

Onward, Naked Puritans!:

The Progress of the Heroines of *Bear* and *The Glassy Sea*¹

by Ann M. Hutchison

At first glance Marian Engel's writing seems schizophrenic; it is almost inconceivable that the author of *Bear*, a masterful and exuberant novel about a woman who discovers herself through her relationship with a bear, is also the author of its sequel, *The Glassy Sea*, which tells the story of how a woman finds herself by becoming an Anglican nun. And yet *The Glassy Sea* is not so different; it can, perhaps, be seen as a companion to *Bear*. Both heroines have a strong but latent desire to face up to their true selves, and both need a strong impetus to set them on the way to self-discovery. Though they begin at different stages, and though we see a more complete picture of the development of the heroine in *The Glassy Sea* than of the heroine in *Bear*, they both go through a similar process. Each begins by retreating: in *Bear*, Lou hides in the basement of the Historical Institute, and in *The Glassy Sea*, Rita escapes to Eglantine House, an order of Anglican nuns. External circumstances take the heroines away from their retreats into the world of "adventure". Living alone in an isolated house on an island² in a remote area — another kind of retreat, perhaps — each woman eventually finds an identity which she had previously rejected, Lou more immediately and Rita after a variety of occurrences. Both then return more assured, or certainly with more self-knowledge, and are ready to begin again. Lou's future is vague, but she realizes she needs a new job. Rita returns "for a term of five years" (p. 163) to Eglantine House, but this time her intentions are clear — this is not a retreat.

What is very different about these novels is their atmosphere and, to some

extent, their narrative method. *Bear* is a bright, summertime adventure story³ with all the activity and trappings of this mode: a trip to the northern wilderness, an exotic house on an island, a library whose books contain secret messages, trunks full of costumes in the basement, an ancient Indian lady who can communicate with bears, and, of course, the bear itself. *The Glassy Sea* describes a mental voyage, and like the workings of the mind its method is complex and varied. This novel also covers a longer time-span than *Bear*; it relates a whole personal history. Yet despite these differences in tone and method, the novels share an experimental quality; through the unexpected they attempt to come to an understanding of very pressing contemporary problems. In *Bear*, Engel stretches fantasy to its limits, but at the same time deals with a woman's problems and thoughts; in *The Glassy Sea*, she attempts to write about a woman's dark night of the soul in terms the modern reader can relate to and understand.

In *Bear*, we participate in the story as it unfolds. We follow Lou to Cary Island in northern Ontario where a timely legacy to the Historical Institute has provided her with a splendid house and research to occupy her summer — the much needed opportunity to break free from her humdrum, grey life as an archivist in the Institute's basement. As she drives north out of the city and into the wilderness, Lou experiences, as she writes to the Institute's Director, "an odd sense... of being reborn" (p. 19). Out of the city, Lou's senses reawaken. On the Island, her orderly, scholarly research into Colonel Cary's books and papers gradually and

unexpectedly becomes combined with probings of an unusual sort as Lou encounters and becomes increasingly familiar with the Cary bear. Her labours at the Institute have prepared her for the archival work, but it is the 100-year-old Indian woman, Lucy Leroy, who provides her with the clue to unravelling the mysteries of the bear. The two avenues of research become linked as neat, handwritten notes on the antiquity, significance, naming, anatomy and habits of bears fall from the books Lou is cataloguing. As she becomes steeped in the lore of bears and as her relationship with the bear develops along more and more fantastic (and intimate) lines, her disciplined bibliographical work becomes, for Lou, a justification for being, a licence for her enjoyment.⁴ When summer draws to an end, however, Lou discovers that her scholarly researches have led nowhere, she has learned nothing about the early settlement in the region — "the empty, enormous house" might be "a fine buiding, but it had no secrets" (p. 139). Her probings of the bear too have reached a dead end. And yet through him she has come alive. At the end of the summer, she discovers she has changed physically: "She seemed to have the body of a much younger woman. The sedentary fat had gone, leaving the shape of ribs showing" (pp. 133-134), and she has learned about the unmethodical, irrational side of life — she has understood the meaning of serendipity and experienced happiness and joy. Through the bear she has learned about love, but perhaps more importantly she discovers on her last night with him what it means to be loved:⁵ "That night, lying clothed and tenderly beside him by the fire, she was a

