ART, DEPTH AND AFFECT IN WINTER:
METAMODERNIST CONTEXTS OF ALI SMITH'S NOVEL[1]

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ABSTRACT. *Art, Depth and Affect in* **Winter***: Metamodernist Contexts of Ali Smith's Novel.* The paper discusses Ali Smith's *Winter* through the prism of the theory of metamodernism. The novel can be related to the works of authors who reject the cynical sophistication of postmodernist art and appropriate its strategies to focus on authenticity, sincerity, and affect. Drawing on Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen, who maintain that the metamodernist structure of feeling manifests through a mix of/or oscillation between pre-modernist, modernist and postmodernist tropes and devices, the author considers Ali Smith's novel a mixture of postmodernist, modernist and romantic elements and explores how these elements function in the production of the metamodernist effect of her novel.

Keywords: metamodernism, Ali Smith, Winter*, art, depth, affect*

REZUMAT. *Artă, profunzime și afect în* **Iarna***: Contexte metamoderniste în romanul lui Ali Smith.* Această lucrare se ocupă de romanul *Winter* de Ali Smith prin prisma teoriei metamodernismului. Acest roman poate fi asociat cu lucrările unor autori care resping sofisticarea cinică a artei postmoderniste și își însușesc strategiile postmodernismului pentru a se concentra pe autenticitate, sinceritate și afect. Bazându-se pe Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons și Timotheus Vermeulen care susțin că structura metamodernistă a sentimentului se manifestă combinând și/sau oscilând între tropi și procedee pre-moderniste, moderniste și postmoderniste,

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autoarea apreciază că romanul lui Ali Smith este o mixtură de elemente postmoderniste, moderniste şi romantice şi cercetează modul în care aceste elemente funcţionează în producerea efectului metamodernist al romanului.

Cuvinte-cheie: *metamodernism, Ali Smith,* Winter*, artă, profunzime, afect*

Ali Smith's novel *Winter* is the second volume of her *Seasonal Quartet* that she published in rapid succession between 2016 and 2020. Designed as a "deliberate publishing experiment, to see how close to publication the author can capture current events" (Merritt), the *Seasonal Quartet* is filled with reactions to some of the most pressing issues of contemporary British life: Brexit, the immigration crisis, the tragedy of Grenfell Tower, climate change, and various other political upheavals. Besides presenting readers with intensely political texts marked by radical topicality, Smith also offers interesting literary experiments in which postmodernist narrative strategies are combined with new post-postmodern sensibilities. In this article I read Smith's *Winter* through the prism of metamodernist theory to show that this novel can be related to the works of authors who reject the cynical sophistication of postmodernist art and appropriate its strategies to focus on authenticity, sincerity and affect.[3]

Metamodernism

The decline of postmodernism that has been repeatedly brought to attention by prominent postmodern theorists, such as Ihab Hassan (2003) and Linda Hutcheon (2002), has been met with the increased attempts of scholars to map and define post-postmodern elements in the postmillennial cultural paradigm. Authors who share the opinion that postmodernist theory has lost the potential to offer fresh and productive responses to the latest cultural developments have suggested a variety of terms for these contemporary trends: "remodernism" (Childish and Thomson 2000), "renewalism" (Toth and Brooks 2007) "hypermodernism" (Lipovetsky 2005), "digimodernism" (Kirby 2009), "altermodernism" (Bourriaud 2009), "automodernism" (Samuels 2010),

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[3] Jaroslav Kušnír draws attention to "meta-metafictional" or "post-scientific" authors, such as David Forster Wallace, who carefully approach postmodernist strategies, perceiving them as "primary weapons of mass culture", devoid of the rebellious potential that they once possessed (Kušnír 29). In this respect, Lee Konstantinou talks about postironists (e. g. Wallace Smith, Chris Bachelder, Rivka Galchen, Jennifer Egan and others) whose return to sincerity includes the preservation of "postmodernism's critical insights (in various domains) while overcoming its disturbing dimensions" (88).

"cosmomodernism" (Moraru 2010), "performatism" (Eshelman 2008) and "metamodernism" (Vermeulen and Akker 2010). Since Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker published their seminal essay in 2010, the term metamodernism has received considerable attention from scholars and is now widely accepted as the most suitable term for describing the postmillennial structure of feeling.

