

Teata

**“And Whoever Makes Up the Story Makes Up the World”:
Morphing Stories in Ali Smith’s *Autumn***

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1. Introduction

Ali Smith's *Autumn*, published in 2016, is not only the first novel of her seasonal quartet series but also one of the first in terms of the (post) Brexit literature. Being a symptomatic reaction to the United Kingdom's European Union membership referendum of June 23, 2016, the novel tends to capture the moment of transition that becomes a traumatic event for the country shaken and torn by conflicting reactions and attitudes. The stable and predictable summer of the UK as part of the European Union has become a matter of past within the timespan of one day, and autumn, which inevitably follows summer days, illustrates the state of the socio-economic challenges brought on by the breaking from the European Union. "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature" (Smith 3). The first lines of the novel not only serve as an intertextual allusion to the social disarray and feeling of fear accompanying the French revolution and the Reign of terror in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) (Cox 10) but also compare the post-Brexit Britain to the times when "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (Yeats). Almost a century divides William Butler Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919) from Ali Smith's *Autumn*, still both works depict notes of discord from people believing "themselves to be living through a period of serious decline" (Poplawski 482), a feeling that can be identified as prevalent in the early 20th century, due to the shift from the accelerated development of Victorian society to a more moderate pace of social transformation following that era. A similar feeling permeates *Autumn*, which also describes the migration crisis of the 2010s as a regress compared to the breakthrough in post-colonial and migration policies of the 1980s.

In the 2017 Penguin Books edition of *Autumn*, a separate page is dedicated to highlights from the reviews of the novel, and one such excerpt from Heller McAlpin's review published by the NPR (National Public Radio) comments on the loose structure and fragmentation of *Autumn*'s narrative: "Knits together an astonishing array of seemingly disparate subjects, including mortality, unconditional love, Shakespeare's *Tempest* [...] free spirits, and the life force of art – along with kindness, hope and a 'readiness to be above and beyond the foul even when we are up to our eyes in it'" (sic). Apparently, art in Ali Smith's work can be identified as one of the underlying and perhaps most powerful motifs that knits the fragments of post-Brexit life in England together. From allusive references to different genres and pieces of literature to ekphrastic meditation on the works of the British pop artist Pauline Boty, art appears in a diversity of manifestations. In Smith's narrative, art communicates through stories: the story of Prospero facing the difficulty of seeing into men and monsters and the realities of

justice; timeless and various metamorphosis narratives conceptualising trauma and excess; visual narratives of pop art or mundane stories of the post-Brexit England.

The art of storytelling is presented in the novel as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon, characterized by difficulty in unambiguous descriptions and emphasizing the changing and adaptive nature of stories. *Autumn* reflects upon the struggle of distinguishing between truth and non-truth, reality and fiction in a postmodern manner, which Linda Hutcheon defined as “deliberately self-reflexive and contradictory” (12). One of the tools Smith uses to depict the fluidity of stories and blurring of lines within the contemporary post-Brexit UK are the narratives of metamorphoses for “her insistence on transformative political engagement is crucially informed by an ongoing concern with Ovidian themes of renewal, liminality, and change” (Ranger 416). Smith portrays Brexit as a dual phenomenon, simultaneously seen as a traumatic event and a process of transition possessing a certain duration of time where the starting and finishing points are unknown. “Here’s an old story so new that it’s still in the middle of happening, writing itself right now with no knowledge of where or how it’ll end” (Smith 181). In other words, the novel allows one to ask whether Brexit is a story “so new” that it becomes a starting point, provoking transformations in the UK unprecedented in the past century, or whether it reflects the culmination of an “old” process that was already preceded by other processes of change which will naturally continue after it. This uncertainty of beginning and ending creates a non-linear temporal space where everything is happening now, in the present moment, as in the only existing time unit which becomes a story, a narrative.

The aim of this paper is to explore the communicative and connective function of art, with a focus on storytelling. By analysing how the novel uses the postmodern approach to the plenitude of narrative voices and how they manifest themselves within the context of pre- and/or post-Brexit UK, this research investigates how telling and reading stories become an exercise in (re)creating the world. Ovidian plots of metamorphosing into a tree appear as a powerful tool of enacting change, of resisting the rhetoric of post-truth, and a symbol of preserving humanity. Stories in the novel become self-sufficient agents, and their adaptability allows them to be interpreted as a way of communication, an ongoing dialogue between past and present generations of people.

