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# Ali Smith's 'Coming-of-Age' in the Age of Brexit

Harald Pittel

Ali Smith's celebrated Seasonal Quartet – *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020) – has often been hailed as an epitome of "Brexit fiction." There has been less focus so far on the fact that the cycle also addresses ageing as a social and cultural issue. This essay argues that Smith's engagement with old age should be read in close relation with these novels' larger cultural and political strategies, amounting to a complex intervention in a post-referendum discourse which tends simplistically to present the situation in terms of an antagonism between age groups. More specifically, Smith unfolds a distinctive un-ideological view of ageing, placing it at the heart of an elaborate communicative and political ideal aimed at reinvigorating a sense of open culture and reclaiming history in solidarity. Also insisting that literary traditions can be rewritten, the Seasonal Quartet challenges dominant perceptions of old age and provides a new myth as antidote to Brexit.

Keywords: Ageing, Ali Smith, Brexit, Brexit fiction, myth, Northrop Frye, old age

In social-media discussions concerning the state of the nation in the wake of the 2016 referendum, commentators have drawn stunning parallels to Terry Gilliam's short film *The Crimson Permanent Assurance Company*. Some will remember this pre-movie to Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* (1983) about the elderly employees of this "Permanent Assurance Company" – a dull and dusted London firm which has recently been taken over by ruthless yuppies in charge of "The Very Big Corporation of America." Tormented like galley slaves by their much

younger corporate masters, the ageing employees start to rebel after one of them is sacked. Doing their best to emulate swashbuckling movies from the 1940s and 1950s, they turn their huge Edwardian office building into a pirate ship (of sorts) to cross an oceanic desert and take on the monumental corporation's glass tower. The bloodthirsty crew make all the yuppies walk the plank; they celebrate their glorious victory and keep on sailing the Seven Seas, only to fall eventually off the edge of the world – which, sadly enough, they still take for a disc.

This dramatization, once created as a satire of neo-liberal capitalism as facilitated by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, can easily be adapted to fit a prevailing mentality in referendum times, in which a common stereotype constructs 'old' Britain as essentially non-European and the comparatively young European Union as a hostile economic power. This is why iconic images commenting on the Brexit situation can be drawn from the film that would seem to illustrate the often-made, blunt association of the older generations with archaic values, stubbornness, and nationalism. Correspondingly, the young are blamed for shunning their elders, and for being always already too deeply involved in globalization, which in this light would seem clearly marked as an inhuman capitalist project.

Gilliam's film also reflects a more general trend in British culture to present younger and older generations as antipodes, a clash that has often been amplified by youth cultures, as most memorably expressed in The Who's 1960s Mod anthem, "My Generation" (which includes the line "Hope I die before I get old"). While such a rigid opposition reflects a questionably romantic and heroic ideal of youth, it is important to note, regarding the present predicament, that not all representations of social divisions in terms of an age conflict must necessarily be simplistic, stereotypical, or myth-ridden. On the contrary, various researchers have confirmed that looking at different age groups indeed offers one key to understanding the contemporary crisis. Age difference, though, must be grasped not so much as a natural difference but as arising from the social conditions and cultural implications of life phases and generational gaps. The fact that citizens over forty-five largely voted Leave in the referendum, while those below that age preferred to Remain, is in tune with a generational divide regarding stances on immigration and security, reflecting disparate preferences for either cultural openness or nationalism (Clarke et al. 146-74; Norris and Inglehart 385-94). Moreover, as in many other Western societies, age segregation effects "the division of individuals within society on the basis of their age" (Kingman 5), often related to housing conditions which manifest them-

selves in increasing country-city and inner-urban divides (Sabater et al.). To put it plainly, in times of rapid population ageing, the old and the young no longer share the same worlds; they live separate lives with little intergenerational contact (Umunna).

No wonder that a growing number of programmes, initiatives, and platforms in today's Britain pursue various strategies to overcome age segregation socially, culturally, and politically. The creation of shared sites for young and old, as well as integrative approaches to childcare, student housing, and care for the elderly are advocated by specialized think-tanks and realized by many regional and local projects (United for All Ages; All Party). Such practical strategies, while advancing change at many interrelated levels, might not be sufficient to raise awareness for the depth of the trenches, the actual dimensions of intergenerational misunderstandings. One might think of art and literature as having a vital function here when it comes to recording – and thereby helping to understand – the age-related “structure of feeling” (Williams, *Marxism* 128-35) of the conflicted present.

The Scottish author Ali Smith, long known for exploring the deeper and complex interdependencies that constitute identity and reality in works such as *There but for the* (2011) or *How to Be Both* (2014), has reacted to the present crisis by creating the Seasonal Quartet, a political kind of fiction that captures and chronicles the post-referendum climate. The novels that constitute the series – *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020) – have often been referred to as landmarks of “Brexit fiction” or “BrexLit,” as they use a literary style of multi-perspectivity and intertextuality to paint not only a picture of the extent of social estrangement marking today's Britain, but also to suggest an ideal of dialogic communication and political solidarity to overcome this state of paralysis (see for instance Rau; Tönnies and Henneböhl). However, I would suggest a more specific reading of Smith's Seasonal Quartet, arguing that her analysis of the present predicament, as well as her approaches to overcome it, are most closely associated with representations, myths, and traditions related to the social experience of old age and the cultural process of ageing. This essay aims to show that Smith thoroughly subverts established ideas about the condition of old age as well as intergenerational relations, suggesting better alternatives. This is not to imply that Smith, now writing in her fifties, is *exclusively* interested in old age and ageing; however, it is a vantage point from which the novels' more general critical and political ambitions can be elucidated adequately.



