BOOK REVIEWS

THE TATTOOED WOMAN

Marian Engel. Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1985.

Elizabeth Brady

Marian Engel, who died in February 1985, spent the last months of her life selecting, from her published (or broadcast) and unpublished short fiction, the collection of stories that make up *The Tattooed Woman*. She was assisted in this task by her friend Timothy Findley, who also contributed a touching Preface. For having encouraged her more serious short fiction, "irrational" stories that took her in a new direction, she credits another friend, Robert Weaver, long-time producer of CBC Radio's *Anthology* program:

> *For a long time I wrote short stories as practical exercises in earning necessities, chronicles to pay the bills. They did what they were told to do and failed to be any kind of art. Then irrationality decided to creep in, and the richness that comes from having written for long enough to know it is no use holding anything back. Robert Weaver... began to buy these irrational stories... It became easier to write them because he is the ideal reader: ready for anything but sloppy work.*

Engel goes on, in her Introduction, to distinguish between two kinds of fiction — "traditional narrative" based on "ordinary reality" (for which she claims no competence) and narrative that springs from "the irrational, the area where, when the skin of logic is pulled back, anything can happen." She says that the "irrational, the magical impulse," increasingly came to dominate her work; possibly she was influenced in this regard by the work of the Latin American writers she so much appreciated.

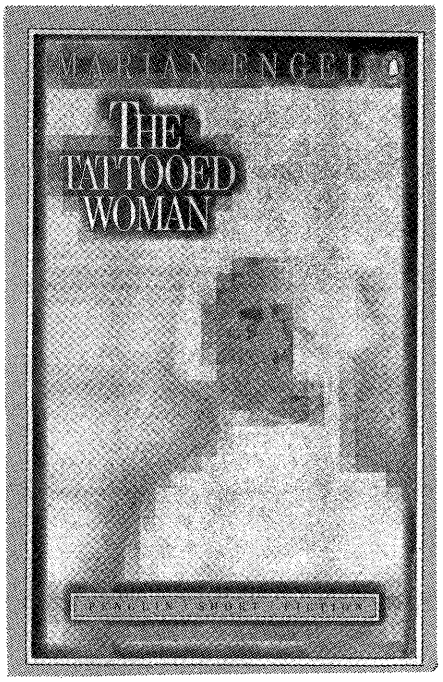
"Super-reality" — "that element in everyday life where the surreal shows itself without turning French on us" — is the hallmark of four of the more engaging stories in this collection: "The Tattooed Woman," "Madame Hortensia, Equilibriste," "The Life of Bernard Orge," and "The Country Doctor." In freeing herself up to pursue the illogical, disquieting associations of the subconscious, Engel claimed for herself a new fictional terrain over which she could track the psychic life along the fine divide between reality and hallucination. These four stories offer fresh perspectives on familiar Engel themes: the crippling effects (particularly on the artist) of the suppression of difference within southern Ontario culture; how the unfettered imagination — creative vision — can transform our mundane perceptions of reality; and how creativity must embrace the extraordinary, albeit frightening, aspects of the seemingly banal. And Engel's choice of protagonists — two housewives, a deformed child, and a journalist — seems to suggest that this power of transformative vision does not reside exclusively in artists. Right to the end of her writing life, Engel continued to issue impassioned pleas for the license to be unconventional in a prim, provincial society that preeminently rewards conformity.

In the title story a forty-two-year-old woman, upon discovering that her husband is having an affair with a girl half her age, develops a technique for giving her previously internalized pain and self-loathing a visible manifestation. She carves elaborate patterns into her skin: "Experience must show, she thought." But her obsessive acts of self-mutilation become a proud symbol of the artist's transformation of raw experience into significant visibility:

> *I am an artist, now, she thought, a true artist. My body is my canvas. I am very old, and very beautiful, I am carved like an old shaman, I am an artifact of an old culture, my body is a pictograph from prehistory, it has been used and bent and violated and broken, but I have resisted. I am Somebody.*

This keenly focused, richly detailed, and moving story is narrated by a third-person "centre of consciousness," which gives the onlooker-reader a chilling, ironically detached perspective on her morbid actions. Several reviewers (perhaps significantly, all of them male) complained that both the governing idea and its irresolution are unsatisfactory. Douglas Glover, for example, criticized "the strangely sentimental notion the reader is asked to swallow — namely that this self-pitying self-mutilation is somehow redemptive. Rather, it is a kind of hyper-romantic shorthand, the bizarre fronting for character, which reads like a wish-fulfilling fantasy... (*Books in Canada*, Aug.-Sept. 1985, p. 15). They miss the subtly ironic point Engel is making through the anthropological allusions to 'primitive' cultures (in the above long quotation from the text) and to "African women in the National Geographic magazine with beautiful slashes in their ebony skins." In our more 'sophisticated,' yet thoroughly misogynist, society, a woman's coming of middle age is often marked by her mate's infidelity, which can be read as the husband's perverse rite of passage, via a younger woman, into rejuvenated manhood. From this explicitly feminist perspective, the emblematic significance of ritualistic scarring is thereby inverted. The dominant (male) culture perceives it as abnormal; the woman regards it merely as flesh-inscription of the psychic scarring inflicted upon her by 'normal' male behaviour. As it compels complicit others to witness what she has suffered, and as it allows her to move beyond the scars of her victimization into a new condition of empowerment, her act is redemptive.

