

Systems and Self: Understanding the Posthuman in *Beautiful Losers*

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Leonard Cohen's experimental 1966 novel, *Beautiful Losers*, is his second foray into the novel form. Cohen uses the text to balance his conflicting views of technology as neither the great liberator of humanity nor the bane of that which signals human identity. The human condition arises shakily from the dialectic formed between these two extremes. Cohen demonstrates that Western society has entered an age whereupon it relies on technology to a dangerous degree. The reliance humans have upon technology endangers identity, yet through this obsessive relationship, humans may find a means of transcendence. Katherine Hayles' book, *How We Became Posthuman*, similarly addresses the implications of the changing relationship between human beings and machines. The novel yields well to posthuman analysis for two reasons: On the level of content the text's references to technology and media are highly suggestive of the concerns to be found within posthuman discourse. Perhaps of greater interest, is the means by which the text, as a form, reflects the concepts posited by posthuman theorists. Cohen shows, with both anxiety and desire, the West's transformation into a posthuman society. While posthumanism endangers identity at the level of content—producing an identity crisis for the characters of the text—*Beautiful Losers* ultimately relies on the posthuman discourse that it anticipates in order to inform its structure.

The novel centres on the spiral into madness that the nameless protagonist (conventionally named "I" in literary criticism) undergoes as he tries desperately to cling to a sense of individuality. The cause of "I"'s deteriorating sanity has been his best friend, F., a man obsessed with controlling and shaping "I" through various lessons and tests. F., the reader learns, has died of some sexually transmitted disease while in a mental hospital. "I's" wife, Edith, is also dead, having committed suicide by allowing an elevator to crush her before the story opens. These three individuals are involved in an intricate sexual relationship which unfolds as the

novel progresses. “I” discovers to his horror that Edith and F. had slept together and, perhaps even worse, that Edith knew that “I” and F. were intimately involved too. The final character of importance is Catherine Tekakwitha, a real 17<sup>th</sup> century saint whom “I,” a historian, is researching for a book he is unable to finish. “I” is gradually consumed by insanity as the story moves forward. He cloisters himself in his apartment embracing his filth and mourning the loss of Edith and F. In the novel’s surreal conclusion, “I” and F. merge into a single character which ultimately transforms, once more, into a projection of a Ray Charles film.

The novel maintains a consistently ambivalent interest in technology. By technology I refer to both physical and electric machines as well as the media which these manifestations allow. Machines are simultaneously a source of death, such as the elevator which crushes Edith, and a source of transcendence that offers an existence beyond the limitations of the physical world. Machines offer respite, as in the films the protagonist is obsessed with, and lead to utter frustration, as in the case of Edith who loses all understanding of her identity as a result of the intruding influence of technology on her body. On the one hand, the protagonist finds himself unable to climax while involved in a sexualized car drive. On the other hand, Edith, who has forgotten how to achieve orgasm, is ultimately forced to rely on a machine, the Danish Vibrator, to climax. This dialectic complicates an easy understanding of technology’s place in society.

The role of technology in *Beautiful Losers* has been taken up only lightly in critical discussion. Nicole Markotic views certain forms of technology in the novel as a means for characters to find an outlet for communication that protects them from physical connection (Markotic). Steven Scobie draws attention to the constant failure of systems. His discussions however, only hint at the manner in which *Beautiful Losers* plays with liberal humanism. Both Markotic and Scobie note the constant reference to humans in terminology used to describe

machines. Meanwhile, critics such as Frank Davey and Patricia Morley have spent far more time considering the text in terms of its religious or political context and as such have left analyses of *Beautiful Losers* in terms of the dawning electronic age rather sparse. Despite posthumanism's possible applicability to such perspectives as nationalism, aboriginal studies, or religion, I intend to focus specifically on the technological aspect of the novel in order to flesh out this underdeveloped aspect of criticism.

The form of the novel has been a source of interest to literary critics too. More so than texts generally allow, *Beautiful Losers* connects its form with the content that it explores. Linda Hutcheon's identification of *Beautiful Losers* as one of the first Canadian postmodern texts demonstrates the noticeable presence of the text within literary contexts (27). She points to the unique narrative techniques of the text: its various "referential levels of language" which lend the text "an increased sense of 'literariness'" (Hutcheon 29). Cohen's novel is as much an exploration of literature and the process of writing, as it is an exploration of the various themes of religion, sexuality, and other cultural elements which constitute the text's content. Michael Ondaatje makes similar assertions about the text. He focuses attention on the peculiar form of the novel rather than dwelling on the dense, and often indecipherable, content. Ondaatje says that "we therefore find the essential drama of the novel in the styles Cohen uses" (47). Consequently Ondaatje demonstrates that the text relies largely, not on content, but on form as the basis of its identity. Later, Ondaatje explicitly states that "the plot is almost completely ignored" (49). He views the style of the text as intrinsic to the overall theme Cohen is attempting to explore. To change the style of *Beautiful Losers* would have been to "castrate its powerful ideas and its vulgar sanctity" (49). The text is a metafiction which opens doors to an understanding of the role literature plays in shaping society.

To situate *Beautiful Losers* in terms of posthuman discourse one must comprehend how the term, posthuman, is to be understood. Posthumanism is a rather ambiguous term that lends itself to a number of interpretations. Posthumanism does not imply a time or place wherein humans no longer exist. Rather, posthumanism unhinges the assumed superiority that humanity has long exercised over life and all inanimate objects. Humankind is understood as simply one of many other things that populate the universe. Posthumanism questions notions of human identity that date back as far as the Enlightenment. Liberal humanism, in particular, is compromised by the thoughts which posthumanism provokes. While this paper is interested specifically in posthumanism as it applies to our understanding of the human relationship to machines, posthumanism offers many ways through which to destabilize preconceived ideas of what it means to be human.