babe, a child, an innocent... Lapped in his fur, she was wrapped in a basket and caressed by little waves. The breath of kind beasts was upon her..." (p. 136). Her parting with the bear, then, is not the wrenching apart of lovers, but the more peaceful and affectionate exchange of farewells with a companion, and as Joe King takes him away, Lou's last view is of "a fat dignified old woman with his nose to the wind in the bow of the boat" (p. 138).⁶ Unlike Colonel Cary and his descendants, Lou avoids the fate of "perishing in the wilderness" (p. 139), and drives south to the city, her guilt for "having to do with a bear" healed, feeling "strong and pure" (p. 140). And yet, some of his essence finally stays with her as she drives home mindful that "overhead the Great Bear and his thirty-seven thousand virgins kept her company" (p. 141). In *Bear*, Engel writes directly and courageously about a woman's feelings and of the successes and disappointments she encounters in her search for herself. She also writes of her return from that odyssey healed, changed and in control of her destiny. Lou, we feel confident, has developed the capacity to stand up to her "Director" and will find a more satisfactory job.

Engel's novels may speak to women, but they speak to men too, and though she feels strongly about the position of women in today's world, she rarely preaches, nor does she give a "message" at the expense of her fiction. On the other hand, Engel's fiction is not mere fantasy; her novels deal with real people who experience real feelings. Though Lou's adventures in the solitude of Cary Island may appear fantastic, they are conceivable in terms of the fictional world Engel has created. Engel has been careful to establish a place and a situation in which the presence of a bear is credible: the island setting is instantly recognizable, the Fowler octagon accurately depicted, and the nineteenth-century romantic ambitions of Cary and his possession of a bear belong in this context. While for Lou, as was true perhaps for Byron, Cary and Lucy Leroy, the bear may stand for many things (Lou discovers that she can project or "paint any face on him that she wanted," p. 72) — a creature needing care, the Cary bear, Lucy's companion, fleetingly Trelawny, a hero, a saint, a constellation, her lover, her gentle protecting mother — he himself is, finally, just bear.

Whereas *Bear* presents a physical journey and a physical working out of distress over a limited time period, *The Glassy Sea*

is more concerned with the psychic processes of a lifetime. In *Bear*, there is energy and a feeling of exhilaration; in *The Glassy Sea*, we encounter the heroine "sitting in an exhausted reverie" (p. 9), and the entire novel is a reflection of her thoughts and feelings about her past and about the events that have led to her present situation. In *Bear*, the reader participates in Lou's adventures and reacts with her; in *The Glassy Sea*, the reader encounters the heroine's progress at a remove (the fact that she is a nun distances her, for most readers, still further). The device of a frame, "The Prologue" and "The En-voie" which surround "The Letter", besides sounding vaguely Chaucerian, increases the distance and allows her life, encompassed in her reverie, to be held up to scrutiny. The novel's actual time frame is the passage of one evening, and the only character we encounter directly is the central character, Sister Mary Pelagia, the newly installed sister superior of the newly revived Eglantine Order. We spend the evening witnessing with her episodes from her past, first as they have been recounted some months before during the summer in a letter written to Philip, Bishop of Huron, and then as she recalls the events of the intervening months leading up to her present situation. What *The Glassy Sea* lacks in direct involvement, however, it makes up for in the complexity of its style. The reader becomes immersed in this intimate, personal revelation; in writing it, Engel draws upon available modes for writing about times of internal crisis.

Perhaps the most immediately apparent is the method of psychoanalysis, the therapy of self-examination, the long and painful process of summoning up the past to help interpret the motives of the present. The reference, early in the novel, to Dr. Stern suggests this mode, but more significantly the instinctive way Sister Mary Pelagia defends herself before continuing with her reminiscences indicates that psychiatric treatment has been a recent experience for her.⁷ Since the speaker is a nun, Engel experiments, not unexpectedly, with modes of religious writing. There is, for example, the confession (or apology), often the autobiography of a conversion, a recounting of the wanderings and temptations which become important stages on the way to a new life. This revealing of the inner self is in many ways a kind of therapy akin to psychoanalysis — one thinks of the greatest model of this genre, *The Confessions* of St. Augustine.⁸ *The Glassy Sea*, like traditional confessions, abounds in the

