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Ali Smith's *Companion Piece* and the Value of Close Reading

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Ali Smith's *Companion Piece* (2022) expands on the exploration of apathy and anomie undertaken in the *Seasonal Quartet*, further connecting these experiences to a pervasive sense of despair in contemporary society. Once again, Smith reflects on the role of the arts, seeing in them a vehicle for hope and change. In an interesting twist, *Companion Piece* focuses specifically on the effects of close reading, pointing to the way it opens opportunities for unexpected connections that can escape the divisive competitiveness of contemporary neoliberalism. I suggest that the novel's preoccupation with close reading responds to the intense debates in literary studies about post-critical methods of reading, while entering a dialogue with I. A. Richards's notion of practical criticism. Yet *Companion Piece* revises Richards's framework, extending the target of close reading to include a variety of artworks, material objects and natural phenomena. It also widens the focus from individuals to the relationships between them, depicting close reading as a catalyst for intersubjective bonding. The transposition of Richards's argument to a contemporary neoliberal context broadens the role of close reading, granting it greater relevance and urgency. For Smith, the aimless attentiveness of close reading becomes an act of rebellion against the market imperatives of speed and efficiency. As it highlights the anomaly of close reading in the neoliberal milieu, *Companion Piece* implies that it can unsettle the neoliberal profit-maximizing paradigm, boost the imagination, and enable new ways of connecting with people, animals, and even the environment.

Introduction

Ali Smith's *Companion Piece* (2022) continues her exploration of contemporary experience initiated in her earlier novels and extended in the *Seasonal Quartet*, while sharpening the *Quartet*'s conclusions about the power of art to affect the world.[1] Like the seasonal novels, *Companion Piece* addresses contemporary issues in real time—in this case, looking at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people living in an atomized neoliberal society that prioritizes self-interested competitiveness over collaboration and solidarity. Opening with its protagonist, Sandy Gray, staring 'at nothing' (4), the novel depicts her state of being 'past caring' (4) within a societal context that generates a pervasive sense of disconnection and alienation. As she waits for news about her hospitalized father, Sandy is isolated and apathetic. Her grey mood reflects the pandemic period, with its sense of aimless helplessness. However, Sandy's mood also reflects the broader socio-emotional reality that Smith explores in the earlier seasonal novels, which are dominated by the (non)-experiences of insensibility, detachment, and unfeeling.[2] *Companion Piece* returns to this emotional terrain and the social conditions that underlie it. Concurrently, the novel continues to explore the potential of art to act as a counterpoint to this contemporary alienation. In an interesting twist, *Companion Piece* looks specifically at the effects of close reading, pointing to how it opens opportunities for unexpected emotions, connections, and actions that can break free from the affective regime of contemporary society.

In analyzing *Companion Piece*'s focus on close reading, my discussion aligns with recent scholarship that reads Smith's work as 'an almost philosophical meditation not only on art but also [on] art criticism' (Anker, 2017: 20), and as a 'theorization of the artistic encounter' (Lewis, 2019: 144).[3] Particularly, it draws on research that links these meta-critical aspects of Smith's work to her interest in the recent scholarly debate about methods of reading and criticism. Known as the 'critique' versus 'postcritique' dispute,[4] it revolves around the question of whether (and how) 'literary criticism matters' (Best and Marcus, 2009: 2). Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus famously argue that 'critique' answers this question by relying on 'the depth model of truth' (2009: 10),

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[1] On the role of the arts in the seasonal novels, see Schmitz-Justen 2022. See also Rachel Wilson's article in this special issue.

[2] I discuss this issue in my book *The Neoliberal Imagination in Contemporary Literature: Empathy in a Time of Global Crisis*, upcoming from Routledge.

[3] See also Masters, who reads Smith's seasonal novels as meditations on the 'ethico-political commitment' of the novelistic form (2021: 982), and Schmitz-Justen, who argues that in the seasonal novels 'Smith meditates on how the novel can intervene into the present historical moment' (2022: 318). In a similar fashion, Campos argues that Smith's works from 1999–2019 contemplate the connections between storytelling and hospitality.

[4] For an elaborate discussion of critique and postcritique, see Anker and Felski 2017.

which sees the surface of texts as 'superficial and deceptive' (2009: 4). Truths must be wrestled 'from the hidden depths of resisting texts' (2009: 13), and the role of literary criticism is to emancipate readers from cultural and ideological mystifications. Best and Marcus, as advocates for postcritical approaches, dispute the assumptions about deep truths and resistance. They suggest shifting the critical focus to the surface of texts, thus opening alternative ways of engaging with literature. They note that 'valorization of surface reading as willed, sustained proximity to the text recalls the aims of New Criticism, which insisted that the key to understanding a text's meaning lay within the text itself, particularly in its formal properties' (10).

Both Elizabeth Anker and Cara Lewis point to Smith's enthusiastic engagement with the postcritical turn, and her exploration of alternatives to critique-based modes of symptomatic reading that involve 'the excavation, adumbration, interrogation, and exposure of hidden or deeper truths' (Anker, 2017: 26). Focusing on *How to Be Both*, they each read the novel as reflecting upon and questioning the desire 'to attain negative distance from a text' (Anker, 2017: 28) in order to deploy 'depth hermeneutics' (Lewis, 2019: 133).[5] Smith's engagement with close reading in *Companion Piece* can be seen as deepening her reflection on methods of reading and 'the nature and stakes of interpretation' (Anker, 2017: 20). However, in *Companion Piece* Smith takes this exploration a step further—or a step backward—by engaging with the legacy of early twentieth-century British theorist I. A. Richards, and his concept of 'practical criticism'.

