

# From Silence to Dialogic Discourse in Selected Short Stories by Ali Smith<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the contemporary Scottish writer Ali Smith, specifically on the motifs of silence, voice, and Bakhtinian dialogism in her short stories “The Hanging Girl” and “The College”. A brief introduction to the relevant history, traditions, and concepts in Scottish writing in general and Scottish women’s writing in particular is provided to contextualise Smith’s fiction and illustrate how the author engages with her cultural heritage and how she updates it to address current issues. The selected stories are representative of Smith’s work in that they deal with the recurrent themes of loss, death, and longing for a genuine human connection. Smith explores manifestations of otherness in all senses of the word and pushes the possibilities of heteroglot interillumination of perspectives to give a voice to those who have been silenced, forgotten, or repressed by the dominant monoglot discourse. The stories in question, as well as Smith’s other fiction, include multiple voices and juxtapose different views while refraining from allowing any single of them to dominate the others. Ultimately, Smith’s forceful stories of human interest establish conditions of dialogic heteroglossia to draw attention to what we share as human beings rather than what makes us different from one another.

**Keywords:** Ali Smith, Scottish literature, Bakhtin, dialogism, silence

Before undertaking to analyse in depth the specific details of Ali Smith’s dialogic literary texts, one needs to be aware of the broader context in which they have been created. Much to Smith’s chagrin, she is conventionally pigeonholed by contemporary criticism as a Scottish lesbian woman writer. While these labels are certainly not untrue and may provide a helpful starting point for a first-time reader, they are inevitably grossly reductive. Filing Smith under the category of Scottish women’s writing, narrowed down even further by the attribute

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of sexuality, might misleadingly imply that the writer's overarching agenda is to engage directly with questions of nationalism, feminism, and sexual identity. This could have been the case with writers emerging at the onset of what retrospectively came to be known as the second Scottish literary renaissance, a powerful revitalisation and new flourishing of Scottish literature starting in the early 1980s. However, it does not apply to the strictly apolitical Ali Smith, whose works exhibit no overt agenda apart from the artistic one: "Art's the whole point," she explains her motivation (Wagner 2015, 53). Even so, Smith cannot help her art emerging from the Scottish background, just as she cannot help her happening to be a woman, both of which have traditionally been rather less favourable circumstances to nourish creative writing.

Ali Smith embarked on her literary career in the early 1990s, well after the publication of the monumental *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981), the ground-breaking first novel by the iconoclast and doyen of Scottish letters, Alasdair Gray, which was a major milestone that arguably ignited the rise of Scottish writing from a neglected periphery to the position of a force to be reckoned with. Before *Lanark* and before a host of new writers directly or indirectly inspired either by the book or by its charismatic author, the standing of Scottish literature was perhaps as precarious as the standing of the stateless Scottish nation within the convenient but problematic construct of the United Kingdom. The 1707 Act of Union, which joined into a single political entity the formerly sovereign kingdoms of Scotland and England, respectively, was a bond of reason rather than a bond of love. An ensuing series of attempts to restore Scottish independence, known collectively as the Jacobite risings, culminated in the decisive Battle of Culloden in 1746, where the Scottish rebels were crushed, and repercussions followed with the aim of suppressing the Scottish spirit and individuality manifested in indigenous culture and traditional ways of life. Renewed calls for a free Scotland, leading up to a failed devolution referendum in 1979, a successful second attempt in 1997, and an independence referendum in 2014, testify to the fact that the idea of a sovereign state is by no means a matter of the bygone past.

