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Author(s): Säntti, Joonas

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COMING UP ROSES

Gender Ambiguity and the Unnatural in Two Short Stories by Ali Smith

Joonas Säntti

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ABSTRACT

Discussing two short stories by contemporary Scottish author Ali Smith, my article recommends a close reading of short prose narratives as potential examples of ungendered character-narration. I combine queer and unnatural narrative theory to consider how forms of telling contribute to gender ambiguity. Further, I advocate interpretative strategies that resist naturalization and causal explanations. Instead, a queer reading of Smith's "erosive" (2003) and "The beholder" (2015) delights in their ambiguity, waywardness, and narrative inventiveness. The texts can be approached as exercises in unknowing.

Keywords: queer narratology, unnatural narratology, ungendering, narrative voice, causality, Ali Smith.

ABSTRAKTI

**Ruusuisia aikoja: sukupuolen monitulkintaisuus ja epä-
luonnollisuus kahdessa Ali Smithin novellissa**

Artikkeli käsittelee kahta skotlantilaisen nykykirjailija Ali Smithin novellia. Ehdotan lyhyiden proosatekstien lähilukua mahdollisina esimerkkeinä sukupuolittamattomista henkilökertojista. Yhdistelen queeriä ja epäluonnollista kertomusteoriaa osoittaakseni, kuinka kerrontaratkaisut vaikuttavat sukupuolen monitulkintaisuuteen. Artikkeli myös suosittelee tulkintastrategioita, jotka vastustavat luonnollistavia ja kausaalisia seltyskiä. Näiden sijaan queer luenta Smithin novelleista "erosive" (2003) ja "The beholder" (2015) nauttii niiden ambiguiteetista, arvaamattomuudesta ja kerronnallisesta kekseliäisyystä. Tekstejä voi tarkastella aktiivisen tietämättömyyden harjoituksina.

Avainsanat: queer-narratologia, epäluonnollinen narratologia, sukupuolitomuus, kertoja, kausaalisuus, Ali Smith.

Imagine this: a person going to a hospital for breathing problems discovers a series of branch roots growing from their chest, soon blooming into roses of the Young Lycidas variety. While the first-person narrator of "The beholder" (Smith 2015)¹ tries to make sense of this metamorphosis, they² receive a mysterious benediction from a "gypsy," reminisce about their past love affairs, the recent death of their father, and the following family dissolution. Instead of anxiety, the narrator meets their transformation with anticipation as "every flower open on me nods its heavy head" (*ibid.*, 54).

Imagine this: someone getting struck by a lightning and falling in love with a total stranger chancing to witness the freak accident. During the eight pages of "erosive" (Smith 2004) the character-narrator experiences intense emotions related to infatuation and disappointment in love while trying to decide what to do to an apple tree being destroyed by ants. The events described take place during a long, indefinite period of time. This is no straight story, however, as the narrating discourse moves from middle to end to beginning. The text ends with the beginning of the story, with the narrator deeply in love with "her," as well as the natural world and words

1 The story was first published in Shire (2013). This article refers to the collection *Public Library and Other Stories* (2015). My discussion of "erosive" (2003) refers to page numbers in Penguin edition from 2004.

2 In this case, I use "they" as a sign of ambiguous identity, not to refer to subjects who self-identify as non-binary.

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found in an old dictionary, pointing out how “at this point of the story even the ceiling is glorious” (*ibid.*, 122).

In both of these short stories by the Scottish author Ali Smith, the character-narrators do not inform us what their gender might be. While extreme things happen to their bodies and their minds, these metamorphosing humans are not sexed. The author has written several narratives with characters of unmarked gender, starting from her³ first short story collection, and later in longer prose fictions, such as the genre-bending essay/novel *Artful* (2012) where the narrator leafs through the posthumous academic notes of their similarly ungendered lover. Several different kinds of queer and genderqueer characters and narrative voices abound in Smith’s novels, which also make use of logically impossible, non-human or partly human character-narrators such as ghosts.

To focus on this one particular omission might seem an artificial strategy in the case of the two short stories discussed here. After all, why stop to consider a non-event like the withholding of the protagonist’s gender when so many startling events are described?⁴ In a short story, especially one so keen to do away with plausibility and realistic expectations, why would such an omission matter? Compactness, a focus on certain key moments, the interplay between lyrical density and narrative tension are considered universal trademarks of the short story genre.⁵

3 In using the pronouns she/her, I am following the standard practice of Smith scholars. It should be noted, however, that Ali Smith has on occasion suggested different options, for example using the neologism “intergender.”

4 Non-events can take place at the level of discourse as well as the story as Hühn (2008) has suggested.

5 Charles E. May (2012) argues that short story is a form opposed to realist novel’s expansive focus on plot and character development. The short story is particularly suited for experiences that question our “conceptual framework of reason and social experience” (May 2012, 176). May (*ibid.*, 181) even suggests that “the short story’s need to express largeness in its smallness”

It seems only natural, then, that narrative researchers studying ungendered narrators have focused on novels. Some famous cases include Brigid Brophy’s *In Transit* (1969), Anne Garreta’s *Sphinx* (1986), and especially Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1992) – a novel enjoying a central position in the development of queer narratology as a field of study. Susan Lanser, in a landmark article of 1996, used Gerard Genette’s term, paralipsis, to name Winterson’s choice of “underreporting” information conventionally provided by character-narrators. According to Lanser (1996, 250–254), this absence is so significant that it contributes to the narrative dynamics of the novel “at least as much as its surface plot” does. This is made possible by the readerly desire to designate a gender to any narrative persona, something that Lanser then considered a routine act of interpretation.⁶

Compared to a more large-scale prose narrative, a short story with an ungendered narrator is less likely to be perceived as a deconstruction of “clichés about love, gender, and specific male or female codes of behavior” (Berry 2017, 106). In novels the drama of readerly expectations and identifications has more time and space to be played out. Novels such as *Written on the Body* knowingly play with cultural scripts of gender roles and expectations, their rich descriptions becoming “a virtuoso performance of gendered indeterminacies” (*ibid.*, 113). In the two stories by Ali Smith discussed in my article, readers’ gender expectations are not teased out with such consistency. However, to engage in a close reading of them requires the reader to consider this lack of information, especially when the narrator’s body, looks, and relationships are referenced in the narrative.

make it closer to a poetic than narrative form. For a different consideration of narrativity in short stories see James Phelan’s (2007, 151–215) rhetorical approach to narrative, lyric and portraiture modes, and their hybrid forms in 20th century short stories.

