

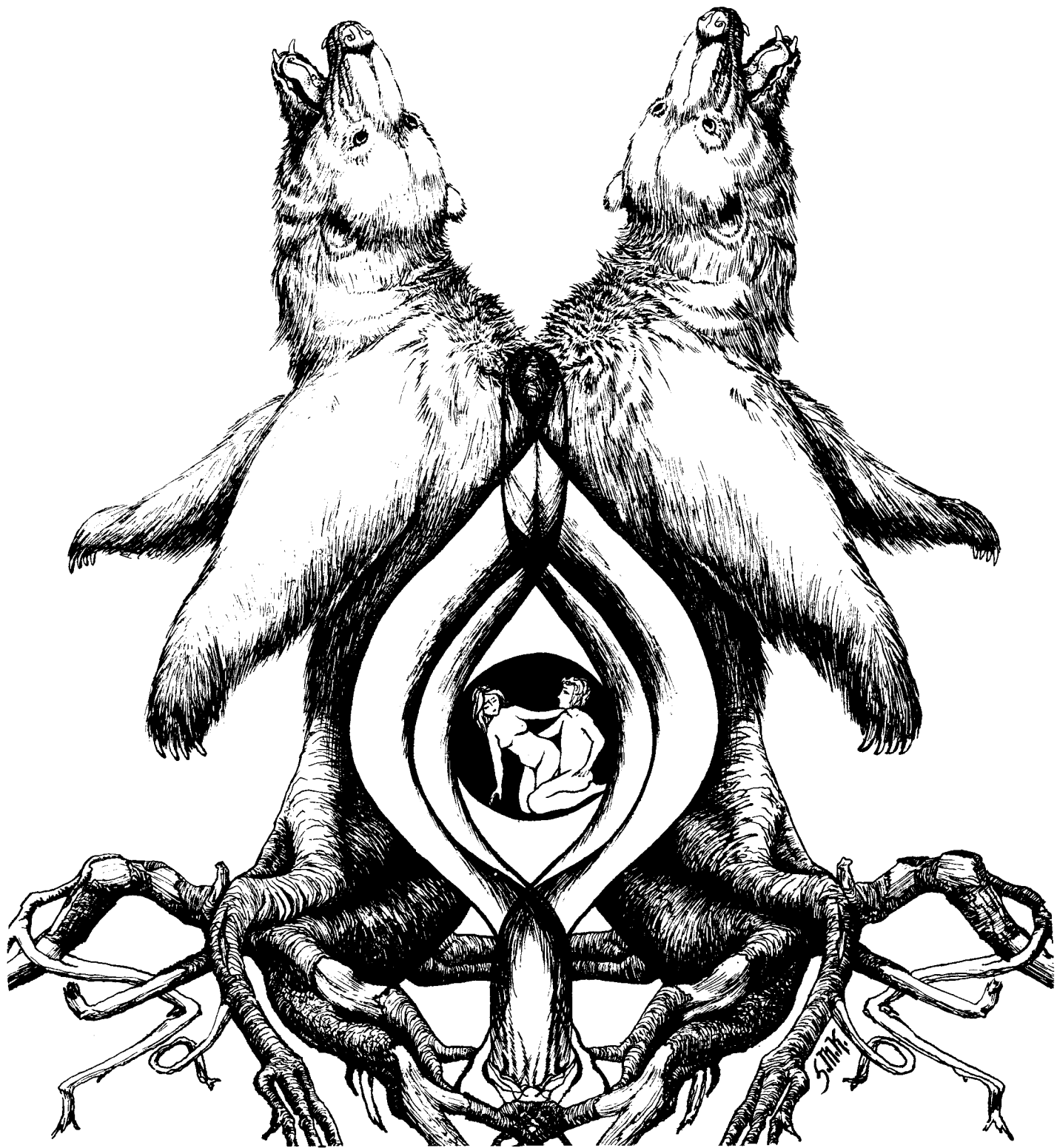
# *ENGEL'S BEAR:*

## *A Furry Tale*

A look at the reviews of Marian Engel's Bear(1) reveals a remarkable agreement about the book. It is not an agreement of opinion (for the reviewers' opinions as to whether the book was good or bad vary considerably), but an implicit agreement, expressed as a positive or negative emotional response, about the symbolic "charge" the book carries. Adèle Wiseman expresses the positive response, classing Bear among those works of art "that leave one a little shocked, a little shaken, and . . . more than a little enriched."(2) Scott Symons' dismissal of it as "gangrene of the soul" reveals an equally deep negative response.(3) Both responses to the book, although opposite in character, are to the same stimulus--the energy involved in the work--just as some people revel in electrical storms while others are terrified by them. An energy which can provoke such strong and divergent responses needs to be accounted for; in this paper I shall attempt to account for it, at least in part, by examining Bear in terms of Carl Jung's theory of the archetypes. By doing this, I will demonstrate that the source of the book's energy is the symbolic ambivalence of the bear itself. In the course of this demonstration, I hope to show that to see

