

*BY GRAND CENTRAL STATION  
I SAT DOWN AND WEPT - SUFFERING  
AS A POETIC EXERCISE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to demonstrate how *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* by the Canadian writer Elizabeth Smart is essentially a poetic expression of the suffering provoked mainly by the author's turbulent love affair with the poet George Barker. The text is more than a factual narrative, becoming instead a distillation into prose of almost palpable sentiments. Thus, we have in effect a quest for literary expression, pulsating with experimental language that is more reminiscent of a lyrical exercise. The poetic techniques exploited, which render the narrative text a rich tapestry of lyrical discourse, succinctly reveal Smart's primary inspiration, her parallel love affair with the English language.

RESUMEN

Este estudio se propone demostrar hasta qué punto la novela *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, de la escritora canadiense Elizabeth Smart, es principalmente la expresión poética de aquel sufrimiento provocado por la turbulenta relación amorosa que la autora mantuvo con el poeta George Barker. El texto es más que una narrativa factual; se convierte en una destilación en prosa

de sentimientos casi palpables, una búsqueda de expresión literaria que desborda un lenguaje experimental que sería más apropiado en un ejercicio lírico. Los recursos poéticos explotados hacen del texto una rica tapicería de discurso lírico, y revelan sutilmente la inspiración primaria de Smart, su amor por la lengua inglesa.

Contemporary women's writing in Canada is undoubtedly the result of a strong multi-voiced feminine literary tradition, and their creative origins can be easily traced in their own country<sup>1</sup>. However, that tradition has evolved from the early pioneer women's responses to the wilderness they found themselves a part of, up until the late nineteenth century, to latterly incorporate more Canadian women writing about noticeably more cosmopolitan experiences, like the expatriate writer Elizabeth Smart (1913-1986), who spent long periods in England and maintained close contact with the poetry circles of the 1930s. Smart, the first writer to break with the English-Canadian tradition of realism, was also a precursor of that re-emergence of self-conscious stylistic innovation in the arts which reached its zenith during the 1950s and 1960s and which was to culminate in the post-modernist movement, arguably part of the collective Canadian experience itself, with serious experimentation by Canadian writers eventually coming to light in the 1960s<sup>2</sup>.

*By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (1945) is the evocative, yet curiously tragic, title of what could be described as a meticulous distillation into prose of the overpowering sentiments inspired by Elizabeth Smart's, intense and, at times, achingly desperate love affair with the English poet George Barker. In effect, it is a stunningly lyrical expression of love and psychic pain in the aftermath of passion as well as a radically original and unjustly neglected work, an autobiographical love poem in prose, spiralling towards a vortex of searing emotional pain, sublimely translated into the written word.

More than a narrative account or a mere record of a love affair, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* is perhaps in reality more reminiscent of a lyrical exercise revolving around the unavoidable but vital concept of intense longing and suffering in consequence of extreme passion that plays utter havoc with such a vulnerable romantic sensibility as Smart's. We remember Wordsworth's famed words, «poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings»<sup>3</sup>, and this exotic, impassioned work, with its poetics of pain lurking in the confines of prose, undoubtedly lives up to such a definition.

The novella is structurally compact and concise, divided into ten equally intense sections, which are overtly inspired by fact and driven by the unrelenting force of, at times, seemingly unrequited passion. It is, however, in its very essence and inspiration a superbly daring experiment in suggestive language and imagery, moreover when we recall that certain parts, as well as its subject matter of love and pain, and Smart's unmistakable poetic voice and inspiration, were both conceived and articulated before our author and her lover Barker had even had occasion to meet<sup>4</sup>, let alone embark upon any kind of romantic liaison. We can even unearth in Smart's diary of the time this telling remark in reference to her planned literary project, a novel: «I want my book to be about love. But love is so large and formless (But so full of new worlds)»<sup>5</sup>. The germ of her masterpiece had already begun to grow.

Likewise, we must not forget that it was Barker's poetry that attracted Smart before the man himself, thus the power of seductive lyricism and the printed word of poetry was the inspiration not only for an infamous affair, but more remarkably Smart's own sublime literary offering. Thus we could rather denote this outstanding work as not a novel as such, but poetry in the guise of prose, a prose poem or in Stephen Fredman's terms «poet's prose» as his «response to the terminological nightmare surrounding nonversified poetry»<sup>6</sup>; it is essentially a quest for poetic expression, overflowing with almost palpable emotions in a rich web of hypnotic lexis, pulsing with a sexual under-

current. What we have before us can be called neither a novel, nor merely «poetic prose»<sup>7</sup>, but a transcendental showcase of poetic devices that embellish and even stimulate its other inherent literary qualities.

