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"What a story it could be": Identity and Narrative Strategy in Ali Smith's *Like*

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Remarking upon its dual narrative structure, muddled chronology and conflicting accounts of past events, Ali Smith described her debut novel *Like* as "a nasty warring book, a book of two sides" (qtd. in Murray 222). The connection made here between the "warring" nature of the novel and the opposing narratives that constitute its "two sides" is crucial, and reveals that the conflict described by Smith relates as much to *Like*'s fragmented structure as it does its content. Indeed, the "warring" that takes place in *Like* occurs not only in its various settings – the bedrooms, dormitories and theatres in which its protagonists, Amy and Ash, witness their carefully concealed relationship bloom and wither – but also between its contrasting sections, each narrated from a different point in time. What is at stake in this war of words is the memory and legacy of the love once shared between the novel's now estranged protagonists: a love which is brought proudly to the forefront of Ash's personal account of the past, yet is largely absent from the third person, present tense narrative that constitutes Amy's section of the text. Offering the reader a series of readings (and re-readings) of events and encounters in this way, *Like* reveals itself to be a novel concerned with the strategies behind storytelling, with the memories one might artfully preserve, discard, embellish or invent when fashioning a version of one's history and, in turn, of *oneself*.

In this article, I address *Like* in relation to the academic work undertaken in recent years on the concept of "narrative identity", or the way in which our sense of self is dependent upon, and even determined by, the stories we tell. This has been evident in the humanities, but is also visible in the human sciences, where studies have considered the role of narratives in social and psychological life, with many arguing the value of narrative as a crucial mode of self-conceptualisation. Kim Worthington's study of remembrance and subjectivity in contemporary fiction, *Self as Narrative*, is fairly representative. In this study, Worthington argues that it is through the presence of a narrative voice that subjectivity is constituted: "In thinking myself, I remember myself: I draw together my multiple members – past and other subject positions – into a coherent narrative of selfhood which is more or less readable by myself and others" (13). Studies like Worthington's allow for an illuminating

reading of Smith, a contemporary Scottish author whose fiction is characterised by its use of multiple and often opposing narrative viewpoints, with characters developing ways of escaping silence and communicating their experiences. In line with this approach to storytelling, identity in Smith's fiction is constructed, often tactfully, by each narrating character, and the interplay between these constructed selves renders identity fragile and fluid. While Smith's work has received little in the way of sustained academic criticism, scholars such as Emma E. Smith and Kirsty Williams have produced detailed and extremely insightful analyses of the narrative techniques used by the author to explore notions of community, intimacy and subjectivity. For Emma E. Smith, the author's fiction is "characterised both by its inventive examination of the possibilities of narrative and by its intricate and intently human explorations of everyday relationships" (81). My intention in this article is to illustrate the ways in which Smith not only examines but utilises these narrative possibilities, presenting characters for whom writing is essentially a dynamic process. Rather than presenting finished and discrete images of the autobiographical self, Smith's narrators map subjects-in-process, which evolve within and *because of* that greater text (the novel) and its reading.

"Stuck together out of joint" – Of fact and fiction-making

Like, Smith has commented, is a novel "about how we put history together" (qtd. in Murray 217). Smith's remark suggests that the notion of a narrated, remembered self denotes an interpretative process through which individuals actively order their conceptions of selfhood and the world around them. Such concerns are best represented in a pivotal episode in the novel, as recalled by the adult narrator and central protagonist of its latter half, Ash. In this episode, the teenage Ash retrieves a photograph taken of her while on holiday with Amy, the friend she then secretly and shamefully desired. Separating her from the object of her affection, however, is Amy's mother, who stands between the girls in the picture. Displeased by what she perceives to be an imperfect reminder of the holiday, the young Ash proceeds to alter the photograph by taking a pair of scissors to it. "I cut her out of the middle", the adult narrator recalls, referring to the image of Amy's mother, "and stuck the two halves of the picture up on the wall by my bed, me and Amy stuck together out of joint" (195). What might appear here as an unnecessary, even juvenile act of destruction serves instead as a bold gesture of defiance, and reflects the way in which Ash, as adult narrator, recounts the events of her life. Just as her younger self alters the photograph, centralising desires once made secret, the older narrator uses narrative to foreground the existence of a love that she was

once afraid to make known. Remaking the artifact, like remaking the past, is for the narrator a private act, shared only with the reader. By altering and consequently reclaiming past events in this way, desires which were hidden are made explicit, a voice once silenced is amplified, and a relationship marginalised by society becomes central to Ash's story.

