

Ethics and Aesthetics in Ali Smith's Fiction

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9 Other artistic encounters

9.1 Introduction

In Chapter 7, I examined the intertextual aspects of Smith’s fiction, followed by an exploration of intermediality in Chapter 8. This highlighted how Smith employs ekphrasis to offer readers a vicarious aesthetic experience, prompting discussions about the novel’s relationship with other art-forms. A significant shift occurs in *Summer*, where ekphrasis is primarily directed at the reader rather than integrated into the narrative. Nonetheless, the complexity of Smith’s fiction is such that Chapters 7 and 8 only scratch the surface of the various artistic encounters she creates for her characters and audience.

In the present chapter, therefore, I shall study other artistic encounters enabled by Smith. This involves looking at her novels as examples of “media combination,” a form of intermediality that results from bringing together two or more “medial forms,” each retaining its own “materiality” while contributing to the creation of another form altogether (Rajewsky 2005, 51–52). My study will explore Smith’s early fiction and identify elements that anticipate *How to Be Both*, where media combination flourishes. However, emphasis will be placed on her later works, as no research has yet focused on the complex relationship between text and paratext in the five novels that Smith published between 2016 and 2022. Thus, I shall first analyse the works by Pauline Boty, Barbara Hepworth, Tacita Dean, and Lorenza Mazzetti featured as endpaper artwork in *Autumn*, *Winter*, *Spring*, and *Summer*, respectively, investigating the fascinating ways in which they relate to such texts.

My analysis will then investigate the complex relationship between Smith’s post-referendum quintet and the cover artwork by David Hockney used in these five novels. For this, I will embark on a journey through Hockney’s visual art, focusing on the artist’s motivations and aims in the 2000s, when the relevant paintings were produced. This will enable me to draw parallels between Smith’s and Hockney’s artistic visions and identify the narrative

mechanism used by Smith to make this connection explicit, with important implications for the nature and boundaries of the novel as a genre.

Additionally, Hockney's paintings present a valuable opportunity to explore the theme of seasonality, so prominent in Smith's quartet. A separate section will therefore investigate this further connection between Hockney and Smith, highlighting that themes of seasonality and the circularity of the birth and death cycle permeate all her fiction. My analysis, inspired by Smith's own interpretation of Hockney's landscape paintings, draws on trans/metamodern theory, ecocriticism, and ecofeminism, introduced in Chapters 1 and 5.

This will enable a more in-depth discussion of the blurring of boundaries between the natural and the human. If art and nature cannot be separated, it follows that contact with nature is in itself, at least potentially, an aesthetic experience. I shall explore this idea in light of Smith's arguably Neo-Platonic views. As discussed in Chapter 7, these imply that nature's art reflects the "permanently valid moral laws in the universal scheme" (Dósa 2019, 17). Here, I shall consider examples from Smith's more recent fiction in addition to those provided in Chapter 7, analysing detailed evidence from *Companion Piece*, which I regard as the most elaborate expression of Smith's Neo-Platonism (of which more later). My analysis, largely informed by Adams' (2010) ecofeminist revision of Wolfe's (2003) animal grid, will ultimately bring together the concepts of dialogue, solidarity, relational identities, meta/transmodernism, and the "naturalcultural," all of which have appeared in this book.

Finally, the chapter analyses an additional type of art encounter enabled by Smith's fiction. This involves the art of storytelling itself, reflections on which Smith sometimes offers outside the diegesis in her novels. Often enough, however, Smith does not merely expose her characters to art; instead, she engages them in the process of art-making, art here being different forms of storytelling. In what follows, therefore, I shall also analyse instances of what I call "collaborative art-making," further confirming the deeply ethical nature of Smith's literary project.

9.2 Media combination: the novel as an art object

The study of media combination in Smith's fiction involves scrutinising her use of photography or painting as cover and/or endpaper art which is subsequently alluded to or even fully described and discussed in the narrative. The first example can be found in *The Accidental* (Smith 2005). This practice was notably prominent in *How to Be Both* and has since become one more characteristic feature of her novels. Smith's meticulous selection of artwork has been confirmed by the author herself (F. Wooding 2020, 145). By relating the chosen artwork to the narrative, Smith raises questions as

to “what art is—and by extension, what literature is—and what they can do” (Calder 2023, 350).

In turn, this strategy involves fusing the “paratextual and textual aspects of the novel” (Cheong 2022, 345), thereby challenging the former’s subordination to the latter as the reader is crucially “alerted to the differences between reading a prose description of an artwork and looking directly at the original artwork” (349). In other words, the paratext in Smith’s novels reminds the reader that “[t]he act of looking is far from fixed, and the variables that might influence the moment of encountering the artwork are possibly inexhaustible” (352). In many ways, then, this complements ekphrasis in Smith’s novels but also goes one step further. Through ekphrasis, the reader arguably experiences a doubly *mediated* aesthetic moment, participating in the “feeling thing” experienced by fictional characters who are products of the writer’s imagination. Through media combination, however, readers, although not completely unguided, are invited to take a more active role, reflecting on the nature of the aesthetic experience and how their own reactions to a particular artwork relate (or not) to those described by the characters or the narrator in the text.

How to Be Both marks a departure from Smith’s previous use of paratextual artwork. To begin with, the novel provides ekphrastic descriptions of the artwork on the front cover of the Penguin paperback edition—a photograph by Jean-Marie Périer of Sylvie Vartan and Françoise Hardy, two icons of the French yé-yé movement (Smith 2014, 81–82). This practice had already been anticipated in “The Universal Story” (2003, loc. 39–171), where the narrator provides an ekphrastic description of a film still used on the cover of the 1974 Penguin edition of Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, although the image itself is not reproduced in the text.

In *How to Be Both*, ekphrastic descriptions are also provided of the artwork on both endpapers (2014, 110–11)—two human figures painted by Francesco del Cossa. One of these is a man whom Smith uses as a character, with whom the painter (imagined as a woman by Smith) has sex in the novel. As Cheong ingeniously puts it, this

is a meeting between one character, who is based on an actual painter, and another character, who is based on an actual creation by the aforementioned painter. Yet, in this fictive world, these characters somehow exist on the same ... fictional plane. ... [This] is an impossible meeting between an artist and his artistic creation that only fiction makes possible.

(Cheong 2022, 350)

The endpaper in *Autumn* reproduces Pauline Boty’s *The Only Blonde in the World*, which is ekphrastically described in the novel. It is first candidly

described by the child Elisabeth to her mother (Smith 2016, 81–82), which causes the reader to interrupt the reading process and refer to the endpaper to view the artwork through the eyes of an innocent child. Another description of the same work appears in a frame section towards the end of the novel (245), this time encapsulating the essence of the message that Smith imagines Boty intended to convey in this particular painting (see Chapter 8).

Winter, *Spring*, and *Summer* all feature artworks on their endpapers although, interestingly, these works differ from those ekphrastically described in the narrative. Moreover, such works often employ a different medium from that highlighted in their respective novels. For instance, the endpaper in *Winter* reproduces Barbara Hepworth's *Winter Solstice*, a 1971-screenprint on paper. While this work features forms which are sculptural in nature, it also represents another medium of artistic expression, further blurring the boundary between the novel and yet another form of artistic representation.

Winter Solstice offers connections with the narrative in *Winter* on different levels. First, its multiply-framed, blue-shaded circle evokes the spherical forms characteristic of Hepworth's sculpture (Bailey 2015, 247–48) and, more specifically, the small “son” stone from *Nesting Stones*, which is central to the plots of both *Winter* and *Summer*. Moreover, although primarily a piece of abstract art, *Winter Solstice* is also representational, suggesting a distant, cold Planet Earth viewed from a window flooded with warm sunlight. This interplay of coldness and warmth evokes both the winter season that the print and the novel are named after and the summery hope that is never absent from Smith's novels. Thus seen, this could be a visual reiteration of Grace's interpretation of *The Winter's Tale* in *Summer*: “Shakespeare ... infects things with winter precisely so that he can have a *summer*, make a merry tale come out of a sad one” (Smith 2020a, 284; italics in the original).

