podstiče njegove ambicije za revolucionarnom promenom koja je vrlo često usmerena protiv političkog konzervativizma i društvene represije. Koen prikazuje ljudsku prirodu u svim njenim oblicima, od razvratne i bogohulne do božanske. On traži i pronalazi predmet svoje čežnje u paradoksima modernog sveta. Čini se da on govori u ime cele generacije stradalnika, dajući krajnje sumornu sliku budućnosti.