

## Art, Nature and Politics in *Spring*: Metamodern Sensibility in Ali Smith's Dialogic Novel

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### Abstract

This article discusses the third instalment of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, a work whose complex multi-voiced narrative addresses various important issues including the role of art in the contemporary world. The authors of the article employ two theoretical frameworks, Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and Vermeulen and van den Akker's studies on metamodernism, to argue that Smith adopts a dialogical approach to the theme of art. With the help of close reading the authors map the dialogical clashes between the main voices and the semantic positions which are taken in order to demonstrate that the central dialogue presented within the novel is that between postmodern and metamodern sensibilities. Special attention is paid to the character Richard who represents the clear replacement of the postmodern sensibility with a metamodern approach through his semantic position, as is informed by his search for universality in art, his neo-romantic turn to the appreciation of the beauty of nature and his rejection of the postmodern trends that produce superficial and inauthentic forms of art.

**Keywords:** art, nature, politics, postmodernism, metamodernism, dialogue, Ali Smith

Like the other three novels in her *Seasonal Quartet* cycle, Ali Smith's *Spring* (2019) presents a complex, multi-voiced narrative that addresses various topical issues of the postmillennial world. The novel, the third in the series, touches on a range of issues including art, immigration, friendship, suffering, and grief, all of which are presented in a narrative that employs two main focalisers: Richard, a seventy-year-old film director who is forced to come to terms with the death of his long-life mentor while trying to work on a new film project, and a young woman Brittany (or Brit) who works at a migrant detention centre. While Brittany's story provides Smith with an opportunity to address the post-Brexit political situation and Britain's "hostile environment" towards immigrants, the storyline that focuses on Richard allows her to intertwine the political concerns of the novel with its second major theme – the theme of art. Brit's role in the novel and her desensitized, self-righteous and cynical approach both to immigrants and to life in general appear to support Dorel-Aurel Muresan's interpretation that Brit is a symbolic character who "becomes the embodiment of a post-Brexit England that walled itself against the whole world" (134). In contrast, Richard's engagement in various discussions related to his film project and his search for his own artistic vision provides the basis for the argument, pursued in this article, that the character of Richard is intended to draw the reader's attention to art and its role in contemporary society.

This article employs two theoretical frameworks, namely Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and Vermeulen and van den Akker's studies on metamodernism, to argue that Richard's storyline takes a dialogical approach to the theme of art, providing a dialogue between two sensibilities – the postmodern line which is manifested, in various forms, in the opinions of Richard's mentor Paddy and his new colleague Martin Terp, and the metamodern approach that can be identified, again in various forms, in Richard's own perspective. It also aims to show that although Richard's position is informed to a great extent by his search for universality in art, his neo-romantic turn to the appreciation of the beauty of nature (in both art and in reality) and his rejection of postmodern trends that result in superficial and inauthentic art forms is not a radical step but one which can be seen in terms of the oscillation between the postmodern and the modern that Vermeulen and van den Akker have placed at centre of the metamodern sensibility.

## **BAKHTIN'S DIALOGISM AND SMITH'S DIALOGUES ABOUT ART AND POLITICS**

Many critics have drawn attention to the importance that Ali Smith places on the representation of various voices in her work. For example, Daniel Lea notes that

Smith's works "tend to be constructed as duologues or multilogues, with characters' differing versions of the world built around shared events or experiences" (397). Monica Germanà argues that "multiple voices and points of view are distinctive characteristics of Smith's narrative style, revealing her interest in the politics of dialogue" (454) and Ema Jelínková applies Bakhtin's theory in her exploration of Smith's approach to the use of voices: "In Bakhtinian terms, Smith rejects the hegemony of monoglossia and absorbs in her fictional discourse the plurality of polyglossia, letting the various languages and idioms interact, interanimate, and interilluminate one another" (11-12).

Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on heteroglossia, polyphony and his definition of the dialogic novel, the prime examples of which are the works of Dostoevsky, are of undoubted use in shedding light on Smith's usage of multiple voices and her construction of their different semantic positions. Bakhtin argues that a novel can only be seen as dialogic if it includes "the passing of a single theme through many and various voices" (265), each of them presenting a distinct semantic position. Caryl Emerson clarifies this concept in her introduction to her translation of Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984): "A voice, Bakhtin everywhere tells us, is not just words or ideas strung together: it is a 'sematic position', a point of view on the world, it is one personality orienting itself among other personalities within a limited field" (xxxvi). Bakhtin praises Dostoevsky's dialogic approach that allows each character to express their individual and multifaceted ideological stances, and, as David Duff notes, his discussion of Dostoevsky outlines a theoretical perspective that is particularly useful for the examination of the coexistence of different ideologies within a single novel (59). In Bakhtin's opinion, a truly dialogic novel values the various voices equally; a novel in which "not a single one of the ideas of the heroes – neither of 'negative' nor 'positive' heroes – becomes a principle of authorial representation" (25).

The interplay of diverse semantic positions (ideological positions) through plot developments and interactions produces a dialogue that contributes to the overall meaning of the novel, and this strategy also lies at the heart of Smith's *Spring*. Although *Spring* forms its discussion of the theme of art and the dialogue between postmodern and metamodern sensibilities through just three main voices, the novel bears clear signs of, what Bakhtin calls "*a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices*" (Bakhtin 6, original italics). These major dialogical interactions are developed in the passages in which Richard discusses his new film project with his former colleague and mentor Paddy or his new colleague Martin Terp. Paddy plays the important role of mentor to Richard; over the many years of their collaboration, her opinions have done much to shape Richard's perception of art and its role in the post-war society during many years of their collaboration, and therefore his semantic position is given more space in the novel than Martin

Terp's. From Richard's numerous memories and references to the films that he has coproduced with Paddy, the reader is left with the clear impression that these films represent Paddy's artistic vision of the world, one which is marked by a specific postmodern sensibility. Her films explore and deconstruct dominant discourses and use experimental techniques to reveal their roles in the construction of various socio-historical perspectives. As Richard recalls, the films were created at "a time when anything progressive on TV was quite often thought to be a kind of sin" (237), and their docudrama format was out of step with mainstream taste: "*Sea of Troubles caught the first voicings of what would become the Northern Irish peace movement, and Andy Hoffnug was one of the earliest UK TV drama productions to take the first steps towards articulating what had happened to people three decades earlier in the Holocaust*" (57-58, original italics). These docudramas were intended to cast doubt on official historical narratives and relied on typical postmodern experimentation with language, image and representation. *Andy Hoffnug* "told the story by not telling it", revealing the tragedy of the Second World War through images of empty, deserted, bombed streets in London (61), while the *Sea of Troubles* relied on postmodern fragmentation: "they'd made the camera move as the human eye moves among real people, via fragments of the life of the real places they lived" (58).

Paddy is a well-educated woman who enjoys passionate discussions about politics, Brexit, Donald Trump's presidency and other issues that enrage her (69); she is fully conscious of the close connection between what we perceive as reality and the narratives that we use to make sense of it: "[t]here's a difference between narrative strategy and reality, but they're symbiotic, she said to him [Richard] one day in the 1970s ... The sentence Paddy had just uttered had something to do with the sentencing of the Maguires" (63). Paddy is referring to the Maguire Seven, the six men and one woman who were wrongly convicted of involvement in the Guildford pub bombings of 1974 (Ewing & McCann, 48), a key event in the history of the Troubles. Paddy is suggesting that the interpretation of this event is determined by the side of the conflict that holds control over the official narrative, and opinions like these and the character of the films that she has created reveal that Paddy represents a semantic position related to high postmodernism with its focus on the political element in art, on art's discursive and contextual implications and an appreciation of art that reflects an awareness of various theoretical discussions about discursive constructions of reality. In contrast, Martin Terp is depicted as holding a position more related to low postmodern trends as is reflected in the superficial plays with styles and images that focus solely on the entertaining and commercial function of art.

