

## **What can we learn from an exercise in analyzing Leonard Cohen's lyrics?**

Teresa Quayle, *Smudging the Air: The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen* (2016), 333 pp.

Reviewed for the *Leonard Cohen Files* by Doron B. Cohen

In a former book-review for the *Files* (the current one being my fifth) I observed that after long years of relative neglect, the production of books about Leonard Cohen's life and work was turning into a cottage industry. Teresa Quayle's book fits this observation literally, as it was published privately, directly from the author's PC, without the benefit of a publisher, an editor, a proofreader or a public relations office. Still, the book is being sold on Amazon, from where I got my copy, and despite my various reservations I felt that the author's sincere efforts merit a serious review.

The author shares with her readers her personal experiences regarding LC's songs and the process by which her book came to be written. As a student in Liverpool in the late 1960's she often listened to his first album and was captivated by it, but then lost touch with LC's work for several decades. Having "rediscovered" him by chance on television, she attended two of his concerts in England and was captivated once again. At the time, following an early retirement from the IT business, she took up the study of English language and literature and decided to make LC's song lyrics the subject of her MA dissertation, which she completed in less than a year. She then spent two more years turning her dissertation into the current book.

The author's main purpose was to expose the meaning of each song's lyrics (she does not deal with the musical aspect of the songs, saying that this is not within her competence). In the process of studying the meaning through linguistic analysis she identified six "subject areas" in LC's lyrics: Relationships (including sex, but also all other kinds of relationship), Politics (including all military references), Belief (religion, spirituality, ideology and cultural identity), Addictions (including drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and gambling), Ageing, and Music. To these was added a seventh category she named "Free", for lyrics where the subject matter is unclear. The book is divided into two parts; the first contains eight chapters in which she explains her methods and offers her general findings; in the second part she goes through the songs one by one and determines the meaning of each of the lyrics. Incidentally, one of the endearing aspects of this book is that the title for every chapter and section is a quote from one of the songs (and this includes the book's title, of course); the author undoubtedly immersed herself in these texts.

Quayle restricted herself to songs written by LC himself (or in collaboration) and released solely on the 14 official studio albums, not including the songs he covered and disregarding the alternative versions and some additional songs on the live concert and compilation albums, thus analyzing 125 lyrics in all. It is somewhat regrettable that she did not consider several other songs not on the studio albums (and since she did not offer a thematic analysis of each album, individual songs could certainly have been included). I have in mind songs such as “Store Room”, “Blessed Is The Memory”, “Please Don’t Pass Me By (A Disgrace)”, “Queen Victoria”, “Do I Have To Dance All Night”, “Never Any Good” and “The Great Event”. A fuller study of the lyrics by a future author should also include songs written but not recorded by LC himself, such as “Priests”, and even songs written in collaboration with Jennifer Warnes or Anjani Thomas and recorded by them and by others.

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In Part 1 of the book, Chapter 1 is a general introduction to the project. Chapter 2 imparts at some length the author’s personal story regarding LC’s songs and her academic studies, as summarized above; she explains how she created and used a computerized database of the lyrics, as well as a second one, containing the lyrics of popular songs by other artists for the sake of comparison. Chapter 3 summarizes the author’s findings about the special language features of the lyrics, and this and the following chapters contain many tables in which those findings are presented. Several interesting points are offered in this chapter, which is a worthwhile read. Concisely, the author finds that LC often uses everyday language side by side with poetical features, including rhyming and metaphors; she also finds he writes lyrics as if he is having a conversation with the listener. All these points are well demonstrated through her linguistic analysis of the songs to an extent that cannot be substantiated by intuitive observation alone.

Incidentally, I assume that the current book is considerably different from the author’s academic dissertation, and not necessarily for the better. It seems that she has little faith in her readers, as demonstrated, on the one hand, by some trivial explanations such as of what a noun is (43), and, on the other hand, with the lack of any theoretical background or references to the academic linguistic material she must have used for her dissertation. Neither does she offer any of the data she gleaned from other popular songs for the sake of comparison. Her explanation of metaphors also leaves a lot to be desired, ignoring the distinction between similes and true metaphors. I find all this rather regrettable.

