



I Am Love

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The very first things I wrote were something like journal entries, except there was no journal. It didn't occur to me that these impressions and imaginings might be organised one after the other in a notebook specifically for that purpose. I wrote on loose sheets of paper my father brought home in blocks from work, and in the back pages of school exercise books, which is where my English teacher discovered one of my first stories. It was a very small story, about a girl who is sewing her sisters' broken dresses by candlelight in a lower room—a cellar probably, or even a dungeon perhaps, since the walls are very thick and bare and the floor is stone and the window is tiny and square. I didn't describe the room at all in the original story, but now that I am recalling it, I am reacquainted effortlessly with the definite image that was in my mind as I wrote it. I offered few details about the girl's immediate surroundings because her predicament is straight out of a fairy tale of course, and most people would already be familiar with the kinds of settings these conventional scenarios typically make use of. In any case, my starting point wasn't the room or the girl, or even her grim situation, it was the cotton thread she moved with the aid of a sharp needle back and forth through the severed cloth of her sisters' dresses.

I had been doodling, with a green biro, in the back of my exercise book—you would never use a green pen for things at the front of the exercise book, it wasn't permissible. I was drawing the face of the man I was curious about, a curiosity that was both vague and intense, and naturally I





began with his eyes. I am consistently useless at drawing but this exercise wasn't about verisimilitude it was about feeling close to this man so I kept going with it even though—even though—I could see I was making a real pig's ear of it. It all went irretrievably haywire when I came to the hair, which frequently happens, I believe. Do you render it as a single mass with just one undulating outline, or as an infinitude of single strands with lots and lots of quick little dashes? Clearly if you're besotted with your subject you'll want to spend as much time as you can on this, as such a microscopic approach would seem to offer more in the way of gratification. One hair at a time. Biro's aren't great for this task, the feeling's all wrong—the feeling's connected to maths and the chip in the ruler—and I soon lost all connection with what I was doing and became distraught and got manic with the pen and very quickly the whole thing was a tight frenzied bundle of steel wool. My vexed little fist relaxed soon enough, but I could not relinquish the pen.

With the nib on the page I let the line trail and meander for a while, and then it tapered off. Just like a stray length of cotton thread, that's how it seemed to me. I could almost feel its frayed tail between my teeth. I was not happy with this so I continued drifting the line onwards disinterestedly and somewhere along the way a shift occurred, from rendering to expressing, as the thread did a few exuberant loops then broke up into words. And the words set forth the story of a girl who sews the broken dresses of her sisters by candlelight, so diligently and for so long that her fingers become alarmingly thin and flimsy, just like the cotton





thread itself, in fact. The needle drops to the flagstones and disappears into the gloom and the girl realises she cannot take hold of a single thing now, nothing at all. The girl's fingers cascade into growing lengths of thread that flail around the room with the electric energy of a lasso until at last they whip the flame of the candle and are instantly set alight. The fire sprints up the girl's arms and blazes across her chest and whole body and she leaps splendidly into a nearby basket where the clothes she has mended for her sisters are folded neatly, and together they burn in a bright disc of white fire which collapses softly to a pale heap of softest ash.

On the one hand, yes, it sounds like a rehashed folk tale, yet when I wrote it, during an afternoon English lesson, fairy tales were the last thing on my mind. I was sitting at a table with three other girls and I went along with the things they liked to talk about but I felt no affinity to them whatsoever and I suppose they knew this or sensed it: I was taken up with something else completely. There was a man I couldn't stop thinking about and I remember that thinking about him made me feel like I was burning, really burning. It was a disturbing and precious sensation. The man who was a part of almost everything that went on in my mind, even while I was sleeping, was of course the same man who discovered, in the back pages of my exercise book, one of the first things I ever wrote.

There has been a succession of journals and notebooks, with many unsent letters among them. None of them can ever be got rid of, not by me, not deliberately, yet sometimes





these things are difficult to pull out and read. Difficult in the sense that occasionally there are pages, one after the other, which are quite incomprehensible, as if, at the time of writing, I'd lost my grip on things and my senses were in disarray, and going over these pieces can sometimes upset me. Sometimes it seems as if my vision of things was nightmarish and I think I must have been quite distressed. Then, occasionally, there will be something spontaneous and crystalline, and that sears me also, for quite another reason, and I wonder if perhaps I was a better writer then, when I didn't have much of a grip on the world, before I had any ideas about being a writer.