6 Lanser has since then considerably modified this position. See Lanser 2015, 30; Lanser 2018.

A closer look at these two short narratives, neither of them self-evidently “about” gender, might help us reconsider the scope of ungendered narrators as a textual, narrative phenomenon, and to find connections between queer and antimimetic (or unnatural) narrative forms. One particularly literary effect of unmarked narration is how it directs the reader to slow down and reconsider their interpretive acts of gendering. However, this communication is not one-way: wilful readerly choices can either expand or constrict the significance of ungendering.

I begin by discussing some interlacing interests of queer and unnatural narratology and continue with readings of the two short stories as antimimetic, queer narratives, which call into question default expectations about gender and gendering as well as narrative progression. I suggest that readers should modify possible metaphorical interpretations with a queer emphasis on discontinuity and unknowing. Finally I present some tentative arguments about (queer) interpretation of surprising and ambiguous narrative forms in general.

The Queerly Unnatural

Mapping the ways that make narrative voice possibly queer, Lanser (2018, 926) suggests the following three categories, related to three definitions of queerness:

- 1) a voice belonging to a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject by virtue of sex, gender, or sexuality;
- 2) a voice that is textually ambiguous or subverts the conventions of sex, gender, or sexuality; and
- 3) a voice that confounds the rules for voice itself and thus baffles our categorical assumptions about narrators and narrative.

The two narrators discussed in this article can be considered as examples of Lanser’s second and arguably third categories of “queer voice” because their queerness does not reside in any situated, verifiable or topical queer subjectivities. Furthermore, “subversions” of conventions take a more roundabout route and are not directly related to issues of gender or sexual identity.

Lanser (2018, 930) goes on to suggest that while character-narrators of ambiguous gender are easy to identify, they are quite rare in narrative fiction. Short stories, however, can be suggested as an overlooked possibility. Surprisingly many short prose narratives with first-person narrators, even in grammatically gendered languages, leave the narrator’s gender open to interpretation. Emphasizing such possibilities is also in tandem with Lanser’s general argument that narratologists should consider a wider scope of textual features for their queer potential (*ibid.*).

First person character-narration makes ungendered voices a surprisingly typical case in short fictions, where readers perceive and “see” the fictional world with and through the narrating “I.” Because first-person narrators are typically not described from the outside, the perceivable differences relating to feminine, masculine or genderbending looks and behaviour can only become represented less directly, for example in the described reactions of other characters or dialogue.

It is possible to argue, that the ambiguity of the narratorial gender only becomes noticeable and relevant if the story or the narrating discourse draws attention to it. I suggest that in the two stories discussed here, certain metanarrative comments (“erosive”) and some plot events foregrounding embodiment (“The beholder”) guide us to notice this lack of information, even when it is not explicitly mentioned in the text.

The suggestion that literary queer(ness) is related to formal innovation

and transgression of conventions is by no means unprecedented or uniquely narratological. D. A. Miller, Leo Bersani, Judith Roof, Lee Edelman, Valerie Rohy, and several other notable theorists, often deploying a poststructuralist and/or psychoanalytical framework, have richly contributed to understanding queerness in relation to style and artistic form. In this tradition narrative has often served as the foil: especially notions of narrative coherence, causality, and the continuity of narrative voice are often presented as normativizing and normalizing textual deviance and perversion into manageable, reductive identities.⁷ More recently, Tyler Bradway has argued for the importance of renegotiating what narrative means in contemporary experimental and mixed genre writing. As Bradway shows, in the antisocial and anti-identitarian tradition narrativity is often understood as containing or domesticating queer unruliness, becoming the powerful adversary that both queer theory and unconventional literary writing seek to dismantle. Antinarrativity has served as a “foundational” presupposition for queer literary studies. Pitting desire against realism, disturbance against coherence and queer transgression against inherently normative narrativity, however, makes for a too straight and narrow understanding about the potentialities of narrative form. (Bradway 2021, 712–713, 723–724.)

Playing with narrative sequentiality, time structures and expectations about narratorial identity have been trademarks of Smith’s prose works ever since her first collection of stories, *Like* (1997). The importance of form and structure is an unmissable part of her writings, making them rich material for narratological analysis, especially for post-classical narratology⁸ that

focuses on readers’ interpretations and sense-making strategies.

Returning to Lanser’s discussion about queer narrative voices, her third category – a voice that breaks with assumptions about narrators and how narratives work – is strikingly similar to definitions of unnatural narrative, especially those that place significant emphasis on the discourse. Brian Richardson recommends differentiating between nonmimetic and antimimetic elements: only the latter question narrative conventions. While a multitude of fictional works present physically or logically impossible situations, antimimetic works of fiction specifically seek to defy the conventions of narrative discourse, drawing attention to their choices of telling. (Richardson 2015, 4–5.) Hence, having a rose tree suddenly grow from a character’s body is arguably not in itself antimimetic, when it works only to add a fantastic or logically impossible event to an otherwise mimetic storyworld. But to encounter these events as told by a narrator like in “The beholder,” with their surprising ways of relating to and rearranging them, makes the short story a more interesting example of countering narrative conventions. This surprising, exceedingly literary, and affectively ambiguous stance towards metamorphosis and transformation contributes to queer ends, as I hope to show.