These two positions are placed into a dialogical clash with Richard's position when he develops his own idea of how to frame his new project, a film based on

“the novel about the two writers [Katherine Mansfield and Rainer Maria Rilke] who happen by coincidence both to live in and around the same small Swiss town in 1922 but don’t ever meet each other” (Smith 33). Promising “an escape from an era of Brexit” into the nostalgic “idyll of piece and quite”, the novel seems to apply to Richard’s desire for art which focuses on the things that Paddy’s docudramas clearly did not deem sufficiently important:

I quite liked it [the original novel]. Two people live quiet writerly lives and pass each other sometimes in a hotel corridor. One’s finishing a life’s work, though she doesn’t know it. She’s ill... The other writer... Rilke... finished a life’s work earlier that year, Richard says, he’s exhausted... the place is empty, the hotel as well as the town, and sometimes the two writers end up sitting not far from each other in the same dining room. Sometimes they walk past each other in the hotel gardens, and the novel goes on at some length about the mountains above them and them below, etc just, you know, living their lives with all that grandeur of the Alps as their backdrop. And what happens? Paddy says. I just told you the whole plot, he says. (34)

Richard’s description indicates his focus on the novel’s universal themes – the figure of artist as they near the end of their (creative) life, the sublime eternal presence of nature vs. the transitoriness of human existence – and also on its aesthetic effects that he aims to preserve in the film adaptation. Both Paddy and Martin Terp criticise Richard’s vision, with Paddy accusing him of escapism and Martin pointing out its lack of appeal to mainstream audiences. Paddy is also quick to point out some important events that formed the wider historical and social contexts of the two artists’ lives, suggesting that the incorporation of these themes into the film would create added value and contemporary relevance: “1922, the killing of Michael Collins, she says... Think about it, Paddy says. Ireland in uproar. Brand new union. Brand new border. Brand new ancient Irish civil unrest. Don’t tell me this isn’t relevant all over again in its brand new same old way” (41). She also believes that the film would benefit from a discussion of Mussolini’s path to power (*ibid.*), the rivalry between the British and German Empires (43) or the rise of fascism and despotism (*ibid.*), drawing a connection between the ordinary daily lives and problems of the two writers and the political instability and turmoil of the interwar years in Europe while criticizing the British inability to learn from its past. By declaring that these issues are “relevant all over again”, Paddy shows that her position matches that of postmodern artists who “recognize the need for an ethical examination of the material condition, and social well being of a post-modern world” (Koscianski 80).

Terp, on the other hand, recommends taking a more superficial, soap opera approach to the source material by incorporating a largely fabricated plot. He

intends to fill the film with scenes that would generate instantaneous and fleeting emotional responses at the expense of deeper characterisation and reflections of the reality which lay behind the screen. As Richard informs Paddy, “Martin Terp has already handed in a series of draft sex scenes” (35) that would depict fictitious encounters between Mansfield and Rilke with the sole purpose of attracting a mass audience that perceive sexual content as an essential of the entertainment industry. This reliance on play with attractive images that have no connection with the true reality of the famous authors’ lives is rejected as ridiculous by both Paddy and Richard:

Sex scenes? Paddy says... In his [Rilke’s] tower, in her [Mansfield’s] hotel room, in various other hotel beds including her friend’s bed, there’s a bit of lesbian interest too, and – wait, I’m not finished – in the hotel’s gardens in a little grotto where a string quartet usually plays, in the hotel corridor wrapped in a curtain behind a pot plant, and in the hotel’s billiard room on the billiard table, the balls go everywhere. Comedy fuck, he says. Paddy laughs out loud. I’m not laughing at the comedy fuck, she says. I’m laughing because it’s not just laughable, it’s impossible. For one thing, Mansfield had fully-developed TB by 1922. (36)

