

The Bells Take This Longing: A Psychosemiotic Approach to Leonard Cohen

Duane Vorhees

The poet, who deals in metaphor, thus puts the universe together, while the scientist pulls it to pieces, the poet being a synthetic workman, the scientist an analytic workman; ...thus it is clear that while the scientist plucks apart the petals of faith, it is the business of the modern poet to set them together again....
—Sidney Lanier

As anyone who has ever felt the spontaneous need to write poetry knows, a poem is an expression of some inner compulsion. As any psychoanalyst knows, the resultant poem is an expression of some unconscious desire that is normally repressed in everyday language, so the poet cannot say what he really means but is forced to assert some mimetically false but similar statement instead—if poets could say what they mean directly they would have no need for figurative or stylistically deviant language. And as any semiotician knows, a poem is a linguistic transformation of sounds into an integrated series of symbols: a pure poem would have no unconnected elements whatsoever.

Likewise, an apparent obsession with a single poem or lyric must be highly significant. If a particular poem-song fails to sufficiently un-repress some unconscious desire within the poet's psyche, it may be necessary to return to that poem-song, reformulating it in a radically different manner. Canadian folksinger Buffy Sainte-Marie, on her album *She Used to Wanna Be a Ballerina* (Vanguard VSD-79311), recorded "The Bells." "It took me six or seven years to get a version for myself," the song's composer, Leonard Cohen, wrote on the jacket of his own album, *The Best of Leonard Cohen* (Columbia PC-34077). "I began it while listening to Nico sing at the Dom on 8th Street in 1966. I broke the code in Asmara and finished the song in the shed on St. Dominique Street in Montreal last year." "The Bells," refurbished as "Take this Longing," was originally recorded on Cohen's album *New Skin for an Old Ceremony* (Columbia KC-33167).

The following is a transcription of the lyrics of the two poem-songs, as they were sung by Sainte-Marie and Cohen respectively; there are, therefore, some discrepancies between these versions and other published sources. In order to compare their structures more easily I have also arranged them in a side-by-side manner that places the analogous stanzas parallel to each other, without altering the stanzaic integrity of the poem-songs themselves. I have made no effort, in this paper, to conduct an analysis of the musical components of the two songs.

THE BELLS*

I'm writing this to say goodbye
to what you never should reply:
that of all the lords and demons that you
leave,
I stand entirely alone.
That is to say, your loving me
would be your only crime.

And isn't it a pity?
You can see your duty clearly
in the midst of some great city,
in the midst of all this love?

Many men have loved the bells
you fastened to the reign.
And every one who wanted you
found what she would always want again.
And I have been the dust for you.
And I have been the grass for you.

But you tell me with your beauty
you can see your duty clearly
in the midst of New York City,
in the midst of all my love.

Your body like a searchlight
in the prison of my need.
Oh, I would share your loneliness
and I demand your greed.
And everything depends upon
how near you sleep to me.

And isn't it a pity?
You can see your duty clearly
in the midst of New York City,
in the midst of all our love.

I will be writing this
when you are so very young again
that the forests that you burned away,
and then sailed away,
are truly, truly gone.
I will be waiting.

Their starfish is your hair.
and the jewels for your shoulders
fall through the walls of sand,
fall through the walls of sand.

(*Stranger Music, Inc., BMI)

TAKE THIS LONGING*

Many men have loved the bells
you fastened to the reign.
And every one who wanted you,
they found what they will always want again,
your beauty lost to you yourself
just as it was lost to them.

Oh, take this longing from my tongue,
whatever useless things these hands have done.
Let me see your beauty broken down
like you would do for one you loved.

Your body like a searchlight,
my poverty revealed.
I would like to try your charity until you cry,
"New you must try my greed.
And everything depends upon
how near you sleep to me."

Just take this longing from my tongue,
all the lonely things my hands have done.
Let me see your beauty broken down ;
like you would do for one you love.

Hungry as an archway
through which the troops have passed.
I stand in ruins behind you
with your winter clothes,
your broken sandal straps.
I love to see you naked over there
especially from the back.

Oh, take this longing from my tongue,
all the useless things my hands have done.
Untie for me your hired blue gown
like you would do for one which you love.

You're faithful to the better man.
I'm afraid that he left.
So let me judge your love affair
in this very room where I have sentenced
mine to death.
I'll even wear these old laurel leaves
that he's shaken from his head.

