


**Please cite the Published Version**

Byrne, Eleanor  (2024) Called Back: Reading Backwards in Ali Smith. *Scottish Literary Review*, 16 (1). pp. 23-43. ISSN 1756-5634

**Publisher:** Association for Scottish Literature

**Version:** Accepted Version

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**Overture: *Namenlose***

I love that moment where something will swerve off. Where we thought we understood what the person was saying but we didn't. Even if we hear the words we expected, actually something else happened.<sup>1</sup>

The question of the connection between queer form and queer relations is the heart of Ali Smith's short story 'Fidelio and Bess' in *The First Person and Other Stories* (2008). An unnamed narrator who is involved in an affair, appears to be delivering a blow-by-blow retelling of the plot of Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* to their lover, but then in a spontaneous recitative, swerves into an account of *Porgy and Bess* as the cast of *Fidelio* break into the song Summertime. The plot spins out of control as the two narratives work on each other and merge. The narrator's voice retreats, and a stage becomes visible. A concrete version of an imagined textual collision appears, confusing the actors, the conductor, and the orchestra.

The anonymous (ungendered and unnamed) narrator identifies with and re-reads the opera *Fidelio* from the position of a minor character, Marzelline, who is in love with Fidelio. Her desires are thwarted as 'he' is revealed to be a woman, Leonore, who has disguised herself as a man to rescue her imprisoned husband. The narrator then sutures the opera *Porgy and Bess* in such a way as to reroute each plot to a new merged conclusion. Their (partnered) lover rejects this 'remix,' saying 'you can't just revise things for your own pleasure or whatever [...] No one can just as it were interject *Porgy* into *Fidelio*.'<sup>2</sup> They discuss the correct term for this dissident or transgressive suturing/merging. 'I don't think interject is the right term,' the narrator says, and the lover replies, 'I meant inject'.<sup>3</sup> The narrator doesn't challenge this qualification, as their discussion appears to have become rather tense, meaning that any final word on this creative re-writing and in/fidelity to plot and partner is left unresolved by either party.

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<sup>1</sup> Ali Smith in conversation with Gillian Beer, *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, eds., Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, Bloomsbury, 2013, p.138.

Ali Smith 'Fidelio and Bess', *The First Person and Other Stories*, 2008, p.42

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p.42

In a reading routed via Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one familiar sense of this narrative act would be of the queer narrator's 'dissident reading' as a reparative reading; 'additive and accretive' insofar as it can 'assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will have resources to offer an inchoate self.'<sup>4</sup> Smith's juxtaposition, of texts and bodies, is suggestive of what Musser and Perez argue in 'Queer Form', is a notable strategy for Sedgwick. It gives scholars license to 'think together' concepts and works of art that might appear inconsonant according to strictures of historical period, genre, medium, or perceived cultural context, but whose relevance and discursive imbrication become visible through the activity of the queer critic, whose expressed desires or politics then have space to become heuristic starting points.<sup>[00]</sup> Just as for Getsy, queer creative production might 'examine the ways in which forms exceed boundaries; how they behave differently in different contexts; how they are being deployed against their intended use',<sup>5</sup> Smith's narrator reassembles the two texts to her own taste. She does just as she likes, despite her partner's warnings, but the terms for what she has done are not agreed upon, interject or inject are terms used but the final definition is left unresolved.

To create her new opera with two women as a couple, the narrator stages a reading for historic queer female couples more generally. They must be put together, radically juxtaposed from different sources, genres or eras, 'shipped' from the archive. The rewriting is also routed explicitly *via the back*. After watching the opera, they continue to their tryst in a hotel, still discussing *Fidelio*, where the touching bodies of the naked couple is characterised as a 'blessing' of the narrator's back; 'You are warm behind me. You make my back feel blessed, the way you are holding me. I can feel the curve of your breasts at each of my shoulder blades.'<sup>6</sup> Reading this backwards embrace as suggestive of the suturing of texts that the lovers discuss, offers a figure of one text/body cradling the other from behind. The back is the site of pleasure, intimacy and desire. Slightly later in their conversation the narrator states 'You kiss the back of my neck. You use your teeth on my shoulder. Its allowed, you biting me.'

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<sup>4</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: affect, pedagogy, performativity*, Duke UP, 2003, p.149

<sup>5</sup> David J. Getsy, 'Queer Relations', *ASAP/Journal*, 2.2 (May 2017): 254–57 (p. 256)

<sup>6</sup> Smith p.42

<sup>7</sup> In this case, due to the illicit nature of the relationship the lover is not allowed to mark their partner's body in case the trace is visible, they must simply be 'written/bitten' on, the back. This tender bite, a 'love bite', where the teeth touch the skin, locates a nexus of back, lips and teeth as a prime site of erotic signification, a 'taste'. In what follows I will argue for this version of textual suturing made visible via the back as a nascent queer form, an '*amuse bouche*' for formal structures developed in Smith's later novels.

