C21 LITERATURE
Journal of 21st-century Writings

Andeweg, Agnes, and Dušan Janković. 2024. "'Always try to welcome people into the home of your story'. Forms of hospitality in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* 11(1): pp. 1–18. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.11168

'Always try to welcome people into the home of your story'. Forms of hospitality in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*

Agnes Andeweg, University College Utrecht, Utrecht University, The Netherlands, a.andeweg@uu.nl
Dušan Janković, Utrecht University, The Netherlands, d.jankovic@students.uu.nl

This article analyses how hospitality emerges as a key issue in the four novels of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* (2016-2020), on different levels: thematically, linguistically, narratively and readerly. Firstly, hospitality is a recurring theme, as an act performed—or not—by institutions or individuals. Secondly, hospitality is present as a topic explicitly reflected upon as a linguistic act, an act of bridging different meanings and opening up the language. A third form in which hospitality emerges in the *Seasonal Quartet* is as a narrative practice, both through marked interventions of the narrator and through the open narrative structure. By constantly juxtaposing different texts and lives, Smith allows for very different voices to be heard. The reader is invited to actively make these voices resonate with one another, a process we would call training a fourth form of hospitality: readerly hospitality. Informed by notions of hospitality as theorized by Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, but especially Paul Ricœur and Derek Attridge, in this article we analyse how Smith's seasonal novels thematize, stage and perform hospitality, as well as reflect on it. We conclude that Smith endows the reader with the ethical responsibility to be hospitable: a responsibility to engage with and open up to the stories of others.

C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. © 2024 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.
OPEN ACCESS

Introduction

When, in 2021, Ali Smith was awarded the Orwell prize for political fiction for her novel *Summer*, the prize judges called her 'the great chronicler of our age'. It is true that just like Charles Dickens did in his day and age—and Dickens is a writer she often refers to—Smith finds ways to comment on topical political questions like migration, climate change, and the covid pandemic in her novels. Yet the term chronicler suggests someone who is recording time's chronological unfolding, and this is actually the last thing Ali Smith can be said to be doing. Although the novels of the *Seasonal Quartet* were published consecutively, named after each season—*Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020)—which in itself may suggest the timespan of a year, and although they do unfold in time—the various storylines set in the present roughly span the period 2016-2020—Smith finds many ways to undo suggestions of chronology, for one by adding a fifth instalment to what seemed to be a completed series: *Companion Piece* (2022). This act of opening up chronological time and allowing other timeframes to enter the story, resisting the straitjacket of one moment inevitably following another, is just one dimension, one level of the openness we will argue the *Seasonal Quartet* enacts on many different levels. These distinct layers of openness, we will argue, can be conceptualized through different forms of hospitality, a central issue in the works of Ali Smith. She herself points to the intimate connection between writing and hospitality: in an interview, she said 'perhaps the novel should be a doorway. [...] Don't you think books revolve around hospitality?' (De Vries 2023), evoking the scene of host and guest.

As others before us have also observed, hospitality—the friendly treatment of visitors—emerges in Smith's work as a key issue: a political issue for our times, a moral issue for us as human beings, and an aesthetic one for artists and writers, though these three are always entangled in Smith's work (Bennett 2018; Hart 2022; Popa 2021). In this article we will analyse the many different ways hospitality takes shape in Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, and how these forms of hospitality relate to the political, moral and aesthetic dimensions we just outlined. We propose to read Smith's work as a literary response to the problems with the moral 'law of hospitality' as proposed by Emanual Levinas and Jacques Derrida, and its resonance with Paul Ricœur's alternative model of hospitality-as-translation. Following Richard Kearney's and Melissa Fitzpatrick's discussion of Derrida, Levinas, and Ricœur in their recent book *Radical Hospitality* (2021), we will argue that Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* can be read as an artistic rendering, revision, and expansion of philosophic conceptualizations of hospitality. Through formal and thematic analyses, we will trace how Smith in her *Quartet* articulates answers to the question of how to be hospitable. As we will argue, Ali Smith's novels thematize

and *do* the generative work of time: they constantly remake the world as we know it and generate a futurity for its inhabitants—including outcasts and unsolicited visitors. This world-making comes with an ethical imperative and a responsibility for the writer, as Smith is well aware, for as Daniel Gluck in *Autumn* states: 'whoever makes up the story makes up the world' (Smith 2016, 119). But even more so as we will elaborate, it comes with a responsibility for the reader.

As a preliminary remark, we would like to note that the prominence of recurring tropes like opening up and boundary crossing in *Seasonal Quartet* serves as a reminder for us to resist the urge to unify the quartet or arrive at an integrated, overarching conclusion about the four—or should we say five—books. The wide variety of characters populating the *Seasonal Quartet* defies an all-too-tight reading of the novels as a whole, or as culminating in a single plot. The relative weight given to openness and hospitality finds its counterpart in understating the importance of blood ties. Even though several narrative strands and family lines are brought together when characters from *Autumn* (Daniel), *Winter* (Art) and *Summer* (Robert) find themselves in one and the same room in *Summer*, possibly suggesting a form of spatial and narrative closure, we would like to resist such a reading, if only because their (blood) ties are unbeknownst to the characters involved, and moreover, these ties are touched upon so inconspicuously that many readers will not realize that 104-year-old Daniel is actually meeting his son Art(hur) for the first time in his life, as well as his great-grandnephew (13-year-old Robert, who Daniel mistakes for his sister Hannah) (Smith 2020, 195–97). Neither Art nor Daniel seem to realize their relation, nor does the narrator comment on it, and thus many readers will pass this point not-noticing. Rather, it is the meeting of Art and Elisabeth (another protagonist from *Autumn*) and their 'seeing' each other (falling in love) which is made prominent. It shows the relative unimportance of blood ties or family trees in Smith's work, and the relative stress on alternative forms of kinship recurring in her work. Even when Charlotte, Art's ex-lover, comments on how 'a bunch of strangers he only met last month have magicked themselves into becoming his family', the nature of these family ties is backgrounded (Smith 2020, 319).

