TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF FRIENDSHIP: ALI SMITH'S *AUTUMN*

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ABSTRACT

The first part of this article argues that aesthetic aspects play a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of friendships. While most philosophers of friendship emphasize ethical concerns, I draw inspiration from Alexander Nehamas's predominantly aesthetic approach in *On Friendship* (2016). Nehamas claims that deep friendships depend on a strong fascination with the friend's unique characteristics. Although this may be true, I argue that friendship relies more fundamentally on the mutual appreciation of shared experiences, which includes a third entity: an object of interest, a situation, or the atmosphere created between those involved.

The second part of the article analyzes how Ali Smith portrays friendship as a process of sharing experiences in her novel *Autumn* (2016), with a focus on forms of attention, observations, and discourse. The reading also supports the hypothesis that the novel genre is a particularly rich source for exploring the significance of friendship.

KEYWORDS

Friendship, Love, Joint Attention, Collage, Everyday Aesthetics, Ali Smith

In philosophy, friendship has traditionally been regarded as a matter of ethics. This article proposes a rethinking of friendship from the point of view of aesthetics. My point of departure is that novels can explore friendship in ways that exemplify, problematize, and transcend philosophy's attempts at defining it. Many novels expose how friendships emerge and are maintained in acts of *shared attention*. While friendships are often discussed as a relationship between two persons, I shall emphasize that friendships are mediated by a third element and involve joint attention to *something*. This might be a landscape, a work of art, themes in a conversation, a sports event, or an undefined, pleasing atmosphere. In the novel I shall discuss in the last part of this article, Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), games and art facilitate shared attention and, as a result, friendship.

Awareness of this third element is not neglected in the philosophy of friendship, but it has received surprisingly little attention. By emphasizing this third element, it is easier to see, I argue, that questions about friendship are relevant to a broader discussion of forms, procedures, and rituals related to traditional and new life forms.

The article consists of two main sections. The first offers a theoretical philosophical discussion of possibilities and challenges for an aesthetics of friendship, drawing on Aristotle, Alexander Nehamas, Alain Badiou, April Flakne, and Giorgio Agamben.[1] The second offers an analysis of Ali Smith's *Autumn,* providing examples of what "sharing attention" might mean in concrete situations, and particularly related to play and the *collage* form. The article shows how Smith explores the foundations of friendship by focusing on specific *forms* of experience, communication, and attachment. I argue, finally, that the book poses the question of how smaller acts of friendliness, as described in the book, are relevant to rethinking political agency within the bleak picture of the political and cultural crisis in post-Brexit Britain as depicted in the novel.

ETHICAL AND AESTHETIC APPROACHES TO FRIENDSHIP

Alexander Nehamas' book *On Friendship* from 2016 is perhaps the most promising of relatively few recent attempts at rethinking friendship from the point of view of aesthetics.[2] I shall, therefore, clarify how his perspective is both helpful and insufficient for my purposes.

Why do we love our friends? Nehamas asks. To answer this, he discusses the most influential texts on friendship of all time, Aristotle's

books 8 and 9 of *The Nicomachean Ethics*,[3] and Book VII of *Eudemian Ethics*.[4] According to Aristotle, there are various reasons for appreciating friends, related to three different friendship types: friendships of *utility*, *pleasure,* and *virtue*. Friendships of pleasure are later often referred to as aesthetical friendships.[5] For Aristotle, friendships of utility and pleasure are inferior to those of virtue. True, actualized friendship, "primary friendships,"[6] is, for him, only possible between virtuous people in the sense that they will treat each other as *ends in themselves* and not as means for one's utility or pleasure.[7] While Aristotle writes about three different types of friendships,[8] Nehamas claims that friendships of utility and pleasure should not be called friendship at all and that the term is inappropriate unless it describes a bond stronger than mere momentary pleasure.[9] More importantly, he points out that Aristotle ignores the singularity of the friend. He agrees with Aristotle that deep friendship is rare and can only be experienced with a few people. However, the reasons why we are drawn to a particular person and not others are not necessarily because we recognize and love the person's refined virtues, as Aristotle argues.[10] Some people possess all the right virtues, yet we do not love them. And we sometimes love people despite their many weaknesses. We love them not for their virtues but for *who they are*, according to Nehamas, and we cannot say exactly what it is about the other person that draws us to him or her. Nehamas suggests that a fascination for *otherness*, similar to our fascination for *art*, drives our orientation toward our friends.