Five interrelated aspects are particularly worth looking at: (1) the Seasonal Quartet presents old people as embodied ideals, serving as antitheses to social reality which is marked by nationalism, estrangement, and disorientation; (2) the novels feature ageing characters as ‘changers,’ able not only to redefine the direction of their lives but also to embody larger perspectives of social transformation and political solidarity; (3) this view of ageing implies that history, with the elderly figuring as the most qualified bearers of historical knowledge and wisdom, can be made productive to animate such political change in the present that fundamentally questions one-sided and nationalist perceptions of identity and reality, making visible many deeper and more complex connections; (4) such a transformative view of history is also manifest in how the novels engage with the Western *literary* tradition. In the way they undermine and revise long-standing literary myths or meta-narratives, they challenge old-age-related assumptions on an even deeper level which problematically associates ideas around age with the cycle of seasons. More specifically, the circularity of the Seasonal Quartet implies that although some traditions appear to be more stable than others, such as the fact that autumn precedes winter, there is nevertheless hope for a transformation of those traditions that can potentially be changed and rewritten. By revisiting the literary myths of romance, tragedy, comedy, and irony/satire, Smith’s engagement with old age and ageing shows that even key narratives at the heart of Western culture can be freed from ideological implications. (5) Moreover, by circling around the idea that young and old can reunite ever anew in solidarity, the Seasonal Quartet comes close to a new myth as antidote to Brexit – the myth of a joint ‘coming-of-age,’ so to speak.

## 1 Revising Representations of Old Age

In the most general terms, the representations of old people in Smith’s quartet are targeted at fighting cultural stereotypes that link ageing with bodily and mental decline, unproductivity, and social invisibility. Following Andrew Blaikie, it was only in the earlier twentieth century that “modernity produced an enhanced awareness of stigma via the growing administrative classification of older people as a chronologically determined social group with a fixed identity” (111). However, even in our own days of ageing societies, positive ideas and cultural forms to realize the ‘third age’ in diverse and meaningful ways are less highly developed and widespread than one might think. The danger of

challenging the 'decline' narrative of old age is naively to embrace the exact opposite and cling to the ideology of infinite progress, the belief that death can be conquered and kept at bay virtually forever (Gullette 18-19; Gilleard and Higgs 59-89). These opposing views hark back to a long cultural history in which longevity was either ignored and condemned or associated with wisdom and hence seen as worth aiming for (Parkin 37; Minois 303-07).

How does Smith's take on ageing deal with the multiple demands and pitfalls in this ideology-fraught territory? To begin with, positive figurations of old age feature prominently in the Seasonal Quartet. These depictions of preferable and/or successful ways of getting old often have a clearly idealizing tendency, which is balanced, however, by a note of social realism. The most obvious example of this would be Daniel Gluck in *Autumn*, who befriends eleven-year-old Elisabeth Demand when he is long past retirement age, emerging as a kind of mentor and thus taking a significant influence on the young girl's coming-of-age. An affinity towards idealizing is evident when Daniel appears larger than life to her, "like a magician" who is "always just too far ahead" (39, 38). By sharing with Elisabeth whatever is generated in some "fruitful place in his brain" (29), "the cave of [Daniel's] mouth becomes the threshold to the end of the world as she knows it" (36).

While these sublime perceptions of Daniel, conveyed through the perspective of Elisabeth's childhood amazement, partly verge on the otherworldly sphere of myth, fairy tale, or romance, it would seem difficult to figure his peculiar presence from a more conventionally grounded point of view. To begin with, Daniel does not meet expectations that old age goes together with bodily decay: "He wasn't old. [Elisabeth] was right. Nobody truly old sat with their legs crossed or hugged their knees like that. Old people couldn't do anything except sit in front rooms as if they'd been stunned by stun guns" (50).

Figured as a young man in an old body, Daniel somehow fails to hit the mark and effectively subverts common assumptions about old people. No wonder then that Elisabeth's mother – although at first charmed by Daniel's voice, which reminds her of "old films where things happen to well-dressed warplane pilots in black and white" (48) – retains a queer impression of him overall. She stigmatizes Daniel's influence as "[u]nnatural" and "[u]nhealthy" and takes him for gay or perverted or worse, using a register that is apt vaguely to remind some readers of anxious late-Victorian reactions to decadent aesthetes like Walter Pater or Oscar Wilde (77-83). An even more blatant allusion to the sexually monstrous is made in passing when Elisabeth is promised a

video of the Disneyfied *Beauty and the Beast* as a reward for *not* meeting Daniel (231). It is for the young girl to counter all these allegations from her mother regarding sexual unorthodoxy by declaring bluntly: “Daniel’s not gay. He’s European” (77).

If being “European” in this context implies ‘un-stranging’ the strange, Elisabeth’s remark would seem to entail that there is nothing “[u]nnatural” and “[u]nhealthy” (83) about what Daniel has to impart: namely, a richer life that is open to more authentic forms of communication, to making significant contacts with others, and, by the same token, to getting in touch with the deeper, more complex and inherently social dimensions of the self. “European” in this sense can be understood as a political metaphor signalling, in Brexit times, a more socially and culturally interdependent sense of self than a narrow codification of identity in terms of ‘Britishness,’ let alone ‘Englishness,’ would imply. This is why the novel takes meticulous care not to let Daniel’s otherworldly loftiness indicate a point of yearning for a deep-set, purely original, and mysterious self in terms of the romantic genius. Rather, what makes Daniel so attractive is closely related to his French and German background, countries that were often constructed as Britain’s cultural and political Other. Retroactively identifying in *Summer* as the son of a “German Englishman” (155), hybridity would seem to constitute Daniel’s sense of self from the beginning. Imagining himself in *Autumn* as “shut in the trunk of a Scots pine” (89) in a dream, “a tree that can last for centuries” as it “doesn’t need much soil depth” (90), perfectly sums up Daniel’s identity in terms of a ‘more-than-English’ migrant self that can belong to a place without the guarantee of having exclusive ancestral ties to the land.<sup>1</sup>

