Leonard Cohen: The Modern Troubadour

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Abstract
The following essay portrays parallels between the work of a contemporary singer-songwriter and author Leonard Cohen and the medieval Occitan troubadours. The main focus is put on the importance of the feminine character in their works. This character is often discouraging to any close intimacies – as far as the world of literature is concerned – but the singers are subjected / subject themselves to persistence in its worship. The paper does not want to prove any direct relatedness, but to highlight the importance of the tradition of the troubadour song and its echoes in the popular culture as we know it.

Keywords
Leonard Cohen; song; Troubadours; poetry; medieval; woman; feminine; music; musician; religion.

Introduction

In the first book ever published on the singer, the Canadian critic Michael Ondaatje characterised the persona of Leonard Cohen as follows: "Cohen himself is the twentieth-century troubadour lover who in separation transforms his losses into ethereal images.[1]" Thus he linked him with the tradition of the troubadour poetry in academia. This cognomen "troubadour" has been in use ever since almost in every article, book, journal or magazine dealing with the singer. In addition, newspaper headlines, now almost on daily basis, read: "Leonard Cohen: A Troubadour's Journey;[2]" "Leonard Cohen: The Troubles of a Troubadour;[3]" "Leonard Cohen, a Troubadour for Our Times;[4]" "Leonard Cohen, Troubadour of Love[5]" to name a few.

This article investigates what it means to be the troubadour poet in the contemporary era and how certain qualities of the troubadour poetry manifest in the work of the contemporary singer-songwriter.

L'amour courtois

The thematic of the troubadour poetry was courtly love (*fin'amor*), which is a type of *love* distinguished for the fact that it ennobles or refines male lover. The often unresponsive *feminine*

1 Michael Ondaatje, *Leonard Cohen* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), 21–22.

2 Jonathan Kirsch, "Leonard Cohen: A Troubadour's Journey," *Jewish Journal*, September 19, 2012, http://www.jewishjournal.com/books/article/leonard_cohen_a_troubadours_journey.

3 Ted McDonnell, "Leonard Cohen – Troubles of a Troubadour," September 12, 2015, http://www.tedmcdonnell.com/blog/2015/9/leonard-cohen---troubles-of-a-troubadour.

4 Alexis Dimyan, "Leonard Cohen, a Troubadour for Our Times." *Brecon Nomad*, January 13, 2012, https://alexisdimyan.wordpress.com/2012/01/13/hello-world.

5 Patricia Zohn, "Leonard Cohen, Troubadour of Love." *The Huffington Post*, last updated May 25, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/patricia-zohn/culture-zohn-leonard-cohe_b_204424.html.

character of the troubadour lyric is elevated and worshipped like a religious ideal. The poet matures in his suffering for its beauty and qualifies himself to experience *joi,* the state of completeness that is the result of the union with his Lady.

> Joy, which when all is said and done is the ultimate objective, is the metamorphosis of individuals into another, amalgamated entity that has nothing more in common with what people willingly say about procreation.[6]

The "amalgamated entity" of the above quote represents poet's masculine and feminine parts in union with one another. For many, *courtly love* stands for platonic love, however, *fin'amor* was not platonic at all as many of the medieval poems reveal.

Joi is the consummation of desire bringing about almost spiritual wholeness of body and mind. According to Jean Frappier, the term comes from the Latin word *gaudium.* It describes internal mental state which may elevate man to such an extent that it gives him a sense of the complete recovery. [7] In southern variations of the Occitan language *joi* appeared as *gaug* (read as "gautsch") with the meaning of "pleasure." Alexander Denomy claims that its origins may be found in Christian teachings. "I am fairly sure that the troubadours built their idea of *Jois* as a habit and virtue resultant upon love from the Christian teaching of grace.[8]" This is an ideological statement, yet there is some validity in it if we see the grace as a favour of G-d and understand how it works in the troubadour myth. The succumbing of the long-desired and often aristocratic woman to the arms of the poet may be, actually, understood to be a favour of the arbiter to consummate their clandestine relationship.