language of the Church with its references to hymns,⁹ biblical passages, teachings, doctrines, and great religious figures. In addition, there is the meditation, a kind of deep concentration during which one identifies with, or even attempts to become one with, the object contemplated in an attempt to understand the nature of the universe and of one's own relationship to it. In her letter, Rita describes such an experience at its most intense: "I concentrated my whole soul on the roses and thought what were possible thoughts about roses..."; and she remembers the effect: "for one fleeting moment I was back in the rose-world inhaling all the mysteries; I felt the metaphysic and the crowns and the thorns were around me again and I wanted to go into the heart of them all" (pp. 18-19).¹⁰ As Rita thinks about her life, she endows many other objects or living things — birds, especially the windhover and the starling, the field, the sea, the egg, etc. — with a rich and shifting symbolic significance as she observes or remembers them.¹¹ The symbols and imagery of contemplation are also the stuff of psychoanalytic interpretation, thus indicating how intricately related the methods of understanding psychic processes can become. Finally, the letter itself, which comprises the major portion of the novel, suggests a monologue, or perhaps a conversation or debate, and is thereby a kind of self-revelation. Rita's reaction to Philip's letter (which sparks her own reply), "hey, presto, complete: one life. As in *Life and Letters*, of course" (p. 16), strengthens this association. The notion of writing letters in solitude is also contained in the novel's epigraph, the final stanza of Rilke's poem, "Herbsttag". This poem significantly belongs to Rilke's transitional volume, *Das Buch der Bilder*, which moves away from the subjective emotionalism of his early poetry to the more objective stance of his mature work, and evokes a mood of inner change mirrored in the seasonal change, a time for keeping watch, for reading, and for writing long letters, as Rita herself describes her days at the end of her letter (p. 144). The association with Rilke himself is interesting, since in his verse he attempts to grapple with his problems and seeks to interpret himself; his numerous letters also seem to mark the stages of inner progress toward a resolution and acceptance.¹²

As the novel opens, we find Sister Mary Pelagia sitting alone, worried about the implications of her decision to become a nun again and so revive the Eglantine

Order. She wishes to linger a little in her past and reflect: "It is as if I haven't quite walked through the looking glass" (p. 13). She rereads the long letter she wrote shortly after arriving at her retreat by the shore hoping it will help her learn "how finally to deal with the disastrous baggage of the past" (p. 14), so that she can at last feel more confident about her present position. In the letter itself, each of the novel's modes — the psychoanalytic, the confessional, the contemplative and the epistolary — seems to inform and lend meaning to the story that emerges. Most immediately, the letter is addressed to "Philip Yurn" (as Huron sounds in an Ontario accent), who as the Bishop of Huron is now her spiritual mentor, though at the time of writing he was a benevolent friend trying to persuade her, Rita Bowen, to resume her role as an Eglantine sister so that under her direction the Order could be reconstituted.¹³ Just as Philip's official name, Huron, identifies the authority of his office, so his nickname, with its pun on "yearn", defines his relationship to Rita. As she writes to him to explain "why I can't do what you ask for the church" (p. 20), her longing for such a vocation, for "roses" and "escape" from the world (p. 24), pervades her letter. Throughout the letter too, memories of her recent sessions with Dr. Stern counterpoint the story she relates to Philip. The letter seems, in some measure, an attempt to weigh her experiences as Dr. Stern's patient against the attractions of the life Philip offers; yet it is also a testimony to the "success" of Dr. Stern's work. While frequent references to him make it evident that Dr. Stern is very much on Rita's mind as she writes to Philip, there is also the sense that there are things Rita can discuss, and that she revels in discussing, with Philip that are closed to the world of Dr. Stern. With Philip she can speak of the metaphysic and mystery of "the rose world", its crowns and its thorns, and of the rose "enthorned, thus enthroned" (p. 24). With Dr. Stern, who "would be disapproving" (p. 19) and unsympathetic with her "yearning" for mysteries, she learned about reality: "so that instead of contemplating the mysterious id, I was contemplating what was; not what had been, not what should be, but what was" (p. 143). For the time being, then, "reality" seems to be on the winning side.

