

Autumn: A Short Tale of Art, Life, Nature, and Time Ali Smith (2016): Autumn. London: Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Random House

Silvia Rosivalová Baučeková

Faculty of Arts, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, Košice
silvia.baucekova@upjs.sk

Autumn, published in 2016, is the second most recent novel by Ali Smith and the first book of an upcoming tetralogy, whose stories are loosely connected by the theme of the four seasons. The next book in the series, which is, of course, titled *Winter*, came out just a couple of days before this review was written. Smith begins *Autumn* by quoting the very famous introductory sentence from Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*. However, her version is slightly altered. It reads: "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times." And it is the difference between the two that seemingly sets the tone for the whole book. While Dickens viewed the time of his novel, the 18th century, as confusing and conflicted, horrible and amazing all at once, Smith's time, the early 21st century, appears much bleaker. Ours are the worst of times, squared, she seems to be saying. But first impressions might be misleading and this is definitely the case with *Autumn*, because, ultimately, this novel is a very uplifting read.

The book tells the story of a friendship between two very different characters. Daniel Gluck is 101 years old. He is a retired songwriter and free spirit who has lived through much of the turmoil that wrecked Europe in the 20th century. Elisabeth Demand is a 32-year-old junior lecturer of art history at a London university. She temporarily returns to her hometown and to her mother's house in order to be closer to a comatose Daniel, who is spending what seem to be the last days of his life in a care home. The two first met when Daniel moved into the house next door to Elisabeth. At that time, Daniel was already an old man while Elisabeth was a little girl, just 8 years old. Despite the huge age difference, they were instantly drawn to each other. Daniel admired Elisabeth's perceptiveness and sincerity, whilst Elisabeth was fascinated by his imagination and by how he was able to mesmerise her with stories. Now they are reunited after a long period of estrangement, and Elisabeth clings to the hope that despite Daniel's age and obvious fragility, they might still be able to snatch a few moments of togetherness from the tight grip of passing time.

Although the book is undeniably a story about Daniel and Elisabeth, it is also much more than that. It is a story about friendship, time, transience, history, humanity, art, and nature. Elisabeth is every young woman, looking back at her short life and evaluating it, trying to find meaning. She is also a member of one British generation at a time of historic change, upheaval, and uncertainty. She is a human being in a world on the brink of an environmental disaster. And she is a female in what still seems to be a man's world. Daniel is not only a dying man, he is also a dying century, with its history, its struggles and conflicts, but also its breakthroughs and achievements. Daniel is a story, a long and complex narrative that offers numerous options for interpretation, a narrative that seems to be almost over, but still, somehow, goes on. In these two characters, Smith was able to masterfully blend a very human, everyday story with deep and complex political, philosophical, and metaphysical observations.

"And if I'm the storyteller I can tell it any way I like, Daniel said. So, it follows. If you are — So how do we ever know what's true? Elisabeth said.

Now you're talking, Daniel said."
(p. 121)

One of the themes that feature most prominently in the novel is that of dream and imagination versus reality. The book opens with a description of one of Daniel's visions. At first, he believes he might be dead, but he gradually realises that he is merely asleep. He already has experience deciphering situations like this, as his mental existence is now largely made up of such liminal states between hallucination and consciousness, between being here and being on the other side. Elisabeth also has dreams and visions. It is in them that she is able to investigate her emotions and look back at lost memories. But it is not just the two characters who frequently find themselves on the borderline between dream and reality. The world itself is presented as illusory and absurd. When Elisabeth tries to apply for a new passport, she enters a truly Kafkaian realm of bureaucracy and absurdity. The post office, with its sleepy atmosphere, desperate customers, and despondent employees is a surreal, nightmarish space that seems to fit more into *Brave New World*, the novel Elisabeth is reading while she waits in the queue, than into the mundane, everyday reality. The structure of the text clearly echoes this theme. At times, the whole novel seems like a dream sequence whose fragments are occasionally brought to the surface and then allowed to fade away. This is just one of the ways in which Smith integrates meaning into form. The disjointed narrative is like the disjointed memories the characters retain of their lives, but it is also just like the disjointed present in which they find themselves: a present where Britain has become a split nation and the future seems even less real than a dream.

"whoever makes up the story makes up the world"
(p. 119)

In a world where it is not possible to distinguish reality from imagination and dreaming from consciousness, life and history turn into a story people are in charge of. Thus, art and fiction become legitimate means of changing or even creating reality. Throughout *Autumn*, Smith emphasises this formative potential of art. Thanks to their ability to produce beauty and meaning, artists and storytellers can fight against absurdity, hopelessness, futility, or even evil. Daniel is presented as one such visionary creator. He adopts the postmodern view that "whoever makes up the story makes up the world" (p. 119). In *Autumn*, however, this standpoint does not lead to cynical relativism, but rather to an optimistic belief that we are, after all, able to shape our reality and create a new world, if the current one is not living up to our expectations. Daniel not only transforms reality into song lyrics, he also changes and moulds young Elisabeth with his stories about art and life. Later, Elisabeth discovers a similar creative power in the work of Pauline Boty, a British pop art painter, who used snippets of life's ugliness to create humorous colourful collages. Elisabeth describes Boty as a kind of vitality goddess who "arrives on earth equipped with the skill and the vision capable of blasting the tragic stuff that happens to us all into space, where it dissolves away to nothingness whenever you pay any attention to the life-force in her pictures" (p. 239).