His critical reorientation builds on Michel de Montaigne's conclusion after trying to explain his love for his diseased friend Étienne de La Boétie: "If a man should importune me to give a reason why I loved him, I find it could no otherwise be expressed, than by making answer: because it was he, because it was I."[11] In other words, true friendship does not have clearly defined characteristics and can only be explained by a fascination for the person's uniqueness. Such unique qualities are more difficult to define than the virtues Aristotle singles out as necessary in so-called "primary friendship." This is one of several reasons why philosophy has not been able to deal with friendship in a satisfying way, according to Nehamas. If one wants to know what friendship is, he claims, one must go to the arts, which deal with the particularities of the sensible.

NOVELISTIC APPROACHES TO FRIENDSHIP

The various arts are, however, unevenly suited to illuminate the qualities of friendship according to Nehamas. Painting is of limited

use, since friendship is not defined by specific objects, situations, or actions, but by intentions—something a painting cannot easily convey.[12] Literature is a better, though not the optimal, source, he argues. Epics and novels are often structured around dramatic scenes and plot twists, but friendship unfolds slowly through the repetitive patterns of everyday life. Therefore, epic and novelistic descriptions of friendship risk becoming tedious. Nehamas admits that classic epics, like *Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad*, raise fundamental questions about friendship. However, he argues that friendship is a secondary motif in these works, which primarily focus on the pursuit of honor and glory. He provides a long list of classic narrative texts in which friendship plays an important role: *The Odyssey, The Aeneid, Robinson Crusoe, Ivanhoe, Paradise Lost, War and Peace, Crime and Punishment, Middlemarch, Buddenbrooks, Pride and Prejudice,* and many more. In such works, friendship, he claims, "[…] furthers plot, creates verisimilitude, and illuminates character," but the main concern of the works lies elsewhere; it could be adventure, bravery, fidelity, love, war, human imperfections, or other themes.

In contrast to narrative genres, Nehamas highlights drama and film as particularly suitable for treating friendship. Through readings of Yasmina Reza's play *Art* (1994) and the movie *Thelma and Louise* (1991), he explains how dramatic genres can inspire a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the qualities and risks of friendship.

But is it true that narrative genres such as the epic, sagas, the novella, and the novel are less well suited to illuminate the nature of friendship? The Danish biologist and philosopher of science Claus Emmeche has disputed this assertion. In comparing several approaches to friendship by philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and others, Emmeche argues that Elena Ferrante offers a particularly rich exploration of various aspects of friendship in her so-called Neapolitan quartet, starting with *L'amica geniale* (2011) / *My Brilliant Friend* (2012).[13] In addition to this example, numerous contemporary novels, with friendship as a central theme, can be easily identified.[14] There is also a growing amount of scholarship on the importance of the friendship theme in literary history.[15] I shall later explain in more detail why the novel in general, and particularly *Autumn,* is well suited to describe friendship and to present, analyze, and problematize specific *forms*, *procedures,* and *rituals* of shared attention. But let me first point out another problem with Nehamas' approach.

FRIENDSHIP AS SHARED ATTENTION

Nehamas makes an important contribution by arguing that the philosophical discourse on friendship (after Aristotle) has been too narrowly focused on ethical considerations and has tended to see genuine friendship as morally good. I also agree with his claims that we can have deep friendships with people who are not particularly virtuous and that profound friendships can inspire both good and less good deeds. He is also right in pointing out that Aristotle ignores the particular qualities of the friend. But while emphasizing the uniqueness of the friend, he seems to underestimate an equally important aspect of friendship: the joy of shared attention.

