Return to "Heart of Darkness": Echoes of Conrad in Marian Engel's "Bear"

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In *Bear*, Canadian novelist Marian Engel's heroine finds her identity and learns how to live her life through an encounter with reality in the form of the wilderness. The meeting is archetypal, reminiscent of the confrontation with the "night of first ages"[1] experienced by Marlow and Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Although there are important differences between Engel's and Conrad's handling of this theme, the parallels in plot, setting, concepts, and symbolism in these works suggest that Engel, perhaps without being aware of it, found in *Heart of Darkness* an inspiration for *Bear*.

To begin, we should consider the nature and means of the physical journey in both novels. To move into the interior of Africa, Marlow travels up a river. From Campbell's marina, which may be paired with one of the coastal outposts in *Heart of Darkness*, Lou goes upriver in a leaky "old cedar strip outboard" (p. 21) that, in its dilapidation, resembles Marlow's "tin pot" steamboat with its "leaky steampipes" (p. 97). Both voyagers move from a decorous and secure civilization to a primitive setting in which whatever restraints exist are to be found within the individual. Both journeys end with the central characters returning to civilization, profoundly affected by their experiences.[2]

Engel's civilization is epitomized by Lou's dry, methodical paperwork in an archives presided over by a Director who seems as hypocritical and emotionally empty as the hollow men who manage the affairs of the trading company that employs Marlow. Like Marlow, who is impatient to get a new command, Lou welcomes the chance to escape the stifling security of the Institute and explore the Cary estate in the wilderness. She regrets the

absence of life in the historical records of the Cary family. The "Canadian tradition" of suppressing details in the interest of propriety (p. 14) has transformed the man who built a rare octagonal mansion in the northern bush into a silent shade. As she pursues her investigations, she seeks to discover the true personality of the first Colonel Cary, "to find his voice" (p. 91). In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad makes Kurtz's voice the symbol of the man, and, like Lou, Marlow sees in it the object of his quest. When natives attack the steamer and Marlow fears that they already have killed Kurtz, he realizes what it is that he has been looking forward to: "I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. . . . The man presented himself as a voice" (p. 113). It is also noteworthy that the authentic voice of Cary is revealed in unexpected notes on bear-lore, unsystematically stored between pages of books in the otherwise conventional library, even as the concise note at the end of Kurtz's report on the suppression of savage customs reveals an honest thought of the living man behind the mists of pretentious rhetoric. Although in that unguarded moment, and once again as he nears his death, Kurtz becomes one who, like Trelawny, "speaks in his own voice" (p. 91), his career, like his report, is in large part a series of empty gestures disguising ulterior motives, much as the Director's letters to Lou mask the true intent of the man who wrote them. Lou knows that the enquiries about her progress on the inventory of the estate and his impatience at her requests for further extensions of time conceal his selfish desire to resume their loveless weekly intercourse among the maps. A similar discrepancy between ostensible and actual purposes runs through *Heart of Darkness*, the central instance being the contrast between the public image of the company as a philanthropic enterprise — a view held by naive souls like Marlow's aunt — and the reality of brutal colonial exploitation. Although he lies to protect the innocent faith of Kurtz's "Intended," Marlow rejects the flabby pretense that "civilized" Europeans use to defend themselves against the dark realities of their own hearts. It is this world of pretense that Lou is eager to leave and, through most of the summer, reluctant to return to,

"for the image of the Good Life long ago stamped on her soul was quite different from this" (p. 12).

In contrast to this bloodless and hypocritical civilization, which smothers one's true voice, Conrad and Engel make the wilderness vital and profound. The superficiality of civilized life is accentuated by Conrad's description of jungle depths inhabited by inscrutable people and mysterious creatures. A hippopotamus which has survived countless attempts on its life by Europeans (p. 84) embodies the wilderness, an animate equivalent of the triumphant vegetation. A human manifestation of the jungle is the native who has become Kurtz's consort. Upon this woman, the forest gazes, as if upon its perfect reflection: "the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (p. 136). In Engel, the animal counterpart of this dark immensity is the bear itself, which, though it is physically shorter than Lou when it stands erect, is "immensely dense, deep in the chest, large-limbed" (p. 60); within the house it gives off an aura of darkness that compels Lou to light another lamp (p. 56). The gaze of the bear is inscrutable, the depths of the primeval spirit it embodies symbolized by the thick pelt that Lou's fingers explore: "She took his thick fur that skidded in her hands, trying to get a grip on his loose hide, but when she went deeper into it she encountered further depth, her short nails slipped" (p. 111). In endless "depths and depths, layers and layers" of fur "so thick she could lose half a hand in it" (pp. 57, 70), Engel shadows forth the mysterious and mute wisdom of the wilderness. With her hands buried in fur, Lou feels "a strange peace.... It was as if the bear, like the books, knew generations of secrets; but he had no need to reveal them" (p. 70).[3]

