

“The Suitable Language of Love”: Confessional Discourse in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*

MYRA BLOOM

FROM THE TIME OF ITS PUBLICATION in 1945, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* has been read as the true confession of its author, Elizabeth Smart. One of the earliest reviews of Smart’s “curious outpourings” criticized the fact that “actual incidents were washed away in a flood of self-revealing comment and analysis” (qtd. in Sullivan 228). Smart’s mother, likewise mistaking the book for autobiography, attempted to destroy what she perceived as the scandalous evidence of her daughter’s “erotomania” (qtd. in Sullivan 229). These autobiographical assumptions, though misguided, nevertheless have both a textual and a social basis. First, they are occasioned by the use of an intimate first-person address delivered by an unnamed narrator who resembles the author. Second, they can be attributed to a culture of confession that, as Michel Foucault argues, constantly exerts pressure “to constitute oneself as an object of knowledge both for other people and for oneself” (*Politics* 151). What is particularly ironic about the autobiographical readings of *By Grand Central Station*, however, is that the novel formally and thematically *resists* the demand for disclosure. The first section of this paper focuses on Smart’s formal obstructions, which include practices of self-fictionalization, metatextuality, and paratextual ambiguity. The second section shifts to confessional discourse in the novel itself, which I argue produces *pleasure* rather than what Foucault calls “knowledge-power” (*History* 58). By disconnecting her statements from empirical reality, referring them instead to a metaphorical structure in which “love has other laws” (*Grand Central Station* 84), the narrator challenges the social and legal condemnation of her extramarital relationship. She simultaneously performs an elaborate “rhetorical seduction” of the reader (Felman 29), persuading her to suspend her moral judgment and likewise embrace the celebration of erotic love.

Ambiguous Confessions

Although much attention has been devoted to the mutual implication of Smart and her narrator in illicit love affairs, few critics have noticed a more important point of convergence between them: namely, their shared resistance to the coercive power of what Robert McGill calls the “confessional matrix” (70). While McGill makes only passing reference to Foucault, his description of the “demand for self-disclosure” faced by Smart and other writers is illuminated by Foucault’s critique of confessional culture (McGill 68). Foucault argues that confessional discourse occupies a central place in all social institutions, including “justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, . . . the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and . . . the most solemn rites” (*History* 59). Although confession has been canonized as the privileged vehicle for expressing truth, its primary function is in fact to shore up repressive social mores; Foucault traces its origin to the medieval Inquisition, notorious for eliciting confessions of heresy through torture (58). Over the centuries, these police tactics have become incorporated into our psyches: today the cultural imperative to confess is so strong that, far from requiring torture devices to elicit it, we perceive it not as a constraint but as the basic precondition of our being. The problem, however, is that confessions construct the truths that they purportedly reveal, in the process producing “knowledge-power” (58). Beyond fabricating knowledge, confessions enforce the social norms that govern which subject positions are acceptable within a determinate moral code: the “truth” that the subject confesses is therefore determined by her awareness of the mores to which she is expected to conform.

The disciplinary underpinnings of confession are revealed in the reaction of Smart’s mother, Louie, to what she perceived as *By Grand Central Station*’s moral degeneracy: upon its publication, she immediately bought the six available copies in an Ottawa dry goods store and promptly burned them. She also petitioned the Department of External Affairs to prevent the book’s importation into Canada (Sullivan 229). Although Louie Smart was mistaken in her assumption that the book is autobiographical, her extreme actions display both the normative framework in which confessional writing operates and her perception of her daughter’s failure to conform to social standards. Her reaction, however, was not only misguided but also deeply ironic given Smart’s overt challenge to the “knowledge-power” engendered by confessional

discourse. Confession is both the rhetorical mode and a major plot point of *By Grand Central Station*, whose climactic scene involves the border police's attempt to make the narrator admit that she has committed adultery; nevertheless, the desire for a "true" confession is consistently thwarted by strategies of obfuscation that both Smart and her narrator employ to resist the demand for self-disclosure.

