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The Violent Beauty of Movement in “When I Uncovered Your
Body”

In Leonard Cohen’s poem “When I Uncovered Your Body,” the speaker ruminates on the relationship between art and beauty as he¹ observes the body of his companion. Viewing this human body and its beauty provokes a contemplation of the function of art and the process of art making. The speaker appears as an artist figure, perhaps a poet, and evaluates the uncovered body as a potential subject of his art. Perfection, at first, seems to be a quality essential to a worthy artistic subject, but nearly impossible to attain naturally. Perhaps it is the artist’s role to “bestow” (4) this perfection through the creation of art. Perhaps perfection can be attained only in miraculous instants, when one is framed attractively by deceptive shadows. These notions are proposed in the first stanza of “When I Uncovered Your Body” but rejected in the second when a sudden movement is made. The uncovered body breathes and turns, reveals its real and violent beauty, and renders impossible any potential artistic interpretation.

In the first stanza, the speaker, upon uncovering his companion’s body, defines his initial notion of human beauty and its relation to art. He finds the body shrouded in shadows that “fell deceptively, / urging memories of perfect rhyme” (2-3). His reaction suggests that human

beauty

1 I assume that the speaker is male for convenience, but I do not believe the gender of the speaker, or that of the uncovered body, to be essential to my argument

originates and derives value from a state of perfect stillness, even if such perfection is carved out by deceptive shadows. The shadows fall and frame the body neatly, like verse perfectly rhymed. The body is strikingly still, acts as subject to no verb throughout the first stanza, but rather as the object of the speaker's various actions. He or she lies static—viewed, “painted” (8), and “kissed” (9). Art seems to offer the speaker a means of preserving such perfection, as he recollects the “perfect rhyme” of foregone poets (3). He summons other forms of artistic preservation, equating his subject's face to one that he had seen “painted twice / or a hundred times” (8-9), or one that he had kissed “when it was carved in stone” (10). As he includes poetry, painting, and sculpture, the speaker clarifies a tradition: human beauty is retained through artistic recreation.

By citing this tradition, the speaker reveals his initial belief that art imitates life by improving and preserving its beauty. This belief is complicated when the potential preservation of his companion's beauty turns spiritual, and the artist-speaker becomes priestly. When he declares, “I thought I could bestow beauty / like a benediction and that your half-dark flesh / would answer to the prayer” (4-5), the artist-speaker reveals his expectation of the miraculous ability to bestow beauty, and art-making becomes a divine process. The speaker thereby reveals a belief that art defines and sanctifies the beauty within life, with the hope that life “would answer to the prayer.” This anticipated “answer,” then, is an expectation for life to imitate art. Our speaker seems to drift, unsure, between the two ideologies.

In addition to this ideological ambiguity, the first stanza contains various structural and rhetorical hints that foretell the total collapse of his notions in the second stanza.

When confessing his initial beliefs, he introduces each with the phrase “I thought” (2,4,7), constructing an anaphora that emphasizes a *former* understanding. This instructs the reader to expect the destruction of these thoughts in an imminent moment of revelation. By the third “I thought” statement, “I thought I understood your face / because I had seen it painted twice / or a hundred times” (7-9), this repetition has conditioned the reader to become suspicious. The replicability of the painted face seems untrustworthy, even shallow, and forces questions about the relation between art and human beauty.

Visually, the first stanza, stacked tidily above the jagged second stanza, resembles those perfectly rhyming poems that the speaker mentions in the third line, and channels the stillness that is so essential to his conception of the body’s beauty. Though Cohen does not adhere to a rhyme scheme, he constructs a stress-based meter with four stresses to a line that enforces the tidiness of the stanza. Line five is the only exception; it protrudes peculiarly, with six stresses, and wags the ominous phrase “half-dark flesh” beyond the well-behaved lines above and below. The dramatic hypermeter in line five draws attention to this phrasing. “Half-dark” is a phrase distinct from what is perhaps the more natural option, “half-light.” It is a phrase that insists upon darkness and suggests something unknown and unaccounted for in the speaker’s perception of the body. This phrase, in drawing special attention to darkness, wonders at a different type of beauty hiding in the shadows and foreshadows the revelation of this beauty.

