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Cohen's Songs of Suffering Move us with Power of Prayer

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Cohen's songs of suffering move us with power similar to prayer

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RITE AND REASON: I HAD the privilege of attending the final lap of Leonard Cohen's Dublin concerts in the O2 last July. It was a deeply moving experience. When I tried to analyse the broad appeal of Cohen later, I concluded it has to do with his being a seer, a spiritual guru, a prophet, writes **EAMON MAHER**

He has known intense suffering in the form of alcoholism and depression and his songs/poems do not make any attempt to hide this. Nonetheless, there is something uplifting about them.

His achievement in emerging relatively unscathed from such serious handicaps makes him all the more precious. His humanity, gentleness and sensitivity come across in the throaty rendition of his songs. We come to believe he is in some way telling our story, recounting our life experiences, capturing our pain. So, we sing along gustily to the chorus of *Hallelujah*, identifying with the struggles of the songwriter: "I did my best/It wasn't much/I couldn't feel/So I tried to touch/I've told the truth/I didn't come to fool you/And even though it all went wrong/I'll stand before the Lord of Song/With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah . . ."

We are fellow pilgrims in Cohen's quest, a quest we undertake with the confidence of being guided to calmer waters in the safe hands of the 75-year-old poet. The closest thing to a Cohen concert for me was attending a reading by the late John McGahern. For both men, life is a perilous journey, but one in which a patient dignity must always prevail. Artistic success was only achieved after years of fine-tuning; of searching for the right note and rhythm; of carefully crafting and recrafting the work until it achieved a seamless, universal quality.

The distinctive voice and serenity of both men struck a chord as they entered old age. The warmth and support of their fans and readers sustained them as they contemplated the mystery of eternity. They revelled in the warm glow of love.

Cohen is as much philosopher as he is poet or singer. He dwells on the everyday in a unique manner: the pain of unrequited love; the horrors of war; the cruel inevitability of death; the moments of precious gentleness; the beauty of the natural landscape; the tenderness of human beings; the insights that light up the path of life.

He speaks at length of "the crack that allows the light in". There is beauty in our brokenness. His special appeal to women undoubtedly has to do with his vulnerability and openness. In *A Thousand Kisses Deep*, he writes: "I loved you when you opened/Like a lily to the heat/. . . There's no forsaking what you love/No existential leap/As witnessed here in time and blood/A thousand kisses deep."

His use of repetition and refrain are akin to prayer and his spiritual depth is always to the fore. In the current climate of financial uncertainty and religious turmoil, we need Leonard Cohen like we used to need religion: to bring us comforting words; to soothe us; to provide us with hope.

As the camera zoomed in on his wrinkled and expressive face; as he knelt on the ground with the microphone close to his mouth; as the poetry gushed forth; there was a type of transcendent moment, an epiphany, a feeling of deep happiness normally associated with a mystical experience. That, in my view, is the "Cohen factor".

He is special.

Walking out of the O2 arena after the concert, I felt purged of some of the detritus of modern life and wondered wistfully if I would ever again experience what happened to me that night in Dublin last July. Then again, the poetry, the precious prayer will always be there. Thankfully.

Eamon Maher is director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies in IT Tallaght. He and John Littleton are

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