Deborah Levy puts sticky labels on the cover of her notebooks so she has an idea of what's inside them. This is a good system but I don't suppose I'll ever get around to doing it myself and even if I were to, I'd probably find whatever tag words I'd come up with were cryptic and the opposite of helpful. Recently I vacated the cottage I'd been living in for the last four years and since there was nowhere particular for me to go, I put all my things into a storage facility and came to France. Since I am paying by the cubic metre I wanted my things to occupy as little space as possible, so I got rid of several sacks of clothes, half of my books, and I took my CDs out of their cases and slid each one of them into the pockets of a zip-up folder. I hadn't yet made a start on this piece but I'd come up with the proposal for it so I had some idea of what it would involve and I packed my suitcase with clothes and so on and the books I'd be referring to in the essay, this essay.

The thought of writing something of an essayistic





nature without having access to my full catalogue of books and notebooks made me uneasy—selecting which reading material to bring with me was fairly straightforward but predicting which notebooks would come in handy was much less obvious. One notebook is an unattractive A4 exercise book actually, quite unlike all the others, which are mostly leather-bound, and the reason I bought it five or so years ago was because I was undertaking French classes and needed big, lined, pages to write down all the grammar I would fail to absorb week after week. Naturally this notebook was packed into my suitcase and it has proved very useful, though not in the way I'd thought it would be—I haven't spent much time at all studying the verb tables set out in the front pages. However, when I flipped it over, turned it upside down, and began reading from the back, I discovered quite a different notebook with some interesting items here and there, which I may or may not mention in due course.

Everything I write begins in a notebook and is nearly always written with a Parker pen in blue black ink. This is in black however, for the reason that when I went to get new cartridges in the stationery shop here I saw that everything to do with fountain pens was arranged in small cupboards behind a glass counter, and since I was focused very much on remembering and pronouncing the word *cartouche* correctly I thought I'd keep everything else simple. As I said, it all starts out here, and whenever I'm writing I do not know immediately whether what I write is a private meditation or a creative exploration that will eventually be shared with others. The relationship between my personal notes and





the stories that end up on the printed page is a slippery one, and it has taken an awfully long time to negotiate satisfactorily the transition from one to the other, so that vivid yet obscure elements of the former are preserved while at the same time the ensuing story is communicative and gratifying. In *Out of Sheer Rage*, Geoff Dyer admits to preferring the notebooks and letters of D.H. Lawrence to his novels, and the reasons he gives are mostly to do with the unmediated expressiveness of personal writings which emit a bracing immediacy and bring the reader into direct contact with an extraordinary range of rich and complex experiential modes. It is as if the act of writing is a medium through which sensation and experience is processed, deconstructed, reimagined. There is no obligation, in one's journals, to build towards an enduring subject or to remain steadfast to a cogent theme, one's perspective is free to fluctuate, obsess, deviate, and contradict itself—at the same time it seldom acquires the flowing quality that we associate with a stream of consciousness—arguably there is often a practical element in our notes, so that reading through them is to witness the mind in action.

Along with Dyer, I too lament the move towards fixity which the transition from notes to prose seems to entail, since it belies the ambiguity that is such an integral part of what we perceive. Recently I said to someone I really don't enjoy accomplished writing, which he took to mean I like rubbish writing—that is not what I meant. What I was referring to was writing where everything is interpreted and defined to the same degree so that a homogeneous index of reality is set forth and upheld. I have a fancy for a rather





more dappled conflation of vagueness and exactitude, flippancy and earnestness, aplomb and disquietude, scintilla and shadow. Once an image becomes definite and persuasive it settles like a patio slab and no longer reverberates with intimations and possibilities which attest to the shifting planes of memory, imagination, here and elsewhere. 'One gets so weary,' says Dyer, 'watching authors' sensations and thoughts get novelised, set into the concrete of fiction, that perhaps it is best to avoid the novel as a medium of expression.' Indeed, Lawrence himself was aware of the particular ontological constraints exercised by the form; in a letter to friend and editor Edward Garnett he advises that, 'You mustn't look in my novel for that old stable ego of character...the ordinary novel would trace the history of the diamond—but I say 'diamond, what! This is carbon.' ...You must not say my novel is shaky—it is not perfect, because I am not an expert in what I want to do'. Indeed the dusky, unrefined, properties of coal are more in line with Lawrence's earthy, inconsistent and uncommonly tactile handling of human behaviour than the limpid poise and finesse of a sharp-edged diamond. It would seem that Lawrence wanted to remain close to something organic and possibly rough-hewn because he recognised that style is as much an ethical issue as it is an aesthetic one.