Courtly conduct is characterised by *cortezia*, a special behavioural pattern which includes *jovens*, a metaphor for the coexistence in mutual generosity and love towards one another;[9] *mezura,* the absolute self-control that would prove that a suitor merits reward; *assag* which consists of being able to restrain oneself in touching a naked lady with whom one is sharing a bed; and other means to test poet's worthiness.

Desire for the Lady has the potential to make her *victim* virtuous, depending if he is moderate in his actions or not. Those who cannot love and postpone the consummation of their longing to the very extremes, cannot be considered courtly. Humility and servility also belong to the basic troubadour virtues and, as reward, the poet may have been allowed to touch the Lady's hand, or he may have been given a ring or other token of love for his service.[10]

These concepts fully developed at the courts of Southern medieval princess in 11th and 12th centuries, however, it is difficult to discern to which extent *fin'amor* is an artificial myth surviving in the literary works of the period or a dignified way of conduct current among chivalrous knights. It is equally difficult to distinguish who is the subject addressed in the troubadour poetry. Some critics see it as the feminine spirit that is more likely to be in relation with the poet's soul or mind,

6 Jean Markale, *Courtly Love: The Path of Sexual Initiation* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2000), 100.

7 Josef Prokop and Jiří Holub, *Přátelé, přiléhavý složím vers* (Praha: Argo, 2001), 249.

8 Alexander J. Denomy, "Courtly Love and Courtliness," *Speculum* 28, no. 1 (1953): 45–46.

9 Prokop and Holub, *Přátelé, přiléhavý složím vers, 249*. The term is perhaps *derived from the Arabic poetry and the word fata*, meaning young, *noble*, *and generous* or *futuwwa*, representing youth, generosity and nobility.

10 Denomy, "Courtly Love and Courtliness," 62

such as Robert Charles Cholakian who describe *its* necessity for the full development of the poet's personality.[11] Other possible explanations are that the Lady has spiritual links to Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, or to the Mother Goddess. However, the reader of the troubadour poetry feels that it is at once a Goddess and a real woman.

Canso and the literary character of midon and the divine feminine

Canso is a song structure consisting, especially in the first stages of development, of three stanzas.[12] Later on, we can meet five, six, seven stanzas (*coblas*) ending with the shorter stanza called *tornada* or *envois.* The song tells a love story in which there usually is a rejected lover, a beloved woman and sometimes a third party, such as a husband or king, or just a lover's adversary. The woman is often anonymous, and, based on her qualities, seen as a divine, or semi-divine being. She was frequently described by the term *midon*, the word containing "the feminine version of 'my' (*mia*) and the masculine noun for 'lord' (*domnus*).[13]" This invention aimed to protect her real identity, as well as another figure of speech, *senhal,* which described a *midon* in abstract terms, such as "Bon Vezi" ("Good Neighbour'), "Bels Vezers" ("Lovely View"), "Miels de Domna" ("Better than Woman") or "Belhs Deportz" ("Lovely Pleasure") in order to protect her real identity.

Leonard Cohen has named several of his songs in a similar way: "Winter Lady," "Lady Midnight," "Our Lady of Solitude, or "The Darkness," perhaps not to protect *midon's* identity but to speak of the *feminine* element to which he ascribes the qualities of cold, night, solitude and darkness.

There is also a possibility that the word *midon* was influenced by the Arabic poetry in which two terms with the same meaning as *midon* exist: *sayyīdī* (an appellation to the Lord in the feminine gender) and *mawlāya.*[14] Magdaléna Vitásková, an Arabist from Charles University in Prague, writes in our personal correspondence that *sayyīdī* (سَيِّدِي), as well as *mawlāya* (مَوْلَاي), means "My Lord" or "My Master." While the first term is being used mainly among the **ancient Arab-Bedouin** *peoples*, the use of the second one often appears in the context of the Sufi literature. *Midon*, therefore, is a concept without gender, as both genders conflate in the literary character that has the feminine beauty but wields the omnipresent masculine power of G-d.

