

*'All changed, changed utterly':
endangered identities in Autumn
by Ali Smith*

by Chiara Sciarrino*

Elisabeth wonders what's going to happen to all the care assistants. She realizes she hasn't so far encountered a single care assistant here who isn't from somewhere else in the world.

Autumn

«All changed, changed utterly», pronounces one of the characters of Ali Smith's most recent novel, *Spring*, quoting the well-known poem «Easter 1916» by Irish poet William Butler Yeats.

In a time of walls and lockdown, the Scottish writer, born in 1962, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, opens up a big dilemma: if the time we are living in is changing, can fiction change the nature of history? Can novels change reality? How should authors approach the task of writing a novel today? Can a text be always didactic, that is, must a reader learn something from every text? Can a text become a catalyst for change in a given culture?

This is after all what many of her contemporaries living in Great Britain most likely ask themselves today. This is one of the major reasons she embarked on the generous project of writing about the time she is living in and producing a seasonal quartet of novels, of which three have already been published: *Autumn* in 2016, *Winter* in 2017 and *Spring*, in 2019¹. Her writing encompasses traditional

* Università degli Studi di Palermo.

¹ A. Smith, *Autumn*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2016. A. Smith, *Spring*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 2019. A. Smith, *Winter*, New York, Anchor Books, Penguin, 2017.

definitions of the genre and engages the reader into a sequence of apparently disconnected narrations, whose interweaving will only be gradually loosened as the reading of the story goes on.

Style versus content is something Ali Smith discussed at an International writers' festival in Edinburgh, emphasizing the importance that the major issues dealt with in the Cyclops Episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses* – violence, history, hatred, love, life – are all about reality, yet presented in a style which defies all boundaries as this is what literature can do, i.e. while drawing attention to itself, it entertains the readers and makes them escape into layers of would-be morality.

Form is of particular interest to her, as a writer of a type of fiction which dramatizes the impossible dilemma of telling a true story in a credible way. Form is the style which allows her to create a sense of realism yet, at the same time, with its raptures and narrative techniques, gives the effect of the trauma within that realism. This is reinforced by a Bakhtinian juxtaposition of distinct narrating modes, or multiple narrations, which conveys a sense of displacement or *estrangement*.

This is what Smith does when writing a short story about asylum seekers, «The Detainee's Tale», published in support of the Refugee Tales Project in 2015, which not only tells about people detained while seeking asylum, but also opens up a debate, thus making literature a means through which the policies of immigration detention can be thought of, reconsidered. This is what she does in *Autumn*, where the deconstruction of essential identities is seen as a necessary condition for an adequate understanding of what happens within English society today: she invites some responses on careful readers through carefully orchestrated formal strategies and important themes which raise readers' consciousness.

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Celebrated as the first post-Brexit novel in newspaper reviews, *Autumn* is the first of a quartet of planned seasonal books, of which the fourth, *Summer*, will be published in 2019. In *Autumn* some of the jerkiness of postreferendum national identity appears most prominently in the scenes which follow the novel's British protagonist, a thirty-two-old art history university lecturer, Elisabeth Demand, to a post office where she applies for a passport.

It is not the first time she has been there. In fact, the passport application begins as a bureaucratic farce, reinforced by the postal assistant's comments about the seriousness of the whole business of

asking for a passport and getting it, increased by the gradual discovery that it is not because she wants to leave the country that she has applied for it, but it is simply because she does not have a valid document which she was asked for, when first visiting – after a long time – the man she had spent much time with when she was young, her neighbor, Daniel, now unconsciously lying on a bed of a nursing home.

During the hundredth encounter with bureaucracy, Elisabeth asks the novel's central question about the nature of identity documents: «So what does a piece of paper prove, exactly, in the end?»² Can it show how you are? Or, is it only a physical document, a textual object which she needs to go into a building? Elisabeth's insistence in having her picture taken for the passport sharply contrasts with the absurd observation made by the woman behind the counter upon the size of her head and the hair on her forehead, which sharpens the feeling of distance and alterity between single identities and public institutions:

There's a problem, I'm afraid, the woman says.

What? Elisabeth says.