I would even argue that there are reasons to doubt whether deep friendship relies on a strong fascination with the friend's unique qualities. Although such a fascination is a reality in many friendships, I suggest that the experience of joy in *sharing experiences* with a particular person is an even more fundamental condition. Many close friends love one another not primarily because they are endlessly interested in the particularities of the other, but because *they love to be in the atmosphere created when they are together*. This atmosphere depends on a third element, something they can share. They might like to do activities together, explore nature, experience a work of art, discuss politics, or go fishing. The perfect fishing partner would *not* attract his friend's attention but inspire a sensibility for the particularities of nature, water, and fish, being able to talk and stay silent at the right moments. Such aspects of friendship are seldom addressed in the philosophy of friendship, but they are often hinted at, explored, and conceptualized in fiction.

What I miss in Nehamas' and other philosophical writings on friendship is a better understanding of how aesthetic appreciation plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining various kinds of friendship at all levels, not only in friendships of utility or pleasure (aesthetical friendships), but also in so-called virtuous ones. I suggest that the unique bond between two friends is not necessarily based on an endless fascination for the other but rather on the experience that we love being in the presence of our friend because this is particularly calming, inspiring, or exciting, whether we go for a walk in the woods, discuss politics, or assist one another in giving verbal form to intimate thoughts. Nehamas is obviously right in pointing out that it is more pleasing to spend time with some people than with others, and that this joy depends on personal traits, but he fails to explain that it can be just as inspiring to spend time with someone

who enables you to see and experience *the world* differently, as with someone who draws attention to themselves. I suggest that deep friendships can exist between people who view each other as quite ordinary.

My argument that friendship involves a third element deserving attention, is partially inspired by Alain Badiou's theory of love as outlined in *In Praise of Love* and other works. As Badiou explains what he calls the "two scene" of love, one commits oneself to see the world in relation to how the beloved sees it.[16] Since both are unique, they will never perceive things in exactly the same way. Thus, the potential for an event arises from the tension between these two distinct perspectives. This is why love, for Badiou, is *a truth procedure*. Love is not primarily about paying attention to the particularities of the beloved or sharing intimate secrets (which can be wonderful), but spending time together in a committed way, and being exposed to the beloved's way of experiencing, offers an opportunity to see the *world* in a completely new way.

One should not overlook the difference between the more restricted meaning Badiou attributes to love and what we normally call friendship. For Badiou, love is restricted to an exclusive relationship between two, sealed by the pact for eternity that is entered by the oath "I love you." Although similar oaths can be made by friends (e.g., by so-called "blood brothers," literally or metaphorically),[17] friends can usually allow themselves to drift apart if the foundation of the friendship changes. Despite such reservations, Badiou's philosophy of love remains relevant to our purposes, as he emphasizes how committed contact with the other opens new insights about the world.

Nehamas' approach to friendship is very different from Badiou's to love. Nehamas comes close to seeing friendship as conditioned by a third object when he discusses Yasmina Reza's play *Art,* but does not pay due attention to this in his general theory of friendship. As the friendship between the three friends in the play seems to break down, due to a seemingly less important disagreement on a painting, the play dramatizes and exposes how aesthetic judgment is combined in complex ways with other aesthetic and ethical considerations. When a strong disagreement on aesthetic judgment is discovered, other disagreements, previously not important, now appear in a new light. It is as if everything the three friends have thought about one another has to be reconsidered. Nehamas illuminates this process

in detail but, in my opinion, does not sufficiently theorize a fundamental premise of the play: that *friendship depends upon how those involved relate to objects of shared attention*. This could be an art object, as in Reza's play, a beautiful view (Badiou's example), a political cause, or what Michel Serres refers to as a quasi-object.[18]

Such an understanding of friendship is not clearly articulated by Nehamas. For Aristotle, however, the pleasure we feel in the company of our friend is clearly related to a third object when it comes to friendships of utility and pleasure. For example, I help you renovate your walls, and you help me fix my car. Or: First, we play tennis (my preferred activity), then we drink beer (your preferred activity). When it comes to Aristotle's virtuous, "primary" friendship, there is a tendency in the reception to underestimate the third element. But a close reading of Aristotle shows that it plays an important role also for him since primary friendship is actualized first and foremost in discourse—*about* politics, philosophy, the natural sciences, or other issues. Only in the mutual appreciation of *something,* can friendship be fully realized.

