

**Leonard Cohen in French culture: A song of love and hate.****A comparison between musical and literary translation****Francis Mus, University of Liège and University of Leuven****ABSTRACT**

Since his comeback on stage in 2008, Leonard Cohen (1934-2016) has been portrayed in the surprisingly monolithic image of a singer-songwriter who broke through in the '60s and whose works have been increasingly categorised as 'classics'. In this article, I will examine his trajectory through several cultural systems, i.e. his entrance into both the French literary and musical systems in the late '60s and early '70s. This is an example of mediation brought about by both individual people and institutions in both the source and target cultures. Cohen's texts do not only migrate between geo-politically defined source and target cultures (Canada and France), but also between institutionally defined musical and literary systems within one single geo-political context (France). All his musical albums were reviewed and distributed there soon after their release and almost his entire body of literary works (novels and poetry collections) has been translated into French. Nevertheless, Cohen's reception has never been univocal, either in terms of the representation of the artist or in terms of the evaluation of his works, as this article concludes.

**KEYWORDS**

Leonard Cohen, cultural transfer, musical translation, retranslation, ambivalence.

*I don't speak French that well. I can get by, but it's not a tongue I could ever move around in in a way that would satisfy the appetites of the mind or the heart.*

(Leonard Cohen 1975 in Burger 2014: 85)

**1. Introduction: Leonard Cohen, from Canada to France<sup>1</sup>**

Nowadays, arguing that static descriptions of cultural artefacts are inadequate and should be viewed in a context that includes transfer, mediation, translation, etc., is stating the obvious. Itamar Even-Zohar (1978) made this point already forty years ago, but it remains difficult to conceptualise this hybridity in a way that does justice to all of its aspects, especially in a public discourse such as the mainstream media. The 'case' of Leonard Cohen provides an intriguing example in this regard: as a Canadian Jew (or Jewish Canadian), as a poet, novelist and musician, as a universally renowned artist who loved to stress his local roots, he clearly cannot be summed up in a single term. Yet, when one takes a quick look at the mass of reviews that appeared since his comeback on stage in 2008, that is precisely what happened. Cohen has been portrayed in the

surprisingly monolithic image of a singer-songwriter who broke through in the '60s and whose works have been increasingly categorised as 'classics' since his long-awaited world tour after a 15-year absence.

A classic, in the words of Pascale Casanova (2004:92), is "literarily speaking, [...] a work that rises above competition and so escapes the bidding of time. Only in this way can a modern work be rescued from aging, by being declared timeless and immortal." Cohen's literary and musical consecration of the last years (through several cultural prizes and a worldwide-translated biography (Simmons 2012)) further reinforced this classic status. Due to this timelessness and immortality, one might forget that the artistic identity of Cohen's oeuvre and persona were shaped by means of a complex trajectory through several cultural systems. In what follows, I want to nuance Cohen's contemporary one-sided image by showing how, at a crucial point in his career, he aimed to acquire a legitimate position as both a singer and a writer. I examine here how he managed to gain entrance into the French artistic system in the late '60s and early '70s, and the type of *different* and sometimes *ambiguous* positions he then assumed in it.

Cohen's biography shows an affinity for French language and culture<sup>2</sup> that might have contributed to his success in France. In this study, I want to highlight the institutional tracks through which he and his works went. Cohen's initial forays in France are an example of mediation brought about by both individual people (singers, writers, translators, journalists, critics, publishers) and institutions (musical and literary magazines, publishing houses) in both the source and target cultures. Moreover, his texts not only migrate between geo-politically defined source and target cultures (Canada and France), but also between institutionally defined musical and literary systems within one single geo-political context: at different stages in his career, he was simultaneously active in both literary and musical magazines or publishing houses. Since the start of his musical career in 1967, Cohen has been popular in France, a popularity he enjoys to this day. All his musical albums were reviewed and distributed there soon after their release. In addition, almost his entire body of literary work (novels and poetry) has been translated into French.

To define Cohen's position in the French literary and musical system, one must mention his early career in Canada. He made his debut as a poet in 1955, in his hometown of Montreal, then as a novelist in 1963 (*The Favourite Game*, published in London), and finally as a singer-songwriter in the United States in 1967 (*Songs of Leonard Cohen* was realised with Columbia). By that time, he was a well-known writer in Canadian literary and academic circles. He was also a mediator and translator in his own right between the English and French-speaking artistic circles of Montreal in the '60s. He worked on *A tout prendre* (1963), an avant-garde film by the hallowed Montreal filmmaker Claude Jutra, which he then translated in its

entirety into English as *Take it all* (see Mus 2016a). He was also directly involved with *Les Automatistes*, a Montreal-based group of Québécois painters and poets. Surprisingly, no mention of this is made in the many biographies that have appeared on him to date<sup>3</sup>. Until today, his early career, being locally and literarily oriented, remains partially neglected because, to a certain extent, it is studied through the lens of his contemporary international and musical identity.