In reading this letter, we the readers almost assume the role of an analyst, or at least feel we are witnessing an analytic session, and become engrossed in the details as the various stages of Rita's past gradually unfold. As in traditional psy-

choanalysis, Rita begins with her earliest memories. She tells of growing up on the shore in West China Township and of the plain gas station and "bleak field", which made her "long for better things" (p. 20). We learn about her family, the Macraes and the Hebers, who had "staying power" and had lived on the same line for 150 years, and who were "plain people not made for mysteries" (p. 20). Rita remembers tall and fair Aunt Mary who grew roses and who was — in many ways the antithesis of her mother who pumped the gas, baked, patched, mended and tried "to make ends meet" (pp. 20-21), and who eventually wore the pants as well (p. 126). In those days Rita saw herself as the perverse, left-handed ugly duckling who drove her mother wild (pp. 21, 45). In time, however, she discovered that Rita the dreamer, as she was called, was more like her mother and the other women in her family, who "routinely... worked their fingers to the bone" (p. 30), than she had allowed herself to think; she was, in fact, a better Martha than a Mary. Many of these "historical" facts or images become integral parts of her life story — the Mary vs Martha debate, for example, associating Mary with roses, with beauty and with romantic pursuits and Martha with the humdrum, ever busy, working world, is waged throughout the novel, and perhaps continues beyond its conclusion.

Although Rita's reminiscences follow a narrative sequence, here and there she interrupts them, often with a comment to Philip, as thoughts occur to her and as she herself tries to analyse and understand her past. Her memories are elucidated and enriched by the variety of comparisons and meanings she consciously or unconsciously attaches to them. She recognizes that she was, and we indeed notice that she still is, "fatally seducible by ear and eye" (p. 36). This characteristic accounts for many of the choices she has made throughout her life (her attraction to Boris, Christabel, Asher Bowen, for example, and to Eglantine House itself). And, although she may not have chosen it herself, the beauty of her situation as she writes the letter — an isolated house by the sea, with a field full of flowers to observe from her window and the antics and pursuits of birds to engage her attention — holds her captive, at least for the summer.

Just as past events give significance to her life, so too her name is always of importance in establishing her progress at any one time. Although as a child Rita felt like the beige product of a world of black and red Hebers and Macraes, and though

she was told the correct derivation of Heber (p. 19), she nevertheless saw herself as the R. Heber who wrote the glorious hymn about resurrection (from which the novel's title is taken). Rita, moreover, is the diminutive of Marguerite, her full name (though she never uses it), which means as she is later aware, pearl, the symbol of perfection (marguerite is also the daisy and thus ties in with the novel's flower imagery). On becoming an Eglantine, Rita remembers the irony of her naming. Sister Mary Rose gave her the name Pelagia, not for St. Pelagia of Antioch, the reformed whore and later transvestite saint, but for Pelagius, the British monk and heretic, who, believing in the potential of the individual to reach perfection, was "as great a Puritan as [she]" (p. 78). And yet, perhaps more appropriately, she sees herself as Pelagia — the prostitute who was converted by Bishop Nonnus, who became a holy person, and who, in order to serve God "better", became a Desert Father of great piety (a frequent practice in the misogynist atmosphere of the early Church), noted for his asceticism and power to help the weak.¹⁴ On leaving the Eglantines, Sister Mary Pelagia resumes the name Rita, but later Asher, who dislikes "Rita", calls her Peggy (pp. 75, 112), another diminutive of Marguerite, but one which sounds like Pelagia, thus linking these two parts of her past. When her marriage is over, she is once again Rita and signs her letter, Rita Bowen. Though she takes "a new name for a new life" (p. 75), the newness is superficial, for the names are all in some way associated with her "full" name, Marguerite.

Rita also seems to see her life as a series of stages, (she even speaks of herself as "hatching only in stages," p. 158) or a progress from one house to another. At each house she either "inherits" or creates a "family", and each in some way reflects or contrasts with her first home. Her first home and her ready-made family create the pattern, or archetype, for the others. In this process, her mother and her older sister Shirl stand out, while her father, and her brother Stu remain fairly shadowy figures. At University a "shabby, old, fake Tudor house" (p. 49) becomes her residence, and the presiding Dean of Women mistakenly hopes she will teach her good Christian ways (p. 53) to her roommate, the beautiful, flower-like Christabel,¹⁵ who instead becomes, as Shirl could not be, her "pagan" (p. 53), amoral alter ego, until eventually Christabel's commitment to a man in marriage breaks the spell. Home, after collapsing at Christabel's wedding, and convalescing

