

“A DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL”: SEXUALITY, SUBJECTIVITY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MODES IN MARIAN ENGEL’S *THE GLASSY SEA*¹

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ABSTRACT

Marian Engel’s novel *The Glassy Sea* (1978) features a woman in search of a creative and experiential voice through a complex process of individuation. This coming to terms with her self is doubly complicated, since the protagonist, the Protestant nun Marguerite Hebert, is confronted with secular and religious patriarchal hierarchies that displace the key to her individuation, the mastery of her body and sexuality.

This paper explores the triangulation set up by an autobiographical mode, the confessional letter, the mastery of female sexuality and its role in the coming to terms with Hebert’s gendered self. The former acts as the vehicle to tackle the many contradictions inherent in the protagonist life, while it also screens a retrospective autobiography that deploys a controversial approach to Hebert’s sexual drives. This challenges the ahistorical existence of the typical nun consecrated to its present, reconstructs the nun’s past and envisions her future. Marguerite’s writing subverts the Protestant way to perfection and makes room for a lay path to self-recognition.

Key words: Marian Engel, subjectivity, sexuality, fictional autobiography, Canadian novel.

RESUMEN

La novela de Marian Engel *The Glassy Sea* (1978) presenta a una mujer en busca de voz creativa y legitimadora de su experiencia personal a través de un proceso complejo de individuación. La aceptación de sí misma es doblemente

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complicada, ya que su protagonista, la monja protestante Marguerite Hebert ha de enfrentarse a las jerarquías patriarcales religiosas y seculares que desplazan la clave de su individuación, el dominio de su cuerpo y sexualidad.

Este artículo explora la triangulación generada por un modo autobiográfico, la carta confesional, el dominio de la sexualidad femenina y su papel en la creación del sujeto genérico de Hebert. La primera actúa como el vehículo para acotar las muchas contradicciones inherentes a la vida de la protagonista, mientras que proporciona una autobiografía retrospectiva que despliega un controvertido enfoque del impulso sexual de Hebert. Éste desafía la existencia ahistórica de la monja típica consagrada a su presente, reconstruye su pasado y proporciona una visión de su futuro. Los escritos de Marguerite subvierten el énfasis protestante de perfección mientras que abren una senda laica de conocimiento propio.

Palabras clave: Marian Engel, subjetividad, sexualidad, autobiografía ficticia, novela canadiense.

The Glassy Sea (1978), the sixth novel by the Canadian writer Marian Engel (1933-1985), went almost unnoticed after the successful and scandalous *Bear* (1976), the two epithets being in this case more interrelated than it is usually thought.² Thematic and formal differences notwithstanding, both novels have much in common. The two of them present us with women in search of a creative voice to enunciate a gender-marked experience. They equally show a complex process of self-individuation in which the protagonists, the librarian Lou in *Bear* and the Protestant nun Marguerite Hebert in *The Glassy Sea*, strive to dissociate themselves from the patriarchal mould and attain self-definition beyond an iron-fisted regime of dualities (Brady 1987: 46; see Hutchinson 1987). *Bear*, like *The Glassy Sea*, does not hesitate in indicting the extremely conservative Canadian society of the 1970s for the oppression of women. *The Glassy Sea*, nevertheless, focuses on a more complex process of self-individuation, inasmuch as Marguerite has to cope with religious and secular hierarchies that conflate to displace and silence the key to the nun's self-exploration, her mastery of her body and sexuality. Through its fictionalisation of Hebert's life on an epistolary axis, Engel's novel engages with a political act concerned with the reclaiming of women's vital space, and shows in parallel that "autobiography localises the very program of much feminist theory – the reclaiming of the female subject, even as it foregrounds the central issue of contemporary critical thought – the problematic status of the self" (Brodzki & Schenck 1988: 2; Donnell & Polkey 2000: xxix).

² Apart from *Bear* and *The Glassy Sea*, Engel was the author of other five novels, *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* (1968), *The Honeyman Festival* (1970), *Monodromos* (1973), *Joanne* (1975) and *Lunatic Villas* (1981), and two short-story collections, *Inside the Easter* (1975) and *The Tattooed Woman* (1985). All the way through the seventies and the early 1980s, Engel worked extensively on literary and cultural affairs and published a number of papers on the Canadian novel, creative writing and gender and fiction. Verduyn (1995) provides an extensive list of Engel's whole work, archival sources included.