In *Spring*, the endpaper artwork is *Why Cloud* (2016), one of Tacita Dean's cloud chalk drawings but not part of the *Bless Our Europe* triptych ekphrastically described in the narrative. However, its physical presence in the book, along with its title, invites the reader to “suspend time” (Cowtan 2023) and elucidate the profound significance of the novel's cloud imagery. Furthermore, the inclusion of this piece has been noted as a reinforcement of the “father-daughter” theme that permeates the narrative in *Spring*. As seen earlier, after a difficult divorce, Richard is estranged from his only daughter and, following Paddy's advice, imagines her instead, taking her “to see things” (Smith 2019, 75; italics in the original). This is what he does when he visits the “Landscape” exhibition. Schmitz-Justen quotes Smith herself in an interview to argue that the strengthening of “the theme of the father-daughter relationship” can be seen in the fact that all of Dean's cloud drawings bear titles referencing “the places in her father's old

Shakespeare concordance where the word cloud appears in his writing, or the word Europe” (Smith, qtd. in Schmitz-Justen 2022, 332).

Indeed, the Shakespearean reference has not passed unnoticed by critics. Armitstead (2019) identifies the title *Why Cloud* as a line from *Pericles* (the Shakespearean intertext in *Spring*) referring to “when the Prince of Tyre struggles to solve the first of the play’s riddles.” Calder builds on this, specifying that the quotation

comes from the scene where Pericles questions the gods about human inaction after witnessing injustices against others: asking why those ‘who do nothing are not blinded on the spot, as if not to see anymore is the only way to survive, to carry on living’.

(Calder 2023, 368)

This strongly resonates with the concept of “guilty innocence” (inaction in the face of the world’s problems) that is consistently present in Smith’s oeuvre and lends her fiction an ethical function that is inseparable from her own conception of art.

The endpaper artwork in *Summer* is Lorenza Mazzetti’s *Self Portrait* (2010), an acrylic painting on canvas. The choice of this work to highlight Mazzetti’s artistry in her lesser-known role as a painter is not surprising. According to the narrative voice in the novel’s third frame section, her style recalls that of painters such as Matisse and Charlotte Salomon (Smith 2020a, 262). There is something indeed about Mazzetti’s predominantly flat and yet extraordinarily expressive *Self Portrait* that evokes the simplified forms favoured by the French and German expressionists with whom Smith compares Mazzetti. Moreover, the connection between Mazzetti and Salomon opens fascinating avenues of semantic and intertextual inquiry, as both artists were of Jewish descent and suffered atrocities under the Nazi regime. As seen in Chapters 6 and 8, Mazzetti witnessed the slaughter of her aunt and cousins by Nazi officials, while Salomon herself died, most probably gassed, when she was five months pregnant in Auschwitz. In all likelihood, this is one of “those not-quite-coincidences” (Armitstead 2019) that permeate Smith’s novels. Furthermore, it strengthens my hypothesis that the character of Hannah Gluck is partly inspired by the figures of Hannah Arendt and Charlotte Salomon (see Chapter 6).

Mazzetti’s *Self Portrait* depicts a woman of indeterminate age against a blank background. She is dressed in dark clothing—a dark brown jumper, what looks like a knee-length denim skirt, black leather boots, and a long, dark green coat draped over her shoulders. The bold brushstrokes defining her face and hair contrast sharply with her somewhat undefined attire, drawing immediate attention to her expression. Her dark clothing suggests a tragic past and the trauma she bears, yet her forward stance implies a

strong determination to leave the past behind, symbolised by the blank background. The contrast between her sharply defined features and the almost blurred outline of her body can be interpreted similarly. Additionally, her confident posture, as she casually pushes aside her coat, coupled with her bright smile and direct gaze at the viewer, radiates a sense of hope that is immediately relatable to the hopeful nature of her film *Together* and, ultimately, to Smith's fiction itself.

Companion Piece features no immediately detectable endpaper artwork but the novel is *intermedially* linked to the seasonal quartet, as the front covers of all five novels reproduce remarkably similar artwork by David Hockney. Smith has acknowledged that through her cover artworks she “state[s] a relationship” between “the book and the visual arts” (qtd. in F. Wooding 2020, 146). For the seasonal novels, it was her editor at Hamish Hamilton who immediately thought of, and obtained reproduction rights for, the David Hockney paintings on their covers before the writing process started, “[s]o before any of the books were written they had covers They mean that the books already exist, and ... I have to just do the work” (Smith, qtd. in F. Wooding 2020, 146). More recently, Smith has confirmed that “[t]he design of these books has been one of the reasons I could write them” (qtd. in Calder 2024, 13).¹

David Hockney (Bradford, 1937), like Ali Smith, is an intellectual artist known for his extensive discussions on art theory. While Smith's fiction investigates the possibilities of the novel as an art form, Hockney's work is largely “about art and the making of art” (Stephens 2017, 12; 15; 20; see also Farquharson 2017, 6). Although originally from Yorkshire, Hockney has spent much of his life in Los Angeles, producing a diverse range of art across various genres and media (Stephens 2017, 12). His visual style has evolved significantly, transitioning from abstract expressionism to post-modern self-reflexivity, and ultimately merging abstraction with representation, culminating in a more naturalistic painting approach. However, he has avoided the “photo-realist” or hyperrealist style popular among some contemporaries (15–16). Likewise, his artistic focus shifted from depicting the human form to landscapes largely devoid of people in many of the works he produced early in the new millennium (Weschler 2013, 63). As will be seen below, this is less of a contradiction than it might at first seem. More importantly, this evolution is integral to my argument here, as the paintings used as cover artwork for Smith's post-referendum quintet were produced between 2006 and 2008.

In the late 1960s, Hockney was sceptical about photography as an artistic medium, using it solely to aid his memory. Seeking to address the limitations of perspective in western art, which produces images that cannot be fully seen “at a single moment” (Stephens 2017, 20), he began experimenting with photographic collage in the early 1980s. He thus created

images from photographs taken in quick succession, reflecting his ongoing exploration of time and motion and their relationship to space through unconventional perspective (Brown 2017, 125).

The examples above are key to the landscape paintings Hockney would mainly produce after the year 2000, largely focused on the countryside of the East Yorkshire Wolds, where he had re-settled. Hockney became familiar with this region when he was around fifteen, having spent two summers working on a farm in the Wolds (Daniels 2012, 460). Later, members of his family moved to East Yorkshire—most importantly, his sister Margaret. Hockney would from then on join his mother and other members of his family for annual Christmas visits to Margaret in Bridlington. In 1989, Hockney bought a house there so that his mother could move in with his sister. Following his mother's death in 1999, Hockney made this house his main residence until he left England in 2013 (Livingstone 2009, 182–83; Farquharson 2017, 6).

The East Yorkshire countryside inspired a large photographic collage and a series of watercolours (created in 1997 and 2004, respectively) before Hockney embarked on a large oil painting project in 2005 that would yield his most technically complex and evocative works to date (Livingstone 2009, 183–87). Over the next three years, Hockney focused intensely on the changing landscape of the Wolds across the seasons, paralleling Lucien Freud's obsession with the nude (Boyd 2014, 446). His first painting, *A Close Winter Tunnel, February-March* (2006), marked the start of his multi-canvas pieces. These paintings were created on-site, with Hockney moving between canvases to assemble a large cohesive image (Art Gallery of New South Wales n.d.; Livingstone 2009, 188; Little 2017, 176). This gave the paintings a collage-like quality, linking them to his earlier photographic efforts (Little 2017, 175) and establishing connections to Pauline Boty's visual art, Tacita Dean's films, and ultimately, Ali Smith's fiction itself.

Mirroring Smith's intertextuality, Hockney engages in a visual dialogue with earlier British landscape painters, particularly Constable and Turner. He shares with Constable his treatment of trees "as human figures in a landscape more complex than architecture" (Little 2017, 172). However, unlike Constable, whose naturalistic vision leaned towards photography, Hockney actively seeks to challenge photography's perspectival constraints. Hockney's East Yorkshire landscape paintings also draw inspiration from the Impressionists' vibrant depictions of the present moment and from post-Impressionist and Fauvist influences, such as Van Gogh and Matisse, emphasising subjective expression over objective representation (Livingstone 2009, 189; Stallabrass 2012, 93). This approach reflects Hockney's rejection of traditional western perspective rules, which translates as changing viewpoints, evident in his portrayal of the Woldgate Woods (Stephens 2017, 21).