### **Act I Call Back**

'What calls you and to what will you respond? For how long will you refuse to be seduced or pretend you weren't seductive?' <sup>8</sup>

In the final pages of her memoir, Mary Capello ponders the meaning of the phrase called back to her now that she has been called back to her life following cancer treatment. It is tempting to read her appropriation of Emily Dickinson's words as a straightforward reversal, a queer inversion, as the phrase passes between one queer writer and another; called back not to God, but to life. However, Capello resists this over-simplification;

'Are last words the same as vital words? Called back were Emily Dickinson's last words in a letter to her cousins an entire letter in two words, 'Called Back' and later carved, the words appeared on her tombstone at the behest of her niece. *Called Back* was the title of a novel that had haunted her, and the perfect final signature because it did not cancel yearning.' <sup>9</sup>

Capello contemplates how coming to the end of her cancer treatment, and her memoir, will free her up to the other work her treatment took her away from; 'Away and back, not ever fully either, but differently turned toward: called back'.<sup>10</sup> Called back: to be asked to return, to be taken away. The call speaks of yearning, of felt desire, moving between life and death, which is mirrored in the multiple ways that this phrase signifies, as it moves between

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 44

<sup>8</sup> Mary Capello, *Called Back: My Reply to Cancer, My return to Life*, 2009, p.204

<sup>9</sup> Mary Capello, p.206.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.205.

epistolary and memorial. In the phrase that always means twice and moves in two directions, where one meaning is held/signalled by the other, we might find a kind of embrace. This textual/physical juxtaposition, a queer arrangement or adaptation, is deployed in Smith's two novels, *How to be both* (2014) and her latest work *Companion Piece* (2022) as a concrete queer form. When the back becomes felt, visible, animated, embodied, there is a suturing of times and/or genres that get to mingle with or overtake one another, which is mirrored, materialised and written on the body, specifically on the back. Its textual operation is also a reaching, touching or holding, which moves beyond the hand or the fingers and can instead be found around/through the back(s), and makes this form instigate new queer narratives that enable a reckoning with grief, that offer usable pasts, as well as potential futures for queer identities and expression.

In *Queer Forms* (2022), Ramzi Fawaz cautions against a broad or generalised celebration of 'fluidity' as a key queer aesthetic, stating instead that 'queer cultural forms are those aesthetic or creative figures that concretise aspects of gender and sexual non-conforming life, so they become conceivable in the mind's eye [...], they give concrete shape to abstract identities.<sup>11</sup> He proposes a series of queer forms resulting from his own interest in reactivating feminist and gay liberation strategies of the 1960s and 70s, which he argues were explicitly experimental in their forms of envisaging political change, these include the circle, used for consciousness raising and the serial form for 'coming out of the closet'.<sup>12</sup> If the 'backwards embrace' which sutures two genres or times were to be added to this list, might it insist on the role of yearning that Capello bears witness to? Might it also speak to Judith Butler's comments on the term queer as 'a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes'.<sup>13</sup> Queer would here be understood itself as a term also moving in two directions simultaneously, meaning all queer embraces are in some sense backwards, a kind of 'redemption', which moves in two

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<sup>11</sup> Ramzi Fawaz, *Queer Forms* NYUP, 2022, p.6

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.6

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer', *GLQ*, 1993, 1 (1), p.30

directions, historical and future facing, mobilising.<sup>14</sup> To queer would always already mean to 'call back'.

Like Smith's narrator, this essay will seek to perform its own minor surgery, suturing theories of the back in post-structuralist writing by Nicholas Royle and David Wills, with that of three notable critical texts from the queer canon, all of which engage in the poetics of the back or backwardness, and are suggestive of the ways that the 'call back' has already taken up a key place in queer theorising; Carolyn Dinshaw's, *Getting Medieval* (1999), Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* (2007), and Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds, Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010). Each explores a queer relation to the past; Dinshaw asserts that 'the process of touching, of making partial connections between incommensurate entities is queerly historical because it creates a relation across time that has an affective and erotic component'.<sup>15</sup> In Love's 'backward turn', she comments that 'a central paradox of any transformative criticism is that its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence, she reads queer modernist writing as marked by a trope of figures of backwardness as 'allegories of queer historical experience'.<sup>16</sup> Freeman seeks out 'a historiographic method that would admit the flesh, would let eroticism into the notion of historical thought itself'.<sup>17</sup> For Freeman this 'erotohistoriography' has a bodily component. [It] 'is distinct from the desire for a fully present past, a restoration of bygone times. Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter'.<sup>18</sup> This view, that 'admits the flesh', holds a significant place in queer visual culture. Notable back photography would include Catherine Opie's monumental *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993), Del LaGrace Volcano's many back portraits such as *Zack's Back* (1994), and *INTER\*me: Lanna Back* (2011) and Jill Posener's photograph of Kitty Tsui for the first women run erotica magazine in the U.S. *On our Backs*, (1998). The meanings produced in these various portraits are diverse, often contradictory and suggestive

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<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, p.30

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities Pre-and Postmodern*, Duke UP, 1999, p.50

<sup>16</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Harvard UP, 2007, p.5.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', Carolyn Dinshaw; Lee Edelman; Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero; Elizabeth Freeman; Jack Halberstam; Annamarie Jagose; Christopher Nealon; Nguyen Tan Hoang, *GLQ*, (2007) 13 (2-3), pp177-195