While Ash revisits and reclaims past events in her narrative, Amy, who is unable to speak of her early life following an incident of unspeakable trauma, is devoid of any such narratorial control. Accordingly, the third person, present tense narrative found in "Amy" (both characters' sections are eponymously titled) reflects its subject's inability to recall past experiences or construct a narrative identity of her own. It is only by reading Ash's narrative, therefore, that the otherwise unfathomable story behind Amy's distress begins to appear. Amy, the reader gradually infers, remains traumatised having surviving an arson attack inflicted upon her by Ash, and has had to emerge, in both a literal and figurative sense, from the ashes of the past to live again. Furthermore, and in terms of the novel itself, the Amy of old emerges from "Ash", the section of the text in which her presence is resurrected through the words of her former lover. It is the resemblance – the very *like*ness – between Amy's present, ongoing recovery of body and mind, and the gradual construction of her narrative identity in the latter half of the novel, that points to *Like*'s status as a work of metafiction. *Like*'s foregrounding of its own textual processes, its presentation of a link between the complex "text" of personal history and the material text of the novel, encourages an exploration of one's similarly "textual" interpretation of the world. In many metafictional works, Linda Hutcheon observes, "the act of creation becomes paradigmatic of all human acts of constructing ordered visions", so the metafictional novel serves as "a continuation of that ordering fiction-making process that is part of our normal coming to terms with experience" (89). To read *Like*, then, is to confront the very nature of one's own "fiction-making"; the compulsion to organise the disparate, often inexplicable, events of a life into comprehensible stories, regardless of how truthful they may be.

While the story one tells of oneself or another might enable self-conceptualisation, therefore, creative potential is inherent in the autobiographical splitting of the self, whereby the narrating "I" must separate off from the subject which it narrates. Before offering her version of events, Ash remarks, "What a story it could be. What a beautiful, what a romantic, what a passionate story" (158). Here, Ash makes explicit her narrative strategy; she aims to translate her personal history into a love story, a tender yet tragic romance which, like the amended version of her photograph, has her relationship with Amy firmly at its centre. As Hutcheon contends, "we do not... take leave of fiction-making when we abandon fairy tales

and childhood games. We always tell stories – to escape, to remake, to alter our past and our future" (90). By offering the reader an insight into Ash's narrative strategy, Smith demonstrates that "fiction-making" is as much a part of life, that is, of human acts of recollection and relation, as it is of art. Aware of this, Ash comes to perceive the very idea of writing an autobiography as little more than a deceitful "game", which poses the challenge of "giving shape to things that didn't actually have a shape at the time" (169). And, aware of the contrived nature of her narrated self, Ash thus finds herself torn between her desire to reconfigure history and re-inscribe her relationship with Amy in a central role within it, and her reluctance to transform a very real love into a faint and fictive approximation.

Despite these reservations, Ash approaches the "game" of autobiography with a sense of optimism. By "giving shape" to past experiences, she hopes that her orderly, coherent story will not only illustrate the prominent position Amy occupies in her personal history, but will also serve as a counterweight to the anarchic forces of anger and insanity that have characterised episodes of her life:

> if you write something down, it goes away. I've been carrying it around with me for so long now it's taken on a kind of life of its own, I can feel it breathing against me inside my rib-cage, feeding off me, taking all the goodness out of what I eat, all the calcium out of my teeth. I want rid of it. (157-158)

Here, Ash's hopes for her narrative bear a certain similarity to the ideas of Anthony Paul Kerby, who argues that there exists a redemptive power in writing the story of one's life. "The narrated past", Kerby writes, "best generates our sense of personal identity", providing "both a structure and a degree of understanding to the ongoing content of our lives" (33). Kerby argues that "without language, without a modicum of self-narration occurring during the course of one's life, even one's unreflected or preconscious life loses structure, loses its implicit narrative" (70). Paul Ricoeur adopts a similar stance when he asserts that "self-knowledge is an interpretation; self interpretation, in its turn, finds in narrative... a privileged mediation; this mediation draws on history as much as it does on fiction, turning the story of a life into a fictional story" (188) [1]. For Ash, then, whose sense of self has been left damaged and dispersed through episodes of rage and destruction, the "fiction-making" of self-narrative appears potentially salvific, promising a restorative reformation of subjectivity which Amy lacks in comparison. Ash hopes that writing her story will give even her most distressing experiences, including her struggle to come to terms with her homosexuality and the social alienation it provoked, as well as the rage that led to her frenzied attack upon Amy,

a semblance of order and an impression of narratorial control.

