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# “A Necessary Collaboration”: Biographical Desire and Elizabeth Smart

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I myself cannot (as an enamored subject) construct my love story to the end: I am its poet (its bard) only for the beginning; the end, like my own death, belongs to others; it is up to them to write the fiction, the external, mythic narrative.

Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

I peer into the mirror to find a distortion of my own image which would make my pain into a bearable legend.

Elizabeth Smart, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*

WRITERS AND READERS OF FICTION ALIKE are susceptible to the pull of biographical desire. Despite the decentring or dismissal of the author by various critical movements in the twentieth century, the notion of authorship has hardly withered away. Even in the case of fiction, a literary mode in which the author is the producer of the text but not, strictly speaking, its subject, there is often curiosity and debate about how it came to be written and whether or not it is based on its author's life. Biographical desire—the desire to treat a literary text as a way of coming to know its author—is not new, but it is particularly evident in the present day, when it is facilitated by a matrix of media offering writers diverse opportunities to make their faces known and to articulate the personal basis of their

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work. Confronted with a demand for self-disclosure both in and about their writing, it is not surprising if some authors should seem flirtatious by discussing their texts in ways that are alternately coy and confessional, sometimes explaining the autobiographical background of a particular text, sometimes emphasizing the role of imagination and invention in its creation. Meanwhile, their fiction can itself seem to court biographical readings. Whether by featuring a protagonist who resembles the author in appearance and background or by otherwise gesturing intratextually back to the author, fiction often appears to express the biographical desire of authors to be recognized not merely for but in their work. Such texts can seem to tease readers by inviting biographical readings even while featuring conventional disclaimers that any resemblance to real people, places, and events is purely coincidental. In this way, the presumption of non-reference entailed in the categorization of a text as fiction is thrown into dispute by the referential intimations of the text itself, not to mention the assertions of its referentiality that the author or others might make.

Such contradictions abound in the case of the Canadian-born author Elizabeth Smart and her 1945 novel *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*. An unnamed woman's narrative about her passionate affair with an unnamed married man, *By Grand Central Station* has gained the status of a cult classic, not least because it has been taken by many readers to be a recasting of Smart's own affair with the English poet George Barker. However, the novel is spare in concrete details about the narrator that might consolidate a biographical reading. Instead, it is predominantly a poetic rendering of her inner life, which is characterized by her desire for her lover and her agony when he eventually abandons her. Moreover, because the narrator goes unnamed, the text implicitly proposes what Philippe Lejeune has called a "phantasmatic pact" with its reader, under which the narrator gains an ambiguous status akin to that of the speaker of a lyric poem: she may or may not be taken to be an incarnation of the author (27). Readers who feel uncomfortable with such ambiguity are left to adjudicate the novel's referentiality in the field of what Gérard Genette has called "paratexts": materials such as interviews, cover blurbs, and prefaces that inform readings of literature and that are produced by or with the aid of the author and her "allies" (editors, publicists, et al.) (2). More broadly, texts such as reviews, critical biographies, and author profiles also fulfill this paratextual function. It is through such paratexts related to *By Grand Central Station* that the story of Smart and Barker's affair has become public, and in these materials the biographical desire of critics is clear. What also emerges is the importance of Smart's collaboration to the

process of interpreting her book. As *By Grand Central Station* underwent waves of republication and publicity during the later decades of her life, she both abetted and resisted biographical readings of the novel. Attention to her paratextual appearances shows her to be responding to a complicated set of desires on the part of her audience, as the public's wish for the book to have autobiographical elements runs alongside its ambivalence about the propriety and literary merit of including personal history in fiction.

The publication of *By Grand Central Station* inaugurated a multifaceted and shifting biographical project with which Smart was compelled to co-operate, as critics asked her either explicitly or implicitly to publicize details of her life insofar as they related to her book. Such explications oriented critical attention away from the text and toward Smart herself, who became an alternative text to interpret and promote, both before her death in 1986 and afterward. Therefore, to examine the reception history of the novel is also to track the flux in the public's apprehension of its author and her relationship to her text. In doing so, one is afforded an almost emblematic glimpse into the development of confessional culture through the latter half of the twentieth century.

In the novel's reception history, a significant recurrence is the critical impulse to identify Smart with her protagonist. Although this impulse could be taken to be a simple misunderstanding of fiction's relationship to reality, it might be read alternatively as a reaction to an underlying, unspoken anxiety that fictional texts in particular are radically independent of their authors: that even when they seem to represent them, they remind readers of the authors' absence. Accordingly, the desire to locate Smart in her novel is a particularly melancholic one, as critics become producers of texts themselves, creating a paratextual discourse that constantly attempts—and necessarily fails—to install the author at the centre of discussions about her text by treating the text as a monument to her. In the case of *By Grand Central Station*, the identification of author and narrator that seems requisite for such a monumentalization has been hyperbolized by the fact that Smart's reputation rests almost exclusively on that book. Consequently, the trajectory of her public presence has more or less followed the changing fortunes of the novel's publication record. An inspection of those fortunes that is attentive to the presence of biographical desire both in Smart and her critics is required in order to appreciate the role that paratexts play in the construction of authorship and attitudes toward fiction.