One strategy that Smart adopts is to blur the line between fact and fiction such that the confessional act becomes unmoored from its empirical referent. In *By Grand Central Station*, she piques the reader's "biographical desire — the desire to treat a literary text as a way of coming to know its author — " by framing the narrative as an intimate first-person address (McGill 67). Smart thereby appeals to the privileged status of confessional discourse in Western culture as "a prime mark of authenticity, par excellence the kind of speech in which the individual authenticates his inner truth" (Brooks 4). Beyond merely communicating information, confession has the performative function of elevating the subject's narrative to the status of truth claim.¹ The stakes of this performative power are clearest in "institutional" confessions (Bok 88) — for example, those that a person makes in the police station — where a statement is transmuted into a fact that can be used to adjudicate a legal case. The same power attends confessional discourse in a non-institutional context, where the act of confessing transforms the speaker's inner experience into a form of outward "truth." As "a type of autobiographical writing which signals its intention to foreground the most personal and intimate details of the author's life," confession is a particularly privileged genre in women's writing, in which, as Rita Felski affirms, "feminist confession continually refers to the question of *truth* as its ultimate legitimation" (83, 100).

This truth effect is arguably heightened by the fact that many of the novel's details bear striking similarities to Smart's biography; although the characters are unnamed, or, in the case of minor characters such as the Wurtles, given fictional names, geographical locations remain unchanged, as do biographical details, such as the couple's arrest at the American border. The novel is also formally tied to its author because of its partial origin in her personal diary: her notebooks contain letters, poems, and annotations by both her and George Barker, her lover, as well as "recipes and beginning drafts of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*" (Alice van Wart, qtd. in Smart, *Necessary Secrets* 247).

The narrator's justification for her affair — namely, that “love has other laws” — originates in a diary entry from 17 December 1940, in which Smart laments her lover's return to his wife, Jessica:

He did the one sin love won't allow. The FBI, Mummy, Witchie, the Montreal Police, and Hull were powerless, but love has other laws and a slight trespass is punished without trial.² George did sin here, and though he says it was in pity's name and that pity was only fighting a losing battle with love, he was useless to pity and in wavering injured love which was, after all what he had staked all for, all he had, ungamblable. (*Necessary Secrets* 254)

This passage reappears in *By Grand Central Station* in a slightly modified form:

He did the one sin which Love will not allow. The police, domestic scenes, cooling friends, the bribed provincial cops, the sordidness of hotels, were powerless, but love has other laws, whose infringement, even by a slight trespass, is punished without trial.

He did sin against love, and even though he says it was in Pity's name, and that Pity was only fighting a losing battle with Love, he was useless to Pity, and in wavering, injured Love, which was, after all, what he staked all for, all he had, ungamblable. (84)

Also excised from the novel is Barker's response to the passage cited above, which Barker scribbled in the margins of Smart's diary: “I did bloody well not. GB” (*Necessary Secrets* 255). Smart's erasure of names and other autobiographical details, complemented by her elevation of the personified Love and Pity to the status of proper nouns, has the effect of expanding her personal narrative to heroic dimensions; Smart spent three years revising the manuscript of *By Grand Central Station*, “working over passages again and again to tighten up their metaphorical structure” (van Wart, qtd. in Smart, *Autobiographies* 71). Yet the changes that she *did not* make are also important: in this excerpt, her imagery and use of personification remain almost identical in the journal and the published text, complicating the divide between fact and fiction.

Another way that Smart blurs these lines in *By Grand Central Station* is through metatextuality. Although Barker's words are excised from the passage cited above, they are in fact recorded elsewhere in the novel. Anne Quéma has argued that, in at least one passage, the narrator is in direct dialogue with criticisms that Barker made of an early draft

of the manuscript. She points us to the narrator's interrogation of the phrase "minor martyrdoms," which appears in Barker's critique (Smart, *Autobiographies* 71): "Why does he write 'minor' martyrdoms? Didn't the crucifixion only last three days? Is it the shortness of the days of torture or the fact that hope still breathes that lets him say minor? How can anything so total not be major?" (*Grand Central Station* 86). Quéma reads this passage as Smart's direct response to Barker's criticism that the novel lacked depth and rightly argues that the leaping of diegetic registers thereby "transforms her writing into a dialogical and agonistic performance" (305). This metatextuality confirms that the ambiguous relationship between author and narrator is not merely a by-product of Smart's idiosyncratic compositional process, as Dee Horne maintains it is in her treatment of the book as a "novel-journal"; rather, Smart's simultaneous evocation and thwarting of biographical desire knowingly challenges the "moral obligation . . . to know oneself, to tell the truth about oneself and to constitute oneself as an object of knowledge both for other people and for oneself" (Foucault, *Politics* 151). *By Grand Central Station* resists perpetuating the disciplinary norms enforced, as Foucault argues, through self-revelation, by leveraging the authenticating power of confession against the production of knowledge that it is usually meant to facilitate.