In addition to its mystery and depth, the wilderness in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Bear* is a place of uncompromising reality. In a Congo outpost office, "big flies buzzed fiendishly, and did not sting, but stabbed" (p. 69); Lou's "leg streamed blood" from the bite of a black fly, and she is tormented by a "cloud of insects" as she tries to garden (p. 72). Conrad is especially effective in impressing the reader with this reality through olafactory

imagery. While enduring the chatter of a man so false that he seems to be made of papier-maché, Marlow becomes aware of the surrounding forest, an overpowering presence of silent immensity and the "smell of mud, of primeval mud" (p. 81). Later he says that the man who would learn truths about life and himself must learn to "put up with sights, with sounds, with smells, too, by Jove! — breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated" (p. 117). In *Bear*, smells also signify truth and reality. At the end of the summer, Lou "stood in the doorway of the bear's old byre and inhaled his randy pong. Really, she thought, really" (p. 140). This odor offends her sensibility, as Engel convincingly reveals through the repetition of "really," an exclamation chosen for its verbal imprecision in order to convey Lou's almost speechless wonder at how she ever could have been oblivious to this clear sign of her lover's animal nature. In this context, inhaling "randy pong" is equivalent to breathing dead hippo, of accepting reality, however unappealing.

Combined with the idea of the wilderness as a place of truth is the theme of the *interior quest*. Since the particular region of reality that concerns Engel and Conrad is the country of the soul, the journey into the wilderness becomes a metaphor for self-exploration, and both the literal and moral expeditions have risks and rewards. If one can escape becoming lost, one may return with self-knowledge, the object of Lou's quest. Lou enters the wilderness cautiously, slowly widening her area of exploration, gradually increasing her intimacy with the bear. At first she looks upon the animal as little more than a pathetic, dog-like creature and is aware of its befouled state: "As it turned to drink, she got a large whiff of shit and musk. It was indubitably male, she saw, and its hindquarters were matted with dirt" (p. 35). The bear's condition, resulting from its confinement, prompts Lou to undertake the task of bathing it in the river and grooming it — acts which suggest an attempt to domesticate nature and mask its essential wildness. This effort to make the primitive tolerable by tidying it up resembles the manner in which the Accountant, a man who reminds Marlow of a hairdresser's dummy, maintains his identity and sanity in the Congo. Though not deluded enough to extend his efforts beyond his office, this petty clerk makes per-

sonal cleanliness a fetish. To maintain starched collars and snowy linen, he has taught a reluctant native woman to do his laundry. The Accountant, like Lou, attempts to keep his little world under civilized control in the face of "the great demoralization of the land" (p. 68), a demoralization paralleled by Engel's description of the bear as "defeated" (p. 35), and having a look of "infinite weariness" (p. 36). Seen in terms of Lou's self-exploration, her desire to cleanse the wilderness is similar to suppressing truths about herself, or of gilding reality to make it appear acceptable.

An alternative to laundering and taming the wilderness is to adopt its ways, become part of it. Following the counsel of Lucy Leroy, Lou defecates in the open to establish a bond with the bear. This act, recalling both the "smell of primeval mud" and the decaying hippo meat of *Heart of Darkness*, is followed by increasing unkemptness in Lou's appearance, which steals upon her so imperceptibly that her first awareness of it frightens her (p. 125). While Lou has been trying to tame the wilderness by bathing the bear and allowing it into the house, she has been, despite early wariness, subtly transformed to a half-wild creature — herself an image of the wilderness. When Homer Campbell tells her that she reeks of bear musk (p. 128), one thinks of Marlow's warning against becoming "contaminated" by breathing dead hippo. Had Engel followed Conrad's tragic line, Lou, like Kurtz, eventually might have looked upon her soul and exclaimed, "'The Horror! The Horror!'" (p. 149). Instead, the outcome of Lou's encounter with the wilderness is mutually rejuvenating. Clean and sleek when Joe King takes it away in his boat, the bear "looks in good shape" (p. 137). Symbolically, the wilderness is healthier and purer for having known Lou, who has freed it from the unnatural restraint of the chain. On her side, Lou is reborn: "She was different. She seemed to have the body of a much younger woman. The sedentary fat had gone, leaving the shape of ribs showing" (pp. 133-34).