At the same time, *By Grand Central Station* can be read as a book that anticipates its own public life. Although Elizabeth Smart could not possibly

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have predicted the particular twists and turns that would come to distinguish her novel's history, *By Grand Central Station* is a text that is preoccupied by the same notions of desire and abandonment that characterize the book's reception. As a metafictional allegory of reading, *By Grand Central Station* is prophetic in addressing the issues that have arisen since its publication. In this allegory, Smart's abandoned narrator is a stand-in for the reader: like the novel's audience, she enters a relationship that is intimate, adulterous, and eventually estranged. Moreover, like readers, she must negotiate between a demand to distinguish fantasy from fact and a contrasting impulse to view life at the level of myth and metaphor. Through a juxtaposition of this allegorical reading of *By Grand Central Station* with a study of its reception history, it becomes clear that the dynamic between author and reader is intrinsic to, not simply a consequence of, the text's signification. In particular, questions of referentiality are ones that the novel poses but cannot solve autonomously. The text serves as a catalyst for the necessary collaboration of reader and author, and of text and paratext, as discussions of the novel's autobiographical character in a matrix of media make the author as much an object of study as the text that she produced.

### Flirtation in the Confessional Matrix

The reception history of *By Grand Central Station* demonstrates the ways in which biographical desire is expressed, frustrated, and provoked in the public sphere. In particular, scholars and reviewers have frequently memorialized Smart by installing her at the centre of their readings of her novel, while Smart's own paratextual flirtations with regard to the book's referentiality have complicatedly supported this process. If Judith Butler is right in suggesting that "to the extent that writing cannot reach beyond itself, it is condemned to figure that beyond again and again within its own terms," then the reception history of *By Grand Central Station* might be taken as exhibiting just such a repetition compulsion: again and again, reviewers and critics have attempted to conjure an absent author whom they believe the text represents (374). Accordingly, as the Elizabeth Smart of the 1940s who wrote *By Grand Central Station* has slipped further away with time, exegetical inventions of her have only grown more determined. In this regard, critics of the novel have not been beholden to the text alone in their interpretations and evaluations; instead, they have enlisted the aid of paratextual testimony and evidence in order to configure the novel as a monument to Smart.

Such monumentalization has been a long and complicated process, one that has been connected to changes in the mass media over the last sixty years. When *By Grand Central Station* was first published in 1945 by Editions Poetry London, it received scant attention and disappeared quickly from the public eye, but it did garner a few positive notices, including one from Cyril Connelly in *Horizon*. Connelly shows little interest in the book's autobiographical aspects and mentions neither Smart's affair with Barker nor any concrete connection between Smart's life and text. However, Connelly does seem to conflate author and narrator when he mentions "the hit-or-miss night-minded school of writers to which Miss Smart appears to belong," suggesting that the book was written quickly and implicitly ascribing to Smart the passionate spontaneity of her protagonist. Similarly, when Barker's *The Dead Seagull* was published in 1950—also a poetic prose narrative about an affair, but from the male lover's point of view—reviewers were silent about possible autobiographical inflections. The omission of explicit biographical interpretation meant that any *succès de scandale* occurred only within the circle of those already acquainted with the Smart-Barker relationship. In that circle, though, the reaction was intense, at least in the case of Elizabeth Smart's mother, Louie, who saw the affinities of her daughter's novel with real life as all too obvious. Upset at the depiction of the narrator's parents, her act of critical commentary in 1945 was to buy and burn the six copies of *By Grand Central Station* that she found in an Ottawa bookstore. Moreover, according to several accounts, she subsequently used her political influence to have Prime Minister Mackenzie King ban the book's importation into Canada (Sullivan 229). In 1966, she wrote to her daughter: "you hold up your father & mother to public criticism." However, she was willing to admit to some uncertainty about the intended meaning of the book's autobiographical content, writing: "I am sorry if my understanding is still at fault. Perhaps you can take time to enlighten me" (quoted in Sullivan 300–01). Elizabeth's immediate response is not extant, but in a 1977 journal entry she recalled:

Remember how she wanted *By Grand Central Station* completely destroyed and forgotten because of the things in it (very few) that she thought were about *her*, when really I was only trying to mention the severing of the bonds with parents that passionate love brings. NO portrait intended, but offence mightily, wrathfully taken. (Smart, *Angels* 88, original emphases)

Given the thirty-year gap between the novel's composition and Smart's journal entry, her denial of autobiographical intent cannot be taken as a definitive account of her mind at the time she wrote *By Grand Central Station*, but it does provide a glimpse of her attitude about the book as it was gaining notice again in the 1970s. By then, an insistent critical attention to the book's autobiographical aspects had caused her to emphasize its non-referentiality instead.