As we have previously established, the story revealed in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* is based on fact and is suffused with autobiographical material, penned in very much a confessional, unburdening tone, and was in fact completed when Smart was pregnant by Barker with their first child, in fact two weeks before the birth<sup>8</sup>. Its ten sections are linked by a thin factual narrative thread, connecting events in chronological order, which are easily related to Smart's own life, especially since the publication of her diaries, *Necessary Secrets: The Journals of Elizabeth Smart* (Grafton, 1991)<sup>9</sup>.

Underlying the story, however, we are bombarded with abundant poetic techniques vividly exploited by Smart's impassioned hand including metaphor, rhyme, elision, repetition, disjunction and irony which are integral to the progression of the action. Smart herself was more than conscious of the intrinsic experimentation of her opus as we can again read in her diary: «...But I need a new form...each word must rip virgin ground. No past effort must ease the new birth»<sup>10</sup>. It is our concern in this brief analysis to highlight certain elements of this inherent poetic language in an attempt to illustrate and justify such prominent lyrical features, more often to be found in verse than in our so-called novel.

The work's most outstanding feature, the imagery and figurative language employed, is multitudinous and unrelenting. In her search for the definitive portrayal of all-consuming passion, Smart has resorted overwhelmingly to the natural and animal kingdoms, as well as appropriating religious images - at times with remarkable sexual overtones.

Take for instance the opening lines of the first section, a veritable pot-pourri of sexual imagery in which the reader is immediately drawn into a whirlpool text overflowing with emotive fragments that

convey the heroine-narrator's sexually-possessed state of mind, replete with suggestive imagery and interspersed with factual incidents in an effort to give the work a realistic edge. On holiday with her lover and his wife on a pretext of working together<sup>11</sup>, the almost palpable sexual tension is strongly evoked in natural images. Echoed by the lush, balmy context in which the author finds herself, the Californian coast, the exuberance of her uncontrollable emotions is given full rein in powerful images: let's consider for instance «The creek gushes over green boulders into pools no human ever uses, down canyons into the sea» (p. 18)<sup>12</sup>. This startlingly conjures up a seemingly unstoppable flow of sexual desire, verbally transformed into a rushing creek, which is soon to be cut short in the following paragraph, restrained in the following way: «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» (p. 19). Smart's guilt, and at the same time her impotence in the presence of her competitor for her lover's affections, his legal partner, is aptly described as a malignant force, a «poison oak», uncontrollably invading «the damp overhung valley», a sexual image which speaks for itself<sup>13</sup>.

Smart's writing is suffused with other similarly powerful natural imagery, faithfully reflecting Smart's unquenchable ardour. Still in this feverish first section, she is surrounded by sympathetic natural phenomena, by «kelp in amorous coils» (p. 19), appropriately named flora like «bleeding-hearts» (p. 19), pine-needles in her hair forming an ironic «bridal-wreath» after furtive love-making (p. 25), «the wet hands of the castor-tree» suggestively brushing her at night (p. 27), and all this erotic activity is played out against a throbbing backdrop equally as suggestive: «The sea booms. The stream rushes loudly» (p. 19).

There stealthily creeps in an element of sexual guilt which infiltrates deeper as we move into Part 2 where «bats and a spider are weaving my guilt» (p. 32), the «vines of remorse get ready to push up through the damp» and «my shame copulates with every September

housefly» (p. 32). Such remorse and passion are inextricably wound up, constantly reinforced by such natural images that populate her immediate, unchanging environment.

Margaret Atwood has pointed out that Nature in poetry often reflects the writer's attitude towards «the natural external universe»<sup>14</sup>. These sentiments are unavoidable and vital, like very Nature itself - «Nature, perpetual whore» (p. 18) is a powerful and succinct metaphor which reinforces that ever-present pulse of the unstoppable forces of life and desire, which are all too often exploited and chastised. This is reflected also in her description of her lover: «He is the moon upon the tides, the dew, the rain, all seeds and all the honey of love.» (p. 40), later enhanced as «he is also all things: the night, the resilient mornings, the tall poinsettias and hydrangeas, the lemon trees, the residential palms, the fruit and vegetables in gorgeous rows, the birds in the pepper-tree, the sun on the swimming pool». Her lover and her own ardour have been absorbed into the very essence and fabric of life and all that surrounds her.