However, when the term *midon* or *senhal* is not used, the troubadours speak about *dompna,* or the feminine literary character resembling the Goddess. This character, in general, has pagan features and may be divided into two varying principles, which suggest its pre-Christian origins and relate it to the ancient Mother Goddess. The first principle is ruled by the goddess Aphrodite, according to Julius Evola, and is characterized by "the dissolving, overwhelming, ecstatic,

11 See Rouben Charles Cholakian, *The Troubadour Lyric: A Psychocritical Reading* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

12 Leonard Cohen follows this threesome structure in some of his songs, such as "The Master Song" (*Songs of Leonard Cohen*, 1967) or "Famous Blue Raincoat" (*Songs of Love and Hate*, 1971).

13 See Roberth Kehew, Ezra Pound, and W. D. Snodgrass, *Lark in the Morning: The Verses of the Troubadours* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 5.

14 Prokop 19, 250.

and immeasurable force of sex," while the second one, Demeterian principle, is characterized by fertility and motherhood.[15]

In Antiquity, we might find goddesses who bore both aspects. Ishtar, for instance, the Babylonian goddess, was the symbol of "sexuality and reproduction[16]" as well as a lethal character annually sacrificing her son / lover Tammuz in order to uphold the laws of Nature.[17] There are other myths from world mythology describing the same, such as the relationships of Inana and Dumuzi; Atargatis and Mithra; Fatima and Husain; Aphrodite and Adonis; or Cybele and Attis.

In Christianity, this division appears in the characters of Mary Magdalene and Virgin Mary. It may be true, however, that during the medieval times, the division between the two was not so clearly demarcated and the Virgin Mary also embodied the sexual power of Mary Magdalene, which may have reawakened the primitive understanding of the universal pagan goddess. There are some even non-literary depictions still reminding us of the dark character of Mother Goddess, such as the statues of Black Madonnas in Spain, Italy, France or Germany.[18] Despite the fact that the Virgin does not sacrifice her Son in Christian religion, He dies close to His Mother and Mary Magdalene who are mourning at the cross.[19]

Many ancient myths testify to inherent love between the Mother and her Son in the carnal sense, of which the Christian myth fully disposes. The motif of incest appears in the Egyptian myth of Osiris and Isis. Other relationships which suggest incest during which the male consort dies in order to be resurrected, include Dumuzi, Dionysos and last, but not least Jesus.[20] Their fate may be a parallel to the rebirth of the grain, which was the subject of many agrarian rituals of the primitive societies of the Mediterranean. Nowadays, there is a general consensus that the

15 Julius Evola, *The Metaphysics of Sex* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1983), 128.

16 Moreover, according to David Leeming she "was [also] central to the ubiquitous Mesopotamian ritual of the sacred marriage. In hymns for these occasions she longs for and achieves intercourse with a king in order to bring fertility to the land." David Leeming, *Jealous Gods and Chosen People: The Mythology of the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40–41.

17 See Shahrukh Husain, *The Goddess: Power, Sexuality, and the Feminine Divine* (London: Duncan Baird, 2000), 114–15.

18 See. for instance, the Madonna of La Cathédrale du Puy-en-Velay; in the Abbey of Saint-Victor de Marseille; or in Notre-Dame de la Daurade in Toulouse. In the Czech Republic, we may meet a baroque statue of the black Virgin at "Dům U černé matky boží" in Celetná street in Prague, or the painting of "Madona svatotomášská" in Brno. There is an annual festival taking place in Mikulov the first Sunday in September during which the pilgrims make a procession with a replica of "Loretánská Černá Madona" which rests in the church of saint Václav.

