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# **Lili Marlen and the Ghosts**

: Decoding a song to find a poet

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*I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,  
and I have been circling for a thousand years,  
and I still don't know if I am falcon, or a storm,  
or a great song.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*

*What is a poet? A poet is an unhappy being whose  
heart is torn by secret sufferings, but whose lips are so  
strangely formed that when the sighs and the cries  
escape them, they sound like beautiful music.*

—Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

### **How do songs work?**

It is deceptively easy to define song: an artistic form based on music. The Oxford Dictionary definition is narrower than that: “A short poem or other set of words set to music or meant to be sung.”<sup>1</sup> As such, song is transparent and oblique at the same time. Its layers of meaning from its lyrics are amalgamated with their counterparts in melody forming an

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Dictionary of English, third edition, Ed. Angus Stevenson; electronic version

outstandingly complex set of connotations, undertones and overtones inextricably intertwined<sup>2</sup>. In spite of this complexity, song is universally accessible: even in those ancient times when public and communal vocabulary was only beginning to develop song was already present as an artistic form since it didn't require any external tools.

However, if we concentrate too hard on the artistic side we are in danger of forgetting that birds sing too, on the wire or off of it, that whales sing, and that the astronomers are catching "songs"/songs of distant celestial entities which are yet undefined. Which brings us back to the point that is often ignored: song is a form of communication.

There is considerable evidence to indicate that music functions widely and on a number of levels as a means of emotional expression. In discussing song texts, [...] one of their outstanding features is the fact that they provide a vehicle for the expression of ideas and emotions not revealed in ordinary discourse.<sup>3</sup>

It is, of course, impossible to extricate communication from the sociological aspects of music, as they are tightly connected<sup>4</sup>. The relationship between music and emotion is well established, but only recently some new theories have started illuminating this process. Philosopher Jenefer Robinson has proposed the "emotions as process, music as process"<sup>5</sup> theory. In short: an emotion is a dynamic process—consisting of overlapping and

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<sup>2</sup> This essay deals with the form where song consists of words and music, thus excluding the instrumental songs.

<sup>3</sup> Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, Northwestern 1964. P 219

<sup>4</sup> Merriam lists ten functions and uses of music: emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, communication, symbolic representation, physical response, enforcing conformity to social norms, validation of social institutions and religious rituals, contribution to the continuity and stability of culture, and contribution to the integration of society.

<sup>5</sup> *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; pp. 310-13

simultaneous streams—preparing us for possible action; it is followed by cognition, allowing us to “recognise” the feeling and name it (so we could communicate it). Music, argues Robinson, is also a series of simultaneous processes and is an ideal medium for reflecting aspects of emotion.

I would add that this system of dynamic mirrors reflects not only emotions but the whole reality of a given location.

Music functions in all societies as a symbolic representation of other things, ideas, and behaviors.<sup>6</sup>

In the same way that silence is a language on its own, the whole set of cultural codes can be built into a popular song, thus making it a statement even when it doesn't purport to be one. Recognising its own situation in the specific song, the audience responds by appointing it to sing as their representative. Songs speak for their audience, they shout, rebel, fight, conform, agree. Good songs are ambassadors of their aficionados. Good songs affirm their times.

This is likely one of the main reasons why popular music gains such wide following, allowing for gigantic, multi-million sales of the sound carriers and making their authors wealthy and known overnight.

Contemporary sociology includes popular music into its definitions of modern youth cultures and, indeed, often even bases the definition on the type of music that the specific group prefers. Punk as a movement is inseparable from its music. Mods and rockers as well. Every segment of urban counterculture has its own music and its own music heroes. Each of these music idols has at least one song that serves as their ID. From each of these

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<sup>6</sup> Merriam, p 223

movements, from each era, some songs survive, to become more than mementos, to rise to the status of evergreen, thanks to the symbolic meaning they carry and cultural values they represent and reflect<sup>7</sup>. These songs transcend their birth, their surrounding, even their author, and acquire a life on their own, as all true art does. We say Dali and we see a liquid clock dripping from the side of the table. We say Picasso and we see dead bodies of men and bulls and the cold, macabre colours of the *Guernica*. We say Tchaikovsky and the swans start floating across the stage in our mind. We say Brel and in the port of Amsterdam drunken sailors dance. We say Leonard Cohen and "It's four in the morning, the end of December."

### **A very famous raincoat**

A day after his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday, in 1970, Leonard Cohen went into a studio in Nashville and in five days recorded the material for his third album, *Songs of Love and Hate*, a set of intense, dark songs. The speed at which the album was made is deceptive, as the record was the fruition of a long process. Some of the songs from the collection have been in circulation for several years before they were recorded. As was the song that would become one the most important items in his opus, "Famous Blue Raincoat."

