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Leeann R. Drabenstott
The University of Montana

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ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LACANIAN REAL:  
THE BEAR AS PHALLIC MOTHER IN DOUG PEACOCK'S *GRIZZLY YEARS*  
AND MARIAN ENGEL'S *BEAR*

by

Leeann R. Drabenstott

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Approved by:

[Signature]

Chairperson

[Signature]

Dean, Graduate School

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Date
Bear literature—that is, literature in which a bear plays a central role—has historically portrayed the bear as a vicious enemy or as a mythical figure that serves as a symbol of the wilderness. Some contemporary works of bear literature, like Doug Peacock's *Grizzly Years* and Marian Engel's *Bear*, represent the bear differently. The bear emerges in these texts as a figure out of what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the Real. Specifically, the protagonists of each book experience in the encounter a confrontation with the "phallic mother." Their approach exemplifies a new turn in environmental literature—one that could be considered post-modern.
In 1995, Montana nature writer Rick Bass published *The Lost Grizzlies: A Search for Survivors in the Wilderness of Colorado*. His timing was perfect: grizzly bears were quickly becoming a hot topic in environmental politics of the American West. Talk of grizzly reintroduction in the Selway-Bitterroot wilderness of Idaho and Montana had started to simmer, heated by the grizzly's status as one of the "token" animals for protecting America's most wild places from deforestation and development (right up there with the spotted owl and the wolf).

Bass's work of non-fiction joins the cry for more protection of wildlands, even when only a few members of a threatened species exist in a given area. Though stylistically a memoir, the book obviously has political motives. If Bass can prove to the reader that grizzly bears exist in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado, he can perhaps persuade him or her to send off letters to government officials—stir up a little ruckus in hopes of moving toward protection of that land. In Bass's text, the bear is the ultimate symbol of wilderness and wild power—things which to him are desirable.

His representation of the bear builds on a tradition of the mythical bear in literature, which rose in challenge to the nineteenth century shoot-to-kill mentality. Many other authors of what I call bear literature—that is, literature in which the bear plays a central role—take a similar approach. And in the United States, bear literature has recently proliferated: "true story" bear attack books, bear safety manuals, and bear "memoirs," to

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1 In 1995, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service held several scoping sessions throughout Montana and Idaho to gather public input on their plan to reintroduce grizzlies to the Selway-Bitterroot. The issue has since created heated battles throughout Montana and Idaho, but it appears as if the reintroduction will happen.
name just a few. However, I argue that some contemporary authors go another step to move beyond the mythic bear to a profoundly different representation. One such author is Doug Peacock, who wrote the non-fiction work *Grizzly Years: In Search of the American Wilderness*. Unlike bear encounters in other texts, his most significant encounters with bears remain largely indescribable and deeply unsettling. Though there are perhaps many ways to go about closely analyzing Peacock's encounters, one helpful way is to utilize psychoanalytic theory, namely the work of Jacques Lacan. Using Lacanian theory, we can understand how big a shift a work like Peacock's has made from earlier traditions of the literature.

**Bear as Enemy and God**

Less than two centuries ago the bear appeared in literature as an almost diabolical force, which reflected cultural perceptions of the bear at that time. The bear was the hunted creature—an animal deserving of the white man's attitude of unquestionable
domination. America's western heroes, Lewis and Clark, understood the bear as among Westering man's worst enemies, a "monster." At any chance, they killed a grizzly bear; sometimes they expressly hunted the grizzly bear and used its oil, furs, and meat. On May 14, 1805, Lewis wrote:

one of the party wounded a [grizzly] bear very badly, but being alone did not think it proper to pursue him. In the evening the men in two of the rear canoes discovered a large brown bear lying in the open grounds about 300 paces from the river, and six of them went out to attack him, all good hunters; they took the advantage of a small eminence which concealed them and got within 40 paces of him unperceived, two of them reserved their fires as had been previously concerted (sic), the four others fired nearly at the same time and put each his bullet through him...in an instant this monster ran at them with open mouth . . . . (DeVoto 109)

Lewis continues to explain how the bear chased after the party all the way into the river before a man on shore was able to shoot it through the head. Because this particular "monster" was old and its flesh "indifferent," they took only the fleece and skin. Later on in the journey, on the Missouri river in Montana, Lewis commented that grizzlies were so numerous that he feared sending a man out anywhere alone (DeVoto 148). If the bear represented anything to them, it was a brutish obstacle in their search for the Northwest Passage.

In *Astoria*, a "historical fiction" account of John Jacob Astor's explorations, first published in 1836, Washington Irving presents bear hunting as an "heroic game": "The hunters, both white and red men, consider this the most heroic game. They prefer to hunt

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1The extent to which the text was fiction or non-fiction was much debated. Irving was accused of plagiarizing large portions of well-known texts, including the journals of Lewis and Clark, in describing early scenes of the West. Irving used letters and journals that Astor provided as his main sources, as well as more accessible texts. See the Alfred Powers introduction to the book in the Clatsop Edition (date not given), published by Binfords and Mort.
him on horseback, and will venture so near as sometimes to singe his hair with the flash of his rifle" (Irving 210). The protagonist of T.B. Thorpe's short story, "The Big Bear of Arkansaw," boasts to fellow travellers on a Mississippi steamboat that he sleeps on mattress made of black bear skins. "Just stop with me, stranger, a month or two, or a year if you like, and you will appreciate my place. I can give you plenty to eat; for beside hog
and hominy, you can have bear-ham, and bear-sausages, and a mattress of bear-skins to
sleep on . . . That bed would put you to sleep if you had the rheematics in every joint of
your body. I call that ar bed a *quietus*"(Thorpe 181).