In chapter 4 the author describes her perspective on the meaning of the lyrics and explains how she tried to categorize them into subject areas, although she does not claim to give a definitive meaning for the lyrics of each song. One of her main arguments is that “there is no absolute meaning in [...] the songs. The lyrics are [...] deliberately ambiguous so that they can be interpreted by each listener in a way which is relevant to themselves” (68). This is an intriguing but problematic idea; I’ll come back to it when examining some of the author’s interpretations in Part 2 of the book later on. Still, this chapter too contains some worthwhile findings.

In chapter 5 Quale analyzes the songs from the perspective of who holds power over whom, offering once again some interesting observations. In chapter 6 she deals with the identity of the speaker in each song and with the other figures mentioned in them. In this respect it should also be noted that the author is certainly right in insisting that the voice speaking in each song, its narrator, is not identical to LC himself, although she admits that it is often difficult to tell them apart. We must always remember that the songs are an artistic expression by a gifted poet and not confessions or entries in a diary. So while the narrator would in most cases represent the poet he is not identical to him, in spite of the understandable – and sometimes justifiable – tendency to find pieces of LC’s life in the songs.

In chapter 7 the author divides LC’s recording career into early, middle and late periods and looks for differences in subject matter and other aspects of the lyrics. Her first finding is that “Cohen’s lyrics have stayed fundamentally the same over his long career” (180), although she also detects some changes. In chapter 8 she sums up concisely her main findings in the previous chapters.

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In Part 2 of the book the author goes through the songs one by one, album by album, and determines their meaning. She uses a letter code to designate the subject area of each song, according to the seven categories she indicated earlier. Thus, for example, “Suzanne” is designated “RRR BB” because it “is primarily a relationship lyric, with many religious references” (R stands for Relationship, B for Belief); “Hallelujah” is “BBB R M A”, as the main theme is religion but it also contains references to relationship, music and ageing. Is this system helpful or is it restrictive? Probably both, depending on what one is looking for.

The author insists time and again on her objective linguistic approach to the meaning of the lyrics, but this is not always the case. While in principle trying to limit herself to the internal linguistic evidence, she sometimes allows herself to look up and refer to outside opinions and even to LC's biography; challenging the author's interpretation of several of the songs is therefore unavoidable. I found I often had the strongest issue with songs which she designated as "Free". The author explains that in such a song "the power of this lyric lies in the interpretation brought to it by the listener, who is free to consider the language in the context of his own life experience" (pp. 204-5). This sounds like a fine idea that could explain some of the appeal of the songs to many listeners, but it is hard to accept that LC wrote these songs with such intention in mind and that he did not have a clear idea of what he wished to convey through them or that he had often failed to do so. His intention might be difficult to discern or explain, but in many cases songs designated "Free" by Quayle can be shown to have a clear intention. Even when the meaning seems obscure one must not assume that LC was obscure for the sake of obscurity. Following are but a few examples:

"Teachers" (204-6) is designated by the author as "Free" with references to music and addiction, while ignoring the fact that the word "teacher" has a strong connotation, certainly in LC's world, of spiritual guidance. The narrator in the song goes through a series of experiences of various kinds, including various forms of love, seeking guidance in an attempt to overcome depression and struggling with his creativity. There are too many concrete references in this song to regard it as "free".