19 See Matt. 27:55

20 The theory of Jesus being the Son and Lover of his Mother who is understood, according to the aforementioned mythological pattern, to be the composite character of the Christian Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, is suggested in the Gnostic texts, such as *the Gospel of Philip* (63:30–36), which is a part of *The Nag Hammadi Library.* This text portrays Jesus and Mary (the Mother) as lovers. "[Jesus] loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples [….T]hey said to him "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Saviour answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness." Robinson, James M., and Richard Smith. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 148.

troubadour poetry revivified the very ancient idea of the Mother Goddess and her lover Son and put it behind the story of *courtly lovers.*[21]

Persistence

One of the requirements to prove the lover's worth was to test his persistence. The overcoming of hardships was regarded as a refining element whose objective was the "the lover's progress and growth in natural goodness, merit and worth."[22] In the poem by Bernart de Ventadorn, we find that the poet is on the verge of leaving the Lady / Goddess since he cannot endure her unresponsiveness:

Pus ab midons no·m pot valer
Precs ni merces ni·l dreihz qu'eu ai,
Ni a leis no ven a plazer
Qu'eu l'am, ja mais no·lh o dirai.
Aissi·m part de leis e·m recre ;
Mort m'a, e per mort li respon.

Since she, my Lady, shows no care
To earn my thanks, nor pays Love's rights
Since she'll not hear my constant prayer
And my love yields her no delights,
I say no more; I silent go;
She gives me death; let death reply.[23]

One had to deserve love of the Lady by withstanding his longing and some poets found even a masochistic sense of pleasure in it, such as Guillem de Cabestanh (1162–1212):

Anz li maltrag mi son joy e plazer
Sol per aisso quar sai qu'Amors autreya
Que fis amans deu tot tort perdonar
E gen sufrir maltrait per gazaignar.

Ai! si er ja l'ora, dompna, qu'ieu veya
Que per merce me vulhatz tant honrar
Que sol amic me denhetz apelhar !

Rather these pains to me are joy and pleasure:
I know that he who truly seeks love's treasure
Must, with courtesy, prepare to withstand
Pain, forgive mistakes; so Love commands.

I live for the day when it will be your pleasure
To show mercy, Lady, and condescend
To honor me by calling me your friend.[24]

Cohen portrayed a similar exercise in patience in the song "Teachers" (*Songs of Leonard Cohen,* 1967). There, in several stanzas, he describes a patient refused by various women entering a hospital, which itself resembles a church, a place of spiritual healing. However, this place "where none was sick and none was well" is a living hell of desire. The singer himself does not know to whom he is even singing:

21 Ezra Pound reached the same understanding as early as in 1910 in his essay "Psychology and Troubadours." There he wrote: "[I]n the Eleventh Century, we see a new refinement, an enrichment, I think, of paganism. The god has at last succeeded in becoming human, and it is not the beauty of the god but the personality which is the goal of the love and the invocation." Ezra Pound. "Psychology and Troubadours." *The Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 2005), 98.

22 See Denomy, "Courtly Love and Courtliness," 44. This is corroborated, for instance, by Peire d'Alvernhe's verses, who regards suffering for love as a refining exercise "Meilluratz / Et amatz / Es cui jois s'aura" ("He is improved / Who knows love / And feels its joy suffusing"). Kehew, Pound, and Snodgrass, *Lark in the Morning,* 109.

23 *Translated by W. D. Snodgrass. See Kehew, Pound, and Snodgrass, Lark in the Morning, 77.*

24 *Translated by Robert Kehew. See Kehew, Pound, and Snodgrass, Lark in the Morning, 261.*

Who is it whom I address,
who takes down what I confess?