While in recent years there has been a growing body of scholarship on Ali Smith's work in general, and the *Seasonal Quartet* in particular, only few scholars have yet addressed all books in the quartet. Eleonor Byrne's analysis of depictions of post-Brexit Britain in *Autumn*, *Winter* and *Spring* also includes a discussion of hospitality (Byrne 2020). Byrne characterizes Smith's novels as celebrating a 'queer hosting' which 'pushes at the limits of hospitality through a radical overturning of the conventionally understood guest-and-host dynamic, where the migrant or outsider figure in each novel, who might be constructed as a guest/intruder/alien by the establishment, Daniel

(*Autumn*), Lux (*Winter*) and Florence (*Spring*), each host and provide refuge to the other more established characters in the novels' (Byrne 2020, 88). Moving beyond chronicling the 'disorientation, disconnection and division' of Britain's precarious political reality of the moment, Byrne argues that the 'radical hospitality' of the *Seasonal Quartet* acts against 'rising public discourse of hostility to the "Other" and the increasing evidence of xenophobic ethnonationalism' (Byrne 2020, 87).[1] She conceives this hospitality to be twofold, manifesting both as a theme and in the form of the novels. Thematically, Byrnes sees the hospitality of Smith's project to be evident in the insistence on 'modes of kinship beyond blood relations and normative nuclear families'—as in Elisabeth and Daniel's friendship across a seventy-year gap—as well as in the 'radical openness' to strangers.[2] Byrne considers this to be most clear in the interactions between Sophia and Lux (*Winter*), or Brittany and Florence (*Spring*). In terms of the quartet's form, Byrne sees hospitality especially enacted through the extensive use of dialogues, which break open interior monologues of characters who are extremely distressed or isolated: 'the texts hold or "host" them and provide routes out of their current suffering.' (Byrne 2020, 88). We recognize the thematic instances of hospitality in the *Seasonal Quartet* and agree with Byrne that the dialogic form is an important way of enacting hospitality. However, we will expand on Byrne's discussion of hospitality in the *Seasonal Quartet* by looking at what we consider other ways of being hospitable through form, and by including the reader's work in this process.

Debra Rae Cohen and Cara L. Lewis touch upon how the reader is made to feel welcome in Smith's work in their introduction to *Post45*'s cluster of short essays entitled 'Ali Smith Now' (Cohen and Lewis 2022). They stress how Smith's fiction is '*companion able*', having acquired an identifiable form which helps the reader enter 'a familiar zone, into familiar company'; it is precisely this emphasis on company, evident in Smith's fiction as they argue, that recognizes hospitality as a key aspect of her work. Cohen and Lewis thus conceive of hospitality as something that happens between Smith's novels and their readers. We will return to this form of what we will call readerly hospitality below. In the same cluster, Matthew Hart's piece 'How to be strange', echoes Byrne's arguments about how the prevalence of 'uninvited strangers' in the *Seasonal Quartet* configures 'hospitality's radical promise and its tragic betrayal' (Hart 2022). He argues that characters like Lux (*Winter*) and Florence (*Spring*), both 'strangers-from-elsewhere' at the brink of deportation from the UK, refuse the distinction of 'unassimilable difference' and disrupt the narrative with their 'extraordinary power

[1] On post-Brexit sentiments, see also Rau (2018), who analyzes how the narrative and political 'now' of *Autumn* is built on narrative and rhetorical uses of memory and history.

[2] On the topic of Ali Smith's engagement with Refugee Tales, Derrida's law of hospitality and verisimilitude especially in *There but for the* see Bennett (2018).

to dazzle and illuminate' (Hart 2022). Hart's discussion of the etymology behind the name Lux ('light' in Latin) reverberates in the main argument of Charlotte Terrell's 'Wordsmith', also part of the *Post45* essays (Terrell 2022). Terrell argues that Smith's wordiness—or wordcraft—serves to 'unlock empathy and openness [in] order to [forge] connections between people and readers across time and space.' The allegorical dimensions of characters' names in the four novels, like *Winter*'s Art and Lux or *Spring*'s Brit, Terrell explains as demanding a certain kind of attention from the reader, one which can indicate that words have the capacity to divide and unite. Building on the insights of these authors, we will explore the range of hospitality in the *Seasonal Quartet* more systematically by discussing its thematic, linguistic and narrative manifestations in the novels and by adding a fourth notion that underlies the other three: readerly hospitality. The work of Paul Ricœur and Derek Attridge on hospitality will aid us in this endeavour. While we will discuss how hospitality manifests itself in the *Quartet*, we will also zoom in on moments where the limits of hospitality seem to be reached, asking ourselves what the conditions of hospitality are.

