

"Tell Me a Story.... I am Starved for Stories": Storytelling, Voice, and Self-Development in Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*

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we spend our years as a tale
that is told

Fair and Tender Ladies

The distinctive "down-home" quality of Lee Smith's narrative voice reverberates with the poetic power of Southern speech. In her work she taps into the rich oral tradition of the South, showing herself as alive to the poetic cadence as to the comic undertow of the region's vernacular. Her fictional landscape is a Southern, small-town one; her later narratives are centered in the mining towns and communities of southwestern Virginia where she grew up. Presently living in North Carolina, where she also teaches English, Lee Smith has published eight novels and two collections of stories over the last twenty-five years, attracting increasing critical attention as well as a quickly growing reading audience.

I

In both of her to date two most acclaimed novels, *Fair and Tender Ladies*¹ and the earlier *Oral History*,² Lee Smith can be said to criss-cross the artificial boundary between history and fiction, working in an ambiguous and murky gray zone that offers uncharted and intriguing possibilities for a writer so inclined. Interested in exploring how "facts" are transformed through the act of telling, fascinated by the (un)reliability of oral history as well as the significance of the role of the teller of the tale, Smith recently told an interviewer: "I believe the notion of oral history is an oxymoron. If it is spoken it is not history, if it is spoken it is automatically the storyteller's tale."³ One of her concerns in these texts, then, is the malleability of truth and reality; seeking to achieve a sense of history the way some modern historians do, she immerses herself in the everyday happenings and the ordinary lives of people rather than in the capitalized date and event. Beginning with *Oral History* and continuing in *Fair and Tender Ladies* documenting and recapturing a disappearing way of life becomes a strong component of Smith's fictional enterprise. She seeks in her narration to recreate a place and a time, to rescue an all but vanished way of life. With anecdotes and stories as structuring devices she lets these texts revolve around a lifestyle not very distant in years, but yet to most Americans infinitely remote and strange, shaping narratives which bear witness to the momentous changes that in the last century have swept and in many respects ravaged an isolated part of the country, the "hollers" and small towns of southwest Virginia.

It is not only in Lee Smith's finished texts that history and story blend and blur, they meet already on the planning stage as she uses her own research into oral history as an aid in fiction-writing. The oral history absorbed in many hours of conversation with older Appalachians—songs, ghost-stories, legends about family feuds and curses, and descriptions of, say, what might happen when the circuit-rider came to town—becomes the fertile soil out of which her books spring. The later

1 Lee Smith, *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988; New York: Ballantine Books, 1989). Subsequent references will be given within parenthesis in the text.

2 Lee Smith, *Oral History* (New York: Putnam, 1983).

3 Elisabeth Herion-Sarafidis, "An Interview with Lee Smith, June 13, 1991." *Southern Quarterly*, forthcoming.

novels build on, incorporate and actually grow out of this traditional material, the artistic method a kind of fusion between the role of the historian and the fiction-writer. Engaged in trying to articulate the lives of people in this poverty-stricken mountain region of Virginia where she grew up, Smith, I feel, found *her* literary voice in the writing of *Oral History*. Belatedly, perhaps, she was ready to accept the artistic validity and creative possibilities offered by the well-known material. This stumbling on what William Faulkner referred to as that "private postage stamp of soil," proved also in Smith's case to be artistically liberating. As she in her stories seeks both to capture the oral quality of speech and to achieve the sense of immediacy that a first-person narrator can transmit, the dramatic monologue has become her preferred domain. One distinguishing feature of Lee Smith's authorial voice is her fondness for magic, myth and lore, for the tales and songs of mountain Appalachia, for the very act of *telling* and sharing stories—the sheer love of a good tale. But suffusing her texts there is also an urgency, what almost amounts to a compulsion to tell, to keep history alive, and in that telling render alive a fate, like that of Ivy Rowe.