Ron Cornelius, who was Cohen's bandleader for several years, remembers:

"We performed that song a lot of places. Typically gardens in Copenhagen, the Olympia Theater in Paris, the Vienna Opera House. We played that song a lot before it ever went to tape. We knew it was going to be big. We could see what the crowd did—you play the Royal Albert Hall, the crowd goes crazy, and you're really saying something there."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Merriam, p 258

<sup>8</sup> Songfacts, website; <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=2580> ; accessed 2 June 2015

At a concert in a mental institution in New York, in the summer of 1970, “There appeared to be quite a few Leonard Cohen fans in the audience. One called out a request for ‘Famous Blue Raincoat’ ”, says Sylvie Simmons in her book *I’m Your Man*. Cohen was surprised.

“It was a song that I didn’t know anybody knew about, that we have only sung in concerts. It’s a song that I wrote in New York when I was living on the east side of the East Side, and it’s about sharing women, sharing men, and the idea of that if you hold on to somebody . . .”<sup>9</sup>

“Raincoat” mixes firm grounding with surrealism, Greek mythology with Scientology, and has been a perpetual source of speculations since its publication, the fact not much helped by Cohen's insisting that he doesn't remember the origins of the song.

It's four in the morning, the end of December  
I'm writing you now just to see if you're better  
New York is cold, but I like where I'm living  
There's music on Clinton Street all through the evening.<sup>10</sup>

On a first hearing, this is a precise and well-illuminated song: it is obviously about a love triangle, and in it one man is writing a letter to another, pleading for reconciliation. The surface elements of the song also seem easy to decode. The raincoat:

On the day he arrived in London [December 1959—D.T.], Cohen bought a typewriter, a green Olivetti 22, for £40, which would remain with him for years. He also acquired his ‘famous blue raincoat,’ a Burberry with epaulets. That, too, remained with him until it was stolen from a New York loft in 1968. In London, these objects acted as amulets, arming him to combat the world.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sylvie Simmons. “I’m Your Man.” iBooks, Chapter 12. Ecco. Epub Edition 2012; ISBN: 9780062096913

<sup>10</sup> “Famous Blue Raincoat. Copyright © 1971 by Leonard Cohen Stranger Music, Inc. ” Quotes in this essay are based on the principle of fair usage for academic purposes.

<sup>11</sup> Excerpt From: Ira B. Nadel. “Various Positions.” iBooks. Vintage Canada.

An apartment on Clinton Street, where in the song he says he is living at the moment, can be traced to around 1966 and as a rental did not last longer than 1968, which—bearing in mind Cohen’s words about when did he write the verses—means that the song was at least two years old when it was taped.

The only person mentioned by the name, Jane, has not been recorded by any of his biographers, and Cohen himself does not mention a woman of that name in any of his other songs, so we can presume that this is a pseudonym.

Finally: going Clear.

Cohen’s biographers mention that he was briefly a member of the Church of Scientology in the late 1960s.

“On June 17, 1968, Cohen received a Scientology certificate awarding him ‘Grade iv—Release.’ ”<sup>12</sup>

On the ladder of progress of the Church of Scientology members, the level of Clear is reached at the moment when past traumas and pains are not felt anymore.

“To reach Clear means that the individual has erased his reactive mind, his unconscious mind is gone, and he is totally alert and totally capable.”<sup>13</sup>

The state of Clear is the borderline position on the ladder of Scientology. Before that, a member of the Church is mostly being introduced into the doctrine; after reaching Clear the "exciting secrets" of the movement are revealed to the "Clear" members and the rise through further eight levels begins.

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<sup>12</sup> Nadel, Ch. 7

<sup>13</sup> L. Ron Hubbard, interview in “Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief”; HBO Documentaries, 2015; 00:22:18–00:22:28.



Now that we have cleared the surface elements, what are we left with? In other words, how does Cohen as a poet work?

The song begins by grounding: on a cold New York night the narrator is awake, writing a letter to his former friend. (We will presume that this story is a tail of a long sleepless night rather than an early morning exercise.)

Immediately we are getting more in the untold layers than in what we hear.

The end of December means it is festive season, a time of melancholy and longing. Something is troubling the narrator, something keeping him awake all through the night. He tells us about the music coming from Clinton Street throughout the evening. New York winters are bitter around that time and so there could have been no bands playing outside. The music come from the local bars. So, the narrator is listening carefully, straining his ears for the sounds of the street, as if hoping to hear steps approaching. The steps of someone who won't be coming tonight.