While embodying these complex connections, Daniel is not simply a mental construct, an implanted idea, symbol, or ‘utopian container’ of a culturally and socially ‘better’ personality. Rather, the novel presents Daniel as an interactive agent, encouraging Elisabeth to share her reading experiences and freely co-create in joint storytelling, and thereby work towards a more authentic expression of identity and reality so as to “bagatelle it as it is” (121): “I [Daniel] can make up something useful, entertaining, perspicacious and kind. We have this in common, you [Elisabeth] and I. As well as the capacity to become someone else, if we so choose” (51-52). And as Daniel’s teachings help Elisabeth find a

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<sup>1</sup> There is also a darker note as Daniel is associated with the European Jews and the Holocaust, which is discussed further below in the context of the Seasonal Quartet’s engagement with history.

sense of self along with an aesthetic vision of her own, she soon discovers that Daniel's sense of particularity is not about standing apart from others, rather implying a deep awareness of the collective dimension of reality as "[n]obody spoke like Daniel. Nobody didn't speak like Daniel" (148). Despite his idiosyncrasy he shares a common 'language' with people that goes beyond speaking a specific national language such as English, which further underlines a sense of borderless and therefore European communication. And even beyond, as Daniel explains to Elisabeth, his "unexpected queen of the world" (52) that her last name "Demand" really means "du monde," revealing his will to share his deep-seated cosmopolitan outlook with his soulmate (50).

Society, however, marked as it is by social pathologies, its unquestioned clinging to arbitrary borders and regulations, is depicted as immune to such modes of contact and channels of communication. By conventionally locating old people at the margins, dominant ways of seeing fail to understand people like Daniel and his uncommon friendship with Elisabeth. Rather than recognizing the third age as a phase of self-determination and vitality – Daniel remains fit at an age far beyond seventy, and he is able to run his household all by himself until well into his nineties (113, 157) – society associates old age with a fourth age instead and generalizes it as mental and bodily decline. However, when the novel shows Daniel spending his final days in a care facility in what Smith abstains from ever directly referring to as 'deathbed,' it amounts in more general fashion to a complex critique of how society frames and treats its elderly: old people are left alone while their individuality and citizenship are denied. Daniel, willing to pay for the understaffed care facility himself, can no longer do so because he did not receive any compensation for the use of his song "Summer Brother Autumn Sister" in a recent TV commercial. Elisabeth's active solidarity-in-friendship forces her to intervene, to pose as a lawyer claiming the song's rights for Daniel, and thus to beat the system at its own game (233-38).

Old people thus suffer most in an alienated society as their status as a subject of rights is impaired and their contributions to culture no longer count. In short: they are prone to become dehumanized. Yet while old age receives an added cultural meaning here as it represents the extremes of marginalization and misrecognition, the novel's idealizing strategy very much deploys Daniel as an embodiment of hope, aimed at overcoming that unwholesome climate. Daniel retains his creativity even during his fourth age; his dreams are not set apart from but reflect the political reality of a world in which, in times of precarious migration, dead bodies are found on beaches (12); he is still temporarily

able to share his thoughts with Elisabeth and even bonds with his care assistants (170-71) – another glimpse of hope in this sterile environment. All this helps to revise stereotypical views of ageing as it unfolds a radically alternative image to the extreme perspective of senescence and care dependency. Associating the active life of the mind and communicative ethos of a 101-year-old man with being “European” creates a visionary outlook against the Brexit climate because it revokes the assumption of elderly people’s supposed Euroscepticism.

Iris Cleves from *Winter* similarly undermines the idea that older generations abandon their relations beyond Britain. Iris, well into her seventies, has been a socialite and socialist all through her adult life, fighting, among others, for peace, the environment, and open borders for refugees. Described by her conventionally grounded sister Sophia as both “brilliant” and “trouble” from childhood days (23), Iris in this light would seem to inhabit a different plane of reality, as Sophia alternately calls her a “mythologizer” (155, 173) and laments her proclivity to “disenchant” (211). There is a parallel to Daniel Gluck, as Iris makes an inspiring connection in conversation with her nephew, encouraging him to tell her “something real” (170). This reiterates Daniel’s tenet to “bagatelle it as it is” (Smith, *Autumn* 121), which would suggest a sense of authenticity in storytelling. Her character embodies the history of left-wing protest culture and alternative life forms in Britain and elsewhere, and thereby clearly counters the prejudice often heard throughout the Brexit-related state-of-the-nation debates which, in a simple manner, associates the older generations with political conservatism and falsely registers progressive tendencies as movements exclusively initiated by the young. And Iris’s energy remains undaunted in *Summer*, when she supports homeless immigrants during the Covid-19 pandemic (341-42), thus setting a towering example for younger generations of activists.

Daniel Gluck and Iris Cleves are not the only elderly people in the four novels who are surrounded by an air of the extraordinary and retain an open-minded political attitude. Patricia Heal, aka Paddy from *Spring*, conspicuously associated with the power of healing, is a vivid depiction of a charismatic, wise, self-reliant, and cultivated woman who dies at the age of eighty-seven. Her close friend, the documentary film director Richard Lease – younger by seventeen years – finds her, a former scriptwriter, extraordinarily “good” (20) at what she does; echoing Daniel’s and Iris’s calls for authentic storytelling, her scripts make “*something real*” (21) happen, thus animating Richard’s own work and self-understanding with a sense of realism that is both social and imaginative. Paddy is widely read in European literature and history, and deeply



affected by the present socio-political situation, not losing her sense of anger until very late in her life. This is partly due to her Irish heritage, as Paddy remembers the times when anti-Irish racism was virulent in England. Identifying as a migrant, she comes to reject the discourse around a "migrant crisis" claiming that migration should be accepted more generally as a condition that constitutes identities (67-68). Richard admires Paddy for knowing "everything about everything" (39) – a naively idealizing way of seeing which she modestly ridicules. Impressed with her aura, Richard believes that she will "never die," but Paddy warns him not to fall for the "modern fantasy and malaise" of "sailing the ship into the sunset forever" (32). For Richard, Paddy embodies a combined ideal of friend, lover, colleague, and mother at the same time. At one point in their friendship, they have a one-night stand, and at another, they giggle together like schoolchildren. Richard reckons that "[t]hey were bigger than sex," but unlike Daniel, Paddy is by no means completely aloof from the sexual: she likes "a good fuck as much as the next person" (63-64).

