

BOOK OF LONGING: LEONARD COHEN'S WELLSPRINGS OF INSPIRATIONDOI: <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2022.63.11>

Jiří Měsíc, *Leonard Cohen: The Modern Troubadour*. Olomouc: Palacký University Press, 2020. 226 pp. ISBN: 978-80-244-5784-0 (print). ISBN: 978-80-244-5787-1 (iPDF).

There has been much deserved attention of late on the ground-breaking granting of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Bob Dylan in 2016. Another singer-songwriter legend, Leonard Cohen, who died the same year, has often been unfortunately overshadowed. This is certainly not the case, however, amongst his dedicated followers, who, to quote Ben Jonson on Shakespeare, love him “this side idolatry.” There have been a number of both popular and scholarly books and articles dedicated to Cohen’s remarkable achievements, both in music and prose and poetry, published not only during his lifetime, but also since his recent demise. Jiří Měsíc focuses on Cohen as troubadour, a term the author himself admits tends to be overly used and loosely employed. As opposed to providing a general overview of Cohen’s oeuvre, the monograph delves into the rich tradition of troubadour poetry and how it impacted and inspired the singer-songwriter. The greatest shared theme is unsurprisingly the worship or praise of women, often employing the language of medieval courtly love.

Měsíc is currently affiliated with University of Grenada in Spain, but is originally from the Czech Republic where he studied English philology at University of Ostrava and completed his doctorate at Palacký University in Olomouc. The current monograph is an extended and revised version of his dissertation. A number of the chapters were initially published, in various forms, in literary journals both in his home country and abroad. Měsíc is also a poet himself, having published a Cohenesque-sounding collection entitled *Píseň zamilovaného Misogyna* (*Song of a Misogynist in Love*) in 2014. He often recites his poems accompanied by music, making the affinity with Cohen even more apparent.

The respect Měsíc has already attained is in evidence by the inclusion in the monograph of a foreword by Alberto Manzano entitled “Some Ruminations on Recent Songs.” Manzano is the leading expert on Cohen in Spanish and also a widely published poet. Together, they presented not only the Cohen book in Olomouc, but also Manzano’s poetry in Měsíc’s Czech translations at ProtimlůvFest in Ostrava. Manzano’s foreword focuses on Cohen’s album *Recent Songs* from 1979, which is apparently a shared favourite. He also sets the tone for the overall approach of the monograph by foregrounding the inspiration drawn from European poetry and religious impulses from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

The book is divided into seven chapters, this being a number Měšic has an almost mystical affinity with. Although it reads at times as too obviously an academic work with multiple introductions and conclusions, it is a truly impressive piece of scholarship with a wide range of primary and secondary sources in multiple languages.

The first chapter introduces the troubadour tradition in Occitan literature and how the high modernists, like Pound and Eliot, drew inspiration from it. There is also a discussion of Cohen's studies at McGill University in Montreal, including references to some of the teachers and mentors who inspired the young singer. I would have personally appreciated a clearer, more systematic, overview of Cohen's own studies and readings; I found of particular interest the reference to a review written by the legendary Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye of Cohen's first poetry collection *Let Us Compare Mythologies* published in 1956.

Chapter 2 provides a more detailed look at the specific features of troubadour poetry. These are supported by citations from medieval troubadour poems with the original and English translations side by side. The third chapter focuses on the motif of the virgin, initially in the troubadour poetry itself and consequently in the songs and poems of Leonard Cohen. The texts of the poems in this section even include translations by Měšic himself.

Chapter 4 is titled eponymously as the book and begins to focus more on how Cohen's own love life is reflected in his songs. The discussion of the women who served as Cohen's muses made me wonder whether Cohen actually developed thematically as a lover, writer, and singer over time or mostly continued in the same vein. Měšic seems to be arguing here that Cohen's quest for the ideal woman remained a constant throughout his lifetime. I was particularly intrigued by the dalliance Cohen had with Janis Joplin, among other renowned women performers.

The fifth chapter entitled "Medieval Andalusian Muslim Poetry and Song" is definitely impressive in terms of its scholarship and insight, but seems to be misplaced. As it attempts to establish the preceding possible contribution of Arab and Sufi/Persian poets to the development of the troubadour tradition, it would seem logical to have placed it earlier in the monograph in order to provide a more systematic argument. This chapter also makes almost no reference to Cohen at all, which seemed somewhat odd after the detailed discussion of the previous chapter. I was particularly intrigued, however, by the discussion of the English-language scholarly work on Andalusian Muslim poets by the Czech researcher Alois Richard Nykl from the 1940s. Nykl's academic work would be worthy of further study and commentary, particularly for a Czech specialised readership.

Chapter 6 once again brings the focus back on Cohen and his work. The discussion is mainly centred on particular songs which Měšic uses to exemplify

his principal argument that Cohen drew inspiration from an incredibly rich assortment of musical, poetic, religious, and philosophical sources. This erudition makes Cohen truly unique, according to the author, when it comes to English-language singer-songwriters. The conscious borrowing from medieval models also makes the Canadian singer a genuine modern troubadour in the true sense of the word.

The final chapter discusses Cohen as a prophet and priest in the Judeo-Christian sense of the tradition. Měšic establishes a distinction between the two biblical roles with the argument that the priest would make use of the pronoun 'we,' as he would be speaking on behalf of a community, while a prophet would employ the first person as he only expressed his solitary voice. I was unclear if this argument was an established one, had been drawn from Cohen himself, or was the construction of the author himself. Whatever the case, Měšic demonstrates convincingly that Cohen intermittently embodied both of these roles, in particular when it came to his own relationship with Judaism and Jewishness.

In the conclusion, the author expresses his hopes that this monograph can serve as an impulse for additional scholars to pursue the roots of inspiration for other singer-songwriters, as opposed to merely focusing on classic biographical studies. One can only express full agreement with this judgement. Although I occasionally found myself wondering if Měšic was stretching and straining with plausibility when suggesting quite obscure (at least to me) sources for Cohen's songs and poems, I finally appreciated being exposed to such a range of often unfamiliar material. The author displays a remarkable erudition and I cannot help but admire his willingness to delve into such an extensive range of literatures and disciplines in a number of different languages. To use a medieval metaphor, fitting for the subject at hand, Měšic has definitely laid down the gauntlet, challenging other scholars to dig deeper when investigating the creative work of singer-songwriters.

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