

## «FIVE YEARS WITH THE LENGTH OF FIVE YEARS»: ECHOES OF WORDSWORTH IN THE WORKS OF LEONARD COHEN

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The first line of «A Long Letter from F.», Book Two in Leonard Cohen's novel *Beautiful Losers* (1966), is perhaps the most obvious reference to Wordsworth to be found in the works of this Canadian author. F., the dominant member of the pair of characters around whom the story is built, writes a letter to his friend, the unnamed Narrator of the first part of the book. It is his last message, the final point in his instruction of the Narrator (F. calls himself «a teacher»), since the letter is to be opened five years after F.'s death.

My dear friend,

Five years with the length of five years. I do not know exactly where this letter finds you<sup>1</sup>.

This line will not be overlooked by those who know their basic Wordsworth well. F. chooses to begin with what is a distorted version of the opening lines of «Tintern Abbey»:

Five years have past; five summers, with the length of five long winters!<sup>2</sup>

Although this may be the most readily identifiable allusion to Wordsworth, it is not the only one to be found in the works of Leonard Cohen, both prose and poetry. In the following pages, I simply intend to bring together some examples of passages which in my opinion either allude to the works of the English Romantic poet or are influenced by him. They may, perhaps, contribute to a

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), p. 183. All further references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, «Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey», in Thomas Hutchinson, ed., *Wordsworth: Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 163. All further references to Wordsworth are to this edition.

fuller study of the works of a writer whose later success as a singer and composer has to a certain extent drawn attention away from his printed literary production<sup>3</sup>.

Echoes of Wordsworth can be traced in Cohen's earliest poetry. The poem «On Certain Incredible Nights», included in his first book, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956), seems to follow a typical Wordsworthian pattern in its construction: a sensory perception, remembered and described by the poet, gives way to a contemplative reflection in an exclamatory tone in the second part of the poem:

On certain incredible nights,  
 When your flesh is drenched with moon  
 And the windows are wide open:  
 Your breasts are sculptured  
 From the soft inside of darkness  
 And your belly is a fragment of a great bright flask.  
 Thank-God a peninsula of sheet across your waist  
 Imprisons you upon my bed.  
 O not toward the flory  
 Of the beautifully infested outside skies,  
 Where girls of light are floating up from every room,  
 Would I a moment turn my head,  
 As other men have innocently done!<sup>4</sup>.

Admittedly, the style and imagery of the first part are not comparable to Wordsworth's, but the poem does develop along the lines of the structure I have mentioned, and the last five lines are very much in the mood of the final reflections —so often ended by an exclamation mark— that can be found in Wordsworth, for example in many of the sonnets in the «River Duddon» series.

In Cohen's third book of poems, *Flowers for Hitler* (1964), there is one which contains a tribute to the visionary power of the poet. In the third part of it we find the following lines:

From a hill I watched  
 the apple blossoms breathe  
 the silver out of the night  
 like fish eating the spheres  
 of air out of the river  
 So the illumined night fed  
 the sleeping orchards  
 entering the vaults of branches  
 like a holy procession  
 Long live the Power of Eyes

<sup>3</sup> Before appearing in public as a singer of his own compositions in 1967, Cohen had published *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956), *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961), *Flowers for Hitler* (1964) and *Parasites of Heaven* (1966) (poetry) and also *The Favorite Game* (1962) and *Beautiful Losers* (1966) (novels). In 1972 he published *The Energy of Slaves* (poetry).

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Cohen, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (Toronto: Mc Clelland & Stewart, 1966), p. 58.

Long live the invisible steps  
men can read on a mountain...<sup>5</sup>

The very situation in which the poet places himself, contemplating nature atop a hill, may remind us again of «Tintern Abbey», and this impression could be reinforced by the fact that the last three lines quoted appear to allude quite directly to Wordsworth's poetic vision of nature as expressed in the poem «Composed upon an Evening of extraordinary Splendour and Beauty», part III:

Yon hazy ridges to their eyes  
Present a glorious scale,  
Climbing suffused with sunny air  
To stop - no record hath told where!<sup>6</sup>

Some of the poems in *Flowers for Hitler* have titles worded in the fashion of the summary circumstantial explanations so often used by Wordsworth and other poets of his time; constructions like «On Hearing a Name Long Unspoken», «The Failure of a Secular Life» or «On the Sickness of my Love» bring to mind many others which are found in Wordsworth, such as «On the Power of Sound», «Obligations of Civil to Religious Liberty» and «On the Death of His Majesty». It should be noticed, however, that in these poems the coincidence in style lies merely in the form of the title. The poems themselves could hardly be called «Wordsworthian» in their manner or content, and Cohen is probably playing with something which Wordsworth was very much aware of: the English poet warned his readers that, on perusing his poems, they might even question the right to call them poetry, since they did not answer to the kind of writing that people expected under that name<sup>7</sup>. The same awareness of readers' expectations is also behind Cohen's choice of titles. A disparity between the type of poem suggested by the title and the actual text renders the reading more forceful. It has been pointed out that Cohen is fond of expressing contradictions in the titles of his books and records<sup>8</sup>; the use of Wordsworthian models to name some of his poems appears to be justified by a similar desire to produce a paradoxical impression on the reader. In fact, titles seem to be quite important in *Flowers for Hitler*, and of course that of the book itself is the most striking one, especially when we learn that the author is Jewish. Here too, the effect is based on the meaning that we normally attribute to the act of giving flowers, but in one of the poems in the book, which apparently bears no relation to Hitler, we find an explanation:

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Cohen, *Flowers for Hitler* (Toronto: Mc Clelland & Stewart, 1972), p. 49. Further references are to this edition.