The field of unnatural narratology has also witnessed a growing interest in the politics of form. For example, Brian Richardson (2015, 143–161) has studied relations between political opposition and literary experimentation in the work of feminist and ethnic minority authors, who have questioned the concept of plot and the supposed universality of credible or mimetic characters, and experimented with narrative temporality and causality. Discussing feminist narratology and experimentation by female writers, Ellen Peel (2016, 85) asks “when and how do techniques that question narrative conventions support the questioning of societal and ideological convention?” In a similar manner, I am interested in those queerly narrative

7 For one summary of this still highly influential tradition, see Rohy 2018.

8 In addition to feminist, queer, and postcolonial narratologies with their contextualizing and political bent, cognitive and other reader-oriented theories and unnatural narratology are all typically considered post-classical, in contrast to structuralist (classical) narratology.

works where ambiguously gendered or ungendered narrative voices meet other forms of narrative transgressions.⁹

Recently, Catherine Romagnolo (2020, 17) has suggested that “unnatural narrative forms” are in some cases deliberately linked to representations of “gendered subjectivities historically termed unnatural.” Romagnolo takes an important step to enquire why exactly narrative theorists should be wary of discussing the full potential of “unnatural.” Instead of simply dismissing the conservative baggage inherent in the word ‘unnatural’, Romagnolo proposes confronting the “unintentional evocation of the ideologically unnatural” (*ibid.* 15). This then allows the researcher to take better note of how individual texts can denaturalize conventional notions of gender through their unnatural narration. I certainly agree. After all, queer is a word with a very similar history: echoes of slander, exclusion, and violence, alongside its more recent reclaiming by minority subjects, are quite simply a part of its conceptual power and evocativeness.

Discussion about antimimetic techniques as political acts or strategies has often tended towards the distinctly experimental (see e.g. Richardson 2015; Berry 2016; Bradway 2018; Romagnolo 2020). What interests me in Ali Smith’s short fiction is precisely how it occupies a kind of middle ground between the more aggressively antimimetic texts and the traditional, plot-driven fictions with more realistically developed, plausible storyworlds – the latter narrative texts are more typically associated with revising minority representation. “The beholder” and “erosive” are both easily recognized as narrative texts with a richly imaginative fabula, quite far from modernist or postmodernist “plotlessness” or collapsing structures of fictions flaunting their incoherence. The queer difference of Smith’s short

stories as narrative texts, then, is often suggested by what they are not *quite*, even while flirting with established genres and modes like developmental narratives, myths, and fairy tales.

While I subscribe to Richardson’s formulation of antimimetic as different from simply non-mimetic, it is also worthwhile to keep the variety of queer experimentation in view. Focus on the established or prototypical case studies can narrow our understanding of literary phenomena. If a theory about queer voice is based only on too perfect examples, it runs the risk of becoming narrow. The same applies to defining the unnatural, antimimetic or indeed, the more often contested term of the experimental. One should be wary of defining experimentality in purely formalist terms, “a specific set of stylistic moves” operating transhistorically (Bradway 2017, xliv). All literary experimentation is not by nature procedural, nor is it only readable in works by highbrow avantgarde authors.

Because the queerness of the two short stories discussed is not attributable to the characters or events being coded queer in any culturally common sense, it would be dishonest to claim that contextual information has not guided my interest. If these texts were not written by an author whose oeuvre is populated by many non-binary characters (and who has lived for years in an out lesbian relationship), would I be as willing to read their narrative strangeness as possibly queer? And if my reading of these stories as queer is focused on antimimetic *narration*, where would I draw the line between queerly unnatural and “just” unnatural? When formal challenges to textual norms are perceived as queer, does that not empty out the situated meaning of “queer,” all ties to gender and sexuality, making it basically synonymous with anything that is ambiguous or strange?

I return to these questions concerning the politics of reading in the end of my article, after discussing my two examples in detail.

⁹ I do not suggest that all challenges to realism or mimesis would be somehow automatically emancipatory or politically transgressive. Neither am I claiming that a traditional, realist novel could not do important feminist, queer or anti-racist cultural work.

Strange Causalities and Temporalities in “erosive”

In Ali Smith’s essay/novel *Artful* (2012, 30) another ungendered narrator muses upon the potentialities of short form in relation to time: “short story will always be about brevity. [...] the short story can do anything it likes with notions of time; it moves and works spatially regardless of whether it adheres to chronology or conventional plot.”

Published in the 2003 collection *The Whole Story and Other Stories*, “erosive” certainly utilizes this formal aspect of spatializing temporality. This short story has two apparently unrelated plot lines, one concerning the narrator’s struggle to save an apple tree from ants, and the other their falling in love after (literally) being struck by a lightning. The first paragraphs serve as exposition to both these dilemmas as the narrator describes a feeling of memory loss and their confusion about seeing their own image in the mirror. “Look at me now,” the narrator says, “here I am the beginning, the middle and the end all at once, in love with someone I can’t have” (Smith 2004, 115). The rest of the narrative then follows with subtitles “middle,” “end,” and “beginning,” in this order, all of them narrated in the present tense.

While the narrator’s gender is not a topic directly addressed, the very first sentences emphasize expectations about the narrative voice: “What do you need to know about me for this story?” (*Ibid.*, 115) The metanarrative commentary with its increasingly far-fetched questions draws attention to what is and what isn’t told: “How old I am? how much I earn a year? what kind of car I drive?” (*Ibid.*) Smith’s use of narrative voice affirms the partiality of the personal in opposition to the titular, ironic “whole story,” perhaps suggesting the centrality of reader’s desires and interpretive interests.

It is possible to interpret the opening as a metafictional joke about the triviality of world-building details of many realist fictions. Yet on another

level it seems to discuss differences and their importance: what does the reader of a short story need to know about the narrative voice to keep on reading with interest? What details would actually count, would have weight and importance for understanding the events that follow?¹⁰ The ungendering of the narrating “I” receives heightened significance in relation to this opening. Beginning with metanarration – narrating about the act of narrating – can be understood as an invitation or a hint to pay special attention to storyworld elements, including the seemingly inconsequential details.

It is hardly accidental that the information *not* mentioned concerns exactly the kinds of identity-building differences highlighted by present day intersectional approaches: gender, ethnicity/race, sexual orientation, religion. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that the narrator has a garden, a tree, and books, including a dictionary, which moves the narrator to muse upon hidden connections at the height of their bliss.¹¹

Containing dialogues with the narrator’s friend, father, next-door neighbour, and two salespeople at the supermarket, the “middle” passage is the longest part of the text. After launching the story with the promise of a love plot, this passage quite surprisingly only describes problems

10 It is possible to read this as a subtle commentary on “relatability,” that is, the idea that situated similarities of identity positions between readers and narrative voices (and often extended to authors) are important in reading and enjoying narratives. As value-laden notions about “authenticity” and “credibility” are often tied to political questions about story ownership and entitlement, texts are at this time perhaps more than ever before received as written by *this* person from *this* background in *these* circumstances for these audiences. Smith’s queering of narrativity can be understood to operate differently.