*by Patricia Monk*

in Engel's portrait of Lou evidence of hostility towards or contempt of women is to be needlessly disturbed. Consideration of the bear's symbolic ambivalence must begin with the fact that although the sex of the bear is male, its gender is female. The distinction which I am emphasizing here is imposed by the fact that the bear is both an individual animal and also a representative of the family Ursidae. Sex is a physical attribute of the individual animal, which may be either male or female; gender is a symbolic attribute, and in the case of the bear is feminine. It is important to keep this distinction in mind, since each of the two attributes is the key to a separate thematic development within the narrative.



Lou herself, however, never consciously understands the bear's ambivalence. Its sex is established for her (and hence for the reader) early in the story, since one of the things that Lou notices about the bear in her first encounter with it is that it is "indubitably male." (p. 35) In her subsequent encounters she confirms this visual, and to a certain extent olfactory identification (from the "whiff of . . . musk"), by touch, when she cradles "his big, furry, asymmetrical balls in her hands." (p. 111) Because the sexual identification is made through her sensory perceptions, however, the identification begins to waver and become less certain when those sense perceptions are shown to be unstable. The symptom of this instability is Lou's difficulty in keeping an accurate image of the bear. At different times it seems to her by turns like "a fur coat . . . some kind of raccoon," (p. 48) "a near-sighted baby," (p. 54) and "a cross between a king and a woodchuck." (p. 55) The succession of different images suggests that to her the bear is something outside the range of normal perception.

The cause of this blurring of her vision is hinted in her response to being told about the bear. At first, when she hears about it from Homer, the idea strikes her as "joyfully Elizabethan and exotic"; (p. 29) but in the actual encounter her feelings

are quite different. When she goes out the morning after her arrival and stands outside the old cabin where the bear is chained, she senses its presence powerfully and strangely even while it is still inside and unseen:

She had expected to be afraid of the bear, but here she was standing quite calmly in his doorway. She was certain that it was there, and that it was benevolent.

(p. 35)

This sort of remote contact, according to Jung, often signals the presence of an archetype, for the archetypes "represent or personify certain instinctive data of the dark primitive psyche, the real but invisible roots of consciousness," (4) and they retain all of the psychic energy of the unconscious from which, in each individual, they spring; this is manifest as what Jung calls the "numen," which we can all, even unknowingly, recognize. It is the numen which betrays the presence of an archetype in Lou's shabby old bear. More than this, in fact, for the ambivalence of the bear in sex and gender also permits an ambivalence in the archetype; we find not one but two of these strange and difficult presences indicated by the symbol.

I will begin with the simpler of the two: the male bear as a symbol of a masculine archetype. The animal disguise of fur, non-retractable claws and so on (in lengthy Linnaean de-

tail) conceals the archetype known as the Animus--the personification of the contrasexual element in a woman, which she carries within her as a masculine soul-image (just as a man carries within him a feminine contrasexual element, the Anima). These contrasexual elements within the personality seem to be a psychic analogue of the physical genetic blue-print for the opposite sex within each human being, with the difference that, again according to Jung, the psychic blue-print must be activated and accounted for by the Ego in order to form the integrated total Self, whereas the physical blueprint must remain unactivated if a normal infant is to result. The role of the Animus is to introduce into the total personality of the woman those elements which most Western cultures attribute specifically to the male human animal. Since it is with Lou's psycho-sexual development that the narrative at this level is concerned, the bear-Animus therefore symbolizes specifically the development of sexual activity or initiative in Lou.