Posthumanism, as I intend to examine it, arises from the theoretic field of cybernetics. Cybernetics, in broad terms, describes information systems and the feedback loops by which information systems function. Cybernetics is applicable both to machines and to living organisms. Just like a machine, society depends on many smaller components. Within society, humans function as the smaller pieces which constitute a machine. With time, cybernetics has helped blur the line between what constitutes human and machine. The frameworks governing cybernetics have changed over the decades but what is of greatest interest to me is the reflexive period of the 1960s through to the 1980s, coinciding with what Hutcheon claims to be the beginning of the postmodern period in Canadian fiction. Katherine Hayles defines reflexivity as “the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates” (Hayles 8). The reflexive model shifts attention away from the observed to the observer thus demonstrating the relationship

between observer and the environment being observed. The father of the reflexive model, Humberto Maturana, suggested that the observer does not observe its environment so much as create it through the very process of observation (Hayles 131).

Hayles' book, *How We Became Posthuman*, provides the basic theoretic guidelines through which to view Cohen's text. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles provides a number of basic elements which define the posthuman condition:

- Abstract informational pattern is superior to material instantiation;
- Consciousness is an incidental occurrence and should not be considered the basis of human identity;
- Finally, the body is but the first of many prostheses humans have available to them and it is natural to replace and modify our bodies with these new prostheses (2).

A key element of posthumanism is the reduced importance of the body in comparison to the mind. In such a system, informational pattern is more important than the bodies (or machines) through which information is transferred (2). The result of this is to disembodiment information, rendering the difference between silicon chips and organic matter irrelevant. Whether information is passed along the wires of an electric cable or through the neural pathways of the human brain becomes an arbitrary difference once information is isolated from material form. The information itself is more important than the means by which it is transferred. Pattern can be viewed as a superior form of existence because "as long as the pattern endures, one has attained a kind of immortality (36). Ultimately this notion leads pattern to become more meaningful than any material instance.

The process of distinguishing between information and its material instantiation invites comparisons to Marshall McLuhan's assertions to consider the medium separate from the content which it contains. "The medium is the message," as McLuhan has so famously written. It is important to understand that there is a vital difference between a particular medium and the content which it contains. All media carries as its content, another medium. The content of radio might be speech or song for instance. Individuals often mistake the content of a medium for the medium itself (McLuhan 20). Media affect us subliminally. Generally media's impact is hidden behind the content that it carries (31). Currently, humans are in a position to understand the impact media have on their lives more consciously. The shifting emphasis away from industrialism and towards the electric age provides us with an unprecedented opportunity to awaken from the subliminal control of our media extensions. Western society is currently in the midst of what McLuhan calls a break boundary as we switch from one form of social organization to another (58). Predominant media guide the organization of any society. During a break boundary, when two media coalesce, we cease to be numb to their underlying presence and we become aware of media's influence (81).

As the centrality of the body as the seat of consciousness diminishes, sexuality has increasingly taken form within the confines of the mind. Claudia Springer examines the theory of techno-eroticism: sexuality bound intimately to the technology with which humans exist. Techno-eroticism provides humans with the opportunity to escape the defects which plague our bodies (Springer 50). The digital age has brought about a period of bodiless sex which protects partners from the increasing risks of sexuality such as pandemic diseases and social issues like abortion (84). Here, it is information and the potential that it affords which yields eroticism (57).

Springer concludes that information yields eroticism because it allows humans to escape the limitations of the body (58).

As mentioned earlier, Hayles sees the human body as but the first prosthesis individuals have available to them. That is, the human body is, in of itself, a tool. Taking this further, tools can be seen as extensions of the human body (Hayles 34). It is through various prostheses that humans navigate their world. These extensions of our bodies change as our technologies change. The stresses of a changing world can lead individuals to withdraw inwards and rely more and more on new technologies as compensating prostheses to navigate the environment (34). The continuous withdrawal of humans into themselves produces an overreliance on technology that threatens our conceptions of identity.

Marshall McLuhan provides further insight into the prostheses humans use, considering, in particular, the role of media. He begins by explaining the basic form which media assume. In *Understanding Media*, a book published almost contemporaneously with *Beautiful Losers*, McLuhan writes that media are extensions of the human body. Humans create new technologies in order to compensate for difficulties which arise in our lives (McLuhan 64). Extensions of the human body result in intense focusing upon the particular area of the body with which the extension is concerned. McLuhan writes that in order for humans to withstand the severe focusing, our nervous systems numb ourselves to the particular body part in question (64). The danger of an increasing reliance on outside extensions to define ourselves is that it puts humans out of touch with their bodies (148). Thus we are at risk of disintegration as we struggle to maintain the semblance of a unified body. As we rely evermore on technological prostheses it becomes increasingly difficult to conceptualize the self; it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between the extension of the body and the identity which resides within.



McLuhan goes one step further than Hayles in asserting that the degree of human reliance on technology has approached near religious zeal. Humans take a narcissistic pleasure in their use of media (31). This pleasure reaches a zenith comparable to worship, for, in order to use media, one must necessarily embrace them (68). To this end, McLuhan sees humans as worshipping the media which they have created. Technology is beginning to take on a sacred role, becoming an object of worship that threatens traditional forms of spirituality.

