A Canadian Heloise:

Elizabeth Smart and the Feminist Adultery *Novel*

by

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Elizabeth Smart's By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept (1945) is a brilliantly written prose poem celebrating an intense love affair.(1) As a feminist adultery novel, it is a Canadian first. For this romantic tour de force, Smart has created a language of feeling--subjective, passionate and extravagant, a language of bold conceits and of classical, literary and biblical allusions; of biblical cadences which augment the religious and spiritual dimension of the affair; and by its incantatory rhythm contributes to the portrayal of an individual caught up in an inevitable process.

The protagonist and her lover act out the age old story of love and abandonment; the woman's emotions run the gamut from expectancy to foreboding, from joy to grief, from hope to despair. As emotional intensity builds, the emotions themselves shift and change--expectancy, fulfillment, guilt and ecstasy in early parts of the novel give way to grief, suffering and despair.

Smart writes in the confessional mode. The voice is that of the unnamed woman

protagonist. From time to time, her voice is contrasted to or counterpointed with other voices. The novel's antecedents are the soliloquy, the epistle and the diary. As the story of an adultery told from the feminine perspective, and as an exploration of the complicated emotions such a situation engenders, By Grand Central Station continues a tradition which has its roots in a long ago past.

Most love stories told from the male perspective are stories of courtship, of despondency and despair prior to acceptance, of seduction, and not infrequently of a "love them and leave them" kind of relationship, after which the "hero" goes on to further conquests. But the woman is no longer heard from--or of--for we are concerned solely with the male protagonist's adventures in which the woman is "the other." The conventional feminine story is one of courtship, of resistance until the ultimate prize of matrimony is proffered, and of marriage. Samuel Richardson's Pamela comes to mind. This tale continues to be enacted today in Harlequin romances.

The feminist story differs from either of these as Ellen Moers has pointed out.(2) There are two works in particular to which I wish to allude to indicate that the response of Smart's unnamed protagonist to her dilemma is in the mainstream of an honourable tradition, that of the feminist adulterer. This author's singular contribution to the tradition, I suggest, resides in her stylistic innovations--specifically in her use of a paradoxical structure and in her essentially feminine imagery.

The tradition to which I refer goes back to ancient Greece. Probably the first western writer to focus on feminine psychology was Euripides, who gave precedence to women characters of passion and conflicting emotions in plays such as Medea, Electra and The Trojan Women. However, By Grand Central Station's more specific antecedent is a Roman classic, Ovid's Heroides written some two thousand years ago. The Heroides are erotic elegies--monologues in the form of letters, mostly written by women who have been betrayed or deserted by husband or lover.

There are two basic reasons for claiming Ovid as Elizabeth Smart's antecedent. First, because of the influence of his Amores, Ars Amatoria and Heroides, Ovid is recognized to be "the father of epistolary, sentimental, and psychological fiction."(3) The Heroides, as letters which, rather than furthering the plot, reveal the emotions and reactions of the sender, added a new dimension to storytelling. As one critic of the epistolary novel puts it, "These poetic epistles [The Heroides] are one of the most important sources or models for the emotional layer in the structure of modern fiction . . . . The elements of letter fiction are all here, requiring only

to be combined and properly developed, though they had to wait centuries for the process to take place."(4) The epistle is, of course, the progenitor not only of the epistolary novel but of the interior monologue; for it provides the opportunity to depict emotion, reaction and thought; to present a narrative subjectively, with vividness, spontaneity and immediacy, and to reveal fluctuations in the individual's thinking and feeling. The epistolary method is but a short step from the interior monologue itself, which in effect, is what Elizabeth Smart's novel is.

The second reason for considering Ovid's Heroides as the progenitor of Smart's novel lies in the particular focus of the Heroides. In these poems, Ovid selects a crucial moment in a love story and uses the voice of the woman involved to reveal her emotions. He presents a psychological portrait as the writer, in her letter (which is really a monologue), recalls and relives her love affair. Heroide vii is the poem which most closely parallels By Grand Central Station. In this poem, which is based on Book Four of Virgil's Aeneid, Dido writes to Aeneas in one last attempt to persuade him not to abandon her. Ovid alters both the episode and the character of Dido; Ovid's Dido is gentler and more persuasive than Virgil's; she is angry but not vindictive; her arguments are reasonable and, as Ovid presents her, her attitude is justified. By shifting her address between second and third person, Ovid makes her appear to address Aeneas, then others, then herself. This technique allows for more flexibility, more shifts of mood, than would a static situation. Finally, Dido kills herself with Aeneas' sword --a symbol to her of their love, to the reader of Ovid's time of the future enmity of Carthage and Rome. To the phallic-conscious twentieth-century reader, the sword is an effective symbol indicating that Aeneas, by his abandonment of Dido, is responsible for her death.

