

# Explod/ing/ed Fictions: Marian Engel's Writing

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Marian Engel's novels and short stories are a compelling illustration of Québec feminist Nicole Brossard's assertion that patriarchal reality is more accurately understood as a fiction for women whose female reality is in turn regarded as mere fiction under the terms of patriarchy. Brossard states:

For most women 'reality' has been a fiction, that is to say the product of an imagination that is not theirs and to which they cannot really adapt. Let's name some fictions: the military, the rise in the price of gold, the news, pornography...At the same time, one can also say that women's reality has been perceived as fiction. Let's name some realities here: maternity, rape, prostitution, chronic fatigue, violence (verbal, physical and mental).<sup>1</sup>

Through her writing Brossard has worked to explode the structures and fictions of patriarchy in order that a new female reality emerge and be expressed. Brossard's literary project is distinctly theoretical in thrust but equally forceful. Marian Engel's novels and stories, likewise, move toward shaping, through fiction, a more female-oriented reality. Major strategies in this evolution include dislodging (small town Ontario) puritan reality, against which all Engel's protagonists struggle and rebel, and deploying feminist female imagination. The tension between living within the parameters of a male oriented reality and living in a freer world of female imagination is played out in Engel's work through her protagonists—feisty, explosive individuals who are the hallmark of the author's work. Beginning with Sarah, the protagonist of Engel's first published work, *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* (*No Clouds of Glory*), through Minn Burge—*The Honeyman Festival*, Audrey—*Monodromos* (*One Way Street*), Joanne—*Joanne, Lou—Bear*, Rita—*The Glassy Sea*, Harriet Ross—*Lunatic Villas*, and finally the various protagonists of the short stories in, *Inside the Easter Egg* and *The Tattooed Woman*<sup>2</sup>, Engel's protagonists lean further and further away from the puritan and patriarchal reality they and

other women are expected to accept, toward a freer world of the female imagination where the fantastic and the extra-ordinary explode reality into and through fiction. As Engel observed, shortly before her death, in the introduction she wrote for the posthumously published collection of short stories *The Tattooed Woman*, "I...believe in the irrational, the area where, when the skin of logic is pulled back, anything can happen" (xii). If Engel's later works present her protagonists in settings structured less by rationality and more by sensuality and imagination, capable of expressing women's experience, in her earlier works, Engel's protagonists find themselves in rational, puritan and patriarchal frameworks against which they rebel.

In re-naming herself Sarah Bastard, the protagonist of Marian Engel's first novel, *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* (*No Clouds of Glory*) signals her rebellion against life as she has been taught to live it and, in particular, against her life as an academic. Successful in the highly structured and male dominated university setting, Sarah is considered by all to be "wonderful, bright, intelligent, gorgeous...everything a woman should be and a Ph.D. to boot" (34). This externally engendered image does not correspond to Sarah's own inner vision of herself as "female, nonconformist, self-important, intellectual, free, fucking, undressed gorgeous, too good for this place, here" (22). The novel traces Sarah's struggle to move away from "here"—the University, those associated with it (her tedious brother-in-law Eldon, her straight-laced mentor Lyle, etc.), and the Ontario town where it is located. Her decision is precipitated by two events. The first, is a trip to Europe during which, among other experiences, Sarah has a love affair with her sister's husband which ends in Sarah undergoing an abortion she comes to regret. The second, is her father's funeral, which brings Sarah back from Europe to Ontario. Reflecting on what now appears to her to have been the relatively unsatisfying life her father led, Sarah decides to avoid following in his footsteps and submits her resignation. While mentor Professor Lyle

tries to dissuade Sarah, refusing to see her as a “genuine sinner,” choosing instead to believe Sarah will “return to right paths soon enough” (29), Sarah is increasingly convinced that every day she works for Lyle, she is more obliged to be what she cannot be: “a saintly, serious, kind and undiscriminating woman”—“the kind of girl that God would have her be” (34). To everyone’s disbelief, Sarah walks away from her university teaching position. Significantly, this move coincides with her desire to do more of her own writing. Unable to find satisfactory self-expression within the academic world, Sarah leaves to settle, at least in the first instance, in Montreal. While this new “here” may not offer a specifically woman’s language and culture, it does offer another (non-English) language and (non-puritan) culture through which Sarah might expand beyond the confines of a puritan upbringing and a patronizing, patriarchal environment.