Richards' position within the 'critique' versus 'postcritique' debate is a point of contention among scholars. While Best and Marcus connect his method with the formal focus of surface reading (10), Rita Felski associates it instead with the approach of 'the symptomatic reader [who] is fascinated by ambiguity and equivocation' (2015: 63) and maintains a distance from the text as well as from 'everyday concerns and commitments' (2020: 11). Smith's dialogue with Richards in *Companion Piece* challenges both these perspectives. On the one hand, she implies that close reading does not require a division between surface and depth. On the other hand, it does not demand a distance from the texts (or artworks), nor does it dismiss attachments and feelings as causing 'a precipitous derailing of [the reader's] thought' (Felski, 2020: 126). Moving beyond this dispute and the oppositions that underlie it, *Companion Piece* explores the practical effects of close reading, presenting them as crucial to contemporary social concerns.

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[5] Anker reads the novel as 'a playbook in postcritical reading' (2017: 19), which invites readers to an 'experiential immersion with the literary' (29). Lewis also reads the novel as '[dramatizing] a postcritical disposition' (2019: 133), focusing on how 'the visual dynamics of *How to Be both* consistently unsettle comfortable distinctions between viewing subjects and viewed objects' (142).

In this, Smith's follows in the footsteps of Joseph North, who analyzes Richards' invention of close reading and practical criticism within the historical and specifically British context of the time, while reminding us that these methods 'were originally designed [...] [to help] readers, each from their own specific material situations, to use the aesthetic instruments of literature to cultivate their most useful practical capabilities' (North, 2017: 15). Although Richards is considered the father of New Criticism, North emphasizes an essential difference between Richards's political commitment to improving people's lives via close reading, and the complete separation between literary study and life that underlies the approach of the American New Critics, with their focus on 'the pure aesthetic text' (2017: 40). North highlights that, contrary to the New Critics' later argument, Richards's famous experiment in *Practical Criticism,* in which he removed all the details of the poems that his students were asked to analyze, did not aim to suggest that extra-textual contexts were irrelevant for literary interpretation. Rather, it aimed 'to examine as precisely as possible the actual relationships existing between works of literature and their most important context: their readers' (2017: 32). Richards looked at how people actually read and responded to literature with the intention of augmenting readers' skills through training in the method of close reading. His aim was '[bringing] about some larger change in the culture as a whole' (2017: 35).

In this article, I argue that Smith's *Companion Piece* joins the ongoing debates about methods of reading by revisiting and revising Richards's oft overlooked perspective on close reading and its social possibilities. The Cambridge-based Richards whose 'left liberal' politics (North, 2017: 26) shaped his view of close reading is perhaps a natural point of departure for Cambridge-based Smith in her exploration of the roles of reading in contemporary society.[6] Indeed, Smith's interest in close reading is part of her longstanding preoccupation with the broader question of the value of art for human life—a topic that scholars have explored in Smith's earlier work.[7] This is a concern that she shares with Richards, who insists that 'there is no such gulf between poetry and life' (1930: 319). Like Richards, Smith sees the value of art as emanating from the relationship between artworks and their audiences, and the potential of this relationship to improve people's lives.[8] However, *Companion Piece* transposes Richards's argument from early-twentieth-century England to a contemporary neoliberal context, in which

[6] Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out this connection to me.

[7] On Smith's earlier preoccupation with the relations between art and life, see Dominic Head 2013; Lewis 2019.

[8] These practical concerns of Richards were completely repudiated by the American New Critics, who co-opted his method while rooting it in 'a neo-Kantian aesthetics of disinterest and transcendent value' (North 2017: 27) and rejecting the relevancy of the reader and their affective responses.

the market values of utility and efficiency have seeped into every domain of life. The change of context broadens the role of close reading, granting it greater relevance and urgency. For Richards, close reading is a practice that enables people to cultivate their aesthetic sensibility, 'ordering [their] minds' (1930: 349), so as to ultimately enable them to think better and live better lives. For Smith, close reading also becomes an act of rebellion against the market imperatives of speed and efficiency. If Richards focuses mainly on individual readers and their responses to literary texts, Smith extends the target of close reading to include a variety of artworks, material objects and natural phenomena, while also turning attention from individuals to the relationships between them. Close reading becomes a catalyst for intersubjective interaction. *Companion Piece* implies that the attentiveness demanded by close reading can potentially facilitate connections between the people who are engaged in it. Thus, close reading can help create new forms of cooperation and solidarity that go against the market logic of contemporary society.

Neoliberalism and the Disease of Uncaring

Neoliberalism, often referred to as global capitalism, is a political framework that promotes market competition, utility-maximization, and unlimited profit-making, while treating 'everything [as] fair game for marketization' (Mirowski, 2009: 437). As scholars have shown, Smith's early work engages with the 'systemic precarity and exploitation' (Karl, 2020: 275) that characterizes neoliberal society, while examining 'the alienating individuation of contemporary labor and consumption' (Karl, 2020: 275).[9] Smith further explores the neoliberal situation in her seasonal novels, which depict 'attempts to counter the neoliberalist model of "everyone for oneself" in these precarious times' (Kuznetski, 2022: 264). *Companion Piece* continues this concern with counteracting contemporary alienation, while placing it within the urgent context of the neoliberal response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Indeed, it is neoliberalism per se that is presented as the trigger for Sandy's malaise. Early in the novel, Sandy recalls a TV commercial for a food delivery service that depicts delighted clients receiving beautiful boxes of fruits and vegetables (31)—a total inversion of reality as Sandy knows it. In the real world, underfunded hospitals with medics wearing 'binbags' (52–3) struggle to treat the sick and dying during a harrowing plague; climate events reveal 'the ruination of the planet' (28); and refugees fleeing famine and violence are 'being housed in the real cells of an old decrepit prison'

[9] See also Levin, who reads Smith's *The Accidental* (2005) and *Hotel World* (2001) as 'an exploration of both the economic and the epistemic cruelty of late capitalism' (2013: 36).