II

Not a plot-ridden writer—in fact, only marginally concerned with linear plot—Lee Smith once commented on the apparent plotlessness of her novel *Fair and Tender Ladies*: "I just knew that it was something I had to write and I just didn't care if it was too regional, too personal. I knew it didn't have a plot—it was just some woman's life from the beginning to the end, and that's what I wanted to do."⁴ One of Smith's main con-

⁴ Virginia A. Smith, "On Regionalism, Women's Writing and Writing as a Woman: A Conversation with Lee Smith," *Southern Review* 26 (1990), p. 785. Interestingly, in being character- rather than plot-oriented, the text resembles not only Smith's own earlier texts, but also the fiction of a number of fine contemporary American women writers, many of them from the South. That the focus on the creation and development of the individual voice is a common bond is shown e.g. in the texts by Jayne Anne Phillips, another Appalachian writer, who finds herself working not "by ideas so much as by trying to create believable characters of a mesmerizing voice, because I think everything else will follow from that," as she says in the interview in Michael Schumacher, *Reasons to Believe: New Voices in American Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 79. As in the case of Smith, Phillips's fictional endeavor hinges on her being able to create a voice that gives the impression of authenticity. Phillips's *Machine Dreams* as well as Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster*

cerns as a writer has always been the question of immediacy and authenticity, with telling a story through voice alone. In this text, seeking to claim the reader's trust from the first page, she chose to have Ivy Rowe write her own life—become a woman storyteller—chose to make the narrating voice the sole one. Phrasing it differently, using Lucinda MacKethan's words, we might say that "the sound of the voice telling the story becomes the primary story."⁵

Lee Smith employs almost exclusively a female perspective in her narratives and focuses on the private sphere of human life. Her stories are organized around the rituals of family, concerned with the female experience and a female point of view. Like the majority of Smith's texts, *Fair and Tender Ladies* is thus a woman-centered book—abounding in mothers, aunts, sisters, female friends and daughters. And against this backdrop fairly seething with fates and tales crying out to be told the story of Ivy Rowe is unfolded, a story about self-creation, in which a woman learns to take possession of herself and the world. As circumstances and crippling social definitions early on thwart a development into the writer she feels herself destined to become, Ivy's creativity manifests itself in the private rather than public sphere. At various stages in her life the sole epistolary narrator of this novel finds herself quite desperately in need of a listener, and as there is no one to heed her voice, she clothes her thoughts—her fears, desires and insights—in words and sets them down in letters, an effort, she will eventually realize, which is motivated more by her own need for understanding the forces of life than by a compulsion to communicate with the addressees. Ivy's writing should thus be viewed as an interpretive effort, an attempt to explore and, ultimately, make sense of experience. Interestingly, Lee Smith has described how the writing of this novel served as a kind of escape for her at a time of personal distress and sorrow. This "escape route" was, however, not used merely to get away, but, it seems to me, as a means of acting out, an attempt to find solace and strength through the making of stories. The emergence of the strong and courageous character Ivy Rowe thus coincides with Smith's desire to create something of a role model for herself, a woman tough enough to go through

and *A Cure for Dreams*—or, for that matter, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*—are cases in point here.

5 Lucinda H. MacKethan, *Daughters of Time: Creating Woman's Voice in Southern Story* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1990), p. 2.

hardship, pain and change, but to remain always *alive* and interested. We might say that the function of making stories out of her life for the character Ivy Rowe is made to coincide with the function of storytelling for the author of *Fair and Tender Ladies*.

In the choice of *how* to tell the story about Ivy Rowe, Smith focused her text in Ivy, made her narrator/writer. *Fair and Tender Ladies* is, then, an epistolary novel with only one sender, made up of a lifetime's worth of letters written on Sugar Fork on Blue Star Mountain and addressed to family and friends. As the quality of the narrating voice changes over the years the letters reflect a moral development and Ivy's growing awareness of her own needs: as the girl turns into a rebellious and confused young woman, as the silenced woman hears and heeds her own voice and grows into old age. The text, her letters, offers up a woman's life told from her own perspective, a story of compromise, of hardship and resilience, as she, embarked on what MacKethan terms a "journey of self-definition," engages in an on-going, life-long "dialogue" with experience. Intriguingly, Smith has not attempted any conclusion or final reckoning; as the letters span a period of some sixty years and are meant for different receivers, and as there is no evidence of their ever having been collected, we must consider that we read them as they are being composed. A reflection of the non-public nature of Ivy Rowe's writing is of course that there will be no final record of it, no one to sum up—the most intimate of these letters, which she never even sent, she finally destroys rather than have someone read them. She feeds them to the fire one by one and watches "as the smoke from the burning letter rose and was lost in the clouds" (314). The sense of life-as-lived, then, of the ongoingness of it all becomes a strong force in a text which ends only with the petering out of Ivy's voice, the fading away of her words, with what the reader believes is her death.

