Betraying What is Necessary A Depth Psychological Interpretation of "The Traitor" by Leonard Cohen

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It was about the feeling we have of betraying some mission that we were mandated to fulfill - and being unable to fulfill it - and then coming to the understanding that the real mandate was not to fulfill it. And that the deeper courage was to stand guiltless in the predicament in which you found yourself

- Leonard Cohen

These were the words of Canada's most beloved poet, Leonard Cohen, in his fifty-fourth year responding to a question on a song he wrote a decade earlier. When we look at the words of "The Traitor" (See appendix), we see it not only as a return to the bardic, acoustic folk style the artist is most famous for but as a roadmap one can traverse as they forge their path of individuation. We have in front of us eight stanzas written in the formal quatrain. They are not rigidly isometric, and depending on the line alternate between eleven or twelve galloping syllables. The words help illuminate some of the same mysteries Jungian psychology has brought into the cultural light, accomplished less through the scientific language of the analysts and more in the lyrical tradition of Herman Hesse or Thomas Mann. Unfortunately, for the sake of time and space, I won't be able to perform an archeological dig on all of these verses, but will limit myself to building upon the key themes presented in this song, viewing it in the context of the life and work of C.G. Jung as well as the personal history of Leonard Cohen, "Master of the Incantatory Verse". Mainly, we will be focusing on what Cohen expresses above, the motif of the descent into the underworld, the confrontation with the unconscious.

Hillman (1973) informs us that it is futile to try and employ upper world tactics—logic, reasoning, exacting analysis—to underworld phenomena. Poetry, like dreams, requires a very specific form of analysis carefully attuned to its nature as a process, a poesis, rather than some "thing" we can measure in controlled environments. The unconscious is not someplace we can

arrive at in a pair of blue jeans (As Cohen would often say if he knew where the good songs came from, he'd go there more often!). If we want to understand the depth psychology of Leonard Cohen, we need to enter into the song. That is why this essay won't be an attempt to recreate the wheel and answer what does "The Traitor" mean, but will treat Cohen's associations no differently than an analyst would a dreamer, tending to the life inside a dream. Jung set his psychology apart from his contemporaries by avoiding falling into the catastrophe of nominalism, that wretched philosophy put forth by William of Occam—as far as the Arts are concerned—whereby the mythical quality of language is reduced down to mere labels. In doing so, a supernatural, transpersonal element gets replaced with a lifeless equivalent. This paper aims to arouse the archetypal perspective and stir the anesthetized soul by contacting the greater intelligence living inside sensuous metaphor and imagery. It is important to remember that the business of psychology we are involved with here is meant to be lived not just learned. So, I will try to write in a way that demonstrates this principle.

Now the Swan it floated on the English river

Ah the Rose of High Romance it opened wide

A sun tanned woman yearned me through the summer

And the judges watched us from the other side

Doniger (1988) wrote that "it is impossible to define myth, but cowardly not to try" (p. 25) The same goes for poetry—we must try. The song opens by placing us in front of that gaping, primeval chasm that has forever haunted the imagination of man, separating him from

the world he knows and that unnamable "other side" of the life he has not yet lived, but to where he must travel if he aims to successfully become who he was meant to become. At its core lies his inner-center.

Many different names have been ascribed to this organizing and unifying principle abiding at the center of the psyche. For the Romans, it was called the "genius"; the Greeks spoke of it as the "daimon"; the Egyptians revered it as the "Ba-Soul" (Jung et al., 1964, p. 162). And for Jung, we may call it the Self. It should be understood that the nature of the Self is paradoxical, in that it resides in the center while simultaneously composing the circumference (Edinger, 2017, p. 6). This accounts for the Jungian fascination with the labyrinth, as the pattern, one walks corresponds to the unfolding of psychic order and life. One walks not a linear but a circular path of self-realization, heading directly into that unexplored "other side" which is an image for the unknown unconscious. It is there that we discover something essential, a renewal of life. In the first two lines, Cohen quickly introduces the symbol of the rose, invoking the story of Narcissus who, after descending into the underworld, underwent a nekyia, a symbolic death, thus being transformed into a flower: "The inescapable conclusion is that narcissism, at least in its original mythological sense, is the way into the unconscious where one must go in quest of individuality" (Edinger, 2017, p. 162). Its position in the song as the opening verse sets us up to explore this motif descent into the underworld—nekyia—as a pre-requisite for healing, renewal, and purpose.