2. The Power of Storytelling

2.1 The Polyphony of Storytelling

It is undoubtedly true that Ali Smith's novels and collections of short stories make a vast contribution to the contemporary British fiction and address a large number of issues, among which Daniel Lea outlines "concerns of human connectedness, technology, and the transformative capacities of language" (397) as the most prominent, though, surely, not the only ones. Similarly, it is not only challenging to highlight exclusively dominant motifs in Ali Smith's literary work but it is as difficult to situate her work within one single cultural paradigm. Some researchers tend to cast doubt on her works being purely postmodernist and suggest to position her fiction within what is debatably called today "metamodernism." Monica Germanà, while acknowledging the legacy of postmodernism in Smith's fiction, asserts that "her writing also departs from postmodernism in a way that . . . combines formal experimentation with a strong ethical commitment to distinctly contemporary concerns" (100). John Brannigan, talking about Ali Smith's *How To Be Both* (2014) concludes that "her work restores and renews faith in the capacity of art to connect, communicate, and resist authority" (607), creating a difference with classics of postmodern fiction. Such a metamodernist understanding of *Autumn* is crucial in perceiving Ali Smith's writing as a manifestation of continuities existing between postmodern and postmillennial epochs and an engagement with notably contemporary issues (Germanà 106).

Having said that, one cannot deny the importance and explicitness of postmodernist elements in *Autumn*. John Brannigan, for instance, asserts that Ali Smith's work adopts many of the innovations brought to life by postmodernism, therefore partially conforming to its definitions (607). Among such elements one can name the postmodern narrative strategies of fragmentation, intense use of cultural and literary allusions, metafictional components, intertextuality, and the preoccupation with the boundaries between the real and the fictional. In view of this, this paper while acknowledging the metamodern context and nature of the novel, rather focuses on the postmodern concepts and tools present in the narrative and analyses how they are used specifically in delineating the complexity of Ali Smith's account of storytelling.

Linda Hutcheon, one of the most prominent theoreticians of literary postmodernism, contends in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*: "The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to a coherent, meaning-generating entity. Narrators in fiction become disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate. . . . In Charles Russell's terms, with postmodernism we start to encounter and are challenged by 'an art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and

extended meaning' (1980a, 192)" (Russell qtd. in Hutcheon 11). Describing how storytelling serves in Smith's works to investigate the nature of human connections with each other, Daniel Lea emphasises the plenitude of narrative voices in her fiction by proposing that "these voices explain the world as it appears to them, but none are allowed the ultimate satisfaction of determining the meaning of another's experience. Instead Smith relishes the argumentative grist of opposed perspectives, replacing singular with plural truths" (397). Storytelling hence undermines "alienated otherness" and the "centralized sameness" by replacing it with the notion of difference, and in the same way as in the postmodern canon singular culture has transformed into plural cultures (Hutcheon 12), so does *Autumn* feature the polyphony of multiple narrative voices.

2.2 "Always Be Reading Something"

The novel tells the story of Elisabeth Demand who is trying to make sense of fragments the fragments of her life "as she keeps vigil by the bedside of her 101-year-old lifelong friend Daniel Gluck, whose prolonged sleep embodies autumn: a link or a crack between life and death" (Mulalić 44). Elisabeth is reading books in the physical reality by the bed of her friend who, in his sleep, finds himself in the metaphysical space of his own memory and consciousness, where images and memories flow into each other, creating the never-ending circulation of stories on different levels. Stories in *Autumn* become the manifestation of (creative) life force, acquiring the power to maintain themselves and act as self-sufficient agents, while storytelling appears as the foundation for sustaining life in people and narratives alike.