This paper is concerned with the triangulation determined by an autobiographical mode, the confessional letter, the mastery of female sexuality and its role in the coming to terms with the gendered self. The personal letter acts as the vehicle to revise the many contradictions inherent in the protagonist's life, while it also screens a retrospective autobiography that deploys a controversial approach to Hebert's innermost longings. The conflict between the nun's will to a hankered, Puritan perfection and the inescapable materiality evinced in her concern with her sexual drives preside over her writing. Her epistle challenges as well the ahistorical, asexual existence of the stereotypical nun consecrated to its present, reconstructs the nun's past and envisions her future. In the course of a whole night, in which she reads and writes her life in a letter to her bishop Philip of Huron as a response to his petition for her to direct a new nunnery, Marguerite sets aside the path to perfection that ruled her early existence and turns it into an itinerary of self-recognition, while her whole process of reading and writing echoes, as it also undermines, the confessional tone and redemptive goal of male autobiographies and their “orgasmic rhythms” (Newton 1998: 52).³

As a woman writer's fictional autobiography, *The Glassy Sea* rapidly establishes a conglomerate of relations that delve into several, interconnected fields of analysis, such as, gender, genre, subject and representation. Indeed, as Donnell and Polkey put forward, auto(/)biography “[...] is less a field of enquiry under dispute than a field on the move, inhabiting new intellectual spaces as feminist scholarship and ideas concerning situated knowledge begin to intersect more meaningfully with other theoretical frameworks, including colonial discourse theory, queer theory and performance theory” (2000: xxi). With their use of the term *auto/biography*, Polkey (1999), Donnell & Polkey (2000) and Stanley (2000) highlight the inevitable relation of intertextuality affecting the narration of one's life, which is inflected by the form in which we receive, understand and contextualise other vital narrations. *Auto/biography* pinpoints then the hybrid categorisation of the genre and the potentiality of intersubjectivity (Donnell & Polkey 2000: xxii; see Martín Lucas 1999). For those critics who trust the referential mirror of autobiography and for those who consider it the terrain of a subject-in-process within an arena for the contention of the subject, self and author in the production of a text, gender concerns have been of minor relevance (Neuman 1991: 1). This is evident in their construction of the autobiographer as a public figure whose access to the social discourse of intervention is guaranteed. Consequently, women have had to cope with this reality and adopt a male ventriloquism in turn for visibility (Smith 1987: 37), which is perceptible in Engel's fiction.

Structurally, three differentiated parts constitute the novel and lead us from the present to the past and back to the present of Hebert's life. In the “Prologue”, an already retired Marguerite, now known as Rita Bowen, converses with her psychiatrist, Dr. Stern, and Bishop Philip, who intend to persuade her to return to the Eglantines. The hesitating ex-

³ In his study of gay autobiography, George Newton employs this sexual terminology to refer to a unilinear textual design that mirrors male sexuality in its disposition of tremor, hesitation, release and eventual recognition of the self. Texts like St. Augustine's *The Confessions* (c. 397) present this phallogocentric structure that retrospectively features conflict and is oriented to resolution (Newton 1998, 51).

nun decides to take on a decision after reading and re-writing the letter that one year ago she sent to Philip. The “Prologue” finishes when, at night, Rita prepares to read her own text, which is the central part of the novel, and is concisely entitled “The Letter”. Temporarily speaking, that act of reading covers a night in which Rita delves into her past, “a dark night of the soul”, as we read in the front lap of the McClelland & Stewart edition, in which she intends to come to terms with her self. Through that act of writing and reading, Rita refuses to pursue her old way to perfection in favour of one of self-discovery and recognition, while posing writing as ‘a sign of authority’ in the reconstruction of her subjectivity. For her, the process of writing and reading “[...] authorises, gives solidity, fixity; it produces a text, something apparently inert and ‘there’, a thing rather than an occasion” (Stanley 2000: 12). As a result of the newly created authority, “Envoi”, the third and last part, sheds some light on the reinvigorated Rita, now more aware of herself than ever, who accepts Philip’s offer, but transforms the initial proposal. The centre that she will direct will host women in need of physical and moral protection and will combine the contemplative life of the former Eglantines with their new social service.

