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# Covidian Metamorphoses: Art and the Poetics of Transformation in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*

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**Abstract**. Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), coined "the first Brexit novel", relied on a very "time-sensitive" publication schedule: weeks after the manuscript had been submitted, the book was already published, documenting almost in real-time the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. The remaining three volumes of the *Seasonal Quartet* (*Winter,* 2017; *Spring*, 2019; *Summer*, 2020) also followed a similarly tight schedule; hence the last piece of the collection, published in the summer of 2020, could already reflect on yet another crisis: that of the COVID-19 pandemic and the first lockdown in Britain. The *Quartet* offers art as a vital coping mechanism for such critical times, but the present paper argues that the function of art in the *Quartet* is even more pervasive than that. The sequence's entire poetics of transformation is founded on art as a mediatized means of experiencing the world, which is then turned into a rhetoric of transformation. The paper traces the three main motifs of the *Quartet*: that of the tree, the stone, and the cloud/sky to look at how their art-based transformations create a sense of connectedness in the four novels.

**Keywords**: Ali Smith, crisis, transformation, art, *Seasonal Quartet*

## I. Introduction: The Artist and Her Age

"It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature" (Smith 2017a, 3), read the opening sentences of the first piece in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* entitled *Autumn.* Published just a few months after the 2016 Brexit referendum, the novel relied on a very time-sensitive publication schedule: weeks after the manuscript was submitted, the book was already printed, documenting almost in real-time the aftermath of the vote. As it were, the course of events both in

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the UK and globally supplied excellent material to Smith's exploration of "the worst of times" in the following three volumes of the loosely connected quartet: *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020) also followed a similarly tight publication schedule; hence the last piece of the collection could already reflect on yet another crisis: that of the COVID-19 pandemic and the first lockdown last spring. Even though these crises could suggest that we are living extraordinary times, it seems, as György Kalmár argues, "as if this feeling kept haunting us, as if we were living through a series of terrible events that probably started with 9/11 in 2001", overall hinting at a more general crisis of liberal democracy in the late 20th century (2020, vii–viii). Even the fact that *Autumn*'s opening lines echo those of yet another narrative about a very different historical period, Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* alludes to the same non-extraordinariness of crises. Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* offers art as a vital coping mechanism for critical times by showcasing elevating pieces of art from all media, as Preston concludes in his review: "telling future generations what it was to live in these fraught and febrile times, and how, through art, we survived" (Preston 2020). The present paper argues that the function of art in the *Quartet* is even more pervasive than that: the sequence's entire poetics of transformation is founded on art as a mediatized means of experiencing the world. I am going to support this claim by tracing the three major motifs of the *Quartet*, that of the tree, the stone, and the cloud/sky, to look at how their art-based transformations create a sense of connectedness in the four novels.

The fundamental realization that we are living in critical times also underlines why, as Ali Smith in her Goldsmiths Prize lecture argues, novels matter. "The novel matters" – she contends – "because Donald Trump" (Smith 2017b). Drawing a comparison between the rise of fascism in the 1930s, "the last time of Thanatos", she points out that the novel is a form that is able to tell us "what the anything and the everything of living in a time of Trump and a time of Brexit are" (Smith 2017b). The events that are casually mentioned in the novels – even for readers who are only vaguely familiar with British domestic and foreign affairs (e.g. the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017, the Windrush scandal of 2018, or the Tory MP Nicholas Soames barking in the House of Commons) – already belong to the past, yet the fast-paced publishing experiment can still be regarded as successful inasmuch as the novels engage the future just as well as the present.

The legitimacy of writing for the present, however, has also been problematized in the last piece of the *Seasonal Quartet*, in a letter that one of the protagonists, Daniel wrote to her sister Hannah from an Ascot internment camp in the 1940s, eventually eluding the answer: "The other day I was really thinking of you when the debate we had was: Should The Artist Portray His Own Age. I tell you Hanns there was nearly a fistfight. And you would be so proud of me, because I spoke up and said, but what about the artist portraying her own age" (Smith 2020b, 189, emphasis in the original). Although the novels do not include any conclusion

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to the debate, they are still closely rooted in the question. The first national lockdown of the UK, for instance, serves as a point of reference with mask-related puns for the protagonists of *Summer*, originally published on 2 July 2020,[1] also underlining a zeitgeist of isolation and the lack of connectedness.

