

The Favorite Game

Leonard Cohen, 1963

the spectre of Leonard Cohen sits across me, wearing a thin, sweaty shirt and the finest trousers. an incomplete, ignorant testament to my judgement.

i just spent six months plodding through *Discipline and Punish*, scoffing at *Wild Mind* (Plotkin), trying to uncoil this mortal coil with *No Death, No Fear* and *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, and graduating. so i needed some light reading.

i skewered *The Favorite Game* precisely at the intersection of our milieu's incisive, nuanced unpacking and what is perhaps a perennial pain— romantic love. i was at once disgusted and captivated at the juncture.

it comes as perhaps no surprise that even Cohen was inculcated with the toxic amalgam of entitled, oppressive racial, sexual identities that permeates (living) Western history. my safe 'radicalism' compels me to rid myself of the book at a used bookstore once i complete this reflection.

sometimes i feel like the stakes are just too fucking high to give this kind of shit a chance. (CANCELED.) recently, certain consumables in this American culture have taken on the personal appellation: due diligence. i.e. just to hear/see it. but this work wasn't so simple. it's *Leonard Cohen*, with all the present grief and aura, before he was *Leonard Cohen*.

He tore the [leather-bound poetry books] as his father weakened. He didn't know why he hated the careful diagrams and coloured plates. We do. It was to scorn the world of detail, information, precision, all the false knowledge which cannot intrude on decay. (17)

Lawrence Breavman, the protagonist, was a kid, his father was dying. Cohen also lost his father at a young age. i recently enjoyed [this interview](#) with Ila Bêka, who spoke on the purpose of cleaning- to avoid death. some kind of mantra, "i don't want to die, i don't want to die", to recite while cleaning. earlier this year i was thinking about the nature of work, even when it seems useless. all of this effort to escape The Darkness, stagnation, inactivity; we keep moving to avoid this mortal fear.

Lawrence Breavman is an excellent name. Canada's Laurentians, a mountain range north-east of Montréal, are mentioned a few times. this invokes posterity, ancient

connection, and nature, which Breavman struggles to accept and embody. note also the similarity of his surname to *bereavement*. maybe names are cheap, once decoded, but it adds a pathos to otherwise syntactically pure sentences.

You've lost, Breavman addressed them out loud. (213)

embodiment in this novel; it's simple, pervasive, singular.

She did not reply and her silence removed her body from him a little distance.

"Tell me some more about Bertha, Krantz and Lisa."

"Anything I tell you is an alibi for something else."

"Then let's be quiet together." (19)

almost none of the modern disconnection. here's a rare example from a telephone scene:

"It's so hard," said Shell's voice. "Everybody has a body." (205)

to approach rigor, i suppose this draws an atemporal line to Judith Butler's work:

Breavman observed to himself that [Shell] was further from divorce than she thought. Women take very seriously an attempt to mutilate their bodies.

...

He was bothered by the knowledge that Shell was making real decisions, acting, changing her life. He wanted to watch her at rest. It involved him in the world of houses and traffic lights. She was becoming an authentic citizen, using his love for strength.

Suppose he went along with her towards living intimacy, towards comforting incessant married talk. Wasn't he abandoning something more austere and ideal, even though he laughed at it, something that could apply her beauty to streets, traffic, mountains, ignite the landscape – which he could master if he were alone? Wasn't that why he stared at her, indulged himself in every motion, expression? (181)

Breavman's cognitive dissonance is in relief: his love for Shell is basal, carnal, reduced to a dehumanizing objectification; Shell's predispositions are obverse, she uses **the potential** to drive her out of despair and live well. ironically, her marriage, which was based wholly in intellectual/emotional support, was insufficient. her asexual husband-mediated through Cohen's pen-couldn't *unleash* her loving energy. Breavman's is a world where 'men' are agents; consider **this ancient Woody Guthrie song**, as imagined by Wilco.

could we cast this as a pre-lingual purity? embodiment as protest against the 'reductions' of language (barring the beauty of Cohen's prose.)

He returned to his watchtower an hour every few days to fill in his journal. He wrote quickly and blindly, disbelieving what he was doing, like a thrice-failed suicide looking for razor blades.

He exorcized the glory demons. The pages were jammed into an antique drawer that Shell respected. It was a Pandora's box of visas and airline-ticket folders that would spirit him away if she opened it. Then he would climb back into the warm bed, their bodies sweetened by the threat.