The second work in the feminist adultery tradition which I wish to relate to By Grand Central Station is The Letters of Abelard and Heloise. Heloise was the brilliant young woman of twelfth-century France who became the mistress of her tutor, the renowned scholar Peter Abelard, had a son by him, and later, to placate her family, married him. Her family, somewhat less than placated as it turned out, arranged for Abelard's castration. Thereupon, Heloise, at Abelard's behest, entered a convent, where she was to lead a distinguished and successful life as prioress and later abbess.

As her letters clearly indicate, Heloise had no wish to marry Abelard, preferring, rather, to be his mistress; nor was she pleased with the unseemliness with which he thrust her into the convent, prior to his own withdrawal into a monastery. His urgency

appeared to her (quite rightly, no doubt), to hint at mistrust of her and possessiveness. Heloise's letters indicate that she was an articulate and highly educated woman at a time when most women were not educated at all. Like Ovid's Dido, she argues from a classical viewpoint. Like Elizabeth Smart's protagonist, she quotes Scriptures and the classical writers in support of her arguments.

These three women--Ovid's Dido, the medieval Heloise, and Smart's protagonist--have much in common. All three are adulterers. All three give their love freely and rejoice consciously in that love. All three are distraught when abandoned by their lovers--Dido kills herself, Heloise takes the veil in a mood of tragic despair, Smart's narrator contemplates suicide but then determines to go on alone. These are not conventional women: they are bound neither by contemporary mores nor by concern for appearances. None considers marriage as needful. Whereas Dido says, "If you shame to have me your wife, let me not be called bride, but hostess; so she be yours, Dido will endure to be what you will;"(5)Heloise says, "I looked for no marriage bond, no marriage-portion, and it was not my pleasures and wishes I sought to gratify, as you well know, but yours. The name of wife may seem more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always be the word mistress, or, if you will permit me, that of concubine or whore."(6)

Each of these three is passionately in love and ecstatic in love making. Dido says, "I am ablaze with love, like torches of wax tipped with sulphur, like pious incense placed on smoking altar-fires," (p. 85) and Heloise, "In my case, the pleasures of lovers which we shared have been too sweet--they can never displease me, and can scarcely be banished from my thoughts;"(7) Smart's narrator, "And I lay down on the redwood needles and seemed to flow down the canyon with the thunder and confusion of the stream, in a happiness which, like birth, can afford to ignore the blood and the tearing." (p. 26)

With each of these three, there is a sense of wrongdoing but it is a sense of sin and guilt acknowledged and fully accepted. "Exact the penalty of me, O purity undone!--the penalty due Sychaeus! [her husband in Tyre, now dead] To absolve it now I go--ah me, wretched that I am, and overcome with shame!" (p. 91) says Dido, adding shortly: "He was worthy who caused my fall, he draws from my sin its hatefulness." (p. 91) Heloise confesses, "I should be groaning over the sins I have committed, but can only sigh for what I have lost;"(8)and Smart's protagonist, "So hourly, at the slightest noise, I start, I stand ready to feel the roof cave in on my head, the thunder of God's punishment announcing the limit of his endurance." (p. 29)

The three women indicate a classical,

humanist outlook. One would expect this with Ovid's heroine but not necessarily with the medieval nun, Heloise, nor the twentieth-century Canadian woman. As a matter of fact, even Dido's classicism is unconventional, inasmuch as it is Greek, rather than Roman. Howard Jacobson, in his study, Ovid's Heroides, notes that the Greek dramatist Euripides "must be considered the distant ancestor of the Heroides, not merely because he so effectively and influentially utilized women's speeches, but also because in the Heroides, Ovid--whether consciously or not--inherited many of the intellectual and moral attitudes that were Euripides'."(9) Jacobson sees Euripides' moral relativism as having "a major impact on Ovid's thought and sensibility. Trapped in an age of deliberate and imposed puritanism, himself by disposition a liberal spirit, Ovid was only too ready to adopt a Euripidean pose in his opposition to Augustan policy and dogma. The Heroides, a spectrum of love and lovers, is almost ipso facto in its deheroization of the mythic material and in its rejection of the male viewpoint, a denial of the Augustan (and Vergilian, at least as envisioned in the Aeneid) ideal." (p. 7)

Heloise's attitude also is classical. She and Abelard were representative of the best of their time in their combination of classical knowledge with devotion to the Christian church. Heloise's natural manner of expressing herself is classical. She argues from the standpoint of the humanist in claiming that the ideal relationship is that achieved through love freely given, claiming that marriage can add nothing to the union, and indeed arguing with her lover, Abelard, that she preferred "love to wedlock and freedom to chains." (10) Heloise cites Cicero, Seneca and Lucan, as well as the Old and New Testaments and the Fathers of the Church, in support of her attitudes. Elizabeth Smart's protagonist, too, quotes classical and Biblical analogues.