The action of Engel’s second novel, *The Honeyman Festival*, unfolds in the home of the protagonist, housewife and mother Minn Burge. Awaiting the imminent birth of her fourth child and the return of her (again) absent husband, journalist Norman Burge, Minn’s story appears at first glance to be quite different from the flamboyant Sarah’s. However, eight and a half months pregnant, Minn’s manifest femaleness is an impressive counterpoint to the male-dominated world of film-making and slim trimmed starlets. Significantly, Minn fails in the role of actress in Honeyman’s world. She is literally unable to act in Honeyman’s scene of moving-making and role-playing. She is given other work—rewriting or translating scripts and dubbing films. Minn’s struggle is not necessarily to find her own language as a woman writer, but to move beyond a disembodied voice or a model (best remembered for her forty-inch bust) for Honeyman movie poster-bills, which barely resemble real-life Minn.

Initially, Honeyman helps twenty (to his fifty-five) year old Minn shuck off the puritan values of her upbringing: “He made it look easy to live, as if living were some road you strode alone and not the puritan hurdle course she had been taught to believe in:” (18); “When she lay beside him in bed and drew the heathen blanket of southern Ontario guilt around her, he turned to her, he comforted her, he talked to her, taught her what she was” (170). But long after Honeyman leaves her, Sarah carries him “like a stone, like a calcified embryo” (21): “Honeyman. Years. Like some dreadful addiction waiting for him as for a fix. Later, fighting him.” (19). Hosting the reception for the Honeyman Film Festival proves Minn with the occasion to sift through her past with Honeyman and to focus on her present without him. Her reverie, which is sustained

throughout the preparation for the reception, the duration of the gathering and the remaining hours of the night after the guests have left, forms a flexible structure for the novel, most suitable to Minn’s loosely structured story. Memories are juxtaposed with details of life with young children and a conversation with God in which she informs him as to what women’s reality really consists of:

Plumbing, my Lord. The ruby lips connected to the red lane, the infected bronchii depends on the liver. Lights, tissues, sphinctres (wrong orgasms on wrong nights), veins (to be pulled one by one, shrieking like mandrakes from women’s legs and put, white worms, in jars), tubes (to be blown or cut according to the season), uterus (pear-shaped, capable of bearing or being hysterectomised), egg-laying apparatus (cystic or fibrous), stomach (seat of good humour), and if I did not mention lights, the partially ruptured gut. One will not speak of faeces... And, well, glands, my Lord...my glands. With age, and worry, they tighten. I think, for instance, if godforbid but if, and wouldn’t it be awful or wonderful?—if I for instance at my age, stage, point of pregnancy, girth, general hairiness etc., managed to fall in love... (70-71).

Minn’s defiant self representation to the divine (male) authority of God anticipates a symbolic refusal and challenge to male authority at the end of the novel. When a policeman shows up at Minn’s door in the early morning hours looking for one of her lodgers, Minn refuses to let him enter her house. Her verbal interdiction is backed up by a physical act when Minn lunges her sizeable pregnant body at the policeman to push him out of her house. Minn’s house is her domain—one defined by the very female-oriented existence that unfolds within it. Life as a mother and/or a housewife, led in the apparently disorderly way Minn’s leads it, represents a sprawling challenge to the orderly, male dominated domain of movies, cinema, honey-men and lawmen alike.