The structural disposition of the novel brings along a reverse temporality, since the “Prologue” is more recent than the events recounted in “The Letter” and “Envoi”. This rupture of the linear and teleological presentation of the autobiographical narration advances that Marguerite’s recollections are plagued with temporal dislocations that go back and forth in time, from her childhood to her marriage, from her period of chastity to her retirement. This broken temporality reinforces the idea that “[...] women’s autobiography is (relatively) discontinuous, digressive, fragmentary and concerned with personal relations”. In this context, “digression and fragmentation, for instance, imply a *lack* of linearity and wholeness and it is this implied narrative that we recognise as autobiography [...] in the Western tradition” (Broughton 1991: 78). However, this autobiography also makes room for the unsaid and collapses in this way the one-to-one correspondence between the *bio-* and the *-grapho*. Thus, Rita realises that “while I was writing to Philip, I had in the intervals between the sentences, written a great deal more, truths and untruths, in my head, on the sky on the evanescent clouds” (Engel 1978: 146).

In this novel, the male autobiographical mirror of reference is appropriated and particularly concerned with the possession of the female body and sexuality, the two of them being fundamental cornerstones in the protagonist’s self-recognition. Therefore, the omitted body references of canonical autobiographies are brought to the fore and exposed here as part of the male humanist tradition that dissociated body and spirit. In other words, in *The Glassy Sea*, the autobiographical mirror does not silence the body, but the body and sexuality are the vehicular means to Marguerite’s construction of subjectivity. In this way, the recurrent equation between masculinity and universality is undermined to favour gendered and sexually charged considerations, and thus, in opposition to the views that dissolve subjectivity and make it the result of a role (see Barthes 1986; Foucault 1991; Neuman 1991), the feminist recovery of the novel explicitly states “[...] that it makes a great deal of difference who is speaking. The discourse of authority, of patriarchy, of morality can be spoken very differently from various vantage points. The discourse may be the same but it affects people differently, and people affected differently are likely to

think, act and feel differently” (Goodman 1988: 308). This consideration acknowledges, on the one hand, the relevance of the personal experience to position the subject in the social discourse, and on the other, it states the subject’s capacity to transform the social entanglement in/through which its construction is produced. There is, therefore, an abiding interrelation between the social reality and the narration of the self, and in this sense, Goodman continues, “we seek a concept of the ‘self’ which fully recognises the inevitable role of social discourse in our self-imagining and the authenticity of individual interior experience” (1988: 319). Engel’s novel is fully consonant with the *petit recit*, with the gendered experience and its potential to modify the patriarchal grand-narratives of culture and history and their bearing on the dual organisation of female subjectivities.

The attention that Marguerite pays to her sexuality and her body acts as the catalyst that disrupts part of that dualism, since it impedes the ossification of a temporal partition before and after her entry into the Eglantines; her sexuality is active all the way along her life and boils inside the convent as a repressed force that, far from equating itself to an absence, reinforces its power on the nun’s subjectivity. Therefore, the occluding of the dual presentation of ideas in the woman’s rendition of her life owes a great deal to a continuum of experience in which her sexuality constitutes a structuring skeleton. From the time in which the teenager Rita is attracted to the married Boris in the Ontario town of West China or to her roommate Christabel, to reach the turning-point of her commitment to the Eglantines and following renunciation and marriage to Ash Bowen, sexuality is a repeated presence in Hebert’s autobiography. And, in so far as it is always looming in her life, it is impossible to delimit experiential phases as marked by its presence or absence. In a chat to Dr. Stern, the ex-nun concludes: “‘why’, Dr. Stern wanted to know, ‘did you become a nun?’. He had more than a psychiatric interest. I suppose his mind, too, was impregnated with the mysteries of nuns’ tales, the inevitable sexuality that clings to the asexual” (Engel 1978: 24).

First censored as incompatible with the Puritan zeal for perfection and later as impeding the proximity to the Husband hankered by the nun, sexuality in this autobiography evinces that repression, far from ending with the repressed, produces it in the Foucauldian sense and initiates a circular process in which the fiercer the interdiction, the more prolific the production of the banned. This consideration actively informs Rita’s retrospective recollection. It is she that reports that “[m]uch nonsense has been written about convents and sexuality; of course, the absence of sex implies its presence in the strongest terms, and Christian imagery is as well highly sexually charged” (Engel 1978: 78), to affirm later that “if there was suppressed sexuality in the air, it was channelled into the roses” (Engel 1978: 78-79). As we will see below, Marguerite’s religious renaming by sister Mary Rose as Maria Pelagia contains the ancestral collusion between the sexual and the chaste in the juxtaposition of the virginal Maria and Pelagia.⁴ It is within the convent where Maria Pelagia’s sexuality seems paradoxically more alive than before, and the walls of the Eglantine House, surrounded as they are by a garden of roses and white daisies, symbols of