It is here important to understand how friendship, for Aristotle, is *a process* of simultaneously getting to know the other, oneself, and the world. Friendship develops when people *live together*. Only then can they experience what he claims in a famous and cryptic passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that the friend is "a second self." The explanation is that

> […] just as a man's own existence is desirable for him, so, or nearly so, is his friend's existence also desirable. But, as we saw, it is the consciousness of oneself as good that makes existence desirable, and such consciousness is pleasant in itself. Therefore, a man ought [*dei*] also to share his friend's consciousness of his existence [*sunaisthanesthai hoti estin*], and this is attained by their living together and by conversing and communicating their thoughts to each other; […].[19]

How is it possible to "to share [a] friend's consciousness of his existence"? The keyword here is *sunaisthanesthai*. In the passages just before this quote, Aristotle uses words with the same root, like *sunaishanomenoi* (perceiving/sensing together) and *aisthésis* (perceiving/sensing). The phenomenon pointed at is not restricted to a specific kind of sensorial experience, as later uses of such terms, especially after Alexander Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750-58) and the

development of modern aesthetics, could mislead us to believe. The Greek word *aisthésis* (αἴσθησις) is not restricted to sensory experience; it is better translated as "perceiving," a process that includes both cognitive and sensuous aspects.

There seem to be two particularly influential interpretations of what Aristotle meant by sharing consciousness: 1. *merged self-theory*, which forefronts the role of *nous*,[20] and 2. *mirrored self-theory*, forefronting self-love. Both interpretations should, according to April Flakne, be rejected since they "[…] assume a self-relation or 'subjectivity' that pre-exists the activity of friendship. Friendship as *sunaisthanesthai*, the sharing of my friend's consciousness/perception of her existence, relies on no such assumption."[21] It rather implies that friendship is a dynamic relation where it is possible to recognize what is foreign in oneself in the other, as an unfulfilled version of oneself. Flakne provides a more thorough interpretation of Aristotle than Giorgio Agamben's more elliptical reading in "The Friend," which was published in 2007, two years after Flakne's.[22] In Agamben's interpretation, the aspect of virtue, which is explicitly articulated in the passage by Aristotle cited above, is toned down. Agamben, instead, highlights an ontological disposition for friendship, which is a precondition for Aristotelian *sunaisthanesthai*, which he translates as "con-senting."[23] He illustrates his view by referencing Giovanni Serodine's oil painting *The Apostles Peter and Paul on the Road to Martyrdom* (1624) and points out a kind of paradox. As Peter and Paul cross paths on their way to martyrdom, their faces are so close, "almost stuck together," that they cannot see one another. They appear as each other's second selves, but not in a narcissistic or self-effacing way. They are both in a mutual process of confusion, understanding, and revelation. For Agamben, this painting is "[…] a perfect allegory of friendship. Indeed, what is friendship other than a proximity that resists both representation and conceptualization?"[24] In the affirmation of this completely open basis for friendship, Agamben locates a common ground for non-identitarian friendship. Without going further into the problems raised by Agamben, we should note that his interpretation of Serodine's painting appears to both support and challenge Nehamas' claim that paintings are inferior sources for understanding friendship. Agamben convincingly points to an original and striking aspect of friendship, but he could not have done so if he did not already know that the two central figures in the composition (captured in a violent and turbulent situation) were friends or at least united in a common cause.