In his interview with Ali Smith, Karl Anderson describes the relationship between Daniel Gluck and Elisabeth Demand as being "bound by stories they read and the stories they make up together" (Anderson). Reading becomes an exercise in interpretation, a process of learning how and why things happen in the world, and this is one of the two main skills Daniel Gluck is teaching Elisabeth: "Always be reading something, he said. Even when we're not physically reading. How else will we read the world?" (Smith 68). Reading acquires two possible levels of signification. The first one refers to the interpretation of the world as a collection of stories incorporating a multiplicity of narrative voices. At this point, reading becomes another form of connecting people and making them listen to each other. To put it in Daniel Lea's words, "Reading and loving are thus closely related for Smith – her characters love to read, but they also read to love. Both practices come with costs and benefits and they

both offer ways of understanding the world” (401). Reading, hence, can be seen in the novel as making sense of the world overwhelmed by the multitude of perspectives and opinions.

The second understanding of reading as a practice makes it a tool of creativity. This interpretation is well articulated in Wolfgang Iser’s *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1976) in which every literary text is considered to be a form of communication while reading is a process of re-creative dialectics:

In other words, the literary text enables its readers to transcend the limitations of their own real-life situation; it is not a reflection of any given reality, but it is an extension or broadening of their own reality. In Kosik’s words: “Every work of art has a unified and invisible double character: it is an expression of reality, but it also forms the reality that exists, not next to or before the work but actually in the work itself. . . . As work and as art, it represents the reality and so indivisibly and simultaneously forms reality.” (qtd. in Iser 79)

Thus, reading in *Autumn* can be perceived as a process of appropriation of a particular narrative, “the unveiling of the other story, which exists beyond the border and the surface of things” (Germanà 100), which in Ali Smith’s work usually accounts for the communities of outsiders, outcasted by the intransigent immigration policies. In *Autumn* such narratives often signify the communities of outsiders, the ones being cast out by the intransigent immigration policies. Reading becomes the procedure of fragmenting the given reality of sameness suggested by the grand narratives into the polyphony of “characters’ differing versions of the world built around shared events or experiences” (Lea 398). Reading serves as an opportunity to listen to the plurality of narrative voices momentarily, voices sometimes contradicting each other, but never having the possibility to establish the dominance of one over the others. Such attitude to reading is inevitable in post-Brexit UK, where “All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country people felt, they had really lost. All across the country, people felt they’d really won. All across the country, people felt they have done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing” (Smith 59). The coexistence of opposed narratives as well as their subjectivity (the factor of intentionality) creates a certain chaos in terms of which voices to believe and which voices to be perceived as the “true” representation of the ruling sentiments of the country since all of them appear to influence the world in one way or another. Hence reading as a double-natured process of both understanding and retelling must be a continuity without a halt.

2.3 The Truth of Storytelling

In the introduction to *Telling Truths through Telling Stories*, a textbook for storytelling classes, Amy E. Spaulding reflects upon the ambivalent nature of truth in/through storytelling: “Truth, like story, cannot be written in stone, for it dies when it is solidified. The first person to write down the Veda (Hindu sacred scriptures) was called ‘the butcher of the Veda’ because he trapped the words on paper, rather than letting them be alive and free as sound” (4). The relationship between truth and storytelling appears troubled in post-Brexit Britain, where “All across the country, nobody spoke about it. All across the country, nobody spoke about anything else” (Smith 60). Stories do indeed have intrinsic dynamism, their “life force” lies in their non-static nature, the ability to adapt to the constantly changing environment in which they exist. However, Spaulding’s claim about a similar fluidity of truth raises the danger of the truth being manipulated for personal aims, of distorted truth being disguised as a one more story. Given the political and social context of the pre-Brexit UK, one cannot avoid considering the misuse of this adaptability quality in order to create what is now called post-truth.

Coincidence or not, in November 2016 the Oxford English Dictionary awarded “post-truth” to be the word of the year, also providing it with a definition with an emphasis on subjective influence in the formation of public opinion, when one prefers to present their emotions and beliefs as facts (Barbieri 24; Brahms 2). Investigating the notion of post-truth in the context of its Brexit-related popularity, Yael Brahms offers the following definition:

a term denoting circumstances in which our ability to clarify reality in order to understand it and in order to function within it on the basis of facts is weakening as a result of high-intensity interference by four peak waves: the information explosion and disruptive technology; the dwindling of faith in institutions and in “truth tellers”; undermining postmodernist ideas; and bitter political battles. (17)