Just take this longing from my tongue,
all the useless things my hands have done.
Let me see your beauty broken down
like you would do for one you love,
like you would do for one you love.

Many men have loved the bells you fastened to the reign is obviously a significant line: it provides the title for "The Bells" and the introduction for "Take this Longing." But it is the key line in another, more subtle, sense as well: it is an iconic pun. To make mimetic sense the last word in the line should be *rein*, connoting some external device used to control some subject, such as a horse; *reign* magically transforms the subject into the ruler. In addition, this homonymous pun strongly suggests the presence of another (unactivated) pun in the same line: *belles*—which would place women in the role of sex-objects to be fastened to, or to adorn, your rule: many men have loved, or envied, the belles.

And everyone who wanted you—in "The Bells" *found what she* (everyone) *would always want again*, but in "Take this Longing," *they* (many men) *found what they will always want again*. These altered pronouns modify the entire thrust of the rest of the poem-song.

To paraphrase this verse in "The Bells," many men have envied your sexual conquests, of which I am one; and like all your other conquests I want to be subjugated by you again. In the standard Freudian equation, *you persecute me* is the same as *I love you*. This notion is reinforced by the couplet which follows (*And I have been the dust for you./And I have been the grass for you*=I have let you walk all over me). This masochistic attitude has been evident since the opening verse.

To paraphrase the same verse in "Take this Longing," many other men have loved you, or at least loved your sexual enticements. Bells in this case are attention-getting trinkets (charms) and/or trophies. *What they will always want again* is *your beauty lost to you yourself just as it was lost to them*, beauty being a poetic euphemism for the idealized presexual fantasy which is destroyed upon consummation. The entire poem-song, in this version, is a plea for an end to continence. (*Take this longing from my tongue,/ all these useless—lonely*, in one chorus—*things my hands have done*=let's engage in oral sex, release me from having to masturbate.) Masturbation is the psychic murder of sexual intercourse; to stop this type of murder we must substitute the murder of our presexual fantasies: *Let me see your beauty broken down like you would do for one you loved*.

In this regard, after conjuring an image of Roman triumphs by referring to *an archway through which the troops have passed*, Cohen pleads, *let me judge your love affair in this very room where I have sentenced mine to death./I'll even wear these old laurel leaves*. Aside from the obvious reference to sentencing his own love affair to death, Cohen uses this oblique reference to Roman culture to underline his theme of masturbation: part of the popular mosaic we have in our minds concerning Rome is the gladiatorial games in which the emperor would give life to a defeated man by claspng some imaginary rod and pointing the thumb up—if repeated in a short, jerky motion, this is also the classic masturbation-mimicking gesture. So, *many men have loved the bells you fastened to your reign* takes on added significance if we consider the structural similarities between bells

and a scrotum.

Cohen's use of *beauty* also creates an interesting transdialogue between the two poem-songs as laid out in my parallel structure. *Your beauty lost to you yourself just as it was lost to them* is immediately followed, spatially, in the other poem-song by *But you tell me with your beauty you can see your duty clearly*, which is immediately followed in the other poem-song by *Let me see your beauty broken down*. This reverberation between poem-songs is not accidental, especially since Cohen deliberately deviates from the standard chorus line, *isn't it a pity*, to achieve this effect. Within each separate poem-song the effect of using *beauty* is quite different, however: in "The Bells" it helps reinforce the you-persecute-me/I-love-you dichotomy, while in "Take this Longing" the progression from having the love-symbol *lost* to having it completely *broken down* indicates a possible sadistic obsession.

Your body like a searchlight is an apt signification of the purpose of this stanza. As in the Jungian notion of a mandala, the juxtaposition of the searchlight stanzas is designed to inculcate a series of mirror symmetries. A mandala's function is to help regain control over some mental chaos by defensively distracting the subject's attention away from the ego-dystonic fantasies implicit in the situation and toward himself. At the same time it is meant to provide a possible resolution of the difficulty.

The "Bells" persona has just been told *with your beauty* that *you can see your duty clearly*; since *your body is like a searchlight*, obviously this persona is finally forced to see the true nature of the relationship. The searchlight is *in the prison of my need* because *your loving me is your only crime*. The fantasies are reversed in this mirror-symmetry, so the "Bells" masochist *demand[s] your greed* while the sadist in "Take this Longing" *would like to try your charity* (love and mercy) *until you cry*. To the sadist, *your body like a searchlight* exposes *my poverty* (and *longing*): *hungry as an archway... I stand in ruins*. But the "Bells" persona is ultimately forced to admit that *everything depends upon how near you sleep to me* and the "Longing" persona projects his own fantasies by putting them into the mouth of his love-object. After thus articulating these fantasies, each poem-song then attempts their resolution.