To conquer the world, Cohen had to go beyond Canada. In the '60s, he moved to New York and became involved in the Beat and folk scene. There, he was discovered by several prominent figures, of whom Judy Collins was the most important. She eventually played a key role in introducing him to the rest of the world. One of the first mentions of Cohen's name in France – as the "jeune poète canadien d'un talent immense" [young Canadian poet with a huge talent]<sup>4</sup> (Vassal 1968: 66) – is from a May 1968<sup>5</sup> discussion of Judy Collins' albums (*In my life*, 1966, *Wildflowers*, 1967, and *Who knows where the time goes*, 1968). He is mentioned again later in connection with Buffy Sainte Marie (*Illuminations*, 1969) (Vassal 1970a:121), who also covered some of Cohen's songs in her album. Both of these singers were major representatives of the New York folk scene in the '60s, which was being covered closely by the French music magazine *Rock et Folk*.

## 2. Why translate music? Ambiguity on the level of the works

By the mid-'60s, the musical media landscape in France was torn between a nationally-oriented press on the one hand and, on the other, an ensemble of new periodicals with an outspoken interest in international music. The monthly magazine *Rock et Folk*, which put Cohen on the map in France, was part of the latter group. *Rock et Folk* was founded in 1966 in answer to *Salut les copains*, which focused primarily on national music by the so-called *yéyés*, and resisted the reception of Anglo-American music. The *yéyés* were "French rock singers who recorded rock-and-roll songs in French for a French audience, and found a name in the early 1960s as the interest in rock and roll *groups* gave way to personality cults" (Pires 2003: 88). The dynamic between these two publications engendered true music press polarisation.

In the wake of Judy Collins' covers, Cohen's first albums were then also individually reviewed in *Rock et Folk*. Cohen was portrayed as an artist whose work was all the rage in the folk scene but still outside of it. In terms of genre, his first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, was described as "une musique qui défie toutes les classifications. 'Folk song' est la première dénomination qui vient à l'esprit" [a music that challenges every classification. 'Folk song' is the first designation that comes to mind] (Mohr 1968: 51). As a whole, the content of the musical texts was a major part of the music criticism in *Rock et Folk*. Next to that, the (ir)relevance of translations (of his musical *and* literary work) is expressed repeatedly – and

not only in *Rock et Folk*. In the examples mentioned below, the critics invariably pay attention to the English language use, which was not very surprising, given the dominant counterdiscourse of the *yéyés*. To be precise, they considered the English language at once as a barrier (hindering textual understanding), yet also as an inessential carrier of a broader musical experience.

Son premier disque [...] va [...] lui permettre d'atteindre un public beaucoup plus vaste [que ses lecteurs], même celui ne comprenant pas la langue anglaise. Il est évident qu'on perd beaucoup si l'on ne peut suivre les textes, très beaux, mais le seul enchantement de la musique lui vaudra d'innombrables fans qu'il n'aurait pu toucher par ses œuvres littéraires. (Mohr 1968: 52) [His first album will allow him to reach a much wider audience [than his readers], even those who don't understand English. It is obvious that one loses a lot when one cannot follow his beautiful texts, but the magic of his music will draw numerous fans who would not have known his literary works.]

Dans la salle, peu de gens saisissent parfaitement les textes de Cohen: pourtant, dans le labyrinthe apparent de ses phrases les spectateurs suivent les mots. (Baqué, 1972: n.p.) [In the room, few people understood exactly the texts of Cohen: however, in the apparent labyrinth of his sentences, the spectators followed his words.]

Malheureusement, son récital de deux heures ne put être apprécié de la majorité de l'auditoire à cause de la barrière de la langue. (*Pop Music* (no author) 1970) [Unfortunately, his two-hour recital could not be appreciated by the majority of the audience because of the language barrier.]

Ensuite, on est passé au "Sacré vieil imper" et à "L'histoire d'Isaac", qui sont de sacrés beaux textes et mériteraient d'être chantés en français (je connais des gens qui, en amateurs, s'y sont essayés, et le résultat n'est pas mal du tout) (Vassal 1972: 66) [Finally, we moved on to "Sacré vieil imper" and "L'histoire d'Isaac", which are bloody beautiful texts and deserve to be sung in French (I know people who, as amateurs, have tried it, and the result is not bad at all).]

Yet this outspoken interest in translation is fairly unusual. Susam-Sarajeva (2008:192) suggests that "non-translation in the case of music may allow the imagination more leeway (...)." Music is indeed mostly conceived as a total experience, with musical quality, stage performance, public image and so forth being as important as content.