11 These details *do* tell us something about class, and some might argue, by implication about other intersecting positions. For a nuanced narratological interpretation of strategical ambiguity in relation to race and disability in Toni Morrison’s short story “The Recitatif,” see Warhol & Shuman 2018.

with the apple tree. The narrator receives different instructions from all their possible helpers, before choosing to paint the area around the trunk with white paint. This is followed by a very brief “end” where the narrator despairs of ants, killing “as many of them as possible” before conceding defeat (*ibid.*, 120). The narrator then returns indoors to rearrange the bookshelf before doing away with the tree problem altogether by violently uprooting it. While the sequencing of these events creates a sense of narrative momentum, the progression is temporally non-linear and seemingly wayward in terms of thematic cohesion. The reader is invited to interpret possible connections between the two storylines.

It can be disheartening to attempt a plot summary for an Ali Smith story – not only due to the number of events, but also to the difficulty of choosing what is important, especially notable for narrative tension. A recurring interpretive challenge for a reader of Smith’s short story is making hypotheses about the possible links – causal and thematic – between the narrated parts of the whole. Why are just these acts mentioned and these situations described when so much background information is left out?

In “erosive,” like in so many other Smith’s stories, the narrator’s style of presenting apparently unrelated events makes it difficult to fathom what the story is “about.” Smith offers different possibilities for combining events into meaningful chains, including some false starts to lead readers astray: a possible plotline is suggested and leads nowhere, while other branches begin to emerge. These may include unrealized possibilities of storyworld events and narratorial comments about what did not happen (the disnarrated), sometimes even canceling earlier versions of events (denarration).¹² The reader is asked to actively bring in their interpretive tools to make sense of possible links between such events or non-events.¹³

In this way the stories anticipate and thematize the interpretive work required of their readers.

The experience of reading and the power of words often take centre stage in Smith’s emplotment. In “erosive” a rather undramatic situation, the opening of an old copy of a dictionary serves as a sort of narrative denouement or an epiphany, even though situated at the “beginning” of the story.¹⁴ Browsing the words, the narrator finds that “[e]verything is meaningful” (*ibid.*, 122). I venture to read this as suggesting the unknowability of meaningfulness: one can’t tell in advance what matters, in a text, in a person, in a relationship, or in a love affair. It just may happen that you find yourself deeply enamored with a tree (as in “may,” one of the other stories printed in the same collection), just as it may be that having yellow hair and looking “like summer” (*ibid.*, 121) are the most important features in a loved one.

The ending of the text, where the narrator still feels drunk on words and new-found love, invites readers to reconsider the temporal and causal logic, to return to the beginning of the discourse. In the end of the text, the beginning of the story, the narrator describes an overwhelming sense of meaningfulness that love makes it possible to perceive, as if for the first time. Even knowing that in the “end,” all this leads to failure, the reader is left with a “gleam of hope, a gleam of understanding” (*ibid.*, 122). The

poetics. The novels appear to invite symbolic and allegorical readings, offering themselves to be understood mostly on the thematic level. This, however, works as a “red herring” that invites readers to critically consider their inclination towards “immediate associations and simple categorization.” The work of fiction, then, becomes “about” interpretation.

14 Epiphany, especially in modern literature, can be summarized as a moment of sudden insight or revelation defined by intensity, a sense of expansiveness and mystery, which escapes rational explanations (see e.g. Nichols 1987, 1–5). While it is possible that the narrator of “erosive” experiences this moment as an epiphany, the playful ordering of events in the narrative discourse reframes this moment in an ironic, somewhat “eroded” light.

12 Richardson 2019, 34–35, 56, 132–133.

13 Reading Smith’s novels *The Accidental* (2005) and *There but for the* (2011), Ulrike Tancke (2013) sees such “red herrings” as a strategic part of Smith’s

non-linearity in the telling guides me to re-read, returning to look for what my previous reading may have missed.

While the narrator is browsing the dictionary “randomly,” the chosen words obviously carry meanings in relation to the thematic level. Indeed, focusing on these details proves that “everything is meaningful.” One of the dictionary entries reads “Gordian: as in Gordian knot” (*ibid.*, 122). It is possible to interpret Smith’s short story as one kind of a tangled knot where contradictory possibilities emerge. The Gordian knot is suggested by (at least) two narrative solutions: first, the impossibility of deciding how the events in the very first paragraphs of the text – before the passages titled “middle,” “end” or “beginning” – relate to the events described in those passages.

The relations between these three sections do not follow a straight logic either: two characters met for the first time in the “middle” section are mentioned at the “beginning” where the narrator should not be aware of their existence. This suggests that the whole is more complicated than simply arranging a linear ABC fabula into a BCA order. Also, the narrator possibly points out the very artifice of present tense in the last sentence of the short story, when they describe their emotions “at this point of the story.”¹⁵ Upon re-reading, the narrative turns out to be much more antimimetic and self-contradictory than it first seems.

This short story perhaps turns out to be about the (metaphorical) erosion of causal expectations and the character attributes that psychological development narratives traditionally rely on. Leaving the reader wondering

¹⁵ It is also a possibility that there are more than one apple tree and love affair, which makes the temporality even more complicated. Another possible allusion to the Gordian knot is suggested by the narrator’s decision to uproot the tree, thus solving the dilemma with force, quite similarly to Alexander’s solution of using a sword to split the puzzling knot!

what and who the story is really “about,” the potential queerness of it is based on ambiguity – unproven possibilities that resonate differently with different readings.

As a comparison case, consider how rearranging the narrative order and time works in a different, considerably more detailed queer fiction. Valerie Rohy reads the backward-moving time structure of Sarah Waters’ *The Night Watch* (2011), where the narrative moves from 1947 to 1941. According to Rohy, the novel invites the reader to take the role of “armchair detective,” on the lookout for past causes to better understand the characters’ dilemmas. Yet the narrative does not provide any definite answers in the form of past events. Instead, it guides the readers to accept the accidental in what is typically read as causality, even if the desire to retrospectively narrativize “a meaningless contingency” remains an issue for both the characters and the readers. The novel can teach us about contingency, which Rohy strategically deploys against the false binarism of “fate” and “choice” in discussions about homosexuality. (Rohy 2015, 163–184.)

