

De-metaphorizing and becoming animal: when the animal looks back. A reading of Marian Engel's *Bear*

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ABSTRACT. The primacy acquired by nature in our current culture has given way to several issues not strictly connected with an immediate and 'purely' ecological interest: there is rather the need to question how we conceive the animal with a focus on the possibility to transcend Western cultural heritage. When trying to give a literary representation of the animal, it is particularly important to adopt some measures which, following the trajectory of a genuine, positive 'becoming-animal', will safeguard its independence and avoid reducing it to metaphorically anthropomorphic representations. This essay intends to underline how, from this viewpoint, a few novels coming from the post-colonial area, where animal tales often show how interwoven humans and animals are and how they are constructed in relation to each other supply interesting case studies. My interest focuses particularly on Canadian Marian Engel's *Bear*, where the writer tries to deal with unspeakable subjects between a woman and a bear: through an act of radical approach to its physical reality, the former comes first to recognize the latter, and then to accept its Otherness. On its side, the bear seemingly 'shows' a post-colonial attitude subversively resisting a typically Western anthropomorphic allegorization. Holding fast to itself and its animality, choosing in a way to 'stay mute', the bear keeps the role of a 'perceptive catalyst', 'thought-producing' and thus 'world-changing', according to an aesthetics of perception suggesting that the animal gaze might be the best perspective from which to observe not only our world, but especially our own selves.

Keywords: animal gaze, de-metaphorizing, becoming animal, post-colonial, Marian Engel.

RESUMO. Desmetaforizando e tornando-se animal: quando o animal retorna o olhar.

Uma leitura do romance *Bear*, de Marian Engel. A primazia adquirida pela natureza sobre a acultura em nossos dias abriu o caminho para vários problemas não exatamente ligados a interesses imediatos ou puramente ecológicos. Pode-se perguntar como poderemos conceber o animal tendo como foco a possibilidade de transcender a herança cultural ocidental. Quando tenta-se dar uma representação literária ao animal, é extremamente importante adotar certas medidas as quais, seguindo uma trajetória como tornar-se animal de maneira genuína e determinada, garantirá sua independência e evitará reduzi-lo a representações metaforicamente antropomórficas. Este artigo destaca como, a partir deste ponto de vista, alguns romances inscritos pelo pós-colonialismo, em que fábulas de animais frequentemente mostram a maneira das interações entre homens e animais e como elas são construídas em relação umas com as outras, propiciando casos interessantes. O principal interesse aqui é o romance *Bear* da escritora canadense Marian Engel, no qual a escritora trata de assuntos escabrosos entre uma mulher e um urso: por meio de abordagem radical à sua realidade física, a mulher, primeiro, reconhece o urso e depois aceita a sua alteridade. Por outro lado, parece que o urso 'mostra' uma atitude pós-colonial pela resistência subversiva à alegorização antropomórfica tipicamente ocidental. Agarrando-se a si mesmo e a sua animalidade e escolhendo ficar 'mudo', o urso assume o papel de um 'catalizador perceptivo', criador de pensamentos, e, conseqüentemente, um transformador no mundo, de acordo com uma das estéticas da percepção, sugerindo que o olhar do animal poderia ser a melhor perspectiva para observar a realidade e, de modo especial, a nós mesmos.

Palavras-chave: olhar do animal, desmetaforização, tornando-se animal, pós-colonial, Marian Engel.

Introduction

The primacy acquired by nature in the culture of our times has brought to the fore several issues which are not strictly connected with an immediate and 'purely' ecological interest. It is not only a

question of invalidating the Cartesian dualism, which has deeply influenced the modern perception of the world, with a view to fostering, broadly speaking, a new 'ecological sensibility'. There is also, indeed, a wholly post-modern theoretical emphasis on how "relations to the non-human world are

always historically mediated" (SOPER, 1995, p. 4) and thus on how our culture has developed its tools to build and classify the animal world, 'semanticizing' it in its relationship with the human one.

