

The Telephone Dance & Mechanical Ecstasy in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*

by Nicole Markotic

The telephone, hitherto so foreboding and powerful, was our friend! It was the agent of some benign electronic deity, and we wanted to praise it. I suppose that certain primitive bird and snake dances began the same way, a need to imitate the fearful and the beautiful, yes, an imitative procedure to acquire some of the qualities of the adored awesome beast. (Cohen 39)

They are under the influence of telephones.

The characters of Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* surrender to a mechanical discourse of human desire. They are drunk on an ecstasy that allows for artificial human connection yet bypasses physical contact. The Telephone Dance in Book One is a sexual game in which human beings become mechanized, and the vibrator scene in the holiday resort in Book Two personifies then liberates an electronic sexual toy.

The binary opposition of the physical body and its mechanical expression represents instability in the text, an instability that sparks energy, creates impetus, and maintains textual momentum. Cohen refuses to allow his reader the refuge of the known or the stable. His tone "wobbles all over the map; it is clinical, power-tripping, spoofingly pornographic, repentant, lip-smacking" (Lee 85). But this wobbling is deliberate, and it encourages the reader to question the inertia and instability of the text, and to suspect the linear coherency that this collection of chapters suggests: "The desire for order is so palpable in the minds of both narrator/characters . . . that any conclusions they reach ought to be suspect" (Dragland 165).

The text's connection of communication and aborted physical contact parodies the traditional ideal of intimacy and undermines

the myth that shared experience will bond individuals. *Beautiful Losers* is a hagiography of a fallen-saint, a near-saint, a half-saint, and a narrator who is saint-obsessed. These characters all fail (beautifully) in their attempts to follow the paths of excess, yet their failures elicit the reader's sympathy and admiration (and even participation) to a far greater degree than would any triumph.

The F.-character assumes the role of master to a narrator-disciple, positioning himself as guru to his reluctant pupil. F. constructs the narrator as student and follower, as lover and rival. Yet the narrator also constructs and immortalizes his mentor. By associating his own journal with F.'s last letter, by composing the three disparate parts as a completed book, the narrator constructs F. as a hero who is more than mere protagonist, a manufacturer of bodies who performs the disappearance of his own body at the end of the novel.

The narrator, an unnamed scholar, pursues a seventeenth-century version of the Christian Virgin. He "merely wanted to fuck a saint, as F. advised" (43). Given that he is a historian, "the implications" of such desire "are enormous" (226). He sits in his tree house and composes love letters to Catherine Tekakwitha, a long-dead Iroquois saint, his words filled with grief and remorse over his wife Edith's suicide and his friend F.'s subsequent violent death. So, at the beginning of the novel, three of its main characters are already dead, and the fourth tries desperately, hopelessly, and unsuccessfully to continue to communicate with each one.

The night after Edith's suicide, the narrator and F. sit together in bed, consoling one another. F. confesses that he and Edith had slept together "five or six" times (8). The narrator, furious, questions F. relentlessly about the exact *number* of times that F. and Edith had sex. But F. is a teacher who does not answer questions, or respond to accusations based on the presumption of sexual ownership. F. advises the narrator to "connect nothing" (20), then immediately launches into an intricate explanation of the Telephone Dance so as to further confound and confuse his friend.

During the Telephone Dance, Edith and F. lick fingers and insert them in the other's ears. They are "diminishing the tyranny of the nipples, lips, clitoris, and asshole" (211). This performance of the Telephone Dance allows subjects to construct themselves in an imitation of mechanical communication, a form of technological exchange without electronic intervention. Discovering pleasure within the apparatus of sexuality destabilizes notions of the systematization of pleasure (Foucault 191). The intricate

commotion of language, and the physical expression of love without words, encourages the characters toward mechanized excess. But the narrator, trapped in his obsession with the historical, trapped in his desire to express desire through ecstatic human communication, dismisses the "eternal machinery" (42) that F. preaches.

F. then relates to his friend how both he and Edith *became* telephones, able to receive and process sound usually restricted to electronic arenas: "Suddenly the sounds of the lobby were gone and I was listening to Edith" (36). The narrator is jealous because F. inserted his fingers into virgin ears, and because Edith's body was sending signals he feels she should have been sending to her husband alone. What doesn't occur to the narrator, despite F.'s provocative remarks, is that his own body should have been receptive to the "electrical conversation" (41) his wife's body has become. By demanding to know what F. *heard*, the narrator continues to distinguish between a received message and the human telephone Edith's body emulates. He locks his own body in stasis, then resents the other two subjects for inventing sophisticated body games without his participation.

F. also torments the narrator with delays and contradictions: "I distorted the truth to make it easy for you" (42), he confesses, distorting again. The strategy of distortion, then, is as important to the "education of jealousy" (41) as the sexual implications of F.'s and Edith's aural adultery.