The shoot-to-kill or shoot-for-sport mentality toward bears was certainly not a
phenomena only of the American West. In 1874, an international weekly newspaper,
The Graphic, published on its front page a sketch of a "Dumb Waiter" bear owned by
British Lord Suffield, who shot the bear in Russia (see Figure One). Suffield was on a
bear hunting expedition as a part of the Duke of Edinburgh's marriage festivities,
"Imperial bear hunts being one of the chief features of the festivities." He hauled the dead
bear back with him to England, where a naturalist stuffed and mounted the bear in the
form of a waiter. The bruin can stand with a tray to serve "wine, cigars, or desert" *(sic)*
("Bruin, A Dumb Waiter" 343). Of course, the word-play in the title suggests that the
bear is unable to speak--it is "dumb." They have effectually "silenced" the bear and
placed it into the menial service of royalty.

At least in American literature, the representation of the bear shifted significantly
at the turn of the century as the number of "real" bears began to dwindle and they were
pushed into evermore remote areas. One notable text is Ernest Thompson Seton's *The
Biography of a Grizzly*, a work of fiction published in 1900. Written from the point of
view of a grizzly bear in Wyoming whose mother and three siblings were shot by a cattle
king, this text seeks to gain empathy for the bear. The bear, named "Whab," is injured in
the gunfire that killed his family, and he must struggle to survive in the world alone--with
a disability. At the end of the book, Whab has grown old, pained, and depressed. He
ends his own life by pitching himself into a gulch, then imagining that he is once again sleeping in his mother's arms (Seton 167). In this book, the antagonist is the human—not the bear (although Seton highly anthropomorphizes Whab). Seton challenges former representations of the bear as the savage enemy.

Faulkner's famous short story, "The Bear," follows Seton's precedent of a more positive portrayal of the bear. While the bear is the hunted creature in this story, the intent of the hunt has changed, and the bear becomes something of a mythical figure. The group of hunters in the story have hunted a particular bear, "Old Ben," for many years. At ten years old, Ike McCaslin makes his first hunting trip with "the men"—Sam Fathers, Boon Hogganback, Major de Spain, and others. Year after year, these men head out hunting each November in "the big woods," or what remains of the wilderness of the South (Faulkner 186). Though they hunt for various game and fowl, the ultimate focus of their trip is Old Ben, the toughest and oldest bear in the woods, from which none of them had even drawn blood. In that first trip, Ike realizes that the bear is more than a creature to shoot. The focus of the hunt in this story is placed more on the pursuit of the bear than it is on actually killing it. Ike realizes this early on in his hunting career: "he only knew that for the first time he realised that the bear . . . was a mortal animal and that they had departed from the camp each November with no actual intention of slaying it, not because it could not be slain but because so far they had no actual hope of being able to"(192). Even so, Boon Hogganback and his dog Lion finally do kill Old Ben in a highly sexual scene in which Boon mounts the bear and stabs it in throat, then "probes" it with his knife (231). But Old Ben's death is not a cause for rejoicing. Sam Fathers dies soon after Old
Ben is killed, and Boon eventually goes crazy.

This grief-stricken response to Old Ben's death is linked to the bear's mythical representation in the text. Many critics, such as Paul Shepard, argue that Old Ben represents the last vestige of the Southern wilderness: "the haunted old bear is Faulkner's symbol for that untamed and fading wilderness" (Shepard 171). Similarly, Judith Bryant Wittenberg likens "The Bear" to Aldo Leopold's environmentalist Bible, *A Sand County Almanac*, because they both decry the destruction of the wilderness at the hands of ruthless capitalists. She argues that both texts use a bear as the symbol for that land: "... in both... the most compelling symbol of the wilderness that is at once magnificent, threatening, and threatened is an immense and fearsome, yet ultimately vulnerable, bear" (Wittenberg 65). The death of the bear in each text "heralds the decline of the wild areas he inhabits" (67). In the literature, the bear no longer connotes evil. It is an awe-inspiring creature of mythical dimensions—one that can stand for the entire wilderness. The "hunt" for the bear becomes more of a dance of hope—hope that the bear and the wilderness will continue to exist or that, at the very least, they are lost for a good purpose.  

In *The Lost Grizzlies*, Rick Bass continues the tradition established by Faulkner. He presents the bear as the ultimate representation of wilderness—and its loss as evidence for the loss of a sane world. The book documents Bass's experiences helping Doug Peacock, a grizzly expert, and Dennis Sizemore, a biologist, search for grizzly bears in

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4Wittenberg notes that Faulkner took more of a wise-use approach than Leopold. On page 50, she quotes him saying that using the land for an "agrarian economy of peonage" was "base," but that it can be acceptable to destroy the wilderness if the benefits of destruction outweigh the loss.
the San Juan mountains of Colorado. In the last official report, in 1982, the Colorado Division of Wildlife did not find any grizzlies in the mountains—only inconclusive evidence of their presence. Since then, most people—especially government agencies—have assumed that the grizzly has gone extinct there. Bass and Peacock, however, still hold to the belief that grizzlies roam those mountains and deserve protection. Their hope is that documentation of grizzly presence in the San Juans will instigate various protective measures for their habitat: "I am not arguing for the bears, because that cannot really be done. They seem beyond argument, like whales or clouds. What I am arguing for is a little space for the bears" (Bass 51). Working with the knowledge that their "proof" must pass government agency muster, they aim to obtain a photo of the bear as well as samples of hair and scat.

