

Beyond Mommy and the Machinery: Leonard Cohen's Vision of Male Desire in *Beautiful Losers*

by Paul Nonnekes

Let's start with F's "ordinary eternal machinery," which like Deleuze and Guattari's "desiring machines," conceives of the body as a multiple symbolic generator, continually pumping out desire in the most eccentric ways. As in the "Telephone Dance" with F and Edith, where F says "I became a telephone" and "Edith was the electronic conversation that went through me" (Cohen 35). A profusion of production occurs with F imploring I, our narrator, in his usual didactic manner, to "connect nothing." The problem is I connects everything, weaving his imaginary thread through all forms, bringing them into the whole, under the lure of maternal love. F's task is to be the big daddy phallus, symbolic destroyer of imaginary wholeness, cutter of connecting threads. F, like Proust's Penelope, implores I to empty his memory, to listen to the present.

There is a deep friendship

F is failing.

F: "I have followed women everywhere I followed them and I sank down with them" (156).

The veiled woman enticing, luring male desire, away, away from the straight, multiple jouissance.

Problem for F: "Women hissed at me" (156).

Hissing of women's desire unable — ha, ha — to rattle the phallic tree.

Hiss as animal desire.

Poor F: "Will the animals stop howling, please" (157).

Stop the women — hiss — stop the animal desire.

F loves dances, but not foreign dances.

"I love dances that have rules, my rules" (157).

between I and F, one not surprising given the force of attraction between I's imaginary quest for wholeness and F's destructive symbolic activity. The difference between them, yet their mutuality, is shown in the work of the bowels: I is continually constipated, can't let go, and is thereby marked with an incredible loneliness, whereas F is always losing control of his bowels, always spilling himself out for the world. F is going to teach something to I about this. I is "weighted with a sealed bowel" and, unlike F who spills, he cannot "help the flowers and the dung beetles" (41). Thanks to F, though, he is seeking a way out: "Please make me empty, if I'm empty then I can receive, if I can receive it means it comes from somewhere outside of me, if it comes from outside of me then I am not alone" (41). The problem I has is a familiar one for males who are consumed with the maternal connection, a connection that funds their narcissism. The warm and cozy love mommy once provided locks the male into a fantasy world of the ONE true love. As I says, "I am the sealed, dead, impervious museum of my appetite. This is the brutal solitude of constipation" (42).

F's training of I is an education in hysteria. I tells us that F "was ready to use any damn method to make me

F loves rules, must use the ruler, drawing his lines, straight across the page.

Sorry, project failing.

"The voice comes out of the whirlwind" (158). Hiss.

F's insight: "My dear friend, go beyond my style" (161).

Men veiled from the Real.

Not by the Father, but by the Mother, the maternal.

I's love connection to the maternal, consumed by fantasies of completeness, bringing loneliness and not redemption.

Ends up trapped, world of sameness, always ever self-generated, going nowhere, lonely, boring.

What for men, to lift the veil?

Nothingness.

Nothing as love.

Does not leave us constipated and lonely.

Spreads and spreads, opening our desire, outside of the enclosure.

Without trapping us in another system, like F.

Style is madness.

hysterical" (59). F says that "hysteria is my classroom" (59). This is said on the occasion of F's giving I a prayer box with the inscription: "A man translates himself into a child asking for all there is in a language he has barely mastered" (59).

F's hysterical solution arrives in the form of a box of fireworks. I plays with the "red and green firecone" and with the "skyrocket" (67) and finds his imaginary ego coming apart; once bound, I's secure ego becomes unbound, unraveled.

This is a painful process for I, and as he experiences the pain of the explosions he cries out for "nummy, nummy" (67), longing for the maternal retreat. No retreat is possible now, though, and the dummy ego of I "has sneaked out into the furniture" (68). The exploding symbolic fireworks of F are unplugging the previously sealed orifices of I. "I've leaked all over the kitchen," says I. Somebody needs to "put me back in my skin" (68). We are faced here with the inevitability of aggression in the destruction of I's imaginary world.

Fundamentally, this is an aggression towards oneself, a violence that turns against the constipated ego, a primary masochism that battles narcissism in its fixation on the maternal. We have in F's explosive teaching the expression of the death drive and through its expression the

Get past imaginary unities of I through madness.

"You were the wall which I, batlike, bounced my screams off of, so I might have direction in this long nocturnal flight" (161).