III

Discussing *Fair and Tender Ladies* and Ivy Rowe, Lee Smith once described her intentions by saying: "I guess I wanted to create a woman who would have a heroic journey. But you had to put that journey in

Ivy's terms and on her turf."⁶ A heroic journey is certainly what the text amounts to, albeit not in the traditional sense of cosmic confrontation and grand gesture. Ivy's quest is conducted with considerably less fanfare than we have been conditioned to expect from this genre, though assuredly no less heroism. And as the forging of an identity becomes a central theme in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, the reader becomes a witness to Ivy's struggle to construct a sense of self, refusing to let convention and the hardships of poverty do what they did to her mother, and countless other women—turn despair and rage on herself, forcing silence upon her.

From the very first of these letters, somewhat "breathless" in tone and beautifully misspelled, Ivy reveals a consuming need, in Tillie Olsen's words, to try to "total it all"; she displays the curiosity and ruthless honesty which will remain her distinguishing characteristics. Capturing a life in words may be an impossibility, but the glimpses offered and selected by Smith, the "emotional aura" transmitted through the strong and distinct voice of this woman, amount to a portrait of a human being who refuses to let herself be defined by narrow, in some respects oppressive, circumstances. The true nature of Ivy Rowe's life, the quest for understanding that it is, the exploration of questions of identity and relationship, is reflected in her letters and stories. She *will* not be drained of her capacity for wonder, robbed of a love of words and stories, of her conviction of the necessity for making connections, but strives to find a balance between what she had in the past and her need to move beyond that past.

The narrative articulation of this female life takes its beginning somewhat ramblingly as a very young Ivy Rowe, shortly after the turn of the century, in a letter to a potential pen friend, conjures up herself, her family and their life on a poor farm up on Sugar Fork. The book ends, her voice stopping abruptly in mid-sentence, when Ivy, old and ailing but still writing, still curious about what life has in store and still striving to "total it all," is interrupted by death. The middle—main—section of the book consists of letters to family and friends, the occasional foe and even her dead father, but mostly to her wild, wandering and crazed sister Silvaney—haunted and silent Silvaney, who as a young girl is sent away and confined to an institution. The bond between the two is, however,

6 Virginia Smith, p. 787.

not solely of a sororal nature, it is a link almost tangible in strength; Silvaney might be viewed as the inseparable other half of Ivy, a wild, darker, driven part hidden away from the eyes of the world. The circumstance that the letters to Silvaney continue long after her early death suggests that they spring out of a need of another kind than simply a desire for communication. This is a writing that is truly vital to a spiritual survival; it is "the road out," the place where thoughts are explored, sorrows and fears revealed, and otherwise or elsewhere not fully realized connections made, and it is clearly also a means, momentarily, to escape a life spelling hardship, fear and a total lack of privacy. Ivy gives evidence of an awareness of the mechanism that drives her to write already in one of the first, never-to-be-sent, letters to the pen-friend Hanneke:

But it is snowing now and so I think of you, and sometimes it seems to me like you are more real than my Family, you seem more real to me now than the days that pass. It seems I can not talk to my Family they is so many of us here in the house in the snow we have to keep the younguns in you can not bath yourself nor nothing and little Danny crys. They is noplac here you can go to get away from him crying, it is only when I am writing you this letter late in the nite that I dont hear (24).

Having no one in whom to confide and desperate not to be engulfed by hopelessness, she writes "for you cold Hanneke, Hanneke Queen, or for nobody, or maybe it is for me." (32).

