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'Going to Collage': Ali Smith's *Autumn* and Post-Liberal Democratic Imagination

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Across her many works of fiction, Ali Smith at once laments the breakdown of civic conversation and, in what seems a paradoxical move, draws stark ethical demarcations between characters who represent different political orientations. This tension is acute in her Seasonal Quartet, and especially the first of the four novels, *Autumn*. Hailed on publication as the first serious literary response to Brexit, 'Autumn' gives vivid account of the 'end of dialogue' at a time when 'all across the country, there was misery and rejoicing.' On one hand, in *Autumn* and elsewhere, Smith laments the consequences of the 'end of dialogue' between citizens and populates her fiction with sympathetic characters who notice, with alarm, that 'people [are] saying stuff to each other and none of it ever actually becom[es] dialogue.' Yet on the other hand, her work is itself partisan, specifically in its tendency to draw caricatures of complacently xenophobic middle-class Britons. This article argues that this tension is in fact crucial to the political outlook suggested in Smith's work, which hints at a positive, post- or nonliberal vision according to which neither novels, nor politics, draw democratic power from empathetic exchange or dialogue, but rather through world-affirming judgment. The specific sort of judgment Smith endorses, I argue, is rooted in *Autumn*'s 'collage' aesthetic, and its significance crystallizes when read alongside Hannah Arendt's account of political judgment. For both Smith and Arendt, the foremost threat to contemporary political life is not partisanship, but rather, the fragility of the 'common world,' and Smith proposes that the collage aesthetics of work like hers play a specific function in helping restore the 'common world.' This article thus proposes that Smith, read alongside Arendt, articulates an original, political purpose for art in the contemporary era.

Across her fiction, Ali Smith laments the breakdown of civic conversation. At the same time, in what seems a paradoxical move, her fiction also draws stark ethical demarcations between characters who represent different political orientations. This paradox is acute in her *Seasonal Quartet*. The first of the series, *Autumn*, was published mere months after the Brexit Referendum in June 2016 and has been widely described as the 'first significant post-Brexit novel' (Shaw 2018: 20).[1] It depicts a divided political and cultural atmosphere, in which 'all across the country, there was misery and rejoicing,' and its protagonist feels as if she has witnessed the 'end of dialogue' (Smith 2016: 59; 112). In *Autumn* and elsewhere, Smith populates her fiction with sympathetic characters who notice this 'end of dialogue' with alarm, straining against the grain of 'people saying stuff to each other and none of it ever actually becoming dialogue' (112). Yet simultaneously, her work is itself distinctly partisan, unambiguously anti-Brexit and clear about its judgments towards conservative, xenophobic figures, who are represented in flattened caricature. Fiction that wears its political commitments so openly would seem to jar with the idealization of dialogue it simultaneously evokes, insofar as 'dialogue' implies an exchange between standpoints that becomes difficult to credit if one standpoint is reduced to caricature.

Some critics have taken Smith's work to task for precisely this tension. Kate Bradley (2017), for instance, criticizes *Autumn* for making 'no attempt to explore the political views of the "nice" or nasty people, the motivations for the xenophobia,' then rhetorically asks, 'what's the point of a novel about a changing political landscape that doesn't attempt to understand anything apart from the author's point of view? Why not write a monologue, or a *Guardian* column?' Such criticism in fact highlights two conflicts: first, the conflict between partisanship and the texts' ostensible nostalgia for civic tolerance and, second, a conflict between partisanship and the novel genre itself. Bradley's question – why not write a monologue? – calls to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's still influential account of the novel as a dialogic genre, a literary form that is fundamentally heteroglossic, poetically enacting the many-voicedness of the modern, pluralistic world.[2] For Bakhtin and the countless theorists who have built on his work, dialogism makes the genre of the novel a synecdochic part of a modern world comprised of numerous competing worldviews, each encapsulated in different (metaphoric and actual) languages. Bradley's question also recalls a longstanding assumption that novels have helped forge a specifically liberal modernity, a modern world of nation-states bound into an 'imagined community' through print culture, in which novels provide a distinct adhesive because of their capacity to extend readerly

[1] See Rau (2018: 35–6) for further discussion of the book's immediate hailing as 'the first Brexit novel.'

[2] See, especially, 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse' in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Bakhtin 1981).

empathy.[3] In other words, Bradley is not accusing Smith's novel of artless propaganda, nor of merely undermining its apparent ambitions to help readers understand the contemporary political landscape; rather, she is implying that *Autumn* betrays genre-specific political affordances of novels.

Critics who have praised the Quartet have tended to do so in terms that reinforce Bradley's framing of both the Seasonal project and the political affordances of fiction in general. Along such lines, Catherine Bernard (2019) argues that Smith paves the way for 'a re-affected, empathic language' of narration by first proposing an alternative national narrative, one that acknowledges the grievances of working-class British people who have suffered under austerity and globalization but reframes these grievances in solidarity with other struggles. Sibyl Adam (2022) argues that Smith's work captures a national 'mood' and foregrounds the political salience of such amorphous affect – a reading that essentially filters Bakhtinian novel theory through affect theory. Dirk Wiemann (2021: 4) proposes that Smith thematizes the very conflict between novelistic discourse's alleged pluralism and the divisions of post-Brexit Britain, interrogating 'one of the most basic preconditions on which the novel traditionally relies, namely the climate of a community establishing itself dialogically.' Wiemann concludes that *Autumn* and other exemplary novelistic renderings of Brexit Britain offer an update to Bakhtinian narrative theory, making the novel stand in for the 'pure negativity of a post-dialogic imagination' (Wiemann 2021: 8). And Nicole Schrag (2023: 2), in another reading influenced by affect theory, argues that the Seasonal novels propose that art can forge a 'dissident, politically engaged counterpublic sphere' by reattuning the 'dissident middle-class' – Smith's readers, as well as her artistic and intellectual protagonists – who require affective, aesthetic revival following decades of postmodern cynicism in both art and politics.[4]

I will argue, in contrast to both critical and laudatory readings of *Autumn* rooted in its relation to affect and empathy, that Smith hints at a positive, post- or nonliberal vision according to which neither novels, nor politics, draw democratic power from empathetic exchange or imagination. Rather, Smith's is a vision in which the relation between aesthetics and politics is routed not through affect but through judgment.