What seems to be being addressed here critically is the “depthlessness” that Frederic Jameson perceives as one of the “constitutive features of the postmodern” reflected in the “culture of the image or the simulacrum”, a concept which is associated with the “weakening of historicity” (6). As Vermeulen (“The New”) explains in his discussion of Jameson’s ideas, the depthlessness of the postmodern art can be illustrated by, for example, Warhol’s Pop Art image of *Diamond Dust Shoes* that “articulate[s] no clues about the affections, localities, or histories behind it” (9). Both Jameson and Vermeulen examine the same works of visual arts to underline the difference between modern and postmodern approaches to the representation of reality. Vincent van Gogh’s modern work *A Pair of Boots* (1887) reflects depth in the sense that it “intimates a lived context outside the painting – the artist’s state of mind, for instance, or the ‘brutal’... reality of the farmer” (Vermeulen “Metamodern Depth” 147). In contrast, Andy Warhol’s postmodern photo print *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980) offers the viewer little opportunity to delve into the deeper social, cultural or psychological realities beyond its surface: “Van Gogh’s painting pulls the viewer into the world it depicts, extends our gaze beyond the paint, behind the canvas. Warhol’s print, by contrast, pushes us back, cuts short the ‘hermeneutic gesture’ to suggest, as the artist would later himself explain, that ‘there is nothing behind it’” (Vermeulen “Metamodern Depth” 148). Terp’s version of the film about Mansfield and Rilke can be seen as equally depthless since without giving relevant clues about the historical contexts of their lives or some deeper insights into the nature of their art, it reduces the historical

figures to actors in sex scenes and thus treats them as little more than conveyors of superficial emotions. In Terp's artistic vision, thematic development, deeper characterisation and contextual depth are to be replaced with titillating images that will bombard audiences with fleeting stimuli and prevent them from forging a deeper emotional response to the film. Martin Terp's position is also reflected in his earlier project, a website "where he'd created and displayed the obituaries of people who'd never existed" (100) and thus lied "about life, about the deaths, and about emotional connection" (101). The "artistic" strategies that Terp adopts in his projects, his focus on perfectly devised simulacra of emotions and the commodification of sex suggest that he can be seen as a personification of the postmodern sensibility that, as Bran Nicol claims, replaces genuine emotion with brief and transitory sensation (185).

The dialogical clash between Terp and Richard can thus be conceived as a clash between two artistic visions and two ideological positions. In voicing his disagreement with Terp, Richard outlines a very different approach to the artistic representation of reality:

*If I'm to direct this project, I want us to go about this story quite another way...I'm going to insist that if you want to work with me we approach this project differently and start over with a new script. Re this new script: I see it shaped formally as like a series of postcards from these writer' lives. By which I mean depiction of very slight moments from their lives that will act as revelations of depth. This I think is more in keeping with the spirit of the book we are adapting. (96-97, original italics)*

This vision comes close to Vermeulen's concept of "new depthiness" that he discerns in metamodern art. Vermeulen ("The New") points out the difference between modern art's attempt to convey the sense of depth (or reality) behind the text and postmodern art that has been defined by its "depthlessness" and its focus on superficiality, in particular the postmodern tendency for wordplay and games with language. In order to clarify his concept of depthiness, Vermeulen devises a metaphor employing the figures of a snorkeler, a diver and a surfer. While "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" (8). In other words, while modern art attempted to examine the depths of human experience and postmodern art coasted on the surface, interested only in language, the metamodern snorkeler struggles to reach the depths which will forever lie just beyond their grasp. The metaphor implies the audiences of metamodern are caught in a similar position; the work of art encourages them to imagine the depth beyond the textual surface of the work but denies them the means of transcending this superficiality.

