

“‘Monastic in his [own] way’: Thomas Merton and Leonard
Cohen”

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Friends, members of the ITMS, visitors from near and far: let me offer my own word of welcome to you as we come to this rich feast of encounter and reflection, the 11th general meeting and conference of the International Thomas Merton Society.

In thinking of what I wanted to say tonight, I was guided by two considerations. First, I wanted to say something that would relate to our theme, “Bearing Witness to the Light,” with its focus on interfaith understanding and dialogue.¹ Second, it occurred to me that as the first Canadian to be president of the ITMS I ought to give you some of what in Canada we call “Canadian content.” This phrase refers to the requirement of

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the Canadian Radio and Television Commission that a certain percentage of songs played and television shows broadcast in Canada must be produced in Canada, lest we find our cultural distinctives washed away by the tsunami of creativity coming from our great neighbor to the south.

That decided, the next question was “how”? I got my first clue when I read a review by Pico Iyer of Leonard Cohen’s most recent book of poetry, *Book of Longing*, in the *Times Literary Supplement*.² In that review he makes a brief reference to Thomas Merton as the poet Cohen most resembles. So far so good, then: Leonard Cohen, a Canadian poet, visual artist and singer-songwriter, with a resemblance to Thomas Merton.³

Then the next challenge: how to frame that resemblance. To my rescue rode in our national paper of record, *The Globe and Mail*, with an article by Sarah Hampson containing the inside-page title, “No longer a monk, but monastic in his way.”⁴ And there it was. Who else was monastic in his own way if not Thomas Merton? Was there ever another monk like him? Will there ever again be a monk like him? We can’t know that for certain, of course, but the chances, in my view, are unlikely in the extreme, not only because of Merton’s gifts and temperament, but because of the historical moment in which he exercised those gifts. So in this address I will be telling you a story about a Christian and a Jew--a Jew from Montréal with a strong affinity for Catholicism,⁵ and a Christian who once commented that he often felt that he wanted to be “a true Jew under my Catholic skin”⁶ It will be a kind of

case study of how two men, each monastic in his own way, bore and still bear witness to the One Light.

Merton, I am taking it as given, is already well-known to you. So I will say more in this talk about Cohen than I will about Merton, before I conclude with a reflection on what it might mean to you and to me to be monastic in our own ways, and then with a playing of Cohen's song "Hallelujah," written in 1984 and accorded in 2002 by *The Globe and Mail* the title of the greatest Canadian song ever written.⁷

But let us remember at least these points about Merton. A monk, yes, to his dying day, but a most unusual one. He was a monk with more than a thousand correspondents; a monk, at one time, with two secretaries and a chauffeur; a monk in an order with a strong commitment to silence who also had a profound yearning for communication; a monk whose abbot once called him the most obedient monk in the monastery yet who bent if not broke almost all the rules—and so on. You can add other items to this list from your own acquaintance with Merton.

Leonard Cohen, next. He was born in Montréal in 1934, the grandson and great-grandson of rabbis, to a comfortably-off family involved in various forms of commerce. As an English-speaking Jew, he was a member of a minority within the anglophone minority in Québec, which as a chiefly francophone culture is a minority within Canada, which is a cultural minority within North America.⁸ He studied, if that is the right word, at McGill University, during which time he began to write poetry and to set some of his poems to music. He then studied law for a brief time at Columbia—another link with Merton—but quickly moved on to the life of a

fulltime artist. In addition to his poems and songs, he has written novels, produced paintings and, interestingly, undertaken the daily early-morning practice of a drawing of his own face--something which could be seen as narcissistic, but which I interpret as a kind of examen of consciousness, if not of conscience. In the same vein, Sarah Hampson calls it “a form of meditation, a daily practice ... that helps ground him and prepare him for his day.”⁹