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[3] The phrase 'imagined community' was coined by Benedict Anderson (1983); for canonical accounts of the relationship between the novel genre and liberal modernity, see Anderson, Watt (2001), Jameson (1983), Armstrong (2005), and Gallagher (1985). For arguments that literature exercises sympathy or empathy in terms beneficial to liberal democracy, see Trilling (1950), Nussbaum (1995), Eagleton (1996), Plotz (2017), and Keen (2007), the latter of whom are doubtful about the virtues of both literary empathy and liberal universalism. See also Cheah and Culler (2003).

[4] Of the scholars mentioned, my reading is closest to Schrag's (2023), although she does not explore the contrast between dialogue and other modes of political participation crucial to the counterpublic theory from which she draws. In this regard, I think the present essay can fruitfully be read in tandem with Schrag's.

In the process, I outline what I take to be the implicit response Smith's work offers to the first half of Bradley's question, which indeed runs beneath most responses to the Quartet: what is the point of a *novel* about a changing political landscape? And by extension, what is the point – politically speaking – of writing novels today, at all?

This article takes up these questions as both thematized and formally enacted in two of Smith's works, *Autumn* and her earlier novel *There But For The*, published in 2011. Like *Autumn*, *There But For The* laments the breakdown of humane interpersonal discourse – in one character's Shakespearian gloss, conversation has collapsed into 'sound and fury' (Smith 2011: 107) – and like *Autumn*, it critically satirizes polarization, racist nationalism, and the saturation of ordinary interactions with casual cruelty. Yet it, too, is partisan: it makes no serious effort to give empathetic texture to the perspectives of conservative characters, who express xenophobic, racist, homophobic, and simply foolish views with bold egotism. I draw on *There But For The* at the beginning of the article because its lack of formal 'dialogism' is especially noteworthy given its title, which incompletely gestures towards the phrase 'there but for the grace of god go I,' and thus – when we complete the sentence – towards the classic idea that narrative fiction stimulates our empathetic imaginations. The incompleteness of the gesture is important; I argue that Smith's work reflexively challenges this view and, perhaps inadvertently, invites us to imagine political affordances of novels that stem not from their relation to empathy (and hence, to tolerant dialogue), but instead from their relation to judgment.[5] The resulting account of fiction is not a simple apologia for propaganda or partisanship. It entails a specific vision of how political worlds are made, which I develop by linking my readings of Smith's fiction to Hannah Arendt's political philosophy. For Arendt, the foremost threat to modern democratic life is the risk of losing the 'common world' or 'the world we have in common,' which makes her work especially pertinent in an era when the common world seems jeopardized by a flight from shared truth. After first delineating the provocations about narrative, empathy, and world-sharing prompted by *There But For The* and *Autumn*, I illuminate their resonances with Arendt's thought. When read together, I claim, Smith and Arendt reveal a 'point' for novels responsive to contemporary concerns not about the fate of civic 'dialogue,' but about that of the common world as such.

I. *There But For The* and polarization in narrative form

The premise of *There But For The* is that a man named Miles Garth has locked himself into the spare bedroom of a couple hosting a dinner party. He remains there for months,

[5] My phrasing is deliberately modest: I do not propose a new 'theory of the novel,' but rather an account of what novels can (and sometimes try to) do.

during which his never-explained action becomes a global media sensation. The novel is often read as a commentary on hospitality and inhospitality, owing to parallels it draws between responses to Miles's behavior and Britain's inhospitality towards refugees, and to its reflexive considerations about how literary style can welcome or exclude certain types of persons.[6] Yet the novel is itself arguably *inhospitable* towards the demographic represented by the dinner party's hosts, if hospitality entails, beyond the provision of (narrative) space, an ethic of openness and responsiveness.[7] 'Hospitality,' as defined by the *OED* (2023), implies not only the allowance of another's presence, but 'liberality and goodwill' notably absent from *There But For The*'s characterization of the party's hosts and their friends.

The party is an annual tradition in which Genevieve (Gen) Lee and her husband Eric gather an unlikely assortment of friends and people 'a bit different from the people they usually saw' (Smith 2011: 13). A previous year, Gen explains, they invited 'a Palestinian man and his wife and a Jewish doctor and his partner,' which 'resulted in a very entertaining evening' (13). The implication is that political tension is entertainment to Gen, a politically clueless woman prone to instrumentalizing others. Her deficits are also displayed in a piece she writes for a local paper about 'what it's like living twenty-four-seven with an uninvited stranger,' in which she appeals for public sympathy by referencing the expensive hobby equipment and cultural capital locked away in the occupied room ('my rowing machine and my husband's wine-making kits and DVD collections of sci-fi classics of the fifties and sixties'), as well as the 'beautiful and authenticated c17th door' she doesn't want to damage by forcibly removing Miles (70–71). To make clear that Gen represents a type – in this case, defined primarily by blinkered, callous privilege – Smith gives the two Lees jobs with ambiguous titles that suggest the reproduction of the existing sociopolitical order: Gen is a freelance (and ironically named) 'welfare' consultant for workers in finance, providing private benefits for a fee, and Eric works for the ominously vague 'Institute for Measurement and Control.'

The dinner party itself is filled with excruciating snippets of miscommunication, prejudice, anxiety, jealousy, selfishness, and scorn. Deep political differences surface, dividing the guests. One guest, who works for a company that manufactures surveillance drones, advocates for tighter border security, defensively lauds 'civilization' against elitist intellectuals, and seems provoked by the presence of an openly gay man into

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[6] See, e.g., Bennett (2018), Davies (2017), and Campos (2022).

[7] See Bennett (2018) for a reading of *There But For The* that draws heavily on Jacques Derrida's exploration of the impossibility, and ethical importance, of absolute hospitality, and Davies for a complementary reading that draws on Martin Heidegger's account of 'dwelling.' See Byrne (2020: 88) for a reading of the Seasonal novels as 'push[ing] at the limits of hospitality' as described by Derrida.

making frequent homophobic remarks. He clashes with a pair of academics, who suggest that his advocacy of border 'fortifications' against displaced persons conflicts with his sales of surveillance technology. The drone salesman's wife cannot absorb the fact that the academics are Black and so well informed about things she considers distant from their 'own culture,' and her obtuse comments provoke the couple's ten-year-old daughter Brooke to ask her, 'Have you not met any or very many black people before or are you just living in a different universe?' (90).