<sup>6</sup> *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, p. 359.

<sup>7</sup> See the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (*Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, p. 734).

<sup>8</sup> «Les titres de plusieurs de ses oeuvres rappellent à chaque instant à quel point il demeure, depuis des années, au coeur de cette problématique: c'est pourquoi les perdants sont aussi magnifiques [*Beautiful Losers*], les chansons d'amour sont aussi chansons de haine [*Songs of Love and Hate*] ... les esclaves possèdent aussi une énergie [*The Energy of Slaves*]; et le paradis referme aussi des parasites [*Parasites of Heaven*]». Jacques Vassal and J.D. Briere, *Leonard Cohen* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1974), pp. 63-64.

Flowers do not stand for love,  
or if they do - not mine<sup>9</sup>.

Wordsworth's influence on Cohen is felt more deeply than might be suggested by the examples mentioned here in another remarkable passage found in *Beautiful Losers*. The allusion to «Tintern Abbey» in F.'s letter is not, in fact, the first time that we come across an echo of the poet in the novel. In Book One, the Narrator is engaged in the study of the life of St. Katherine Tekakwhita, the first Canadian Indian martyr. His friend F. has urged him to pursue his knowledge of saints as a part of the «treatment» he has designed for him. At one point, remembering his friend's advice, the deranged Narrator goes into a long and mediated dissertation on the nature of sainthood:

What did F. mean by advising me to go down on a saint? What is a saint? A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago. ... It is a kind of balance that is his glory. ... Something in him so loves the world that he gives himself to the laws of gravity and chance. ... he is at home in the world. He can love the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart. It is good to have among us such men, such balancing monsters of love<sup>10</sup>.

This penetrating analysis, written by the Narrator in one of the moments when his mind is more lucid and his language more coherent<sup>11</sup>, has more than mere overtones of the famous and often-quoted passage which Wordsworth included in the Preface to the 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*:

What is a Poet? ... He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with a more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; ... who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him<sup>12</sup>.

The affinity between the two texts is not merely formal, although in this respect it should be remarked that there is a clear change in the Narrator's style when he begins this passage. His writing, often made up of apparently unrelated sentences which seem to follow his stream of consciousness (the ten lines preceding this excerpt are a case in point), suddenly becomes rational, smooth and con-

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Cohen, «The Glass Dog», in *Flowers for Hitler*, p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>11</sup> M. Ondaatje has compared the styles of F. and the Narrator. Of the latter, he says: «The Narrator... drowns in imagery. [His material weaknesses] are all physical parallels of his mental state, his inability to get out what he wants to say... His art is tortured and unproductive... His 'book' is the most tortured piece of writing imaginable». Michael Ondaatje, *Leonard Cohen* (Toronto: Mc Clelland & Stewart, 1970), p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Wordsworth: *Poetical Works*, p. 737.

nected - and similar to Wordsworth's. But there is more than that. The traits ascribed to the Saint have much to do with those assigned to the Poet, for certainly the latter, in being endowed with special feelings has achieved human possibilities not attainable by other men. The Saint described by the Narrator in *Beautiful Losers* is, it should be noted, defined by purely human qualities, and this keeps him on the same level with the Poet. One is happy to be alive, the other feels at home in the world. The Saint's balancing power has its counterpart in the Poet's comprehensive soul; this makes them exceptional, but thoroughly human.

Both Poet and Saint are seen as being well rooted in the world; they know and love their fellow men, and they can feel with them. And, of course, they both have something to give:

... it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time, perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs...<sup>13</sup>.

In writing, Wordsworth says, the Poet's ultimate aim is to give pleasure. The Saint in *Beautiful Losers* cannot re-arrange the world, but —and this would spring from his «comprehensive soul»— he can provide a balance for his fellow men. The Saint also has something to say; the close correspondence between Saint and Poet that Cohen's text implies, leads to an identification of one with the other. Thus this reflection on the role of the saint is closely linked with Cohen's ever-present concern with the role of the author. Speaking about *Beautiful Losers* in an interview, Leonard Cohen said:

I was writing about a model of sainthood and not my own model and it doesn't represent my own programme... Any saint is a kind of con man in that he puts himself across... he somehow understands that there is nothing... and to give people comfort... he puts forward a number of things... He's got to give some answer... It really doesn't matter what the answer is as long as it is delivered with the right kind of music and compassion<sup>14</sup>.

The last reference to music brings to mind Cohen's position as a composer and singer, the new dimension of his art which he first made public over ten years after he had published his first book. This vision of the saint as a comforter, a modified and perhaps more pessimistic version of the one given in *Beautiful Losers*, leads us to feel that, in the end, Cohen is dealing with the problem of his own position as an author. It is not something new; in his work there are frequent allusions to the function of the writer or the singer as regards his audience and society. In approaching the subject in *Beautiful Losers*, Cohen reformulated for our age the more personal part of Wordsworth's poetics: the idea

<sup>13</sup> Wordsworth: *Poetical Works*, p. 737.

<sup>14</sup> Leonard Cohen in an interview with Eli Mandel. Quoted by Michael Ondaatje, *Leonard Cohen*, p. 55.

of «a man speaking to men». Cohen's extremely individualist approach to literature —and this includes his songs, of course— makes us feel that he never wants us to forget this aspect: behind every line we read or hear, there is a human being. The Narrator in *Beautiful Losers* says it openly (making use of a vocative often employed by Wordsworth): «O Reader, do you know that a man is writing this?»<sup>15</sup>.



<sup>15</sup> Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers*, p. 130.