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## The Banal Daily Drudge: Telling Stories in Scotland

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Ali Smith is rightly looked upon as a Scottish writer, however her Scottishness is not as easy to recognise as it is with other writers: she does not use any dialect and rarely locates her fiction in Scotland. In short any sense of Scottishness she presents to her reader is more than subtle. This paper will attempt to show how Smith's fiction draws upon an oral tradition of storytelling that is prevalent in Scottish fiction. This will be established by looking closely at Smith's narrative techniques and her attention to detail.

In his essay 'The Proof of the Mince Pie' Tom Leonard suggests that criticism of the local in literature often comes from those who are in a privileged position:

But one thing I've noticed, on my odyssey through Western Culture, apart from the absence of the single pie, is that most of the heroes of the literature I was reading didn't seem to work a great deal of overtime [...] So this is another aspect of "high culture" that because of its simplicity tends to be overlooked; the fact that the people who are having all the "noble emotions", have them removed from the banal daily drudge of earning a living. (Leonard, 1995a, p70)

It is this notion of 'the banal daily drudge' that is of interest to my discussion. James Kelman argues in relation to his work that 'Glasgow just happens to be the city I was born within [...] I could have been born anywhere I suppose.' (Kelman, 1992, p78)

This contention seems to be as relevant to Ali Smith's fiction. I would argue that Inverness just happens to be the city that she was born within, as her fiction is largely devoid of location.

At this point it is necessary to distinguish between locality and localised. For Smith locality is of little interest. It is localised events that dominate her narrative. The setting of the fiction is not important, as Smith devotes a large part of her narrative to the description of everyday detail. It is this sense of the local in her narrative that will be analysed

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau argues that the use of the everyday provides the means for a writer to subvert the established literary and social hierarchy:

A way of speaking this received language transforms it into a song of resistance, but this internal metamorphosis does not in any way compromise the sincerity with which it may be believed nor the lucidity with which, from another point of view, the struggles and inequalities hidden under the established order may be perceived. More generally, *a way of using* imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. (de Certeau, 1988, p18)

When this is applied to Ali Smith it would seem that her adoption of the everyday as a subject matter for her fiction is an agency for challenging the established order of literature. That is to say she is a writer who focuses on the minutiae of everyday life while adopting high literary techniques. The result of which are texts that subvert the traditional roles adopted by literature and criticism.

Smith treats the everyday and extraordinary as equals and one of the most obvious examples of her utilisation of the everyday occurs in the chapter entitled 'Future Conditional' from *Hotel World*. The action of the chapter is concerned with Lise's attempts to fill out

a form to help with her illness, anything else is either reported or a summary of her thoughts:

*About you – continued.*

*If you need help filling in this form, or any part of it,  
phone 0800 88 22 00.  
Tell us about yourself.*

Well. I am a nice person.  
It was sometime in the future. Lise was lying in bed.  
That was practically all the story there was.  
(Smith, 2001, p81)

This quotation from the opening of the chapter stresses the sense of nothingness that pervades this section and the overall book. ‘That was practically all the story there was’ is a fair summation of the chapter for the reader. Most of the narrative of this chapter is spent quoting from the form and focussing on Lise’s attempts to complete it. Lise’s narrative slips between first and third person and, as is the case for the majority of Smith’s fiction, no distinction made between speech and narrative. Smith’s narrative does not retain any hierarchy between character speech and narrative. And this allows her to formulate subtly observed social commentary. This social commentary is extended into Lise’s form filling and also into the anti-war subtext of *The Accidental*, which will be expanded on later in this paper. For the time being I will look at Smith’s narrative technique. Ali Smith borrows her narrative structure from James Kelman, in that she does not make the distinction between narrative and speech. Kelman discusses this technique in relation to his novel *The Busconductor Hines* in an interview with Duncan McLean:

It’s very possible, you see, that Hines could be writing that novel. I mean it is technically possible within the framework of the novel. Nothing that happens happens outwith the perception of Hines...So Hines could have

written absolutely everything...I could describe it as a first person novel written in the third person. (McLean, 1995, p101-102)

Kelman states that this is a first person novel written in the third person, this also holds true for Smith's narratives, as the boundaries between narration and speech are broken down. Her text does not participate in the traditional hierarchy that privileges speech over narrative. By simply removing quotation marks from her work, narrative and speech are placed on the same footing. This is clearly demonstrated in the following quote from *Hotel World*:

Now again. The woman in the hotel uniform is saying something but Else is dizzy and can't hear properly. She looks at the woman's shoes. They are recent and fashionable; they have thick soles of the kind of moulded plastic that looks industrial and prehistoric at the same time. The woman gets up. She stops, stoops down again and picks up something. Here, she says to Else, holding out her hand. In her thumb and forefinger is the one pence piece Else couldn't reach earlier.

Else nods, takes it.

Yours, the woman says. The one that got away. Nearly.