The novel's view appears to be the latter: the drone salesman and his wife live in a different moral universe from Brooke's family (but as will become important later in this article, this does not mean they live in a different historical, political universe). The sympathetic characters form allegiances, recognizing each other as unbigoted, politically leftist, and sensitive to art, and they signal this allegiance with meaningful looks, side remarks, and occasionally simply by repeating the insensitive (or worse) words of the hosts and other guests. As Theo Tait (2012) remarked in a negative *London Review of Books* essay that anticipates Bradley's critique of *Autumn,* certain 'characters are so stupidly tactless and frequently evil that their values come entirely pre-punctured.' Tait acknowledges that Smith prefigures this reading. When Anna, the focalizer of the novel's first section, meets Genevieve, she creates the portmanteau 'generic' from the Lees' first names: a critique-via-pun that simultaneously signals Anna's affiliations and acknowledges the heavy-handedness of the novel's satire. For Tait, Anna's pun is 'protective self-consciousness' that fails to make up for the tiresome, predictable, and ungenerous critique. He rhetorically asks, 'does that help the reader, really – knowing that the author knows her targets are obvious?'

The answer, I think, is in fact that *yes*, it does 'help' the reader, insofar as it should provoke us to ask why the novel simultaneously invites us via its title to reflect on the ostensible links between narrative and empathy, yet thematizes its own refusal of empathetic treatment to certain characters. The novel's evocation of the phrase 'there but for the grace of god go I' – typically (although with some disagreement) attributed to the sixteenth-century English priest John Bradford, who allegedly uttered a version of the phrase while watching convicts led to execution – resonates with a familiar story of the genre's relation to ethics and politics, according to which novels played a crucial role in establishing the 'imagined community' of the modern nation, the abstract collective of commonly interested and legally integrated strangers.[8] Literary-historical narratives about the 'rise of the novel' describe it as a technology that helped forge the private individual, while also helping script the relational ties between individuals

[8] See Rutledge (2006) for a discussion of Bradford, and 3n for referents regarding the novel genre's relation to liberal modernity.

necessary for liberal society, a political and economic order premised on a vision of 'common humanity beneath surface differences' (Plotz 2017: 427).

Along these lines, John Plotz (2017: 427; 429) has posited that the realist novel became 'such a favored form during liberalism's rise' due to its '*there but for fortune* motif,' which helped readers navigate the seeming mismatch between social inequality and the liberal doctrine of equal humanity. By this view, the underlying message of realist fiction is that we are equal in the most fundamental ways that make us human – we share the equal capacities for reason, autonomy, and desire that make liberal markets and elections work – but fortune intervenes, resulting in the unequal world we see. Our moral imperative in this context is to feel appropriately, to acknowledge that the differences we witness in our worlds are metaphysically unjustifiable, that those who suffer do not 'deserve' a fate that might have been our own. This does not necessarily result in empathy, but it implies a similar underlying mental action: the imaginative projection, via fiction, of oneself into the plight of another, in which individual feeling is crucial. Novels, in Plotz's words, become 'the vehicle of liberal guilt, the place where the privileged acknowledge how easily things might have been otherwise,' at once supporting the 'rationalization' of inequality and 'anatomiz[ing]' this same 'justificatory impulse,' exposing the 'contingencies that separate one fate from another' (Plotz 2017: 427; 429).

As sceptics of a naïve view of narratively-induced empathy will note, if reading, rather than politics, is the 'place' where injustice is acknowledged, the empathetic operation can discharge even as it gives shape to 'liberal guilt.'[9] Moreover, if 'fortune' rather than policy (or differences in 'merit,' however conceived) is the root of inequality, those with privilege thank their lucky stars and perhaps provide charity where their imaginations move them, instead of working to redistribute 'fortune' through political means. From this standpoint, it is less problematic that Gen and Eric Lee fail to exhibit empathy towards those less fortunate and treat dinner parties as entertainment spectacles (although they do both), than that their jobs in finance and 'measurement and control' perpetuate the sociopolitical structure in which vast inequalities of 'fortune' proliferate. Likewise, it is not necessarily a flaw that the novel declines to give the kind of empathetic treatment to the Lees that would invite readers to imagine that, 'but for fortune,' we might be as 'evil' – and our values as 'pre-punctured' – as they and their friends. Such imaginative empathy might prepare us to hear out their real-world analogues in the marketplace of ideas, but from the sceptic's position we must ask what good that will do, if such marketplaces are themselves exclusionary and distorted, as evidence abundantly suggests.

[9] For additional criticisms and juxtapositions of this tradition to a narrative ethics of alterity, see Hale (2020) and Houser (2017).

There But For The undertakes a more complex inquiry into equations of empathy and progressive politics (or ethics) in reference to another set of people whose humanity is flattened by narrative: the asylum-seekers with whom Anna worked until shortly before the novel begins. Anna's job had been to transcribe the stories of people seeking asylum in Britain, condensing lives into 'word-length perfect' narratives submitted to a vaguely described agency evaluating asylum claims (41). Smith has named as an influence Caroline Moorehead's *Human Cargo: A Journey Among Refugees* (2005), in which Moorehead writes that for asylum seekers, 'their story is [often] their only real passport' (Moorehead 2005: 136).[10] But the novel's description of Anna's former job critiques the state's instrumental use of narrative for precisely this function. As Anna explains, 'I had to get people to talk to me about stuff that had happened to them, which was usually pretty horrible,' then condense 'these true stories, their whole life stories in some cases, on to just two-thirds of one side of [...] A4' (37). The job entailed filtering out experiences of trauma not considered 'salient' to the state, such as 'hearing the voices of others being tortured [which] was not as salient as being tortured yourself' (40). It might seem that the novel implies problems arise from the absence of empathy in the state's procedures. Surely there is a dearth of empathy in demanding specific traumas and narrative tropes. But the job also exemplifies the problem of approaching the contemporary crisis of mass human displacement via narratable private life in the first place, as opposed to via political action to address the global and mutually reinforcing systems of capital, national borders, warfare, and climate that drive the crisis.