The narrator does not subject his own sexual exploits with F. to the same rules he imposes on Edith. He adheres to a definition of sexual fidelity based on male possession. Sex, which he frequently engages in with F., is distinct from Edith's sexuality, which he has failed to recognize. The narrator sets up a hierarchy between sex and sexuality, an opposition that Foucault says "leads back to the positing of power as law and prohibition, the idea that power created sexuality as a device to say no to sex" (190). Because the narrator has not honoured his memory of Edith as a sexual woman (32), he cannot now accept her as desiring sex with anyone else. F.'s revelation that Edith could and would perform the Telephone Dance destabilizes the narrator's previous construction of his wife.

Book Two is composed entirely of a letter F. writes to the narrator, having stipulated that it be delivered five years after F.'s death. Traditionally, in epistolary novels, "the absent presence of the receiver becomes the dominant (obsessive) element to the discourse" (Genette 256), but Cohen plays with this notion: the

reader participates here with the letter-receiver in his reading, rather than with the letter-writer as he composes. This positioning of the reader over the shoulder of Book One's narrator emphasizes F.'s absence by the very signifier of his letter's presence. Lacan says that "a letter always arrives at its destination" (704); the destination of this letter is not just Book One's narrator, but the reader. In delivering words posthumously, F. resorts to the word on the page instead of communicating with the narrator by either oral or bodily means (as in the Telephone Dance). And the narrator's inclusion of his friend's words after his own acknowledges his recognition that his friend's correspondence belongs to the book he himself is composing. What the narrator offers to the reader as Book Two is F.'s, but he himself has converted F.'s letter into typed form: "The actual written nature of F.'s letter (that is, a text written by hand) is ironically exploited by the *printed* text we read" (Hutcheon 36). F.'s supposedly handwritten letter is passed on as if verbatim, though, by its very inclusion in the novel, it should be interpreted as an edited version of F.'s letter.

In his letter, F. reveals to the narrator another incident involving Edith, this time set in a holiday resort. F. claims to have created Edith in a bodily sense. Instead of the perfect skin and ideal body the narrator so treasured, F. maintains that Edith was riddled with acne and underwent several bodily "tamperings" to achieve her perfect surface. According to F., Edith was the product of his mechanical interference. She is F.'s construction, literally and literarily, and he composes a letter to the narrator that destroys the narrator's memory of his wife.

The incident at the holiday resort inverts the human/machine binary opposition exposed in the Telephone Dance scene. There, F. and Edith joined physical bodies in order to achieve eternal machinery. In this scene, Edith craves the physical, yet is unable or unwilling to derive satisfaction from human touch: "Don't touch me, F. I'll die" (214). Because of the medical manipulations F. has performed on her body, she is unable to achieve orgasm on her own and begs F. to help. After attempting to stimulate her verbally with over-determined sexual metaphors, F. responds with a mechanical solution: "I plugged in the Danish Vibrator" (219). A degrading struggle follows, as F. refuses to surrender his perfect sexual toy to Edith whom he has brought to a "summit she could not achieve" (218) through his verbal recitation of unusual sexual practices, of sexual terms, and of human suffering (212-18). Once Edith has seized it, the vibrator successfully replaces human contact, the mechanical finally takes over the discourse of the physical.

"Of course, the implications of [this] pleasure are enormous" (226). The erotic logic of this scene is more about succumbing to the body's needs and demands than it is about pleasure. Although F. and Edith are consumed by ecstasy, neither appears to have a choice in the achievement of that ecstasy. The Danish Vibrator, a mechanical invention for heightening sexual pleasure, has taken control of the techniques of desire. Moving from one to the other and back again, the machine becomes the insatiable lover, perfect and ridiculous at the same time. Edith, trapped in the body F. has manufactured for her and for her husband, wants to achieve orgasm but cannot. F. wishes to stimulate, but is not permitted to touch. So, the Danish Vibrator becomes the go-between, the piece of machinery that allows these two lovers of the same lover to reconstruct their own bodies.

"Call me Dr. Frankenstein with a deadline" (221), F. declares to Edith (and to the over-the-shoulder-reader who is the narrator of Book One [and to *his* over-the-shoulder-reader]). F. has constructed himself as Frankenstein, not only as artist, but as someone responsible for the ills of the world, responsible for simultaneous creating and repairing. In his vision of himself, F. invokes the mad scientist who creates then abandons his creation; but F. feels overly responsible, "joined to [his] own grotesque creations" (221), and maintains contact and "training" with his two (Edith and the narrator) perfect creatures.

The monster at the end of Shelley's *Frankenstein* vows to "collect [his] funeral pile and consume to ashes [his] miserable frame" (Shelley 222). Annihilation is his final aim, yet his story rises above the ashes of his self-destruction. Edith and F., in giving in to the raging desires of the Danish Vibrator, also give way to the narrator:

Oh, Edith, something is beginning in my heart, a whisper of rare love, but I will never be able to fulfill it. It is my prayer that your husband will . . . But he will do it alone. He can only do it alone . . . We said good-by to you, old lover. We did not know when or how the parting would be completed, but it began that moment. (228)

The narrator persists in the story F. and Edith have abandoned: Book Three is the third-person continuation of the F.-character the narrator has become.