"The Butcher" (212-4) is designated "Free" with references to belief, music, ageing and addiction; however, the song can be plainly read as a painful accusation against God. It may be hard to accept that LC would designate God as a butcher, but it is not far-fetched either. Quale recognizes some of the religious motifs in the song but fails to recognize others or give them the deserved weight. In the first verse the narrator protests the slaughtering of the lamb, and the butcher answers: "...I am what I am" which is a biblical phrase usually translated "I am that I am" (Exodus 3:14), and is not mentioned by Quale; it is the God of Israel's self-designation so there can hardly be any doubt as to his identity in this song. In the second verse the narrator seems to be trying to escape the horror of reality through the use of drugs, but it is not sufficient. In the third verse he resumes his protest against God, but again receives no satisfactory answer (challenging God, but failing to get a satisfactory response, is a long Jewish tradition, beginning with Abraham in the Bible). Still, in the fourth and final verse he begs not to be left alone. Quayle is right in arguing that there is difficulty with the last lines (the absence of

quotation marks makes the identity of the speaker here somewhat ambiguous); however, it seems that the narrator wishes to end the song with a glimmer of hope, or at least purpose. Reading this song closely demonstrates its true subject matter, showing also that LC's songs contain suggestions of difficulties with the belief in God long before "You Want It Darker".

"Dress Rehearsal Rag" (222-3) – This song is designated "Free" with references to relationship, music, and addiction. Here I must protest the author's inclination to connect any mention of "razor" in the songs with the use of drugs, which does not sound the least plausible; it can be related more convincingly with either suicide or simply shaving, as in this case (see also her questionable list on pp. 120-1). Quale disregards the fact that shaving is a connecting motif in this song; the narrator looks at himself in the mirror and a voice says: "Hey Prince, you need a shave" [this unavoidably brings to mind LC's anecdote quoting his mother who told him that whenever things got bad he should stop what he was doing and have a shave, and he would feel better (Simmons, 57); a famous case when LC followed his mother's advice was during his 1972 Jerusalem concert, when he left the stage in the middle of his performance, but then went back on stage after shaving in the dressing room (ibid, 264). This scene is also in Harry Rasky's film, *Song of Leonard Cohen*.] So with an effort the narrator unwraps "a stainless steel razor blade"; "There's no hot water", but he still encourages himself to "cover up your face with soap"; this motif is lifted again in the final verse. The mention of the veins that "stand out like highways, all along your wrist" can allude to the intention of suicide (and not necessarily of shooting drugs) as does the mention of a funeral. This is clearly a song about a man in depression, locked in a cheap room, oscillating between finding a way out, which is symbolized by taking a shave, and committing a suicide, perhaps also having hallucinations but these are not necessarily the result of drugs. He is looking for various ways out, and Quale disregarded one of his options: "Why don't you join the Rosicrucians, they can give you back your hope"; this should have merited a "B" for Belief in the author's system. So on the whole I think Quale read too much into this song and too little in it.

"Diamonds In The Mine" (223-4) is designated "Free" with a reference to Belief, but strangely, the political aspects of the song were disregarded by the author. This is clearly a protest song, although perhaps not as focused as some later ones ("Democracy", for example). There's a mention of the "revolution's pride", who has clearly veered off the right way (Castro, perhaps?). There are also clear references to pollution and other concerns.

“The Window” (251-2) - Quale seems to have missed some of the overwhelmingly religious language of this song, with many references, some plain and some hidden, to the soul and its mystical ascent to heaven. Since I’ve written an elaborate interpretation of this song before, I will not repeat my arguments here (see my article, posted on the Analysis pages of the *Files*). Quale did not ignore the religious language, but still designated the song as “Free”, with “Belief” as minor subject matter, and in this I think she is wrong. I concur that this is one of LC’s songs into which different listeners tend to read different meanings, but I believe that a careful reading unveils its unquestionably religious subtext.

“To A Teacher” (307) – Here Quale ignored the dedication to A. M. Klein, one of the Montreal poets whom LC admired in his youth, and the fact that the poem appeared in his second book of poetry, *The Spice-Box of Earth*. Once again the mention of a razor seems to her, implausibly, to be a reference to drug use, although she admits that “there are other possible interpretations”. I believe that “the held-high razor, shivering every ram and son” is a clear allusion to the binding of Isaac, of which LC has often written elsewhere (“The Story Of Isaac”, *Book of Mercy*).