Beyond the ecological interest, there is the need to question how we conceive the animal with a focus on the possibility to transcend Western cultural heritage, underlining and demystifying the "human blinkeredness rather than human fascination with the non-human world" (BAKER, 2000, p. 16). When trying to give a literary representation of the animal, it is particularly important to adopt some measures which, following the trajectory of a genuine and positive 'becoming-animal' (as Deleuze and Guattari contend in *Mille plateaux*), will safeguard the independence of the animal itself and avoid reducing it to metaphorically anthropomorphic representations.

From this viewpoint, some novels coming from the post-colonial area, where animal tales often show how interwoven humans and animals are and how they are constructed in relation to each other, supply interesting case studies. The attention here is particularly focused on Canadian Marian Engel's *Bear*, where the writer tries to deal with unspeakable subjects between 'man' (here a female character, Lou) and 'animal' (namely, a bear): through an act of radical approach to its physical reality, the former comes first to recognize the latter, being then able to accept its Otherness even on the linguistic level. On its side, the bear seemingly 'shows' a post-colonial attitude subversively resisting a typically Western anthropomorphic allegorization and avoiding any easy reduction to passive victim.

Considered one of the most articulate feminist fiction-writers of contemporary Canada, Engel was insightfully skeptical about the existence of a monolithic Truth, usually inferred from a reality based on a strictly dichotomic structure which inescapably divides it into "black-white, pro, contra [so that] all the time the shades are neglected" (VERDUYN, 1999, p. 62). Engel was rather concerned with what lies 'between the lines', those too often 'neglected shades' of a multiple reality in the analysis of which one can find the only way toward a deeper understanding both of others and of ourselves.

Through *Bear*, she offers a peculiar interpretation of the relationship between a human being and an animal, and this interpretation tends to go against a traditional metaphorical exegesis of the latter. Such a relationship takes place in a space which is real and metaphorical at the same time: a

sort of 'free zone', a border area whose margin starts undergoing a redefinition due to the upsetting which comes from the close intimacy between the woman and the bear. The situation, interestingly, does not provide any specific answer, but, philosophically, poses questions: that is, through a perplexing and disowning process, it makes us humans think in a different way, introducing new options and alternatives never thought of before, till we are able (in Cixous' words) to think the unthinkable¹.

To briefly recall the novel's plot: Lou, a Toronto archivist, is sent to northern Ontario to catalogue Colonel Cary's vast and valuable library, which, along with his estate, Pennarth, and the island itself, has been left to the Historical Institute Lou works for. Once there, she is caught by surprise by the unexpected presence of a male bear, chained up in a shed behind the house.

Bear: reading between the lines to go beyond the line

From a certain point of view, this novel seems to proceed counterpointing every metaphorical implication with its literal meaning. At the beginning, Lou feels herself metaphorically aged (her work, we can read, "had aged her disproportionately, [...] she was as old as the yellowed papers she spent her days unfolding"), but near the end we find her literally young again, rejuvenated: naked, in front of her mirror she can see her body is that "of a much younger woman" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 19 and 134). And there is more. In the incipit Lou is "like a mole, buried deep in her office", plunged in a thick metaphorical night: sun-rays only seldom enter the room, heavy with dust, and the only odour she perceives is "[the] stink of a winter of nicotine and contemplation" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 11). In the end we find Lou in a totally reversed attitude: she is driving (that is, she is not static, but dynamic), surrounded by a "brilliant night, all star-shine" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 141), smelling pure natural scents around her. And last, but not least, she realizes it is time to shake herself out of the metaphorical winter her life is wrapped into, and leaves for a new task at the beginning of summertime.