Hospitality: Levinas, Derrida, Ricœur and Attridge

Central to our ensuing discussion on hospitality in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* are philosophical conceptualizations of hospitality of which Levinas' and Derrida's notions of the stranger and (un)conditional hospitality have been most influential. For Emmanuel Levinas, the encounter with the other (or Other) is the foundation of ethics, and this notion of hospitality in which 'the welcoming of the singular other as an ethical act' is shared by Jacques Derrida, as Derek Attridge stresses (Attridge 2015, 282). Drawing on Levinas' dichotomy between the ethical and political realms of hospitality, Derrida discusses the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of an unconditional hospitality in his *Of hospitality* (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000). Imagined as a moral imperative, unconditional hospitality for Derrida is a story of welcoming an unexpected and unknown guest, 'the other', inside one's home with no provisions or time constraints. This act is predicated on the ultimate 'Law' of hospitality, understood by Derrida as the 'absolute, unconditional, hyperbolical' moral imperative 'to give the new arrival all of one's home and oneself […] without asking a name, or compensation' (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000: 75, 77). The 'Law' of hospitality, however, can only be eventuated by its mediation into 'laws of hospitality'—the norms, conditions, and duties of guest-host relations—which, paradoxically, cannot accommodate the 'hyperbolical' hospitality which the singular 'Law' names. Derek Attridge summarizes Derrida's position: 'To be hospitable, then, is to be inventive in one's relation to the Other. […] For hospitality doesn't simply require an open door; it requires that the other's specific needs be taken care of.' (Attridge 2015, 299). Because of this singularity,

for Derrida ‘the language of hospitality must be poetic: it’s necessary that I speak or that I hear the other in a place where, in a certain sense, language reinvents itself….’ (Attridge 2015, 299–300).

Levinas’ and Derrida’s notions of hospitality offer some helpful ways to read Smith’s work, as several authors have shown especially in analyses of the visitors/strangers who regularly turn up in Smith’s fiction (O’Donnell 2013; Byrne 2020; Hart 2022). However, for our purposes of analyzing hospitality on many different levels in the *Seasonal Quartet* we want to employ two other conceptualizations of hospitality which place a stronger accent on language, narrative and reading. Both Paul Ricœur and Derek Attridge, building on and to some extent departing from Levinas’ and Derrida’s work, have developed notions of narrative and readerly hospitality, respectively, which we consider to be closely affiliated to what Smith does in her writing. Ricœur’s concept of hospitality depends on what he calls ‘the ethical requirements of translation’ (Ricoeur 1996, 8). Richard Kearney, one of Ricoeur’s main interpreters characterizes it as more practicable than Derrida’s absolute and impossible unconditional hospitality. Different from Levinas, for whom the typical scene of hospitality is the parent-child relation, and different from Derrida, who considers the anonymous stranger washing upon the shore as such,[3] for Ricœur, translation—the encounter between different languages—is the paradigmatic scene of hospitality. According to Ricœur, translation requires a form of linguistic hospitality which comes with a dual ethical responsibility: a need to honour both host and guest language, to remain faithful to one’s own language while welcoming the foreign language at the same time. This ‘middle road’, as Kearney calls it, resists the delusion of infallibility on the one hand and the defeatism of considering translation as impossible on the other (Kearney and Fitzpatrick 2021, 17). While there is an irreducible linguistic difference, transitions between and transfusion of languages are possible, even if conditionally.

We consider this a productive starting point for our analysis of the *Seasonal Quartet*. It is good to realize that more often than not translation is also the very real condition of hospitality; it is not only in translation that there is an irreducible linguistic difference between host language and guest language, but also in the encounter between host and stranger. Kearney argues that with Ricœur, it is possible to think of translation as the development *over time* of a ‘hermeneutics of empathy’, where degrees of similarity can be explored rather than absolute difference presumed (Kearney and Fitzpatrick 2021, 22). This forging of understanding over time, as a dialogic exchange is what Ricœur coined narrative hospitality in passing (Kearney 1996, 8). Kearny further develops this

3 For Derrida, Odysseus meeting Nausikaa is a primordial scene of hospitality; coincidentally – or not – the opening scene of *Autumn* rewrites this very scene from the *Odyssey* with Daniel floating on the thresholds of death.

notion of narrative hospitality, as meaning 'taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern that other' (Kearney and Fitzpatrick 2021, 24). It is this temporal dimension that allows for translation, or transfusion to take place.

From language and time it is only a small step to the novel, the narrative art form par excellence that gives shape to the human experience of time (Langer 1973). Ali Smith shapes the open-endedness of the process of being hospitable to (O)thers and works through the implications for the novel as a genre pointing to the future. If hospitality equals a form of risk-taking, of leaping into the future, as Kearney and Fitzpatrick argue through connecting Hannah Arendt's concept of natality to Ricœur's hospitality, this leap is enacted time and time again in the *Seasonal Quartet*, and it is this leap which emerges as the most urgent political need of the present. Hospitality thus comes to resemble, or collapse into, creativity: both cannot but take the risk of the unknown, the radical openness of the future. Significantly, the final sentence in the Quartet's *Spring* evokes 'time's factory', the creativity and generosity of nature recurring every year.