The nervous system becomes an important centre of comparison for McLuhan. The instantaneous processing of information which the nervous system affords unites every part of the human body into a single entity. Similarly, electricity has united production, consumption, education, and entertainment into a unified whole (463). Society has begun to emulate the organic structure of the body rather than the fragmented system which the industrial age provided (462). Indeed, electricity is a unifying force bringing together all parts of society (466). In this sense it is quite opposed to the fragmentation and specialization which marked the industrial era. McLuhan proposes that electricity has turned society into a single conglomerate machine whose purpose is to produce wealth (467). The conflict between maintaining one's identity and submitting oneself to a greater system is brought to focus largely through the unification possible via electricity.

The autonomous individual has become threatened in a variety of ways in modern society. Free will has become largely a façade through which to hide the systems by which humans abide. Humans increasingly function as units in a greater network or system. In this sense, posthumanism heralds the end of the self-will. Hayles suggests that in the posthuman world it has become difficult to distinguish self-will from the will of the other (Hayles 109). Added to this perspective is the role of the machine. Machines function as a human prosthesis. Machines

allow humans to interact evermore within the systems which organize reality. As Hayles suggests, humans increasingly rely on machines as they withdraw themselves from a reality which appears increasingly hostile. In this manner, the means by which to distinguish human from machine is quickly complicated. It becomes difficult to separate the human being from the technological sensory organs he or she uses to navigate reality. Here, then, we have two ways in which the idea of an autonomous, independent, human being is problematized. How do you distinguish the will of one individual from the will of another? How do you distinguish one individual from the technological prostheses upon which he or she relies?

Overexposure to media has also contributed to the dissolution of the individual. In “The Ecstasy of Communication,” Jean Baudrillard writes that present society has lost its depth of consciousness. Instead, our current society functions at a perpetual surface level, emulating the flat surfaces of the screens and monitors we engage with on a daily basis (Springer 43). Baudrillard perceives the obsessive nature in which humans indulge in technology to be of danger to our perceptions of reality. The sheer overexposure to information that technology and media have allowed us has created a situation wherein the very fabric of reality begins to give way. The objects of signifiers become irrelevant and, instead, reality is composed of signifiers with no signified. This is hyperreality: a world where what is real is what is perceived on television, in the theatres, on the internet. Hayles discusses the difference between body and embodiment—a concept which resembles hyperreality. Whereas the body is rooted intrinsically in the flesh, embodiment constitutes a culturally established construction, which does not physically exist. Embodiment is a manifestation of what a culture accepts as the ideal body. Hayles explains that embodiment is something which never fully coincides with the true

representation of the body (196). Humans lose sight of their real bodies, and in turn their identity, in pursuit of an embodied conception which can never be reached.

The discourses I have thus far discussed demonstrate the concerns theorists have expressed over the future of the human identity resulting from the reorganized structure of society. While some theorists display serious concern over the ramifications of a posthuman society, others fully embrace its approach. In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway suggests that the rise of the cyborg signals the end of the oppressive boundaries of conventional Western society. For Haraway, the cyborg offers the chance to overcome the Cartesian dualities which structure modern society by blurring the lines between human and machine. The resulting boundary confusion enables the equality of historically oppressed categories of identification. Gay and lesbian rights, feminism, and racial equality all stand to gain from the age of the cyborg.

Springer acts as a check on Haraway’s optimism, expressing doubt in the benefits to be wrought from the deconstruction of obstructing dualisms. She receives posthumanism with far less enthusiasm. For her, posthumanism spells the obsolescence of the body and, with it, the withdrawal of sexuality inward. Rejection of the physical body ensues in light of modern day issues of society which demonstrate how meek the human body is: pandemic diseases, abortion discourses, nuclear warfare. In *Electronic Eros*, Springer remarks that she aims to demonstrate both that modern society has reconceptualised sexuality within the terms of the newly arisen electronic age while, simultaneously, the old gendered conceptions of industrialism cling to society (Springer 8). In doing so, Springer demonstrates that society is still in the process of formulating an identity within the electronic age. Anxieties are a natural part of this slow transition—this break boundary.

Posthumanism and the reflexive model of cybernetics have valuable applications to literary study. The reflexive model parallels the self-aware tendencies of literary self-reflexivity. The emphasis that reflexivity places on the observer is also of great interest because of the similarity between observer and system, and reader and text. Ultimately, Hayles uses literature as an anchor for her discussions of cybernetics to avoid delving too deeply into the abstractions which often plague theoretic discourse (22). Consequently, Hayles demonstrates the ultimate inefficacy of abstractions and the need to ground concepts within embodied experiences to some extent. This of course demonstrates the need for abstract informational pattern to figure itself in some embodied way (22). Embodiment as described by Hayles also provides insight into postmodern literature. Embodiment is prone to change as technology changes. These alterations work their way into discourse too so that as our bodies are affected by technological advances these shifts become evident within language and literature as well (Hayles 206-207). Thus literature becomes a rich ground from which to study the shifting human identity. For Hayles, literature is not a “passive conduit” but an active shaper of culture (21). Literature helps to situate technology within a cultural context that helps individuals to understand it.

McLuhan makes explicit note of the direct impact literature, as another medium, feels as a result of electricity's presence. Industrialism has clear links to the Gutenberg process from which Western literature follows (235). The potential for mass repeatability that the printing press offered made its way, in turn, into the rest of society. However, while literature propounds sequentiality, electricity provides the opportunity for vastly different forms of information. Television and photos encourage instantaneous consumption of knowledge (258). Our society has deep roots in the world created by print. Thus we experience acute trauma as electricity

begins to challenge the authority of mechanization and all that it encapsulates, including the written word (453).