Smart's multiple, conflicting accounts of the origins of *By Grand Central Station* can likewise be seen as resisting the demands of confessional culture; in his thorough discussion of its popular reception, McGill details how Smart alternatively emphasized biographical elements to generate interest and minimized them when they threatened to overshadow the autonomy of her artistic creation. She was the first person, in fact, to make autobiographical insinuations: in 1966, on the occasion of Panther's publication of a second edition of *By Grand Central Station*, the *Evening Standard* quoted her as saying, "I sat down by Grand Central Station for a whole day crying and writing the novel" (qtd. in McGill 72).³ Smart also capitalized on the public's interest in her relationship with Barker by appearing alongside him at literary events and speaking openly of their affair (McGill 75). As the biographical reading gained traction in the public imagination, however, Smart increasingly downplayed the novel's referential status: among other examples, McGill cites a 1977 interview in which she claimed that "they've made far too much of the autobiography" and describes

her “horrified” reaction to a screenplay of *By Grand Central Station* that gave the names Elizabeth and George to the book’s unnamed protagonists (75-76). Viewed in the context of Foucault’s critique, Smart’s project becomes more than just a “flirtation” with her audience, as McGill puts it; Smart does not merely titillate the reader’s desire for ontological closure but also, more radically, takes aim at the cultural mechanism that perpetuates this desire and regulates what can be disclosed (70).

The stakes of Smart’s practice become clear in the climactic scene at the Arizona border, when the narrator and her lover are arrested for committing adultery; it is not a stretch to suggest that this scene microcosmically embodies the same wariness of confession that informs her autobiographical ambiguity. As Peter Brooks observes, in the juridical scenario, “confessions rarely are products of a free and rational will. They arise in situations of constraint, whether physical or psychological” (63). Instead of capitulating to the officer’s interrogation, however, the narrator empowers herself by responding with lines from the Song of Solomon:

What relation is this man to you? (My beloved is mine and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies.)

How long have you known him? (I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies.)

Did you sleep in the same room? (Behold thou art fair, my love, behold thou art fair: thou hast dove’s eyes). . . (*Grand Central Station* 47)

The police are “representatives of a culture that demands strictly referential confession” (McGill 81), a culture, moreover, in which social mores are enshrined in law. The brutality of this extorted confession is embodied in the juxtaposition of the interrogator’s questions, with their harsh, pared-down sentences, against the flowing lyricism and imagism of the Song of Solomon. Whereas the officer wants the narrator to admit that she is guilty, she refuses to define her relationship as either a moral or a legal transgression. And, though the police officer cannot make sense of her responses, their seeming incommensurability, for the reader, is a fully intelligible articulation of her protest against the normative underpinning of society and its laws: they represent her refusal to temper the heroic terms of her love into “a reductively literal view of the world” (McGill 80). When the narrator is accused of having “antagonized” the border guards by the family friend into whose

care she is released (*Grand Central Station* 51), she protests, “But they brought in the nature of Truth” (52); her definition of the truth must be juxtaposed with “[t]he truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” forcibly extracted from her by the border guards (49). In her lexicon, the subjective truth of erotic love is more legitimate than the institutional discourses that police sexual expression.

This scene functions as an object lesson regarding the insidious alliance between confession and the enforcement of sexual norms, which Foucault argues has inhered in Western culture since the nineteenth century (*History* 54). Sex, he maintains, has been transformed into a science, a “*scientia sexualis*,” through its codification and regulation by institutional discourses. By *Grand Central Station*’s interrogation scene demonstrates how sex, “the privileged theme of confession,” is policed through disclosure (which Foucault argues can be either voluntary or, as we see here, forced) (*History* 61, 59). The scientific discourse surrounding sexuality is the paradigmatic example of the production of knowledge-power insofar as sex thus codified can be adjudicated according to empirical criteria (e.g., healthy versus unhealthy, correct versus deviant). Foucault contrasts this instrumental approach to sexuality with the *ars erotica* practised by other cultures throughout history:⁴

In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul. (*History* 57)