In the end of the song, he asks his "teachers," the female characters of the song, if his lessons are done, but he gets the same question back as a reply:

Oh 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 Troubadours and the Lady

The earliest troubadour, Guilhèm de Peitieus, Duke of Aquitane (c. 1071–1126), does not tell us much about his Lady because he does not know her appearance. This points toward another supposition: the Goddess seems to be a mind construct[25] rather than a real character, as illustrated in the poem beginning with words "Ferai un vers de dreyt nien" ("The Nothing Song"):

Anc non la vi et am la fort,
Anc no n'aic dreyt no no·m fes tort;
Quan non la vey, be m'en deport
…
No sai lo luec ves en s'esta,
Si es en pueg ho es en pla

Though I've not seen her, my love's strong;
Not seeing her, I'm scarce undone;
She never did me right or wrong
…
As for her homeland, I don't know
Whether she's from the hill or plain[26]

This "construct" is, actually, an artificial invention which, perhaps, mirrors some psychological processes.[27] We may find that the word *troubadour* itself, means an "inventor" of the lyrics and form.[28] To them, a*rtistry and artificiality*[29] *are very important and it is one of their most*

25 This supposition that a woman is a mind construct, or a remembrance of the first sight of feminine beauty is corroborated by Cohen himself: "All the sad adventures in pornography and love and song are just steps on the path towards that holy vision." Brian D. Johnson,. "Life of a Lady's Man: Leonard Cohen Sings of Love and Freedom." *Maclean's*, December 7, 1992.

26 *Translated by W. D. Snodgrass. Kehew, Pound, and Snodgrass, Lark in the Morning, 25–27.*

27 See Cholakian, *The Troubadour Lyric*, 9.

28 "The verb *trobar* is believed to be derived from the low Latin *tropus* (*τρόπος), an air or melody: hence the primitive meaning of trobador is the 'composer' or 'inventor,' in the first instance, of new melodies." Chaytor, 9. It may be also derived from the Latin word tropare, to make tropes, or religious musical compositions. Another theory suggests that it developed from an Arabian word drab. See Prokop and Holub, Přátelé, přiléhavý složím vers, 257. Online Etymology Dictionary says that the word comes "*from Old Provençal *trobador*, from *trobar* 'to find,' earlier 'invent a song, compose in verse,' perhaps from Vulgar Latin **tropare* 'compose, sing,' especially in the form of tropes, from Latin *tropus* 'a song.' The alternative theory among French etymologists derives the Old Provençal word from a metathesis of Latin *turbare* 'to disturb,' via a sense of 'to turn up.' Meanwhile, Arabists posit an origin in Arabic *taraba* 'to sing.' General sense of 'one who composes or sings verses or ballads.'" Accessed 31st March 2016, *http://etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=troubadour*

29 "The forms of this poetry are highly artificial, and as artifice they have still for the serious craftsman an interest, less indeed than they had for Dante, but by no means inconsiderable." Pound and Eliot, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 94.

characteristic features.[30] *Moreover, the idea of the Lady must have been made according to a given set of criteria.* In a *sirventes*[31] *by Bertran de Born (1159–1215), the poet is composing the feminine character out of various women of whom he borrows a quality or a specific trait. By this he tries to reach its* perfection:

Irai per tot achaptan	*I will go out a-searching,*
De chascuna un bel semblan	*Culling from each a fair trait*
Per far domna soisseubuda,	*To make me a borrowed lady*
Tro vos mi siatz renduda.	*Till I again find you ready.*[32]

Bernart de Ventadorn (c. 1130–c. 1200) claims that the Lady was made by G-d Himself. In the following poem, he describes mainly her body:

Ai, bon'amors encobida,	*Ah, good and desirable love,*
Cors be faihz. delgatz e plas,	*Well made body, slender and smooth,*
Frescha chara colorida,	*Fresh skin and high colour,*
Cui Deus formet ab sas mas !	*Which God formed with his hands,*
Totz tems vos ai dezirada,	*Always I have desired you*
Que res autra no m'agrada.	*For no other pleases me;*
Autr'amor no volh nien !	*No other love do I want at all!*[33]