⁴ In “Stabat Mater”, Kristeva affirms that the virgin attribute defining Mary is a translation error whose transcendence affected the subsequent depiction of her figure in religious as well as secular discourses. The translator replaced the Semitic term for *unmarried* for the Greek *parthenos*, producing an error that has survived in the following translations of the gospels (1990: 163).

passion and purity respectively, bear witness to the revival of Pelagia's former attraction for women. Thus, when after the religious daily service she sees Mary Cicely masturbating in her room, far from being astonished, Pelagia claims "I would even, I think, have made love to her, if I would have known how - do you see why I am a heretic [...]" (Engel 1978: 87).

What Pelagia contemplates as a handicap in her longed perfection fosters her leaving the order to start a new lay life. During her period as the *au pair* of Maggie Hibbert, she comes across and eventually marries Asher Bowen. From that moment on, the former Marguerite Hebert, then Maria Pelagia, is Peggy Bowen, but her renaming does not conceal that her married life is governed by a different concern with perfection, the social perfection that Bowen's career as a politician demands. Incapable of meeting that necessity and of coping with a new episode in her life, that of mother of the hydrocephalic Chummy, Peggy's personal and married life increasingly deteriorates and falls in the abyss after Chummy's death. As she parts ways with Bowen, Peggy shelters herself in alcohol while her sexuality seems to recede from her writings, but she occasionally comments that it was subdued to Asher's will. Significantly, while mentioning the fact that a painting of the Crucifixion hangs on her bed, Peggy opines: "I didn't like being made love to under the dead eyes of a hysterically Jesuitical unresurrectible Jesus" (Engel 1978: 115). Her words show that the seemingly irreconcilable spheres of the chaste and the married woman are not so far apart, in the same way that her name of Peggy retains part of the former Pelagia.

All the way through, Hebert's attention to her sexuality reverses the mystic path to perfection and approach to the male divinity, and advocates in turn a path of self-recognition and body repossession. Stating her sexuality and her seeming heterosexuality, Rita contradicts Julia Watson's statement on that "[...] in autobiography, only homosexuals have sexuality. Heterosexuality, because it does not have to be named, retains some of the disciplinary power that Adrienne Rich attributed to it in delineating its 'compulsory mechanisms'" (Watson 1992: 140). As Watson indicates, the unmarked trait of heterosexuality derives from its equation to universality and the resulting heterosexual/social contract that it engendered. As Monique Wittig expresses in several of the essays collected in *The Straight Mind* (1992), the social contract is quite indebted to Rousseau's, since the pre-social and pre-heterosexual is part of the unclear state termed the individual's 'unity of the will'. The ultimate consequence of the heterosexual/social contract is that women have been precluded their constitution as speaking subjects, a category undeniably codified in male terms. Therefore, for centuries women's autobiographies have been inscribed within the norms dictated by the heterosocial and heterosexual contract, which is clearly patriarchal (De Lauretis 1989: 17). Consequently, a number of gender-specific concerns were omitted to avoid their *unbecoming* nature. Writing gender and sexual peculiarities in this type of production has become a means to un-write the classical autobiographies written by men. In this sense, the tendency in (post-)modern autobiographies by women to posit a challenge to the traditional autobiographical conventions has to be read as a rupture of the genre in which it is the body that produces an excess that counters the generic boundaries. Drawing on Bidy Martin's words, sexually concerned autobiographies have become a "rhetorical figure of the negotiations around

identity and difference” (qtd. in Watson 1992, 143). This reinforces the idea that, socially speaking, gender has been determined by a matrix of heterosexual desires also present in (post)Lacanian theory (e.g. separation from the mother, approach to the father, castration, etc.) (Butler 1990: 329). In turn, queer theory has posited resistance against the dual schema of sexual identities in a strategic move that, in its break with the foundational binary logic of thinking, shows a postmodern ascription (Bristow 1997: 221).