If the world of film is hardly conducive to genuine representation of women, then the setting chosen for Engel’s third novel is even less receptive to women’s representation of themselves. *Monodromos* takes place on a Greek island where the protagonist Audrey has come at her ex-husband Laddie’s request and on the insistence of her new partner, an English poet named Max. Where Sarah “borrowed” her husbands, and Minn’s was mostly absent, Audrey’s has become a needy friend often leaving her to live with his male lover. It is the latter’s departure from Laddie’s life that has precipitated his call to Audrey

whose discovery of Greek culture leads to a number of important insights into her own life. Audrey's early sense that "in this society [she is] handicapped by [her] femininity, [that she] can't take on any male enterprise at all" (79), is subsequently borne out by a comment made by a woman artist living on the island: "Women are not allowed to express themselves here, and merely to pick up a paint brush is a form of cultural rebellion" (75). *Monodromos*—One Way Street—comprises Audrey's observations of an essentially unidirectional society which mirrors the larger world of patriarchy. Because of the written form her observations take—in letters to Max or in the blocnotes, particularly of the section "March"—Audrey's questions about the given world are also questions about the language that describes it and the literary forms language takes in doing this. In an early letter to Max Audrey notes that "when you take this place apart with words, it ceases to exist" (38). Later she writes that she "never liked Julius Caesar in school. It's all men and fortune-tellers and set speeches. Politics and male bonding" (178). Audrey's comments corroborate the preference many contemporary women writers manifest for less structured writing and more woman-expressive language. At the same time, they characterize the shape of *Monodromos* itself—indeed of all of Engel's writing, in which short written segments, one-word sentences and oddly placed commas that deliberately disrupt the rhythm of the language are distinguishing features.

Audrey's rebellion against a world she questions includes her usual living arrangement—with her ex-husband as her "brother"—an affair à la Sarah Bastard with a local, married man, and most importantly, a symbolic "pilgrimage" to a monastery in the mountains. This odyssey-like journey is a parody of the mythological undertaking of the Greek male hero. Astride a donkey which, unknown to her, should be ridden away from rather than toward the mountains, Audrey doggedly struggles with the animal through villages whose residents hear tell of her well before she arrives. Finally, filthy from days of difficult travel, she arrives at the monastery only to contend with a Bishop bent on bedding her. Audrey's confrontation with this representative of male authority, in whose eyes she sees "not desire but the firmest will-to-power" (228), parallels Minn Burge's defiance of the policemen at her door. For Audrey, who is not disinterested in sexual relations, to resist the Bishop's demands is to assert her own self interests over another's, something which goes against everything she has been taught. Having penetrated the male circle of the monastery, asserted herself within the confines of the structure as a self-valuing woman, Audrey takes leave, rides her donkey back

down the mountain and sets the date of her departure from the island. Her return to England marks the beginning of a new life of and on her own, because Max the poet has died during her sojourn in Greece.

There is a temporary departure from the novel form at this point in Engel's career as a writer. The next two works include an account of the "last days of a modern marriage" called *Joanne*, written originally for broadcast on CBC radio, and Engel's first collection of short stories entitled *Inside the Easter Egg*. While both works carry on in directions Engel's writing takes up to this stage, the short stories further introduce and develop characters and concerns to appear in the three novels to follow—*Bear*, *The Glassy Sea* and *Lunatic Villas*, and in the author's final collection of short stories *The Tattooed Woman*. In the introduction of the latter, Engel notes that "more and more, the irrational, the magical impulse dominates [her] work" (xiii), and there is indeed a strong streak of the fantastic and female imagination in *The Tattooed Woman*. This tendency toward the extraordinary is present in her earlier work too, however, turning up most assertively, perhaps, in the author's fourth novel, the renowned *Bear*.

*Bear* is a natural extension of Marian Engel's evolving vision of a more female shaped and female articulated reality wherein patriarchal fictions about women, about love, truth and variety of other stories that are told in life are exploded. The particular fiction that is explored and exploded in *Bear* is one that held interest for the protagonist Lou's predecessors—Sarah "Bastard," Minn Burge and Audrey—as well: sexuality—in particular, how women experience it. The spatial dimensions of the novel, whose action unfolds in the extraordinary octagonal, historic house of the late Colonel Jocelyn Cary, fantastically built on an island in the bust north of Toronto, are also a logical extension of Engel's previous novels. The spatial configurations represented by the house and the island are key motifs in *The Honeyman Festival* and *Monodromos*, respectively. *Bear* further feminizes these spaces through a location in the northern Canadian wilderness—a sort of no man's land where a woman and a bear spend a summer together. The official reason for Lou, an employee at the Historical Institute, to travel to the Cary estate is to research the years on Cary Island. However, the novel does not recount this *history* but rather *herstory*—Lou's—as she moves away from a routine and sterile life at the Institute to a more freely structured and imaginatively rich life on the island. Engel writes Lou's story *over* the history of Colonel Cary's estate, subtly displacing the traditions of historiography with incidents of Lou's sexual encounters with the bear. The fiction of the centrality of male sexual-