The four paintings selected for the seasonal novel covers illustrate the emergence of the motif of the “Tunnel” in Hockney, i.e. “tracks leading off country roads flanked by trees and bushes,” creating a natural leafy canopy (Little 2017, 176). These were *Early November Tunnel* (for *Autumn*), *Winter Tunnel with Snow* (for *Winter*), *Late Spring Tunnel* (for *Spring*), and *Early July Tunnel* (for *Summer*), all painted in 2006. Except for *Winter Tunnel with Snow*, they are all collage-like two-canvas pieces. They were first shown in the “A Year in Yorkshire” exhibition held at Annelly Juda Fine Art in London in 2006, showcasing twenty-five new outdoor works painted across the seasons. This enabled Hockney to “[capture] the essence of nature in all its vivid tones and characteristic forms,” transforming perceptions of the countryside through his “exact” yet “spontaneous” brushwork and resulting in powerful paintings with a “field of vision wider and deeper” than photography can offer (Annelly Juda Fine Art 2024). This produces an intensely immersive experience (Raine 2012, 40), enabling the viewer to transcend photography’s limited perspective (Brown 2017, 125) and adopt instead multiple points of view.

Relevantly for the purposes of my analysis, different points of view are exactly what Barbara Hepworth’s sculpture (Schmitz-Justen 2022, 328–30) and ultimately Ali Smith’s radically polyvocal fiction (Byrne 2020, 88) invite viewers/readers to adopt. Thus, a parallel can be drawn between Hockney’s persistent attempt to “depict the world different from how the lens views it” and Smith’s realism-defying narratives: both defy verisimilitude, even though this should not be taken as a flight from reality. On the contrary, it is their way of encouraging the viewer/reader to consciously engage in “active looking.” As Hockney himself puts it, “I do not think the world looks like photographs. I think it looks a lot more glorious than that” (qtd. in Little 2017, 172). For these four tunnel paintings, Hockney used digital photography in his studio so as not to lose track of the assembled image he wanted these complex paintings to represent (Art Gallery of New South Wales n.d.).

The *Companion Piece* front cover artwork, *Felled Trees on Woldgate* (2008), is one of several paintings that Hockney created for an exhibition at London’s Royal Academy in 2012. For these works, however, the painting would not take place exclusively outdoors but also inside his studio. Painting largely from memory gives these works a different, almost surreal quality, mostly because of the use of much brighter, “blaring” colours (like the electric green vividly represented on the novel’s endpapers) and simpler outlines, “as the artist allows his imagination to infiltrate the canvas” (Stallabrass 2012, 94; Weschler 2013, 64; Little 2017, 175).

An additional difference is the contrast between the verticality of the standing trees—already present in his earlier pictures—and the marked horizontality of the felled ones (Livingstone 2009, 196). This is due to the

fact that the location depicted in these paintings is a “stretch of timberland thicket that was thinned out ... in 2008, the felled logs dragged out onto the roadside and stacked in piles,” all presided over by what Hockney refers to as “the Totem,” a towering tree stump that Hockney had requested the foresters not to cut down (Weschler 2013, 64).

The subject matter, however, remains the same, since this painting still portrays the East Yorkshire landscape. When it was chosen as artwork for *Companion Piece*, critics immediately noted that the novel was, indeed, “a companion piece” to the four earlier works, as “[e]ven the (beautiful) David Hockney cover looks like it was designed to sit on a shelf next to the Quartet” (Preston 2022). The link between Smith’s 2022 novel and the seasonals was thus made visually clear.

Companion Piece uniquely offers a metatextual reflection on the relationship between Smith’s post-referendum novels and their cover artwork. A scene set two years before the narrative present takes place in a location that mirrors *Felled Trees on Woldgate*: “[m]y father is waiting for me on the path by a pile of cut-down trees in a clearing. It’s his birthday” (Smith 2022, 58). Through Sandy’s first-person narration, Smith creates an immersive experience that echoes Hockney’s intent for viewer engagement in his multi-canvas works. She invites readers to join in a multi-sensorial exploration of the wood clearing by incorporating olfactory and tactile descriptions that transcend the visual, enhancing the emotional depth of the scene:

The smell of cut wood is in the air and the space all around the pile of logs is trampled to mud and littered with woodchips.

Work well done by somebody, he says patting the side of the highest log. This one’s the age of me. I counted the, the. You know.

Rings, I say.

I bend down and pick up a piece of inner tree the size of my hand. It’s so light-coloured and fresh-smelling that I hold it to my nose then put it in my pocket.

(Smith 2022, 58–59)

This differs from the “ekphrastic moment” theorised by Louvel (2018) because the narrative is not completely paralysed: minimal dialogue occurs between Sandy and her father. However, it produces something beyond the “visual reading event” of the ekphrastic text. This, I contend, is a metatextual ekphrastic passage. On the one hand, it describes—and, by describing, invites—the “feeling thing” (Smith 2014, 228) that the aesthetic moment should trigger. On the other hand, it also alludes to the intricate relationship between text and paratext in Smith’s fiction. This is done by merging the narrative voice with a character’s voice and, ultimately, even what may

be perceived as the authorial voice: the scene is set in a location described by the protagonist's first-person narrative voice, allowing the reader to interpret it as a work of art in its own right, partly through its relationship to Hockney's painting—a relationship known to Smith but not to the fictional character of Sandy.

The “feeling thing” and the nature of Smith's fiction as intermedial text are further highlighted as Sandy's dialogue with her father progresses. At the sight of the felled trees, Sandy's sensitive nature takes centre stage. She is an artist and, as such, one of the characters related to (the study of) art that Smith frequently employs in her novels. She cannot help thinking aloud. This is a dangerous thing to do as her relationship with her father, an eminently practical man, is fraught with difficulties, primarily due to his inability to understand why she has “wasted” her intelligence by becoming an artist whose art he cannot comprehend. Aware of the danger she incurs, she proceeds nonetheless, expressing her concern as to “whether trees in a wood freak out when someone cuts down their neighbouring trees right in front of them” (Smith 2022, 59).

Sandy's father dismisses her remark as ridiculous (59), prompting her to quote a line from a John Keats poem that he fails to recognise. As they walk along the curve of the path depicted in *Felled Trees on Woldgate*, Sandy articulates her frustration, revealing that a picture that she had lovingly painted—her Christmas gift to him—serves as a visual representation of the poem (60). This revelation of the essence of Sandy's art—a visual representation of literary works—reflects the significant role that Hockney's cover artwork plays in the post-referendum quintet. Moreover, it serves as a metaphor for the intricate relationship between cover artwork and narrative in Smith's fiction. Crucially, this metaphor challenges the traditional subordination of paratext to text, positing instead a *symbiotic* or *dialogical* relationship between two equally important elements creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The whole I am referring to is no other than the fiction book itself—specifically, the novel as an art object. This is perhaps best seen in *Shire*. “The Poet,” the second text in this genre-defying volume, is a short piece featuring a fictionalised account of the life and work of Scottish poet Olive Fraser, mixed with personal interpretations by Smith. The young Olive is first introduced taking a book and throwing it “across the room and when it hit the Wall then fell to the floor with its pages open it clearly broke.” This act is crucially presented as sacrilegious (Smith 2013, 41), thereby reinforcing the perception of the book as an almost sacred object deserving of reverence.

The novel as an art object is a notion that Smith seems to have vindicated from the very beginning of her writing career with, for example, her “unusual and beautiful justification on the page” (McNeill 2019, 359). Nevertheless, her vindication has become more emphatic since *How to Be Both*.

This is a novel not only available in two editions (each suggesting a different reading order); it also makes sophisticated use of artwork and features a character—Lisa—who makes “books, one-offs, like artworks, books that were themselves also art objects” (Smith 2014, 117). Thus, Smith highlights the beauty of the *physicality* of the book (McNeill 2019, 359).