> This is the precise point at which Charlotte takes the phone away from her ear and presses the hang-up button.
> She puts the phone in her pyjama jacket pocket.
> She is close to tears.
> Why is she nearly crying?
> Because of something quite unexpected. The bright sides of graffitied trains and the smudges on the insides of train and bus windows where people have pressed their noses. She is now crying because she is missing these things so much. (Smith 2020b, 332)

Charlotte is not only crying because she misses physical human contact but also for grieving her lost relationship with her former boyfriend, Art – similarly to how the entire *Quartet* is founded on the idea of connectedness way before the pandemic rendered the entire world "united in isolation" (Smith 2020b, 338).

Crises and critical situations, however, are not regarded as incapacitating, they are rather treated as the raw material to be transformed into something aesthetically pleasing or meaningful, just like clouds are formed "if they had a piece of something, like a tiny fragment of dust, or salt" (Smith 2020a, 161). Similarly, in *Summer*, Daniel encounters an artist, Kurt, in the internment camp, who collects discarded items and rotten food to turn them into statues. "He most urgently wants any porridge that goes uneaten, if there's any that he comes across left in a dustbin after a breakfast. That's when Daniel sees that the sculptures are made of solidified porridge and that the porridge they're made of has gone so mouldy that each of the sculptures is sprouting green hair. These sculptures are alive, he says" (Smith 2020b, 178).

## II. Metamorphoses

### II.1. "The Tree in Me"

Art transforming crisis into something of value is but one aspect of the *Quartet*'s poetics of transformations, which is present in all layers of the novel. *Autumn*, describing the dominant sentiment after the Brexit referendum as fundamentally paradoxical, identifies the significance of the decision as dividing the nation

1 In the UK, the first lockdown measures came into force on 26 March 2020.

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against itself. "All across the country, the country split in pieces. All across the country, the countries cut adrift. All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there, […] a line you don't even know exists here,/a line you can't afford there,/a whole new line of fire,/line of battle,/end of the line,/here/there" (Smith 2017a, 59). It is in this context that the possibility, and even necessity, of transformation appears as a balancing, all-encompassing force in the novel and the sequence alike.

It is certainly not by chance that probably the most important hypotext in *Autumn* is Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* At one point Elisabeth, "his neighbour's daughter" (Smith 2020b, 143), reads to Daniel, lying unconsciously in a nursing home: "She opens her book at random. She starts to read, from where she's opened it, but this time out loud, to Daniel: *His sisters, the nymphs of the spring, mourned for him, and cut off their hair in tribute to their brother. The wood nymphs mourned him too, and Echo sang her refrain to their lament*" (Smith 2017a, 171). Surprisingly, it is not Echo and Narcissus's story but that of Daphne and Apollo that makes a recurring appearance in the novel. Daphne, turning into a tree to protect her honour from lustful Apollo is evoked in the context of the Profumo affair, as Christine Keeler is being interrogated in a dream vision of Daniel (Ranger 2019, 404). The process of morphing into a tree, however, just as Daphne did, is a central motif of the novel that is not limited to the scope of the Profumo scandal.

In his analysis of the Ovidian tradition, Tamás Bényei contends that turning into a tree is fundamentally different from turning into a stone or animal, as the human body preserves its vertical dimension and hence part of its anthropomorphic proportions and symmetry (2013, 35–36). This anthropocentric conception of turning into trees is of utmost significance in the game that Daniel and Elisabeth play: they think of a character each and then make them work together to create a story. While Elisabeth decides to pick a man with a gun, as it is wartime, she says, Daniel chooses a character who is a man in a tree costume. Standing for those who have been marginalized because of their uniqueness, their difference, but more specifically transforming into a strong symbol of foreigners under the fire of xenophobia, the tree is transformed into what is probably the most humanist symbol of the entire novel. "Think what it'd be like if everyone started wearing tree costumes, the man with the gun said. It'd be like living in a wood. And we don't live in a wood. This town's been a town since long before I was born. If it was good enough for my parents and my grandparents and my great grandparents" (Smith 2017a, 125).

