

## Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne" and Perfect Bodies

*"Love is touching souls"* Joni Mitchell

Suzanne was the first song on the first album released by Leonard Cohen. In those three verses almost everything that Leonard Cohen wrote subsequently was anticipated – the inter-weaving of love, sex and spirituality; the sense of loss, the eroticism, the uplifting message in defiance of pain and doubt. It encapsulates the whole world both in space and time – from Plato and Jesus to the middle of the twentieth century, from China to Montreal. It is a window into almost everything.

I remember a friend telling me that the lyric was flawed – that no one has a perfect body. I replied that, on the contrary, everyone has a perfect body, but that it can only be touched *by the mind*. Leonard Cohen was only too aware of imperfection – it was he who said, after all, that "there is a crack in everything". The lyric is true and flawless – a perfect love song – and one that needs no prolonged explanation to appreciate. But that comment, "no one has a perfect body" has irked me ever since and this piece is both an attempt to explain why it is not true and a personal tribute to Leonard Cohen.

The idea that there are perfect bodies that can only be touched by the mind is an ancient one going back, as far as we know, to Plato. Plato argued that the soul comes into this world already knowing certain things – it is not a *tabula rasa* – a blank sheet to be written on by our senses from birth – it already has knowledge of ideas or "forms". Take, for example, the idea of a perfect circle. No such thing exists in nature. There are things that are approximately circular – like the disc of the sun or moon viewed from the Earth, or man-made circular objects, but none of these are *perfectly* circular. For a circle to be perfect, every point along the circumference would have to be *exactly* the same distance from a single point - the centre. But this is never the case nor ever could be. And yet, we can define and know what a perfect circle is – our minds can comprehend the idea of a perfect circle even though we have never seen one.

The same is true of perfect bodies – the pyramid, the sphere, the cube. So, Plato argued, these perfect forms or bodies exist but not in the natural world observed by the senses. Yet the soul has knowledge of them, and therefore that knowledge must be, he argued, innate - it could not have been derived from the senses. The mind can touch them, but the hand cannot, nor can the eye see them.

Cohen was undoubtedly familiar with these ideas. He was a very interested in the Jewish Kabbalah and particularly the Lurianic Kabbalah which was heavily influenced by Neoplatonism.<sup>1</sup> He could not have been unaware of the Platonic resonances in the line "touched her perfect body with your mind". He took this Platonic idea and transferred it from the philosophical and mathematical realms to the personal and poetic.

So what is the perfect body of Suzanne that Leonard touches with his mind? And what is the perfect body of Leonard that is touched by Jesus and finally by Suzanne? It is the *essential* Suzanne – what she is, stripped of all artifice, all masks, all pretence all accidental attributes. It is the body of Suzanne that could only be Suzanne and nobody else. Just as the

definition of a circle defines it perfectly and excludes all other forms, so when we really know someone, we know them in such a way that we could never confuse them with anyone else – we have touched their perfect body with our mind. It is the person we can meet only intimately, when we have got beyond the public face, the mask, and really know someone:

-“And you want to travel with her, and you want to travel blind,  
And you know that she will trust you for you’ve touched her perfect body with your mind”.

She trusts him because she knows he has touched what she is and no one else is or can be. A level of intimacy has been achieved between them that can only be achieved through trust. It is not her physical body that he refers to but what makes Suzanne Suzanne and no one else – her defining form, her soul. Of course, by using the word “body”, Cohen will have been aware that most people will think of the physical body and that the touching of it will arouse sensual if not sexual connotations. He deliberately fuses the Platonic and the sensual. His lyrics almost always operate on multiple levels moving between the sexual, the intensely personal and the spiritual. Like William Blake, I suspect he believed that “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul”<sup>2</sup>.

The rest of the verse frames the space in which Leonard and Suzanne achieved intimacy and trust with just a few beautiful brush strokes – the nights they spent together listening to the boats go by, her half-craziness, the tea and oranges that she gives him and that connect them both, via the river, to China, to the whole world.