All in all, Paddy is a passionately energetic and determined woman who has had it all in a competitive and male-dominated world: marriage, twins, and a job, all of which have made her appear "even more care-free" to Richard (62). However, while Paddy represents a creative, independent, and professionally successful woman with a migration history – quite unlike Daniel, an outsider – her depiction also implies a critique of certain ideologies about ageing. While Paddy, just like Daniel, complicates the standard association between old age and bodily/mental decline from the outset, her character explicitly takes issue with the idea of ageing as infinite progress, namely the widespread belief in the "ship of the liberal world" (32) which promises that you can be whatever you like regardless of both social conventions and nature.

Following Margaret M. Gullette, it is precisely between these two ideological extremes of negative and positive stereotypes around ageing – based on decline and progress, respectively – that a more unbiased discourse regarding old age should emerge (21-39). This is very much what Smith's presentation of a free and independent Paddy amounts to. Paddy is successful and happy at an advanced age, but she is *not* larger than life, as she accepts the natural fact of dying with pride and equanimity. This dignified ideal of ageing, a sense of greatness that remains existentially down-to-earth, is summarized in Richard's formulation that Paddy belongs to the "uncategorizable sort" (62): extraordinary, but still a "sort"; not aloof from the everyday world, nor a romantic mystery. The presentation of Paddy thus underwrites a persisting myth about

Irishness, or more generally, Celticness, in terms of an unexpected 'third' position subverting the binary oppositions that construct hegemonic culture (Pine).

The unconventional friendship between Paddy and Richard, just like the one between Daniel and Elisabeth, testifies to relationships between people that defy any categorization in terms of appropriate behaviour concerning age and gender. However, if we compare these relationships, it seems that Smith's strategies of representing old age more adequately have shifted a bit from the "uncategorizable" to the "sort," so to speak, presenting Paddy, unlike Daniel, as a more earthbound and socially integrated embodiment of the extraordinary, with a sexual side and a higher psychological complexity. It is only fitting, then, that Daniel is retroactively ascribed a sex life (with men and women) and biological fatherhood in *Winter* (248-76) and *Summer* (185), while his spiritual presence remains unbroken.

From this first survey of figurations of old age in the Seasonal Quartet, it is clear that Smith complicates any straightforward stereotypical associations, constructing ageing as neither unequivocal decline nor unquestioned progress, and depicting a range of old characters as neither unproductive nor politically conservative. While this 'ideal' cast of elderly people is diverse and undermines the sweeping perception of old people as a homogenous or indigenous group, the following section discusses a further set of older characters that is not so ideal but shows a readiness to reflect seriously on their existence, thus allowing them to change and develop at a late stage in their lives in order to arrive at a new self-understanding and political attitude.

## 2 Never Too Late: Learning to Change

Looking at the earlier novels, *Autumn* and *Winter*, it would seem at first sight that processes of change are mainly attributed to the adult protagonists in their thirties. Both Elisabeth Demand in *Autumn* and Art Cleves in *Winter* feel a need to question and revise ready-made conceptions of identity so as to overcome a certain extent of alienation, as is manifest in Elisabeth's longer coming-of-age story and in Art's more acute state of confusion and disorientation over his broken-up relationship. Even a character like Brittany "Brit" Hall in *Spring*, who works as a security guard in a detention centre and is wholly absorbed in hegemonic logic, is not immune to change. This becomes clear as deeper and more complex levels of the self are temporarily awakened in



Brit when she encounters the novel's miraculous child, Florence, who engages her in a joyful conversation about her favourite things and makes her "remember the more-than-one meaning of a word like cell" (183). The established ways of seeing nevertheless eventually get the better of Brit (319-29). In all of these relatively young adults, Elisabeth, Art, and Brit, maturing is connoted with an important phase of reorientation, typically associated with a new project such as Elisabeth's decision to write her doctoral thesis on Pauline Boty against the explicit will of her tutor (Smith, *Autumn* 154-56), or Art's resolution to turn his blog on nature observation into a co-written project (Smith, *Winter* 318).

But change is not exclusively ascribed to the younger generation in the Seasonal Quartet, as some of the older characters, too, undergo such significant processes. A thorough kind of transformation is evident in Elisabeth's conventionally grounded mother, Wendy Demand, who, having been stuck in her house for ages, is now in her mid-fifties yet not too old to start her first lesbian relationship and turn into a political protester (Smith, *Autumn* 213-21, 254-55). Likewise, Richard, well past retirement age, comes to cut his ties with the alienating culture industry and funds his own solidarity project for a refugee support network (Smith, *Spring* 269-77).

As already indicated, a crucial dilemma deplored by Gullette in her seminal *Aged by Culture* is that a fundamental change of one's outlook regarding the cultural meaning of old age is often bound to shift from the blunt extreme of decline to a progress narrative, with little in between (143-47). However, the transformations presented by Smith are at once subtler and deeper, implying not an unthinking break with one's past but, first and foremost, a thorough change in making sense of one's memories. Wendy is suddenly able to see that her nostalgic passion for collecting antiques was actually aimed at preserving bits of hope that a better society might have been possible in the past, or may be possible in the future. Throwing the collectibles at an ominous fence that may well belong to a detention centre is thus a plausible step from passive to active resistance against a *zeitgeist* perceived as thoroughly dehumanizing.