You'd been to the station to meet every train  
And you came home without Lili Marlen<sup>14</sup>

Why is a young Jewish poet singing about a major Nazi popular cultural propaganda symbol from World War II?

### **Lili Marlen über alles**

“Once upon a time, there was a hotel in New York City. There was an elevator in that hotel. One evening, about three in the morning, I met a young woman in that hotel. I didn't know who she was. Turned out she was a very great singer. [...] She was looking for Kris Kristofferson [laughter]. I wasn't looking for her, I was looking for Lili Marlen.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Famous Blue Raincoat”

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, in his concert introduction to Chelsea Hotel #2, quoted in Nadel.

In this cryptic description of his first meeting with Janis Joplin, Cohen doesn't betray his true fascination with perhaps the most famous war song of all times. But fascinated he was with it, as there are several references to that title in his concert introductions and interviews.

In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, Cohen was exploring wider cultural grounds than the ones that Montreal and Canada offered him. During that period he spent time in London, Greece, Israel, Cuba, USA... These were his years without a permanent address. He bought a house on the Greek island of Hydra, but did not reside permanently there. In the late 1960s, when in New York, he lived in the Chelsea Hotel and was infatuated with Nico, a singer-songwriter, model, composer and actress, who—after recording an album with The Velvet Underground—had obtained a cult status in the New York's alternative artistic circles. She was aloof like Marlene Dietrich and sang in a low voice, accompanied mostly only by a guitar.

“I was completely taken,” Cohen said. “I had been through the blonde trip; I had lived with a blonde girl and I had felt for a long time that I was living in a Nazi poster. This was a kind of repetition.”<sup>16</sup>

Thelma Blitz, one of Cohen's lovers from the period, remembers:

“I didn't know what the Chelsea Hotel was so I said, ‘What's there?’ and he said, ‘Nico.’ I only had a vague idea then of Nico and Andy Warhol but he had a wistfulness in his voice when he said ‘Nico,’ which makes me think that was why he was there.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Simmons, *ibid.*, Chapter 9.

<sup>17</sup> Simmons, *ibid.*, Chapter 11.

Nico's real name was Christa Päffgen and she was German. Was she Leonard Cohen's Lili Marlen?

Text for the song "Lili Marlen" was written in 1915 during World War I by Hans Leip. Composer Norbert Schultze set it to music in 1938, but he had to wait another year for the song to be picked by a major name on the German music scene, such as the much loved chanteuse Lale Andersen. It was published on Electrola<sup>18</sup> label in August of 1939, only a few days before the German troops invaded Poland, the act that effectively started the World War II.

Today, we know this song mostly in the version recorded by Marlene Dietrich in 1945 (and in later subsequent recordings). It is a dreamy love song, with a velvety voice of a longing woman. That Dietrich's version is based on Andersen reworking of the song from 1940<sup>19</sup>. The original from 1939 was more energetic and Lale Anderson sings in an upbeat tone. It is a strange case of a military march disguised as a waltz but written in four quarters. It begins with a drumroll and a short introduction on bugle, and continues with an accordion spilled over everything before the tempo of a military march starts slowly and persistently grinding under the seductive voice of the singer.

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<sup>18</sup> There are several accepted ways to write the name of this song, from Lilly Marlene, Marleen, Lily Marleene, to Lili Marlen. I have opted for the last one, simply because it was the way the name of the song was spelled on the original record when it appeared for the first time.

<sup>19</sup> As can be heard on Archive.org: <https://archive.org/details/LiliMarleen-01-40>

But that was not the right time for seductive voices. The German Reich required firmness and marching boots. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda chief, hated the song for not being "military" enough. He wanted it changed into an uplifting march.

To loyal Nazis, the song seemed to be anti-war, even close to treason, and singer Lale Andersen was believed to be sympathetic towards Jews. The song was banned and both Andersen and Schultze were charged with "moral sabotage" of the nation's aims. She was placed virtually under house arrest and he was ordered to compose music praising Nazi ideals.<sup>20</sup>

The song didn't get much time on the waves of the German radio stations also because the war propaganda shifted into high gear and sentimentality as such was not welcome on the waves that Goebels controlled.

In April 1941 the Luftwaffe bombarded Belgrade and started the invasion of Yugoslavia. In that bombing, the building of Radio Belgrade was damaged, and a bomb destroyed the majority of records and tapes kept in its music library. When Hitler's army occupied the city, they turned Radio Belgrade into Soldatensender Belgrad, a propaganda station for entertaining the Afrika Korps. But there was no music to be found in the damaged building, almost none. Among the few coffers that survived bombing simply because they contained the unpopular records and as such had been kept at the bottom of the vault, Lale Andersen's song was found. "Lili Marlen" was played first on the waves of Radio Belgrade and was an immediate hit, first with Rommel's troops, then also with the Desert Rats.

