THE NOVELS OF ELIZABETH SMART:

Biological Imperialism and the Trap of Language

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse,
would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live,
how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves,
how our language has trapped as well as liberated us. . .

On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, Adrienne Rich

Cy-Thea Sand

En comparant la première et la seconde oeuvre en prose d'Elizabeth Smart, publiées avec 30 ans d'écart, Cy-Thea Sand recherche ce qu'Adrienne Rich appelle "les indices de notre mode de vie". Partant d'une analyse des thèmes et des images des deux romans de Smart, "By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept" et "The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals", Sand montre que l'héroïne, archétype féminin, passe de l'état de fille de la Nature à celui de créature de culture, une actrice, non pas celle sur qui on agit. Dans son second roman, Smart tente de faire face aux restrictions linguistiques et culturelles qui lui sont imposées à elle, écrivaine. En le faisant, elle se préoccupe moins de la femme victime, et plus de la femme écrivaine, celle qui transcende les limitations.

In this article I compare Elizabeth Smart's first and second prose pieces — published thirty years apart — for "clues as to how we live." *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* is an archetypal tale of the wife/mistress/husband syndrome, very much a woman's story. *The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals* is, three decades later, a soliloquy from the woman who survived the suicidal intensity of youth to nurture four children and to reclaim her literary voice. With an analysis of the themes and imagery of the two novels, I will show that the heroine — symbol of woman, of archetypal female — is transformed from Nature's daughter into a creator of culture, an actor rather than one acted upon.

The act of reading *By Grand Central Station* is analogous to scraping one's hand along stucco. The intense pain is relentless: the mistress-heroine suffers the torment and loneliness of intermittent love while the deserted wife waits, agonizing, until her repentant husband returns. Elizabeth Smart's story is chanted; at times it reads like an unbearable spasm of pain. The three central characters are nameless, which helps to give the work its mythic, universal quality.

Brigid Brophy writes in her foreword that "reading the book is like saying a tragic, pagan, erotic rosary." Biblical and classical myths abound in the novel's imagery and symbolism. The language of the fathers (male constructs of pagan myth/symbols and the patriarchal images of the Bible) provides the framework for the author's exploration of erotic passion. Woman is

Elizabeth Smart. *Photo provided by Cy-Thea Sand*

identified, at times to a mystical degree, with the realm of Nature. On the second page of *By Grand Central Station*, Smart refers to Nature as a "perpetual whore," and with this phrase we are alerted to the phallocentricity inherent in women's use of male-defined language in general and in Elizabeth Smart's use of it in particular.

When the narrator meets her rival at the novel's beginning, the latter is ensconced in natural imagery:

> How can she walk through the streets so vulnerable, so unknowing, and not have people and dogs and perpetual calamity following her? But overhung with her vines of faith, she is protected from their gaze like the pools of Epping Forest. (p.18)

□ □ □

The three characters vacation in Monterey, California, where the lushness of the natural world reflects both the heroine's increasing passion and the tragic futility of her longing:

> But poison oak grows over the path and over all the barks, 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. (p.19)

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The danger in the narrator's sexual awakening is underscored by her deep sense of sexual shame. The novel's realm in the natural world is established at its beginning, and woman is inferior within this microcosm:

> One day along the path he brushed my breast in passing, and I thought, does this efflorescence offend him? 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. 21)

Her shame and sense of inadequacy are exacerbated when she learns that her lover has been in love with a boy:

> One should love beings whatever their sex, I reply, but withdraw into the dark with my obstreperous shape of shame, offended with my own flesh which cannot metamorphose into a printshop boy with armpits like chalices. (p. 21)

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Venus (Aphrodite) had to share Adonis with another woman, whereas the narrator must compete not only with her lover's wife but with men as well. Her position of vulnerability and powerlessness becomes the leitmotif of this work. She has no control over her feelings for this man. She cannot act to save herself; she is continually acted upon. The narrator-heroine is the antithesis of the social individual, the creator of culture. She does not manipulate or transcend reality; she is controlled by it, an element of Nature herself but swept away by its force nonetheless:

> It is written. Nothing can escape. Floating through the waves with seaweed in my hair, or being washed up battered on the inaccessible rocks, cannot undo the event to which there were never any alternatives. O lucky Daphne, motionless and green to avoid the touch of a god! Lucky Syrinx, who chose a legend instead of too much blood! For me there was no choice. There were no crossroads at all. (p. 24)

