



Dehumanization and Propaganda in Ali Smith's *Spring* (2019)

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Abstract. Ali Smith's series of novels, known as the *Seasonal Quartet* (2016–2020), has received significant academic acclaim for its exposure of political lies, post-truth mindsets, and the xenophobic sentiments of the Brexit Leave campaign. Nonetheless, there has been minimal focus on the specific mechanisms that allow institutions of power to construct a divisive narrative of political, social, and immigration instability. The third novel in the series, *Spring* (2019), distinguishes itself by scrutinizing the anti-immigrant rhetoric within the post-Brexit UK political environment. In *Spring*, language is politically manipulated to become a tool for various forms of propaganda and dehumanization. This propagandistic language use revealed in the novel fosters demagoguery and marginalization of immigrant groups in the post-Brexit UK. The inhumane treatment of immigrants in detention centres results from this dehumanization, stripping both detainees and employees of their subjectivity and agency. Ultimately, *Spring* presents a counter to the politicized abuse of language by emphasizing its potential to tell stories, unite people, and amplify the voices of those victimized by political discourse.

Keywords: *Spring*, dehumanization, propaganda, Brexit, *Seasonal Quartet*.

Introduction

Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* (2016–2020), with four novels, each named after one of the seasons, has become an idiosyncratic record of our time. The first novel of the *Quartet*, *Autumn* (2016), published in the year of the Brexit referendum, sets the tone for the *Quartet* in its quest to capture modernity with documentary accuracy, including the “spirit” of the era with its internal contradictions, complicated political climate, and intricate socio-cultural changes. For this reason, *Seasonal Quartet* covers an extraordinarily wide range of topics, among

which one can name “the contextual divisions within the UK and the current fractures between it and Europe, [...] other global issues as mass media and political manipulation, immigration and climate change” (del Pino Montesdeoca Cubas 2019, 72). While approaches to analysing Smith’s sequence may vary, a common strategy seems to be employed for the majority of criticism, namely, to posit the narrative against a backdrop of political undertones with Brexit serving as a centrepiece for the setting (Dobrogoszcz 2021, 137; Masterson 2020, 355; del Pino Montesdeoca Cubas 2019, 72). Thus, the seasonals can be situated within the genre of BrexLit, which Kristian Shaw defined as “fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain’s exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitan consequences of Britain’s withdrawal, [...] addressing fears surrounding national identity and cultural change in post-Brexit Britain” (Shaw 2018, 18). At the same time, by turning the paradoxical and far from pleasant reality of the modern United Kingdom into a narrative, Smith highlights the artificiality and constructedness of the discourse surrounding Brexit, thereby suggesting its mutability and emphasizing the existence and viability of the human ability to resist it.

While Ali Smith’s tetralogy is widely acknowledged as an exposure of political narratives built on falsehoods, post-truth attitudes, and the incitement of xenophobia associated with the Leave campaign, not so much attention has been paid to the specific (linguistic) devices that enable the establishment to create a divisive discourse centred on political and social instability. Talking about her motivation to write the *Seasonal Quartet*, Ali Smith frames the entire project as an urgent response to modes of official communication and narrative control, particularly those shaping public perception during political crises: “And if we see what happens, however destabilising or unsteading or steadying or impactful as a form of narrative, then we can start to read it, and reading is everything”.¹ Thus, in *Seasonal Quartet*, reading becomes “an exercise in making sense, a process of learning how and why things happen in the world” (Likhovid 2024, 250). In Ali Smith’s literary works, reading can acquire two possible interpretations. The first one involves viewing the world as a tapestry of stories, shaped by a diversity of narrative perspectives, while the second one allows to see it as a process of appropriation of established narrative, the creation of “the other story” “which in Ali Smith’s works usually accounts for the communities of outsiders, outcast by the intransigent immigration policies” (Likhovid 2024, 251). Reading offers a chance to engage with a variety of narrative voices, voices that may conflict with one another, yet none of which can assert dominance over the rest. These voices reflect the metamodern quality of Smith’s fiction,

1 See the article posted on 5 August 2020 on the website of Penguin Books: “Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet*: An Oral History.” <https://www.penguin.co.uk/discover/articles/ali-smith-autumn-winter-spring-summer-seasonal-quartet-oral-history> (Last accessed 18 July 2025).

remaining “at once polyphonic and individualistic” (Masters 2021, 24), a quality that captures Smith’s ability to present distinct, subjective perspectives without collapsing them into a unified or hierarchical whole.