(Smith, 2001, p62-63)

Notice the division between narrative and speech becomes obscured. This whole passage sounds like an internalised first person narrative, narrated from Else's point of view, when in fact it is a reported third person account from an impersonal narrator. Again this is achieved through the removal of any speech marks. The reader has to instead rely on the lack of the first person pronoun to determine who is narrating. Thereby the consciousness of the narrative is dictated by the conjunction of speech with narrative. The last line, 'Yours, the woman says. The one that got away. Nearly,' demonstrates the ambiguity of the narrative. When it is read, it becomes clear that it is an ambiguous statement, as it could either be said by the woman or

thought by Else. This ambiguity is the essence of Smith's narrative where the lines between subjectivity and objectivity become blurred. This can also subsequently be observed in the passage taken from *The Accidental*:

Astrid kicks her trainers off on to the floor. She slides back across the horrible bed. Or possibly the beginning is even further back than that, when you are in the womb or whatever it's called. Possibly the real beginning is when you are just forming into a person and for the first time the soft stuff that makes your eyes is actually made, formed, inside the hard stuff that becomes your head i.e. your skull. (Smith, 2006, p8)

This passage begins with an account of Astrid's actions and swiftly moves into her thoughts, the use of the word 'horrible' is part of the third person narrative while also being the type of word that Astrid would use to describe the bed. Thereby the character's thoughts are implicitly contained within the narrative and this is developed further as the narrative slips into Astrid's stream of consciousness.

Storytelling is at the forefront of Smith's narratives and this can be demonstrated by looking at the structure of her third novel *The Accidental*. The narrative of *The Accidental* is arranged into three sections, each is entitled 'beginning', 'middle' and 'end' and this reflects the model of a story, in that traditionally stories are expected to have a beginning, a middle and an end. However, *The Accidental* undermines this expectation, with each section having four different perspectives on the same events. Each point of view has a recognisable voice and as these are read it becomes apparent whose perspective is being shared with the reader. The effect of this technique is to place in doubt the authenticity and reliability of each narrator as the reader pieces together the whole narrative. The complete story can only be ascertained by reading all of the

individual narratives. Effectively Smith is taking a traditional technique of narrative [beginning, middle and end] and using them in an innovative fashion in order to subvert the established reception of a text.

*Hotel World* also plays around with the narration. The novel is divided into six distinct chapters, and each is headed as follows:

1. Past
2. Present Historic
3. Future Conditional
4. Perfect
5. Future in the Past
6. Present

These can be viewed as a play on the reader. They are grammatical terms, specifically verb tenses, and as such these chapter titles give an indication of the temporality of the narrative, while the type of narration is in part derived from the headings. Effectively Smith is playing with the expectations of the reader as these titles give the impression that each chapter will be set in the past, present historic, future conditional and so forth.

Robert Crawford identifies the experimental nature of the narrative:

*Hotel World* marks a stylistic advance in Smith's fiction that is as striking as the stylistic discoveries made in prose by James Kelman two decades earlier<sup>1</sup>. Like Kelman's, Smith's breakthrough appears technically simple, but has led to profound consequences. Unjustifying the right-hand margin of her prose, so that her line endings look like those of poetry, Smith produces a text that is 'freed-up', able to operate like a fusion of traditional fiction

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<sup>1</sup> In fairness the typography of *Hotel World* owes a debt to the advances made by Alasdair Gray in both his novels and short fiction. Smith pre-empted this comparison in an article on Janice Galloway for *Chapman*; 'Galloway, really the first woman to take advantage of the pioneering styles of Kelman and Gray.' [Smith, 1993, p177]

with aspects of poetry and conceptual art. (Crawford, 2007, p710)

By linking Smith's prose to poetry Crawford subconsciously calls attention to the property of her fiction that she shares with other Scottish writers and that is the sense of voice. This is particularly prevalent in her novels where she exploits multiple narrators – each with a distinctive voice of their own.

There is an implied backdrop to *The Accidental*, that of the Iraq war, and this is demonstrated in the 'public narratives' that the characters of the novel are aware of. In the example of Magnus' account of a narrative he has witnessed on television:

The television is full of the news about Saddam's dead sons. The Americans killed them in a shoot-out a couple of days ago. The tv shows the photos of them again, the ones taken directly after the killing. Then it shows the photos the Americans took after they shaved them to look more like they're supposed to look, like they looked when they were recognizable. The photos taken after that prove they're clearly the sons. This is a turning point, the tv says. It has broken the back of the war, which will be over now in a matter of weeks. (Smith, 2005, p146)

Although Magnus makes no specific comment upon how he feels towards either the events or how they are reported his overall tone is one of indifference. Magnus reports them to the reader as if they were everyday occurrences. The implication of this is that Magnus has become sanitised to events like this appearing on the news and as such their magnitude becomes distilled.