Such authorial resistance to biographical readings was not so evident in 1966 when Panther published a second edition of *By Grand Central Station*. That year witnessed the first explicit public suggestions that the book was autobiographical, and they were made by Smart herself. By this time, of course, Smart was twenty years older than she had been when she wrote the novel, and several journalists who noted the lapse in time also sublimated their opinions about Smart's age and appearance into judgments of her fiction. A comment in an *Evening Standard* article, "Smart Then and Now," that she "seems incredibly youthful both in appearance and manner," is echoed by reviewers who—in a later issue of the *Evening Standard*—insist on calling the narrator of *By Grand Central Station* a "girl" or, even, in *Observer* and *New Statesman* reviews, "a young girl" (Wyndham). The *Observer* notice also uses the epithet of youth to discuss Smart herself, implicitly identifying author and protagonist when it avers: "[T]his is a young writer's book and you need to be very young to get swept up in her emotion." Meanwhile, the initial *Evening Standard* article consolidates a biographical reading with a quotation from Smart about her book's title: "It's not just a play title. I sat down by Grand Central Station for a whole day crying and writing the novel." Evidence would later surface that Smart had taken three years to compose *By Grand Central Station*, but her statement in the *Evening Standard* seems to corroborate Connelly's insinuation that the book was a spontaneous expression of passion. Indeed, the very fact that the *Evening Standard* chose to include a quotation from Smart demonstrates the media's interest in confession. In response, Smart entered into a series of flirtations with the press that alternately embraced and challenged biographical treatments of her novel.

This flirtatiousness came to the fore in 1977 with the publication of Smart's first book of poems, *A Bonus*, which instigated what Smart would call her "resurrection" (quoted in Peterson). Reviewers often chose to discuss the book alongside *By Grand Central Station*, another edition of which was published by Polytantric to strong praise. Notably, this celebration was concomitant with the first widespread discourse in print about the novel's autobiographical aspects. Frequently, articles offered

interpretations of the book that were self-contradictory, in one sentence speaking of it as fiction and in the next as straightforward autobiography. For instance, Leland Bardwell's review in *Hibernia* describes the plot as a love affair between an anonymous woman and an anonymous poet and then notes: "Ms. Smart has spent that time [since 1945] rearing the poet's children." Catherine Stott's article in *Cosmopolitan* presents an equally seamless shift from discussing Barker and Smart to declaring that the novel "chronicles one of the strangest love stories of our time," eliding any sense that the narrative might be at least partly non-referential. However, this sudden attention to the book's autobiographical background is hardly surprising, since the Polyantric edition of *By Grand Central Station* encourages such interest. The cover features a photograph of Smart and Barker, and the book's biographical blurb takes care to mention that Barker is the father of Smart's four children. The presence of the blurb and photograph on a book classified as a novel support Gérard Genette's argument that the zone of paratexts is "broad enough to contain a number of items of information that may contradict each other" (41).

The use of such contradictory techniques constitutes another way of flirting with readers and stimulating their biographical desire. Like a striptease artist, the text and its paratexts harness the reader's imagination, which anticipates and infers details even when biographical connections are not explicit. Of course, to compare fiction to a striptease is to risk suggesting that it presents a "veil" of fantasy over a referential story in the manner that clothing hides a body, when in fact a text presents only a single surface of language with no necessary referent. However, as Roland Barthes recognizes, to use the striptease metaphor for reading is to foreground the desires that readers manifest for texts; the pleasure of the text in this case is in the sense of anticipation it creates, and in its deferral of satisfaction, not in the fulfilment of it: "[T]he entire excitement takes refuge in the *hope* of seeing the sexual organ ... or in knowing the end of the story" (*Pleasure* 10, original emphasis). In fact, although Gerald Prince argues that "Without desire on the part of the receiver and without the fulfilment of this desire, there can be no point to a narrative," it might be that the persistent frustration of the reader's desire and the deferral of certainty are two of fiction's hallmarks (159). Autobiographical fiction does feature literal endings, thus satisfying what Barthes and Prince both identify as readers' desire for narrative closure, but it does not satisfy readers' desire to arrive at a confident understanding of its referentiality. The cultivation of this frustration functions to lead readers out of the text, into



the world of commentary, to seek verification of the text's referentiality if they so wish.

