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Lee Smith and the Bronte Sisters

by H.H. Campbell

Early in her recent book *Lee Smith*, Dorothy Combs Hill names Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Elizabeth Spencer, Katherine Anne Porter, and Virginia Woolf as among the early inspirations who taught Smith that she "could write out of female experience" (8). My purpose here is to demonstrate that Charlotte and Emily Bronte are also among the most important inspirations for Smith's work. I will begin with some of Smith's more obvious—if less significant—connections with the Brontes and build up to what I believe to be the most important relationship: that between Smith's *Oral History* (1983) and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847).

The most readily apparent examples of Smith's use of the Brontes are, however, the several references in *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988) to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Smith's protagonist letter writer Ivy Rowe, who, like Jane Eyre, is writing a kind of autobiography, reports when in her mid-teens, "I am reading a grate book Jane Eyre" (86); and she draws on this reading for terminology and images that allow her to impose some shape and definition on the powerful emotions she is beginning to experience, emotions that sometimes startle and frighten her.

When Jane Eyre is undergoing her ordeal of deciding whether or not to leave Rochester, she says that "a hand of fiery iron grasped my vitals. Terrible moment: full of struggle, blackness, burning!" (278) Ivy borrows and employs this "fiery hand" image at least a half-dozen times, to describe both the height of feeling she experiences at a religious meeting ("A hand of fire clutched me in the stomach . . . , it was the

hand of God almighty" [102]) and the physical passion aroused in her by the young man Lonnie Rash ("When he kissed me I felt that fiery hand as always" [118]).

In her anxiety and confusion over her feelings for Lonnie, fearing that she may be "going crazy" and in danger of "a complete nervous breakdown like Jane Eyre when she got shut up in the Red Room" (104), Ivy is drawing on another of the powerful scenes in *Jane Eyre*, a scene in which the child Jane is subjected by her cruel guardian to a frightening and permanently scarring emotional experience. Later Ivy uses Jane's great love for Rochester as a measure of her own love for Lonnie Rash and finds the latter wanting, "not a love to stop the heart" (113).

Smith again draws on *Jane Eyre*, this time with no indication of the source, in setting up Ivy Rowe's relationship to the Boston missionary Miss Torrington, who, recognizing Ivy's gifts, would take her out of the hills to be educated for a higher calling. There are close parallels here to Jane Eyre's situation with the sternly religious cousin St. John Rivers, who would make a missionary of Jane and even have her enter with him into a loveless marriage, entirely against her own nature and inclinations. Rivers and Miss Torrington are, for example, given quite similar physical descriptions. Both appear cold and hard like a piece of sculpture, he like an antique statue, she like a cameo; he with "marble-seeming features" (323), a "high forehead, colorless as ivory," and "eyes . . . large and blue" (303), she with "face . . . carved in pure white marble" (1045), "forehead . . . wide and white," "big deep eyes . . . dark blue" (100).

In addition, St. John Rivers and Miss Torrington alike threaten their charges with the displeasure of God if they do not use their talents as the adviser wishes: Rivers warns Jane that she must turn "to profit the talents which God has committed to your keeping and of which He will surely one day demand a strict account" (344); and Miss Torrington tells Ivy that "it is a sin . . . if we do not use our talents that God has given us . . . it may be the greatest sin of all" (105). Both Jane and Ivy are also offered a "love" that they consider counterfeit (Jane the marriage of convenience with Rivers and Ivy a lesbian relationship with Miss Torrington); and both finally reject these somewhat dubious apostles of the "higher calling" and return to their earthly lovers, Jane to Rochester and Ivy to Lonnie Rash.

Other than a brief passing reference to the Brontes in another novel, *Black Mountain Breakdown* (1980),¹ I believe that the references in *Fair and Tender Ladies* represent the only specific mentions of the Brontes in Smith's books. Nevertheless, before going on to my main topic, the rela-

tionship of *Oral History* and *Wuthering Heights*, it may be worthwhile to mention just briefly some apparent borrowings from another of Charlotte Brontë's novels, *Villette*.

Two of the mountaineer Almarine Cantrell's sons in *Oral History* are named Isadore and Nun, and their mother is Vashti. These names are somewhat unusual, even exotic, for turn-of-the-century backwoods southwest Virginia; and it is likely that Smith's choosing them is linked to her reading of *Villette*. Isidore and Vashti are not only names of characters in *Villette*, but also chapter headings (9 and 23). Nun, while not the name of a character, is one of the most prominently-used words in the book and in most editions is printed in several places very noticeably in all capitals, as in NUN. Justine Poole, the name of another character in *Oral History*, could be taken from other names prominent in *Villette* (Justine Marie) and *Jane Eyre* (Grace Poole).

