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ESSAY 2 ON ALI SMITH'S *AUTUMN*: ESTABLISHING ETHICAL DIALOGUES

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The age of information has brought forth rapid communication through text, email, and social media. Subsequently, human interaction has evolved into a less personal form of communication. In *Autumn*, seventy-seven-year-old Daniel Gluck uses interpersonal communication to establish an ethical and formative dialogue with his eight-year-old mentee, Elisabeth Demand. Within their twenty-five-year relationship, ten years have been spent away from each other, leading to disarray in Elisabeth's life. It might seem like ethical communication shared between herself and Daniel helped mold Elisabeth into becoming a complex individual; however, Daniel's sense of truth allows Elisabeth to assert herself with authoritarian figures, discern problems within her community and attempt to adjust them, and stand up for what she believes in. It is therefore evident that despite Elisabeth's outcome, the lessons that Daniel instilled gave Elisabeth an overwhelming sense of understanding her community.

Daniel's sense of truth has been acquired by his perception of the world throughout his many years. When he watches over an eleven-year-old Elisabeth, the first thing he asks her is "What you reading? Elisabeth showed him her empty hands. […] Always be reading something. [...] Even when we're not physically reading something. [...] Even when we're not physically reading. How else would will we read the world?" (Smith 68). Daniel uses this first interaction to begin a Socratic method of thinking that affects the next series of questions he asks Elisabeth. By establishing an ethical dialogue from the first conversation, Daniel attempts to build a relationship based on logical reasoning, not on personal feelings. Daniel uses a form of cooperative dialogue between himself and Elisabeth to express that a thirst for knowledge does not draw from books but rather from examining other people within their society. Daniel gives Elisabeth a thirst for analyzing her surroundings and using critical thinking to explore the ongoing relationship between herself and her environment.

The interpersonal relationship between Daniel and Elisabeth stems from the complexity of their differences in age and education. Daniel continually educates Elisabeth on complexities within society that stem from historical norms. In an

entry within the Encyclopedia Britannica, these ethical dialogues are shown within the context of philosophers. Despite the growing complexities and consistent shifts of communication between them, Daniel and Elisabeth have a keen sense that "[k]nowing what a person says, for example, is a matter of knowing what truth (or falsehood) his words convey; so communication itself requires cognizance of the connection between language and the world" ("Philosophy of Language"). Daniel's description of art to Elisabeth is interpreted as a connectivity of absolute truths that his language implies. Daniel uses this knowledge and his methods of a cooperative argument to solidify the idea that Elisabeth has a specific interconnectivity between herself and the world. Daniel also uses this argument to establish that truth is subjective to the speaker and listener and that actions are typically what someone will believe.

Daniel and Elisabeth's sixty-nine-year age difference drives specific ethical dilemmas due to Elisabeth's naivety. When Elisabeth is thirteen, Daniel offers to play his interpretation of the game Bagatelle after Elisabeth comments on the distance of their walk. Daniel does this to begin Elisabeth's cultivation of the Socratic method and to justify a sense of trifle "because the whole point of Bagatelle is that you trifle with the stories that people think are set in stone" (Smith 117). Elisabeth's attitude toward the walk shows her overthinking everyday occurrences, seemingly building her own self-reliance from society. Elisabeth's introduction to treating situations as trifles, just as Daniel did throughout his life, allows her to continue forward through adversity by analyzing Daniel's point of view toward situations; however, it is evident that Daniel wants Elisabeth to go beyond treating situations as trifles and to instead rise above irritations to begin social change. Daniel attempts to disentangle Elisabeth's trifles so she will be inclined not to let them dominate her life.

Elisabeth's sophisticated upbringing is partially due to her perception of her mother and Daniel. Elisabeth thinking that she is smarter than her mother is a "[problem that] may not always be easy to discern. You may have to analyze the situation carefully and interpret it in the light of these values—understanding that, for example, a keen sense of loyalty may be a form of responsibility, while a disciplined devotion to accuracy could be a version of honesty" (Kidder 76). Daniel continually uses his lessons to show Elisabeth the importance of values and loyalty, yet because of her naivety, she does not feel inclined to impart these values toward her mother. Elisabeth's independence from and disdain for her family in itself is a gross imposition of power due to her attitudes with her mother. Daniel sees this

malice building within her and attempts to show her that an abundance of reliance on oneself typically leaves one in tragedy.

Elisabeth does not treat situations as Daniel would want. She continually overanalyzes simplicities and common occurrences instead of treating them as trifles. Such can be seen as Elisabeth is renewing her passport: a "notion that my head's the wrong size in a photograph would mean I've probably done or am going to do something really wrong and illegal. [...] And because I asked you about facial recognition technology, because I happen to know it exists and I asked you if the passport people use it, that makes me a suspect as well" (Smith 24). Elisabeth attempts to use battle with the sense of taking back control from this postal worker by treating the situation as a trifle. By evading the accusations and prejudice, Elisabeth sets forth a precedent within the remainder of the dialogue that she is fighting the worker's narrative; however, this tactic fails because of Elisabeth's current disconnect from Daniel and results in a destructive conversation with authority.