I cannot comment upon whether or not Lawrence's letters and notebooks are more compelling than his novels because I have only ever read his fiction, though I did read a couple of his essays in a pub lounge in Marlborough many years ago, and they were veering, eccentric and occasionally quite brilliant. I can, though, contribute some thoughts on



the subject of journals and novels having recently read, first of all, Elizabeth Smart's book *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, and then the first volume of her collected journals, *Necessary Secrets*.

By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept is an ornate, implicating, testament of Elizabeth Smart's love affair with the English poet George Barker. It is often described as a prose poem and, although generally I'm uncomfortable with that phrase, in this case it is quite apt. The novella is composed of ten short sections and each has a sense of having always existed. This may in part be due to the many allusions throughout to Catholicism, and the pagan and Greek mythologies. The experience of reading it is not unlike wandering into one of those small baroque chapels in Santa Croce on an exceedingly hot afternoon and standing a short time in the exquisite gloom with one's eyes in a lull while the whole of one's skin is impressed upon with beads and frames and wax and white cloth and condemned fingertips. It shakes you but you are steady, as if not entirely there anyway. Then someone opens a door off to the left, comes into the chapel, perhaps holding something, and leaves the door open. Your eyes peer round the door frame and balance upon some teacups upside down on a tea-towel, just below a window, and there are leaves—leaves, and flowers and vines, right there against the windowpane. The person who came out of the door is coming back and her hands are empty and she looks up the aisle at you, the lone woman standing in the aisle of a chapel, and it is a look that has always existed and goes on and on; it is intimate but



not personal. Sometimes you are not in the mood for this. Sometimes *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* is the wrong book to be in. Sometimes the sinuous metaphors of suffering, martyrdom, and ecstasy appear dated and gaudy and make you cringe. You might not be in the mood for it—and I wasn't the second time I read it—but you would have some difficulty trying to deny it.

What the novella doesn't mention is how the affair began. It matters not, as anyone who has read either Elizabeth Smart or George Barker will more than likely know about the controversial circumstances that precipitated it—and if they haven't their ignorance will soon be alleviated. A brief account of how Barker came into Smart's life is provided in the biographical note on the very first page of the book, and goes as follows: 'One day, while browsing in a London bookshop, she chanced upon a slim volume of poetry by George Barker—and fell passionately in love with him through the printed word. Eventually they communicated directly and, as a result of impecunious circumstances, Elizabeth Smart flew both him and his wife to the United States. Thus began one of the most extraordinary, intense and ultimately tragic love affairs of our time...their relationship provided the impassioned inspiration for one of the most moving and immediate chronicles of a love affair ever written—*By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*.' It sounds so straightforward, and I've often tried to put myself in her boots. I've often, briefly, imagined standing in a narrow dim passageway in a London bookshop holding a slim volume of poetry in my left hand, reading. Reading. Going along. Going along the lines. Turning the pages.



Beginning again. Starting from the top again. My right hand spreading out along my collarbone. Going along, again. And then...*falling in love through the printed word*. But *where*? Where exactly? That word there? Or was it after perhaps? Later, when the words, all the words, had sunk in? Or was it that Barker's poems coincided with an already ripened heart and provided it with a much needed pole star? But what sort of heart is taken like this? The affair itself no longer captivated me, and the idea that the novel it produced is a raw and revelatory offering, an impassioned cry, failed to take hold. I began to sense that beneath the agony and the ecstasy was something quite deliberate, something decisive—not a raw defenceless heart, but a cultivated and focused one—and I very much wanted to know and understand what had gone into the making of it.

And so, I ordered the two volumes of Smart's collected journals.

And, naturally, the second volume turned up first.

The second volume has turned up first, I texted my friend, do you think it's OK to go ahead and read bits?