with her plain, but comforting tulip wallpaper, she basks in the warmth of the caring attentions of her mother. Later she exchanges tulips for roses and her mother for Sister Mary Rose, as tasteful, Victorian Eglantine House — which would have given William Morris pleasure (p. 75) — becomes her home and its sisters her family. Here the ugly Sister Mary Cicely becomes her alter ego, a kind of anti-type of Christabel, until she too disappears because of a man (this time in a car crash). This loss brings with it a more significant loss; the world of Eglantine House no longer has a place for her. Just as she has been pushed out of the family nest by her mother (p. 45), now Sister Mary Rose pushes her out of her nest and into the harum-scarum world of the Hibbert household in Toronto. Five huge, virile sons, the delicate Phoebe, and the practical Maggie with her scarcely visible lawyer husband replace the tranquil world of the Eglantine Sisters and prepare her for marriage and her own home (the coincidence of names — Maggie Hibbert and Marguerite Heber — seems calculated on Engel's part). Her husband Asher's house, a large elegant one in Forest Hill, is not the typical household of a happily married couple, but more nearly resembles Eglantine House gone wrong, with a Spanish painting of the crucifixion ("an obviously sex-hating icon" p. 115) instead of the beautiful white ivory crucifix from Glastonbury (pp. 10, 79). Their deformed offspring, Charles or Chummy, becomes a symbol of this disorder. The house of Uncle Eddie, her hated birthday present from Asher, is a further aberration, though it is inhabited briefly by the mysterious and warming presence of Oliver. As she tells Philip, "The space between that house and this house" is best filled by imagining the hell-paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (p. 134). The shabby farmhouse by the sea, like her shabby home by the shore in West China, is "comfortable" (p. 16) at first; later in the dead of winter, it too will take on other aspects and become subject to dark visions.

These descriptions are rich in allusion, but at the same time their full significance at any one reading remains elusive. The skillful selection of detail allows for concrete visualization, but also gives rise to a multitude of possible associations. Thus the letter achieves an almost poetic quality, and, like a meditation, at each reading it furnishes new sources for contemplation.

The conversational, or almost polemical, tone of the letter, which for long

periods becomes submerged in the narrative, surfaces again near its conclusion. Rita's final refusal of Philip's offer is couched in the language of vision. In opting for the reality of the present, she rejects the potential of the religious world: "I wish to spend this part of my life seeing what I can see of the universe as it is, rather than attempting the perfecting of my soul. That is a worldly aim, Philip, but I need to be worldly" (p. 144). Yet Rita's closing words seem to belie her resolution. As she writes, "But leave me here, please, to dream my redemptive dreams" (p. 144), we recall "Rita the dreamer", the young girl who imagined herself as belonging to "the halcyon, flashing, glorious" world of visions, the girl who has always been seduced by the world of poetry. While the actual process of writing the letter may have been intended as a refusal of Philip's offer, rereading it gives Rita, now Sister Mary Pelagia, a different perspective. The writer of the letter, Rita Bowen, still sensitive to "the painfully acquired advice of Dr. Stern" finds the "Rule" he has formulated for her, "including the Thou Shalt Nots" (p. 135), compatible with "the morality of the Christians" who raised her (p. 147), and she opts for his "stern" world. But there is another aspect to Dr. Stern. Rita feels grateful to him for leading her "to some kind of reason" (p. 135), and for offering her "a unique experience: the freedom to see things as they are... to see the here-and-now" (p. 143); Dr. Stern has become in some sense her guiding "star" (*Stern* is, in fact, the German word for "star"). In retrospect, his "Rule" is perhaps not vastly different from the Rule of the Eglantines; and in retrospect, Philip too "with his lovely smile" (p. 166) and his timely query "And how does your husband enjoy being married to one who was once the bride of Christ?" (p. 11) bears some resemblance to Dr. Stern, the "lovely man" who asked her why she became a nun. It is not until later that the two worlds — the contemplative or irrational and the practical or rational — merge in the person of Brother Anthony Stone: he is an emissary from Philip and a member of a religious order, but, like Dr. Stern, he deals in facts. Though his timely arrival Rita is rescued from the distressing "reality" that, shut in her solitary retreat by the sea by the ravages of winter, she has begun to create.