ity to female sexual experience and pleasure is exploded as Lou finds in her relations with the bear satisfaction she has not known previously with men. But if this is the most noticeable fiction exploded in *Bear*, it is not only one. The novel also suggests alternative ways of "reading" the world or "reality." The orderly, logical system of the filing folders, index cards, notebooks and typewriter, Lou lugs north with her, fall to the wayside as imagination and sensorial perception begin to take over. Lou revels in the feel of the cool lake water, the bear's warm fur and eventually the bear's mobile tongue against her body. When, at the end of the summer, Lou heads south again, back to the city; but not back to her former life, she is guided by the "star-shine [of] the Great Bear and his thirty-seven thousand virgins" (41) whose light recalls the epigraph Engel chooses for her novel: "Facts become art through love, which unifies and lifts them to a higher plane of reality; and in landscape, this all-embracing love is expressed by light."—Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art*. In *Bear*, as in Engel's other works, writing probes the edges of so-called reality and its fictions, striving through fiction toward another reality enlightened by authentic, women's perspectives and experiences.

With *The Glassy Sea*, Engel takes another step away from patriarchal reality (pro)posing the convent, as an all female community, in place of the male monastery, seen earlier in *Monodromos*. The convent has been subject to many fictions, and Engel begins to explode these having her protagonist Rita (Marguerite) Heber, a small-town Ontario of French descent, who becomes the first "protestant (protesting) nun," tell her own story. Rita accomplishes this through a long letter which, along with a Prologue and an Envoie (not exactly standard literary form in contemporary literature!), makes up the novel. The letter traces Rita's tumultuous life through marriage, motherhood, divorce, while it re-inserts and asserts female experience in the too-often fictionalized life of nuns. When the possibilities "reality" offers her all result in deep unhappiness, Rita decides to enter a world of possibilities that are real for her. She becomes an Eglantine sister and helps to build a house of her own. Eglantine House is a hostel for the "hundred[s] of women who would...retreat from their noisy, empty lives" (144), "a refuge from the war [between men and women]; an alternative to the plan of disposing of us [women] all at thirty" (161):

I'm starting a women's commune, and then trying to believe in it. I don't want to lose myself in the cloud of unknowing, just to believe in enough goodness to call it God...I won't take all that stuff about women bringing sin into the world and there-

fore having constantly to be beaten for it. I won't believe we're essentially better or essentially worse than men. Lease the virgins and the unicorns back in the middle ages, I'm living in the here and now. (166)

Engel's protagonists' search for a place and time where there is room for women, does not end in Eglantine House, but rather moves on to *Lunatic Villas*, the name of Harriet Ross's made menage in the author's last published novel.

Possibly the fullest expression of Engel's vision of a female inclusive reality, *Lunatic Villas*, illustrates the positive potential of values as unlikely under the umbrella of patriarchy as lunacy, disorder and chaos. These dislodge rationality, logic, order and control as sources or vehicles of creativity and energy. Also highly valued is motherhood—not "patriarchal motherhood" as Nicole Brossard terms the "institution" by which women are reduced to reproducers of the human race and disallowed a concurrent role as producers of or even just participants in culture. In a new vision of motherhood, glimpsed by Brossard and Engel alike, the authoritative father no longer rules over the family and mothers can adopt creative roles in addition to that of bringing children into the world and raising them. Hence, Harriet's household is not overseen by a father or any other man. It runs not on the basis of Harriet's authority over her children, but on that of mutual (if not always smooth) cooperation between Harriet and her children, and the helping hands of some women friends—notably Harriet's neighbour, novelist Marshellene. In another departure from "patriarchal motherhood" Harriet is not the biological mother of all of her children. She has given birth to two—the twins—but the remaining four become part of her family in other ways. Harriet further overrides the restrictive role of woman as reproducer by engaging actively in the production of language and literary form. Harriet is a writer. She writes about:

welfare and aprons, abortion and fitted sheets, hyperactivity and hyperacidity...the unmentionables of society, a sordidness less sanctionable than sex: the fact that dirty things have not gone away you cannot deal with in a glossy magazine (16).