In "Madame Hortensia, Equilibriste," the narrator's bizarre nature resides in her physical being and her former celebrity: diminutive to the degree of near-dwarfdom, she overcame birth defects of an unspecified nature that made it diffi-



cult for her to learn to walk, and became a famous acrobat. From her present, undistinguished vantage point as "Mrs. Robinson," resident on the outskirts of a small town where she lives contentedly with her six children in self-imposed obscurity, she spends her evenings writing her autobiography. Although she claims that hers is "not a moral story," she is repeatedly very explicit about the didactic motive prompting her to tell it: "The only happy people here are the ones who are ordinary." Madame Hortensia's story becomes a witty parable about Canadian national identity, which, Engel suggests, rests on our pinched conviction that mediocrity, if not entirely preferable to distinction, at least is in better taste. The writer engagingly alters the shape of her story to conform to her heroine's two modes of existence. Her sheltered, exquisite childhood and her exotic career are narrated as "fairy tale;" her return to 'ordinary life' takes on the more prosaic contours of "Canadian fiction." This is a playful, inventive story.

The other two stories in this "irrational" group both play with the fantastic possibilities that open up to a woman who temporarily crosses the line separating her ordinary life from the worlds she can inhabit imaginatively. In "The Life of Bernard Orge," Marge Elph, "middle-class and fustian and middle-aged," assumes a new *male* identity: with the assistance of a prosthetic caricature of a nose, she becomes "Bernard Orge, frail collector of early Rumanian icons." The story ends with a magic twist when her unconvincing fantasy becomes self-actualizing with the appearance of the real Bernard Orge. "The Country Doctor" is darker in mood, a Jamesian ghost story complete with a haunted Gothic house by the sea, the ghost of a dead mistress, and a mysterious widower with a face that "disintegrate[s]." The terrified protagonist returns at the end to 'reality' and "the cynicism she had had to learn to protect herself from her imagination."

An equal number of strong realistic stories in this collection belies Engel's contention that she is "not good at traditional narrative" and that "reality brings out the worst in [her]." In fact, the two best stories in the book, "The Smell of Sulphur" and "Could I Have Found a Better Love Than You?," demonstrate her assured fluency in the conventions of realistic prose. The fact that this mode releases a number of characteristic narrative strengths is suggestive. Engel produced better work when she wrote from the objectifying distance afforded by third-person narration or by a first-person observer: her style is tauter and less self-engaged. These longer stories also allow her the space in which to develop those convincing eccentricities of personality that distinguish her more memorable characters, to accumulate the finely observed details of landscape and light that issue in fully realized settings, and to sound the recurrent images that so strikingly unify her materials.

"The Smell of Sulphur," a lyrical and elegiac evocation of a perfect childhood summer vacation, advances with symphonic precision in a three-part temporal progression that concludes with the simple realization that the sites and conditions of past happiness, while retrievable through memory, can not be revisited in reality. In "Could I Have Found a Better Love Than You?" Miss Iris Terryberry, an eighty-nine-year-old flower breeder of considerable distinction and marked individuality, recounts for the narrator the story of her unconventional life. The catalogue descriptions of the floral varieties she developed correspond to central people in her life and set up lovely echoes within the narrative. Here, too, the dominant tone is elegiac: along with the death of this remarkable old woman, one senses the passing of an entire way of life in southwestern Ontario.

Two other stories deserve final mention here, because they are good and because they serve as simple elegies to the spirit of the woman who wrote them. "The Confession Tree" (which has as its epigraph *Timor Mortis Conturbat Ne*) hauntingly records

Marian Engel

another variation on the theme of retrieval of the past through memory — and of coming to a point of peaceful accord with it. The narrator, who has cancer, draws sustenance from an apple tree in her garden: "So she turned away from... the accounts of disease and disaster that are so reassuring to the elderly, and let the rush of Schubert in her ears pour out through her eyes into the apple tree. All the voices stopped, and there was only music and this benison of blossom." On a smaller scale, Engel's handling here of the recurring nature imagery is as deft and moving as it was in *Bear*. In the final story, "Gemini, Gemino," the narrator is brought to a realization that was central to Engel's own literary credo: the best fiction comes from the passionate and honest elaboration of "one's interior life."

Marian Engel's life and work stand as vital testimony to that conviction.

The Marian Engel Award

An endowment fund has been established in Marian's name to provide for an annual prize which rewards achievement and encourages future production among women novelists.

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