This quality of Smith’s writing, as Greer points out, is also detectable by the emphasis put on the very essential nature of the act of reading. As Greer argues, Smith presents reading as an antidote to the current condition of Britain, something that would allow the continued interpretation of the Ardentian collage-like “common world” even after the “end of dialogue” had come (Greer 2024, 4, 2). This, Greer maintains, evidences that “Smith’s is a vision in which the relation between aesthetics and politics is routed not through affect but through judgment,” a position that is further supported by the observation that, in Smith’s other works, conservative characters are regularly represented in “flattened caricature” (Greer 2024, 3, 2). While Greer’s insights are certainly valuable, it would be remiss not to insist that although one is indeed advised to “go to collage” in *Autumn*, with the intent to sample a variety of standpoints and worldviews, e.g. to develop the ability to read, this does not compel *Spring* to offer an even-handed ensemble of political opinions. Rather, it could be argued, *Spring* ought to unevenly amplify “the other” voices – while still ensuring that they, or one of them do not become dominant –, thus becoming a representation that might deliver dissenting opinions to the readers. This is perhaps best showcased in the case of Brit, who after encountering Florence and keeping her Hot Air Book (Smith 2019, 323), becomes more sensitive towards “the other story” and can no longer fully exclude it.

Smith’s engagement with xenophobic realities of immigration and detention was already evident in her contribution to the *Refugee Tales* project, a literary initiative that pairs writers with people who have experienced indefinite detention in the UK. Her short story *The Detainee’s Tale* (2016b) draws directly from the testimony of a person held in immigration detention, using fiction to give voice to often-silenced experiences. This background provides an essential context for *Spring* (2019), the third novel in her state-of-the-nation *Quartet*, which stands out from the sequence by paying particular attention to the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the (post-)Brexit political landscape within contemporary UK. John Masterson goes as far as to describe the novel as “amplifying its predecessors [*Autumn* (2016a) and *Winter* (2017)], offering readers a suitably estranging compass to chart the often toxic tides of official discourse” (2020, 356). The first chapter of *Spring* traces the journey of Richard Lease, a filmmaker, who spontaneously decides to travel from London to Scotland following the recent loss of his friend and co-worker, Paddy. During his journey, he meets Brittany Hall, a young woman working in one of the detention centres who travels with Florence Smith, a “magical,” highly intelligent child who is searching for her mother. Florence embodies Ali Smith’s frequently used trope of the stranger, serving as a kind of

litmus test for the rest of the characters and breaking the extreme realism of the narrative by adding a surreal element to it.

In *Spring*, the official discourse is constructed through the politically motivated use of language, making it a tool for performing various forms of propaganda and dehumanization. The manipulation exposed in the novel leads to the spread of demagoguery and othering of immigrant populations in the (post-) Brexit era. The novel's protest against the othering of foreign nationals becomes particularly vocal in its portrayal of detainment centres where the inhuman treatment of immigrants takes the shape of dehumanization that, consequently, deprives both detainees and employees of subjectivity and agency, transforming detainment centres into concentration camp-like spaces. As a result, populist government and post-truth politics are combined into a volatile mixture of intolerance, borderline fascism with aftersounds of nationalism and imperial nostalgia wherein dehumanization becomes a legitimate instrument of the bureaucratic government machine. At the same time, with Smith's inherent optimism, *Spring* offers an antidote to the politicized misuse of language in the form of faith in the power of language to tell stories, unite people, and give voice to those who happen to be the victimized target of political discourse.

Propaganda

Spring opens with one of three satirical passages written from a collective "we," embodying the voices of those behind the propaganda and populist agenda of the Leave campaign. Each of the passages has its own thematic focus (political discourse, social media, and sexism respectively), and they serve as openings for the three chapters of the novel. As the reader later learns, these passages belong to the pen of Florence and, as Brit thinks, are "funny pages, about *realism*, the foul things people really say or tweet" (Smith 2019, 323: emphasis in the original). *Spring*'s first sentence is a slightly modified quote from Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) and is perhaps a succinct and accurate observation of what has come to be called post-truth politics: "Now what we don't want is Facts. What we want is bewilderment. [...] What we want is people in power say the truth is not the truth" (Smith 2019, 3). The actions of Smith (both Florence and Ali) in this case fall into the logic of the famous Russian proverb stating that no axe can take out what the pen has written about and, as María del Pino Montesdeoca Cubas points it out while reading the first passage, "[w]e are hence provided with numerous items of news that might otherwise be forgotten" (2019, 74). Ali Smith's disagreement with the Leave campaign's political agenda becomes ostensibly visible as she mockingly expresses the hidden motivations of populists: "[w]e need news to be what we say it is. We need words to mean what we say they