(30). All these crises reveal a society in which 'market values are crowding out all others' (Brown, 2015: 79). Yet the dire consequences of this 'neoliberal rationality' (Brown, 2015: 20) are hidden behind cheerful commercials that push viewers to seek freedom and happiness through buying and consuming goods. What is more, Sandy recognizes that the soundtrack to these enticing images is an anti-war song about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, recalling joint protests and 'nightmares about our eyes melting in their sockets' (31). Now, images of dying people are replaced with images of satisfied customers, and life itself—even in the midst of a deadly pandemic—is treated like a marketable commodity: 'a lifestyle thing' (31). Sandy feels that 'a whole new kind of communal melting of the eyes [is] happening in front of [her eyes], on prime TV' (31), boosted by an indifferent government that refuses to respond to the pandemic wake-up call. Watching 'the happy faces of the adverts' (32) while thinking these hopeless thoughts, Sandy undergoes a strange emotional breakdown: 'a string inside my chest snapped, much as if I was a small stringed instrument tuned too tight. Ow! […]. But then it stopped hurting and after that nothing did and I no longer cared what season or day' (32).

Here, Sandy catches the disease of 'not giving a fuck' (31) that infects the emotional infrastructure of contemporary neoliberal society—a disease that Smith also explores in the seasonal novels.[10] Smith implies that this condition is triggered by the interaction of two concurrent phenomena that induce unbearable cognitive and emotional dissonance. On the one hand, *Companion Piece*, like the seasonal novels, depicts a world in which a series of socio-political crises (such as the refugee crisis, Brexit, climate change, and Covid-19) require large-scale social cooperation to enable long-term collective healing. On the other hand, this world is dominated by a neoliberal political framework that pushes in the opposite direction, privileging the individual and fostering competition, while encouraging behaviors that serve short-term self-interest. If the recent crises reveal that 'nothing's not connected' (Smith, 2021: 338),[11] the 'contemporary neoliberal governance operates through isolating and entrepreneurializing responsible units and individuals' (Brown, 2015: 129), thus inducing disconnection. The chasm between the crisis-ridden reality and the static and all-encompassing political framework causes people to feel helpless. Believing nothing can be changed, whether in society or in their personal circumstances, they sink into apathy. This is what happens to Sandy. Even

[10] The seasonal novels portray characters who suffer different kinds of emptiness and detachment. For example, Sophia Cleves in *Winter* 'had been feeling nothing for some time now. Refugees in the sea. Children in ambulances. […] atrocities. People beaten up and tortured in cells. Nothing' (29). See my discussion of this issue in chapter 6 of my forthcoming book, *The Neoliberal Imagination*.

[11] This is a reminder from Iris to Charlotte in *Summer*, amid the Covid-19 crisis, as Charlotte grapples with feeling 'lopsided' and 'very much at a disconnect' (338).

though she is an artist who specializes in change—transforming poems into visual representations—she becomes apathetic, feeling that 'even words and everything they could and couldn't do could fuck off and that was that' (4). Yet despite Sandy's despair, the novel suggests that art does indeed hold the seeds of hope.

Unexpected Change: Becoming Affected

The catalyst for change is a late-night phone call: Martina, an old college classmate, calls Sandy to request help in interpreting an enigmatic phrase. Sandy, who is 'past politeness' and 'past caring' (11), makes no effort to communicate with her former acquaintance. Yet as the tale unfolds, she is gradually captivated. Martina tells Sandy how she was detained while travelling to return an old English artifact—the fictional Boothby lock—from an exhibition abroad. Held alone in a room in the airport, she heard a voice making a strange statement that she hopes Sandy can interpret. This exchange reawakens Sandy's emotions, while pointing to the transformative potential of the aesthetic experience—especially that of close reading.

Sandy's response to Martina's story demonstrates the importance of the *affective* element of storytelling, how it can move people despite their intentions, expectations and inclinations (Felski, 2020: 7). Felski argues that the issue of people's peculiar and oftentimes unpredictable attachments to stories and artworks is mostly ignored in scholarly discussions, which assume 'that a felt closeness to a work of art will hamper one's ability to analyze it' (2020: 126). In *Hooked,* Felski delves into various affective bonds that are involved in the aesthetic experience—be they between people, texts, stories, artworks or other objects. Looking at 'examples of people getting stuck to novels and paintings and films and music in ways that matter to them' (2020: 35), she analyzes them through the prism of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), which explores how human and nonhuman actors participate in creating attachments that eventually build social networks. Felski teases apart the multiple chains that contribute to 'art's uptake and influence' (2020: 139), while emphasizing that an analysis of these interactions reveals how 'intense affinities [often] […] have little to do with conscious commitments' (2020: 48).

Sandy's response to Martina's story is indeed surprising and incompatible with her conscious intentions. She herself wonders 'why the fuck […] was I having to care about […] something that may or may not have happened in the head or in the life of someone I hardly knew and didn't even like that much, in fact consciously disliked, when I did know her?' (24–25). Yet despite Sandy's lack of empathy for Martina, and her general apathy, she realizes that Martina's drama 'did intrigue' (24) her, that 'something about the story of that old lock mechanism had unlocked something in me' (34). From

this point on, the novel, like Felski, focuses on the unexpectedness of attachments to stories and artworks, exploring Sandy's response and its rippling aftereffects. As Felski theorizes, these attachments indeed lead to networks of relations between people and things that produce unpredictable developments, new ties— and, in this case, hopeful possibilities.

Interestingly, among the factors that shape Sandy's emotional reawakening is the practice of close reading, in the spirit of Richards's method of readerly 'attention to [the poem's] literal sense' (1930: 203)[12]—a practice alluded to directly later in *Companion Piece*. Whereas in *Hooked* Felski criticizes the method of close reading as representing the view 'that attachment is an *obstacle* to interpretation' (2020: 126, italics in the original), Smith presents close reading as a practice that is inseparable from affect and connection. In contrast to Felski, Smith emphasizes its crucial role in 'the cluster of relations that most directly impact aesthetic experience' (Felski, 2020: 144). What is more, *Companion Piece* highlights how it is specifically close reading that can push back against the neoliberal ideals of profitability, competitiveness and utility-maximization. The connections generated by close reading can work to unsettle the affective constraints imposed by the neoliberal framework, unlocking new ways of connecting with people, animals, and even the environment.