In academic research as well, translation of popular music often fails to receive the attention that it deserves. The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (1998) has no index-entry or article on song-translating, and the *Handbook of Translation Studies* (2012) deals almost exclusively with opera translation, whereas in *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies* (2011) a clear-cut distinction is made between Opera, Popular songs, Musicals, and Interlude - sung poetic text. However, despite its non-canonical character, it often plays an important social role (Susam-Saraeva 2015: 166; Kaindl 2005: 235, 240). When, in the '90s, translation of music became an object of study within Translation Studies, canonical genres were privileged. Until today, this focus on opera librettos or 'Art

Songs' (Julia Minors 2013; Low 2003) remains important. The first studies on the translation of popular music were often made by practitioners in the field rather than by academics, with the notable exceptions of Gorlée (2005), Hewitt (2000) and Kaindl (2005). One should not forget that many translations of popular music are often realised within an amateur framework, i.e. by fan communities (nowadays they can be very often found online – see also Susam-Saraeva 2015: 133-156<sup>6</sup>). However, as Bosseaux wrote in 2011, since about 2000, "song translation is receiving more and more academic coverage" (184).

In the case of Leonard Cohen, the explanation for the importance of translation is multifaceted. Occasional French adaptations of his work appeared from the very beginning. Along with French songwriters Georges Chelon<sup>7</sup> and Serge Lama<sup>8</sup>, it was mainly Graeme Allwright, an immigrant from New Zealand, who translated several of Cohen's songs and released his own French-language covers of them<sup>9</sup>. Chelon and Lama made their name around 1964, in the midst of the *yéyé*-period, which explains why a French interpretation of Cohen's work could easier find acceptance. As for Allwright, the comments he gives in the paratexts of his translations are revealing: he puts Cohen's songs in a broader "universe" and links them with a coherent "body of thought." On the back cover of *Graeme Allwright chante Leonard Cohen* (an album released in 1973 with songs that Allwright sang since 1968), he writes:

En adaptant ces chansons, j'ai essayé de respecter dans la mesure du possible *la pensée* de Leonard Cohen que j'estime beaucoup. J'espère que mon travail aidera l'auditeur français à mieux comprendre et pénétrer *l'univers* souvent difficile de Cohen. (emphasis is mine) [When adapting these songs, I have tried to respect as much as possible *the thought* of Leonard Cohen which I appreciate a lot. I hope that my work will help French listeners to better understand and penetrate Cohen's sometimes difficult *universe*.]

In other words, his translations fulfilled two functions: they were both meant to be sung and to clarify the content of the songs. Thus, Allwright not only had to pay attention to correspondences concerning content (fidelity), but he also had to take into account other factors such as singability, rhyme, rhythm and naturalness (the five criteria of Low's 'pentathlon principle' for the translation of songs; Low 2005).

With the translations that appeared in *Rock et Folk*, however, the collaborators only wanted to provide the audience with a better comprehension of the source text. Several extensive discussions of his work were printed. They included translations of song fragments (often without the accompanying source text) for closer commentary. This way of song translation is remarkable. According to Bosseaux (2011: 185), "the two major translating modes used [are] sung or singable versions [...] and surtitles." In *Rock et Folk*, however, something else is at stake. The text is separated from the music. The lyrics function autonomously and become

subject to analysis and commentary. In this regard, they also differ from the way that translations appear in concert programmes or album inserts. Although these translations also fail to take into account the singability factor, they can still be considered as a “*supplement* to the original lyrics or performance” (Franzon 2008: 378-379, my emphasis). Instead, the *Rock et Folk* translations are designed to stand on their own.

The vast majority of the articles about Cohen in *Rock et Folk* were written by Jacques Vassal, who worked for nearly twenty years for the magazine and acted as a cultural mediator for various American and Canadian artists. In 1973, for instance, Vassal wrote of his translations that they were only meant as a “*modeste contribution à une meilleure compréhension de la pensée de Cohen*” [modest contribution to a better understanding of Cohen’s thought] (1973:73, emphasis is mine). The function of these translations is all the more important given the fact that when the first albums arrived in France, lyrics were not published on the back cover of the album sleeves. Vassal (in Mus 2017) recalls: “Et chemin faisant [...] nous tendions l’oreille pour recopier au fur et à mesure les textes. Puis arriva le premier ‘songbook’ de Cohen, en importation chez nous. Et là, enfin, la possibilité de vérifier qu’on avait bien tout compris, plus celle d’apprendre à accompagner les chansons à la guitare.” [Along the way [...] we concentrated on the words to copy the texts line by line. Then came Cohen’s first ‘songbook’ as an imported work. And then, finally, we could check whether we had understood everything, and learn how to accompany the songs on the guitar.]

