

Bagatelling Stories in Ali Smith's *Autumn*

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Abstract: Ali Smith's Autumn, often called the first ever (post-)Brexit novel, portrays the dystopian reality of the modern UK, overwhelmed by the plurality of narrative voice and the manipulative mass culture of lies. As a way of resistance, Ali Smith restores faith in the capability of storytelling as an art form to connect, communicate and enable change. Stories in Autumn become the manifestations of (creative) life force and display an ability to act as self-sufficient agents. Storytelling as an art form appears as a foundation for sustaining life in narratives and people alike as well as a way of connecting people. Interacting with stories is portrayed as an exercise in interpretation, a process of making sense of how and why things happen in the world, a skill essential in (post-)Brexit UK. In the novel, the stories are compared to a home, a safe space for those who were cast out by the discourses of Brexit nationalism and serve as a form of constructive dialogue between past and present generations.

Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) is not only the first novel of her Seasonal Quartet series but is also often called the first ever (post-)Brexit piece of literature. Being a symptomatic reaction to the United Kingdom's European Union membership referendum of 23 June 2016, the novel captures a moment of transition that becomes a traumatic event for a country shaken and torn by conflicting reactions and attitudes. The stable and predictable summer of the UK as part of the European Union has become a matter of the past within the timespan of one day, and autumn, which inevitably follows summer days, illustrates the state of the socio-economic challenges brought on by the break from the European Union. "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" (A. Smith 3). The first lines of the novel not only serve as an intertextual allusion to the social disarray and feeling of fear accompanying the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) (Cox 37) but also compare post-Brexit Britain to the times when "[m]ere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (Yeats). Even though almost a century divides William Butler Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919) from Ali Smith's *Autumn*, both works depict notes of discord from people believing "themselves to be living through a period of serious decline" (Poplawski 482), a feeling that can be identified as prevalent in the early twentieth century due to the shift from the accelerated development of Victorian society to a more moderate pace of social transformation following that era. A similar feeling permeates *Autumn* as well, which also describes the migration crisis of the 2010s as a regress compared to the advances in post-colonial and migration policies in the 1980s.

The story of *Autumn* unfolds in London in June 2016. It centres around a man named Daniel Gluck, residing in a care home in a state of prolonged sleep. The reader sees him being frequently visited by the female protagonist of the novel, Elisabeth Demand, who reads stories by his bed and shares news from the post-Brexit world. As Kristian Shaw describes it, the "divisive consequences of the referendum are complemented by the collage-like, disjointed temporality of the narrative structure, with brief, fragmentary chapters shifting from Daniel's youth in 1930s Europe to Elisabeth's childhood in 1990s England, emphasising that their relationship '[is] about history, and being neighbours'" (21–22). Daniel, who would frequently look after child Elisabeth, made "lifelong friends" (A. Smith 52) with her, teaching her about the importance of art, painting, storytelling, and reading.

The centrality of Brexit in *Autumn* allows the novel to be positioned as *BrexLit*, a term coined by Shaw, referring to contemporary literature that responds to the Brexit referendum and/or post-Brexit landscape in an "increasingly fragile and uncertain political climate" (Shaw 15). Reflecting upon how this subgenre emphasises the divided condition of the UK, Shaw highlights how *BrexLit* is preoccupied with what came after the referendum: "The term *BrexLit* concerns fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial, or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal" (18). The large number of areas of social and cultural life affected by Brexit is mediated in Ali Smith's *Autumn*, which offers the interpretation of Brexit within the contexts of post-truth, anti-immigration policies, historical

cycles and the decline of ethical values (21–22). Shaw also labels *Autumn* as the first post-truth novel, giving tribute to how the novel emphasises the role of right-wing propaganda in the destabilisation of the political landscape in the UK (21).