Indeed, this feeling of loss of faith in politicians, the rejection of populist speeches is present in the novel and takes shape in refreshingly precise and observant words of Elisabeth’s mother: “I’m tired of liars. I’m tired of sanctified liars. . . . I’m tired of lying governments. I’m tired of people not caring whether they’re being lied to any more” (Smith 57). The last part of her outcry, however, may imply that the greatest danger of manipulating the truth is that people stop “reading” the world, thereby rather accepting the half-truth offered to them, showing signs of apathy and carelessness, the inability to be involved, to participate in the course of their own life. However, considering Daniel as a source of knowledge for Elisabeth, including knowledge about how to read, understand and create, this paper still tends to perceive the artistic potential

of storytelling and reading in its constructive quality. When Elisabeth asks Daniel if she can ask him a question, Daniel answers the following: “You can ask me anything you like, Daniel said. But I can’t promise to answer what you ask unless I know a good enough answer” (Smith 70). The implications of these words are dubious. On the one hand, Daniel acknowledges a certain level of manipulation in his potential answer, saying that his answer depends largely on the question, in which case this statement reinforces the quality of post-truth as subjectivity. At the same time, it remains possible to assume that a “good enough answer” is an answer that is quite complete and, perhaps, honestly answers the question, as far as Daniel’s perspective is taken into consideration. Thus, *Autumn* does not provide a clearly articulated view on storytelling. Post-truth and storytelling seem to be two interpretations of the same act of telling something, and the differentiation between the two lies in the speaker’s intention to tell the “truths” and the listener’s desire to “read” them.

2.4 Bagatelling Stories

Daniel Gluck teaches Elisabeth the game of Bagatelle, or to put it in a more abstract way, the art of storytelling. His words somewhat resonate with what Spaulding claimed about the non-static nature of stories: “. . . the whole point of Bagatelle is that you trifle with stories that people think are set in stone” (Smith 117). The game of Bagatelle can be considered as the key to understanding of the power of storytelling viewed as a means of influencing (physical and/or metaphysical) reality in *Autumn*. Daniel invites Elisabeth to play Bagatelle, a version of playing the game he came up with on the spot and whose rules are very simple: “How we play is: I tell you the first line of a story, Daniel said. . . . Then you tell me the story that comes into your head when you hear that first line, Daniel said” (Smith 116-7). Here again, a story appears not as a passive object perceived, but as something endowed with independence and the capacity to act independently, able to “come into head.”

The game of bagatelle has its own history that, in accordance with Daniel’s view on stories, is still not set in stone. As Rick Sherin examines, Bagatelle was originally an outdoor British table game, which was later adapted for in-door activities at the times of King Louis XVI and his queen, Marie Antoinette, at the Chateau de Bagatelle, under whose name it is known today. This was not the last stage of its evolution, and as technology was advancing, the game of bagatelle evolved into different types of pinballs and, recently, into numerous forms of electronic game-playing (Sherin). While the general idea of the game has remained the same, technological advances allowed new inspiring mechanisms for the game, thus maintaining its popularity through the ages. The way of playing Bagatelle that Daniel offers gives a new take

on it, transforming it into a means of communication through retelling old/new plots that link people, pasts and histories together.

Daniel and Elisabeth trifle with the widely known, 19th-century English fairy tale of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” When Daniel suggests that Goldilocks sprays her name with spraypaint on the walls, Elisabeth objects that such a detail (or interpretation) is impossible since the fairy tale originates from the times when spraypaint did not exist. Daniel objects this crude factual interjection of Elisabeth: “Who says? . . . Who says the story isn’t happening right now?” (Smith 117). Elisabeth insisted on the temporal anchorage of the narrative. Daniel, however, deconstructs the understanding of a story as existing at a particular moment in time, blurring the line between past and present, as well as in Elisabeth’s reading of authenticity and fabrication. Stories, thus, appear to be able to survive from past contexts into the present.