The word choices of Allwright and Vassal is not incidental. By granting Cohen’s songs the status of “*pensée*” [thought] or “*univers*” [universe], there is a shift in the status of his work. His creations are now considered as part of a framework of artistic views, as evidence of an author’s poetics. In this case, an important difference between source and target culture must be pointed out. In Canada, Cohen was first known as a writer and then as a musician, while in France the songs were first distributed and translated, only later to be followed by the literary works. Certainly, Cohen’s dual literary-musical identity had been recognised from the start, but the dominant representation is that of a musician. Allwright had started already in 1968 to translate Cohen’s songs, while the first poetry translation, *Poèmes et Chansons*, dates from 1972. Several other translations were published in the ‘70s and later: *L’énergie des esclaves* (1974, bilingual), *Poèmes et Chansons 2* (1976), *Mort d’un séducteur* (1980, partly bilingual), *Le livre de miséricorde* (1984), *Musique d’ailleurs* (1994), *Le livre du désir* (2008). The alternating label given to the exact same texts — songs, poems, whether or not seen as carrier of an author’s poetics — provides them with what Yuri Lotman has called an “ambivalent” status: “a certain corpus which [is] [...] generated in one system is also interpreted accordingly to models of another system, so that it functions simultaneously, though differently, in both” (quoted in Sheffy 1991).

However, in this case, the ambiguity not only problematises the status of the works, but it also marks how the artistic persona and the relationship between artist and audience are represented.

### **3. Ambiguity on the level of the artist's (self-)representation**

'Authenticity' is a key component of the 'ethos' (the authorial self-representation) of a singer-songwriter for whom the message is an essential part of the songs (see Keunen 2002:73), and it accordingly does not go unnoticed in media criticism. Thanks to the early translations of Cohen's lyrics, the initial groundwork was already laid for posing further questions of textual understanding. At the same time, Cohen was able to instantly legitimise his position as an insider in France, to some extent, in a system in which he would no longer be *entirely* foreign. The term 'singer-songwriter' that, according to pop specialist Gert Keunen (2002: 73-74), cannot be linked to a style direction but only refers to a basic attitude that can be filled in in various ways, is hardly used in the discourse of the music magazines of those years. The representation of Cohen is often unclear. Why is that?

(1) Although Cohen was active as a writer since 1955, in France he first gained visibility as a musician with the release of his debut album in 1968. His literary career was never disowned by him, but stood in the shadow of his musical identity which, as shown above, was connected to 'Folk Music' from the outset. That status was further reinforced when he was called "Folksinger de l'année" [folk singer of the year] in 1969 by the weekly magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Yet this popular label was also ultimately a poor fit for Cohen. Vassal (1977: 319-321) gives four reasons explaining the misconception of Cohen as a folk singer. Cohen writes texts with a content to which he attaches great importance and accompanies them on the guitar; he made his musical entry at a folk festival (Newport) thanks to the involvement of folk celebrity Judy Collins; he worked with Bob Johnston, who previously also produced folk singers like Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, Marty Robbins and Simon & Garfunkel; he was recognised as a member of the 'family' in the folk circles.

(2) The connection between Cohen and folk music arose in part thanks to a similarly ambiguous correlation with the figure of the protest singer. While Cohen was never a protest singer in the strict sense — his engagement is never explicitly or concretely formulated to serve any particular cause — the leftist activism of the folk movement is clearly evident in his own interventions in the French system. In 1974 he performed at the "Fête de l'humanité", the French Communist Party's annual political concert event, and in his on-stage remarks — commented on in *Rock et Folk* — he mentioned May '68, Mikis Theodorakis, and Irish protest songs. Nevertheless, the status of his political engagement was never explicit. The

tone of his on-stage remarks, for example, vacillated from the very concrete to the decidedly vague — an ambiguity that was only amplified in his songs.

(3) On top of that, his distinguished stage presence caused some to accuse him of being a 'bourgeois' singer. The distance from the audience was much greater for Cohen than for Dylan. In comparing Cohen to Dylan in 1969, Jacques Vassal writes, "we would never dare say 'Leonard' the way we say 'Bob'". A minor debate ensued in 1970 not only in *Rock et Folk*, but also in the "bourgeois press" (the term Vassal (1974) used for the daily newspaper *France-Soir*) as to Cohen's bourgeois identity. This was prompted by a concert in Aix-en-Provence for which the audience had had to pay exorbitant ticket prices and where Cohen took the stage riding on a horse. Reflecting back on it, Vassal summarises the situation as follows:

Le comportement de Cohen fut diversement apprécié, mais presque toujours défavorablement. Dans *Rock et Folk*, Philippe Paringeaux résuma assez lucidement le problème: "Cohen s'est fait jeter, à Aix, parce qu'il a eu le courage de dire qu'il n'était pas révolutionnaire. Dire qu'on l'avait traité de démagogue à l'Olympia! Eh bien, je trouve mille fois préférable l'attitude de Cohen à celle de types qui ne sont pas plus révolutionnaires que lui (et qui accepteraient de bon cœur son cacheton) mais s'acharnent à le faire croire à un public fasciné par un extrémisme de pacotille. Eux sont les vrais demagogues." (Vassal 1974:139)

[There were various reactions to Cohen's attitude, but most of them were unfavourable. In *Rock et Folk*, Philippe Paringeaux summarised the problem quite clearly: "Cohen was chucked out in Aix because he had the courage to say that he was no revolutionary. He was even dismissed as a demagogue at the Olympia! [during his first concert in France in 1970] Well, I much more prefer Cohen's attitude to that of guys who are not more revolutionary than he is (and who would be quite pleased with what he earned) but keep claiming they are so, in front of audiences that are fascinated by any trash form of extremism. They are the real demagogues".]