mean. We need to deny what we are saying while we are saying it. We need it not to matter what words mean" (Smith 2019, 5). By placing such strong emphasis on the linguistic side of manipulation, Smith draws attention to the deliberate distortion of objective reality, in place of which the collective populist "we" creates an unstable environment of political propaganda, which is one of the most pronounced symptoms of post-truth politics.

One might argue that the lines above signify a troubled relationship with reasonableness, the latter being one of the key elements of any successful communication. In his book *How Propaganda Works* (2015), Jason Stanley, while analysing how demagoguery as a form of propaganda functions in a liberal democracy, states that demagoguery is a discourse that appears to take every perspective into account but that has the goal of rendering some reasonable perspectives invisible (Stanley 2015, 120–121). In other words, demagoguery pretends to be something that it is not, creating the illusion of following democratic ideals and, to some extent, collective consent. One of the biggest dangers of such an attitude is that it purposefully silences the opinions or reasons of those who do not agree with the enforced political agenda. The silenced group becomes the actual target of propaganda, for, as Stanley puts it, "reasonableness presupposes [...] the capacity for empathy for others. [...] [W]e should expect paradigm cases of propaganda to have as part of their communicative content that a group in society is not worthy of our respect. So one characteristic way to convey that a target is not worthy of respect is to cause one's audience to lose empathy for them" (Stanley 2015, 127).

The opening line of *Spring*, "We want the people we call foreign to feel foreign we need to make it clear they can't have rights unless we say so" (Smith 2019, 3), leaves little doubt about whom the Leave campaign cast as outsiders. The absence of punctuation, which typically signals semantic pauses, creates a sense of urgency and emotional escalation. As Jason Stanley argues, propaganda often appeals to emotions that are detached from reason (2015, 48), and the unpunctuated syntax amplifies the pressure and sense of threat that characterize much of the immigration discourse. The use of the pronoun "we" is not accidental. According to Quassim Cassam, identity propaganda relies on oppositional constructions of "us" versus "them" and "appeals to a narrative about who 'we' are, who 'they' are, and what 'they' are doing to 'us'" (2021, 60). In *Spring*, Smith makes this dynamic explicit: "[g]unships To Stop Migrants How Many More Can We Take Bolt Your Doors Hide Your Wives we want zero tolerance" (Smith 2019, 4). Tomasz Dobrogoszcz argues that such propagandistic constructions of identity arise from "the assumption that at the centre of British national identity is a void" (2021, 147), and that "the isolation of the allegedly menacing others facilitates the oppositional fabrication of the collective psyche of the British nation" (2021, 149). Within this context, the use of the pronoun

“we” can be understood not only as the exclusive “we” that deliberately excludes others but also as the inclusive “we.” As Steve Buckledee explains, the inclusive form “includes the interlocutor(s), as in ‘your aims are not so different from ours, so I’m sure we can reach an agreement acceptable to all’” (2018, 46). This formulation implies a cooperative stance, yet in the context of propaganda, it functions as a manipulative device that masks ideological exclusion behind the illusion of mutual agreement. The artificially constructed British identity promoted by the Leave campaign thus becomes paradoxical: it is simultaneously unified by, and defined against, the image of the threatening immigrant.

As immigrants’ status is reduced to objectified and menacing otherness, lack of empathy becomes a state-of-the-nation symptom, having a dehumanizing effect on society as such. One of *Spring*’s favoured characters, Paddy, Richard’s Irish friend, who was “Irish when being Irish in London was like being black and being a dog” (Smith 2019, 67), refuses to accept the state of paralysing indifference that accompanies political propaganda: “[f]uck compassion fatigue [...] That’s people walking about with dead souls” (Smith 2019, 67). What becomes clear from this state is that although demagoguery tries to present political discourse as actively engaging in dialogue with the population, in reality, it is characterized by its complete absence. Even if at first glance it may seem that supporters of the political agenda, in this case, supporters of the UK’s exit from the EU, are active participants in the discourse, the reality turns out to be paradoxically the opposite. When Brittany, one of the novel’s least politically engaged characters, is approached by a journalist from BBC and asked what she thinks about Brexit, Britt refuses to enter into a conversation “because what’s the point, if nobody in the end is going to listen to or care what other people think” (Smith 2019, 163). The displayed indifference creates an environment of passivity where people in power get the opportunity to legitimize any agenda without much resistance from the public.