This piece of hair here should be off the face, the woman says [...] In any case, the hair is irrelevant, the woman says. Your eyes are too small.

Oh God, Elisabeth says [...] Your eyes don't sit with the permissible regularity inside the shaded area, she says. This doesn't line up. This should be in the middle and, as you can see, it's at the side of your nose³.

Elisabeth's insistence on the importance of having a picture which shows exactly how she is, epitomizes Smith's depiction of the «worst of times», as the opening lines of the work, dickensian remember⁴: searing divisions through society, a demise of faith in democracy, an interest into the relationship between the self and the other, into the dynamics of guest and host – Elisabeth is not a foreigner, after all, but she is considered as such – surface in many places of her fiction, from *Hotel World* (2001) to *The Accidental* (2005), taking up an unequivocal position, an overt response to the present, in her later novels. Elsewhere,

² Smith, *Autumn*, cit., p. 106.

³ Ivi, pp. 107-108.

⁴ The passage will be quoted, read aloud by the protagonist, Elisabeth, to the sleeping Daniel, towards the end of the novel, in a way connecting it back with the long list of contrasting images of pages 59, 60 and 61: «*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us*», ivi, p. 201.

in the most recent past, her concern about these issues has led to the writing of a short story, «The Art of Elsewhere»⁵, commissioned by the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2010, which describes an elsewhere, with no borders, no passports or immigration controls.

The presence of a sudden border echoes in unexpected moments of truth of *Autumn*, where Elisabeth's mother – and eventually, Elisabeth herself – notices that a fence has been raised not far from her house. Her mother tries to draw a line on a local map with a red pen to understand more:

She points to a spot quite far inland, on the new red line. That's where the World War II pillbox fell into the sea ten days ago, she says. She points to the other side of the map, furthest from the coast. That's where the new fence has gone up, she says. Look. [...] Apparently a fence three metre high with a roll of razorwire along the top of it has been created across a stretch of land not far from the village. It has security cameras on posts all along it. It encloses a piece of land that's got nothing in it but furze, sandy flats, tufts of long grass, scrappy trees, little clumps of wildflower. Go and see it, her mother says. I want you to do something about it⁶.

Only a week has passed since the Brexit Referendum but things seem to have utterly changed. Her mother is unable to understand but also unable to stay still. Her initial confession effectively surprises the reader and anticipates the strength of her gestures, as we would later find her attacking the electric fence with objects of different sorts, more than once:

I'm tired, she says.

It's only two miles, Elisabeth says.

That's not what I mean, she says. I'm tired of the news. I'm tired of the way it makes things spectacular that aren't, and deals so simplistically with what's truly appalling. I'm tired of the vitriol. I'm tired of the anger, I'm tired of the meanness, I'm tired of the selfishness. I'm tired of how we're doing nothing to stop it. I'm tired of how we're encouraging it. I'm tired of the violence there is and I'm tired of the violence that's on its way, that's coming, that hasn't happened yet. I'm tired of liars. I'm tired of sanctified liars. I'm tired of how those liars have let this happen. I'm tired of having to wonder whether they did it out of stupidity or did it on purpose. I'm tired of lying governments. I'm tired of people not caring whether they're being lied to any more. I'm tired of being made to feel this fearful. I'm tired of animosity. I'm tired of pusillanimosity⁷.

⁵ A. Smith, *Elsewhere*, in "Public Library and Other Stories", London, Hamish Hamilton, 2015.

⁶ Smith, *Autumn*, cit., pp. 54-55.

⁷ Ivi, pp. 56-57.

The fence, which is heavily guarded by security, has been installed in open nature to usurp a piece of common land for an unclear purpose. It brings up associations with detention camps for refugees while suggesting/hinting at a border-like division between Scotland and the rest of the country, possibly due to major differences in the referendum results, thus symbolizing a distinct form of distance from what are the real, important issues for commonsense ordinary people.

Though unprecise topographical details are given in the novel, we infer that the house is somewhere in Scotland, close to the «border» with England. The fence then turns into a key symbol of what can be done, a symbol of hope and resilience as Elisabeth's mother is arrested after her attacks to it.