When it is suggested to her by a (male) colleague that "perhaps it is immoral to earn a living in a world so unrealistic" (16), Harriet's telling retort that he "find her a world where [one] could support six kids and where there was no unreality" (16), is a clear illustration of the differing male and female visions of what constitutes "reality"

and “unreality.” The distortion of what are, in a genuine female perspective, realities and truths emerges again in a conversation between Harriet and her friend Marshellene. The latter speculates about what Harriet might gain from giving in to the claim for joint custody of the twins which is being made by her ex-husband, recently remarried into a wealthy family. “You can get cash...[the children] could go to camp and you could have a holiday,” Marshellene reflects, while Harriet indulges in a little daydream of “Coats...Sailboats and canoes and riding lessons. Skating lessons...” (177-178). A simple way for Harriet to secure these everyday “realities” in the lives of some is, Marshellene notes, to accept the “lies, the speculations, the slanders: the novels about our [women’s] darker selves, the selves that people who want to take things away from us make up for us” (177). Because neither Harriet nor Marshellene can accept these fictions, “they float forward from one [fiction] to another” (178), merely speculating about the many “realities” (holiday, sailboats, riding lessons, etc.) that will remain fictions in their lives as women and writers. Both women undertake to replace fictional reality through writing (fiction, in Marshellene’s case, articles and short texts in Harriet’s) about women’s realities from women’s perspectives.

Given an explosive sense of the disparity between truths and tales and realities and fictions in male-oriented and in female-oriented worlds, Engel’s writing develops two constructs of significance. The first is the increasing privilege of women as writer or artist. The second is the changing shape of the writing itself. “When the mirror cracks,” Engel writes in her introduction to *The Tattooed Woman*, “I find the compression necessary to miniaturize the narrative drawl, create a world in small compass” (xiii). While Engel’s comment explains her growing interest in the short story as a vehicle for her writing, it also points to the new task this writing must accomplish. When the reflections of women mirrored by realism and tradition—in life as in literature—are perceived as lies or mere fictions, the mirror cracks. Then quickly, with no time for the “narrative drawl”—a true image/imagination has to be created and a new story told. The short stories included in Engel’s last publication, *The Tattooed Woman*, move yet further toward this end, the goal of all of the author’s works.

The smooth surface of the balzacien mirror of literary realism cracks with the swell of the irrational, inexplicable and the imagination of Engel’s works. These elements are seen as increasingly characteristic of the lives of Engel’s protagonists and increasingly disruptive of literary traditions of realism. The short story entitled “The Tattooed

Woman” is illustrative of the explosive effect of the imagination and the extraordinary in everyday “reality.”

The protagonist Linda is representative of the women given increasing status in the second half of Engel’s work: the woman society regards as “older.” Youthful Sarah Bastard and fertile Minn Burge have grown with Joanne, Rita (*The Glassy Sea*), and Harriet (*Lunatic Villas*) to become the woman approaching or past menopause. Stereotypical images and fictions about the latter are probed as Engel explores the thoughts and imagination of the explosive protagonists of the short stories included in *The Tattooed Woman*. Engel presents these women as wise women and as artists.

Linda’s age is initially an obsession for her when she learns that her husband of twenty-one years is in love with a young woman of twenty-one—half Linda’s age:

She had almost expected it. Every woman of her age expected it. And she had nothing but habit to offer him, really...She let him go and subsided meekly to her room. When she noticed her hands were shaking, she took a sleeping pill (4)...The nights...were bad. She would dress for bed and sit in her lingerie thinking of the girls’ body, the legs that had never had veins pulled out, the privates from which children and miscarriages and later tumours had never been extracted. The humiliations she had never been exposed to... She thought of her as tight and white and neat...(5).