In other words, by persistently drawing the reader’s attention to “art and aesthetics,” Smith’s novels become objects that are not only to be read but also seen, as Calder argues (2023, 346–47), although he adds that “the artistry of the novel lies not with its physical properties ... but with its literary style” (347). I can imagine Ali Smith disagreeing here. The printed page is, for Smith, what film is for her admired Tacita Dean in her film portraits: “as much the subject as the medium of her art” (Barrett 2018). Every single feature that has been identified in this book as characteristic of Smith’s fiction is a constituent element of her unique style, through which she constantly explores the nature and boundaries of the novel. This includes everything, from her distinctive typesetting and variable font size to her unique use of capitals, bold type, italics, unusual justification, the epigraphs that precede her narrative, and, perhaps most notably, her very conscious use of artwork on both covers and endpapers and the way this artwork interacts with the narrative itself.

Crucially, too, this style also proclaims the *artfulness* of the physical novel as an antidote to the “age of distraction” if approached through “slow reading,” just as Tacita Dean’s art requires viewers “to look long and look slowly” (Barrett 2018) and Hockney’s paintings encourage “active looking” (Little 2017, 172). In sum, reading is for Smith, “like other forms of aesthetic experience, something active and creative” (Wilson 2024, 2). It is in this light that one can fully appreciate the significance of “The Universal Story” (Smith 2003, loc. 39–171), in which the main protagonist is not a person but a physical book: a 1974 Penguin edition of Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.

9.3 Nature in art and art in nature

9.3.1 *Interpreting seasonality*

By depicting the same stretch of land in different weather conditions, Hockney’s “Tunnel” paintings represent “the eternal cycle of nature” (Stallabrass 2012, 93). This contributed to their selection as cover artwork for Smith’s seasonal quartet (Penguin 2020). Hockney’s ever-changing landscapes emphasise that space and nature are dynamic, representing life in defiance of all expectations. In his own words, “[t]rees are never more alive than in winter, you can virtually see the life force, thinned but straining, pulsing, the branches stretching palpably, achingly toward the light”

(qtd. in Little 2017, 172). This is something that Ali Smith (2020b) appreciates about Hockney's art, specifying that

[y]ou can sense it every time Hockney makes visible the unexpected shock of colour in the dark of a body of bare trees ..., the swing of a branch loaded with not-snow, spring like the hinge on the seasonal door.

For Livingstone, Hockney's "Tunnel" paintings are "about now" but also "celebrations of timelessness" (2009, 181), thus ultimately conveying a message of trans/metamodern hope. Here lies the solution to the apparent riddle posed by Hockney's abrupt transition to landscape painting. While painting in the Bridlington countryside, Hockney learned that his own ancestors had been peasants. This makes Daniels read his east Yorkshire landscape paintings as "the recovery of a collective as well as individual ancestry" (2012, 460). Additionally, the fact that in 2012 Hockney became painfully aware of his own mortality—he suffered a minor stroke—strengthens the interpretation of his Yorkshire landscapes as "portraits of the land ... that [Hockney] himself had worked as a teenager ..., land across which his mother's very ashes had been scattered." Thus seen, such landscapes intriguingly become "humanscapes," "timescapes," "lovescapes," and, ultimately, "lifescapes" (Weschler 2013, 67; 75).

It becomes apparent that at the core of this vision lies a blurring of the boundary between the natural and the human. Hockney's landscape painting makes Ali Smith (2020b) think of Virgil's *Georgics*, which "suggests a different politics ... by reading the earth, the signs in the stars, the weather, the habits of the creatures and plants with which we coexist." Smith's eco-critical reading of Hockney's oeuvre is not coincidental. In *Hotel World*, the ghost of Sara Wilby evokes the celebration of life, the unavoidable communion between the human and the natural, and the perception of there being something transcendent about the finitude of life. Her spectral voice closes the novel with what almost resembles a visual poem in which the decreasing font size suggests the vanishing of the ghost:

remember
you
must
live

remember
you
most
love

remainder
 you
 mist
 leaf

(Smith 2001, 237)

The poem employs a descending line and characteristic puns to establish connections between semantically distant words. Notable semantic chains include “must-most-mist” and “live-love-leaf,” with “remember” and “remainder” also linked. The terms “must” and “most” position happiness as a moral obligation, potentially reflecting the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*, which encapsulates a yearning to be desired by the other (Chiesa 2015, 9). This “other” is identified in the third element of the chain, the surrounding “mist,” symbolising nature as the force behind “generation, evolution, and growth” that has been held separately from what since classical antiquity has defined the essence of humankind—“any rationally organized activity which has a practical ... end” (Close 1969, 467).

A similar message is conveyed by the second semantic chain “live-love-leaf.” Notably, “leaf” seems to be used as a verb, not as a noun—“remember you most leaf,” as the poem goes—which I interpret as a coinage by Smith conveying the meaning of not only “being in leaf” or “coming into leaf” but also that of “abscission,” i.e. the process through which deciduous plants shed their leaves. The reader is asked to “remember” that it is through this cyclical seasonality that the “remainder” *remains*, as it were, to begin the cycle anew.²

The poem, therefore, blurs boundaries between the human and natural worlds, and between life and death. It thus anticipates Smith’s short story “Erosive” (2003, loc. 1207–84), in which the narrator learns to embrace the aphids infesting an apple tree as the origin of new life resulting from the tree’s death (Schmitz-Justen 2024, 10–12). This supports my argument in Chapter 7 regarding Smith’s concept of art and connects to the seasonality theme that is central to both Hockney’s “Tunnel” paintings and Smith’s recent fiction. Indeed, the cyclical nature of the seasons imbues the quintet with a sense of *jouissance*. A young Grace experiences this sense of “grace” in *Summer* as she gazes upon the stunning blend of golden hues and vibrant greenery of the English countryside, beautifully contrasting with the backdrop of the sea (Smith 2020a, 288). As an adult, however, Grace learns that happiness lies in the certainty of returning summers, heralded by the arrival of the swifts, a lesson she later imparts to Sacha (149; 249).

In *Autumn*, the child Elisabeth is saddened by the end of summer, and Daniel helps her see that it is never completely gone (2016, 148). While

Hockney signals life in his winter paintings, the narrator in the novel's frame sections highlights that winter conceals the promise of burgeoning life, for example in the form of insect eggs quietly nestled beneath the surface (178). In this context, the passing of time is not measured using human, finitude-connoting units but by the vast, cyclical transformations of nature—countless flowers blooming and bowing, then fading away only to be replaced by new blossoms. The cycle continues with buds evolving into leaves, which eventually fall and decompose, thereby becoming earth and ultimately making it possible for countless other plants to produce a myriad of fresh buds (123).

The narrator in *Winter* presents the transition from autumn to the year's coldest season as a “reversal ... from increase of darkness to increase of light” (Smith 2017, 141), echoing Sara Wilby's ghost's “remember you must leave / remember you most love / remainder you mist leaf” (Smith 2001, 237) by defining winter as “an exercise in remembering how to still yourself then how to come pliantly back to life” (2017, 66). Finally, an unambiguous note of hope is provided in *Spring* when, despite the evidence of climate change gloomily noted by Richard (he complains about the abrupt transition from freezing, snowy weather to scorching heat in only two weeks), spring invariably returns. Thus, Paddy corrects him, arguing that this is “[o]ne of the loveliest springs I've known. Plants couldn't wait to get going. All that cold. All this green” (2019, 72).

9.3.2 *Naturalised femininity and feminised nature*

As outlined in Chapter 7, ecofeminism views both the environment and gender as social constructs connected to power relations among humans. Consequently, gender-based violence and climate change arise from “the cultural devaluation of both women and nature” through “*the naturalization of femininity and the feminization of nature*” (MacGregor 2017, 1–2; 4: italics in the original). I argue that Smith, influenced by her Neo-Platonic views, portrays this in her fiction as an attack on the moral laws governing the universe (Close 1969, 480), pointing at its disastrous consequences.