In contrast to the fragmented landscape of social and political crisis, *Autumn* proposes to turn to the uniting function of art as it “knits together an astonishing array of seemingly disparate subjects, including mortality, unconditional love, Shakespeare’s *Tempest* ... free spirits, and the life force of art along with kindness, hope and a ‘readiness to be above and beyond the foul even when we are up to our eyes in it’” (McAlpin). Art, then, in Ali Smith’s work can be identified as one of the underlying and perhaps most powerful motifs that ties the fragments of post-Brexit life in England together. From allusive references to different genres and pieces of literature to an ekphrastic meditation on the works of British pop artist Pauline Boty, art appears in a variety of manifestations. In Smith’s narrative, art is communicated through stories: the story of Prospero facing the difficulty of seeing into men and monsters and the realities of justice; timeless and various narratives of metamorphoses conceptualising trauma and excess; visual narratives of pop art or mundane stories of post-Brexit England.

The art of storytelling is presented in the novel as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon, characterised by difficulty in unambiguous descriptions, at the same time emphasising the changing and adaptive nature of stories. *Autumn* reflects on the struggle of distinguishing between truth and non-truth, reality and fiction in a post-modern manner, which Linda Hutcheon defines as “deliberately self-reflexive and contradictory” (12). Smith portrays Brexit as a dual phenomenon, simultaneously seen as a potentially traumatic event and a process of transition over a certain period of time where the starting and finishing points are unknown: “Here’s an old story so new that it’s still in the middle of happening, writing itself right now with no knowledge of where or how it’ll end” (A. Smith 181). In other words, the novel allows one to ask whether Brexit is a story “so new” that it becomes a starting point, provoking transformations in the UK unprecedented in the past century, or whether it reflects the culmination of an “old” process, already preceded by other processes of change which will naturally continue after it.

This paper aims to explore the communicative and connective functions of art with a focus on storytelling in Ali Smith’s *Autumn*. By analysing how the novel uses the postmodern approach to the plenitude of narrative voices and how they manifest themselves within the context of pre- and/or post-Brexit UK, this research

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investigates how telling and reading stories become an exercise in (re)creating the world. Stories in the novel become self-sufficient agents and their adaptability allows them to be interpreted as a way of communication, an ongoing dialogue between past and present generations of people.

THE POLYPHONY OF STORYTELLING

It is undoubtedly true that Ali Smith's novels and collections of short stories make a vast contribution to contemporary British fiction and address a large number of contemporary issues, among which Daniel Lea outlines "concerns of human connectedness, technology, and the transformative capacities of language" (397) as the most prominent, though surely, not the only ones. Similarly, it is not only challenging to single out a set of dominant motifs in Ali Smith's literary output, but it is just as difficult to situate her work within one single cultural paradigm. Some researchers tend to argue against her works being purely postmodernist and suggest positioning her fiction within what is now debatably called "metamodernism." Monica Germanà, while acknowledging the legacy of postmodernism in Smith's fiction, asserts that "her writing also departs from postmodernism in a way that ... combines formal experimentation with a strong ethical commitment to distinctly contemporary concerns" (100). For example, Smith's commitment to making a clear ethical stand appears to be quite visible as the reader sees her expressing concerns about the decaying state of democracy within post-Brexit UK: "It is like democracy is a bottle someone can threaten to smash and do a bit of damage with" (A. Smith 112). John Brannigan, talking about Ali Smith's *How To Be Both* (2014), concludes that "her work restores and renews faith in the capacity of art to connect, communicate, and resist authority" (607), creating a clear-cut difference from classics of postmodern fiction. A metamodernist interpretation of *Autumn* is vital to view Ali Smith's work as establishing continuity between the postmodern and postmillennial eras, responding significantly to important issues of our time (Germanà 106).

Having said that, one cannot deny the importance and explicitness of postmodernist elements in *Autumn*. Brannigan, for instance, asserts that Ali Smith's work adopts many of the innovations brought to life by postmodernism, therefore, partially conforming to its definitions (607). Among such elements, one can name the postmodern narrative strategies of fragmentation, the intense use of cultural and literary allusions, metafictional components, intertextuality, and the preoccupation with

the boundaries between the real and the fictional. Given this, the present paper, while acknowledging the metamodern context and nature of the novel, focuses on the post-modern concepts and tools present in the narrative and analyses how they are used specifically in delineating the complexity of Ali Smith's account of storytelling.