Anxiety is common when a predominant medium is circumvented by the appearance of a new medium. Human perception is guided by the dominant media which act as extensions of our bodies. We experience trauma as new media begin to challenge the authority of media through which we define the world around us (453). This is what has been happening for some time now as electricity begins to challenge mechanization and all that it encapsulates. The individuals best equipped against the throes of a new medium's control are artists. Their immunity to the control of media comes from their understanding of perception and the means in which to shape it (31). Serious artists can perceive the subliminal effects of a medium. In the wake of electricity, older media such as print are forced to fit themselves into new niches. This is the way of all media: the introduction of new extensions necessitates the adaptation of older forms (237). While literature propounds sequentiality, electricity provides the opportunity for vastly different forms of information. Television and photos encourage instantaneous consumption of knowledge and allow for depictions of realism never before possible (258). In the wake of these new types of media that allow for incredible realism, literature can interest itself in new goals. Instead of attempting to convey realism, writers can now turn to expressions that explore the "inward gestures of the mind" (263).

The ideas thus far examined enable us to now examine the means through which *Beautiful Losers* charts the gradual loss of individuality as human beings become enmeshed within the systems and technologies which govern society. At the heart of *Beautiful Losers* is the conflict between maintaining one's identity and embracing transcendence at the cost of individuality. The text is populated with many examples of systems which seek to propel the protagonist of the

story into infinite possibility if only he will forsake his identity. Let us begin, then, by examining these systems and coming to terms with the means in which they fit into the theory as it has thus been discussed. I will concentrate on four specific segments of the novel which demonstrate Cohen's interest in the human relationship to machine and systems: "I's" transformation at the system theatre; the telephone dance; the Danish Vibrator; and "I" and F.'s midnight car ride to Ottawa.

Much of the story takes place within and around the System Theatre. The name immediately draws attention to itself. The letters of the theatre marquee are lit, however two of the letters, "S," and "y," have broken so that the name reads as "stem theatre." The theatre itself is, as Scobie suggests, unable to contain the system (Scobie). The sequence which I am interested in occurs in book three, the conclusion of the novel. Here, in third person, an old man who combines elements of "I" and F. to form a composite IF comes to the System Theatre to watch a film. As IF, he encompasses a "remote human possibility" that F. had posited earlier in the novel (Cohen 99). While he waits for the newsreel to begin he watches the moviegoers around him. He notices that when "all the eyes contained exactly the same image, like the windows of a huge slot machine repeating bells, they made a noise in unison" (248). Cohen accomplishes two things through this description of laughter. He equates humans with a machine, and he situates the moviegoers within a greater whole reducing their individuality. Now IF focuses his attention on the screen, but it is not a film that he sees. Indeed, "The movie was invisible to him. His eyes were blinking at the same rate as the shutter in the projector" (248). The content of the film has lost any and all meaning. Instead, it is the projector and screen itself which is brought to the focus of IF's attention. The medium, then, is made the message. IF himself now becomes invisible as he becomes as much a part of the film as the screen or projector. IF then decides to

leave and (suddenly visible again) enters an arcade. He is soon surrounded by a mob that is half intent on beating him and half intent on praising him. As the mob rushes towards him, IF undergoes one last transformation. IF's body begins to disintegrate from the inside out and just as his body has almost vanished, he reassembles himself into an enormous projection of a Ray Charles film which is then projected out to the masses that had gathered to watch. IF's disintegration embodies precisely those anxieties McLuhan expressed concerning the human overreliance on technology. As noted, McLuhan states that as individuals increasingly depends on various forms of technological prostheses, they lose touch with their bodies. This would appear to be the case with "I" and F. too as they gradually merge into a composite character before totally foregoing a human form.

The presence of the mob during IF's transformation is also of note. Police officers run towards IF, "ripping insignia away...but preserving their platoon formations, in order to offer an unidentified discipline" (252). The officers shed their identity and embrace instead a greater unity. Amongst the rabble are also "Androgynous hashish smokers" (252). The mob actively defies identification. They are simply that: "the living mob" (253). In their disregard for identity, the mob embraces the boundary ambiguity which so enthralls Haraway.

The final transformation echoes Baudrillard's belief that the body "becomes a pure screen," in modern society (445). Reality, as Baudrillard suggests, has been emptied of any and all depth. Instead, reality functions at a perpetual and infinitesimal surface level wherein everything, all information, is presented simultaneously. F. says at the beginning of the novel that "we've got to learn to stop bravely at the surface. We've got to learn to love appearances" (4). F. has embraced the depthlessness that Baudrillard perceives in contemporary society. Baudrillard saw the dawning "ecstasy of communication" as leading to a time when our lives are transformed into a

“series of instants” (443). In becoming a projection, “I” overcomes his anxieties over losing his sense of self. He sheds his “I” and embraces the system. His body, a prosthesis, is but a screen for IF to project upon. “I” had been perpetually preoccupied with the desire to assert his authority as a creative figure in a desperate plea to maintain selfhood. This manifested itself in his obsession with Catherine Tekakwitha and his attempts to craft her story (a project that fails). Cohen demonstrates through film “I”’s anxieties over letting go of his individuality. His constipation is a central facet of his character and only through films—through the power to shape reality that they afford—does “I” receive temporary respite. Movies allowed his eyes to “pee” (66), in essence giving him a means of excretion which he cannot otherwise achieve. Film produces a simulacrum that is more real for “I” than reality itself. The movies are a representation of the hyperreality in which “I” lives. He sees film as the means by which to shape reality. “I” remarks that film has shaped the perception of the Native American (14). F. notes that while watching films with Edith and “I,” he would wonder “*What will happen when the newsreel escapes into the Feature?*” (235). In essence, F. waits for the film to *become* reality.