Similarly, Richard gains unexpected recognition from Alda for his documentary films made in the seventies (Smith, *Spring* 254-60), which is a crucial reminder for him that he had always been creative and independent, and that there is no reason not to build on that former sense of self and establish a new political relation to it. Ageing, then, is not simply about decline or progress, but about inventing new ways of making the past cause the present, which the novels present as a social and political act.

It is also clear from these examples that Smith sees expressions of political solidarity, and commitment in terms of political activism, as the highest forms, the ultimate goals, and most important dimensions of transformation. Change as such has no age, and authentic decisions to change, as the novels make clear, are neither bound to any specific phase of life nor overly 'path-dependent' in terms of a previous orientation or occupation that may have been far removed from any serious political awareness or commitment. But how can one work towards such transformation? A key factor would be an ideal of communication that is implicitly and explicitly advocated in the novels to overcome the deplorable state of society with its real and arbitrary divisions. 'Communication' here is not to be simply understood as pertaining to technology or a national language; rather, communication is centred around a collective dimension of existence that opens up an authentic dialogue with others, thus overcoming the restrictions of the overly atomized, privatized, or even national self (Williams, *Keywords* 36-37). This is obvious in Daniel Gluck's Europeanness, as discussed above, and in former chain-store owner Sophia Cleves in *Winter*, who, far over seventy, is able to overcome the barriers of identity which have led her to Scrooge-like isolation in a state of paralytic nostalgia. What seems most important in *Winter* is that one should never attempt to bypass what Sophia registers as "the pitfalls of human exchange" (36). Rather, one should accept arguing as something liberating, which is what eventually breaks the ice between 'capitalist' Sophia and her 'political' sister, also implying that the referendum gap between Leavers and Remainers might be overcome in this way (205-14, 229-36). At any rate, a real, more authentic sense of self, grounded in recognizing and accepting one's true social relations with significant others, is something one needs and can achieve regardless of age if one does not wish to feel haunted, like Sophia in the novel's opening pages, by ghosts from the past (7-32).

However, the idea of 'communication' put forward here exceeds the level of immediate intersubjectivity. It entails cultural forms and media practices that may be shared as points of departure for larger strategies to change the social climate (Williams, *Marxism* 36-37; Eldridge and Eldridge 63-64, 75-95). What one should therefore carefully consider are the various forms of communication that, as Smith suggests, play a role in overcoming the restrictions of identity to arrive at a more socially grounded sense of self. Generally speaking, as we have seen between Iris and Sophia, the sharing of memories, exposing one's experience and judgments to the views of the other, and engaging in the free play of perspectives, may well help to challenge cemented individual outlooks.

At a higher level, there are the more cooperative approaches of joint imagining and storytelling as co-practiced by Daniel and Elisabeth in *Autumn*. Their common construction of a shared way of seeing is bigger than any individual outlook but nonetheless bears the signum of true individuality (72-76, 116-21).

Other forms of communication function over longer distances in both time and space. Smith is not blind to the innovative connections offered by digital forms of communication such as the collective blog initiated by Art in *Winter*, however, the use of email in *Spring* would suggest a certain amount of scepticism regarding the cultural dominance of new media, foregrounding their aseptic side (when Paddy's sons coldly inform Richard about her funeral, 73-76) and manipulative potential (when a big-headed scriptwriter sends an obtrusive email to Richard's superiors, pretending to speak in the film director's name while really ignoring his opinion and making it hard for him to intervene, 103-05).

By contrast, the exchange of picture postcards, apt to communicate moments of one's life to others while allowing them to co-imagine what these moments may be like, becomes the prime channel of communication between Richard and Paddy (76-81). And little wonder that he thinks of this type of communication when looking for a way to transform a novel about the impossible encounter between Katherine Mansfield and Rainer Maria Rilke into a film (95-99). In more general terms, literature offers itself as a more complex medium that allows a similar degree of shared intensity in objectified form, which is made clear as Richard discovers Paddy's final message to him as an addendum to her volume of Mansfield's *Collected Stories* (278-85), which now bears an added dimension of personal significance for him.

Smith thoroughly explores all these channels of communication as they help to work on a desirable 'old-and-new culture,' offering many forms to relate to each other in unrestricted, diverse, and authentic contacts, also implying the creation of new networks of political solidarity. All this happens regardless of any specific associations with age, but because it invites the sharing of memories and experiences, it especially welcomes the participation of older people as they not only have a wealth of memories and experiences to look back to, but also are potentially considerably wiser than the younger generations and, as I argue below, can relate their own past to a broader understanding of history. They thus ensure that key events, such as the world wars and the Holocaust, or important developments in art, are not forgotten.

### 3 Reclaiming History

It is in this sense that the political consciousness and commitment of the old taps into history. In fact, history offers a very concrete explanation for Daniel's interest in Elisabeth, as she would seem to remind him of his long-lost beloved sister, Hannah, who was deported in Nazi-occupied France, probably to be killed in a concentration camp (Smith, *Autumn* 63-66, 181-93). Historical and personal dimensions converge here as the complex whole of the twentieth century, centred around the persecution of the European Jews and the Holocaust, crystallizes in Daniel, who had a German-Jewish mother (Smith, *Summer* 155). He was also interned together with his German father by the British Army during the Second World War, which gives rise to a whole network of British-continental historical relations. As *Summer* specifies, Daniel and his father were eventually transported to Hutchinson camp, in which German academics and artists were safeguarded from the Nazis (144-46, 168-92). This facility, which became famous for its high level of intellectual exchange and production, was located on the Isle of Man in the geographical centre of the British Isles, at roughly equal distances from the English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish mainlands. This setting symbolically locates the joint creativity of displaced artists and intellectuals at the very heart of twentieth-century Britain and thus implicitly challenges unilinear accounts of overly 'national' history-writing.