In *Autumn*, a piece of common land is mysteriously enclosed, with a fence complete with barbed wire and surveillance cameras (Smith 2016, 55). This violation of the natural principle of cooperation (Waal 2005)—the reader later infers that this site of natural enjoyment is being used to build an Immigration Removal Centre—is symbolically resented by the very nature that has been violated and hence feminised: Elisabeth notices that this brutal human intervention does not prevent “weed-life reappearing ... through the churned-up mud round one of the metal posts” (Smith 2016, 139).

Using personification, Smith goes one step further in *Spring*, a novel in which winter and spring are represented by Brittany (a detention custody

officer) and Florence (the daughter of an undocumented alien), respectively. Echoing Hockney's painting, in which winter's life force is emphasised, Smith highlights that winter "make[s] [spring] possible" (2019, 201). This encourages a more positive interpretation of the character of Brit than Byrne (2020, 91) allows for, as I shall argue in Chapter 10.

If communion with nature is a prominent theme throughout the seasonal quartet, its importance is reinforced in *Companion Piece*. At one point in the narrative, Sandy converses with her father's dog in her dreams. In this dialogue—anticipated in *Artful* (Smith 2012, 49)—the dog argues that what differentiates humans from their animate natural others is "cruelty," i.e. the deliberate choice to inflict suffering on another living creature (2022, 152). Interestingly, Smith identifies the defining feature of the human race by evoking the figure of the "humanised animal," which paradoxically blurs the human/animal binary (Gaard 2010, 645). This is one of four categories in Cary Wolfe's species grid and primarily refers to pets, i.e. those non-human animals that "we exempt from the sacrificial regime by endowing them with ostensibly human features" (2003, 101). This category "tacitly extends a model of human subjectivity to animals, who possess our kind of personhood in diminished form," thereby undermining "admirable [essentially human] ambitions and values" such as compassion and generosity towards the victims of injustice or oppression (Wolfe 2009, 572).

Smith shares this reflection in *Companion Piece*. However, to demonstrate this, I must return to Wolfe's species grid, which includes three other categories. Presiding over the hierarchy of the animate world is the "humanized human." At the lower end are the "animalized animals." These are objectified to enable "the ongoing practices of violence against non-human others." Wolfe argues that the status of these two "pure" categories as "ideological fictions is evinced by the furious line drawing at work" in two additional, "hybrid" categories. One is the humanised animal, seen above, to which he adds a fourth category, the "animalized humans," which he presents as "perhaps the most troubling category of all," as the animalisation of humans may occur through all forms of brutality imposed by cultural norms (Wolfe 2003, 101).

Adams has revised Wolfe's grid from an ecofeminist perspective, arguing that the "humanized human" is often "white, male" and with "the right to vote and own property." She also notes that "[c]asting individuals as animalized humans is usually influenced by race, sex, and class" (2010, 312–13). To this end, she adds two categories: the "feminized animal" and the "animalized woman." Feminised animals, which I view as an extension of the feminisation of nature discussed by MacGregor (2017), refer to female animals objectified to obscure the violence inflicted upon them for their reproductive and, ultimately, bodily productivity as meat (Adams 2010, 316). For their part, animalised women would be their human equivalent. Adams

contends that, by being “animalized” as “meat” available for (male) consumption, women become absent referents, thereby justifying the violence perpetrated against them.

In *Companion Piece*, Smith illustrates the objectification of the Boothby Lock girl in Part 3, by never naming her. The narrative begins with her brutal rape by three men, shortly after the plague has claimed the lives of the Shaklocks, the owners of the forge where she works as an apprentice. “Wotcheer, one said,” as if referring to an animal about to be slaughtered. “Get the legs, the other said” (Smith 2022, 173), linguistically fragmenting her body and therefore “sever[ing]” what has already become an object “not only from its body but its ontological meaning” as a human being (Adams 2010, 304). “I’ll do the dogs if there’s trouble, the third said,” completing the objectification process by aligning her with household animals. “Then they did it,” the narrator notes, carefully avoiding the nature of the deed, only to add that “they dumped her” in a ditch (Smith 2022, 173), depicting her as disposable. After a short digression, the narrator resumes the story of her rape, verbally fragmenting her body into parts to provide a detailed picture of the violence inflicted upon her: “they’d thumped her in the stomach, taken her hammer and held it above her head,” the narrator continues before somewhat humorously adding that “they were decent in the end and hadn’t hit it with it” (174). This “decency,” however, conceals a sense of self-gratification, as what these men seek is (forced) sex with her, and disfiguring her head would have seriously diminished the lust required to perform the act that is about to follow. “Instead,” then,

one held her down over the anvil, one had her, and the third watched

They could all have had her there and then but they didn’t. Because having her wasn’t the point and they wanted her to know.

...

They killed the dogs first. ... When they were finished she played as dead as the dogs and they put her in a sack and dumped her

She has five years apprenticed. Two more years to go. Those years can’t happen now. It is law. Whether you chose to fuck or didn’t makes no difference to law and that was the point of the being had. That’s her brotherhood over.

(Smith 2022, 174–75)

The violence of the sex scene, with the girl being forcibly “had” by one of the men—and therefore becoming his “possession”—is reinforced by the image of her lying over the anvil, an instrument on which metal is hammered and, ultimately, shaped. This rape, involving a perpetrator and two accomplices who also derive voyeuristic pleasure, forces the animalised girl into submission to the “humanised humans,” who have the right to

dispose of her objectified self as they wish. This way, the rape mirrors the very institution of apprenticeship from which she is about to be expelled, which was predominantly male and served to teach professional skills as well as to keep “social discipline” in Tudor England, particularly regarding “the sexual license and disorderliness” typically associated with the younger generations (Archer 2001, 25–26).

In practice, however, fornication rules—within guilds and patriarchal Tudor society at large—usually addressed women, not least because the loss of one’s virginity is far more easily proved in women than men. Those found guilty of fornication faced the humiliation of being carted off to a public place where they would be whipped or forced to stand locked in the pillory or the stocks (Hennish 2000, 88; L. Wooding 2022, 129; 538). The Boothby Lock girl endures this public shaming, experiencing the severe punishment of being “burned at the collarbone ... with the V of a brand” (Smith 2022, 211). This “mark[ing of] the vagrant body with a legible sign,” common from 1495 to the eighteenth century (Carroll 2017, 113), further animalises the girl, subjecting her to a procedure reserved for cattle, i.e. “animalised animals.” Through this process, the girl becomes a pariah and is rejected by fellow humans. After escaping the ditch where her rapists left her, she finds solace in the companionship of a curlew, which proves far more reliable than the empathy and compassion she rarely finds among fellow human beings.

In deliberate contrast to the magical realist quality of the Boothby Lock girl story, the narrative continues with a tragic episode of anti-Catholic prejudice experienced by Sandy’s mother as a young girl, presumably in Northern Ireland in the 1930s. This story, which touches upon Ireland’s tragic history and recalls Paddy’s own family story as told fragmentarily in *Spring*, is offered as a reminder that the animalising of human beings is a far more common practice that can be found closer to us in both time and space than we might otherwise think.

At any rate, it is worth highlighting that, by presenting both instances of (hyperbolically) humanised animals and animalised women, *Companion Piece* effectively questions the neat separation between humans and their non-human others, thereby invoking an ecocritical, ecofeminist approach to the relationship between human beings and their environment. Further emphasising the parallels between the sixteenth-century Boothby Lock girl (an animalised woman who, having been rejected by fellow humans, accepts the companionship of a natural other) and twenty-first-century Sandy (a woman who, undergoing a personal crisis, has isolated herself from the outside world), Smith turns Sandy into a contemporary version of the Boothby Lock girl, as I shall now argue.

Sandy—who has hitherto been a rather reluctant caregiver for her father’s dog—moves to her father’s house. Then, a miracle occurs: successful

communication is established between Sandy and the dog. Every morning without fail, the dog (a female, invariably referred to as “the dog” throughout the text, echoing the unnamed Boothby Lock girl),³ asks to be taken out. This message is successfully conveyed, as Sandy complies, recognising that, through her barking, the dog directs her driving towards the very spot where her father used to take her (Smith 2022, 223). This place is the town’s common. Sandy lets her out, which leads to another aesthetic moment. In Sandy’s words, “[t]he colour of things hits me like something I’ve lacked” (224).