For Bass, finding and protecting grizzlies and their habitat means regaining something that humanity has lost: "If only we could loosen the constricting bands around them, perhaps our own limits to spontaneity would begin to heal. We have lost these grizzlies and lost our relationship to them. We have lost a part of ourselves, of who we were and who we will be" (51). Bass is out to save the wilderness and, in some small sense, save humanity through this book, using the bear as the clincher.

This works for the reader only insofar as Bass, as a distant observer of an objective reality, consistently presents the bear as an awesome, holy, mysterious creature. He frequently associates the grizzly bear with an other-worldly, saintly force. "Why would anyone come into church and kill all the grizzlies?" he asks (149). Even at a point at which his life is at the mercy of a grizzly bear, he doesn't stray from his fundamental
notion of what the bear represents for him. The entire book leads up to the moment when Bass actually sees a grizzly bear in the San Juans. He is out searching alone when suddenly a bear rises from behind a log about ten yards ahead of him: "It's a bear with a big head, and for the smallest fraction of time our eyes meet. The bear's round eyes are wild in alarm, and mine the same or larger, I'm sure." His first thought, before fear, is that the bear is bigger than a moose. He says that for a second he almost feels a sense of reverence or awe, but then starts looking for a tree to climb, debating whether or not he should climb the one that would take him three steps closer to the bear. By the time he reaches the tree, the bear leaves (214-216).

After noting his pounding heart, Bass realizes it's his "duty" to continue to follow after the bear. But first, he re-evaluates the situation to determine why it is that he was able to get so close to the bear. He takes a rational approach to the event. Then he feels a sense of loss and "wants more": "the anti-climax of it--the absence, the continued lack of proof--is so strange and disheartening as to be almost crushing"(216). Bass continues to comment on the fact that he "saw" the bear, but doesn't have a way to prove it: he is "ashamed of the lack of allegiance I have of my own eyes"(217). He knows that only by fully playing his role as the observant journalist does he have any chance at achieving the party's goal. Yet, the details and proof he is able to gather don't ultimately change his idealized view of the bear. He continues to call the bear things like "Old Grandfather, Illustrious Master, Honey Paw"(218). He remarks right after the event that he had actually seen a member of the "most keystone of species"(219). In some of the final words of the book, he presents a grand vision of the grizzly bear and implores the reader
to love and protect it: "They skirt the high lakes above the tree line, their fur rippling, their muscles rolling. Heaven is in their teeth... We must learn to love them" (239).

Through the entire book, Bass creates a bear of mythic proportions whose existence and survival holds the world in balance.

**Moving Beyond the Mythical Bear**

Through much of the journey described in his book, Bass travels with Peacock, who is fundamentally at odds with Bass's role as writer/reporter. Early on in the journey, Bass comments on this mild tension: "He doesn't seem to mind so much when he turns around and catches me scribbling notes on the palm of my hand and on little scraps of paper. 'Drives me fucking crazy,' he says, but nothing more" (Bass 67). Though Peacock is himself an accomplished writer, his approach to experiencing the natural world differs from Bass—a difference reflected in their individual representation of bears in literature. When Bass confronts the bear, he doesn't leave the world of the rational, nor does he shake off his ideal notions of the bear.

Peacock's book reflects a new turn in the representation of the bear in literature—a more profoundly disturbing representation. Peacock, the protagonist in one such "new" work, experiences life-changing encounters with the bear that disturb him at a more primordial level. The experience can be described as a confrontation with what Lacan calls the Real—an experience that is simultaneously and paradoxically enjoyable and horrifying. The confrontation elicits a strong and unprecedented response from Peacock
and often inspires him to pursue more of the same experiences.

As I will later discuss, an experience of the Real links a person back the world of primal desire, or to early experiences of sexuality. In Peacock's text, the encounter with the Real is more specifically an encounter with a primal force that Lacan calls the "phallic mother." Though latent in the text, his encounters with the "phallic mother" always retain an undercurrent of sexual desire, not completely unlike what appears in the famous scene of Faulkner's story in which Old Ben is killed. Peacock seeks a sort of "union" with part of the natural world and thus with the phallic mother, although these impulses also frighten him. In the Canadian novella, Bear, Marian Engel extends the possibilities set forth in Peacock's text by portraying a protagonist who actually pursues a sexual relationship with a bear. What is latent in Peacock's text becomes overt in Engel's.

These two works stand as forerunners to a different sort of bear literature and to a new approach to writing about the natural world and human relation to it. They hold the promise of a more post-modern environmental literature—a literature that debunks representations of the natural world that are still modeled after Enlightenment ideals. The authors relinquish the notion of the unaffected, distant, and superior observer of the natural world.