For Baudrillard, the hyperreality which constitutes western society is a form of pornography because what is perceived as real is nevertheless “forced, [and] exaggerated, just like the close-up sexual acts in a porno film” (Baudrillard 443). Present day culture has manifested an artificiality which is to be compared to that of pornography’s display of sex. The pornographic and over-the-top sexual descriptions of the novel mirror the equally forced artificiality of the advertisements and media which scatter the text. The reader learns that a Charles Axis advertisement found in the back of a comic book (playing on the popularity of Charles Atlas), is what provided F. the chance to achieve a perfect body and become the “HERO OF THE BEACH” (71). Edith’s perfect body is the product of F.’s soap, “electronic massage[s], and applications of



hormone mold” (172). F.’s interference goes so far as to cause Edith to forget who she was prior to his interference—his various treatments and cures symbolize what Hayles calls the embodied image. The process has destabilized Edith’s identity.

Cohen repeatedly returns to the superiority of the medium over any potential content. At the conclusion of book two, as F. sits in the system theatre he says, “I often raised my eyes to consult the projection beam rather than the story it carried” (235). What F. is describing mirrors precisely that oft quoted phrase by McLuhan: “The medium is the message.” The telephone dance is a recurring motif within the text that also bears relation to McLuhan’s sentiments. F. explains to “I” that what is of importance is not what is heard during the telephone dance but rather the transformative process that occurs during it. F. says, “Hear is not the right word. I *became* a telephone” (34). F. does not become the content of the telephone. Instead, he becomes the telephone itself with all its capacity as a medium. F. explains that during the telephone dance he heard “ordinary eternal machinery” (34). The speech in this context can, perhaps, be conflated with touch. Edith is the conversation that goes through F. (34).

The telephone dance is first performed in the basement of the system theatre (32). Edith and F. find themselves in awe of the telephone that rings once, seemingly alive. They wish to praise the telephone, and the telephone dance becomes a means of worship (32-33). This reverence is just like McLuhan’s assertions of the human zeal for technology. Edith and F.’s worship suggest a link between the technology and media of the present day to religion. If sequences such as “I”’s transformation suggest transcendence through technology, then technology can be viewed as a modern day religion. The constant comparisons which Cohen provides between Catherine Tekakwitha and the present day characters of the text seem to allow for the reader to compare Catherine’s religious zeal with “I”, F., and Edith’s technological zeal.

This constant comparison which the text provides the reader seems to suggest that spirituality has been surpassed by technology in the modern world.

Cohen's imagery often appears to reduce bodies to simple machines as in his descriptions of schoolboys in their bathroom stalls as "squatting machine[s]" (105). But at the heart of the issues of the body to be found within *Beautiful Losers* is Catherine Tekakwitha, a woman who, despite being far removed from contemporary society or technology, nevertheless lends an integral hand in Cohen's analysis of society's technological obsession. While technology yields potential for transcendence to Edith, "I," and F., the same cannot be said for Catherine. Of course, Catherine exists in a very different time period so it is important to distinguish between technology and the imagery of technology. Cohen describes the obstacles which confront Catherine in her search for spiritual fulfillment in terms that conjure the image of technology. Catherine is affronted with what Cohen calls an "assault of human machinery" (45). Her life separates her from the most human elements of existence and, instead, she sees only the mechanical side of human life. She witnesses the "preparations and all the conclusions" (45). She witnesses eating and sex but nothing in between. The romance of a young couple and the intimate struggle between hunter and prey do not exist for her. As such, the human body is relegated to the role of a machine and Catherine yearns for something higher, a spiritual calling. This highlights Cohen's ambivalence towards technology. He refuses to throw his content into an easily discernible light.

The telephone dance is eroticised not because the participants touch each other. The ultimate source of sexuality in the telephone dance can be attributed to the repositioning of the individual within a system. The telephone dance involves a closed circuit. F. and Edith place their fingers in each others' ears and produce a closed loop. Preceding the original introduction of the telephone dance "I" remarks that he desires to stuff Edith's nipples in his ears. He says

that he “wants those leathery electrodes in my head” (28) thus associating Edith’s nipples with electricity and technology. “I” believes that if only he could stuff one of Edith’s nipples in each ear he might achieve something greater. He might “hear the conversations between those stiff wrinkled sages” (29). It is the potential for knowledge which excites arousal in “I”. Springer writes that in the electric age it is the “thrill of control over information” which incites eroticism (Springer 57). When asked what he heard during the telephone dance, F. answers: “ordinary eternal machinery” (34). The systems at play in the novel can be read within a similar context to that of the systems Springer asserts humans preoccupy their sexuality with. The contradiction evident between the withdrawn sexuality Springer theorizes and the sexuality through an outer system as seen in the novel is reconciled by McLuhan’s suggestion that the human nervous system has been externalized. For, while the systems of the text are external—outside the realm of the mind—they nevertheless function in a similar means as the internalized forms of sexuality discussed by Springer. The externalization of the nervous system has also enabled the externalization of techno-eroticism.