Linda Hutcheon, one of the most prominent theoreticians of literary postmodernism, contends in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*: "The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity. Narrators in fiction become disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate. ... In Charles Russell's terms, with postmodernism, we start to encounter and are challenged by 'an art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and extended meaning'" (11). Describing how storytelling serves in Smith's works to investigate the nature of human connections, Daniel Lea emphasises the plenitude of narrative voices in her fiction by proposing that "these voices explain the world as it appears to them, but none are allowed the ultimate satisfaction of determining the meaning of another's experience. Instead, Smith relishes the argumentative grist of opposed perspectives, replacing singular with plural truths" (397). Storytelling hence undermines "alienated otherness" and "centralised sameness" by replacing these with the notion of difference, and in the same way singular culture has transformed into plural cultures in the postmodern canon (Hutcheon 12), *Autumn* also features the polyphony of multiple narrative voices.

The polyphony of Smith's novel, however, does not come down to an unintelligible cacophony of voices but, to a greater extent, evokes the concepts of polyphonic novels and heteroglossia, as discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin. Monica Germanà, reflecting upon how the preoccupation with the notions of sameness/difference in Smith's novel contributes to the polyphonic structure of the novel, highlights the "connective simultaneity, whereby the different, previously clashing, voices merge into one choral narrative celebrating diversity in togetherness" (103). This togetherness is born out of the dialogical nature of language in the Bakhtinian understanding which implies the impossibility of any singularity of interpretation: "between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 276). Thus, the construction of a linguistic reality becomes a kind of dialogue between the subject and the object, the latter of which already incorporates the concept of otherness. However, one can further develop

this idea by suggesting that such a perception of (linguistic) reality undermines the dual opposition of subjective sameness and objective otherness since subjectivity in this case is determined only by the point of view of the speaker. This becomes particularly visible during the scene where Daniel and Elisabeth play a game of Bagatelle with the story of Goldilocks, which will be analysed in more detail later in the paper. During the game, Daniel challenges his position of a singularising subject in charge of the narrative by presenting Goldilocks from a certain angle “for no reason other than that’s what I, the person in charge of the story, have decided that all Goldilockses are like” (A. Smith 121). One can suggest that such an emphasis on the determining role of the speaker’s viewpoint implies awareness of the fact that there exists a reality of differing interpretations of the same story, allowing the othered object to become the subject in charge of the narrative.

Recognising the subject in the other becomes a crucial element in the building of the polyphonic novel. Mikhail Bakhtin explores this concept in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984) concerning Feodor Dostoevsky’s works, which he considered an exemplary polyphonic body of texts. By the term “polyphonic novel,” Bakhtin means “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices ... with equal rights and each with its own world ... not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse” (*Problems* 6–7). The concept of heteroglossia is also crucial to our understanding of the polyphonic novel. The term refers to the varied character of language, implying that instead of being a singular, static construct, language is a multifaceted interaction of diverse voices and perspectives (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 263). Similarly, Ali Smith’s novels, including *Autumn*, give voice to many subjective speakers, allowing them to express their differing visions of the same events, engaging in dialogues with each other, the author and the reader. Importantly, as Daniel Lea puts it, Smith never grants any of the voices the privilege of establishing dominance: “The real point of interest is not the victory of one voice over another but the profusion of different registers, paroles, tones, vocabularies, accents, and pitches that feed into the dialogic ambiguity inherent in communication” (398). In view of this, the potential of *Autumn* as a polyphonic novel rests on embracing diverse voices and perspectives, which produces an affluent narrative tapestry, enabling these voices to engage in dialogical communication without dominance by any single one.