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Duke UP, 2010, p.95

of the ways historical contestations around sexuality and identity and future imaginings of queer selves might route themselves via the queer operations of the back.<sup>19</sup>

## Act II Art of Friction

Most stories are at least two stories, if not more. You have to find a way to put the pieces together. The process is actually about dialogue, the story's own dialogue, your dialogue with whatever the story is, and the story telling you it is back.<sup>20</sup>

In the encounter conceived of from behind the sexual morphologies, organs or protuberances that come to be imprinted on the back will signify first as a space of unpersonality.<sup>21</sup>

In *How to Be Both*, a story of the Renaissance arts of the 1460s, embodied in the figure of cross dressed/gendered artist Francescho del Cossa touches the present-day life of George who lives in Cambridge. She had visited del Cossa's frescos with her now dead mother and begins a pilgrimage to one of their paintings in the National Gallery in London, as a kind of 'call back', a route to grieving for her. Via a structure of layer and underlayer, narrated near simultaneously, del Cossa and George uncannily share explorations of maternal loss, queer identities and desires as they are experienced in different eras. Celebrated for its formal experimentation, the book was published in two versions in which its two halves were swapped round, enabling neither text to be straightforwardly 'first'. Numerous excellent close readings have noted that the fresco form is a key preoccupation ordering and informing the writing in *How to be Both*. As Robert Kusek and Wojciech Szymański comment, Francescho openly voices the preoccupations of Smith, their creator: '[h]ow to tell a story but tell it more

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<sup>19</sup> For discussion of some of these images see: Any Answers: Del La Grace Volcano, *British Journal of Photography* (21 June 2019); Kitty Tsui photographed by Jill Posener cover of *On Our Backs*, 7.2 (Winter 1990); Juliette Melia, 'Catherine Opie's three self-portraits: "Let's push the boundaries a little here about what you guys think normal is"', *E-CRINI – La revue électronique du Centre de Recherche sur les Identités Nationales et l'Interculturalité*, 5 (2013)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.mslexia.co.uk/v2/interview/interview18.html> Ali Smith cited in *The Ali Smith Method*, Interview 18, Vol.2, Mslexia.

<sup>21</sup> David Wills, *Dorsality*, p.201

than one way at once and tell another underneath it up-rising through the skin of it'.<sup>22</sup> Surprisingly though, the concept of suture or join is often avoided in these close readings. Cara Lewis's discussion would be a good example, where she offers a careful reading of the juxtaposition of past and present. She comments:

These are commonalities, but not necessarily interactions. Even though we can understand them as bringing Francescho's and George's worlds into what Nathan Hensley has described as "asynchronous contemporaneity", they serve primarily to underscore the differences between George's world and Francescho's world, and between both of these worlds and our own, even though there are moments in which it seems like this boundary will be breached.<sup>23</sup>

Lewis offers a persuasive reading of the phrase 'behold' in the last section of her essay but sidesteps the possibility of reading for a queer embrace. Registering the presence of hold in the visual act and the written word beholding, she comments 'freed from both worlds we are temporarily suspended, in the gift of the moment', but only notes this kind of *physical* holding via the image of del Cossa in their dead mother's trunk, wrapped in her dresses.<sup>24</sup> Arguably the hold is a lot queerer than this, a being held that is a queer touch as well as a queer look. My reading would press against this one, insisting on a touch, that is, a 'reciprocal tactility between disjunctive moments' which for Dinshaw characterises queer historicism.<sup>25</sup>

In *How to be both* the 'backwards embrace' is used to dramatize the moment that the two distinct historical texts encased in the novel collide in a queer touch. Francescho del Cossa has been spirited out of their time and place, and first sees the present-day George, from the other half of the text, from behind. 'Good: I like a good back: the best thing about a turned back is the face you can't see stays a secret. Hey: you: can't hear me? Can't hear? No? My chin on your shoulder right next to your ear and you still can't hear, ah well.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Kusek and Wojciech Szymański, 'Ali Smith's *How to be both* and the *Nachleben* of Abi Warburg'. *HJEAS* 2017, p.272

<sup>23</sup> Cara Lewis, *Beholding: Visuality and Postcritical Reading in Ali Smith's How to be both*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 2019, p.143

<sup>24</sup> Lewis p.145

<sup>25</sup> Dinshaw p.35

<sup>26</sup> *How to be both*, p.5



From behind, del Cossa touches her shoulder with their chin whilst viewing her as a boy. George's fascination with the painting, specifically its route to mourning the loss of her mother, appears to have brought del Cossa back from the grave. Her gaze at the painting activates a route of return/right to return to the painter, and conjures del Cossa into their presence, at their back, something they cannot be aware of visually or viscerally. They offer a distanced textual/virtual embrace, via a narrator who moves between contemporary London and their own life memories, the older narrative hosting/holding the younger one. The historical/spatial collision of Renaissance Italy and present-day London is marked by the pleasure of del Cossa's 'backwards view', which is caused by a gender ambiguity, one that mirrors del Cossa's gender/genre bending.