This aesthetic experience is also a moment of enlightenment and discovery of “all the lush liveliness that comes and goes and comes again, nature that abides” (Weschler 2013, 75) and powerfully evokes the tenet of the philosophy of art that since classical antiquity understands nature as an artist (Close 1969, 480). This realisation takes the reader back to the moment when “a butterfly drinking from the corner of [Ash’s] eye” is declared “the most beautiful thing” in *Like* (Smith 1997, 168). The sight that Sandy tries to take in—which recalls the neo-Arcadian description of Regent’s Park in “The Definitive Article” (2015, 165–66)—is a model of symbiotic coexistence (Kostkowska 2013, 6) featuring “[a] man ... playing chords on a guitar,” “[a] swan ... listening to the man play,” “a man ... fishing,” and “cows gazing across the common” (Smith 2022, 224–25).

By portraying what I regard as a model of “Sympoiesis” (Haraway 2016, 58), Smith engages in an exercise of not only creative (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012; Gaztambide-Fernández et al. 2022) but also (ecofeminist) political solidarity, as Mallory (2009) would argue. Mallory follows Val Plumwood’s ecofeminist doctrine rather than the tenets of Sally Scholz’s (2008) political solidarity, understanding that political solidarity refers to “beings” (in this case, humans) being “motivated to act on behalf of others” (in this case, natural others) with “whom one admits one does not (necessarily) share experiences, interests, worldviews, or subjectivity” (Mallory 2009, 8). Such views are consistent with those of Wolfe, who critiques the cruelty inherent to both the “animalisation” of animals and their “humanisation,” precisely because, as Mallory (2009) argues following Plumwood, this implies endowing animals with a kind of human subjectivity that they clearly lack. This would account for the reference to the man fishing in the above quotation from *Companion Piece*. Importantly, and as previously seen, the “humanisation” of animals is also problematic because it overlooks “admirable” qualities that can only be found in humans, such as generosity and altruism (Wolfe 2009, 572).

Such qualities, I would argue, are precisely what make political solidarity possible in the first place, founded upon a pre-existing sense of

community. Crucially, a deeper investigation into the idea of community uncovers another connection between Hockney's art and Smith's fiction. As previously seen, the painter's Yorkshire landscapes can be viewed as an attempt to recover a sense of "collective as well as individual ancestry" (Daniels 2012, 460). Not coincidentally, while contemplating this "natural-cultural" work of art, Sandy remembers that this is the spot where the victims of the plague were hastily buried centuries earlier.⁴ Immediately afterwards, "[a] church bell tolls the distance" (Smith 2022, 224).

The precision with which Smith uses language clarifies the importance of this last sentence. The tolling of a church bell would signify death, serving as a painful reminder of the transience of human life, which the use of this common land as a burial site has just evoked. However, the verb "toll" here suggests that the distant past (in which those buried lived) has merged with the present, uniting the Boothby Lock girl, her parents, the Shaklocks (who perished in the plague and, it is implied, were buried on this very site) and Sandy. It is this sense of community, of essential companionship, that enables transhuman political solidarity, which the novel's ending clearly signifies.

Sandy is woken up, as it were, from her aesthetic moment by her father's dog joyfully greeting somebody she recognises. Sandy immediately realises that this person—a young woman—is someone her father used to see when he took the dog for her daily walk on the park before he fell ill. Since these are still COVID times, she keeps social distancing. However, this does not preclude their talking. Immediately recognising the dog, the young woman enquires after Sandy's father. Sandy identifies herself as his daughter and informs her that he is ill in hospital (Smith 2022, 226). Crucially, the dialogue triggers empathy:

I've been worried, she says. ... Will you pass on my best wishes to him? ... Tell him hello from me.
I'll tell him, I say.

(Smith 2022, 227)

The implication is clear. Solidarity relies on empathy, i.e. the capacity "to imagine ourselves in the position of different others" (O'Halloran 2016, 241). Such "different others" may include natural others, not necessarily fellow human beings (Mallory 2009). This is why it is only empathy, not sympathy—which entails "a conformity or agreement of feelings and temperament" (Cuddon 2013, 233)—that the performance of solidarity requires, as sympathy cannot be felt for those natural others with which humans cannot "share experiences, interests, worldviews, or subjectivity" (Mallory 2009, 8).

Accordingly, solidarity is always initiated by humans and, for humans to stand together and exercise solidarity, a sense of community must be built.

While Smith acknowledges the imagined communities shaped by national identities—and the reference to one's ancestors in the excerpt above is good evidence of this—it is equally clear that her fiction rejects an essentialist notion of national identity, as seen in Chapter 5. Rather, I would argue, her fiction reflects a relational understanding of identity that can now be more appropriately defined as an eco-cosmopolitan posture. Eco-cosmopolitanism implies “a more nuanced understanding of how both local cultural and ecological systems are imbricated in global ones,” which entails “a cognitive understanding” of, “and affective attachment” to both humans and natural others globally (Heise 2008, 60; 62–63).

In order to achieve this, however, communication—dialogue—is required. This is the ultimate message that *Companion Piece* conveys, as the novel's ending shows. Having just asked Sandy to say hello to her father for her, this near stranger adds:

And to you too, she says. Good to meet you. Hello.
I call it back.
Hello.

(Smith 2022, 227)

Using “hello” in what seems to be an evident violation of a basic pragmatic rule signifies the intention of never fully breaking up communication. Furthermore, “Hello”—the last word in the novel, and therefore addressed not only to Sandy's interlocutor but also to the reader—recalls the “‘Ello ‘ello ‘ello” (3) with which the novel opens, conjuring up a powerful image of incessant, never-ending dialogue. Dialogue is also signified through Smith's constant intertextual and intermedial play. Ultimately, this intermedial dialogue not only expands the boundaries of the novel but also the very concept of art itself, thereby establishing a symbiotic relationship between the natural and the cultural beautifully encapsulated in Neimanis and Hamilton's concept of the “naturalcultural” (2018).

In this regard, when Lux is asked *in Winter* to point out one beautiful thing to Sophia, Iris, and Arthur, she chooses the mark of “the bud of a rose” left on one of the pages of “a very old copy of Shakespeare” kept in a Canadian library: “a mark made on words by a flower. Who knows by whom. Who knows when” (Smith 2017, 212). This refers to the copy of the first Folio of Shakespeare's plays preserved at Toronto's Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, known precisely as the “Rosebud Folio” because the impression of a rosebud can still be seen on the pages of *Cymbeline*—the Shakespearean intertext in *Winter*. Towards the end of the narrative, Arthur goes online and sees an image of the Rosebud Folio for himself. The narrator, focalising on Arthur, describes it as “the ghost of a flower not yet open on its stem, but look, still there” (319).

This echoes the end of *Autumn*, which requests the reader to “[l]ook at the colour” of “a wide-open rose” blossoming “[i]n the damp and the cold” (2016, 259). In turn, this evokes the opening of *Artful*, where the narrator remembers her deceased partner asking her to “look at ... a hundred-year-old greenfly” kept between the pages of an old copy of Henry James’ *The Golden Bowl* (2012, 14), which again invokes Amy’s identification of pure beauty in a butterfly drinking from Ash’s eye in *Like*.

Readers are therefore constantly invited to engage in the aesthetic gaze and admire the artfulness of nature, literally wrapped in cultural artefacts recognised as masterpieces of world literature. This unambiguously calls for a fusion of the natural and the cultural, communicated from generation to generation. In turn, this provides a sense of both community and uninterrupted communication, which Smith’s fiction encapsulates. Quite literally, the novel, as understood by Smith, is a guide to the nature of art and, as Arthur’s eventually ecocritical blog is called, art in nature.

9.4 Collaborative art-making: storytelling in *Autumn* and *Spring*

In this section I shall examine one last kind of art encounter, this time in the form of storytelling itself, which Smith’s fiction offers the reader either directly or vicariously through its characters. Reflections on the nature and power of storytelling are central to Smith’s fiction. By way of example, one of her early texts—“A Story of Love” (1999, 124–32)—explores the bond created between two people whose romantic relationship is based on the stories they regularly tell each other. The text clearly invites not only a metafictional reading as a reflection on the art of storytelling itself but also its power and limitations, as already mentioned in Chapter 3.