At one point in the narrative, Daniel compares words, which constitute stories, to “living organisms” (Smith 69) which are able to grow from different sources, therefore illuminating on the vitality of stories. According to Bortolotti and Hutcheon, from a biological perspective, adaptations at the genetic level do not occur for the survival of certain groups of organisms or individuals, but for the survival of replicators (447). The replicator is the narrative idea, and the purpose of adaptation is not the survival of the original, but of the idea, and the plot and replication/adaptation becomes a repetition with change (Bortolotti 447). Adaptations are like carriers of genes/ideas/ “truths,” serving as physical embodiment for constantly retold narratives within new contexts plots (448). From this point of view, the Bagatelle scene can be viewed in terms of reinforcing the impossibility of the petrification of stories. Stories possess adaptability that allows them to further evolve, where both reading and storytelling become the source of life power to serve as a link between past and future, which especially resonates with the general sentiments and anxiety of people at the times of post-Brexit UK.

A very similar idea is expressed in Ali Smith’s “The Universal Story” from *The Whole Story* (2003), in which “each book’s history is enshrined in another story, a form of endless recession that indicates the continual resonances of stories through each other and through their tellers/readers. Smith’s book/ story is like her relationship: always open to fresh interpretation and analysis, but also subject to surprising transformation and redirection” (Lea 401). Such vitality of stories is partially determined by the vitality of words themselves, which serve as “microcosmic universes for grander stories” (401), giving them the transformative power to grow into stories. As Daniel describes them, words in *Autumn* are “herbal and verbal,” compared to “bright red, blowing about” poppies ready to vegetate into “even more language” which can later be used to tell and retell stories (Smith 69). Words and language are depicted

as open to change and mutation, which reinforces “language’s anti-authoritarian ability to avoid cliché and hierarchy” (Lea 402). Such perspective fills stories with powerful life force that creates a sense of connectedness of people and stories once (re)told by them.

Storytelling emerges as the ability of stories to evolve and preserve the multiple “truths” embedded in them, in the meanwhile defying the authoritative canonization of one “truth.” The storyteller is the force that is able to influence the world, already woven from stories, which is relentlessly evolving and changing with the passage of time: “And whoever makes up the story makes up the world, Daniel said. So always try to welcome people into the home of your story” (Smith 119). In this way, Daniel teaches Elisabeth the art of making sense of the world, the craft of creating and transforming stories. In addition, the story is compared to a home, a place where one can always find comfort, ease and security. In the context of the post-Brexit reality, this gives storytelling the sense of a safe space where one can distinguish truth from lies and remember exactly how the world works. Elisabeth now has the necessary “benefit of the doubt” (in her mother’s words, she does not agree to be lied to), which is an ability to differentiate between what is true and what is not, she matures to be “ready to bagatelle it as it is,” a skill essential in a reality where there is no unifying perspective (Smith 121).

3. The Unbroken Thread of Verse

3.1 The Old/New Narrative of Xenophobia

Circularity and change seem to be traceable in many layers of the narration in *Autumn*. It is not only stories that change and are changed, these are also stories of change that turn *Autumn* into truly a transformational work. At the very beginning of the narrative, Elisabeth, stuck in the bureaucratic hell of the Post Office, is reading Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and the following passage strikes her eyes, which in turn conjures up Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "'O brave new world!' Miranda was proclaiming the possibility of loveliness, the possibility of transforming even the nightmare into something fine and noble. 'O brave new world!' It was a challenge, a command" (qtd. in Smith 18). Elisabeth, whose given name is not used according to "the normal way of spelling" (Smith 22), let alone her family name's ("Demand") oddity—which raises the suspicion of the Post Office clerk—and whose "face is the wrong size" on the photograph she attaches to her passport application (Smith 24) do not fit in the normativity of the UK. With painful irony, she realises how Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Huxley's *Brave New World* come together in a real, non-fictional nightmare of the dystopian UK, where her whole identity on all possible levels are questioned. To play upon the fluctuation between fictional and non-fictional realities the Post Office clerk "This isn't fiction. . . . This is the Post Office" (27).

The contemporary UK has transformed into something both new and old, and "suddenly Daniel Gluck's memory of his sister Hannah's rounding-up in Nancy in 1943 was not just part of that mnemonic driftwood washing ashore in the last days of life" (Rau 39). The allusion to one of the most terrible wars in the history of humanity draws a clear parallel to the rhetoric of Brexit migration policy, and what is new (as well as terrifying) for Elisabeth, is "that old thing" for Daniel, and, perhaps, for history as well.

