

LEONARD COHEN'S POEMS—SONGS

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Five of Leonard Cohen's lyrics were presented to the public first as poems and later as songs. An examination of the changes made in transforming poem to song suggests some interesting aesthetic implications and yields a fundamental understanding of Cohen's craft as both poet and songwriter. "Queen Victoria and Me" in *Flowers for Hitler* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964) resurfaced in 1973 as "Queen Victoria" on his album *Live Songs* (Columbia, KC 31724). Similarly, "I Met a Woman Long Ago," "Suzanne Takes You Down," and "I Believe You Heard Your Master Sing" — all first published in *Parasites of Heaven* (Toronto and Montreal: McClelland and Stewart, 1966) — appeared two years later on the record *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (Columbia, CL 2733) as "Teachers," "Suzanne," and "Master Song." Another poem from *Parasites of Heaven*, "I Stepped into an Avalanche," turned up in 1971 on *Songs of Love and Hate* (Columbia, C 30103) under the title "Avalanche." Since "Suzanne" has been recorded by other singers as well as Cohen, its history is more complicated than that of the other four songs. I shall therefore discuss it last.

Each time Cohen transformed a poem into a song, changes, both major and minor, crept in. The song "Queen Victoria" improves upon the poem "Queen Victoria and Me" by eliding the fourth and fifth lines ("the slim unlovely virgin anyone would lay/the white figure floating among German beards") into a single line, "the slim unlovely virgin floating among German beards,"¹ eliminating a reference that violates the decorum that Cohen associates with Victoria. Otherwise the song differs from the poem only in shifting "and make her read little Bibles" to the more colloquial "make her read those little Bibles."

"Teachers" is full of minor changes: only the fourth verse remains precisely as it first appeared in the poem "I Met a Woman Long Ago." There are several kinds of modification. Cohen adds little words to fill out the weak beats in his basically iambic rhythm. The second line thus changes from "hair black as black can go" to "Her hair the black that black can go."² Conversely, "wished" in line 10 becomes "had" in the interests of rhythm. Secondly, where the poem sometimes reports an event, sometimes dramatizes it, the song almost always dramatizes and emphasizes the involvement of the speaker. Thus, "Are you teachers of the heart?" (line 25) becomes "Are you teachers of my heart?" The metre of the last two lines of verse 7 ("Have I carved enough? / You are a bone") is filled out in such a way as to emphasize that this is a conversation: "'Have I carved enough, my Lord?' / 'Child, you are a bone.'" The conclusion of the second-last verse shifts for similar reasons from "Are you a teacher of the heart? / A chorus answered Yes" to "'Are you the teachers of my heart?' / 'We teach old hearts to rest.'" Thirdly, the logic of the second-last verse is better in the song. In the poem, the speaker seems to be questioning only one teacher, though his answer comes from a "chorus." The song leaves the identity and number of

¹My transcription from the record.

²Except for "Queen Victoria," the lyrics of the songs discussed in this paper appear in two of the song books Cohen has published. When quoting songs, I follow the text given in these books, noting any variations from the recorded version. The lyrics of "Teachers" appear on p. 82 of *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (New York: Amsco Music Publishing Co., 1969).

those questioned indefinite in line 1 and then uses the plural in line 3, thus preparing for the answering chorus. A fourth kind of change occurs only in the last verse. There, in addition to supplying words for the weak beats in his metre and making the situation more immediate by emphasizing his personal involvement and using direct dialogue, Cohen introduces repetition. The last verse in the poem is

Teachers, are my lessons done
or must I learn another one?
They cried: Dear Sir or Madam,
Daughter, Son.

This becomes

"Well,³ Teachers, are my lessons done?
I cannot do another one."
They laughed and laughed and said
"Well, child, are your lessons done?
Are your lessons done?
Are your lessons done?"