Sex understood as pleasure, in his assessment, is the antidote to the clinicized discourse allied with knowledge-power. In the literary context, a similar insight underlies the *écriture féminine* practised by Hélène Cixous and other feminist practitioners to inscribe women’s *jouissance* into a linguistic system that excludes female sexual experience. Denise Adele Heaps has argued that Smart and Cixous are “kindred spirits” insofar as their writing shares a number of ideological and discursive features, particularly the articulation of “libidinal” femininity (145). Heaps concludes her article, however, by registering her ambivalence toward Cixous, who has been accused by several prominent feminist critics, including Toril Moi, Morag Shiach, and Domna Stanton, of promoting

an essentialized view of woman. These critics argue that Cixous at times portrays woman as a particular type of embodied subject rather than the multiple and irreducible heterogeneity suggested elsewhere in her own writing. Like Heaps, I also aim to demonstrate that the rhetoric of *By Grand Central Station* serves a contestatory function and creates a space for a discourse of pleasure; in my analysis, by contrast, its target is not explicitly a “masculine” linguistic economy but, *pace* Foucault, a broader culture of confession that polices sexuality through disclosure. I contend that the narrator critiques the knowledge-power alliance by separating confession from the realm of empirical knowledge and challenging the Judaeo-Christian moral system to which it is usually attached, operating instead in a world in which “love has other laws.”

Rhetorical Seduction

By Grand Central Station's narrator creates an *ars erotica* through a confessional discourse of *pleasure* or, in her words, a “suitable language of love” (23) that runs counter to the discourse of *knowledge*. Avoiding biological essentialism, I argue that she does so by way of a methodically constructed rhetoric rather than through the “ambiguous language” that styles itself “as in some sense quintessentially feminine” (Felski 32). Shoshana Felman’s concept of the “rhetoric of seduction” (29) provides a useful lens in this regard. Drawing on J.L. Austin’s theory of speech acts, Felman argues that “The trap of seduction . . . consists in producing . . . the illusion of a real or extralinguistic act of commitment created by an utterance that refers only to itself” (31). She derives this analysis from a close reading of Molière’s *Don Juan*, whose protagonist is so famous for his romantic proclivities as to have become metonymous with them. Felman is particularly interested in the role that language plays in seduction: Don Juan’s romantic success, she argues, is in fact attributable to his rhetorical prowess. His language is “performative and not informative; it is a field of enjoyment, not of knowledge. As such, it cannot be qualified as true or false, but rather quite specifically as *felicitous* or *infelicitous*, successful or unsuccessful” (27). Don Juan never follows through on the promises that he makes to the women, but it does not actually matter whether or not he does so, since this fact is external to his project of *convincing* women of his sincerity.

In *By Grand Central Station*, the narrator’s confessional rhetoric functions in the same manner as Don Juan’s promises. Both protagonists

make sustained use of a defined speech act (promising in the latter case and confessing in the former case). For both, language operates within a “field of enjoyment” rather than of knowledge, and both endeavour to *persuade* rather than *inform* their audiences. Just as the relationship between “the narrator . . . and her poet lover is thoroughly linguistic in nature” (McGill 80), so too the relationship between the narrator and the reader is one of linguistic luring. Like Don Juan, who seduces by making promises with no external referents, the narrator’s confessional discourse refers not to empirical reality but to a carefully constructed pattern of imagery and rhetoric centred on sensual pleasure: the narrator “repeatedly identifies mythological resonances in her experiences, resisting simplistic distinctions between reality and metaphor” (McGill 81), and presents her world as an erotically charged space, where sensual beauty is the chief virtue. Within the larger confessional frame of the text, the narrator takes aim at specific instances of institutional confession, which are representative of restrictive social mores. By positioning itself in opposition to these repressive norms, the text works to convince the reader to suspend her judgment and instead embrace the celebration of pleasure; in other words, it works to “seduce” her into accepting its idiosyncratic logic. It is impossible to ascertain the extent to which the narrator’s confession is *true* in any empirical sense, either in the world of the text or in relation to the author’s much-discussed autobiography, for the terms that the narrator uses are sensual and metaphorical rather than factual. Nevertheless, the extent to which her seduction is *successful*, I would argue, is confirmed by the enduring fascination with the novel.

