"TIME TRAVEL IS REAL": NAVIGATING THE METAMODERNIST OSCILLATIONS IN ALI SMITH'S *AUTUMN* (2016)

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ABSTRACT. Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), the first instalment of her *Seasonal Quartet*, has been analysed as a Brexit novel or "Brexlit" (Pittel 58), when it actually represents a much wider reality. Although some academics highlight the unclassifiable nature of the novel, I believe that, despite its undeniable political undertones and thematic concerns when depicting our transmodern society, both its form and its content are aligned with the features of metamodernism that authors like Nick Bentley and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker define in their research (2017, 2010). While most critical studies have been concerned with the thematic aspects of the novel as the first post-Brexit novel, my aim is to offer an analysis of all the different aspects that make *Autumn* an accurate example of the metamodernist novel fluctuating between modern features like the use of free indirect discourse and stream of consciousness and postmodern features like multiple narratives and fragmentation. In its oscillation between the modern and the postmodern, *Autumn* finds a balance through its main characters, Daniel Gluck and Elisabeth Demand, who embody these two structures of feeling. Different as they might be, the reader, alongside these two characters themselves, will find that they are more alike than they expected, and thus their shared ideas and concerns turn into the main themes of the novel: the cyclical nature of time and history, the unheimlich and the nature of art.

Keywords: Autumn, metamodernism, Brexlit, network fiction, planetary novel, Ali Smith.

"VIAJAR EN EL TIEMPO ES ALGO REAL": EXPLORACIÓN DE LAS OSCILACIONES METAMODERNISTAS DE *OTOÑO* (2016) DE ALI SMITH

RESUMEN. Otoño (2016) de Ali Smith, la primera entrega de su *Cuarteto Estacional*, ha sido analizada como una novela Brexit o "Brexlit" (Pittel 58), cuando en realidad representa una realidad mucho más amplia. Aunque algunos académicos destacan la naturaleza inclasificable de la novela, creo que, a pesar de sus indudables matices políticos y preocupaciones temáticas al representar nuestra sociedad transmoderna, tanto su forma como su contenido están alineados con las características del metamodernismo que autores como Nick Bentley y Timotheus Vermeulen y Robin van den Akker definen en sus teorías (2017, 2010). Si bien la mayoría de los estudios críticos se han centrado en los aspectos temáticos de la novela como la primera novela post-Brexit, mi objetivo es ofrecer un análisis de los diferentes aspectos que hacen de *Otoño* una novela metamodernista que fluctúa entre características modernas como el uso del discurso indirecto libre y el flujo de conciencia, y características posmodernas como las múltiples narrativas y la fragmentación. En su oscilación entre lo moderno y lo posmoderno, *Otoño* encuentra un equilibrio a través de sus personajes principales, Daniel Gluck y Elisabeth Demand, quienes encarnan estas dos estructuras de sentimiento. A pesar de sus diferencias, el lector, junto con estos dos personajes, encontrará que son más parecidos de lo que esperaban, y, por lo tanto, sus ideas y preocupaciones compartidas se convierten en los verdaderos temas principales de la novela: la naturaleza cíclica del tiempo y la historia, lo unheimlich y la naturaleza del arte.

Palabras clave: Otoño, metamodernismo, Brexlit, ficción en red, novela planetaria, Ali Smith.

1. INTRODUCTION

The publication of the first instalment of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* in 2016 brought with it a plethora of academic and cultural publications interested both in this literary experiment and in the trend *Autumn* seemed to inaugurate: the "Brexit novel" or "Brexlit" (Pittel 58). The *Seasonal Quartet* shares several features with Ali Smith's previous novels: *Like* (1997), *Hotel World* (2001), *The Accidental* (2005), *Girl Meets Boy* (2007), *There But For The* (2011), and *How To Be Both* (2014). As Daniel Lea points out:

> Stylistically her writing embraces fragmentation and multi-perspectivalism to reflect the crumbling of singular, authoritarian voices in contemporary discourses. Her narratives are filled with contrasting points of view, invoked in a restless marriage of difference and competitiveness, each seeking the privilege of primacy. (7)

Many of her novels make use of innovative forms and structures that place her style within the realm of postmodernism: *Hotel World*, where the human meets the supernatural and the main character's fall is mirrored by the layout of the lines on the page and keeps going from chapter to chapter; *Girl Meets Boy*, a gender-bending novel and retelling of Ovid's myth of Iphis; or *How To Be Both*, where the author

involves the reader in the construction of this subversive novel by presenting us with the choice of which of the parallel narrations we should start reading first. However, in the past few years, there have been some developments in the analysis of Smith's oeuvre in an attempt to come to terms with her stylistic and thematic evolution, acknowledging that postmodernism now seems insufficient.

The *Seasonal Quartet* does show a slight thematic and tonal shift from Smith's previous novels, but classifying it as Brexlit is an oversimplified approach. Although the political undertones of the novels are undeniable, they are not completely disconnected from postmodernism. With their unique blended style, the Brexit referendum's outcome is just one of the abundant themes they explore. The microcosm the novels depict is a reflection of our present macrocosm: the socio-economic situation leading up to Brexit is not necessarily exclusive to British territory, but rather it is a reflection of a global condition: migration crises, racism and xenophobia, unemployment, and the rise of the far right are issues that resonate with citizens worldwide outside of the United Kingdom, which demonstrates the global dimension of these novels. As Smith herself claims, a novel "is bound to and helplessly interested in society and social hierarchy, in social worlds; and society is always attached to, in debt to, made by and revealed by the trappings of its time" (*Artful* 29). This global and interconnected dimension the novels depict through their interest in creating a mosaic of our present time and society is not only portrayed thematically but also formally through a style that represents metamodernism, a structure of feeling that, according to some critics is "characterised by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2). Accordingly, metamodernism employs modernist techniques like "the examination of subjective time; liberal use of interior monologue, free indirect discourse and stream of consciousness; and disruption of linear narrative" but also of postmodern features like "the use of fragmented form, multiple narratives, and complex models of identity and characterisation" (Bentley 1). Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore the resources *Autumn* uses to portray the global condition of our present time and to offer a formal analysis in an attempt to redefine the style of the novel, from "Brexlit" to metamodernism.

2. THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHANGE TO CONTINUANCE

From the very beginning, *Autumn* has a style that is not easily classifiable. The opening passage of the novel is characterised by classic modernist resources like the use of free indirect speech, internal monologues, the flow of consciousness and rich descriptions of nature:

> Daniel Gluck, your luck's run out at last. He prises open one stuck eye. But – Daniel sits up on the sand and the stones – is this it? really? this? is death? He shades his eyes. Very bright. Sunlit. Terribly cold, though. He is on a sandy stony strand, the wind distinctly harsh, the sun out, yes, but no heat off it. Naked, too. No wonder he's cold. (Smith, *Autumn* 11)

However, these modernist techniques alternate with a distinctly postmodern style, thus presenting several instances where the narrator seems to be aware of its own narratological status, using a fragmented form and highlighting the fictionality in storytelling:

> Here's something else from another time, from when Elisabeth was thirteen, that she also only remembers shreds and fragments of.
>
> And anyway, why else are you always hanging round an old gay man?
>
> (That was her mother.)
>
> (Smith, *Autumn* 61)