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<sup>20</sup> The story behind the song: Lili Marlene; Telegraph web site;

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/3561946/The-story-behind-the-song-Lili-Marlene.html> ;

At the moment when the record was first played in Belgrade, the recording was officially banned in Germany. Goebbels resisted calls to ease the ban. However, he couldn't say no to the Field Marshall Rommel, with whose personal support the song started again airing each night.

“Lili Marlen” is a simple song, revolving around the memory of a girlfriend parting with her soldier boyfriend under the street lamp in front of the barracks. The rest of the verses are the usual schmaltz: I am going to war but will think of you, your face will be on my mind wherever I fight, your face under the lantern. Why did this song, so ordinary, become such a hit, and why has it kept its appeal for so long?

A post-war photograph shows Lale Andersen performing on the British Forces Radio Network. When asked to account for “Lili Marlen's” popularity she replied, “Can the wind explain why it became a storm?<sup>21</sup>”

Good songs reflect their time. Great songs deny their time. “Lili Marlen” is a perfect song for soldiers. In all the brutality that surrounds them, all the doom and darkness, there is a lantern and there is a light, and there is a soft face and there is that name that makes the tongue do the same *salto* it does when it says “love”. Love. Liebe. Lili Marlen.

### **The Poet in the Coat**

The timbre of Leonard Cohen's voice invokes immediate intimacy. His singing seems to be personal, exclusive for each and every listener. One mouth for one ear. This confessional

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<sup>21</sup> Imperial War Museum web site; <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-story-of-lili-marlene>; last accessed 2 June 2015.

tone allows for some elements in his poems to be left out, so the space between the lines in his songs becomes enlarged—sometimes so much that a whole song by some other poet would fit inside.

From the visible/decodable elements in “Famous Blue Raincoat” and their relationship with the untold we can observe how Cohen works as a poet.

SAID / SURFACE	UNSAID / SUB
Precise time setting (4:00 in the morning; end of December)	Timeless (to meet every train; I’ve heard...)
Precise place (NY, Clinton St.)	Dislocation (deep in the desert; the station...)
Defined actors (Writer, Brother/Killer, Jane)	Faceless, spiritual, ascetic presence (living for nothing; Lili Marlen; going Clear...)

Taken together, the surface elements suggest normalcy and some sort of order in the narrator’s world. Taken together, the subliminal messages are telling quite a different story: disturbed psyche, insecurity, a world haunted by the ghosts of the past. This tension between the said and the unsaid is what makes this song so powerful, and yet, Cohen was not very happy with his work:

“I always thought that that was a song you could see the carpentry in a bit. Although there are some images in it that I am very pleased with. And the tune is real good. But I’m willing to defend it, saying it was impressionistic. It’s stylistically coherent. And I can defend it if I have to. But secretly I always felt that there was a certain incoherence that prevented it from being a great song.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Songfacts, Famous Blue Raincoat; website; <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=2580> ; last accessed 2 June 2015

Let's return to that raincoat and explore its true meaning:

What is a coat to a poet?

There are several meanings of the word coat, from the outer garment, to hair or fur, to a layer, but they can all be reduced to the covering, to a substance which lies between a body and its surrounding. That would be a definition of *coat* applicable to any situation, but what is it to a *poet*? Is it perhaps another form, a more urbane one, of the cassock? The word comes from French *casaque*—'long coat', from Italian *casacca* 'riding coat', probably from Turkic *kazak* 'vagabond'. Priests and poets—the original vagabonds. Citizens of the temporal lands. Wearing cassock does not come from the need to cover, but from the urge to show dedication and belonging. We recognise a Poet in a Coat much the same way we recognise The Cat in the Hat: prone to games, which do not necessarily end nicely. A Poet in a Coat will probably walk around clenching his teeth, hands deep in pockets, shoulders cramped, as Cohen does in the early scenes of the documentary titled *Ladies and Gentlemen... Mr. Leonard Cohen*<sup>23</sup>. Because he only has that one layer protecting him from the vacuum of the Universe around him. It's almost like a space suit. Any hole in it would be dangerous. Imagine a poet whose coat is torn at the shoulder. The horror.