One of the ways that the narrator replaces empirical language with the persuasive rhetoric of seduction is by strategically aligning herself with intertexts drawn from the literary canon, Greek mythology, and, most prominently, the Bible. Her primary source is the Song of Solomon, which provides a basis for the fusion of religion and eroticism that is a hallmark of her rhetoric.⁵ The Song of Solomon, or the Song of Songs, as it is also known, is a book in the Old Testament written in highly poetic language and structured as a dialogue between two lovers. It is singular in both Jewish and Christian traditions for its blatant eroticism, which has led many religious exegetes throughout the ages to read it allegorically, either as a parable for the relationship between God and Israel or Christ and the Church (Hunt 9). Although the allegorical

reading persists, contemporary scholars appear to be increasingly comfortable accepting its sensuality at face value: one critic goes as far as to name it a “Hebrew *Kamasutra*” (Hunt ix).⁶ In their poetic address, both lovers draw heavily from the natural world to convey their feelings. The female interlocutor describes herself as “the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys” (Song of Sol. 2.1); her beloved is “unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of Engedi” (1.15); the spring is “the time of the singing birds” (2.12). The interpenetration of humans and the natural world present in the Song of Solomon is clearly a prototype for the narrator’s “suitable language of love”: the narrator quotes this text both implicitly and directly (“Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm, for love is strong as death” [*Grand Central Station* 44]) in the lines of the interrogation scene. One notable example is the repeated mention of doves, which in both texts are strongly correlated with the lover: in the Song of Solomon, the lover “has dove’s eyes” (1.14) and is apostrophized as a “dove that art in the clefts of the rock” (2.14); the narrator of *By Grand Central Station* apostrophizes her lover with the identical phrase (48) and later implies his agency when she states that her “heart is eaten by a dove” (23). By inscribing her love affair within this intertext, the narrator performs several useful rhetorical feats: she creates a metaphorical language that deflects the referential demands of confession; she gains authority from the scriptural origin of the persona that she adopts; she finds a symbolic vocabulary for her erotic experience; and, perhaps most ingeniously, she grounds her celebration of eroticism in scriptural precedent.

The erotically charged physical landscape of the Song of Solomon also inspires the setting of *By Grand Central Station*, whose details are metaphorical rather than empirically precise. This setting is correlated with “a larger, more permissive and sexually anarchic logic of nature” in whose lexicon “[p]ost-coital guilt and repentance have no place” rather than with a standard Judaeo-Christian moral framework (Heaps 153, 154). In the narrator’s erotic geography, nature is personified as a “perpetual whore” whose “long days seduce all thoughts away” (*Grand Central Station* 18, 19). The physical environment is rife with dangerous temptations: “the kelp in amorous coils” that “appear to pin down the Pacific” (19); the hill that “turns from the sea and goes into the secrecy and damp air of forbidden things” (21); the enormous trees that “forbode disaster by their beauty, built on too grand a scale” (18). This

“anarchic logic of nature” is best illustrated in the scene of the narrator’s first sexual interaction with her lover “under the waterfall,” after which the narrator writes, “Absolve me, I prayed, up through the cathedral redwoods, and forgive me if this is sin. But the new moss caressed me and the water over my feet and the ferns approved me with endearments: My darling, my darling, lie down with us now for you also are earth whom nothing but love can sow” (24). This passage continues with nature’s imagined panegyric to the narrator, a scene later revisited with the additional detail that “the winds boomed triumph” (34). Nature is both a participant in and an adjudicator of the sex act: the diction moves from sensuality (“caressed me”) to morality (“approved me”), culminating in an apostrophe through which the narrator literally embodies the voice of the earth as it gives blessing to the union. This passage continues with a description of their sexual encounter as a “confirmation” (25), sustaining the motif of the consummated affair as a sacred alliance.

Although the narrator makes use of Christian language, she does so only to discard a conventional religious paradigm as an acceptable hermeneutic for her love. As in the scene at the border, she parrots the diction of an institutional confession (“Absolve me . . .”), in this case a religious one, to showcase the incommensurability of her love with its strictures. The Christian confession admits fault so as to achieve expiation: a confessor

believes that what he or she did was wrong according to a recognized set of norms, . . . believes that the person to whom he or she is confessing also shares those norms, or that the person to whom the confession is given is in a position of authority over the confessor and that the confessor is aware that his or her confession correlates with some type of punishment. (Shuy 4)