Moreover, the narration makes constant allusions to its own fictional status: "That moment of dialogue? Imagined. Daniel is now in an increased sleep period" (Smith, *Autumn* 33). However, even though, like Linda Hutcheon affirms, "the postmodern clearly also developed out of other modernist strategies: its self-reflexive experimentation, its ironic ambiguities, and its contestations of classic realist representation" (43), *Autumn* slightly deviates from the typically subversive definition of the postmodern. Despite the use of modernist and postmodernist techniques, the novel seems, like Charles Dickens was, deeply interested in creating an accurate portrait of today's society. Smith echoes the Victorian writer from the very beginning of the novel, choosing to rewrite the opening passage of *A Tale of Two Cities* and starting *Autumn* with "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times" (Smith, *Autumn* 1), thus drawing an obvious parallel between the two novels. Nevertheless, the small but powerful change Smith makes in the original quotation, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (Dickens 1), illustrates the way intertextuality is used in postmodernism: "It uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony" (Hutcheon 118). Therefore, from the very beginning of the novel, Smith demonstrates the way *Autumn*'s hybrid style oscillates between postmodernism and realism. Consequently, Smith fills the novel with descriptions of everyday life and references to contemporary culture:

> It is still July. Elisabeth goes to her mother's medical practice in the middle of town. She waits in the queue of people. When she gets to the front she tells the receptionist that the GP her mother is registered with is at this practice, that she herself isn't registered with a GP here but that she's been feeling unwell so she'd like to talk to a doctor, probably not urgent, but something does feel wrong.
>
> The receptionist looks Elisabeth's mother up on the computer. She tells Elisabeth that her mother isn't listed at this surgery.
>
> Yes she is, Elisabeth says. She definitely is.
>
> The receptionist clicks on another file and then goes to the back of the room and opens a drawer in a filing cabinet. She takes out a piece of paper, reads it, then puts it back in and shuts the drawer. She comes back and sits down.

> She tells Elisabeth she's afraid that her mother is no longer listed on the patient list. (*Autumn* 103)

Through fragments like this one, *Autumn* creates a snapshot of our contemporary society, describing everyday life in a way that seems obvious and simple to us, but that might be used as a tool to understand 2016's British society in fifty or one-hundred years' time, in the same way as Dickens' novels currently help us understand Victorian England. Furthermore, Smith also includes several references to popular culture that resonate with the present reader but that will not have the same impact on future audiences. We can clearly understand–and even relate to–certain situations depicted in *Autumn*. We have all been greeted by unfriendly people working at reception, like Elisabeth is when she goes to the care home to visit Daniel: "This time, the woman at reception doesn't even glance up. She is watching someone get garrotted on *Game of Thrones* on her iPad" (257). As Smith's contemporaries, we understand the obsession of society with HBO's TV show *Game of Thrones* and with using a portable device like an iPad to watch it anywhere, but in a few years these references might lose their meaning. Smith uses these specific allusions to create a portrait not only of our present time, but specifically present Britain, even including the name of one of the most typical British supermarkets: "There'd be nothing brought back from Tesco's" (50). These references to our present lay the foundations of the complexity of *Autumn*, and they demonstrate the way it tries to create a realistic mosaic of today. In order to fully understand this novel, the reader needs to be familiar with contemporary Britain.

Smith herself believes that "in its apparent fixity, form is all about change. In its fixity, form is all about the relationship of change to continuance, even when the continuance is itself precarious" (Smith, *Artful* 74). The form of the *Seasonal Quartet*, mirroring the passing of the seasons it is named after, is markedly characterised by its changeable and ambivalent nature. The ambivalent style of the novel combines postmodernist, realist and modernist techniques, without fully conforming to the definition of either of these movements. As Vermeulen and van den Akker state, metamodernism should be "conceived of as 'both-neither' dynamic. [It is] at once modern and postmodern and neither of them" (6). By making use of modernist features like interior monologues and postmodern techniques like the multiplicity of narratives, Smith creates a vessel that brings together an array of diverse characters that compete, with no success, to become the dominant voice of the narrative. Instead, through its hybrid style and by showing different perspectives and mindsets *Autumn* manages to reflect the heterogeneity of humankind through the depiction of a plurality of views on conflicts of the past and the present.