Rohy’s reading certainly helps us to reconsider the queer potential in anti-causality. Genre expectations, however, operate very differently in a lengthy historical novel, while the contemporary storyworld of Smith’s stories is not similarly connected to large cultural narratives about the Second World War or the literary conventions of realism. But an even more important difference concerns the knowability of characters at the outset, since in Waters’ novel their gender and sexual orientation is central for the plot. The causal expectations broken with are of a different kind.

Queer Growth in “The beholder”

If the power of language is an important element in “erosive,” words turn out to have even more potential for change in the short story

“The beholder,” where a strange causality seems to suggest that crying over the beauty of a word like “easel” can cause a mighty rosebush to sprout from a human chest. The narrator muses about the sensuous feel and slumbering connotations of the word as well as its exceptionality (“it wasn’t a straightforward word”). Then, in the beginning of the next paragraph, another very unstraightforward thing appears:

Then one day not long after I had surprised myself by crying about, of all things, how beautiful a word can be, I had just got up, run myself a bath and was about to step into it. I opened the top buttons of my pyjamas and that’s when I first saw it in the mirror, down from the collarbone. (Smith 2015, 45.)

This teasing of a strange causality between two apparently unrelated events is yet another example of Smith’s surprising, meandering narrative voices. Taken literally, this would be a very anti-mimetic form of causality, a kind of verbal plotting where words cause actual plot events, somewhat like verbal event generators or literalized metaphors (see Richardson 2019, 89–92). Another significant moment where the world building potential of words contributes to the plot occurs when the narrator happens to meet a “gypsy” woman selling “lucky white heather” on the street. This character has a name for the growth that confounds the medical authorities: “a very nice specimen you’ve got there in your chest, if I’m not wrong, a young licitness” (*ibid.*, 48).

“[I]t wasn’t until a bit later,” the narrator continues in an easy-going tone, when they encounter a similar specimen at Regent’s Park: “It’s called a Young Lycidas, it’s a David Austin variety, very hardy, good repeater [...]” (*ibid.*, 50). Lycidas, as the narrator goes on to report, is a tragical hero in John Milton’s renaissance era pastoral elegy – and, unmentioned by the narrator, often discussed as a possibly gay poem. The narrative then takes a delightfully wayward turn as the narrator engages in a short lecture about

the many words Milton contributed to English language (fragrance, gloom, lovelorn, padlock), then perceiving a bird fly over their head continues to reminisce about a bird seen in Greece several years earlier. (*Ibid.*, 50–52.) This apparently haphazard progression is a recurrent stylistic element in Smith’s prose fictions.

The “gypsy” character had used a different word for the flower. “Licitness” has a dictionary meaning of “the quality of conforming to law,” that which is legal. In “The beholder,” the word signifies something else than the institutionally sanctioned. It suggests license, or what you will give yourself a permission to become. The characters take license to behave against expectations of proper behaviour: in a memory sequence the narrator’s father starts masturbating on his deathbed in front of his confused offspring. “Whatever he’s doing under the covers for those few seconds he takes, it makes the word wank beautiful” (*ibid.*, 54). The punning on licit, license and Lycidas is polymorphously queer: a possible grammatical error or a word misheard, suddenly opening a permissive relation to perceived changes in the self. It is perhaps a misspelling that serves best, that gives the most accurate sense of the word’s potential. Even the instructions offered for caretaking seem to connote queerness as a spatial metaphor that goes against straight lines: “always cut on the slant, my lovely” (*ibid.*, 49).

Young Lycidas is also a cultivated variety and therefore “unnatural,” not appearing without human care and intervention.¹⁶ It does not seem far-fetched to suggest that Smith is punning on queer growth, both in the

16 The presence of natural imagery, trees, flowers, and partly cultivated spaces such as parks is another central element in Smith’s oeuvre. A more sustained focus on how this thematic contributes to thinking natural/unnatural in relation to queerness is not possible in the space of this article.

meaning of personal development and in the more social sense of queer influence.¹⁷

Kaye Mitchell (2013, 61–74) has presented a persuasive reading of metamorphosis both as a theme in Ali Smith’s work and as one possible conceptualization for queering identity. According to Mitchell, the concept of metamorphosis stresses the fluidity and permeable boundaries of human existence while maintaining a desire for continuity of the self through the change of self. It serves as a queer model of thinking about personal identity in an age where identity markers have ever greater strategic significance for minorities while permanent identity categories are often felt to be narrow, reductive, even stigmatizing.

While Mitchell is discussing a Smith novel of very different kind, *Girl Meets Boy* (2007), which foregrounds political issues and acts of resistance to everyday normativity, the notion of metamorphosis as queering personal development certainly works with this short story. It suggests the finding of new “species” in the self as enabling and healing: in this sense, transformation does not necessarily imply perfect discontinuity but rather the appearance of something previously hidden, or existing as a kernel of possibility. “The beholder” serves as a positive example about the paradox of metamorphosis, adroitly summarised by Mitchell (2013, 68): “it is change that facilitates continuity.”

Naturally (or should I say unnaturally) there are several other options for reading this short story, because once again, it seems to be as much about interpretation as about anything else. Importantly, our understanding of

the short story rests on how we interpret causality between the events that seem at first reading unrelated.¹⁸

Several details can be called in service of an extremely conventional “it was all a dream” interpretation: the narrator is suffering from acute sleeplessness and even sees their marvelling about the word “easeful” as an invitation to slip “into a warm clean bed” (Smith 2015, 45). Perhaps they really are falling into an “easeful sleep,” so we could perceive the following memory images and fantastic events as befitting a certain dream logic. Possible references to falling asleep are repeated in key moments, and the final flowering takes place while the narrator is lying in bed (*ibid.*, 55).

The order of story events can suggest yet other, more thematic causalities. In the very beginning, the narrator lists losing their father as one of several recent catastrophes. Later in the text, short episodes depicting childhood events and the father dying in hospital alternate with passages in the narrative present. The episode where the narrator remembers listening to a traditional folk song with the line “and from her heart grew a red red rose,” is positioned near the ending of the text, and can be understood to contribute to a metaphorical or allegorical interpretation of the growth in the narrator’s chest. As we move from a fond childhood memory to a present moment of metamorphosis in full bloom, the narrator describes how “[e]very flower open on me nods its heavy head” and they are “learning to let go.” (*Ibid.*, 54–55.) This might invite a metaphorical interpretation, where the original sense of coming undone by grief is then perhaps followed by coming to terms with grief.