In short, Cohen's position in the artistic system was not only unclear because of the disjunction with the identities of folk singer or protest singer, but it was also controversial because of his detached demeanour; a stance that is framed here against the backdrop of the political values of the late '60s and reinforced by the language barrier and the double status of his works (see point 2, above).

This ambiguity is equally apparent in interviews, where Cohen is often elusive with his interviewer. As early as 1970, Michael Ondaatje (1970:3) stated that "the mask, egotistical and flamboyant, goes on when he faces a camera or journalist." Cohen's slightly ironic, bantering style melded well with the general tone of the music criticism in *Rock et Folk*. After one concert in 1972, a reviewer from the magazine praised the quality of Cohen's songs, while complaining about the high price of the concert ticket as being inconsistent with the musical genre Cohen represented: "bon, ça va, on n'est pas dans un journal littéraire" [OK, fine, this is not a literary magazine]. In this context, Mat Pires points to the mediating role of humour in seeking a certain legitimacy for pop and rock music:



Seriousness was a problematic area for pop and rock critics. On one hand, they took their subject seriously, sought to assert the field, and gain respect for it. However, while this was a logical solution in the 1960s and early 1970s, as time wore on, and pop began to emerge into the mainstream, a humorous mediation became possible, indeed logical; such an approach could articulate not only the historical marginality of a cultural form still widely despised, it could also demonstrate self-assurance in evoking other cultural practices, and comparing itself to them. Identity derived from a carnivalesque portrayal of the cultural gap. (Pires 2003: 92)

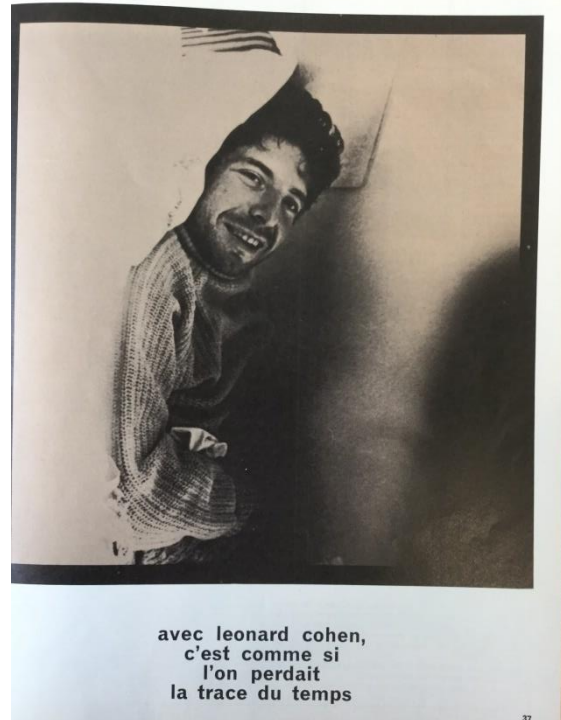
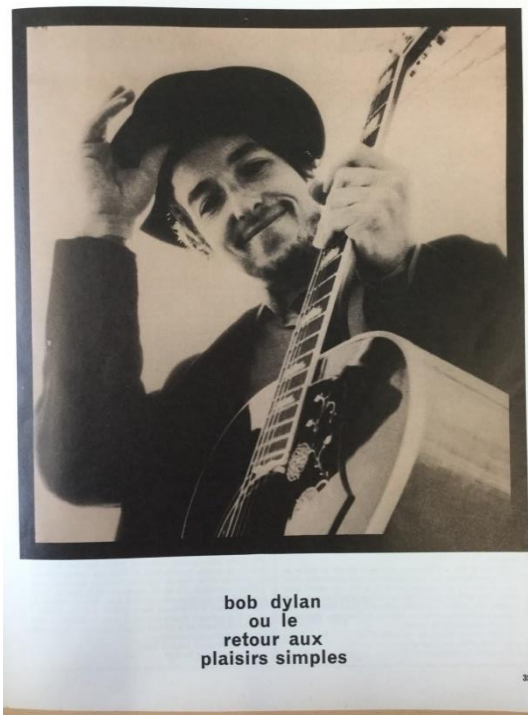
Cohen's humoristic approach compensated for the often ponderous style of his lyrics (which also contrasted with the mood of more popular entertainment music) and allowed him to resonate more easily with his audience.