A sense of ethical commitment arising from historical awareness becomes evident from Richard's concern with the popularity of extreme right-wing views, which remind him of "[t]errible times, easily resurrected" as too many people play history "on repeat" rather than learning from it (Smith, *Spring* 241) – an insight he has probably gained while working with Paddy. The more demanding potential of history to animate commitment becomes clear by looking at yet another character from *Spring*, namely, the seemingly weird woman identified as "Alda Lyons." She is a librarian in her fifties from the Scottish town of Kingussie, who first appears in an absurd setting in front of the town's train station, operating a coffee truck that has no coffee, nor anything else, to sell (50-55). When she gives Richard a ride up north to Inverness and they pass the site of the 1745 Battle of Culloden, she is easily able to substantiate Richard's simplistic idea of this event as the "[l]ast battle of the English against the Scots" by explaining the conflict's historical complexities (232-37). It becomes clear that Alda is probably just

as knowledgeable as Paddy, though she lacks the scriptwriter's glamour and charisma.

Despite these similarities with Paddy, the depiction of their old age is different, since Alda's character complicates the simple categorization of either being a social insider or outsider. As a local librarian, Alda would seem to lead an 'ordinary' and quiet everyday life, with a stable and respectable position in an accessible public institution. At an advanced age, such constant and modest lives may well bear the stigma of unproductivity in a society focused on staying competitive and career-oriented regardless of age – a condition well known to Richard, who was not offered a job in nearly four years. In fact, the ridiculous introduction of Alda as spending her day off in a coffee van without coffee epitomizes this stereotype of unproductivity and social dysfunctionality. In meritocratic societies, lives like Alda's are therefore likely to be belittled as marginal and insignificant, a condescending view that ties in with often-heard negative expectations regarding Scottish independence. This cliché is corrected by Alda, whose preference for books and films reflects the desire to really understand the collective past and present – a humanist will to knowledge that not only empowers her to read the traces of a historical conflict in the landscape but also informs her involvement in the "Auld Alliance" programme – a project of active solidarity (370-77).

The "Auld Alliance" – an underground railroad for refugees – unites committed people of all ages, based on a radical vision of political equality in which everybody involved is called by the Guy-Fawkes-style universalizing signifier "Alda" or "Aldo Lyons." This once again undercuts the clichéd perception of political movements in terms of youth culture by reimagining the bonds of solidarity in the sign of old age (270). Furthermore, the "Auld Alliance" alludes to a literally 'old' alliance between Scotland and France. Originally formed in 1295 as a treaty that lasted till the sixteenth century, this military defence agreement stipulated that if either Scotland or France were attacked by England, the other country would invade English territory. In Smith's appropriation of the term, this historical "antidote to the English" (Macdougall) is reanimated to undermine England's dominance in times of Brexit. In the light of this allegory, England would be always already known for its hubris, prone to impose its rule and expand its sovereignty at the cost of others. However, the borders constituting England's cultural and political identity in the first place are more porous than they would seem, and its false sense of stability might be challenged more easily than expected. The old and the young acting in concert in this "countrywide" (270) network for



unrestricted migration and open borders thus becomes the obvious expression for a 'good repetition' in terms of a transformative understanding of history, in which the "Auld Alliance" is not simply a thing of the past, but remains "to come" (Derrida 81) as a tentative realization of even stronger alliances in the future.

#### 4 Transforming Literary Tradition

The transformative approach to history in terms of a 'good repetition' is also enacted in the quartet at the self-reflexive level of *literary* form. This is most evident in the novels' seasonal cycle and the often-cited postmodernist aspects of Smith's writing (see, for example, Wood). Ripe with intertextual references across the ages and media, including paintings, film, songs, and much else, the novels present their material from cultural registers high and low in multiple perspectives, their non-linearity also allowing for shifts in narrative voice.

Also, stylistic elements like puns, and the sustained allegorizing of names as in Elisabeth Demand or Paddy Heal, would suggest a systematic-yet-instable view of language: everything is connected, while words nonetheless lend themselves to multiple, even oppositional readings and/or spawn diverse associations that go beyond a narrow (English) meaning. Hence Daniel suggests that Elisabeth really wants to go to free-spirited "collage" rather than stifling college (Smith, *Autumn* 71), while the Cleves family name would evoke the word 'to cleave' (to break apart) but also the French 'clé' (key, old spelling 'clef') in terms of a possible opening-up and connection. Multi-perspectivity thus even exists at the level of signifiers, as meaning is typically 'more-than-English' and refuses to let itself be unambiguously pinned down to a pure, monocultural signified. However, in our context it is especially interesting that the decentring of a privileged viewpoint thus effected goes together with a more specific strategy that exposes literary tradition itself as dynamic and not immune to change. Avoiding a conservative view that overemphasizes the coherence and distinct qualities of certain traditions, Seasonal Quartet demonstratively destabilizes their borders and paves the way for an unrestricted transformation of the literary past.

This comparatively 'young' approach to writing, with its proclivity for popular culture, is nonetheless fascinated with the 'old' inventory of tradition as it actualizes Shakespeare, revises Dickens, and draws on Ovid – 'classic' writers whose works provide Smith with a rich repertoire of literary elements around the idea of unexpected, even impossible

change. However, Smith's novels show an even deeper investment in literary history, fully acknowledging tradition's importance for shaping today's consciousness but nonetheless emphasizing its transformative potential. Smith's engagement with the literary canon goes beyond exploring a few selected poets or works of the past, as it also shows a more wholesome – though somewhat hidden – understanding of the *systematic* aspects of tradition, which by no means stand in the way of transformative appropriations or reinterpretations. More specifically, her overall approach to writing a comprehensive set of texts, respectively identified in terms of different seasons, can be plausibly related to the literary prominence of the seasonal cycle as a systematic structure pertaining to the logic of genre at a fundamental level.