The interest generated by paratextual and journalistic stories about *By Grand Central Station* was great enough that when Smart published her second novel, *The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals*, in 1978, critics paid substantial attention to the first book once more. Eleanor Wachtel's article on Smart in *Books in Canada*, "Stations of the Womb," was not unusual in combining a review of the new novel with a profile of Smart that rehearsed the story of her affair with Barker, while other critics were quick to find continuity in the resemblances between the narrators of the two books. As a result, *Rogues and Rascals* provided another opportunity to extend and consolidate the Smart-Barker myth. Such strategies were particularly evident in Canada. Smart lived as an expatriate in England for most of her adult life, and thirty years passed before *By Grand Central Station* had its first public reception in the country of her birth. In fact, it was only when the novel was published in an American Popular Library edition in 1976 that it came to the attention of Canadian reviewers, whose "discovery" of a Canadian novel and a Canadian novelist was simultaneous, cementing an intimacy between the two that had already been forming in England. The conflation of author and novel is evident in Adele Freedman's 1976 *Canadian Forum* article on *By Grand Central Station*, which concludes that it is "good to be able to report: Smart lives!" Here "Smart" apparently refers metonymically to the novel rather than the human being, since there is no earlier reference to the latter. Meanwhile, reviews such as Freedman's evince a particular feature of writing about Smart and *By Grand Central Station* that became a staple of nearly all subsequent journalism about them: namely, each commentator seems obligated to remark not only on Smart's first novel but on its reception and Smart's personal fortunes since its publication. Critics commemorated not merely the book—which was seen as unjustly ignored—but the young Elizabeth Smart whom they saw as preserved in the text. When Smart, a former debutante, traveled to Canada in 1982 to become writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta, her return was virtually a second "coming out" for her—and, indeed, the metaphor is not inappropriate, since the disparity between the young, attractive protagonist of *By Grand Central Station* and the sixty-nine-year-old author was much commented upon in the nation's press. Ken Adachi's article in the *Toronto Star*, "'Conformist' Was Years Ahead of Her Time," has the tone and title of an obituary, and Adachi remarks that Smart's face carries a reminder of its "youthful beauty" (17). Smart and her book together provided critics with a myth of

lost youth, and the story of the Canadian recognition of *By Grand Central Station* was as much about the belated act of discovery itself as about the virtues of the book, as though Smart's growing older were a product of an ignorant or indifferent Canadian audience rather than merely of time. Smart was construed as a Canadian Tithonus, granted eternal life through her book but tragically still aging and old before she could be properly appreciated. Implicitly, reviewers saw in the story of *By Grand Central Station* an allegory of its author: just as the novel's narrator is abandoned by her lover, Elizabeth Smart had been abandoned and ignored by literary culture on both sides of the Atlantic.

Given the media's imperative that authors confess to the personal aspects of their fiction, some degree of complicity on the part of Smart in critics' conflation of her life and her text was no doubt inevitable in the course of her efforts to promote her new work. She did not usually shy from discussing her affair with Barker, and she fueled biographical speculation by giving readings with him, including an appearance together at the 1980 Edinburgh Festival where she read from *By Grand Central Station* and Barker from *The Dead Seagull*. An article by Andrew Brown in an advance publicity bulletin claimed Smart was "afraid that she and George might argue for the whole time." However, in a review of the event for the *Scotsman*, Allan Massie observes that the two writers "refused to play the game" expected of them by organizers, and he wonders what kind of conflict or confession had been anticipated. At the same time, Smart and Barker's coyness might be seen as part of the "game" itself, since uncertainty about the exact autobiographical nature of their books was no doubt part of the stories' appeal for some readers.

For other reasons, too, Smart grew increasingly wary of discussing the autobiographical aspects of her work, even if she still often invoked them. As early as 1977, she claimed in an interview: "They've made far too much of the autobiography. Naturally, you have to use your own life—even Mary Shelley used parts of her own life when she was writing about Frankenstein. But I only took things out of my own life which I felt were relevant" (quoted in Jones). A letter to Smart from Wachtel two years later suggests that Smart continued to resent biographical readings. Enclosing an article about Smart entitled "Passion's Survivor" that she has published in *City Woman*, Wachtel writes: "I fear you will not approve [of it]. I too have some misgivings which I tried to assuage by quoting from your own articulation of disdain for 'mere gossip' and personality. Compromise is seldom admirable but I wished you to reach a wider audience than the academic journals have so far provided." Here, Wachtel accentuates the

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difficulty of providing a curious audience with information about the author without sliding down the slippery slope into biographical explication of her novel.

Indeed, several times Smart found herself struggling to assert the imaginative qualities of her work, especially in the case of film and theatre versions of *By Grand Central Station*. For example, a 1979 adaptation for the stage in St Louis named its characters Elizabeth Smart and George Barker, and a letter of that year to Smart from the Canadian author Susan Swan makes clear Smart's dissatisfaction with the choice. Swan writes: "I hope you get the matter settled about the play. I think there's no question the woman has confused a dramatic treatment of Grand Central with a biography of you and your lover." Similarly, after Metropolis Pictures bought the film rights to the novel in 1980 and showed Smart the subsequent screenplay, she was horrified by its biographical emphasis and declared: "I sold the rights to my book. Not to my life" (quoted in Sullivan 340). Still, it might seem difficult to sympathize with Smart's complaint that she is "sick of those who assume that the woman is me and the man is George" when in her own script for a film version of *By Grand Central Station* she named her protagonists Elizabeth and George (quoted in Layton 2). One might argue that such a gesture was a subversive complication, not a simplification, of the novel's relationship to reality, but it is clear that Smart was less prone to see such gestures in so charitable a light when they were made by others. In that respect, her participation in the media's confessional matrix might be understood as a desire for control over her text, even if exerting such control meant occasionally contradicting herself in the course of negotiating the various desires of her interlocutors. As Joe Moran argues, one paradoxical effect of the media's author-centred textual supplementations is the removal of agency from authors: "The author becomes gradually less in control not only of her work but also of her image and how it circulates" (61). Authorial commentary about the text after its publication is one way in which authors can continue to "produce" their texts and define their relationship to them—a relationship that may change as public apprehension of the texts changes. This was clearly the case for Smart in the face of the explications and adaptations of her novel that were being produced by others.