The heterosexual and heterosocial contract has also provoked the interdiction and concealment of homosexuality and the need of the outing in homosexual autobiographies, but it has also made that, male autobiographers, writing from the humanist tradition, overlook their heterosexuality and situate that concern on the margin of their texts. Considering heterosexuality not as *a* sexual preference, but *the* sexual preference has produced an effect similar to the one described by Irigaray in connection with female gender. In her book *This Sex which Is not One* (1985), the French philosopher states that the male sex is the norm whereas the female one has been regarded as a deviation, a *sex which is not one*. Similarly, the *normal* condition of heterosexuality has blurred its mark and labelled homosexuality as deviation. In desiring men and women, Peggy’s crossing of the borders of sexual orientation seems to reaffirm the need to state heterosexuality as a condition, and not as the norm of human behaviour usually expected. Her movement across borders of sexual definition has to be examined within the novel’s rejection of constraining dualities, its affirmation of experiential multiplicity and its consideration of gender and sex as iterative acts that materialise on the body to produce a given inscription (see Butler 1990). The sexual/gender crossing is then a break of the dualities constructing female subjectivity under the scope of the heterosexual contract and one more of the renegotiations of identity categories produced by the autobiographical act in *The Glassy Sea*.

Instead of the suppression of sexual concerns expected in a letter of confessional tone, there is an overt engagement with the body and its politics. The body seems to be the key to the female self and the articulator of a particularly earthly mysticism of self-recognition that is frequently tainted with existentialism. This philosophical flavour is however obscured by the relevance given in the novel to social agency and the individual’s power to act and vary the social inscription in which s/he is encapsulated. In this context, Rita’s decision to lead the new Eglantine house as a refuge for women must be appreciated as a way-back to personal action and an advance in the process of personal self-recognition beyond the dualities of English/French, Catholic/Protestant, Marguerite Hebert/Margaret Heber/Maria Pelagia/Peggy Bowen. In this context, when valuing Philip’s offer, Rita claims from her retirement:

I don’t, like some philosophers, disapprove of mysticism. [...]. But, knowing I am imperfect, knowing also that I am part of the universe and entitled to be so, 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 [...]. Once I hunted in the hearts of roses for what I was to be. I tried to be a rose, the knight who plucked me found he could not bear my thorns. Then the roses reached out and robbed me. Now I am a crazy lady by the shore. That is what I want to be. No mystic, gnostic, hermetic, self-flagellating solitary anchoress; but a woman living by the shore (Engel 1978: 144).

In this form, Hebert's body is always intersecting with the body politic and the social body, this pointing out a coalescence of bodies in the autobiographical realm. The process of writing a personal autobiography undergoes frequent interruptions by any of these bodies, a process that unveils the subject as a mediated entity, while promoting the illusion of coherence and unity. In spite of this proliferation of bodies, and as Shirley Neuman explains, "bodies rarely figure in autobiography" (1994: 293). As we have seen, the humanist tradition expelled the bodily realm from its text, and underestimated the set of differences that bodies brought to the fore. Far from the purely biological, it is clear that "bodies seem to position us as demarcated subjects separate from others and to locate us in bounded temporalities and trajectories of identification (Smith 1994: 267). This explains why women writers opted for the 'neutralisation of the body' and the 'out-of-the-body experiences' narrated in their texts, since the opposite would have gained for them social censorship. For Sidonie Smith, to write body experiences beyond those of nurturing and mothering is to write unwomanly (1994: 272).

Also underlining motherhood and nurturing, *The Glassy Sea*, nevertheless, posits a *different* body in its epistolary autobiography as intertwined with self-definition, with redefinitions of the dual feminine subjectivity created by the patriarchal structures. Speaking the body produces then a transgression of the social demarcation given to the individual within the social sphere, since, in accordance with the action of patriarchy, "the fragmented materiality of bodies helps sustain the illusion of indisputable continuity between biology and culturally constructed identities, the illusion of stable categorisations" (Smith 1994: 268). In this way, as Smith concludes, "the autobiographer's body is the site of multiple solicitations, multiple markings, multiple invocations of subject positions" (1994: 270-271). This multiplicity precludes the insertion of any dual, binary schema of female subjectivity. It is across these multiple positions that Marguerite Hebert's subject is constituted. In this sense, the novel goes from the presentation of a number of dualities whereby gender has been historically encoded to their disintegration to finally attempt a definition of subjectivity beyond their restraining scope.