The new conclusion is just as paradoxical as the old, turning the question back to the questioner. The repetition tells the listener that this is indeed the end of the song and asserts the unanswerability of the question.⁴

"I Believe You Heard Your Master Sing" also underwent many subtle changes when it became "Master Song." Some appear to be accidental, since they affect neither sense nor metre. Thus "while I lay" (line 2) becomes "When I was," "I believe" (line 3) becomes "I suppose," "a numberless man of a pair" (line 11) becomes "a numberless man in a chair," and so on. Similarly minor is the shift from "has" to "had" in line 12 which moves the change in verb tense that occurs in the second verse to one line later.⁵ Most other modifications are of the sort noted in "Teachers." "And" and "that" are the words most frequently added for metrical reasons. Many minor revisions emphasize the personal involvement of the singer. The concluding lines of the first verse are changed from "O love did you come . . ." to "And now do you come . . .," the present tense making certain that the listener thinks of the singer as exploring his sense of betrayal and loss *now*.⁶

³The word "well" does not appear in the song book, though Cohen sings it, and it is on the sheet of lyrics that was sold with the record album. The sheet is much closer typographically to the poem, as it omits quotation marks and most other punctuation except that at the conclusion of a verse. It, like the song book, contains minor (and different) variations from the words Cohen actually sang. ⁴There are two other differences between poem and song. Cohen replaced the "knew" of the poem with "met" in line 9 and, omitting the first line of verse 5 and the last two words of the fourth line of the stanza, added the new line, "My silver spoon." Neither alteration seems particularly significant.

⁵This change appears in *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, which prints the lyrics for "Master Song" on p. 79, but in singing the song Cohen omitted the "Who has/had," beginning the line with "Just."

⁶A change in verse 5 offers a counter example. In the poem the verse ends:

My body is growing numb
O love I hear your master sing
Your shirt is all undone,

where the song concludes:

My body has grown numb
O now you hear your master sing
Your shirt is all undone.

Cohen's motives for moving from present to past and from "I" to "you" are obscure, but, to me, the effect of the modification is insignificant.

Several times "the" becomes "this" ("And will you kneel beside *this* bed . . . I've lain by *this* window long enough"). The effect is to keep the focus on the speaker. His involvement is declared, not merely implied, as "and he touches your mouth now so suddenly bare / of the kisses you had on before" becomes "Then he touches your lips, now so suddenly bare / Of all the kisses we put on sometime before." This last quotation includes one of the three times that the song differs from the poem in being vaguer. Why "*sometime* before"? Likewise, the penultimate verse of the poem, in which the speaker rejects the lady for being shop-worn, concludes: "Let's say you came back too soon." This becomes "Let's say you came back sometime too soon." And again, in the next verse, the tempter who stole the lady away is depicted as having been rescued earlier by the speaker from "starving in a mystery." In the song he is "starving in some deep mystery." Why these imprecisions? Are they attempts to fuzz further what clarity of mind the listener may have after subjecting himself to the confusions of the logic of the song, for any hard-headed examination of the speaker's role in the story reveals him as victimizer and not as a victim deserving our sympathy? The final notable revision is one involving repetition. Cohen rounds the conclusion of the song by repeating, with two minor variations, the opening verse. This device is effective, as it often is in Cohen's songs, because it reminds the listener of the situation that moved the singer to tell the story and because it brings attention firmly back where Cohen wants it, to the sacrificial, pity-drawing figure of the speaker: "And now do you come back to bring / Your prisoner wine and bread?"

When Cohen shaped the poem "I Stepped into an Avalanche" into the song "Avalanche," he lengthened many lines by one to four syllables, adding such words as "this," "your," "here," "the," "that," "just," "those," "quite," and "now."⁷ Several times he expands single words into two or three, and three times he achieves a longer line by means of repetition. These three instances occur in the concluding lines of stanzas. Verse 1, for example, which in the poem ends, "Must learn to serve me well," in the song finishes, "You must learn, learn to serve me well." All expansions are necessitated by the musical shape Cohen chose for his song. The particular method of expansion — repetition — that appears in the three concluding lines has the effect, as Cohen no doubt intended, of aurally asserting that a verse is coming to an end.