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Daphne was a huntress who shunned both gods and mortals as lovers. Apollo pursued her nonetheless, but Daphne's father turned her into a tree to save her from Apollo's advances. Apollo used her leaves to make a laurel wreath to crown himself. Syrinx ran from the god Pan and was turned into a tuft of reeds by her sister nymphs. Pan, like Apollo, turned this defeat into use by creating shepherd's pipes or Panpipes out of the reeds. Our mortal heroine will be used as well. She believes that she is unable to alter her fate as she is "mortally pierced with the seeds of love":

> Under the waterfall he surprised me bathing and gave me what I could no more refuse than the earth can refuse the rain. (p. 26)

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The lovers continue to meet and make love. The wife's tormented eyes haunt the narrator as days pass and the intensity of her illicit love approaches the breaking point. The lovers finally leave California to travel across the United States. The narrator enjoys the freedom to indulge herself completely in love. She experiences love as a way to transcend mortal existence:

> But I have become a part of the earth: I am one of its waves floating and leaping. I am the same tune now as the trees, hummingbirds, sky, fruits, vegetables in rows. I am all or any of these. I can metamorphose at will. (p. 45)

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This revelry of passion ends abruptly. The lovers are arrested at the Arizona border, humiliated, and separated. The man is imprisoned; the woman travels to her parents' home in Ottawa. She stays only long enough to record her impressions of people consumed with the reality of war in Europe and disparaging of *her* obsession with love.

The lovers meet again in New York when the man is released from prison. He divides his time between his wife and his mistress. The latter spends long hours alone in hotel rooms: "I am the last pregnant woman in a desolated world. The bed is cold and jealousy is as cruel as the grave."

The last segments of this short novel record the dissolution of a woman, who without her man

> becomes a corpse, a deadweight: Thus every quarter-hour it puts the taste of death in my mouth, and shows me, but not gently, how I go whoring after oblivion. (p. 91)

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The heroine feels martyred (ascetic images abound) but does have compassion for the suffering she has caused the wife. She is paralysed with worry that her lover will not return to her. She forces herself not to think of the fate of her unborn child. Finally, unable to bear the torment any longer, she decides to throw herself into the river near her lover's home.

By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept is an exhaustive (and exhausting) study of one woman's obsession with love. In its relentless honesty it exposes woman's vulnerability, confusion, and need for approval. It is a classic example of a woman divided against herself and other women in her desperate search for self-acceptance and self-respect.

The first sentence of Smart's second novel, *The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals*, introduces the social milieu of the work: "Wandering in the wastes of Kensington, the mean mad faces pass like derelict paper bags."

This is postwar England and our heroine has become "just a woman in a fish queue, with her bit of wrapping paper, waiting for her turn." The narrator-heroine has joined the community of women Adrienne Rich has described as those "who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world" ("Natural Resources," in *The Dream of Common Language: Poems 1974-1977*). Elizabeth Smart as narrator contemplates the economic and social consequences of World War Two — a battle she reduced to a backdrop in *By Grand Central Station.*

Trapped in a routine, clerical office job, the narrator looks out at the world:

> Yesterday from my office window I saw a crippled girl negotiating her way across the street, her shoulders squarely braced. At each jerky movement her hair flew back like an annunciating angel, and I saw that she was the only dancer on the street. (p. 21)

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This image not only reflects the narrator's concern with the lives of girls and women around her but also serves as a metaphor for woman's uneasy participation in the world of men. The narrator writes of having to suppress her emotions in order to function at her job and juxtaposes her "obsessional fog" with staid government procedures:

> An obsessional fog, even if it is made of a flock of holy ghosts, is not the sort of thing we can put before the members of Parliament. . .
> Is it a certain shyness on their part that makes them unable to take in these trembling statistics, too fleshy too flighty too messy for debating floors? (pp. 25-26)

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The narrator then describes her feelings about pregnancy and birth — the waiting, the vulnerability, the slowing down of metabolism. She says that women may wish to think and move quickly, but Nature has enveloped them in fluid, forcing them into lethargy and passivity.