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I have many other specific remarks, but I’ll limit myself to only a few more observations on the author’s analysis in Part 2 of the book, while skipping numerous difficulties in Part 1:

“Lover Lover Lover” (232-3) – The author regards “father” in this song as referring to God; for this she uses external evidence, such as the fact that “Cohen has admitted to being influenced by the Persian poets Attar and Rumi, who use ‘lover’ as a way of addressing God”; she also mentions that “Father” is a term “used in Christianity and sometimes in Judaism to address God”. Although this is plausible, it is equally plausible that LC is addressing his own father, to whom he referred also in a few other songs, as well as an earthly lover.

“The Gypsy’s Wife” – The author asserts that “Gypsies and Jews often shared the same fate in Nazi Germany and perhaps Cohen has an affinity for their culture and history” (255). This is no doubt true (and see also “Almost Like The Blues”), but it is also worthwhile to mention Lorca, the poet of *Romancero Gitano* (translated as *Gypsy Ballads*) as an important influence in this regard (hence also “gypsy boy” in the much earlier “So Long, Marianne”).

“Night Comes On” (261-2) – I found Quale’s analysis of this song very strange, and I can’t see why the family in this song has to be “fictional”; it seems to me one of the cases in which the narrator and the poet come very close together, and we may indeed hear LC speaking here to his mother, father, companion and children. Strangely, she asserts unequivocally that the narrator “took to religion” “as consolation for mother’s death”; there is no indication for that in the song and it seems quite obvious that in the third verse he is “locked in this kitchen” with his companion, the mother of his children, and not with his own mother who is mentioned in the first and fourth verses.

“Hunter’s Lullaby” (266-7) – Quale disregarded the plausible interpretation that the “hunter” here is going after women, and that is why he cannot take his wife or child along with him.

“If It Be Your Will” (268-9) – Here Quale determines that the song is derived from a certain prayer for the Jewish Day of Atonement which she quotes, but there is no clear connection between the two texts (unlike the case of “Who By Fire”, where the source is clear). The prayer she quotes uses a phrase common in Jewish prayers, “*may* it be Your Will”, which is not the same as “*if* it be...”. As I explained in my talk at the Amsterdam Event last summer, the source should be looked for elsewhere, and I believe I found it in the New Testament (see the text of my talk, which is also available on the *Files*).

“First We Take Manhattan” (270-2) – Quale refers to a “minor music reference in ‘plywood violin’” in this song, but there is a plausible interpretation of it as having to do mostly with music: “to take” in the meaning of having a successful tour, the beautiful weapons are the musical instruments and so on, down to the last verse with “I used to live for music” which Quale fails to mention.

“Take This Waltz” (275-7) – Quale says that LC’s version of Lorca’s poem constitutes “a very free translation”, which may be true on one level, but on another it can be said to be a very loyal one. As she herself says, “Many of the lines still carry the essence of the original Spanish”. Changes had to be made in order to fit the poem to the tune, but these changes are always made in the spirit of the poem.

“Anthem” (285-7) – Here again Quale resorts to an outside source, even quoting from a website (supplying the long URL, but not the name of the specific article’s writer, who turns out to be one Michelle Togut, writing her private reflections in an online magazine). This she does in order to introduce the Kabbalistic notion that lies behind

the celebrated lines: “There is a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in”, as LC himself hinted and has often been discussed. Once again it would seem that limiting oneself to its linguistic evidence is not sufficient for understanding all the meanings in an LC song, but if resorting to external evidence is done once, it may be done regularly. Still, I would hold with the view that the internal evidence of a poem or a song is its most crucial aspect, and what is brought from the outside must be shown to have true relevance or stand on good authority; in this case LC’s own hint leaves little doubt as to the background of the image, but this is not the only such case.

“Here It Is” (293-4) – Quale interprets this as a religious lyric with some references to relationship, addiction and ageing; in my view this is an example for how highlighting certain words in a song can lead to a wrong interpretation. I find that when reading consistently through the song its outstanding theme turns out to be sickness, ageing, death and farewell, in a song released some 15 years before LC’s actual departure (and it is, by the way, surprising that Quale did not find death to be another regular subject area in LC’s songs). “Crown” and “rings” do not necessary indicate religious language, and even the cross, nails and hill in the last verse which clearly refer to Jesus, can also refer by extension to human suffering. Another outstanding aspect of this song is the love that remains even after death.