Note that I do not use the word "aggression." This is a deliberate avoidance, for the idea of Lou as a sexual aggressor is based, I believe, on a misunderstanding of some of the so-called activity described and also of Lou's admission that she is aggressive. (p. 122) This misunderstanding has led to at least one critic seeing the bear as the victim of a fate worse

than death(5)--a poor, innocent animal almost raped by a viciously aggressive woman, who is punished for her temerity by being clawed when she goes too far. The physical interaction between the two (on her part, fondling and stroking; on the bear's part, licking) seems like sexual behaviour to Lou (and consequently to readers and critics) since it is a normal part of sexual behaviour between human beings; but to the animal it would convey no sexual meaning at all, since a male animal is stimulated only by the pheromonic traces of a female in oestrus (heat); a tom-cat, for example, is only interested in penetrating the female, and erogenous zones really are erroneous zones for him. Many animals, including the primates, spend considerable time licking each other and preening each other's fur, but this is "grooming"--a generalized social behaviour which occurs entirely outside the sexual context of mating.(6) To the bear, if he could formulate ideas, the idea conveyed by Lou's activity would be that she was feeling sociable.

Furthermore, her feeling that "there was a kind of aggressiveness in her," (p. 122) is unfounded. The evidence of her past affairs, as she remembers them, seems to me to indicate not aggressiveness, but an undue passivity interrupted by outbursts of uncontrolled emotion and behaviour; such outbursts do not qualify as aggression, since aggression is, in its usual sense, behaviour directed at a target,

and therefore is not totally uncontrolled. The kind of behaviour that Lou remembers in her past reveals that in her psychological development she has not yet learned to use and direct the Animus energy, but is still merely a victim of its autonomous activity.

In order to govern her Animus she must meet him in a conscious encounter, in which all her concentration can be turned upon what she is learning. For this learning process, she requires a sexual partner of a particular kind: he must be male to provide the correct stimulus and yet unaware of his maleness (as a male animal is unaware). For these reasons the bear perfectly fulfills the function of the Animus. He is vaguely human in stance and appearance (there is the legend, which Engel cites, that bears were the first parents of the human race, not Adam and Eve), (7) and he is explicitly male. He is also large and strong and, therefore, suitably supportive as her image of him as a piece of furniture--a sofa (p. 70)--suggests. But above all he is extremely passive in a way that no human partner would be: he never does anything except in response to her initiative--he eats because she feeds him, drinks because she gives him water, swims because she takes him to the river and licks her because she presents a lickable surface--and when she does not initiate any action, he sleeps.

Her development in initiative is marked by her understanding that "she could paint any face on him that she liked." (p. 72) His passivity enables her to practise her roles towards whatever her image of him is at the time (baby, woodchuck and king all require different approaches). When it seems to her that the face (image) she has given him is appropriate, it is so because it reflects her own level of development stalled at that point. In accordance with this reading of her situation, what is punished by the raking claws is not any "aggression" by Lou, or even her attempts at a truly sexual initiative (when she attempts to mount him). (8) On the contrary, the blow falls when she is "offering herself" to him, in the posture of a female animal. Since this kind of passive self-offering seems to have characterized her earlier human sexual relationships, it becomes clear that the punishment is for the relapse into passive behaviour. The blow is to teach her to remember what she has learned of initiative, and for this reason, as Engel emphasizes, the scar which will remain will not be "the mark of Cain." (p. 134)

The lesson she has learned from the encounter with her Animus, her contra-sexual self, is to be able to use consciously the psychic energies and qualities which the Animus contributes to the total personality. That she is successful to a certain extent is em-

phasized by the fact that she succeeds when she deliberately seeks out Homer Campbell and they make love. This encounter is a marked improvement in human contact when compared with the weekly sessions with the Director on her desk in the office. Even though not all her sensitivity has been restored (she still feels nothing, with Homer (p. 126) she does achieve something more nearly approaching real contact. The missing feelings have to come from another part of her personality, through an archetypal encounter which runs concurrently with the encounter with her Animus.

This other archetypal encounter is signalled by a rather strange image among the many which Lou associates with the bear. It occurs to her immediately after she has identified the bear as male, when, briefly, she sees it as "a middle-aged woman defeated to the point of being daft." (p. 36) It is this image which is the key to the other side of the bear's symbolic significance--the fact that the bear is generically feminine, and is as important to Lou's psycho-sexual development in this generic feminine aspect as it is in its individual male aspect.