At this point, the "Bells" chorus is repeated, but it refers this time to *our love*, a highly unrealistic description of the nature of the affair. The next stanza attempts to move away from self-pity to vindication of a sort in a remarkably unreal, illogical world. Instead of the very real, painful moment at the beginning of the poem-song when *I'm writing this to say goodbye...I stand entirely alone*, the persona decides that *I will be writing this* at some impossible time *when you are so very young again that the forests that you burned away...are truly, truly gone*. Even the usual chorus is abandoned in favor of a new one to match the new time-and-mindframe.

But escaping into a fantasy world is not an adequate resolution of the problem. Perhaps that is why Cohen spent "six or seven years" until he finally "broke the code."

In "Take this Longing," even after the searchlight stanza the persona continues to express the same desires as previously, but the imagery becomes more concretized, more intensified; he talks specifically about *your winter clothes, your sandal straps. I love to see you naked over there especially from the back.* Even, at one point, the usual *Let me your beauty broken down* refrain is replaced by the explicit *Untie for me your hired blue gown.* (The use of the adjective *hired* is an interesting one. On the one hand it implies that since the gown is not really your own perhaps you are not really *doing what you would do for one which you love*—and the awkward addition of *which* dehumanizes the entire act. On the other hand a hired dress also implies a hired woman, or prostitute—another masturbation-like substitute for genuine love.) But, despite the concretization of the poetic imagery, there is no textual evidence of sexual consummation; the poem-song ends with its constant plea: *Just take this longing from my tongue,/all the useless things my hands have done./Let me see your beauty broken down/like you would do for one you love, like you would do for one you love.*

In fact, both poem-songs end with the device of chantlike repetition. Chants serve the purpose of psychically buttressing some weakly held attitude or belief, as in "The Bells," and they also serve to emphasize a fixation, or even to cast a magical spell, as in "Take this Longing."

I would like to make one more point concerning the searchlight stanzas. The repetition of linguistic elements provides an economical way of communicating previously inaccessible information. Perhaps the energy saved by such structural similarities is then capable of being employed in overcoming whatever was making that information inaccessible in the first place. Thus, in one respect, the searchlight stanza in "Take this Longing" is an improvement over the one in "The Bells": the initial quatrain has a more regular rhyme scheme (ABAB) than the same quatrain in "The Bells" (ABCB). But in order to regularize the rhyme scheme Cohen chose to violate the already existing metrical order. *Until you cry* is "motivated" because it explicitly defines the persona's sadistic fantasy but it reveals a continuing resistance to the cathectic effects that could be achieved through poetic repetitive devices.

If someone were to edit the two poem-songs into one single canon by excluding the fugitive passages not mutually present in both, the preliminary result would be something like this:

Many men have loved the bells
 you fastened to the reign.
 And everyone who wanted you
 (they) found what (they/she) (would/will) always want again.
 Your body like a searchlight
 (And I demand your greed/Now you must try my greed)

And everything depends upon
how near you sleep to me.

Obviously, no matter how significant this coincidentalness of texts is, there is more going on in the trans-dialogue between the texts than just the coincidentalness. There are whole cycles of intertext echoes that reverberate like bells from one text to the other.

"The Bells" begins, *I'm writing this to say goodbye to what you should never reply*. But "Take this Longing" does reply, repeatedly, *Take this longing from my tongue*. This is a classic statement of the conflict between repression and expression.

"Bells" claims *I was the dust for you*. "Longing" opposes that claim with a comment about *your winter clothes*. "Bells" laments *I was the grass for you*. "Longing" reinforces the image with a comment about *your broken sandal straps*. It is significant that these comparisons are not random within the poem-songs but that each set is paired as a kind of couplet.