Given the deeply rooted continuing tensions between the two nations that share a single state, it follows that Scottish writers start from a particularly difficult position, as often as not divided between defiant national pride and a gnawing sense of their own inadequacy, even inferiority, and parochiality. The intrinsic ambivalence informing the Scottish perspective is exemplified by Robert Louis Stevenson's seminal novella *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886),

which revolves around the ideas of duality, duplicity, and doubles and which has inspired numerous retellings, reimaginings, and indirect nods by later authors. In various shapes, the motif of duality therefore continues to reappear in Scottish literature up to the present; Gray's *Lanark*, already mentioned above, is based on the mirroring of seemingly different fictional worlds and characters, and the trope of ghostly doubles is also present in Ali Smith's stories, as will be discussed further on. While certainly not unique to Scotland, duality forms such a strongly perceived part of the Scottish character that it has earned a term of its own, "Caledonian antisyzygy", coined by G. Gregory Smith, who concludes on the subject thus: "If therefore Scottish history and life are, as an old northern writer said of something else, 'varied with a clean contrair [sic] spirit,' we need not be surprised to find that in his literature the Scot presents two aspects which appear contradictory. Oxymoron was ever the bravest figure, and we must not forget that disorderly order is order after all" (Smith 1919, 4-5).

One last general observation that is pertinent specifically to Scottish women's writing has to do with the traditionally overtly masculine nature of Scottish culture in general and its literature in particular. Apart from rare exceptions, the most notable being the prodigious Scottish writer in exile Muriel Spark, there has been little space allowed either to fully-fledged female protagonists or indeed to female writers. To begin with, Scotland's literature struggled to forge its own peculiar identity and fell back on defining itself in negative terms, that is, in opposition to England's literature. This strategy can be well illustrated by means of the now internationally recognised Irvine Welsh, whose *Trainspotting*, both as a book (1993) and a film (1996), startled its first audiences with its authentic rendition of urban working-class dialect and its unflinching portrayal of the sordid realities of Edinburgh's housing-scheme low-lives. Kirstin Innes aptly summarises the ambivalent contribution of this cult classic as follows:

Whereas there can be no doubt that *Trainspotting* has successfully ruptured the hegemony of middle-class Standard English narration, the novel's popularity has helped facilitate the reconsolidation of other hegemonic structures. The much-fêted new visibility of Scottish culture, which coincides with the working-class male's literary enfranchisement, appears to be won at the expense of women, gay men and ethnic minorities, whose voices are silenced by the new literature's blatant misogyny, homophobia and racism. (Innes 2007, 303)

Welsh's book epitomises the noisy masculinity and the calculated anti-English stance characteristic of the type of Scottish writing which is somewhat burdened by its self-imposed task of consciously setting an appropriate direction for a post-devolution national literature and which tends to err in simply substituting one dominant discourse for another.

Ali Smith, poignantly dubbed "a writer of otherness" (McRae and Carter 2004, 138), comments along the same lines on the relative novelty in Scotland of the voices of women and other previously unheard minorities:

People are particularly keen to categorize themselves as different . . . from English . . . To be Scottish is to be separate; that's why . . . Scottish women's writing has only really been given a place . . . in the last ten years . . . The idea that there are other forms of difference apart from this one. (Gonda 1995, 5; ellipses in the original)

Smith positively embraces difference and otherness in all senses of the word in that she typically works with the least likely candidates for characters, giving space not only to social outcasts, the inarticulate, young children at one end and the dying at the other, but also the outright dead and their ghosts. Reflecting on her creative process, Smith observes that to her "everything has voice", even suggesting that "everything is voice", and goes on to elaborate on her preoccupation with the authority of voice: "At every point there's a calibration of voice happening, and what's interesting to me really is what the calibration is, where it's coming from, who's got the authority to have the voice" (Beer 2013, 138). Smith is, however, completely uninterested in establishing any single authoritative voice to guide her narrative; quite the contrary, she refuses to prefer one voice over another and lets multiple voices overlap, leaving it up to the readers to construct their version of the story out of the often contradictory accounts. Working on the small scale of everyday ordinary lives that are inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, she eschews a unitary voice and a master narrative in favour of "a narrative free-for-all", as she terms it (Beer 2013, 146).