In Vermeulen's understanding, depthiness indicates the "performative reappraisal" ("The New" 8) of the depth whose representation postmodernism has abandoned. Although Richard, shaped by Paddy's postmodern vision of the relation between reality and its textual representations in multiplicity of narratives, is sceptical of the possibility of creating a film which would provide an objective reflection of Mansfield's and Rilke's lives, he nonetheless wants to suggest to the viewers of his film that there is indeed a reality that has inspired the novel and its adaptation. The sense of the real lives of the historical figures, the sense of historical depth beyond the surface of the film is to be constructed with the help of a form that still represents some degree of postmodern fragmentation – the film will employ postcards that capture isolated scenes from the writers' lives, "slight moments" which, although they might seem initially insignificant, will imply the psychological, historical and affective depth of their lives. Richard's attempt to construct a sense of depth is also reflected in his intention to focus, with the help of the writers' diaries, on actual events rather than on fictitious sexual encounters. He wants to stress the significance of fleeting moments and small details from their lives, like the fact that a postcard "pinned on the wall [by Rilke's lover]" inspired the writing of some of his great poems:

*A postcard meant that all those great poems somehow got themselves written. The slightness of it gestures against the odds. It is like a magic spell. And this in itself is very like the fact of those writers just living in the same place at the same time in their lives, whether they met or not. This is the kind of coincidence that sends electricity through the truths of our lives. Our lives which often have what we might call a postcard nature. (99, original italics)*

Richard yearns for art that can draw our attention to the "magic moments" in our fragmented lives and that possesses the power to enchant us. His voice thus represents the semantic position that emphasizes the aesthetic and transformative roles of art, a fact that provides further connections between his voice and the metamodern sensibility that Vermeulen and van den Akker have identified in contemporary art.

## **ART, NATURE AND TACITA DEAN – THE NEOROMANTIC ASPECTS OF METAMODERN SENSIBILITY**

Metamodernism has been defined by van den Akker and Vermeulen as "a structure of feeling that emerged in the 2000s" in western cultural productions (4). Drawing on Raymond Williams' earlier definition of the "structure of feeling", they see it as "a sensibility, a sentiment that is so pervasive as to call it structural"



(6); it is a sensibility that “everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down. Its tenor, however, can be traced in art, which has the capability to express common experience of a time and place” (7). In their seminal article “Notes on Metamodernism” (2010), Vermeulen and van den Akker introduced the fundamental aspects of metamodern sensibility that they perceived in films and visual arts of the period. They argued that numerous contemporary artists had replaced postmodern scepticism and irony with a revived sense of optimism, utopianism and hopefulness that connects their works more with modern than postmodern visions of the world.

As Vermeulen and van den Akker emphasize, “metamodernism appears to find its clearest expression in an emergent neoromantic sensibility” (8), a concept which is particularly apparent in, for example, the works of Romantic Conceptualists.<sup>1</sup> “Romantic Conceptualist efforts to present the ordinary with mystery and the familiar with the seamlessness of the unfamiliar” (7) are seen as signs of oscillation between opposite poles. The authors make reference to Isaiah Berlin’s study *The Roots of Romanticism* (2000) to argue that oscillation is a key element of the Romantic sensibility. Berlin characterises the 18th-century movement above all through its concern with “beauty and ugliness. It is art for art’s sake, and art as an instrument of social salvation. It is strength and weakness, individualism and collectivism, purity and corruption, revolution and reaction, peace and war, love of life and love of death” (18). In *Spring*, Richard’s search for his own artistic vision not only features an oscillation between the perception of art as an instrument of social salvation and art as a source of aesthetic experience but also incorporates some other important features of the neoromantic attitude.

The neoromantic sensibility that can be found in Richard’s semantic position is particularly evident in his encounters with and responses to the art of Tacita Dean, one of the most widely exhibited and acclaimed artists of the contemporary era (Eakin para. 7). The curator Jörg Heiser included Tacita Dean’s artworks in a 2007 exhibition titled *Romantic Conceptualism*; his concept for the exhibition defined “Romantic Conceptualism” as an art movement that reveals “some interesting parallels between the German Romantics of the early nineteenth century and artists working in the realm of international conceptualism” (“Moscow, Romantic”, 1). He argued that some contemporary artists resolve the tension