3. THE BALANCE OF DANIEL AND ELISABETH

Metamodernism is not only reflected through the form of the novel, but it is also portrayed through the relationship between the protagonists, Daniel Gluck and Elisabeth Demand, which in itself becomes the embodiment of metamodernism. Daniel is a dreamer, a man of German-British descent who is over 100 years old and

who believes in change and tends to be more abstract: he represents postmodernism. Elisabeth, on the other hand, a young English art history student, is more suspicious, she is witty and more practical: she is more akin to realism. Their different worldviews, originating in their generational gap, are usually a subject of many debates between them:

> There is no point in making up a world, Elisabeth said, when there's already a real world. There's just the world, and there's the truth about the world.
>
> You mean, there's the truth, and there's the made-up version of it that we get told about the world, Daniel said.
>
> No. The world exists. Stories are made up, Elisabeth said.
>
> But no less true for that, Daniel said.
>
> (Smith, *Autumn* 119)

Daniel's ideas seem to align with postmodernism's rejection of metanarratives (Hutcheon 6), whereas Elisabeth represents the old rational ideas postmodernism seems to contradict. Despite their different worldviews, these two characters lean on each other, in their journeys of growing up and growing old, as they share their common anxieties about the state of the world, their passion for art, and their reflections on truth, stories and history. In a similar vein, "ontologically, metamodernism [...] oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 6). Between Daniel and Elisabeth, in the ideas that they share, in their conversations and in the way they mutually influence each other, they create a harmonious fluctuation: metamodernism. The balance between these two seemingly disparate characters parallels the oscillation of the metamodernist structure of feelings.

The novel is structured into three sections, each of them ending with a brief chapter that is independent of the two main narratological periods and that describes the passing of time focusing on the physical changes in nature as seasons change. These short endings of each of the sections combine the importance of nature as a functional tool to represent the passing of time with landscape descriptions as a mere aesthetic element, thus introducing modernism's concern with the subjectivity of time and its inclination to nature as one of its main themes:

> A minute ago it was June. Now the weather is September. The crops are high, about to be cut, bright, golden.
>
> November? unimaginable. Just a month away.
>
> The days are still warm, the air in the shadows sharper. The nights are sooner, chillier, the light a little less each time.
>
> Dark at half past seven. Dark at quarter past seven, dark at seven. (Smith, *Autumn* 85)

Moreover, they also serve as a way to alter the chronology of the narration, as postmodernism often does, while also reinforcing the structure of the novel. *Autumn* is divided into thirty-seven chapters that break the traditional linear chronological order, choosing instead to alternate between chapters set in the past, chapters set in the present and certain surreal dream-like sequences with an unclear time setting. In the same way that the novel's style is heterogeneous and ambivalent, its narrative is also far from homogeneous and straightforward. Both the form and the content of *Autumn* complement each other and blur and defy boundaries, creating:

> A dialogue, an argument, between aesthetic form and reality, between form and its content, between seminality, art, fruitfulness, and life. There'll always be a seminal argument between forms—that's how forms produce themselves, out of a meeting of opposites, of different things; out of form encountering form. (Smith, *Artful* 64)

4. FROM GLOBALISATION TO PLANETARITY

Smith incorporates formal features from different styles to create something new. Several critics such as Ben Masters, who highlights the adjustment-style of Smith's novels (986), or Nicole Schrag, who analyses the "aesthetic of extreme 'porosity'" in the *Seasonal Quartet* (2021), among others, have moved beyond the label of postmodernism and pointed out the metamodernist style of Smith's novels, and she appears in key theoretical texts like van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Vermeulen's 2017 edited collection. As Schrag observes: "the multiple analyses of Smith's metamodernism virtually all consider the relationship between political content and literary form" (2024), a relationship that becomes even more evident in her *Seasonal Quartet*.