Ah, the last time we saw you, you looked so much older  
Your famous blue raincoat was torn at the shoulder.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uv4J7sID3Pk> ; accessed 2 June 2015

<sup>24</sup> "Famous Blue Raincoat"

## Strange years

I discovered Leonard Cohen fairly late, in the early 1980s. A song of his would make a splash here and there on the waves of Radio Belgrade, and it would be all it was supposed to be: fascinating, hypnotising, powerful. However, the life I lived then required three quarters and a Fender, and Cohen was put on standby, to wait for stranger times when I would need to borrow a cassock from The Poet in the Coat.

Then came a strange year.

In the summer of 1985 the wife of my friend called and asked me to travel with her to Amsterdam. Originally, the two of them were to spend there a couple of weeks. She was a poet and was finalising her new collection and had a dream in which she was told it had to happen in Amsterdam. Now the ticket was free, as her husband had found a last minute excuse. I knew his excuse, I had danced with her once. During the trip, by a slow bus driven by a slightly crazy driver, it somehow became clear that my friend's wife was perhaps interested in getting even with my help. But in the pair of seats in front of us was a young German/Dutch couple. I liked the German woman very much and we started joking. Then flirting. I told her she was Lili Marlen. Buses are terrific means of transportation—not in physical space, perhaps, but in emotional space. A few hours later her smile was all I needed in life. Her boyfriend was showing signs of interest in my friend's wife. Before the ride was over, they invited us to stay in their place, a small house in the centre of Amsterdam.

For the next ten days all we did was smoulder in their living room, all four of us. In spite of all the smoke nobody was asking about the fires because they were obvious. We kept sitting on the white carpet in front of the record player, sipping bad German wine,



rolling cheap tobacco and their homemade weed and listening to the *Songs of Love and Hate*. We didn't even have to talk much, as Cohen was not bad with words. In the meantime, Lili Marlen's boyfriend became like a brother to me. We loved the same music, the same movies, the same...woman.

Two Lili Marlens and two soldiers, with love ricocheting in all the wrong directions. And, as if this was a good metaphor, there was an even more difficult one: four people in two triangles. One is always out, one always a shadow, one is always afraid of the shadow.

In short, nothing happened between us there.

A few months later I wrote a story, and published it. It was titled "A Voice from the Early Morning of January 1<sup>st</sup>" and it was about how I met my own Lili Marlen, and directly inspired by "Famous Blue Raincoat". I wrote it from the perspective of that other man, the one to whom Cohen's narrator is writing a letter.

In any case, publishing my Amsterdam story did not end the Amsterdam triangles. We continued with night calls, with sending pictures in envelopes, together with a few dense words—because all of us were taken. We all belonged to some relationship. So each one of us was a shadow to some couple. And each person in each couple was afraid of their shadow—that it will succeed one day, in taking the beloved one, in breaking apart that thin crust that is love.

In May 1960, on the island of Hydra Cohen met Marianne Ihlen<sup>25</sup>, the beautiful wife of the Norwegian author and bohemian Axel Jensen. Several months later she moved, with

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<sup>25</sup> The Leonard Cohen Files <http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/marianne2006.html> accessed 2 June 2015

her small son, into Cohen's rented home across the ocean. Surely, the answer to who are the characters that make the triangle in "Famous Blue Raincoat" is clear: Marianne and Axel.

But is that so?

The key protagonists of this deceptively simple love triangle are the people (and objects) who are absent from it. The man who is "my brother, my killer" to the narrator, the "famous blue raincoat" which is seen in a state of disrepair, a Lili Marlen who has never arrived... "Famous Blue Raincoat" seems to be a song of ghosts.

It wasn't until a year later that I travelled again to Amsterdam. I had made up my mind in the meantime and wanted to talk seriously with Lili Marlen (ah, the sweet pretentiousness of youth: "serious talk"—is there a more revealing sign of emotions?). In my backpack was a magazine with her photo on the front cover—a picture of her I took when we first met, hoping to present myself as a creative person, but which turned out really well and I was able to sell it to a magazine. And some letters I haven't had the chance to send, and other proofs of undying love.

I rented a bed in a Christian shelter, not because of religious connotations but because I was poor, left my backpack and went to see her. When she let me in, her boyfriend/my brother was sitting at the table.

Everything was very civilised. She had made her choices, he had as well, and I was the shadow they didn't want to have. They wanted their relationship to be a noon love.

I gave her the magazine—which caught them both by surprise—kept my letters and left. Back in the shelter my backpack was stolen, and with it all my underwear, and that I took for a brilliant metaphor of the situation.

Walking, later, by the canal, rolling tobacco and counting the leaves that had already gone yellow, I found a single strand of long blonde hair on my sleeve. It was hers, of course.

I comforted myself that there was at least one thing I got from the whole affair: I now fully understood Cohen's "Famous Blue Raincoat". Hell—I lived it.