Besides Ricœur's narrative hospitality, we will also employ Derek Attridge's notion of readerly hospitality in our analysis of the *Seasonal Quartet*. Attridge, building on Derrida's work, redirected the latter's conceptualization of hospitality to the scene of reading, the encounter between a reader and an other (the text). Attridge coined the term 'readerly hospitality' as necessary attitude for this encounter, which he describes as a 'readiness to have one's purposes reshaped by the work to which one is responding' (Attridge, 2004: 80). This readerly hospitality is a responsibility in every sense of the word: the reader needs to be responsive, answerable to (though not necessarily answerable for) the other; the reader needs to be response-able. Attridge makes explicit the close connection between the inevitable risk involved in this responsibility and creativity: 'Since there can be no certainty in opening oneself to the other—certainty being by definition excluded—every such opening is a gamble' (124). As we will argue with help of Ricœur's and Attridge's notions of hospitality, Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* perform and invite being hospitable on many different levels.

Thematic hospitality in the *Seasonal Quartet*

As outlined above, the first way in which hospitality emerges as central to the *Seasonal Quartet* is thematic. Each of the novels in the *Quartet* present scenes where hospitality is enacted, desired, or denied. The lacking hospitality of bureaucratic and technified institutions designed to receive and care for people is a staple of Smith's work: from the hospital ward in *Autumn*—where only family members are allowed to visit and Elisabeth is forced to sneak past the reception desk in order to see her dear friend Daniel, or the medical practice that has removed Elisabeth's mother from the registered patients without

notification—to the detention centre in *Spring*—where Brittany (Brit) works, the refugee Hero is interned, and Florence makes magic happen—to the World War II internment camp on the Isle of Man in *Summer*. In each of these situations of inhospitality it is human inventiveness and moments of escaping the confining machinery of state institutions which allow the people caught in that machinery to act hospitably nevertheless. A notable exception is the bank in *Winter* where hospitality has been commodified into service but rich customers like Sophia are not being served properly.

Secondly, hospitality is not only thematized as something that is performed—or not performed—in institutional settings, but also in private, between individuals, indeed beyond the family as Byrne has argued. There are many examples of individual characters extending hospitality to complete strangers in the *Seasonal Quartet*. Ben Masters, in his review of *Summer*, went as far as calling the many uninvited strangers populating Smith's work a part of her 'formula' (Masters 2020). Indeed they are plenty: Art & Lux, Lux & Sophia, or Sophia and the floating head ('I couldn't have a less obtrusive guest') in *Winter* (Smith 2017, 13); Art and Charlotte in *Summer* who take with them people they only just met, Grace and her children Sacha and Robert, on a trip (to Daniel); in *Spring*, Alda is running the underground railroad for undocumented refugees; and last but not least, the hospitable act of the French couple who care for and raise Hannah's daughter during World War II in *Summer*. These scenes of hospitality point to Smith's foregrounding of forging connections beyond blood relations and normative nuclear families (Byrne, 2020).

Interestingly, Smith also reshapes the home as key site where the self-evidence of hospitality among and between family members is put into question. Whereas for Levinas the parent-child relation is paradigmatic, hospitality between family members in the *Seasonal Quartet* is often difficult or marked as not self-evident. This is easily identifiable in *Winter*: Sophia's ritualized hospitality at Christmas is reluctantly performed toward her son Art and sister Iris with whom both she has a strained relationship, or in *Summer*: the boy Robert does not really feel at home and tries to be invisible in both of his homes, his father's and his mother's (the two are separated). But the figure of the unhospitable home and its transformative potential is especially emphasized in *Autumn*.

Growing up without a present father who the reader later learns is *Spring's* main character Richard Lease, Elisabeth is represented as having a conflictual relationship with her mother, Wendy Demand, throughout her adolescence and young adulthood. Wendy's counterproductive attempts to keep Elisabeth from meeting with their neighbour Daniel inadvertently help the two establish their lifelong friendship, and culminate in Elisabeth accusing her mother of having 'used Daniel as [her] unofficial babysitter for years.' (Smith 2016, 80). The extension of Elisabeth's home from the house she inhabited with her mother to both Daniel's house and the walks they went on

is highly indicative of Smith's 'radical hospitality' (Kearney and Fitzpatrick 2021). Daniel is rendered a 'stranger' by Wendy's accounts of his person, as seen in her homophobia and xenophobia exemplified by statements such as 'old queen' (43) and '[he] probably can't speak very good English' (Smith 2016, 45), but Smith evokes a plurality of meaning whereby 'the stranger' can feel more homely than a family member.

Wendy and Elisabeth's strenuous relationship sees significant improvement when Elisabeth, in her thirties and unable to keep her job and flat in London, asks her mother whether she could stay with her, stating 'I want to get some work done and to be a bit closer to, uh, home' (198). Elisabeth's hesitation marks the lack of self-evidence of calling her mother's house home. Yet, at this point Wendy *is* able to welcome her daughter, and she expresses her desire for Elisabeth to meet her new lover Zoe. It is precisely in narrating Wendy's enactment of hospitality, the welcoming of the daughter-stranger into her home, that the home is retold into a site of a queer hospitality where familial and romantic love are (re)built after a long time has passed.