The evolving stance of Scottish literature, with Ali Smith representing the culmination of its current democratic direction, can be fruitfully described in terms of M. M. Bakhtin's dialogic theory of discourse in the novel, which is certainly also applicable to short fiction, and which does not regard literary language as an isolated entity but rather considers its broader sociopolitical ramifications.

Bakhtin's case for dialogism turns on the premise that human language "is never unitary" and that any attempts to impose unity will result in creating an artificial construct hovering dangerously "in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualizations that fill it, and in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is a characteristic of all living language" (Bakhtin 1981, 288). The establishment of a single unitary language, which Bakhtin terms the condition of monoglossia, represents the dictatorship of the centripetal forces that push towards uniformity and thus engage in a conflict with the decentralising centrifugal forces, which promote the inevitable existence of multiple languages, termed polyglossia (Bakhtin 1981, 270-72). Bakhtin argues for a disruption of the hegemonic monoglot discourse and for free rein to be given to heteroglossia, which he understands as an "internally dialogized interillumination" or "inter-animation of languages" (Bakhtin 1981, 363, 51). In the history of the novelistic discourse, Bakhtin identifies two major factors that drive heteroglossia forwards: one of them is the already-mentioned natural state of polyglossia, while the other is the anarchic power of laughter generated by "parodic-travestying literature" which offers a "corrective reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly *too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fitted into a high and straightforward genre" (Bakhtin 1981, 50, 55; italics in the original).

In keeping with the above theoretical observations as formulated by Bakhtin, the writing of Ali Smith represents what Peter Clandfield and Christian Lloyd describe as "redevelopment fiction", a new strain in Scottish literature that marks a shift from the national to the international, from the local to the global, and in the case of Ali Smith also from explicitly Scottish settings, characters, and themes to concerns with a more universal resonance (Clandfield and Lloyd 2007, 124). Clandfield and Lloyd argue that "rather than cultivating pathos or disaffection", which are typical of devolutionary fiction, more recent Scottish writings "acknowledge the inevitability of redevelopment and insist that literature can help map and guide the process of renovation, as well as challenge any grandiose, ideologically motivated attempts to channel and dictate its course" (Clandfield and Lloyd 2007, 131). Smith certainly steers clear of the grandiose, and while she unrepentantly challenges authority, she does not do so in an aggressive manner or in order to replace one set of beliefs with another. Instead, she offers insights into the perceptions of multiple competing parties and disturbs her readers' complacency by drawing attention to previously neglected perspectives and unheard voices. In Bakhtinian terms, Smith rejects the hegem-

ony of monoglossia and absorbs in her fictional discourse the plurality of polyglossia, letting the various languages and idioms interact, interanimate, and interilluminate one another. Olga Roebuck poignantly characterises Smith's approach as a quest to cast a spotlight on the "authenticity of a specific experience rather than speaking on behalf of some collective identity" (Roebuck 2019, 122). Despite Smith's penchant for quirky characters and on-the-edge experiences, often revolving around the themes of breakdown, loss, and death, the author seeks to highlight what members of the human race, alive or dead, have in common rather than what divides us.

Although Smith focuses on the private over the public and the personal over the political, she does not avoid addressing current topical issues, however indirectly, weaving them into a story of human interest rather than making them the sole point of her narrative. A case in point is "The Hanging Girl" from her second collection, *Other Stories and Other Stories* (1999). This deeply disturbing short story opens with a depiction of a young girl's public hanging, which is staged as a film set, complete with a television crew, since the execution will be both televised live and available as playback for viewers who wish to watch again. An episode in the television series *This Is My Death*, the presentation of the hanging resembles a theatre performance or, even more, a reality show:

Here I go here I go here I go again the big number one more time ladies and gentlemen put your hands together please for this little lady a singer a swinger in the performance of a lifetime (music applause) start spreading the noose I'm leaving today slow slow build it build it up blast it out thank you thank you ladiesangentlemen I'm a little hoarse forgive me my throat's a little tight for it today but a very warm welcome to the show I'm your (g)host for this evening morning afternoon evening morning afternoon. (Smith 2004, 16)