Spring does not ignore the almost complete impunity of the sometimes-neofascist political agenda, multiplied by modern technology and social media. In a conversation with Paddy, Richard notes with some irony the omnipresence of ideas that would previously have led to the collapse of the government: “[r]acism. [...] Legitimized. Legitimized division 24/7 on all the news and in all the papers, on so many screens, grace of the god of endless new beginnings, the god we call the internet” (Smith 2019, 67). The broadcasting of xenophobia as a normalized form of media production evokes associations with the political rhetoric of Europe in the middle of the last century. Richard places the post-Brexit reality in a broader and frightening historical context of The Second World War:

An awful time, he says. Truly. I always feel so relieved not to have had to live through it. Always on television now, always the same awful pieces of footage, the same faces, same thugs shouting don’t buy from Jews, same

shopfronts with the slogans painted on them, same terrorized bullied people being filmed walking towards trains or away from them in the mud, same old Hitler shouting footage. As if such terrible history's a kind of entertainment. All that poison. All that anger. All that brutality. All that loss. You'd think we'd learn from it. But no, instead we play it on repeat, let it play away in the corner of the room while we go on with our lives regardless. Terrible times, easily resurrected. Type in some words, up it comes on any screen. It's a bit like that song playing a minute ago on the radio. I have this same thought in supermarkets too when they play, you know, music from decades ago as if it's the soundtrack of now. Well, it is the soundtrack of now. (Smith 2019, 241; emphasis in the original)

Comparison of contemporaneity with the recurring tragic events of the past blurs the boundary between past and present, turning the events described in the novel into a distorted repetition of the past. At the same time, comparing WWII footage to a "kind of entertainment" signals a lack of empathy for the victims of genocide, contributing to the dehumanization and xenophobia. The constant repetition of otherwise terrifying images might lead to them starting to be perceived as normal, creating a legitimized background for other time illegal actions. As Hannah Arendt commented while talking about the "banality of evil" in connection with Adolf Eichmann, one of the main organizers of the Holocaust, "[t]he trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. [...] [T]his normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together" (Arendt 2006, 276). Arendt observes that the result of Nazi propaganda was the creation of conditions in which the commission of crimes against humanity was legitimized to such an extent that it was impossible for the perpetrator "to know or to feel that he is doing wrong" (Arendt 2006, 276). While *Spring* does not claim that what is happening in post-Brexit England is a virtual replica of the events of the last century, it does make it clear that the current political course of nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric could result in a humanitarian catastrophe.

Dehumanization

Ali Smith's concerns about the dehumanizing effects of anti-immigrant propaganda are embodied in her criticism of the network of Immigration Removal Centres (IRC). Brittany, who works at one of these, describes it not as a prison but "a purpose-built Immigration Removal Centre with a prison design" (Smith 2019, 160). The prison-like design of the detention centres seems a natural consequence

of the marginalization of immigrants as products of political propaganda and legitimized xenophobia. Peter Arnds in his book *Wolves at the Door: Migration, Dehumanization, Rewilding the World* (2021) puts an emphasis on the often criminalizing or even inhuman portrayal of immigrants:

The language and imagery used for migrants reinforce the perception of them as trespassers and criminals, implying fears of their appearance in large numbers or as lone crazed terrorists. This has, in particular, been the case in recent political rhetoric that casts migration as a criminal act, equating migrants with parasitic, predatory animals and warning against being “flooded” or overrun by “hordes” or “swarms” of people. (Arnds 2021, 1)

Being a result of identity propaganda, dehumanizing labelling of certain groups of people, especially comparing them to animals or insects, is particularly dangerous for, as Jason Stanley points out, there is a well-established link between genocide and dehumanizing propaganda (2015, 150). Moreover, “[t]he message of such representation is to legitimate the kind of treatment our society recommends for the relevant kind of animal” (Stanley 2015, 160). In other words, the dehumanizing use of language seeks to displace the humanity of the targeted group by imposing their perception through the lens of their inferiority.