The Unanticipated Repercussions of Close Reading

Close reading is first introduced in Martina's intradiegetic story, when she tells Sandy about her inspection of the Boothby Lock. While Martina does not explicitly label her action 'close reading', her meticulous examination of the lock is in fact a variation of this practice. The situation in which this act of reading takes place is telling: Martina is alone in a bare room 'with nothing in it but a table and two chairs' (10). Like the poems included in Richards's experiment, the object of her inspection has been divorced of any contextual information. All that is known about this artifact is its association with 'late medieval and early renaissance English metalwork' (9). With this limited knowledge, Martina puts the object on the table in front of her, and scrutinizes its 'actual flesh, the actual metal' (13). There is a rawness and immediacy to this meeting, which echoes Richards's experiment in creating an immediate encounter between readers and poetic texts. Although it is not an artwork per se, Martina's close inspection of the lock leads

[12] As Richards writes: 'All respectable poetry invites close reading. It encourages attention to its literal sense up to the point, to be detected by the reader's discretion, at which liberty can serve the aim of the poem better than fidelity to fact or strict coherence among fictions. It asks the reader to remember that its aims are varied and not always what he unreflectingly expects. He has to refrain from applying his own external standards' (1930: 203).

her to admire its artistry and exclaim that 'whoever made it had God knows what magic in his hands' (13).

The scrutiny of the lock is not motivated by any particular goal: it is not driven by a desire to discover something specific, nor by an intention to impress someone, and not even by an expectation of aesthetic pleasure. Although it takes place during a business trip, Martina's investigation of the Boothby Lock is not part of her job. The narrative emphasizes the aimlessness of the activity, which takes place in an empty room with no witnesses (and no technological devices present), in the liminal space of the airport—a situation that makes Martina realize that 'I've never really had any time alone with the Boothby' (13). Removed from the busyness and distractions of everyday life, and from the pressure of the constant demands for increased efficiency that characterizes the neoliberal experience, Martina can take the time to pay attention. Significantly, even though it is detached from her normal existence, Martina's close reading of the lock has powerful impact: it eventually causes her to contact Sandy and share her experience—a conversation that makes Martina feel that 'I may've been waiting for you [Sandy] all my life' (111).

The close reading of the lock dominates the late-night conversation that reignites Martina and Sandy's relationship. Martina virtually re-performs her analysis of the lock, as she lingers on the various fine elements that she observed. She begins with 'each of these metal ivy leaves [which] looks so like an actual ivy leaf' (13–14), and recounts how they affected her, making her 'know all over again how amazing a real ivy leaf that's growing really is' (14). Her account of her attentive exploration of the Boothby Lock reveals how a seemingly aimless activity can nonetheless produce powerful affects. As Martina tells Sandy, the lock 'was so beautiful it made me forget, for a while anyway, how much I really had to go to the toilet' (14–15), the aesthetic examination affecting even basic bodily sensations.

It is a few minutes after this inspection that Martina hears a voice stating: 'Curlew or curfew,' and then 'Curlew or curfew you choose' (11). The narrative sequence makes it seem as if the close reading of the lock summoned the mysterious voice. Martina tells Sandy that she feels that 'I've been given a message, I've been entrusted with it' (17). The question is: 'what *is* the message?' (17).

On the diegetic level, the novel presents Martina's wish to uncover the meaning of this message within the framework of a dialogue that emphasizes not the solution to the puzzle—which is never discovered—but rather the relationship that develops between the two women who speak of it. This focus on relationship testifies to Felski's contention that 'meaning can be activated only by its audiences' (2020: 157)—which actually echoes Richards's view that the production of meaning is dependent on the responses

of the readers and 'their varied minds' (1930: 253). More importantly, the episode draws attention to the bonding that takes place around the process of interpretation—a bonding that builds on the earlier attachment that Martina experienced to the Boothby Lock. The willingness to pay attention and patiently scrutinize the lock causes Martina to recall Sandy, who years earlier had helped her pay proper attention to a poem. This is what catalyzes Martina's decision to contact Sandy and involve her in interpreting the poetry-like cryptic sentences.

Sandy indeed tries to decipher these sentences, which—like the poems in Richards's experiment—have no title, no author, and no context to rely upon. Examining the sounds of the enigmatic words, as well as their spelling and signification, Sandy observes that 'curlew' and 'curfew' are 'almost the same word save for a single consonant change' (20), and suggests that the 'key' (20) is the word 'choose' (20). Encouraged by the enthusiastic Martina, Sandy proceeds to develop an inventive interpretation of the contrast between 'curlew' and 'curfew' in a process that seems to follow Richards's view that meaning is always determined by the reading context.[13] Here, Sandy's context of interpretation—the story of Martina's airport detention—establishes the flow of meanings, and thus, the opaque choice between 'curlew' and 'curfew' takes on the present-day urgency of choosing 'between nature and an authoritarian shaping of time [...] or between the environment and our control of or harmful and expedient use of the environment –' (21).