While it is the most pronounced in *Autumn*, trees remain to be offered as connectives between people or between different layers of the diegesis throughout the remaining three volumes, just like in the case of the Profumo-affair allusion. In *Winter*, Sophia meets Daniel in the 1980s under a large tree, and later on her

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reunion with her sister Iris also happens when the latter arrives with a small magnolia tree in the Christmas tree's stead. More importantly, in *Spring*, Richard Lease, an elderly TV director, after, in passing, associating from the lemons on display at a supermarket to "the breast on the statue of the woman whose hands are turning into twigs in the Villa Borghese" (Smith 2020a*,* 263), that is, Bernini's statue of Daphne and Apollo, meditates about lemon trees, further exploring the tree-migrant analogy that *Autumn* created.

> But what's in his head now is the little lemon tree some friend of his ex-wife gave his ex-wife for Christmas. That tree had arrived smelling heavenly. Then it lost all its flowers, lost all its leaves, grew leaves again, lost them again, grew a few back again. But it was a resilient thing. It had only finally died the winter after they'd gone and he realized he'd never once thought to water it in all the months. (Smith 2020a, 265)

The harsh reality of the English climate and neglect for a lemon tree is then juxtaposed with the other major plotline of *Spring*, that of Britt, a warden at "a UK immigration removal centre by SA4A, the sinister security firm that has appeared in the previous books" (Preston 2020), making the commentary on the situation of immigrants in the United Kingdom easily decipherable.

*Spring* includes yet another tree image, implicitly referring to one more hypotext: a specific reading of Katherine Mansfield's short story, "Bliss". Richard interprets the pear tree that appears in the text as a counterpoint of all mundane things, as a self-contained point of reference (Smith 2020a, 279). Just right after his epiphany about the meaning of the tree in the text, he finally finds the over-the-grave message of his recently deceased friend/lover, Paddy, once again offering the image of the tree as a piece that connects people through implicit yet clear references to canonical texts.

The last jigsaw piece in the progression of the tree imagery is yet another text that the protagonists of the *Quartet* encounter: a poem carved into an "eaten-away stone" at a church backyard, discovered in *Summer* by Grace in the late 1980s: "The tree in me shall never die. Be I ashes be I dust. That is the tree that joins the sky. To earth and us. The tree in me shall never die. No lovers sleeping breath compare. With her shy music in the sky. Of leaves and air" (Smith 2020b, 305). The tree, therefore, functions as a versatile symbol woven into the entire *Quartet*, very much like Daniel, whose "energy is steady, something like a tree root" (Smith 2020b*,* 208), linking together people, as it eventually turns out that almost everyone is connected to Daniel, the 103-year-old German immigrant – diegetic levels such as in the case of embedded storylines and various pieces of literature and art, while in the above-mentioned poem the tree also holds together the earth (stone) and the sky (clouds), the other two most prevalent motifs of the novel.

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## II.2. "The Stone with the Hole through the Middle of It"

While trees in the *Seasonal Quartet* connect various elements and layers of fiction, another recurring motif, that of the stone, tends to be associated with art as a transformation, a painful process that always exposes a sense of emptiness, of lack. While – as trees have many roots – the motif of the tree is connected to many literary texts and related art pieces in the novels, a round stone is always singular, whence all the stone occurrences throughout the *Quartet* are somehow connected to one single stone: a part of a sculpture by British artist Barbara Hepworth, referred to in the novels as a "mother and child maquette" (Smith 2020b, 167). In *Autumn*, the reader learns about the maquette as one of Daniel's valued properties, as an item that he would have been willing to sell but he was happy he could not because part of the statue, a smooth, round stone, the "child" from the duo, was missing. Called "arty art" (Smith 2017a, 43) by Elisabeth's mother, and contrasted with their own items of decoration – "The picture of the squirrels made from bits of real pinecone. The poster of the dancers by Henri Matisse. The poster of the woman and her skirt and the Eiffel Tower" (Smith 2017a, 44) – the "mother" part of the maquette was resting on Daniel's table, incomplete but still regarded as a very much appreciated piece of art. Although the first novel of the sequence does not inform the reader that part of the "stone" is missing, and it is only in the closing novel, *Summer*, that we can read how "a woman he slept with once stole the child piece of stone" from Daniel (Smith 2020b, 167), the maquette still feels incomplete: "the stone with the hole through the middle of it" (Smith 2017a, 44).