What is important for the argument here is that both Agamben and Flakne stress that *sunaisthanesthai* (con-senting/joint perception) should be understood as a process in which friends not only recognize pre-existing traits in each other, but that both subjectivity and the sense of community are produced and recognized mutually in concrete situations. While Agamben sees friendship as "purely existential, a con-division that, so to speak lacks an object,"[25] Flakne explains that friends are both oriented to a common object and to each other's perception of the other object.[26] This process involves both aesthetic and ethical concerns. Observing what gives the other pleasure, "they [the friends] correct each other's faults."[27] Sara Brill also stresses how Aristotelian friendship should be understood as a process of sharing experiences among people who live together. She further points to a problematic tendency in the reception of the Nicomachean and Eudemian Ethics: to overestimate the element of shared intellectual life while underestimating how Aristotelian *sunaisthanesthai* also implies sharing a rich perceptual life.[28]

In summary, Nehamas has significantly contributed to an aesthetics of friendship by criticizing the limitations of the ethical framework, emphasizing the unique and particular qualities of friends, and turning to the arts as a means of rethinking friendship. His reading of *Art* comes close to recognizing the importance of the third object, but this very concern is notably absent from his general theory. Similarly, he seems to underestimate the importance of shared attention, whether this is understood as Aristotelian *sunaisthanesthai* (of virtuous men), or as a more open form of mutual aesthetic appreciation. Such an open form of shared attention is explored in several novels, not the least in Ali Smith's *Autumn*.

AUMTUMN: AN EXPLORATION OF FRIENDSHIP FORMS

Ali Smith began writing *Autumn* immediately after the 2016 referendum, in which the British voted for Brexit. The first sentence in the novel is a misquote from Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times."[29] England is here described as a divided country where community and solidarity are in crisis. People tend to regard each other with suspicion, not trust, and friendship seems to have scarce opportunities.

In this situation, Smith describes the gradual development of an unlikely friendship between a little girl, Elisabeth Demand, and her neighbor, an elderly German immigrant, Daniel Gluck. They develop a friendship in which aesthetic appreciation plays a major role. The

novel starts when Elisabeth has become a 32-year-old Art historian and Daniel, now 101 years old, is hospitalized and in a coma. She sits by his bed and reads Huxley's *Brave New World*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities aloud to him*. Through flashbacks, and shifts of narrative perspective, including passages of stream of consciousness, we learn about Daniel's partly surreal, dreamlike fantasies from his hospital bed. We also follow Elisabeth in her daily affairs and get her recollections of the development of their friendship from the time when she was a little girl.

How did this friendship come about? How should we describe this particular friendship? And to what extent can it tell us something about friendships in general?

During childhood and adolescence, Daniel was a Socrates figure, an intellectual midwife, for Elisabeth. Due to the age difference, the friendship that developed between them cannot be described as a "primary" friendship of virtue in Aristotelian terms. But it is striking how they, despite the age difference, established a ground for mutual respect, where they could somehow see each other as equals, and recognize the mutual joy of being together. What is particularly interesting in this context is how they connect through aesthetic appreciation. The novel gives rich descriptions of specific forms of being together, of dialogue, play, observation, and narration. One game stands out as particularly important: the one Daniel calls Bagatelle. One day, when Elisabeth is 13 years old, Daniel suggests they play Bagatelle:

> How we play is: I tell you the first line of a story, Daniel said.
>
> Okay, Elisabeth said.
>
> Then you tell me the story that comes into your head when you hear that first line, Daniel said.
>
> Like a story that already exists? Elisabeth said. Like Goldilocks and the Three Bears?
>
> "Those poor bears, Daniel said"[30]

Then he retells the story in an anachronistic manner, about how Goldilocks breaks into their house and sprays her name with spray paint on the walls of their bedrooms. Elisabeth protests. That's not how the story goes!

