The Elizabeth Stories and Women's Autobiographical Strategies

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Isabel Huggan's *The Elizabeth Stories* is not, strictly speaking, autobiography, even though the circumstantial details of Huggan's life are almost identical with those of her protagonist. Yet, like Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, and Margaret Laurence, Huggan creates a fictive world which offers the reader a mode by which she can reconstruct the experience of growing up female and fettered in a repressive Canadian town.[1] Huggan's stories both reflect and refute the construction of female sexual identity, describing women's compliance with and defiance of dominant patriarchal traditions, both literary and sexual. There is an implicit declaration that fiction creates the womanly reader.[2] The heroine Elizabeth self-consciously reads herself into existence through the stories her culture tells about women, but also by telling her stories in response to that culture. She breaks women's silence, allowing both author and reader to do likewise. Huggan's purpose is to dis-cover the female self which lies buried under the palimpsest of patriarchal versions of femininity, to articulate that self while also preserving the culture and the time that created and defined that process of discovery—a multi-layered, complex process. Her technique gives the reader a sense of being admitted into the experience of a precocious child while simultaneously conveying adult insights. Elizabeth's childlike perceptions are coloured by the adult recognition of women's oppression, and any retrospective glance is tainted by that knowledge. In this manner, the author both denies and supports the fictiveness of Elizabeth's world. Huggan's awareness of this paradox is sustained but never resolved, for it is unresolvable in the context of writing about

female identity. Even when we realize that the immediacy of Elizabeth's experiences is feigned, we are still overwhelmed by its palpable "truth." This narrative strategy points us toward several possible interpretations: women are betrayed by patriarchal values, and the art which describes such values is also a deception. The only certainty within such confines is the uncertainty of meaning. Words can offer only incomplete, provisional versions of the truth, mere translations, and must remain open to question. Thus the reader's identity is challenged as Elizabeth formulates her own, and Huggan's translation of girlhood experience into story destroys the possibility of absolute truth. "Autobiography completes no pictures. Instead, it rejects wholeness or harmony, ascribed by formalists to the well-made art object, as a false unity which serves as no more than a defense against the self's deeper knowledge of its finitude" (Gunn 25).

Yet, reading these stories, I am still tempted to identify, to admire Huggan's ability to strike a familiar chord; I want to say, "Yes, that's exactly how it was!" to stumble into womanhood in an inhibited Ontario community. In determining whether or not Elizabeth's experiences are representational, perhaps it is useful to keep in mind Alice Munro's disclaimer when she was asked whether or not her stories should be read as autobiographical: they are true, but not necessarily real, she replied.

To see *The Elizabeth Stories* as representative of the period in which Elizabeth grows up is both essential to an understanding of Huggan's strategy, and problematic. Sidonie Smith observes that women writers of memoirs might better be called "unrepresentative":

> What precisely would it signify for a woman's life and her narrative to be "representative" of a period? Very few women achieved the status of "eminent person"; and those who have done so have more commonly been labelled "exceptional" rather than "representative" women. (8)

One critic calls the personal memoir which many women write a "strange hybridization of the autobiographical genre" which is "seeking an intimacy with history that will give public meaning to

personal identity" (Hart 209). But there is another reason why women writing memoirs might not presume to be "representative." Besides needing to draw attention to the social construction of the female self, a woman may be attracted to retrospective writing because it allows her to live in a world of "others" who, as they come together in her memory, become significant in the articulation of her "self."[3] Many women find it easier to tell their own stories through the lives of their "significant others"; not only do women's accounts acknowledge the "real presence and recognition of another consciousness," but also, the "disclosure of female self is linked to this 'other'" (Mason 210). Because of her "doubled subjectivity," the female writer can be both narrator and protagonist of her story, but both participate in the process of narration through the link to this "other" (Smith 17).

This seems particularly true of one of Huggan's stories, called "Sawdust." In the town named Garten, with its harsh Anglo-Germanic puritanism and denial of the flesh, Elizabeth Kessler somehow manages to discover her own sensuality at a very young age. In dream-like reminiscences, she describes how she and her five-year-old companion Rudy Shantz climb into an abandoned bread wagon for secret explorations of each other's bodies, lying on the yeast-smelling shelves in the dark. Five years later, in an attempt to recreate this closeness, Elizabeth and Rudy are discovered on the floor of the butcher shop by Rudy's father, the local butcher. Elizabeth's father seeks vengeance when, in his capacity as bank manager, he denies Mr. Shantz a loan to expand the butcher shop, effectively bankrupting him and driving his family from the town. The IGA takes over the butcher shop, which is made into a "real supermarket" (32)—real by community standards of "improved" and culturally homogeneous—effectively eliminating the foreign element represented by the Shantzes. (Rudy's exotic allure is epitomized by the tantalizing taste of spicy sausage, disparaged by Elizabeth's non-garlic-consuming family.) The story is significant because it focuses on the gendered learning of sex roles, on social and literary authority, and on the

necessary deployment of female secretiveness in a dualistic, puritanical environment.