Sure, he said. Or something like that. But I didn't read it, any of it. I didn't want the after, or even the during; I wanted the before.

The journals begin in 1933 when Smart is nineteen and hasn't yet figured out what she's going to do with herself. The first entry is written from London where Smart is studying music quite seriously, even so, it's clear she's not enraptured with the subject sufficiently to dedicate herself to it in the way that is necessary. What follows is a kaleidoscopic catalogue of Smart's attempts to find a foothold in the world, a quest that



is recurrently derailed by the rather less pragmatic impulse to maintain and nurture a state of oneness with all things. Among the descriptive and peopled passages are tentative glints of an almost metaphysical connection with the natural world: 'The edge of the water was still, still and glassy but just then the middle of the pond ruffled and crinkled, a faint swell came over the water and two small drops fell into it. The light was so lovely and the queer colours reflected in the water and the pregnant mysterious feeling so intense that I sat on a seat and watched. There was a real sense of water—water—the real and intimate thing.' It's an experiential mode that is romantic, even sometimes esoteric, yet Smart's meditations rarely come across as affected or contrived and, on the basis of their freshness and propinquity, one willingly accepts it when she claims, 'I cannot enjoy anything unless I can be a part of it. Harmonize... The whole beauty, the whole of life—the whole point of a place is lost if I have to walk through it in high-heeled clob-hob shoes... No use. No use at all.' What these journals collectively attest to is a profoundly felt dichotomy between the requirement to establish an identity and the compulsion to remain unfixed enough to go on experiencing an affinity with the broader reality, as such the tone and focus of the entries are delightfully fidgety throughout, sometimes flickering with a lithe, rapacious, energy, sometimes squirming with petulant frustration. Whether animated or listless, Smart exhibits what E.M. Forster calls 'a profound vivacity,' a term that doesn't so much denote a passing mood but rather refers to a level of awareness which enables one to formulate 'a continual and sincere response' to everything one encounters.





Indeed, the ability to connect is a prevalent theme in the novels of E.M. Forster, and each can be taken as a warning of the intractable consequences wrought by an ‘undeveloped heart’. The single work of his regrettably small oeuvre which, to my mind, explores this notion most movingly is his third novel *A Room with a View*. In this ruffled story of a young woman who must decide whether to be guided by the force of her own feelings or by the sanctioned ideas of others, we encounter many stilted hearts, and the heroine, Lucy Honeychurch, very much under their influence, creates a series of rather superb muddles in her determination to arrest the commotion that George Emerson has set off in hers. An undeveloped heart, Forster tells us, is ‘not a cold one. The difference is important.’ When at last Lucy releases herself from her engagement to the well-meaning but frequently peevish Cecil Vyse, Forster concludes the scene with a devastating caveat which makes clear that the denunciation of arduous feeling is no light matter, those ‘who follow neither the heart nor the brain, and march to their destiny by catch-words,’ he warns, ‘have sinned against passion and truth, and vain will be their strife after virtue. As the years pass, they are censured...they feel and produce discomfort wherever they go. They have sinned against Eros and against Pallas Athene, and not by any heavenly intervention, but by the ordinary course of nature, those allied deities will be avenged.’ This is all quite serious stuff and one wonders what qualities must we develop in order to acquire the aptitude and the courage to throw caution to the wind and follow our hearts. It is significant that while writing the novel Forster was reading the letters of John





Keats, and here he discovered the poet's notion of negative capability, and it is this philosophical formulation that, arguably, substantiated Forster's instinctive and progressive ideas about love.

Negative capability is a term which describes the intrinsic capacity human beings have to experience the world and its phenomena directly, outside of any predetermined interpretative categories and theoretical frameworks—'There was a real sense of water—water—the real and intimate thing.' It refers to a deeply attuned degree of receptiveness that is attained 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...' It is easy to see why Keats' conception of openness struck a chord with Forster, he also advocates a rebuttal of received ideas in order that we may transcend and revise our contexts, rather than be bound and irrevocably censored by them. Of course, going abroad is a very effective means of being ousted from one's comfort zone. No longer cosseted by our familiar environments and dependable routines, or kept in check by the unvarying treadmill of external expectation, our responses are more likely to be spontaneous and not so habitual—indeed in strange surroundings we might well behave 'out of character'. Much of the comedy in Forster's novel derives from the obstinate determination his characters exert as they endeavour to apply and uphold the cultural mores and moral codes of Victorian England in an Italy that, in Forster's rendering, is expressive, passionate, unhindered. The well-bred guests of the Bertolini head up the hills in a couple of much debated over carriages in order to have a picnic and