The most meaningful and significant impact of a Brontë book on Smith's writing, however, occurs in a situation where there are no immediately obvious mentions or parallels at all: in the relationship between Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Smith's *Oral History*. I will attempt to demonstrate that *Oral History* is influenced in several crucial ways by Smith's reading of *Wuthering Heights*.

The two novels share some general characteristics such as an isolated rural setting and the constants of a family dwelling and a graveyard; but the more meaningful parallels are in the areas of structure, narration, and characterization. Structurally, both books begin with scenes in present time, and return to the past for essentially all the action of the story, and by the end have circled back again to the present. *Wuthering Heights* begins in 1801, soon returns to the beginning of Heathcliff's history in the 1770s, and by the end has brought the story back to the present 1801–1802. *Oral History* begins on a summer day about 1980, quickly goes all the way back to 1898 and even earlier for the beginning of Almarine Cantrell's story, and at the end returns to the same evening on which it began.

In the present time scenes with which both books open, the curtain rises on a few survivors from the much larger cast of characters of these tragic tales, mostly now dead. Both opening sections also include outsiders who draw erroneous conclusions about the relationships of the people present. At the beginning of *Wuthering Heights*, for example, Lockwood botches things and angers his hosts by first assuming that Cathy is the wife of Heathcliff, and then that Hareton is Heathcliff's son. In *Oral History*, Jennifer, knowing almost nothing of the tortured Cantrell and Wade family relationships, assumes that Ora Mae is her grandmother and Little Luther

is her grandfather, neither of which is true. Both outsiders experience in these opening scenes, furthermore, a substantial element of “spookiness” (Lockwood the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw, and Jennifer the haunted Cantrell cabin), as if among ghostly presences as well as the living.

One of the most interesting and telling areas of similarity between *Wuthering Heights* and *Oral History* is the kind of use Bronte and Smith make of their male and female narrators. *Wuthering Heights* is, like Smith’s novel, literally an “oral history.” Bronte uses what might be called a layered narration, with Lockwood (from whom we hear everything) sometimes narrating his own direct experience, more frequently reporting what Nelly Dean (from whom most of the story comes) has experienced and is telling him, and, at times, what Nelly says that others have reported or written to her. Smith employs eight different first-person narrators more or less sequentially.² Three of the eight, however, are by far the most important: Granny Younger, whose long narration opens the Cantrell family history in 1898; Sally Wade, whose equally substantial story brings the history near to its close; and Richard Burlage, whose extensive “Journal” and “Discourses” dominate the center of the book.

In *Wuthering Heights* and *Oral History* these male and female narrators contrast sharply—and in remarkably similar ways—in their roles, their methods, and their effectiveness, with Richard Burlage being an exaggerated version of Lockwood and with Granny Younger, Sally, and to some extent Ora Mae also, fulfilling the role and function assigned to Nelly Dean in the earlier novel.

The male narrators, Lockwood and Burlage, are outsiders who mainly dwell egotistically on themselves, who are incapable of any genuine comprehension or involvement, who remain almost entirely untouched by pathos and tragedy, and whose language too often borders on meaningless hyperbole and/or abstraction with little or no identifiable relationship to the hard realities around them. The women narrators, on the other hand, are for the most part involved, knowledgeable, confident, and—in contrast to Lockwood and Burlage—capable of turning outward and telling stories of others, as when Sally pauses to remark, “It’s her [Pearl’s] story from here on out” (261).

There are a number of specific parallels between the situations of Lockwood and Burlage: they are both young men, city dwellers who find themselves in rural, isolated areas; they are both fleeing failed romances; and both see and are greatly attracted to a young woman in the rural environment. They also reflect in similar ways on the fancied moral superiority of the rural life; they both undergo a spell of illness; and they both

leave toying with the idea of taking the young woman back to the city with them. Although both come back one time to the rural setting, neither has developed any more real understanding or commitment than during the first visit.

Although neither Lockwood nor Burlage could possibly understand much after the briefest exposure to the rural characters, both are soon ready with sweeping comparisons: Lockwood “perceive[s] that people in these regions . . . do live more in earnest, more in themselves, and less in surface change, and frivolous external things” (52). Similarly, Burlage, even before he reaches the mountains, studies his seat companions on the train and decides that there are “two ways to face the world. One way as embodied by this old woman—simple, unassuming . . . a naturalness inherent in her every move. The other, exemplified by the girl—smartness, sophistication, veneer without substance” (102).

And one notes how the reactions to their first glimpses of Cathy and Dory closely resemble each other: Lockwood sees in Cathy “the most exquisite little face that I have ever had the pleasure of beholding: small features, very fair; flaxen ringlets, or rather golden, hanging loose on her delicate neck; and eyes . . . irresistible” (8). Burlage, echoing both the content and structure of Lockwood’s description, calls Dory “the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. . . . Her alabaster face is framed by the finespun golden curls. . . . Her eyes are deep, limitless violet” (118).