“ALWAYS BE READING SOMETHING”

The ability to acknowledge the subject in the other and their right to offer a differing story is presented in *Autumn* as a skill that is acquired through reading, making this latter one of the most prominent themes in the novel. The book shares Elisabeth Demand’s journey as she attempts to piece together scattered elements of her life and the reality around her shaken by the Brexit referendum. She spends her time next to her lifelong companion, Daniel Gluck, who at 101 years old, finds himself in a prolonged sleep. Elisabeth is reading books in the physical reality by the bed of her friend who, in his sleep, finds himself in the metaphysical space of his memories and consciousness, where images flow into each other, creating the never-ending circulation of stories on different levels. Stories in *Autumn* become manifestations of the (creative) life force, acquiring the power to act as self-sufficient agents, while storytelling appears as the foundation for sustaining life in people and narratives alike.

In his interview with Ali Smith, Karl Anderson describes the relationship between Daniel Gluck and Elisabeth Demand as being “bound by stories they read and the stories they make up together.” Reading becomes an exercise in making sense, a process of learning how and why things happen in the world, and this is one of the two main skills Daniel Gluck used to teach Elisabeth: “Always be reading something, he said. Even when we’re not physically reading. How else will we read the world?” (A. Smith 68). Reading acquires two possible levels of signification. The first one refers to the interpretation of the world as a collection of stories incorporating a multiplicity of narrative voices. At this point, reading is understood as another form of connecting people and making them listen to each other and can be seen in the novel as making sense of the world overwhelmed by the multitude of perspectives and opinions.

The second understanding of reading as a practice makes it a tool of creativity. This interpretation resonates well with Wolfgang Iser’s *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1976) in which every literary text is considered to be a form of communication while reading is a process of re-creative dialectics:

In other words, the literary text enables its readers to transcend the limitations of their real-life situation; it is not a reflection of any given reality, but it is an extension or broadening of their own reality.

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In Kosik's words: "Every work of art has a unified and invisible double character: it is an expression of reality, but it also forms the reality that exists, not next to or before the work but actually in the work itself. ... As work and as art, it represents the reality and so indivisibly and simultaneously forms reality." (79)

Thus, reading in *Autumn* can be perceived as a process of appropriation of a particular narrative, "the unveiling of the other story, which exists beyond the border and the surface of things" (Germanà 100), which in Ali Smith's works usually accounts for the communities of outsiders, outcast by the intransigent immigration policies. Reading becomes the procedure of fragmenting the given reality of sameness suggested by the grand narratives into the polyphony of "characters' differing versions of the world built around shared events or experiences" (Lea 398). Reading serves as an opportunity to listen to the plurality of narrative voices momentarily, voices sometimes contradicting each other, but never having the possibility to establish the dominance of one over the others. For Ali Smith, such an attitude to reading should be inevitable in post-Brexit UK amidst the visible dividedness of the nation. As Smith writes, "[a]ll across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt they had really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they have done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing" (59). The coexistence of opposing narratives as well as their subjectivity (the factor of intentionality) creates a certain chaos in terms of which voices to believe and which voices to perceive as the "true" representation of the ruling sentiments of the country since all of them appear to influence the world in one way or another.

In the introduction to *Telling Truths through Telling Stories*, a textbook for storytelling classes, Amy E. Spaulding reflects upon the ambivalent nature of truth in/through storytelling: "Truth, like story, cannot be written in stone, for it dies when it is solidified. The first person to write down the Veda (Hindu sacred scriptures) was called 'the butcher of the Veda' because he trapped the words on paper, rather than letting them be alive and free as sound" (4). The relationship between truth and storytelling appears troubled in post-Brexit Britain, too: "All across the country, nobody spoke about it. All across the country, nobody spoke about anything else" (A. Smith 60). Stories do indeed have intrinsic dynamism, their "life force" lies in their non-static nature, their ability to adapt to the constantly changing

environment in which they exist. However, Spaulding's claim about a similar fluidity of truth raises the danger of the truth being manipulated for personal aims, of distorted truth being disguised as one more story. Given the political and social context of pre-Brexit UK, one cannot avoid considering the misuse of this quality of adaptability to create what is now called post-truth.