The setting for this reciprocal toning and purification is appropriate. The Cary home, a model of sophisticated architecture, representing the achievements of civilization and culture, is a contrast to the original log house, now inhabited by the bear. Furthermore, there is a remarkable correspondence between the

house and the theory of the architect, for according to Lou "its phrenological designer thought it good for the brain" (p. 36). The allusion to phrenology confirms the presence of the *interior quest* motif, doubling the links with *Heart of Darkness.* As Marlow prepares to leave for the Congo, a physician with an interest in phrenology measures his skull, noting that when men go "'out there . . . changes take place inside'" (p. 58). A variation on this theme occurs in the description of the skulls that face *inward* upon Kurtz's Inner Station (p. 130). In effect, the Cary house is Lou's inner station, and here a subtler parallel with *Heart of Darkness* must be mentioned. Describing his growing conviction of a "remote kinship" between civilized man and his primitive forebears, Marlow remarks that "the mind of man is capable of anything — because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future" (p. 96). Marlow's comment reveals the source of possible moral confusion that awaits a sensitive and introspective person in isolation. Engel introduces a similar potential for perplexity in Lou's impression of the house as "a gentle bulk" (p. 23), closely uniting that showpiece of rational theory and enlightened culture with the "dusty bulk" of the bear (p. 34). The association implies that Lou may tend to blur distinctions between the primitive and the civilized, the animal and the human soul.

This implication gives significance to the scene in which the bear enters the house of the rational mind one night and finds its way without hesitation to the upstairs room in which Lou reads and catalogues, leading her to imagine that the barrier between civilized man and the wilderness is not impenetrable. From this conception, she goes on to fancy a lasting union with the wilderness by one of two means:

> Bear, give up your humility. You are not a humble beast. You think your own thoughts. Tell them to me. (p. 112)

> No, I won't go away, she thought to him. I won't ever go away. I shall make myself strange garments out of fur in order to stay with you in the winter. I won't ever, ever, leave you. (p. 113)

In the first scenario, the bear will throw off its disguise (humility) and assume its rightful human role. In the second, the wilderness will not change; Lou will put on fur and become a bear. Either

possibility is illusory. A very real boundary separates the wilderness from man, despite the basic ways in which man and the other animals share in the gift of life. Only by recognizing the line and staying on the proper side of it can a healthful and dignified identity exist for both man and the wilderness. When one of Marlow's companions aboard the *Nellie*, a man whose cloistered virtue makes him scornful of the appeal the wilderness can hold for a civilized man, chafes Marlow about the fascination that the jungle holds for him, Marlow replies: "You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no — I didn't. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments, be hanged! I had no time" (p. 97). For Marlow to leave the steamer for a closer look at the raw vitality of the primitive man would have been crossing a line, represented here by the literal shoreline.

Conrad gives many other instances of lines or boundaries: the crew of starving cannibals on Marlow's steamer respect an invisible line of conduct by not setting upon the whites and devouring some of them; the native helmsman dies in consequence of his failure to stay on the proper side of the line separating rational behavior and duty from savage instinct. In the matter of his commitment to Kurtz, Marlow declares that although he would not go beyond a certain line, would not fight for Kurtz, he "went for him near enough to a lie" (p. 82). Yet another instance concerns Marlow's approach to death. He had almost "stepped over the edge," but "had been permitted to draw back [his] hesitating foot" (p. 151). In so doing, he had saved his life but lost the opportunity to gain final self-knowledge, and perhaps fuller insight into the meaning of life. In respect to survival, Lou resembles Marlow, but in most other ways she is more like Kurtz where crossing boundaries is concerned. When Marlow explains to his listener why he did not "go ashore for a howl and a dance," he gives as his reason lack of time. Preoccupied with boilers, steampipes, and a crew of restless cannibals, and with the single-minded purpose of reaching Kurtz, Marlow modestly credits his steadfastness to lack of opportunity rather than to any moral strength. In contrast to Marlow, Lou — like the unfortunate Kurtz — has plenty of time, and, again like Kurtz, she goes native. Both literally and metaphorically she dances with the bear

(pp. 113-14). She takes him as a lover, as Kurtz takes the native woman who personifies the wilderness. Lou finally oversteps the line by attempting full sexual intercourse, even fostering the hope of conceiving by the bear. She recognizes that she has "broken a taboo," has "gone too far" (p. 122), but by this time she has lost all restraint. Of Kurtz, Conrad writes: "the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness . . . had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations" (p. 144).

