Leonard Cohen and the Neo-Baroque Perspective

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As a non-Canadian reader, working in the field of Brazilian literature, I was introduced to Leonard Cohen's songs in the 1990s when I lived in Toronto, and my attraction to his work was immediate. His novels and poetry seduced me as well, and the identification was not with something totally unfamiliar. There was in Cohen's work an artistic pulse that I could recognize. My initial attraction as both a reader and listener led to an academic curiosity that made me realize that Cohen's work has a lot to do with an aesthetics that is somehow foundational for Latin America: the Baroque. As a Brazilian literary scholar, I understand how the Baroque shaped the culture in which I was raised and how it may lead to a specific way of reading other cultures and their artifacts. Having emerged as a Portuguese colony in the sixteenth century, Brazil delineated its existence throughout the seventeenth century and beyond upon the coexistence of contradictions and contrasts such as the amalgam of the sacred and the profane in colonial life, due to the very miscegenation between European, Indigenous, and African people. It is understandable that the baroque aesthetics had found in this context a favourable environment to develop, with its appeal to the senses, its challenge to the harmonic classic beauty, and its emphasis on tension and instability.

Although the word *postmodern* has been used largely to define the contemporary world, some critics, such as Omar Calabrese, have found in the term *Neo-Baroque* a much more precise way to define the present social and cultural contexts. In *Neo-Baroque: a Sign of the Times* (1992), Calabrese defines the term as "a search for, and valorization of, forms that display a loss of entirety, totality, and system in favor of instability, polydimensionality and change" (xii). In other words, the Neo-Baroque presents, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, features that can be related to the historical Baroque. However, the Baroque traces appear in such renewed manners that it is not possible to say that the Neo-Baroque is a return to the Baroque.

In January 2018, I visited *A Crack in Everything*, the exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in homage to the work of Leonard Cohen, on exhibit between November 2017 and April 2018. In the show, several artists presented different ways of interacting with the poet's work and with the theme of crack and light. The antithesis in the title of the exhibition is present in the chorus of Cohen's song "Anthem," one of the tracks from his most apocalyptic album, *The Future*. "There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in": those lines, among the poet's most famous, synthesize very well a Baroque drive that seems to be paradigmatic of Cohen's poetry. *Crack* and *light* are terms taken from opposed semantic fields that are featured by Cohen in a relation of codependence that allows him to design a powerful allegory and alludes at once to several ideas according to its reception: high and low, imperfect and perfect, material and spiritual, sacred and

profane, human and divine. All these oppositions are inscribed in Cohen's poetic device and lead to a synthesis in which the opposed terms cannot be separated.

Although the song clearly thematizes the impossibility of peace, the verses do not have a fixed reference and can be appropriated to numerous situations. This is because there is an operation through which the poet constructs his allegory: it takes the place of what is offered as an ellipse, the signifiers that remain unsaid and which will be substituted by other signifiers according to the different contexts of reception. The Cuban writer Severo Sarduy reads in the poetry of Góngora a trope that turns out to be paradigmatic to the understanding of the literary Baroque: the ellipse. The trope is the literary analogue to darkening in painting. If darkening stimulates the gaze, ellipsis enhances the process of decoding of the poetic resources, such as metaphor and allegory, that take place around the elided words (Sarduy 1232). The opposition between light and darkness, sacred and profane, is strongly present in Leonard Cohen's poetic universe. His last album, released one month before his death, is called *You Want It Darker* (2016) and features songs in which the identity of his addressee is unstable: a woman, God, the cultural industry, or the listener?

In the third millennium, many countries like my own are witnessing a disturbing turn to their more violent roots, to instability and despair. In this sense, the Neo-Baroque can be not only a privileged social label, but also a perspective, a way of reading, a productive form of systematization of artistic corpus, like Cohen's, in which asymmetries, contrasts, paradoxes seem to respond to the very uncertainties of our times.

The word *baroque* derives originally from the Spanish term meaning "irregular pearl." This irregularity seems to be translated in architectural terms in the excess of ornaments and curves. In literature, as Sarduy points out, both the Baroque and the Neo-Baroque are manifested through a process of artificialization, in operations in which the signifiers seem to be densified. Sarduy understands that the Baroque artifice may happen through three types of processes: substitution, proliferation, and condensation. If in substitution the signifier is elided and substituted by another, in proliferation the non-said is replaced by a stream of signifiers. Condensation, though, is an operation in the very materiality of the signifier.