The potential of reading for what is 'behind' materialises when we turn to the back. In his 1996 essay 'Back', Nicholas Royle identifies the word back<sup>27</sup> as a promising entry in an imagined deconstructive dictionary, what he calls a 'DOS', 'dictionary of original supplements'. 'Promising' in its extensive proliferating and unfurling of seemingly limitless meanings, registers, and forms, transforming conceptions of English and interrupting conceptions of history and time, 'as historically and temporally deconstructive, that is to say as a movement that is at once historical and radically anachronistic, attuning to interruptions of all linearity, teleology, calendricity or movement forward and back'.<sup>28</sup> Just as Capello identifies an overturning of the historical and temporal in the phrase 'called back,' Royle unlaces the corsets of the radically deconstructive potential in the word back itself as a portal to infinite *différance*. There is much to say about the classification of back as promising, both of something that 'has potential' but also that issues a statement, that speaks, commits to something.

Like Royle, David Wills identifies something radical about the operations of the back, arguing for a theorisation of the dorsal which foregrounds radical reversal, an invitation which could also be construed as a promise. He comments, 'sexuality practiced in a space that I would call dorsal is the polymorphous paradigm of a sexual relation conceived of from behind, a sexual

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<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Royle, 'Back', *OLR* 1996, p.146

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Royle, p.146

that continually surprises, takes from behind, works from the back'.<sup>29</sup> Coming to this model via a reading of Passolini's film *Saló*, Wills insists there is no 'one' sexual act implied in this turn. Rather it is an overturning that undoes sexual and gender boundaries, binaries and norms:

Whatever passes for a frontal sexuality receives its confirmation is reproduced as norm by passing through the space, or experience, of its own overturning. It is replicated as frontal only by risking the dorsal, it gets 'endorsement' from the close dark space of inversion. [...] Once sex or sexuality is back to front then sexual relations begin precisely with a type of asexualised clean slate on the basis of which the construction of genders and sexualities will take place.<sup>30</sup>

As a figure for an asexualised space on which new modes of sexual identification can be drawn or experienced, the back itself is a 'clean slate', to be drawn on, a site of invention. It is in this view of the back as always already having a queer taste, that the operations of Smith's novel are revealed.

After the 'call back' via an actual back, the narrative swerves us back into del Cossa's memories and their time, 'doubles back', via a quick sketch, a fleeting glimpse of another boy's back, who runs past as they are being interviewed for a job painting frescoes: 'torch bearer, Ferrara, seen from the back'.<sup>31</sup> George and the torch bearer swap places, or more accurately, occupy the same place fleetingly, a doubling, in which one back is placed over the other in del Cossa's vision, pulling the reader down into the historical narrative from the gallery in the present day. The narrative moves from memory to an immersion in a past-present. Having gained an audience with their potential employer, known colloquially as the Falcon, in mid-conversation, the 'other' boy runs past them up a flight of stairs and del Cossa recognises something in the Falcon's look as he passes. Interpreting the desire in the Falcon's look, del Cossa sees/seizes their chance to demonstrate their drawing skills and gain a post:

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<sup>29</sup> David Wills, *Dorsality*, p.197

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.200

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10

I thought to myself, *if I can catch that running boy I'll show this Falcon* whose eye (my own eye saw) was taken by the back of the boy *how good and how fast and how well I'd*  
Then they'd know how exemplary  
And imbuse me accordingly  
So I said as the boy disappeared *Mr de Prisciano, a pen and a paper and somewhere to lean*  
*and I'll catch you that rabbit faster than any falcon* <sup>32</sup>

Smith conveys with the broken phrases, 'how well I'd... how exemplary...', that they gesture to something unnameable that sketching will render visible. In the phrase, 'a pen a paper and somewhere to lean', is an image of touch, pressing on the paper from behind, the surface enables the drawing to be done, asserting its own presence and role in the representation. This might be read queerly as a kind of frottage, a term which, Keguro Macharia eloquently notes, suggestively combines two meanings of artistic and sexual practice which 'gestures to the creative ways the sexual can be used to imagine and create worlds'. <sup>33</sup>

Pressing against a wall, del Cossa draws the boy's back, demonstrating their skills, capturing the object of desire they have seen in the Falcon's eyes, and is duly taken on. This multi-layered and multidirectional narration of the act of creating and its effects, is at once a self-conscious depiction of the artist at work, a validation of the multiple queer looks between del Cossa and the Falcon, a metafictional/metamodern rendering of the 'art' of fiction/friction and of representation, a writing, reading and drawing lesson combined. Pausing to contemplate the stakes of such a representation, as in Smith's work more broadly, it overtly examines and demonstrates its own technique, stages its own representational tricks and speaks the language of semiotics. It is at once a showing off, and a showing and telling (combined). Via a queer turn, knotted and twisted together here, a 'double back' down the rabbit hole, we are taken into the Renaissance wonderland.