Hepworth's art is a recurring source of inspiration for Smith, and one that she tends to refer to when talking about the significance of writing. In her aforementioned Goldsmiths Prize Talk, she draws a comparison between novels and sculptural arts: "say you decide […] to cut a Barbara Hepworth-like hole in your novel either by leaving something unsaid […] leaving readers with a hole at the centre of their reading, then that unsaid thing that pierces the work will also pierce the reader" (Smith 2017b). The image of the stone as a sore lack in the middle of the text is the most pronounced in the second part of the sequence, *Winter*. One of the most articulated storylines in the novel focuses on Sophia, who – as it can be concluded when reading *Summer* – was in fact the woman who took one half of Daniel's maquette, although it is only after her death that she admits it in her will. Instead, *Winter* opens with a disembodied head of a child, "floating by itself in mid air" (Smith 2017c, 7) and only visible to Sophia, which later on, after having been wilfully turned into a head of a child from a piece of stone by Sophia, unstoppably, inevitably reverts back to being just a stone in a time loop of the clock striking midnight again and again: "Midnight again. Sophia counted the chimes. The umpteenth midnight of the night, she told the

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head. The head didn't care. The head was the kind of silent they say graves are. She rolled the head into her hands on the coverlet and picked it up. It was heavy, the heaviest it had yet felt. It had no eyes now. It had no mouth" (Smith 2020b, 130). The sense of loss that is an unalienable part of the transformation of life into art is then juxtaposed with the arrival of Art, Sophia's son, later revealed to be fathered by Daniel himself.

Although it is only in *Summer* that the missing stone finally makes its way back to its mother, when Art visits Daniel to retrieve it per his mother's will, the same pattern can be seen in *Spring*, but this time the reader witnesses a brief reunion between an actual mother and child, immigrants helped to find each other by a secret network of benevolent strangers. By yet another piece of stone, the memorial cairn of the Culloden Battlefield, they meet again. "A child runs across the grass over the bones of the dead and leaps into the arms of a young woman. Can you imagine seeing a heart leap? That's what it looks like. The young woman wraps her arms around the child. They stand there like that and it's like the world can't not coalesce round it" (Smith 2020a, 332). Although the "hole" in the middle of the novel is, for a moment, filled, the most ancient of all, the bond between mother and child is temporarily re-established, they are once again torn apart. "It's not hard for the uniforms to surround them. They don't run away, the child and the woman. They just stand there hugging as if they're one person, not two. The people in the uniforms separate the woman and the child" (Smith 2020a, 332–333).

Despite, or rather especially because of the very materiality of stone, it becomes the basis of a set of elaborate and recurring word games throughout the four novels. It is the "thoughtful and hard-won English" (Smith 2020a, 271) of Lux, the Czech immigrant that is able to integrate a sophisticated pun when knocking on the metal side of a bus: "I refute it bus" (Smith 2017c, 289), referring to Samuel Johnson's appeal to stone, "I refute it thus" when he wanted to prove that physical reality really exists. The appeal to stone appears in yet another version in *Winter*. Art, who has been dumped by his ex-girlfriend Charlotte for not seeing the political relevance and the reflections of *his own age* in his nature writing, turning his *Art in Nature* blog into an "irrelevant reactionary unpolitical blog" (Smith 2017c, 58), has a revelation in the shape of a piece of earth, a piece of Britain, of actual soil in its very physicality, hanging above their dining table (215). "As if, […] instead of Dr. Johnson kicking the stone, the stone came and kicked Dr. Johnson. Reality exists, and it has come knocking, and Art […] will be knocked into a resensitized political awareness", argues James Wood in a review of the novel (2018).