Although both Lou and Kurtz trespass, the consequences are not the same, as can be seen when one considers the difference in the moral and philosophical tone of *Heart of Darkness* and *Bear*. Conrad's narrator is left with a dark and pessimistic view of life and man: "Droll thing life is — that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose" (p. 150). Engel, on the other hand, leaves Lou feeling "Clean and simple and proud" (p. 137), ready to face life, "strong and pure" in her confidence and independence (p. 140). Conrad's tale ends in darkness, Engel's in light. The cause of this distinction lies in the way each author uses the wilderness in the role of lover-teacher. In Kurtz's case, the wilderness is seductive: "it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know" (p. 131). An apt pupil, Kurtz went on to take "a high seat amongst the devils of the land" (p. 116), in recognition of which accomplishment "The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball — an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and — lo! — he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh . . ." (p. 115). Manifesting itself in the native woman, the wilderness embraces Kurtz and infects his blood with wasting disease. The effect of this on Kurtz is revealed at the climax of the plot when Marlow, tracking him through the bush, exclaims, "'He can't walk — he is crawling on all-fours'" (p. 142). Through physical and moral sickness, the wilderness has reduced Kurtz to the level of an animal. Similarly, at the climax of Engel's novel, when Lou sees the bear's erection:

> She took her sweater off and went down on all fours in front of him, in the animal posture.
>
> He reached out one great paw and ripped the skin on her back. (p. 131)

Considering what the bear might have done, the scratch he gives Lou resembles "the playful paw-strokes of the wilderness" (p. 105); little more than an admonitory pat,[4] the effect is not wasting, as it was for Kurtz, but corrective. Therefore, while the wilderness is presented as lover-teacher in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Bear*, the role is qualified in accordance with the theme and tone of each novel. Conrad's lover instructs, but also tempts and destroys; Engel's teaches and heals.

What Engel means when she has Lou say, "the claw . . . had healed guilt" (p. 140) becomes clear when one looks at the scene in which Lou is clawed as the crucial one in her quest for enlightenment. It is well to remember that Lucy Leroy suggests the means by which Lou begins to form a bond with the bear. The name *Lucy* means *light*, and in part corresponds to the name *Lou*. Although Engel may have intended no pun, "Lou" could be taken as a truncated name, consistent with the heroine's lack of wholeness before her encounter with the bear. "Lou" is one who does not yet "see," but is put on the path to illumination by "Lu-cy" (Lou-see). While the pun may not have been intended, it is hardly accidental that there is partial correspondence between the first names of the central characters and the wise old Indian woman. Moreover, *Leroy* means *the king*, a figure of authority to direct Lou toward the answer to her question of how she should live the one life she has been given. Lou wants to learn how to achieve sexual fulfilment, personal integrity, and love. She must gain control of her relationships with men, end the vacuous affair with the Director, and regain self-esteem. She needs guidance, which she receives from Lucy, Homer Campbell, and the example of the female colonel.[5]

From these guides she learns lessons necessary to the recognition of the fine line between humanity and the wilderness. Lucy teaches her that she must abandon civilized inhibitions, yield to natural impulses. Her outdoor excretory acts are symptomatic. They would be natural to a child, and only by becoming something of a child again can Lou become receptive to the lessons of the wilderness. From Homer Campbell she learns that a sexual experience between two humans can be mutually satisfying, even if loveless. Because Homer offers and expects maturity and re-

spect, Lou can be direct with him sexually. It is also from Homer that she hears the story of the female colonel. More than any other Cary, this woman has achieved a balance between civilization and nature, is admirably self-sufficient, and *speaks in her own voice*. Able to survive by fishing and trapping, capable of killing, skinning, and tanning a lynx, Jocelyn Cary has toned and toughened her character while retaining the domestic skills and social graces of a civilized human being. When Homer describes her as "'an imitation man, but a damned good one'" (p. 81), he reveals his respect. In effect, he has outlined the kind of woman that Lou might become, or at least one who might serve as a model for her to follow in broad outline.