In 1926, Jung dreamed a famous dream. In it, he was being driven in a horse-drawn wagon through the front-lines of an Italian battle, surrounded by exploding, enemy artillery (Jung, 1989). These "shells" were missiles sent from that notorious "other side". It was decided

that he and the "little-coachman" should drive right through the bloodshed, and shortly after taking that decisive risk, marveled as it opened up into a radiant, bucolic landscape of rice fields, olive groves, and vineyards. They crossed a drawbridge and entered into an ancient village.

When the gates clanged shut, the little coachman leaped out of the wagon, exclaiming that they were caught "in the seventeenth century." Upon waking, Jung sensed an internal shift that readied him to approach his fascination with Gnosticism and the alchemists who once seemed too bizarre and inaccessible to possibly comprehend. In the places that once appeared so strange and monstrous, Jung would find the key to his inner life, the beating heart of the unifying vision of his theory.

Jung understood it was the nature of our unconscious complexes—charged, emotional clusters—to split away from the psychic structure and assume personified form in the external world, in what he called projection (Jacobi, 1971):

Since unconscious contents are experienced only in projected form, the unconscious complex appears first in projection as an attribute of an outward object or person...This object may either belong to the actual outside world, or it may merely be thought to come from outside but actually stems from within. (p. 16)

From the perspective of the ego, these lawless and grotesque realities belonging to the outer world appear to be the true sources of evil, darkling all that is innocent and good. The quest for individuation requires the gradual reconciliation of these parts and the withdrawal of projections back to their true source—the personal unconscious. While we speak colloquially of projection as a process someone controls—"He keeps projecting his mother onto me!"—it is inaccurate. Instead, it is the deep unconscious that is doing the projection, using the person instrumentally as

a film projector casts a reel onto a screen. Who can forget those famous words of Freud (1930) written in fire forever emblazoning the headstone of the psychoanalytic tradition: "Es war, soll Ich werden" (p. 112), admonishing those in analysis that true self-knowledge is not some "idle duty", but forged in the fires of courage, rigorous honesty, and strength. We earn ourselves. We are not given. Years later, Cohen (2012) would echo the same message: "I had to go crazy to love you / Had to let everything fall / Had to be people I hated /Had to be no one at all" (Old Ideas, Track 6).

The search for the inner center is a symbolic quest for ultimate meaning of religious proportions. It demands the tremendous sacrifice of the ego who believes itself to be at the center of conscious experience. Jung (1967) writes in Symbols of Transformation, how the descent into the underworld effects a metanoia, a transformation of soul, describing a point in psychological life when the libido pulls away from the outer world and sinks back into the unconscious. The neykia initiates one into a new mode of vision and is considered to be the oldest, most original of all mythologems (Kenner, 1971). The mythic pattern reflects the natural course primitive man observed the sun follow as it rose every morning and descended in the evenings marking a nightsea journey by which the sun-hero was thought to descend into the underworld of night and battle with the monsters of the depths. For some cultures, their entire spiritual practice was assisting the sun to complete its trajectory across the sky, for the night posed many dangers. It acted as a tabula rasa the unconscious filled in with its projected, sometimes nightmarish fantasies. The night became a genuine confrontation with the unconscious and this has been recounted in the initiatory ceremonies here to the world over, such as in the caves of Eleusis or in Ireland's Newgrange, a monstrous stone-age passage tomb constructed to align with the rising sun on the morning of the Winter Solstice.

In mid-life when the psychic energy gets rerouted from adaptation to the outer-world down to the service of their soul, one is initiated into the same natural cycle described above, a personal nekiya demanding an equal exertion of will and effort one used to adapt to the first-half of life. Jung (1969) compared the stages of life to a parabola that one must ascend in the first half of life. Then, there comes a point when one is forced to descend the summit with the same amount of vigor, intensity, and courage to reenter, "the valley where the ascent began" (pp. 405-408). He's alluding to an inner obligation one feels mandated to fulfill after realizing something irredeemable about their nature, that it is not simply enough to receive the message and hang up the phone. Instead, something more demanding is being asked—the individual must actualize that message and share it with the world. We see this remarkably with how both Jung and Cohen both relied on their childhood pastimes to inform the work they did as adults.

To Jung, the split with Freud marked the symbolic death of a father. Their correspondences once brimmed with paternal affection. Their very first meeting in 1907 lasted twelve-hours. Jung thought of Freud as "extremely intelligent, shrewd and altogether remarkable." Freud anointed Jung heir to the psychoanalytic throne, calling him his "eldest son" (Freud and Jung, 1994). The combination of the divorce and Jung entering mid-life catapulted him into such a turbulent upheaval that he believed at times he was "menaced by a psychosis". Under the attack of an "incessant stream of fantasies", he'd be forced to submit himself and endure the wrath of the other side, preceding that winter of 1913 when his visions intensified and culminated in that one dream where he took that "decisive step", and plunged into

the depths of his unconscious. A few days later, he would dream of shooting dead Siegfried, and upon waking, resolve that if he failed to understand it, he would shoot himself (Jung, 1994).