The master flees the wholeness through mad flight.

I is "the good animal [F] wanted to be" (161).

Failure of madness and possibilities for I.

Not through madness, but a mystical move.

Connect with the feminine, with Catherine's desire, forgetfulness, realizing that there is Nothing beyond the veil.

Is there not a problem with eccentricity?

Does it not circle back continually?

Do we as males need Catherine's indifference?

A contact with Nothing?

Problem is F "cannot stop teaching" (161) Teaching madness.

F has "nothing but a system" (162), whereas I is "bound by old laws of suffering and obscurity."

F is "fearful of the cripple's

possible coming-into-being of the subject against the constraints of the imaginary ego. Why else such a fascination with dismemberment and excrement?

We all know the inadequacy of language in the face of the Real (we are all such good Kantians). The question is what will be the response to this condition. F's solution is that of the poet's: "the notion that he is not bound to the world as given, that he can escape from the painful arrangement of things as they are" (59). And now, as the master and teacher, he must convince I that to gain some access to the Real requires an hysterical language that is not bound to this world and its "painful arrangement." A special symbolic jouissance will destroy all arrangements that have settled in and become frozen like idols, fetishistic illusions, imaginary solutions as a longing for security.

The explosion of F's fireworks is closely connected to sexual explosions. Firecrackers and cocks, they both blow up in your hand. F is an expert at finding new spaces to spill himself to the world. On their way to Ottawa where F will take up his position as a new Member of Parliament, F begins to

wisdom" (163).

F, you were never tormented, never suffered, never trembled before the terrors.

I has and F understands the connection with redemption: "Has loneliness led you into ecstasy?" (163, 164).

Catherine's baptism is "apocalyptic . . . that which is revealed when a woman's veil is lifted" (105).

Political demonstration (125-31).

The crowd connects, imaginary rhetoric of nationalism.

Illusory language of wholeness and completeness established through blood as fetish.

I with woman in crowd whom he cannot see, who is veiled.

She grabs him and blood begins to flow.

Blood also flowing amongst the demonstrators.

Terrible British, trying to destroy the French blood connection.

They shout, "give us back our blood" which "is our nourishment and our destiny" (129).

masturbate while driving. I is awed at F's phallic power, which is the power of the symbolic that men strive for. "I've never seen you so big," says I. "Can I hold it I love your power. Teach me everything" (97). I claims he cannot bear his loneliness any longer and starts to masturbate with F, "two swelling pricks pointed at eternity" (97). F is able to come and enjoy his release, but I doesn't, because just before he is about to, they run into a wall, "made of a scrim of painted silk" (99). F asks: "How about the second just before you were about to shoot. Did you sense the emptiness? Did you get the freedom?" (100). I didn't for he feared the wall. F tells I that he should have kept going and disregarded the wall. There is nothing to be done about the wall anyway, so you might as well get a good come out of it. But I cannot empty himself, cannot gain the freedom. There is always the wall for him, which has become internalized into his character. F wants him to forget the wall. The wall is not so dangerous. In fact, it is made of silk. It is beautiful, feminine, an aid in pleasure.

F's eccentric experimentation

Blood as a unitary quest, the unity of the people, spreading though the crowd.

Does the blood that seeks unity achieve its goal?

Does I meet the woman where his blood can find its release?

The crowd disperses, nothing accomplished.

Quest for unity ends up with Nothing and I cannot find the woman — she is still veiled — and hasn't come. "F, I cried, I didn't come. I failed again" (131).

F realizes something more important has been achieved. He responds: "No, darling, you passed" (131).

"Magic is alive" (167).

Magic, magic, "It rests in an empty palm. It spawns in an empty mind" (168).

Only when emptied, then magic experienced.

Did F neglect to properly empty himself? Will this be left to I?

A bark hut beside the path. There lived Oscotarach, the Head- Piercer.

with "ordinary eternal machinery" is aided by the variety of instruments available in popular culture. Popular culture products, in their diffuseness, serve as one way of breaking through the imaginary wholeness, the ego isolation.

The Danish Vibrator is one of these popular culture instruments. Edith cannot make herself come any more. F, naturally, has the symbolic solution and is going to design things so that Edith will "perfect the pan-orgasmic body" (178). First, says F, "we do it with books" (179). F reads from books, everything from "What We Can Learn From the Anteater" to "Auto-Eroticism in Windows" (179). This gets Edith excited. F reads of "unusual sex practices" in which "there is some greater pleasure than orgasm through intercourse" (180). He reads of "bizarre practices" that "involve a measure of mutilation, shock, voyeurism, pain and torture" (180).

