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An Analysis of the Pattern and Purpose of Allusion in *By Grand Central Station I sat Down and Wept*

Even the most perfunctory examination of the Classical and Biblical allusions in Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station* must surely reveal one clear and prevalent pattern: the narrator's desire to elevate the personal to the level of the universal. In simple terms, a desire to bolster and aggrandise her love and circumstance by linkage to great love and great circumstance of our Western cultural heritage. This generalisation, however, smacks of egocentricity and narcissism, for it touches only the surface and overlooks the subtle textures of specific meaning. By examining a selection of allusions in some detail, we shall discover a natural division between Biblical and Classical allusions and that their combined effect is not merely aggrandisement, but to demonstrate the narrator's significantly altered view and place in the universe as created through love.

Certainly the first Biblical allusion we encounter is the title itself--indicating immediately the vital role of intertextuality in *By Grand Central Station*. The transformation of the initial line of "Psalm 137" is perhaps the most complex Biblical allusions in the whole book. The original text: "By the

waters of Babylon,/there we sat down and wept,/when we remember Zion," seems at first a simple lamentation born of the Jewish exile in Babylon. Biblical Babylon, however, presents a certain duality: positively as the setting of the potentially creative Diaspora; negatively as a metaphor for degeneracy. Equating the romance of *By Grand Central Station* with the Jewish exile in Babylon seems then entirely appropriate: the two lovers are essentially exiled from society--realised dramatically in the Californian border scene, where the dull officer personifies the hypocritical Puritanism of America, as well as in the subsequent and unfortunate homecoming of the narrator. The potential for creativity in exile is actualised by the narrator, both implicitly by our reading and by the nature of allusion itself--which relies upon literary tradition, and more explicitly in several self-reflexive passages which draw attention to the written word. The negativity of Babylon is also realised in the "immorality" of the affair--though the authority of this judgement is clearly negated by the narrator's new and developing interpretation of morality. If we follow the parallel to its conclusion, however, we begin to see the complex nature of the Babylonian allusion, for one question begs resolution: what is the analogous referential to Zion? Certainly, *By Grand Central Station* speaks of exile through love in a somewhat prosperous and foreign land--foreign to love that is--but the narrator finds herself exiled in an entirely different respect: exiled, in the name of pity, from her love by her lover, and it is from this perspective that Zion takes on the meaning of the

love affair itself. The Babylonian allusion of "Psalm 137" therefore functions in two entirely different ways which are essentially contradictory: in the former it is the love affair which provides the sense of exile, in the latter the love affair is the homeland. This is not so much the weakness of allusion as its nature: conjuring up notions which function not as strict analogy, but as suggestive correlations. The Babylonian allusion of the title essentially provides a framework by which the novel must be read, introducing the metaleptical quality of its allusions. But, more specifically, at least in terms of this paper, it suggests a relationship between the religious experience and the experience of love. As we shall see, this relationship is gradually clarified to reveal an actual marriage of religion and love, where love is no longer simply secular, and religion not solely of the spirit.

The pervading theme of the first two parts is pity and guilt--both relative to the lover's wife. She is imagined in religious terms which draws attention to the corporal: "Her shoulders have always the attitude of grieving, and her thin breasts are pitiful like Virgin Shrines that have been robbed." (25) This is perhaps the first religious allusion that demands the presence of the physical, stripped naked like the slashing of a double underline. Shortly, this physical realm is broadened, becoming nature: "Absolve me, I prayed, up through the cathedral redwoods." (Notably, the nature imagery in these sections is mostly all hostile: ". . . the lowest vines conspire to abet my plot, and the poison oak thrusts its insinuations under my

foot.")(22) The association of the physical--sexual--religious and natural realms is soon consummated with the classical allusion: "Jupiter has been with Leda . . ." suggesting the bestial encounter with Jupiter transformed into the form of a Swan. Returning though to our present Christian focus, the schism of body and spirit is quickly and sharply defined.

To deny love, and deceive it meanly by pretending that what is unconsummated remains eternal, or that love sublimated reaches highest to heavenly love, is repulsive, as the hypocrite's face is replaced when placed too near truth.(28)

Besides the sheer breathtaking poetry, this is a scathing reproof both of the literary tradition of courtly love and the immaculate conception of puritanical sanctimony that saw its birth. Indeed, we might see the guilt of these opening sections as the age old beating stick of Puritanism. Notable, part three sees the beginning of a shifting point of view regarding religion. The concluding line of part one: "There is nothing to do but crouch and receive God's wrath,"(30) is never actually realised, for the face and character of God begins to alter.

Clearly, we are beginning to realise, largely through Biblical allusion and imagery, that orthodox religion appears an entirely alien concept when viewed through the eyes of unorthodox and dare we say "pure" love. When the narrator informs us that "Jesus Christ walks the waters of another planet, bleeding only history from his old wounds," (35) the suggestion seems clear: religion has robbed the godliness from religion, reducing it to

the merely "histrionic" historical.