In the meanwhile, one cannot avoid noticing that *Brave New World* is not the only literary work described in the novel as old/new. By placing old texts in new and different contexts, Smith uses "her own writing as a way of both charting the world, and trying to enact change within it" (Cox 11). Being heavily charged with political context, *Autumn* draws on Ovidian metamorphosis as "for Smith, the Ovidian and the political seem complementary, if not inextricable" (Ranger 403). One of the recurring sub-plots in the novel is featuring the sleeping Daniel with Elisabeth by his bed. In one of these scenes, Elisabeth opens the book of *Metamorphoses* (8 CE), the stories of which in Daniel's mind provoke visions of how he transforms into a tree. Smith's rewriting of the Ovidian plots of metamorphosing into a tree "links her contemporary readers in communion with millennia of earlier readers of the same

myths and stories” (Cox 3), reinforcing the power of stories “to accompany the human world in its unending process of transformation” (3), giving hope for the possibility of the current nightmare to turn into something fine and noble.

3.2 The Voice That Tells No Story

The central most prominent motif of metamorphoses in *Autumn* is the idea of transformation into a tree, which Zsófia Orosz-Réti has defined as “the most humanist symbol of the entire novel” (63), standing for all those who have been marginalized due to the rhetoric of xenophobia and anti-migratory discourses. Such discourses have become prevalent around the time of the Brexit referendum. Although immigrants appeared to be central figures in the Brexit discussions, their voices were notably absent:

Not allowed to actually cast their vote in the referendum of 2016 that has fundamentally changed their lives in Britain, affecting their livelihoods and career opportunities, (ab)used as bargaining chips in the ensuing political wrangle about the how and when of Brexit, they have largely been reduced to powerless onlookers, mere recipients of new policies that determine their fates rather than active participants in their shaping. (Berberich 5)

What this passage also highlights is the lack of dialogue, which only reinforces the reduction of migrants to objectified passive otherness. However, dialogue acts as a crucial element in recognising the subject in another person—let alone being integral to the formerly discussed storytelling as a form of communication between divided subjects—his or her ability to communicate on equal terms. This type of interactive communication is absent from both the pre- and post-Brexit social debates, bringing back to life the memories of similar nationalistic patterns existent at the times of the Second World War. Because of this, the storytelling of Ovidian *Metamorphosis* “offers a necessary counterpoint to the frightening and dreary politics of nationalism” (Cox 11), in the meanwhile suggesting another form of dialogue as a substitute for the missing one: a dialogue between books and readers.

Noteworthy is the fact that the opening paragraph of *Metamorphosis* is quoted in *Autumn* immediately after Elisabeth reflects upon the migratory politics of the current UK as, to some extent, a result of a lack of communication between people. Elisabeth recalls what might best be described as a parody of a dialogue, where the unwillingness to even discuss the problem becomes obvious. While one speaker on a radio programme Elisabeth heard offers some sort of critique of what he calls “*encouraging the opposite of integration for the immigrants to this country*” (Smith 111, emphasis in the original), the other spokesperson

answers in extremely reduced sentences: “*Get over it. Grow up. Your time’s over. Democracy. You lost*” (112). It is not only the lack of communication between immigrants and a native population that leads to the sad consequences, but it is the lack of dialogue between UK citizens (defined on the same page as “*ourselves*” as opposed to “*immigrants*”). As Elisabeth observes, “It has become a time of people saying stuff to each other and none of it actually ever becoming dialogue. It is the end of dialogue” (112). Moreover, in the same passage, Daniel is compared to “sleeping Socrates” (112), which in the context of the text might be interpreted as an allusion to the Socratic dialogues of Plato as “the most influential ancient works in dialogue form” (Baldick 96). This allusion even more emphatically illustrates the significance of dialogue between individuals, and the ability of this form of communication to stimulate critical thinking, “the benefit of the doubt” (Smith 120).