In this regard, it is important to mention the nature of the relationship between the artist and his audience. This relationship is a crucial dimension of Cohen's craft. As a singer, Cohen could create a rapport between himself and his audience, but it was a connection always threatened by his own problematic self-awareness as an artist. He struggled to maintain the spontaneity that he believed was integral to the artist-audience dynamic. Cohen has commented extensively on the power of language and the artistic communication which he aims to achieve in his work. In this regard, he sees a critical difference between writers and singers. According to Cohen, unlike a poem, a song can directly engage the listener, who experiences it not on a rational level (intellectual understanding), but on an irrational, emotional level: a movement "from lip to lip and heart to heart" (an expression he has used in several interviews throughout his whole career).

It follows then that Cohen usually expresses his engagement in general – or 'universal' – terms ('humankind,' 'the heart,' etc.) rather than with concrete temporal, spatial or linguistic demarcations. In fact, Cohen's music seems to make his listeners float away from the here and now: they want to be 'transported' to a different place and time. Because the song in its entirety (the combination of text and music) can realise this movement, translation of the lyrics is not always necessary, while sometimes it can be even counterproductive (although Cohen did his best to address his audience in French between the songs from time to time). Allwright seems to realise this when, for example, in the translation of *Suzanne*, he makes the correspondences concerning content subjacent to the formal power of music. In his translations, he stresses the melodic guitar play and the preservation and even reinforcement of rhyme. In Cohen's first novel, the main character compared his artistic expressiveness with that of a hypnotist. For this reason, in Cohen's case, the distinction made by Gorlée (2005: 8) between 'logocentric' and 'musicocentric' songs seems difficult to apply: here they mutually undergird and support each other.

As stated above, artistic communication is one area in which Cohen differs markedly from Dylan, whose style is much more concrete. That difference

is also reflected in their (early) genre choices: whereas Cohen tends toward the ballad, Dylan has a penchant for the blues, “since the blues was more suitable for referring to local American life and for integrating sub-cultural elements, especially of Black origin” (Sheffy 1991:181). In an article from 1969 comparing Dylan and Cohen, Vassal (1969:35, 37) refers to this directly:



The connection Cohen seeks with his audience is in keeping with the traditional way folk singers viewed their relationship with the audience: being part of a community bound together by the topos of music as the universal language. Yet Keunen (1998: 22) argues that one must bear in mind that familiar idea about the folk singer — that the artist and the audience form one homogeneous community — is based on a lie. There is and will always be a gap between the two. Other artists, such as Prince and David Bowie, “refuse to deny the gap between the musician and the spectator, but take it precisely as a starting point and play with it. Hence the pleasure in image shifts [...] Music as a (well-considered) game, that wants to uncover some contradictions in the pop-story. Such as the illusion of direct communication or the disguise of its entertainment nature” (Keunen 1998:22, my translation). Cohen is aware of this tension between direct, genuine communication and the artificial character of his onstage communication. It is not only the farce at the Aix-en-Provence concert that proves this. In the early '70s, at the time when Bowie went on tour with Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars (1972), Cohen also played with the idea of going on stage wearing a mask. He asked his friend and sculptor Morton Rosengarten to make a mask for him, “a live death mask made from

a plaster cast of his face, expressionless, with gaps for his mouth and eyes. [...] it [...] would make it obvious that the public Leonard was a performance and that he was well aware of the masquerade. [...] In the end Leonard decided not to wear the mask. He held on to it for decades, though". (Simmons 2012: 224)

In short, Cohen's ambiguous (self-)representations have their origins not only in his hybrid literary-musical identity but also in his critical attitude towards any uniform mode of artistic communication. Against the backdrop of the 'authenticity' of the (folksy) singer-songwriter and the temptation of overt artificiality, Cohen created an artistic persona that evades both these categories.

#### **4. Translation of the literary works and steps toward canonisation**

In the last section of this article, I want to dwell briefly upon the way in which Cohen, through his musical recognition, made gradual headway in the French literary system. In the introduction, I mentioned that today nearly all of Cohen's literary works have been translated into French. Any exceptions predate Cohen's arrival in the French music scene. For example, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956) and *Parasites of Heaven* (1966) have never been translated. *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961) and *Flowers for Hitler* (1964) were translated, but into one single compilation volume, *Poèmes et chansons 2* (1976). This translational history exemplifies clearly how the recognition of Cohen's literary career was dependent of his musical trajectory. It was only after he had established a reputation as a singer that his literary work was translated.