Lou is a lonely and dissatisfied woman, who has realized that "the image of the Good life long ago stamped on her soul was quite different from this

¹See Cixous (1993). In this respect Derrida's point of view is also interesting. To him, it is the very animal which, more than anything else, encourages the re-thinking of the human 'subject,' who's confronted not only with a paradoxically homogeneous otherness, but with the real *autre de soi* (humanistic philosophy, in fact, underlining the responsibilities of an individual toward the Other, regards as a thinkable 'alien subject' only a human one: the Other is, inevitably, an other *human being*). See Derrida (1989, 2006).

and she suffered in contrast" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 12). A gloomy shadow seems to be shrouding her past and hanging sulkily on her future, darkly loomed by the name of "Lou's predecessor³⁶" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 13), Miss Bliss, whose life has been anything but blissful, since she has long ago taken to drink. To avoid all the "vulgarity of the world" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 19), Lou has chosen to spend her life working hard and thus secluding herself from any contact with other human beings: "Oh, she was lonely, inconsolably lonely; it was years since she had human contact. She had always been bad at finding it"; "in a fit of lonely desperation, she had picked up a man in the street", "the Director fucked her weekly on her desk [...]. She had allowed the procedure to continue because it was her only human contact" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 2).

As Adriana Cavarero insightfully observes, following Hannah Arendt, an individual is not given without the Other, since "the relational essence of identity always assumes [...] the 'other' as necessary" (CAVARERO, 2005, p. 38, my translation). The highest price Lou had to pay in leading such an isolated life has been to lose contact with herself, with her interior life ("she was still not satisfied that this was how the only life she had been offered should be lived"), and with a present which seems to fade "from her view", becoming "as ungraspable as a mirage" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 20).

Her journey to the island can thus be seen as a moving from the artificial, sterile monotony of her 'winter' life into a period of 'summer anarchy', an epiphanic and eschatological journey toward, as in Margaret Laurence's words, inner freedom and strength, and ultimately toward a sense of communion with all living creatures.

Some critics interpreted this novel as a blurring of the differences between the primitive and the civilized, the animal and the human soul, and as a border-crossing. Indeed, Lou crosses a border, but this is not, say, a definitive action. To be clearer, let me introduce the scenario of today's customs: once crossed the first border, one enters the 'free area' and has to go over a second border to move into, say, another country. As for Lou, she crosses the first border and enters the 'free area', but she does not go on into the Other's realm. Rather, she meets such an Other (in this case, the bear) inside a sort of 'grey zone' where it is possible, and desirable, to uncover the whole process of natural revelation.

The border, in this novel, is not just a metaphor, since we find it literally in the very beginning of the narrative where Lou is described as she crosses a river: "The road went north. She followed it. There was a Rubicon near the height of land. When she

crossed it, she began to feel free" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 18). Clearly, the use of *antonomasia*² here highlights the importance of this moment, which is also marked by several words semantically linked to some key concepts of this novel: first, there is an upward movement (the Rubicon is said to be "near the 'height' of land" and, once having crossed it, Lou "sped 'north' to the *highlands*" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 17-18); second, the connotation 'brightness', hinted at through the word 'lightheaded', which proleptically links (as we shall see) the going-beyond-the-line action to the house Lou will stay in.

Moreover, this last word testifies of the 'healthy madness'³ the heroine is going to experience during her stay at Cary Island. At first, be it said, she feels uneasy about the dizziness she is starting to go through, and tries to tame it, holding fast to her sense of order ("She always attempted to be orderly, to catalogue her thoughts and feelings, so that when the awful, anarchic inner voice caught her out, her mind was stocked with efficacious replies" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 83)), or concentrating on the practical task of cataloguing Colonel Cary's reputedly vast and valuable library ("Book, book. Always when these things happen, pick up a book", (ENGEL, 1987, p. 64)). But in the end she yields to a sense of madness and anarchy till she finds herself led to a higher sanity, and with "an odd sense of being reborn" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 19).