This is the only moment in the story when the victim is allowed to speak, alas, not in a voice of her own, which is literally stuck in her throat, but almost as a mechanical medium used to reproduce a script written by someone else. As Jess Orr notes, Smith here alludes to Walter Benjamin's critical essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), updating Benjamin's concerns to the present era of routinely televised violence, actual and fictional, side by side to the point of their mutual confusion:

When watching news images of war-torn countries and human suffering, for example, spectators may feel as though they are watching a fictional film, due to the sophisticated special effects they have become used to encountering. In this regard, our responses to actual real-life horrors have been pre-empted by cinematic depictions and can become almost automatic. (Orr 2019, 56)

In this respect, Smith's shock technique in the story forcefully illustrates how by being constantly exposed to brutal scenes, we have become desensitised inasmuch as we perceive suffering and death as banal occurrences and even trade them as commodities.

Even the short extract from the girl's last speech quoted above makes it clear that instances of chilling irony and gallows humour abound in her utterance, which can be described, in line with Bakhtin, as a parodic discourse, in other words, "an intentional dialogized hybrid" presenting "a dialogue between points of view" in that "two 'languages' (both intra-lingual) come together and to a certain extent are crossed with each other: the language being parodied and the language that parodies" (Bakhtin 1981, 75–76). Unable to use a language entirely of her own making, and probably not being in possession of such language in the first place, the hanging girl adapts the stock phrases of show presenters and twists them sufficiently so as to convey a parodying, travestying, or carnivalesque effect, as Bakhtin would have it. Despite the girl's clever appropriation of the hegemonic monoglossia, a truly dialogic discourse is not established at the moment because an essential party is missing – that of a responsive listener. Bakhtin calls this requirement "an *active* understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse", as opposed to "a passive understanding of discourse", which only involves "an understanding of an utterance's *neutral signification* and not its *actual meaning*" (Bakhtin 1981, 280–81; italics in the original). Apart from the film crew, who busy themselves with the technical aspects of the job and do not seem to notice the horrendousness of the task at all, the spectators of the execution remain unseen, safe in the anonymity of their homes. With no perceptive audience available and no hope of any active understanding taking place, the victim resorts to silence for the rest of the story, muted by the monolithic discourse of monoglossia.

"The Hanging Girl" then moves on from the eponymous object of the spectacle to the subject that is being entertained by it, embodied by the unremarkable

Pauline Gaitskill, who suddenly finds her health failing for no apparent reason. She accordingly seeks help at institutions of health and social care but finds the system deeply dysfunctional, meeting with a lack of interest and disrespect, even hostility and humiliation. Pauline recalls an ominous incident at her and her partner's housewarming party just before she fell ill, when the television was running in the background, showing at intervals footage of heaps of dead bodies, which the intoxicated hostess and her guests deemed irresistibly hilarious at that moment. The ghosts that she was laughing at, however, return to haunt her, and Pauline soon starts seeing, or hallucinating, the hanged girl with the noose still around her neck. When the girl materialises to her hanging from a lamppost and, once the rope is cut, landing limp on the ground, Pauline instinctively rushes to scoop her up and invites the ghost to stay at her home. The two become unlikely friends, with Pauline beginning to look increasingly like a ghost herself, losing weight and wasting away. Pauline concentrates all her efforts on lovingly caring for the girl's ghost, trying to make her feel welcome, safe, and at home, comforting the girl so that she does not feel different because of the noose that she keeps on wearing and refuses to have removed, perhaps because she feels that it is integral to her identity and cannot be simply cut off from her:

I tell her, to comfort her, because she must need comfort, that there's nothing so strange or different about it, that she's missing nothing, that it's the same for everyone; every one of us falling through air with one end of the rope attached to our birthdates till the rope pulls tight. Some people just have less far to fall, I say. (Smith 2004, 27)

Pauline is the only one to see the hanging girl, acknowledge her, and embrace her as she is, thus accepting a collective responsibility for any past wrongdoings instead of looking away or dismissing her own attempts at rectification as "displaced guilt", as Pauline's therapist puts it (Smith 2004, 30). Indeed, as Jorge Sacido-Romero suggests, the hanging girl can be read as symbolising a "ghost of the past that calls for an ethical transformation of the world inhabited by those who deny its existence to preserve a cynically inhumane, ludicrously rigid, and secretly obscene social functioning" (Sacido-Romero 2016, 99).