Like Elizabeth Kessler, Isabel Huggan must defy convention and establish the discursive authority to interpret her "self" within the confines of a patriarchal culture. Take the opening sentence: "I've had warm, tingling feelings between my legs for as long as I can remember." The emphasis is upon telling the truth, on feeling, on sexual assertiveness, on female pleasure, and on memory. It is a courageous statement—hardly the manner in which a "good girl" (as Elizabeth's mother urges her to be), let alone a "respectable lady writer" introduces us to her past! While we must remember that this is the adult woman provacatively shaping and interpreting her past as a child, the sentence is still remarkable for its insistence upon awareness of sexual difference. Yet it is also rife with contradiction: we learn later that Elizabeth is dishonest about her sexuality, resorting to learned female passivity when it is to her advantage to manipulate the truth. In this, Huggan is much like Elizabeth's grandmother, who is conscripted by the parents to chastize Elizabeth for playing with herself in the way that the guileless child demonstrates to her grandmother by rubbing the teddy bear's crotch: Elizabeth's grandmother coyly passes around the box of chocolates, while reserving the soft centres for herself. The reader can be forgiven for thinking, as Elizabeth does, that the hard centres at the core of things are a "shock and a cheat." The ways in which Elizabeth's opening statement of literary authority relate to her sexuality as it is present (or absent) in this story reveal as much about Elizabeth's survival strategy as they do about Huggan's narrative strategy. Consider the same story told from Rudy's perspective; as one of the "others," he might reveal Elizabeth's calculated retrospection as a lie, as distorted memory.

If Rudy were telling the story, he would reveal that he and Elizabeth had enjoyed their childhood game of "greeting," their euphemism for mutual masturbation. When, several years later, he invites her to help him clean up his father's butcher shop after school, he might interpret her willingness as consent to continue "greeting." When the two children are caught *in flagrante* on the floor of the butcher shop, Rudy would probably assume that his

chagrin and guilt were shared by his partner. No doubt it is a shock to him to find that Elizabeth blames him, but then she feels he has betrayed her, something which Rudy might not concede. The incident has serious repercussions, its significance magnified by the parents' racism, sexism, and snobbery; not only is the children's friendship shattered, but everyone's lives are permanently scarred, as Elizabeth notes:

> And so my father was successful and in time the town closed over the space where the Shantzes had been, and they were forgotten. But not by me. I still find Rudy in my thoughts from time to time and wonder if I am ever in his. (32)

When she looks him up in Winnipeg many years later, the voice on the other end tells her that she has reached the wrong number. Possibly Rudy does not remember, does not want to remember, his humiliation. But the "space" which Elizabeth recalls is of her creation, preserved by her selective memory, analyzed from varying perspectives. To remember is to understand the formation of sexual identity, to see how feelings were shaped at an early stage. A woman's space does not close over; it is often ripped apart.

The ten-year-old Elizabeth's recollection is different from Rudy's. Rudy is no longer an equal, for he has power over her, and their games are tinged with cruelty:

> There was an urgency to his squirming on top of me that had never been part of the game before. I felt the first shreddings of female dread, the coming apart of the dream.
>
> "Don't greet so hard," I whispered, and tried to push him away a little bit. All the warm feelings I'd been having were dissipated with the discomfort of being pressed down so heavily. But he wouldn't stop, he kept moving rhythmically of top of me, saying, "Shut up, Elizabeth, shut up." (24-5)

The girl's desire for intimacy is destroyed by the boy's new aggression, and the friendliness of "greeting" has dwindled into mere lust. As Elizabeth feels betrayed by Rudy, she now betrays

him, in the way she has learned is the only socially acceptable recourse for women: she feigns passivity, victimization. She has learned that female bodies are subject to male control—a theme repeated in another story where her cousin Gracie is born brain-damaged because the doctor did not allow Gracie's mother to push at will during childbirth. When Elizabeth is confronted by her angry parents, she instinctively lies to protect herself, having learned "how I could possibly turn the events to my advantage" (26):

> I knew then that I was as guilty as Rudy, and as frightened, but that somehow I was safer than he was. I was safer because I was the girl, because he was the boy and had been on top. (25)