A third key concept, coming out of the Rubicon-crossing episode and closely linked to the animal world, is that of smell. The word 'smell' follows Lou along her journey: when on the ferryboat to the island, she will remember a man telling her how "it was now impossible to find a woman who smelled of her own self" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 19). Once in the house, Lou perceives "smell of stove oil. Smell of mice. Smell of dust" and then "another smell, musky, 'unidentifiable' but good" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 24). Moreover, strongly opposing the "stink of nicotine" enveloping her in the *incipit*, at the end of summer she feels as if "her flesh, her hair, her teeth and her fingernails smelled of bear, and this smell was very sweet to her" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 119-120). What we have here, is a real smell, not a metaphorical one, and, interestingly, it is this very physicality which opens Lou to the *Unknown*, fostering the first encounters between the two protagonists: as the native Lucy Leroy says, "Bear lives by smell. He like you" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 49);

²Lou is said to go over "a Rubicon", which metaphorically means "a limit that when passed or exceeded permits of no return and typically results in irrevocable commitment". Available from: <<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/rubicon>>. and <<http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/Rubicon>>. Accessed on: 11 Jan. 2007.

³For a further analysis of this topic see Cameron (1977-1978); Thistleton (1966).

besides, upstairs in Lou's bedroom, the bear "sat for a long time staring at her, smelling at her" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 73) and in a second moment, sniffing on her a man's smell (after a sexual intercourse), the animal will not enter the house (ENGEL, 1987). We are not however allowed to read this behaviour in a romantic way: even if the idea of the bear who chooses not to stay with his beloved, smelling on her signs of her infidelity, is a fascinating one, we must not forget that Marian Engel did not want to give but a physical, real portrait of the animal.

When Lou reaches her destination, she immediately realizes how peculiar the house she is going to live in is: an intriguing place where opposite forces will, at the same time, collide and collude, making dichotomies merge, or dissolve. The building ("a classic Fowler's octagon", that is built according to phrenological dictates (ENGEL, 1987, p. 22)), on one side, reveals to be the product of what Lou calls "colonial pretentiousness" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 36), whose artificiality is totally out of context in the 'monstrous'⁴ Canadian landscape. But, on the other side, it shows the stamp of its last owner, Colonel Cary's niece, a sagacious and resourceful woman who, giving away much of the family finery, asserted her anti-Victorian/anti-colonial attitude in favour of a deeper contact with the island and its native inhabitants, Lucy Leroy and John King.

The octagonal mansion can be considered as the reification of a metaphorical border area. In it the two main characters, though coming from different worlds, will be able to meet and come into contact. Even the big central stair is both metaphorically and literally fundamental, so, this playing with the figurative and the literal sense somehow goes on, since it leads to the 'head' of the house, whose name, not accidentally, is Pennarth, an ancient Welsh word meaning "bear's head" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 64); thus, the phrenologic structure and the name of the house are closely linked and they both call forth the presence of the bear. Moreover, the stair sums up two movements, directionally opposite but conceptually similar: an upward one (the bear going upstairs to Lou's bedroom) and a downward one (the sunlight flooding down from the lantern above), so that we are interestingly and meaningfully linked back to the epigraph:

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

Here, all the key concepts of the novel are proleptically implied: the 'all-embracing love', the raising, both metaphorical and literal, toward a higher level, the landscape, "her [Lou's] kingdom", (ENGEL, 1987, p. 29) and the light.

This building is therefore a place where opposite forces can live together, an 'in-between' space where a more intense communion with nature, and specifically with one of her delegate, can take place. The bulky bear seems somehow to belie what Margaret Atwood said in *Survival*, that "animals in literature are always symbols" (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 90). Engel's bear is not, or at least not in any simple way. It is an animal with matted fur and rotting teeth, and no vocabulary beyond grunts and whimpers. In the beginning, Lou tries many times to reduce it to a metaphor, which is an anthropocentric attitude, indeed: "[it was] not a creature of the wild, but a middle aged woman", "[a] near-sighted baby", "compar[able] to the man", "a strange, fat, mesomorphic mannikin", "solid as a sofa, domestic", "lover, God or friend" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 36). This is surely typical of the human being, who usually tends to interpret the Unknown according to the rational categories of the Known, which are thus powerfully confirmed: the fundamental and severe ideological criticism, the only one able to subvert and revise the traditional cultural taxonomies, is thus baffled.