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Coincidence or not, in November 2016 the *Oxford English Dictionary* chose "post-truth" as the word of the year, providing a definition that emphasises subjective influence in the formation of public opinion when one prefers to present their emotions and beliefs as facts (Barbieri 24; Brahms 2). Investigating the notion of post-truth in the context of its Brexit-related popularity, Yael Brahms offers the following definition:

a term denoting circumstances in which our ability to clarify reality to understand it and function within it based on facts is weakening as a result of high-intensity interference by four peak waves: the information explosion and disruptive technology; the dwindling of faith in institutions and in "truth tellers"; undermining postmodernist ideas; and bitter political battles. (17)

Indeed, this feeling of loss of faith in politicians, and the rejection of populist speeches is present in the novel and takes shape in the observant words of Elisabeth's mother: "I'm tired of liars. I'm tired of sanctified liars. ... I'm tired of lying governments. I'm tired of people not caring whether they're being lied to any more" (A. Smith 57). The last part of her outcry, however, may imply that the greatest danger of manipulating the truth is that people stop "reading" the world, thereby they rather choose to accept the half-truth offered to them, showing signs of apathy and carelessness, the inability to be involved and to participate in the course of their own life. Interestingly enough, *Autumn* also comments upon how, paradoxically, many people started to research what leaving the European Union actually means only after the referendum: "All across the country, people looked up Google: *what is EU?*" (59). María del Pino Montesdeoca Cubas comments on this level of public negligence, bringing attention to the fact that "politicians are not the only

ones to be considered responsible for the new direction the country is heading to. Ignorance and neglect among part of the voters has also played a key role in the turn of events” (75). *Autumn* also draws attention to how the lack of awareness of the real state of affairs among the voting population created fertile ground for manipulation by the leaders of the Leave campaign. Elisabeth comes across an article titled “Look Into My Eyes: Leave. EU Campaign Consulted TV Hypnotist”: “*The Power To Influence. I can Make You Happy. Hypnotic Gastric Band. Helped produce social media ads. Are you concerned? Are you worried? Isn’t it time? Being engrossed in TV broadcasts equally hypnotic. Facts don’t work. Connect with people emotionally. Trump*” (A. Smith 137). The text brings to light the absurdity of how a post-truth approach to storytelling can present irrational, unconfirmed claims as rational and based on facts by seemingly sharing common emotions with people; emotions, one might notice, evoked by the manipulators themselves.

The underlined questions above serve as an illustrative example of creating fake emotionality, not based on facts but through the use of loaded rhetorical questions which, according to Elena Krizhanovskaya, serve as a means of evoking an emotional response to otherwise empty questions and can be used as tools of manipulative influence on the audience (59). Highlighting how rhetorical questions implicitly contain their expected answers, she defines the main function of this technique as “the activation of a mental activity in the recipient of the message in the aspect programmed by the author of the text, a hidden call to action and very often, unfortunately, attempts to offend other participants in the discussion” (59, translation my own). Thus, *Autumn* satirises how Leave advocates played a crucial role in the division of the United Kingdom even before the referendum. By offering potential voters narratives that ostensibly coincide with their emotional state, they created tension and gave space for anxiety, fear and hostility. Interestingly, such narratives do not offer any specifics as to what to worry about or what it is time for, functioning on the level of inarticulate implications, falsely creating the impression of a dialogue to hide what in reality is a monologue.

The scene of Elisabeth reading the article is followed by a description of her mother, who loves watching retro TV shows, “start[ing] the forty years ago dance routine up one more time; the jaunty music begins again” (A. Smith 137). The temporal reference is there by no accident, and the socio-political connotations of the 1970s in Britain allow us to contextualise post-truth as a means of reviving the anti-immigrant rhetoric. In an interview with Olivia Laing, which took place shortly after

the publication of the novel, Ali Smith made this parallel transparent: “Listening to the radio in the run-up to the referendum, she was appalled by the collapse of dialogue, the creep of lies, the resurgence of a kind of bullying language—‘go home’; ‘we’re coming after you’—she hadn’t heard since she was a schoolgirl back in the 1970s.” The monologising nature of post-truth is highlighted once again when even the dialogical nature of language, its predisposition to acknowledge the subjectivity in another, was abusively manipulated to serve as a provocation. Thus, the novel raises awareness of a person’s responsibility to navigate discourses potentially constructed of lies, and, importantly, not to repeat the lies offered. Post-truth and storytelling seem to be two interpretations of the same act of telling something, and the differentiation between the two lies in the speaker’s intention to tell the “truths” and the listener’s desire to “read” them.