The four titles mentioned above were published in London before Cohen came into the public eye in France around 1970. In addition to that, there are three other titles also originally released before 1970 but which were translated afterwards into French: his two novels (*The Favourite Game*, translated in 1971, and *Beautiful Losers*, translated in 1972) and his anthology *Selected Poems 1956-1968* (translated in 1972 as *Poèmes et Chansons*). They were all brought out within a period of two years by the publisher Christian Bourgois. There are several possible explanations for the early translation of these titles:

(1) Generally speaking, novels are more readily translated than poetry, which is traditionally considered as a less accessible genre and therefore harder to market. This appears to be the case with translations into other languages as well. The two novels were translated into far more languages than the poetry volumes (The Leonard Cohen Files).

(2) The translation of the anthology offered a commercial advantage. In one single volume, the reader had an overview of the most important poems taken from various earlier volumes.

(3) The three titles were not only released in the US or Canada, but also in Europe (London) in their original English version. *The Favourite Game* was published in 1963 (Secker & Warburg), *Selected Poems* (1956-1968) in 1969 (Jonathan Cape) and *Beautiful Losers* in 1970 (Jonathan Cape). For other titles, such a European release, be it in English or in translation, would only happen from 1973 onwards.

(4) Bourgois was known as a publisher of American literature, including the works of the Beat poets. Thus, his motivating force was not only Cohen's success as a singer, but also Cohen's association with the Beat poets.

From that moment onwards, almost all of Cohen's literary works were consistently and almost immediately translated into French (a trend that continues to this day). It will come as little surprise, then, that once Cohen was established in France as a writer and a musician, the first book *about* his work quickly followed: *Leonard Cohen*, written by Vassal in 1971 as part of the *Rock et Folk* collection (Vassal 1974). The book highlights the literary aspects of Cohen's oeuvre more than ever before and includes a number of detailed literary analyses of his work.

Starting in the '80s, both Cohen's literary and musical works became institutionally embedded in French culture. Nowadays, his literary oeuvre is easily available in English or French. In terms of his status as a musician, he began being covered in *Les Inrockuptibles*, the more intellectual counterpart of *Rock et Folk*:

Conscientiously distinguishing itself from its rivals by a sober, spacious layout and black and white photography, it played to a more cerebral pop consumer [...]. Since it became a general culture weekly, though, *Les Inrockuptibles* is more likely to compete with *Nouvel observateur* and the highbrow TV guide *Télérama* than with *Rock et Folk*. (Pires 2003:93)

*Les Inrockuptibles* was a significant medium for the music of Leonard Cohen, because it created a space within the musical system where longer contributions and detailed analyses became possible. The very figure of Cohen constitutes an interesting mix between popular culture and the canon, in particular with regard to how he combines a vulgar and/or locally rooted language with a noble and/or abstract language in his works (Mus 2016a). This hybridity seems to be difficult for the French literary system, where the focus on the noble/abstract aspect resounds in the portrayal of Cohen as a writer, and the vulgar/local aspects of his work remain more unexamined. A telling example of this is the difference in the two separate French translations of the poetry volume *Book of Longing* (2006), one in France (*Le livre du désir*, 2008, translated by J. Vassal and J.-D. Brierre) and one in Québec (*Livre du constant désir*, 2007, translated by M. Garneau). In the paratext of the French edition, Cohen is rather vaguely presented as a universal poet whose work transcends national boundaries,

whereas in the Québécois press, Garneau (quoted in Montpetit 2007) left no doubt about the fact that Cohen is first and foremost a Montreal poet: “c’est un artiste qui a été particulièrement marqué par Montréal” [he is an artist that has been particularly marked by Montreal]. Tanasescu and Alberti (2016) have shown convincingly that the French translations have a loftier language than their Québécois counterpart. The French works feature the frequent use of capitals and a more composed, poetic translation style both lexically and grammatically, such as Vassal-Brierre’s choice of the *passé simple* (a literary tense, which cuts off the past from the present) contrasted with the *imparfait* [imperfect tense], of Garneau.

## 5. Conclusion

The French reception of Leonard Cohen in the early ‘70s can be summarised as a difficult ‘song of love and hate’ – to paraphrase the title of Cohen’s third studio album. In the very first reviews, his work is described as challenging every categorisation. This is reflected in his problematic relationship with existing labels such as folk singer, protest singer, bourgeois singer, etc. The explicit focus on language and translation in the receiving culture can be explained on the basis of three factors: (a) the polarised media context that opposed Francophone and foreign language cultural products; (b) the ambivalent status of Cohen’s oeuvre and artistic persona which led to focusing on the literary qualities of his musical work *qua* carrier of his poetics, thereby allowing for analyses that are independent of the music; (c) the importance that Cohen himself attached to the connection he wanted to establish with his audience. Both on and off stage, he achieved this in an indirect way, namely by means of an inextricable mix of text, music and direct dialogue. For Cohen, it was characteristic of his musical production that, by the mutual influence of these three elements, he managed to connect with his audience.