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1 As Vermeulen and van den Akker explain, the term “Romantic Conceptualism” was coined by the cultural critic Jörg Heiser who “argues that that the rational, calculated conceptual art of Jeff Koons, Thomas Demand, and Cindy Sherman is increasingly replaced with the affective and often sentimental abstractions of Tacita Dean, Didier Courbot, and Mona Hatoum. Where Demand reproduces the most concrete simulacra, Dean creates affective illusions that can never materialize. Where Koons obsesses over the obscene, Courbot is concerned with the increasingly obsolete. And whereas Sherman criticizes subjectivity, Hatoum celebrates the felt heterogeneity of identity” (7).

between the Romantic and the conceptual by simply combining the cerebral and emotional aspects and sentiments of these two disparate art movements (“Emotional Rescue” para. 12). Eva Scharrer adds that certain artists can truly be said to breach “the ratio of the conceptual with aspects of the autobiographical, emotional, irrational, poetic, and even sentimental” (para. 1, original emphasis). Vermeulen and van den Akker also mention Tacita Dean in their article on metamodernism, suggesting that her works provide an illustrative example of the metamodern oscillation between modern and postmodern tendencies in art. For example, her major work *The Montafon Letter* combines strong Romantic tendencies (such as the representation of the sublime that plays an important role in Richard’s story) with elements of postmodern conceptualism that draw attention to the political contexts of post-Brexit Britain. As Jonathan Griffin explains:

As with many of Dean’s drawings, its [*The Montafon Letter*’s] surface incorporates hand-written notes (intended to be largely indecipherable) some of which relate to the anecdote that inspired the title: a sequence of avalanches in 17th-century Austria that buried some people, then buried the priest who went to officiate at the site of the burial, then – finally – unburied the priest, still alive. Dean says in some ways it’s about Brexit, which she finds devastating, and about hope – “hope that the last avalanche will uncover us”. (para. 9)

Dean’s artwork evokes the Romantic concern with nature and the sublime but at the same time it suggests other intertextual meanings that connect a series of natural disasters from the 17th century and the more recent political “avalanche” of Brexit. It makes allusions to the “devastating” consequences of Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union but refuses to succumb to hopelessness. Dean’s drawing opens up a Romantic imaginative space that evokes strong emotional reactions and also encourages the viewer to contemplate contemporary socio-political issues, creating for the viewer the possibility to oscillate between the two positions.

Although Richard focuses only on the Romantic aspects of Dean’s pictures and overlooks their connections with conceptual art, his encounters with Dean’s art play an important role in his oscillation between political and purely aesthetic perceptions of art. While his earlier involvement in the production of postmodern docudramas is indicative of his interest in art as an instrument of social salvation, his perception and reception of Dean’s visual art during a visit to a gallery reveals his appreciation of the aesthetic and the transcendental in art:

The gallery room he went into smelled brand new and was largely hung with pictures of clouds. They’d been done in white chalk on black slate. But the thing that stopped him in his tracks in this room was that one whole wall, also chalk

and slate, was a mountain picture so huge that the wall became mountain and the mountain became a kind of wall. There was an avalanche coming down the mountain picture towards anyone looking at it, an avalanche that had been stilled for just that moment so that whoever saw it had time to comprehend it. Above the mountain peaks the sky was a black so dark it was like a new definition of blackness. As he stood there, what he was looking at stopped being chalk on slate, stopped being a picture of mountain. It became something terrible, seen. (78)

*The Montafon Letter* that affects Richard so powerfully is clearly referencing some famous works of Romantic landscape painting, such as Philip James de Loutherbourg's *An Avalanche in the Alps* or Joseph Turner's *The Fall of an Avalanche*, images which, like Dean's work, evince the aesthetics of the sublime, reflected in the contrast between the beauty of the wild landscape and the terror induced by the unstoppable force of nature. However, Richard's powerful emotional response to Dean's painting is derived less from the concepts that the picture may be attempting to represent and more from his perception of the picture as an image of the real; in Richard's perspective, "a picture of a mountain" stops being a picture and becomes "something terrible, seen." The avalanche becomes real to him; he sees it, experiences it, and is affected by it, suggesting for a brief moment that the work of art can summon the potential to function as a window to the real and threatening world within the safe walls of the gallery.