"Who says the story isn't happening right now," Daniel replies "[…] the whole point of Bagatelle is that you trifle with the stories that people think are set in stone."[31]

Bagatelle is a game that temporarily suspends conventions of consistency in narratives. It facilitates creative meetings between extremely different persons, in this case, a 13-year-old girl and an 85-year-old learned man. The idea of storytelling as a means of facilitating community is crucial for both the poetics and the politics of friendship in the novel. Daniel expresses this when he says to Elisabeth:

> […] whoever makes up the story makes up the world, Daniel said. So always try to welcome people into the home of your story. That's my suggestion.
> How does making things up welcome people? Elisabeth said.
> What I'm suggesting, Daniel said, is, if you're telling a story, always give your characters the same benefit of the doubt you'd welcome when it comes to yourself.[32]

This game cultivates a way of speaking that most children practice intuitively when making friends. They make up stories together, play roles, and create something that is not already settled, and which is not fully representative of any of them. Daniel's rules for the narrative game Bagatelle also correlate with those of the artistic collage, a central theme in the book. Smith writes extensively about the collages of the previously neglected British Pop Artist Pauline Boty, from the early 1960s. The novel can in itself be read as a *literary* collage, as it incorporates real events, photographs, and political discussions into the narrative. It also references a vast number of literary works by Homer, Ovid, Shakespeare, Keats, and many others, as well as graffiti, political speeches, and historical events. The practice of collage is related to the plastic arts, literature, and ultimately to the personal communication between Elisabeth and Daniel.

Daniel explains the game Bagatelle as a discourse of friendliness. This goes contrary to the meanings "collage" and "montage" have had in the historical *avant-garde*. Even though these terms convey slightly different connotations (collage is usually used about visual artworks combining various materials, e.g. photography and painting in an inorganic way, while montage can also be used about one medium, e.g. film), they are both used within aesthetic theory

as figures for non-identity, resistance, and negative dialectics. Peter Bürger writes that "According to Adorno, it is the characteristic of the non-organic work using the principle of montage that it no longer creates the semblance (Schein) of reconciliation,"[33] and "the negation of a synthesis becomes a compositional principle."[34] Finally: "This refusal to provide meaning is experienced as a shock by the recipient."[35] Interestingly, Smith's collage aesthetics implies a much more playful approach to understanding the dynamics of form and content. It is a discourse in stark contrast to the discourse of conflict and polarization that is also incorporated in the book, whether this happens as references to graffiti slogans like "Go home," claims about "the worst of times," or repetitions of the phrase "all across the country the Country was divided."[36]

On the one hand, the book reiterates slogans of confrontation and irresolvable conflicts. On the other hand, it shows how art and play can facilitate opportunities for togetherness, where differences in kin, age, background, or opinions can be temporarily put aside.

The relevance of Bagatelle has several implications: It establishes a communication form beyond the asymmetry of the old man *who knows* and the young girl *who does not know*. Further, the technique is also presented as an artistic strategy, collage, as this technique is practiced by Pauline Boty, and later by Smith herself in the book we read. Finally, Daniel suggests that rearranging well-known narratives can have political and ethical implications.

As Elisabeth grows older, storytelling and literature become an important reference point in her conversations with Daniel. The phrase "What you reading?" almost serves as a refrain throughout the book,[37] underscoring that their friendship is not based on exchanging personal, private feelings but rather on the sharing of experiences external to themselves. One asks not *How are you?* How are you feeling? What are you thinking, but *"What you reading?"* The attention is directed toward a physical or imaginary object. This way of questioning is characterized by a similar openness as the principle of the artistic collage. "What you reading?" is an open question, inviting the other to bring anything (not belonging to any of the two) into the conversation. This is not the case if you ask, "How are you?" "What do you feel?" or "What do you mean?" Elisabeth and Daniel's conversations revolve around a third object, which can be a tangible reference, an imagined concept, a piece of art, a story, or even a fragment of a story.