As for the Danish Vibrator, once it has had its way with both F.

and Edith, it hurls itself out of the window, descends onto the beach and into the huge rolling sea (227-28). The scene with the Danish Vibrator parodies Frankenstein and his fear of the horrific monster he has let loose into the world. "*It had learned to feed itself*" (225), F. repeats, like Frankenstein's italicized repetition of his monster's "*I will be with you on your wedding-night*" (Shelley 170). And just as Shelley's monster seeks "the most northern extremity of the globe" (Shelley 222) into which to disappear, F.'s Danish Vibrator introduces its obscene body into "the world" (228) of the endless ocean.

The second part of F.'s letter offers the narrator a history of Catherine Tekakwitha's final days. Her corporeal desire for disembodiment is so strong that she declares: "I have given my fuck away" (110), and that desire changes the history of Canada for the novel's narrator and historian. During Edith's throes of unfulfillable passion in the hotel, she demands her cunt back from F. (211), implying that the right to give away "her fuck" has been taken from her. Both women attempt to control their bodies; one in order to transcend the sexual, one in the hope of realizing a sexual completion. Both women suffer pain, and then die, easier able to determine their deaths than their own sexuality.

Book Three of the novel relates the final scenes of the character amalgamation of the narrator and F. Within this conflation of characters, the narrator of Book One continues to relate events, but he blurs the distinction between himself and F.; he has written a "dirty old man" character who could be the one or the other or both. This character finds himself in front of the System Theatre, "not the place where systems triumph but where systems are broken" (Scobie 101). The experience of the movie has become invisible to him, because his eyes blink at the same rate as the shutter in the projector (298). The old man, relaxing for the first time in his life, observes his body metamorphose into an imitation of the beam of projected light upon which his eyes cannot focus. Then he "greedily reassemble[s] himself into — into a movie of Ray Charles" (305). The pop culture movie represents another mechanical expression of human desire: "Just sit back and enjoy it, I guess" (305), one member of the gathering crowd exclaims. A riot that begins with politics and sex becomes a textual one which invites audience participation, reader response: "Writer and reader are also together, abandoned . . ." (Dragland 265) in a "rented ending" that is the novel's closure.

Amid all the death, the world is indeed waking up." — Listen, my friend, the elevators, the buzzers, the fan: the world is waking up in

the heads of a few million" (35), F. tells the hapless narrator early in the novel. The two female characters in the novel bring about their own deaths, and both Edith and F. die as a result of mechanized contraptions: Edith by crouching at the bottom of an elevator shaft, and F. by constructing bombs. Catherine Tekakwitha, dies from her overzealous attachment to a torture "machine" she makes from her own blanket and several thousand thorns.

The narrator, at the beginning and end of the novel, finds himself unable to produce excrement. His body has become a machine that refuses to operate. And yet, there is a certain ecstasy in a body that explodes from the inside. The narrator is learning how to translate himself into a run-down replica of his old friend F., whose many lessons have been communicated sufficiently well that by Book Three the narrator appropriates the position of historian he could only emulate in the beginning. In the last section of the novel, not only do the original narrator and F. conflate into one congruous character Stephen Scobie designates as *IF* (Scobie 97), but the narrator shows what he has learned from his teacher by reducing himself to a withered and constipated body, the saint "who achieve [s] a remote human possibility" (121). The narrator betrays F.'s direct instruction, but follows implicit instructions he could not have achieved through mere obedience and imitation. The key to F.'s teaching is paradox and confusion: "Did I trick you again?" (186), he asks his friend posthumously. "My dear friend, go beyond my style" (190), he commands. The only way for the narrator to obey this appeal is to ignore it; the only way *not* to become F. is for the narrator to write himself as an *F.-like* character. The way to escape becoming F. is to imitate him.

By assuming a third-person voice, the narrator is able to exit from his first-person identity, and enter into a voice that connects him to F. This shift in narrative voice (though not in narrator, for Book One's narrator composes/assembles the book as a whole) also serves to blur the distinction between reader and writer: "Everyone understands . . . the real author of the narrative is not only he who tells it, but also, and at times even more, he who hears it" (Genette 262). By the last page of the novel, an "I" has reappeared to claim (some) responsibility for the narrative: "I will plead from electrical tower. I will plead from turret of plane" (307). The narrator, here, has managed to position himself as both magician *and* magic, he has "come through the fire" of love (307) not unhurt, but unsilenced: "Welcome to you who read me today" (307). Communication — mechanical and practical and human — manifests itself as the physical construct of book.

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