There is pleasure here in the death-drive. That pleasure comes through the destruction of the usual and the courting of the unusual and the bizarre. F continues to read, the practices becoming even more bizarre and shocking: "Men masturbated to death. Cannibalism during foreplay. Skull Coition" (182).

During this symbolic

"It was his function to remove the brains from the skulls of all who went by 'as a necessary preparation for immortality' " (196).

*Spirit is only a skull.
Subjectivity as emptiness.*

Is this the lesson for I in the treehouse?

F: "Perhaps the treehouse where you suffer is the hut of Oscotarach" (196).

I's first lesson: subjectivity is not imaginary wholeness.

I's second lesson: subjectivity is not F's symbolic systems, F's ordinary eternal machinery.

I must lose his brain and catch hold of the emptiness that is the Real.

"The moonlight wants to get in your skull. The sparkling alleys of the icy sky want to stream through your eyeholes" (196).

F's problem: "We who cannot dwell in the Clear Light, we must deal with symbols" (197).

Poor F. Needed at first, hard master, destroying I's puny ego.

Important task, setting the scene for the heart of self-realization, the emptiness, the skull without the brain.

No longer needed. F cannot enter the treehouse, like I.

enactment, Edith "moan[s] in terrible hunger" (184). She desires to "be freed from the unbearable coils of secular pleasure" (184). Secular pleasure involves coils that keep us bound to the cult of the here and now, the everyday. We desire to "soar into the blind realm," lose our attachments to petty material pleasures, find the pleasure "so like sleep, so like death," a pleasure that is "beyond pleasure" (184).

Books provide for a symbolic destruction, destroying the imaginary ego, the bound ego, creating a space where unusual desires can be expressed. Secular pleasure involves a reduction of excitement in the homeostatic quest of the imaginary ego. The symbolic language of sado-masochism blasts apart that boundedness, no longer reducing excitement, but allowing the subject to be overwhelmed by jouissance.

Books, however, are not enough in this symbolic quest. The technology needs to be more powerful. Enter the Danish Vibrator, which, like the Telephone Dance, is part of F's ordinary eternal machinery.

F plugs in the D.V. "A degrading spectacle followed" (185). According to the demands of the death-drive, this is only appropriate. Edith gets hold of the D.V., and it "hum[s] like a whittler as it [rises] and [falls] over Edith's

It is "too lonely for me" (196).

F always in symbols, remaining in symbols.

Liberation as symbolic madness, hysteria of ceaseless movement along the chain, phallic movement forward, forward, never resting, new technologies, whatever works.

Screw the English, blow up the Queen's statue, resist, resist, political agitation.

I goes beyond F, to catch hold of the Real.

Again, the importance of the feminine.

Feminine as Nothing, which is the veil itself.

Nothing beyond or behind the veil.

All our troubled pursuits, nothing.

Male desire experiencing feminine jouissance.

Male desire beyond maternal fantasy of wholeness.

Great mother, mommy, first love.

Done away with by F's phallic signifiers, F's machinery.

Too pretentious those signifiers, that machinery.

Destroyed.

young contours" (188). With the assistance of the D.V., both Edith and F are able to come. Thinking they are finished, they pull the plug on the D.V.

The D.V. stops, but then begins to "produce a shattering sonic whistle" (190). Says F: "It's learned to feed itself" (190). F and Edith realize that they do not control the ordinary eternal machinery. They are its servants as it makes light of their puny egos and shows who's boss. The death drive rules.

The D.V. moves toward Edith. She is frightened, but, "numbed by horror and the prospect of disgusting thrills, she [is] ready to submit" (191). Here, we have gone beyond the pleasure principle, and in this state Edith submits totally to the death work of the master D.V. She then becomes "nothing but a buffet of juice, flesh, excrement, muscles, to serve its appetite" (191). The coherence is lost, the boundedness provided by ego work abandoned, the victory is to symbolic destruction.

The work of symbolic death through popular technology continues with the Charles Axis body building. F gets his extraordinary body by

The maternal returns for male desire.

Not as wholeness, mommy, Great Mother.