Along with numerous other stories by Smith, "The Hanging Girl" offers a strikingly original treatment of the theme of individual trauma, which, accord-

ing to Gemma López Sánchez, “has come to describe a whole cultural *Zeitgeist*” and which, in Smith’s fiction, is typically represented “through repression and silence” (López Sánchez 2010, 44, 46). The hanging girl does not speak, ostensibly because she is dead, but also because she happens to be a victim of trauma which is unspeakable and politely unspoken of; in other words, she embodies a voice that has been repressed. She is reduced to re-enacting her traumatic experience again and again in different ways, exploring various places in Pauline’s house to hang herself from. However perversely, by deliberately hanging herself rather than being hanged by order of an external, imposed authority, the girl comes to enjoy being hanged as a pastime and even uses hanging from unexpected places to amuse her hostess, as the latter believes. In bringing the spectral visitor to her home, Pauline does not invite death over the threshold but effectively explores new ways of experiencing life, since “the spectre intrudes upon the tradition-steeped living,” Stephen M. Levin argues, “creating significant struggles that nonetheless hold the potential to restore life to the living” (Levin 2013, 38). Even though the spectral girl remains deprived of speech, she connects with Pauline intimately on a non-verbal level through symbolic gestures conveying friendship, trust, and love, such as when she lets Pauline tuck her in for the night, breathes with her as one being, and puts her hand on Pauline’s heart. Pauline sings for her little friend, as singing is “a universal language”, and continues to talk at her despite the fact that the girl shows neither any understanding of language nor any interest in grasping the concept (Smith 2004, 26). Ultimately, each of them sticks to her own preferred means of communication without forcing it on the other, so that previously gaping “silences are filled up with meaning, love and life”, as López Sánchez sums up (López Sánchez 2010, 55).

In the conclusion of the short story, Pauline finds herself entirely alienated from the world of the living and comes to identify herself with the dead girl up to the moment when she re-enacts the girl’s plunge to death on the gallows by jumping off the garage roof and breaking her leg on impact. The subversive carnivalesque strain underlying the story comes to the foreground again in the closing scene, which neatly refers back to the opening paragraphs describing the original hanging, as after her haphazard jump, “Pauline lay on the grass with her leg jutting up. Tears streamed across her face and she was laughing” (Smith 2004, 34). The responding police officer called by a neighbour dismisses Pauline’s anarchic laughter as hysteria, but there seems to be more depth to her apparently unmotivated mirth. That is, notwithstanding the pain of the broken

leg, Pauline experienced an intoxicating moment of transcendental connection when her ghost friend summoned multitudes of creatures like herself, forming “a great greyed carpet studded with lost things”, all gathering to watch Pauline’s free fall: “The silence like a cheer going up, roaring round my head when, flung into the air, diving like a bad swimmer into it, I went over the edge” (Smith 2004, 35). The crucial difference between the girl’s death by hanging and Pauline’s leap of faith from the roof lies in the respective audiences of the events: the former was observed by indifferent or invisible spectators, while the latter was accompanied by a supportive crowd, whose silence Pauline confidently interpreted as roaring cheers of encouragement. At the beginning of their relationship, Pauline perceived the ghost girl’s silence as an absence of language; however, her initial impression evolved into an understanding of silence as a language in its own right, perhaps the only viable language fully belonging to the speaker, considering Bakhtin’s maxim that “language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (Bakhtin 1981, 294).