While his encounter with *The Montafon Letter* reveals the capacity of art to represent the sublime aspects of nature and produce the effects that nature can provoke in the real world (such as the terror evoked by a real life avalanche), some of Dean's other works also examine the transformative effect which art can induce in its recipients:

But then he'd stepped back from the mountainscape and looked round that room again at the other things in it, and the pictures of clouds on the walls, done in the same materials as the mountain, had made something else happen, something he didn't realize till later, till he'd left the room, come out of the gallery and on to the street. They'd made space to breathe possible, up against something breathtaking. After them, the real clouds above London looked different, like they were something you could read as breathing space. This made something happen too to the buildings bellow them, the traffic, the ways in which the roads intersected, the ways in which people were passing each other in the street, all of it part of a structure that didn't know it was a structure, but was one all the same. (78-79)

Tacita Dean's cloud drawings that affect Richard so strongly also reveal some important similarities with Romantic representations of nature, most notably the

cloud studies of Johann Georg von Dillis or John Constable. Again, the novel emphasises the transformative effects which art can exert on its recipients' perceptions of the world; influenced by Dean's artistic representations of clouds, Richard not only sees the actual clouds in the sky in a new light, suddenly awakened to their unique characteristics which can serve as "a breathing space". However, the transformation is even more profound; the whole world around him begins to appear in a radically different, more alive manner, with its various elements, clouds, buildings, traffic, the movement of people, revealed as participating in a vast and interconnected structure. Richard's encounters with Dean's art in the gallery thus draw attention to the importance of the aesthetic function of art, suggesting that Dean's representations of nature have opened up Richard's capacity to feel a greater sensitivity to the beauty of nature in the real world.

Richard's encounters with real nature acquire special significance during his trip to Scotland. His perception of the wild Scottish landscape are reminiscent of his response to Dean's pictures of nature, and he instinctively searches for the beauty that can allow him to draw aesthetic pleasure both from art and the natural world. His tendency to aestheticize reality is reflected clearly in his reaction to the Scottish mountains that seem to offer him a safe haven, a possibility of respite from the tragic or troubling aspects of his life: "Today they look like a line drawn freehand by a huge hand then shaded in below, they look like something asleep and waiting. They look like the prehistoric backs of imagined sleeping sea-beasts" (15). The combination of the divinely beautiful (the mountains appear as a picture drawn by the hand of God) and the terrifying (they resemble a sleeping beast) produces the effect of the sublime that inspires almost a religious devotion in Richard, and he feels compelled to get off the train and enjoy their magnificent presence:

Some of those mountains over there have what looks like raincloud over their tops, like their tops are veiled. The cloud the other way, direction south he'd say, looks like a wall, a wall lit from behind. The cloud over the mountains, north, northeast, is mist. It's why he'd got off the train here: the train had pulled towards this station and there'd been something clean about the mountains, clean like swept clean. They had something about them that accepted the fact of themselves, demanded nothing. They just were. Sentimentalist. (14)

The descriptions of the mountains draped in cloud, the suggestion that they can provide a peaceful environment in which Richard can enjoy the healing effect of solitude and Richard's emotional response to the place all make him appear as a Romantic character. It is even possible to discern a resemblance to the central figure of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), a seminal

Romantic painting that combines the representation of the sublime power of nature and the motif of personal struggle. On the whole, Richard's reactions to the images of nature in Dean's pictures and to the reality of the Scottish landscape are suffused with a (neo)Romantic sensibility that is "characterized by an admiration of the sublime as that power in nature and art which inspires awe and deep emotion" (Day 49-50).

