

Richard Nemesvari

"Work it Out For Yourself": Language and Fictional Form in Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*

Until very recently it was common for critics to describe the work of Stevie Smith as eccentric or, at best, idiosyncratic. However, with the almost simultaneous appearance of two full-length biographies, one by Jack Barbera and William McBrien, the other by Frances Spalding, it has become more difficult to employ a strategy which so obviously attempts to marginalize a writer not easily moulded to fit the pattern of "serious" artist. Like Edith Sitwell, another poet whose "childish" pose and unconventional style of presentation defy simple categorization, Smith's combination of mock innocence and satiric humor has proven an uncomfortable mix. After all, a woman who insisted on illustrating her poems with self-proclaimed doodles and who, when presenting that poetry at public readings often did so in a disconcerting, high pitched singsong, hardly seems part of the same tradition as that which produced *The Waste Land*. As Barbera and McBrien note, Eliot had "made popular the notion that good poetry is impersonal. It would have been as unlikely for him to decorate his serious poems with doodles as it would have been for him to sing them" (199). Yet it is Smith's very "non-seriousness," what might be called the playfulness of her poetry, which provides the clue to a particularly modernist concern that she shares with her contemporaries—the question of the role and efficacy of language itself. This concern is apparent not only in Smith's poems but also in her novels, and especially in her first, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, published in 1936. It is in this work that she displays her distrust of the very method through which she communicates, for within the novel Smith explores and exposes the

arbitrary nature of language, and of conventional fiction, by forcing her reader to recognize the unavoidable "play" between author and audience, and between signifier and signified.

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida provides a succinct description of the process often emphasized by a Smith text. He notes that "One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence" (50). For Smith this Derridean *jeu* takes the form of a direct confrontation between her author/ial voice and the author/ity of the language which both embodies and restricts her expression. Thus the reader is unable to escape the awareness that she is being exposed to an author for whom, as Martin Pumphrey puts it, "language is an alien even hostile medium" (95). Further, it is Smith's unwillingness to soften her attitude towards language which has influenced the reception of her work. The *Grammatology* observes that "'pure literature' . . . in its irreducibility, also risks limiting the play, restricting it. The desire to restrict play is, moreover, irresistible" (59). Yet for Smith the desire to "restrict play" appears to be very resistible, and this has had the effect of excluding her from the ranks of those who produce "pure literature."

Indeed, in some ways she courts that exclusion, most noticeably through the illustrations which accompany her poetry. Smith drew them herself and insisted that they appear within her texts, declaring to one of her publishers "I would never mind cutting a poem to make room for a full-page drawing" (Spalding 253). Yet their obvious and admitted status as doodles creates an immediate undercutting of expectation. Clearly what Smith desires is the *play* between illustration and text, but such an interaction immediately subverts the "purity," the self-sufficiency of poetic language-in-itself. By employing two different forms of discourse, two forms whose interplay appears antagonistic and contradictory, Smith demonstrates that "signification is formed only within the hollow of difference: of discontinuity and of discreteness, of the division and the reserve of what does not appear" (Derrida 69).

This is not an attempt to claim Smith as some type of proto-deconstructionist, but rather to suggest that her faux-naïf pose is itself a device for calling attention to the uncertainties and protean nature of language. Like Derrida she is very aware that the "self-identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move" (Derrida 49), and also like him she realizes that writing often attempts to deny this fluidity

in the search for transcendence of meaning. If Derrida forces us to recognize that language always carries within it the very contradictions it attempts to deny, then Smith's poetry and prose provide an exploration of the screens and facades literature erects in an effort to spare us that recognition. The subtitle of *Novel on Yellow Paper* is "Work it Out For Yourself," and the Derridean challenge inherent in this phrase, its refusal to assign or impose signification, is characteristic of Smith's attitude towards her role as author. To a certain extent, however, Smith's feelings about language are more overt in her verse, so that as a prelude to an exploration of this novel it may be helpful to look briefly at one of her poems.