It is worth observing that Lou, significantly, does not give the animal a specific gender nor a name. In fact, though when referring to the animal she uses the male personal pronoun 'he', we cannot ignore all those passages in the novel where, patently disregarding gender-based grammar rules, the bear is variously described as "indubitably male", "a large-hipped woman" or even "a [...] baby," till in the end Lou herself admits that "she could paint any face on him that she wanted" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 72). Also, it seems to me that in refusing to give the animal a name, and making her heroine calling him, commonly, Bear, Engel declines to ratify the God-given wholly human duty, which accords Man the right to subdue and have dominion over everything on Earth. Engel was in fact concerned about the somehow pretentious implications inherent to the act of naming, as we can read in one of her cahiers: "I came here to [...] what, unwind. Stop naming things", and further, about writers' pretensions to be something else, she writes "[a snipe] is not trying to be a writer [...]. He does not suffer from a lust to name things" (VERDUYN, 1999, p. 428-431, my italics).

Such an attitude is, in my opinion, related to the refusal to condemn the animal to a condition of

⁴According to Margaret Atwood, Canadian nature was perceived as a 'monster' by those who approached it the wrong way, having illusory expectations or fighting its "conditions rather than accepting them and learning to live with them". See *Nature the Monster* (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 55-81).

helplessness and deep unhappiness provoked, according to Walter Benjamin, by the mere fact of being named, since 'naming' means reifying, bereaving someone of any abstract aura of mystery and fascination, thus confirming the inescapable mortal condition of the individual.⁵

Marian Engel's bear is, therefore, far from showing anthropomorphic attitudes (let us think about what a character says about it: "however human it looks, it's a wild critter after all" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 40), and it is also far from lending itself to anthropocentric interpretations. We are in front of a beast that is neither submissive nor subordinate at all. Holding fast to itself and its animality, refusing any easy allegorization, our bear manages to reveal its own different truth to us. But how?

The animal gaze

We know it: animals cannot speak human languages, and they cannot write either. But they force Man to recognize an 'other' place, an 'other' dimension, which is still very very near, adjoining. To say it in Deleuzian words, this dimension is a sort of 'contiguity' studded with stops, each representing a possible line of flight. Such a 'contiguity', situated between two sets, belongs to none of them though it involves them both, and it is thus the only way to subvert dualisms from the inside.⁶ From a pragmatic point of view, the becoming-animal in literature would be a 'false' escape way, because unfeasible: it is not possible, in fact, to reproduce an authentic animal voice in a text, as Engel herself writes in one of her notebooks. "I'd rather see authors doing their own voices, not pretending to be fishermen and farmers unless they bloody well know what fishermen and farmers think. (Not pretending to be bears, either)" (VERDUYN, 1999, p. 438).

The challenge is, therefore, when trying to give a literary representation of the animal, to avoid reducing it to anthropomorphic or metaphorical implications, an action which tends, as we have seen, to restore the Unknown to the Known, rendering it familiar, flattening all the differences. We have to respect the animal's independence, thus following the trajectory of a genuine and positive 'becoming-animal'.

Lou realizes quite soon that it is impossible to have any linguistic contact with the bear. At first,

she tries to approach him in a typically human way, asking herself "What do you say to a bear?" and then saying: "Hello" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 33). But she comes to the predictable conclusion that "I am a woman [...]. That is a bear. Not a toy bear, not a Phoo bear, not an Airlines Koala bear. A real bear" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 34). Later on, the narrator tells us how Lou is asking herself if the animal "like herself, visualized transformations, waking every morning expecting to be a prince, disappointed still to be a bear", but concludes this reasoning with a resolute "she doubted that" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 89).

As a human being and as a woman, she will talk to the bear in her own language, but she will not try to force a similar communicative system on such a peculiar conversational partner: "What does he think? she wondered [...] No, back to the beginning: how and what does he think?" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 59-60), till she admits that "A bear is more an island than a man [...]. To a human" (ENGEL, 1987, p. 60, my italics).