These guides prepare Lou for an unmediated encounter with truth, manifested in the bear in its role of lover-teacher. Her experience shows that although there is danger of becoming lost in the wilderness, its depths — unfathomable and mysterious as the human mind — offer a chance to discover one's self. In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz attains self-knowledge, and Marlow acknowledges that it is "the most you can hope from [life]" (p. 150). Self-knowledge, or identity, is Engel's main theme, and the actions which result in Lou's illumination constitute the climax of the plot. To emphasize this climax, Engel shows Lou at the height of confusion in the hours and moments just before the revelation, expressing this confusion through purposeful handling of olfactory imagery. As earlier shown, one who will look upon truth must "breathe dead hippo" and "inhale randy pong" without becoming "contaminated," without going native. Marlow ventures close enough to the wilderness to recognize his kinship with the primitive people who inhabit it, close enough to contract a disease so malignant that he nearly dies, but not so close that the smell of dead hippo becomes incense to him. For Lou, on the other hand, in a state approaching ecstasy, the bear's rich musk is "drink" (p. 131), even as Kurtz's insatiable soul craves the "abominable satisfactions" of the jungle that has enthralled him (p. 151). Engel's metaphor reveals how close Lou has come to losing her human identity, for the musk symbolizes the quintessential bear. If this musk can sustain her, Lou's whole system

has changed, or is in the process of changing, to enable her to assimilate and thrive on this elixir.[6]

The vividness of the musk/drink metaphor is matched by the care with which Engel has prepared the reader for it, using strategically placed references to the smell of the bear to lead to the climactic event, Lou's attempt to consummate her union with the wilderness. Lou takes the bear for swims, but despite regular bathing, the wilderness is redolent of itself. As Lou learns to love the musk, she begins to lose the only identity she has known, that of a proper, conventional lady-archivist who secretly thinks of herself as insignificant and sub-human.[7] This loss is indispensable to her perception of a true, wholesome identity, but before this identity can come to light, Lou must look upon her image as it appears at her nearest approach to psychological chaos: "She looked at herself in the female colonel's pier-glass. Her hair and her eyes were wild. Her skin was brown and her body was different and her face was not the same face she had seen before. She was frightened of herself" (p. 125). In *Heart of Darkness*, the counterpart to this passage is an observation upon Kurtz by Marlow: "Being alone in the wilderness, it [Kurtz's soul] had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad" (p. 145). "Madness" is Conrad's equivalent to the psychic disarray symbolized by Lou's appearance as she, like Kurtz, symbolically stands before the mirror of Self.

Pursuing the theme of identity while holding in mind the role of the wilderness as lover-teacher, one discovers further parallels between *Bear* and *Heart of Darkness*. As the animal manifestation of the wilderness in Engel retains its wild character, symbolized by musk, the human emblem of the wilderness in Conrad remains unalterably savage despite the parody of European jewelry with which she is adorned (p. 135). This primitive female divides Kurtz not only from his proper mate, the refined and delicate Intended, but also from the ideals she represents — cultivated virtues such as moral responsibility and human gratitude, conspicuous by their absence when Kurtz repays with threats of death the devoted Russian youth who has ministered to him in his illness. Through the agency of the native woman, the wilderness has "taken him, loved him, embraced him . . . and sealed his

soul to its own" (p. 115). The language in this passage suggests a sexual and spiritual consummation that Lou merely attempts. Where she fails to achieve full intercourse with the wilderness, Kurtz, through literal and symbolic union with the native woman, succeeds.