Pretty

Why is the word pretty so underrated?
 In November the leaf is pretty when it falls
 The stream grows deep in the woods after rain
 And in the pretty pool the pike stalks

He stalks his prey, and this is pretty too,
 The prey escapes with an underwater flash
 But not for long, the great fish has him now
 The pike is a fish who always has his prey

And this is pretty. The water rat is pretty
 His paws are not webbed, he cannot shut his nostrils
 As the otter can and the beaver, he is torn between
 The land and water. Not 'torn', he does not mind.

The owl hunts in the evening and it is pretty
 The lake water below him rustles with ice
 There is frost coming from the ground, in the air mist
 All this is pretty, it could not be prettier.

Yes, it could always be prettier, the eye abashes
 It is becoming an eye that cannot see enough,
 Out of the wood the eye climbs. This is prettier
 A field in the evening, tilting up.

The field tilts to the sky. Though it is late
 The sky is lighter than the hill field
 All this looks easy but really it is extraordinary
 Well, it is extraordinary to be so pretty.

And it is careless, and that is always pretty
 This field, this owl, this pike, this pool are careless,
 As Nature is always careless and indifferent
 Who sees, who steps, means nothing, and this is pretty.

So a person can come along like a thief—pretty!—
 Stealing a look, pinching the sound and feel,
 Lick the icicle broken from the bank
 And still say nothing at all, only cry pretty.

Cry pretty, pretty, pretty and you'll be able
 Very soon not even to cry pretty
 And so be delivered entirely from humanity
 This is prettiest of all, it is very pretty.

It is not difficult to perceive this poem as an extended exploration of the subjectivity of language. With her initial evocation of the "underrated" (1) word "pretty" Smith begins a process whose goal is apparently to rejuvenate the adjective's meaning by expanding its applicability. Yet as the poem proceeds from the opening stanza's conventionally attractive images of autumn leaves and woodland stream, to those of stalking pike, water rat, hunting owl, and disembodied eye floating above the field, the reader becomes increasingly uneasy with the poet's insistence that these scenes are "pretty." Smith disorients her reader by asserting the legitimacy of her own definitions. Meaning is certainly being expanded, but in ways that call into question the concept of "meaning" itself, since that expansion transforms a trivial, innocuous word into its opposite—into a dark and vaguely sinister epithet. Once such an expansion is complete, and "pretty" can mean anything and everything, it paradoxically means nothing, because its utility as a signifier has been destroyed. The poem's seventh stanza then presents the idea that this is the normal state of the non-human world, for "Nature is always careless and indifferent / Who sees, who steps, means nothing, and this is pretty" (27-28).

Through her manipulation of the word "pretty" the poet has demonstrated the artificiality of language by contrasting its assumed values with

the indifference of the natural world. But she does not stop there, for in the last two stanzas Smith introduces the human element which has to this point been conspicuously absent. Her description of a person who comes along "like a thief" (29) and steals "a look, pinching the sound and feel" (30), likens the imposition of meaning and the appropriation of significance to a kind of larceny—the removal of possibility and the restriction of play whose only result is the fatuous ability to "still say nothing at all, only cry pretty" (32). The final stanza, however, offers a possible escape from the confines of language. By resorting to the children's game of repeating a word over and over until it becomes nonsensical, one can literally force the recognition that language is composed of arbitrary word sounds, and thus be "delivered entirely" (35) from the humanity which depends upon such devices for its definition and existence: "This is prettiest of all, it is very pretty" (36).

But of course by the end of this poem the claim that anything is "pretty," let alone that it is "prettiest of all," can only be ambiguous. On one hand the poet desires the freedom which a recognition of language's subjectivity provides. Yet such a recognition also possesses sinister possibilities of alienation and isolation; it is "pretty" in the same way that the water rat's existence is "pretty"—it provides the opportunity to inhabit two worlds: the world of play and the world of fixed meaning. It is at least possible to suggest that Smith perceived herself in this way, as someone aware of the pitfalls of language and yet determined to utilize its resources, but what is certain is that she embodied this situation in the character of Pompey Casmilus, the heroine of *Novel on Yellow Paper*.