In her use of mythology, it is intriguing to see how Smart reverses Ovid's method. It has been remarked that in his Heroides, Ovid "recreates the myth by forcibly projecting it into a new world: of elegy, of the erotic, of an idiosyncratic psychology."(11) Smart, on the other hand, projects her individual and her situation, with its erotic and elegiac elements and idiosyncratic psychology, into the world of myth, by aligning her heroine with the mythic heroines of love. Thus, Smart's protagonist can say of her lover and herself, "Jupiter has been with Leda, I thought, and now nothing can avert the Trojan wars;" (p. 27) and after she has been abandoned, "By the Pacific I wander like Dido, heaving such a passion of tears in the breaking waves, that I wonder why the whole world isn't weeping inconsolably."

(p. 108) Smart's woman and her lover are never named. This fact in itself, along with the association of them with Zeus and Leda, Tristan and Isolde, Dido and Aeneas, lends them archetypal or mythic stature.

There is a strong flavour of fatalism in these three tragic affairs. Each of these women views love and the suffering it entails as inevitable. Dido speaks of the first day she gave herself to Aeneas, "I heard a voice; I thought it a cry of the nymphs-- 'twas the Eumenides sounding the signal for my doom!"(p. 91) Abelard recalls Heloise's prophecy, when he insisted on their marriage: "We shall both be destroyed. All that is left us is suffering as great as our love has been."(12) Elizabeth Smart's protagonist says, "I am possessed by love and have no options." (p. 42)

Each of these women is caught in a tension between guilt and love, and finds that her excessive joy gives way to excessive grief. Heloise, in her despair at the loss of her beloved, Abelard, contrasts the intensity of past joy with the intensity of present grief. She employs the classical concept of Fortune raising man to the peak of success only to cast him down: "What glory she [Fortune] gave me in you, what ruin she brought upon me through you! Violent in either extreme, she showed no moderation in good or evil. To make me the saddest of all women she first made me blessed above all, so that when I thought how much I had lost, my consuming grief would match my crushing loss, and my sorrow for what was taken from me would be the greater for the fuller joy of possession which had gone before; and so the happiness of supreme ecstasy would end in the supreme bitterness of sorrow."(13)

The polarities to which Heloise here refers, of good and evil, glory and ruin, supreme ecstasy and supreme sorrow, form the basic structure of Elizabeth Smart's novel. And here I come to what I see as Smart's original contribution to the feminist adultery novel. She manipulates these polarities to contrive a continuous structure of paradox. Smart creates this structure out of her own awareness of the simultaneous existence of the mundane and the magnificent, the squalid and the marvellous, and the existence of these oppositions within the same experience. In By Grand Central Station, love itself is portrayed as both sacred and profane, spiritual and earthbound, specific and universal, purveyor of joy and grief, ecstasy and despair, death and life.

From the beginning of the novel, love is linked with both violence, pain and death, and with birth and life, as in this passage: "But that huge shadow [of her lover] is more than my only moon, more even than my destruction:

it has the innocent slipping advent of the next generation, which enters on one night of joy;" (p. 23) and later, "I am mortally pierced by the seeds of love." (p. 35) Smart plays one polarity against the other, juxtaposes one with the other; counterpoints one with the other. All of the elements of the novel--landscape, imagery, literary and Biblical allusions--contribute to this tension of opposites implicit within the emotional context. For example, the lush California wilderness in which the love affair begins mirrors the woman's emotional dilemma:

> Up the canyon the redwoods and the thick leaf-hands of the castor-tree forebode disaster by their beauty, built on too grand a scale. The creek gushes over green boulders into pools no human ever uses, down canyons into the sea.
>
> But poison oak grows over the path and over all the banks, and it is impossible even to go into the damp overhung valley without being poisoned. Later in the year it flushes scarlet, both warning of and recording fatality.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> When the sea otters leave their playing under the cliff, the kelp in amorous coils appear to pin down the Pacific. There are rattle-snakes and widow-spiders and mists that rise from below.
>
> But the days leave the recollection of sun and flowers. (pp. 19-20)

Like the impending love affair, the landscape is beautiful, but "built on too grand a scale," and it is dangerous, it "forebodes disaster" and "poison oak grows over the path;" it includes sea otters playing and kelp "in amorous coils," but it includes also "rattle-snakes and widow-spiders and mists that rise from below." That this setting is linked with the protagonist's own dilemma is made quite clear by the following passage: "His foreshortened face appears in profile on the car window like the irregular graph of my doom, merciless as a mathematician, leering accompaniment to all my good resolves. There is no medicinal to be obtained from the dried herbs of any natural hill, for when I tread those upward paths, the lowest vines conspire to abet my path, and the poison oak thrusts its insinuation under my foot." (p. 22)

Throughout the novel, the immediate backdrop--the sensous California landscape, the cold Canadian winter, the desolate Arizona police station, the impersonal and bleak railway station--and the more remote landscape of the suffering and death of the Second World War, mirror the protagonist's internal state.