Another poet Gui d'Ussel (fl. 1195–1209) wrote about the Lady: "vos passatz sobre tot pensamen" which could be translated as "you are better than all the ideal images.[34]"

Cohen and the Lady

leonard Cohen in the beginning of his music career experienced an unrequited longing for Christa Päffgen (1938–1988), also known as "Nico." Nico was idealised by Cohen and made a subject of his worship. The last part of his *Selected Poems 1956–1968,* seems to be describing two women closest to Cohen then, Marianne Ihlen with whom he split before the release of his first album, and Nico whom he ardently pursued during her performances at the same time. While Marianne initiated Cohen into the mysteries of the *feminine* as described in the poem "This is for You,[35]" Nico of

30 "It is essentially a literature of artificiality and polish. Its importance consists in the fact that it was the first literature to emphasise the value of form in poetry, to formulate rules, and, in short, to show that art must be based upon scientific knowledge." Chaytor, *The Troubadours*, 40.

31 *Sirventes* was a song which parodied a certain phenomenon well-known in the local society. It often borrowed a tune from a well-known composition together with lines and words. Its main proponents were Marcabru, Peire Vic, Bertran de Born who were know for their vitriolic attacks.

32 *Translated by Ezra Pound. See Kehew, Pound, and Snodgrass, Lark in the Morning, 151.*

33 *Translated by Rosenberg. See Samuel Rosenberg, Margaret Switten, and Gérard le Vot, eds., Songs of the Troubadours and Trouveres: An Anthology of Poems and Melodies (London: Routledge, 1997), 63–64.*

34 The whole poem can be read in René Nelli and René Lavaud, *Les Troubadours: L'œuvre poétique* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000), 120–21.

35 "I wanted you for your beauty / you gave me more than yourself / you shared your beauty / this I only learned tonight / as I recall the mirrors / you walked away from / after you had given them / whatever they claimed / for my initiation."

whom he says that she represented "all the women / [he has] ever wanted,[36]" was unapproachable. This encounter with the "unapproachable" might have given impetus to the poet who responded by constructing the Goddess that subsequently appeared in his lyrics:

> You do not have to love me
> just because
> you are all the women
> I have ever wanted
> I was born to follow you
> every night
> while I am still
> the many men who love you.[37]

In other poems, Cohen describes himself as a god in need to use the *goddess's* body.[38] Nico as the Goddess is also the subject of song lyrics such as: "Winter Lady;" "One of Us Cannot Be Wrong;" "Last Year's Man;" "Joan of Arc;" "Take This Longing." Possibly she appears also in the song "Memories" in which she is described "as the tallest and the blondest girl."

In his longing for her, Cohen could be described as a troubadour. However, he did not follow the rules of *cortezia* for long since he went on other conquests for women who were more approachable. He failed to keep *mezura* and was doomed to sing about the loss of the Goddess in the future. For instance, the song based on Constantine P. Cavafy's poem "Alexandra Leaving" (*Ten New Songs* 2001), which originally spoke of Marcus Aurelius' loss of Alexandria, was adapted by Cohen to portray the mourning for Alexandra. Cohen encourages her lover to cope bravely with this occasion:

> And you who had the honor of her evening,
> And by the honor had your own restored –
> Say goodbye to Alexandra leaving;
> Alexandra leaving with her lord.[39]

We see here, as in many Cohen's songs, that the true claimant, "[L]ord," obstructs the lover in his exploits. Arthurian legends portray this quite clearly in their Trinitarian plot: Arthur – Guinevere – Launcelot, as well as the stories of Celtic origin, which may have inspired them: King Mark – Cresseid – Troilus. This motif appears also in the stories of Greek provenance with the characters: Menelaus – Helen – Paris and is partly reflected in Jewish faith with the "characters" of G-d – Shekhinah – Israel and also in Christian teachings: G-d

Leonard Cohen, *Selected Poems: 1956–1968* (New York: Viking, 1968), 222. Moreover, it is interesting to read in a newspaper article that Cohen used to call Marianne "My Lady" See William Kloman, "I've Been on the Outlaw Scene since 15," *New York Times*, January 28, 1968, 20–23.