Sarduy observes that the abundance and excess of the Neo-Baroque is an elaboration around the lost object (the non-said), and functions as a parody of the very human reproduction leading to an inevitable eroticism (1401-02). In this sense, it is totally possible to understand the work with language in Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966) as proliferation around the very sacred figure of Catherine Tekakwitha, an Indigenous saint from the seventeenth century who is the narrator's addressee, around whom the narrator proliferates his obsessions, and through whom the novel delineates its mixture of the sacred and the profane.

Proliferation has a lot to do with the conception of the infinite fold in Gilles Deleuze's seminal work entitled *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1993). The philosopher takes from Leibniz a fascinating allegory to explain the Baroque conception of the world: the Baroque house which has two levels. On the first level is the world of matter and its pleats. On the second level, the immaterial world, the souls and their folds. Those two levels are connected inside the house. However, only on the first level are there windows to the outside world. Only the world of matter communicates with the outside world. The level of immateriality is a closed chamber, but, in communicating with the first level, it reaches the outside world through matter. "There are souls down below," writes Deleuze, "sensitive, animal; and there even exists a lower level in the souls" (4). If there are souls in the

material world, spirituality and materiality are not totally opposed to each other.

This idea of a world where the minimal element is the *fold* challenges both the dichotomy between body and mind and the notions of identity and singularity, since all elements of the universe are connected to each other through the infinite fold. In other words, every element or every being is related to its alterity. The inscription of alterity is central to Cohen's literary corpus and has been evident since his first book. Published in 1956, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* gained attention from critics for featuring

> the comparison of various mythologies—Jewish, Christian, Hellenic, and so on—as the major thematic unifying force of the collection and as a much needed Canadian touch of exoticism, though it was clear that it was Cohen's Jewish background that was central to his vision,

as Linda Hutcheon points out (6). Keeping in mind the centrality of his Jewish identity, Cohen's first book makes a very interesting move not only by inscribing other mythologies, but in naming his own religion as a mythology itself.

Throughout his life, religion and spirituality remained important for Cohen. He had been involved with Buddhism for more than ten years when in 1994, after touring his album *The Future*, he decided to spend some time in a monastery. This decision relates to the 1992 album's theme and its apocalyptic tone. Through Buddhism, Cohen seems to have been trying to resolve on a personal level the disenchantment he felt for the world that found in *The Future* its perfect artistic expression. "Get ready for the future: it's murder" is definitely a strong verse.

Cohen was ordained as a monk, travelled to India, and after a certain time he considered that he had finally overcome the depression he had dealt with since his father's death during his childhood. After years in the monastery, which he left in 1999, Cohen presented to the world an artistic production that expressed the sensitivity of a mature man who would transform the awareness of his aging process in both the matter and the style of his poetry, music, and stage performances, in which the coexistence of the sacred and the profane would be more observable.

Book of Longing was published in 2006 and was the result of artistic experimentations that took place largely during Cohen's time in the monastery. The book includes poems, prose, and many drawings, most of them self-portraits. This hybridity of forms is a precise stylistic move. Instead of the complex allegories from his former books, Cohen seems to have incorporated a certain lightness taken from music. However, his Baroque soul is still there, but expressed in a very different manner. It is now through intratextuality, another resource used by the Neo-Baroque, as Sarduy points out (1399-1400).

It is not only that the constant rhymes in the book correspond to another texture in which musicality takes place, but that the illustrations are both ornamental and functional at once, especially the self-portraits that work as mirrors in which the poet projects representations of himself. Besides, the drawings are mainly accompanied by paratexts, brief subtitles: descriptions, explanations, or readings of the drawings. However, the drawings have a primitive, rustic quality that demands attention, and they all show a representation of a serious and mature Cohen, since the traces tend to stress the marks of time in his face. In most subtitles, Cohen describes himself in the third person in a style that works as a subjective unfolding: there are the representations in the figures, there are the readings of the viewer/reader, there are Cohen's readings of his own representation of himself. There is also the role that self-irony takes in this Neo-Baroque scene, since irony is by definition a trope that deals with the non-said.

Book of Longing is among other things a book about desire. If the profane and the

sacred are found throughout Cohen's work, in this book the poems capture a body whose small desires defy Buddhist detachment. Irony is still present, but the book overcomes the acidity of previous works. It is no longer a question of distancing oneself from the horror, but of approaching oneself in almost childlike rhymes that dwell in the present body that survives. The simplicity of the verses centred on simple actions of daily existence makes the poems into streams of light through the shadows, which allow the book to be approached as a Neo-Baroque composition.