Storytelling is central to the philosophy of Hannah Arendt—who may have inspired the character of Hannah Gluck (see Chapter 6). Arendt emphasised the social and political aspects of storytelling, noting that cultures use narratives to “order their understanding of themselves.” Furthermore, for Arendt stories are based on a sense of community, involving “the teller of the story, the hero of the action, and the listener or reader who stands back, judges it and responds to it” (Swift 2009, 19). This is exactly the subject matter of the folktale that functions as the second of two frame sections preceding *Spring*’s Part 3.

The first-person narrator’s opening words—“**It was the time of the year when everything was dead**” (Smith 2019, 225; bold in the original)—immediately establish the folktale/fairy tale quality of this short narrative whilst echoing the openings of both *Autumn*—“**It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times**” (2016, 6; bold in the original)—and *Winter*—“**God was dead: to begin with**” (2017, 1; bold in the original).

The scene seems to be set in an undefined past in which the members of a group, hierarchically organised and dressed in such a way that ancient religions are clearly evoked, participate in a ritual to bring in spring (2019, 225). Naturally, this further enhances the seasonal theme that permeates the quartet.

What the tribe offers the gods on this occasion is a pure maiden (226). The suspension of disbelief is abruptly halted when the appointed victim steps forward and refuses to be sacrificed, addressing the crowd using modern idiom—"I'm not your symbol. Go and lose yourself ... in some other story" (227)—and enraging the crowd, who "wrote furiously on their [iPad and iPhone] screens" (228). This brusque violation of genre expectations compels readers to engage with the story differently. The violent irruption of anachronisms suggests that the execution of deeply unjust actions—like the event portrayed in the story—is in fact a common feature of the extradiegetic present.

The relationship is therefore altered between the three participants in the community that, according to Arendt, stories are based on, as readers empathise with the hero(ine), sensing a blend of narrative and authorial voice. The gods empower the girl to confront her tribe members, yet the ending remains ambiguous, leaving her fate uncertain. What is important, however, is that this mirrors the *deus ex-machina* trope prevalent in Smith's work, characterised by the semi-magical interventions of her disruptive characters. This short story, therefore, is an instance of *mise en abyme*, reflecting not only the larger narrative of the novel *Spring* but also Smith's fiction as a whole, which, through such semi-magical interventions, reveals the underlying stories through which its characters (and readers) "order their understanding of themselves" (Swift 2009, 19).

At times, storytelling is presented as an act of artistic co-creation, merging the roles of the author/teller and the listener/reader in a clear instance of communication. This interaction is essential for fostering empathy and, ultimately, solidarity, which are central to Smith's literary project. A notable example can also be found in *Spring*, when Brit, already captivated by Florence, boards a train to Edinburgh with her. Throughout their journey, Brit attempts to draw personal details from the enigmatic girl, yet ironically, it is Brit who reveals information about herself and her family. Unbeknownst to her, Brit has initiated a journey of self-discovery alongside Florence, with her first lesson already taking place. Mesmerised by Florence's vast knowledge, Brit learns about Zacharias Janssen, credited with inventing the microscope, which allows "the human eye ... [to] perceive the small things made massive" since the "human eye can only see a fraction of what is actually there" (Smith 2019, 180–81).

Brit inadvertently directs the reader's attention to the core issue at hand. "Perceive, Brit says. Big word" (180), reflecting Florence's metaphorical

language, which highlights the distinction between reality and perception. Florence proposes a collaborative game called “Lucky 13.” This involves Florence asking just as many questions, which must then be answered by both Florence and Brit (185). However, Brit struggles with the game, as Florence seeks figurative questions with imaginative answers, while Brit insists on factual questions to extract personal information. Frustrated by Florence’s seemingly unresponsive nature, Brit adapts her strategy. She recognises Florence’s focus on learning through cooperative creation and suggests a storytelling game: Brit starts by telling Florence why her mother chose “Brittany” as her name, and then Florence is expected to reciprocate by telling the story of a member of her own family (189). Brit narrates a simple story, depicting her mother as an unimaginative person (189–90). In turn, Florence’s answer is deceptively short: “[m]y story is lost at sea” (191).

Figuratively, as the daughter of an undocumented alien, Florence does share her own life story. Creative, solidarity-informed imagination is precisely what Brit seems to lack, which makes it difficult for her to imagine anything other than the film showing in the cinema of her “own preconception,” as Florence puts it (191). This collaborative art-making session, therefore, does not end entirely successfully. However, one does not have to look far to find another that clearly sows the seeds of hope.

In *Autumn*, Daniel teaches Elisabeth to play “Bagatelle,”⁵ which focuses on storytelling. “Bagatelle” echoes creative co-writing in *There but for the*. At the end of this novel, Miles and Brooke agree to write short stories based on each other’s prompts (2011, 346–47). “Bagatelle” involves oral storytelling, yet ensuring that “you trifle with the stories that people think are set in stone.” Elisabeth is shocked at Daniel’s radical re-interpretation of the traditional English fairy tale “Goldilocks and the three bears,” which is the first story that crosses her mind (2016, 117). This also evokes the provocative fusing of the plots of Beethoven’s *Fidelio* and George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* in “Fidelio and Bess” (2008, 40–48; see Dósa 2025, 13–14). Elisabeth cannot tolerate Daniel’s take on the fairy tale, presenting Goldilocks as “a bad wicked rude vandal” that breaks into the bears’ house, wreaking havoc and “[s]praying her name on the walls.” Naturally, Elisabeth objects: “That’s not in the story,” she protests. “Who says?,” Daniel daringly replies (2016, 117).

Through this creative game, Elisabeth is introduced to the discursive nature of knowledge. Yet the game continues. Elisabeth is invited to co-create a story with Daniel on a topic of her choice—she chooses war—each contributing a different character. Elisabeth realistically comes up with “[a] man with a gun” while Daniel proposes someone disguised “as a tree” (118). As expected, Elisabeth takes issue with Daniel’s choice, insisting that, if they are to create a valuable story about war, it should reflect the world as it is. Otherwise, it would simply perpetuate what she believes

is a universal pattern: the unbridgeable gap between what is important—reality—and the useless, ineffectual fabrications that stories are (118–19).

Elisabeth's epistemological position here is not only identical to Brit's in *Spring* but also Brooke's in *There but for the*. "I can see the point of a fact ... If a story isn't a fact, but it is a made-up version of what happened ..., what is the *point* of it?" Brooke wonders (2011, 345; italics in the original). Miles' calm reply will trigger the cooperative short-story writing game. What happens in the process, of course, is that Miles is giving fact-obsessed Brooke the opportunity to recognise that reality and the perception of reality are quite different. "Bagatelle" serves the same purpose in *Autumn*. To Elisabeth's complaint that she should not be bothered with made-up stories, Daniel is ready with his answer: the world is ruled by stories, and all of them are made up. Accordingly, his suggestion is to "always try to welcome people into the home of your story" (2016, 119). At first, Elisabeth is flabbergasted by Daniel's heavily distorted version of the traditional tale. However, with Daniel's help, she finally understands that his distortions are just as made up as the original tale they have been inserted into. Daniel realises that Elisabeth has learnt a valuable lesson when she asks him how truth can be recognised (121).

In this scene, Smith addresses the relative nature of truth by alluding to Althusser's notion of ideology as "a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence" (1999, 317). While the existence of an outer reality is unquestioned, Daniel makes Elisabeth (and the reader) challenge how individuals relate to this reality through discourse. Additionally, his words offer a metatextual reflection on the ethical implications of fiction, suggesting that the discourse it disseminates should help build—not fragment—communities. This aligns with Boxall's claim that Smith's fiction suggests that "to be a citizen of the world now, we need also to be a citizen of nowhere, the no place that has haunted the novel's utopian imagination since Thomas More's 1516 work *Utopia*" (2019, 292). To use the ecocritical terms that inform my analysis, for Smith the literary work should function as a "discursive environment ... where cooperation replaces hierarchy and value dualisms" (Kostkowska 2013, 6).