There is a new Genesis. There is a moment beneath a waterfall when love spirit meets love physical and the guilt is finally washed away. Throughout *By Grand Central Station*, water is the symbol of power, and part three--a section of metamorphosis--begins with "the water of love that floods everything over." (41) Appropriately, when the narrator is abandoned, the water of love flows on and she becomes its victim: "But the sea that floods is love, and it gushes out of me like an arterial wound. I am drowning in it." (118) Soon after the "aquarian" Genesis though, to return to more promising times, the nature imagery becomes benevolent and is firmly bound to the concept of God.

When we lie near the swimming pool in the sun, he comes through the bamboo bushes like land emerging from chaos. But I am the land, and he is the face upon the waters. He is the moon upon the tides, the dew, the rain, all seeds and all honey and love. My bones are crushed like the bamboo-trees. I am the earth the plants grow through. But when they sprout I also will be god. (42)

Besides this more beneficent nature, we see, not only in the above quotation but repeatedly elsewhere, a new Trinity of the Individual, Nature and God.

Without doubt the most striking and potent Biblical allusion comes in part four with "The Song of Songs."

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 and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies).(51)

The counterpointal rhythm and melody of police interrogation and Biblical interpolation provides welcomed comic relief, but also the penultimate expression of the gulf separating the narrator from the "real" world.

It is an episode of blacker than black humour. "The Song of Songs" is perhaps the most problematical section of the old and new testament, yet is entirely appropriate to *By Grand Central Station*. Interestingly, "The Song of Songs", contains an impressive number of metaphors from the realms of flora, fauna and animal, wrapped up in vivid imagery, reminiscent of the nature imagery in *By Grand Central Station*. As well as this, the particularly un-Biblical expression "my darling" appears repeatedly, just as it does in sense if not in sentence in *By Grand Central Station*. And this, according to the Oxford Companion to Christianity, occurs nowhere else in the Bible. The Song of Solomon, as it is otherwise known, has been variously interpreted as an allegorical account of the Lords love of Israel, with the man representing God and the woman Israel; Christ's love for the church; but more sensibly as a collection of love lyrics celebrating human love. This final reading, though certainly more honest, nevertheless places "The Song of Songs" in a kind of limbo, outside religion. Indeed, nowhere in the Song of Solomon is religion, in the name of God, ever mentioned. But religion, in the name of God, is mention in *By Grand Central Station*: ". . . and the girl's a religious

maniac,"(53) mentions the inspector. The "Song of Solomon" shows another similarity with *By Grand Central Station*: there is a portrayal of the universal presence of love. Notably, for the first and only time, this particular allusion surpasses allusion and becomes veritable quotation, just as the conceit might upstage the lowly simile. It is the poetic conclusion that the subordination--if we might express it so generously--of the physical to the spiritual is no less than a defilement, a blasphemy.

Tracing the Biblical and religious allusions and following their development, the pattern we discern is an almost sacrilegious interpretation of Christianity. Within the context of this new interpretation, "the Word that Was in the Beginning"(44) is no longer the Greek *Logos*, tied to wisdom in Hellenistic Jewish thought, but is a reinterpretation of the gospel according to John, becoming not simply a self communicating and divine presence in God but the expression of love in God: the Word that Was in the Beginning is become love.¹ The movement we find is a fundamentalist movement: a movement not so much out of Christianity towards the East, where a unity with cyclical nature is central to "belief," but backwards towards a more archaic Christianity when paganism still held its place; when St. Augustine was nothing more than a perhaps some day; when the flesh was still something fresh and wholesome; when love was both spiritual and sexual. Love then, for the

¹Poetic license is here applied.

narrator, becomes the means of interpreting religion, of reading religion, but also of *writing* religion: where the ten parts of the novel become ten stations leading to comprehension; where the age old division of body and spirit is abandoned in the name of unification; where love becomes the power of creation and all the world is created in the image of love. The Word is a new word for a newly spelled religion.

Turning now from the Biblical to the Classical. When lovers first meet to the shaking sound of an earthquake, that earthquake, though coincidental to the uninvolved, becomes an essential aspect to their love: it was the sound of their souls colliding. Notions such as this lead all great lovers into a sense of being part of something larger than themselves with a new place and new importance in the general scheme of things. This is certainly the case with the narrator of *By Grand Central Station*. When love reaches particular intensity, the damn bursts and it floods and spills into everything else; the flood is too large for subjection by the subjective and must surely be part not of one or two but of all. This new place and new importance is one of the central ideas conveyed through the literary and classical allusions.

One of the earliest literary references appears during the early guilt stage of the novel.