This is why the outburst of Elisabeth's mother is important as it establishes an important thread that runs through the novel's separate sections: it leads into the following chapter, where the narrative of the disappointment, designed not a series of mere clear repetitions, but mainly as a set of contrasting images and concepts, continues, clearly positioning the text into the Remain campaign side.

The feeling of being in a place which the characters hardly identify with, the disbelief into the now which comes with erecting instead of removing borders, make *Autumn* an engaged book, stressing the importance of the richness of multicultural and multiethnic identities and the absurdity of real political outcomes which work as a backdrop for the deployment of the story.

Ali Smith insists on the importance of content over style, as it has the power to «dismantle authority» and make the experience of reading a book a communal one rather than a purely individual one. Consciences are raised while a dickensian list of contrasts is provided to describe present day reality. The constant repetition of a key phrase, «All across the country», in a whole chapter, sums up the predominant collective state of confusion and public feelings in the weeks following the referendum, of which newspapers, day after day, gave a vivid account:

All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing.
All across the country, what had happened whipped about itself as if a live electric wire had snapped off a pylon in a storm and was whipping about in the air above the trees, the roofs, the traffic.
All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the

wrong thing. All across the country, people looked up Google: *what is EU?* All across the country, people looked up Google: *move to Scotland*. All across the country, people looked up Google: *Irish passport applications*. All across the country, people called each other cunts. All across the country, people felt unsafe. All across the country, people were laughing their heads off. All across the country, people felt legitimized. All across the country, people felt bereaved and shocked. All across the country, people felt righteous. All across the country, people felt sick. All across the country, people felt history at their shoulder. All across the country, people felt like they counted for nothing. All across the country people had pinned their hopes on it⁸.

What is striking is that form never loses its importance in the novel. While the omniscient third person narration is sometimes substituted by the third person narration, narratives are presented, as disjointed accounts are given, and multiple strategies foreground the ethical processes at work in the telling and receiving of stories, as each new section calls for a repositioning of their own relation to the whole story world, a repeated negotiation of response and responsibility.

A disoriented, fragmenting portrayal is, for instance, the one offered at the beginning of the text when the narration of Daniel's consciousness is dominated by fictional facts as well as the narrator's phrases of description and introduction, to a far degree than either of the others, so that as readers we observe his from without almost as much as we hear his internal thoughts.

This gives way to the disorienting, fragmenting portrayal of reality which comes to be intertwined with a dream-like status where the indeterminate temporal location is conveyed by the unstable tense usage, the present. As readers, we do not know nor do we clearly understand what is happening; we cannot make sense of what we read as it is the author herself or better, the narrator, who keeps doubting whether it is a dream or not. It is Daniel who is dreaming and remembering, unconscious and unable to wake up as he is lying on a bed of a caring house, now a hundred years of age.

Smith thus creates a parallel world of his mind during which nature plays an important role: descriptions of imaginary and lived places affirm its importance, its aspects, its role within the life of the characters and Smith's fiction. Autumn, with its colours, its shapes, its smells, its rhythm takes over, representing an alternative to an epoch with «people saying stuff to each other and none of it actually ever

⁸ Ivi, pp. 59-60.

becoming dialogue»⁹ or «waking up feeling cheated of something all over the country»¹⁰; an alternative made up of fantasies and memories, providing an opportunity for seasons to still exist in a time where they no longer seem to do so.

Still, this is a place which is still able to vividly call the contemporariness of migrants' and refugees' arrival on the beaches of Italy and other countries, a place where the present also reminds us about the past.

«Community», «identity» and «stability» are, not accidentally, key concepts, cited by Elisabeth, who thus remembers Aldous Huxley. If the idea of stability is questioned and the idea of community is at risk, Smith's characters still know who they are and what they think: the unkind invitation written out on someone's house walls, close to her mother's apartment, i.e. «GO» «HOME» will, not astonishingly, be followed by the clear writing «WE ARE ALREADY HOME»¹¹. Their identity is stable and helps them to make sense of their position in the world. As Hall and Du Gay¹² observe «identities are constructed through, not outside difference»: it is therefore only through the relation with the Other that the self can define what he/she is not. National identities can thus be defined not just through what they are, but what they are not. This is why Smith insists on the long series of «radical other»¹³ forms of being made of different values, as these do help to reinforce our endangered identities, to interrogate how we relate to one another across national and cultural boundaries, offering an imaginative space for the envisioning of political futures and a moment of reflection about our future:

All across the country, people waved flags in the rain. All across the country, people drew swastika graffiti. All across the country, people threatened other people. All across the country, people told people to leave. All across the country, the media was insane. All across the country, politicians lied. All across the country, politicians fell apart. All across the country, politicians lied. All across the country, politicians fell apart. All across the country, politicians vanished. All across the country, promises vanished. All across the country, money vanished. All across the country, social media did the job. All across the country, things got nasty. All across the country, nobody spoke about it. All

⁹ Ivi, p. 112.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 197.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 138.

¹² S. Hall, P. Du Gay (eds.), *Questions of cultural Identity*, London, Sage, 1996.

¹³ See J. Gibbins, *Britain, Europe and National Identity: Self and Other in International Relations*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

across the country, nobody spoke about anything else. All across the country, racist bile was general. All across the country, people said it was about control. All across the country, everything changed overnight. All across the country, the haves and the have nots stayed the same. All across the country, the usual tiny per cent of the people made their money out of the usual huge per cent of the people. All across the country, money money money money. All across the country, no money no money no money no money¹⁴.

While the country finally looks divided, «spit in pieces», «cut adrift», an imaginary line is drawn by the writer who unclearly and almost poetically confirms – while dismantling it at the same time – a «here/there», still existent, discrepancy. Daniel seems to be awake again, back to the present, imaginatively restoring an idea of morality, prefiguring a return to a possible beauty, the one made by memory, human affection and art, be it represented by literature – intertextual references in the novel are numerous – and visual arts.

Never explicitly referring to Brexit, the novel is, though, an all-interesting meditation on personal and national identity issues which obviously connect with the themes of the other novels of the quartet as well as with other books that have been published in the meantime, thus making the corpus of the so-called BrexLit¹⁵ bigger and bigger as time goes by and the date of the exit from the European Union gets closer: *Time of Lies* by Douglas Board, *A Stranger City* by Linda Grant, *The Cut* by Anthony Cartwright, *Reservoir 13* by Jon McGregor are only a few of them, not to mention a whole series of crime/detective novels which have a specifically contemporary political setting. Ian McEwan, a strong «denialist», has announced a surprise Brexit satire, entitled «The Cockroach», from Kafka's «Metamorphosis», which sees an ordinary man up one day finding himself to be the Prime Minister, a sort of nightmarish experience which challenges his abilities in an attempt to become powerful. McEwan writes:

As the nation tears itself apart, constitutional norms are set aside, parliament is closed down so that the government cannot be challenged at a crucial time and ministers lie about it shamelessly in the old Soviet style, and when many Brexiters in high places seem to crave the economic catastrophe of a no deal and English nationalist extremists are attacking the police in Parliament Square, a writer is bound to ask what he or she can do. There's only one

¹⁴ Smith, *Autumn*, cit., pp. 60-61.

¹⁵ An interesting collection of essays on the topic, edited by Robert Eaglestone, has been recently published: *Brexit and Literature. Critical and Cultural Responses*, London, Routledge, 2018.

answer: «write» [...] Mockery might be a therapeutic response, though it's hardly a solution¹⁶.

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Autumn thus concludes with the belief that humans can change, that love in its various forms will flourish even in the grimmest circumstances, that events are not necessarily catastrophic. As time goes by, though, and as political debates keep dominating tv shows, tv news, small talk and newspaper articles, we, as readers and intellectuals should wonder whether darker times are to be expected than anything else.

A brief look at the opening of *Spring* with its three-page speech-like sequence, rich with contradictory concepts questioning everyday representations of the nation and trying to discursively construct a new collective voice, confirms our suspicions: the voice of the first-person plural pronoun which plays a special role in national identity construction, an unspecified «we», here, ambiguously ends up creating more confusion.

¹⁶ S. Cain, *Ian McEwan announces surprise Brexit satire, The Cockroach*, in "The Guardian", 12 September 2019, in <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/12/ian-mcewan-announces-surprise-brexit-satire-the-cockroach> (accessed 12 September 2019).