Richard's escape into the aesthetic perceptions of art and the world that ignore the political aspects of both is however interrupted by the appearance of Alda Lyon, a local woman whose vision of the Scottish mountains clashes sharply with Richard's more romanticizing perception. During their car ride to a nearby town, Alda offers a corrective to Richard's Romanticization and idealization of the Highlands:

Far too mountainous for people to ever live here, Richard says. But then that's what's beautiful about the Highlands. It's so beautifully deserted everywhere. He watches a flush going up the neck of Alda the coffee truck woman; it spreads up to her ear from under the collar of her jacket. No, this was a thriving busy place, she says. Quite definitely populated, much busier that it is now. Not that the Clearances made an impact here anything like how badly they did elsewhere in the north. (236)

Alda draws Richard's attention to the historical and political contexts that have shaped the modern face of the Scottish Highlands and the lives of the region's people, implying that there are conflicts and terrifying aspects of human reality from which the beauty of nature offers no respite. Alda's account of the reality of the Highlands and the new perspective on the more recent conflicts surrounding Brexit and the hostile reception of immigrants which Richard gains through his friendship with Florence, an immigrant girl, dissuade Richard from shifting from the highly political style of filmmaking he produced with Paddy towards an apolitical indulgence in the Romantic imagination. Inspired by Tacita Dean's representations of the sublimity of nature and his own experience of the terrifying beauty of Scottish mountains, Richard initially planned to move away from postmodern docudramas concerned with the politics of everyday world in favour of art that addresses instead the aestheticization of reality and the universal issues that take people beyond the limits of the political (as in his concept for the Mansfield-Rilke project); nonetheless, the reality of everyday political life forces him to abandon this plan, preventing him from ignoring the more pressing issues of the contemporary world.

At the end of the novel, Richard is already at work on a documentary titled *A Thousand Thousand People* (269) about a "solidarity project for a refugee support network" (131), with Richard interviewing members of the "countrywide network" (270) called the Auld Alliance that has "so far helped 235 people escape or

outwit detention estate” (271). The documentary is attempting to identify positive solutions to the refugee crisis and is constructed as a focal point for various voices engaged in dialogical communication about the harsh reality facing immigrants and their struggles in contemporary British society. Alda, a member of the network, has high hopes for both the Auld Alliance project and Richard’s documentary, an attitude that Richard tries to share and support in his own work despite his personal doubts that the Auld Alliance project will ever bring about any significant change. While conducting the interviews, Richard constantly inserts his own comments and questions that reveal his doubts. He refers to their goal as “a vicious circle” (272), “[a] pipe dream” (276), “[a] fairy story” (ibid.) whose large-scale success is “not feasible” (273), revealing a tension between his desire to help those in need, the desire for empathy and a more effective approach to the world’s problems, and his awareness of the possibility that the project will ultimately be futile. In this sense Richard’s voice reflects an oscillation between “a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy” (5-6) that Vermeleun and van den Akker place at the heart of metamodern sensibility.

In conclusion, as the paper’s discussion has shown, the third instalment of Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet*, *Spring* meets Bakhtin’s definition of a dialogic novel since it passes the theme of art through various voices that take distinct semantic positions. Paddy’s vision of political art, Martin Terp’s depthless, commercial art, Richard’s idea of art as the search for the universal, the beautiful and the transcendental all coexist in the novel within the overall concept of metamodern art that oscillates between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony, between desire for the beautiful (in terms of relations among people) and the realization that the ugly realities of the contemporary world require the presence of a political perspective. The crucial presence of the metamodern in *Spring* is also supported by Tacita Dean’s voice, expressed in her works that play a major role in the development of Smith’s main character Richard. The combination of the conceptual and the (neo) romantic that creates the essence of Dean’s pictures offers a possibility of transcending the limits of both high and low trends in postmodern art; the possibility whose artistic exploration lies at the heart of Smith’s inspiring novel.

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## **Umetnost, narava in politika v *Pomladi*: metamodernistična senzibilnost v dialoškem romanu Ali Smith**

Članek raziskuje tretji del dela *Seasonal Quartet* Ali Smith, ki je kompleksna pripoved in se dotika različnih pomembnih vprašanj vključno z vlogo umetnosti v sodobnem svetu. Avtorici članka uporabita pri svoji analizi dvojje teoretskih izhodišč, Bakhtinovo teorijo dialošnosti in študije metamodernizma.

**Ključne besede:** umetnost, narava, politika, postmodernizem, metamodernizem, dialog, Ali Smith