F. sees in the telephone dance the potential to end the reign of the genitals as the sole arena of sexual pleasure (34). The telephone dance will “extend the erogenous zone over the whole fleshy envelope” (Cohen 175). In this sense the body becomes a microcosm of society as a whole. Rather than dwelling on particulars F. wants the telephone dance to unite the entire body as a collective whole just as ordinary eternal machinery will unite all participants in society together. Once more then, the telephone dance produces arousal by uniting parts within a collective whole. The telephone dance compromises liberal humanism’s notions of the self, mirroring the anxieties Hayles poses in her text. Its success is dependent on removing individuality from individuals and repositioning them within something greater than themselves.

In a scene involving the Mohawk village where Catherine Tekakwitha lives we are invited to see just how the telephone dance unites its participants within a greater system. The Mohawks stuff their fingers in their ears and refuse to listen to le P. Jean Pierron, the missionary stationed at their village. The act of putting their fingers in their ears, of course, mirrors the telephone dance which Edith and F. had previously performed. Jean Pierron later returns with a painting of hell which frightens the Mohawks so much that they remove their fingers from their ears and accept the guidance of the missionary. Jean Pierron says to them, “you must forget forever the telephone dance” (85). The Mohawk villagers that “gathered at the priest’s hem shivered with a new kind of loneliness. They could not hear the raspberries breaking into domes, they could not smell the numberless pine needles combing out the wind...” (85-86). The Mohawks have been torn from their system. Where once they had belonged to something greater—had been *connected* to something greater—now they are alone.

While the Mohawks are torn from their beloved system, “I” struggles ceaselessly to remain separate from any system. To join a larger system would entail giving up his individuality, that liberal humanist concept so dear to modern society which, as Hayles perceives, has come under attack in the posthuman age. This is the source of “I”’s constipation: the system threatens to subsume “I” and he fears to open up lest he lose part of what defines him. Instead of joining with the ordinary eternal machinery, “I” attempts to maintain authority through the pages of his written history of Catherine. As a narrator “I” attempts to take control of a system. He is not part of a system; he is above it. Unlike F who submits to the whims of the system “I”, in his quest to maintain his individuality, must be in control. F. remarks that “I” was not satisfied to be Charles Axis. He had to be Superman, above the system (122). All this is temporarily overcome when F. and “I” find themselves at a Quebecois nationalist rally. Here, for a brief moment, “I” finds

himself one with the crowd; a nameless entity in a swath of beings. This is but a brief lapse in “I”’s fear of a greater system as he consequently attempts to identify who it was that he had embraced within the crowd (127-128).

While the telephone dance evoked a figurative example of sexuality, the Danish Vibrator offers an explicit example of human-machine coupling. This scene combines together a number of central themes of the novel. It is one of the most pornographic sequences in the text. Edith and F. go on a vacation together to the Argentine unbeknownst to “I.” Edith is literally incapable of reaching climax. Edith’s fundamental problem, her inability to orgasm is linked to a variety of interconnected problems. She says to F., “I can’t remember anything now. Perhaps I was beautiful before” (173). She is frustrated by the ways in which she has been constructed by F. This brings to light the concept of embodiment that Hayles discusses. Edith has been shaped by F. to represent what he sees as the ideal of the human body. But as culture changes, so does this ideal body which F. pursues: “I had an idea of what a man should look like, but it kept changing (183). In an attempt to reach an ideal imposed by embodiment she has lost all understanding of her body. She says that she feels lonely and that “Sometimes I forget where my cunt is” (175). Edith’s apparent inability to find her “cunt” suggests that her problem stems from a disconnection from systems. She is too preoccupied with the specificities of her body rather than embracing her body as a whole. She has lost sight of the purpose of the telephone dance which is to unite the whole body into an erogenous whole.

F reads to Edith a variety of books. He begins with topics relating to sex. Cohen emphasizes the nature of F.’s voice: “I cleared my famous throat” (176), “My throat was burning with the hunger of it” (177). The erotic literature F. reads is clearly incapable of satisfying Edith. She demands more, “Do something F. I beg you.” (179). Edith asks that he read anything. It is key

that Edith does not care what it is that F reads. She desires not content but form: F.'s voice. F. goes on to read a history lesson on the Iroquois torture of two Jesuit priests. Edith's unconcern over what is read to her highlights that she is interested in the act of reading itself. The medium, then, is brought to the fore. This recital brings Edith even closer to a climax that still remains just out of reach. It is here that the Danish Vibrator is introduced. Immediately upon bringing out the DV, F. finds himself unwilling to give it up, suddenly consumed by the desire to use it himself.

The two struggle to gain control over the machine. But ultimately it is the machine that gains control over them. The DV first takes on Edith's body and gives her the orgasm she had desperately sought. But not satisfied with the attention it had received from Edith the DV then approaches F. and forces itself on him. The sequence is forceful and intrusive: "I had heard of these things happening before, and I knew it would leave me bitter and full of self-loathing" (185). Beyond the humour to be found within the sheer ludicrousness of the scene lurks rather disturbing ideas. The fulfillment of Edith's sexual desire rests upon the violent intrusion of the machine. Yet despite the rape imagery which is invoked by this sequence, Edith (and F.) finds herself deeply satisfied by the coupling.