In other words, the dilemmas of Anna's job stem not only from the flattening translation of a person's life into a brief, bureaucratic narrative, nor from the heartache of the many times her efforts did not effectively win the sympathies of the state. They also, and most foundationally, stem from the impossibility of addressing a global political problem through such narrative. While *There But For The* does not explicitly articulate this problem with Anna's job, it gestures towards it in her haunted imagination of the 'literally thousands' of children 'crossing the world by themselves right now,' and her memory of 'person after person' she had seen, 'from all over the world,' who had 'arrived by air, by sea, by lorry, in car boots, on foot' (38). Empathy and guilt might prompt political action, but both can also divert attention from the scale of such problems, focusing on individual and private struggles: the struggles amenable not only to an individual-centred asylum process but also to conventional novelistic representation. As the psychologist Paul Bloom (2017: 25) puts it, empathy 'favour[s] the one over the many and the specific over the statistical' – words we might apply equally to the narrative form of the novel.

[10] See Bennett (2018) for a careful account of Smith's engagement with Moorehead's work.

The subtle parallel between the satirical treatment of the 'generics' and the novel's more serious critique of the state's flattening of refugees' experiences does not imply an equivalence: the pre-punctured bourgeoisie can afford their exclusion from the ethical universe of a work of fiction more readily than refugees can afford their expulsion from England. Satire has long been a tool for dethroning the powerful, prompting audiences to see those with power differently, and Smith's depiction of the Lees and their friends in *There But For The* functions to some extent according to this tradition. But the reflexiveness of the novel's satire, together with this subtle parallel between 'generics' and asylum seekers, draws attention to the power relations always present in storytelling, as well as the tendency, in a world of bordered, liberal nation-states, for narratives focused on individual experience to formally affirm those power relations even when trying to counteract the consequences in specific instances.

This leaves us with the question of what political ends might be served by a reflexive problematization of links between narrative and empathy. Elsewhere, Smith has claimed she believes in the power of narrative to humanize and provide 'hospitality' to others.[11] Her involvement in the *Refugee Tales* project, through which professional writers render the stories of people seeking refuge in Britain, may be seen as an attempt to correct the imbalance and improper political instrumentalization of narratives of human displacement and migration. We might conclude that, for Smith, hospitality in fiction is not an equal right, or need, at this junction in history: even that politics might benefit from a shift in emotional allegiance prompted by shifts in narrative hospitality. It is beyond my purposes to draw such conclusions with any conviction, however; my point is simply to highlight the nuance of Smith's uses of both empathetic and nonempathetic narration, a nuance also reflected in the fact that she does not give direct expression in her fiction to migrant experience, even in the later Seasonal novels that thematize the issue of migrant detention, *Spring* (2019) and *Summer* (2020). She instead focalizes those novels through a security guard and an activist teenager, among other consistently British characters: the outlooks of individual British people who perceive or fail to perceive injustice, characters like the implied reader. So, we might legitimately ask what political role fiction is to play beyond satirical critique if we rule out the function of 'humanizing' either one's political antagonists or those who have been culturally and politically marginalized. It is with these questions in mind that I turn, now, to *Autumn*.

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[11] On the website of the *Refugee Tales* project, Smith (n. dat.: n. pag.) writes, 'Story has always been a welcoming-in, is always one way or another a hospitable meeting of the needs of others, and a porous artform where sympathy and empathy are only the beginning of things. The individual selves we all are meet and transform in the telling into something open and communal.'

II. The end of dialogue & *Autumn*'s drawing of lines

Two passages in *Autumn* are typically singled out as key to its depiction of the Brexit moment. Both, however, are more complex than a swift, conventionally liberal gloss might suggest. *Autumn* is set in the summer and autumn surrounding the Brexit referendum held on 23 June 2016, nearly contemporaneous with its publication in late 2016. Its protagonist is a 30-something adjunct instructor of art history, Elisabeth Demand, whose navigation of a hostile political climate interweaves with flashes from her childhood friendship with an elderly neighbor named Daniel Gluck, Daniel's life, and that of his sister Hannah, whom the reader infers was killed by the Nazis, as well as glimpses of the life and art of the 1960s British painter and collage artist Pauline Boty.

The first passage to consider tracks Elisabeth's thoughts as she generalizes from a toxic exchange she hears on the radio to a description of the era, the 'time' of the referendum:

> It is like democracy is a bottle someone can threaten to smash and do a bit of damage with. 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.
> She tries to think when exactly it changed, how long it's been like this without her noticing. (Smith 2016: 112)

This passage evokes liberal nostalgia, situating Brexit as a time after the dissolution of the preconditions of liberal democracy. There is a possibly unintended pun in the passage: for liberalism, the 'end of dialogue,' as in the purpose of dialogue, is rational democracy, 'the people's public use of reason,' as Habermas (1991: 5) writes in his seminal work describing the rise and fall of the ideal and partially realized bourgeois public sphere. The end of dialogue in this idealized sense is 'communicative reason,' consensus forged through the liberal protocols affirming the 'forceless force of the better argument' (Habermas 2005: 384). The pun, whether intended or not, highlights the distance of the present end of dialogue (irrational breakdown) from its idealized end (rational telos).

Elisabeth's evidently nostalgic lament does not, however, stand in for the novel's assessment of the present. *Autumn* challenges both the implied judgment of the past as a time in which people engaged in rational dialogue, and the endorsement of dialogue as the foundation of democracy. Not only is Elisabeth unable to pinpoint a precise moment of change, but the text's layering of past and present troubles the idea that there was any definitive break. Consistent with all of Smith's works of fiction, *Autumn* does not proceed in a linear fashion. Memories and unremembered experiences are

mixed with realistic accounts of events in the novel's contemporary setting, as well as glimpses from history that none of the protagonists directly experienced, and extended ekphrastic passages, in this case describing Pauline Boty's collages. Flashes of the past – such as the 1960s media furore surrounding Christine Keeler and the 'Profumo affair,' which Boty, the novel tells us, critiques and reworks in a collage centred on Keeler rather than on the two men involved – undercut any straightforward nostalgia about inclusive, rational public dialogue. And as I will argue shortly, the novel's reflexive employment of 'collage' aesthetics similar to Boty's further complicates the implied equivalence between democracy and dialogue.

