

**Chantal Ringuet and Gerard Rabinovitch, dir. *Les révolutions de Leonard Cohen* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2016), 292 pp., ISBN: 9782760544338.**

**Aubrey Glazer, *Tangle of Matter & Ghost: Leonard Cohen's Post-Secular Songbook of Mysticism(s) Jewish & Beyond* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017), 336 pp., ISBN: 9781618115492.**

The celebrations surrounding the 150th anniversary of the Canadian Confederation and the 375th anniversary of Montreal's founding have prompted a diverse array of TV series, films, exhibitions, essays, and books dedicated to various aspects of Canadian and Montreal history and culture. Of the numerous Canadian men and women whose life and work are being thus rediscovered, few enjoy such universal approbation as the recently deceased and widely-mourned Leonard Cohen. Chantal Ringuet and Gerard Rabinovitch's edited volume, *Les révolutions de Leonard Cohen* (2016), and Aubrey Glazer's *Tangle of Matter & Ghost* (2017) offer widely diverging approaches to the arduous task of shedding new light on the life and career of Montreal's cherished 'bard.' Neither book is argument-driven, both opting to tackle the challenge of 'finding' Cohen through an exploration of a theme of great importance to his music and poetry. Whereas Ringuet and Rabinovitch focus on the revolutions of Cohen's life and career, Glazer is more interested in mysticism, especially Jewish mysticism. Taken together, these books not only highlight aspects of Leonard Cohen's long life and career that were previously overlooked; they also hint at exciting new avenues for research.

Leonard Cohen has become a prime subject for academic inquiry in France and Quebec over the past few years. Notwithstanding this recent effort, the francophone scholarship still pales next to the voluminous English-language literature dedicated to the poet-songwriter. Yet, by approaching Cohen's life and career from a French or Québécois perspective, this new scholarship has the potential to make original and exciting contributions to the field. Toward such an effort, the co-editors of *Les révolutions de Leonard Cohen* opted for a collective and interdisciplinary approach. The anthology brings together a heterogeneous group of historians, poets, writers, and translators, united by their admiration for, and their personal or professional ties to, Cohen and his work. The essays range from the purely academic reflection on the various forms of exile expressed in Cohen's work (Chapter 6), to an intimate contemplation on the bard's place in 1970s' Montreal artistic circles (Chapter 11). As per the book's title, a single concept ties everything together: the multiple and multifaceted 'revolutions' that underlay Cohen's life and work. With this notion as a guiding principle, the beautifully-written chapters follow Cohen through various

periods of his life in Montreal, New York, Israel, Greece, and beyond, retrace various phases of his spiritual development and his changing relationship with Judaism and Zen Buddhism, and highlight the diversity and richness of his work, from his music and poetry to his less well-known novels and prosaic essays. The result is an excellent overview of Cohen's personal and professional life. Overall, the collection is a highly enjoyable read that may be more suitable for the general reader than for a researcher looking for analytical depth. Ringuet and Rabinovitch's successful and broad approach comes with an important pitfall. The relative lack of cohesion that runs through the book, notwithstanding recurrent allusions to Cohen's 'revolutions,' precludes large themes and ideas from coming to the fore. This is especially true when it comes to the treatment of Cohen's Jewishness, which, despite what is presented in the book's preface, is only addressed in a few chapters. As commendable as Ringuet and Rabinovitch are for taking such a broad approach to Cohen's life and work, therefore, the curious reader can't help but feel like they have been offered an abstract puzzle with missing pieces. I hope the editors' endeavour provides an incentive for more insightful inquiry on the part of francophone academic communities on both sides of the Atlantic.

The San Francisco-based rabbi and scholar Aubrey L. Glazer has written broadly and extensively on aspects of Jewish philosophy. His work has dealt with, among other things, kabbalistic and Hebrew poetry and liturgy, and various forms of Jewish mystical thought. In *Tangle of Matter & Ghost*, Glazer presents a collection of previously published essays which deal, directly or indirectly, with Jewish and other types of mysticism as evident in Leonard Cohen's songbook. Glazer approaches this mysticism in what he calls a "post-secular" fashion. In other words, he is looking at the evolution of Cohen's relationship to mysticism, and Jewish mysticism in particular, from a resolutely pragmatic perspective. Based on extensive theoretical and conceptual analyses and intensive research in Cohen's private archives and in the Leonard Cohen archival collection at the University of Toronto, Glazer's work presents a cursory but dense survey of several themes of Jewish philosophy that recur in the music of the "pop-saint" of Montreal (40).