Linguistic hospitality

The prominence of thematic instances of hospitality in the *Seasonal Quartet* also inevitably draws attention to how language functions in such encounters. With Ricœur, we can understand the encounter between host and guest as one determined by the attempt to open up language as a means of communication and connection. Smith recurringly addresses how language itself is capable of including, welcoming, and being hospitable through specific grammatical or semantic choices. This focus on language itself in the *Seasonal Quartet* is what we identify as the second dimension of hospitality: hospitality as a linguistic act performed through etymological and semantic excursions. It is often in actual acts of translation, of discussing the meaning of words—hence in enacting Ricœur's paradigmatic scene of hospitality—that inventive leaps into the future are taken: through translation, a different world can be imagined. Interestingly, Smith does not only open up different languages to each other, but also the English language to itself. In *Summer*, the brief etymological discussion of the word 'summer' serves as a good example of such a hospitable linguistic act. The narrator states that '[the] English word for summer comes from the Old English *sumor*, from the proto-indo-european root *sam*, meaning both *one* and *together*' (Smith 2020, 263). This 'othering' of the word 'summer' temporarily estranges even a native speaker from their language; disclosing the word's history offers alternative temporalities of reality. It gives the word a past by discussing the history of the English language, shown as having merged with languages radically different from English as it is spoken today, thus opening up the language to itself and others. The etymological gesture also gives the word a new future with a new, expanded meaning which is simultaneously old. And semantically, this excursion gives

the season a social meaning ('together'). Translation, in this case of older versions of English into newer ones, thus enacts hospitality in many ways.

Similarly, in *Autumn*, Daniel introduces the etymology of Elisabeth's last name (Demand) to her:

> I think your surname is originally French, Mr. Gluck said. I think it comes from the French words de and monde, put together, which means, when you translate it, of the world.
>
> Really? Elisabeth said. We always thought it meant like the asking kind of demand. (Smith 2016, 50)

Here too, it is the act of translation (from French to English) that forges new understanding. In her response, Elisabeth displays the estrangement caused by seeing her own name as 'Other', i.e. French, but in that same instance, Daniel's linguistic act offers Elisabeth a meaning of 'togetherness', and a belonging to a world community of innumerable others. Daniel succeeds in sparking Elisabeth's curiosity for herself as Other, a hospitable moment in which (at least temporarily) she is able to see herself as a host and a guest of this world, without hierarchy at least temporarily.

Echoing the previous discussion of 'summer' as having roots in 'togetherness,' *Autumn*'s protagonist carries in her name what appears to be at the core of Smith's linguistic manoeuvres in the *Seasonal Quartet*—generating and re-envisioning hospitality by means of etymological, genealogical work. This is best seen in the discussion of the word 'letterbox' in *Summer*, situated in two places within the novel. First, there is a lengthy passage which explains how the word is compiled of other words, derived from ancient Greek and Latin, and which goes in depth at illustrating the use of 'letterbox' in the contemporary British setting: from being an icon of both Royal and Common culture, this iconic 'letterbox' has been tarnished by Boris Johnson (then British Prime Minister) in a racist account of 'Muslim women [choosing] to go around looking like letterboxes,' yielding hostility and unhospitable political sentiments through this image (Smith 2020, 87–91). The narrative situation of this discussion is of relevance here, for it is young Robert Greenlaw who reads out loud the letterbox-passage from a book his father's new partner Ashley is writing. Ashley is a non-speaking character, literally left speechless by what is going on in the world, and her written words do not (yet) find a place to land. Robert thus acts as a human letterbox, a node in the communication chain, receiving and delivering Ashley's words to his family and the two strangers (Art and Charlotte) who just brought his sister home. For Robert, at the same time, this reading of Ashley's words is a way to show off to Charlotte, whom he has only just met but is falling in love with.

Smith's meaning-making is further layered by the dialogue about the word letterbox between Daniel and his romantic interest, Cyril in the internment camp on the Isle of Man, where they—both German 'aliens'—are imprisoned during World War II. In an act of linguistic hospitality, Daniel tells Cyril, whose mother tongue is German, that the 'word, for the letters in the box' is 'letterbox', whereupon Cyril realizes it is the same in German, 'Brief-kasten'; a connection across language boundaries is thus forged (Smith 2020, 156). It is noteworthy that both these linguistic exposés happen in the context of (undeclared, undelivered) love and are, in some way, acts of love between strangers. Smith's linguistic hospitality resembles Ricœur's notion in that it regards translation as the paradigmatic scene of hospitality. But we would argue that Smith is more expansive than Ricœur as translation does not only (need to) happen between languages; the difference of language within itself—an internal multilingualism proper to all languages—also asks for translation, with may result in an expanded understanding of self and other.

Narrative hospitality

A third type of hospitality in the *Seasonal Quartet* is performed on a narrative level, through the ways in which different stories and events are combined, or in how the narrator intervenes. Ricœur enables us to understand this as a form of narrative hospitality consisting in the exchange of life narratives which form our narrative identities, facilitating mutual understanding. Kearney develops Ricœur's notion of narrative hospitality as something that is enacted in, and evolves over time, through leaping into the unanticipated and finding common ground in conversation. We agree with Byrne that Ali Smith uses the narrative form of dialogue in such a way that it has the effect of establishing hospitality between characters: think of Lux and Sophia, or Brit and Florence (Byrne 2020). But there is another type of 'dialogues' in the *Seasonal Quartet* as well, different exchanges between (life) stories, across time and across storyworlds. We already observed how the juxtaposition of different narrative strands opens up fixed teleological plots, which could also be seen as a form of hospitality in that this opens up the future. By combining different times, narratives, and perspectives, which happens throughout all the novels of the *Seasonal Quartet*, the narrator radically opens up the story in which characters are enmeshed, with the effect of giving time another dimension than the chronological. It is reminiscent of modernist techniques like Virginia Woolf's 'tunnelling process' which Woolf described as giving her characters depth by 'telling their past in instalments'.[4] The image of the dandelion clock in *Summer* serves as an apt symbol of how time in the *Seasonal Quartet* flows in all

---

[4] Woolf, *Writer's Diary* 15 Oct 1923 (Woolf 1953).

directions: we are never stuck in the timeline of one story, we are never moving in only one direction; new connections to the past are possible.