God, she was beautiful. Why shouldn't he stay with her? Why shouldn't he be a citizen with a woman and a job? Why should he join the world? The beauty he had planned as a repose between solitudes now led him to demand old questions of loneliness. (185)

this evokes a **partition**, where Breavman's writing, expression, cannot exist cospatially/contemporaneously with Shell. further, were the two worlds to meet, he would sublimate to Canada (they're loving one another in New York.) even still, the 'threat' of such atomic fusion drives each hemisphere to primal intentionality. finally, the defense for bodily reduction arrives: any higher recognition would support the orderly world, which couldn't keep his family intact or appreciate his art.

Shell is the present apotheosis of Lawrence's love journey. all of the trauma and travail of Montréal romance leads to Shell. she compels him to maturity, if only relatively. or she merely takes him beyond immaturity, giving him the volition to separate himself from his socialization. she wishes he would settle down with her, but in his self-absorption (distortion- call it dedication to art), he chooses a wayward, writerly world.

lest we forget that these characters are fabricated/mediated.

[the first time Shell and Breavman spend time together]

She realized that years ago this was exactly how she would have liked to be observed, with music, before a window, with light made soft by old wood.

...

She closed her eyes and could still feel his stare. It had the power of defenceless praise. It did not call her beautiful, but called her to delight in her beauty, which is more understandable and human, and it pleased her to contemplate the pleasure she created. Who was the man who did this to her? She opened her eyes and smiled her curiosity at him. (172)

Lawrence/Leonard will project, justify his writing to protect his identity, his attachment. could we use another point of reference? his mother *descends into 'madness'* as the book progresses. she is *only* portrayed as wholly vain, mired in a martyr complex beyond repair, declaring herself forsaken by a dead husband and a selfish son. Lawrence never reaches her. after a delivering a diatribe to her son, Lawrence is relegated to inaction:

He sat back, didn't try to break in again. If she let him speak she wouldn't hear. He really didn't know what he would have been able to say had he known she was listening. (228)

Mother Breavman is the only adult in the novel who is given extended representation and expression. she serves as the ground of reality, the consequences of Breavman's way of life. maybe she's supposed to be extra, or hysterical, but i don't even think Cohen believed she was. she is a Great Teacher, keeping Breavman's sense of guilt and pity alive, keeping him from his own descent into an inconsiderate, selfish way of life.

is there an implicit politics of choice in Lawrence's behavior? i've been considering *socially acceptable* behavior. at which point does a person's passivity in social interface constitute toxicity, apathy; and can/does it simultaneously represent self-care, protection, and equanimity? the implication here is that i'm *going* to be misrepresented; how can i be misrepresented most appropriately?

additionally, i've been sensitive to a thesis that expression in its many forms, while multifarious, has as a principal principle social policing– we push and pull on the boundaries of normativity **and** the fringe, in what is perhaps a zero-sum game. why am i writing this, if not to have my views verified or vehemently denied in the public sphere?

is Breavman's isolation, toxic entitlement to the bodies of others, and juvenile disgust with order/age, Cohen's attempt to justify in reality, by proxy, the elements of consciousness he perpetuates? or is it Michael Chekhov's work? is this an artist on the fringe, perceiving embodied, bacchanalian beauty, or a narcissistic control-freak's manifesto? both. too many archetypes can operate at once.

Breavman and Tamara were city-white, and it separated them from the brown bodies [tanned, beach] as if they were second-rate harmless lepers.

...

It wasn't just that they were white – they were white together, and their whiteness seemed to advertise some daily unclean indoor ritual which they shared.

“When the Negroes take over,” Breavman said, “this is the way we're going to feel all the time.” (105)

it's easy to think of fate while reading this book. the themes of Cohen's life are present in this novel. there are a few mentions of monastic living, a few pages of spiritual ascent, and of course, numerous ruminations on romance.

Breavman spends part of the narrative working a summer camp. Martin, one of the kids there, is very intelligent and unique. i don't want to spoil anything, but Martin's story reveals a definite, inseparable arc– his very nature defines his destiny. now, i have just finished *No Fear, No Death*; in it, living is instantaneous birth-death. the circumstances, conditions of birth and death are present in each moment. because of this, that exists, and vice versa...

none of this is to insinuate that change is predictable, within 'safe' boundaries, or contrived. nor is it to imply Breavman's notable development of maturity (and low-key respect for femme folk) is to be discounted. maybe i'm just very concerned with these essentialist, evolutionary-scientific tangents as they are so politically relevant (read–petulant, predatory), to my livelihood as a non-binary person.

in conclusion, i never liked *bildungsroman* anyway.