Having explained his post-secular approach, Glazer explores Cohen's work through complex themes such as the dialectic of exile and redemption (Chapter 2), the search for enlightenment in music (Chapter 3), the entanglement of body and spirit in modern America (Chapter 4), the modern quest for a 'pure' consciousness of the self (Chapter 5), and the connections between spirituality, religion, and theology in an increasingly agnostic world (Chapter 6). Throughout, Glazer frequently appeals to his reader's knowledge of classic Jewish philosophy, literature, and music, both popular and canonical, and the scholarship on these topics. However, whereas *Les révolutions de Leonard Cohen* suffers from its broad approach and popular appeal, Glazer's *Tangle of Matter & Ghost* presents the reverse challenge. A work of much deeper literary and religious analysis, its academic tone and specialized vocabulary makes it

an object of great interest to the initiated reader. It will seem a little hermetic to the neophyte, however.

Neither *Les révolutions de Leonard Cohen* or *Tangle of Matter & Ghost* explicitly aim to define Leonard Cohen's multi-layered and changing identity as a man, an artist, and a spiritual being. And yet, as the authors endeavour to find Cohen through his revolutions and his mysticism, they make identity as a central part of the analysis of each book. Indeed, retracing the various strands of the bard's identity may be the main accomplishment of Glazer, Ringuet, and Rabinovitch. Although neither book fully engages with the broader implications of Cohen's own sense of identity, both hint at the significance of his emotional and artistic ties to the various physical spaces he inhabited (Montréal, New York, Greece, Israel, etc.) and to the spiritual areas into which he delved, be it Jewish and Zen spirituality, and less defined forms of mysticism. The next step, for scholars interested to pursue similar fields of inquiry, would be to examine how Cohen's Jewishness, his belief-system, and his set of values, for instance, influenced his understanding of his Québécois and Anglo-Canadian compatriots and neighbours. Inversely, it would be interesting to think more deeply about Cohen's place within the broader musical and poetic landscapes of Montreal, Quebec, and Canada, and about the short- and long-term impact of his work.

Both these books contribute to the scholarship on Leonard Cohen in three main ways. Above all, they signify an important move beyond the classic 'rock'n'roll' biography. By approaching Cohen's life and work as a legitimate object of inquiry, they establish effectively Cohen's significance and relevance as a poet. They also affirm the relevance of popular culture more generally as a field of academic research in several disciplines, and they add to the Canadian scholarship on Jewish culture and history. With thorough and erudite textual analysis, Glazer ties Cohen's poetry and music convincingly to various strands of Jewish philosophy. With their broader, interdisciplinary approach, Ringuet and Rabinovitch insist on the multiplicity of influences that played a role in Cohen's life and work. Whereas Glazer touches on these influences through the notion of mysticism, Ringuet and Rabinovitch approach the subject from a social perspective, retracing Cohen's life experience in his youth and as an older man. The picture that emerges from the two books is not unlike that of a spider's web tying together sometimes contradictory or unlikely sources of influence. Finally, these books are also a major contribution to the francophone and Quebec scholarship on Cohen in particular, and on Jewish history in Quebec more broadly. Ringuet and Rabinovitch explicitly set upon the task of rectifying a language imbalance in the scholarship by their collective and interdisciplinary approach. Though the result is flawed, they do open avenues for future research. Along with other recent efforts in North America and Europe, their work establishes Leonard Cohen and Jewish popular culture as proper objects not only of academic research, but of academic research *in French*. And while Glazer writes in English, his approach of Cohen's work as an expression of a particularly Canadian, and even *Québécois* strand

of Jewishness, shows the potential of further inquiry on Cohen and francophone Quebec.

These considerations lead me to a final point. This true 'Canadien errant' (wandering Canadian) was perhaps more than anything a modern broker, or a *truchement*, to borrow a term from French-Canadian history. Leonard Cohen's work often acted as a bridge between cultures, languages, religions, and modes of expression. His deep voice and knack for evocative metaphors may explain his resounding success, but the uniting nature of his work is the most important explanation for his sustained success.

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