The title of the novel contributes to that conflation of dual categories structuring the protagonist's subjectivity. As we know in the course of Pelagia's presentation of ideas, *the glassy sea* is a verse from a religious hymn that the young Rita Hebert sang in her United Church community. As Verduyn has detected, the title is part of "The Holy Trinity", a hymn produced by Reginald Heber (1738-1826), whose surname curiously resembles Marguerite's, this pointing out the crossing between the fictional autobiography of the novel and the tangible realities circulating around Engel's works and life. As the first lines of that hymn read, dualities in the novel are broken in joining the celestial scene of adoration and Marguerite's moving across this sphere into the secular one:

Holy, holy, holy! all the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea.
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,
Which wert, and art, and evermore shall be (qtd. in Verduyn 1995: 141).

Yet *the glassy sea* fosters the disintegration of the essential dualism by inflecting it with a spatial dimension, since it is a defining element of Peggy Bowen’s forced exile on the East coast of Canada after her tumultuous divorce from her husband and thriving politician. There, through the undistinguished territories of the estuaries determined by the confusing coexistence of water and sands, the novel mirrors this space in Marguerite’s life producing a telling continuity between her secluded life in Eglantine House and her return to the outer world.⁵ This landscape is further evidence of that tendency to the irresolution of contraries, a panorama where land and water meet and give way to a territory of non-definition inhabited by animals that populate watery soils, such as clams and herons.⁶ *The glassy sea*, as title, establishes a similar continuum that supersedes the partition in dualities that leaves its imprint on Marguerite’s text, pointing out in parallel that the teenager Margaret Heber is not that different from the late Rita; that the married Peggy and the nun Maria Pelagia have many things in common. Furthermore, the collapse of dualities in the novel is part and parcel of the long field of tensions that Engel’s sees as conspicuous to women’s experience. In her epistle, Rita crosses many of them, negotiates anew her position in and out of these tensions and, especially, circumvents the authority, secular and clerical, that restrains her existence. In her narration, the time *before* and *after* being a nun intertwine, images of naivety and purity merge with those of overflowing desire, the daisy and the rose intermingle, Martha and Maria strive for prevalence, and this “[...] produce[s] a continued investigation into the impact of dualism on women’s experience” (Verduyn 1995: 139).

In opposition to the dual design of the religious and lay hierarchies, Rita’s narration opens for her a place of multiplicity that empowers her as speaking subject. Genealogically, she describes a locus of conflict between the national duality of Canada, the English and the French, but also between the Catholic and the Protestant. Her surname was originally the *Canadien* Hébert, later transformed into the Anglophone Heber, as her present Margaret derives from Marguerite. Her family’s rejection of the French side of their ancestry cannot conceal that presence, despite their will to relate themselves to the Anglos and overcome the social stigma of belonging to the French low class of West China. As a member of the United Church of Canada, Margaret’s life is led by the Puritan zeal for perfection whereas the Catholic cult is rapidly equated to the Papist. Thus, Margaret concludes: “[t]he original Hebers had been Catholic but by now they’d mostly seen the light and come over to our side; fortunately, else my parents would never have been allowed to marry, or I’d have grown up with my hair parted in the middle [...]” (Engel 1978: 21). For the late Rita, the

⁵ In her preliminary remarks to *The Glassy Sea*, Engel affirms that the Eglantine convent of the novel owes a great deal to a convent in Cyprus where she stayed. She states as well the influence of the medieval “Ancrén Rule” in her fictionalisation of this religious space. Much of the symbology that the novel adopts, especially as regards the protagonist’s naming, is clearly borrowed from Medieval religiosity. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Beatriz Hernández Pérez for her illuminating orientations. All faults remain mine.

⁶ The clam is one of the ancestral symbols of female genitalia whereas the heron represents fragility and elegance but it also brings about the difficulty to clearly distinguish the male from the female. This complexity in clearly ascertaining gender/sexual difference adds up to the already complicated arena of sexuality in the novel. It is not a coincidence that Rita’s coming to terms with her self comes out and is produced in this physical territory of indetermination.

name she is usually appealed to by her family, these ruminations already contain the presence of the virginal Mary, from which she has struggled to set difference all the way through her life. In so doing, she moved onto the opposite pole, so that the young Rita was, in the words of a more mature one, “[...] perverse. Left-handed, too. I drove my mother wild” (Engel 1978: 21).

However, Mary’s relevance is rapidly replaced in Margaret’s identity spectrum by the conflict in her way to perfection between Martha and Mary, Lazarus’ two sisters, who exemplify the active and the contemplative view of human life, but also the conflict between the idea of a personally forged fate and the predestined vital itinerary. Such a duality permeates the whole narration and Margaret’s secular and religious spheres, to be later negotiated in her particular project to remodel the Eglantine House that she is to govern. As an Eglantine sister, Pelagia is unable to reconcile her contemplative seclusion with her need to act personally and socially. This tension she resolves in her letter to Philip, where she accepts both episodes as part of her life, while she exposes the historical inequity that forced the Eglantines to remain as contemplative nuns.