"IN LOVE NOT WITH SOMEBODY BUT WITH THEIR EYES"

In *Autumn*, the visual arts play an equally important role as literature and conversational games. Daniel knew and loved the British pop artist Pauline Boty before she died at 28 in 1966. At the time when Elisabeth was a child, Boty's work had faded into obscurity. However, Daniel describes the forgotten pictures to her. As Elisabeth grows older, she becomes involved in rediscovering Boty's art, writing her PhD thesis in art history on Boty.[38]

After having handed in the thesis, Elisabeth and Daniel talk about Boty, and Daniel says: "it is possible […] to be in love not with somebody but with their eyes. I mean, with how eyes that aren't yours let you see where you are, who you are."[39] This assertion can be read as a key to the novel. It sums up not only the love Daniel has felt for Boty but also an aspect of the friendship between Daniel and Elisabeth. Their relationship could be described as an aesthetical friendship. However, this does not mean that it is solely an aesthetical friendship. Their contact certainly also has ethical implications. Daniel feels responsible for treating the little girl as an end in herself (as she later does with him when he is hospitalized). But when Daniel becomes a friend for life and is not simply remembered as a nice babysitter, that is due to the mutual experience of aesthetic appreciation. Daniel has recognized a sensibility, a way of seeing, in Boty's paintings and collages that he loves and passed it over to Elisabeth. Sharing this recognition of a way of looking establishes an important aspect of the bond between them. However, it is not completely clear what Daniel means, because, in the same conversation he says "We have to hope […] that the people who love us a little bit will in the end have seen us truly. In the end, not much else matters."[40]

Elisabeth interprets Daniel in a specific way as […] "a coldness was shifting all through her body […]

> *Not a person*
> *Daniel does not –*
> *Daniel has never –*
> *Daniel has never known –*[41]

For Elisabeth, love for a particular way of seeing cannot, apparently, be separated from the love of *someone*. Consequently, she appears shocked by what she suspects is coldness on Daniel's part. This might explain why she avoids Daniel for many years before he is hospitalized. What is at stake here is highly unclear and open to

various diverging interpretations. Without being able to go deeper into the complex relationship between Daniel and Elisabeth here, it is, however, clear that their friendship is grounded on aesthetic appreciation, storytelling, and talk about aesthetical objects. These are paintings, songs, literature, and other invented stories. For Elisabeth, there is no dividing line between this aesthetic friendship and the love of the person with which she has an aesthetic friendship. Daniel, on the other hand, claims that such a line can be drawn. The novel leaves the reader with the following question: What is the relevance of aesthetic friendships to various forms of love, attachment, care, and engagement?

THE RELEVANCE OF FRIENDSHIP

Most critics have noted that *Autumn* is a "Brexit novel," but surprisingly, no one (to my knowledge) has highlighted how friendship is the overarching, central theme of the work. Smith underscores the importance of friendship already in the opening dedication: "For Gilli Bush-Bailey / see you next week […]." And the book ends with a list of personal thanks, situating the text in personal networks as if to break with the idea of the solitary author who creates solely out of her own imagination. The work should rather be read as a text by a person who could not have created it if she were not indebted or connected to these named persons outside the realm of fiction. When we start to read, we learn that Smith's aesthetics of Friendship in *Autumn* also raises questions about a possible *politics* of friendship. Her literary collage includes references to controversial news at the time the novel was written, especially the refugee crisis in 2016, due to the war in the Middle East. The narrator refers to pictures of dead children washed up on the shore, international camps for refugees, and to how access to common property has been restricted by fences. Smith describes a society of brutality and unfriendliness. But also, a society in which there is banter at the post office regarding strict passport restrictions, where people act friendly and make new friends. The book describes a crisis of friendliness and hospitality on the political level and friendliness in personal relations. In mapping the various ways people connect and experience care and attachment, the book poses the question of whether these acts of friendliness hold any relevance for the broader cultural and political situation. It experiments with *forms* of speaking, *ways* of living together, and *techniques* for establishing and nurturing friendships that potentially can have a broader political significance.

