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**THE BLESSING AND THE BURDEN OF MEMORY:  
ALI SMITH'S *AUTUMN* AND GEORGI GOSPODINOV'S  
*TIME SHELTER***

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The paper discusses some thematic, narrative and stylistic parallels between Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) and Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter* (2020) – two notable recent novels engaged in apprehending the personal and political crises of the present through the problematization of our involvement with memory and the past. The central analytical tools are those of “restorative vs. reflective nostalgia” (Svetlana Boym, 2001) and “cruel nostalgia” (Robert Eaglestone, 2018). These concepts contribute to a deeper understanding of the highly ambivalent attitudes to memory and the past shared by the two novels.

**Key words:** Ali Smith, Georgi Gospodinov, memory, nostalgia, nationalism

The two books discussed below are undoubtedly among the most remarkable novels of the past decade, chronicling the recent social upheavals in their own countries and simultaneously addressing the unprocessed traumas of our common European history and the anxieties of our shared European identity. Ali Smith's critically acclaimed *Autumn* (2016), the first part of her *Seasonal Quartet*, is considered “the first serious Brexit novel” (Preston 2016), shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2017 and ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in *The Guardian*'s 2019 list “The 100 best books of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.<sup>1</sup> Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter* (2020), winner of numerous national and international literary awards, has already been

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<sup>1</sup> “The 100 best books of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. *The Guardian*, 21 Sept. 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/21/best-books-of-the-21st-century> (12.12.2023).

translated into over 20 languages, and in 2023 its English translation, done by Angela Rodel, was awarded the International Booker Prize.

Regardless of their different settings and contexts, these two novels echo each other's concerns to an uncanny extent. Personal, philosophical and at the same time topical, engaged with the current political and moral crises of their societies and the whole of Europe, they are ultimately about memory, about the ways in which our personal and collective versions of the past shape our present and future existence. They are about the value of the past and the price we pay when we forget it, but also when we obsessively cling to it. Both veer between representations of memory as a life saver and as a pernicious spectre haunting the present and undermining the future. I believe that the two novels' indirect dialogue is best illuminated through the concept of nostalgia, as elaborated by some cultural and affect theorists – more specifically, Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia, and Robert Eaglestone's "cruel nostalgia".

In Boym's definitions,

Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. Restorative nostalgia is at the core of recent national and religious revivals; it knows two main plots – the return to origins and the conspiracy. Reflective nostalgia does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones; it loves details, not symbols. ... This typology of nostalgia allows us to distinguish between national memory that is based on a single plot of national identity, and social memory, which consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory. (Boym 2001: XVIII)

"Cruel nostalgia" was coined by British academic Robert Eaglestone in his analysis of Brexit, on the model of what influential affect theorist Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism":

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. ... [T]he *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. But, again,

optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving... (Berlant 2011: 1–2)

While Berlant's concept relates to the ways in which unrealistic fixations and fantasies of the *future* compromise the possibilities for meaningful existence in the present, "cruel nostalgia" postulates an equally detrimental attachment to versions of the *past*: "Most affect theory deals with the present or (as in the case of cruel optimism) a focus on the future which ignores the detrimental effects in the present: but Brexit focuses on the past. Not cruel optimism but *cruel nostalgia*" (Eaglestone 2018: 95–96, emphasis in the original).

*Autumn* and *Time Shelter* share a deeply ambiguous attitude to memory and the past. On the one hand, they portray the loss of memory as lethal. In Gospodinov's novel, it literally kills Alzheimer's sufferers and deprives communities of their future: "the first thing that goes in memory loss is the very concept of the future"; it creates "a critical deficit of future" (Gospodinov 2022: 124) and "a critical deficit of meaning" (Gospodinov 2022: 132). In Smith's novel, the willing forgetfulness of the atrocities of recent history dooms present-day Britons to a vicious cycle of their repetitions.

But obsessions with the past are equally destructive. Nostalgia is a no less insidious disease than dementia. This is how the futility of restorative nostalgia – the attempt to return to a cherished past moment or recreate it exactly as it was – is described in *Time Shelter*, on a personal level:

There's something, a draft and grief,<sup>2</sup> which instead of weakening seems to grow stronger with the years ... Isn't this draft pulling toward the past in the end an attempt to reach that sound place, no matter how far back it might be, where things are still whole, where it smells of grass and you see the rose and its labyrinth point-blank? I say place, but it's actually a time, a place in time. Some advice from me: Never, ever visit a place you left as a child after a long absence. It has been replaced, emptied of time, abandoned, ghostly. There. Is. Nothing. There. (Gospodinov 2022: 148)

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<sup>2</sup> The morbid seductiveness of restorative nostalgia is even more transparent in Bulgarian owing to the more obvious phonetic similarity of the words, "тъга и тяга" (Gospodinov 2020: 184).