Smart's ambivalence may also be synecdochic of a broader cultural uncertainty about the aesthetic and ethical implications of writing autobiographical fiction. While there is an expectation that authors of fiction draw their plots and characters from their own lives, there is also a common denigration of those who do so transparently. Women in particular

have had to combat a prejudice that equates autobiography with lesser literature and that also assumes women's fiction to be "merely" autobiographical—what Mary Jacobus calls "the autobiographical 'phallacy'" (520). Feminist scholars have sometimes abetted this association; as Molly Hite argues, "[M]uch American feminist criticism has concentrated on the woman who writes and the female experience represented, in the process presuming a realist or even confessional mode of women's fiction" (16). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note "two suspicions that have informed traditional histories of art: on the one hand, that women's autobiographical representation in self-portrait, diary, and performance is 'merely personal'; and, on the other hand, that it is 'merely narcissistic'" (4). In response to such attitudes, critics of the last two decades have rejected the hierarchy of fiction and autobiography, claiming the latter as valuable historically, politically, and aesthetically. At the same time, there is a continuing sensitivity to the apparent "reduction" of women's fiction in particular to the status of life writing.

Perhaps wary of seeming to diminish Smart's text, feminist reviewers of *By Grand Central Station* in the 1970s generally downplayed the book's autobiographical aspects and celebrated it instead from a formalist perspective. For example, Lorna Sage's review in the *Times Literary Supplement* attacks Brigid Brophy's earlier description of *By Grand Central Station* as a "skinned, nerve-exposed book" and prefers to praise the novel for its "simple, rigid structure." Implicitly, Sage is skeptical about the political efficacy of celebrating a woman's book for the stereotypically "feminine" quality of unrestrained emotion. Meanwhile, *Autobiographies*, a collection of Smart's writing edited posthumously by Christina Burridge and published in 1987, demonstrates a continuing struggle not only by Smart but by her editors to balance a recognition of the autobiographical component of her work against a need to distinguish *By Grand Central Station* from "mere" autobiography. While Burridge emphasizes the aesthetic merit of the non-fictional material in *Autobiographies*, she also articulates her hope that the book will bolster *By Grand Central Station*'s claim to fictiveness: "The diaries show clearly ... that the climactic scene of abandonment at Grand Central Station, was a 'tarting-up' of a previous occasion, before Smart left for the West Coast to give birth to Georgina, fiction and not history" (6). Even as Burridge attempts to defend Smart's imagination, the phrase "tarting-up" suggests Burridge's worries about the seeming indecorous character of using one's life in fiction.

Rosemary Sullivan's 1991 biography of Smart, *By Heart*, offers a more complicated view of Smart's relationship to her novel. *By Heart* is a tra-

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ditional literary biography insofar as it traces the life that ostensibly lies behind the published texts, but Sullivan makes it clear that she does not endorse a reading of *By Grand Central Station* as autobiography. Instead, Sullivan insists that *By Grand Central Station* is “archetypal” (153). Lest one object that autobiography could also be read as deploying archetypes, elsewhere Sullivan offers an even subtler distinction: *By Grand Central Station* is “a recording of experience at the *level* of archetype” (135, emphasis added). Sullivan’s contribution to discussions of the novel’s autobiographical content is to redirect inquiry from the source of the story to its function in opening a hermeneutic space that need not be encumbered by questions of referentiality. In this space, readers might more easily treat the narrator’s experiences, thoughts, and emotions as emblematic or even universal. The audience might suspend their disbelief, embrace the text’s play with language, and recognize the role of metaphor and fantasy in everyday “real” life. Still, other readers may continue to read *By Grand Central Station* in search of its author, a figure who is both implicated in that text and absent from it.

### An Allegory of Desire

While many people have approached *By Grand Central Station* with such hopes of finding Elizabeth Smart at the heart of her novel, they may have been better off searching for themselves. Although the book’s narrator has been seen as both a literal and archetypal version of her author, it seems just as fruitful to consider her as a figure representing the novel’s readers. When approached with this possibility in mind, *By Grand Central Station* becomes not just autobiographical fiction but an anticipatory allegory of its own reception. The narrator’s relationship with her lover, their adultery in the face of his wife, their transgressive border-crossing travels together, and his eventual abandonment of her all serve as tropes for the experience of the book’s readers, who similarly desire Elizabeth Smart but are abandoned by her, not only in terms of her aging and death but due to the necessary distance between any text and its author. Accordingly, the narrator’s yearning for her absent lover echoes the reader’s quest to find Smart in the language of her book. An identification of the absent lover in *By Grand Central Station* with Smart is corroborated by the former’s apparent status as a writer; his exact vocation is unclear, but the “literary letters” he exchanges with the narrator and the book that he is typing support the biographical assumption that like Barker—and like Smart—he is a poet (50, 25). The lover’s penchant for storytelling is also evident when the narrator first meets him: he speaks for himself and his wife as he