The second passage typically cited in readings of *Autumn* in relation to Brexit offers a conspicuously literary panorama of divided Britain, thereby underscoring the novel's interest in the relation between politics and aesthetics – here, specifically literary aesthetics. The passage is an extended, poetic description of feelings and actions taking place 'all across the country' in the aftermath of the referendum. Here is the beginning of the roughly 3-page-long passage, a standalone section that appears early in the novel:

> All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing.
> All across the country, what had happened whipped about by itself as if a live electric wire had snapped off a pylon in a storm and was whipping about in the air above the trees, the roofs, the traffic.
> All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing [...] (59)

The first conspicuously literary device to note is anaphora, the repeated use of the clause 'all across the country.' As Dirk Wiemann (2017: 5) has observed, the use of anaphora generates a suggestive paradox: 'irreconcilable antagonistic factions are yet simultaneously held together by the conspicuous repetitiveness of the anaphoric phrase, "all across the country," that on the level of content ensures that nothing and no one is exempt from this divisiveness, but, on the level of form, provides a unifying frame for all that appears so irreconcilable.' He proposes that this produces, '(if only) in the medium of poetic language, [...] a paradoxical commonality that all the numerous opposing camps share: namely the literal common ground of "the country" as such' (Wiemann 2017: 5). This paradox is key to Wiemann's reading of *Autumn* as recasting the Bakhtinian theory of the novel for a contemporary era, in which the novel enacts the 'negativity' and end of dialogue that is today's ironic common ground.

The passage also makes a tacit allusion to Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) in its 'repetitive, anaphoric list of antinomies,' which, as David Rudrum (2019: 36) argues, captures 'the contradictory ways of accounting for a sense of crisis' encapsulated in the famous opening of Dickens's novel. In this way, the passage of antinomies revives the more explicit allusion to Dickens in the first sentences of *Autumn*, which read: 'It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again' (3). Such allusions evoke British literary tradition, inviting readings of *Autumn* as a contemporary 'state of the nation' novel, a reanimation of the subgenre associated with Dickens and other Victorian novelists who self-consciously interwove the fates of their genre and the modernizing nation.[12] According to this reading, literary-historical allusion adds to the novel's resistance to a progressive vision of history, in which Brexit Britain is an historical aberration, and not only because it recalls previous novelistic iterations of concern about the fate of liberalism. As Rudrum reminds us:

> Dickens famously undercuts his own bold assertions: not only is it somehow the best of times and the worst of times, but these hyperboles are belied at the end of the passage with a glib and disconcerting summary – "in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only" – which strongly suggests it was neither the best nor the worst of times. (Rudrum 2019: 36)

Smith makes the same point more succinctly in that second sentence of the novel – 'Again' – and at a slightly different angle midway through the anaphoric panorama: 'All across the country, everything changed overnight. All across the country, the haves and have nots stayed the same' (Smith 2016: 61). For Rudrum, Smith's 'remediation of Dickens' problem' pinpointing the nature or moment of change makes *Autumn* an exemplary expression of the 'post-truth epoch,' in which any claim to understand the nature of the times would undercut the epoch's alleged flight from discernible, articulable truth (Rudrum 2019: 37). It can also be read as further critique of liberal nostalgia: on the symbolic level, perhaps, 'everything' changed for a segment of 'the haves,' who awoke with new perception of a reality that, in material terms, had not changed at all. To conflate this group's historical understanding with 'everything' via the dubious platitude that 'everything changed overnight' is to reproduce the blinkered, partial perception that arguably fueled the Brexit vote, and which perhaps recurs in lamentations about the end of dialogue.[13]

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[12] For examples of readings of *Autumn* along these lines, see Adam (2022), Byrne (2020), Purvis (2021), and Schmitz-Justen (2022).

[13] See Zadie Smith (2016: n. pag.) for a thoughtful reflection on how 'middle-class liberals' who experienced 'profound shock' in the wake of the referendum 'must have been living behind a kind of veil, unable to see our own country for

If the paradoxes and ironies of this section enact what Rudrum dubs our post-truth 'cluelessness,' and Wiemann the 'pure negativity of a post-dialogic imagination,' they also enact a positive, poetic alternative. Or, to be more precise, they locate in poetic form an alternative to such historical and political breakdown. This is especially evident in the section's culmination, which reads:

> All across the country, the country split in pieces. All across the country, the countries cut adrift.
> All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there,
> A line you don't cross here,
> A line you better not cross there,
> A line of beauty here,
> A line of dance there,
> A line you don't even know exists here,
> A line you can't afford there,
> A whole new line of fire,
> A line of battle,
> End of the line,
> Here/there. (61)

Smith playfully stresses the multiple meanings of the word 'line,' its use to denote separation, affront and injury, aesthetic forms (of beauty and dance), and military figures. Some connotations of 'line' are ambiguously figurative: a line you can't afford might be a line of dialogue or action, words or movements you cannot 'afford' because they put you at risk or commit you to further lines of action. It might instead be a line of clothing or some other too-expensive commodity, or a queue leading to a product out of reach because of the money or time required. The 'end of the line' might be the terminus of a transit route or a point of surrender. Or, as it literally is (both here and there), the end of the line might be the end of the textual line.

Poetic form thus enacts a way in which splitting into pieces can establish new lines of beauty, new occasions for dancing (and dancing, like poetic line breaks, often literally performs togetherness premised on separation). Poetic form spreads meaning across

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what it has become.' Insofar as such 'shock' suggests a conflation of one's own perspective with 'everything,' nostalgic lamentations about the 'end of dialogue' arguably perpetuate a similar conflation between a privileged presumption of inclusion in political 'dialogue' and the political system as such. Contra such nostalgia, Zadie Smith suggests in the same essay that the referendum offered those barred from political 'dialogue' 'the rare prize of causing a chaotic rupture in a system that more usually steamrolls all in its path.'

lines, producing splits and requiring that we traverse them as we read. In other words, there is both punning and provocation in the uses of line breaks to trouble the politics of drawing lines. Via this poetic performance, the passage enacts a uniquely literary pluralism: not the dialogism of worldviews (Remainers and Leavers, welcomers and shunners of refugees, drawers and crossers of lines), but the constellation of multiple significations we find in exemplary fashion in dense aesthetic forms. The passage itself exemplifies this multiplicity. At the level of content, its meanings encompass partisan divisions in emotion, action, and perceptions of historical rupture and continuity. In content and form, the passage encompasses puns and puzzles, ironies, negativity, paradox. Its meanings encompass a vision of totality comprised of pieces, held together, paradoxically, by the same poetic form that cuts them adrift. The passage's meanings encompass an implicit metaphor – undoubtedly utopian – inviting an analogy between the beautiful paradox of poetic pluralism and the broken plurality of the country.