Smart can also evoke tenderness with more immediate images. For example early on in the text she recounts how «Under the waterfall he surprised me bathing and gave me what I could no more refuse than the earth can refuse the rain.» Once again, sexual feeling mingles with natural impulse and the quenching of vital urges, reinforced in other lines such as «the new moss caressed me» (p. 24) or «we wrote our cyphers with anatomy» (p. 34), as the author attempts to reconcile her desire with the universal driving force of Nature.

The unavoidable guilt she feels as touched upon above is, of course, also fuelled by the fruit of the illicit union already growing in her womb. As Smart herself dramatically declares, «I am indeed and mortally pierced with the seeds of love» (p. 23). This is a perfectly suggestive image with an inherent double meaning. Here, the seeds which have implanted themselves in her could be likened to the piercing arrows of love, reminiscent of those of Cupid himself, which have

found their way to their unsuspecting victim's heart. More probably, the «seeds of love» refer to the conception of their love-child.

The examples of natural imagery which pervade the whole work are too numerous to mention in their entirety, but we have selected these examples from the beginning as both illustrative and representative. In the same way, we will make brief mention of the animal imagery Smart exploits. One of the most outstanding images as a vehicle for sexual expression is again to be found in the midst of Part One, with the writer in the throes of her torment:

I am over-run, jungled in my bed, I am infested with a menagerie of desires: my heart is eaten by a dove, a cat scrambles in the cave of my sex, hounds in my head obey a whip-master who cries nothing but havoc... (p. 24).

Here, the inevitability and desperation of her desire, embodied by a frantic feline or hunting hounds, is effectively contrasted with the gentleness and purity of the dove, that archetypal embodiment of romantic love. What sensitive reader could fail to respond to such a frenzied, but at the same time tender, representation of sexual passion?

The animal imagery contained in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* is unrelentingly erotic, reflecting hungry animal instinct, differing from the image of animal as a victim normally characteristic in Canadian literature<sup>15</sup>. In the final part of the novella, the author fantasizes about the reconciliation with her lover as she awaits him deliriously, isolated in her tortured ecstasy from the humanity bustling in the yawning vacuum of Grand Central Station, from which episode the work takes its title. The desperation of jerky prose is punctuated by reminiscences of more delicate and intimate moments, recalling the yearned-for contact she hopes to imminently resume: «He kisses the circles on top of the water beneath which I lie drowned. Soft as a fish, the kiss glides down to me, it swims through me, trailing its bubbles of love» (p. 110). The internal rhythm of the second sentence, coupled with the soft sounds it entones in the con-

sonance of the «s», makes this image doubly effective and onomatopoeiac, wholly demonstrating Smart's ear for balanced, buoyant syntax and rhyme.

This contrasts with the more direct image from Part Three, when Smart is immersed in the reality of her adulterous dilemma, her mundane daily life coloured by her unremitting desire once the previous guilty shadows of the night described in Part Two have been momentarily banished, and a «wet wing brushes away the trembling night» (p. 35). As she hears the object of her lust arrive, she describes him vividly in animal terms as «More single-purposed than the new bird, all mouth with his one want.....» (p. 40). Water is also very much a feature of the imagery in this section, as in the final section, eliciting such phrases as, for example, «I turn to liquid to invade his every orifice» (p. 40), contrasting with the later mention of «the swollen river of my undammed grief» (p. 104).

Such sexual imagery is rife and erotic feeling permeates the work, at times reinforced by such bald statements emphasising the involuntary nature of her urges as: «...he never passes anywhere near me without every drop of my blood springing to attention» (p. 20). Blood, or the colour red typically encapsulates passion as when it is stated that «In a bleeding heart I should find only exhilaration in the richness of the red» (p. 42). However, these instinctive lustful feelings are tinged/coloured by guilt, with that afore-mentioned «poison oak» which «Later in the year [...] flushes scarlet» (p. 19), reaching full expression after her lover unconsciously touches her breast in the country: «And I went into the redwoods brooding and blushing with rage, to be stamped so obviously with femininity, and liable to humiliation worse than Venus' with Adonis, purely by reason of my accidental but flaunting sex» (p. 20). Here the colour red of the trees and her flushed face maybe signifies illicit passion with the consequent ominous foreboding, in contrast with the former life-blood, and her inner conflict is further enhanced and even justified by her plundering of classical mythology.