In addition to changes that lengthen the line and several unimportant modifications (for example, "ask" for "beg"), there are three revisions of some significance. In the song, the conclusion of the second verse is left in the third person ("He does not ask for your company") like the rest of the verse but unlike the poem, which uses the first person ("I do not beg for company"). It is not clear to me why Cohen made this revision. The changes in the final two lines of each of the last two verses, however, have obvious effect. The opening four verses present the hunchback's material independence and his emotional self-sufficiency, particularly from fumbling, inadequate, charitable attempts to give him material or emotional solace. He declares that he can teach people how to "conquer pain" if they are willing to learn how to approach him. Then, in the fifth and sixth verses, where the

⁷See *Songs of Love and Hate* (New York: Amsco Music Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 20-21. There are three variations between the song as sung by Cohen and the published lyrics. The record has "hill" (line 4), not "hills"; "for your gold" (line 9), not "for gold"; and "greed" (line 26) like the poem but unlike the song book, which prints "creed."

revisions occur, the mood shifts. The fifth, which reveals the hunchback suddenly vulnerable, yearning for "you," runs in the poem:

I have begun to claim you
 I who have no greed
 I have begun to long for you
 I who have no need⁸
 The avalanche you're knocking at
 is uninhabited.

Here the last two lines are simply puzzling. They seem to mean that, in spite of his longing, the hunchback has suddenly made himself unavailable to the approaches of the one for whom he yearns. The song replaces these lines with: "You say you've gone away from me / but I can feel you when you breathe." These maintain his mood of longing, his annoyance at his own vulnerability and his sense of rejection, while implying that the "you" is more involved than she/he admits. This notion introduces the mood of the last verse. There the poem declares:

Do not dress in rags for me
 I know you are not poor
 Don't love me so fiercely
 when you know you are not sure
 It is your world beloved
 It is your flesh I wear.

Here the speaker returns to his earlier rejection of inadequate emotional offerings and suddenly turns the tables on "you" in the last two lines by implying that his own grotesqueness, his suffering, and his alienation are actually shared by "you." The song makes this clearer, its final two lines reading: "It is your turn beloved / it is your flesh that I wear."

Of all the poems Cohen used as a basis for songs, "Suzanne Takes You Down" and "Suzanne," his best known poem and song, have the most interesting and complex history. In re-using his poem as a song, Cohen made many minor revisions and substitutions, particularly at the beginning of lines. These appear to be largely whimsical. Seemingly slight changes in the last lines of the song, however, dramatically alter the meaning of the lyric. The first verse of poem and song describes the way the "half crazy" Suzanne manages to create in "you" the ability to love, to feel, to trust, and to desire continuity. In the poem, the verse concludes: "and you know that she can trust you / because you've touched her perfect body / with your mind." The meaning of the middle verse is unclear, but it seems to imply that Suzanne's power over supernatural experience is greater than Christ's. Then the final verse presents physical details through which Suzanne "gets you on her wave-length," offering an experience parallel to the one in the first verse. Once again Suzanne is the leader, the alchemist who enchants "you." Then the poem ends, "and you're sure that she can find you / because

⁸In the song, the first four lines of this verse run as follows:

I have begun to long for you
 I who have no greed (*creed* in song book)
 I have begun to ask for you
 I who have no need.

she's touched her perfect body / with her mind." This is odd to say the least. The experience evoked involves two people. Its intensity comes in the first verse from Suzanne's ability not only to reach out towards "you" but to make "you" reach back. The conclusion of the last verse, the action of which recapitulates the first, seems curiously flat since all experience seems to be contained within Suzanne. The ending of the song, on the contrary, ("And you know that you can trust her / For she's touched your perfect body / with her mind")⁹ is much more satisfying. Now the success of the mystical experience Suzanne has wrought is revealed by Suzanne and "you" exchanging strengths. Where, at the end of the first verse, Suzanne trusts "you," for "you've touched her perfect body / with your mind," at the end of the third, the "trust" flows from "you" to Suzanne since "she's touched your perfect body / with her mind."