Book of Longing surpasses the atrocity of the themes of Cohen's first books and offers its reader lightness interspersed with drawings that revisit something of the infantile world, but now to express the complexity of the "third act" of life. Mostly written in the monastery, the book seems to incorporate a certain folk tone in which simplicity contrasts with the complexity inscribed in the poetic prose of *Book of Mercy*, published in 1984, for example. Cohen's last work seems to overcome the dichotomy between song and poem. Its poems aspire to clarity and music. Many address the daily life of someone whose worldly needs resist the spirituality that is desired within the monastery. There is in the colloquial tone of the poems something that even touches antipoetry. The simplicity is, however, only apparent. A second glance reveals unexpected complexities.

Another noteworthy aspect of *Book of Longing* is that Cohen includes in the volume some pieces from past decades, writings left aside; and this inscription calls attention to the aesthetic character of the gesture of recollecting. It also inscribes in the book another type of fold. The paratext that reveals the original years indicates to the reader that there are two poets being presented in a mirroring process very similar to what happens with the self-portraits. The reader is not being presented to the poem, but to the poet presenting a poem taken from his past. The process allows different times to communicate with each other, since those verses dated from past decades are like flashes of memories in an elderly mind. This is exactly the Neo-Baroque polydimensionality mentioned above.

While it was the last book Cohen published in life, *Book of Longing* was not his only artistic realization after the period in the monastery. There were his albums and there was his voice, and everything he could still do with it despite the fact that in the early years of his career he did not have a clear intention to perform. It was Judy Collins who, after recording some of his songs, convinced him to do so. "Collins encouraged Cohen's first major singing performance, on April 30, 1967," writes Ira Nadel:

> Cohen walked out and played a few bars of 'Suzanne,' but then froze and walked off stage, a combination of stage fright and the fact that his Spanish guitar had gone out of tune. . . . However, the audience shouted for him to come back and, with Collins encouraging him, he returned to finish the song (151).

In those early years, Cohen's performances, like those of many other pop singers, were in that frontier where flaws and limitations are transformed into signs of uniqueness and authenticity. Over the years, though, Cohen's voice changed and he seemed more comfortable singing in a lower register in which he sounded dark, deep, and very masculine. I would say that by *I'm Your Man,* his eighth studio album, released in 1988, Cohen was a performer who had finally found his voice. However, in the self-reflexive "The Tower of Song" from that album, this same dark voice announced a man who was already very aware of his aging process.

In this sense, it should be noted, with Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, that the voice is a singular, unique instance that inscribes in itself the marks of the body and

its finitude and "stands in contrast to the various ontologies of fictitious entities that the philosophical tradition, over the course of its historical development, designates with names like 'man,' 'subject,' 'individual'" (173). In the case of Cohen, a smoker for most of his life, the weaker his voice became, the more he acquired a dark quality that addressed the listener as if he wanted to share secrets, thus producing an effect of intimacy. At the end of his life, the fragility of the poet's voice made it allude to something spiritual that moved crowds to his concerts.

In his performances on stage during his last long tour, Cohen addressed his condition as an old man, and the long history of his relationship with his audience was part of the show. Unlike other pop stars, who tend to desire the appearance of eternal youth, Cohen was a man who apparently aged without doing anything to hide the marks of time, and who tended to refer on stage to the generosity of the audience towards an elderly man. On his last tour, both his physical condition and his voice betrayed the fragility of a man in his seventies. However, it was the contrast between this fragility and the incredible strength of the words he pronounced that seemed to shape the emotional response of the audience. If Cohen had throughout his artistic career addressed God or a spiritual force, his fragile body was now able to present a proximity to death that no one could deny.

Cohen was one of those rare artists who could really embody his art. At the end of his life, the Baroque drive that moved his wandering poetic mind was present in the fragile and dark voice of his last album. The oppositions presented in the verses of the eponymous song "You Want It Darker" seem to be mediated by a mind that has decided upon darkness, but who does so with the same breath necessary for the voice that carries his last words: "You want it darker / We kill the flame." The song that opens Cohen's last album is one of the most perfect ones: it is about the acceptance of death, a respectful and conscious acceptance of finitude that few will be able to experience.

I wonder now how many people across the planet are reading Leonard Cohen's *The Flame*, his posthumous collection of poetry released October 2018. Its title seems to respond to—to unfold—the title of his last album. Cohen's readers and listeners seem not to have predicted the proportion that the feeling of *loss* would take with his death in November 2016, one week after Donald Trump was elected President of the country in which the poet had found in Buddhism a personal and aesthetic turnpoint. Reading Cohen from Brazil in a Neo-Baroque perspective in 2019 allows the perception that his poetry and voice respond to the contemporary context in a transnational mode in which the sacred plays a main role. Who knows how much light *The Flame* may still offer to a planet immersed in so many uncertainties?

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