The sex act performed between F. and the DV is not done in order to satisfy the demands of F. but rather that of the DV who "seemed to have a life of its own..." (185). The two hapless individuals, Edith and F., soon make the disconcerting discovery that the DV had "learned to feed itself" after seeing that unplugging it from the wall does nothing (186). This element of the DV episode appears to signal the self-perpetuation of information systems. Despite the initial fear that confronts Edith and F. as the DV obstinately approaches its target, both receive satisfaction that only the DV could offer. The DV offers completion. Edith cannot fulfill her desires without the DV. The DV brings her closer to a release from the limitations which identity

heralds in the age of posthumanism. Rather than reconciling Edith with her identity prior to F.'s interference, the ordeal that Edith undergoes solidifies her separation from any individuality. Orgasm brings Edith to a point of bliss, "toward an atomic ancestry, more anonymous, more nourishing than the arms of blood or foster family" (181). What is of interest is the pleasure Cohen prescribes to the anonymity of the orgasm. It is imagery that is often reflected with positivity throughout the text. "I" describes orgasm in similar terms as a voyage that ultimately leads to "a beautiful knowledge of unity" (18). This voyage brings together "all the disparates of the world, the different wings of the paradox, coin-faces of problem, petal-pulling questions, scissor-shaped conscience, all the polarities..." (18). Orgasm unites individuals, rendering singularity obsolete.

The violent sexual imagery continues as the DV now creeps towards Edith once more. Edith is first pictured with abject fear, crouching in the corner, submissive to the whims of the approaching DV. But soon Edith is enjoying the DV as much as it appears to enjoy her. The sexual act reduces Edith into an object. Edith becomes "quite happily, ...nothing but a buffet of juice, flesh, excrement, muscle to serve its appetite" (187). The two are simultaneously objects devoid of identity and characters with desire. It is at this moment that the DV does what the telephone dance was intended to do. Edith finds bliss as a thing devoid of identity. Haraway might see the boundary ambiguities that scenes such as this produce as an opportunity to destabilize the authority of repressive Western conventions. But this reading is problematized in this instance because the coupling between the DV and Edith or F. is so violent. While the scene certainly provides a destabilization of sexual convention it is done with clear ambivalence: Edith, F. and the DV all take pleasure from their coupling but of importance is that the DV remains in command. The ultimate necessity for Edith to use the DV highlights that for her, the vibrator has

become an extension of her partner's body as Hayles would see it. For Edith to satisfy her sexuality, she requires the DV.

The DV is not the only time in which Cohen links sexual satisfaction with technological extensions. A car ride to Ottawa becomes another demonstration of human dependence on machinery. The car ride is of particular interest because Baudrillard uses the relationship between human and car to illustrate how connected individuals are to technological interfaces. Just as the DV functions as a means of achieving orgasm, F.'s pleasure is intricately connected to the car he drives just as "I's" dissatisfaction derives from the same connection. The two characters are on their way to Ottawa where F. is to present a speech to parliament. As they are driving along, F. unbuttons his pants and begins to masturbate. As he comes closer to climax he progressively speeds. The overlay of F.'s masturbation with the process of driving links the two actions together. The car shares in F.'s arousal, working harder and harder as F. approaches climax. "I" is transfixed with F.'s masturbation: simultaneously aroused and afraid as F. goes faster and faster along the highway. "I" eventually gives in to his desires and begins to masturbate too. F. orgasms but just as "I" is about to climax, F. drives through a silk sheet painted to appear as a brick wall. The sheer trauma of the incident, orchestrated in advance by F., immediately turns "I" impotent and unable to orgasm.

After coming to a halt, F. asks the sobbing "I", "How about that second just before you were about to shoot? Did you sense the emptiness? Did you get the freedom?" (98). Two things are of note here. Once more, Cohen connects freedom with anonymity, presented here as "emptiness." The sequence demonstrates "I"'s inability to embrace that emptiness. He fails to come. His connection to the vehicle that he and F. occupy falls short because he is unable to let go of his body. Secondly, the very ordeal which F. forces upon "I" resonates clearly with "I"'s eventual



transcendence as an enormous projection. In both cases, “I” is faced with a screen—a depthless surface which relates back to Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality. This screen is just as constructed as the “realities” portrayed on television and computer monitors. Whereas “I” fails here, in his first encounter with the depthless embrace of the system, he will, as noted, later succeed at the System Theatre.

Modern theorists such as Springer examine the obsolescence of the body in terms of withdrawal into technology, the internet, and the world of electronics. For Catherine, spirituality functions in a similar way. Instead of withdrawing sexually into the confines of the mind through technology, Catherine uses her faith. Indeed, there is an unmistakable sexuality pinned to Catherine’s spiritual devotion. Baudrillard asserts that as the emphasis of a society shifted towards “screens or terminals” (443) the body becomes useless. All that would matter is the mind. Whatever the real body once offered was now obsolete because what constitutes reality is to be found within the networks of hyperreality. Consider the disdain with which “I” views his body when compared to that of F. who has allowed himself to be shaped through the teachings of Charles Axis into the hyperreality of embodiment.

What I have thus far described is the measure to which “I” explores the posthuman landscape with a level of anxiety concerning the measure to which identity must be sacrificed in order to attain the transcendence which systems and technology promise. But despite these clear anxieties Cohen does not approach the subject matter of his text with total pessimism. In order to come to terms with this redress, one must, as McLuhan would assert, look beyond the content. In light of this, I maintain that Cohen’s text relies on attributes of posthumanism. Thus Cohen is compelled to restrain his criticism because, paradoxically, his text finds an identity through posthumanism

rather than losing its identity. This turn requires an understanding of the relationship between posthumanism and literature.