Great Goddess and Mary, mother of Christ.

We are Christ with Mary now our wife.

Catherine Tekakwitha as energy of love.

Through baptism (102-05).

Catherine spills her glass of wine.

Wine spreading everywhere.

Contagion effect to the energy put out.

The water of baptism, Catherine's connection with the Father, phallic line of paternity.

Turns suddenly into the wine of love, no longer contained in the symbolic rite.

Through contagion, spreading, spreading, exploding the boundaries of paternal security.

Christ turned water into wine.

The outpouring of wine-love to the world, the Son's connection to the Mother, not to the symbolic Father.

responding to an advertisement on the back of a comic book (73). The ad has seven frames which show men bullied because they are too skinny; they get muscles, are no longer bullied, and then get the women. The story line is, of course, clichéd, but yet, as far as F is concerned, it has its usefulness. Both F and I are too fat, and F has decided he is going to lose his fat. He works out with the Charles Axis method and, by treating it as a religious experience, is able quite quickly to lose the fat he despises. But at this point a disturbance is registered in F's discourse, a disturbance that will deepen as things progress. After doing the popular symbolic body work, F is bullied by Charles Axis who castigates him for being too skinny. Men constantly pursue the phallic ideal, with work never ending in the quest for symbolic solutions. From F's perspective, this is surely an advance over I's passivity, signified by a lonely sedentary lifestyle which results in fat. In fact, I confesses that he "dLet's start with F's "ordinary eternal machinery," which likeidn't listen to Charles Axis" (122). All he had to do was give up fifteen minutes a day to achieve an acceptable body. To F, I has an "arrogant body" (123). I wants to be "Blue Beetle," "Captain Marvel," "Plastic Man," not

*Baptism into mother-son love.
As in Mary's love for Christ.*

*Catherine takes on feminine
maternal love.*

*And her wine of love spreads to
I. Female saint, the love of the
Goddess.*

*Contact brings about a
"balance in the chaos of
existence," does not "dissolve
the chaos" (101), but gathers
the chaos in to calmly embrace
its passionate fury.*

*Reigns in the impatient
movement of male desire,
phallic symbolic expression.*

*I says there is "something
warlike and arrogant in the
notion of a man setting the
universe in order" (101).*

*Male desire embraced by the
saint-Goddess, a new movement
forward (not backwards or
regressive).*

*Embraced, eccentric movements
of male desire, world of
movement, come together in
moments of wonderment.*

*Chaos embraced in a moment
where it is lovingly captured.*

*So embraced, the male "rides
the drifts like an escaped
ski" (101).*

Robin but Batman, "Superman who was never Clark Kent" (123). I goes on to admit that he "wanted miracles," that he "wanted to wake up suddenly with X-Ray vision" (124). These are all fantasies of easy completeness, womb quests, imaginary solutions, desire without any struggle, ecstasy without any contact with the heavy handed work of material symbols, plenitude without the experience of difference. But the symbolic quest of F has its own difficulties for men. Lost in the mad quest to get beyond imaginary entrapment in the maternal is the insight that there is a lack at the very core of our being and that the task is to somehow accept the nothingness of that space, our inherent incompleteness: once fat is done away with, skinny is there to make its demands. The insight of lack is avoided by both imaginary and symbolic solutions, or, as we shall see, can only be grasped through a mutual destruction.

It turns out that the real problem for men is not just imaginary entrapment, which seals one in the grasp of the maternal, the Great Mother, but also symbolic entrapment, spun out into the world in a dance of signs, always moving forward impatiently, yet never satisfied.

We begin to see movement

I is Catherine's son, leading I away from F's symbolic destruction.

A higher jouissance only allowed to those males whose desire is embraced by the Goddess.

Catherine Tekakwitha. Our access to the Real through Catherine. Her self-torture and self-mutilation and death.

The ultimate loser. I is a loser like Catherine, not F.

Catherine asked: "What do you think is the most horrible painful thing?" (206).

Proceeded to enact it.

Built a fire and "spent several slow hours caressing her pathetic legs with hot coals . . ." (206).

She "branded herself a slave to Jesus" (206). Catherine's link to Mary.

I's devotion to Catherine like devotion paid to Mary in Christian tradition.

The irruption of the maternal.

Destabilizing the symbolic tradition.

Catherine's love for Jesus like Mary's.