This lesson stays with Elisabeth into her adult life, particularly during the Brexit-ridden narrative present filled with "violent language in the media, from people passing under her window, and ... racist vandalism" (Schrag 2023, 2029). Within this context, Smith's ecocritical ethics become particularly evident. Days after the referendum, Elisabeth notices that a threatening message—"GO HOME"—has been painted on the front of a cottage in the village where her mother lives (Smith 2016, 53; block capitals in the original). As time passes, Elisabeth discovers a response to this threat (reminiscent of the vandalising in Daniel's take on the Goldilocks

story). In stark contrast to the ominous black of the initial message, a cheerful “WE ARE ALREADY HOME THANK YOU” has been painted beneath it, next to “a tree ... and a row of bright red flowers” (138; block capitals in the original). Evoking Robin and Anthea’s protest art in *Girl Meets Boy*, Smith subverts this graffito’s divisive message with yet more art. In turn, further illustrating the interplay of nature and art, the flowers also anticipate the novel-closing image of a “wide-open rose” defying the approaching winter on a cold November day (260). Shortly before this, however, the reader learns that the painting is gone, and that only one word is barely discernible: “HOME” (253; block capitals in the original). This is a fitting finale that imposes Smith’s “ethics of inclusion” over “the non-dialogic speech of the contemporary world she represents,” as Cowtan concisely puts it (2023, 181).

9.5 Concluding remarks

This is the last of three chapters in which I have explored the mechanisms used by Smith to facilitate the artistic encounters central to her preferred mode of dénouement. This has first involved scrutinising her creative use of what Rajewsky calls “media combination,” anticipated in her early work and fully realised in all her novels since *How to Be Both*. As argued, media combination invites readers to engage actively as aesthetes. Thus, when confronted with a particular artwork, readers are prompted to determine whether their “feeling thing” parallels that of the characters or narrator, when the artwork in question is also ekphrastically described in the text. In the absence of ekphrasis, readers are invited to experience their own “feeling thing” and elucidate how art relates to the narrative. Such interpretive work has been applied in this chapter in relation to different art pieces by Pauline Boty, Barbara Hepworth, Tacita Dean, and Lorenza Mazzetti, used as endpaper artwork in *Autumn, Winter, Spring, and Summer*.

Additionally, I have investigated the complex relationship between Smith’s post-referendum quintet and the remarkably similar cover artwork by David Hockney used in the five novels. This has unveiled intriguing connections between Hockney’s multi-perspectival vision and Smith’s polyvocal, magical realist prose, ultimately revealing Hockney’s painting and Smith’s writing as invitations to engage in “active looking” and “slow reading,” respectively.

My analysis also identifies *Companion Piece* as a novel that provides a metatextual explanation of the relationship between Smith’s five post-referendum novels and their cover artwork. This is done in two complementary ways. First, Sandy (the protagonist) is an artist who creates visual representations of literary works, mirroring the intended function of Hockney’s cover artwork. To further clarify this, Smith seems to draw on a strategy from *How to Be Both*, the first of her novels to translate visual

principles into fiction. As discussed, this novel presents a striking meeting between a character based on a real painter and another inspired by the painter's work (Cheong 2022, 350). In a metafictional tour de force, Smith sets one of the key scenes in *Companion Piece* in a location unmistakably represented in David Hockney's *Felled Trees on Woldgate*, i.e. the novel's cover artwork. Through narrative, she creates a multi-sensorial experience that mirrors the immersive quality of Hockney's painting, effectively triggering the "feeling thing" associated with the aesthetic moment. This produces a "visual reading event" that challenges Louvel's (2018) theorisation of ekphrasis, as it does not suspend narrative time. The analysis highlights the porous nature of Smith's narrative, revealing it as a discursive environment that accommodates all forms of symbiotic dialogue between the arts, which thus join forces to effectively fight the "age of distraction."

Smith's powerful message, however, extends beyond mere aesthetics, illustrating that the relationship between humankind and nature, as well as life and death, is symbiotic or dialectical. This conclusion has been reached in a twofold way. First, I have scrutinised the prominent seasonal theme in Smith's aptly called "seasonal" quartet, linking it to Hockney's corresponding cover artwork and Smith's earlier fiction. Second, an analysis of *Companion Piece* alongside examples from her previous novels reveals Smith's status as an intellectual writer, as the text invites trans-/metamodern and ecocritical readings—these being theoretical perspectives that also inform interpretations of Hockney's landscape paintings, including those by Smith herself.

Wolfe's (2003) animal grid, supplemented by Adam's (2010) ecofeminist update, has proved particularly useful prisms through which to approach Smith's 2022 novel. Thus interpreted, the Boothby Lock girl emerges as an indisputable example of an "animalised woman." In turn, this also has intriguing implications for the interpretation of other "animalised humans" that Smith's fiction is also regularly home to, including Catholics of Irish extraction.

The same theoretical framework, supplemented by trans-/metamodern theory, has informed my analysis of the ultimate aesthetic experience portrayed in *Companion Piece*: Sandy's final walk on the common with her father's dog. Read from an ecocritical perspective, this scene beautifully exemplifies not only creative but also inter-species political solidarity (Mallory 2009). Additionally, trans-/metamodern theory makes it possible to assimilate Smith's text to Hockney's Yorkshire landscape paintings and interpret it as an evocation of a sense of collective ancestry—and, therefore, identity—that not only transcends the otherwise transient nature of human life but, crucially, facilitates solidarity. Such solidarity is powerfully symbolised by the emphatic call for dialogue with which the novel ends. Smith's deeply intertextual and intermedial fiction

may thus be seen as a plea for a dialogue-based, relational, eco-cosmopolitan identity that fosters understanding and respect for both human and natural others.

The chapter concludes by analysing one last form of art encounter offered by Smith's fiction, which offers further reflections on the need for dialogue and the very function of literature. In this case, storytelling itself is framed as an act of artistic co-creation between different characters, emphasising the significance of dialogue and encouraging readers to consider the discursive nature of knowledge. More importantly, Smith articulates an ethical purpose for fiction. To adapt Kostkowska's (2013) terms, Smith posits that literature (and art in general) should serve as a discursive environment that fosters permanent dialogue, aiming to replace hierarchy and fragmentation with equality and unity.

Such ideas conclude my exploration of Smith's favoured mode of dénouement, examined in Chapters 7–9. My analysis reveals a significant ethical component in Smith's fiction, alongside her belief in the transformative power of literature and art. These issues will be fully explored in Chapter 10, in which I shall scrutinise the effects of the artistic encounters enabled by Smith's "disruptors" on fellow characters, as well as discuss the implications of these effects concerning the extradiegetic crises reflected in their personal traumas.

Notes

- 1 In the same interview, Smith explains the instructions she gave her publisher concerning the *Companion Piece* endpapers: "what if we just took one colour, one of the greens [from the David Hockney front cover artwork], and just made it richer so that by the end of the book something has greened. ... [I]t's very very subtle but something deepens in the colour of the endpapers. You wouldn't even notice but it does happen" (qtd. in Calder 2024, 12).
- 2 The turn of the Millennium seems to have made seasonality more prominent a theme in Smith's fiction. *Hotel World* was, after all, published in 2001. Shortly afterwards, the theme appears again in *The Whole Story and Other Stories*: "It was the turn of the century, and the turn of the season again" is how "The Shortlist Season" begins (Smith 2003, loc. 1721).
- 3 For his part, Sandy's father "has always called all his dogs Shep" (Smith 2022, 149), which very much amounts to their being deprived of a truly distinctive name.
- 4 This clearly evokes Smith's autobiographical short story "Writ," in which the narrator recalls that the common near the house she has recently bought "is actually a common burial ground; it's where they buried most of this city's thousands of plague-dead centuries ago. Beneath the feet of the dogwalkers and the people coming back from the supermarket, under the grass and the going snow, under the mound where the paths all come together, are all the final shapes their lives took, all the bare bones" (Smith 2008, 83).
- 5 In French, *Bagatelle* denotes something of little importance, although it can also be used ironically to mean the exact opposite.

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