The second verse takes this idea a step further. In it, Jesus observes humanity from his tower, his cross, and sees so many drowning, suffering souls. He offers them redemption from suffering – that they too might be sailors and rise above it. He has grasped the perfect form of all human beings – seen the essence of what it is to be human. As Leonard touched the perfect body of Suzanne with his mind, so Jesus touched the perfect body of the larger concept of humanity. But rejected, broken, he is misunderstood and sinks beneath the understanding of those that crucify him, and perhaps even of those who profess to follow him. Cohen offers us a very human idea of Jesus. Not a god, but a broken man who we might follow, not because he is mighty, but because he has understood us - “touched your perfect body with his mind”. The god becomes intensely human, feeling for humanity the same urgent empathy that Leonard and Suzanne feel for each other as they sip tea that came all the way from China. The river flows on reminding us that all things are connected, that the way we are with each other reflects and affects the whole world through both space and time. The verse seems to reference some ancient notion of the elements in evoking water, wood and stone.

In the third verse Cohen completes the circle running from Suzanne and the personal to Jesus and the universal and brings us back to Suzanne. She takes his hand and leads him to the river where she holds a mirror up to life and shows it to him – the children in the morning leaning out for love, the heroes in the seaweed. How could he not love her? He

knows that she knows him – she has touched his perfect body – and he knows that he can trust her.

A brief mention of the music running under these lyrics is well worth a mention. I think Cohen's music, as opposed to his lyrics, is often underrated. Try focusing on the guitar accompaniment running under these lyrics. It is perfectly crafted to the lyrics. The river runs right through this song, and you can *hear* it, if you listen to the guitar. The finger picking rises and falls beautifully, gently, like the rising and falling of water. Not the crashing of waves by the sea, but the gentle lapping of water against the riverbank. It is soporific, dreamlike, you can almost hear the boats floating through the night.

I learnt to play this song in 1971 whilst lying in Manchester Royal Infirmary with a broken leg. I was in a ward with other men who had fallen foul of gravity – window cleaners, builders and roofers. I never attempted to sing but just picked the strings very quietly trying not to disturb anyone. Nevertheless, inevitably, the music drifted down the ward but no one complained as I worked my way through the song book of Cohen's first two albums. In fact I was requested many times to "play that song" – and it was always the same one – Suzanne.

I remember one roofer leaving us, "healed", limping out with one leg now shorter than the other. He asked me for the details of the song so he could buy it. I said I thought he would have been tired of it by now. He answered that he could listen to it forever and never tire of it. Leonard's music, like the St Lawrence River, flowed into a vast ocean and seemed able to touch everyone – even a burly roofer in Manchester.

Suzanne was not perfect, nor was Leonard. They were both human. But their imperfections formed part of those "perfect bodies" that defined what they were, what they are. According to both of them their relationship was never consummated – it was, you might say, purely "Platonic". She was the wife of a friend of Leonard's with whom he had a brief relationship but one which opened a window for him into the soul which he was good enough to show to us. He did not write a Platonic treatise. He did what all great poets do – he drew on a palette of ideas that he had stored away, to paint as well as he could, a poetic vision, in this case formed by a close, intimate relationship. Others have expressed similar ideas – "your eyes kissed mine", sang Joan Baez; "love is touching souls", said Joni Mitchell. But, as always, Leonard Cohen says it deeper, says it best.

C.B. Wilde  
Harrogate,  
England

[chriswilde145@btinternet.com](mailto:chriswilde145@btinternet.com)

1. On Cohen and the Lurianic Kabbalah see Rabbi Mordecai Finley: <https://jewishjournal.com/judaism/212745/> .On the Lurianic Kaballah and Neoplatonism see Moshe Idel, "Metamorphoses of a Platonic Theme in Jewish Mysticism", <http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/yb03/08idel.pdf>
2. On William Blake and Leonard Cohen see C.B. Wilde, <https://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/Wilde2016.pdf>