In "Notes on Metamodernism," Vermeulen and van den Akker map out a new structure of feeling in the visual arts, arguing that "new generations of artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favour of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis" (2). Drawing on the metaphor of *metaxis*[4], they stress the "both-neither dynamic" of metamodernism:

> Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. (6)

In their opinion, metamodernism finds its "clearest expression in an emergent neoromantic sensibility," in "the return of the Romantic, whether as style, philosophy or attitude" (8), in contemporary artists' "negotiations between the permanent and the temporary"; in their "questioning of Reason by the irrational"; or in the "re-appropriation of culture through nature" (8). In later publications (Akker, Gibbons, Vermeulen 2017; Gibbons, Vermeulen, Akker 2019; Akker, Gibbons, Vermeulen 2019) Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, together with Alison Gibbons, focus on the re-emergence of historicity, affect and depth in contemporary art to further document its metamodernist trends.

Referring to Frederick Jameson's study *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) that aligns postmodernism with the "weakening of historicity", "a new depthlessness" and "the waning of affect", Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (2019) maintain that the return to historicity, depth and affect in postmillennial art signals a return to pre-postmodern (modernist) artistic concerns. But they also note that this return is, in fact, shaped by new post-postmodern (metamodernist) sensibilities. While the weakening of historicity under postmodernism resulted, in extreme cases, in "the stifling of the sense of history itself" (Jameson quoted in Akker 22), metamodernism relies on a new

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[4] Vermeulen and van den Akker draw especially on Eric Voegelin's idea that the structural principle of existence is an "in-Betweenness" that has been reflected over the centuries through "the language of tension between life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time and timelessness, between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence …"(6).

regime of historicity which can be characterised as "multi-tensed" in contrast with the "presentism" promoted by postmodernism and the "futurism" associated with modernism (Akker 22). This metamodern regime of historicity is reflected in multi-tensed narrative structures that can be identified across contemporary culture.[5]

This return to historicity combines metamodernism with the "new depthiness" that has replaced the postmodernist depthlessness – the postmodernist repudiation of a variety of modern depth models such as "the dialectic schema of appearance and essence", "semiotic codes distinguishing between the signifier and signified", "the psychoanalytic obsession with the manifest and the latent" and "the existential politics of the authentic and the inauthentic" (Akker, Gibbons, Vermeulen 44-45). While postmodernist art reflected "a collective inability to experience, beyond a surface level, the totality of the objective (real, actually existing) conditions in which the subject lived its daily life" (Gibbons, Vermeleun, Akker 173) through its replacement of an "authentic depth of representation with free-floating signifiers on a surface level" (Gibbons, Vermeleun, Akker 173), metamodernist texts "produce a 'reality effect' – a performance of, or insistence on, reality" (Gibbons, Vermeulen, Akker 174).

The waning of affect in postmodernism can be seen as a natural human response to the superficiality of the postmodern representation, the representation of a hyperreality in which the image does not stand for a single referential real world but becomes a simulacrum, a "simulation that no longer has any meaningful relation to that which could previously have been described as reality" (Gibbons, Vermeulen, Akker 173). As Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (45) explain, the lack of depth in postmodernist art – the recipient's inability to form an interpretative reality in order to comprehend the image – inevitably leads to the waning of affect. With the help of Frederick Jameson's examples from the visual arts (the difference between the depth of Munch's modernist painting *Scream* prompting the viewer's emotional response to the tormented figure at its centre and the superficiality of Warhol's postmodernist "stripped-back" images in *Marilyn* or *Diamond Dust Shoes*), the scholars provide a similar comparison between modernist and postmodernist literature to relate the return of depth and "affective turn"[6] in literature to metamodern sensibilities.

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[5] See James MacDowel's "The Metamodern, the Quirky and Film Criticism"; Josh Toth's "Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the Rise of Historioplastic Metafiction"; Jorg Heiser's "Super-Hybridity: Non-Simultaneity, Myth-Making and Multipolar Conflict"; and Sjord van Tuinen's "The Cosmic Artisan: Mannerist Viruosity and Contemporary Crafts".

[6] As Alison Gibbons (2017) explains, the "affective turn" can be related either to the belief that the rise of affect emerged in parallel with the demise of postmodernism or to Jameson's criticism by those who believe that he has done away with affect "too readily" (84).