But just as the sun rose every morning and renewed life on earth, an underworld descent heralds a renewal of life. Contrary to the Christianized view, the ancient Greeks didn't view the underworld as a place of eternal damnation. To them, the underworld was the land of the psyche. Its inhabitants were immersed in deep reflection and subjected to a creative process, eidola, the "ideas that form and shape life" (Hillman, 1971, p. 51). Not only did Jung's dream of killing Sigfried symbolize the death of his ego but also the death of the heroic ego myth he believed the soul of Europe to have outgrown. From it, he searched to discover a new myth better suited for the zeitgeist that was capable of assimilating the subtleties and vicissitudes of pre and post-war Germany. What he found was the myth that resides in the core of the individual—the individuation process—and how by devoting ourselves to actualizing it, we reveal the mythic essence of human life (Downing, 2020).

Cohen's professional career officially began after the publication of his first poetry series

Let Us Compare Mythologies (1956). In 1959, Cohen received a \$2,000 grant from the Canada

Council for the Arts to write a novel. Then in the Spring of 1960, the promising poet landed on

Greek island of Hydra as a creative move to assuage the melancholy he felt living in London. He

lived on Hydra for seven years in a little shanty he purchased with his grant money and a small

sum he inherited from his grandmother and published three collections of poetry—The Spice
Box of Earth (1961), Flowers for Hitler (1964), and Parasites of Heaven (1966)—and two novels

—The Favourite Game (1963) and Beautiful Losers (1966)—before retuning to Montreal to

"renew his neurotic affiliations" (Cohen, 1961). His publishers arranged a university tour for him

to perform his readings and the tour was recorded and turned into a film showcasing the brilliant young writer in a documentary called Ladies and Gentleman, Mr. Leonard Cohen (1965). He is twenty-eight years old, and his poetry is beginning to grow with a religious sense of awe, almost a self-deification.

When the ego keeps imagining itself as the steerer of the ship or above the laws of nature, the psyche will restore balance by occasioning a chain of cascading events that will relativize the ego back to its original order, deflate its superiority. Henderson (1964) explains that initiatory ceremonies help restore balance to the psyche by re-relativizing the ego's position to the greater personality of the Self. If there is a failure to do so willfully, a sacrifice will be imposed. Our estrangement from our reliance upon rites and passages to maintain psychological balance has distanced us from their conscious effects. However, their archetypal influences have not vanished. One can recall what Jung carved above the front door of his house in Kusnacht, Switzerland: "Vocatus atque non vocatus deus aderi" ("Called or not called, the god will be there."). It is when an archetypal pattern gets split off that it returns with the vengeance of the neglected gods: "In the failure to sacrifice, we are sacrificed" (Slater, 1997, p. 114). It didn't take long after moving to Hydra for reality to set in on his life as a novelist. While his popularity was growing, Beautiful Losers was receiving mixed reviews. Its production was haggard and drove Cohen into a manic period of existential torment and madness, underpinned by indulgent experimentation with hash, acid, and amphetamines. He'd eventually apologize for his breakdown in "A Note to the Reader" (2000):

Beautiful Losers was written outside, on a table set among the rocks, weeds, and daisies, behind my house in Hydra, an island in the Aegean Sea. I lived there many years ago. It

was a blazing hot summer. I never covered my head. What you have in your hands is more of a sunstroke than a book. Dear Reader, please forgive me if I have wasted your time.

But soon, fate would come hammering on his door. Cohen's breakdown forced him to scramble to try and pay his bills, step off the well-worn path of Canada's poetic movement and find a distinct voice that could reach the world. Besides blackening pages, all he knew were a few chords a flamenco guitarist taught him in childhood. In a leap of desperation, he traveled to New York for a poetry reading at the 92nd Street YMHA (Young Men's Hebrew Association) and performed "The Stranger Song". The Jewish establishment signified the same return to that childhood playfulness Jung found solace in at the Tower. In his autobiography, Jung (1989) writes how it was a turning point in his fate when he realized he knew of nothing else than to return to the hobbies he loved as a child, that of playing with sticks and stones, translating in his adult years with the construction of the Tower at Zurich that served as a temple for him to explore the depths of his unconscious. Cohen himself was a descendent of a respectable lineage of high Jewish priests—kohen, kohanim. His grandfather, Rabbi Solomon Klonistky, chief rabbi of Montreal, was the distinguished author of "Otzar Taamei Hazal", a voluminous thesaurus of Talmudic interpretations. He was known as Sar HaDikdukim, "Prince of Grammarians," Cohen grew up immersed in Jewish orthodoxy, amidst the droves of davening devotees exceptional in all-things Chumash and Talmud. This space at 92nd Street YMHA, just a few blocks away from the Jewish Museum on 5th Ave in the Upper East Side, encircled by dozens of bagel shops and small shuls, acted like an alembic, an alchemical still. His song became a prayer expressing that same Jewish longing to return home he knew so well as a child. It is reminiscent of his discovery of poetry at the age of nine, during his father's funeral, when he cut the wing off of one of his father's bowties and sewed inside a few words he had written, burying it beneath a tree in the background overlooking the hills of Westmount, Montreal. It took about a year before "The Stranger Song" became popular and fell upon the ears of artists like Judy Collins. His prayer would be answered.