In her article “*Because It’s Easier to Kill That Way*”: *Dehumanizing Epithets, Militarized Subjectivity, and American Necropolitics* (2021), Janet McIntosh, exploring the aspects of dehumanization in the militaristic sphere of the United States, develops a definition of dehumanization based on Wierzbicka’s notion of nominalization as purposeful “categorizing a person in terms of a single property” which, in its term, leads to “the exclusion of other properties” (Wierzbicka qtd. in McIntosh 2021, 585). Describing dehumanization as denying someone the presence of positively connoted human qualities, the author draws attention to a wide range of specific forms in which dehumanization can manifest itself, including “likening a person to an animal or object, and/or treating them as if intrinsically polluting” (McIntosh 2021, 585). In IRC, the detainees are detached from their subjectivity and identity and are referred to as “deets,” a dehumanizing term which, as Brittany notes, can be replaced: “according to some DCO [Detention Centre Officer] *scrotum*, *pigbollocks*, *penis* and *pricks* were all suitable things to call deets” (Smith 2019, 150; emphasis in the original). In her paper, Janet McIntosh puts an accent on how the language used to dehumanize the enemy often consists of half-understood, not particularly clear concepts (2021, 591). Similarly, the nominalization “deet” is not provided with any clear explanation or conceptual clarity, at first offered only as a term used by DCOs to refer to IRC detainees. The dehumanizing nature of the term is contextually defined after the reader becomes witness to Brittany’s conversation with “deets” who are refused

such basic human needs as (clean) toilets, fresh air, and personal space (Smith 2019, 159–160). The prison cells lack any form of seclusion: the sleeping areas are not divided by any barriers from the lavatories, which results in detainees refusing nutrition: “[t]he toilets had no lids and most of them were in the room with no screen or anything between them and the beds. This had a good knock-on effect of a lot of deets not eating much, given that nobody unless they’re insane wants to shit in front of anyone else” (Smith 2019, 151). After two months of working in the detainment centre, Brittany starts viewing privacy as one of the constituents of subjectivity and agency for privacy meant “she wasn’t a deet” (Smith 2019, 165).

The scenes of linguistic and other forms of abuse, to which detainees are subject within the network of IRCs bear a certain similarity to Giorgio Agamben’s notion of the concentration camp as an ultimate form of reducing a person’s life to “bare life” (Agamben 1998), that is to the biological side of life only with no attention paid to how this life is lived: “[h]ow dare you ask for a blanket. The day she heard herself say the last one she [Brit] knew something terrible was happening” (Smith 2019, 166; emphasis in the original). Indefinitely detained within the IRC camp-like network, people become subject to the exercise of institutional power within a state of exception where the boundary between legal and illegal becomes blurred: “[w]hoever entered the camp moved in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit” (Agamben 1998, n. p.). Among the list of things Brit learned while being a DCO (Detainment Centre Officer) was that for detainees “there was isolation for kicking off. No bedding, lights on 24/7, security checks every 15 mins 24/7” (Smith 2019, 150). Such treatment demonstrates not only the state’s power over immigrants’ identity and agency but also an abusive control over physical processes such as rest and sleep.

At the same time, Agamben’s definition of the concentration camp, especially the part detailing, concerning “whoever” enters it, implies that those exercising power within the camp are equally under its dehumanizing effects. Janet McIntosh emphasizes how within the military sphere in the United States not only those who can be classified as an “enemy” but also army recruiters are brought into the zone of dehumanization, for “[t]he prequel to dehumanizing the enemy is the dehumanization of American service members themselves” (McIntosh 2021, 586). The dehumanizing use of language leads to recruiters’ “recreation” of their identity as detached from their subjectivity and agency, thus subject to dehumanization and unquestionable following of orders. This, consequently, results in recruiters seeing the enemy as a similarly objectified Other, hence equally subject to dehumanization and, worse, killing. In *Spring*, as Harald Pittel points out, “the inmates’ reduction to bare life also affects the guards” (2023, 140) and becomes clear from Brittany’s alienated self-reference as a “machine” (Smith

2019, 171), allowing her to distance herself from the dehumanizing conditions of her work, where “it didn’t really matter, then, what or who Brit was” (Smith 2019, 164). Brittany appears similarly indefinitely detained, being no longer able to differentiate between the inside and outside of the IRC: “But she was sort of always there, even when she wasn’t” (Smith 2019, 132), transforming detainment centres into claustrophobic, no-way-out spaces.