“Banjo” (316-7) – Quale designates this song as “free” lyrics “because it cannot be taken literally”, which raises the question: why can’t it? There is good evidence from LC himself that connects this song with the devastation of Hurricane Katrina (which Quale mentions later in connection with “Samson in New Orleans”). A search on the Forum (Banjo+Katrina) should lead to the source; it is possible that LC actually saw such an image on TV. Quale may argue that this is too obscure a hint and therefore to most listeners the song would remain open to personal interpretation; this may be true, but even without the external evidence it is not necessary to argue that the image of the floating banjo “cannot be taken literally”.

“Almost Like The Blues” (320-1) – “The great professor of all there is to know” can’t possibly refer to Roshi, as the author asserts, by any stretch of imagination. LC must have had a real professor in mind, someone like Richard Dawkins.

“A Street” (322-4) – Quale believes that like “On That Day”, which openly did so, this song refers to the events of 9/11 and to New York, but there is absolutely no evidence for that outside of private imagination.



Finally, after criticizing some of Quale's assertions I would like to quote a sentence of hers I fully identified with (it isn't the only one). Writing about "Tower Of Song", and mentioning LC's ironic quip about his "gift of a golden voice", she adds: "However, Cohen fans would respond that they prefer his songs in his own voice, because of the emotion he conveys and that to them he has indeed 'a golden voice'" (279). This has always been my opinion too.

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To the various problems that plague this book one must add a certain number of factual errors; for example, Marianne, LC's companion and muse, was not Swedish but Norwegian (P. 22); LC did not go to Israel in 1973 with the intention of enlisting in the army, for which he was not qualified, but with the idea of volunteering in a kibbutz, before he was recruited to sing for the soldiers (p. 107). The valuable table titled "References to real people and places" (pp. 174-9) suffers from several curious omissions; for example, Jesus is mentioned by name not only in "Last Year's Man" but also in "Suzanne" and in "Jazz Police"; there are several people's names missing from the list, such as Freud ("Is This What You Wanted") or J.P. Getty I&II ("Jazz Police"); and the fact that "Stories Of The Street" mentions "Spanish voices" does not necessarily mean that it takes place in Spain, since the language is spoken in other parts of the world as well (in my opinion the scene takes place most likely in Havana). There are also a considerable number of typographical errors that could have been avoided with better scrutiny (repeated words, missing punctuation marks and letters, indentation problems and more). It is also very regrettable that the author failed to include a bibliographical list or references; she sometimes mentions certain authors without bothering to mention the titles of their books (e.g. Maurice Ratcliffe, p. 27).

So who is this book for and what does it offer its potential readers? For one who has been immersed in LC's words and music for nearly five decades, the book mostly helped strengthen existing notions, but also offered some fresh ones and some food for thought. I of course can't speak for all old-time admirers (I dislike the use of "fans"), but I can imagine that many of them would find some valuable insights in the book, although like me they may be deterred by its various problems and infelicities. I would have liked to see this book reedited, corrected and brought out by an established publisher, but I guess there is but a slim chance of this happening. I would also have liked to read an article that followed academic conventions and summarized the author's findings in chapter 3 and in a few other chapters; this should be easier to achieve.

And as for newcomers to LC's songs, I'd be even more reluctant to put this book in their hands as it might plant some wrong notions in their minds. It certainly cannot serve as a sole introduction to LC's work, and familiarity with other sources is highly recommended.

LC was a creative artist for over 60 years; he absorbed various influences and created a great body of imaginative and sophisticated work. To understand everything he did might also take a lifetime. The discussion of his work is important (and that is one of the reasons why I dedicated so much time to the writing of this overlong review), and good studies may constantly advance us towards better understanding of his achievements. In my view Teresa Quayle's study is a sincere effort, which is partially valuable and partially flawed.

## **References**

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