Ivy realizes early on that writing down her responses, trying to make sense of a bewildering complexity of emotions, is a conscious effort to freeze time, a momentary stay against the chaos inside her. She creates, or dis-covers, her own self through the compulsion to make stories of her life; she does, in a sense, compose herself in the writing. The interpretive effort is obvious in statements like "[y]ou know I've always got to write my letters, and think about what's happened, and what I've done" (245). Not until experience has been transformed into "stories" does it acquire the aura of reality: "I seen it all throgh the little winder wich has made a frame around it in my mind" (50). She achieves distance from what happens to her with the aid of language, scanning actions and reactions through an imaginary frame, putting words to them. And in this way she makes certain that she will remember and hold onto not merely the gist of what has taken place but each nuance and every inflection that went into it: "I think this is the reason why I write so many letters to you, Silvaney, to hold onto what is passing"

(144). But, as Ivy comes to understand at the end of her life, taking out the pile of letters she has written to Silvaney throughout the years, to burn them, one by one: the *letters* as such were never important, "[i]t was the *writing* of them, that signified" (314). She can be said to comprehend the essential truth of Peter Brooks's statement about the significance of storytelling:

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue.⁷

The continuous process of writing in which she was involved enabled Ivy to listen to her own voice; letting experience reverberate, she unraveled and wove herself back together.

IV

Love, compassion and responsibility towards others are the forces that rule and determine Ivy's life, in these respects a conventional female one. But her very first letter also sets up a tension between two strong and conflicting sides: her clear-sighted questioning, her passionate and adventurous nature on the one hand, and her compassionate, nurturing one on the other. The first story she tells is the dramatic and tragic tale of her parents; the story of a fifteen-year old girl eloping into the dark bluish-black night with a man on a horse named Lightning. The man brings her to his isolated farm, proceeds to give her eight children and then to waste slowly away in a heart disease, all of them living in near starvation for years. The connection between physical passion and words and language is grasped by the girl Ivy, foreshadowing the vital role of love and storytelling in her future life. Love is, early on, the subject uppermost on her mind, an irresistible, shaping force: "When I grow up and become a writer, I will write of such a love and I will write of a man like my uncle Revel who can come like a storm in the night and knock a born lady off her feet" (73). In an intimation of what adult life

⁷ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (1984; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 3.

will bring she writes in that first letter to the longed-for pen-friend: "I take a intrest in Love because I want to be in Love one day and write poems about it, do you? But I do not want to have a lot of babys thogh and get tittys as big as the moon. So it is hard to think what to do" (7). It is indeed. The age-old dilemma she here comments on, the remark occasioned by a clear-eyed look at her mother's life, is one that the reader senses will eventually shape also Ivy's life. The forces that for centuries have determined women's lives everywhere are, of course, present also here in the Appalachian mountains. Ivy's time and place cannot allow her the satisfaction of both intellectual and emotional growth; that famed "room of her own" is most singularly absent. And the course of her life is equally predictable; as a woman, when her responsibilities to others take over, her responsibilities to herself give way.

The story of Ivy Rowe's life bears out many of the observations about women's moral development and the formation of the female self that Carol Gilligan makes in *In a Different Voice*.⁸ In a conflict between rights and responsibilities, passion and duty/compassion, a woman, Gilligan argues, tends to consider the needs and desires of others before her own, understanding morality in terms of a relation to others rather than to self. Self-denial thus becomes a female way of life. Early on aware of the sacrifice that her mother's life became, but without other role models and alternative ways of life, Ivy struggles to find another norm to live by, to find a voice of her own. A pregnancy ends her girlhood irrevocably and abruptly, and the possibility of that life of study, of books and libraries that has been her fondest dream, is suddenly and forever erased as her mother refuses to agree to an abortion. In this her first crisis of magnitude, at the moment of decision, Ivy finds it impossible to act according to a morality not sanctioned by her peers; fearful of acting selfishly—a most effective deterrent for potentially headstrong women—she is reluctant to neglect or hurt people in her surroundings to pursue an abstract goal. Unable, then, to force her will on her mother, a mere husk of a woman at this stage, Ivy stays passive: "I could not go against her, Silvaney, Momma has been through so much" (119).