17 Speaking of queer influences, the rose motif also references Gertrude Stein, one of the most discussed authors in the queer canon. Similarly to Stein’s oft-cited verse, “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” the growth in Smith’s story seems to both invite and escape metaphorical interpretation.

18 The titles also deserve attention: who or what is “The beholder” and what is being beheld? Why is it “erotive” rather than “erosion”? Perhaps the choice of word implying a process rather than the end product, or the adjective more than the substantive, once again foregrounds the required act of interpretation.

I perceive such potential explanations as a textual strategy, which teases the reader with shortcuts for a default interpretation: will I go for the straight story? Giving the reader just enough license to create a coherent explanation, the text also makes its potential queerness very much the reader's business. The principle named by Emma Kafalenos as functional polyvalence¹⁹ allows us to consider the interpretations that "it was only a dream" as well as that "this is simply a metaphorical way to describe traumatic emotions." We can apply them to make sense of the narrator's change, thereby explaining away the queerly unnatural aspects as simple allegories. While the knowledge of these possibilities is a part of the complexity of the story, I suggest we should not be satisfied with them.

In the following section I discuss why I consider a readerly resistance to gender attribution to be both aesthetically and politically worthwhile. What is required from a reader to embrace permanent ambiguity as a possibility rather than a problem for interpretation?

Reading Short Stories for Gender Ambiguity

In prose fiction, the ambiguous gender of the narrating "I" is often emphasized by the gendering of other characters. For example, in Winterson's *Written On The Body* (1992), the protagonist clearly discusses their earlier and present lovers as men and women – this explicit bisexuality, according to some early commentators, guarantees the novel's status as "queer" (Lanser 1996), as if the gender ambiguity of an unmarked narrator would not suffice.

In "erosive" the narrator's love interest is repeatedly gendered as a woman ("she," "her") as is the friend whom the narrator calls to ask advice. Male characters include a grumpy neighbour and the narrator's "grouchy" father. In "The beholder," some very minor characters are gendered in a way that hardly serves any purpose in the narrated story: in addition to the decidedly gendered "gypsy" woman, some family members, doctors, and even the noisy neighbour heard practicing drums are depicted as men. Helpful women, irascible men: it seems as if these stereotypical gender attributes are there to help us take note of the ungendered first person.

However, other ungendered characters do appear. Most importantly, the past lover/spouse who is only referenced as "you" in a memory of a wedding trip ("The beholder"). Because Smith has extensively used second-person narration, it's good to point out the differences between a "you" possible to interpret as a form of metaleptic addressing of the reader, like at the beginning of "erosive" (Smith 2004, 115) and a "you" who is clearly a character inside fiction, as is the case here.²⁰

In our quotidian lives, the gendering of others is typically based on visual recognition and similarly, the capability to present oneself as entitled to a "credible" gender identity requires meeting certain expectations of looks. This, however, is no guarantee that gendering is operating correctly and that the gender as perceived by others and experienced by the self in question, would match. As Sara Ahmed (2006, 99) has suggested, we need

20 One typical effect of second-person narration ("you"), and even more of undifferentiated "we" narration is the indeterminacy of gender related to narrative voice. Tory Young (2013) suggests that Smith's use of second-person narration plays with the different possibilities of address, eventually directing attention more to universal experiences, such as feeling (in) love. The readers form an intimate relation more to these situations than to characters of certain identities. Such an emphasis on ambiguity of address chimes well with my own interpretation of Smith's queer poetics.

19 As different readers use differing criteria to interpret causal relations, functions (those events that significantly change a prevailing situation) change according to context (Kafalenos 2006, 6, 16–17).

a “fundamental critique of the idea that difference only takes morphological form (race/sex) and that such morphology is, as it were, given to the world.”

While Smith’s prose fictions use less direct and more literary means to make their argument, they have been interpreted as presenting similar critical considerations about the knowability, readability, and visibility of minoritarian identities. For example, Tory Young (2018) relates Smith’s widely discussed novel *How to be Both* (2014) to feminist and queer discussions about gender and visibility, seeing and being seen. We live in a culture that places ever more emphasis on visual representations of identity and often correlates heightened visibility to successful political activism for gender minorities as well as women. According to such logic “you can’t be what you can’t see” (Young 2018, 993), and thus visibility becomes embraced as a value in itself. Young suggests that Smith’s novel presents us with a chance to imagine differently, emphasizing the unmarked and the unknowable as queer potentiality (“you cannot always see what you can be”), while serving as a critical reminder of how easily visibility shades into surveillance in our contemporary culture (*ibid.*, 1004–1005).

Reading texts like “erosive” and “The beholder” *for* (meaning in the service of) ambiguity can contribute to critiques of “the very distinction of same/difference” (Ahmed 2006, 97) presumably residing in bodies, just waiting to be perceived as registered facts. This is one way a fictional text may experientially queer our thinking about gender and sexual difference. In Smith’s case, it is tempting to interpret the fantastic morphing of the chest – itself a significantly gendered part of the human anatomy – as an absurdly humorous take on rules of gender attribution: who stops to wonder about the supposed difference between male and female when there’s a rosebush growing from the human body?

To focus on ambiguity means reading the texts against the naming and localizing of known subjects, against the easy equivalence of “issues” in the

real world and the potentialities engendered by the textual universe. The mimetic world-building performed by the reader’s mind faces an obstacle that might perhaps best be left unsolved: Are these character-narrators trans, are they genderqueer, are they men, are they women? Reading and re-reading the short stories, I recognize these questions as well as their inescapable cultural force, but I still choose not to choose an answer.