The Role of the Real

A post-Freudian, Lacan works out of a notion that the formulation of identity and consciousness is a result of psychosexual trauma because of the insertion of the subject
into language, which the subject spends his or her life attempting to reconcile. He argues that the primal experiences of human life guide our actions, both conscious and unconscious, through life. The most primal experiences, which occur from birth to around six months of age (prior to the famous "mirror stage") mostly involve eating and defecation. In this "pre-mirror" stage, the infant cannot differentiate between its body and other objects in the world. It "experiences its body as fragmented parts and images. During this time the infant has no sense of being a totality or an individual unit..." (Ragland-Sullivan 18). The infant's needs are fulfilled by the "other"—or the primary caretaker (often the mother)—because the infant is helpless and not in control of its movements and coordination. The infant depends on objects to help it overcome its inadequacies—objects that bring fulfillment of a need, which in turn brings the child pleasure, or *jouissance*. Such objects—such as the breast, excrement, gaze, and voice—become the "primordial objects of Desire"(Ragland-Sullivan 22). They are the objects that let the infant off the hook, so to speak, of its inadequacies and fragmentation. Thus, they are absorbed in the infant's memory and carried through life as reminders of a primal fragmentation as well as primal satisfaction. In later life, intimations of the pre-mirror stage fall into the category of experience that Lacan calls the Real, which is not necessarily to be equated with the term "reality": "In Lacan's usage, the Real is quite a different thing from 'reality,' which refers simply to subjective reality"(Childers 254).

The experience of the Real is ultimately elusive—it cannot be represented by language or

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5 *Jouissance* connotes enjoyment or delight, and can also be understood as an experience of great sexual pleasure. According to Childers and Henzi, Lacan refers to *jouissance* both in reference to "specifically female sexual pleasure" as well as pleasure that arises in the Imaginary order (Childers 162).
rationally understood.

Eventually, the infant moves into the mirror stage and begins to understand the other not in terms of fragments (partial-objects) but rather as a whole form. At the same time, the infant can recognize itself in the mirror and sees that, like the other, it appears as a whole. This gives the infant a sense of unity, but one that comes from outside and "consequently is asymmetrical, fictional, and artificial" (Ragland-Sullivan 26). The sense of unity depends on the infant's image of itself that it identifies with the image of the other. The experience of the mirror stage falls under the cognitive order that Lacan calls the Imaginary. In the Imaginary, the infant's sense of a "self" is wholly linked to the image of the (m)other, and it seeks to maintain that link by becoming the other's object of desire. It fashions an image of itself based on what it thinks the other desires.

Eventually, the infant realizes that it cannot fulfill the other's desires--become the other's "all"--which begins what Lacan calls "the drama of primordial jealousy," or Oedipal jealousy (Lacan *Ecrits* 5). The infant envies the one who can please the desired parent and wishes for that person's annihilation. In response, the big "O" Other, often linked to the father, imposes its power over the infant--the power of symbols and culture. The power established by the "father" is called the Name-of-the-Father. It says "no" to the exclusive mother/child relation. It is a power that names the infant, that "makes" the infant by placing him/her into a symbolic world of meaning completely separate from that primal world with the (m)other. At this point, the infant has entered into the Symbolic realm and assumes subjectivity. The subject begins to communicate under the terms of the Father, through various forms of signification, and thus loses that primal connection.
with the mother. The Name-of-the-Father is an aggressive, devouring force. Lacan speaks of it in terms of the phallus, not literally meaning the penis, but rather a symbol of power: "By 'phallic signifier' or Phallus, Lacan means the symbolic or representational agent of separation, and not the male sex organ per se . . ." (Ragland-Sullivan 55).

Paradoxically, the phallus is both a symbol of power and also a signifier of castration because, as soon as a person asserts phallic authority, he or she becomes a medium or an agent of the power of the Other. The power does not come from the organ directly, so the Other effectively castrates the phallus, as Slavoj Zizek explains: "if we are to assert our (symbolic) 'phallic' authority, the price to be paid is that we have to renounce the position of agent and consent to function as the medium through which the big Other acts and speaks. . . its crucial feature therefore resides in the fact that it is not 'mine' . . . " (Zizek "I Hear You" 109).

In the Symbolic order, the subject becomes aware of his individuality as well as the relations between other individuals and objects. He begins to experience the "Other," or everything that the self is not--everything that the subject will lack. Life becomes an experience of lack, which is what fuels desire. As Juliet Mitchell explains in the introduction to Lacan's *Feminine Sexuality*, "Desire persists as an effect of primordial absence. . . " (Lacan *Feminine Sexuality* 6).

Despite the power of the Symbolic, a part of the Real remains leftover or is "missed" by the process of symbolization. A residue of the Real always remains in the unconscious of the subject, reminding the subject of its early experience of fragmentation and fulfillment by primal objects. Because the Real is not subsumed by the Symbolic
world, it remains unrepresentable—it can never be fully understood. As Lacan explains, some objects can arouse in the subject that residue of the Real. They can remind the subject of the failure of symbolization, which gives the illusion of wholeness. These residual objects—the breast, hair, feces, eyes—function as what Lacan calls the *objets petit a* (the objects of the *autre*, or other). It is "a privileged object which has emerged from some primal separation..." (Lacan *Four Fundamentals* 83). But behind the *objet petit a* is nothing, meaning that it represents nothing, lack, absence. It reminds us that we are not fundamentally unified and whole selves. Yet, the *objet petit a* also provides the possibility of again experiencing *jouissance*.

At a point in a infant's development, the Name-of-the-Father does not impose on the mother/child relation, which leads the infant to the experience of the phallic mother. Instead of the phallus signifying the promise of becoming "whole," the (m)other offers that promise. The (m)other becomes the infant's "all," the totality for the infant, which means that the infant comes to a sense of self outside of the parameters of the rational world. The child is forced to exist in a psychotic world apart from the structures of language and culture. Such an existence is both fascinating and dangerous for the child. The phallic mother is a devouring figure—all-powerful, terrorizing. It creates an existence for the child marked by both *jouissance* and consumption.