While the rejection of psychological realism, the representations of fragmented subjectivities, and the emphasis on fictionality in postmodernist literature prevent readers of postmodern narratives from developing an affective relationship with the narrator and/or characters, metamodern texts, partly through their revival of modernist strategies, encourage readers' meaningful emotional responses that support "both self's relation to its own feelings and the self's relation to others" (Gibbons 86). Although some scholars, such as David James and Urmila Seshagiri (2014), perceive the revival of modernist narrative strategies as a core feature of metamodernism, Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen maintain that the metamodernist structure of feeling manifests itself in literary works through "a mix of or oscillation" between pre-modernist (romantic, realistic), modernist and postmodernist tropes and devices that are "put to new use, engaging with, and responding to the social, ethical, political, economic, and environment material circumstances of the twenty-first century" (48). In the following pages I approach Ali Smith's *Winter* as an example of such a mixture of postmodernist, modernist and romantic elements and explore how they function in the production of the metamodernist effects of her novel.

Art, Depth and Affect in *Winter*

As with the other volumes of the *Seasonal Quartet*, *Winter* continues Ali Smith's explorations of the issues that she has repeatedly addressed throughout her literary career. A brief look at Daniel Lea's list of Smith's recurrent concerns (397) reveals that Ali Smith has long been interested in the effect of technology on human life, the failure of connection between people and the search for meaning through art. All of these features find their way into her story of a dysfunctional family and its reconstruction in the depths of winter. The novel also illustrates Lea's claim about Smith's interest in the creation of stories as "duologues or multilogues" which include "contrasting point of views" and "characters' differing versions of the world built around shared events or experiences" (397-398).

In *Winter* the multilogue of characters having different visions of reality acquires a centrality that opens up the possibility of reading the narrative as a "novel of ideas," a genre that has been identified as "a characteristic form of postmodernity" (LeMahieu 180). The novel's connection with postmodernism is also apparent in a typical feature of Smith's style, the tendency to "pitch voices against each other" without "the intention of establishing an authorised account" (Lea 398-399), an approach which has contributed to her image as an author who celebrates the carnivalesque and anti-hierarchical. Equally important is Smith's usage of postmodernist narrative strategies such as fragmentation,

puns and allusions or metafictional, intertextual and intergeneric elements. These postmodernist games with language and ideas are combined with modernist and pre-modernist (romantic) devices, tropes and concepts that draw the reader's attention to the importance of affect and depth both in human relations and in art, and thus connect Smith's novel with metamodern concerns and sensibilities.

Out of the four novels named after the seasons of the year it is undoubtedly *Winter*, with its focus on four characters forced to spend Christmas exchanging ideas in a house called CHEI BRES (or the House of the Mind), that most strongly encourages its interpretation within the framework of the novel of ideas. As Michael LeMahieu (2018) explains, the term has been applied to "fiction in which conversation, intellectual discussion and debate predominate, and in which plot, narrative, emotional conflict and psychological depth in characterization are deliberately limited" (177); and "action is sacrificed to discussion between persons who function as personifications of concepts or mouthpieces for ideas" (178). The four protagonists of *Winter*, Sophia, her older sister Iris, Sophia's thirty something son Art, or, Arthur, and Lux, hired by Art to play his "girlfriend" during their Christmas stay at his mother's, do function as personifications of concepts, ideas, and attitudes. Each character is defined by their name, and they represent four crucial elements of human existence: Reason, Passion, Art, and the Light of Inspiration. These characters are allegorical elements in contemporary post-postmodern society, but each of them also appears as having been shaped in their own way by the effects of the postmodern age.

Sophia (from the Greek Σοφία, or wisdom), the former director of a successful international business who has now retired to a house in Cornwall, represents wisdom reduced to rational economic thinking and the pursuit of profit. Iris shares her name with the Greek goddess of the rainbow, but her nickname Ire relates to the Latin *ira* (anger, wrath, passion, rage). The latter serves as a reminder that in the postmodern age the waning affect was paralleled with the intensification of the passions of those who, like Iris, participated in post-war social protests. Iris is a symbol of the social activism movements continuing to struggle in spite of the apathy of postmodern consumer society, just like the rainbow flag used at peace marches and demonstrations against nuclear weapons. Art, the unsuccessful writer of the "Art in Nature" blog, represents postmodernist narcissistic art, trapped between reality and the screen of modern technology, unable to convey an authentic experience of the world and in need of the light of inspiration. This light appears in the form of Lux, the fourth allegorical figure in the novel, who enters Art's life like a *deux ex machina* to inspire not only Art's own transformation but also the reconstruction of his family.