As Daniel and Elisabeth's connectivity with each other shifts throughout the novel, a sense of "retreat and return" can be identified in Elisabeth's retreat into the world and return to Daniel. Terry Gifford, in his publication about the effects of pastoral environments, alludes that Elisabeth's retreat has justification to it. Elisabeth unknowingly retreats from Daniel in an ecocritical perception, yet it is seen because "there must in some sense be a return from that location to a context in which the results of the journey are to be understood. When the pastoral is merely escapist, […] there is an implicit attempt on the part of the writer to resist return" (Gifford). Elisabeth seemingly resists the return to Daniel because of her complicated relationship with him, making the retreat initially feel like a plea for escapism from the one she loves. Elisabeth knows that the environment Daniel has created for them gives her a false sense of authority that she desperately desires. Elisabeth's retreat from Daniel implies that she has yet to understand the results of the journey she has taken away from him.

As Elisabeth begins to visit a sedated Daniel and to recall his teachings, her attitude toward society shifts to become less aggressive. She begins to realize that her journey to acquire power is faulted if she cannot love those around her. This concerned attitude is portrayed within a dialogue with her mother as "Elisabeth grimace[s]. Every morning she wakes up feeling cheated of something. The next thing she thinks about, when she does, is the number of people waking up feeling cheated of something all over the country, no matter what they voted" (Smith 197). Elisabeth's point of view becomes less self-centered and more global as she

observes certain injustices. The many lessons Daniel instilled within her have begun to surface despite Daniel not being present. Her self-realization is so impactful because it stems from Daniel's Socratic method and her applications of critical thinking to injustice toward strangers.

Daniel's ethical communication has allowed Elisabeth to establish a sense of trifles for herself and not toward society. Daniel has done this because "[a]cts of communication affect what is good, right, or virtuous for everyone involved in the communication process. […] It is a way of living that recognizes that our communication co-constructs the world in which we live" (Tompkins 15). Elisabeth, when she was a child, could not fully comprehend what was good, right, or virtuous for society. Daniel, in his years as a Holocaust survivor and an immigrant, was able to acquire the sense through his natural, ethical conversations. Daniel's most important lesson, which can be shown in nearly every lesson he gives Elisabeth, is that the unconcealed attainment of power in any environment will undoubtedly lead to tragedy. That communities of communication construct their morals and that the individuals within the community adjust the morals as society changes is the pinnacle of Daniel's teaching to Elisabeth.

Daniel Gluck's desire to protect Elisabeth from the consequences she imposes on herself and her surroundings leads to Elisabeth's desire for power being fueled. As Elisabeth recalls a stroll with Daniel, she cannot remember what led to the actions of throwing "Daniel's watch, not just any old stone or piece of litter, flying through the air, and knowing too that there was no way those boys could know this, that only she and Daniel know the enormity of what he'd just done. She remembers that Daniel had given her the choice, to throw or not to throw. She remembers she chose to throw" (Smith 76). Daniel gives Elisabeth his watch to symbolize his willingness to surrender a physical entity, his watch. More importantly, he gives Elisabeth an intellectual dominance of a specific secret that only they would share. Daniel allows young Elisabeth to throw his watch because he would rather take the consequences and harm over society. Daniel attempts to deconstruct any emotional relationship he has built with Elisabeth, by giving her the freedom and choice to implement his lessons in a controlled environment. Elisabeth instead is in a state of self-deception and throws the watch simply because she can. Elisabeth's inner dialogue is likely foreseen due to her naivety at the time, yet as she recalls the memory, she still cannot piece together why she threw it.

Elisabeth uses Daniel's Socratic method to instill an analytic sense of observation within her inner dialogue. Literary critic Richard Kelly affirms the use of inner dialogue to justify the creation of complex relationships in "follow[ing]

Elisabeth as she spends weekends with her mother in the village where she grew up. Together they observe various disquieting post-Brexit phenomena that are as plain as the change in the weather; they see Spanish tourists harangued at a taxi stand, hear people in the street crowing about kicking undesirables out of the country" (Kelly). Elisabeth and her mother observe these post-Brexit occurrences, yet it is Daniel who instills the ability to distinguish the change. Daniel's desire to protect society from Elisabeth, and vice versa, is justified by the future interactions that Elisabeth partakes in.

Elisabeth's restitution with Daniel comes as she visits him in the hospital. As she talks to one of Daniel's care assistants about his past, she has an epiphany of what Daniel truly is to her. Elisabeth seemingly realizes that she genuinely does not know who Daniel is because "[h]e's never talked about any of that, not to us, Elisabeth says. Family for you, the care assistant says. Easier to talk to someone you don't know" (Smith 171). Elisabeth considers her relationship with Daniel to be one of familiarity, not realizing that he has always considered it a mentor-mentee association. When Elisabeth discovers from a stranger moments of Daniel's history that she did not know, it becomes evident that Daniel is also protecting himself from Elisabeth's overanalysis.

Daniel and Elisabeth's relationship stems from their personal outlooks of each other and shifts as their communication changes over time. Although Elisabeth knows she cannot have what she truly wants—her idea of Daniel's love—she understands that he has given her an overwhelming sense of understanding society. By using and not using Daniel's lessons, Elisabeth forged her own path to personal fulfillment despite the adversity of a hostile post-Brexit society. Daniel Gluck undoubtedly wanted this for Elisabeth, and it is pertinent to understand that he deserves the benefit of the doubt because he believes what he is doing is right. Despite Elisabeth's constant curiosity, she was able to discover when and when not to strive for fulfillment.

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