He also adds, "it's not simply that she loves puns; it's that she thinks through and with them; her narratives move forward, develop and expand, by mobilizing them" (Wood 2018). Yet another word play on the similar forms of "head" and "dead"

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can be regarded as a clear and apparent linguistic manifestation of the substantive transformation that seems to take place concerning the child stone: right before Sophia's encounter with the head, the novel starts with a poetic prologue – later on it turns out that it was based on Art's Google search on the word dead – repeating the word more than fifty times in various contexts in just a few pages. Later on, after a bedtime story about a man killed with a stone (dead by a stone to the head), the association becomes even more visible. For Sophia, "Dead. Dead. Dead, the bell went. Or maybe: Head. Head. Head" (Smith 2017c, 79).

*Autumn*, at certain points, foreshadows the recurring pun. "Daniel is now in an increased sleep period [that] happens when people are close to death. He is beautiful. He is so tiny in the bed. It is like he is just a head. […] his body so near-nothing under the covers that it hardly makes any impression, just a head by itself on a pillow, a head with a cave in it and the cave is his mouth" (Smith 2017a, 33). Daniel, a person who is regularly referred to as a child – "laughs silently but like a child" (38) and then signs a postcard (as it happens, to Sophia) "with love from an old child" (15) – now symbolically takes the place of the stone that was taken from him, just like in the reunion of mother and child in *Summer*, long before the symbol itself was fully explored.

These structural moves are closely connected to the necessary abstraction that allows art to transform a child into a child's head and then into a smooth-surfaced stone ball, and also to the literary device that enables the novel to integrate other media: ekphrasis. Elisabeth has to write "a portrait in words" about Daniel, and their friendship in *Autumn* is based on a sequence of ekphrases that Daniel gives of Pauline Boty pop art artist's collages, and then, in return, in *Summer*, Elisabeth, now an art professor, describes pictures that she recently saw to Daniel.

## II.3. "The Nursling of the Sky"

The first ekphrasis of a Boty-collage in *Autumn* is already connected to the third major motif of the *Quartet*, that of the sky. Just as Pauline Boty's collages typically use "a picture of a picture" (Smith 2017a, 81), that is, source material that are not objets trouvés in the sense that they have already been transformed and adjusted, this one, an ekphrasis of the work *Hair Dye*, starts off with the depiction of an artificial sky: "The background is rich dark blue, Daniel said. A blue much darker than sky. On top of the dark blue, in the middle of the picture, there's a shape made of pale paper that looks like a round full moon" (Smith 2017a, 73).

Along with the context of art as mediatization as seen above, the sky – and, adjacently, clouds and air – could be characterized, contrary to the relatively stable motifs of trees and stones, as examples of what Masterson calls the "necessarily metamorphic, expansive" imagination of Smith's (2020, 365). Although each novel adds its share of air-related symbolism to the *Quartet*, it is

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undoubtedly *Spring* that expands it to its maximum capacity (just like *Autumn* was primarily focused on trees and leaves, *Winter* on the stoneness of stones, and the concluding *Summer* on connecting the three).

In *Spring*, one of the tropes that connects the collage-like layers and plotlines of the novel is that of the cloud, but just like in the Boty-ekphrases above, the clouds in Smith's fiction are always mediatized through either visual art or poetry. Fitting into the line of extraordinary British female artists being evoked in each of the novels of the *Quartet*, *Spring* uses the art of Tacita Dean as a point of reference throughout the text. Her *Bless Our Europe* is sent as a postcard from Richard to Paddy, Dean's works generating a testimony about the transformative power of art: "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" (Smith 2020a, 79). Later on, Smith also refers to Dean's short film *A Bag of Air*, about the artist's experiment to rise with a hot-air balloon to collect pure mist, which, quoting Dean's narration, also evokes alchemy as a frame of understanding art: "If you rise at dawn in a clear sky, and during the month of March, they say you can catch a bag of air so intoxicated with the essence of spring that when it is distilled and prepared, it will produce an oil of gold, remedy enough to heal all ailments" (Smith 2020a, 218), and later on the narrator herself explicitly connects Dean's artworks to alchemy and transformation – echoing Richard's insight about the painted clouds changing the way he perceives reality: "The film is a piece of pure joke-vision. But in it, breathing takes flight. Alchemy and transformation become matters of good spirit. Something dismissible and ridiculous – and magic if you'll let it be – happens in front of your eyes" (Smith 2020a, 220).