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A more optimistic approach to storytelling is expressed in the scene where Daniel Gluck teaches Elisabeth the game of Bagatelle, or to put it more abstractly, the art of storytelling. His words somewhat resonate with Spaulding’s claims about the non-static nature of stories: “the whole point of Bagatelle is that you trifle with stories that people think are set in stone” (A. Smith 117). The game of Bagatelle can be considered as the key to understanding the power of storytelling viewed as a means of influencing (physical and/or metaphysical) reality in *Autumn*. Daniel invites Elisabeth to play Bagatelle, a version of which he came up with on the spot and whose rules are very simple: “‘How we play is: I tell you the first line of a story,’ Daniel said. ... ‘Then you tell me the story that comes into your head when you hear that first line,’ Daniel said” (A. Smith 116–117). A story appears not as a passive object perceived, but as something endowed with agency: an entity which is able to “come into one’s head.” At one point in the narrative, Daniel compares words, which constitute stories, to “living organisms” (A. Smith 69) which are able to grow from different sources, therefore, illuminating the vitality of stories. From this point of view, the Bagatelle scene can be viewed as reinforcing the impossibility of the petrification of stories. Stories possess adaptability that allows them to further evolve, where both reading and storytelling become the source of life power to serve as a link between past and future, which especially resonates with people’s general sentiments and anxiety in post-Brexit UK.

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The game of Bagatelle has its own history that, following Daniel's view on stories, is not set in stone either. As Rick Sherin examines, Bagatelle originated from an outdoor British game of shooting marbles, which was later adapted for in-door activities at the times of King Louis XVI and his queen, Marie Antoinette, at the Château de Bagatelle, under whose name it is known today. Bagatelle became a game similar to modern billiards, the essence of which was to achieve the highest score by shooting balls into holes on the board. This, however, was not the last stage of its evolution, and as technology was advancing, the game of Bagatelle evolved into different types of pinballs and, recently, into numerous forms of electronic game-playing (Sherin). While the general idea of the game has remained the same, technological advances allowed new inspiring mechanisms to be incorporated into the game, thus maintaining its popularity through the ages. The particular way of playing Bagatelle suggested by Daniel offers a new take on it, transforming it into a means of communication through retelling old/new plots that link people, pasts, and histories together.

Daniel and Elisabeth play Bagatelle by "trifling" with the widely known, nineteenth-century English fairy tale of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," which, with some level of abstraction, manifests the changeable nature of stories. The first written version of the fairy tale belongs to Robert Southey, who in 1837 published it under the title "The Story of the Three Bears" in *The Doctor*, and this version of the fairy tale featured a wicked old woman who trespassed into the house of the three bachelor bears. Although Southey claimed to have heard the story from his uncle, William Dove (Opie 199), most researchers debate the authorship and origin of the fairy tale (Opie 199, Tatar 245). Maria Tatar proposes that "Southey did not rely on oral sources but instead conflated a Norwegian story about three bears with the scene from the Grimms' 'Snow White' in which the heroine enters the cottage of the dwarfs. The little old woman seems to be Southey's own invention" (245). Following this line of thought, "The Story of the Three Bears" from the moment of its creation was an example of the so-called "literary fairy tale" (K. P. Smith 4), which denotes the author's invention or reinterpretation of several fairy tales, the story thus becoming a literary construct. This idea is complicated by the fact that in 1951, a manuscript version of the fairy tale, dated back to 1831, was discovered, and this manuscript described the fairy tale as a "celebrated nursery tale" (qtd. in Opie 199). Thus, the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" becomes a story without any evidence of a fixed date of origin and, in this manner, it serves as a living example of Bagatelling stories.