Because “guilt and expiation are a desired end,” one only confesses to perceived wrongdoings; “one does not confess to getting straight As on a report card or to being promoted to vice president, except perhaps facetiously” (Shuy 4). The narrator’s account of her sexual “triumph” is not facetious, but it *is* meant to challenge the religious discourse that would reduce it to a sin; the narrator does not believe that she is wrong or that her implied interlocutor (i.e., the reader) possesses the authority to stand in judgment over her. In the place of repentance, the narrator prays to God to come down to her level, “to understand my corrupt

language and step down for a moment to sit on my broken bench” (*Grand Central Station* 32). In another instance, the narrator mentions that she is “unable to assuage my guilt” and implores the “dove in the eucalyptus” to tell her “how to atone” (35); however, the apostrophe to an imagined interlocutor that is in fact incapable of speech casts doubt on any true recognition of wrongdoing. She confirms her unwillingness to atone later in the text, as she prepares to return to her parents’ house, when she states that she is “[a]sking no one’s forgiveness for sins I refuse to recognize” (56). This rhetoric is consistent with the narrator’s refusal to furnish “[t]he truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” to the border guards (49). In all of these instances, the alternative truth of the narrator’s love stands in opposition to the discourse of conventional morality and religion, as embodied in the language of institutional confession: the text’s overarching rhetoric of seduction replaces the rhetoric of sin and expiation as a viable form of self-expression.

Although the narrator turns her back on the conventional morality associated with a religious paradigm, she nevertheless retains a religious vocabulary, which she resymbolizes such that sexual love becomes elevated to the highest virtue. When, from her prison cell window, she observes a pepper-tree “droop[ing] with green love,” she wonders, “Did they see such flagrant proof and still not believe?” (49). The language of “belief” points to her transcendent, religious conception of her erotic love, as does her classification of those people who are critical of her relationship — “the leering police thugs,” “Mr Wurtle and his conventional pin-pricks,” “the well-meaning matrons” — as a “parade of unbelievers” (61). Love is depicted as a kind of pagan religion beyond the power of the individual, allied to a more fundamental natural force, and the narrator represents herself as being in direct communion with these primal vectors that animate the universe.

If the narrator is “the evangelist preaching a religion of love” (Heaps 147), the wife of her lover, by contrast, occupies a different religious office: that of sacrificial victim. In one instance, she is the “lamb of God” and “the innocent who is always the offering” (*Grand Central Station* 24); in another, she is a martyr to the faith (“Is there no other channel of my deliverance except by her martyrdom?” [31]). The imagery of sacrifice and martyrdom transforms the wife’s suffering from mere collateral damage into a sacred cause: namely, the enabling of the narrator’s passionate love. These roles are entrenched through a

sustained contrast between the wife's virginal qualities and the narrator's flagrant sensuality: the latter's first glimpse of the wife is expressed in synecdoche as her "Madonna eyes, soft as the newly-born, trusting as the untempted," emerge from the bus (17). The imagery oscillates throughout this and other passages between the innocence of the child and that of the virgin mother and sometimes invokes both: the narrator observes the wife "[s]itting nymphlike in the pool," with her hair falling "like sorrow, like mercy, like the mourning-weeds of pity" (23). This image contains the dual figuration of the child, here a "nymph," and the religious icon whose anthropomorphized hair forms a kind of pieta, adorned as it is with Marian adjectives. Whereas a traditional religious framework ascribes virtue to these figures of innocence and chastity, in the narrator's iconography these qualities have subtly negative connotations. The narrator compares the wife to "the flowers that I crush with my foot when I walk in the field" (24); if the narrator's lover is a dove, his wife is "as gentle as trusting as tenacious as the birds who rebuild their continually violated nests" (23), an image that is revisited in the narrator's admission that "I have broken her heart like a robin's egg" (35). This sense of futility and inconsequence must be contrasted with a love as "strong as death" that has been divinely inscribed in the destiny of the cosmos, where "Eons have been evolving and planets disintegrating and forming to compel these two together" (44, 69).

Within her alternative paradigm, the narrator not only opposes the power of eroticism to the pettiness of moral scruples but also goes a step further in ascribing morality *to* erotic love. Whereas Foucault speaks of the subject's "moral obligation" in epistemological terms ("to know oneself, to tell the truth about oneself and to constitute oneself as an object of knowledge both for other people and for oneself" [*Politics* 151]), the narrator, by contrast, connects morality with sexual and aesthetic pleasure. Passionate love is a beautiful thing, and therefore, according to the narrator's reasoning, any impediment to the pursuit of her passion is an affront to the good. The narrator mobilizes a Kantian rhetoric in support of her assertion that "there is no beauty in denying love": "To deny love, to deceive it meanly by pretending that what is unconsummated remains eternal, or that love sublimated reaches highest heavenly love, is repulsive" (*Grand Central Station* 26). Dante's *Divine Comedy* (specifically *Paradise*) is a clear intertext in its movement from terrestrial love to the divine "love that moves the sun and the other stars" (XXXIII.145).