Much of the first half of his life was devoted, and many would say that “devoted” is indeed *le mot juste*, to wine, women and of course song. Then, as so frequently happens during the mid-life passage, came a moment of truth. He had been studying Zen off and on for many years.¹⁰ This led to his spending the years 1993-99 at Mount Baldy, a Rinzai Zen monastery in California, presided over by the redoubtable Kyozan Joshu Sasaki Roshi, still alive in 2009 at 102. As one of his biographers comments, “When asked what Roshi and Rinzai Zen contributed to his work and life, Cohen unequivocally answered, “Survival.”¹¹ In addition to learning Zen from Roshi, who gave him the monastic name of Jikhan (“ordinary silence”¹²), Cohen influenced him as well, working as his secretary and introducing him to the delights of Scotch. (I recall here learning that after his own enlightenment, the great Chadril Rinpoche, whom Merton called the greatest Tibetan teacher he met on his Asian journey, began eating meat and watching Rambo movies.¹³) It was during his time at Mount Baldy that he and Roshi visited Gethsemani, both to experience something of the life of a Christian monastery and, one infers, to pay their respects to Merton’s memory.¹⁴

The time at Mount Baldy was pivotal and healing for Cohen, and from there he returned to the ordinary life of a performing artist with new maturity and energy. He makes no claim to enlightenment, however. With characteristic irony, he addresses himself on this point in a post-Mount Baldy poem called “A Life of Errands,” every word of it capitalized:

In Spite Of The Ache

In Your Heart

...

And The Fact That

After Years Of

Spiritual Rigour

You Did Not Manage

To Enlighten Yourself

A Certain Cheerfulness

Will Begin To

Arise Out Of Your Crushed

Hopes And Intentions.¹⁵

What he does claim is that he has emerged from his years in the monastery

with what he calls a “unified” heart. This is an important term for him: he calls the team which travels with him on the tour on which he is currently engaged the Unified Heart Touring Company; and he has established, as any poet is of course free to do at any time, an order of spiritual chivalry which he calls the Order of the Unified Heart.¹⁶ He retains his human imperfections, of course: at one level he is the same man he has always been (“Before Zen, chop wood, carry water; after Zen, chop wood, carry water”), *and* he is simultaneously the new man, grounded and unified of heart.

It was a great shock to him around this time to learn that his manager had absconded with almost all his money, and that at an age when many retire he would have to make a financial fresh start. But he set to work with a will, and currently is on a world tour stretching over many months. The reviews of these concerts have been uniformly laudatory, even venerational. I went to his concert in Seattle (April 23, 2009), and would say from that experience that the reviews are in no way overstated. If you want to see and hear for yourself what he is doing in these concerts, I recommend the DVD of his London concert: “Leonard Cohen Live in London.”

In Seattle he received ten standing ovations—one for “Hallelujah,” one at the end of each set, and one after each of his seven encores. It was clear to me that for those present, the concert was a spiritual occasion. Cohen, now 74, and “born with the gift of a golden voice”—a self-deprecating line (from “The Tower of Song”) which generated appreciative laughter from the crowd, was singing both to the crowd and to himself, even within himself. As Cohen sings and interacts with the crowd, he evinces in his singing and stage presence what I would characterize as *delight*, evidence that he has, in

Merton's phrase, recovered Paradise—that he is speaking to us from Eden regained (Eden meaning “delight” in Hebrew).¹⁷ He has become in his eighth decade a spiritual teacher, signified most notably at the concert when he thanked us for what we had shared, and then sent us home with his blessing, somewhat as follows: “So I say God bless you, first of all those of you who will go home to family and friends, then also those of you who live in solitude, who live a different kind of life.” As Pico Iyer says in his program notes, “Is this cabaret or prayer-hall, you may wonder as the show goes on?”¹⁸ Larry Rohter, writing in *The New York Times*, cites Iyer again, and supports my bringing together of Merton and Cohen when he says that Cohen

appears to see performance and prayer as aspects of the same larger divine enterprise. That may not be surprising, coming from an artist whose best-known songs mingle sacred concerns with the secular and the sexual and sound like “collaborations between Jacques Brel and Thomas Merton,” as the novelist Pico Iyer put it.¹⁹

Back then to the ways in which they counterpoint each other's lives. Merton, as we know, was in his twenties, and on the edge of breakdown, when he was seized by the reality of God, made newly intellectually possible for him by his reading of Etienne Gilson.²⁰ Here then, in his turn, is Cohen on God.

I think there really is a power to tune in on. It's easy for me to call that power God. Some people find it difficult. ... But it doesn't have ... evil associations or ... organizational associations for me. It's easier for me to say God than “some unnameable mysterious power that motivates all living things.” The word God for me is very simple and usable.