The distinction between realized and attempted consummation is consistent with the different fates of Lou and Kurtz. As we have earlier said, the loss of the identity which restricted Lou to a half-life in the archives is a step in the direction of the discovery of her true identity. Like the unconsummated relationship with the bear, this loss is not complete; in fact, only undesirable subservience, inferiority feelings, discontent, and moral timidity are lost, replaced by the underlying identity of independent and confident womanhood. In contrast, Kurtz, by consummating his union with the wilderness, loses not only his social identity as a civilized idealist — a man of promise — but also nearly loses his soul. Marlow warns Kurtz, "'You will be . . . utterly lost'" (p. 143), and despite the tragic grandeur of Kurtz's pronouncement on the "adventures of his soul on this earth" and the "moral victory" he has won (pp. 150, 151), the soul which survives is a soul in ruins. Yet the differing fates of Lou and Kurtz share in a common unity, for while it is true that Lou's future following her encounter with the wilderness is hopeful while Kurtz's end is so disastrous that merely witnessing it plunges Marlow into despair and pessimism, it is also true that both Lou and Kurtz have seen the truth and gained self-knowledge from their experiences.

The reader accepts Marlow's opinion that Kurtz is a "remarkable" man, because only a person of heroic integrity could judge himself as Kurtz does when he confronts the image of his soul. This judgment is Kurtz's last act. The more fortunate Lou contemplates the image of her soul while it is still in a state of transition, permitting her to take action which will influence her destiny for better or worse. Her journey may be compared to that of the Lady of Milton's *Comus*, as the soul descends from the regions of Platonic light into the dark wood of the world, where it is tested to determine its future state. If the soul succumbs to fantasies and temptations, it cannot resume its upward path. Like Milton's Lady, Lou is already in the lower regions when her

story opens, but she retains an "image of the Good Life long ago stamped on her soul" (p. 12). This image is, of course, at odds with the reflection she sees in the first of the two scenes in which she studies herself in Jocelyn Cary's mirror (p. 125). The contrast between her memory of the ideal and the reflection of her image frightens her. It is almost as if she were undergoing the "Dark Night of the Soul," a negative phase which the mystic must endure in the process of spiritual development.[8] Engel's imagery for this negative phase substitutes immersion in musk for immersion in darkness. Approaching the crisis of her trial, Lou is so steeped in musk that Homer Campbell bluntly tells her, "you stink of bear" (p. 128).

It is fitting that Lou's contemplation of herself in the mirror, and her anxiety at what she sees, precedes her visit to the abandoned lumbermill and the subsequent rebuff by the bear. Intercourse with Homer is the first stage of a two-part action which results in the clearing of Lou's vision, dispersal of the musk, and the emergence of a positive identity. Although rationally Lou would know that her natural mate is man, not a bear, even as Kurtz would know that the refined Intended is the proper mate for a civilized European, she has succumbed to the spell of Cary's notes linking men with bears in folklore and mythology, especially the Finnish legend that "*The offspring of a woman and a bear is a hero, with the strength of a bear and the cleverness of a man*" (p. 99). Lou here treads perilously close to the pit that Kurtz was unable to avoid after he perceived that "we whites . . . 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings — we approach them with the might as of a deity'" (p. 118). Conrad's allusions to Kurtz "getting himself adored" and having the Russian as a "last disciple" (pp. 129, 132) leave little doubt that Kurtz's tragic flaw is the classic one of forgetting his mortal limitations. Lou's fantasy of entering a world of magic in which she might become the Chosen Vessel to bear a hero reveals a similar inclination to self-apotheosis. This delusion, an excessive reaction to habitual feelings of inferiority, combines with the repelling force of memories of an unhappy love affair and the unsatisfactory sexual performances of the Director to so muddle her vision of identity that she must recover and confirm her image

through an experiment, the first step of which is sexual intercourse with a human being. The test with Homer has a successful outcome, for while there is no emotion, the act is physically satisfying: "He excited her. And it was good to have that enormous emptiness filled, but she felt nothing with him, nothing" (p. 126).

Ironically, while coitus with Campbell has not been accompanied by love, love with the bear cannot be accompanied by coitus. Conrad also separates sex and love in the relationship between Kurtz and his two women. While gratification of passion and the senses can be provided by the native woman, there is no hint that Kurtz loves her. On the other hand, the Intended is so decorous and ethereal that any physical intimacy between her and Kurtz is unthinkable. For Engel, it is equally unthinkable that Lou should couple with an animal, and it is the author's purpose to make the second stage of the experiment, unsuccessful intercourse with the bear, confirm the first. When the bear claws Lou's back Engel shows that nature will not tolerate pretense. Full union with the bear would symbolize both the violation of biological law and the denial of human identity. Engel makes clear that it is not within Lou's power to do either of these things, even if she wills it. The shock of truth has been administered; the recognition of truth will soon follow.