During their first rural sojourns (Lockwood from October to January, Burlage from September to January), neither shows any willingness or even capability to love truly or commit genuinely. Lockwood fears and evades commitment altogether, and Burlage, although he indulges himself physically and describes his feelings for Dory in the most hyperbolic terms (“I felt as if I were Jesus, and the stone door to my tomb was rolled away!” [119]), cannot even “see” her except in the most idealized and unrealistic of images. Burlage’s glimpses of Dory are typically flooded with light from behind or blurred by her hair falling or blowing, conditions that prevent his seeing her face, a situation commented on several times in the novel.

Despite his utter inability to even approach Cathy, Lockwood leaves for London still reflecting that it would have been “more romantic than a fairy tale . . . had she and I struck up an attachment . . . and migrated together, into the stirring atmosphere of the town!” (258). And Burlage, despite his unconvincing earlier statements about Dory, professes to believe that “my only hope of salvation in all the world” is to take Dory back to Richmond with him (163).

Both Lockwood and Burlage do later return to the rural setting, but for reasons having nothing to do with Cathy or Dory. Lockwood comes back to Wuthering Heights a few months later only because he “unexpectedly” finds himself in the area. Burlage returns to Black Rock ten years or so later only because he wishes to “capture a bit of the past” (217) with his new enthusiasm, the camera. When Lockwood’s chance to speak with Cathy comes, he feels “irresistibly impelled to escape” (286) and runs away; when Burlage tries to “capture” Dory from a distance with his camera, a “mere bright blur” (228) is the result, indicative of the fact that she has never really existed for him except as a “bright blur.”

Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights* and her opposite numbers in *Oral History*, Granny Younger and Sally Wade, are, on the other hand, insiders, natural talkers and story tellers with real knowledge to impart. They share a long acquaintance with the area and its people and have been directly and intimately involved with the lives of the principal characters. For the most part, they employ a plain, practical language, far less abstract than that employed by Lockwood and Burlage. Even the touch of pride and vanity they share about their own knowledge and good sense gives them the confidence needed to forge ahead in narrating these complicated, disturbing, and tragic tales.

In addition to their naturally being talkers of an honest, down-to-earth sort, the key to the superiority of these narrators in both novels is their knowledge. They are themselves aware that to “know” is their primary storytelling credential: Nelly Dean opens her narration with “I know all about it” (28), Granny Younger hers with “I know what I know. I know moren most folks. . . . I know moren I want to tell you, and moren you want to know” (27). Another of the female narrators in *Oral History*, Ora Mae, comments, “I wisht I didn’t know what-all I know” and “I know a lot more than I want to” (207, 215).

This superiority of knowledge comes not just from closeness but from length of acquaintance, with Nelly and Sally, for example, both being able to give first-hand impressions of the childhoods of some of the principal characters and also of their deaths many years later. Knowledge extends in each case, furthermore, to the witnessing of key private events not meant to be observed at all, as with Nelly Dean’s witness of Heathcliff’s surreptitious embrace of Isabella (95), Granny Younger’s of Almarine’s kissing of Red Emmy (52), and Sally’s of Ora Mae throwing the earrings into the gorge (277).

All three narrators, furthermore, credit themselves with having more wisdom and/or common sense than the more emotional and less restrained

principal characters; and all three effect—or at least attempt to effect—a change in the course of things by offering advice to these less rational characters. In the midst of the madness and emotional excess around her, Nelly Dean believes herself to be “a steady, reasonable kind of body,” who has “undergone sharp discipline which has taught me wisdom” (52–53); and she freely offers her advice to Catherine, Heathcliff, Isabella, Cathy, and others throughout the story. Granny Younger on several occasions advises Almarine Cantrell, as when she tells the young man, “What you need is a girl” (36) or when, later on, she tries to help him with the more serious business of getting the “witch” Red Emmy out of his house and out of his life. Sally Wade believes herself to be “the only one with any sense” (240) in her family; and she too offers advice, as when she tells her unstable and impulsive sister Pearl, “I’d think twice before I left my husband” (271). That the advice is in almost all cases unavailing to avert tragedy says more about the sheer power of the destructive forces operating in the characters’ lives than it does about the quality or sincerity of the advice.