The magic of transformation is echoed in Shelley's "The Cloud": also an attempt of communication by Richard directed towards the then-deceased Paddy. Intending to read it at her funeral, Richard hopes to turn the personification of the cloud in the original poem into a prosopopeia for his missed friend: "I am the daughter of Earth and Water / And the nursling of the Sky; / I pass through the pores of the oceans and the shores; / I change, but I cannot die" (qtd. in Smith 2020a, 287). The juxtaposition of Tacita Dean's artworks and Shelley's poem is the centre of the associative network starting from the image of the clouds that is expanded to cover a number of connected themes, such as cyclicity and birds for "The Cloud", and, among many, breathing and hot air in the case of Dean's works.

In fact, hot air and the sense of elevation that the image encompasses can be claimed to link together Dean's hot-air balloon and Shelley's poem. Handwritten by her mother, the following lines open the notebook of Florence, a magical, almost mythical child who wishes to get back to her mother, currently in detention: "All through your life people will be ready and waiting to tell you that what you are speaking is a lot of hot air. This is because people like to put people down. But I

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want you to write your thoughts and ideas in this book, because then this book and what you write in it will help lift your feet off the ground and even to fly like you are a bird, since hot air rises and cannot just carry us but help us rise above" (Smith 2020, 324). While it capitalizes on the discrepancy between the colloquial and literal meaning of "hot air" in a vertical figurativity of language, as Masterson remarks, "the Maya Angelou allusion to 'rising above' is vital" (2020, 366). One of Angelou's similes, in fact, "but still, like air, I rise" (Angelou 2013, 163), functions as a reversal of the one used by Shelley, already quoted in the novel: "Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,/ I arise and unbuild it again" (qtd. in Smith 2020a, 287). Although the ground of the comparison in the physical movement remains articulated in both cases, in Shelley's poem the tenor – the personified cloud/air – is paralleled with the human-like forms of the ghost and the child, also maintaining the womb-tomb cyclicity, whereas for Angelou the human lyrical speaker of the poem is compared to air as a vehicle.

Also connected to Tacita Dean's art is the motif of breathing, something that – as being taken for granted – is only mentioned in critical situations, mostly in anticipation of an inevitable loss: this is how Elizabeth in *Autumn* listens to Daniel's inhalations, exhalations, and the eerie silences between them, how Sophia in *Winter* closely monitors the head if it is still breathing, and also how Hannah, Daniel's sister, guards the sleep of her soon-to-be-abandoned daughter, Sacha. In *Spring*, however, the crisis that is manifested by a sudden attention to breathing is connected to a Vietnamese immigrant, Hero, who, in his confinement in the Immigration Removal Centre both literally and figuratively, needs more air to breath. The way his English is continuously corrected by Brittany Hall, the guard and also a semi-allegorical figure of contemporary Britain, just emphasizes the legitimacy of his questions and the lack of responsiveness from the officer's side.

> Why can't we open window in this prison? he said. Open a window, she said, and this isn't a prison, it's a purpose-built Immigration Removal Centre with a prison design. When you're live in Immigration Removal Centre with a prison design you dream air, the deet said. When you're living, she said. Or, when you live. You dream about air. . .
> Tell me. What is like to breath real air?
> Breathe, she said. What is it like. Why are you lying on the floor?
> I watch clods, he said.
> He meant clouds.
> I am watching, she said. Clouds. (Smith 2020a, 160)

Similarly, yet another metonymy of the sky, that of the birds that populate it, is also connected to Hero, dreaming about being able to breathe real air. In *Summer*, Sacha Greenlaw, granddaughter of the aforementioned baby Sacha, writes a

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letter, addressing the detainee without knowing him. Wanting to send him "the open horizon" (Smith 2020b, 121), she starts to write about swifts and the unique features of these migratory birds, evoking their symbolism and peculiar biological traits. "Why would we ever imagine that anything in the world takes a shape more important than the eye or the brain or the shape in the sky of a bird like that" (121), she concludes. All this resonates with yet another remark regarding birds, this time a Canada warbler by Lux, the Czech immigrant. When, lured to the countryside in the hope of spotting a rare bird, a group of tourists arrive to Cornwall, Lux underlines the apparent discursive link between immigrants and migratory birds, also hinting at her unavailability for a relationship with Art: "What can I say? The world is full of people looking for meaning in the shape of a bird not native to this country turning up in this country after all" (Smith 2017c, 290). Lux's implied metaphor is then turned into a pun later on, when Art realizes that he is never going to see the Canada warbler or Lux again: "One flown bird doesn't stop the whole kingdom of birds from singing. It's just one gone bird" (Smith 2017c, 303).