Given the symbolic meanings of their names, the reader cannot fail to ignore the symbolic aspects of the characters' interactions and the allegorical meanings of their multilogues. Sophia and Iris's long-term conflicts and their quarrels over the Christmas dinner table are clearly something more than merely the disagreements of two old women over such issues as Brexit, the immigration crisis or radical social activism. Ali Smith presents here the dichotomy between detached reason and passionate commitment that have respectively informed the sisters' lives. On the one hand, we see the cold headed involvement in the economic sphere that keeps the world going, on the other a passionate belief that the world needs fixing and the constant monitoring of its healthy and moral development. Smith's anti-authorial narrative avoids taking sides, however, and the reader may be left with the sense of multiple truths that sit together, albeit uneasily, just like the two old women at the table, each of them arguing a point worth considering.

In a similar vein, the novel draws attention to two radically different versions of art – one marked by presentism, instantism, and a spontaneity which may often lack authenticity; an art dressed up in the modern clothes of Internet blogs; and an art which is timeless, deeply philosophical, and written in language that is anything but instantly readable. Again, none of these versions of art are celebrated at the expense of the others. Both the "Art in Nature" blog and Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* – for which Lux expresses admiration because Shakespeare can make even a "mad and bitter mess" (Smith 200) into something graceful – have their place in the contemporary world. Only the former needs an injection of authenticity and non-narcissistic focus on the social and the political in order to comply with the definition of art offered by Smith in one of the many puns which abound in her text: "I said to your aunt last night, she [Lux] says. After you came out here, when you were asleep. I said, Art is seeing things. And your aunt said, that's a great description of what art is" (286). The fact that "Art in Nature" has had to be turned into "a co-written blog by a communal group of writers" (318) who have improved Art's original "*irrelevant reactionary unpolitical blog*" (59) suggests that authentic art is always political. However, it is timeless art that captures the depths of humanity regardless politics. "*…*THE HUMAN *will always surface in art no mtter* [sic] *its politics*" (317). This is what Iris's text message to her nephew and Smiths' message to us reads.

Smith's own work of art combines the political topicality of the novel of ideas that traditionally "reflects larger cultural trends and political preoccupations" (LeMahieu 181) of its given era with a focus on the timeless aspects of the human condition, which saves her text from becoming an example of what some critics of the novel of ideas call a "dressed-up political polemic" (LeMahieu 180). As Michael LeMahieu (179) explains, the novel of ideas emerged at the end of modernism as a negative counterpart to modernist aesthetics and has often

been perceived as differing from the concept of the "novel as art". Smith combines the revived modernist aesthetics with postmodernist narrative strategies, an approach which produces a metamodernist oscillation between the modern and the postmodern that Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (2019) have identified in contemporary art. On the one hand, Smith relies on postmodernist strategies that highlight the constructedness of fiction and the allegorical nature of her characters, but on the other, she uses free indirect discourse in a way that revives modernist uses of the stream of consciousness and thus opens the sense of possibility that Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen have identified in metamodernist texts – the possibility for the reader to enter into "an affective relationship" with the characters and "a depthy relationship with a reality partially existing, perhaps performatively, beyond the pages of [the] book" (49).

A major postmodernist strategy of Smith's novel is the fragmented narrative structure that alternates the focalisation of the characters with the focalisation of the narrator who provides background information on actual historical events such as the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp. Smith also presents what seems to be future, improved versions of the "Art in Nature blog", she includes a story within a story, or parallels a chapter that shows Iris narrating a story to a younger Art with a chapter in which the future Art reads *A Christmas Carol* to another small child. The postmodernist character of the novel is intensified by the presence of metafictional passages. For instance, the author-narrator imagines and then rejects an alternative "much more classical sort of story" (Smith 31) wherein Sophia is the protagonist and whose

> perfectly honed minor-symphony modesty and narrative decorum complement the story she's in with the right kind of quiet wisdom-from-experience-ageing female status, making it a story that's thoughtful, dignified, conventional in structure thank God, the kind of quality literary fiction where the slow drift of snow across the landscapes is merciful, has a perfect muffling decorum of its own, snow falling to whiten, soften, blur and prettify even further a landscapes where there are no heads divided from bodies hanging around in the air or anywhere, either new ones, from new atrocities or murders or terrorism, or old ones, left over from old historic atrocities and murders and terrorism....
> well, no,
> thank you,
> thank you very much. (Smith 31)