Now, as she rereads the letter in the peaceful solitude of Eglantine House, Sister Mary Pelagia's memories of the crisis that followed her blissful summer by the shore are vividly revived. These

scenes, depicted in the *Envoie*, are part of what is by far the bleakest segment of her life and certainly the most stark and angry section of the novel: the narrative element almost disappears and her world draws in upon itself. It is midwinter and Rita is completely isolated; the once comforting view of the sea has been "reduced to the size of a palmprint on a frosted window pane: (p. 146). She sees herself as a crazy lady (p. 153), imprisoned like the first Mrs. Rochester portrayed in Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, (pp. 149, 151). She has once again sunk into her own private hell and spends her days fuelling the furnace and, with her feet in the oven, she reads about nihilism and contemplates death to the accompaniment of clanging pipes. Her anger, like the storm outside, rages uncontrollably, and her debate becomes more grim: "I, who had resolved to meditate on the possibilities of life, became involved in a duel with his adversary, death" (p. 146). She fantasizes about death, and as if seeking to pacify her former husband, constructs a world of young women where those over thirty, or past childbearing, are killed off to suit the desires of men like Asher who liked "only the young, perfect, underripe" (p. 151).

Yet destruction is not Engel's mode; her heroines are, if anything, survivors. Somewhere in the depths Rita realizes that all the time she counted on an ending: "I caught my breath: I was banking, finally, on some kind of ending to the plan; on limitations; somewhere in my black, angry, jealous heart there was still room for a small eternity: a resurrection" (pp. 151-152). The almost miraculous arrival of Brother Anthony Stone gives Rita "a faint and interesting *frisson*" (p. 152); her intuition has been right. Brother Anthony proves to be not only good company (p. 152) and a soul mate, with whom she can reminisce about Eglantine House, but he is also the guide or debating partner she most needs. His arguments, she now realizes, were "compassionate and efficient"; they were logical, but they also "allowed for the spaces between the lines of the stave of logic", and most importantly they made her feel better (p. 153). But more than that, by stressing the need for Sister Mary Pelagia herself to reestablish Eglantine House, Anthony has reawakened her desire to live. After rejecting the oblivion offered by Dr. Stern's sleeping pills, Rita experiences a final night of stormy struggle: she becomes a child again, now a feverish child needing care, now a child intensely longing for something, and yet at the same time she is a mother figure caring for this child. At last,

she comes to recognize her need, a desire for a world to have importance in (p. 157). With the coming of morning, she proclaims herself "half in favour... for practical reasons" (p. 158).

Rita has indeed opted for life. Like Lou during her last night with the bear, she has experienced some kind of regression and/or rebirth, but unlike Lou at the end of her experiences in the wilderness, she does not emerge feeling strong and pure. Rita no longer rages, but her inner debate has not entirely subsided. Sitting now in Eglantine House, she feels "I have this one night to turn the matter over and over again in my hands like a darned egg" (p. 159). As in *Bear*, Engel brings her heroine back, but here she also attempts to reestablish her heroine in the world to which she has returned.

In dealing with the heroine's reintegration, Engel seems to be more tentative; she seems to allow her fictional mode to surface and become more obviously merged with the eventual *modus vivendi* of her heroine — i.e., the novel becomes more obviously mechanical. In her solitary house, Rita has nourished herself on books in an attempt to find "an analogy" which she could "forge... into a different reality" (p. 160). *Lysistrata* and the writings of E.M. Cioran have not been the right ones; but the biography of Florence Nightingale, which she has read "with astonishment and delight", at last provides her with a model. Just as Florence Nightingale felt the urgency of "life-saving" rather than "soul-saving" in time of war, so too in her world where the "fall-out from the battle of the sexes is getting worse every day and will continue to do so" (p. 160), Rita/Pelagia recognizes an urgent need, can accept Philip's and Anthony's call to service and will pitch into the war effort (p. 160). Rita thus constructs a war for herself, where like her model, her talents can be realized. She at last recognizes: "I am the bloody-minded Martha that my mother was, ... I was no good at being a Mary" (pp. 164-165). She will help "resurrect" Eglantine House, not as "a pretty piece of pseudomedievalism" (p. 153), but "as a kind of hospice, a refuge from the war" (p. 161). Like Florence Nightingale, whose life-saving activities saved her from the suffocating clutches of her mother and sister, Rita too is "saved" as she accepts the role of saving others. She sees herself now as "a practical Pelagian", who emerged from her "shell" to do this work. And the novel's various strands begin to come together as we think not only of a fledgling preparing to fly, but also of Pelagia's counterpart,