One of the main metamodernist features that *Autumn* relies on is the interlocking of narratives, not only as a formal tool, but also as a narratological resource that contributes to the characterisation of *Autumn* (and the *Seasonal Quartet* as a whole) as a "network fiction", defined as:

> a group of narratives that have been proliferating during the last two decades in literature, film, television and the Internet, which interweave multiple interlocking narratives set in different times and spaces around the globe and involve many characters, often in a state of mobility and travel, who get involved in or affected by incidents from another storyline. (Mousoutzanis 2)

Daniel offers this kaleidoscopic perspective to the narrative by being the focaliser of the stories set in Germany in the past, the stories set in England in the 1960s and certain stories set in the present, while Elisabeth also offers a perspective on modern-day England while Daniel is ill. Thus, the interlocking storylines of these two characters are used to embody and reflect the wider reality of our interconnected world. Daniel represents the past and the present, and Elisabeth represents the present and the future. Interestingly, the employment of fragmentation and complex

models of characterization developed through the interlocking narratives and the alternation of focalisers contributes to the definition of the novels as "translit":

> Translit novels cross history without being historical; they span geography without changing psychic place. Translit collapses time and space as it seeks to generate narrative traction in the reader's mind. It inserts the contemporary reader into other locations and times, while leaving no doubt that its viewpoint is relentlessly modern and speaks entirely of our extreme present. (Coupland)

Translit novels have originated in a context of change: in the past few decades, authors like Linda Hutcheon (2001) or Alan Kirby (2006) have argued that postmodernism is over. As Alison Gibbons likewise points out, "a new dominant cultural logic is emerging; the world–or in any case, the literary cosmos–is rearranging itself". The new cultural paradigm that emerges after the decline of postmodernism is known as transmodernity, which constitutes, according to Rodríguez Magda, one of the main theorists on this concept:

> in the first place, the description of a globalised, rhizomatic, technological society, developed from the first world, confronted with its others, while at the same time it penetrates and assumes them; and secondly, it constitutes the effort to transcend this hyper-real, relativistic enclosure. (Rodríguez Magda 16, Trans. Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen)

This rearranging of the cosmos is in line with the concept of the planetary turn that gave way to the current planetary condition, defined by Min Hyoung Son as "a different order of connection, an interrelatedness that runs along smooth surfaces, comprises multitudes, and manifests movement" (qtd. in Elias and Morau xx). Unlike globalisation, generally understood as a "hegemonizing force" (Min Hyoung Son, qtd. in Elias and Morau xvii) or, as Gayatri Spivak defined it, "the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere" (87), the planetary condition emphasises "its relationality model and return to ethics" (Min Hyoung Son, qtd. in Elias and Morau xvii), shifting "from globe as financial-technocratic system toward planet as world-ecology" (Min Hyoung Son, qtd. in Elias and Morau xvi). This shift has been deeply influenced by the growth of environmental movements and ecocritical analysis, which in opposition to the abstractions of global modernity imposes a grounded, phenomenal, earth-anchored ethics and aesthetics (Lawrence Buell, qtd. in Elias and Morau xxxiv). The heterogeneous tapestry that Smith constructs weaving different time periods and characters within *Autumn* and within the Quartet reflects the paradigm shift from globalisation to planetarity that the transmodern period introduces. This transformation of thought inevitably gives rise to a series of cultural and artistic changes that reflect this evolution, which led to the appearance of metamodern literature, the ambivalent stylistic reflection of these philosophical changes where *Autumn* finds the perfect springboard to develop the parallel stories that carry the narrative and to make a portrait of the subtleties of our present. As Pittel points out, *Autumn* "resists any facile categorization in terms of existing genre markers" (60), old categories fail to grasp the complexities and intricacies that the novel presents, and there is a need to make use of new terms in order to be able to

define its originality. In terms of content, Brexit is just one of the many events that define the tone and the themes of the novel. Migration and economic crisis, youth unemployment, climate change, or the rise of the far right are just some of the issues that define the setting, and although the term "Brexit" does bring these together, it may offer a reductive perspective on the novel as a whole. As Elisabeth observes when witnessing a xenophobic aggression:

> The people standing in front of the Spanish people in the taxi queue were nice; they tried to defuse it by letting the Spanish people take the next taxi. All the same Elisabeth sensed that what was happening in that one passing incident was a fraction of something volcanic. (Smith, *Autumn* 130)