The political work done by ungendering, therefore, is not only about widening or readjusting the perceptive framework, but about asking whether it works in the first place. This is where “the coherence of the categories are put into question” (Butler 2004, 216), and that questioning includes the categories based on liberatory, emancipatory, and minoritarian interests. Acknowledging ambiguity resists understanding queerness only as “a set of visible or embodied differences that mark people or events as queer” (Menon 2015, 18). Such an approach to queerness is universalistic in its denial of ontological specificity (*ibid.*, 17) and therefore hardly transferable as rules or blueprints for activist agendas. It is deeply political, however, in the sense that it requires us to constantly interrogate our preconceptions. Fictional narratives emphasizing the experience of unknowing can teach us something about the blind spots operating inside situated knowledges in queer, feminist, and trans theorizing of difference(s).

Perhaps it is exactly because they are imaginary encounters with metaphorical “voices” cognized from material signs, fictional texts can serve as a reminder about these blind spots in my own acts of gendering. A short story becomes the “place” that gives me pause, delaying those acts of perception that appear almost automatic in the everyday social world: “look, there goes a X.”

I suggest this troubling of commonplace, even automatic gender attribution can have queer significance in fictions that do not directly foreground

thematics of minority experience or sexual desires. If we require that a text needs to have a distinctly trans, genderqueer, gay, lesbian or bisexual character to count as “a queer text,” we are also continuing to further minoritize and ghettoize gender non-normativity. We end up requiring all things queer to “get in line,” to look their part, to stand and be counted, as if we safely know where queerness can be found. In the worst case this reification makes queer into one marketable identity category among others, “a difference that makes no difference,” as Rohy (2018, 177) cogently sums up.

Another kind of queer reading might make use of a more situated queerness, in the sense of Lancer’s first category. No passages in “erosive” or “The beholder” help to secure the narrator’s gender, but a reader might build expectations based on cultural frames and scripts about likely gender attributes. For example, in “The beholder” the narrator describes how their brother had taken them into his arms, “and that’s how he holds me, sleeping himself, until I fall asleep too” (Smith 2015, 55). Is it easier to imagine someone taken under the protective arm of a brother to be a girl, perhaps the smallest and youngest of the family? Yet immediately I feel the pull of a different interpretation: what a lovely thought, this intimate domestic moment between two brothers.

Contemporary readings do not have to stop at the binary, unless one is operating under the impression that a character can be non-binary only when it is explicitly mentioned in the text. Considerations of “credibility” and plausibility easily slide into a harmful binary of gender and readerly sense-making is in danger of practically becoming another normative process. The very assumption that non-binarity should be explicit naturally serves to maintain binarism as a cultural code and expectation, that is, something “too obvious” to even mention. In these two stories, it seems that the closer one looks at the narrated situations and the narrative voice, the harder it gets to make a choice.

Recognizing the possibility of non-normative gender can further contribute to reading certain key passages differently. For example, one might ask, *why* exactly the narrator of “erosive” would be such a strange sight to the staff at the supermarket where they go shopping for ant deterrent: the shop assistant “looks at my clothes and my hair. She backs away” (Smith 2004, 118). The reaction could be explained by the narrator’s disheveled appearance, already mentioned: “I look as if I have been sleeping in my clothes” (*ibid.*, 115), says the narrator of their image in the mirror. Still, once the gender identity of the narrator becomes an issue, it’s possible to read the shop assistant’s behaviour as befitting cultural scripts about transphobia.

I mention these arguably unconvincing examples to emphasize the importance of the reading process – not only in the sense of unconscious identifications and attunements, but also the more conscious interpretive strategies. Maintaining several conflicting possibilities about the character-narrator’s gender requires a willingness to constantly consider and reconsider the terms of gendering as an interpretive act. Discussed by Berry as “reading indeterminately” (2017, 115–119, see also Abbott 2013, 4–9), this strategy requires a willingness to meet and appreciate the ways that the text “manipulates, frustrates and accommodates multiple readerly desires.”

Politically, it is vital to consider those different genders existing outside the binary, multiplying our understanding of forms that “living as” (or writing as, reading as) can take in the social world. As Gayle Salomon (2010, 95) puts it, genders outside the male and female binary “are neither fictive nor futural, but are presently embodied and lived.” Reading literary works for representations of these embodiments can contribute to contesting cultural notions about what is deemed real and what is not, thus analysing how knowledge claims are necessarily related to power (Butler 2004, 214–215).

But I maintain it is another thing to experience the failing of cultural notions of gender attribution as a permanent state, questioning not only the old binary but all practices conditioning how gender and gendered differences become “known” to any of us, including the norms that govern who are perceived as queer or non-queer, trans or cis, one thing or the other.

In Ali Smith’s short fiction such indeterminacies do not appear as a negative thwarting of readerly enjoyment. In contrast to those radically experimental writers who knowingly create limit texts with extreme and violent affects, Smith depicts even the most transformative bodily and mental experiences with a gentle and congenial tone. The affective rhetoric used to describe experimental poetics often seems ill suited for such a light touch. For example, Ellen Berry (2017) has studied woman writers whose style of writing gives rise to “antisocial forms of radical refusal,” requiring readers to cultivate a “willingness to submit” to even “extreme demands” that the text presents (Berry 2017, 1, 5). In a similar vein, H. Porter Abbott (2013, 107–139) discusses “egregious” narrative gaps that are often intentionally disturbing. Such dark arts are often experienced as states of confusion, perplexity, recalcitrance, and bewilderment.

In comparison, the affective positivity of “erosive” and “The beholder” is at least partly due to the tone or mood of Smith’s prose style. The indeterminacies are not threatening, rather the mood is closer to something like joy, akin to the vitality of new forms of life: “A branch breaks into flower at the right-hand side of my forehead with a vigour that makes me proud” (Smith 2015, 54). Smith’s work is often described in reviews and criticism as joyous, exuberant, affirmative, and enthusiastic (see e.g. Pohl 2017, 694–696).²¹

21 Rebecca Pohl (2017, 697–704) delivers a nuanced reading of enthusiasm as a tone in Ali Smith’s fiction and non-fiction, especially the way it is created by textual traits, “the grammar of enthusiasm” apparent in both Smith’s prose

Mitchell (2013, 64–66) points out that while queer theory has recently emphasized negative feelings of loss, melancholy, and shame, Smith’s optimistic tone is more similar to the early queer theorizing with its giddy delight in openness and transgression. I agree with the notion that Smith’s often celebratory way of describing the unpredictability and open-endedness of desires and personal growth has significant similarities to the oft-cited formulation of queer as “the open mesh of possibilities” operating against categorization by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994, 7). For Smith, an important part of this queer optimism is the situation of finding surprising connections through words. In both “erosive” and “The beholder,” words have the capacity to cause significant change, to engender new desires and break with existing patterns. Words create new spaces for “licitness” to appear.