Extending the metaphor, a country does not achieve unity through dialogue. A country's unity, its commonality, depends on poetic perception – that is, perception that doubles as *poiesis*, creation: on how we see and read it, how our interpretive vision traverses and troubles lines, rather than what 'it' and its constituent people do. Here, finally, we come to the novel's use of collage, which itself is a matter of making new totalities by cutting and crossing and breaking. Before first describing Pauline Boty's work to her, Daniel playfully tells the young Elisabeth that she should aspire to 'go to collage,' instead of – or in addition to – 'college.' Whereas 'college,' according to Elisabeth, is where a person goes 'to get an education and qualifications so [they]'ll be able to get a good job and make good money,' 'collage' is, according to Daniel, 'an institute of education where all the rules can be thrown into the air, and size and space and time and foreground and background all become relative, and because of these skills everything you think you know gets made into something new and strange' (71–72). Via Daniel's punning yet sincere education of Elisabeth – 'pupil of my eye,' he calls her (76) – *Autumn* presents 'collage' as an artistic practice and form, as well as a medium through which to retrain perception.

The novel itself enacts collage as characterized by Daniel. The anaphoric panorama of 'the country' is a condensed example of the collage aesthetic, but throughout *Autumn* and, indeed, all her works of fiction, Smith throws conventional narrative rules into the air. She mixes fictional and historical pasts with our emergent present. She interweaves timelines. She juxtaposes memories, fantasies, and forgotten experiences. She places on the same narrative plane fictional characters and famous or forgotten 'real' historical figures. Via repeated passages of ekphrasis, she prompts readers to

imaginatively juxtapose novels with media that signify very differently. Her works aspire to be institutes of education, training us see new dimensions of our world, the strangeness of the familiar and the familiarity of the fictional.[14]

It is significant that Daniel's lesson to Elisabeth focuses not on the artist or writer who makes a collage, but on the pupil who learns to see things in collage, as collage. The skills we learn 'in collage' are interpretive before they are creative. In collage, the world *gets made* into something new and strange: perception and interpretation are the key creative forces, not cutting and pasting. Collage skills allow us to let go, interpretively, of conventional assumptions about size, space, time, foreground, etc., which implies we relinquish assumptions about rationally progressive history, for example, and about which events and people are rightly foregrounded in our understanding of the world. Going to collage, we learn that the world we inhabit is multidimensional and that relations are multiple and complex, that the angle from which we have learned to perceive the world is not the only one available. We learn, ideally, to see our world as if we ourselves move freely among dimensions.

Autumn reiterates and clarifies the agency and responsibility ascribed to interpretation through Daniel's recollections of his sister Hannah. It is from her that he gained a principle he passes along to Elisabeth, the commitment to 'always be reading something,' which he tells Elisabeth helps us learn to 'read the world' (68). Hannah's approach to reading underlines the implied connection between reading and collage: as Daniel recalls, his sister 'prefers to be reading several things at once,' because this 'gives endless perspective and dimension' (183). A letter from Hannah explains the purpose of this training in perspective and dimension. She stresses the importance of the 'question of how we regard our situations [...] how we look and see where we are, and how we choose, if we can, when we are seeing undeceivedly, not to despair and, at the same time, how best to act' (189–190). She does not advocate forcefully optimistic interpretations: we must strive to see undeceivedly, a stipulation all the more striking because the backdrop to Daniel's memories is the ascendency of the Nazis, who will murder Hannah.

In the same letter, she also observes that when we are struggling 'to deal with the negative acts towards human beings by other human beings in the world,' we should

[14] The echo of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is another literary remediation, another performance of the collage aesthetic, wherein pieces of the literary past are thrown into new arrangement. That Shakespeare and Dickens are so frequently invoked might be read as an effort to tap into a national literary past – sometimes invoked to nationalistic ends – to insist on continuity between Britain's literary past and a more cosmopolitan present. In that regard, the intertextual allusions invite further interrogation of links between novels and nationalism. It is beyond my scope, however, to pursue the effects of linking Britain's literary-historical sense of identity to distinctly cosmopolitan politics and a range of visual, sculptural, and cinematic artworks.

remember 'that nothing human is alien to us' (190). This remark should not be equated with a recommendation of empathy; she does not tell Daniel to imagine the feelings of a Nazi, nor to imagine that, to recall Smith's earlier novel's incomplete titular gesture, 'but for the grace of god' he might be a Nazi himself. She lays stress not on imaginative projection into the sensibility of the other, but on acknowledging the common context of human beings. Nothing done by others is 'alien' to us, or (in Brooke's words) from 'a different universe' (Smith 2011: 90), and we are 'in the world' with these others. In other words, reading undertaken as collage prepares us not to empathize, but instead to judge, or as Hannah puts it, to 'choose [...] how best to act' (190). I'll now suggest it does so partly because it reorients us towards what Hannah Arendt calls 'the world we have in common,' a world that she – rather like Smith – characterizes as 'usually regarded from an infinite number of different standpoints' (Arendt 1968: 51).

III. Arendt's Traveling Imagination

For Hannah Arendt, a foundational threat to democratic life arises if we see others as 'alien' and not of 'the world,' which is a good synopsis of the sense of lost common ground expressed, and poetically contradicted, in the anaphoric panorama considered at length above. Smith's collage philosophy is most significant insofar as it suggests a unique response to this sense of loss, a response that resonates provocatively with Arendt's account of the fragility of our common sense of inhabiting the same world, as well as with her recommendations for judging 'how best to act,' accordingly.