Martina breaks into this flow of interpretation by 'laughing' (21)—an interruption that highlights the act of communication between the two women. Though they cannot settle on one fixed, correct meaning, the dialogue itself becomes a locus of meaning, expanding the imagination of both participants in unexpected ways. Looking back on the conversation, Sandy realizes that 'I was thinking [...], quite vividly and quite unexpectedly, about the lock she'd described, with its way into itself hidden by ivy that isn't ivy, its soft cloths splayed round it unwrapped on a cheap airport table in a windowless room' (18). It is Martina's detailed depiction of the Boothby Lock that reawakens Sandy's imagination, arousing her care. Sandy can now envisage how 'something like [the Boothby Lock] might transform wherever it got placed' (18). In her mind's eye, she sees the dull airport room, 'the one she'd made me imagine her locked up in for seven and a half hours' (18) turned into 'a whole new kind of museum' (18). Martina's story opens the possibility of change, transforming both the airport room and Sandy's emotional state, as she realizes that 'for half an hour at least I'd been not-thinking about how much I didn't care about anything' (49).

[13] See Richards's view in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1965: 32 – 39).

Another Look at Close Reading

The late-night exchange with Martina is built on an earlier exchange that also revolved around close reading. Sandy recalls their first interaction, which took place when they were both English students in university many years before. Here, the novel alludes to Richards's method of close reading more directly (albeit without mentioning his name), by stating that the class they attended together was a 'practical criticism seminar' (36). At that time, Martina, panicking about an upcoming presentation, asked Sandy for the paper that she herself was writing. In this initial interaction, the two women are not only not-friends, but are almost foes, belonging to opposing social milieus and divided in their opinions, concerns, and aspirations. It is the shared process of close reading that bridges the gaps between them.

When Martina tearfully insists that she cannot understand anything about an e.e. cummings poem, Sandy invites her in, and '[puts] the piece of paper with the poem on it down on the bed between us' (38). The poem thus becomes a connective object, whose reading turns the antagonists into allies. It is a very specific kind of reading that enables this change: open-minded close reading that is attentive to the poem, in 'all its minute particulars,' as Richards puts it (1930: 302). This process of reading starts with frustration, for as Richards writes, 'nearly all good poetry is disconcerting, for a moment at least, when we first see it for what it is' (1930: 254). Initially, all Martina can see is that '*nothing* about it means *anything*' (39, italics in the original). The novel cites the poem in full so that readers can share in this initial frustration, and experience what Sandy describes more perceptively as 'the fog of the strangeness' (40) that the poem produces. Sandy helps Martina navigate this fog, instructing her with the basic tenet of close reading: 'Just look at the words. They'll tell you what they mean' (39).

The conversation that follows presents an exercise in close reading, in which Sandy helps Martina confront 'the problem of *making out the meaning*' (Richards, 1930: 180, italics in the original) of this modernist poem. Thus, when Martina complains about the strange punctuation that attests to the poet's wish of 'showing off' (39), Sandy responds by noting that 'it only looks strange because we expect spaces round punctuation' (39). She invites Martina to recognize how detecting the actual elements of the poem prompts the question 'but why do we [have these expectations]?' (39), ultimately leading to 'shaking our minds out of the routine of expectation' (Richards, 1930: 238). When Martina struggles with the first line of the poem— 'to start, to hesitate; to stop' (38)—Sandy helps her by connecting it to their own immediate context in the act of reading itself: 'something [...] on the page, has made you look again, have to hesitate, even stop' (40). The close reading that they perform enacts the poem, as it involves slowing down, looking again, hesitating, stopping, doubting and trying anew. In line

with Richards's directions, they focus on the minute elements, the order of the words, the brackets, and the scattered upper-case letters that seem 'like a random fall' (42). When Martina suggests that 'the poem wants us to trust meaninglessness' (42), Sandy challenges her to linger more on what seems meaningless. Sandy herself '[looks] at the poem again on the page' (42), and as she examines the random letters afresh, she sees another option—to 'spell it sort of backwards' (43). This mindful attention to the small details of the poem produces a change: a possible meaning emerges out of the cryptic capital letters THAED: death. 'They both smile happily' (43) at this unforeseen development. As Richards notes, 'the only proper attitude is to look upon a successful interpretation [...], as a triumph against odds' (1930: 336).

However, while Sandy and Martina are happy in 'the fall of meaning' (43), the episode does not align with Richards's view that good reading is by definition 'the most correct reading' (1930: 244). For Richards, 'the astonishing variety' (1930: 12) of interpretations that his experiment uncovered indicates that 'misinterpretation [is not] a mere unlucky accident. We must treat it as the normal and probable event' (1930: 336). Therefore, in *Practical Criticism* he proactively outlines the 'main exits from true interpretation' (1930: 189) in order to enable readers to avoid these wrong turns. *Companion Piece,* by contrast, implies that the issue at stake is not 'truth', but rather the willingness to participate in the mindful examination of an artwork: the attentive noting of minute details. The point is not avoiding "wrong" turns, but rather the ability to confront the problematic pitfalls that Richards discerns so eloquently—the preconceptions, expectations, beliefs, and prejudices that hold readers enthralled, blocking them from facing the unfamiliarity of 'what is actually in the poem' (Richards, 1930: 164). For Smith, it is the critical practice per se that matters, not its results. The attentiveness demanded by close reading itself—and the openness to 'spell[ing] it sort of backwards' (43)—acts to expand the imagination, generating new emotions and unexpected connections.

While Sandy and Martina experience growing insight into the poem, they do not arrive at a fixed and final answer to the question of meaning. What is more, their shared process of close reading does not lead even to a coherent interpretation. Years later, when Sandy recalls this early act of reading, she acknowledges their limited understanding, as well as their ignorance of the broader historical context. In a cynical observation that echoes the post-New-Critical approach of suspicious reading, Sandy observes 'Now, though, I knew he'd supported McCarthy and the US witch-hunts' (48), while also noting cummings's 'outright sexist and racist little verses' (48). Yet does this additional information imply that the early, naïve, formalist and non-contextualized reading was worthless? No, because what matters to Smith is that Sandy and Martina

were attentive, patient, and open-minded in their engagement with the poem, and that their (limited) analysis was meaningful for both of them.