Left alone after the death of her mother, refusing to marry the man who fathered her child, she moves away from her home-place to a sister

8 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

in a mining-town on Diamond Mountain. The ensuing eight years of Ivy's life, spent in Diamond Fork, are characterized by a somnambulistic quality—it is a period of passive indecision interfoliated with moments of frantic physical abandon. The text is interestingly reticent about this period of her life; reflecting the inner drama at this point by indirection, her letters are almost devoid of dreams and speculations; they are, in fact, completely silent about anything but daily chores and Ivy's increasing awareness of the brutality of the mining company. The only contentment that shines through is the one that motherhood affords, her daughter becoming a sort of anchor against the whirls and tugs of existence. The strangeness of Ivy's life at this time can be seen as a measure of her distance from herself. Having been unable to acknowledge her needs and potential creative powers at that crucial moment of decision, she now conducts her existence so as not to have to make any major decisions, this in itself a reflection of the complexity of her emotions.

The second major crisis of Ivy Rowe's life evokes another kind of response. In this second conflict between personal integrity and loyalty to those dependent on her, she acts intuitively, out of inner compulsion. As the wife of Oakley Fox and mother of five she now lives once again on Sugar Fork, in her old home, working the farm. Outwardly, her life has become a duplicate of her mother's and the daily grinding struggle for a living has taken its toll, to the extent that Ivy might be said, in the words of Adrienne Rich, to have "been nullified by silence." Where her heart should have been there is a hollowness such that she feels herself to have dissolved, been erased. And in what is really an act of self-assertion, a move away from what is best described as a state of spiritual atrophy, she seeks actively to reclaim herself. The "instrument" with , whose aid she is able to do this is the aptly named, roaming bee-man Honey Breeding. From the instant he shows up to help the Foxes catch bees Ivy is truly like a person bewitched. As if in a trance, quite literally leaving her life behind when he asks her to accompany him up on Blue Star Mountain, higher, significantly, than she has ever been though she has lived there most of her life. It is a gesture fraught with danger and defiance, grounded in desperation—for which she will pay a terrible price. The clear implication of the text is, however, that Ivy really has no choice this time but to heed her inner voice; whether her decision be deemed courageous, selfish or immoral, in a situation where spiritual survival was at stake, she knew to listen to herself.

When the two of them finally stop their climb, having arrived at the top, she reaches out for that which she needs: "'Tell me a story,' I said.... 'All about you,' I said. 'Tell me all about you.... Tell me,' I said. 'I am starved for stories.... It seemed like years since I'd heard a story.' I stretched out there on the moss, and the wind played over my face" (226). And as Honey Breeding's words fall like rain on her, his stories filling her emptiness, they have an all but incantatory effect on Ivy Rowe, enabling her in turn to find words of her own and tales long buried and sealed off from memory. Encapsulated in time, insulated—yet, paradoxically, aware of the transience of the moment—their stay on the mountain lasts for weeks. Ivy now knows nothing but Honey, his body and his stories, the desire that commands her is of a physical as well as a linguistic nature, once more suggesting the affinity between the two. We might say that Ivy here is engaged in an act of life-giving, strong enough at this point in her life to heed her own most vital needs, defying convention and social responsibility, even that responsibility as life-giver to others by which until this moment she has let herself be defined. And even though the consequences of her going off with Honey Breeding become almost more than she can bear in the months to come—her little daughter dies while Ivy is gone—and she returns to a long period of sorrow and guilt, she remains convinced that she could not have acted in any other way. It is as if she willed him to appear in her hour of need, as if she conjured him up to enable a break away from the heavy silence that has become her life; like a creature starving she craved the magic, the honey, he has to offer. And he breeds back what has been drained and seeped out of her, allowing her to piece herself together and retrieve her voice.