36 Cohen, *Selected Poems*, 223.

37 Cohen, *Selected Poems*, 223.

38 See for instance other works from *Selected Poems*: "I Met You" (227); "You Live Like a God," 229–230; "Aren't You Tired," 230; "It Has Been Some Time," 229–230; "She Sings So Nice," 231; "Who Will Finally Say" 234; "Waiting to Tell the Doctor," 234.

39 The verse "leaving with her lord" may be speaking about Shekhinah who abandons her nation on the eve of the Sabbath evening.

– Son – Man, and, finally, in "depraved" Cohenian world of sexual spiritualisation: G-d – woman / Goddess – man. In all of these, it is the middle—feminine—element that serves as a means to reach union with the Highest.

We should not forget that the Goddess has absolute power over her lover. Already in his first collection of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956), Cohen described her as exerting such a power that she can convert her lovers into animals by will:

My lover Peterson
He named me Goldenmouth
I changed him to a bird
And he migrated south

My lover Frederick
Wrote sonnets to my breast
I changed him to a horse
And he galloped west

My lover Levite
He named me Bitterfeast
I changed him to a serpent
And he wriggled east

My lover I forget
He named me Death
I changed him to a catfish
And he swam north

My lover I imagine
He cannot form a name
I'll nestle in his fur
And never be to blame[40]

The last stanza speaks about the lover of her own choice; the lover who is imagined. The *midon* seems to await someone who cannot form its name. It means that when a poet tries to form a name, he necessarily humanises the Goddess (which is very unwise if a man wants to live the sane life). Another example comes from the lyrics from another poetry collection *Parasites of Heaven* (1966) in which Cohen wrote that he tried to give various names to the Goddess, but all the "names [went] the do-do way:"

Ah, what were the names I gave you
before I learned all names go the do-do way?
Darlin, Golden, Meadowheart

I've been walking in the far green
I've lost what all the leaves are called
Elm, Chestnut, Silver

O come here you, thou
Bring all thy, bring all thine
Far into the splinter let's sing for nothing[41]

40 *Leonard Cohen, "Song," in Let Us Compare Mythologies, new ed. (New York: Ecco, 2007), 41.*

41 Leonard Cohen, *Parasites of Heaven* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966), 17.

The Difference between the Troubadours and Leonard Cohen

The difference between the troubadours and Leonard Cohen may lay in the fact that they often attributed physical qualities to the Goddess, while Cohen attributes divine qualities to real women. Therefore, the troubadours often humanised the objects of their desire, while Cohen has divinised them. The following stanza from the text by Jaufre Rudel (d. c. 1147) "Quan lo rius de la fontana" ("When the rill of the source") shows making of the Goddess whose image would be then applied to the real woman:

Quan pensar m'en fai aizina	*When I have time to fantasize about her*
Adonc la bays e la col,	*Then I kiss and hug her;*
Mas pueys torn en revolina	*But then I twist and turn*
Perqu'em n'espert e n'aflam,	*Because it frustrates and fires me*
Quar so que floris non grana.	*That the flower doesn't give fruit.*[42]

His *vida,* a short biographical account that was later added to accompany the collection of his poetry, speaks about a Countess of Tripoli whose physical description resembled that of the Goddess. It is not difficult to realize that this was done in order to explain the Goddess behind his songs and give her the real physical contours.[43]

With regard to Leonard Cohen, it is often a real woman who ignites the poet's fantasy. The genesis of the song "Seems So Long Ago, Nancy" (*The Songs from the Room* 1969) describes this quite clearly. Harry Rasky spoke with Cohen about the "seed" of the song which was planted when he encountered the woman in Nashville. According to Cohen, Nancy appeared when he was throwing coins into the jukebox and looking for a song, (which makes a great parallel to the creative process):