Failure to grasp Engel's meaning here would lead to a sentimental trap. To some it might be attractive to suppose that, sensing the odor of Homer's masculinity on Lou, the bear spurns his beloved because he feels betrayed. To infer this human motive would clash with Engel's portrayal of the bear as a real animal — kind and half tame, to be sure, but still an animal. The bear does not act from jealousy. His motive is not to be discovered in his psyche, but in Engel's symbolism: he is acting the part of primitive mentor. Lou has earlier seen that the bear is not a human in disguise, but she has not been able to see that she is more than a bear without a pelt, just as Kurtz could see that the savages were not enlightened Europeans but could not see why he should not cut off heads and place them on poles — the act of a savage. In Lou, this one-way rationality is consistent with incomplete self-knowledge and the inferiority feelings that lie at the root of the

comparison of herself to a mole. Since she fancies herself an animal, it is fitting that she assume the posture of one before the bear. He rejects her, dramatically and painfully — and, in consequence, unforgettably — answering Lou's questions, the central ones in the novel. The first, that of identity, was subtly formulated when Lou asked the bear "who and what are you?" (p. 36). (This question comprehends the unspoken one "who and what am I?"). The second question is about how the life one has been given should be lived (p. 20). The bear answers both questions. He is no mythological creature, and she must live in the actual world; to the second question the bear implicitly replies: "Honestly, without illusion or self-deception."

The clawing scene is carefully framed to emphasize its importance. Immediately before it, we learn that Lou's "garden was a flop" (p. 130), symbolizing the loss of a primitive human skill — agriculture. As her industry fails, Lou loses all concern for her appearance: "She was idle and grubby. Her nails were broken. She and the bear sat in pompous idleness on the lawn. In the evening, they lazed by the upstairs fire" (p. 131). Her skin is now called a "pelt," signifying the extent to which she has lost her human identity. In sharp contrast to the approaching oblivion of her self-regard in the hours preceding her effort to have intercourse with the bear, Lou awakens next morning to a sober recognition of her state: "The room she lay in was dirty. Her hands were dirty. How long have I been like this? she wondered" (p. 133). This is a moment of revelation, a moment similar to that in which Kurtz, with supreme moral clarity, pronounces judgment on his soul. In contrast to Kurtz's vision of horror, Lou's second look into the pier-glass reveals a younger looking body, reflecting the rejuvenated spirit within. On her back she carries the mark of her knowledge and identity. After cleansing herself in the river, by natural means, she disinfects her wound — an act of human reason which symbolically seals her alienation from the world of blind instinct.

The disinfectant also symbolizes the end of Lou's confusion about the nature of the wilderness and her relationship to it. Before her first sexual contact with the bear, her ideas about him waver. At times she sees him as simply an animal:

> He, she saw, lay in the weak sun with his head on his paws. This did not lead her to presume that he suffered or did not suffer. That he would like striped or spotted pyjamas. Or that he would ever write a book about humans clothed in ursomorphic thoughts. (p. 60)

Opposing this strained objective stance are strong intuitions that the bear is a person. An early impression is that he is:

> Not at all menacing. Not a creature of the wild, but a middle-aged woman defeated to the point of being daft, who had sat night after night waiting for her husband for so long that time had ceased to exist and there was only waiting. I can manage him, she decided, and went inside. (p. 36)

Once, reading Trelawny, she compares the bear to other animals, only to end by linking him with man: "Look at the bear, dozing and drowsing there, thinking his own thoughts. Like a dog, like a ground-hog, like a man: big" (pp. 90-91). These unsuccessfully resisted impulses to see the bear as human are accompanied by the delusion that she "can manage" the animal. Though at first she is cautious when she looses the chain to walk and bathe him, she soon becomes careless. A near-drowning and an almost broken arm foreshadow her revelation but do nothing to measurably increase her caution. Lou forgets, or fails to see, how small man is against the wilderness when she thinks of becoming the bear's mate, compounding this error with presumption bordering on *hybris* when she imagines herself worthy of conceiving "twin heroes" (p. 121). Her confusion reaches its peak when she misinterprets the bear's state of mind when she sees its erection. She is at that moment the antithesis of Marlow, who neither presumes that he can manage the wilderness nor loses sight of its inscrutability:

> I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. (p. 81)