The "maternal phallus" is what Zizek calls an "object of hatred," and about such objects he says: "the more we destroy the object in reality, the more powerfully it rises in front of us," meaning the more powerfully it rises in our psyche (Zizek "I Hear You With My Eyes" 107). His example is of the Jews in Nazi Germany:
Consider the way the figure of the Jews figured in Nazi discourse: the more they were exterminated, eliminated, the fewer their numbers, the more dangerous their remainder became, as if their threat grew in proportion to their diminution in reality. This is again an exemplary case of the subject's relation to the horrifying object that embodies its surplus enjoyment: the more we fight against it, the more its power over us grows. (Zizek *Looking Awry* 6)

In another essay, he continues to develop this idea. The Nazi object of hate was a "conceptual Jew" that didn't exist, "but for that reason I fear him even more." He says:

"In this respect, the Jew is like the maternal phallus: there is no such thing in reality, but for that very reason, its spectral presence gives rise to an unbearable anxiety. Therein also consists the most succinct definition of the Lacanian Real: the more my (symbolic) reasoning tells me that X is not possible, the more its specter haunts me . . ."(Zizek "I Hear You" 108). The phallic mother rises out of the unconscious of the subject as a haunting apparition. It becomes "more than" itself in the mind of the subject.

Generally, the subject represses the phallic mother—leaves the phallic mother behind to accept the Name-of-the-Father (except in cases of psychosis). But at times the phallic mother can emerge from the unconscious to traumatize the subject, usually as a result of a terrifying experience or crisis, or during a nightmare. While an encounter with the Real is a profound experience, a confrontation with the phallic mother is even more disturbing.

Peacock's Encounters

The power of the residue of the Real over the subject, what Zizek calls a
"traumatic kernel," emerges strongly in Peacock's text (Zizek \textit{Sublime Object 5}). While Peacock attaches Imaginary (ideals, fantasies) and Symbolic (rational understanding) significance to bears throughout the text as does Bass, in certain scenes he experiences the bear differently. The bear elicits an encounter with the Real. The moment of encounter always includes an element of "real" danger for Peacock—the bear is close and ready to attack, or he senses that the bear is prowling around at night with ill intent. In these moments the bear represents a devouring force, one that can annihilate Peacock both physically and psychically. The bear "emerges" as the phallic signifier—the all-powerful force—as well as an object out of the Real. The bear is a furry creature, and fur can be understood as metonymic of the (m)other—as a partial-object. It becomes to Peacock the phallic mother—a particularly frightening being that is capable of uncovering his primal desires and fears. It is also a being to which he is drawn again and again. He can't seem to get enough of bears.

His experience of the bear as phallic mother always occurs when he experiences the "gaze" of the Other, which creates an even more disturbing experience. As Lacan explains, seeing happens both ways—both from subject to an object (such as a tree, not necessarily an object with eyes) and from object to subject. The former is a type of function of the eye, while the latter is a function of the gaze. Simply, objects "look" back at us. But it's not really the object looking, rather it is the Other looking at us through the object's "return of the gaze," as Zizek puts it (Zizek "I Hear You" 90). In fact, the whole world—everything we are not—always already looks at us. Lacan calls this "everything" the spectacle of the world: "The spectacle of the world, in this sense, appears to us as
all-seeing" (Lacan *Four Fundamental 75*). The experience of the gaze is destabilizing for the subject because it objectifies the subject—it "reflects our own nothingness" (Lacan 92). The gaze is particularly unsettling because it is the Other that creates our sense of selfhood. As Lacan explains: "What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside" (Lacan 106). The tendency of the subject is to assume absolute authority over self-determination, but the gaze "surprises me and reduces me to shame" (84).

Lacan's example of this is his experience with a sardine can. As a young man at sea one day, another man pointed out to him a sardine can floating on the water. The man told Lacan that the can could not see him. But Lacan felt that the can, shining its point of light his way, could see him, and that at that moment he "looked like nothing on earth" (95-96). The gaze reduces the subject to its fundamental state of absence and lack. Under the gaze, the subject becomes "the punctiform object, that point of vanishing being . . ." (83). But the gaze is not something that the subject can actually see, rather it is something perceived: "The gaze I encounter . . . is not the seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other" (84). Though it seems an absurd parallel, in Peacock's text the bear often serves as a sort of "sardine can" that reduces him to nothingness.

As we will see in several scenes from the text, Peacock specifically experiences what Lacan calls the anamorphic gaze. As Zizek explains it, in anamorphosis, "if we look at a thing straight on, i.e. from a matter-of-fact, disinterested, objective perspective, we see nothing but a formless spot. The object assumes clear and distinct features only if we look at it 'from aside,' i.e., with an 'interested' look, with a supported look, permeated and
distorted by a *desire* [italics his]" (Zizek "Looking Awry" 34). Zizek distinguishes between two ways of looking at an object. In the first way, when the subject views an object, the object appears as merely a "formless spot." Viewed directly, the object remains "unseen." Looking in such a way, the subject can still experience the unsettling feeling that comes from being under the gaze, but the object blots out the more traumatic glimpse of that Real. The blot diffuses the gaze, and then also dilutes its power. Yet, in the other way of looking, "looking awry" as Zizek calls it, the subject assumes a less straightforward view of the object—a view that is "distorted by desire." In so doing, the object then assumes "clear and distinctive features" (Zizek "Looking Awry" 34). The features, though, are not of the object, but rather of the *objet petit a*. Yet, as I explained before, the *objet petit a* is actually nothing. In Peacock's book, the bear that watches him is the embodiment of that nothing, the anamorphotic object. It profoundly unsettles him.