By multiplying the timeframes and opening up the story to other texts, lives, and often artworks—from Pauline Boty, Tacita Dean, Laura Mazzetti, to Charlie Chaplin, Katherine Mansfield or Albert Einstein—Smith makes the artworks and lives of these historical artists and scientists resonate with her fictional characters, creating a conversation for the reader between the storyworld of characters and these other lives, forming new connections and modes of 'togetherness'. We would consider this welcoming of 'strange' texts and artists—from very familiar to more obscure cultural references, as also explored by Rachel Wilson in this issue—an expansion of Ricœur's narrative hospitality which requires interpretive work of the reader, an issue we will return to. To illustrate: the example of the etymological roots of 'summer' we just discussed happens in the middle of a narrative strand about the life and works of Lorenza Mazzetti, an Italian-British film director whose family was murdered by the Nazis. By first introducing Mazzetti in the novel and thus rendering her relevant to the narrative of *Summer*, Smith introduces someone who is likely to be unknown to many readers. This defamiliarizing act creates a digression from the 'main narrative' of the novel, just like the stories of Christine Keeler and Pauline Boty do in *Autumn*, or the stories of Rilke and Mansfield in *Spring*. These intertextual moments are often marked by the presence of the narrator, who signals these interludes with cohesive ties such as 'So...' or the repeated 'And.' The reader must accommodate the intertextual and intermedial references, or 'provide a home' to all these 'Others' who are knocking at the door of the novel. Different from Cohen and Lewis, who stress how Smith's fiction has an identifiable form which helps the reader enter 'a familiar zone, into familiar company' (Cohen and Lewis 2022), we would say that the reader may feel estranged by the sudden jumps at times, and that Smith's use of intertextuality asks for readerly hospitality, a concept we will return to.

Furthermore, Smith expands Ricœur and Kearney's notion of narrative hospitality-as-dialogue through interventions by the external narrator which enact hospitality at the level of the storyworld. The narrator forges connections between characters when they cannot actually speak to each other, literally trans-lating (carrying over) their words beyond words, beyond realities: again, the narrator can be very present in these acts, commenting, or moving the story forward or in another direction. Novel writing thus becomes an even more powerful way of doing hospitality than only via dialogue. We will give some examples of how this narrative hospitality plays out. First, there is Daniel and Elisabeth's communication beyond words in *Autumn*. Recurringly, Elisabeth is sitting at Daniel's bedside, often falling asleep, Daniel also asleep, or perhaps dying. Their dreams or hallucinations seem one-sided, but at some points there also seems to

be a real connection, as when Daniel thinks he sees his little sister sitting next to him, or when Elisabeth in her dream is expecting Daniel to come. When she wakes up, she thinks ‘So this is what sleeping with Daniel is like. She smiles to herself. (She’s often wondered) (Smith 2016, 205). Punning on her falling asleep, and his coming, sitting beside his bed, there is nevertheless the suggestion of connection beyond words. The narrator makes these magical (or god-trick) acts of communication possible, across the boundaries of not just language, but consciousness.

A second, similar example is Daniel and Hannah’s letter-burning ritual in *Summer*. The siblings are separated by the war: Hannah in France as a resistance fighter, Daniel in an internment camp at the Isle of Man. Yet they write each other letters as they agreed to do when they last met, letters they then burn (for the danger or the impossibility of actually sending them). By focalizing through Daniel and Hannah, the narrator allows the reader to make the connection between the two and let them converse. While no actual dialogue is taking place, the reader can let it happen by performing an act of hospitality: through connecting their two stories and by realizing how much Daniel and Hannah were attuned to each other despite their being apart—rather than lamenting Hannah’s tragic fate.

The limits of hospitality?

Most scholars seem to agree, and we have argued so far as well, that Ali Smith’s work enacts and rethinks hospitality in radical ways through her fiction (O’Donnell, 2013; Byrne, 2020; Hart, 2022). But there are also moments in the *Seasonal Quartet* where narrative interventions come across as not so hospitable at all. We will discuss one example of narrative inhospitality from *Spring* in more detail to analyse where and how hospitality reaches its limits in the *Seasonal Quartet*. It is telling that this concerns Brittany, a security officer in a refugee detention centre whom is easily read as an allegory of the nation, a British Marianne. In this particular scene, Brit (Brittany) finds herself in a van driving through Scotland with Florence, the refugee girl she travelled to Kingussie with, film director Richard, and Alda who helps illegal migrants find refuge. Having arrived at this point in the novel the reader, who has been privy to Richard’s inner life and thus made to sympathize with his tribulations, will probably feel relieved to see Richard is finding some meaning in life again after Florence just prevented his suicide attempt earlier that day. In the van, Richard feels acknowledged by Alda who turns out to know many of his films. This recognition throws him ‘back into the story of his life’ (261). With an abrupt intervention by the narrator (‘That was October. It’s now next March’ (Smith 2019, 269)), the reader is told Richard will be making films about refugees and will still be alive ‘five years from now’ (Smith 2019, 277). It sounds like a happy-ever-after, but the story continues, or rather *returns* to the very