Suddenly, the body moves. The second stanza begins with the speaker’s report of, “a breath, a vague turning” (11). With such a subtle motion, the body “uncovered shadows” (12), allowing the speaker to finally greet the hidden half-dark mysteries. Movement distinguishes the

second stanza. The change is visible in the uneven lines, as if, by turning about, this person has shuffled the neat balance. Quick words like “deftly” (13) and loud words like “clamoured” (17) create a physical atmosphere that makes the still body of the first stanza seem lifeless, as if the speaker had uncovered a corpse in a morgue. The rivalry between stillness and movement across the two stanzas manifests itself in a departure from the four-stress scheme established in the first. There is no fixed pattern. Line 12 only contains two stresses, while line 17 contains five. These unpatterned stresses fluctuate and rumble, creating a rhythmic power that expresses the newness of the speaker’s revelation and the difficulty he will have in containing it. The beauty hiding in the half-dark shadows emerges triumphantly as: “the real and violent proportions of your body” (14). Words like “real” and “violent” are stressed here deliberately, not as a passive consequence of an established pattern. In the jagged rumble of the second stanza, the body attains this “violent” quality in its realness, in its very breathing, and in its ability to disrupt any illusion of perfect stillness as perfect human beauty. Through only a slight turning movement, the human body forcibly destroys the speaker’s already crumbling notions of the relationship between life and art.

“When I Uncovered Your Body” is an attempt to understand the violent beauty of movement and, ultimately, the beauty of stirring, breathing life. No poem will succeed in this endeavor. The speaker himself seems to believe that no artist has ever succeeded, asserting that his companion’s movement “made obsolete old treaties of excellence, / measures and poems” (15-16). A viewer of a painting will never understand the face that seems to have been painted “twice / or a hundred times.” No reader can fully grasp the beauty of a body written into “perfect rhyme.” In concluding that the breathing, moving beauty of a living person “cannot be

interpreted or praised,” (18) the speaker finally rejects the notion that art imitates life. Art is incapable of imitating life. At the same time, however, life does not imitate art. The two are separately fruitful, and connected in various complex ways, but separate from any form of imitation. Imitating, interpreting, or praising life through art is futile. “Personal beauty” (17), that is, the beauty of a human person, “must be met” (19). In fact, the poem concludes with that line “it must be met” (19), a line so brief and simple that it feels blunt and cut short. We are left to wonder what it means to “meet” such beauty. Grappling for clues to understand this sudden and mysterious conclusion, one can only turn to motion, the very force that shatters the poem in the second stanza. “Meeting” requires movement, physical communion with beauty, and acceptance of the futility of any attempt to imitate life. Life demands life.

So, who, then, is “you?” Whose body is so beautiful that it renders artistic interpretation futile? That it proves to the speaker that art cannot imitate life and life, art? The first stanza offers a clue when the speaker discusses art with such generality. Rather than alluding to specific poets and painters, he simply talks of perfect rhyme and a painted face. He uses the passive voice to describe when this face “was carved in stone” (10). General, too, is his description of the perceived body, the most specific and noted feature being the flesh. There is no talk of breast to reveal a female, or phallus to reveal a male. Gender, colour, and size are left out, and are therefore marked as insignificant. Cohen’s speaker invites us to be general, almost uncomfortably so. An engaged analysis of this poem would be incomplete without “meeting” such an invitation. As he reduces art to only its materials (paint, rhyme, carved stone), he reduces humanity to its material—the body, the *flesh*. This act of uncovering and evaluating is a study of the human body and its multiplicity of form and movement, which he discovers to be very real,

and very violent.

Real moving bodies make “obsolete” any poetic depiction, and yet this verse comes from a poetic mind so preoccupied with depicting flesh. The *Toronto Star* calls Leonard Cohen’s poems, “flesh-intoxicated.”² This poem itself is an attempt to depict flesh, but with a crucial recognition of its own failure. It ends with an intention to answer the demands of the flesh, to transcend the page, and “meet” the personal beauty. In Leonard Cohen’s work, this intention

²Quote taken from the back cover of “The Spice-Box of Earth,” see “Works Cited.”

comes and goes, sometimes forgotten or ignored, but sometimes, as in “When I Uncovered Your Body,” agonized over.

Works Cited

Cohen, Leonard. “When I Uncovered Your Body.” *The Spice-Box of Earth*, McClellan & Stewart, 2018, p. 31.