Loss of voice, silence, and solipsism on one hand and a painful desire for communication, connection, and understanding on the other hand also underlie another of Smith’s hallmark stories, “The College”, from her first collection, *Free Love and Other Stories* (1995). On the surface an almost quotidian story of young Alex’s struggle to come to terms with her sister Gillian’s death in a diving accident, on closer reading it turns out to be a characteristically multifaceted narrative touching on a range of themes, including Smith’s preoccupation with the authority of voice. Smith likes to experiment with a juxtaposition of contending voices without ascribing authority over the others to any one voice. As Daniel Lea observes:

Stylistically her writing embraces fragmentation and multi-perspectivalism to reflect the crumbling of singular, authoritarian voices in contemporary discourses. Her narratives are filled with contrasting points of view, invoked in a restless marriage of difference and competitiveness, each seeking the privilege of primacy. The voices explain the world as it appears to them, but none are allowed the satisfaction of authoring the truths of others’ experience. (Lea 2016, 27)

A hostile clash of competing voices is shown in what should have been a harmless exchange of trivial remarks but instead immediately turns into an inexplicable conflict symptomatic of a deeply seated discord in the dead girl's family, where the parents are separated but still maintain an on-and-off relationship, much to Alex's chagrin:

This was a very different England from home, like a foreign country really. . . . When she'd said that as they drove past the colleges her father had said it *was* a foreign country, either that or a different planet, and her mother had got angry and said it was a beautiful place and that Gillian had loved it here. A silence had filled the car. (Smith 1995, 89; italics in the original)

Apart from this ill-advised remark, Alex refrains from initiating conversation, gives monosyllabic answers, and resorts to silence throughout most of the story, but underneath her composed appearance she boils with anger and in her internal monologue she lashes out at the world. Her defiance goes beyond the ordinary teenage angst because she feels that she is alone in her bereavement and cannot even begin to understand the outright frivolousness of her parents, who go about their business as usual and fail to as much as notice their surviving daughter's anguish. Alex seems paralysed by the trauma of her sister's death and exasperated by the fact that the world does not come to a standstill and that the people with whom she has brief encounters do not acknowledge Gillian's untimely demise as the only thing that matters, in Alex's eyes.

The outward action of the short story consists of the family taking a trip to the college attended by Gillian to be there for the delivery and placement on the premises of a wooden bench with an inscribed dedication to the deceased. While the sentiment is surely commendable, the execution fails to rise to the piety of the occasion, starting already with the delivery men unloading the heavy bench quite unceremoniously, "shifting the weight to and from each other, first to get it out of the van and then as a kind of game, calling to each other when one caught the other out" (Smith 1995, 87). The family and two college representatives then stand awkwardly in front of the bench, not as a tightly-knit group of mourners united by their common loss but rather as an almost random selection of solipsistic individuals, too engrossed in their own concerns to offer a meaningful tribute to the memory of Gillian. When Alex later wanders around alone and sits down

on a different bench in a different garden, her personal physical and mental space is invaded by a condescending National Trust employee, who educates Alex at length about the rare roses cultivated here. Alex remains outwardly calm but is so irritated by the woman's imposing manner that when the latter leaves, she destroys several of the cherished roses in displaced rage because the flowers mean nothing to her: "Because what right had this old woman beside her to be this old? What right had she to think this stuff was important?" (Smith 1995, 99)