*Autumn* foregrounds the same kind of nostalgia as a leading motif in the discourse of British Europhobia, reconstructing the imperial past and the mythologized period of the Second World War as a “Golden Age” of British glory and national unity:

Rule Britannia, a bunch of thugs had been sing-shouting in the street at the weekend past Elisabeth’s flat. Britannia rules the waves. First we’ll get the Poles. And then we’ll get the Muslims. Then we’ll get the gyppos, then the gays. You lot are on the run and we’re coming after you, a right-wing spokesman had shouted at a female MP on a panel on Radio 4 earlier that same Saturday. The chair of the panel didn’t berate, or comment on, or even acknowledge the threat the man had just made. Instead, he gave the last word to the Tory MP on the panel, who used what was the final thirty seconds of the programme to talk about the real and disturbing cause for concern – not the blatant threat just made on the air by one person to another – of immigration. (Smith 2017: 197)

This, in turn, parallels the farcical scenes in *Time Shelter* of historical reconstructions of mythologized periods in the Bulgarian past: of “life as a reenactment” (Gospodinov 2022: 123). Absurd and kitschy, these “tragicomedies dell’arte” (193, 287) lay bare the sinister face of nostalgia as a tool of political manipulation. Restorative nostalgia, it turns out, is not the preservation of memory and history, but their falsification – the manufacturing of seductive simulacra which destroy any meaningful perceptions of time. As the enigmatic Gaustine, Gospodinov’s alter ego in the novel, puts it:

And so began the mass doubling of the happened and the unhappened... In ever more detail, ever closer to the real events, sometimes even more real than the originals. And no one could discern which was real and which was the likeness anymore... (Gospodinov 2022: 265).

The project of homogenization of national memories and narratives is predicated on exclusion and the suppression of difference – which eventually threatens the very coherence sought. At a pivotal moment in Smith’s novel, the conflicting narratives that fuelled the post-Brexit referendum mayhem are rendered as follows:

All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing. ...

All across the country, people felt they’d really lost. All across the country, people felt they’d really won. All across the country, people felt they’d done the right thing and other people had done

the wrong thing... All across the country, people felt legitimized. All across the country, people felt bereaved and shocked. All across the country, people felt righteous. All across the country, people felt sick. All across the country, people felt history at their shoulder. All across the country, people felt history meant nothing. ... All across the country, people threatened other people. All across the country, people told people to leave... 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 ... (Smith 2017: 59 – 61)

Your time's over. Democracy. You lost.

It is like democracy is a bottle someone can threaten to smash and do a bit of damage with. It has become a time of people saying stuff to each other and none of it actually ever becoming dialogue.

It is the end of dialogue. (Smith 2017: 112)

In a very similar way, *Time Shelter*'s fictional referendums on which decade in the past century each European country should return to is fraught with hatred and strife:

The past was rising up everywhere, filling with blood and coming to life. A radical move was needed, something unexpected and prescient, which would stop this irresistible centrifugal force. The time for love had ended, now came the time for hate. If hate were the gross domestic product, then the growth of prosperity in some countries would soon be sky-high. (Gospodinov 2022: 124)

Both novels probe the contemporary uses of the concepts of “democracy” and “the nation”, as well as the perniciousness of referendums in which crucial decisions are driven by blind affect and fabricated collective memory. These are prime manifestations of restorative nostalgia as cruel nostalgia – indeed, of cruel optimism and cruel nostalgia rolled into one, compromising the possibility for meaningful existence in the present. Gospodinov has created his own metaphor for this hybrid between cruel optimism and cruel nostalgia, transported in the novel from his own short story, “Blind Vaysha” (Gospodinov 2001). This is the “Blind Vaysha Syndrome”, named after the girl who sees only the past with her left eye and only the future with her right. In other words, “the ability (and misfortune) to see the world in its before and after at one and the same time, but never in its present, here and

now” (Gospodinov 2022: 260). It is characterized by a “painful sense of not belonging to any time, quick jumps between past and future, functional blindness despite having normally functioning pupils, attempts at self-harm and suicidal tendencies” (Gospodinov 2022: 260).

