

Marian Engel's "Bear": Pastoral, Porn, and Myth

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Sure, they're women's books, because they're about women and written by a woman . . . Remember that glorious song from *The Music Man*, "The Sadder but Wiser Girl for Me?" That's what I call a woman — and when I get letters and phone calls from intelligent women, I don't think the term "woman's writer" is perjorative, not at all. Who's afraid of women's books?

(MARIAN ENGEL, Interview with Graeme Gibson)¹

Bear won the Governor General's Award for the best Canadian novel of 1976 and rightly so, I think, because it is quintessentially Canadian.² It is a Canadian pastoral about landscape and wilderness, about a quest, about a bear, about the relation between civilization and savage nature. Like *Surfacing* it is a pastoral written by a woman, but it offers even more radical alternatives to the conventions of pastoral and animal stories, for what *Bear* does is attempt to inscribe female sexuality on the wilderness. A curious mixture of tradition and innovation, *Bear* erects a complex structure of pastoral, pornography, and myth in its exploration of desire and our unattainable dreams of communion and transcendence through sex, through wild nature, through mystic vision. Inevitably dreams have to confront real possibilities of limits and transgressions and in the end can have their fulfilment only in fantasy and myth. This is the territory of *Bear* as it traces a woman's experiences on an island in Northern Ontario in the late 1970's.

The story can be simply told: it is about a woman and a bear. The woman, Lou, a librarian from the Historical Institute in To-

ronto, has a summer assignment to catalogue the resources of the Cary Estate, which has been bequeathed to the Institute and which is located on an island off the north shore of Lake Huron. It is only when she arrives on the island that her prospects change, and a familiar academic job of investigating "early settlement in the area" becomes an unfamiliar journey into the wilderness of Lou's own psyche as well as of the Canadian place itself. There has always been a bear on the estate; bears are part of the Cary family's history, for the first Colonel Cary, following the model of Lord Byron whom he had met at Malta, had a tame bear, and there is a bear there still. It is this bear whose massive presence comes to pervade the novel, taking possession first of the house and then of Lou's consciousness and fantasy life. The story develops as a summer idyll of her love affair with the bear, which is for Lou a regenerative experience releasing imaginative energies and allowing her to make vital connections with her own hidden nature and with the natural world outside herself. It might be seen as a process of "decreation" where Lou gets rid of her socially-acquired persona and pushes to the very demarcation line between humanity and nature or animality.³ But with the end of the summer comes the end of the idyll: Lou's work is finished, the bear, obeying its natural rhythms, is getting ready to hibernate; finally it is the bear who draws the demarcation line between them and shows her what is forbidden by natural law. As Lou attempts to copulate with him, the bear reaches out one paw and rips the skin on her back from shoulder to buttock. Only then does she realize the gap between the animal and the human and retreat to her side of the line, dismissing the bear and waving a burning stick at him. She gets ready to leave; the bear is taken away by an old Indian woman, and having made her farewells, Lou starts her drive back to Toronto. She is the same yet not the same, her old self but "at last human," in transition between the wilderness and the city, between old patterns and new possibilities — and comforted as she drives at night by the constellation of the Great Bear in the sky.

Bear has its place in a long Canadian tradition of writing about the wilderness and its creatures (either Indians or animals) and civilization's attitudes towards them.⁴ The vastness of landscape

seems to have affected the Canadian imagination differently from that of their American neighbours, for there is much less of the challenge of frontier experience and individual conquest and far more of the feeling of "wilderness," disorientation, and a sense of human inadequacy in Canadian literature — just as there is a stronger awareness in modern Canadian writing of the regenerative powers of landscape and the possibilities it offers for psychic and spiritual renewal. The penumbra of allusions to nineteenth-century wilderness literature like Major John Richardson's *Wacousta*, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, and the animal stories of Jack London, E. Thompson Seton, and "Sir Charles Goddam Roberts" (who also wrote a novel about a bear, *The Heart of the Ancient Wood*) plainly signals the context within which *Bear* will spell out its differences, for though it too is a response to the strangeness of Canadian landscape it is finally not about hostility and victims but about the inviolability of natural order and the healing corrective power of nature to save us from ourselves. The novel also carries a strong sense of the alien Canadian landscape which human beings have to come to terms with in order to go on living in Canada. The brownness of the bear is of a different quality from the whiteness of the whale in *Moby Dick*, for even if the bear is a blank to human beings, his colour makes him a part of the Canadian landscape with its dark forests and curiously dark clear lakes. The bear's otherness, something that D. H. Lawrence would have appreciated if he had gone to Canada as well as to Australia and Mexico, is a sign of the mystery of the natural world that remains outside human comprehension. Jay Macpherson spells out the literary response to this perception of affinity between the creatures and the wilderness:

In Canadian writing as a whole, the ambiguity of the animal and of our relation to it, its passivity in suffering, its inability to speak, balanced by the occasional power to make itself felt in destruction, make it embody the imaginative essence of life in this [Canadian] setting. (Macpherson, p. 255)

The behaviour of the bear in this story presents the same enigma, with its indifference to the woman's initiatives and its final assertion of power as it tears her skin in an indecipherable gesture which she is free to interpret as she pleases. She can see the gash

as a way of making the relationship more equal, for if the bear strikes back it removes her feeling of guilt at exploitation (the Rape of the Countryside surely hovers behind this version), just as it reminds her of her transgressions and restores her to sanity. But the bear's action is as neutral as a flood or a snowstorm, and next day it retains no memory of the previous night. It is this moral neutrality which cleanses the woman of guilt so that finally she chooses to read the indifference of nature as benign. However, that is her response and it reflects more about herself as a reader of nature than about the bear or the landscape.

I said earlier that this was a version of pastoral, and it has many of the traditional signs of that genre with its emphasis on seasonal imagery highlighted by the real difference between Canadian winter and summer; it draws sharp contrasts between life in the city with its overheated basements and gas fumes, and life in the country with its smell of water and trees. The novel also suggests the oddly ambiguous quality of the pastoral world as a separate enclosed place wherein the artificial and the natural coexist, for Cary's nineteenth-century colonial house with its European library and its lawns is set on an otherwise uninhabited island—uninhabited that is, except for the bear. This is a Canadian translation of the world of Shakespeare's comedies and late romances, with the woman sharing the values of both worlds and finally returning to the cultured world from which she came, rehabilitated and perhaps redefined by her wilderness experiences. Like every pastoral, *Bear* is ultimately elegiac, celebrating while at the same time mourning a world of lost innocence, "thinking herself into a rugged, pastoral past that it was too late to grasp" (p. 130). Only the vestiges remain in memory or in dream, available to be transformed into myth.

I have written at some length about the pastoral wilderness aspect, realizing I am in danger of falling into the very trap that Lou envisages for herself in one of her bookish similes:

She felt like some French novelist who, having discarded plot and character, was left to build an abstract structure, and was too tradition-bound to do so. (p. 84)

However, this way of proceeding is intended to counterbalance my

discussion of sex in this novel and what I see as its rehabilitation of pornography for women readers. This seems to me a decidedly female narrative about sexuality and sexual fantasy explored with a very unusual lack of inhibition. I want to call it "pornographic" rather than "erotic" for several reasons, first I suppose because of its highly charged atmosphere of sensuality, then because of its desire to transgress or transcend limits within the self. In her very interesting essay, "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different," Anne Barr Snitow defines the essence of pornography in ways that are directly applicable to *Bear*:

Pornography is not about personality, but about the explosion of the boundaries of the self. It is a fantasy of an extreme state in which all social constraints are overwhelmed by a flood of sexual energy. . . . Class, age, custom — all are deliciously sacrificed, dissolved by sex.⁵

It is in this sense that *Bear* may be called pornographic — soft porn certainly, but arguably women's porn in some quite revelatory ways which are different from yet allied to the Harlequin or Mills and Boon romances that are Anne Barr Snitow's subject. These romances treat sex from the "respectable" woman's point of view, where sex, love, and marriage are explicitly linked, whatever the provocations to transgress these codes. In the end it is "sex as social drama" (Snitow's phrase, p. 274), where the heroine successfully domesticates male feelings to accommodate her own desires. What is perhaps most interesting about these romances are the undercurrents which threaten to subvert those carefully structured fictions: the fascination with wild men or wolf men ("undersocialized heroes" as Snitow calls them) with their strength and size and hairiness, and the heroines' fantasies of violation. *Bear* seizes on these subversive elements and makes them the main text instead of the subtext, so that the "undersocialized hero" becomes a bear, and the heroine recognizes that to be ravished is a consummation as devoutly to be wished as to be feared. Not only does this novel expose the hidden dynamics of women's romantic fiction, it also turns upside down the power fantasies of conventional male-oriented pornography, for here it is not the woman who is tamed and transformed into a sex object, it is the bear: "It was indubitably male, she saw, and its hind-

quarters were matted with dirt" (p. 35). She is the one who takes all the initiatives, asserting her own wishes and instructing the bear in ways to give her sexual pleasure with his licking and later his dancing. It is always her gratification which comes first, for she continually emphasizes the bear's indifference and lack of sexual responsiveness although, womanlike, she wants to include love in the relationship. As she says, "He served her" (p. 118). The animal with his own vitality gives the woman something she needs: the free expression of her sexuality uninhibited by any male expectations of what a woman should be.⁶

