

On Leonard Cohen's 'Famous Blue Raincoat'

by Christopher Rollason, Ph.D, Metz, France

*This article was published as part of a multi-voice discussion of Leonard Cohen's song of 1970, 'Famous Blue Raincoat', in Essays on Canadian Writing, No 69, Winter 1999 - Leonard Cohen issue (ed. Stephen Scobie), pp. 111-113. The same volume was also issued in book form as **Intricate Preparations: Writing Leonard Cohen**, ed. Stephen Scobie, Toronto (Canada): ECW Press, 2000 (same page nos.).*

'New York is cold', the narrator of 'Famous Blue Raincoat' declares, 'but I like where I'm living'. The Big Apple location plunges the listener into the world of the great 1960s songwriters - the city's famous harsh winters also feature in Paul Simon's 'The Boxer' ('the New York City winters aren't bleeding me') and in Bob Dylan's very first self-penned song (or first in track sequence of the two on his debut album), 'Talkin' New York' ('somebody could freeze right to the bone ... New York Times said it was the coldest winter in seventeen years').

But in Cohen's song, the snowy city half-conceals the heat and ferment of social revolution. Quaint and archaic as it may seem from the neo-conservative 90s, the 60s and early 70s were a time of social experimentation, to a degree that many have now forgotten, or preferred to forget. One of the beliefs of the day that held brief sway in certain radical circles was 'non-jealousy' - a corollary of the phenomena of 'open couples' and 'multiple relationships' which some at the time favoured in both theory and practice - even if to recall all that today might seem like what Dylan, in 'My Back Pages', calls 'memorising politics of ancient history'.

This aspect of the period's social history is touched on only very marginally in the work of Dylan - indeed, only retrospectively, in the Montague Street episode in 'Tangled Up In Blue', his song of 1974 that is also his farewell to the 60s. In Cohen's work of the 60s and 70s, however, non-jealousy is a recurrent theme. 'Sisters of Mercy', from his first album ('Songs of Leonard Cohen', 1968), contains the line 'And you won't make me jealous if I hear that they sweetened your night', and 'Paper Thin Hotel', from 'Death of A Ladies' Man' (1977), offers up the theme with a remarkably stark explicitness. Even as late as 'Various Positions' (1985), we hear, on the song 'Coming Back To You', these lines: 'But I have to deal with envy/When you choose the precious few/Who've left their pride on the other side of/Coming back to you'.

'Famous Blue Raincoat' is centred on that same 60s theme. Cohen's text throws out the gauntlet to traditional views of monogamy and exclusiveness in marriage - to the conventional wisdom that prevailed before, and now prevails after, the experimentation of the revolutionary period. The song is in the form of a letter, from the narrator, 'L. Cohen' (best taken as a fictional character), who is also the husband of 'Jane', to an unnamed third (male) person who at some point in the past engaged with 'Jane' in a practical demonstration of non-exclusivist interpersonal

relations: 'And you treated my woman to a flake of your life/And when she came back she was nobody's wife'. The writer of the letter tells the addressee that he forgives him, and even claims that the whole experience was fruitful: 'I guess that I miss you, I guess I forgive you/I'm glad that you stood in my way ... thanks for the trouble you took from her eyes'. Not only that, he invites his alter ego ('my brother, my killer') to repeat the experiment, some day: 'If you ever come by here for Jane or for me/I want you to know that your enemy is sleeping/I want you to know that his woman is free'.

This gesture could be seen as one of extreme, even Christ-like magnanimity - or, indeed, as a message from a social universe on the verge of eruption, a signal from the vanguard of a revolution that never quite happened. Such a reading seems to me, at any rate, rather more useful than trying to read the song as autobiography. It is of course true that this song-as-letter is signed 'Sincerely, L. Cohen', and that in other songs too Cohen allows a signature to enter: on 'New Skin for the Old Ceremony' (1974), in the title of 'Field Commander Cohen' (but that song is clearly a fiction); and on 'Recent Songs' (1979) in the line 'My darling says, "Leonard, just let it go by"', at the end of 'Ballad of the Absent Mare' (but that song is visibly dealing in symbol and allegory).

However, all these signatures are best taken as pointing not to the individual Leonard Cohen, but to the producer of the text, and, therefore, to the fictional entity 'Leonard Cohen' created out of the body of texts signed with that name (equally, the 'Bob Dylan' whose name appears in the song title of 1963 'Bob Dylan's Dream' is not the historical Zimmerman-Dylan, but a fictional character, dreamed into being by a series of dream-texts). Judy Collins seems, indeed, to have got the point in her cover version of Cohen's song (featured on her 1971 album 'Living'). In contrast to Emmylou Harris, who, in her version of 'Absent Mare' on her album 'Cowgirl's Prayer', mutates Cohen's title into 'Ballad of a Runaway Horse', Collins makes no attempt to 'feminise' the song's 'I' or to reverse its gender attributions - and, notably, does not transmogrify the signature into 'J. Collins', but retains the 'Sincerely, L. Cohen'.

I do not mean to suggest that the 'L. Cohen' of 'Famous Blue Raincoat' is - any more than the 'Bob Dylan' of 'Bob Dylan's Dream' - a fiction in the sense of being a free-floating, arbitrary construct dissociated from all human history. The point I am trying to make is that this song - like many other songs by Cohen and by Dylan - communicates certain experiences and sensations of the 1960s that were ultimately collective, and does so all the more powerfully by operating, not through the register of unmediated autobiography, but through that of a resonant and multilevelled fiction.

Chris Rollason