Behind a front of passive resignation, however, Linda engages in spying and more consequential activity:

She took the blade out of her razor and washed it. She went and sat at her dressing table and turned the mirrored lights on. I am forty-two and she is twenty-one, she thought. Neatly and very lightly, she carved a little star on her forehead. Experience must show, she thought...She did not cut deeply. She was not interested in hurting herself. On her breasts she made lovely arabesques, on her forearms almost unnoticeable cross-hatchings of little houses and trees. They did not show very much, but she knew they were there and was comforted. (6)

Discarded by her husband who has replaced her with a new and unmarked model, Linda understands that she is a marked woman, regarded as used goods like many other women of her age in her society. Unlike many other women, Linda manifests her insight in a visible way. She

undertakes to illustrate what she understands herself to be in the eyes of a society that reserves little place and value for women particularly those of her age. She shows herself to be a marked woman; she becomes the tattooed woman—and, significantly, she does the marking herself. In this way she might recuperate some value for herself, find a new place for herself as an artist, someone whose role is not just to reproduce (young Minn rewriting scripts, dubbing films) but rather, someone who produces. Linda refuses to be a non-entity, even if at the outset this means expressing herself in a raw and primitive way by writing on her own body, carving her own flesh:

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 (8).

When he discovers her new body/self, Linda's husband sends her to a doctor who fails to understand her explanation for the marks on her body. Speaking to the doctor, Linda has further insight and the story spirals back toward "reality" as the protagonist touches ground again—if only temporarily—instructing the doctor to send her to "some kind of clinic where I can get rid of the scars" (9). Having illustrated and assumed the role reserved for her as a rejected, older woman in a society which spins tales/fictions about women and suppresses the realities of their lives, Linda can now reject the marks of this role as a tattooed woman and take up a life of new possibilities, travelling—as she always wanted, but was never able to do.

If Engel exhorts women of all ages to become "somebodies," she also cautions against possible pitfalls of this undertaking by celebrating—throughout her work—"ordinary" women. The protagonist of "Madame Hortensia, Equilibriste" believes "the only happy people here are the ones who are ordinary" (23). As a young woman, she wanted above all "to be someone, distinguish myself somehow" (28). A successful and unusual career as a circus performer who twists her body in marvellous ways on the high wire, is followed by a disastrous marriage. As an older woman and mother, she reflects:

When I look back on it all...I see what is wrong. Perhaps it was the Women's Liberation Movement that taught me this. To be different, to set oneself up above other people...is to become an object, a freak...As Madame Hortensia, I was as unreal, as objectified, as one of the little figures on the Porcelain de Paris plates, as people on talk shows (32).

Being an "ordinary woman" is alright: it is "ordinary reality" that keeps turning, as Engel remarks in her introduction to *The Tattooed Woman*:

Ordinary reality keeps turning me on. What I have to deal with is super-reality, that element in everyday life where the surreal shows itself without turning French on us, and people have extraordinary conversation because they have confused clam and lamb soup" (xiii).

Hence, one can be "the last wife" in the world, as the protagonist of the story "The Last Wife" feels she is when she compares herself to her flamboyant artist friend Marina. On her twenty-seventh birthday, Pat feels a growing anxiety that she ought to have pursued her career as an artist instead of settling into life as a contented wife and mother: "She was not a real artist, not an independent" (15). This is Pat's growing concern, until she discovers an area in which she is quite independent from her husband—that of religion. Her belief in God is viewed as superstition by her husband, as an affront to his image of her as a "good rationalist" (19), and as the basis of a "kind of secret life" she has had all along without his knowledge. For Pat, this little "irrationality" in her life brings a new comfort and insight: "The reason her drawings had not been good was that they were too easy, too perfect, they did not reach out, or strive. Her life had a flaw in it now, and she felt better" (20).

Valorizing imperfection and irrationality in the lives of "ordinary" women helps foster "secret lives" with which to side-step the fictions handed to women by so-called reality. One of the more fantastic "secret lives" Engel explores is that of Marge Elph/Bernard Orge in "The Life of Bernard Orge."