Instead, Smith constructs a narrative that, far from being conventional, plays with language and its playful deferral of meaning[7]. Smith depicts Sophia

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[7] The most telling examples of these postmodernist experiments with language and the explorations of its elusive meanings include the chapter in which Smith divides Art's and Lux's rejoinders into

as a female version of Scrooge, who is visited at Christmas by a ghost in the form of a child's head. Although Dickens's famous parable about the power of the Christmas spirit to save one's soul creates the main intertext of her novel, Smith offers a more realistic version. The Christmas ghost appears as a hallucination generated by the protagonist's anorexic and solipsistic existence. Just as with Dickens' Scrooge, the events which Sophia experiences on Christmas Eve offer her the chance of a personal revival which results in reconciliations with her estranged sister and son.

In the stream of consciousness passages Sophia enters the depths of her past by remembering the events that affected her relationships with Iris, Art, and Art's biological father. The result is a sense of psychological depth that takes Sophia out of the category of flat characters reduced to the representation of an idea, a political stance or a mere function in the construction of the plot. While Iris and Lux never fully shake off the apparel of the symbolic representations of the author's political positions and artistic visions, Sophia and Art, whose focalisations are offered in free indirect speech passages, appear, despite their allegorical functions, as complex characters filled with the depths of humanity. If the postmodernist elements of Smith's novel encourage the reader to appreciate, intellectually, Smith's carnivalesque play with language, ideas, voices, and plurality of truths, the modernist strategies open up the possibility of experiencing aesthetic pleasure through the empathetic emotional responses to characters whose troubled existence is revealed through their thought processes.

Sophia's and Art's focalisations provide insights into the rational and irrational parts of their minds (they both experience hallucinations and the surreal effects of dreams) and draw the reader into worlds, both psychic and physical, that appear no less real than our own. On the other hand, the postmodernist devices that continually emerge throughout Smith's narrative, even in the pages in which the modernist style of writing is dominant, prevent the reader from diving too deep into these worlds and ensure that the reader cannot move too far from the surface textual levels of these worlds and forget the constructed nature of those who inhabit them. In this respect the reader's experience corresponds with that of Vermeulen's "snorkeler", taken as a metaphor for a metamodernist modality of artistic imagination that is put into contrast with the experiences of the "diver" (the modernist modality) and the "surfer" (the postmodernist one):

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two separate passages, thereby turning their dialogue, at least formally, into two monologic discourses. Another example is the chapter in which a child at an early stage of language acquisition reveals to Art and the reader the fluidity of concepts through which we try to fix a meaning and thus produce a meaningful vision of the spatio-temporal reality in which we exist.

Whereas the diver moves towards a shipwreck or a coral reef in the depths of the ocean, and the surfer moves with the flow of the waves, the snorkeler swims toward a school of fish whilst drifting with the surface currents. Importantly, the snorkeler imagines depth without experiencing it [...] he will not, and often cannot, dive downwards; or if he does, then it is only for as long as his lungs allow. That is to say: for the snorkeler, depth both exists, positively, in theory, and does not exist, in practice, since he does not, and cannot reach it...When I refer to the "new depthiness," I am thinking of a snorkeler intuiting depth, imagining it – perceiving it without encountering it. If Jameson's term "new depthlessness" points to the logical and/or empirical repudiation of ideological, historical, hermeneutic, existentialist, psychoanalytic, affective, and semiotic depth, then the phrase "new depthliness" indicates the performative[8] reappraisal of these depths. (Vermeulen page 8)

These reappraisals of depths emerge in Smith's novel through the metamodernist oscillation between modernist and postmodernist tropes, with the narrative constantly swinging to and fro between an emphasis on the constructed natures of her fictitious characters and the reality effect which some of them produce for the reader. Although Iris and Lux also exhibit aspects derived from the real world shared by the author and the reader, they remain mono-dimensional and static throughout the novel. In contrast, the insights into Sophia's and Art's personal histories endow these characters with a multidimensionality and inner dynamics that suggest reasons why they appear as troubled persons at the beginning of the narrative. This approach grants their transformations a genuine sense of verisimilitude.