Like many philosophers, Arendt distinguishes the 'world,' as a human creation, from the earth, the material and given context in which we create the world. She writes in *The Human Condition* (1958) that the 'public realm' – also called in her work the 'common world' and the 'world we have in common' – 'ris[es] out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators' (Arendt 1958: 57). The world, she elaborates, 'arises out of [people] acting and speaking together'; it appears 'between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be,' and it lasts only while people continue to meet in this 'manner of speech and action' (Arendt 1958: 198; 199).

There are two key features of Arendt's vision of the 'world' that I wish to highlight. The first is that she describes the 'world' as a performative achievement, a space generated when and where people meet and regard the same objects from different vantage points. Like any performance, the 'world' has a temporal existence and neither preexists nor outlasts the presence of actors and audience. It is endlessly changing, depending on who gathers, what they say, and how they attend to one another. Speech, or communication, is essential. The world does not arise simply if people are standing in a circle; it arises when, through speech, people collate their different perspectives.

Arendt writes that it is through 'incessant talk' that we learn 'to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects,' to recognize 'that the same object [we see] also appears to others though its mode of appearance may be different' (1968: 51; 1978: 50).

Talk, or 'dialogue,' has very different 'ends' in Arendt's work than it does in conventional liberal theory. To borrow language from *Autumn*, talk is another 'institute of education,' for Arendt, and it can be put to similar ends as 'collage.' This is the second feature I wish to highlight, which helps clarify the significance of Smith's hints about the relation between politics and aesthetics. The world as described by Arendt is *constitutively multiperspectival*: this is the implication of her description of the world we have in common as a space that 'rises out' of the 'sum total of aspects' or perspectives on common interests brought to light through talk. 'The reality of the public realm,' she writes, 'relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself' (Arendt 1958: 57). Her point is not that all individual perspectives are equally 'valid' or should be given equal normative weight when it comes to deciding 'how to act' or judge the 'negative acts' perpetrated by our neighbours. Rather, her point is that all perspectives have an equally constitutive power in generating the 'world we have in common,' the world in which we must act and judge. Hence, we should cultivate the capacity to perceive with 'endless perspective and dimension' if we wish to perceive the world 'undeceivedly,' as Hannah Gluck writes. Others are not 'alien' to our world, by Arendt's lights, precisely because their perspectives – however repugnant or irrational, to us – help comprise the world we have in common with them, which is the world in which political life necessarily unfolds.

At the time of her death, Arendt was working on a theory of judgment applicable to this multiperspectival, contingent, and ever-changing world. She died before presenting its full articulation, but in lectures, notes, and occasional essays, she initiated a political reformulation of Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment for the purpose. Whereas moral philosophy and theology traditionally seek rubrics for assessing or guiding actions, Kantian aesthetic theory proceeds under the assumption that we do not judge the beauty of objects by following rules or applying fixed, predetermined criteria. We start with the specific object – a painting, sunset, flower, etc. – and we respond to it in its specificity, as we apprehend it through our own embodied senses, without 'mediation of a concept' (Kant 1951: §40, 138). Simultaneously, however, we universalize when we judge. We believe we 'speak with a universal voice,' Kant famously writes, and we 'claim the assent of everyone' – imagining that, although we do not have a rule to point to, nor logic we have followed, everyone must agree (§8, 50). A curious combination of subjectivity and universality is thus intrinsic to aesthetic judgment, and it is fruitless to try to rationally persuade others to share aesthetic judgments because we cannot hitch our judgments to articulable reasons.

There are clear similarities between judgments of aesthetic taste, thus described, and judgments on political matters. At both interpersonal and collective, public scales, rational 'dialogue' is unlikely to persuade anyone to change their minds about political issues. Arendt, moreover, argues that just as there is no transcendent criterion of 'beauty' we can apply to particular flowers, sunsets, etc., there are no transcendent, transhistorical criteria for judging the justice or injustice of a specific policy or event. Although she does not make this link directly, there is a connection here to her account of the 'world we have in common': as a performative achievement, unpredictable and contingent on the speech and action of people who gather in public, the public world should not be judged based on predetermined criteria. But this does not mean we cannot judge at all. Indeed, Arendt shares Hannah Gluck's sense that we must decide how best to act in a world partly constituted by views that are neither laudable nor alien.

Arendt accordingly proposes extending Kant's recommendations for how to judge matters of aesthetic taste into political and historical realms. Kant advises we test and cultivate aesthetic judgments through an exercise he calls 'representative thinking,' in which we represent, in the imagination, 'the possible rather than the actual judgments of others,' which we can do 'by putting ourselves [imaginatively] in the place of any other' who might encounter the same object (Kant 1951: §40, 136). Arendt recommends the same operation for political life:

> Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. [... I] imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place. (Arendt 1968: 241–2).

Representative thinking in politics, as in aesthetics, is meant to induce what Kant calls the 'enlarged mentality' of disinterestedness, which is neither the liberal disinterestedness of abstract 'rationality,' which presupposes a concept of rationality, nor the alleged disinterestedness of liberal 'tolerance.'[15] Arendt (1989: 43) comments that such thinking requires 'that one trains one's imagination to go visiting.' But as she stresses,

[15] The liberal method does not call for a specifically rigorous form of 'reflective judgment,' but rather imagines that individuals, however unreflective, can correct each other's opinions in the larger contest of public life (real or imagined). It does not call for 'representative thinking' by individuals, but instead presumes that, in debate, each individual represents their own thoughts.

this 'visiting imagination' is not a civic extension of empathy. Whereas representative thinking aspires to strip one's judgment of self-interest and idiosyncratic feelings, empathetic imagination would trade one's own personal interests for those of another.

This returns us to *Autumn*: we can rephrase Arendt's Kantian recommendation as advising us to 'go to collage,' imaginatively sampling so many standpoints that we learn to see in many dimensions, seeking the judgment we would share with ourselves across all sampled standpoints. As the political philosopher Linda Zerilli (2016) has argued, Arendt's recommended practice of judging via representative thinking is both democratic and 'worldbuilding.'[16] It is democratic in the sense that it is the kind of judgment individuals ought to perform if living in a democracy, making decisions capable of remaking the world we have in common. As Arendt's scornful allusion to 'counting noses' indicates, there is a vast difference between democratic judgment in this Arendtian model and so-called democratic processes like the Brexit referendum. Democracy, here, requires strenuous imaginative responsibility. The world we must judge unceasingly changes, and the standpoints we must sample multiply. New people, in new situations, talk and perceive together, giving rise to ever-new dimensions of the world we have in common.