She must comply with the powers that be, which state, in her mother's words, that "[g]ood girls don't get themselves in situations like that" (27). Internalizing such double messages, Elizabeth realizes that she must resort to duplicity and secretiveness to survive, as her mother has always done—she refers to "my mother's private life to which I only had secret access—rifling through her bureau drawers or eavesdropping on telephone conversations" (45). Elizabeth helps her cousin Gracie to construct what she calls "our secret path" through the woods to avoid the others' persecution and humiliation. The subterranean world of women is dense with secrets; it is ripe with images of fertility and darkness, with womb-like enclosures like bread wagons, closets and forests, and with the smells of yeast and ironing boards. This interior female realm contrasts starkly with the harsh, cold "outside" world of men and Garten society. Like her mother before her, who longs to identify with her flamboyant friend Eadie, Elizabeth learns that she is subject to her father's rules of propriety. Femininity is a game which Elizabeth wryly compares to poker: as Eadie teaches her, a girl merely needs to bluff, to keep a straight face, to lead a double life.[4] Escape is rare, like "[t]he wild card that meant I now had the means of escape" (55). Sometimes Elizabeth sympathizes with her mother; at other moments, "I hated her with all my heart" (70). Both women long

to escape Garten: "she and I united immediately in an odd sort of partnership against my father" (121). Identification with women is dangerous, and Elizabeth fears being victimized like her retarded cousin Gracie or the simpering diabetic scapegoat Celia. These are justifiable fears; she might end up like her basketball coach's wife, physically battered and socially ostracized. And yet she fantasizes being the object of such a man's affections, only to be shocked into reality when she learns that his child is born deformed because he kicked his pregnant wife. The formation of female identity is thus fraught with conflicting views of the female self, with ambivalence and humiliation; there is rarely any clear separation of self from the "other," consistent with the pattern of most women's stories (Chodorow; Gilligan; Gardiner; Christ). The distinction between the private secret world and the public world is blurred, and the boundaries between fantasy and reality widen as Elizabeth is exposed to continual betrayal. Huggan's initial sentence, with its promise of openness, is likewise a betrayal to the reader, for the rest of the story focuses on deception and secretiveness—the hard core beneath the chocolate. While both Huggan and her protagonist would set themselves apart from the puritanism embodied in Elizabeth's stern grandmother, both are trapped by its discourse, and they can only respond by confronting its otherness.

Shifting the critical emphasis from product to process, as the postmodernist approach to self-reflexivity has done, allows us to understand the process by which women's self-identities and memories are shaped. This is a long way from autobiographical criticism which centred on historically verifiable "truth,"[5] or from psychological treatments which sought to delineate the creative growth of the artist or the heroic quest for identity.[6] Isabel Huggan does not offer us a complete picture of Elizabeth, nor of ourselves as women, but gives us a confirmation of otherness, of plurality, a glimpse into the process of becoming women, and, above all, a refusal to remain silent about female conditioning. Huggan's stories defy Cartesian categorization of thought and separation of mind/body, love/hate, good/evil, or self/other. The subversiveness of this narrative technique is summed up by

another Canadian protagonist, Margaret Atwood's Of/fred in *The Handmaid's Tale*:

> By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story, I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (215)

NOTES

[1] Two recent critics have challenged the boundary between fiction and autobiography in the work of Alice Munro, for example. See Margaret Gail Osachoff, "'Treacheries of the Heart': Memoir, Confession, and Meditation in the Stories of Alice Munro," in *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*. Ed. Louis K. MacKendrick (Toronto: ECW, 1983) 61-82; and Lorna Irvine, *Sub/Version* (Toronto: ECW, 1986).

[2] Here I am thinking of Philip Lejeune's definition of autobiography as a creation, a self-reflexive fiction with an implied reader, which he refers to as a "mode of reading" rather than a "mode of writing."

[3] This is the common purpose of many female autobiographers, according to recent autobiographical theorists Marcus F. Billson and Sidonie A. Smith, who discuss Lillian Hellman in this context in "Lillian Hellman and Strategy of the 'Other,'" in *Women's Autobiographies: Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Estelle Jelenik (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1980) 163.

[4] Robin Lakoff documents women's use of two languages to be functionally literate in patriarchal society in *Language and Women's Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

[5] This was what Wilhelm Dilthey sought when he called for a writing of history grounded in autobiographical documentation.

[6] Critics such as Wayne Shumaker, Margaret Bottrell, Paul Delaney, and Francis R. Hart emphasized the problematics of epistemology in autobiography and set the standard for a generation of critics.

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