"And then I could close the cover" – Performance and narrative closure

As her story progresses, it becomes clear to both Ash and the reader that the narrated version of the protagonist's life has failed to produce the satisfying sense of closure it once anticipated. Instead, Ash's actions and experiences have become tethered to a framing, contextualising present narrative, which is full of omissions and overburdened by the intentions of its author. A discrepancy can thus be observed between the content of *Like*'s autofictional narrative and the frequent interjections made by its implied author. Just as her narrated life grows ever more orderly and self-assured, Ash-as-author begins to come apart at the seams, her sense of self thrown into question the more divorced she becomes from the stranger born on the pages of her notebook. "I thought that... I would write it all down and then I could close the cover and it'd be over, out", she admits after pausing from her story, before making the unsettling revelation, "but it's given me the bad dreams again" (309). Here, Ash steps out from the shadows of her narrative performance, allowing another voice, one racked by guilt, doubt and distress, to emerge momentarily from her love story. Despite this, Ash continues to return to her creation, a repeated action which highlights the nature of her narrative, and of autobiography in general, as texts compelled to invent plots and imaginative versions of events, instead of offering positivistic accounts of individual lives.

In her readiness to claim the image of an autonomous, unified and stable self as her own, Ash's behaviour comes to resemble that of the child in Jacques Lacan's theory of the *stade du mirror*. According to Lacan, the child's entry into language (the realm of the symbolic) depends upon its recognition of a reflected self-image that is both self and other. In the Imaginary state that precedes this, the infant is speechless, knows only prelinguistic sounds and images, and is unable to identify its image with itself. It is thus by gazing into the mirror that the child is ushered into a futile yet absorbing quest to identify with the estranged image of a unified self – its "Ideal-I." For Lacan, the impossibility of corresponding fully with the unified self turns the "Ideal-I" into "the armour of an alienating identity", which "will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development" (Lacan 2-4). Characterised by its conflicting voices, which range from the assured, coherent narrative that delivers its love story, to the series of anxious interjections which frequently disturb it, Ash's section of *Like* thus comes to resemble the ego's relentlessly pursued yet unachievable goal of a unified identity. The difference between the self and what Lacan terms its "specular image" is made explicit in a conversation Ash recalls between herself and Amy. "Other people see

themselves in the surface of things", Amy tells Ash, "but you see past the mere mirror of yourself. Even more, your reflection... doesn't even have to look like you, she's so free" (293). Although Amy interprets the obvious division between Ash and her ideal, "free" reflection as an endearing quality of girl she then loved, this division proves torturous for Ash, prompting her fruitless narrative quest to capture and embody the reflected "Ideal-I" by reconstructing it in her story.

That Ash's narrative identity is not entirely her own, but instead a textual representation of her "specular image", explicates the gulf that lies between the speaking subject and the subject of her speech. To return to Lacan, *Like* plays upon the distinction between "*énoncé*", the actual words uttered, and "*énonciation*" (Lacan 229), the act of uttering them. Ultimately, Ash's desire for the approval of her envisaged reader destabilises her attempts at depicting an authentic version of her selfhood in narrative form, causing her to create a subject of speech, a product of "*énonciation*", designed to meet the expectations of an imagined other. This is particularly apparent when, towards the end of her narrative, she re-inscribes what ought to be a loving moment shared between her and Amy as something so ludicrously exaggerated that it comes to resemble a dramatic performance. "And it's the sex scene", Ash declares, displaying a heightened awareness of her reader, who, she assumes, will demand a scintillating, passionate scene at the tail-end of her story. So conscious of her audience's expectations, Ash even imagines them as rowdy voyeurs of her and Amy's sexual acts: "She's in me. The crowd oohs and aahs. I'm in her. The crowd claps and cheers and roars for more" (298-299). For all her attempts to underline her love for Amy in her narrative, Ash, in striving to meet the demands of both her envisaged audience and what she perceives to be the conventions of a love story, forsakes the true nature of her personal history.