In the title segment the narrator explores the pain, loneliness, and the instinct for survival which make up her daily life. She takes a holiday in France in hopes of finding solace with her friends there. She (as in her first novel, Elizabeth Smart does not name the narrator-heroine) tries to externalize herself, to be aware of activity around her, thus avoiding the agony of self-inspection:

> Smile slowly and carefully. This endless exterior is your remedy. Winkle out the ounce of life. That is the work in hand. It is sweaty excavation. But sometimes viable seeds have been found in Egyptian tombs. (p. 43)

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Her need to be outside of herself enhances her trips on the London subways as well. In her interest and concern for other people, she learns how to love:

> I'm easily in the arms of them all when the bus lurches, when the Underground's too full. I tolerate the toothpaste on their breath. My head lies against their dandruffed shoulders. For a minute, sometimes an hour, I know how to love. (p. 53)

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Elizabeth Smart analyses the nature of woman's love and finds that it is nurturing which binds women to children — a love characterized by compassion for the weak. (The fathers she describes leave their families when things get rough.) But this love is rooted in pain and discomfort when enacted within a patriarchal framework. Smart, as narrator, wonders why she cannot be satisfied with "such pain, such babies, such balancing." It is her social/creative need to record her experience that fuels her discontent, her need to be *active* in the face of what she has called woman's "cruel sexual bargain." It is a bargain which does not encourage little girls to absorb and transform their environment:

> Don't moon about by yourself in the woods. People will think you are queer. Learn to arrange flowers and take interest in the house. Be a perfect little lady always. (p. 69)

Smart must battle the angel in the house and the guilt of wanting to write rather than care for others' needs. Smart asserts that "the pen is a furious weapon. But it needs a rage of will." She must work to conjure up this rage so she will "leave the washing up and take a look around." Like so many other women writers, Elizabeth Smart looks at the classics of Western literature and wonders: "Are they (the writers) hidden in veils or strait-jacketed by domestic lives or hammering at their sores in lonely rooms?"

Escaping the legendary blank page of the writer, Smart as narrator goes to Soho pubs. But there she is confronted with the creative woman's albatross: thinking that others' needs are greater than her own:

> But look how ruthless other people are, following faithfully the rigid roads of their own neuroses. Why can't I insist on what suits mine, instead of standing there with this hopeless boring neurotic egotistical middle-aged sailor, having my strength slowly syphoned off, for nothing, for nothing at all? (p. 27)

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Back in the business world she is told not to get too above herself. She is harassed by her boss and is too tired from mothering babies (and trying to write) to compete effectively for a better job. And in one powerful sentence Elizabeth Smart utters the cry of women trapped between their nurturing and creative selves: "The womb's an unwieldy baggage. Who can stagger uphill with such a noisy weight."

The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals is a collage of emotions and observations. Its intensity lies in its juxtaposition of the author's deep feelings and the mundane, everyday life around her. The poetic style and vivid imagery of *The Assumption* are enhanced by rage. It is the rage of a woman becoming conscious of herself in a world designed by and more comfortable for men.

In *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, literary brilliance and emotional intensity are enhanced by narrative tension. The tension is related, I think, to an essential contradiction: the *subject* of the work is woman's vulnerability (falling in love, sexual awakening, pregnancy), while the *author* or cultural authority of the work is a woman speaking man's language. In *The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals*, Elizabeth Smart struggles to come to terms with the linguistic and cultural restraints imposed upon her as a woman writer. While traditional imagery is still used, it is used less, and there are anecdotal stories of women's lives as well as women telling their own stories. As Elizabeth Smart relies more on women's own stories and less on established patriarchal images, she is concerned less with woman as victim — although woman's "cruel sexual bargain" is dramatized — and more with woman as writer, as transcender of limitations. In *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, woman's identification with Nature is a negative association, resonant with powerlessness and pain. In *The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals*, woman is celebrated as a social being confronting a harsh environment with anger and strength.

Cy-Thea Sand's critical prose has appeared in journals such as Maenad, Fireweed, and The Radical Reviewer. For the past three years, Cy-Thea Sand has edited The Radical Reviewer.

Further Reading:

Elizabeth Smart, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*. Foreword by Brigid Brophy. New York: Popular Library, 1977.
Elizabeth Smart, *The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals*. New York: Panther Books, 1980.

WORKING GENDER

Searching for satisfaction
while working for pay
is the acceptable way
to get on.

But in this unequal age
of spurious enlightenment
which voices female entitlement
for anywhere else,
the wage gap 'tween
male and female's
not narrowing.
The experience is harrowing.
Stasis abounds.

Still half work at half pay
and half, not at all.
Deplorable conditions
fit to appal any
fair-minded soul.

In a nation of 20m,
where we're ten million strong,
acting together,
should it take very long
to eradicate poverty
as a feminine noun?

Judith A. Johnson
Winnipeg, Manitoba