The neykia helps one come to honor the significance of their very own, "inescapable predicament," by revealing the hidden mythic currents underlying run-of-the-mill human existences. The dark cave we are afraid to enter is more a womb than a tomb. It is only through falling that we come to stand on our own two feet, for we fall out of the intellectual realm into a more direct, purposeful mode of being, already "immersed in the eternal stream of great ideas". I am reminded of the timeless words of Hesse (2000), who writes so movingly from his quest with a sense of conviction:

The realization that my problem was one that concerned all men, a problem of living and thinking, suddenly swept over me and I was overwhelmed by fear and respect as I suddenly saw and felt how deeply my own personal life and opinions were immersed in the eternal stream of great ideas...the realization was not really a joyful one. It was hard and had a harsh taste because it implied responsibility and no longer being allowed to be a child; it meant standing on one's own feet. (pp. 53-54)

This description glorifies what a transfixion with the sun-hero is wont to miss, that there is an inescapability to the sanctified themes positioned at the center of our lives that we forever encircle as we move towards to the discovery of ourselves. Some of our confrontations are not meant to be mastered but summon our submission to the tremendous forces we live in relation to.

It is for this reason that Jung (1969) writes how ultimately, analysis does not promise cure but instead the courage to deepen one's commitment to life through effecting the adaptation of psychological attitudes, sometimes in strange or irrational ways, in order to bear the unbearable. Those who understand that sense of inescapable loneliness, just as hallowed as it is bereft of conventional belonging, in many ways represent a new vision of being to a world which has not yet seen there exists an interior reality, an enchanted world of dreams and images, just as real as the mountains and trees that stand before them. The descent into the underworld is a gradual process by which that inner world of the individual erupts into the foreground, and the interior demands of the individual take precedence over the social mores. The concerns for amassing private gain or surmounting various hurdles are substituted for the true, irreversible transformation of the psyche and relinquishment of will. I'd like to invoke Freud (1963), commenting on Michelangelo's statue of Moses adorned with horns, that it represented "a concrete expression of the highest mental achievement that is possible in man, that of struggling successfully against an inward passion, for the sake of a cause to which he has devoted himself" (p. 103). The ego divests its power in servitude of the Self, which in turn inspires and strengthens the ego to live out its one true task as an expression of that center in the external world. This is the true source of meaning, and it is created in the dialectic between the human and the pleroma, the totality and fullness of spirit and matter across all levels seen and unseen, in alignment with its essence. (I mention Freud here to emphasize the quality of eternity and timelessness behind these archetypal patterns, and help assist in correcting what I perceive to be a narcissistically, inflated sense of superiority of the Jungian community above Freud and the Freudians when really, both Jung and Freud are stories of their own, myths we live by that

uphold their integrity insomuch as they are returned to a broader, universal narrative encompassing both.)

Let's end where the journey begins—with a return to being just north of that other side separating man from his potential. It could be very well understood that the psychology of the adult who stands on his or her own two feet, is on the other side of a developmental trajectory we must wrestle within our "desire for deliverance" from childhood. Drawing attention to the lines — "I could not move to warn all the younger soldiers / That they had been deserted from above / So on battlefields from here to Barcelona / I'm listed with the enemies of love"—Cohen laments the flight of the imagination to escape into the realm of the intellect, wherein its junior maturations is shielded from facing the demands of life. von Franz (1981) explains that it is often young men who escape into the realm of the intellect and fantasy and compensate for this struggle with an ostentatious display of philosophizing and voracious reading. These men—or should we say boys—are dreamers, seekers, precocious readers, but not "men of action," like Cohen sings; men who's masculinity is consolidated only as an effervescent idea, completely detached from the body, unfound within the hands that can "seize" and "shape" the reality before him. The return to the activities of childhood of our adult-descent is different from merely regressing to an infantile state to return to the womb of unconsciousness, whereby we noncommittally drift through life like a boat lost at sea. In the regression back to a simpler and more direct state of being, distractions and false identities are sloughed away from the individual's distorted self-image, bringing one closer in touch with an ageless, indestructible element. Having acquired adult sensibilities, the individual can readily confront the unconscious with a sense of personal authority rather than powerlessness and the collapse into the compulsive dependency of a child. But first, that inner child and the adult must be brought into communion with one another. The task of effectively relating those two parts is the responsibility of the ego, which by now, has more or less grasped the point that it is not the central authority in consciousness, but the act of consciousness itself. What is left will be taken care of as more initiations are introduced over time.