Had Lou's confusion been replaced by a retreat to the oversimplified view that the bear is merely a wild beast, her quest

would have been fruitless and her illumination would have lacked impact. Instead, the bear becomes for her a complex but unified being:

> Last night she had been afraid that the smell of blood on her would cause him to wound her further, but today he was something else: lover, God or friend. Dog too, for when she put her hand out he licked and nuzzled it. (p. 134)

Although "the high, whistling communion that had bound them during the summer" is gone (p. 134), Lou's emotional and spiritual sensitivity, joined with new-found security based on truth and self-knowledge, gives birth to a communion that is at once lower and higher than the one that seemed to exist in those moments when she ventured beyond the line that protected the identity of each communicant. In this communion, the bear is not banished from the octagonal house of the mind: he watches her as she opens her mail, sits beside her as she reads. His various identities are comprehended in one essence, as in the paradoxical hypostasis of the Trinity. The possibility that he is her God[9] dignifies both the wilderness and Lou's humanity, for only human beings have gods. She still loves the bear, but the recognition of his wildness and sanctity transcends the sexual fantasy she had earlier indulged, a fantasy which degraded the wilderness when she tried to seduce it. The end of the affair, depicted in language of simple eloquence, is tender and innocent:

> Lapped in his fur, she was wrapped in a basket and caressed by little waves. The breath of kind beasts was upon her. She felt pain, but it was a dear, sweet pain that belonged not to mental suffering, but to the earth. She smelled moss and clean northern flowers. Her skin was silk and the air around her was velvet. The pebbles in the night water gleamed with a beauty that was their own value, not a jeweller's. She lay with him until morning birds began to sing. (p. 136)

Though the wilderness has been a place of truth in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Bear*, the central characters return from their quests in opposite states of mind. The tragic grandeur of Conrad's vision is embodied in the imagery of loss and gloom in the final paragraph:

"We have lost the first of the ebb," said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky — seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. (p. 162)

Equally appropriate to Engel's optimistic conclusion is the imagery of light and direction in the last sentence of *Bear*:

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

Purity has been restored to both Lou and the wilderness, as the allusion to "virgins" suggests. The bear becomes the celestial guide of a woman who has achieved understanding of her place in life, and of her personal strength and worth.

NOTES

[1] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, in *Youth and Two Other Stories* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1929), p. 96. All references are to this edition. References to *Bear* are to the first edition (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976).

[2] Although I consider Marlow the central character in *Heart of Darkness*, in this discussion I shall also compare Lou's experiences to those of Kurtz whenever doing so will throw light on Engel's purposes.

[3] By comparing the bear to books, Engel is not implying that instinctive wisdom is of the same order as the rational, carefully organized accounts of human history and culture, particularly those that conform to Victorian notions of propriety. The books in Cary's library contain secrets, but they are found not on the printed pages but between them, on scraps of paper. These notes represent Cary's eclectic, unsystematic, and uncensored researches on all aspects of bears, from mythology to physiology.

[4] Compare Old Ben, symbol of the wilderness in William Faulkner's "The Bear": "when the eleventh hound got back about mid-afternoon and he and Tennie's Jim held the passive and trembling bitch while Sam daubed her tattered ear and raked shoulder with turpentine and axle grease, it was still no living creature but only the wilderness which, leaning for a moment, had patted lightly once her temerity." The passage is on pp. 198-99 in *Go Down, Moses* (New York: Modern Library, 1942).

[5] The Director, a false guide because a selfish and petty one, is Lou's authoritative reference point before the events of the summer. Against him, Engel balances the majestic stars of Ursa Major (p. 141), unifying through this symbol the themes of *guidance* and *illumination*.

[6] A parallel treatment of the identity-transformation theme occurs in Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," in which the enticing fragrance of an exotic blossom delights and sustains the heroine, even as it blights her links with the rest of humanity.

[7] Because the narrative point of view in *Bear* is closely restricted to what Lou sees, experiences, and thinks, when Engel says "she lived like a mole" (p. 11), the choice of simile accurately reveals Lou's self-image.

[8] For a discussion of this aspect of the mystic experience, see Part Two, Chapter IX of Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1930).

[9] The Christian deity has often been seen in all the roles Engel lists. "Lover" and "friend" need no illustration. "Dog," though less common, is scarcely unfamiliar. See, for example, Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven." Furthermore, various critics have speculated on the Dog/God wordplay in line 74 of Eliot's *Waste Land.*