‘see a view.’ Naturally, Miss Bartlett, Lucy’s spinster aunt and fretsome chaperone, produces ‘one of those mackintosh squares that protect the frame of the tourist from damp grass or cold marble steps.’ It is an absurd and symbolically incongruous gesture which more or less finishes an already irascible Lucy off. ‘Vanquished by the mackintosh square’ she heads off, in search of the two clergymen, or at least that’s the surface motive she’s managed to convince herself of. In the process of denying her feelings for George Emerson, Lucy is persistently deceiving herself and everyone around her, and with a great deal of success, since, of course, not to love George is the most acceptable course. Needless to say, none of this nonsense, this muddle, is distinguishable to the eyes and heart of an unbridled Italian carriage driver—when Lucy inquires as to the whereabouts of the ‘*dove buoni uomini*’ she is led directly to precisely the man she has been trying so desperately to avoid. ‘Italians’, Forster tells us, ‘are born knowing the way.’ Granted, the depiction of the Italian sensibility seems somewhat aggrandising and overly romantic to a contemporary reader. Even so, the propensity to suppress our desires is hardly a moribund one, and it matters not in what glorious guises the beauty of love is momentarily evoked; the scene among the violets never fails to move me. ‘*Eccolo!*’ exclaims the driver, and at that moment it is as if Lucy Honeychurch has dropped free from one reality into another; ‘the ground gave way, and with a cry she fell out of the wood. Light and beauty enveloped her... ‘*Courage!*’ cried her companion... ‘*Courage and love.*’

In August 1936 Smart is similarly catapulted from one plane of life to another when she accompanies a Mrs



Margaret Rose Watt on a trip around the world. Mrs Watt was involved with the Associated Country Women of the World and Smart joined her as a personal secretary and travelling companion on a tour that took them through Canada, the United States, Hawaii, Fiji, Samoa, New Zealand, Australia, Ceylon and Palestine. However, as exciting and stimulating as the expedition sounds, Smart, rather like Lucy Honeychurch, turns out to be an indifferent and restless cohort to Mrs Watt, to such an insufferable degree in fact that while in Ceylon the typically gentile yet evidently wounded Mrs Watt finally takes her young stead to task. 'My hand is trembling,' Smart writes, 'Mrs Watt has complained of my rudeness, especially lately, which she says she can no longer stand. She has also mentioned my selfishness, and lack of sympathy.' Arguably, in contrast to the source of Lucy's torments, Smart is not unsettled by a heart that isn't big enough or strong enough to support the passion within her; she rather appears to be suffering from the inverse paradox: a heart that is overblown, but which has no focus, no aim, no single desire. 'I am the cat that walks by herself,' she says, by way of defending her self-interest, 'and this experiment in administration, solicitation and the way the world works is manifestly a mistake.' It is quite clear that Smart faces a challenge that has beset and confounded many souls who have experienced an engrossing metaphysical immersion with the cosmos; how to come back down to earth and forge intimate connections and meaningful relations on a human level. The transition to a more embodied and thus localised mode of contact is a poignant, and confused, passage: 'I have just been swimming in the soft, warm, caressing Indian





Ocean...Leslie was with me. He has a short DHL beard and he wore trunks...I never swam in water so warm. I jumped back into the joyful pagan worship of the holy things of earth. It's such a beautiful abandonment. What else can most of us know but that blissful, permeating, all-embracing warmth. I don't know whether or not it is sex.' Compared to her descriptions of the natural world, which are always vivid, even often fervid, Smart's depiction of Leslie seems cursory, almost begrudging. It's as if she rather resents having to mention him at all.