The aftermath of the referendum is a reflection of a wider reality. Brexit is merely the consequence of the same political and economic issues that are currently happening worldwide, and classifying *Autumn* as a "Brexit novel" or "Brexlit" (Pittel 58) is ignoring the wider scope and the global dimension both of the novel and the world itself. From the very beginning, the conditions that are presented in the novel are not thought of exclusively as British, but rather as a representation of "the world's sadness" (Smith, *Autumn* 13). Even Elisabeth, who embodies the present and the future, explicitly points to the planetary condition of our times through her surname, Demand, as Daniel points out:

> 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. (Smith, *Autumn* 54)

Interestingly, this planetary condition is also portrayed formally through the structure of chapters that alternate between but also link different time periods, and through the interconnected relations of the characters from *Autumn* with the characters from the three other instalments of the *Seasonal Quartet*, thus pointing to the interrelated nature of the four novels. Therefore, the dynamic nature of the metamodernist novel becomes the perfect medium to depict the oscillations and polarisations that characterise the planetary condition that defines the transmodern era.

5. A NOVEL ABOUT TIME

Brexit is just the backdrop for the plot, and the novel's concern with the circular pattern of history implies that the current socio-political climate is in fact not that different from previous crises. Even though to the younger generations, like Elisabeth's, this uncertainty and fear feel brand new, to older generations, like Daniel's, everything has already happened before. "Oh, that old thing" (Smith, *Autumn* 25), he would say when talking to Elisabeth. "It's new to me" (25), Elisabeth would reply. Knowing everything has happened before and everything is bound to repeat itself puts our present circumstances into perspective and thus relativises and downplays the importance we give to our individual experience. Moreover, Mousoutzanis argues that "disruption in space is also often accompanied by

disruption in time, and the non-linear or repetitive temporal structure of these fictions may be seen as reproducing the temporality of the uncanny, which is determined by what Freud termed the 'compulsion to repeat'" (Freud, qtd. in Mousoutzanis 3). Freud claimed this repetition compulsion was a post-traumatic symptom, and as the novel puts forward at the very beginning: "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature" (Smith, *Autumn* 1). *Autumn* is not focused on the referendum as such, but rather on the socioeconomic and cultural background and the consequences of the referendum, a turbulent and traumatic period that is not unique to our present, but that echoes our past and potentially our future. These circumstances are a reflection of Freud's idea of "the unheimlich" or the uncanny, "the encounter between the familiar and strange" (qtd. in Mousoutzanis 3). Elisabeth has to deal with these complex feelings right after the referendum:

> On the Monday after, she wandered through the city; strange to be walking streets where life was going on as normal, traffic and people going their usual backwards and forwards along streets that had had no traffic, had felt like they'd belonged to the two million people from their feet on the pavement all the way up to sky because of something to do with truth, when she'd walked the exact same route only the day before yesterday. (Smith, *Autumn* 149)

These uncanny conditions are depicted in the *Seasonal Quartet* relying heavily on non-linear temporal structures, thus establishing a connection between a traumatic past depicted through Daniel's memories of growing up as a Jewish boy during the Holocaust, and a traumatic present embodied by Elisabeth's struggles in a divided England. The unchronological order of the narrative serves a double purpose: firstly, it creates parallel structures between the past and the present, thus feeding the idea that time is a circular entity. On the other hand, this fragmented chronology also serves as a way to contribute to the creation of the feeling of the global unhomely, a sense of displacement. Mousoutzanis argues that Freud's notion of the uncanny or the unhomely can be a useful lens through which to examine these fictions, since "the experience of dislocation in space in these fictions is often accompanied by a sense of disruption of time, a non-linear, cyclical, repetitive temporality" (9) that mirrors the unsettling of time and space of the uncanny. "Time travel is real. Moment to moment, minute to minute" (Smith, *Autumn* 175), but also chapter to chapter or even within the same chapter, thus becoming a tool to highlight the interconnection of different time periods and places. Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* creates a juxtaposition of times and places through a myriad of voices that call upon the reader to find their own.[1] Despite reflecting discouraging realities, Mousoutzanis argues that network fictions also

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[1] In this sense, it is also important to point out that these new early twenty-first-century networked narratives are almost exclusively written by men, such as David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* or Hari Kunzru's *God Without Men* (Mousoutzanis). Ali Smith, thus, becomes a double trailblazer, being a pioneer and a master of the metamodern novel and also being a woman in a realm dominated by men.