“recounts their adventures,” and later, alone with the narrator, he regales her with a narrative of a past love affair (17, 20). Of course, the narrator is engaged in a similar action in *By Grand Central Station* as she relays the story of her own affair. Through her recounting of her passion for her poet lover, *By Grand Central Station* demonstrates the validity of René Girard’s observation that a text can mediate the desire of readers by providing models whose desires they emulate (5). In Smart’s depiction of the narrator’s unsatisfied desire, she prefigures readers’ reactions to her own absence from her text.

The first and last words of the novel’s opening sentence, “I ... desire,” also frame the book as a whole. In the first scene of *By Grand Central Station*, as the narrator waits for a bus to arrive with her future lover and his wife on board, her state of mind is the same as it is at the end of the novel: she is expectant and desirous. Meanwhile, from the book’s opening sentence, readers are also expectant; indeed, Smart creates this expectancy by withholding details of character and situation. Who is this narrator? For whom is she waiting, and why? The narrator does not provide answers right away. Peter Brooks has characterized “the reading of plots as a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text,” and in *By Grand Central Station*, readers are immediately allied with the narrator in a state of anticipation (37). However, the audience’s curiosity is piqued not by narrative events so much as by a plot of identity: they are carried along in part by the desire to understand who the narrator is. In some ways this desire is fulfilled, as details accrete into a portrait of a young woman who has parents in Ottawa. But in other ways the reader is left unsatisfied, not least with regard to the narrator’s name. Lejeune’s formulation of the “autobiographical pact” suggests that readers decide if a text is autobiography or fiction based on the correlation or non-correlation of the authorial name on a text’s title page with the name of the text’s narrator (14). But until the final sentence of *By Grand Central Station* passes without the divulgence of the narrator’s name and it becomes certain that the text proposes instead a phantasmatic pact, readers cannot even be sure about what attitude toward the text they are being asked to adopt. Accordingly, their movement through Smart’s text is in part an investigation of the author’s intentions—and, by extension, a pursuit of the author herself.

If readers desire to understand the relationship between Elizabeth Smart and her narrator, they also desire a sense of intimacy with Smart, the embodied author who could affirm or deny her identity with her narrator but who can only be encountered through a reading of the words she has

left behind. In the same way, the relationship between the narrator of *By Grand Central Station* and her poet lover is thoroughly linguistic in nature. Aside from the letters they write to one another, their first intimacies are textual ones: in order to be together, they “sit at the typewriter, pretending a necessary collaboration” (25). The narrator’s symbolic, allusive prose style in describing the affair further underscores the fact that the relationship is conducted at the level of language even in its most physically erotic moments, as when the narrator describes a sexual encounter with the phrase, “we wrote our ciphers with anatomy” (34). Indeed, the poet’s appeal for the narrator lies partly in his relationship to language: she first desired him “when he was only a word” and produced in her the “shivers of intimation” that such status brought (20). Her initial infatuation with him lies specifically in the referential promise of language, which suggests a chain of signification that will lead from words to a living body. Before he meets her at the bus stop in Monterey, the poet exists in the narrator’s mind only as a signifier; when he arrives in person, he becomes apparently whole, both word and referent. Accordingly, his affair with the narrator permits her a fantasy of empowerment in which she confers upon herself the ability to unite signifier and signified, claiming, “I can compress the whole Mojave Desert into one word of inspiration” (43). Similarly, readers of *By Grand Central Station* may find themselves infatuated with Smart through the sense of closeness with her that language engenders. Barthes describes the relationship between authors and readers as resembling the intimacy of lovers (*Rustle* 39); readers of *By Grand Central Station* are apt to experience such a sense of intimacy as they are drawn to Smart through the private confessions that she seems to make in her novel.

Although biographical desire appears to seek fulfilment through the translation of fiction into the factual, one might also identify in it a suspension of the desire for certainty, as readers enjoy the frisson of confronting the text’s referential indeterminacy. Such a conception of reading has affinities with that of Barthes, who defines the reader “at the moment he takes his pleasure” as someone “who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions” (*Pleasure* 3). Among the barriers that can be abolished is the one between fact and fantasy; readers abandon their usual verificationist practices in favour of reading through a double lens, both acknowledging language as a locus of make-believe and being drawn to its illusion of referentiality. As Barthes observes, “the reader can keep saying: *I know these are only words, but all the same ...* (I am moved as though these words were uttering a reality)” (*Pleasure* 47, original ellipsis and italics). Readers of *By Grand Central Station* who oscillate noncommit-