In an interview with Louise French, Ali Smith claims:

Although people won't think this immediately, I think it's a war novel. We lived through a war as though it were not a war in this country. We saw it on television



but we saw a very different version of it which would be unrecognisable to people from elsewhere. (Observer, 22/5/05)

Not only does this hint at Baudrillard's notion of simulacrum in relation to the first Gulf War<sup>2</sup>, but also it is the crux of *The Accidental*, for the version of events presented to us through the media is empowered – this version is not necessarily what is happening but merely one interpretation of events. However if this representation is the only version that is relayed to us then this is all that we have to interpret from. Effectively Baudrillard's view of the war demonstrates that events are mediated by those in power in order to manipulate our interpretation. It therefore follows that narrative is similarly empowered as we do not always read the same events from all perspectives. Thereby *The Accidental* is subverting the normal modes of narration by presenting four separate accounts of the same events. It is a novel that is about seeing the same events through the diverse perspectives of the various narrators and it is for this reason that each narrates a beginning, a middle and an end to give a complete story.

For Smith there is an emphasis on storytelling. Her narratives continually remind the reader that they are reading a work of fiction. In the case of *The Accidental* each narrator reminds the reader that they are reading a text as each of their narratives begins with 'the beginning', 'the middle' or 'the end' and as such this blurs the boundaries between the written and the oral.

The opening paragraph to 'The Universal Story' from *The Whole Story and Other Stories* demonstrates that Smith is playing with the conventions of fiction or storytelling:

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<sup>2</sup> See Baudrillard, Jean – *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* [Indian University Press, Indiana, 1995].

There was a man dwelt by a churchyard.  
 Well, no, okay, it wasn't always a man; in this particular case it was a woman. There was a woman dwelt by a churchyard. Though, to be honest, nobody really uses that word nowadays. Everybody says cemetery. And nobody says dwelt any more. In other words:  
 There was once a woman who lives by a cemetery. Every morning when she woke up she looked out of her back window and saw – Actually, no. There was once a woman who lived by – no, in – a second-hand bookshop. (Smith, 2004, p1)

Smith's narrative parodies the writing of and the telling of a story. Furthermore the line 'There was a man dwelt by a churchyard.' is precisely the type of traditional opening to a story that she is parodying. The fact that it was a man allows Smith to subvert the traditional story. The narrative now focuses on a woman and then consciously updates the archaic language to give a contemporary tale about a woman who lives in a second-hand bookshop.

This obsession with 'the story' is further indicated by the titles of Smith's most recent collections of stories *The Whole Story and Other Stories* and *Other Stories and Other Stories* within each of her collection there are numerous stories that draw attention to the fact that these works are stories, for example 'The Universal Story'; 'The Heart of the Story'; 'More than One Story' and 'Kasia's Mother's Mother's Stories'. These titles hark back to the structure of *The Accidental* and combine to emphasise the fictionality of the fiction itself. In the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Short Stories* Douglas Dunn discusses these notions in reference to John Galt, James Hogg and Walter Scott:

Although strikingly different in what they set out to do, the stories here by Hogg, Scott and Galt, have in common a conspicuously audible narrator. 'Sit near me, my children, and come nigh, all ye who are not of my kindred, though of my flock' [...] An immediate

audience is the first priority of his artifice, closely followed by a mimetic portrayal of the preacher's voice. There is a strong element of performance to it. Galt's midwife opens her 'autobiography' by saying: 'When my gudeman departed this life, he left me with a heavy handful of seven, the youngest but a baby at the breast.' There is a similar spokenness, a proximity of writer to reader which encourages a collusion in the tale, and an absence of preliminaries. Scott is more artful in that he delays the identity of the narrator until later in the story. All three writers are in touch with a newer art of story-telling which demanded a written negotiation between the voice and page. (Dunn, 1995, p xi)

In essence the same arguments can be suggested for the fiction of Smith and furthermore these fictions are united thematically through her shared consciousness of the domestic, the everyday and the social. There is a long tradition of short story writing in Scotland. It formally begins with Walter Scott's publication of *Chronicles of the Canongate* in 1827, but perhaps owes its existence to the oral ballad tradition<sup>3</sup> and a reaction to the proliferation of gothic tales in the latter part of eighteenth century; it carries on through James Hogg and Blackwood's magazine and is continued through Stevenson and Lewis Grassie Gibbon, and is picked up by many contemporary Scottish writers.

Dunn also views the rise of the short story as a successor to the ballad and oral tradition and he links this to the 'heightened sociability of Scottish literature'. [Dunn, 1995, pxi] He establishes a connection between Scottish literature and its *demotic* identity, which he then links to the art of storytelling:

A compact between speech and print is an important dimension of short stories in almost every modern

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed a number of Scott's stories owe a debt to ballads as they can be viewed as expansions of individual ballads. For example 'The Two Drovers' bears more than a resemblance to the ballad 'Graeme and Berwick'.

tradition; but in the Scottish story it is especially significant as a consequence of the authority of oral story-telling in prose and verse, and of the position of vernacular language stemming from the social and linguistic stresses of Scottish society. (Dunn, 1995, pxi)

It is these factors that are relevant to my discussion. The Scottish short story seems to be born out of an oral traditional of storytelling: whether these stories are sung as ballads or told as tales they are the roots of Scottish short stories. Furthermore it would seem that these stories share a common sense of the social that manifests itself as a portrayal of the domestic or everyday. Ali Smith's fiction immerses itself in this tradition - her fiction leans towards a representation of the everyday that in turn results in a narrative that emphasises the act of telling a story.

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