"Bells" insists that *I stand entirely alone*, but "Longing" adds another dimension: *I stand in ruins behind you...I love to see you naked over there especially from the back*. "Tells" amends the original assertion: *Of all the lords and demons that you leave, I stand entirely alone*; "Longing" concurs: *You're faithful to the better man. I'm afraid that he left*. "Bells" then continues: *That is to say, your loving me would be your only crime. And isn't it a pity? You can see your duty clearly...Your body like a searchlight in the prison of my need*; "Longing" also continues: *So let me judge your love affair in this very room where I have sentenced mine to death. I'll even wear these old laurel leaves that he's shaken from his head*. (These laurel leaves are iconically repeated in the dual image in the final chorus of "The Bells": *Their starfish is your hair. And the jewels for your shoulders that fall through the walls of sand* which, in turn, are analogs to *the prison of my need*.)

In my side-to-side reconstruction there also exists an obvious trans-dialogue between two fugitive coincident verses. *The forest that you burned away and then sailed away are truly, truly gone* has its semic counterpart in the parallel verse: *Hungry as an archway through which the troops have passed, I stand in ruins behind you with your winter clothes, your broken sandal straps*. The overall impression is of the after-effects of wanton promiscuity. Then the "Longing" chorus repeats the lament about *all the useless things my hands have done*, including, apparently, burning away forests and sailing them away. But the "Longing" persona has not fully repented, he still wants to *see your beauty broken down*. And the final comment of "The Bells"—*the jewels for your shoulders fall through the walls of sand*—is a devastating reply to the "Longing" person's comment that *I love to see you naked...especially from the back*.

Of course each of these poem-songs is an independent, free-standing structure capable of being semiotically analyzed in a vertical manner as well: in the transformation of the

nature of time and the time of nature in "The Bells," for example. The persona first exists in some indistinct, mythical time-and-place *in the midst of some great city* inhabited by *lords and demons*; the nature of the locale is reinforced by the rein/reign pun, connoting two of the most common mythological elements, the horse and the king. But the persona suddenly shifts to *the midst of New York City*, and this here-and-now setting is reinforced by the image of a *searchlight in the prison*. And then the persona suddenly shifts again to a mad, impossible, paradoxical never-never land *when you are so very young again that the forests that you have already burned away, and then*, despite their earlier destruction, *sailed away, are, finally, truly, truly gone*. And not only that, but the *starfish* of those same forests that you sailed away *is your hair*. The poem-song ends with a complete mimetic collapse; nothing makes objective sense, even the grammatic structure is largely nonsensical. However, the systematic relationship of the various elements confers significance. The symbols are two-faced: displaced and distorted in the mimetic system, they are textually ungrammatical; but they are entirely appropriate and "grammatical" within the context of the underlying meaning of the entire poem-song. The persona has, of course, a desperate need to escape from the real world; *I stand entirely alone....And everything depends upon how near you sleep to me, even in the midst of New York City*. The fantasy that *I would share your loneliness and I demand your greed* can be fulfilled only in a fantasy world where your "reign" will be finished, your "beauty" degraded to the point that even the atoms have been reintegrated into other structures (*Their starfish is your hair*); *the jewels for your shoulders*—baubles like *the bells you fastened to your reign*—*fall through the walls of sand* (the sands of time), and *you are so very young again* that time is reversed and the now is *truly, truly gone* (just like the innocent, natural, living forests—more baubles). The psychic cathexis cannot occur in the stressful present (*I'm writing this to say goodbye*), only in the fanciful future (*I will be writing this....I will be waiting*). The time of nature is also transformed in the process: *I have been the dust for you* prefigures *the walls of sand*; *I have been the grass for you* prefigures *the forests that you burned away*.

As valid as this kind of closed-system analysis is in literary criticism, sometimes a single work is not complete in itself. As Charles Sanders Peirce pointed out, a sign is "something knowing which we know something more." In this case, my side-by-side comparison allows us to examine the psychosemiotic processes that are involved more fully than a mere vertical rendering. These processes consist of a series of distorting-mirror symmetries, mandala-like automorphisms that emerge, merge, and submerge continuously throughout the poem-songs. Ultimately, Jung asserts, a mandala relates back to some original "archetype of wholeness" that is a biological "given" within the human species.

By taking some of Leonard Cohen's work and systematically trying to see its "beauty broken down," I have worked on the assumption that "The Bells Take this Longing"

is a continuing effort, almost a plea, to resolve certain interior compulsions. However, the text of the later version seems to suggest that the matter's resolution has thus far eluded his efforts, just as the original version had. Perhaps we shall be served up with a third course someday, lovingly prepared by Cohen's psychic chef.