### **Hair**

Yes, and Jane came by with a lock of your hair  
 She said that you gave it to her  
 That night that you planned to go clear  
 Did you ever go clear?<sup>26</sup>

Almost all ancient civilisations had known the cult of hair in one form or the other, and the basic principles remained the same across the continents and religions: man's power lies in his mane and the woman will want to have a lock of her lover's hair if she wants to control him. Delilah betrays Samson by giving away the secret of his hair, the Roman girls about to be married offer locks of hair to Iupiter, boys across China, India, Egypt, Israel, etc. know they are turning into men when their last childhood locks get removed. And in almost all these civilisations, and many others, giving a lock of hair to someone is a sign of love and trust, because it means giving the key of the personal power to another person. Hair is a powerful symbol and this gesture is a significant step in the development of a relationship.

Jane was given a lock of hair that fateful night when her lover decided to go Clear.

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<sup>26</sup> "Famous Blue Raincoat"

Clear, we remember, means giving up on memories, meaning that when Jane's lover decides to forget everything he gives her a token of his eternal love so she could remember him. Is the lock of hair in this case simply a romantic gesture?

At the exhibition titled "Les Maitres du Désordre/Masters of Chaos," held in Musée du Quai Branly, Paris,<sup>27</sup> the Power Store section was dedicated to magical containers whose purpose is to control the forces of time and destruction. The authors of the exhibition wrote in the onsite information:

Order does not exist without ambivalence. All order, including the divine order, is fundamentally flawed... Death, disease, the vagaries of nature and human violence are the source of ritual practices, which have produced objects, containers for forces, linking this world to the beyond.<sup>28</sup>

Vast majority of such objects contain fibres of some sort—tangled webs of rope, strings made of metal, intestines, skins, and yes, of animal and human hair. A lock of hair is not only a key to having power over the person, it is an instrument of negotiation with the powers beyond.

This is a repeating theme in Cohen's poetry. "Master Song"<sup>29</sup> on the first album, "Seems So Long Ago, Nancy"<sup>30</sup> from the second album... In "Hallelujah," the song published on *Various Positions* (1985), Cohen writes:

She tied you  
To a kitchen chair

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<sup>27</sup> April-July 2012 (curators Jean de Loisy, Sandra Adam-Couralet and Nanette Jacomijn Snoep)

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/programmation/exhibitions/last-exhibitions/masters-of-chaos.html>

<sup>29</sup> "You met him at some temple, where / they take your clothes at the door. / He was just a numberless man in a chair / who'd just come back from the war. / And you wrap up his tired face in your hair / and he hands you the apple core. / Then he touches your lips now so suddenly bare / of all the kisses we put on some time before."

<sup>30</sup> "And now you look around you, / see her everywhere, / many use her body, / many comb her hair."

She broke your throne, and she cut your hair  
 And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah

In many of the ancient poems and paintings women are presented as weavers. The important metaphorical content in this image is that women are the masters of threads. In *Odyssey*, Penelope is a master weaver, and weaving is the tool she has to maintain the rule of her own destiny. Her never-finished shroud becomes her magical container that allows her to connect with her secret powers. Weavers are the masters of time as weaving is only a narrative by other means.

### **Making one out of two**

On a cold December day in 1994 I am sitting in someone's deserted office in a beautiful old building in the centre of Belgrade. This was originally built to be the seat of the Merchants' Guild of Serbia, but later it was given to Radio Belgrade. I am waiting to be interviewed for some radio show about literature, and while waiting I am doing the final touches on that old story about triangles, the one from Amsterdam. Someone is now editing a collection of short stories, some sort of anthology, and they want to include my work. I am leaving Belgrade in a few months, I am to go into exile, but nobody knows about it yet. My old life in this city is falling apart. I want to do a good job on this story. One never knows which footprint is the last footprint.

I feel numb.

Numbness is a form of self-defence. The third war in Yugoslavia is going on, and it is impossible to isolate oneself from it—every hour, every minute, from all directions the news are blaring; almost everything is in short supply; dangerous people in masked uniforms are walking on the streets outside. Majority of them are armed, their weapons

hidden but so you know they are there. If a child would dare light a firecracker it would be answered by Kalashnikovs and Uzis and Berettas and TTs and Zastavas and Colts and...

These are times of quiet joys. There are some good theatre shows—desperate actors retreating into desperate characters to create urgent, drastic theatre—and a movie here and there (the country is under sanctions, so these are the old works of Huston and Hitchcock and Wilder and Visconti and Fellini...), and it is possible to get some good food when one has money. In the early summer of 1993 I had a bunch of bananas. My doctor recommended the fruit because of kalium, so I exchanged 10 DEM and bought a six on a black market stall on Boulevard of Revolution.