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<sup>32</sup> Ali Smith, *How To Be Both*, Penguin 2014, p.13

<sup>33</sup> Keguro Macharia, 'The artist Max Ernst is formally credited with the process of inventing frottage, which consists of laying paper over a surface (a floor or desk, say), and using charcoal or pencil to rub over the paper to reveal the traces history has left on that surface.', *Frottage: Frictions of intimacy across the Black diaspora*, NYUP 2019, P.4

### Act III Scottish Call Back

Don't tell anyone I was here, she says. Your secret's safe with me, I say. So long as you don't tell anyone what everyone says about me behind my back. <sup>34</sup>

The space of Scotland is that 'otherside' to history: where history's grand narratives are reflected in absurd miniature, where history abutts on the eternity which is its negative.' <sup>35</sup>

Smith's 2022 novel, *Companion Piece*, is a text about the various benefits of reading or thinking back(wards) and the significance of reversibility. It is entirely about backs; looking back, coming back, backbiting, 'call backs' and is arguably meant to be read backwards. To some extent associated with the Seasonal Quartet, in terms of its chronology, it offers what I have elsewhere argued could be considered the 'Fifth' Season, a coda or a 'necessary supplement' to the quartet, reflecting on the overtaking of the writing of seasonal by the Covid19 pandemic.<sup>36</sup> But in Smith's driver's seat, fifth gear could just as easily be confused with reverse. With a profoundly anachronistic central character, it could also be considered stuck, stopped or halted, in pandemic time; 'out of time' in two senses: elevated from linear temporality, that is to say 'suspended', but also literally with no time left, as it is running out for its narrator and her father. The possibilities for touch and proximity have radically altered in pandemic conditions where teletechnologies now rule; however, in its suturing of two distinct historical moments and its exploration of how they act upon each other, it also retrieves the experimental form of *How to be both*. The 'turn back' to this mode signals it as a key form Smith uses to express and work through the extreme isolation and grief of this period. *Companion Piece*, in a formal sense, is a companion to *How to be both*.

Set in the lived dystopia of contemporary Britain, *Companion Piece* is a contemplative deep dive of a text, from the position of a 'locked down' narrator, shielding from others in order to be able to visit her sick father in hospital. Delving into roots and routes, via two women,

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<sup>34</sup> Ali Smith, *Companion Piece*, p.46

<sup>35</sup> Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, p.240

<sup>36</sup> Eleanor Byrne, 'The Fifth Season: Queer Hosts and the Covid-19 pandemic in Ali Smith's *Summer* and *Companion Piece*', Special Focus of *Minnesota Review* Pandemic Fictions, Duke UP, forthcoming, October 2024.

isolating and solitary gay artist Sandy Gray, living through the Covid19 pandemic, and an unnamed skilled medieval female blacksmith who is brutally attacked and left for dead. The text is further marked by a backwards reading lesson that Sandy gives to their acquaintance Martina, spelling out the letters THEAD in an e.e.cummings poem. Reading backwards and threading the letters together to spell out and defy death arguably invites a backwards reading of her father's life and her relation to him, narrated in a series of excerpts and memories, starting with the most recent, in a chapter entitled 'Death in Reverse', until she works her way back to the beginning and the earliest ones. The ordering of the text into sections further invites the reader to start at the end via the ordering of the three distinct sections of the narrative, which starts with You Choose, followed by Curlew, then Curfew, reordering and reversing a phrase which Martina hears through a wall. Locked in a windowless customs room for seven hours she hears the phrase 'curfew or curlew, you choose'. If these walls could talk, we often say when we enter a space freighted with possibly traumatising histories; in *Companion Piece* they can. For the reader, Sandy and Martina alike, it feels like we have been put in an escape room with a cryptic clue; there may be some anagrams to decipher along the way via a reading for reversals, and a reordering of letters and words.

The narrative impetus is a belated 'call back' to Sandy, from a university acquaintance, Martina Pelf née Inglis, whose name if she had 'double-barrelled' on marrying would be fittingly translated to Pilfering/thieving English. She is a blast from the past, more throwback than call back, forgotten and unimportant to Sandy. She was once a terrible Knock Knock joke, staging a confrontation of the dominant straight world of undergraduate life with the marginal queer one, now she's a call from an unknown number. Her call also comes from behind; despite the telephone's traditional location in the hall, marking it as the 'entry' point of the house, the call is always via a back door, by surprise. Sandy is also constantly awaiting a call back she *does* want to answer from the hospital, where her father is being cared for, to hear of his condition. Martina's unwanted, unsolicited call slips past her usual filtering because of this, and sparks the stagnant narrator into action. It also initiates an English invasion by Martina's family. Sandy finds herself giving away first advice, then a book, the use of her hallway and Wi-Fi, and finally her front room and entire house which falls under English occupation despite her repeated pleas for the family to leave.

Sand(y) is an unwilling host, whose name implies her status as a contraction for Scotland itself. Nonetheless Martina's call 'unlocks something' in Sandy, via two backward embraces that power the heart of the story. Sandy's memories of her student days are activated by the re-encounter with a past associate, and she recalls a formative moment with her back against a stone wall in a ruined castle, reading a Muriel Spark novel. Remembering herself nested against the wall, she experiences a collapsing of imagined and real pasts, present and her present/future. Time is undone: her back pressing on the ruin allows past and present to embrace. The Scottish ruin opens onto a dream of a living wolf 'which had draped itself around my shoulders, not at all heavy, but warm relaxed as if happily hitching a ride [...] I'd know when I woke up that I hadn't travelled with a wolf in any form since before my mother died. That's a long time.'<sup>37</sup> Text, stone wall, and maternal embrace all coalesce like a garment on Sandy's back, an embrace which operates as a kind of rear-guard protection.