The symbolic femininity of a male animal may be a difficult concept to grasp and is certainly an awkward one to explain. Clearly, Lou's image of the bear as a middle-aged woman is a

self-image, projected upon the bear. But we do not make such projections deliberately or consciously; they are called out of us by the object on which we project them as a result of an unconscious recognition of some analogy between the external object and the internal psychic element. Lou's self-image is called out of her by her unconscious recognition of some affinity with the bear and is consequently projected onto it. However, this projection is conscious for a moment only--the moment in which she actually sees the bear as a woman. Almost immediately it fades, and she is left to struggle through the rest of the encounter in a state of psychic darkness. But the projection has been made visible to the reader; it reveals that Lou has unconsciously recognized certain generic attributes of the bear which are assimilable by conscious experience as aspects of femininity only when they are encountered in symbolic form. These symbolic forms are essential in such circumstances, according to Jung, since "a symbol is the best possible expression of an unconscious content whose nature can only be guessed, because it is still unconscious."(8) In this unconscious recognition Lou repeats the experience of many primitive people as this is reflected in their culture and religion.

To begin with, she encounters in the bear that which the primitives con-

sidered to be divinity. This comes through even more strongly towards the end of the book when the bear is seen as "an enormous living creature larger and older and wiser than time." (p. 119) Specifically, she encounters a feminine divinity in theriomorphic form--the bear-goddess Artio who was worshipped by the Helvetii at Berne and who was a manifestation of the Great Goddess.(9) For Jung this feminine divinity is one of the "mana" personalities or archetypes of the individual psyche: beneath its disguise of fur and maleness, Lou's bear conceals the powerful feminine archetype and "mana" personality: the Sybil.

In a woman's unconscious, the Sybil is of supreme importance, since she "typifies her . . . conscious life as conditioned by her sex."(10) The Sybil can appear in many guises; Jung says that they are "almost infinite."(11) But the Sybil is not merely manifold, she is also complex and ambivalent and Jung explains that he formulated her ambivalent attributes as "the loving and the terrible mother."(12) In the experience of most women, however, the archetype is most frequently manifest as the chthonic type, or Earth Mother. . . . During the manifest phase of the archetype an almost complete identification takes place. A woman can identify directly with the Earth Mother.(13)

It might be objected, particularly by

those who have difficulty accepting the generic femininity of the animal, that there is in Bear a much more suitable figure for the manifestation of the Sybil than the bear itself. This is the old Indian woman, Lucy. However, this objection can be ruled out once it is realized that Lucy--a beloved matriarch for whom the bear is tame--is a proleptic vision of what Lou has the potential to become through her encounter with and understanding of the Sybil who is the essence of feminine nature (hence perhaps the similarity of the names). Furthermore, Lucy is wise, not merely practically (in her advice to Lou about making friends with the bear), but also transcendently--a fact signalled by her "inconceivable merriment," (p. 49) which resembles the "laughter of the gods" in Homer--a laughter quite incomprehensible to mere mortals, struggling (like Lou) to prevent body and soul from coming apart at the seams. Lucy is also old, not only in years but in maturity, and the symbolic importance of this attribute is emphasized by the fact that Lou sees her not merely as old but as eternal. Lucy is, moreover, literally "finished" in the sense that she is one hundred years old and on the point of dying, as well as being symbolically "finished" in the sense of being completed--a totally individuated Self in Jungian terms.(14)

Lou, on the other hand, is beginning; this is why she spends so much time swimming with the bear--playing, as

the developing embryo does in the womb--in the prenatal world of water. This is also why the bear occupies so much of her attention, for the start of the individuation process--the progress towards the complete Self--must be with raw material, and in alchemy the bear traditionally corresponds to raw material (the nigredo of prime matter from which the lapis philosophorum was expected to be produced).(15) Lucy's practical advice to Lou to "shit with the bear," (p. 49) has an additional symbolic significance here, for the prime matter is also symbolized in some contexts by excrement.(16)

But the manifestation of the numinous Sybil as a bear must be carried out for other reasons as well. The bear is a beast and, as Jung points out, "theriomorphic symbols always refer to unconscious manifestations of libido."(17) The Sybil incarnate in a bear represents an unconscious aspect of Lou's femininity. Lou is not altogether without femininity: she has had some sexual experience (most of it bad) and some experience of human contact. In these sexual contacts (with her "elegant" lover and with the Director), however, it becomes clear that her feminine sexuality is underdeveloped, with the result that she is cool, dry and detached--almost as dead as the archives which surround her--in the weekly session with the Director, which even she refers to as a "procedure." (p. 93) But the same lack of develop-

ment as a fully sexual woman allows the uncontrolled Animus energy to break through and send her out into the street in some kind of sexual fury to pick up a stranger or to throw a paperweight through her ex-lover's window in a passion of jealousy. Ester Harding, in a Jungian commentary, points out that:

The instinctive side of the psyche if left undeveloped. . . and unintegrated with the rest of the conscious personality will produce moody, probably. . . rather ill-adapted and compulsive behaviour.(18)

This description is clearly applicable to Lou's behaviour, since even she recognizes that her behaviour is somewhat "ill-adapted" (in Harding's sense of the word). Her undeveloped, instinctive sexuality (which is the source of her "ill-adapted" behaviour) is symbolized by the bear, and her efforts to develop it are represented by her attempts to cope with the bear. The Sybil is represented as a bear to symbolize the animality of instinct, and when Lou first finds the bear, it is dirty, smelly, shaggy and confined in a small, dark space with nobody looking after it. The attention she subsequently gives the bear--in the form of brushing, currying, bathing, warmth, food, stroking--is an analogue of the attention which she must pay to her own instinctive sexuality, so that it can develop as it should. She must, in fact, make friends with the bear--both the real bear and the bear of her



own sexuality for, as Lucy says to her: "Good bear. . . Good lady. Take care of bear." (p. 48)

As a bear Lou's bear is not merely generally and generically feminine, but specifically a mother-image. The most striking maternal image of the bear is found in the bestiaries, where it is recorded that:

. . . the whelpes of bears at their first littering are without alle forme and fashion, and nothing but a little congealed blood like a lumpe of flesh; which afterwards the old one frameth with her tongue to her owne likenes. . .(19)

This suggests the significance of the licking; the real bear may be licking Lou either as a part of grooming behaviour or even merely because he likes the taste; the archetypal maternal bear is framing Lou "with her tongue to her owne likenes." For at the start of the encounter with the Sybil, Lou is just as imperfect as the newly-whelped bear-cub, and must be shaped to the perfection of her as yet undetermined Self.

The bestiary's account of the bear also reveals another aspect of it which contributes to its symbolic value in Lou's psychosexual development. The bear can never be trusted:

. . . it is certaine that they are very hardlie tamed, and not to be trusted though they seem never so tame. . . .(20)

The archetypes, too, are dangerous and

"very hardlie tamed." In another Jungian commentary, P.W. Martin warns the would-be explorer of the unconscious about them, pointing out that they can never be entirely trusted because of their:

. . . manifold ambivalence. They are infantile, undeveloped, semi-animal, semi-reptile even, and at the same time semi-divine. . . They are immensely wise and give the worst possible advice. They can be the truest guides and the most arrant deceivers. They are the light and the darkness, inspiration and madness, the new life and a perpetual distraction.(21)

Moreover, they and the realm they inhabit are intensely seductive to the Ego; Lou, for example, is enticed in this way while swimming with the bear, and pleads:

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)

Indeed, it is a seduction which can lead to total identification, and as Jung points out in a passage I have already quoted, a woman can "identify directly with the Earth Mother." Lou's desire to be identified with the bear is indicated by her plea, "Bear. . . give me your skin," (p. 112) by her plans to make herself "strange garments of fur in order to stay with [him] in the winter," (p. 113) by her

assurances to him: "I won't ever, ever leave you," (p. 113) and by her attempts at sexual union.

But the total or prolonged identification with the archetype in the realm of the inner unconscious reality means the drowning of the Ego in the unconscious, a loss of consciousness of a special and dangerous type. To be "lost in oneself"(22) in this way is to forget who one is and thus to lose one's identity (or soul). In Jung's thinking, women in particular are in danger of this loss of soul, since they are to begin with already more at home in the inner reality than men are; they find it easier to enter and harder to return than men.(23) But they must return: the journey out from the inner reality, up from the bottom of the ocean, must be made if the personality is to survive. However imperfect the outer world of conscious reality, Lou must return to it. But since the Earth Mother is creative as well as destructive, and the unconscious is the "creative matrix of the future" as well as the sheltering womb of the past, the bear itself rescues her.

Just as she is punished for yielding to the temptation to return to passivity having once learned the active sexual role, so also she is punished for yielding to the temptation to stay within the inner reality--and by the same stroke. The blow the bear gives

her, ripping down her back with its claws, jolts her from her preoccupation with the inner reality into the outer reality of consciousness (so that she dismisses the bear abruptly, driving it back to its shed outside). The scar from the blow will mark her, however, as the initiate who has made the journey within and returned--this also is why Engel emphasizes that it will not be "the mark of Cain." (p. 134)

The one blow brings to an end both the archetypal encounters in which the bear has acted to bring Lou to a knowledge of some part of herself. In the bear Lou has encountered her own inner energies as powerful and menacing, yet reassuring and enriching. But more than mere knowledge is required; Lou must act on her knowledge in order to fulfil her potential to achieve what Lucy has already achieved. She still, moreover, has room to backslide into her old self--and it is to prevent this that she is given the scar as a physical and ever-present warning of the consequences of such backsliding. Engel deliberately and, in my opinion, with magnificent artistic tact leaves her at this point in order not to have to define either the nature of the action Lou must take or the nature of its eventual fulfilment (other than what we see of its symbolic form in Lucy). It is in Lou's achievement of self-awareness, I believe, that Engel's portrait of her can be justified as entirely positive.