The importance of the relations between the characters' personal histories and their present and future selves is intensified by a multi-tensed narrative in which Smith plays with past, present, and future tenses: some parts are narrated in the past tense, but many past events are delivered in the present tense, while the glimpses into Art's future are presented in the future tense. Paradoxically, the latter seems oddly inappropriate for rendering a future moment through the focalisation of Art's future self that experiences the future moment as his immediately lived present. The complex multi-tensed narrative in which the past (emerging in memories) is given the sense of the present moment and the present appears as the future's past seems to reject the postmodernist obsession with presentism and emphasises the extent to which our past is constantly present in our thoughts, memories, and identities. Our

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[8] The term "performative" is used by Vermeulen (2015) "above all in Judith Butler's sense of the world. Just as Butler writes that the soul is not what produces our behaviour but is, on the contrary, what is produced by our behaviour – in other words, not inside the body but on and around, a surface effect – depth is not excavated but applied, not discovered but delivered" (https://www.e-flux.com/journal/61/61000/the-new-depthiness/).

sense of presence is constructed as a sequence of the moments that have just passed and our future is yet another present of just passed moments that we re-enter every day. Moving on the various temporal levels of Smith's narrative and struggling towards an understanding of the characters by forging connections between their pasts, presents and futures, the reader may experience the position of the metamodernist subject who "appears to be actively searching for, and cobbling together, [the] lost sense of temporal and historical orientation, in a mostly haphazard, helter-skelter, and makeshift manner" (Akker, Gibbons and Vermeleun 51).

By placing the characters in the tangles of their past, present, and future, Smith also invokes the reader's affective response to the complexity of the characters' life experience. Thus, the reader can be touched by the story of an elderly woman who has transformed from a sensitive and art-loving girl into a pragmatic careerist who chooses business over family only to end up losing both. At the end of her life, she finds herself in a state of emotional death:

> Sophia had been feeling nothing for some time now. Refugees in the sea. Children in ambulances. Blood-soaked men running to hospitals or away from burning hospitals carrying blood covered children. Dust-covered dead people by the sides of roads. Atrocities. People beaten up and tortured in cells. Nothing. (Smith 29-30)

Similarly, the reader is encouraged to feel empathy with Art, the fatherless boy, conveniently shipped off to a boarding school at the earliest possible age. Art grows up into a young man unable to create authentic relationships and this inability even extends to his relationship with Mother Nature, as is shown in his "Art in Nature" blog posts. The characters' inability to relate to the world, human and natural, in an authentic, affective way relates to the disintegration of family relations in Smith's story. The novel seems to ask how we can feel true empathy with strangers if we have lost the ability of forming emotional responses to those closest to us. Even Iris, who as Sophia ironically comments, has spent her life "changing the world," (208), is shown as performing the most authentic and transformative acts at the moments when she deserts her younger sister for a life of political activism. Iris facilitates Sophia's development into the cold person which she later becomes, but afterwards she returns on Christmas Eve to save the aged Sophia from the madness of her solipsistic existence. Here the echo of Dickens' homily that "Charity begins at home" seems to have found its way into Smith's modern version of *A Christmas Carol*.

Another question that Smith poses through Sophia's and Art's life stories is whether we can be expected to learn how to create authentic relationships without being shown good examples. The art of storytelling –

techne – the novel suggests, plays a major role in such education.[9] Thus, the seemingly banal quarrel between Sophia and Iris about a lost child travelling in snow story is, in fact, an unresolved conflict over the creation of a crucial formative memory which shaped the development of Art's personality. It is through memories such as the lost child story (and storytelling) that Art can reconnect with his mother and his aunt and become, in future, a storyteller (storyreader) and a shaper of his own child's personality. The importance of *techne* in Smith's works has also been noted by Daniel Lea who states that Smith perceives the art of storytelling as "the compensatory solace" in a world of rising dependence on modern technology that still remains unable to overcome our "discomfort with life's unanswerable questions" (401).