Without giving it a particular label, Ali Smith diagnoses practically the same “disease” when she writes about the willing surrender of the ability to see “what’s happening right in front of our eyes” (Smith 2017:175). What is more, her emphasis is on the ethical implications of such a blindness which denies the validity of other pasts, the reality of other imagined communities of shared memories, thus suppressing their right to a present and a future, reducing the “space of play with memorial signs to a single plot” (Boym 2001: 43) – or, as Gospodinov’s narrator puts it, forcefully asserting the past “only in the singular” (Gospodinov 2022: 127).

Restorative nostalgia strives “to revisit time like space” (Boym 2001: XV), “to conquer and spatialize time” (Boym 2001: 49). Both novels have their tropes for such spatially reconstructed, frozen time. In *Time Shelter* this is the time clinic, which initially caters for individual Alzheimer’s sufferers, offering them the comfort of returning to the point in their past where they felt the happiest. Soon, however, the monster of restorative nostalgia breaks out and transforms the map of Europe into “time-nations”, homogenized, through farcical referendums, as reconstructions of imagined epochs of national triumph and prosperity (Gospodinov 2022: 246).

In *Autumn*, the overarching spatial metaphor for restorative nostalgia is the antique shop – “the junkshop of the past”. Going in is like “entering what you think is going to be history and finding endless sad fragility” (Smith 2017: 218). But eventually the metaphor is literalized and the junk of the past is weaponized, when the protagonist’s mother stockpiles “junk missiles” from her beloved antique shops with which she bombards the electric fence of the newly-built refugee detention camp (Smith 2017: 254 – 255). The past and its memories are transformed into a means of declaring one’s position in the world, here and now.

The ambivalent attitude to the past and of human longing for revisiting it cuts right through both novels. The past is repeatedly portrayed as a beast, as pestilence and poison, or as ephemeral and worthless – but also as the very warp of identity and a vital resource for intervention into the present. Looking back turns us into pillars of salt (Gospodinov 2022: 277 – 278), but nostalgia is also what inflates Odysseus’s sails and takes him back home, “because of something specific and trifling, which he called hearth-smoke, because of the memory of the hearth-smoke rising from his ancestral home. ... The past is not the least bit abstract; it is made

up of very concrete, small things” (Gospodinov 2022: 112). Humans are wired for nostalgia; it manifests, as Svetlana Boym observes, our refusal “to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition” (Boym 2001: XV). Or, as Gaustine puts it, “A person is not built to live in the prison of one body and one time” (Gospodinov 2022: 241). But in order to avoid becoming a tool of manipulation and destruction, nostalgia needs to be self-conscious and self-ironic, in other words, reflexive nostalgia – “a playground, not a graveyard of multiple individual recollections” (Boym 2001: 54), “present[ing] an ethical and creative challenge” (Boym 2001: XVIII).

Ultimately, and despite the urge to break free from the morbid obsession with the past, *Autumn* and *Time Shelter* yield to the kind of *algia*, or ache, for the past, which doesn’t mummify it or raise it as a monster but weaves it meaningfully into the present, increasing “the emancipatory possibilities and individual choices, offering multiple imagined communities and ways of belonging” (Boym 2001: 42). This inevitably drives the two novels into a self-reflexive exploration of the ethics of writing, of creating multiple narratives rather than a single teleological plot. As one of the central characters in Smith’s novel puts it, “whoever makes up the story makes up the world. ... So always try to welcome people into the home of your story. ... And always give them a choice – even those characters ... who seem to have no choice at all. Always give them a home” (Smith 2017: 120). In Gospodinov’s “Epilogue”,

Novels and stories offer deceptive consolation about order and form. Someone is supposedly holding all the threads of the action, knowing the order and the outcome, which scene comes after which. A truly brave book, a brave and inconsolable book, would be one in which all stories, the happened and the unhappened, float around us in the primordial chaos, shouting and whispering, begging and sniggering, meeting and passing one another by in the darkness. (Gospodinov 2022: 299)

The two novels are very nearly this kind of book, with their blending of personal history and a broad historical panorama, with their collage technique and genre mixing – from social satire to dystopia and surrealism, incorporating documentary record, the philosophical and academic essay, the diary entry and the current-affairs reportage, embracing the archetypal and the topical, bursting with quotes and allusions to centuries of European literature and art, vibrant with a myriad other voices which argue and harmonize within their confines. They are the fractured narratives our fractured present needs to make sense of itself.

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