Since it is not possible to have a linguistic interaction between the two characters, the visual encounter grows in importance. Through the gaze, in fact, Lou and Bear have their first, and extremely significant contact. While being outside "to survey her kingdom", she tries unsuccessfully to deal with the animal, probably "still hibernating". So she sits down to have her breakfast, when all of a sudden "she realized the bear was standing in his doorway staring at her:" Bear. There. Staring. She stared back (ENGEL, 1987, p. 34).

As we can clearly see, it is not just the woman who is able to 'look at'; the animal, too, is allowed to perform an action which is usually considered as a human exclusive right. Here, human being and animal are both on the same level: they are both subjects and are able to become somehow aware of each other. Both on a philosophical and an anthropological level, the gazing theme (to look at, or be looked at), so important in this novel, is closely linked to that of knowledge. Engel was strongly against the presumption of those pretending to be 'always' able to analyze and understand 'everything'.⁷ That is the reason why the uninquiring and unreadable gaze of the bear is so much important to Lou. In his "weak eyes"

⁵According to Benjamin, the act of naming causes 'nature's muteness', which the philosopher refers to when talking about the deep unhappiness ('Traurigkeit') of nature. Nature is sad (*traurig*) because it is subject to the Word which transfixes it, depriving it of its own gaze. For further reading see Benjamin (1979) and also Derrida (2006).

⁶According to Deleuze this contiguity between two sets is like an "étroit ruisseau, qui n'appartient ni à l'un ni à l'autre, mais les entraîne tous deux dans une évolution non parallèle". See Deleuze and Parnet (1977, p. 40).

⁷Just before starting to write *Bear*, Engel underwent some psychoanalytic sessions, which she wrote about in the so-called 'Embargoed Notebook'. Here she noted how in her opinion psychology was "an incomplete worldview [since] specialist[s] can't understand some reality", further adding, ironically, "As if novelists could!" What in my opinion she disagreed with was the psychoanalytic presumption of being able to investigate and understand all that is hidden in one's interior life.

(ENGEL, 1987, p. 69), which represent, as Derrida would say, “le point de vue de l'autre absolu” (DERRIDA, 2006, p. 28) she cannot see any analyzing intent: the animal just lies beside her, “staring at her, smelling at her”, with no questions, no claims, no impositions. The bear is not like Canadian society, which, as Engel tells us, demands that its women should fit a lessening and alienating model; it does not try to judge her, thus freeing her from any conditioning, inhibition, or limitation.

The other's gaze is thus no more a means to express a severe criticism, but rather the chance to be narrated from another point of view, which gives the individual the possibility to gain a deeper self-knowledge. In her everyday living together with an Otherness, represented in the novel by the bear, Lou lets it ‘read’ her life and ‘tell’ it back to her, receiving in this way such a tale which reveals her “the finiteness in all its fragile uniqueness” (CAVARERO, 2005, p. 10, my translation). Lou begins therefore to notice details, differences, peculiarities, being wrapped in a temporal dimension which is no longer prone to the constant flow of life; a suspended time not made up of more or less frantic events, but of a calm and serene everyday life, which gives human beings the possibility to concentrate on themselves and to emerge as individuals. Or, to say it in Cavarero's words, instead of the fugitive and discontinuous time of actions, Lou's stay in a ‘border area’ (such as Pennarth can be considered) offers her the unchangeableness and the duration of narration (CAVARERO, 2005, p. 39, my translation).

Along with the process toward a more complete knowledge of her real identity, Lou understands that the solution to her existential issue lays in the proper interpretation of the pronoun ‘others’: not the other human beings, but an Otherness she is learning to deal and live with, completely respecting its diversity.

She, therefore, will somehow be able to bridge the linguistic gap along the lines of the becoming-animal: she does not mimic, nor does she try to psychologically identify with the bear. She will be very close to the animal inside that border area in which something can and must pass from one to the other. And such a ‘something’ cannot be explained, that is: reduced to any interpretable meaning, but only sensed: “What had passed to her from him she did not know” (ENGEL, 1987, p. 136). In this respect, I think it is interesting to underline how here, in this very moment when the novel seems to slightly open itself to possible

metaphorical interpretations, Engel, ironically, suggests not to do so, hinting that “certainly it was not the seed of heroes, or magic, or any astounding virtue” (ENGEL, 1987, p. 136).