V

As novelist, Smith's strength lies in characterization. She is not a writer who dwells in abstractions, but a sensuous one with a marvellous eye and ear for the concrete detail. Structurally, most of her books, notably *Oral History* and her latest novel *The Devil's Dream*,⁹ are what might

9 (New York: Putnam, 1992).

best be described as episodic novels, perhaps a consequence of her early fascination with the short-story, an on-going interest which in 1990 resulted in a second, award-winning collection, *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse*. In most of these stories character is created by means of voice, a technique which, as we have seen, has become something of a hallmark of her fiction. Concerned with the implications and possibilities of everyday life, Smith, in her short stories, often writes about the kind of characters also inhabiting Bobbie Ann Mason's and Anne Tyler's fiction: the losers, the broken-hearted, turning this way and that in a contemporary world of disruption and emotional restlessness. But Lee Smith testifies to finding it increasingly difficult to content herself with writing stories that are individually centered snapshots, like "windows into someone's life." This is a format that she now feels to be confining: "I started out with stories and I still really like them, but I cannot seem to leave them alone. I always want to add another and another and have a whole community or family."¹⁰ The first time she made use of the episodic structure in a longer work was in *Oral History*, a loosely connected string of tales, without focal point of view, about several generations of the Cantrell family. The telling is polyphonous, each mountain voice—all but one female—complete in itself, each story reflecting the bias of the teller. Together these different color strands in a large multi-colored weave are transformed into something greater than the sum total; together they offer a continued revision of history. The recently published *The Devil's Dream* is structurally reminiscent of *Oral History*, though perhaps not as complex and rich a work, and less dependent on myth. Somewhat less concerned with being an articulation of "place," it is the tale of several generations of an Appalachian country-music family—with the music as structuring device—each first-person narrative voice that of a different family member.

In between these two texts lay the publication of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, an exploration of a woman's quest for inner equilibrium, and a book in the most intimate way connected to its author. In the story of Ivy Rowe, Lee Smith draws attention to the kind of life often disregarded or forgotten, wanting to "validate," as she puts it, the life of a traditional woman. From the outset, Ivy's letters testify to an awareness of the significance of that "other" part of her, revealing the seeds of a certain self-

10 Herion-Sarafidis, "An Interview ...".

sufficiency, and though her life from a contemporary perspective might appear intellectually thwarted, lived wholly outside the public sphere, she ends up, finally, not only with a room of her own, but actually a house; "not beholden to a soul," she writes, totally her own woman. Her emerging sense of self has been reflected through the vitally important act of writing. It is as if she listens to herself in what she writes and how she tells the stories of her life, as if what befalls her does not take on the shape of reality until re-lived in words; ordered, structured, with patterns emerging—made into stories. Storytellers are by her—and clearly by the author of this narrative—endowed with truly life-giving properties, and being able to listen to a story can, as we have seen, at times be a matter of life and death. In a scene of initial sadness from her childhood, Ivy records how she once all but succumbed to the temptation of lying down in the cold, softly falling snow, going to sleep, never to wake again. She describes the two wizened little storytelling sisters who miraculously happened by the isolated Rowe farm that very evening; how they passed the old, familiar and wonderful stories back and forth between them; how they seemed to crave nothing, no nourishment except for what the tales and words provided. Despairing and lost, Ivy was feeling in sore need of the wisdom that these sisters clearly possessed. She sensed that their "knowledge" was powerful and magic enough to be able to sustain her: "For it seemed to me that the only way I could keep from running back out in the snow was to hear a story" (26). So she listens and absorbs, and in this way Ivy, too, is nourished, partakes of the numinous and healing power of words, is at the same time connected to what has gone before and swept away, out of her solitary spiritual confinement.

Ivy Rowe's text thus becomes a testimony to Lee Smith's belief that nothing must be forgotten or mislaid, that connections need to be pursued and ties upheld. Endlessly curious about people and how they will hold themselves, forever fascinated by the world, the perennial observer, Ivy Rowe remains all her life tuned to the way we are all formed and deformed by the past, convinced, as she puts it, that "we spend our years as a tale that is told."