Like her author, who was baptized Florence Margaret, called Peggy, and eventually nicknamed Stevie, Pompey has experienced a renaming: "Did I tell you my name was Pompey Casmilus? Patience I was christened, but later on when I got grown up and out and about in London, I got called Pompey. And it suits me. There's something meretricious and decayed and I'll say, I dare say, elegant about Pompey" (*NYP* 20). The significance of naming, of the words which identify character and self, is important in the novel, because for Pompey her names characterize the conflict between imposed discipline and natural exuberance which typifies her narrative. Patience, with its root in the Latin verb "to suffer," is transformed into the name of a Roman general "whom Stevie would have encountered in her *Selected Letters of Cicero* and which she read in Latin. Cicero describes Pompey as a man of

integrity and high moral character" (Spalding 117). In contrast to this evocation of virtue and solidity is Casmilus, the name Smith believed the Phoenicians gave to Hermes. Smith took the name from Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, and "having the 1832 edition, found under the entry dealing with the god Hermes or Mercury, the phrase 'known also to the Phoenicians as Casmilus,' which is a misprint for Camilus" (Spalding 117). Among his other attributes this god is the patron of trickery, cunning, and eloquence. These qualities certainly hold their place in Pompey's character, and in her relationship with her reader, so that it would not be inaccurate to describe her as mercurial. It is therefore completely appropriate that *Novel on Yellow Paper* begins with an invocation of Pompey's tutelary deity.

Casmilus, whose great name I steal,
Whose name a greater doth conceal,
Indulgence, pray,
And, if I may,
The winged tuft from either heel.

Beginning this book (not as they say 'book'
in our trade—they mean magazine), beginning this book,
I should like if I may, I should like, if I may (that is
the way Sir Phoebus writes), I should like then to say:
Good-bye to all my friends, my beautiful and lovely
friends.

And for why?
Read on, Reader, read on and work it out for
yourself. (*NYP* 9)

This opening section of the novel provides a strong indication of how the text is meant to be read, and of which aspect of Pompey's personality will dominate. After a prayer to the god whom Smith characterized as the "shiftest of namesakes, most . . . delinquent of Olympians" (qtd. in Spalding 118), Pompey immediately echoes "Pretty" by pointing out that even an apparently straightforward word such as "book" may have multiple meanings. It is very tempting to try to limit meaning, however, and for this reason Pompey (and Smith) bids her friends goodbye, because those who treat the novel only as the *roman à clef* it undoubtedly is will be insulted and break off that friendship. As it turned out Smith was correct in her evaluation, and some of her acquaintances did resent

their portrayal in the novel. But the injunction to "work it out for yourself" is not merely an invitation to indulge in discovering the key which will identify the actual individuals and families portrayed. Recurring throughout the work, it is a constant reminder to the reader that such partial interpretations and simplistic reactions are *insufficient*, and should be avoided. Those who insist that "book" or "pretty" can have only one meaning, or that the novel is meant solely to mock those who appear in its pages, will miss the significance of Pompey's narrative, for that significance resides in the play of discourse, not in overdetermined denotation. This being the case, it is fair that the narrator provides an explicit statement about her text.

But first, Reader, I will give you a word of warning. This is a foot-off-the-ground novel that came by the left hand. And the thoughts come and go and sometimes they do not quite come and I do not pursue them to embarrass them with formality to pursue them into a harsh captivity. . . . And if you are a foot-on-the-ground person, this book will be for you a desert of weariness and exasperation. So put it down. Leave it alone. It was a mistake you made to get this book. You did not know. . . . For this book is the talking voice that runs on, and the thoughts come, the way I said, and the people come too, and come and go, to illustrate the thoughts, to point the moral, to adorn the tale. (*NYP* 38-39)

Only readers willing to adopt this kind of flexibility will be sympathetic to the text, for only they will understand Pompey's perception of herself and her society.