Perceiving an ‘other’ code, Lou is able to go beyond the limit, to go over the conventional physical and mental perspectives. She is able to draw her own line of flight, that is to ‘deterritorialize’ herself, which does not mean to avoid one's responsibilities, but to perform an active detachment. Let it be said that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the becoming-animal is not a question of metamorphoses, not simply a mere changing from a condition to another, or going from one starting point to a point of no return: there must be, in fact, a process of ‘reterritorialization’. In this novel, Lou ‘deterritorializes’ herself during her love nights with the bear, but also finds her way back to a ‘reterritorialization’ (“she continued to be herself” (ENGEL, 1987, p. 136)), without which the code-exchanging has no sense at all. Lou is wholly aware she can't stay in the border area forever, that is why she tells the bear “you have to go to your place and I to mine” (ENGEL, 1987, p. 131). And she also painfully realizes that trespassing the limit, thus ‘invading’ the dominion of the ‘Other’, is not allowed: when she tries to make the bear penetrate her, he will hurt her.

The importance of the bear (that is of the Other) in this process of self-knowledge, is undeniable. In the course of the narrative, it takes on more and more not-at-all-humanizing but positive values: if, in the beginning, Lou describes it as “passive”, “stupid and defeated”, “a middle aged woman defeated to the point of being daft” (ENGEL, 1987, p. 35), afterward it is “wise and accepting”, as if “like the books, [it] knew generations of secrets”, “an enormous, living creature larger and older and wiser than time, a creature that was ‘for the moment’ her creature, but that another could return to his own world, his own wisdom” (ENGEL, 1987, p. 117). This extraordinary combination of different qualities makes our bear a particularly interesting living being, a peculiar example of a ‘post-modern creature’, which does not respect the boundary between man and animal. Neither the aesthetics of modernism, nor the philosophical values of humanism can in fact easily come to terms with those hybrid forms which subvert the boundary concept, particularly the one between humans and non-humans. And this is because in the axiological system of modernism and modernity, according to Steve Baker (2000, p. 99), “there was

a widespread urge to homogenize and systematize, to render the world intelligible by eliminating or suppressing inconsistencies, impurities and dissimilarities”.

Thanks to the bear, Lou experiences an opening in herself, and even if she does not exactly know what passed from it to her, “for one strange, sharp moment she could feel [...] she knew what the world was for. She felt not that she was at last human, but that she was at last clean. “Clean and simple and proud” (ENGEL, 1987, p. 136-137).

Conclusion

In this sui generis appropriation of a role which is usually considered a human prerogative (particularly a male one) the bear is not calling forth a return to the origins, as if he could be read as the beastly or primitive man, dispossessing the civilized one. With such an ambivalent declaration of similarity ‘and’ dissimilarity at the same time, it just points to a blurred form, to the existence of that border area where you cannot say what animal or human essence is. An area, according to Deleuze and Guattari, of indetermination, of indiscernibility where something can pass from man to animal and vice versa, just because things, beasts, and persons have reached the very point that endlessly precedes any natural differentiation (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1991).

The attention I have drawn to the gaze theme in this novel, along with a Deleuzian reading of the relationship which takes place between the human and the non-human according to the becoming-animal concept, leads me to interpret the bear as the Derridean *autre absolu*, the real *autre de soi*, the one undertaking the philosophical task to pose existential questions, keeping the role of a ‘perceptive catalyst’, ‘thought-producing’ and thus ‘world changing’. All this chimes in with an aesthetics of perception suggesting that the animal gaze might be the best perspective from which to observe not only our world, but especially our own selves, since such a gaze, giving man back the limits of his perception and of his human essence, testifies to the lack of his language and, literally, to the *senselessness* of his superiority (PRETE, 1993, p. 170, my translation).

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