Because Alex's parents, as if ignorant of the sobriety of the occasion, are at the moment drunk on love, they somewhat perversely decide to extend their stay and go on a trip in the area to revisit the mother's old favourite spot and rekindle the spark. Embarrassed and annoyed by their decision, Alex chooses a similarly perverse diversion, accepts a lift offered to her by a kind stranger who mistakenly thinks that she is waiting for one, and travels on her own to Brighton. With no particular purpose in mind, she ends up spending the day at an amusement arcade playing shooting games, perhaps feeling closer to her dead sister when her character in the game dies repeatedly. Alex's loss of life in a computer game is matched with her other figurative death, that is, Alex appears to be as good as dead to her parents, who are too preoccupied with reigniting their romantic relationship to remember that they still have one daughter to look after. Remembering and its opposite, forgetting, constitute one of the motifs present not only in "The College" but recurring throughout the body of Smith's work. Rachael Sumner comments on Smith's perception of forgetting as follows: "At best this may be regarded as a form of apathy. At worst it is an act of violence committed against memory—a deliberate erasure of inconvenient truths" (Sumner 2019, 135). Alex desperately wants for her sister not to be forgotten and eventually arrives at a point of tentative reconciliation with Gillian's departure and reaffirmation of the fact that she is still alive. When Alex leaves the arcade where she was re-enacting Gillian's death, she proceeds to assume Gillian's voice, which coincides with her own, as she stands on the beach, fearlessly exposing herself to a raging storm, and in what proves to be a cathartic experience, she starts screaming insults at the sea which took Gillian's life.

The conclusion of the story is characteristic of Smith's preoccupation with deeply personal, private, and often trivial incidents which culminate in "moments of affirmation or even epiphany which run just below the surface of the quotidian", thus "suggesting that life, and indeed identity, is made up from such brief and fragmentary moments" (Lumsden 162). Before Alex finds re-

lease for her voice in the storm, whose violence resonates with her language, she prefers to keep quiet because she is discouraged from speaking her mind by the overpowering monoglossia of the adult discourse. Though articulate and quick-thinking, by law and convention she is a child, and as such she is kept at the bottom of the social hierarchy, in which adults, by virtue of nothing other than their age, look down on her, dismiss her, address her condescendingly, or even talk about her in the third person while she is standing next to them, as when the college representative inquires “*if Young Alex would like a lemonade*” (Smith 1995, 89; italics in the original). When Alex is heard, her voice sounds with unflinching honesty and her critical undertone invites dialogue, which, however, threatens to subvert the established dominant discourse, and hence it is repressed as undesirable. Unlike “The Hanging Girl”, which concludes in a tentative heteroglossia represented by the bond between Pauline and her spectral companion, “The College” does not allow the conditions of heteroglossia to be established, but it does succeed in cracking the monolith of monoglossia by acknowledging the polyglot existence of dissenting voices and guiding the young protagonist to find a voice of her own.

Ali Smith is a protean writer who likes to test the limits of fiction with her daring narrative experiments, her witty yet profound wordplay, and her preoccupation with retrieving voices that were lost, forgotten, and repressed by the hegemonic monoglossia of literary language, which, in Bakhtin’s words, “is frequently socially homogeneous, as the oral and written language of a dominant social group”, and hence may not be readily accepting of heterogeneous discourses from the margins (Bakhtin 1981, 289–90). Despite her depictions of often extreme experiences and eccentric characters, Smith’s stories remain easily relatable by virtue of her overarching concern with aspects of humanity. As Lea argues:

Some of the stories critique the nature of individualism in a contemporary world where intimacy has given way to solipsism, but often they address more universal concerns with love and its failure, death, the search for meaning, the human compulsion to tell stories, and – encompassing all of these – the problems of connecting with other human beings. (Lea 2016, 28)

Smith recognises that in order to forge meaningful connections with one another, we need to shift the focus from our differences to what we have in com-

mon, which involves considering with equal weight multiple perspectives and opening up to a polyglot multitude of voices, striving for their inclusive dialogic coexistence rather than allowing them to compete for exclusive power. Smith's narratives teem with manifestations of otherness, appearances of strangers, and other challenges to established patterns of thought and behaviour. Ultimately, Smith urges us to meet otherness without preformed judgement and embrace the conditions of heteroglossia, or, as she phrases it, "if we don't pay attention to the things that happen when something enters our world from outside, and if every dominant narrative tells us to dislike it, then I don't know how we'll manage to stay human" (Beer 2013, 142).

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