Smith's emphasis on her narrator's "thoughts" and "voice" in the preceding quotation is completely appropriate, for it is these two aspects which are most important in bringing Pompey before the reader. In her biography of Smith, Spalding notes that

Marius the Epicurean can be regarded as precursor of *Novel on Yellow Paper* in that the interior monologue technique which Stevie pursues is prefigured in Pater's concentration, not on character, action or plot, but on a series of meditations on sensations and ideas." (42)

Like Pater's protagonist, and other centres of consciousness such as Leopold Bloom and Clarissa Dalloway, Pompey's most vivid experiences are internal, and whatever the reader may learn about the world through which she moves is communicated largely through her reflections upon

that world. But in the transference to the written page something is lost, as both Pompey and Smith are forced to compromise the voice that embodies those reflections. At the suggestion of Ian Parsons, Smith revised her manuscript so that it contained more conventional pointing, whereas in its original state "she made only minimal use of punctuation, the words flowing unhindered until a natural pause invites the use of a period" (Spalding 113). In a passage which collapses author and narrator, Pompey mourns the resulting loss:

And for my part I will try to punctuate this book to make it easy for you to read, and to break it up, with spaces for a pause, as the publisher has asked me to do. But this I find very extremely difficult. . . . Oh talking voice that is so sweet, how hold you alive in captivity, how point you with commas, semi-colons, dashes, pauses and paragraphs? (NYP 39)

Here Smith can be seen exposing the kinds of limitations language imposes at the most basic of levels. In the necessity to make communication "easy," to provide a more orderly text, the complexity of thought and voice are tamed, held in "captivity," and a bit of their life removed.

But if Pompey is forced to make some concessions, she is by no means willing to let others dictate completely the way in which her text will proceed. Thus just before she confesses to the imposition of punctuation, she indulges in a characteristic exchange with the reader. While discussing the effect cities have upon her, Pompey notes:

Always there are some things that exasperate. I get much more furious in London than in the country. Oh beastly London—and yet at times so fine. Oh how I wish I had some money, then I could buy a haystack and go to sleep on it. No, Reader, this is a symbol, and why should I not use a symbol if I like? This haystack is my ivory tower. Sometimes *plus que jamais je sens le besoin de vivre dans un monde à part, en haut d'une tour d'ivoire.*

Do you ever feel that way, you fool? (NYP 37)

This type of abrupt, confrontational address to the reader is common, and serves to break down any illusion that we have entered directly into Pompey's mind. Instead, it emphasizes that Pompey and the reader are distinct, and engaged in a textual process of give and take which prevents any easy relationship being established between the novel and its audience. Similarly, Pompey's aggressive assertion that the haystack is a

symbol, and that she can use any symbol she likes, calls attention to the devices of writing itself, and to the fact that what is being presented is a construct based upon such conventions. In both cases the text self-consciously asserts its own existence, thus fracturing the transparency of language and exposing the artificiality of its mechanics. Finally, Pompey's sudden shift to French, which appears throughout the novel along with equally unprepared-for infusions of German, Italian, and Latin, forces the reader to acknowledge the subjectivity of modes of expression by forcing her to cope not only with "foreign" languages but with a "dead" language as well. The repeated use of such methods creates a novel which subverts traditional ideas about the purely mimetic role of language and fiction, and prepares the reader for a different kind of engagement with the text.

Once Smith's narrator has convinced the reader to accept her "foot-off-the-ground" novel by in essence demonstrating that attempts to impose order are both misplaced and fruitless, she then invites the reader to play along with her "new" aesthetic. And this aesthetic is based largely upon the perception that uncertainty of meaning and definition are not to be denied, but rather embraced. Language is, by its nature, indeterminate, so that "From the moment that the sign appears, that is to say from the very beginning, there is no chance of encountering anywhere the purity of 'reality,' 'unicity,' 'singularity'" (Derrida 91). Thus Pompey herself is not always in full control of either her thoughts or her text. After a long meditation on the nature of German cruelty Pompey finds that she needs some help from the reader to complete her idea.