tally between treating the text as fantastic and as referential have affinities with Smart's narrator, who repeatedly identifies mythological resonances in her experiences, resisting simplistic distinctions between reality and metaphor. Instead she constantly sees double and knows it, asserting: "There is no angle the world can assume which the love in my eye cannot make into a symbol of love" (39). In fact, the irreverence with which she treats the boundary between reality and language imperils her when she and her lover find themselves stopped by the Arizona border police, who appear as representatives of a culture that demands strictly referential confession. In true constabulary form, the officers who interrogate the narrator want "[t]he truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" (49). Accordingly, they are unsatisfied by the metaphorical tendencies of the narrator, whose response is to challenge "the nature of Truth" itself (52), and whose responses during their interrogation take the form of quotations from the Song of Solomon (49). She experiences life through language, as metaphor, and refuses to commit to a reductively literal view of the world. In this way, Smart offers referentially desirous readers of her novel an alternative hermeneutic model.

Moreover, by making the poet lover elusive and indeterminate, Smart anticipates the elusive, shifting position that she herself would take with regard to her text. Not only is he geographically peripatetic, but he moves about in his various erotic affiliations, to the extent that he is defined by his mobility and transformative capacity, a "hermaphrodite whose love looks up through the apple tree with a golden indeterminate face" (20). Because Smart's presence in the text is similarly phantasmatic, *By Grand Central Station* frustrates the desire of readers who would prefer to have a stable sense of the book's referentiality. Catherine Belsey contends that "Part of the intensity of love is the desire to know the truth of the other's desire, to be *certain*," but, she says, "paradoxically, such certainty would be the death of desire" (37, original emphasis). In terms of biographical desire, a text's indeterminacy sustains it; the reader of *By Grand Central Station* takes pleasure from the very act of speculating about Smart's relationship to her novel, and from the anticipation of revelation as much as from revelation itself.

Although Barthes's model of reading construes the author as merely a textual effect, the reception history of *By Grand Central Station* demonstrates that many readers cannot so easily abandon the notion of the author as the referent of a living person, someone who stands behind the text, having created it. By presenting a parallel situation in the narrator's preoccupation with her absent lover, Smart's novel might be read as an



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allegory of fiction's status as an intimate communicative act that carries the trace of its elusive creator. If fiction promises seductively to draw readers closer to the author, it also reminds them that such intimacy is an illusion and that the author has long ago abandoned the text by releasing it into the public domain. As the poet lover in Smart's novel flirts and retreats, his author does, too; the narrator's consequent sense of loss echoes that of the reader who has hoped for some stable, certain sense of Smart in the text. One might reach toward the author through her language but, as Butler observes, "[I]f language were to reach the object it desires, it would undo itself as language" (383). Instead, only the author's phantasm is present in the "shivers of intimation" that words create. If desire is fueled by a sense of the love object's absence—in *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes asks: "Isn't the object *always* absent?" (15, original emphasis)—then a feeling that the author of a text has been lost is one catalyst for biographical desire.

Given readers' wish to locate authors in their texts, the audience's rival is the unnarrated and unsigned, those private aspects of the author's life that go unwritten and draw the author away from public text. In *By Grand Central Station*, this rival is figured as the lover's wife. From the beginning, she is associated with the marginalized and the voiceless—"her silence is propaganda for sainthood," the narrator says (18)—and, in her silence, she becomes another object of desire. Butler argues that "there is no desire prior to rivalry" and that "desire is the consequence of the triangularity of all social structure" (383). Accordingly, just as readers might lust after Elizabeth Smart's private, hidden self, so too is the narrator of *By Grand Central Station* fascinated by the poet's wife from the moment she steps off the bus in Monterey, with "her Madonna eyes, soft as the newly-born, trusting as the untempted" (17). As a figure for the unwritten, the wife is vulnerable to being appropriated into text and the public sphere, but she also presents an alternative to the sphere that is inaccessible to the narrator. As such, she is both attractive and a threat. Meanwhile, the narrator's satisfaction, like the reader's, comes only at the expense of the rival's private, intimate world: the poet lover betrays his wife to be with the narrator just as Smart seems to betray aspects of her personal life to the reader in her novel.

In view of such betrayals, it is not surprising that the narrator's relationship with the wife is fraught with guilt. The narrator wonders: "Is there no other channel of my deliverance except by her martyrdom?" (31). It is a relationship made even more difficult by the impossibility of the two women speaking together; the narrator asks herself: "How can I explain to her any more than I can to the flowers that I crush with my foot when

I walk in the field?” (24). Instead, their relationship is always mediated by the poet, in the same way that the author figure “Elizabeth Smart”—in Michel Foucault’s terms, not a human being but “a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo” (110)—mediates the relationship between readers and the human being Elizabeth Smart. However, if the poet’s wife in *By Grand Central Station* is an allegorical figure for Smart’s own private, unwritten self, then it is notable that the poet eventually flees back to her and, by extension, to the unscripted, abandoning the narrator and leaving her disoriented, “caught without a polestar” (84). The novel ends with the narrator alone at Grand Central Station, where she imagines the poet to be asking his wife for his notebook as he plans to write again. The narrator thinks: “Give it to him, O my gentle usurper, whom I also have usurped, my enemy whom I have both killed and been killed by. Let him write words that will acquit him of these murders” (111). At once, the narrator recognizes her rivalry with the unwritten, her undoing by it, and her conquest of it whenever the poet once more takes up the pen to transform his life into a text that she can possess. For readers of *By Grand Central Station*, Smart’s every act of paratextual commentary stands equally as both a victory and another reminder of defeat, another indication that the novel in itself cannot provide them with the intimacy that they desire.