Although the novel has a realistic setting, it is actually closer to fantasy, for Lou's summer experiences on the island constitute her own private odyssey and have no direct connection with her real life in society. Indeed, it is the bear's otherness that she enjoys so much, for like the wilderness itself he is a blank screen on to which she can project any image that she likes:

She had discovered she could paint any face on him that she wanted, while his actual range of expression was a mystery. . . .
(p. 72)

So the bear undergoes a variety of transformations which are an index of Lou's own needs and desires. He can be "solid as a sofa, domestic, a rug of a bear" (p. 70) or "a strange fat mesomorphic mannikin" (p. 113); he can be a male lover to whom she extends her impossible fantasies of rescue:

Bear, take me to the bottom of the ocean with you, bear, swim with me, bear, put your arms around me, enclose me, swim, down, down, down with me. (p. 112)

And at the end, when summer is over and the bear is being taken away in the Indian's boat, he can be feminized into "a fat dignified old woman" in a fur coat (p. 138).⁷ These are imaginative transformations of course, counterpointed by the woman's sane recognition that the bear is always a bear and ultimately invulnerable:

There was a depth in him she could not reach, could not probe and with her intellectual fingers destroy. (p. 119)

The bear is her ideal fantasy object, malleable to her imagination

yet unreachable in reality, a partner in the woman's dream journey as it tracks through unexplored forbidden territory, allowing her to discover her own repressed primitive self and to make connections with the natural world outside.

This fantasy has the violent ending so characteristic of pornography where the male inflicts physical damage on the female during a sexual encounter, but the opposite of rape is enacted here. The sexual consummation wished by the woman is transformed by the bear's gashing her into something entirely different as the frame of reference suddenly shifts from male/female to animal/human. In this displacement of the sexual context, what is written in blood is the line between the woman and the bear that cannot be crossed. Only now does she recognize the impossibility of her dream of communion with wild nature and the important category mistake she has been in danger of making. Sexual difference becomes only a sign of basic differences in kind, for the bear's action scarifies her into recognizing herself as human, him as animal, and the natural order as inviolable. When being "wanted" by the bear becomes the possibility of being "eaten" rather than "loved," Lou assumes control as a human being by threatening the bear and ordering him to leave — which he does. Her wounding is as far from being the mark of Cain as it is from a love bite, for instead it inscribes a natural taboo line and saves her from bestiality. Then follows a necessary movement beyond her fantasy of their "high, whistling communion" (p. 134) of the summer to the ordered world of social relationships again, the safety of which is imaged most reassuringly in Lou's last evening with the bear. Back in his place beside the fire as a domestic pet, he licks her hand while she sits at her desk reading *Times Literary Supplements* and looking for another archivist's job. When the bear is taken away the next day, he licks her hand again, then settles into the boat: "He did not look back. She did not expect him to" (p. 138). This is no happy folktale ending of the kind we get in "Song of Bear" in Anne Cameron's *Daughters of Copper Woman*, where we are shown "the wonder of a woman and a bear livin' together and bein' happy"⁸ — but that bear is female, and besides, that story belongs to a different genre. Lou and the bear belong to different worlds and she has to leave

the island and go back to the city when summer is over. What she takes with her are two books about landscape, her memories of the bear, and the wound on her back which had "healed guilt." Clearly the bear is only the medium through which she has been able to make her psychic wilderness journey, just as pornography has provided the appropriate language for naming some of the asocial primitive elements in female sexuality which are hidden within our own consciousness as within our writing.

Although the novel modulates back into real life with the drive to Toronto at the end, its final image is not realistic but mythic:

It was a brilliant night, all star-shine, and overhead the Great Bear and his thirty-seven virgins kept her company. (p. 141)