The impact of close reading on the reader is central to Richards's thought as well. While Richards (in contrast to Smith) does idealize 'a perfect understanding' (332),[14] what he emphasizes throughout *Practical Criticism* is 'the quality of the reading' (1930: 349) and its practical value. Good reading strives '[to] have the poem in all its minute particulars as intimately and as fully present to our minds' (302) as possible, in order to investigate how 'the particular experience which is the realised poem' (303) can contribute to the reader with 'the whole fabric of [his/her] past experiences' (303). It is the quality of the reading that Richards wishes to improve, seeing it as a tool for enabling his students to 'strengthen [their] minds' (1930: 320). He believes that poetry presents 'the most serviceable' (1930: 320) apparatus for engaging people in such methodic training in interpretation for '[ordering] their thoughts, emotions, desires' (1930: 320). For Richards, this is especially important in a time when 'our contemporary social and economic conditions, betray us, [and] it is [therefore] reasonable to reflect whether we cannot deliberately contrive artificial means of correction' (1930: 320). North argues that herein lies 'the larger goal of Richards' study' (2017: 35), which is to use the close reading of literature as 'a kind of therapeutic technology' (2017: 29) that works 'not just to analyze cultures, ideologies, and psychologies, but to improve them' (2017: 35).

Companion Piece shares Richards's interest in the potential of close reading to improve people's lives when 'contemporary social and economic conditions, betray' them (1930: 320). However, it renounces Richards's ideals of mental order and equilibrium, while extending his terms of improvement from individuals to the relationships between them. In the cummings episode, the therapeutic effect of close reading is evident first on the individual, emotional, level: Martina's state changes from desperate crying to 'a broad, open-mouthed amazement of a smile' (43). Close reading has a positive cognitive effect as well, which follows the pattern Richards notes for improving imagination (1930: 313). Martina moves from her initial definitive exclamatory complaints ('I don't understand *anything*' [39, italics in the original]), to curiosity and questions ('is that why the doubt and the sky falling are in brackets?' [41]), and finally to imaginative suggestions ('he's playing a game with us' [44]). Martina is surprised by her own transformation, telling Sandy: 'I feel so much better

[14] As Richards explains, 'a perfect understanding would involve not only an accurate direction of thought, a correct evocation of feeling, an exact apprehension of tone and a precise recognition of intention, but further it would get these contributory meanings in their right order and proportion to one another, and seize though not in terms of explicit thought their interdependence upon one another, their sequences and interrelations' (1930: 332).

now [...]. How is that even possible?' (46). Sandy is also changed by the experience, but in a different manner. It is her interaction with Martina that is transformed. Moving away from her initial dislike, she finds herself smiling at Martina, and telling her that she too did not have a clue about the poem 'till I looked at it with you' (43). She also thanks Martina for pointing out a possible 'religious' meaning (45), since 'I'd never have seen these thoughts in it unless we'd had this conversation' (45).

Here is Smith's central divergence from Richards's vision of close-reading-as-therapeutic-technology. In *Companion Piece*, the cognitive and emotional effects of the cummings reading are inseparable from the cooperation that develops between the two women. It is not only that Martina was unable to understand the poem and that reading it with Sandy made it suddenly manageable. Rather, the session of close reading enables cooperation that transcends the barricades of social divisions, prejudices and conventions. When Sandy invites Martina in, the work of interpretation becomes a *joint* activity that produces surprising new possibilities. The reading connects not only the letters in the poem, but also the two women who inspect them, moving their relationship from the opening antagonism of 'don't make a fun of me' (38) to the promise that 'one day I'll help you with something' (47) with which Martina leaves. The episode implies that when people are willing to give the time and energy to concentrate on an artwork, examining it thoroughly in a patient, attentive and unbiased manner, they can treat each other with the same open-minded attentiveness.

Jane Gallop indeed contends that 'close reading is not just a way of reading but also an ethical way of listening;' (2000: 12)—not just to texts, but to people as well. It attempts '[to] understand what [others] are actually saying, rather than just confirming our preconceptions about them' (2000: 12). In a similar manner, *Companion Piece* demonstrates that the close reading of the actual words of a poem also involves careful listening to the actual words of the other human being. Indeed, it is the dynamic of close reading that enables Martina to look beyond the veil of prejudice about bisexuality ('they warned me not to come and ask you in case you made a pass at me', 45), and recognize how brilliant and inventive Sandy actually is: 'You're really good at this stuff', Martina tells Sandy in surprise. Sandy herself also comes to see Martina anew: not as the dull showoff she had thought her, but as an enthusiastic and 'playful' (47) woman who can enrich her own understanding. The close reading affects them both, enabling them to experience a joint, reciprocal adventure—Sandy calls it 'the thinking game' (46)—which is a mutual exchange to which they both contribute, each impacting the other so that the interpretive possibilities belong equally to both.

The ethical aspects of close reading are related to one crucial characteristic that *Companion Piece* highlights: its non-instrumental quality. Martina initially comes

to Sandy with a clear intention—to acquire Sandy's paper for herself, or at least gain a clear interpretation that she can use. However, this instrumental approach fails. Sandy does not have a written paper to give Martina, and she refuses to write down their indeterminate and proliferating discussion of the poem. When Sandy helps Martina read the poem, she actually distances Martina from her initial goal of finishing the paper as rapidly and easily as possible. Instead, Sandy pushes Martina to spend time and intensive efforts on a 'pointless' (37) activity, coaxing her to linger on incomprehensible words, as she experiences just how challenging and demanding the task of interpretation can be. What is more, it is a process without guaranteed results. Yet it is exactly this non-instrumental, slow inspection that enables Sandy and Martina to connect in an unexpected way. The genuine attentiveness to the strangeness of the poem opens the women to each other's strange uniqueness.