In addition, having gained popularity and become part of folklore, the fairy tale continued its independent path of development. In 1849, Joseph Cundell decided to change the protagonist from an old woman to a young girl, justifying it by the opinion that children would prefer an attractive child rather than an old woman (Opie 200). Following this metamorphosis, the new incarnation of the female character regularly changed her name and was known as Silver-Hair, Silverlocks, and Goldenlocks, until the British storyteller Flora Annie Steel named her Goldilocks, the name under which we recognize her today (Tatar 246). Along with Goldilocks, the image of the three bears also changed. If in the original version the bears were simply presented as three friends, over time the status of their relationship changed first to brothers and sisters and then to the traditional family model, including father (big bear), mother (medium bear) and child (little bear) (Tatar 246).

Along with the images of the characters, the moral message of the tale has also changed, and as Maria Tatar puts it, “[t]he girl heroines in ‘The Story of the Three Bears’ fare far better than their aged counterparts in the first recorded versions” (246). While for an elderly woman the punishment for the act of invading the house was death or some other unfortunate fate, Goldilocks either returned home or simply promised to improve.

The message of the story, however, stays unchanged throughout the years, and with Goldilocks/the old woman performing the role of the intruder, “[the fairy tale] suggests the importance of respecting the property and the consequences of just ‘trying out’ things that do not belong to you” (Tatar 246). What at first glance may seem like a cautionary tale for children about obedience and respect for what belongs to other people, in the context of the novel, the story can take on an additional layer of meaning. Kevin Paul Smith, exploring various forms of intertextual inclusions of fairy tales and fairy tale motifs in the text of postmodern novels, among seven other such forms, singles out “incorporation” as a version of intertextuality, defining it as an explicit reference to a fairy tale in the text of a novel, sometimes even in the form of a brief retelling of the plot (10, 17). When Daniel gives a synopsis of the tale in the Bagatelle scene, adding the last detail about the spraypaint on the walls (A. Smith 117), the novel draws the readers’ attention “to the existence and importance of a particular intertext” (K. P. Smith 17) while “the fairytale plot takes on greater importance, becoming a model by which the reader can understand the text” (17). Thus, it can be assumed that the fairy tale can be interpreted on two levels in the novel.

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The first layer of interpretation is connected to the direct context in which this fairy tale is mentioned and is related to the game of Bagatelle. When Daniel suggests that Goldilocks sprays her name with spray-paint on the walls, Elisabeth objects that such a detail is impossible since the fairy tale originates from the times when spray-paint did not exist. Daniel responds to this crude factual interjection from Elisabeth with indignation: “Who says? ... Who says the story isn’t happening right now?” (A. Smith 117). Elisabeth insists on the temporal anchorage of the narrative while Daniel deconstructs the understanding of a story as existing at a particular moment in time, blurring the line between past and present as well as authenticity and fabrication. Stories, thus, appear to be able to survive from past contexts into the present.

The second layer of interpretation, taking into account the key role of the motif of intrusion in the fairy tale, allows us to consider the significance of the socio-political context of the novel, namely, in the frame of post-Brexit, post-truth, and xenophobic sentiments. Following their argument about Daniel inventing the spray-paint bit, this conversation takes place:

“So how do we ever know what’s true?” Elisabeth said.

“Now you’re talking,” Daniel said.

“And what if, right,” Elisabeth said, “what if Goldilocks was doing what she was doing because she had no choice? What if she was like seriously upset that the porridge was too hot, and that’s what made her go ultra-crazy with the spraypaint can? What if cold porridge always made her feel really upset about something in her past? What if something that had happened in her life had been really terrible and the porridge reminded her of it, and that’s why she was so upset that she broke the chair and unmade all the beds?”

“Or what if she was just a vandal?” Daniel said, “who went into places and defaced them for no reason other than that’s what I, the person in charge of the story, have decided that all Goldilockses are like?”