"That'd get into her diary" – Narrative and self-preservation

With her memoir inhabited by a dramatic performance of selfhood, which is influenced in part by the anticipated responses of an imagined reader, Ash's narrative "I" is clearly not hers alone. While Kerby argues that "subjectivity is attained in discourse by assuming the role of "I" in that discourse" (66), the only position from which selfhood in any meaningful sense is attained, more recent theorists such as Paul John Eakin have challenged the notion of autobiography as a literature of the first person. Eakin interrogates and collapses the "illusion of self-determination" promoted in narratives of the self: "*I* write my story; *I* say who I am; *I* create my self." Instead, Eakin argues, "*all* identity is relational" that is, constructed in relation to other forces, be they social, cultural or even linguistic. Although

autobiography may appear to be "the space of the self", for Eakin this space is also "literally occupied by the autobiography and self of the other" (43). Indeed, the overdetermined and objectified nature of Ash's narrative identity represents not an isolated, autonomous consciousness, but rather a relational self, influenced in part by her awareness of both the imagined reader and her own narrative strategy. Ash's excessive narrative performance also serves as an attempt to compensate for the self-negation she experienced during her relationship with Amy, who insisted that their love remain hidden at all costs. For Ash, the most devastating moment in their relationship, and the incident that prompted her frenzied act of destruction, occured when she found herself absent from all seven of Amy's diaries:

> Not a word, not a thought, not a syllable. Not once did I get a mention. I wasn't there, anywhere. She'd left me out.
>
> Now I turned and saw the sky was lit up behind me. The sight of it. The smell on the wind. The charred pages. The historic place of burning, I'd done that, me.
>
> That'd get into her diary, then, if nothing else did. (305)

What emerges from this revelatory moment is that, long before Ash came to write the story of her life, Amy did the same. In a process of "fiction-making" not unlike that outlined by Hutcheon, Amy has constructed a version of the past that omits all trace of her homosexuality and, as a result, of Ash. Proceeding thus, Ash makes an extraordinary attempt to influence Amy's future "fiction-making" by engaging in an act so destructive that her former lover will never be able to recall the past without thinking of it. The sudden transition from Ash's retrospective narrative to her prospective assertion, "That'd get into her diary", foreshadows the unshakeable trauma that continues to haunt Amy and provides a devastating link between both parts of the novel [2]. Ash, as Kirsty Williams observes, "externalises and objectifies the discovery of her absence by setting fire to Amy's things, effectively erasing them and reciprocating Amy's original act of violence – her denial of Ash" (173). Furthermore, Ash's destructive act prefigures Amy's later burning of her own possessions, including some of the diaries that survived the previous attack. Although Amy's daughter, Kate, discourages this, telling her mother that she "shouldn't burn diaries in case they were important for history", Amy responds by likening the act to "when you draw something or write it for the first time and it's not what you wanted, so you throw it away and start again". While Ash writes to remake history, Amy destroys the written word to erase and escape it. After the burning has ceased, however, Amy is left with "ash all over her" (151), a metaphorical imprint and permanent reminder of the love she is desperate to deny.

Here, the significance of Ash's name is explicit, symbolising the lingering remnants of

the past that are scattered throughout the novel as a whole. During the formative stages of their relationship, Amy even tells Ash the dictionary definition of her name, "the dust or remains of something burnt", which gains greater prominence when Ash describes her own memoir as consisting of the "ghosts and dust" (220-223) of history. For all the differences between the two sections of *Like*, therefore, the debris of history enables its estranged protagonists to reflect, however briefly, upon shared experiences. One such memory involves a journey made by the characters, then teenagers, to the setting of an unnamed T. S. Eliot poem, an experience which they recall in profoundly different ways. When Amy recounts the journey, which in itself constitutes a rare moment of introspection, her perspective changes from first person plural to singular, as though in recognising that she has acknowledged the existence of Ash, she feels she must swiftly shift focus from her:

> we got on a train and then we walked for miles along roads that seemed to be going nowhere at all… But it was warm, it was mid-summer, I slept in a ditch that night, it was very exciting, I'd never done anything like it in my life before. (134)

While Amy hastily reimagines the memory as an individual experience rather than a shared one, Ash chooses to remember it as romantic, playful and intimate. To illustrate this, she resists naming herself or Amy in her narrative, and instead uses a variety of personal pronouns to blur the distinctions between the lovers, thus emphasising their togetherness. Described simply as "two friends", she and Amy often appear indistinguishable from one another, their identities and actions blending together in a lengthy, sprawling sentence:

> we waited in the early morning station for the first train, go on beating inside me, keeping time over and over... I took her face in my hands and turned it up towards me like a child's and put the corner of my shirt in my mouth and cleaned a grass-dust smudge off her skin. (342)

Here, Ash's narrative drifts seamlessly from a description of the lovers' journey, as they prepare to board a train together, to the sound of Amy's heartbeat and finally a playful yet affectionate gesture. Perhaps without realising, Ash also slips from past to present tense, with the ambiguous "go on beating inside me" appearing as an interpolation from her immediate moment of narration, coming from the speaking subject rather than the subject of speech. This telling shift reflects the way in which Amy's presence continues to resonate in Ash's life, forever "keeping time" even in her physical absence. By writing of memories such as this one, however, it is *Ash* who is "keeping time", tirelessly preserving versions of history by committing them to language.

"The only story you're going to get" – Searching for the whole story

Although Smith's description of *Like* as a "nasty warring book" may appear reasonable given the blazing fires, nightmares and feelings of shame, resentment and distress dispersed across its pages like scattered ash, the opposing readings of events and encounters between its two sections come to resemble a series of petty squabbles rather than a great war. *Like*'s central concern, the location of meaning in the stories one tells of oneself, is reduced to a childish tantrum in one of the novel's most entertaining scenes. After pleading with her mother for a bedtime story, Kate is finally rewarded with a beguiling yet inconclusive tale about a fish that transforms into a girl. Bemused and dissatisfied, she complains, "It wasn't the story I was wanting", to which Amy replies, "Well it's the only story you're going to get" (83). Similar confrontations about the nature of storytelling can be found throughout Smith's work, particularly in her short stories. The protagonist in "A Story of Love", for example, becomes so infuriated with the supposedly incomplete "half-stories" her lover tells her that she takes to shouting "the end!" (*Other Stories* 174) at convenient points of closure throughout. In "Erosive", the speaker begins her narrative by demanding to know which details her reader considers to be important in storytelling: "What do you need to know about me for this story? How old I am? How much I earn a year?" (*Whole Story* 115). Akin to these stories, the futile desire for absolute knowledge is fundamental to *Like*'s plot, and any reader who refuses to accept the non-existence of a "whole story" will effectively re-enact Kate's tantrum, kicking and screaming for a definitive version of events. For Eakin, this human desire for the "whole story" presents itself as a peculiar problem in terms of writing one's autobiography. Eakin argues that "we know perfectly well that life certainly isn't a story, at least not in any simple, literary sense", yet "some version of this linked notion of self and story, nevertheless, is lurking whenever autobiographical practices are engaged" (99). By presenting even Amy's bedtime story as slippery and inconclusive, Smith casts doubts over the assumption that the narrated self can ever be fully knowable, and thus situates herself closer to Eakin than Kerby and Ricoeur.

In struggling with narrative construction and the location of truth in *Like*, the reader not only comes to understand the disorientating nature of recollection for both Ash and Amy, but must also confront his or her own need for certainty, for the misnomer of a "whole story" on which to cling. A self-conscious, metafictional work of aesthetic surface tension, *Like* engages its readers by exposing the mechanics of their very *engagement* with the text. By becoming embroiled in the unstable textual surfaces of the novel, readers thus "read" themselves, becoming aware of the "fiction-making" processes they themselves apply to

comprehend its strange and shifting story-world, as well their own disparate, often implacable, memories. Through her use of self-reflexive techniques such as these, it is Smith's narrative strategy that succeeds where Ash's fails, and demonstrates the problems as well as the virtues of constructing the story of one's remembered life. Authorial power within the text, Smith reveals, has been lost somewhere between the silent agony of "Amy" and the excessive narrative performance of "Ash". Consequently, and as its title suggests, *Like* can offer only approximations of the past, demonstrating that, through narrative, identities can be remade but never retrieved.

[1] For similar studies of the relationship between narrative and self-conceptualisation, see for example: Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000 (see "Memory in Theory": 11-32), Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001 (see "The Narrative Construction of Personal Identities": 69-105), Donald P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1982.

[2] A detailed description of foreshadowing can be found in M. A. Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

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