The saga of "Suzanne" does not end here. Judy Collins recorded the song on *In My Life* (Elektra, EKL 320) in a well-known version whose lyrics and music appeared in *Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine* (Aug./Sept., 1967).¹⁰ In addition to many minor changes, Judy Collins made several significant ones. She replaced the opening lines of the last verse down to "Salvation Army counters" with the opening lines of the first verse, thus creating a repetition that did not exist in the original. Then she changed the conclusion of the first and last verses in such a way that Cohen's idea was reversed. Verse 1 thus concludes: "And you think you'll maybe trust her / For she's touched your perfect body with her mind." And the last verse ends: "And you think maybe you'll trust her for you've / touched her perfect body with your mind."¹¹ Comparison with Cohen's version of his own song reveals not only that this change reverses Cohen's order, but also that the switch is not as tidy as his, for the second-last lines remain the same instead of reversing.

Nancy Wilson, who recorded the song for *The Capitol Records Guide to Canadian Content Programming: An Anthology of Top Canadian Performers and Songs in a Two Record Set* (Capitol, SPRO 101), also varies from Cohen's words. Like Judy Collins, she introduces the third verse with the first four lines of the first. She invents yet another way of handling the final lines of the first and third verses as she uses Judy Collins' second-last lines (with minor variations) and then concludes both first and third verses with Cohen's concluding line.

There may be other treatments of "Suzanne," or of Cohen's other poem-songs, that I have not discovered, but there is no need to go beyond the examples given here. They provide ample warning of the licence singers take with a composer's lyrics.

Cohen's own song versions of his poems prompt mixed reactions. As we have seen, his sensitivity to the movement of song appears in the addition and subtraction of small words that standardize metre. His awareness of his auditors' need to have verse units defined and a sense of ending established

⁹*Songs of Leonard Cohen*, p. 43. The word "that" is neither on the sheet of lyrics that accompanied the record nor in Cohen's own performance of the song.

¹⁰Judy Collins' recording and the publication of "Suzanne" in *Sing Out!* preceded Cohen's own recording on *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, which did not appear in *Schwann's Catalogue* until March of 1968. Cohen copyrighted the song in 1966. It is marginally possible that he modified the song after Judy Collins made her recording, but this seems unlikely since the song was not given a new copyright in 1968 and since "Suzanne Takes You Down," which was published in 1966, the year the song was copyrighted, is much closer to Cohen's song "Suzanne" than to Judy Collins' version of it.

¹¹I quote from *Sing Out!*, p. 17.

are met astutely with well-handled repetition. More difficult to assess are Cohen's changes in nuance, tone, and voice that focus attention more firmly on the suffering speaker. Here the shift from the formal statement of the poems to the casual conversation of the songs can be seen as a sensitive response to the more personal, immediate relationship between singer and audience. Often, too, the changes have the poetically beneficial effect of tightening the structure and logic of the lyrics by revealing attitudes latent in the poems. But what is disturbing is the self-indulgent, self-pitying speaker that the songs reveal even more clearly than the poems. I find myself wondering whether Cohen's negative picture of himself as a suffering and sacrificial figure is not fed and sustained by the recurrent experience of his male listeners identifying and his female listeners sympathizing with him, and whether this experience will ultimately undercut his capacity for distancing and objectifying the speaking voice in his poems.

In these five poems that become songs Cohen proves that he is capable of revising to achieve consistent tone, logical development, and balanced form. It is satisfying to see how fruitful his reworkings of poems can be. What is frustrating is the fact that most of Cohen's canon would have profited from such care and attention. Too often his poems feel half-finished — their ideas or form not fully worked through, their vocabulary not always appropriate. One suspects that Cohen does not take his poetry seriously enough to give his inspirations the labour and the time they need if their full force is to be realized. The case of "Suzanne Takes You Down" and "Suzanne" is just further evidence of his failure to care sufficiently about his work. The song version of this poem is so much tighter and so much more aesthetically and emotionally satisfying that it is particularly annoying that Cohen did not revise his poem for his *Selected Poems 1956-1968* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968). This and the fact that Cohen has proven his ability to revise effectively make me feel that many of the inadequacies in his work spring not from a natural incapacity but from mere laziness.

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