same scene in the van, now perceived from Brittany's perspective: 'Yeah but enough about the filmmakers and what Russell would call the zzzzzzzz of his story—back to Brit six months ago in October' (Smith 2019, 291). The register of this sentence and the mention of Russell, one of Brit's colleagues in the detention centre, suggests that this intervention by the narrator is coloured by Brit's focalization. She after all is the witness to the story of Richard and Alda ('the filmmakers').

In the van, prompted by Richard's and Alda's exchange about films and TV series that have meant a lot to them, Brit tries to share with them one of the most formative moments in *her* life: watching a film of a Nazi show-trial, and the shocking realization it gave her that this trial was never about justice, but that it was filmed only to scare off people.[5] Neither Richard nor Alda listen to her though, and Brit feels rejected. The realization that Brit(tany) at the very moment of Richard's coming to life again feels unheard, is not listened to, could be a thorn in the side to the smug reader who was empathizing with Richard's loss and Alda's cause: now she has to open up and be hospitable to Brit's needs as well. Even if the reader may not like Brit, she is still an 'Other' deserving of hospitality and receiving a listening ear.

When moments later Alda sings a song in Gaelic, for both Richard and Brittany hearing this foreign language is a key moment, with very different significance. For Richard it is another moment of connection, and he is clearly interested in doing the work of translation together with Alda. Brit in the meantime feels even more excluded ('They aren't listening to her and don't hear her.' (305)), and she also feels she is the only one who is still paying attention to Florence. The Gaelic song reminds her of her work in the detention centre:

> Thank God the creepy singing, in the language that sounds like nothing Brit has ever heard in her life (even in Spring House with all its languages, and it is a horrible feeling when you can't speak a language and aren't in charge of or superior to the person who's speaking it, who might be saying anything at all and you haven't a fucking clue and no right to tell them to be quiet or choose to ignore them), has stopped (Smith 2019, 304).

Clearly unable to perform any form of hospitality in her work setting (and clearly aware of, though troubled by the equality between host and guest in the scene of translation), and reminded of that setting when she hears Alda sing, Brit closes down in the van as well. The narrator then jumps forward quite cruelly to show how—different from

---

[5] This film must be the one the nazis made of the show trial following the failed assassination plot by Von Stauffenberg, which has a scene in which nazi-judge Freisler humiliates Field Marshal Erwin Von Witzleben in the way described by Brit.

Richard—not much will change in Brit's life after her journey with Florence: 'So it isn't, wasn't goodness. Or if it is it's a good that's not and has never really been about Brit anyway [...] she was never a real part of the story' (Smith 2019, 315). Back into her job, Brit reacts annoyed when her colleague Torq speaks Gaelic to her. Even with an equal, she cannot open up to engage in the act of translation in the sense of Ricœur. But she is hurt as well, humiliated: 'it felt like being bullied did, back when she was at school and had to pretend she wasn't clever' (Smith 2019, 326). This little glimpse into Brit's youth probably evokes sympathy, but even though the narrator draws attention to Brit's feelings of hurt, the question is whether the reader can be hospitable to Brit as well. The clash between Brit's moments of showing hospitality—as an individual, to Florence—and the systemic inhospitality she is part of, is laid bare in the wry turn of events after Alda drops off her passengers at a parking lot in Inverness. Brit panics when she discovers that Alda and Florence have disappeared, desperately wanting to return Florence's bag and notebook the girl had left with her. Having been witness to the interactions between Florence and Brit on the train and in the hotel (unlike Alda and Richard), the reader understands that Brit genuinely cares about Florence's wellbeing and her budding writing. Instead of calling a taxi, as Richard advises her, Brit decides to call her SA4A colleagues to help find Florence. This results in a raid at the precise moment Florence and her mother are reunited. Brit's care is counterproductive: it cruelly prevents the reunion between Florence and her mother.

Brit's incapability of showing hospitality in her professional context does not mean she is incapable of opening up to others. The night Brit and Florence spend in a hotel in Edinburgh, when Brit is in her own room, she hears a lowing animal outside in the nearby zoo, which makes her reflect on the word lowing, and how fitting the word is for the low sound she hears. At first she resists her own impulse to listen and empathize with the animal: 'God all fucking mighty. In a minute she'll be wondering what it's really truly like to be a fucking bison or penguin or whatever.' (Smith 2019, 312). But then, despite her own resistance, she listens to the animal nearby:

> [...] not an anxious sound, just a sound she's never heard before, a sound new to her, from an animal letting people and animals know that it's stuck in a zoo and is wondering if anything else anywhere in the neighbourhood speaks its language. It will want to talk about being stuck in a zoo. It will want to say, are there other lives possible for me than this one in here? (Smith 2019, 314).