3.3 The Tree’s Stories

Speaking from the point of view of the chronological sequence of events in the novel, the transformative connection between the dialogue and the narrative of metamorphosis into a tree as a space to “offer homeland to those in exile” (Cox 4) is first manifested in the scene of playing Bagatelle. Along with trifling with the fairy tale of “Goldilocks and The Three Bears”, Daniel and Elisabeth make up a story about a man with a gun and a man in a tree costume: “The person dressed as a tree was standing with its branches up in the air like someone with his or her hands up. A man with a gun was pointing the gun at the person dressed as a tree” (Smith 124). The scene reveals a distorted perception displayed by the ones opposing immigration to the UK, a paradoxical belief that immigrants pose a threat the British society, for instance, turning a civilized town into a “wood” with their mere presence. As we see the man with the gun aiming at the trunk, “the person dressed as a tree transforms before the gunman’s eyes into a real tree, a giant tree, a magnificent golden ash tree towering high above waving its mesmerizing leaves” (112). The transformation into an ash tree acquires a special symbolic layer here since an ash tree is not only an evergreen—at least some of its species—that remains vegetating in all seasons, but also a symbol of life in many mythologies. Also, transformation into a tree appears as a way of maintaining humanity, for “the human body preserves its vertical dimension and hence part of its anthropomorphic proportions and symmetry” (Bényei qtd. in Orosz-Réti 63), as opposed to transforming in a stone or animal. Thus, the made-up story of a man turning into a tree becomes the illustration of transformation, sustainability, and life, as well as agency in choosing how to manage one’s life. The act of telling this story makes

metamorphosis narratives a space of hospitality and witness to marginalisation of immigrant populations offering an escape for those who are now considered outsiders.

This fictitious story emerges in Daniel's storyline, and even though it takes place in his mind, it does not make it any less real. While Elisabeth in the material world reads him stories and tells him about the events in the current UK, Daniel in his mind reacts to these narratives by gradually transforming into a tree. He finds himself "to be shut inside something remarkably like the trunk of a Scots pine" (Smith 89), another evergreen tree, "an ancient and adaptable and noble species" (90) which feels like "wearing a coat of armour, except much nicer, because the armour is made of a substance through which the years themselves, formative, have run" (90). The experience of a lifetime and the timeless plot of transforming into a tree merge, creating an Ovidian space, "a marvellous and ambiguous world where trees shed blood, feel pain, fear and cry, where they give birth, and have shapes and postures that indicate eternal love and closeness, or mourning, and where indeed they may envelop in a strange way another form of life" (Zatta 105). It appears that in Ovidian stories trees can experience all the spectrum of emotions available to humans, and as the physical world of modern UK puts "foreigners under the fire of xenophobia" (Orosz-Réti 63), Daniel feels pain and mourning as this news brings back life memories of his youth in the darkening Europe of Second World War:

Then the old man confined in the bed in the tree, Daniel, is a boy on a train that's passing through deep spruce woods. He is thin and small, sixteen summers old but he thinks he's a man. It's summer again, he is on the continent, they are all on the continent, and things are a little uneasy on the continent. Something's going to happen. It is already happening. Everybody knows. But everybody is pretending it is not happening. (Smith 99)

This memory reinforces the deafening lack of dialogue, the unwillingness to communicate and discuss what is happening, which allows Smith to build upon "the parallels many commentators perceive between the rise of Fascism and the Nazi regime in the 1930s and the return to nationalism and far right movements today" (Cox 14). The imagery of the evergreen spruce forest and the Scots pine, resistant to the influence of the seasons, makes Daniel an Ovidian character and, hence, both a tree and a work of art.

These, however, seem to be connected not only through the book of *Metamorphosis* as a work of art, but also through the materiality of the book as an object, how ultimately all books are metamorphosed trees. At one point, a thought enters Daniel's mind that "If you have to be cut down, good to spend the afterlife as messenger between people across landscapes" (Smith 90). When later on, Daniel has a dialogue with "not exactly God," and an all-embracing cosmic