The best-known example of this approach (though not exactly *en vogue* with present-day scholars) is Northrop Frye's theory of modes as presented in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Frye's theory is centred around four literary modes or "mythoi," including romance, tragedy, comedy, and irony/satire. These modes act as meta-genres – one could also say: meta-narratives – organizing the traditional space of (Western) literature, reflecting its historical development from more myth-bound (romance) towards more secular outlooks (irony/satire), with the "high-mimetic" mythos of tragedy and the "low-mimetic" mode of comedy negotiating between these radically opposed horizons (131-239, 33-67).

Frye's system thus provides traditional coordinates by which literary works can be described in most general terms. Each of these modes implies vague yet fundamental assumptions in terms of existential and social outlooks, which Frye sees attuned to the natural cycle of seasons. According to this view, a cosmology has marked literature from ancient times on, to crystallize fully in the works of Dante and Milton, according to which the order of nature is somehow embedded between heaven and hell, with the cycle of seasons serving as a prime analogy for human life thus conditioned. This exceeds an understanding of life phases attuned to the seasons. More specifically, the seasonal cycle reflects, on the one hand, the upward movement (spring to summer) of human aspiration towards transcendence, and on the other it implies a corresponding downward movement: humanity's fall (autumn to winter) to chaos (158-62). Thus tragedy as the mythos of autumn is traditionally understood in terms of the fate of the tragic hero, who is somewhere between the "divine" and the "all-too-human" and comes to face sordid reality (206-23). At the cold and wintry end of secularity, the brutal realism of irony and satire conveys a modern disillusioned outlook of existential thrownness, reflecting a desperate state of humanity in which



fixed, metaphysical coordinates for orientation are no longer available (223-39). On a more optimistic note, comedy's 'spring' is about the desire of the young to go beyond what is taken for granted, whose urge to rejuvenate and transform society is typically "blocked" by the old, the usurping keepers of the established order (163-86). And the 'summer' of romance celebrates the heroic struggles of the pure and innocent forces of good against evil – aloof from the everyday world and verging on the fantastic; aspiring towards a sense of victory that overcomes previous failure (186-206).

It is obvious from this brief summary that such a systematic approach can easily be criticized for a number of reasons, most importantly, perhaps, because it gives an air of universality to a narrow Eurocentric canon whose underlying norms it reconstructs. However, Frye's theory is useful for raising awareness of the unconscious determinism that comes with naively accepting the implicit assumptions enshrined in the logic of a given literary mode. And once this determinism is recognized, it becomes evident how absurd it is to assume that human beings can never change their customs and conventions. Moreover, Frye's theory implies that every work of literature can in principle be rewritten so as to be liberated from the logic of any particular mode; it can be transposed from one mode to another, and – to continue the train of thought beyond Frye's own reflections – be amalgamated with any other form of narrative, across the boundaries of cultural conventions or media limitations. It is in this sense that Hayden White, arguing that the logic of modes also underlies the development of historical criticism over the centuries, has emphasized that even wilder combinations of modes, with all sorts of genres and narratives, do actually occur (267-80). However, it would be wrong to assume that the traditional outlooks of the mythoi, and the ways they are defined against and interrelated with one another, have completely lost their authority.

Smith's Seasonal Quartet seems to be informed by a similar mythical horizon. In each of the novels, the author does not hesitate subtly to evoke a general outlook that comes close to the logic of Frye's modes, but such a ground note is no sooner struck than subverted, as Smith seems highly aware of tradition's transformative potential. In *Autumn*, the downward movement from the lofty summer of romance to wintry realism as implied by Frye's mode of tragedy is clearly visible in Daniel Gluck. As a romantic artist figuring as an old extraordinary man, still vibrant with uncommon memories and an elevated sense of connectedness, he comes to a fall as he sees his final days in a health care facility, running out of money in an estranged and privatized culture. However,

the tragic thrust is successfully countered as Daniel's border-overcoming communicative ethos is continued by others, namely Elisabeth and Wendy Demand. Together, they generate the golden harvest of a new faith and an attitude of political resistance – a glimpse of hope in an increasingly fractured society.

*Winter*, a season that Frye associates with secularity and brutal realism as nature is perceived at a standstill, most conspicuously distances itself from its opposite, stating explicitly on the first page: "Romance is dead. Chivalry is dead" (2). Indeed, the novel evokes a bleak outlook of everyday life verging on the ice-cold irony of the absence of higher levels of meaning, as reflected, for instance, in the ridiculous bureaucracy and false friendliness that Sophia Cleves has to face when unsuccessfully attempting to withdraw money from her bank account (36-38). However, it seems that a sense of romance eventually returns to the land – helped by the almost magical light-bearer Lux, who makes the ice melt between Sophia and Iris, culminating in a Christmas-time family reunion and a new understanding of political solidarity in Art/art, who feels this revitalization as a divination that also refers to the novel as a whole: "Art will never die. Art will live forever" (307).

In *Spring*, the logic of the comedy mode, associated by Frye with the endeavours of the young to rejuvenate society being barred by the old, is both evoked and inverted; the young block the old when a careerist representative of the culture industry temporarily gets the better of Richard's creativity, demanding that he render the speculative encounter between Rainer Maria Rilke and Katherine Mansfield in such a way that allows for inclusion of a "comedy fuck" scene: the two writers having sex in a Swiss Alps cable car, making bystanders wonder why it is shaking so much (35-36, 83-87). By contrast to such marketable nonsense, it is for Richard not to let himself be 'fucked' any further by the black comedy of commercial exploitation, breaking away from the absurdity of the system in order to realize his own independent, historically sensitive, and solidarity oriented project.