Reading the novel as a metafictional exploration of the authorial self, reflecting on two versions of Smith as woman artist she plays with her own surname, and a series of other potential name contractions that Sandy's name alludes to (Alisdair, Alexander, Cassandra). Smith/Sandy conjures an imagined past ancestor for her present self to converse with, a young female blacksmith. She does something similar in the short story 'writ,' where an older narrator recreates her younger 14-year-old self in an involuntary 'call back'.<sup>38</sup> The anonymous medieval blacksmith/locksmith has been trained by one Ann Shaklock, whose name is a suggestive hybrid of Ann Hathaway and Woolf's Judith, in her cautionary tale of Shakespeare's sister.<sup>39</sup> The blacksmith figure is perhaps a dissident and bleaker feminist counter-narrative to Hilary Mantel's more successful smith, Thomas Cromwell from her *Wolf Hall* series. Like Woolf's tale, *Companion Piece*, via an anonymous 'Cromwell's sister,' performs an example of what Fiona McCulloch terms a Scottish 'ethical palimpsest,' a parallel lost and marginal history of all the female Smiths, an inheritance of loss, violation, and vagrancy, but also of

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<sup>37</sup> Ali Smith, *Companion Piece*, p.51

<sup>38</sup> In 'Writ', *The First Person and Other stories* (2008), the narrator's 14-year-old self arrives in her house as a personification of adolescent sexuality, it happens just after they have been 'expertly backed against a wall and kissed'. There isn't room to discuss this story discussion, but it's clearly another example of the back acting as a textual and chronological twister enabling a queer embrace of the past, in this case one's own past self.

<sup>39</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, The Hogarth Press, 1935, pp.70-74.

craft and survival which is needed for the present. As McCulloch argues, Smith's Scottish fiction's cosmopolitan conscience couples with a queering of timelines that seek a radically hospitable cosmopolitan and intersectional vision and ethics.<sup>40</sup> When the unnamed young blacksmith from another age appears in Sandy's bedroom, she offers her a stout pair of boots.

However, (Quick)sand, true to her name, is stuck. When the novel opens Sand is suspended in her own escape room, come to a standstill between her life, the pandemic and the events surrounding her father's heart attack that have overtaken it. In a tragicomedy of generational mistrust when Martina's twins arrive to accuse her of an affair with their mother, they both seek to invade her home in material forms, to pelf it, but also to draw her into the/their web, to put her on the internet. Like Heather Love's modernist 'queer but not now,' Sand shares with them a 'stubborn lingering of pastness (whether it appears as anachronistic style, as the reappearance of bygone events in the symptom, or as arrested development) a hallmark of queer affect: a "revolution" in the old sense of the word, as a turning back.'<sup>41</sup> Sand reflects that it has taken her time to name herself as gay, a term she 'eventually, as the time passed felt more able and determined to say'.<sup>42</sup> Embodying what Love terms "backwards" emotions elaborated by artists 'for whom the birth of the modern homosexual identity-form was constraining rather than liberating: shame, passivity, melancholy, and recoil, to name but a few, were ways of refusing the progressive logic by which becoming ever more visible was correlated with achieving ever more freedom'.<sup>43</sup> A potentially melancholic modernist queer, Sand's artistic practice repeatedly paints the words of poems over one another, producing in effect a backwards reading in the final result where the first words will be obscured under the subsequent layers. She enjoys her relative obscurity, focusing on the practice, what her father sees as 'failure,' which we might recast as a queer objective/pleasure/necessity.<sup>44</sup>

Her world is juxtaposed with that of the younger generation lolling about in her house; the Pelf twins, Lea and Eden, whose names variously signal gardens and meadows. Members of

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<sup>40</sup> Fiona McCulloch, 'Connected to time': Ali Smith's Anachronistic Scottish Cosmopolitanism' in *Scottish Writing after Devolution*, ed. Marie-Odile Pitton-Hedon, EUP, 2022, pp 57-80.

<sup>41</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards*, p.8

<sup>42</sup> Ali Smith, *Companion Piece*, p.23

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8

<sup>44</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Duke UP, 2011

Gen Z, Eden always appears with a CELINE bag, a dark literary joke about another disappointing modernist. They seem futureless, precariously employed in online jobs that monitor their productivity. This initially unpromising meeting nonetheless holds the seeds of a series of formally creative political shifts in the text. A couple of English proclaimers, they shout about Sandy's sexuality in the street outside her house, as both sides engage in a war of words. Sand proclaims her own esoteric anachronistic words on the street in response, 'SHE'S A CULVER, I shout, A HEART ROOT. A CRYSTAL BUTTON' causing Eden to cry.<sup>45</sup> The twins are the connoisseurs of acronyms, or initialisms, practiced in speaking in single letters. Spelling out the letters of their names as Sand does for Martina in the cummings poem, produces 'a needle,' a potent motif in Woolf's *Orlando* stitching scraps of history together, a tool for suture, as Elizabeth Freeman notes, conjuring an image of how the pieces are united in quilting, sewn back-to-back; all the work is done from behind. The twins become 'attached' to her, going behind their mother's back, they seek her home as a refuge, a gender fluid non-binary space, a literary lending library, a space of queer hospitality.