At other times, the sexual images employed have a cruder strength, for instance as she justifies her passion in the face of her rival in love, Barker's ever-present wife: «...but who will have any pride in the wedding red, seeping up between the thighs of love which rise like a colossus, but whose issue is only the cold semen of grief?» (p. 32). The colour red is again present as a reminder of marital sexual abandon. Love and sex are inextricably linked, but here the link is scornfully portrayed in the context of a mere legal contract, the «wedding red», with the intrusion of the cold, blundering «colossus». This personification is later reiterated and ironically echoed as she describes herself «like a colossus whose smug thighs rise obliviously out of sorrow» (p. 68) as guilt and sympathy for Barker's wife overtake her in Part Six during her return on a parental visit to Canada, with the ensuing atmosphere of morality and enforced good behaviour. It is worth mentioning here that personification is to be found at innumerable points in the work. Take, for example, her attribution of sexual guilt to her unsuspecting typewriter: «The typewriter is guilty with love and flowery with shame, and to me it speaks so loudly I fear it will communicate its indecency to casual visitors» (p. 26) or similarly «The long days seduce all thought away» (p. 19).

Religious imagery is a frequent poetic recourse in order to associate feelings or objects with religious or cosmic concepts. Once immersed in the work after the dramatic and foreboding first sentence<sup>16</sup>, situating the protagonist/author desperately awaiting the arrival of her lover with his wife, later to be echoed at the end of the work when she weeps in her madness, we have the first of an unrelenting series of religious images, this time referring to her rival in love, for whom she feels pity and jealousy intermittently. She describes her, «madonna eyes, soft as the newly-born, trusting as the untempted» (p. 17) These «madonna eyes» then «shower» her with «innocence and surprise». Thus the wife is immediately portrayed as the innocent or manipulated victim.

This image contrasts with other images of sexual guilt transposed into religious sentiment, like for example «There is nothing to do but crouch and receive God's wrath» (p. 27) which will be incurred on her for her shameful pregnancy. Religious images abound, at times a dramatic comparison of her plight with the suffering of another martyr as shown as she reflects on her dilemma, in the midst of her encounter with her disapproving parents: «For I was raised for this event from more than a three- day burial, and would have built memorials to last longer than 2,000 years» (p. 64). She later justifies and ironically validates this image later on the same page with the acerbic comment «Not that I wish to blaspheme». At other times, her religious images veer towards the superbly ironic, as when again referring to the innocent victim, the wife, in the closing section: «Across the room she lies livid with grief and love, legendary and stony as a Catholic Cathedral [...] The spire gored her for christening, even while her upturned face expected the kiss of Christ.»

A further sublime example of religious reference occurs at the beginning of Part Four, which relates another factual incident when Smart and Barker were once stopped on the Arizona border in 1940 on suspicion of spying, this crime converted into love in Smart's account. The event is appropriately dramatized and transcribed by Smart for further reflections on morality mixed with religious musings in her stance of persecuted innocent victim, or, as she later describes herself on her return home to Canada, «the green leprechaun of legends, knocking at the houses asking for bread to find out who is kind» (p. 62).

In this section, lines from *The Song of Solomon*, a legendary source of religious scandal and also a poetic confession of sexual guilt, are wittily juxtaposed with the police's clumsy interrogation, invoking the law and restrictions of enforced morality. The resulting effect is highly ironical, with the elevated language infusing this segment: «What relation is this man to you? (My beloved is mine and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies.) [...] Were you intending to commit forni-

cation in Arizona? (He shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.)» (p. 47). Smart also doesn't miss the opportunity to pass political comments in a later section with the acid remark, «Did you know that 11,000 faces identical with Christ's are growing thinner in the federal prison?» (p. 62).