Maria Pelagia’s religious denomination is in itself a site of struggle between the figures of Mary, unfolded as Jesus’ mother and Lazarus’ sister, and Pelagia. According to Mary Rose, the new nun is named after Pelagius “[...] theologian and heretic [...] he was, she announced, as great a Puritan as I” (Engel 1978, 78). Later, however, Pelagia comes to the conclusion that her name is also related to Pelagia of Antioch, an actress and prostitute converted into Christianity as Pelagius. Pelagia of Antioch was also known as Marina for her richness of pearls, and no less important, for her *ars amandi* indebted to the goddess Aphrodite. The divinity born of the sea is also appealed to as Marina and Pelagia, from *pielagus*. This shows that *Maria Pelagia* bears the traces of the saint and the prostitute, the chaste and the sensual; *marina* is also a name for the pearl, symbol of perfection, which clashes with the sensuality and sexuality expected of Aphrodite. Furthermore, the name of the order derives from the French *églantine* or rose, which directly brings the symbol of passion to the genesis of the religious congregation, and *rosa eglanteria* is a tiny, pink variety of rose extremely common in the landscape where the late Rita lives. The convent’s garden is full of roses and daisies, in French *marguerites*, which directly point to Pelagia’s former name and back to the pearl (Verduyn 1995: 138-161). In addition, Marguerite’s short form, *Rita*, is connected also to the rose, since there is an Italian, 14th century St. Rita whose symbol is the rose (Verduyn 1995: 245-47). The conflict between dualities is omnipresent and travels from Pelagia’s life to Rita’s return to the order when she claims that “the chapel still smells of roses” (Engel 1978: 167).

In the course of her analysis, Verduyn affirms that *The Glassy Sea* separates mind and body, head and heart, and that, unlike *Bear*, it displaces the importance of sexuality for the sake of spirituality (1995: 145). Contradicting her partially, I would argue that most of the spirituality in the novel derives from the acceptance of Marguerite’s sexuality and the mastery of her body. In reading the novel, it seems that a coming to terms with body and sexuality lies at the basis of that spirituality. Assessing her emphasis on plenitude and union with the male divinity, Rita concludes: “I failed so early to distinguish God’s masculinity from my femininity, ill defined as it was by red cardigans and Kitty Higgins

bows, that I became, in spite of my instincts, which are on the whole as passive as any man could wish, a woman of my own generation” (Engel 1978: 30). Her late life demonstrates, however, that the early interest in perfection has been replaced by a greater concern with self-exploration, which escapes from the restrictive dualities of patriarchal morality Rita has become aware of and learnt to consider as relative: “perhaps, in that moment, I was the rose. Not Mary; no, Mary is only one incarnation of the rose. One I fear still as a male projection of the floral and the carnal; but perhaps what to some she represented was the stilling of time in the dead centre of the rose garden, and I was there” (Engel 1978: 19).

In spite of being indebted to the confessional genre, Rita’s epistle in *The Glassy Sea* sets its generic limits against themselves. Thus, whereas precepts like the presence of a religious authority of higher rank are fulfilled, since this is the role played by the addressee of the letter, Bishop Philip, the direct contact provided by the act of confession has been, however, replaced by the distance of the epistolary mode.⁷ Similarly, the will to redemption and absolution have disappeared to make room for personal acceptance and recognition beyond the religious and patriarchal restrictions. In connection with this, factors like conversion and revelation are displaced to put forward a truncated revelation that does not approach Rita to the divinity, but distances her and substitutes the male figure for self-exploration. In this sense, Rita’s confession and the dialogical nature exhibited by a letter achieve a negotiation of the taken-for-granted structures of patriarchy subjecting them to bidirectional communication and likely disagreement. As Eva Karpinski observes of much epistolary fiction, the epistle in Engel’s novel, “[...] in its ability to transgress cultural and generic norms, can force the reader to confront issues of power, agency and mobility in the constructions of subjectivity, gender and authority in different historical and cultural contexts” (2001, 301). As Karpinski posits, epistolary fiction attains this conflict by means of a peculiar triangulation between the author of the letter, Rita, in this case, her addressee, Philip, and the potential reader of her text and the novel. Consequently, like in any autobiographical mode, intersubjectivity attracts the reader to the experience presented in the letter whereas the whole novel locates him/her in and out of the letter’s sphere. In *The Glassy Sea*, this can be appreciated in reading the “Epilogue”, where Rita loses some ground to her interlocutors. As we will see below, the conflict between the individuation and the communal relevance of the confessional letter can be traced back to the 16th century, when the Panopticon imposed on the subject the expectation and the need to explicitly say where s/he was in relation to a given discourse of social, religious or sexual nature. Autobiography, then, is “[...] the name given to a discourse whose existence is needed in so far as it seems to offer a guarantee of personal subjectivity, of the autonomy of the I who has shaped, against all odds, his or her life” (Tambling 1990: 106).