### **Encore: Rear-Guard Action**

To be *avant-garde* is to know that which has died. To be *arrière-garde*, is to continue to love it.<sup>46</sup>

The formally experimental poetry of cummings is no longer of interest to Sandy, who has found out after her university days that he wrote sexist and racist verse and supported the McCarthy witch hunts. Rather, the book reroutes in a Scottish experimental direction; a text of call backs via the *homo-phone*, it pays homage to a vital experimental Scottish and 'queer adjacent' canon in multiple ways. Through the appearance of texts by Conan Doyle, Muriel Spark, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and a carefully guarded Edwin Morgan a constellation of intertexts are present. As a figure for the isolated writer, agoraphobic Scottish poet/artist Ian Hamilton Finlay's work acts as an anonymous 'touchstone' here, a sign or a signpost to the 'rear-guard.' If Finlay can work as a figure for a cosmopolitan Scottish internationalism, it would be by collapsing the opposition between *avant* and *arriere*; he both appears turned inwards and

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<sup>45</sup> Ali Smith, *Companion Piece*, p.122

<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes, III*, p. 1038



embattled, but is also restlessly international, adjacent perhaps to the disjunctive spatial relations that Cairns Craig argues typify the Scottish novel.<sup>47</sup> A creator of concrete poetry on the page and in his large gardens at Stoney Path, later Little Sparta, his location was uncompromisingly exclusive, he could also after Craig be considered a Scottish miniaturist, ruling over Little Sparta. Unlike Sandy whose cosmopolitanism lets everyone in, following to the letter Paul McCartney's lyrics (she and her father listen to the Wings song *Let 'Em In*), and her father's advice about unconditional hospitality, Finlay was notorious for stand-offs on his land, rehearsing long standing border disputes like a true melancholic. His correspondence with Albert Speer places him alongside the other disappointing modernists in the novel, Cummings, and Celine.<sup>48</sup> The poems however are not static but highly mobile, both in terms of their complex origins and hybrid composition and translation and their location in the landscape.

CURFEW/curlew, part of a series of one-word poems by Finlay fits into a Scottish international tradition also associated with Edwin Morgan, mercurial translator, poet, socialist and latterly gay icon. As a concrete form, Curfew/Curlew is also a shape shifting pebble, lobbed over from the previous novel, *Summer*, in the Seasonal Quartet, one of whose subjects was Einstein's brief stay in England in 1933 before he escaped Nazi pursuit to the US; *Ein stein* (a stone) is on the beach, as young Robert notes in *Summer*, and it undergoes a transformation to a physical stone as it crosses the literary/geographical border.<sup>49</sup> Bastion Goursand comments that the Finlay poem 'is part of a natural environment and functions, so to speak, in collaboration with the place [...] this site-specific poem offers an experience of iconicity within the symbolic, and it present[s] itself as 'nested' within the stone, the trees and the call of the birds and what Eduardo Kohn would designate as their semiotic properties.'<sup>50</sup> But this nested poetry also migrates and turns queer. In the early 1960s, Edwin Morgan engaged in a regular correspondence with Brazilians Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, translating some of their

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<sup>47</sup> Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*, EUP, 1999, p.239

<sup>48</sup> Greg Thomas, 'Ian Hamilton Finlay, Albert Speer, and the Ideology of the Aesthetic at Little Sparta and Spandau', *Journal of Lusophone Studies*, 5.1 (Spring 2020): 64–92

<sup>49</sup> Ali Smith, *Summer*, Hamish Hamilton, 2020, p.349

<sup>50</sup> Bastion Goursand, 'The River's Mutterings: Lyrical Discretion, Communal Utterances and Poetry Beyond the Human in Alice Oswald's *Dart*' *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, 56, 2019, p.38

concrete poetry.<sup>51</sup> The collections of one-word-poems in the publication *P.O.T.H.* demonstrate the commitment to formal experimentation and Morgan's committed internationalism. Finlay had requested from his contributors poems which "consist of one word, with a title of any length, these two elements forming, as it were, a corner which would then contain the meaning."<sup>52</sup> He notably expressed disappointment with what he received, regretting that the full scope of the form had been underexplored: 'The kind of poem I would most like is a serious one, for many people have sent examples which are only briefly witty, and the form is capable of more than that. After all, one has the whole title to move around in.'<sup>53</sup> *Companion Piece* turns the transnationally routed Scottish concrete poem back into a question, which brings its two halves to life, activating its radical roots, and restarting an endless chain of signification that has only briefly been crystallised in the act of chiselling the words into stone. Smith is also faithful to the interest in one word poetry, demonstrating repeatedly how much room there is in a word, how accommodating and sheltering that word might be as it unfurls in her single word titles. McCulloch argues that Smith's Scottish fiction's cosmopolitan conscience couples with a queering of timelines that seek a radically hospitable cosmopolitan and intersectional vision and ethics. This text acts to revive a queerly inaugurated internationalist taproot of a tree to lean on, following post-structuralist signposts to what Marjorie Perloff, after Roland Barthes, calls rear-guard actions of concrete poetry.<sup>54</sup> The *arrière-garde* is not simply the opposite of the *avant-garde*, rather it denotes the places to which a loyalty to the once *avant-garde* takes writing, where concretism might take on new life. The words, spoken like a spell, have the ability to initiate new stories in the text. In another major reversal, Smith takes the phrase 'Kill two birds with one stone,' from her previous novel *Summer*, and inverts it, and brings Curfew and Curlew both to life.