Notably, Smith does not present an idealized fantasy of newfound friendship. When Martina tells Sandy that 'I hate to say it, but we're quite good together' (46), Sandy answers with a reserved 'I wouldn't go that far' (46). Both women are aware that the connection they formed via the process of reading is of short duration, and cannot survive in the outside world. Martina actually asks Sandy not to 'tell anyone I was here' (47); Sandy agrees while imposing her own condition that 'you don't tell anyone what everybody says about me behind my back' (47). They part after making this limited agreement based on mutual self-interest, and do not speak to one another again until Martina's late-night phone call. Despite this, Smith implies that their brief coming together is nevertheless significant, with repercussions that reverberate later in their lives. Their joint reading unlocks the previously unimaginable possibility of collaborating with a rival. While it does not produce the required paper, it does expand the minds of both women, enabling them to imagine latent possibilities.

Close Reading and Shifting Networks of Relationships

The almost-forgotten alliance between the two young women around the reading of the cummings poem produces a succession of surprising developments in the present time of the novel. Before leaving on that long-ago day, Martina had promised to help Sandy. Now she—unknowing—indeed offers Sandy something precious by inviting her on another interpretive journey. This time there is no external demand of homework, no conceivable beneficial outcome. Calling Sandy at a particularly distressed time, Martina speaks of something that seems pointless. Yet it is specifically this pointlessness that allows their conversation to escape the instrumentalist context of the neoliberal framework. And the positive effect of this pointless interaction is dramatic. Sandy feels 'better than I'd felt for a while' (49). She is suddenly able to grope her way out of

the dark nothingness that she experienced 'only the day before [when] I'd been past caring' (75).

Sandy's way back to her responsive self involves a trip to the woods, where she has another experience of close reading—this time of natural phenomena. The day after her conversation with Martina, Sandy gets 'completely lost' (77). Like the initial encounter with the cummings poem, the experience is disconcerting: 'I heard trees creaking, not something I knew till then that trees in a wood did, like they were speaking a language to each other' (77). Sandy does not understand this language but listens carefully to the unfamiliar sounds that surround her. Her response to the wood—'I had no idea' (78)—echoes Martina's initial response to the cummings poem: 'I have no idea' (37). Back then, Sandy helped Martina navigate the unfamiliar by turning her attention to the actual words of the poem (39). Here she undergoes a similar process when she holds a tiny thorn 'up to my eyes and looked at it as closely as I could' (79).

For Smith, close reading involves listening carefully not only to texts and to people, but also to nature and animals. Sandy opens herself to 'the sound of the wing movement of an invisible bird' (77), and 'the noise that grasses make when they move' (77). Next, she turns to closely examining the bramble thorn, whose smallness does not prevent her from detecting its minute details. Like Martina's description of the Boothby Lock as 'really cunning' (13), Sandy observes that the thorn also has 'a cunning way of doing what it was meant to do' (79). In this case as well, the close reading is non-instrumental. And in this case as well, it has unexpected impact. After Sandy studies the thorn, she 'sensed, clear as unruined air, [...] the ghost of a chance, a different presence' (79). Sandy's sensations and imagination are reawakened by this presence, and she emerges from the state of nothingness, renewed and connected to the world.

The events that follow this reawakening become progressively more fantastical, as they spread in an expansive network of people and objects that break the framework of contemporary reality as we know it. Sandy returns from the woods to finds a filthy young girl with a giant curlew in her room (99). It is unclear whether this is an actual event; an imagined encounter with the blacksmith who created the Boothby Lock; or if Sandy invents this story in order to share it with Martina. Regardless, Sandy's response to the situation is as surprising as the girl's presence. While at first Sandy is alarmed by the presence of a stranger in her home, she soon responds to the girl's vulnerability, and invites her to 'stay here as long as you like' (104), offering her care. Sandy's hospitable behavior towards the girl and the curlew—which seems unrealistic in its rejection of social norms and the expectations around encounters with strangers (especially during a pandemic)—is inseparable from the scene of close reading that precedes it. The reawakening of Sandy's caring self somehow feeds directly into her interaction with her

strange visitors. *Companion Piece* implies that the mindful contact with nature opened a 'ghost of a chance' of dealing with these intruders in an unconventional way that transcends suspicious cost-benefit analysis. Though unimaginable in the neoliberal context of competitive individualism, the 'different presence' enables engaging with other people and animals as companions in a larger community that shares a future and mutual interests.

Sandy's caring generosity extends to Martina, to whom she tells of the encounter in a gesture of gratitude. It was Martina's story of the Boothby Lock that ignited Sandy's imagination. Now Sandy amplifies and highlights elements of Martina's story in her own rendition of her encounter with the exotic girl, who is described as both blacksmith and healer. The telling has a dramatic emotional effect. 'Martina Inglis was hooked' (107), feeling as if Sandy 'gifted [her] a kind of healer' (111), with whom Martina can have a relationship as well. Echoing Sandy's earlier words, she says, 'you've literally unlocked something [...]. Not just for me. In me' (111). The language emphasizes the reciprocity between Sandy and Martina, who each help the other unlock their emotions and imagination in a time of deep global distress. Gifting stories to each other, they can climb out of the nothingness of their situation. As Martina describes it: 'I feel weirdly ... dimensional' (111).

The network of relationships continues to spread in surprising ways when Martina's twin daughters come to Sandy's house in search of their mother. Initially, Sandy refuses to grant them entry, expressing the fearful logic of Covid, as well as the neoliberal suspicion of 'strangers who might be scammers' (91). However, soon she allows the twins into her backyard, where they sit together at a safe distance and speak about the transformation of Martina, who 'never used to laugh at anything. Now she laughs all the time' (90). These relationships expand and deepen when the twins return to Sandy's house in a series of episodes that feel like 'theatrical farce' (156), in which the twins penetrate further and further into Sandy's home. After Eden collapses in tears outside the house, Sandy brings her into the front room. Next Lea asks Sandy for a place to stay, as their father exiled them from home, rejecting their non-binary identity.