So that I can say “to become close to Him is to feel His grace”
because I have felt it.”²¹

As believers in God, Merton and Cohen, both also students and practitioners of Zen, a program of spiritual discipline rather than a religion, remained and remain committed to their own traditions. Cohen has had to insist to his interviewers that he remains a Jew, as Merton had to insist that he remained a Christian.²² Both were and are rooted and grounded in their own traditions, in Cohen’s case a fact of his birth, in Merton’s the fruit of adult choice. And, interestingly again, both experienced in adulthood the gift of an epiphanic moment of unitive experience, Merton at the corner of Fourth and Walnut/Muhammad Ali,²³ and Cohen some years later in a dream of sitting in a café near The Bitter End in New York.²⁴

Then there is the question of wine, women and song. Merton’s time at Columbia was marked, as we know, with substantial attention to these realities. They were left behind on the material level when he entered Gethsemani, although there is the amusing change between his writing of *Seeds of Contemplation* in 1948-49, in which he says very severely that monks neither drink wine nor swim, and his writing of *New Seeds* a dozen years later in which he changes this to the assertion that monks do not drink champagne, clearly suggesting [insert smile here!] that in the interval they had begun to drink wine.²⁵

Of women, something more serious must be said. Merton’s early relations with women before he met M.²⁶ in 1966 have been largely characterized as matters for regret. However, a passage of an undeniably erotic character in “Day of a Stranger,” written in August 1965, has always seemed to me

unmistakably proleptic of his major shift of consciousness a half year later.

All monks, as is well known, are unmarried, and hermits more unmarried than the rest of them. Not that I have anything against women. I see no reason why a man can't love God and a woman at the same time. If God was going to regard women with a jealous eye, why did he go and make them in the first place? There is a lot of talk about a married clergy. Interesting. So far there has not been a great deal said about married hermits. ... One might say I had decided to marry the silence of the forest. The sweet dark warmth of the whole world will have to be my wife. Out of the heart of that dark warmth comes the secret that is heard only in silence, but it is the root of all the secrets that are whispered by all the lovers in their beds all over the world.²⁷

I give to Merton's biographer Michael Mott the last word here: that after his time with M., "Merton never again talked of his inability to love, or to be loved."²⁸ In a larger frame of reference than the individual, both Merton and Cohen point us to the necessity of the integration of eros into our own spirituality. Merton lived most of his life in a different time than Cohen; but it seems very likely to me that had he lived longer, he would have paid substantial attention to the healing of the wound of theological dualism which has for so many centuries separated body and soul, eros and agapé, a healing which is offered to us time and time again in Cohen's poems and songs. Merton's great poem, "Hagia Sophia," at least points the way forward in this regard.²⁹

So far I have concentrated on the "in his [own] way" part of my title. What

to say, then about the meaning of the word “monastic” as it pertains to Merton and Cohen? The simplest approach, it seems to me, is to identify some of the classic monastic values, and then look for their presence in their lives. Among the values I find when I do this are hospitality, cultural resistance/commitment to marginality, repentance/metanoia, prophecy, silence, solitude, broken-heartedness, prayer, compassion and love. All of them I find in one form or another in both our subjects. Although all of these values can be seen in both Merton and Cohen, here I hold up one such value only--hospitality, a staple of monastic life since St Benedict.³⁰ In Merton’s case, it is chiefly in his response to his vast array of correspondents that I see the essence of his practice of hospitality. To everyone from Popes to teenagers he gave hospitable epistolary response. In Cohen’s case, I see his practice of hospitality in the ambiance he creates at his concerts. He projects a warm and inclusive sense of welcome, inviting those who might in other circumstances simply think “I’m going to a concert” to transcend the limitations of terms such as “audience” or “performer,” to become part of a temporary spiritual community, and so to share in a time which is by turns musical, conversational, erotic, and inspirational.³¹

Merton and Cohen, then: both poets and visual artists, both “strangers” or outsiders, both guilty bystanders who have taken their stands on the cultural margins, both students of Zen, both trickster figures (Pico Iyer calls Cohen a “courtly coyote”; Belden Lane calls Merton a “Zen clown”³²). They are both spiritual teachers who have burst the bonds of cultural constraint which for the most part confine poetry to a limited audience and monasticism to its institutional base. Each one, *sui generis*, and without any doubt, is indeed monastic in his own way.