Aphrodite, the other woman who rises from a shell, and in turn of Marguerite, the pearl which is fashioned in a shell. The home she now envisions, or "resurrects", embodies the best of her former homes¹⁶ — the new Eglantine House will be a hospice of caring sisters, a refuge for "sisters" who need care, a nest for the young; its garden will provide a playground and a place for roses, its chapel, solitude and repose, and for her it will furnish "a need, not to serve, but to belong" (p. 164).

This realization not only integrates the developing images of the letter, but also helps her see other parts of her past with some degree of clarity and lay to rest at least a part of her anger. Thinking especially of her marriage and her relationship to Asher, she realizes that he didn't like her and also that he was afraid of her having power of any kind. She speculates that this fear may be true of men generally, but she also acknowledges the reverse: "and I am afraid, now, deeply afraid, of men. I know what they can do to me" (p. 161). These reflections reinforce her decision to become sister superior of Eglantine House, and for the time being she rejects the possibility of a future relationship with a man because her function "would be domestic only, for one person only" (p. 161). But there is a hesitation, just as there is some ambivalence in her acceptance of herself as a Martha. She hears her voice "rolling up its sleeves" (p. 165) and at the same time describes herself as being once more "at the end of a long and delicious seduction" (p. 166), but this, like the seduction of Donne's sonnet,¹⁷ is a polemical one. As her reverie, and the novel, ends, Sister Mary Pelagia allows the Martha in her to predominate and looks forward to putting Eglantine House "in shape", but in her hope that there will be room in the cloister for "just a little garden" (p. 167), she retains just a little of the Mary as well. She can now accept her Puritan legacy of hard work, but she can also acknowledge the existence of "Rita the dreamer"; this compromise is, perhaps, something of "The truth for her" (p. 162).

If Engel was daring in her use of an almost pornographic mode in *Bear*, for a modern audience she is perhaps more courageous in using a religious mode in *The Glassy Sea*. It is a less immediately accessible novel; it is dense and convoluted and lacks the direct narrative progress of *Bear*. Yet like all her novels, it is well reasoned, convincing and tightly written; there is nothing gratuitous. The novel's present, contracted into the space

of an evening, becomes the frame which contains the heroine's life and on which the various layers of her past are superimposed. To understand the novel's meaning, one must work by analogy, decode the language and strip away the layers, and then reread it, as in modern psychoanalysis or in confession or in medieval meditation.¹⁸ Whether or not the "solution" of either novel is acceptable to the modern reader, these novels themselves are deeply engaging in their attempts to represent the painful struggle of a woman to face up to herself honestly. We admire Engel for accepting the challenge — we perhaps admire rather than identify with Lou and Sister Mary Pelagia who agree to attempt to live it out. As Sarah Porlock, the heroine of Engel's first novel puts it, "You know, what takes the real guts is not to go away, but to start again".¹⁹

¹ Marian Engel, *Bear* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976) and *The Glassy Sea* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978). I would like to acknowledge the helpful suggestions and encouragement of Professor Joan Coldwell of McMaster University who read this article in its first draft.

² Islands have a strong appeal for Engel; see Marian Engel and J.A. Kraulis, *The Islands of Canada* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1981), especially p. 12.

³ See Elspeth Cameron (Lovejoy), "Midsummer Madness: Marian Engel's *Bear*", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 21 (1977-78), 83-94. Cameron demonstrates how *Bear* presents the "summer life" of Lou.

⁴ Lou, like all Engel's heroines, is a product of the Ontario Puritan tradition in which hard work and striving to be a better Christian are the rule. The heroine of *The Glassy Sea* repeatedly makes this point.

⁵ The bear, which formerly Lou had looked after and "mothered", now becomes for her a protective mothering figure, the complex mentor that Engel's heroines often seek. Compare Rita's experiences during her stormy night in her island retreat (p. 157; discussed below p. XX).