The difficulty isn't lost on Smart. With characteristic self-awareness she identifies the problem and delineates it in terms that are concurrently candid and poetic: 'the body is finite, it is unnecessary and it is a detour, for it fences in, and tries to contain an overwhelming ocean. The body binds, curtails.' Nature had provided Smart with a cherished sense of reality's interconnectedness, it was an understanding that enabled her to feel a 'profound vivacity' to all that she encountered, and it was from within this vaster framework of affinity that her ideas about human relationships took their cue. 'Love is large and permeating and accepting,' she writes, 'like nature.' From this perspective, physical, earthly love, is partial and circumscribed, an impoverished narrowing of the abundant, indiscriminate, 'flow towards everyone' that Smart wishes to maintain. 'Then, if for the sake of form, outward form, finality, I chose one, one who is more to me, whose contact is more complete, from the rest of the world, I still have to pretend, for that one spot could not contain the world.' Smart had already anticipated a solution to this schism: a human form whose lines are





blurred and burning, who is permeable and receptive, a single spot equally immersed in mystery and doubt. 'I must marry a poet. It is the only thing. Why don't I know any?' she writes in 1936, a year before she had any knowledge of George Barker at all.

Smart was by no means a cold fish, however, and she certainly didn't mope about while waiting for her poet to materialise. After her travels with Mrs Watt she embarks upon a number of glamorous affairs in London, France, and Mexico, yet despite the allure of the various men, and woman, she becomes entangled with, the liaisons fall short of her ideal of a 'complete love' and Smart soon becomes jaded and impatient. 'Their poor imitation of my sweet soft happy love repels and saddens with a world of insufficiency,' she writes in Hollywood in the spring of 1940. However, during this period Smart was also in correspondence with George Barker, who she had first contacted while working on *The Ottawa Journal* in 1938 in order to purchase the manuscript of his poem 'O Who will Speak from a Womb or a Cloud?'. As far as her personal records go, Barker is notable by his absence—he is seldom referred to in the diaries themselves, yet with the aid of editor Alice Van Wart's rather colourless annotations and endnotes it is possible to piece events together, whereupon one realises that there was a period of approximately three years between Smart chancing upon Barker's poetry in a Charing Cross bookshop and his very real arrival in Monterey, California.

Some years ago I worked in theatre and after a while I withdrew from its activities because the sight of people suddenly



appearing on stage irritated me. They'd just suddenly arrive there, and start moving around and talking right away, it almost always seemed too much, too soon. Beckett thought something similar perhaps, quite often he chose not to show his characters in their physical entirety —you might only get to see half of them, say, such as Winnie in *Happy Days*, who starts out buried to her waist in sand and is up to her neck in it by the play's end, or even just a feature, such as the suspended sussurant mouth in *Not I*. Establishing presence and the means by which we disclose ourselves are procedures that I often wonder about in my personal life and which I am therefore obliged to explore in my creative work. What is the most propitious way of introducing ourselves into the personal reality of another human being? The propensity of disembodied methods of social introduction and exchange in our present culture frequently elicits reminders of the importance of meeting with each other, face-to-face. But perhaps there is something too emphatic, too insistent, too confrontational, even, about our fleshly proofs. From when she first encountered his poetry to when she eventually met him in the flesh, George Barker was unfolding, through his words, his ideas, his imagination, slowly, vividly, in Smart's expansive and generative imagination. 'George Barker's approach is in my mind always,' Smart writes in Mexico, towards the end of 1939. It is the first time Barker's name is mentioned in the diaries and the wording here, unambiguous as it at first appears, is apposite and revealing. She does not say his arrival is on her mind, but that *his approach is in my mind*. Indeed, Barker had been approaching Smart through his words for some time, and bit by bit his latency became more



visceral and persuasive. ‘George Barker grows into a long dangerous image,’ she writes a few days later. By February 1940 this interiorised passion attains such a pitch that at last the body is incorporated in its hunger: ‘If George Barker should appear now I would eat him up with eagerness. I can feel the flushed glow of minds functioning in divine understanding and communication.’ Mind and body have fused. This is the complete, consuming love that Smart had been preparing for. It also gave her artistic vision, which was by now prowling through the natural world like an inconsolable she-cat, a much needed focus. ‘She had already found a voice and a style; the relationship with Barker provided her with the subject she wanted—finally, subject and voice coincided,’ observes Van Wart in her introduction to Smart’s journals.