It is easy to recognize this scene as a moment of cross-species connection, a moment of understanding a foreign language focalized by Brit ('new to her'). It is the possible start of a narrative exchange of life stories between human and non-human in the sense

of Ricœur's narrative hospitality. Though Brit understands the animal, the verb tense 'will want' also betrays her reluctance to enter this dialogue. In the solitude of her hotel room, Brit can hear, listen to and even interpret the imprisoned animal, something she does not manage in her work at the detention centre, caught up as she is there in the systemic power dynamics of dehumanising refugees. Yet while she is open to Florence's needs, ultimately, she is unable to act hospitably. Her actions have an exclusionary effect, unintentionally. It is up to the reader to put the pieces of the story together and decide if and how Brit is part of it.

Readerly hospitality

In novel reading, we might ask ourselves who is hosting whom. Ali Smith's quote at the beginning of this article about the novel as a doorway suggests that it is the novel who welcomes in the reader. Derek Attridge, in his discussion of readerly hospitality instead sees the reader as the host (Attridge 2004). In and of itself, this suggests that the power dynamics of host and guest in novel reading is easily flipped. Like in translation, there is no one master: host and guest both have a responsibility. Our previous discussion on narrative hospitality and the work the reader needs to do in making sense of the *Seasonal Quartet*, highlights the need for a fourth type of hospitality: readerly hospitality in the sense of Derek Attridge. The reader is both guest and host: invited into the text as a guest, she is made to be a host in multiple ways: a host to the alterity of the text, and a host to encounters between characters, appealed to extend and expand her hospitality and make connections with and between them. The imperative Daniel shares with Elizabeth in *Autumn* ('Always try to welcome people into the home of your story') is an appeal to the writer but one directed at the reader as well: Can you always welcome others to the home of your story? Can Brittany, the country personified, be included into the story? Not if she is excluded from the scene by her fellow characters, and not if she is warding off others by not wanting to listen to them. But perhaps she can be if the reader is able to recognize her as another character who is momentarily opening up to other human and animal beings. As Attridge states, otherness is always relational, so there is no absolute other: 'Otherness exists only in the registering of that which resists my usual modes of understanding, and that moment of registering alterity is a moment in which I simultaneously acknowledge my failure to comprehend and find my procedures of comprehension beginning to change' (Attridge 2004, 27). Readerly hospitality is the ethical responsibility the reader is endowed with. The *Seasonal Quartet* invites readers to cultivate that responsibility to engage with the stories of others, and register the moments of change in oneself.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

References

Attridge, Derek. 2004. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge.

———. 2015. 'Hospitality'. In Derek Attridge *The Work of Literature*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198733195.003.0011.

Bennett, Alice. 2018. '"This Ridiculous Thing That Passes for a Passport": Seeking Asylum in Ali Smith's Fiction'. *Contemporary Women's Writing* 12 (3): 322–37. https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpy009.

Byrne, Eleanor. 2020. 'Autumn, Winter, Never Spring: Ali Smith's Brexit Season'. *The Open Arts Journal*, no. 8 (August), 83–94. https://openartsjournal.org/issue-8/article-6/.

Cohen, Debra Rae, and Cara L. Lewis. 2022. 'Introduction: Companioning Ali Smith Now'. *Post45* (blog). 2 May 2022. https://post45.org/2022/05/introduction-companioning-ali-smith-now/.

Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle. 2000. *Of Hospitality*. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. Cultural Memory in the Present. Stanford: Stanford University Press. http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/description/cam021/00056359.html.

Hart, Matthew. 2022. 'How to Be Strange'. *Post45* (blog). 2 May 2022. https://post45.org/2022/05/how-to-be-strange/.

Kearney, Richard, and Melissa Fitzpatrick. 2021. *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action*. Perspectives in Continental Philosophy. New York: Fordham University Press.

Langer, Susanne K. 1973. *Feeling and Form : A Theory of Art Developed from 'Philosophy in a New Key'*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Masters, Ben. 2020. 'A Ghost, a Gift, Ha Ha: How to Write like Ali Smith.' *TLS. Times Literary Supplement*, no. 6123 (August): 18–20.

O'Donnell, Patrick. 2013. '"The Space That Wrecks Our Abode": The Stranger in Ali Smith's *Hotel World* and *The Accidental*'. In *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, 89–100. Bloomsbury.

Popa, Andrei Bogdan. 2021. 'The Future as a Scenario of Hospitality in Ali Smith's *There But For The*.' *American, British and Canadian Studies* 37 (1): 29–47. https://doi.org/10.2478/abcsj-2021-0016.

Rau, Petra. 2018. 'Autumn after the Referendum'. In *Brexit and Literature*. Routledge, 31–43.

Ricœur, Paul. 1996. 'Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe'. In *Paul Ricœur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, edited by Richard Kearney. London: Sage, 3–15.

Smith, Ali. 2016. *Autumn*. Penguin Books.

———. 2017. *Winter*. Penguin Books.

———. 2019. *Spring*. Penguin Books.

———. 2020. *Summer*. Penguin Books.

Terrell, Charlotte. 2022. 'Wordsmith'. *Post45* (blog). 2 May 2022. https://post45.org/2022/05/wordsmith/.

Vries, Joost de. 2023. 'Ali Smith over gastvrije literatuur: "Het boek is een deuropening"'. *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 11 January 2023. https://www.groene.nl/artikel/drempels-en-nog-eens-drempels.

Woolf, Virginia. 1953. *A Writer's Diary : Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Edited by Leonard Woolf. London.