Mother to Son.

toward a solution through an encounter with native spirituality as it collides with the spirituality of the Christian missionaries. In fact, the Telephone Dance must be an ancient ritual, for we find the French Catholic missionaries trying to stamp it out among the Mohawk elders of Kahnawake. The elders do not connect things the way the missionaries want. The missionary says, "You won't be able to hear me if you keep your fingers in your ears" (86). Instead, dribble and spit comes out of the elders' mouths. For the missionaries, the continuance of the Telephone Dance will lead the natives into hell, where a demon will "cut off your head, extract your heart, lick up your brain, drink your blood, eat your flesh, and nibble your bones" (86). In a sense, the Telephone Dance is played out by the missionaries themselves, but now under the sign of repression. There is a sado-masochistic pleasure for the missionaries in meticulously describing the torture, the return of the repressed.

The collision intensifies in the encounter between a Catholic priest and Catherine Tekakwitha's uncle (119-21). Catherine's uncle stays true to the Indian ways, but the priest persists in trying to convert him to Christianity, especially the Christian conception of heaven. In the priest's vision, heaven is a place where all differences are

I being a loser like Jesus gets this.

A maternal connection here.

The child as pain, the pain of separation.

To be experienced by the maternal, by the woman.

She can get past the pain, does not try to fix it, through history.

Experiences the pain and then goes beyond it.

Catherine: "My Jesus, I have to take chances with you" (211).

Jesus as son and lover.

The most painful love, yet the most ecstatic.

Through pain, death, death of the self.

Access to the Real.

Real not a beyond achieved through going past pain and suffering.

In pain and suffering, in defiance of F's symbolic confidence, we are in the Real, the Real as Nothing.

Catherine, in line with Mary, as feminine, gives herself up for I, for men.

I is a young boy, a dreamer, caught in the imaginary.

F's big phallus leads him away.

reconciled. It is a beyond of unitary wholeness in stark contrast to the pain of division which pervades our sinful lives as material beings. For Catherine's uncle, heaven does not overcome the divisions. Death connects you with your ancestors and your relatives around the fire. But first you must begin an arduous journey in which you will have to overcome many obstacles. Once you have done that, the most important event to happen, in order for you to achieve true redemption, is to have your brain removed from your skull. This is the key to the Telephone Dance: the connection between the fingers is made possible by the absence between the ears. Subjectivity is an absence, a fundamental lack in Being, a nothingness which is filled and then emptied, filled and then emptied. The journey of becoming brainless is itself the key in which the puny brainy ego is removed, and Spirit is the emptiness left. This means that true Spirit is not a beyond that we are blocked access to, but is the essence of what is the here and now: it is nothing.

This is something that F does not understand in his quest for symbolic destruction of I's imaginary world. And it should not surprise us that the key for the redemption of masculine desire for both I and F should come through an experience of the feminine. I experiences

Yet, it is I in his loneliness that Catherine loves.

The maternal connection still strong.

Catherine goes through death, achieves ecstasy.

So that I can achieve ecstasy through her jouissance, her Goddess love.

So that she "formally offered her body to the Savior and His Mother" (214).

imaginary entrapment because he is caught up in his first love, an experience of the Great Mother. F sees it as his duty as a friend, teacher, and master to destroy that attachment between I and the maternal.

F's work is phallic, coming between I and the maternal to send I out into the world of "ordinary eternal machinery." The destruction of I's imaginary commitment is important, but definitely not the end of the story, for F's symbolic world is itself in need of destruction, needs to be shorn of its phallic pretensions toward control and mastery, the lure of systems. Even though I has experienced the fall from grace, separation from mommy, his very connection with the maternal opens the possibility for redemption at another level, not the level of the imaginary Great Mother but the level of the Great Goddess, that wonderfully ecstatic experience of the maternal beyond all imaginary and symbolic forms. Thus, male eroticism must escape the maternal at one level, through the work of F's phallic symbolic, but must return to the maternal at a new level of experience, that which approaches the Real. Male desire is always ever drawn to the maternal, our first and only love. The question is whether that love consumes our male desire and leaves us forever speechless and lonely, or whether we can experience that

love anew from the perspective
of ecstasy.

Catherine is losing and I is listening.

I descends from his lonely treehouse.

Past Oneness, through F's symbolic machinery.

Toward Oneness, through Catherine the saint.

Toward Nothing and Ecstasy.

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