However, the narrator of *By Grand Central Station* rejects the Christian teleology: whereas Dante encounters and glorifies figures of chastity, the narrator here recasts this image as “repulsive,” positioning against it the beauty of terrestrial, sexual love. Kant articulates the connection between beauty and morality in the *Critique of Judgment*, in which he writes that “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good” (par. 59). His arguments for this thesis are fourfold: (1) both please “immediately,” (2) both please “apart from all interest,” (3) both involve conforming to law, and (4) both are seemingly founded on a universal principle (par. 59). Just as the concept of “justice” is represented by a goddess holding scales, so too “morality” finds its symbolic embodiment in things that are beautiful (Burnham).⁷ Kant’s postulate regarding the disinterestedness of beauty is particularly salient here: by equating beauty and love, the narrator universalizes her actions, suggesting that they obey a principle that transcends her individual circumstances. Beauty has its own exigencies. A passage from Smart’s diary is instructive in understanding the view expounded in the novel:

Beauty is rare.

. . . Beauty is not sight or sound. It is a feeling. It is a spirit. It permeates through you. It urges you out in a gesture of abandonment or surrender. . . .

Beauty is holy. Beauty is earthly. It is God. It is sex. It is the momentary harmonious union of God with nature. (*Necessary Secrets* 170-71)

For the narrator, “the miracle,” far from the purity of unconsummated love, is precisely the power of erotic love to transmute the ordinary into the beautiful:

It has happened, the miracle has arrived, everything begins today, everything you touch is born; the new moon attended by two enormous stars; the sunny day fading with a glow to exhilaration; all the paraphernalia of existence, all my sad companions of these last twenty years, the pots and pans in Mrs Wurtle’s kitchen, ribbons of streets, wilted geraniums, thin children’s legs, all the world solicits me with joy, leaps at me electrically, claiming its birth at last. (*Grand Central Station* 40)

The ordinary “paraphernalia of existence” are given a new, cosmic significance when touched by the rays of the narrator’s love. Suddenly,

they are cast into the light of beauty on a cosmic scale, bathed in the “glow” of “two enormous stars.” The aestheticization of the narrator’s love becomes a powerful counterargument against two distinct realms of moral censure — eroticism and adultery. By reversing the negative polarity of these discourses, the narrator reconfigures her erotic, adulterous love as an alternative moral truth engaged in brave resistance against the impersonal brutality of the “unbelievers” and their institutions.

The narrator’s Romantic equation of beauty and truth is another example of her use of an *ars erotica* to resist the *scientia sexualis* enjoined by normative social discourse. The narrator leverages beauty against the pettiness of moral scruples, locating a more profound truth in the “miracle” of transformative love. This is one of several rhetorical moves through which she disrupts the knowledge-power alliance produced by confessional disclosure; other such strategies, as we have seen, include intertextual identification, invoking the “sexually anarchic logic” of nature, and stripping Christian iconography of its attendant moral system. These discursive strategies constitute a “rhetoric of seduction” insofar as they try to entice the reader out of her empirical/moral paradigms and into the narrator’s sensual world. The success of the narrator’s rhetoric, to my mind, is evident in the continuing fascination with both the novel and its author: McGill speaks of the “melancholic strategies” that readers and critics have employed to transform “the text into a memorial to Smart” (84). Their eagerness to give it extratextual life by imputing its disclosures to a flesh-and-blood author can be attributed to the persuasiveness of a text that creates the “illusion” of intimacy (80). The logic of seduction, however, is a logic of deceit: like Don Juan, the narrator of *By Grand Central Station* predicates her language of desire on the tempering of knowledge. Although they must be distinguished from one another in many respects, Smart and her narrator are identical in this regard: the harder we try to know them, the farther they push us away.

NOTES

¹ In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin distinguishes between constative utterances, which report facts, and performative utterances, which bring about a certain state of affairs; the difference, as he puts it, is between “doing and saying” (47). Confessions have both a constative and a performative dimension insofar as they simultaneously relay empirical

details and authenticate the narrative being relayed. For a more extensive discussion of the performative dimension of confession, see Shuy.