"It's yet another day, weather, time, news, stuff happening all across the country/countries, etc."
(p. 253)

Although life and history are stories we can choose to write and rewrite, they also seem to be endlessly repeating themselves. Time is passing, but it is reborn with each new human being and each new generation. On the one hand, this means that the same mistakes are

constantly repeated and replayed, and the same problems need to be solved again and again. On the other hand, the cyclic nature of time enables each new generation to rediscover and build the world anew, find new excitement in the same experiences, be inspired by the same books, but learn new truths from them. Thus *Brave New World*, a novel that is old and boring for Daniel, can seem fresh and enthralling to Elisabeth.

Smith implies that the ruling principle of time and the force that creates variation and surprise in the fixed cycle of life is incidentality. Such as when, one day, while Elisabeth was aimlessly wandering the streets of London, she entered an art shop and found an old catalogue from one of Pauline Boty's exhibitions. Boty was a pioneer British feminist painter she had never been taught about in art school. So Elisabeth decided to take her up as the topic of her dissertation. She quickly realised that the pictures Daniel used to describe when she was a child were actually paintings by Boty. Boty was the woman Daniel was in love with a long time ago. As he later reveals to Elisabeth, she was actually the only woman he has ever loved. This is when Elisabeth realises that the love she feels for Daniel has never been mutual. Thus, a little random incident forever altered the course of Elisabeth's life, as well as the nature of her friendship with Daniel. Smith's fascination with incidentality and fluidity of time is also reflected in the formal structure of the novel, as the events and chapters are joined together based on associations, rather than chronology. The conclusion of the novel is left open, as well, as if to bring home the point that each ending is in fact just the beginning of yet another time cycle.

"It's as if the Angel Gabriel has appeared at the door of her mother's life, kneeled down, bowed his head and told her: in a shop full of junk, somewhere among all the thousands and thousands of abandoned, broken, outdated, tarnished, sold-on, long-gone and forgotten things, there is something of much greater worth than anyone realizes, and the person we have chosen to trust to unearth it from the dross of time and history is you."
(p. 129–130)

Autumn deals with the theme of time in many ways. Besides the interest in time's circular character and with the incidentality of events, Smith also explores the nature of memory and our complex relationship to the past and to history. This focus is very logical in the British context, not only because of the British obsession with tradition and heritage, but also because in 2016 much of the nation seemed to be guided by a strong sense of nostalgia, which made them look for solutions to their problems in the past, rather than in the future. Smith subtly criticises this infatuation with the times gone by, which is embodied in the recurring image of a junkshop. She points out that no matter how fond our memories, we should not cling to them too much, because memory is not reliable. As Daniel puts it, "memory and responsibility are strangers. They're foreign to each other. Memory always goes its own way quite regardless" (p. 160). Instead of searching dusty cupboards and antique stores for long lost treasures, what Smith suggests we should do is embrace the inevitable forgetting and move on from the past. In fact, that might be the only way to survive: "we have to forget things sometimes. [...] It means we get a bit of rest. [...] We have to forget. Or we'd never sleep ever again" (p. 210).

*"There's always, there'll always be, more story. That's what story is.
[...] It's the never-ending leaf-fall."*
(p. 193)

The inevitable loss of the past and the eternal forward motion of time are both connected to *Autumn's* central concern, which is transience. Whether it is Daniel's slow

progress towards death, or the change of seasons from autumn to the inescapable winter, Smith reminds us throughout the novel that things are anything but permanent. People are here and then they are gone, amazing artists create and are forgotten, and even huge historical changes, like world wars or Brexit referenda eventually fade into insignificance. The only thing that remains constant is nature, in its never-ending cycle of birth, growth, decay, and rebirth. That is why trees reappear in the novel frequently, always in contrast to humanity, its frivolousness, cruelty, and fragility. However, transience is not depicted as something depressing or demoralising. On the contrary, just like forgetting, the inevitable passing of time brings relief. It gives humankind an opportunity to erase and forget our mistakes and to move on into a future that might hold something a little bit brighter than the present. Thus, while the decay of autumn and the decay of Daniel's body seem to mirror the decay and dissipation within contemporary Britain, Smith reminds us that even on the darkest and shortest winter day, there is always the certainty of a spring to come. Rebirth is possible through art, through imagination, but above all else, through the unparalleled power of nature. The way out of despair is to remember that there is something larger than humanity to fall back on, and that nothing is ever completely lost. Time is infinite, and thus, there will always be more story.

Autumn is a complex novel. It explores themes that are difficult to think about, and undoubtedly also difficult to write about. It is a novel about art, time, memory, history, and death. But despite the philosophical weight of its subject matter and the density of metaphor, the writing never feels laboured or dull. Rather, the reader might have an impression that the book was written in one sitting, propelled by a spontaneous burst of inspiration. What is even more astounding is that it is actually possible to read the novel in one sitting, and still have a profound experience. Ali Smith manages a great feat. She paints heavy themes with a light hand; she injects humour into despair and creates beauty from ugliness. What is more, she edits herself ruthlessly. The formal structure of the novel is in alignment with the message at all times. There is no redundancy or superfluous ornamentation. The experimental elements are not pretentious, but serve a purpose. This is an uplifting book because it does not let the narrative slip into depression and gloom, but instead offers a plausible solution to some very tricky questions. Finally, it is a beautiful book because it aims to do good in the world and make it a more beautiful place. In this way, *Autumn* is an actual, physical realisation of one of its own central ideas: that art can transform the world for the better.