The translations of the lyrics in *Rock et Folk*, which do not fall within the traditional categories of sung/singable versions or surtitles, are unique: the *musical* communication fails, but at the same time the oeuvre gains a literary dimension, opening the door to the recognition of Leonard Cohen’s literary persona. It was precisely Cohen’s musical success that led to his literary work being translated and published in France. Although in the early 1970s, the recognition of Cohen’s literary career was dependent on his musical trajectory, this dependence disappeared quite quickly. From the mid-‘70s to the end of his career, his literary work was always almost immediately translated into French.

Despite the fact that, from the 1980s onwards, Cohen became a household name in French and English-speaking musical and literary systems, he has been portrayed in a different way in each. More specifically, when it comes to the complex relationship between formal and informal register, a crucial theme in Cohen’s oeuvre, it is remarkable that there is an ennobling

tendency in the latest poetry translations, where the local and informal dimension of his works are markedly less visible than the universal and formal dimension. In short: the recognition of his literary profile within the musical system seems to have been realised more easily than the recognition of his musical profile within the literary system. The recent dual translations of *Book of Longing* further attest to this.

Is the literary oeuvre of Leonard Cohen capable of being acknowledged entirely by the French literary system or is his dominant musical image, which once helped him to gain literary recognition, nowadays an obstacle to him being fully accepted as a writer? In September 1971, the literary magazine *La Quinzaine littéraire* (p. 12) wrote quite condescendingly about the literary qualities of Cohen's first novel: "Le chanteur est aussi un romancier" [The singer is also a novelist] is the revealing title of the review of *The Favorite Game*. All the reviewer saw was a singer-songwriter who also happened to write. How this double artistic recognition happens today, after the death of Leonard Cohen, is a question for further research. There is plenty of evidence that the literary system (inside and outside France) has a difficult time recognising hybrid oeuvres, even if the list of musician-writers is quite long.

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## Biography

Francis Mus (1983) works as 'chargé de cours' at the University of Liège, Belgium, and as research assistant at the University of Leuven, Belgium. He wrote a PhD on the internationalisation of the Belgian avant-garde. His interests concern translation and writing in multilingual spaces. He wrote several articles on this topic, amongst others on Leonard Cohen and Milan Kundera. In 2015, he published his book (in Dutch) *De demonen van Leonard Cohen*.

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen was born and raised in the English and French speaking city of Montreal and spent part of his life in France. Montety (2016) sees the influence of this Francophone background in Cohen's works: songs adapted from French (*The Partisan*), references to French persons (Joan of Arc), loanwords (*Avalanche*), several names that can easily be pronounced in French (Suzanne, Marianne), etc.

<sup>3</sup> Two exceptions include the modest but informative account of Cohen's early career by Malcolm Reid (2010) and the fascinating volume by Ringuet and Rabinovitch (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the translations from French are by the author.

<sup>5</sup> Next to Judy Collins, one should add here the name of Martine Habib. In an interview with Jacques Vassal (Mus 2016b), he said, "La toute première fois que j'ai entendu le nom de Leonard Cohen, et une chanson de lui, c'était lors d'un 'Hootenann' au Centre Américain du boulevard Raspail, à Paris, en décembre 1967. C'est une chanteuse française, Martine Habib, qui nous a chanté 'Suzanne'" [The very first time that I heard the name Leonard Cohen and one of his songs was during a hootenanny at the American Centre of Boulevard Raspail in Paris, in December 1967. A French singer, Martine Habib, sang 'Suzanne' for us.]"

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, this account made by Felix de Montety (2016): "[...] [J]e traduis parfois des textes de Leonard Cohen, juste pour moi, juste comme ça, pour sentir leur musicalité, pour me plonger plus profond dans leur langue à la fois cryptique et lumineuse, pour me trouver plus heureux encore de ne rien faire de ces traductions quand je comprends à quel point elles sont bancales, lourdes et impuissantes face aux images fabriquées par Cohen." [Sometimes, I translate texts by Leonard Cohen just for myself, just like that, in order to feel their musicality, to delve deeper in their cryptic but luminous language, to have the pleasure of not having to use these translations in any way, when I realise how flawed, heavy and weak they are compared to the images created by Cohen.]

<sup>7</sup> French singer-songwriter Georges Chelon released French versions of "So Long, Marianne" and "Hey, that's no way to say goodbye", in 1970.

<sup>8</sup> French singer-songwriter Serge Lama translated Cohen's "Bird on the Wire", as "Vivre tout seul." Cohen would occasionally sing this French version during his concerts. The song appeared in Lama's album *Superman* (1971).

<sup>9</sup> Allwright was the most productive translator of Cohen's musical oeuvre. His first covers were released as early as 1968 ("L'étranger" and "Suzanne" – the latter song was also performed by Françoise Hardy, in the Allwright's translation). In 1972, 1973, 1975, 1979, 1985 and 1994 Allwright sang his French translations of several other Cohen songs.