

The Bet

Montreal poet Seymour Mayne remembers his friend Leonard Cohen

Leonard was holding court at the front table unit of the café on upper Stanley Street one Sunday in 1960, when our mutual friend, the poet Henry Moscovitch, ushered me forward to meet him. He was twenty-six that spring, the lion of the McGill University arts crowd, and I was a high school student aged 16. I had just entered the Canadian literary world, small as it was then, having published several poems in *The Canadian Forum*.

The first sight of the debonair figure, with two beautiful young women who flanked him on his left and right side, remains framed in my memory. He must have said something encouraging to me. And that is how our long friendship began. As he grew older, the strength of affection and respect he inspired in his old Montreal friends increased in depth and intensity. When he left us this November, he was still that gracious Davidic figure.

How Jewish was Leonard Cohen? He had no way not to be, born into the unique Montreal Jewish community, sandwiched as it was between the French-speaking working class *quartiers* to the east and the English-speaking middle class suburbs to the west. While Yiddish was the first language of many Jewish immigrants in the working class neighbourhoods of Montreal, it did not have the same currency among the wealthier members of the community. Leonard's home was not suffused with the expressive language—in school he studied mainly in English with French added as a second language. In synagogue he heard biblical and liturgical Hebrew which echoed and strongly resonated for him right up to his last album, *You Want It Darker*. In his middle years he ranged out from biblical texts to the Kabbalah which held him in tow to his last days.

In a province defined by linguistic and religious affiliations, our Jewish community was an almost autonomous city-state of its own, with health facilities, its own hospital, and school system. Every writer and artist who emerged from Montreal in those first decades of the last century was shaped by these communal influences, and Leonard was no exception though he was raised in the upper-class neighbourhood of Westmount. Leonard never forgot nor could he forget that he was Jewish. He carried it as a mark of honour all his life while he alluded to and punned on his priestly name, Cohen, in poem, song and fiction. Called to the Torah by his Hebrew name, Eliezer, he nevertheless published exclusively under his English name, like almost every Jewish boy in Montreal who bore two names, double identities. Although he passed through a Buddhist initiation on Mount Baldy, in his last years his Jewish heritage took more and more of his observance, to the

point that he was returned at the end to be buried, not in Los Angeles, but in one of the Jewish cemeteries of Montreal, alongside generations of his noted family.

The modernist shift in Canadian writing that began in the 1920s owed much to a group of English language poets who were students and teachers at McGill University, Leonard's alma mater, where he completed his first and only degree. At this juncture, A. M. Klein (1909-1972) - a member of this Montreal group and, later, by general consensus one of Canada's major poets - proudly affirmed a strong Jewish voice. Klein unashamedly celebrated his roots and tradition while exploring the bilingual Canadian milieu. Such was the older poet's abiding influence on the younger poet over the years, that Leonard dedicated a number of poems to him, including the resonant 'To a Teacher', which later became a song in the album, *Dear Heather*. The Montreal dynasty of Jewish poets continued from Klein to Irving Layton (1912-2006), with whom Leonard maintained a close and special relationship for decades. The Jewish lineage in Canadian poetry, then, begins with Klein, continues with Layton from the 1950s on, and finds new force in Leonard's poetry and lyrics.

While I am beholden to Leonard for the inspirations of his writing and friendship, he remains indebted with an unfulfilled promise, made over a half-century ago in the apartment of his friend, Robert Hirschhorn. We made a bet one day in 1963, as a group of Leonard's friends sat in a circle in Robert's living room and Leonard strummed his guitar, offering us song after song. Impetuously, as the youngest enthusiast in that room, I predicted that he would easily make a million with his then-unrecorded songs. Leonard quickly responded that he would present me with \$10,000 for my little magazine, if that indeed materialized.

Over the years and on various occasions, I would remind him, with a smile, of his pledge, and he would aver, with an even more winsome smile, that he still hadn't reached that magic million-dollar figure. Over time, of course, I let the matter slip. And then came Leonard's difficult years, when he discovered that his manager had availed herself of his pension fund, which meant that he had to go out on the road again, a wandering minstrel even in his seventies.

Given his recent successes, this past summer—for fun, I was thinking of writing him one more friendly reminder. But his e-mails began to reveal a darker edge. He was "out of the loop for a while"—in his own words, "dealing with some disagreeable visitations from the Sitra Achra," those fearful Kabbalistic presences from the dark and shadowed side of existence. Who under such circumstances could have the heart to raise the issue of an amusing wager made decades earlier? Along with his innumerable fans and followers, I would have to remain satisfied with the ample offerings of his prolific works.

You got away, Eliezer, and the \$10,000 was never paid out. But you left us a legacy which, contrary to your expectations in the rebellious years, I along with all your friends and devotees recognize as rich and bountiful. Your songs and name call up an abundance of blessings. Wager met and copiously acquitted.

We'll miss you, chaver.

Seymour Mayne