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<sup>51</sup> Morgan discovered concrete poetry in 1962, after reading a letter from the Brazilian poet E.M. de Melo e Castro in the *Times Literary Supplement*. He forwarded this to the Edinburgh-based Finlay, with whom he shared an interest in modernist *avant-gardes* and new developments in international poetry. They were soon exploring the work of the Brazilian *Noigandres* group and the Bolivian-born German Eugen Gomringer, and within a year, both men had published their first concrete experiments in Finlay and Jessie McGuffie's magazine *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse*.  
<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/08/the-cries-o-a-new-warld> (83)

<sup>52</sup> Edwin Morgan Archive at the Scottish Poetry Library  
[https://edwinmorgan.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/1980s/nine\\_one\\_word\\_poems.html](https://edwinmorgan.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/1980s/nine_one_word_poems.html)

<sup>53</sup> Ian Hamilton Finlay correspondence with Ernst Jandl, Edwin Morgan Archive.

<sup>54</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Writing as Re-writing: Concrete Poetry as Arrière Garde*.  
<https://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v17/perloff.htm>

In 'Queer Relations', David J. Getsy proposes that 'there is nothing intrinsically queer about a form,' but does go on to argue that a queer formalism 'can track issues of shape and relation such as the erotics of sameness, refusals of conformity, non-monogamous couplings, defiant non-reproducibility, the encouragement of misuse, the vexing of taxonomies, achronological temporalities, and the creation of self-made kinships.'<sup>55</sup> This queer formalism is found in both *Companion Piece* and *How to be Both*, the call back and the backwards embrace offer examples of how queer formalism; an embrace with the past that emerges through the material experience of the dorsal that then proliferates in multiple directions and modes. Both texts explore embodied queer desire routed through dorsality, the back itself cradled, metaphorically attacked, but also a figure for a backward embrace with history that speaks of the anachronistic desire and grieving, at the heart of queer expression. The backwards view, the backward embrace, the call-back, the *arrière-garde* mark a range of 'reciprocal tactilities' after Dinshaw, that materialise via the back. Disjunctive times and places, characters, real or imagined, rub against one another. Reading Smith's textual juxtapositions as also speaking of queer desires, I have argued that this formalism is tied specifically to queer narrators and subjectivities, marked by a radical temporal collision, a (be)hindsight, or call back, terms that exchange in a constant substitution for one another, interweaving, entwined together, but also in a kind of embrace from behind that is concretized in the back itself.

Queer anachronism has a considerable critical pedigree as Sarah Mullen notes,<sup>56</sup> and as McCulloch observes, can be fruitfully juxtaposed with what she terms Smith's Scottish cosmopolitan perspective which 'forges a queer resistance to global temporality, a Scottish cosmopolitan perspective which, though not immediately obvious upon first glance, resonates through her pages like an ethical palimpsest'.<sup>57</sup> Following Cairns Craig's assertion that the Scottish novel 'exists not within the narrative of history but between history and its other, between the map-maker's map and the 'other world,' she suggests a felicitous overlap

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<sup>55</sup> David J. Getsy, *ASAP/Journal* vol.2, no.2 (May 2017): 254-57

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Mullen, *Queer Anachronisms: Reimagining Lesbian History in Performance*, *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer*, ed. by Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier, (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 244–56

<sup>57</sup> Fiona McCulloch, 'Connected to Time': Ali Smith's Anachronistic Scottish Cosmopolitanism, *Scottish Writing After Devolution: Edges of the New*, eds. Marie-Odile Pittin-Hedon, Camille Manfredi and Scott Hames, EUP, 2022, p.57

between a queering of timelines and a long-standing emergence of resistant and dissident Scottish temporality.<sup>58</sup> Characterising Scotland as an 'unbounded' nation, Craig comments that 'Scotland is a space of 'turning things around,' so that it is impossible to tell whether history or its opposite is 'magicked, inspired absurdity.'<sup>59</sup> McCulloch argues that Smith's Scottish fiction's cosmopolitan conscience couples with a queering of timelines which seek a hospitable, cosmopolitan and intersectional vision and ethics. Whilst *How to be both* does not ground itself in specifically Scottish references or locations, *Companion Piece* is explicit in its attention to layers of ancestry, influence and liberatory traditions. Smith celebrates Sand's father's working-class historical vision of radical hospitality and allies it to the internationalist cosmopolitan Scottish *avant-garde*. *Companion Piece* calls up a rear-guard of literary Scottish ancestors, animates them, and joins in.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 60

<sup>59</sup> Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, p. 240