Whereas Arendt's description of representative thinking offers a model for democratic judgment suited to a given era, Smith adds the dimension of time, as if to propose a transhistorical democratic practice. In *Autumn*'*s* vision of an institute for collage, we find a model of sending the imagination visiting perspectives from past and future eras, a use of the imagination that strives to judge events in light not only of their present array of 'aspects,' but also of the array of aspects perceivable across historical time. This practice of judgment is, as Zerilli argues, worldbuilding, insofar as our imaginative travel informs the aspects of the world we regard, multiplying the dimensions according to which we can see – and this traveling imagination is what best allows us to see 'undeceivedly.' By sending our imaginations visiting across dimensions of time and space and polity, we expand the scope of the world, provided we return to tell others what we perceive.

IV. Giving us back the world

In her 2017 Goldsmiths Prize lecture, Smith says that 'the people who make fictions can proffer worlds that give us back the world' (Smith 2017: n. pag.). Read in tandem with Arendt, Smith's work suggests that fictional worlds can give us back *our* world: not by giving us new information about it, nor by dialogism that gives voice to alternative

[16] See, especially, the conclusion to Zerilli's *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (2016).

sensibilities or invites us to imagine that 'but for fortune' or god's grace we might be in another person's shoes. Fictions can give us back the world by training us to see in the manner of collage, training the imagination to go visiting in the specific sense suggested by reading Arendt's account of political judgment together with Smith's collage ideal.

To posit the novel as an institute for this kind of education is to offer an account of the political and ethical affordances of fiction that subtly differs from those common in accounts of the affinities between novels and liberalism. Dialogism remains a political virtue in this vision of the novel as collage, but it is a dialogism of standpoints in the multidimensional world, not of subjective values and feelings – a structural rather than affective dialogism, possible through representative thinking, and compatible with judgment (of Brexiteers and complacent 'generics,' for instance). Collage education exercises imagination not for the sake of granting credence or sympathy to those views one meets in the marketplace of ideas, but for the sake of exercising one's judgment, helping one perceive, contribute to, and judge a multidimensional and continuously changing world. Judgment, according to Arendt, requires imaginative travel in one's *own* identity across dimensions; but the world to be judged is constituted by others as well as us, and their views need not be correct to have this constitutive role. Brexiteers, xenophobes, and fascists share the world with us; they are not alien. Insofar as they perceive, speak, and act in public, they help to make the public realm we must assess and navigate.

To posit this shared worldmaking power is not to validate conspiratorial, false or hateful views – nor to empathize with or tolerate them – it is merely to acknowledge their constitutive power, which is necessary preparation for perceiving undeceivedly the world we have in common with others who have been won over to such views. Recalling Brooke's question at the fateful dinner party in *There But For The,* Smith's generic xenophobes live in a different *moral* universe from her protagonists, but they do not live in a different political universe. Nothing human is alien, and we must keep this in mind if we are to continue to meet – and judge – such others in the world we have in common. We must resist nostalgia as well as the temptation to interpret an overnight change in perception as an overnight change in material reality. Democracy requires we acknowledge this worldmaking plurality. It also requires we judge how best to act in that collectively constituted world.

Towards the end of her Goldsmiths Prize lecture, Smith remarks that the novels she prefers 'invite, or demand, that the reader take part in their making, be present in them, be creative in response to them' (Smith 2017: n. pag.). Her phrasing is suggestive: she is not describing readers as collaborators in a poststructuralist sense in which we have agency unrestricted by authorial intention; she is describing readers' willingness

to make ourselves present *in* the work, to locate ourselves *in the collage* the novel helps us see. Reciprocally, we might read Smith's works as striving to be present in *our* world. The publication of the Seasonal novels in near synchrony with their temporal setting suggests as much (*There But For The* is also set roughly contemporaneously with its publication date). If we suppose the novels are themselves participants, worldmakers in the same sense they urge us to be worldmakers – perceivers, judges, and actors, whose attentive, vocal presence in the multidimensional world helps to make that world – their partisan judgments are integral.

If we do not share the judgments expressed in *Autumn* or any novel, it cannot persuade us with reasons or argument. It might, however, try to '"woo" or "court" [our] agreement,' as Arendt (1989) writes, translating Kant with language that makes a fortuitous echo with *Autumn* (72). In one of Daniel's art-historical lessons to Elisabeth, in which he has described Boty's collage work, he tells her that 'it is possible [...] to be in love not with someone but with their eyes. I mean, with how eyes that aren't yours let you see where you are, who you are' (Smith 2016: 160). Above all else, *Autumn* – and Smith's oeuvre in general – seeks to woo us not into its partisan judgments, but into a way of seeing. As an institute of education, *Autumn* charts our imagination's 'visits' through time, space, and art, and it reminds us that the purpose of such endless reorientation of 'where we are' is to ground responsibility and judgment. Novels, understood in these terms, do not exactly give us back the world. Rather, they provide an occasion for practising the worldmaking collation of 'aspects' through which we give each other the world. As a partisan novel, *Autumn* does not represent all standpoints comprising its – our – world; if wooed to its way of seeing, and to the democratic potential Arendt suggests this way of seeing holds, we must supplement its travels.

It is crucial not to overplay the implications of this account of the political affordances of fiction. As Nicole Schrag (2023) stresses in her reading of the Seasonal Quartet, Smith's novels persistently remind us that they disclose new worlds for their middle-class protagonists, while leaving ambiguous the fates of more marginalized people. As readers, we are interpolated as being like Smith's protagonists. That *Autumn* articulates the political stakes of its collage aesthetic most directly via the words of a young woman murdered by the Nazis underscores the lack of guarantees that 'collage' education will help us make a better world. We nonetheless are invited, or demanded, to try to see undeceivedly, in many dimensions, and choose how best to act.

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The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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