Smart sometimes counterpoints two voices to indicate the essentially paradoxical nature of the lovers'

situation. The most notable example of this use of voice occurs when the two lovers are stopped by the police at the Arizona border. Verses from the Song of Songs are interwoven with the interrogations of the police to indicate the dichotomy between the lovers' view of their affair and that of the staunch upholders of conventional morality:

> Did you sleep in the same room? (Behold thou art fair, my love, behold thou art fair: thou hast dove's eyes).
>
> In the same bed? (Behold thou art fair, my beloved, yea pleasant, also our bed is green).
>
> Did intercourse take place? (I sat down under his shadow with great delight and his fruit was sweet to my taste).
>
> When did intercourse first take place? (The king hath brought me to the banqueting house and his banner over me was love).
>
> Were you intending to commit fornication in Arizona? (He shall lie all night betwixt my breasts).
>
> Behold thou art fair my beloved, behold thou art fair: thou hast dove's eyes.
>
> Get away from there! cried the guard, as I wept by the crack of the door.
>
> (My beloved is mine).
>
> Better not try any funny business, cried the guard, you're only making things tough for yourself.
>
> (Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth).
>
> Stay put! cried the guard, and struck me. (pp. 51-52)

The dichotomy between the world's attitude to their love and that of the lovers, themselves, is underlined but more than that, the imagery of the Song of Songs which in the Scriptures provides an erotic analogue for a spiritual love here serves the reverse purpose, linking what is originally an erotic love with the spiritual, transmuting a profane love into a sacred love; giving it a religious dimension.

Throughout the novel, then, landscape, voice and allusions contribute to the tension of opposites inherent in the protagonist's inner experience. The central images Smart employs, which are blood and water, also contribute to this tension; both are associated with birth and death, creation and destruction. Here are some examples:

> "Will there be birth from all this blood, or is death only exacting his greedy price?" (p. 34)
>
> ". . . a happiness which, like birth, can afford to ignore the blood and tearing." (p. 26)

"Lucky Syrinx, who chose legend instead of too much blood!" (p. 26)

"Not all the poisonous tides of the blood I have spilt can influence the tidals of love." (p. 41)

"He also is drowning in the blood of too much sacrifice." (p. 127)

". . . my face floated away on that haemorrhage of sorrow. . . ." (p. 119)

"O the water of love that floods everything over, . . ." (p. 41)

"Even the precise geometry of his hand, when I gaze at it, dissolves me into water and I flow away in a flood of love." (p. 41)

"I thought it [love] would be like a bird in the hand, not a wild sea that treated me like flotsam." (p. 45)

"But the sea that floods is love, and it gushes out of me like an arterial wound. I am drowning in it." (p. 118)

"Where are we all headed for on the swollen river of my undamned grief?" (p. 118)

Elizabeth Smart manipulates all the resources of language--of rhythm, voice, imagery, allusion and she mirrors internal with external landscape--to weave a complex emotional drama, one which continues in a noteworthy tradition to voice the dilemma of the abandoned lover, whose emotional journey embraces such polarities as hope and despair, fatalism and guilt, ecstasy and anguish. Her unique use of language is her major contribution to the feminist adultery novel, and, she creates a feminine protagonist who, rather than being driven to suicide or to the convent, survives an experience which is as old as humanity itself.

NOTES

1. All page references to By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept are cited from By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept (New York: Popular Library, 1975), which is the first North American edition of the novel.
2. See Ellen Moers, Literary Women (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1976). Moers' chapter "The Feminist in Love," speaks of the feminist novel told from the point of view of the woman in love.
3. Robert Adams Day, Told in Letters (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 11.
4. Ibid., p. 12.
5. Ovid, Heroides, with an English translation by Grant Showerman (London: Wm. Heinemann Ltd., 1958), p. 97. All page references to the Heroides are cited from this edition.
6. "Letter 1. Heloise to Abelard," The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, translated with an Introduction by Betty Radice (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 113. All page references to The Letters of Abelard and Heloise are cited from this edition.
7. "Letter 3. Heloise to Abelard," The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, p. 128.
8. "Letter 3. Heloise to Abelard," p. 133.
9. Howard Jacobson, Ovides Heroides (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 7.
10. "Letter 1. Heloise to Abelard," p. 114.
11. Jacobson, pp. 6-7.
12. "Historia calamitatum" The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, p. 74.
13. "Letter 3. Heloise to Abelard," pp. 129-30.