Hayles posits that although posthumanism emphasizes the disembodiment of information it is nevertheless necessary to situate her theories within a material form. Hayles chooses to focus her attention on literature because its “chronological thrust, polymorphous digressions, located actions, and personified agents” lend it an embodiment that counters the disembodied nature contingent on posthumanism (Hayles 22). Thus Hayles uses the form of her discourse as a means to protest the proposed inevitability of disembodiment that some posthuman critics would suggest is true. *Beautiful Losers* puts pressure on the logic behind Hayles’ approach. The form and content of *Beautiful Losers* brings the text closer to an expression of a posthuman system rather than further from them. Hayles notes that literature is not just a passive conduit of culture, but rather, actively participates in creating culture. In this sense, literature (and any important medium for that matter) becomes important in conceptualizing ideals that constitute culture. But just as a medium like literature charts the shifting mode of culture, it is actively worked upon by the media which supersede it. The break boundary of the twentieth century which saw electricity and disembodied information surpass industrialism has affected literature tremendously. Artists, of all people, are most aware of break boundaries and the changes which they produce in a medium’s role in society (McLuhan 31). Thus one can equate the posthuman tenets of *Beautiful Losers* with the ability of Cohen, as an artist, to succinctly perceive the changing society around him.

What makes this break boundary of interest is that in the same period that Western society is shifting from an industrial to an electric age, a similar shift is occurring within the application of literature. Of course, as McLuhan says, old media do not simply vanish but, instead, find new

methods of expression (237). F.'s purchase of a factory demonstrates the shifting focus of media. F. buys an abandoned factory and the pleasure that he derives from it stems specifically from the lack of industry which take place within it. He uses the factory as a space for play. "I've turned it into a playground!" F. shouts (Cohen 43). Thus the factory is representative of the industrial age which, in light of the electric age has been forced to resituate itself within society. I suggest that literature as a whole has been affected in the same way as the industrial age. The shifting form of literature in the twentieth century can be understood to have been affected, in part, by the rise of new media that forced literature to refocus its interests.

The concluding pages of book II present a conglomeration of different media that work together to actively *create* reality, rather than simply present it. The passage begins with: "(DOLLY IN TO CLOSE-UP OF THE RADIO ASSUMING THE FORM OF PRINT)" (237). Cohen then goes on to describe the alleged escape sequence of F. even as F. sits by the radio listening to the events ensue. "The radio easily interrupts this book to bring you a recorded historical news flash," continues the radio broadcaster (237). The sequence continues to progress and as it comes to a close yet another media interjection is presented: (CLOSE-UP OF RADIO EXHIBITING A MOTION PICTURE OF ITSELF) (238). This passage suggests Cohen's awareness of the intersecting realms that media of the electric age present: radio and film have an interminable presence within the identity of contemporary literature.

Incidentally, the writing of *Beautiful Losers* marks the beginning of what Linda Hutcheon defines as the postmodern movement in Canadian fiction. It may be pretentious to suggest that postmodernism as Hutcheon defines it correlates directly to the emergence of posthumanism in the wake of a break boundary but I do wish to consider that similarities are evident in the reflexive school of cybernetics and various conventions which define modern and postmodern

literature. Language is a system just like ordinary eternal machinery or the system theatre.

Various chapters in the novel seem to break down into confusion wherein there seems little to no meaning behind the influx of strangely capitalized sentences. In light of the odd form which these particular chapters take, the reader is removed from the fictive universe of the text. Instead, the reader is given the opportunity to examine the novel as a constructed fiction. Indeed in one sentence “I” writes, “I Am A Creature In Your Morning Writing A Lot Of Words Beginning With Capitals” (56). “I” will later say “Oh Reader, do you know that a man is writing this?” (106). It is as if Cohen is formally admitting the constructed nature of the text. In doing so, the role of the reader is also highlighted. As such, attention shifts away from the text (environment) to the reader (observer). In a letter to his publisher, Jack McClelland, Cohen addresses his critics by stating that for only a brief moment had he been the author and “Soon it will be the book that *you* have written” (Nadel 136). Thus once more the focus is shifted to the reader or observer. This textual reflexivity mirrors the move to reflexivity which marks contemporary cybernetics of the sixties. Cohen’s message to his critics implies that they are responsible for a level of creativity. Of course, it is a common notion among many literary critics that the reader is ultimately responsible for creating the meaning of the text.

McLuhan suggested that the twentieth century saw a break boundary as the industrial age gave way to the electric age. The text demonstrates the saturated presence of electronic technology; yet the text suggests yet another break boundary. Perhaps one that has been in effect for quite some time: the transition from the age of spirituality to that of technology.

Transcendence into the ordinary eternal machinery—a shift which occurs for all the main characters of the novel—appears to involve the movement away from the physical into something more pure: information itself. The characters achieve what Hayles describes as the

disembodiment of information. It is through this transformation that Catherine, Edith, F., and “I” achieve immortality. Yet, paradoxically, such transcendence was made possible precisely by *embracing* a medium. Whether in the form of religion or of technology, the characters performed the telephone dance, and in doing so, freed themselves from the constraints that had once been hung about them. They shed their identities but in the process managed to find something possibly greater in a collective anonymity. The text’s focus on anonymity foresees the rise of the internet—a medium that brings unprecedented potential for anonymity to society. I do not wish to pose the transformation of the text as a stark positive or negative because to do so would be to avoid the obvious anxieties Cohen has made no efforts to hide throughout the text. Haraway views boundary transgression as a means to eradicate repressive Cartesian dualisms and perhaps in this same vein, Cohen’s ambivalence should be treated as a means of destabilization.

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