Peacock published his book, which documents his 20-some years of experience observing grizzly bears in Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks, in 1990. The book works as memoir, bear study, and political diatribe as Peacock weaves together his encounters with bears and his general knowledge about living in bear country with stories and journals from his time served in the Vietnam War. He explains that his impulse to spend months at a time alone camping among and filming bears is partly to contribute positively to a world gone mad. He hopes that his work will aid in the protection of bears and their habitat. As to Bass, the wilderness is to Peacock the last sane place in the world. At least it's the only place where he feels sane. As he says: "From my slightly twisted point of view, preserving grizzlies was a radical idea; it meant putting the brakes
on a world gone mad" (Peacock 85). Generally, Peacock avoids that "world" that functions out of the Symbolic. He tries to avoid what he calls "syphilization" and eschews scientific animal tracking techniques. He wants to assume the life of the animal as much as possible: "On these trips I tend to leave my human troubles behind. It's the lives of other creatures I want to adopt" (147). In a way, he wishes to assume nature's pre-linguistic state—a state not ruled by the Symbolic world of language and culture.

The book begins with a scene replaying Peacock's watershed grizzly encounter. He recalls the scene later in the book, where he explains that the encounter occurred among his first trips into the wilderness after Vietnam. Then, he still carried a gun with him camping. The scene is set apart from the rest of the text as a sort of preface, complete with a brief analysis of its significance to him. In it, a bear stops close in front of Peacock, so he pulls out his gun and looks down the barrel of the gun and into the "dull red eyes" of the bear. The bear assumes attack stance, but they continue to stare at each other. Time stops for him during the moment of seeing: "We stared at each other for what might have been seconds but felt like hours." The bear also "looked off to the side." Finally, Peacock decides that he won't shoot the bear and that his "shooting days were over." He lowers the gun, takes a step back, and then feels "something pass between us." The bear turns and walks back into the timber. As Peacock explains the experience, "I felt my life had been touched by enormous power and mystery" (Peacock vii). Then he realizes how afraid he had felt in the moment—his breathing is labored, his face flushed. The brutish bear signified death to him. Yet, that moment became his impetus to track bears for the rest of his life. A moment full of what he describes as "potency" set his
career in motion.

Peacock is not able to describe the "thing" that passes between them. Whatever it is, it eludes the realm of language and meaning. It is simply some "thing." But it isn't just any "thing": whatever it is strikes him deeply and moves him to a new understanding of the bear and of his role in life. The bear becomes not just the thing-watched by the objective observer; Peacock also becomes an object under the anamorphic gaze of the Other as it is returned by the red eyes of the bear. The gaze is anamorphic because Peacock must look down the sights of the gun to have this more profound experience. When he looks at the bear in this way, he can only see a few partial objects—the fur and the eyes. These objects remind Peacock of a primal world in which the objects promised jouissance: the world of the phallic mother. As he gazes at the objects, he sees an object of desire at the same time that he is made an object under the gaze. The bear's return of the gaze—some "thing" he can't locate—makes him nothing. Perhaps this moment was among the first that led Peacock to say later in the book: "Bears had become more than bears and I glimpsed a transcendence" (emphasis mine) (248). The bear in this moment becomes much more than just a furry animal—it becomes the phallic mother, which in itself is more than.

At this "potent" moment, he is reminded of his own "impotence." But instead of killing the bear, he lowers his gun. If we understand the gun as a phallic object—as an object of power and domination—then it follows that Peacock at this point "gives in" to the phallic mother. He does not attempt to repress this unsettling experience and, in fact, the experience actually increases his desire to pursue more of the same: "I did not know
that the force of that encounter would shape my life for decades to come. . . I have never questioned the route this journey took: it seems a single trip, the sole option, driven by that same potency that drew me into grizzly country in the beginning” (Peacock vii).

Before this early experience, he sensed the “potency” of the wild, but he hadn't encountered its Real potency as it took shape for him in the bear. The Real encounter makes him commit more strongly to a dangerous life among the grizzlies.®

In fact, the bear he considers most dangerous is the one he follows most intently. It's also the one that, in one scene of the book, takes him to the depths of his fear. He calls this Yellowstone bear "The Black Grizzly" and believes it is among the most large and aggressive animals in the park. One fall, toward the end of bear foraging season, he goes to what he calls the "Grizzly Hilton" to observe bears preparing for the upcoming hibernation. He first sees "The Black Grizzly," a boar, chase a sow and cub across a meadow. Eventually, the bears begin a vicious fight, which Peacock watches with some apprehension. After the sow backs away from the fight, Peacock notices that darkness is descending and knows he must quickly return to camp. However, the Black Grizzly stands in between his observation point and his camp. He must pass directly in front of the bear.

He "let his instincts loose" and prepares to pass by the bear by draping brown bags over his arms to make himself look larger. He talks to the bear as he passes and, at fifteen feet away, he notices the bear watching him. "There was something in his eyes I could

® Peacock may also feel pushed by what Freud calls the death drive. He uses this notion to explain why people gain pleasure through acts that are ultimately self-destructive instead of self-preserving. See Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle.
never quite put my finger on," he says (Peacock 226). But the bear doesn't attack him; it just spins around and ambles away. However, later in the night the bear returns to watch Peacock, though this time the bear remains virtually unseen in the dark night—all except for its red eyes.