Metaphors, central to the notion of poetry, heavily populate the work, enhancing it vividly. She refers to her unavoidable guilt with the stark comment, «The trap is sprung, and I am in the trap» (p. 32). This is reiterated later on the same page when she says, «Love lifted the weapon and guided my crime», equating love with a destructive, unstoppable force. The idea is picked up again two pages later: «Fear will be a terrible fox at my vitals under my tunic of behaviour» (p. 34). Earlier, we have seen other metaphors taken from the natural world like «the seeds of love» (p. 23), «the vines of remorse» (p. 32) and how «the cricket drips remembrance unceasingly into my ear...» (p. 32). We have a particularly apt and beautiful metaphor at the outset of her ode to love describing her inability to deny such love: «...but can I see the light of a match while burning in the arms of the sun?» (p. 26).

Another particularly succinct metaphor occurs on Smart's return to Canada and morality in Part Five, a journey which leads her to reflect on parental authority as a «framework» which parents hopefully build, but their children «contrary as trees lean sideways out of the architecture, blown by a fatal wind» (p. 55). Smart herself is certainly exemplary here, since the publication of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* caused great outrage among her own family, and although it was published in England in 1945 it did not appear in print in Canada until 1975<sup>17</sup>.

Her metaphors can also be daring and unconventional, used for political or social comment, as when referring to her own story of love and suffering: «... as glossed over as the Red Indian's right to be free» (p. 66). A notable instance is when Smart, self-conscious of her own possible lack of attraction for her lover who has just admitted a

homosexual experience, refers to her «obstreperous shape of shame, offended with my own flesh which cannot metamorphose into a printshop boy with armpits like chalices.» (pp. 20-21). She makes reference to the encounter Barker had previously described to her, and impudently mixes the religious «chalice» with a cardinal sin. The writer herself is also highly conscious of her use of poetic technique as she goes on to comment on the same page, «Then days go by without even this much exchange of metaphor.» This humorous, self-conscious touch is picked up later on with the comment «Forty days in the wilderness and not one holy vision. Sights to dazzle the eye, but I bask in the sun without drawing one metaphor from it». Surely Smart's crafting of this passionate love poem in prose is undoubtedly revealing itself as more of an exercise in lyrical expression; even her lover is portrayed as «beautiful as allegory» (p. 108).

The work's highly poetic fabric is also rich in similes, again too numerous to mention in their entirety, but several examples are worthy of mention as deliberate rhetorical devices. She can be tender, as when evoking the idyllic halcyon days, when she and her lover (and his wife) would «lie like lizards in the sun, postponing our lives indefinitely» (p. 19), or cruelly ironic in contrast, again using religious imagery, as when she describes Barker's wife: «... her thin breasts are pitiful like Virgin Shrines that have been robbed» (p. 24). Separated from her lover, she yearns for him, again in a animalistic way: «O where does he stalk like a horse in pastures very far afield?» (p. 84). Later, she resorts to touching sympathy, again referring to the wife: «I have broken her heart like a robin's egg» (p. 35). This simile beautifully captures the fragility of her innocent competitor's sentiments, smashed by the blundering and ruthless mistress as she sees herself, later ironically recalled in her tormentuous separation when she «...can only wait, like an egg for the twenty-first day, for him to arrive with all the west wind of irrefutable conviction» (p. 88).

In Part Eight, the external material world is remembered, «The pawnshop and the bank [...] had different moods, like players subject

to revolving coloured lights» (p. 83) and a sardonic note is maintained throughout the work as the intensity of her feelings mingle unavoidably with the more mundane and banal details of everyday life: «Like Macbeth, I keep remembering that I am their host. So it is tomorrow's breakfast rather than the future's blood that dictates fatal forbearance» (p. 18). Similarly, the necessary subterfuge of the liaison is heightened with the phrase «we always had to return like cornered foxes to the hotel room» (p. 83). However, this detectable note of ironic humour is sometimes rather embittered as she tries to put her predicament into some kind of perspective, but «Philosophy, like lichens, takes centuries to grow and is always ignored in the Book of Instructions. If you can't Take It, Get Out» (p. 84).

Her similes also embellish the inevitable eroticism of her words as in «Did we lie so close like irresistible currents driven together?» (p. 94), this lapse into frenzied nostalgia giving rise to sentiments such as «I writhe in desperation, screaming his name, as my germ dwindles, as the whole universe withers, like a corolla no bee ever found» (p. 107). «Despair grows like a weed to hope» (p. 99), illustrating how any illusion she may entertain of her passion being requited is strangled by enemy forces. This stunning simile is completed in the next line: «Despair grows, and like the cuckoo bird ousts my sleeping baby». Hope and rebirth clash with her jumbled, desperate emotions, coinciding with the imminent presence of the new love-child. This desperation leads her seek her love, eventually leaving her in Grand Central Station, the place her novella opened and her torment began. We wince at her pained vulnerability, reiterated when she described herself as «more vulnerable than the princess for whom seven mattresses could not conceal the pea» (p. 88).