While it is obvious that the confessional tone of Rita’s autobiography does not conceal her challenge to the structures of patriarchy and the humanist writing that displaced gendered concerns, as autobiography, it brings about a remarkable effort in creating a vital space of personal subjectivity. In this context, her confession “[...] can be productive in that process as the subject, articulating problems of identity and identification, struggles

⁷ As affirmed by Verduyn (1995), and in consonance with the symbolic naming employed in the novel, Huron sounds similar to *yeam* when pronounced with a Torontonion accent. Accordingly, it would express Philip’s longing for Maria Pelagia’s return to the clerical life.

against coercive calls to a ‘universal humanity’”. According to Watson and Smith, “[f]or the marginalized woman, autobiographical language may serve as a coinage that purchases entry into the social and discursive economy” (1992: xix). As any autobiography, Rita’s letter is immediately complicated by the illusion of transparency and tangibility of the subject and the impossibility that such a fiction rapidly delineates. Hence, the mirage of the gendered autograph that Rita’s presents recedes out of reach, since “[i]f the autobiographical moment prepares for a meeting of ‘writing’ and ‘selfhood’, a coming together of method and subject matter, this destiny [...] is always deferred [...]. Autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction” (Benstock 1988: 11).

All in all, the centripetal impulse of concentration on the subject, on the individual and his/her intimacies, that characterises autobiography is heightened in the confession, where the strong emphasis on the personal competes for prominence with the construction of a gendered identity that can be collectively read by the feminist struggle. Rita’s letter supersedes the conflict in clearly advocating a personal effort of individuation beyond the gender agenda of the late seventies, which also lies underneath the novel. In this case, as Susan Stanford Friedman says, “the emphasis on individuation as the necessary precondition for autobiography is thus a reflection of privilege, on that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history the illusion of individualism” (1988: 39). As woman, Francophone and nun, Rita knows what that exclusion means and her text vividly portrays that experience, but as the middle-aged accommodated woman that she is at the moment of writing, she also enjoys a certain privilege that, to start with, allows her the production of the text. Her vital rendering reconciles the individuation pursued at this late moment of her life with the communal gendered interpellation, since the confession

[...] help[s] to create the private individual, measured by deep interiority and feelings, and by a personal history. [...] Those addressed by a confessional discourse are ‘interpellated’ (hailed, singled out by name), and are subjected, i.e. made to define themselves in a discourse given to them, and in which they must name and misname themselves; and secondly, made to think of themselves as autonomous subjects, responsible for their acts. Further, the confessional puts an emphasis on the sexual, in both Catholicism and Protestantism, and this connects to far more than the desire to accentuate fleshly weakness (Tambling 1990: 2).

The exercise of recreating her subjectivity through the autobiographical form of the confessional letter empowers Rita. Essential in that effort is her reclaiming of sexuality and her body as two domains out of the scope of the patriarchal contracted morality. Her attention to the sexual endows Rita Bowen with personal cohesion beyond the circumstantial peculiarities of her life. Sexuality produces a clash between all the binary representations of femininity and gives the gendered speaker a privileged stance of enunciation from which she alters the pattern of an already determined gender configuration.

In *The Glassy Sea* sexuality, subjectivity and autobiography form a powerful triangle from which Rita's writing interrogates, while it also relies on, traditional representations of clerical women. Unlike these, Rita's text produces a continuous feed-back between her present and past, never dissociates her lay life from her religious period and, very especially, seldom does she avoid the relevance of her sexuality as key to her subjectivity. Her autobiography, therefore, gives her a valuable path to the self-recognition achieved in *a dark night of the soul*, an introspection that qualifies, and is continuous intertext of, her confessional epistle.

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