It is for *Summer*, eventually, to both affirm and complicate the corresponding mode of romance, which has some special implications. It should be noted that romance is the narrative most closely associated by Frye with the political, which might sound surprising considering the more commonly apolitical associations of the romance mode with wish-fulfilment in a dream-like atmosphere. By contrast, Frye also ascribes to romance a "genuinely 'proletarian' element," seeing in figures like the unknown chivalric hero, with his fight against evil effecting the transformation of society, the manifestation of the hopes of a subdued class

(186). Accentuating the political dimension of romance somewhat differently, White even considers an anarchist outlook reflected in the mode – an interpretation that is not implausible considering that heroic interventions challenging, and helping to transform questionable foundations of culture and society are, in principle, possible always and everywhere (22-29).

A slightly amended quote from *David Copperfield* opens a discussion that is very much at the heart of *Summer*, regarding the question of what political heroism means today: “Whether I shall turn out to be the heroine of my own life” (7). More specifically, Seasonal Quartet’s conclusive volume would seem to conjure the heroic ideal of chivalric romance at several points, for example, when young Sacha Greenlaw, a Greta Thunberg fan, posts a self-ironizing “knight in shining armour emoji” (41) to a friend. However, when her mother remembers an old rhyme about “the days of old when knights were bold,” this would seem to question the patriarchal implications of a bygone age in which “women weren’t invented” (291). Rather than subscribing to an all-too-straightforward understanding of romance with its outmoded and chauvinist ideas of heroism, the overall design of *Summer* corresponds to the mode’s less conventional *penseroso* variant, which, according to Frye, typically unites a group of congenial people in a homely storytelling round and which “marks the end of a movement from active to contemplative adventure” (202). This adequately describes what happens in *Summer* when Art and Charlotte (his ex-girlfriend-turned-political-ally) from *Winter* initiate the Greenlaws into an unexpectedly open and sympathetic exchange of views. It all reads like a deepened and extended conversation scene in which the bars that separate the inner life from expression and collective reflection are no longer in place. Yet this shift towards a shared act of contemplation, in which the characters easily drift between the present and their memories, does not simply entail that the world no longer needs heroes; rather, *Summer* seems to underwrite Sacha’s faith that “the modern sense of being a hero is like shining a bright light on things that need to be seen” (246). While this outlook de-centres heroism so as to make it plural and democratic, it also implies that contemplation is not just for its own sake: rather, it should exercise and fortify the mind in order to make things visible, which is the primary aim that art shares with political commitment. It is therefore only fitting that the *penseroso* romance of *Summer* prominently revisits Daniel Gluck and Iris Cleves, thus giving centre stage to old and wise people with a clear and steady vision rather than celebrating the heroic cliché of the knightly dare-devil.

## 5 Conclusion

All in all, in Smith's Seasonal Quartet cycle, history and tradition, in terms of the flexible logic of literary modes, provide an antidote to the determinism and one-sidedness of dominant narratives. The ideal of inspirational communication and political solidarity animating Smith's novels is, to a large extent, a romance of the old, though the cultural constructs around old age are simultaneously revised, without ever succumbing to the false optimism of a simplistic progress narrative. By returning to the 'ideal old,' Daniel and Iris, *Summer* also provides a sense of closure to the cycle as a whole, pointing back to its beginning in *Autumn* but also suggesting, by nonetheless introducing new characters and drawing surprising connections, that the cycle's prospected repetition will entail difference. In an article for the *Guardian* on the occasion of Seasonal's completion, Smith characterizes the quartet as a whole as "a kind of experiment sourced in cyclic time but moving forward through time simultaneously" (Smith, "Before Brexit"). This experiment, both aesthetic and philosophical, is said to be facilitated by the novel form itself, praised by Smith as "ever-evolving, ever-communal, ever-revolutionary, and because of this, ever-hopeful to work with, whatever it formally does." As such an outlook implies unexpected transformations of generic expectations, it would not appear too far-fetched to read these works more specifically as amended and partly transvalued variants of the coming-of-age novel, in which processes of maturation, implying a ripening sense of collective awareness and responsibility, are presented as independent from biological age.<sup>2</sup> In *Summer*, the coming-of-age of the teenagers Sacha and Robert (her disoriented-yet-brilliant brother) – whose evolving ways of seeing have much in common with Iris and Daniel, respectively (which is also true for Charlotte and Art) – thus reiterates a process of awakening and change that the earlier volumes in the series have attributed to characters of *all* ages, including older people like Wendy Demand and Richard Lease. This sense of an ending, with its revised understanding of family and kinship in terms of wider reaches of

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<sup>2</sup> *Summer* mentions in passing the violence a school teacher recently had to experience from a fanaticized father when insisting that the word "Bildungsroman" does not simply signify a "foreign" literary tradition but has long entered English culture as the general term for a "story of a person's personal development," "about learning how to live and maturing into adulthood" (97). By contrast to such anti-intellectual rancour, the 'coming-of-age' conducted in Smith's Seasonal cycle would expose a careful revision of the Bildungsroman tradition, freeing it from gendered, elitist, and age-related assumptions.

connectedness, would indicate the hope for a new generation that is eager to engage with and learn, rather than to seek distance, from the old. Adapting the expression more generally as a metaphor for Smith's political writing in hard times, 'coming-of-age' as a shared experience in the Seasonal Quartet would suggest a new empowering myth of an ongoing and infinite process, like the change of seasons, that continuously and ever anew unites old and young in empathy, creativity, and solidarity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> While the Seasonal Quartet shares with Yuri M. Lotman's seminal definition of myth a sense of cyclical time attuned to natural processes (151-53), the novels' repetitions of the central 'coming-of-age' theme also generate something new, thus constituting an enlightened and political myth of change that does not impair, but actually encourages, human agency.

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