Most of the similes employed seem to be coined to reflect Smart's own inner personal torment, but we also have her superb description of the dawning of another despairing day: «Like the genii at hell's gates, the darkie porters arrive, and usher in the day with brooms and enormous dustpans. Odours of disinfectant wipe out

love and tears» (p. 112). Reality, at times sublime, can be drastically reduced to clinical anonymity and hygienic, stifling control. Prior to this, we delighted in the contrasting description of the day's beginning for her lover, at home asleep in bed with his wife: «Dawn creeps over his window like a guilty animal» (p. 111). Here «guilty» does not really refer to his emotional state, but rather to the unwelcome intrusion of banal reality.

However, one of the most important features of this lyrical opus, reminiscent of a symphony with its varying movements of cadences and crescendos, distinguishing it from the conventional novel, is not only the utter profusion of poetic recourses such as vivid imagery, metaphor or simile, but also its very narrative structure, textual cohesion and syntactical deviation. At times the prose is realist in nature and typically narrative, but more frequently it resembles a collage of fractured sentiments, poetic utterances juxtaposed with documentary fragments, and towards the end it even transcends to a stream of consciousness, almost bursting with unbalanced, uninhibited ramblings and varying reflections.

Poetic language is characterised by its deviation from normally observed rules of language and creativity. Smart's tone varies considerably, from the rhapsodic or jubilant, to the demented. The rhythm of the text is at times jerky and uneven with frequent jumps - a dramatic isolated sentence frequently punctuates the discourse, as, for example, at the opening of Part Three when our heroine-narrator is in full flow, practically overflowing with ardour, given to rambling among the realms of natural imagery almost resonant with the images of water, «the flood of love». «The overflow drenches all my implements of trivial intercourse» Smart informs us and as if to justify the incoherence of her diatribe, suddenly a lone sentence jumps out from the text: «I am possessed by love and have no options» (p. 39). Then, the discourse continues in the same image-ridden, possessed vein as before.

This type of sudden break is manifest at several points in the text, especially towards its close and Smart descends into all-con-

suming obsession. Sentences, seemingly with no direct relation to each other appear on the page, shuffled together and each clamouring for attention amongst their fellows. In Part Seven, as the descent into sexually-possessed madness gains momentum and she visits her lover in hospital, her confusion is echoed by the textual distribution. After the first paragraph, we are presented with:

No. I am confused.  
 He said No Visitors were allowed. Not even on Friday.  
 Then I went with magazines and fruit... (p. 73).

This jerky sequence aptly resembles her mental anguish as she strives to make sense of or rationalise her reality, as do other similar fragments. Later on in this section describing a sexual encounter, she continues thus:

My love, I think I see a little blood on your clothes.  
 Yes, that's from the belly of the whale.  
 Women are so possessive. (p. 75).

Smart also exploits exalted poetic language on numerable occasions. Take for instance the poetic exhortation «O waste of moon, waste of lavish spring blossoms and lilac as I pass down the path. Cease all blandishments to squander them at his feet, to win him away to life, to be on my side. O be my allies, unfolding ferns, butterfly in the wood» (p. 97). Similarly, we can select «Bow down thou tall cherry tree, I am going to meet my lover» (p. 99) or the rhapsodic ending of Part Three, «Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm, for love is strong as death» (p. 44).

In the same way, we have several instances of literary or mythical reference, heightening the effect of her prose and her timeless, if somewhat surrealistic, story. For example, she compares herself to Dido (p. 94) and Macbeth (p. 18), her lover's «greater never-to-be-given» kiss to the Sword of Damocles (p. 22), or makes reference to Venus and Adonis (p. 20), Daphne and Syrinx (p. 22) and Jupiter and

Leda (p. 25). Surely these utterances would be more suited to poetry, with its use of archaisms, than in prose - hence Smart's poetry in prose.