Peacock builds a fire to spook the bear away from camp. "Shaking uncontrollably," he looks down the hill from his camp to look for the bear. He doesn't see it but can hear cracking branches. He speaks kindly to the bear and makes torches to wave in the air to scare him off. Eventually, he can make out the red eyes of the bear in the distance: "Waving the flaming plumes and branches in the air, I saw the small eyes shine red for a second. They blinked off and disappeared into the darkness. I heard the huge bear slowly move through the bushes back down the hill. I went back and huddled by the fire" (227). Peacock spends a sleepless night by the fire, sometimes standing to wave torches, sensing that the bear is nearby watching him. "Silence. I peered into the blackness, seeing nothing. The torch had almost burned down, leaving me unprotected," he recalls (227). In the book, this is the most tense and frightening scene because, for once, Peacock cannot actually see the object. The bear haunts him through the night, threatening in its potent invisibility to make Peacock nothing. He sees nothing and is made nothing.

Again, his encounter with the bear is inexplicable: "There was something in his eyes I could never quite put my finger on." The "thing" troubles him again, yet opens up the door to his "instincts." Then the experience becomes even more unsettling, as the bear is veiled by the dark of the night. Peacock knows he is sharing some "thing" with
the bear, but he doesn't know what and he can't find out—even if he looks right at the bear or waves torches in the night. The horrifying bear is out there, coming toward him, always with the possibility of reducing him to shreds—or fragments. It threatens his physical and psychical coherence.

All he can sense from his vantage point are the red eyes which, for Peacock, serve as an object of desire. Yet, as an object that emerges from the primal scene, the eye is also a cause of desire—it both produces the lack and moves the subject to overcome it. That is what Lacan means when he says the objet a is the object-cause of desire. It depends on desire to be seen. Though an encounter with the gaze is always infused with desire, the "look awry" provides the more profound experience because it more directly connects the subject with the Real. Though he could, Peacock doesn't avoid the red eyes and instead keeps on trying to see them. When he experiences these red eyes flashing from the darkness, he senses the power of the object of desire over him. He imagines himself as an object—specifically as the grizzly's midnight snack: "My thoughts drifted, landing on the irony of meeting my end at the jaws of my favorite beast. For a moment, I could imagine the flickering fire reflecting the hint of smile on my face. It vanished as I heard another branch break"(228). The bear becomes something like Lacan's sardine can.

For the first and only time in the book, he stays out all night waiting for the bear, waving torches and talking to it. On the most basic level, this appears a mere defense. Peacock wants to keep the bear at a safe distance. Yet there are other ways he could protect himself, such as climbing a tree. He allows the red eyes to penetrate him to the
point of making him nothing, yet he doesn't want to get too close to the phallic mother. However, he appears to almost enjoy the all-night dance with the bear, as the bear circles around his camp.

The trauma that the encounter causes for him becomes clear the next day when he eventually acts aggressively toward the bear. Earlier in the book, a bear encounter inspired Peacock to stay longer in woods. But after that long night, he says he is "angry at the cantankerous son of a bitch"(228). He still heads off nervously for a day of observation, but when he returns, he finds that the bear destroyed almost everything in his camp. With "mixed rage and fear," Peacock pushes a boulder down the slope toward the bear's daybed as he "roared" at the bear (229-230). He decides then to leave the mountains for the season. In the past, Peacock might have stuck it out for a few more days. Instead, he lashes out at the Real force that had traumatized him and decides to head back to the "safer" world of culture for awhile. Though the book ends soon after he makes the decision to leave, it certainly is not his last season spent observing grizzlies.

A few of the bears he encounters transcend to more than a lofty world of myths for him. They transcend the rational and they transcend his ideals. For him, they rise up out of the depths of the unconscious and surprise him with a terrifying power that changes his life and his sense of identity. The bears bring him face-to-face with his nothingness, his lack of coherence. They also provide for him an opportunity to become more of an "animal"—something he deeply desires.
Bestiality and the Phallic Mother

Though Marian Engel's novella, *Bear* (1976), doesn't take place in the wilderness where grizzlies freely roam, the protagonist of the text experiences bear encounters similar to Peacock's. Yet, Engel's story takes a Real encounter with a bear further than Peacock's in that it makes overt the sexual undercurrents present in Real bear encounters. In the story, the protagonist experiences the bear as a representation of the phallic mother and actually indulges in a sexual relationship with the bear, attempting to achieve a connection that is not ruled by the Name-of-the-Father. She wants to escape her rational, ruled life. Like Peacock, this character seeks a union with the natural world, but is more explicit about the means to that end (which ultimately fail).

The protagonist, a woman archivist named Lou, has taken a summer assignment to catalog the library and other belongings of an estate left to the institute for which she works. The Cary estate is the only structure on an island in the middle of a river in the wilds of Canada. An urban woman, Lou is out of her element in the woods, but accepts the assignment with a sense of adventure and a desire to make a change in her life. She doesn't anticipate, though, that the life-changing element of the journey would not be the solitude or the woods--rather it would be her relations with a black bear. The former resident, Colonel Cary, had always kept a black bear as a kind of pet, and it still lives in a shack behind the house. The black bear, which is much smaller than a grizzly bear, is somewhat domesticated--not entirely unlike the nineteenth century "dumb waiter" bruin. Yet, to Lou, the bear is still a wild creature that remains entirely outside of her prior
experience.