‘I want my book to be about love,’ writes Smart at the end of a particularly tumultuous diary entry in Mexico, and I must admit to having always been in possession of a similar aim. ‘Love is so large and formless,’ she continues. Yes it is, so how on earth does one go about depicting it? How to reconcile such a destabilising and intransmutable subject with such a linear and categorical medium as writing, without utterly disfiguring it? It took E.M. Forster five years to complete *A Room with a View*. It wasn’t that he had difficulty writing it, in fact in his diary he noted that it is ‘clear, bright and well constructed,’ yet it was precisely this slick clarity that troubled him. All the elements of a well-made novel were in operation and as far as Forster was concerned this was a gross failure. ‘I have been looking at the ‘Lucy’ novel,’ he wrote in a letter



to his friend R.C. Trevelyan on 11 June, 1907. 'I don't know. It's bright and merry and I like the story. Yet I wouldn't and couldn't finish it in the same style. I'm rather depressed. The question is akin to morality.' Forster lived until 1970, but composed his last novel in 1924, perhaps he was no longer willing to snare and designate essential doubts and mysteries in 'the concrete of fiction.' This linking of style with ethics recalls D.H. Lawrence's defence of what might appear to be a 'shaky' novel. Porous like coal, rather than hard-edged like diamonds, the novel's formal flaws are a reflection of Lawrence's own skewed and shifting perspective. I can't help but wish that the murky, unprocessed stuff, love's forgotten substratum, had not been so rigorously filtered out of Smart's novella. The diversity of register and panoply of perspectives that make the journals so immediate and riveting are traceless beneath an unrelenting confection of myth, metaphor, imagery and ritual. Knowing something of her journey to escape received ideas and of the originality of the vision and voice that flourished in their absence, I wonder why she selected to obscure both in a rhapsodic jumble of pre-existing motifs and allusions—are these not the 'drapery' she wished to avoid? 'A Poem, a note, a diary. These are the raw moments, the raw thoughts. I do not want, I am irritated with the devious method and hidden indirectness of the novel...'

Very probably, Smart wanted to link her specific romantic experience to a broader conception of love, and perhaps the wellspring of myth and religion provided a rich context within which to situate her story. It is regrettable that she aligned herself with these lofty planes of poetic expression



so ardently and omitted some of the more earthly tones and tangible details that animate the journals. Smart's perception of the material, everyday, world was exquisite and sensuous, 'the lake was thick green and shone like a wet olive,' and her inventories of the exotic and mundane are quite delectable: 'The blue blue light water, red earth, coral sand, Mali height where the Congress freed the defeated. Green, dark, and rich, and hard. The island exports pineapple (had some—delicious—at Mrs Herrendean) and sugar cane.' Even when she is back in the comparatively more muted environs of England her unforced sensitivity assembles small easy scenes of immense tender beauty, 'I walked under a room of great trees, across the fields, up the muddy field to the little house, now in the dark, light only from the kitchen windows.' If only she had kept her soil-scuffed boots on. If only God and Daphne and Syrinx and Leda and the Virgin Mary hadn't muscled in. Perhaps I am only a grubby heathen, but celebrated lines such as 'her thin breasts are pitiful like Virgin shrines that have been robbed' and 'armpits like chalices' pile up like so much incandescent kitsch and leave me cold. They could have been written by anyone, at any time at all. I don't want chalices, I'd rather have teacups.

It is a devil to know how to write about love, to take desire's heat and transfer it to another through the page. I keep trying because I don't know that there's much else worth writing about. But I don't wish to contribute to a mausoleum of established ideas about love, I want whatever comes to frighten and confuse, to uplift and to comfort, to wrong-foot and enrich. I want it to be like love itself, unencumbered





and emptying. Love lives and will not be contained, not by human shapes, nor by literary ones. In the upside down pages of my French exercise book there are lists, quotes, outlines, sums, questions. One short question takes up a whole page, it is written at a slant in pencil, and since I have scrutinised another's journals it seems only fair to share it.

What did I do with his shirt? It was full of flowers. He wore it to a jazz festival. What did I do with it?

The cotton thread winds on, appearing here and there in quick flashes through the fabric of everyday life. I feel its frayed end between my teeth and resist the pull to amass it into an ineradicable resplendent tapestry. Better let it blaze, surely, in a bright disc of brief white fire and have its ineffable story imprint, softly, upon a pale heap of softest ash.