⁶ The bear's male and female aspects are more fully dealt with in a fascinating article by Donald S. Hair, "Marian Engel's 'Bear'", *Canadian Literature*, 92

(1982), 34-45; see particularly pp. 41ff.

⁷ "The reason why music goes with religion, Dr. Stern, is that it is also anti-rational" (p. 10). The cool formality of her tone, his name, and the use of his title (we never learn his first name), evoke the clinical distance of the psychiatrist's office. A psychiatrist's or psychoanalyst's office may not actually be cold and clinical, but like the psychiatrist himself, may reflect the patient's mood or attitude. *Bear*, by contrast, is dedicated to John Rich, a psychoanalyst whose name evokes very different associations and whose powers (according to Engel, he "knows

⁸ See Peter Brown, "The 'Confessions'" in *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 158-181. Rita herself tells us she is familiar with St. Augustine.

⁹ The novel's title, "The Glassy Sea", comes from Bishop Reginald Heber's hymn "Holy, holy, holy," the first hymn in the traditional Canadian hymn book. The image of "a sea of glass" is ultimately derived from Rev. 4:6, while the hymn itself is based on Isaiah 6, as well as on this chapter of Revelations. Both passages describe visions granted under special conditions. In the context of the novel, the image suggests the heroine's own high aspirations, especially since she feels the hymn belongs to her (p. 19).

¹⁰ Symbols in medieval religious writing contain more than a single meaning. Engel seems to be fascinated by this potential of the symbol and exploits it

throughout the novel.

¹¹ The prominent use of birds recalls the *Ancrene Riwle*, the Middle English Rule for Anchoresses (which Engel adapts to her own purposes), particularly the part concerning "The Regulation of the Inward Feelings" (*The Ancrene Riwle*, trans. M.B. Salu (London: Burns & Oates, 1955), pp. 53-77), where the writer uses a passage from the Psalms (101: 7-8) as a basis for a meditation on what it means to be an anchoress. Hopkins' poem "The Windhover" is undoubtedly a source as well. In *Bear* too, Lou finds similarly rich symbolic analogies for the bear itself.

¹² See G. Craig Houston, "Rilke as Revealed in His Letters" in *Rainer Maria Rilke, Aspects of His Mind and Poetry*, eds. William Rose and G. Craig Houston (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1973), especially pp. 22-23.

¹³ Like Chaucer's elegant Prioress, Madame Eglantine, and the life she hoped to represent, the world of Eglantine House was one of culture, taste, good food and good breeding. Eglantine, or *Rosa Eglantaria*, is also the name of the briar rose and appropriately enriches the mystical dimension that Rita associates with the life of the Cloister.

¹⁴ The motifs of conversion (or transformation) and transvestitism (or dual personality) are of particular interest since they are similar to central developments in *Bear*: the bear, as has been noted, is both masculine and feminine; the last Colonel Cary, too, is a woman who had to take a man's title and follow his customs in

order to inherit the Cary estate. This topic is more fully discussed by Hair, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-44.

¹⁵ Christabel owes something to both the Christabel and the Geraldine of Coleridge's poem.

¹⁶ One of Engel's models here is the Park Village Sisters, the first order of Anglican sisters, founded in 1845, and referred to in the novel (pp. 64, 68).

¹⁷ See "Holy Sonnet XIV", "Batter my heart, three person'd God;..." alluded to and quoted in part throughout the novel. In the introduction to her edition of the *Holy Sonnets*, Dame Helen Gardner makes the point that "the influence of the formal meditation lies behind the 'Holy Sonnets', not as a literary source, but as a way of thinking, a method of prayer" (John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, 2nd edition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978), p. liv). This comment further indicates the appropriateness of Engel's selection of detail to her theme.

¹⁸ Interestingly in her next novel, *Lunatic Villas* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), Engel returns to a more traditional narrative mode, yet retains some of the themes found in *The Glassy Sea*, particularly that of mothering. At the novel's high point, Harriet goes to court to prove, not that she is fit to be a mother superior, but that she *is* a superior mother.

¹⁹ *No Clouds of Glory* (Don Mills, Ontario: Longmans Canada, 1968), p. 180.

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