Which brings me to the rest of us. What would it mean for you and for me to be monastic in *our* own way? The current movement among evangelical Christians called “the new monasticism,” or “neo-monasticism,” points to the importance which they are assigning to the ancient values of monasticism that I have listed—silence, solitude, contemplation, broken-heartedness, marginality, hospitality. And many books, Merton’s included, urge their readers to live contemplative lives without quitting their day jobs. Insofar as these spiritual practices find a place in your life or mine, then, we are monastic, in our own way. I firmly believe that in each of us, if Merton and Cohen are any help here, there is an inner monastic, if not already active, then silently pleading for release into the practice of hospitality and other values I have listed.

Cohen’s words from his song “Anthem” come to mind here:

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in.³³

Cohen is inviting us to let the light in on that inner monastic, and Merton, on the understanding that the light is already there, waiting to shine out, invites us to bear witness to the light that shines in others—of our own tradition, of other traditions, of no tradition--as well as in ourselves. On the strength of this dual recognition, in honour of Leonard Cohen and in a completely and utterly unauthorized way, I therefore award to Thomas Merton the Order of

the Unified Heart, First Class, with bar.³⁴ And were Merton among us in the flesh on this occasion, I hunch that he would be ready, again in a completely unauthorized way, to award to Leonard Cohen full membership in the Order of Hermits Irregular, also First Class, and also, *bien sur*, with bar.³⁵

I close now with the playing of Cohen's "Hallelujah" as sung by Cohen himself. Thomas Ryan says that the song comes out of Cohen's own experience of brokenness, of the crack that is in everything and everyone, the reality of fallenness, to use a Christian theological category. Yet, as he says, "If sinfulness precluded praise, we would live in spiritual silence. Thankfully it does not. The "broken Hallelujah" on earth conveys praise of God's glory now as the "holy Hallelujah" will in heaven."³⁶ The crack in everything is not only how the light gets in; it is also how the light gets out. And so we end with the words of the great song, in which Cohen frames his sense of accountability at the last day—also a classic monastic concern—and so invites us to be equally accountable—in our own way.

I did my best, it wasn't much,

I couldn't feel so I learned to touch.

I've told the truth, I didn't come all this way [to ...]³⁷ to fool you.

Yeah even though it all went wrong

I'll stand before the Lord of Song

With nothing on my lips but Hallelujah.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

¹ The phrase comes from a letter of Merton's to his Pakistani Sufi correspondent, Abdul Aziz, written November 17, 1960, and published in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985) 45. Here is part of the notably apocalyptic paragraph from which this theme is taken: "... I speak to you from my heart of our obligation to study the truth in deep prayer and meditation, and bear witness to the light that comes from the All-Holy God into this world of darkness where He is not known and not remembered. The world we live in has become an awful void, a desecrated sanctuary, reflecting outwardly the emptiness and blindness of the hearts of men [sic] who have gone crazy with their love for money and power and with pride in their technology."

² *TLS* 5387 (June 30, 2006) 8.

³ Since then, I have noticed the same point made by other commentators. T. F. Rigelhof, for example, in a review of *Good to a Fault*, by Marina Endicott, speaks of her writing as marked with "the flashes of hard-won wisdom that are like Leonard Cohen's when he's at his most self-deprecating. Or Thomas Merton's." *The Globe and Mail* (September 20, 2008) D1.

⁴ Sarah Hampson, "Life of a ladies' man," *The Globe and Mail* (May 26, 2007), R1, R6-7. The phrase is an inside-page title, spanning pages R6 and 7.

⁵ Cf. Thomas Ryan, "Viewpoint: 'Nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah,'" *National Catholic Reporter* (May 27, 2009) 1.

⁶ Merton to Abraham Joshua Heschel, September 9, 1964, in *Hidden Ground of Love*, 434-35.

⁷ Brad Wheeler, "Hallelujah! Cohen takes Europe," *The Globe and Mail* (December 16, 2008) R1.

⁸ Michael Gnarowski, ed. and introd., *Leonard Cohen: The Artist and his Critics* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976) 73.

⁹ Sarah Hampson, "He Has Tried in His Way To Be Free," *Shambala Sun* (November 2007) 1.

¹⁰ Sarah Hampson speaks here of forty years of study: “He Has Tried In His Way to be Free,” 1.