In the identification of the bear as an ambivalent symbolic manifestation of Lou's own inner psychic energies, one answer to her double question-- "Bear. . . who and what are you?" (p. 36)--is provided. It is not necessarily the only answer. Jung himself prohibited the use of his ideas reductively, and the critic who uses Jung's theory of archetypes to reduce a novel like Bear to "nothing but" an archetypal encounter distorts both the novel and Jung's ideas considerably. That there is more in Bear than the archetypal patterns alone, I freely admit, but I nevertheless maintain that these patterns are the foundation of the novel's strange and powerful effect. The presence of these patterns

of archetypal encounter, as the covert narrative of a fierce and crucial psychological drama beneath the playful, tender and erotic pastoral idyll which forms the overt narrative, generates complexity and tension within the novel. Moreover, the fact that the two archetypal encounters are present in the same sequence of events and yet have widely divergent symbolic significance demands a further ambivalence of response to the narrative, which begins to seem a structure of such delicate balance that it does not, I believe, admit of any final or "definitive" interpretation. And if such a critical position in respect of Bear seems dangerous--so after all is any encounter with a bear, real or archetypal.

#### NOTES

1. Marian Engel, Bear (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976). All page references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.
2. Adèle Wiseman, "Pooh at Puberty," Books in Canada, Vol. 5, No. 4 (April 1967), pp. 6-8.
3. Scott Symons, "Lower Middle Class Canada on the Make," excerpted from "The Canadian Bestiary: Ongoing Literary Depravity" in the Spring 1977 issue of West Coast Review, in Canadian Forum, 57 (September 1977), p. 30.
4. C.G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," in The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, in the Bollinger Edition of the Collected Works, Vol. 9 (i) (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2nd ed., 1968), p. 160.
5. "Watch out, brown bear! Chained and submissive, you are the erotic fantasy of liberated shrews dreaming of sexual subjugation and intellectual dominance. If it is Engel's aim to show we have not only domesticated nature but humiliated it as well, she has succeeded. Whatever Captain Ahab had in mind for Moby Dick, it wasn't a fate worse than death": Barbara Amiel, Maclean's, Vol. 89, No. 7 (19 April 1976), p. 64.
6. Elaine Morgan, The Descent of Woman (New York: Bantam, 1973), pp. 73-74.
7. Something of this is reflected in the custom of North American Indian tribes of addressing the bear (in the hunt and so on) as "cousin" or "grandfather." See A. Irving Hallowell, "Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere," in American Anthropologist, Vol. 28, No. 1, New Series (January-March 1926).
8. C.G. Jung, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," in The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, CW 9(i), p. 6n.
9. Felix Guirand (ed.), The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, tr. Richard Aldington and Delano Ames (London: Hamlyn, new ed., 1969), p. 226.
10. Jung, "Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype," CW9 (i), p. 105.
11. Jung, "Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype," CW9 (i), p. 81.
12. Jung, "Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype," CW9, (i), p. 82.
13. Jung, "Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype," CW9, (i), p. 106.
14. When Lou is leaving, after Joe has come to collect the bear, Homer tells her, "Lucy'll die happy now she has that bear back." (p. 140) As Joe takes the bear away, Lou has another image of the bear as "a fat dignified old woman with his nose to the wind." (p. 138)
15. J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962) p. 22.
16. Jung, Symbols of Transformation, CW 5, p. 353n.
17. Jung, Symbols of Transformation, CW 5, p. 180.
18. M. Esther Harding, Journey Into Self (New York: Longmans, Green, 1956), p. 577.
19. Edward Topsell, The Histories of Four-footed Beastes (London, 1607), p. 37.
20. Topsell, p. 40.
21. F.W. Martin, Experiment in Depth (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), pp. 72-73.
22. Jung, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," CW 9 (i), p. 22.
23. Martin, pp. 34-35.