The “machine” metaphor is present throughout the whole narration. Although initially presented as nothing more than a play on words with the name of the indie band Florence and the Machine, it becomes one of the declarations of the dehumanizing tendencies, equally affecting both prisoners and employees. The metaphor is also consonant with Hannah Arendt’s description of the authoritarian regime, towards which we, according to Ali Smith, are heading: “The essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them” (Arendt 2006, 289). A similar sentiment is expressed in *Spring* when Brit, answering to her mother about her job, gives a self-deprecating description of her job: “I am a DCO at one of the IRCs employed by the private security firm SA4A who on behalf of the HO run the Spring, The Field, the Worth, the Valley, the Oak, the Berry, the Garland, the Grove, the Meander, the Wood and one or two others, she said” (Smith 2019, 133). The conspicuous use of the indefinite article before DCO hints at Brit’s perception of her role as one of the many cogs in the power machine. At the same time, a whole catalogue of names for detention centres, each of which bears a seemingly harmless name associated with nature, carries echoes of the propaganda trait of replacing reality with illusion, trying to pass itself off as something less alarming than it is.

The dehumanizing effect of detainment centres on its employment does not limit itself to the “machine” metaphor. At one point in the narration, Brittany remarks to Torq, allegedly the first to have coined the term “deet”: “[i]t’s an insect repellent, you know. [...] You calling them deets makes us the insects, she said” (Smith 2019, 134). Torq’s reply reveals the even more dangerous consequences of dehumanizing language: “I’ll explain, he said. Everything about this job is repellent. And you got to be careful with Deet. Your speech can get slurred, you can feel really sick, it’s a neurotoxin, under your skin going right into you. Numbness, coma. Just warning you early on so you can monitor yourself for the signs, Britannia” (Smith 2019, 134). The wordplay with Brit’s name, that is calling her by the name of the personified symbol of Great Britain, expands the dehumanizing effect of IRC to a nationwide level, warning the readers of the potentially poisonous effects current political solutions may result in. The alienating, numbing effect of Brit’s job becomes clear after she refuses to give a blanket to one of the detainees and the terrible things she has just said: “felt quite far away, as if not happening to her, as if happening beyond perspex, like

the stuff in the windows in the centre, which weren't windows, though they were designed to look like windows" (Smith 2019, 166). The results of the dehumanizing propaganda thus appear toxic for both "us" and "them" of the propagandistic discourse, leaving the whole society in a state of paralysing lack of empathy for other human beings.

"Vivunt Spe"

Despite all the darkness of *Spring*, Smith nonetheless believes there is still some hope left for the rise of "new life" described as "already at work," the elevation of the season to the "great connective" (Smith 2019, 336). Aware of how language can be abused to construct a narrative of manipulation and oppression (and *Seasonal Quartet* serves as proof of that), Smith nonetheless believes that language is the key to communication and the preservation of humanity. In the first part of the novel, Paddy, who has witnessed the dark times of history repeating themselves not once, has faith in the ability of language to resist even the most disheartening times: "[t]here's ways to survive these times [...] and I think one way is the shape the telling takes" (Smith 2019, 21). As John Masterson puts it, "this encapsulates Smith's primary preoccupation in *Autumn*, *Winter* and *Spring*: the knot, slippery or secure, between storytelling and survival" (2020, 361). Thus, by the very act of writing a novel, Smith demonstrates that if political discourse is nothing more than a constructed narrative, there is always the possibility of rewriting it, of creating a literary and linguistic space in which the voices of those who have been silenced by the political agenda can be heard.

The key figure in Smith's attempt to fight against political propaganda and dehumanization happening within the detainment centres is Florence Smith, for she "functions as the embodiment of [Ali] Smith's literary resistance. [...] Rumoured to be a migrant who undertook a sea-crossing from Greece, Florence offers a form of living hope to those facing indefinite detention" (Shaw 2021, 124). When reading the passages written by Florence, Brit "worked out, from how the girl has positioned them on the pages, that some of the pieces have been written to go together as if they are in sort of dialogues with each other, the right wing stuff answered by a voice bigger than it" (Smith 2019, 323). Written "like little stories" (Smith 2019, 199), some of the passages are narrated by those who were silenced and othered by the political discourse and become spaces of witnessing and challenging the Leave campaign propaganda.