Like Macbeth, I keep remembering that I am their host. So it is tomorrow's breakfast rather than the future's blood that dictates fatal forbearance.(18)

Firstly, this introduces the theme of betrayal, recalling the arrival of Duncan at Macbeth's castle and the regicidal plot. The betrayal in *By Grand Central Station* is twofold, beginning with the wife and concluding with the narrator herself. More importantly, in another example of the book's metaleptical tendency, the theme of betrayal presented in this reference provides a link with another brief though vital allusion: "By the pacific I wander like Dido, hearing such a passion of tears in the breaking waves . . ." (108) Again we have the water motif, and now the betrayal has shifted. This is one of several allusions to *The Aeneid*; indeed, Virgil's penmanship, love of nature, supreme pathos and extensive use of myth reminds us greatly of Smart. Certainly the most important and complex theme in *The Aeneid* is that of Fate, which is presented as two quite different characters: the first of the two Fates is singular and predominantly universal; the second, pluralistic and aligned more closely to the individual. This might be clarified as the destiny of a nation, or even of a world, within which individual Fates of men are contained. The two are depicted as being of quite different constitutions. In *By Grand Central Station* the sense of oneness with creation, which we have already noted and which is implicit in the anonymity of both lovers, means that this distinction no longer exists. In *The Aeneid*, it is the connection between Aeneas' personal Fate and the Universal Fate, as defined by his role as founder of a nation, that forces him to leave Dido and forces her to suicide. In *By Grand Central Station*, however, it is pity that leads to the narrator's own

abandonment. The allusion therefore serves to suggest that the personal Fate of the narrator is bound to universal Fate: that it was somehow fixed from the outside and can not be avoided. As well as this, the delicate treatment Virgil grants Dido further heightens the sense of pathos in this concluding section of *By Grand Central Station*. Another allusion to *The Aeneid* occurs as part of the homecoming. "Then there is my aunt, like a harpy of relentlessness, fighting to get all women into uniform."²(71) Virgil makes specific use of the Harpies: Aeneas and his fellows have more or less settled into an island life of comfort, and it is the appearance of the Harpies that remind the band that their destiny has not yet been fulfilled, that Fate will allow them to rest no more. The aunt then has one destiny in mind, unaware of the destiny her niece truly must meet.

The notion of pre-destiny begins as early as Part One, and is essentially tied to two notions: the first is the belief that great love is more than the sum of its parts. "I stand on the edge of a cliff, but the future is already done. It is written."⁽²³⁾ This passage, providing another Biblical allusion and connecting the written word with pre-destiny, also reveals the second and equally important source of fatalism: helplessness. Caught in the flood of love, she is washed away like so much "flotsam." Greatness of feeling and an appalling

²Certainly Virgil is not alone in featuring Harpies, though the militaristic diction, other references to Virgil, and the implicit meaning certainly points to *The Aeneid*.

sense of helplessness are the two principles leading to the narrator's fatalism and greatly influence her choice of classical allusion. This fatalism is often coloured with despondency:

He kissed my forehead . . . and now, wherever I go, like the sword of Damocles, the greater never-to-be-given kiss hangs above my doomed head.(23)

Even allusions whose primary reason d'être is other than a continuation of the Fate pattern, often incorporate this idea as secondary meaning. Such is the case with the phoenix:

But faint as hope, and definite as death, my possible phoenix of love is as bright as a totem pole, in the morning, on the sky, breathing like a workman setting out on a job.(38)

This is a particularly impressive passage for it achieves a multiple of goals: the name "Phoenix"--fabulous bird of Arabian mythology, understood to set itself ablaze and rise from the ashes every five hundred years--actually means blood-red. Like water, blood is a recurring symbol in *By Grand Central Station*. Blood though is decidedly more ambiguous, as exemplified in the Macbeth reference, meaning both life and death. This duality is evident in the above, for the lover is both giver and possible taker of life. It is also another example of the same poetic and ironic combining of old and new that we find in the novel's title, serving to draw particular attention to the variance between how things were and are. Besides all this, the five hundred year cycle of the Phoenix suggests once again the

workings of Fate, the turning cogs of the Universal Machine that must turn as they must turn.

One of the clearest instances of mythical allusion expressing fatalism appears at the conclusion of Part Six.

What you think is the sirens singing to lure you
to your doom is only the voice of the inevitable,
welcoming you after so long a wait.(77)

Sirens, of course, are the bird-women who lured sailors to their death. When ships appeared, they sang so sweetly the sailors lost all semblance of free will--the antithetical principle of Fatalism--and abandoned themselves on the Siren's island where they wasted away. Here then we find Fate, described as "inevitability" tied to the idea of vanquished free-will. These then are another expression of the two principles already identified as being vital to the narrator's choice of classical allusion: greatness of feeling and an appalling sense of helplessness.

Classical allusion places the two nameless lovers in the eternal company of giants. The act of creation, of writing, means the continued effects of Fate, and places this great love in the universal stream of our cultural heritage where it might bobble about as Fate would have it.

We have moved inwards greatly from that general pattern of aggrandisement through allusion, mentioned in the introduction, narrowing our vision greatly--and at some cost to a more balanced analysis--yet in hopes of discovering precisely some of

the mechanics of that aggrandisement. Just as Biblical and religious allusions are a natural extension of the multitudinous qualities of love, so too the classical and literary references appear as an entirely unaffected device. As we supplicate assistance from the spirit of oversimplification, we note that Biblical allusion in *By Grand Central Station* essentially provides, through love, a new view of the universe. The pattern we discern in Classical and Literary allusions, alternately, provides the sense of a new place and role in that universe.

Works Cited

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