Telling similarities between *Wuthering Heights* and *Oral History* can also be mapped in the area of characterization. First, although not a major element, there are some noticeable parallels between Heathcliff and Almarine Cantrell. The wellspring of Nelly Dean’s narration of the Earnshaws and Lintons is Lockwood’s curiosity about Heathcliff’s “history,” and the point of Granny Younger’s long opening narrative in *Oral History* is to give us an account of the earlier life of Almarine, the patriarch of the twentieth-century Cantrells. Both Heathcliff and Almarine are strong male characters who, in youth, go away for several years and come back after mysterious periods of absence that the narrator can only speculate about. Both are described as having grown into remarkably fine-looking men: Heathcliff “a tall, athletic, well-formed man” (81) and Almarine “so tall and so straight . . . the finest-looking man you ever laid your eyes on” (36). Nelly thinks, from Heathcliff’s appearance, that he may have “been in the army” (81); and Granny, from “the way Almarine looked,” is inclined to believe the rumor that he “had been in prison someplace” (31). Nelly thinks the returned Heathcliff looks “much older” (81), and Granny reports that Almarine “appeared oldern he should have been” (31). Both Heathcliff and Almarine, furthermore, find and then lose early their “thing to love” (for Heathcliff, Catherine; for Almarine, Pricey Jane) and, as a result, become hard and mean, remote and forbidding.

A related character parallel is that between Isabella Linton in *Wuthering Heights* and Rose Hibbits in *Oral History*. Both Isabella (“I do hate him . . . would that he could be blotted out of creation” [124, 147]) and Rose (“He

was awful. I will hate him now to the day I die" [81]) give shrill, abusive accounts of their mistreatment by—and escape from—Heathcliff and Almarine, men they had once aspired to. Both women also describe how the man had "carried on" at the death of the loved one, Heathcliff "till he grew hoarse, and his voice was strangled in his throat" (148), Almarine "rant[ing] and rav[ing] . . . screaming out like a crazy man" (83, 81).

But the most interesting character parallel is that between Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* and Dory Cantrell of *Oral History*. Each is a beautiful young woman who stands at the center of her respective novel and whose life ends prematurely and tragically for essentially the same reason: each is caught between an unsatisfying reality (including an unhappy marriage) on the one hand and her strong, unfulfilled dreams and desires on the other. Both characters, furthermore, retain a strong element of mystery, with dimensions that the narrators Nelly Dean and Sally Wade do not or even cannot understand.

At almost the exact midpoint of *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine gives birth and dies; and, in one way or another, all earlier and later action might be said to pivot on that crucial point. Living or dead, Catherine's presence or influence dominates the novel from beginning to end. Dory, although a less pervasive presence in *Oral History*, is nevertheless the character whose fate is central to this story of the "curse" on the Cantrells. She is the only character present, in life or in active memory, for essentially the entire eighty years or so of the main action. The birth of Dory, "the prettiest baby girl I have ever seed before or since" (67), is recounted by Granny Younger, the first narrator; Dory is the principal subject of Richard Burlage's lengthy narrations in the center of the novel; and the account of Dory's later life and death is narrated by her daughter Sally, the final narrator in the book.

Catherine, married to Edgar Linton, feels suffocated in the civilized environment of Thrushcross Grange and longs for the "half savage and hardy, and free" life (107) that she associates with *Wuthering Heights* and with Heathcliff. She is "a haughty, headstrong creature" (55) whose eyes "appeared always to gaze beyond, and far beyond" (133). Dory, married to Luther Wade and living in the depressing environment of a coal camp, still feels strongly the lure of the more romantic and exciting life that Richard Burlage had given her a glimpse of and had promised to share with her. A "stubborn" woman who "you can't tell . . . a thing and you never could" (211), she seems to have "something else on her mind all the time" (211) and, according to her daughter Sally, was "waiting somehow, caught up in a waiting dream" (239) before she "fell—or laid down—on the spur line, and the train cut off her head" (245).

I have attempted to argue that—along with some lesser influences such as that of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* on Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*—there are telling and important similarities between Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Lee Smith's *Oral History*, most importantly in the areas of structure, narration, and characterization. In other words, *Oral History* would not be the work it is if *Wuthering Heights* did not exist; and, furthermore, Smith's novel, perhaps her best known, is a richer, more substantial, more important work because *Wuthering Heights* exists as an important part of its background.³

NOTES

1. See *Black Mountain Breakdown*: "Jules, whose field is the nineteenth century, thinks suddenly of how the Brontës kept catching cold at each other's funeral and dying" (82).

2. Smith also utilizes third-person narration in several sections of *Oral History*.

3. Some credit for the ideas in this essay belongs to two Virginia Tech freshman Honors English classes with whom I discussed the topic in 1992 and 1994. Also, I would like to add briefly here one example of how a thoughtful reading of *Oral History* might, in turn, influence a reading or rereading of *Wuthering Heights*. For me, the character and function of Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights* is brought more clearly and sharply into focus by my encounter with Richard Burlage, whose quite similar character and function is far more fully defined, and more exaggerated, in *Oral History*. Lockwood's self-centeredness, lack of depth or comprehension, and ineffective language present themselves more readily and clearly to the reader who has met, recognized, and pondered the character Burlage. This increased clarity and sharpness with which Lockwood is seen as both character and narrator will inevitably affect, in a fundamental way, one's reading or rereading of *Wuthering Heights*.

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