The bear has undergone another transformation, this time into a constellation of stars. Such metamorphoses have a long literary history, stretching from Ovid and Catullus through Chaucer and Pope's "Rape of the Lock" up to Irving Layton's glorious snake in the sky at the end of "A Tall Man Executes a Jig."⁹ In every case they celebrate the power of the imagination to transform life into art — a very literary process, which reminds us that *Bear* is actually a very literary fantasy. Where else do we find couplings between beasts and women except in legends, myths, and fairy-tales? Indeed, the legends about bears are written into this novel, and Lou is led into her strange summer fantasy through her work as a librarian. It is while cataloguing the Cary books that she finds handwritten slips of paper about bear legends and mythology, which fall out of the books like clues leading from her familiar world of the printed text into a labyrinth more primitively inscribed — first by hand and finally by the bear's claw. Arguably, her love affair may be seen as a transformation of her usual professional activities as a reader of narratives, for the whole time she is on the island she does not neglect her work, and her comment when initially faced with the unknowability of the bear is not entirely facetious: "Book, book. Always, when these things happen, pick up a book" (p. 64). She continues to seek clues lodged in books to explain and sustain her fantasy life with the bear. The problem is that such clues have to be interpreted: although on one level they may be read as encouragement, with

their fragmentary accounts of bears as gods and the heroic offspring engendered by women and bears, on another level they insist on the unreal dimensions of such encounters. On the two occasions when Lou's fantasies threaten to assume the proportions of myth and she tries to couple with the bear, she is brought up against practical physiological limitations. At her first attempt on "the night of the falling stars" she realizes that the mythic conjunction between herself and the bear is impossible, for like the stars it is "always out of reach" (p. 122). However, the tormenting possibility that "'the trouble with you Ontario girls is you never acquire any kind of sophistication'" (p. 124) is not entirely true, for Lou's poetic language in this episode signals her temporary shift beyond sexual fantasy into the mysteries of dream and desire. Transcendence of human limits is impossible and no stars will ever fall into her grasp, a truth underlined in her second sexual attempt with/on the bear, when he inscribes the prohibition on her back in the primitive language of blood. Such failure would be truly forlorn if it were not for the redeeming power of Lou's imagination and the transfigurations of myth.

In the end Lou does get her revelation when she sees the Great Bear in the sky, out of reach of course but part of a natural order which may be read as benign, at least on a clear night. The end leads back to the epigraph of the novel, chosen from Kenneth Clark's *Landscape into Art*:

Facts become art through love, which unifies them and lifts them to a higher plane of reality; and in landscape, this all-embracing love is expressed by light.

In this final transformation sexual longing dissolves by the light of the stars into a vision which is close to mystical communion. *Bear* emerges as a feminized version of the Canadian wilderness myth, a quest for unity of being through loving connection between the human and the natural worlds. Such desires have their realization only in fantasy or myth, though as Jay Macpherson remarks, "the power to dream is not mere passivity or escape, but is creative and transforming, a kind of art" (Macpherson, p. 264).

NOTES

- 1 G. Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), p. 113. See also Alice Munro's "An Appreciation" of Marian Engel in *Room of One's Own*, 9, No. 2 (June 1984), 32-33: "She knew what we were getting at."
- 2 Marian Engel, *Bear*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982). Page numbers refer to this edition.
- 3 I am indebted in my thinking about demarcation lines and transgression in this novel to Jeanne Delbaere-Garrant's essay "Decolonizing the Self in *Surfacing*, *Bear* and *A Fringe of Leaves*," *Colonisations: Rencontres Australie-Canada* (Travaux de l'Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, Série B, Tome 07, 1985), pp. 67-78.
- 4 See Jay Macpherson's Canadian chapter, "Epilogue: This Swan Neck of the Woods," in *The Spirit of Solitude* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) for a scholarly and imaginative account of this tradition; also the chapters on Animals and Landscape in Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972). Lucy, the old Indian woman in *Bear*, is an elusive reminder of the affinity between wilderness creatures in this novel.
- 5 Anne Barr Snitow, "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different," in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. A. Snitow, C. Stansell, and S. Thompson (London: Virago, 1984), p. 269.
- 6 The central situation of *Bear* has interesting similarities with D. H. Lawrence's *St. Mawr* (1925), and in both stories the heroine is called "Lou"; Jeanne Delbaere-Garrant, p. 67, comments on this similarity. In a conversation with Carroll Klein, Marian Engel spoke of herself as a reader of Lawrence: "I gobbled him up when I was young" (*Room of One's Own*, 9, No. 2 [June 1984], 5-30. Here Engel has told the love story from a woman's perspective.
- 7 In her Jungian reading of *Bear*, Patricia Monk highlights these gender transformations, seeing the source of the book's energy in the symbolic ambivalence of the bear itself: "Engel's Bear: A Furry Tale," *Atlantis*, 5, No. 1 (Fall 1979), 29-39.
- 8 Anne Cameron, *Daughters of Copper Woman* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1981), p. 119.
- 9 Margaret Atwood refers to this poem in her chapter on Animal Victims in *Survival*, pp. 84-85, though she uses it to emphasize the possibility of man's resistance to the victim image and I am more interested in the constellation as transformation effected through art.