But I got back thinking how they might treat dear Rosa. And oh how I suddenly warmed up to Rosa thinking of her Herman, and yes even Lottie, yea and even I'll go further and say that husband of hers, whose name I forget, though you'll find it written if you turn back a page or two. (*NYP* 108)

The reader becomes part of the textual process because Pompey is both unable and unwilling to provide all the answers. To do so would be to oversimplify the complexity of human experience and to give a false authority to the words which describe it. Instead, she accepts a loss of authority in exchange for an interaction between narrator and audience. As she will say later, "Well see here Mr. Wedding-Guest-Reader, you got to do some work" (*NYP* 174). This invocation of Coleridge's delayed

partygoer is appropriate because he, like Pompey's reader, must provide his own significance to the tale which he hears. For Smith attempts to impose meaning falsify meaning, and *Novel on Yellow Paper* avoids this trap by forcing the recognition that language and the conventions of fiction are themselves artificial constructs which create their own, often unacknowledged, limitations.

Reviewing the novel for the *Daily Mail*, on 17 September 1936, Douglas West observed that *Novel on Yellow Paper* "suggests what would have happened if Miss Gertrude Stein had written 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes'" (16). And Robert Nichols, assuming Smith's name to be a pseudonym, wrote to Virginia Woolf that "You are Stevie Smith. No doubt of it. And *Yellow Paper* is far and away your best book" (qtd. in Spalding 115). Although both of these quotations may strike us as rather humorous today, there can be little doubt that their associations are legitimate. Smith had read and admired *The Common Reader*, and sections of Woolf's essay "Modern Fiction" are clearly applicable to *Novel on Yellow Paper*. Thus when Woolf observes that the "mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel," and that it is the goal of modern fiction to "record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, [to] trace the pattern, however disconnected in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (Woolf 150), the connection with Pompey's shifting and fragmented perceptions is clear. Similarly, Stein's abstractionist attempts to expand the ways in which language functions are echoed in Smith's use of repetition to establish the rhythm of Pompey's speech. In her essay "How Writing is Written," delivered as a lecture in 1935, Stein explicitly rejects the use of conventional punctuation and presents the following summary of what she is attempting.

I was trying to get this present immediacy without trying to drag in anything else. I had to use present participles, new constructions of grammar. The grammar-constructions are correct, but they are changed, in order to get this immediacy. In short . . . I have been trying in every possible way to get the sense of immediacy, and practically all the work I have done has been in that direction. (Stein 492)

Novel on Yellow Paper also experiments with "new constructions" in order to create "immediacy" and the contemporaneousness which Stein

sees as so essential to writing. Smith's exploration of the ways in which language and fictional form shape and are shaped by the interrelationship between author and reader clearly falls within the boundaries of modernism. It is therefore fitting that she should be linked with her contemporaries.

Yet it is Pompey's voice, the tone and the way in which she addresses the reader, which distinguishes Smith's novel. Filled with colloquialisms, digressions, favorite quotations, poems, and an often caustic wit, the text attracts even as it occasionally irritates. As Spalding puts it, *Novel on Yellow Paper* "darts and swoops from incident to incident, from the lyrical and poignant to the comic, colloquial, and sometimes cruel" (Spalding 115), and it is this lightness of touch that makes Smith unique. Derrida's theoretical ideas on the play of language could be applied to many modernist authors, but few if any could be said to be as playful as Stevie Smith. Thus although Mark Storey tends to perceive her as more distinctly separated from other writers of her time than do I, he nonetheless rightly observes that "Stevie Smith's work has an importance which belies, and is belied by, the image of eccentricity" (42). Her ultimate distrust is saved for those who claim to possess the ability to control and define language, and her text amply demonstrates the spurious nature of such claims. *Novel on Yellow Paper* celebrates the play of meaning and the risks of interpretation by engaging the reader with Pompey's mercurial subversion of traditional expectations and assumptions, even as it acknowledges the arbitrary nature of the signs which embody that subversion. And while at times this leaves us feeling like the "wretched Reader, so mishandled and provoked" with whom Pompey commiserates near the novel's conclusion (*NYP* 229), there can be no doubt that in this work Smith successfully explores the ambiguity of the linguistic tools with which we shape our conceptions of identity and reality.

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