The description of Lea's job in information technology serves to further emphasize the contrast between close reading and neoliberal values. Lea must 'scan stuff for several companies to check for things that digiscans might have missed or misread, to make sure nobody can sue them' (136). This kind of scanning relies on a pre-organized list of 'things to watch out for' (136) and must proceed very quickly because the 'ratio' (137) is constantly checked. When Lea stops working to speak with Sandy, they get 'marked [...] for absent ratio' (138) and they panic, 'colour drained from their face' (138). They then have to sit and work without pause. The contrast

between the patient close reading of a single work and this hurried scanning of large chunks of information is striking. Whereas close reading proceeds without prior targets, this scanning is aimed at spotting specific errors. Whereas close reading is slow and meandering, scanning is judged on the basis of efficacy. Close reading opens conversations, while scanning penalizes them. Close reading does not create tangible profits, while scanning is dictated by economics. Thus, close reading is presented as an anomaly in the neoliberal milieu, and it is exactly its nonconformity that grants it the power to unsettle stock responses, freeing the imagination from the neoliberal chokehold.

This power is soon revealed, as other Pelf family members arrive and settle in Sandy's home: Martina; Eden's small daughter, Amelie; even Eden's partner. Ultimately, it is Sandy who leaves, going to stay in the safety of her father's empty house. Disoriented, she feels as if she is 'hallucinating Pelfs [...] inventing the opposite of isolation' (149). When the Pelfs then request a key to her studio, Sandy refuses, as she does not want them to damage her artwork. Yet ultimately, the awakening of her caring self enables her to think differently about the situation, imagining it otherwise:

> So what if they got into the studio? [...] So what if Amelie played with the paints? I'd want to, if I were her. So what if something or someone happened to mess with or ruin a picture I'd been working on for over a year? The poem wasn't going anywhere any time soon. There'd always be more paint. I could start again. Imagine better. (161–162)

Through her encounters with close reading, Sandy can break free of the bounds of neoliberal thinking. She moves away from profit-and-loss calculation, from questions of property rights, and stops acting from a place of scarcity and disconnection. Instead, she can imagine relationships in non-binary and non-hierarchal terms, moving away from such concepts as enemies / allies, landlord / lodger, guest / trespasser. She can think of her artwork in non-economic terms, and see the world as full of potential, brimming with new beginnings and unforeseen opportunities. This enables her to follow her father's ethical instruction to 'always honour everyone who comes to your door' (65), even if it is not in her immediate self-interest. She can 'imagine better' (162), responding in an unconventional caring way.

Conclusion

Companion Piece continues Smith's dialogue with postcritical theory that began in *How to Be Both*: it explores the affective ties between artwork and audience, while disrupting

the notion of critical distance and the surface versus depth paradigm.[15] Sandy's 'layer painting' (131) of poems clearly questions the dichotomy of surface and depth, producing artworks in which these levels have become materially inseparable ('paint on top of more paint', 62). These artworks deliberately challenge the common opposition between intellectual understanding (that can decipher deep truth hidden behind the visible surface of things) and sensory experience (that is supposedly restricted to the superficial and immediate level of perception). In place of such hierarchical opposition,[16] *Companion Piece* highlights the companionable connections that are formed within and around artworks, texts and artifacts. Its depiction of people who get 'hooked' in surprising ways is aligned with Felski's interest in the unexpected bonds that emerge with works of art, opening significant 'affective and cognitive possibilities' (Felski, 2020: 146).

However, Smith complicates the postcritical viewpoint by emphasizing the role of close reading in shaping the encounters with artworks. In what can seem like a backward gesture, *Companion Piece* intriguingly engages with Richards's notion of practical criticism, portraying how contact with a single piece of art can dramatically affect people's emotions, imagination and relations. Yet Smith diverges from Richards in her focus: for her, what is crucial is not the interpretation, but rather the process of close reading itself. Distancing herself equally from the critical search for deep meanings, and from the postcritical suspicion of close analysis of a single text, Smith instead focuses on the slow, patient, attentive examination involved in close reading, while highlighting its attitude of curiosity and openness.

The novel suggests that this type of reading can forge new avenues of connection, thus countering the detaching effects of neoliberalism. The episodes depicting acts of close reading reveal how this practice reduces stress and distress by enabling readers to be fully present—with an artwork, with themselves, and with each other (not to mention animals and natural phenomenon). This affect extends beyond the individual experiences to impact intersubjective interactions and social relations. Examining the actual details of the object and the internal sensations and thoughts that emerge in response, the mindful reader is emotionally healed, while becoming actively engaged and connected to others. Instead of withdrawing into an uncaring state of detachment,

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[15] As scholars have noted, Smith questions this dichotomy earlier in *How to Be Both* (see Anker 2017; Lewis 2019). Smith addresses this issue also in her collection of essays *Artful*, where she asks 'Are words on the page more than surface? Is the act of reading something a surface act? Do words on the page hold us on a surface, above depths and shallows like a layer of ice?' (2013: 66).

[16] The titles of the chapters in the second part of the novel (the section 'Curlew'), turn attention to different kinds of binary oppositions, including 'Surface v depth' (115).

the close reader can recognize new ways to link elements into meaningful structures, building fresh paths to connection.

In *Companion Piece,* slow, non-instrumental and open-minded close reading—the type of reading that Richards believed could raise the 'level of general imaginative life' (Richards, 1930: 320)—unlocks Sandy and Martina's imagination. Though the two women remain strangers, close reading builds a supportive relationship between them. Close reading connects not only letters and words, but also people and objects in unconventional new ways. When Sandy reads to her unconscious father, she suddenly is 'fill[ed] [...] with sheer wonder when I think how not alone the speaker is every time someone reads that poem' (117). Reading opens new routs of communication and connection that transcend the limited options available in the current world, helping us learn to 'imagine better'.

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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