In the novel, the narrator’s only hope is to embrace language itself and, in particular, its ability to provide substitutes. As Butler observes, if desire comes from a retrospective postulation by the subject of an initial unity, then “Desire is thus defined as displacement, but also as an endless chain of substitutions” (380). The final full paragraph of *By Grand Central Station* articulates a provisional, if ironic, attempt to embrace this substitutive ethos from the narrator’s own displaced position in Grand Central Station. She thinks: “I myself prefer Boulder Dam to Chartres Cathedral. I prefer dogs to children. I prefer corncobs to the genitals of the male. Everything’s hotsy-totsy, dandy, everything’s OK. It’s in the bag. It can’t miss” (112). For the narrator, everything has a counterpart, even the synonymous phrases that she uses at the paragraph’s end. At the same time, there is a profound dissatisfaction with this game of switching. Everything is not okay, and language *can* “miss.” Like the desiring subject, language comes to be defined by loss and lack, by what is absent; it can be found wanting. It is fitting, then, that when Elizabeth Smart later found herself defending *By Grand Central Station* against reductively biographical readings, she would claim that the novel was not about her affair with George Barker, but about her “love affair with the English language” (“Fact” 193). Whether

or not this was true for her, it is certainly the case that for her narrator and the reader of Smart's text alike, their love affair is precisely such a romance with language, even if that language testifies to the absence of the author who produced it.

But then, the ending of *By Grand Central Station* is not entirely devoid of authors, insofar as Smart's narrator herself becomes one. Lynette Felber notes that in much autobiographical fiction by women, there is a struggle by the female protagonist "as she rebelliously defines herself against her partner and his masculine aesthetic" (5). To whatever extent this is true in *By Grand Central Station*, it must also be said that the narrator enacts a melancholic incorporation of the male poet lover's voice. Abandoned by her lover, she writes, "[A]gain and again when I peer into the mirror to find a distortion of my own image which would make my pain into a bearable legend, [his] form bends over me in embrace forever" (82). This image of embrace suggests that the narrator's solution is not to efface the lover but, rather, to draw him into herself. In this respect, it is significant that the narrator's jeremiad comes explicitly in the form of writing. When she is upset, she turns to language, declaring: "I spill uselessly into my ten-cent notebook, my eyes used up with tears" (109). Anticipating Smart's 1966 characterization of her emotional state when she composed her novel, the narrator identifies sitting down and weeping with sitting down and writing the text. In this act, she is quintessentially a melancholic narrator. By becoming not merely a desiring subject but a writing, narrating one, she incorporates the lost love object, identifying with it and transforming herself into the author whom she desires, thus demonstrating more metamorphic potential than she has otherwise ascribed to herself. Similarly, readers of *By Grand Central Station* have enacted melancholic strategies in reacting to the loss of Smart. Critics have supplied biographical contexts for the novel, transforming it into a memorial to Smart in an attempt to fulfil what they construe as her desire to write her own story, while other readers have sought in paratexts the material to author their own biographical readings of the text. An interesting case is offered by Alice Van Wart, who edited Smart's journals and published them as two volumes, *Necessary Secrets* and *On the Side of the Angels*. When Van Wart states in her introduction to the first volume, "Far too much has been written about the biographical implications of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*," it is notable that her language closely echoes that of Smart's own 1977 claim, "They've made far too much of the autobiography." Here Van Wart seems to manifest the melancholic incorporation of an authorial voice that Smart's narrator has exhibited.

Like the desire between lovers that Smart depicts in her novel, biographical desire seeks a human connection. It involves similar fantasies about the other, and it follows the same paths of frustration and unfulfilment. Although the popular media and biographical critics have assembled a wealth of material about Smart's affair with Barker, about her composition methods, and about her opinions with regard to her novel's autobiographical character, the question of who, exactly, sits down by Grand Central Station and weeps at the novel's conclusion is unsolved and unsolvable. In that respect, the unfulfilled biographical desire that the text engenders has provided rich fuel for the production of discourse in the confessional matrix. But then, the autobiographical complexities of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* are not exceptional; they are only a magnification of a common hermeneutic crisis as the boundary between fact and fantasy continues to be both crossed and patrolled. In this regard, fiction's hyperbolization of the everyday human need to negotiate between the two is no doubt a large part of its appeal, since it provides a testing ground wherein readers can cultivate their talent to make such distinctions—or to live suspended in uncertainty.

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