Marge Elph (a "miniature" or a variation of M.E.—the author?) is, again, "a woman of a certain age and not wildly attractive" (36). Like other of Engel's protagonists, she "had had 18 years to maintain the personality of Mum for 12 or 14 hours a day...[She] felt, in fact, like a grindstone, the bottom one against which the gods grind whatever they do grind slow and fine" (35). Despite the demands of her life as wife and mother, however, Marge Elph establishes herself, if modestly, as a poet, one who "had been thinking about change for some time" (35). When change comes about, it is—extraordinarily, fantastically—to become a man: Bernard Orge:

Well...why not? My secondary sexual characteristics are beginning to disappear, and I was astonished

when they appeared in the first place. I don't have lovers any more...Now my body is as ruined as any choir, I have big feet and I wear unisex Birkenstocks. There are as many men as women the same shape as me. My centre of gravity is shifting... (38).

A twofold process of change begins: as life as Marge Elph is discarded, life as Bernard Orge takes shape. This new life is "amusing" (41) rather than a slow grind, and transformative: losing weight and stopping smoking changes the protagonist so dramatically that a routine visit to the doctor lands her/him in the hospital. Here the protagonist realizes that Bernard Orge and she are "intertwined in a different way. He had become not a second self, but a sort of lover" (42)—one who, some weeks later, turns up at the door. In this extraordinary way, Marge Elph creates for herself a comfortable living arrangement for the later part of her life. She retains her self while shaping a lover after her own fashion, giving birth, in a sense reminiscent of Great Goddess myths, to her lover. Not only does this reverse the usual social unfolding of male-female relationships but it implies a criticism of those who are the possibly unwilling yet passive products of established (as opposed to imagined/imaginative) society.

The incursion into the realm of the imagination, the fantastic, the irrational, increasingly frequent in Engel's work, is likewise increasingly facilitated: something as simple as a banana peel left on the coffee table, for example, will trigger the exercise of fiction which queries fact and reality into which it releases the feminine. In "Banana Flies," Engel invites her reader to "play games": "Let me tell you a true story and pretend it's unreal. Let me tell you an unreal story and you make it real" (135). Part of the play is the celebration of women who have met:

misfortune, alienation, fame, success, disgrace, competence, love, hate, disaster, disorientation, fear, the

love of children...O'erleapt mothers' neuroses, grandmothers' proprieties, fears, madresses, the strictures of the men in our lives, judges, doctors, mountebanks. Became (137).

Women who become are the ones realized—made real—in Engel's fiction. Not an easy process, this involves exploding the "reality" that surrounds women but is not oriented toward them. For Engel's protagonists in particular, patriarchal reality is also puritan. Their struggle against it involves the assertion of their femaleness not only as mothers but as lovers—sexual beings. Their efforts allow them to become wise women and artists, women who can create their own authentic reality out of imagination and fiction.

#### NOTES

1. *La Lettre aérienne* (Montréal: les éditions du remue-menage, 1985) p. 53. My translation of:  
La réalité a été pour la plupart des femmes une fiction, c'est-à-dire le fruit d'une imagination qui n'est pas la leur et à laquelle elles ne parviennent pas réellement à s'adapter. Nommons ici quelques fictions: l'appareil militaire, le montage du prix de l'or, le télé-journal, la pornographie, etc. ...D'autre part, on peut dire que la réalité des femmes a été perçue comme fiction. Nommons ici quelques réalités: la maternité, le viol, la prostitution, la fatigue chronique, la violence subie (verbale, physique et mentale).
2. *No Clouds of Glory*. Don Mills: Longmans, 1968. (Re-issued as *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*, Don Mills: Paperjacks, 1974.); *The Honeyman Festival*. Markham: Penguin, 1986.; *Monodromos*. Toronto: Anansi, 1973. (re-issued as *One way Street*, Don Mills: Paperjacks, 1974); *Joanne*. Don Mills: Paperjacks, 1975.; *Bear*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976.; *The Glassy Sea*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978.; *Lunatic Villas*. Toronto: McClelland Stewart, 1981. *Inside the Easter Egg*. Toronto: Anansi, 1975.; *The Tattooed Woman*. Markham: Penguin, 1985.

#### REFERENCES

All references are to these editions of Engel's works. Page locations will appear in brackets in the body of the essay.