> … the song *Nancy.* I remember its genesis very, very clearly. It was someone I met in an all night diner in Nashville. And I was working on the song and I couldn't break it. And I remember just standing at the jukebox looking at the selection of songs and a young woman came up and stood beside me and said, 'You ought to play R7.' And I spoke to her for a moment and I realized that some kind of transfer was being made, that the heart was being softened in some way by the presence of this other person. And in a sense the seed of the song was being handed over.[44]

42 *There is a quarrel about this strophe among the troubadour experts. Some regard it as Rudel's legitimate work, others intentionally omit it like, for instance, the edition of Paul Fabre, Anthologie des troubadours: XIIe-XIVe siècle (Orléans: Paradigme, 2010).*

43 The *vida* of the poet's life says that: "Jauffre Rudel […] fell in love with the Countess of Tripoli without ever having seen her, simply because things he had heard the pilgrims returning from Antioch tell of her, and for her he wrote many fine poems, rich in melody and poor in words. But wishing to see her, he took the Cross and went to sea. In the boat, he became ill, and when he arrived in Tripoli, he was taken to an inn, for he was near death. The Countess was told about this and she came to him, to his bedside, and took him in her arms. He realized it was the Countess, and all at once recovered his sense of sight and smell, and praised God for having sustained his life until he had seen her. And then he died in her arms. And she had him buried with great ceremony in the house of the Knights Templars. And then, on that same day, she took the veil for the grief she felt at his death." rpt. in Kehew, Pound, Snodgrass, *Lark in the Morning*, 60.

44 Harry Rasky. *The Song of Leonard Cohen: Portrait of a Poet, a Friendship and a Film*. (London: Souvenir, 2010). 84.

In the song, Cohen seems not to be singing about the real woman but about the Goddess welcoming her lover who longs to experience joi in her embrace:

> And now you look around you,
> see her everywhere,
> many use her body,
> many comb her hair.
> In the hollow of the night
> when you are cold and numb
> you hear her talking freely then,
> she's happy that you've come,
> she's happy that you've come.

However, Cohen, unlike the majority of the troubadours, is able to make this Goddess a subject of hatred. Like in the poem from the collection of poetry *Death of a Lady's Man* (1978):

> She is beautiful half the time. She is a description. She has black hair. She has bad skin. She is a description. You wrestle with an angel. She surprises you with her buttocks. I made her for you out of everything you hate.[45]

The poem addressed to himself has no precedence among the medieval poets and portrays Cohen personal struggle and even refusal to serve to her in the world of an invented myth.

Conclusion

The Occitan troubadours are considered to be the cornerstone in the development of the European love poetry. Therefore, a contemporary singer-songwriter writing on the theme of love must be put into contrast with them first. For their ideas were exploited by the subsequent literary schools and are still being exploited by the contemporary pop-culture (even if the pop-culture is often not aware of the troubadour heritage). Thinking about the seminal motifs, such as the idealisation of *love*, desire for money and the celebrity status, wanderings, failed marriages, spirituality or religion as a way to solve unsolvable problems, all these things may lead a curious reader into realising that the work and life of these writers resemble our own.

The "modern troubadour" is fascinated in the same way like Pound and T.S. Eliot were, with the medieval poetry and culture that seem to have had strongly defined religious and cultural values. He believes in the importance of tradition, not only literary, but tradition as an attitude to life, and copes with the inability to incorporate it into his active life in the contemporary society. Such a person uses old ideals, and reinterprets them in order to (re)create a myth in which these ideals work.

The essay has made an unlikely suggestion that the tradition of the troubadour poetry continues in the work of our contemporary singer-songwriters. It could serve as an invitation to embark, once again, on the rich field of comparative literature and perhaps open the door to a deeper understanding of Cohen's songs.

45 Leonard Cohen, *Death of a Ladies Man*, new ed. (London: Deutsch, 2010), 133.

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