In her first experiences with the bear, she—like Peacock—experiences the anamorphic gaze and is deeply troubled by it. Either the syntax of the language changes in those moments, or she feels penetrated by the red eyes of the bear shining out of the darkness. However, she develops a "relationship" with the bear (which does not speak), and as their relationship grows more intense, she becomes less and less attached to her work and to the outside world. She notes that she begins to smell like the bear—and likes it. At times, though, the bear "makes her nothing" as bears do for Peacock.

Her "relationship" with the bear eventually turns sexual. One evening in the library she sits reading a book, rubbing her hands and feet into the bear's fur, an objet petit a for her as it is for Peacock. She loves the bear's fur, as is clear in a later comment about Homer, a neighbor-man with whom she has a brief affair: "She stared at Homer's hairless ears and thought of his hairless body. Shuddered."(128). She does not find the penis of a man desirable; she wants the bear's fur. Though the bear is male, she does not pursue the bear as a substitute for a man. Rather, she wants union with the animal world.

Distracted from her book, she remembers her failed loves and "began in her desolation to make love to herself" (93). The bear moves over toward her and, along with her proddings, gives her the pleasure of "ursine cunnilingus." She plays with his ears while enjoying the act to the point of tears, signifying both her continued obsession with the bear's fur as well as her simultaneous desire for sexual connection with the bear. Although her relationship with the bear reaches the point of sexual satisfaction, her fundamental desires are not in some way fulfilled. As Zizek explains, the object of desire
is never something that can be attained. Rather, the subject moves around it through repetitive acts—it aims for fulfillment—but never reaches the assumed "goal":

A goal, once reached, always retreats anew. Can we not recognize in this paradox the very nature of the psychoanalytical notion of drive, or more properly the Lacanian designation between the aim and its goal? The goal is the final destination, while the aim is what we intend to do, i.e. the way itself. Lacan's point is that the real purpose of the drive is not its goal (full satisfaction) but its aim: The drive's ultimate aim is simply to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path, to continue its path to and from the goal. (Zizek *Looking Awry* 5)

Lou enjoys these acts of repetition and, through them, finds "some" sort of deep connection with the bear: "There was some connection, some unfingerable intimacy among them, some tie between longing and desire and the achievable" (emphasis mine) (91). Yet, the complete "connection" she desires is impossible; the phallic mother would devour her first. She'd have to go completely psychotic.

Lou finally tries to achieve that connection at the end of the novella, when she makes an attempt at intercourse with the bear. They are in front of the fire one night, and she notices that his penis is growing erect. "She looked at him. He did not move. She took her sweater off and went down on all fours in front of him, in the animal posture" (131). Then, the bear reaches out and draws his claws across her back, ripping open the skin. She leaps away and demands that he leave. She screams at the bear, then bolts herself into her bedroom, shaking (132). The one she desired had mauled her.

The next morning, when she wakes up and remembers what had happened, she calls herself a fool and knows the affair has ended. She could not attempt make love to the phallic mother without getting wounded, she learns, so she decides to pack up and
leave the island. Like Peacock, Lou gets "too much" of the phallic mother, so she leaves
the unbearable situation. Yet, as she's packing, she remembers "the claw that healed
guilt. She felt strong and pure"(140). Her experiences with the Real, though traumatic,
also served as a healing force for her.

**Why Bears, Why Now?**

Why is it that the animal inspiring works rich in psychoanalytic themes is the
bear? Could it not be another similarly frightening animal—a wolf, a shark, a snake? And
why is there a proliferation of such texts in mid- to late-twentieth century America and
Canada? In its mass and physical power, the bear is one of the few creatures that sits
above humans on the food chain. And bears are often noted for their human-like
qualities: they can sit upright, they nurture their young, they copulate face-to-face as do
many humans.⁷ Perhaps we find them fascinating because they are so much like us, yet
so much more powerful.

But these characteristics do not explain the timing of the appearance of so much
contemporary bear literature. The literature has emerged as bears have grown
increasingly endangered or extinct in the United States and Canada, and at a time when
philosophical trends allow for reconsideration of the superiority of humans in the world.

⁷ Focusing on bear copulation proved problematic to some medieval natural historians who tried to
distinguish between humans and animals on the basis of sexual position. See Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast
Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, New York: Routledge, 1944.
By the turn of the century, countless bears had been slaughtered on this continent by hunters and trappers, or out of self-defense or hatred. They had become what Zizek calls the object of hatred, like the phallic mother. Perhaps the bear is now the spectral apparition that haunts us—a creature that demands a reckoning.

As we have seen, bear literature spans well beyond the bounds of 20th century America and Canada. Paul Shepard documents the significance of bears in early legends throughout the world, and traces these influences through subsequent bear literature: myths, fables, fairy tales, poetry, the novel. Bears also play a prominent role in Native American oral and written histories. Yet, something new is happening now in bear literature. Bear literature has taken off, suggesting that the bear is not just any animal that we can easily substitute.

Some of the new bear stories sound like a broken record: the bear is magnificent, the bear is scary because it can kill me, or "I overcame my bear fear by forcing myself to spend night after scary night alone in bear country." They continue to present the bear in terms of the Imaginary and Symbolic. But some of the stories—like Peacock's and Engel's—suggest to us that our tales of bears can never be so simple. Our desire to understand them and understand our fear of them—and then articulate that through literature—can connect us back to the circuits of our most basic drives. When it does, the result is a new turn in environmental literature—one that more fully represents the relation between human and non-human worlds.
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