Quiet joys: my friends are available, mostly, at least those who have not gone into exile yet; we meet in apartments—there is no money for going out—and we tell jokes... Wait, no. Not jokes. They disappeared at some point in 1991. Just dried out. Nobody is telling any new jokes in 1994. No one. I asked around—all I was given were the old, stale ones, with names of the characters sometimes changed, sometimes not even that...

Quiet joys: we all turned into flâneurs. There were thousands of us flâneurs; not the bourgeois flâneurs—the pauper flâneurs: jobless, lost, too old to believe in war, too young to avoid it, our only pleasure to walk the familiar streets and get the comfort of concrete and glass; hard comfort, but comfort.

Numb. Every night there are reports of new atrocities on TV. These are as brutal as ever, but I do not feel anything anymore. Throats are being cut, fires are leaving blackened houses like rotting teeth in the jaws of the Bosnian mountains, old people are being left behind, counting on humanity of their enemies, counting wrong, paying high. All that:

nothing to me now. Commercials and killings. This being the third war at my window, all that could have been done has been done—by me and to me.

When it all started in Slovenia it looked almost like a joke: a miniature, laughable troops of the Slovenian Territorial Defence fought the Yugoslav People's Army, one of the largest in Europe, and the Army lost the war in ten days. Right. So my friends and I understood that deals had been made, secretly and in advance, that there would be acts staged to look like the real thing, paid in real lives, but we—being far enough—had nothing to worry about. And indeed, nobody was conscripted, no one went to war, and the number of casualties sounded more like a train accident than a war. I was born in a city where the Wehrmacht in 1941 had executed 2,800 boys and men just to instil fear, so through my schooling I was primed to take a war seriously only when numbers get into thousands. Aware that even a single victim is one victim too many, I still wasn't able to take the ten-days-war in Slovenia seriously. But the one in Croatia...

It was different. It was horrible. That was where throats had been cut. Women raped. Villages destroyed. That was where the paramilitaries had gone, ours and theirs. Still, the brutality, the eagerness to inflict pain came as no surprise. The reasoning was that it was just a payback for what had happened in World War II. During the conflict Croatia had been part of the Axis alliance and its government had very enthusiastically participated in the Holocaust. Croatian concentration camp in Jasenovac had been the biggest in the south of Europe. The number of victims in Jasenovac depends on whom do you ask, but the lowest estimation is about 100,000 of Serbs, Jews and Roma (it goes all the way up to 730,000 victims in some estimates). Every time there was a report of the civilian casualties in Croatia I remembered my visit to the Jasenovac Memorial: pliers, knives, hammers, mallets,

long nails protruding from wooden handles—all tools for killing, all in glass vitrines, all with dark brown stains on them that were not rust. Golden teeth. Hair. Raped girls. Sex slaves. Black and white pictures of proud butchers standing on their victims.

I did not understand at the time it was happening that the war in Croatia was just a middle level in a hidden gradation of armed conflicts. That is how war progresses—from mild, civilised skirmishes of the early days, to more blood, betrayal, brutality, to cruelty, ruthlessness, madness, annihilation of moral and denial of humanity. This gradation is only part of how mind works in times of war. The other part is that people don't deny it, they relativize it. Something awful is happening 200 km away from their home, but someone's taken care of that, they think; the authorities are on top of it already. They see on TV that some of their compatriots have been killed, shot from behind, shot point blank, slaughtered, burned alive, buried alive, butchered by the enemy paramilitaries, but they also see the paramilitaries their side is sending to war, and they know the leader—they and Interpol—and they know that the revenge will be swift and ten times worse than the crime. All taken care of. They don't notice that such reasoning lacks moral, that the core of it is wrong. They only want the balance restored. (A pendulum in extremes causes tension; equilibrium is the source of peace. To reach the equilibrium, one has to stop interacting with the reality sometimes, to stop looking, listening, talking. To stop analysing oneself.)

We all expected the madness to pass with the war in Croatia. We never thought the third war would be possible at all. Bosnia was the land of mixed marriages, mixed meat, mixed clergy, and getting people to fight there would cause a slaughter—that's why we didn't believe in the third war. Because we still believed in humanity. Such a fickle thing this particular faith—always bound to fail.