"suggest new forms of communities and new ways towards a cosmopolitan future that may be seen as a response to the pervasive sense of unhomeliness, to create new 'homes' in response to the global unhomely" (3), which is shown in the way Daniel and Elisabeth find companionship in each other. Despite their age gap and the different circumstances they have to deal with, they find common ground in their core values and concerns, in their disappointment at the state of the world, in their losses, in not remembering his "little sister's name" (Smith, *Autumn* 190) or her "father's face" (209) or in their love for art.

As pointed out before, *Autumn* is fundamentally a novel about time, it is a literary experiment about the circularity and interconnections of time and history, reflected by two characters who create a balance between postmodernism and realism, between past and present, using the intersection of their parallel trajectories to portray the interlocking of our experiences in a globalised world. From the very beginning, time has been the main concern of both intra and extradiegetic agents. When Smith embarked on this project, her aim was to bring back the character of novelty to the novel, writing a series of books that "would be about not just their own times, but the place where time and the novel meet" (Smith, "Brexit divisions"). Thus, this initial idea has infiltrated into all the different dimensions of the narrative. Time becomes the centre point of *Autumn*: extradiegetically, its very origin is a concern with time and novelty; and intradiegetically, it defines both its form, with the interlocking of two narratives set in two different time periods and its altering of the traditional narratological chronology, and its content, being one of the big preoccupations the two protagonists share. Moreover, its metamodernist style is in itself a journey in time, travelling back and forth from realism to postmodernism. Smith uses a fragmented narrative and a fluctuating style to take the readers on a time travelling journey establishing a dialogue between the past, embodied by Daniel, the present, embodied by Elisabeth, and the future, embodied by the readers.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, considering how much the concept of time influences and infiltrates every aspect of *Autumn*, one could argue that it is not a Brexit novel, but a novel about time. Brexit is merely the consequence of the novel's interest in creating a portrait of our present time, it is not the root of the novel's concerns, but merely a feature of our time. As Ali Smith herself has explained, the *Seasonal Quartet* is an experiment on time and literature that she embarked on before the referendum. Because it is a novel about time–past, present and future–it inevitably reflects the features of our present, a time tainted by migration crises, unemployment, climate change, racism and the rise of the far right.

It is also important to consider that *Autumn* is not an individual work but part of an interconnected collective of novels, the *Seasonal Quartet*, which further demonstrates its experimental and relational nature. The quartet of novels transcends Brexit as it delves into the connections and similarities between the protagonists of

each of the seasons and their respective time periods. The exploration of time is not only thematical, it infiltrates every aspect of the novel through the parallel storylines, recurrent flashbacks and fragmented style. *Autumn* is a novel about time, about the relationship between Elisabeth and Daniel, the interlocking of their time periods, their memories and their fears, and their place in the world. *Autumn* is not focused on Brexit, it goes way beyond that: it is a portrait of people and time, of the multiple intersections of time when two people meet, of their pasts, their futures and the present that they are building together; it is a piece of work about time as an organic entity that evolves and is dependent on the interactions of the characters and the world outside of the novel. Ali Smith manages to create a portrait of our present through a novel that explores time thematically and formally, demonstrating her ability to create connections and highlighting our similarities, maintaining the witty and playful style of her previous works to embark on this experiment on time. Recurrently, the metamodernist oscillations of the novel point to a wider planetary condition that simultaneously embraces unity and fragmentation, melancholy, and hope, thus pointing to relational feelings and events that we all share, beyond the borders of Brexit.

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