Having made a brief examination of the language used in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, I would denominate this intense, emotional and challenging work as 'poetry in prose' or a prose poem due to the exceedingly wide range of poetic techniques exploited during the course of the narrative, and its succinct, transcendental nature, surely more befitting the poetic genre. Smart has skilfully and sensitively attempted to concentrate her extreme sentiments, produced by her love affair with George Barker, into appropriate language with a narrative thread lending the work the air of a novel. The resulting effect is a rich tapestry of lyrical and flowing discourse which unavoidably penetrates and heightens the readers sensibility.

In effect, Smart's distillation into prose, tinged with the hues of lyricism, of the extremes of female experience and psychic pain is maybe more indicative of the author's freely- admitted love affair with the English language<sup>18</sup> and the resulting effect is, more than a narration of a factual experience, a quest for poetic expression with astounding success and impact. The poetic quality of the novella, and Smart's irrepressible fascination with language is candescent on every page, more resembling poetry written in sentences without versification. As she herself has quoted Proust, «suffering is a mistress I cannot deny»<sup>19</sup>, and pain is undoubtedly her Muse in this intense work: «O the tumult, the unavailing ineffectual uproar of the damned. O the language of love. The uninterpreted. The inarticulate. Amore. Amore. Amore».



## NOTES

- 1 For more information, cf. Coral Ann Howells, *Private and Fictional Worlds: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s*, London and New York, Methuen, 1987, pp. 21-22.
- 2 For a full account of this phenomenon see Caroline Bayard, *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec*. University of Toronto Press, 1989.
- 3 Quoted in John Peck and Martin Coyle, *Literary Terms and Criticism*, Basingstoke, Macmillan Education Ltd., 1984, p. 11.
- 4 Smart had in fact decided to fall in love with Barker on stumbling across a volume of his poetry while browsing in a Charing Cross Road bookshop. For an account of this, refer to Lindsay Duguid's review, «A Large-Scale Family Legend», of Rosemary Sullivan's biography of Elizabeth Smart, *By Heart. Elizabeth Smart: A Life* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, November 8, 1991, p. 8.
- 5 Cf. Elizabeth Smart, *Necessary Secrets (The Journals of Elizabeth Smart)*, edited by Alice Van Wart, London, Paladin, 1992, p. 213.
- 6 Taken from the preface to the first edition included in Stephen Fredman, *Poet's Prose: the Crisis in American Verse*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. xiii.
- 7 Smart herself disliked the term 'poetic prose' as giving the wrong impression, describing her work rather as 'concentrated' or 'distilled' prose. She even goes as far as to compare her writing to dehydrated soup: «You get all the substance without the water». See the obituary by John Goddard, «A Life of Passion» in *Books in Canada*, May 1986.
- 8 Elizabeth Smart and George Barker were to have four children together, but Barker never left his wife, the three of them living at times communally in California.
- 9 It is more than obvious that some parts of the novel in question have been directly transposed from her diary entries of that time.
- 10 Cf. Elizabeth Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 217.
- 11 Smart had in fact paid for the impecunious Barker and his wife to travel to America.
- 12 This, and subsequent page number references correspond to the first Paladin edition (prior to this, the work was published by Panther books and reprinted nine times) of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, published in 1991.
- 13 Water images are recurrent throughout the book. A later example to echo this particular one at the beginning is «...I rush past rivers to *the* river. One river waits. One is the one, and knows I shall fall into the water with a thud» (p. 110).
- 14 Cf. Margaret Atwood, *Survival*, Toronto, Anansi Press, 1972, p. 49.
- 15 For more details, see Margaret Atwood, *ibíd.*, p. 79.
- 16 The text is «I am standing on a corner in Monterey, waiting for the bus to come in, and all the muscles of my face are holding my terror to face the moment I most desire».
- 17 Smart belonged to a very wealthy and influential family in Ottawa. When an Ottawa bookstore imported six copies in 1945, her mother bought all of them and burnt them, and no other copies were allowed to enter Canada thereafter until 1975 due to the

- mother's influence with the then Prime Minister Mackenzie King. However the book managed to enjoy a cult following in London and New York.
- 18 Smart in fact began writing seriously at the age of eleven while spending a year away from school recovering from an illness. Some of her early writing from the first eight years of her writing life has been published in the volume *Juvenilia*, edited by Alice Van Wart and published by the Coach House Press in Toronto.
- 19 From the interview «Elizabeth Smart. Fact and Emotional Truth» in *In Their Words*, p. 196.

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