“I personally shall be giving her the benefits of the doubt,” Elisabeth said. (A. Smith 121)

The key concept of this scene is the “benefit of the doubt” appearing as an opportunity to see the unfolding of another’s story beyond what is considered to be set in stone. Ideas circulating during pre-Brexit discussions about immigrants taking

jobs from British citizens (Berberich 4)—similar to Goldilocks “taking” food and housing from the bears—became a component of the discourse of hostility and negative generalisation, established, in Daniel’s words, “for no reason other than that’s what I, the person in charge of the story, have decided that all Goldilockses are like” (A. Smith 121). Using the example of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” Daniel teaches Elisabeth to challenge “narratorial authority (see Dentith 1995)—where an omniscient narrator guides and effectively manipulates the story” (Berberich 9). In a postmodern understanding, the game of Bagatelle might be an exercise in accepting the coexistence of multiple perspectives and truths. Bagatelling stories, in other words, becomes a useful skill and a means of applying the “benefit of the doubt” method to unveil whether the adaptable and changeable nature of stories was employed to add a new spin to the original story, either as a way of giving voice to another’s point of view or for manipulative purposes instead.

CONCLUSION

Both storytelling and reading in its creative understanding appear as a form of art in the novel, and, as art, they become the very thread that holds together the disparate fragments as well as subjectivities of post-Brexit reality. Stories in the novel are portrayed as polyphonic entities, allowing space for multiple narrative voices, expressing opposing or differing points of view on the world, while avoiding canonisation of any single one as the true or the only one possible. The stories in this novel can be interpreted as both the object and the subject of action, and interactions with them also have a dual nature. On the one hand, stories can be read and, in this case, they manifest a practice of interpretation; on the other hand, once told, they become powerful tools for shaping reality. At the same time, the novel draws attention to the relationship between storytelling and post-truth, namely, the danger of storytelling being misused to create manipulative lies which in the novel are attributed to Brexit supporters. The ability to simultaneously read and tell stories, a skill whose importance is communicated, at the same time, by Daniel Gluck and the overall text of the novel itself, becomes crucial in post-Brexit UK, where the categories of reliability, stability, and hope are appropriated by the perpetrators of the Leave narrative. Stories in *Autumn* acquire agency and performativity; thus, they are not solely dependent on the narrator but possess independence and

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the ability to act on their own accord. Stories are represented as adaptive and unable to be subjected to singular, monologising interpretations, which becomes visible through the example of an old English fairy tale, “Goldilocks and The Three Bears” (1837). Retold within the context of the novel, it not only challenges the understanding of stories as existing at a particular point in time but also serves as a form of denial of the narratorial authority which aims to establish the dominance of xenophobic narratives.

Storytelling emerges as the ability of stories to evolve and preserve the multiple “truths” embedded in them while defying the authoritative canonisation of one “truth.” The storyteller is the force that can influence the world, already woven from stories, relentlessly evolving and changing with time: “‘And whoever makes up the story makes up the world,’ Daniel said. ‘So always try to welcome people into the home of your story’” (A. Smith 119). In this way, Daniel teaches Elisabeth the art of making sense of the world, the craft of creating and transforming stories. In addition, the story is compared to a home, a place where one can always find comfort, ease and security. In the context of post-Brexit reality, this gives storytelling the sense of a safe space where one can accept the existence of multiple truths and remember exactly how the world works. Elisabeth now has the necessary “benefit of the doubt” (in her mother’s words, referring to how she should not agree to be lied to), which is an ability to differentiate between what is true and what is not. She matures to be “ready to bagatelle it as it is” (A. Smith 121), a skill essential in a reality where there is no unifying perspective.

Ali Smith’s *Autumn* provides a detailed and authentic portrayal of the state of disunity, disillusionment and disappointment that has been prevalent in the social and political landscape of the United Kingdom before and after the referendum on EU membership. The novel explores the social, cultural, and racial consequences of Brexit, including the resurgence of xenophobic narratives circulating over the past century, fuelled in large part by political lies. Through the use of the postmodern techniques of fragmentation and narrative polyphony, Ali Smith’s work reflects upon the shattered reality of contemporary UK, nonetheless, articulating hope that change is possible even during the worst times. *Autumn* offers stories as one of the most powerful tools for resisting the nightmarish environment of contemporary UK, creating a safe, homelike space of hospitality and witnessing.

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