voice reveals him how, among others: “I’m the ink, the paper, the grass, the tree, the leaves, the leaf, the greenness in the leaf. I’m the vein in the tree. I’m the voice that tells no story” (192). Paper and trees appear as part of one whole, different manifestations of the same phenomenon and this revelation becomes the foundation based on which Daniel rejects the last statement of the voice, by claiming that “There’s no such thing. . . . There’s always, there’ll always be, more story. That’s what story is. . . . It’s the never-ending leaf-fall” (192-193). Book as an object becomes a product of metamorphosis, not *into* a tree but *of* a tree, the tree’s transformation into a book, a physical storehouse of a story. As Ali Smith observed in an interview with Eric Anderson, “Trees are great. Don’t get me started about how clever they are, . . . how they provide homes for myriad creatures, . . . Their organic relation to books. . . . And of course, autumn – the fall – the lifecycle of leaf, the leaf-cycle of life” (Anderson). Trees metamorphosed into books acquire some sort of afterlife, fitting into “Ovid’s cycles of death and rebirth, endings and beginnings” (Cox 15), reminding us “that books come to new life each time they encounter a new reader” (12). Daniel, metamorphosing into a tree, “resembles a work of art by Arcimboldo” (15). He becomes a story, a way of communication “between people across different landscapes”; an immigrant himself, his story offers a home to those who have no place of belonging and were reduced to mere otherness.

Within the scene of Daniel becoming one with the Scots pine, *Autumn* also echoes another Ovidian story, namely, Daphne and Apollo’s story, in the context of the Profumo affair.¹ The story of Christine Keeler who ended up in the centre of a political scandal, in *Autumn* becomes the “ballad of Christine Keeler” (Smith 93), the “ballad of the Silver Birch” (97), the “green girl” (95). The story of Daphne, turning into a tree to escape from Apollo’s lust, becomes an act of witness as Christine Keeler in the centre of judicial interrogation is re-envisioned in Daniel’s dream (Orosz-Réti 63, Ranger 404). Daniel, himself covered in the pine armour, “imagined Keeler trying on the armour. He dreamt it, though it’s rumoured to have happened” (Smith 93). And indeed, Keeler in Daniel’s dream “has remade herself so she can’t be had by anyone” (96), especially by none of the men “who are angry with her for not lying about lying” (96). As Claudia Zatta emphasises, Daphne’s myth is unique in a way that it depicts not only a physical transformation but that the laurel tree preserves the same emotional response Daphne felt for Apollo (104). The novel uses this plot to articulate Ali Smith’s aversion to a political lie that resulted in damaging consequences in both 1963 and 2016. Christine Keeler

¹ In March, 1963 Britain witnessed the first publicly acknowledged sex scandal. John Profumo, the British Minister of War, deliberately denied in Parliament that he had an affair with 19-year-old Christine Keeler who also had an affair with a Russian spy (BBC World Service).

metamorphosing into a tree becomes a symbol of resistance to “a kind of mass culture of lies” (Laing), a definition Ali Smith offers in her interview with Olivia Laing. She wonders “what happens culturally when something is built on a lie” (Laing), therefore criticizing the abuse of storytelling within the post-truth rhetoric.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, storytelling as an art form in *Autumn* becomes the very thread that holds together the disparate fragments as well as subjectivities of the post-Brexit reality. The stories in this novel can be interpreted as both the object and the subject of action, and the interaction with them also has a dual nature. On the one hand, stories can be read and, in this case, they manifest a practice of interpretation; on the other hand, once told, they become a powerful tool for shaping reality. The ability to simultaneously read and tell stories, a skill whose importance is communicated, at the same time, by Daniel Gluck and the overall text of the novel itself, becomes crucial in the post-Brexit UK, where, in the most postmodern understanding, the categories of reliability, stability, and hope are appropriated by the perpetrators of the outplayed narrative. To resist the “mass culture of lies” constructed in the Brexit UK, Smith uses Ovidian plots as a manifestation of the changeability, adaptability, and transformative capability of art. In the dystopian world of the modern UK, disturbingly reminiscent of the nationalistic landscape of mid-20th-century Europe, dominated by xenophobic discourses, the Ovidian story of a human transforming into a tree becomes the symbol of humanity, witness and resistance, giving voice to those who were deprived of the right to speak. Ali Smith’s *Autumn* restores hope into the capability of stories to both change and enable change by becoming the connective tissue between numerous generations of readers and storytellers.

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