When the third war started it was a tad more difficult to relativize it. For one, there was a siege of Sarajevo going on, and we were not able to even imagine that. In 1990s—a *siege*? Then came the news of popular people going down into Sarajevo and getting out again. That did help relativize it: if one could go in, throw something cheap to the hungry microphones, then get out again—surely it couldn't be all that bad. We weren't the only non-believers: a Sarajevan collective of graphic designers (Trio) used a mock Coca-Cola logo to protest the war, but the company's lawyers sent them a cease and desist letter. Through the humanitarian convoys. Into a besieged city.

And so, we entered silence. We were not sure what to know anymore. With all the media noise around us we went silent. The feeling that you need to switch the music off so you could hear your thoughts. This doesn't meant reconnecting with your inner self (that will happen or it will not happen at some point later on; I have seen many of my acquaintances diving into the quiet of their private aquaria and never resurfacing again); this is only hibernating until the thunder of war rolls over you.

I don't want to know myself anymore. I wish to run away from myself.

Numb.

Making a break, still waiting, I turn around. Framed on the wall, there is a magazine clipping and I come closer to it to read it. It is the story of "Lili Marlen". Suddenly, I realise that this is the same building, perhaps even the same studio, from which "Lili Marlen" was sent to conquer the world fifty-odd years before.

It is a good song for a lonely man. It is a song about a faithful woman. And all faithful women are weavers. Storytellers. Masters of the locks of hair.

You treated my woman to a flake of your life  
When she came back she was nobody's wife.<sup>31</sup>

But who is he, who is the man that Leonard Cohen is writing to?

And what can I tell you my brother, my killer  
What can I possibly say?  
I guess that I miss you, I guess I forgive you  
I'm glad you stood in my way.<sup>32</sup>

My brother, my killer?

Is that the first human to die writing to the first human to live? The one who was killed because he had been giving better offers is now writing to the one who was jealous and killed him, saying that all is forgiven; Cain and Abel? If this is the case, then we suddenly realise that in the beginning of this poem Jane “came by,” but now “Jane's awake—she sends her regards.” It is *his* apartment where Jane is now living, not the one belonging to “the thin gypsy thief,” not the little house deep in the desert.

Jane is the axis of the spinning world on whose opposite sides Leonard Cohen and his “brother/killer” reside, but who is the ghost that Cohen is writing to, who is that shadow?

In his book *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*<sup>33</sup> Jung writes:

“Another, no less important and clearly defined figure is the ‘shadow.’ Like the anima, it appears either in projection on suitable persons, or personified as such in dreams. [...] The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always upon him directly or

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<sup>31</sup> “Famous Blue Raincoat”

<sup>32</sup> “Famous Blue Raincoat”

<sup>33</sup> C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works*, Vol 9, Routledge; 2nd edition, 1991

indirectly—for instance, inferior traits of character and other incompatible tendencies.”<sup>34</sup>

Let’s go back in time for a second and observe. A cold December day in 1959:

“[Cohen] went out to buy a typewriter, a green Olivetti, on which to write his masterpiece. On the way, he stopped in at Burberry on Regent Street, a clothing store favored by the English upper-middle classes, and bought a blue raincoat. The dismal English weather failed to depress him. Everything was as it should be; he was a writer...”<sup>35</sup>

A year later, Cohen travels to the island of Hydra and buys a house there. Axel Jensen and Marianne Ihlen have been living on the island for a couple of years when a new neighbour arrives. He is only 26, from a rich family of textile merchants from Montreal, has one book of poetry published, and is sporting a moustache. He is thin, travels light—a guitar and an Olivetti. He has a lazy smile, dark eyes. A gypsy with a rose in his teeth. Axel has other women, and leaves Marianne often alone with their little son. She turns to the thin Canadian poet and their relationship grows fast. It is only a few months before they move to North America.

Jung writes:

The anima and animus live in a world quite different from the world outside—in a world where the pulse of time beats infinitely slowly, where the birth and death of individuals count for little.[...] Conscious and unconscious do not make a whole when one of them is suppressed and injured by the other.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> C.G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*; Translated by R.F.C. Hull; Routledge, London, 1955; p 284

<sup>35</sup> Simmons. Ch. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Jung, *Archetypes*, p 287-288

And so, ten years later, with that love falling apart, Cohen sits down to write to his shadow. To his former self.

And what can I tell you my brother, my killer  
What can I possibly say?  
I guess that I miss you, I guess I forgive you  
I'm glad you stood in my way.

If you ever come by here, for Jane or for me  
Your enemy is sleeping, and his woman is free.<sup>37</sup>

And so, ten years later, with my old life in Belgrade falling apart, I sit down in the room where Lili Marlen was born, to write to my shadow. To my former self. Trying to become one.

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<sup>37</sup> "Famous Blue Raincoat"