¹¹ Ira B. Nadel, *Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen* (Toronto: Random House, 1996) 272. Sarah Hampson quotes him as also referring to his time there as “rehab,” and as having gone there to cure himself/be cured of his “excesses”: “Life of a Ladies’ Man,” R7.

¹² Hampson, “Ladies’ Man,” R6.

¹³ Personal conversation with Chadral’s student, Konchok Tashi (Steve Brown), December 13, 2000, at Chadral’s compound in Salabari, West Bengal, India. On Merton’s encounter with Chadral, see *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin; consulting ed. Amiya Chakravarty (New York: New Directions, 1973) 142-44.

¹⁴ Nadel, 231-32; Gethsemani is there spelled Gethsemane, the usual English spelling, but not the one in use at Merton’s abbey.

¹⁵ Leonard Cohen, *Book of Longing* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 2006) 66.

¹⁶ Hampson, “Ladies’ Man,” R6.

¹⁷ Sarah Hampson states this very simply: “The man is happy”—“Ladies’ Man,” R7.

¹⁸ “No disguises in the dark,” Unified Heart Tour program book, n.p., n.d.

¹⁹ “On the Road, for Reasons Practical and Spiritual,” www.nytimes.com (February 24, 2009).

²⁰ Cf. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), 140, 171ff., 180, 204, 219, 220.

²¹ Gnarowski, *Leonard Cohen: The Artist and His Critics*, 53. The quotation is cited from an interview published in *Saturday Night* in June 1969.

²² “... in the tradition of Zen that I’ve practiced, there is ... theologically ... no challenge to any Jewish belief.” Rohter, “On the Road,” 3. Cf. Merton’s saying mass in Bangkok on December 8, 1968, two days before he died: *Asian Journal*, 254.

²³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 156-57.

²⁴ Gnarowski, 55.

²⁵ See on this Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1985) 149.

²⁶ The nurse with whom Merton had a romantic relationship in 1966. There is a partial account of this in *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom (Journals VI)*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997); note particularly the appendix called “A Midsummer Diary for M.” (301-48).

²⁷ *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master. The Essential Writings* ed. and introd. Lawrence S. Cunningham, foreword Patrick Hart, pref. Anne E. Carr (New York: Paulist Press, 1992) 219.

²⁸ *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 438.

²⁹ Cunningham, 257-64.

³⁰ “All guests to the monastery should be welcomed as Christ, because He will say, ‘I was a stranger, and you took me in’ (Matt.25:35).” *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. and introd. Anthony C. Meisel and M. L. del Mastro (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975) 89.

³¹ Sarah Hampson makes the same observation, referring to his “open-door atmosphere of hospitality—an invitation to authenticity, to say and ask what you want”: “Ladies’ Man,” R6-7.

³² Pico Iyer “No disguises in the dark”; Belden C. Lane in “Merton as Zen Clown,” <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/oct1989/v46-3-article1.htm>

³³ “Solvency and rapture,” an editorial in *The Globe and Mail* (December 27, 2008), riffs on these lines—surely the only occasion in Canadian history on which a singer-songwriter has been editorially celebrated in that sober newspaper.

³⁴ In case there are any readers of this article who have never heard Merton’s immortal comment—“I love beer, and, by that very fact the world”—in his essay “Is the World a Problem?” in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973) 160, I provide the citation so that they may understand why the order is awarded “with bar.”

³⁵ Referring both to himself and to his partner, Anjani Thomas, Cohen says, “We are both impossibly solitudinous people”—Hampson, “Ladies’ Man,” R7.

³⁶ Ryan, 2.

³⁷ Here Cohen inserts the name of the city in which he is singing.

[This paragraph following isn't part of the paper: I just filed it here in case I found a way to use it in another version of this talk.]

“It’s, as I say, a desire to affirm my faith in life, not in some formal religious way but with enthusiasm, with emotion.... It’s a rather joyous song.” ~ Leonard Cohen, creator of the song, Hallelujah. He says: “I wanted to write something in the tradition of the hallelujah choruses but from a different point of view... It’s the notion that there is no perfection ~ that this is a broken world and we live with broken hearts and broken lives but still that is no alibi for anything. On the contrary, you have to stand up and say hallelujah under those circumstances.”

<http://tmdcelebritynews.com/hallelujah-leonard-cohen-allison-crowe-live-performance/07147>

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