In the wake of postmodernist scepticism, the compensatory solace of art can no longer arise from the belief that "true" art offers truthful insights into the metaphysics of our existence and provides answers to our existential questions. Nonetheless, art still has the power to suggest the possibility of a deeper meaning lying below the surface level of our textual reality. In a metamodern gesture that revives the Romantic sensibility, Smith draws a contrast between the postmodern obsession with surfaces that can reduce Mona Lisa to the background of a selfie taken by visitors to the Louvre who are "no longer even bothering to turn towards it" (12) and the belief that beauty in art is the closest possible thing to what we can imagine as the Truth about the meaning of Humanity. This Truth glows radiantly through the multiple truths of our everyday lives. "Beauty is truth and truth is beauty," states Sophia, quoting Keats and stressing Beauty's potential to change the world: "Beauty is the true way to change things for the better. To make things better. There should be a lot more beauty in our lives... There is no such thing as fake beauty. Which is why beauty is so powerful. Beauty assuages" (211). Whereas Iris dismisses this *aesth-ethical* notion of Beauty's reconstructive power as naïve idealism, Smith's novel refuses to reject this in such a radical way. On the contrary, the beauty that Sophia finds in art and the beauty that her son Art (just like art itself) instinctively searches for in nature are endowed with the potential to recreate for their recipients "a coherent and meaningful sense of self" (Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen 52) that the metamodern subject tries to regain after "realising that it has for too long been indulging in, and succumbing to, postmodern euphoria in the credit-driven, mediatised comfort zone at the End of History" (Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen 52).

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[9] As Slávka Tomaščíková notes, it is narratives that "enable an individual to learn from and/or to teach others – all in the very essence of the meaning of the Latin word narrō – 'to make known, to convey information'" (96).

Lux is so moved by Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, a play which shows the human potential to create beauty out of the mess of existence, that she decides to move to the country that gave Shakespeare to the world (however ironic Smith may intend such a definition of England to be). The birdwatchers are so moved by the beauty of birds that they choose the pursuit of a highly improbable sighting of a Canada warbler in Cornwall over the more typical consumerist celebration of Christmas. Although one reviewer maintains that the bus full of birdwatchers only appears in the novel to give Smith an opportunity to add to the postmodernist games with language and "have Lux, the lover of Samuel Johnson, deploy a leaky pun: 'I refute it bus'" (Wood), the inclusion of a bus "full of people looking for meaning in the shape of a bird not native to [England] turning up in [England] after all" (Smith 290) contributes significantly to the metamodernist effect of her novel. While the Canada warbler and its highly improbable survival after its transatlantic flight stands for a "miracle" that suggests the possibility of God's existence and the beauty of the world in which such an unlikely possibility exists, the art that allows us to create affective relationships with the other (however fictitious this other may be) helps us to connect and reconnect with real people and our own selves. The fusion of art and nature, the two most powerful sources of assuaging beauty, and its crucial function in the constructing and reconstructing of our humanity is symbolically represented by the real-life imprint of a flower in an original folio of Shakespeare's works:

> ...it's nothing but a mark, a mark made on words. By a flower. Who knows by whom. Who knows when. It looks like nothing. It looks like maybe someone made a stain with water, like on oily smudge. Until you look properly at it. Then there's the line of the neck and the rosebud shape at the end of it. That's my most beautiful thing. (Smith 212)

The beauty of this unusual combination of nature and culture stems from the possibility of connecting affectively with a human being emerging from the depths of history. This human being could also appreciate the beauty of (Shakespeare's) art and enjoy nature in the form of the flower whose symbolic connection with beauty and the affection of one human being for another runs through the centuries.

Conclusion

Ali Smith's novel *Winter* represents an illustrative case of the turn towards metamodernism that has emerged in the postmillennial cultural paradigm as a response to the postmodernist structure of feeling. The oscillation between

postmodernist and modernist tropes and devices employed in Smith's complex narrative constructs a metamodern text that revives Romantic sensibilities. The rationalism of the narrator's sophisticated postmodernist language games is contrasted with much more "irrational" and subjective plays of the protagonists' minds that create a sense of psychological depth and encourage the reader's empathetic responses. The postmodernist focus on the temporary and its tendency towards presentism is contrasted with more permanent, timeless aspects of humanity such as the importance of affective relationships with other people (including those lost in the depths of history) with whom we share the capacity to enjoy the beauty of art, a process which helps us to become more sensitive and better human beings. Finally, the suggestion that an authentic relationship with nature and its assuaging beauty may result in more authentic patterns of cultural and social behaviour corresponds with the neoromantic "re-appropriation of culture through nature" that the theorists of the metamodern have identified in metamodernist developments of contemporary art.

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