## III. Conclusion

In this context, art's ability to make "space to breathe possible, up against something breathtaking" (Smith 2020a, 79) is not only a commentary on art's aesthetic function, but it also gives a very clear position about its engagement with politics. Besides the poetics, the rhetoric of transformation equally became central in *Seasonal Quartet*: the novels make very powerful arguments about/through art in the process of poetic transformations, mostly in line with what Monica Germanà suggests about Smith's entire oeuvre before the *Quartet*: "about the acknowledgement of the other within ourselves, the erasure of neat borderlines separating us from the other, and the permeable coexistence of simultaneous identities within the post-millennial self" (2017, 106). In this respect, it is especially telling that both *Spring* in 2020 and *Summer* in 2021 were nominated for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction, awarded to literary pieces that "come closest to George Orwell's ambition 'to make political writing into an art'" (The Orwell Foundation).

In Smith's *Quartet*, Orwell's initial intention works both ways: while political writing is surely transformed into art, writing about art is, reversely, always committed to changes in contemporary social reality and hence is political. In my paper, I argued that the transformations that create the web of tropes that hold the *Quartet* together are in fact invariably rooted in art and the very act of mediatization that it entails. This adhesive function of art was explored by looking at three, interconnected motifs from the novels, which, it can be argued,

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can also be associated with specific parts of the sequence and also comment on various functions of art.

The motif of trees is mostly expanded upon in *Autumn*, evoking not only the Ovidian transformations but also the connective function of art: mapped on the image of a tree connecting the earth and the sky, trees and the related art literally establish a network of art where the characters of the books are connected by telling about specific art pieces to each other, experiencing them together, or just happening to share a catharsis at one point of their lives.

In *Winter*, instead of the interconnected network of trees in art pieces, the narrative focuses on one very specific piece of stone, and in the context of all the other novels in the sequence reflects on the painful nature of turning everyday experience into art (and vice versa), while based on a pun, stones and earth are also conceived as vehicles for a sobering reality check. Interestingly, this most down-to-earth of all motifs seems to have generated the most surrealist visions of floating heads and hovering Cornwalls.

Third, the sky – the centrepiece in a group of images such as clouds, birds, postcards, air, or breathing – is the main focus of *Spring*, where it is used to comment on the transforming, Protean nature of art, but also on the power of art as something transformative. In this respect, it shows a visible parallel with one of *Spring*'s protagonists, Florence, who magically brings the best out of everyone she encounters and makes "the world bigger, not smaller for them" (Smith 2020a, 180).

The grand majority of these gestures of the connective power of art, however, turn out to be under erasure: while the futility of art was subtly present in all the volumes, all this becomes apparent in the fourth piece of the *Quartet*, *Summer*. Although the family union happens because of the statue, none of the participants are aware of the fact that they are a family. Similarly, from *Spring*: while Florence and her mother can momentarily reunite, they are once again torn away by SA4A personnel. Even though a postcard of Tacita Dean's cloud paintings is sent by Richard Lease, the addressee, Paddy, is long gone and will never get it – just like Daniel and his sister, Hannah, who, when apart, communicate through letters that were never sent but were set on fire and turned into ashes, while asking a bird to send it to their sibling (Smith 2020b, 193). And, finally, the poem carved into the stone is forgotten by Grace, and later on "she looked at the photo she'd taken and saw that though it was still a beautiful picture you couldn't see any of the words on the stone to read them, and all she'd actually got a record of was a blur of twigs, a surface of old stone, some bright lichen" (Smith 2020b, 317). Still, even cancelled like that, "art lower case a" (Smith 2020b, 336) still functions as "the great connective" because, as Charlotte, Art's former girlfriend in *Summer*, states, "What art does is, it exists. [...] And then because we encounter it, we remember we exist too. And that one day we won't" (Smith 2020b, 336).

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