Writing as a form of storytelling then acquires symbolic importance, especially as we can see Richard, whom Florence saved from suicide, never parting with a pen, an instrument for writing that Florence gave him. At the beginning of the novel, Richard, devastated by the loss of his friend, is no longer

willing to partake in writing the story of his life: “[t]here is no story. He’s had it with story. He is removing himself from story” (Smith 2019, 11). The absence of a definite or indefinite article before the word ‘story’ not only turns it into a generalized metaphysical concept but also allows to interpret storytelling as a form of experiencing life. The connection between life and storytelling is further reinforced as both Richard and Smith highlight the impossibility of avoiding it: “[t]here was no story. [...] Except, there is” (Smith 2019, 15; emphasis in the original). Richard’s attitude towards storytelling changes radically after his meeting Florence, and towards the end of the novel Richard becomes an active storyteller, making a film about the Auld Alliance (Smith 2019, 269–276), “a nationwide-network of anonymous members utilizing the rail system to help detainees escape IRCs” (Shaw 2021, 124). Richard starts viewing the pen Florence gave him as a source of inspiration for his (creative) life and swears to “keep it in the inside pocket of every jacket or coat he wears for the rest of his life” (Smith 2019, 261). Florence’s “magical” or “hypnotic” properties, mentioned several times in the novel, thus become her ability to engage in or establish dialogue or storytelling, to respond to overwhelming discourse, restoring people’s ability to feel empathy and resist the paralysing power of political monologization.

Florence’s ability to create dialogue has a humanizing effect on other characters, on Brit in particular. During their first meeting at the train station, Brit notices a weird coat of arms on her school form saying “Vivunt Spe” (Smith 2019, 171) which her ex-boyfriend later explains to mean “live in hope or they are living in hope. Something like that. Unusual conjugation” (Smith 2019, 325). Being a reference to William Shakespeare’s play *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (1609), the motto foreshadows Florence’s role “as a modern-day Marina” who “possesses enough virtue and rhetorical persuasiveness” (Jordan 2019, n. p.) to survive even the hardest of times. Florence becomes a symbol of hope for Brit, poisoned by her working conditions, as she convinces Brit to embark with her on a train journey to Scotland aiming to locate her mother by asking help from Auld Alliance. During the train ride, Brit and Florence play a dialogically structured question-and-answer game, which seems like something from a fairy tale for Brit (Smith 2019, 201), who is used to existing in a state of detachment from her personality and indifference from/to others. The Lucky13 game has a truly humanizing effect on Brit, restoring her capacity to perceive herself as a personality: “[s]he literally can’t believe her own life. She is clever again. She is witty and entertaining” (Smith 2019, 198). As Harald Pittel puts it, “[a]nimating a storytelling ethic, this is how the self can be tentatively brought into discourse and an anchor for self-narration is established” (2023, 145). Brittany is finally able to reconnect with her sense of identity and as such now has the hope to display resilience to the dehumanizing atmosphere of the detainment centres. Florence later calls it “the humanizing the machine programme” (Smith 2019, 310), and being “clever with

words [...] and going to write books" (Smith 2019, 310), probably about Brittany as well, she contributes to rewriting the dehumanizing narrative surrounding the immigration crisis. While the novel does not depict a radical transformation in Brit's character – she remains employed at the IRC –, the humanizing effects of her interaction with Florence are nonetheless evident. For instance, she expresses previously absent empathy, feeling "sorry for the hunger striker" (Smith 2019, 327). The final sentence of the novel, while open-ended, implies a tentative hope that Brit might now begin to distance herself from the numbness imposed by her workplace: "Got to stop taking my work home with me, she thinks to herself" (Smith 2019, 329).

Conclusions

Spring presents a critical reflection on the post-Brexit contemporaneity, where political propaganda, xenophobia, and dehumanization have become not only threatening possibilities for the future but a frightening reality. *Spring* exposes how official political discourse has become a field for identity propaganda, which becomes a kind of legalizing background for dehumanizing actions. The main goal of this propaganda is to exclude the immigrant population and present them as a threatening Other. Anti-immigrant rhetoric reaches alarming proportions when the dehumanizing nature of detention centres, which deprive immigrants of basic human rights, results in them being perceived as concentration camps. At the same time, detention centres have a dehumanizing effect on their workers, which, as the reader sees in the example of Brittany Hall, results in a detachment from their own identity and a feeling of apathy. However, Ali Smith, presenting political discourse as a narrative, does not lose faith in the ability of language to resist it while Florence Smith becomes a symbol of hope and the ability of language to oppose propaganda and humanize people.

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