Initiations come in all shapes and sizes. They are voluntary, occur naturally following the life-cycle calendar, as is the case with mid-life, or are forced upon one through tragic or unexpected occurrence. Initiation may very well have the potential to clean up what the previous initiations missed in earlier development. Rites of passage have served many functions throughout the ages, namely helping assist individuals across a boundary or threshold, transition across zones of the liminality of social role, rank, or communion with the supernatural worlds (Henderson, 1964). With both Jung and Cohen, we can observe a gradual maturation of psychological life through the feeling tone of their writing, that at different stages of life conveys a new message, is itself a confession of interior life. Their words feel timeless and ageless because they are inscribed in the heart of every individual. Their writings adapt and speak directly to the vicissitudes of the times because the sense that they have genuinely committed to the discovery of their inner center is apparent, emerging with a strong sense of conviction. The album "Recent Songs" marked a moving beyond Cohen's messianic-charged works comparable to the psalms or dead sea scrolls of his twenties, to the refined and simple storytelling of one man and his fiddle, the seedling to his few-worded ascetic entries as a monk shoveling snow in a monastery. The album also immediately followed "Ladies Man", produced by Phil Spector, which showcases Cohen rather uncharacteristically boyish, no gentlemanly; more a Don Juan

than a mensch. His poetry charts his progression from the hunched-back boy we see nervously scuttling up to read at the podium in the documentary Ladies and Gentleman, Mr. Leonard Cohen, to a sagely figure, now on the other side of a few confrontations, a leader of a big band who signs songs of praise from bended knee. In an interview with Angel City Zen Center, Cohen reflects sagaciously:

Sometimes when you no no longer see yourself as the hero of your own drama expecting victory after victory... I found that things became a lot easier when I no longer expected to win. When you understand that, you abandon your masterpiece and you sink into the real masterpiece (The Real Masterpiece, 2019)

So too, does the Jung of the Red Book leave behind the prophetic, mantic ravings of a visionary, appearing unrecognizable to the "Wise-Old Storyteller from Kusnacht", the author of his autobiography, that speaks now in a voice as deep and sweet as wine.

My life is a story of the self-realization of the unconscious. What we are to our inward vision, and what means appears to be sub specie aeternitas, can only be expressed by myth. Thus, it is that I have now undertaken, in my 83rd year, to tell my personal myth. I can only make direct statements, only "tell stories." Whether or not the stories are 'true' is not the problem. The only question is whether I tell my fable, my truth...In the end the only events in my life worth telling are those when the imperishable world irrupted into this transitory one...I can understand myself only in the light of inner happenings. It is these that make up the singularity of my life, and with these my autobiography deals (Jung, 1989).

Appendix

The Traitor by Leonard Cohen

Now the Swan it floated on the English river Ah the Rose of High Romance it opened wide A sun tanned woman yearned me through the summer And the judges watched us from the other side

I told my mother "Mother I must leave you Preserve my room but do not shed a tear Should rumour of a shabby ending reach you It was half my fault and half the atmosphere"

But the Rose I sickened with a scarlet fever And the Swan I tempted with a sense of shame She said at last I was her finest lover And if she withered I would be to blame

The judges said you missed it by a fraction Rise up and brace your troops for the attack Ah the dreamers ride against the men of action Oh see the men of action falling back

But I lingered on her thighs a fatal moment I kissed her lips as though I thirsted still My falsity had stung me like a hornet The poison sank and it paralyzed my will

I could not move to warn all the younger soldiers That they had been deserted from above So on battlefields from here to Barcelona I'm listed with the enemies of love

And long ago she said "I must be leaving, Ah but keep my body here to lie upon You can move it up and down and when I'm sleeping Run some wire through that Rose and wind the Swan"

So daily I renew my idle duty I touch her here and there, I know my place I kiss her open mouth and I praise her beauty And people call me traitor to my faceReferences References

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