² Mrs. Witchie is a family friend whose son makes an appearance in *By Grand Central Station* as Mr. Wurtle; George had been jailed briefly in wartime Montreal for failing to produce identity papers (van Wart in Smart, *Necessary Secrets* 284n3); Hull, in Smart's words, is a "sleazy town across the Ottawa river" where George had to "skulk" because Smart's mother "refused to have him in the house" (*Autobiographies* 48).

³ This statement was later revealed to be false when it came to light that the novel was written over three years, a fact that confirms Smart's biographical ambiguity (McGill 72).

⁴ Foucault associates *ars erotica* with historical, largely non-Western societies such as "China, Japan, India, Rome, [and] the Arabo-Moslem societies" (*History* 57).

⁵ So sustained is this intertext throughout the novel that one is almost tempted to call it a "hypotext" (Genette 11). A "hypo/hypertext," according to Gérard Genette, is a more sustained form of intertextuality in which one text is actually a *transformation* of another text rather than simply marked by isolated allusions (11). *By Grand Central Station* is deeply indebted to the Song of Solomon in more ways than I have space to discuss here. Nevertheless, to my mind, it is a stretch to describe Smart's novel as a "hypertext" given the prevalence and reoccurrence of other intertexts, including the reference to Psalm 137, from which it derives its title.

⁶ Germane to this discussion is the notable detail that it is uncertain whether the lovers at the centre of the text are in fact married (though "pious exegetes of the synagogue and church" were apparently insistent that they be regarded as such [Hunt 3]).

⁷ For proof of this statement in our own culture, one need only consider the iconography of the Disney film, in which virtuous princesses are beautiful and villains are inevitably ugly. See Umberto Eco's *On Ugliness* for a more sustained discussion of this topic.

WORKS CITED

- Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy 3: Paradise*. Trans. Dorothy Leigh Sayers and Barbara Reynolds. London: Penguin, 1962. Print.
- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. 1962. New York: Oxford UP, 1990. Print.
- Bok, Sissela. "Chapter VI: Confessions." *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*. Toronto: Random House, 1984. 73-88. Print.
- Brooks, Peter. *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000. Print.
- Burnham, Douglas. "Immanuel Kant: Aesthetics." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Web. 26 Apr. 2015.
- Eco, Umberto, ed. *On Ugliness*. Trans. Alistair McEwen. London: Harvill Secker, 2007. Print.
- Felman, Shoshana. *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*. Trans. Catherine Potter. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983. Print.
- Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. 1978. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990. Print.
- . *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007. Print.
- Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982. Print.

- Heaps, Denise Adele. "The Inscription of 'Feminine *Jouissance*' in Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 19.1 (1994): 142-55. Print.
- Horne, Dee. "Elizabeth Smart's Novel-Journal." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 16.2 (1991): 128-46. Print.
- Hunt, Patrick. *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. Print.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*. Adelaide: U of Adelaide, 2014. Web. 26 Apr. 2015.
- McGill, Robert. "A Necessary Collaboration: Biographical Desire and Elizabeth Smart." *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 33.3 (2007): 67-88. Print.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. New York: Methuen, 1985. Print.
- Quéma, Anne. "The Passionate and Sublime Modernism of Elizabeth Smart." *Wider Boundaries of Daring: The Modernist Impulse in Canadian Women's Poetry*. Ed. Di Brandt and Barbara Godard. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2009. 297-323. Print.
- Shiach, Morag. *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Shuy, Roger W. *The Language of Confession, Interrogation, and Deception*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998. Print.
- Smart, Elizabeth. *Autobiographies*. Ed. Christina Burridge. Vancouver: William Hoffer/Tanks, 1987. Print.
- . *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*. 1945. 2nd ed. London: Panther, 1966. Print.
- . *Necessary Secrets: The Journals of Elizabeth Smart*. Ed. Alice van Wart. Toronto: Deneau, 1986. Print.
- "The Song of Solomon." Formilab.ch. John Walker, n.d. Web. 26 Apr. 2015.
- Stanton, Domna C. "Difference on Trial: A Critique of the Maternal Metaphor in Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva." *The Poetics of Gender*. Ed. Nancy K. Miller. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. 157-82. Print.
- Sullivan, Rosemary. *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart*. Toronto: Penguin, 1991. Print.