Is my approach to ambiguity a case of “too close reading,” guided by my desire to find what I wish to find? Another reader might object that the high density of events in Smith’s two short stories and their metaphorical play with words makes gender – or lack of it – even less noteworthy. This is a plausible argument, but it is based on different notions of reading. Queer narrative theory does not have to privilege the situation of first reading nor does it have to limit queerness to something coded into the act of intentional communication, emphasizing the rhetorical mastery of the text or the (implied) author. Furthermore, as I have argued, these particular short stories invite a re-reading by making the multiplicity of possible relations between events a formal element. This allows me to posit that the playful unsettling of gender expectations can actually be found in the text, but still requires a reading tuned towards ambiguity.

style and the critical praise reserved for it. For Pohl, the effect of immediacy is based on “series of citations” and the performance of narrative techniques, only seemingly spontaneous and immediate.

Conclusion: Rooting for Queer Ignorance

In *Real Mysteries*, H. Porter Abbott (2013, 3) discusses the effect he calls “the palpable unknown”: instead of simply understanding in the abstract sense, that something remains unknown to us, works of art can make us feel “immersed in the condition of unknowing.” While striving for narrative sense-making is deeply ingrained in human nature, works of art can use this desire against itself, thwarting and frustrating our attempts at building coherent causal explanations (*ibid.*, 4–9).

The importance of this experience is the reason I am suggesting that ungendered characters should *not* be considered as representations of, for example agender, transgender or genderqueer characters any more than of cisgender men and women. Such a mimetic reduction would hardly be a solution more than it is a part of the problem, missing the refusal of “un-” and “non-.” I suggest that the political significance of ungendered narration is less about reimagining emergent identities and more about giving us pause. Ungendered voices can guide us to reconsider and question our need for gendering and the reliability of our categories of difference, even the most inclusive ones. As Berry (2017, 7) points out, even feminist reading practices have their forms of “critical mastery” that can be beneficially short-circuited by texts relying on confusion and ambiguity. Similarly, in the field of queer studies, we may sometimes miss the beauty of those wayward flowers that do not match the existing criteria for usefulness.

Our deep-rooted tendency to gender not only human-like characters but also narrative voices and rhetorical/stylistic traits should on occasion be consciously countered. This may require a willingness to cherish, even cultivate, a capacity for ignorance. According to Barbara Johnson (2014, 332), ignorance should not be reduced to a simple “gap in knowledge.” It is more like an imperative, an ethical undertaking, closely related to what

she calls “the impossible but necessary task of the reader,” that is, “to set herself up to be surprised.” It is also a continual challenge: “Ignorance, far more than knowledge, is what can never be taken for granted.”

This valuing of ignorance is also closely related to Johnson’s inclination for surprise and astonishment, not only as early stages of reading process, but as permanent experiences of unknowing. Corey McEleney (2013, 154) writes that for Johnson “astonishment marks the interruption or suspension of what we think we know,” and thus comes to anticipate the destabilizing work done by “queer” and “queering.”

An element of surprise seems to me such a central feature of Ali Smith’s poetics, that I suggest her fictions invite an enduring willingness for becoming astonished. This becomes emphasized by the wayward progression, the often-absurd events in mostly mimetic settings, and the choice of detail, especially in relation to what is left untold. Here, once again, the interests of several theoretical traditions seem to converge. Discussing what gives antimimetic forms their affective resonance, Richardson (see 2015, 3–27) suggests a sense of surprise as a qualifying element. What he calls the unnatural appears to resist naturalizing frames of mind as well as conventions guiding narrative writing.

Johnson’s stated desire to “truly experience my ignorance” is reminiscent of Abbott’s “immersive experience” of unknowing as well as the unexpectedness cherished by Richardson. None of these writers are discussing queer theory or gender indeterminacy: Johnson writes generally about deconstructive practice while Abbott and Richardson are considering modernist, postmodernist, and avantgarde fictions, often of the kind “where the narrative motor stops” working (Abbott 2013, 22). Yet I find their formulations immensely useful for explaining the queer potential of narratives with ungendered character-narrators, also in those

cases where the experience of unknowing does not encompass the entire storyworld.²²

Perhaps feeling the full force of a subversive way of telling requires forgetting other learned practices of narrative interpretation, such as reading details for psychological causality and character motivation. The work of ungendering is not done by the text alone but requires readers' vigilance. This allows us to consider several conflicting options at the same time, and to take note of the different metaphorical possibilities without forcing the details to fit one naturalizing interpretation.

Without this active desire of unknowing and undoing, readers will soon find themselves operating as detectives on the lookout for the hidden truth, combining textual cues with at-hand cultural conventions to expose the “real” gender or negotiating likeliness based on what can only be normative gender models. In “The beholder” and “erotive,” gender identity is no mystery waiting to be pieced together by causal deduction. The seemingly arbitrary, rambling progression of these narratives can be read as a part of their queerness, not unrelated to the missing narrative (gender) identity. The additive nature of “poor” storytelling – then, and then, and then – is artfully deployed by Smith to uproot causal expectations. In this sense, understanding may require one to stop making sense.

While I am not comfortable with the idea of equating queerness with endless ambiguity or suggesting that all forms of literary experimentation

are necessarily queer, I do suggest queer literary studies in general would benefit from a sustained focus on such formal and aesthetic means, especially outside the somewhat disproportionately emphasized genre of the novel. Short stories, as well as certain works of (partly) narrative poetry, might present us with hitherto under-recognized opportunities for queering gender, sexuality, and desire.²³

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22 I would suggest that looking for strange bedfellows, theoretically speaking, can be a useful(ly) queer practice. Instead of operating with the queer theoretical canon of Foucault, Butler, and Sedgwick, queer literary research should forge connections with different practices and conceptual traditions, for example narrative theory. This also presents an opportunity to emphasize the gender assumptions and norms operating in much narrative theorizing, even those that are seemingly not related to gender. As Lanser (2015, 39) aptly states, narratology “may be too important to be left to narratologists.”

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