Quotes

Charity had become a social competition in which nobody gave away anything [they] really needed... (41)

Stop this fantasy right now. What were the bodies like on the beach?
Ugly and white and ruined by offices.

...

The mountain released the moon, like a bubble it could no longer contain, with reluctance and pain. I was in a film and the machine was whirring into slower and slower motion.

A bat swooped over the fire and thudded into the pines. Norma closed her eyes and pressed the guitar closer. She sent a minor chord through his spine and into the forest. (75-76)

After a while Tamara fell asleep. That was what he had been talking against. Her sleeping seemed like a desertion. It always happened when he felt most awake. He was ready to make immortal declarations.

Her hand rested on his arm like snow on a leaf, ready to slip off when he moved.

He lay beside her, an insomniac with visions of vastness. He thought of desert stretches so huge no Chosen People could cross them. He counted grains of sand like sheep and he knew his job would last forever. He thought of aeroplane views of wheatlands so high he couldn't see which way the wind was bending the stalks. Arctic territories and sled-track distances.

Miles he would never cover because he could never abandon this bed. (99)

[Breavman and Krantz are driving]

Moving at that speed they were not bound to anything. They could sample all the possibilities. They flashed by trees that took a hundred years to grow. They tore through towns where men lived their whole lives. They knew the land was old, the mountains the most ancient on earth. They covered it all at eighty miles an hour.

There was something disdainful in their speed, disdainful of the eons

it took the mountains to smooth out, of the generations of muscle which had cleared the fields, of the labour which had gone into the modern road they rolled on. They were aware of the disdain. The barbarians must have ridden Roman highways with the same feeling. We have the power now. Who cares what went before?

And there was something frightened in their speed. Back in the city their families were growing like vines. Mistresses were teaching a sadness no longer lyrical but claustrophobic. The adult community was insisting that they choose an ugly particular from the range of beautiful generalities. They were flying from their majority, from the real bar mitzvah, the real initiation, the real and vicious circumcision which society was hovering to inflict through limits and dull routine. (100)

The world was being hoaxed by a disciplined melancholy. All [Breavman's published] sketches made a virtue of longing. All that was necessary to be loved widely was to publish one's anxieties. The whole enterprise of art was a calculated display of suffering.

...

A respect for books and artistry will persist for another generation or two. It can't go on forever without being reconsecrated. (108-109)

[Tamara] had abandoned her psychiatrist and espoused Art, which was less demanding and cheaper.

"Let's no learn a single new thing about one another, Tamara."

"Is that laziness or friendship?"

"It's love!" (194)

"Do you know what the ambition of our generation is, Wanda? We all want to be Chinese mystics living in thatched huts, but getting laid frequently." (210)

[in a letter to Shell]

I'm afraid of loneliness. Just visit a mental hospital or factory, sit in a bus or cafeteria. Everywhere people are living in utter loneliness. I tremble when I think of all the single voices raised, lottery-chance hooks aimed at the sky. And their bodies are growing old, hearts beginning to leak like old accordions, trouble in the kidneys, sphincters going limp like old elastic bands. It's happening to us, to you under the green stripe[d sheets]. It

makes me want to take your hand. And this is the miracle that all the juke-boxes are eating quarters for. That we can protest this indifferent massacre. Taking your hand is a very good protest. I wish you were beside me now. (234)

His **real death** contrasted violently with the hush-hush sacredness of the chapel. The beautiful words didn't belong on the rabbi's lips. I don't know if any modern man is fit to bury a person. The family's grief was real, but the air-conditioned chapel conspired against its expression. I felt lousy and choked because I had nothing to say to the corpse.

...

A religious stink hovers above this city and we all breathe it. ...A religious stink composed of musty shrine and tabernacle smells, decayed wreaths and rotting bar-mitzvah tables. Boredom, money, vanity, guilt, packs the pews. The candles, memorials, eternal lights shine unconvincingly, like neon signs, sincere as advertising. The holy vessels belch misasmal smoke. Good lovers turn away.

I'm not a good lover or I'd be with you now. I'd be beside you, not using this longing for a proof of feeling. (235)

Later on that night they walked up Mountain Street. Breavman showed her an iron fence which hid in its calligraphy silhouettes of swallows, rabbits, chipmunks. She opened fast to him. She told him she had an ulcer. Christ, at her age.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen. I know you're surprised."

"I'm surprised you can be that calm and live with whatever it is that's eating your stomach."

But something had to pay for the way she moved, her steps like early Spanish music, her face which acted above pain. (238)

n. casale

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¹Note, my copy was published by Vintage Books, 2003