One could argue that the book's rethinking of friendship also has another kind of relevance. There are no traces of the traditional nuclear family in the novel. Smith plunges the reader straight into 2016, where the status of the family can no longer be taken for granted. Elizabeth, whom we follow from childhood up to the age of 32, lives with her mother, who, in the last part of the novel, enters a lesbian relationship. And Elisabeth orients herself with the help of her neighbor, an older man living alone, not her father. *Friendship, not marriage*, represents stability in this fictional world. However, as traditional bonds are replaced by new connections, these new ties are not fully acknowledged by society. When Daniel is hospitalized, Elisabeth cannot represent his interests as his *friend*, which is the adequate term for their relationship. She must claim to be his granddaughter. And when a song Daniel composed in the 1950ies appears in a commercial, and she wants to claim copyright for him, she must claim to be his agent. These examples illustrate that "the friend" plays an important role beyond current institutional regulations and discourses. The novel describes a phase of transition. Elisabeth's mother and her friend are friends who become lovers, and if they should want to, they could marry. However, the legal right to do so in England was established only two years before the novel's publication in 2014. The novel describes ways of connecting and living together that are being renegotiated and acknowledged gradually by various discourses for describing alternative forms of attraction, attachment, friendship, and love.

FRIENDSHIP AND THE QUESTION OF HOW TO LIVE TOGETHER?

Unlike Nehamas, I maintain that the study of fiction is highly relevant for understanding and articulating the nature and actuality of friendship. *Autumn* is an interesting case since it, in many ways, maps the potential of aesthetical friendship in late capitalism, changing the focus away from the friend's psychology and morals and over to how friends find ways of appreciating a situation or a third object in acts of shared attention, facilitating genuine events, new insights, in the self, the other, and the world. The third object might be a work of art, an intellectual problem for discussion, a story, or a landscape. By focusing on joint perception and gestures of appreciation, Smith invites us to rethink friendship as something transcending *both* recognition of moral virtues and unique, individual qualities. It focuses on discourse, play, and aesthetic appreciation, showing how friendship is produced and recognized in various social practices. Smith's exploration of aesthetical friendship is, in this regard, related to a broader exploration of the foundations for

new *forms* of living together. This way of rethinking friendship strikes me as more promising when it comes to recognizing the relevance of friendship in a broader cultural or political context than focusing on the unique qualities of the friend.

1 "Aesthetics" is here used in a wide sense, as in Alexander Baumgarten's original use of the term when he defined "aesthetics" as a general "science of perception that is acquired by means of the senses." See Alexander Baumgarten, "Prolegomena to *Aesthetica*," in *Art in Theory: 1648-1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, trans. Susan Halstead (Blackwell, 2000), 489. An aesthetics of friendship should then concern itself with how one perceives the world in the company of friends, or with people who might become friends.

2 Alexander Nehamas, *On Friendship* (Basic Books, 2016), Kindle Edition. See also Sheila Lintott, "Aesthetics and the Art of Friendship," in *Thinking about Friendship,* ed. Damian Caluori (Palgrave Macmillan), 240, who "is pursuing an analogy between art and friendship [...]."

3 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1926), Loeb Classical Library.

4 Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2021).

5 See Herbert James Paton, "Kant on Friendship," in *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader* ed. Neera Kapur Badhwar (Cornell University Press), 142. In "Lecture on Friendship" Kant operates with a three-part distinction similar to Aristotle between friendships of "need," of "taste" (aesthetical friendships) and friendships of moral attitude. See *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, ed. Michael Pakaluk (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1991), 214. Kant also discusses friendship in § 46–48 in his late work from 1797 *The Metaphysics of Morals* (*Die Metaphysik der Sitten*).

6 See Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, [EE1236a15-1238b14] 114–120.

7 In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 139, 1156b) Aristotle writes that, "[...] those who wish good things to their friends for the friend's own sake are friends most of all [...]." He nuances this argument in several places. It is necessary for him that there is some kind of balance in the friendship. If one gives more than the other, the friendship will eventually dissolve. Only when the friends are virtuous, this problem can be avoided.

8 Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 115.

9 Nehamas, *On Friendship*, 197.

10 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE1170 b10], 563–565.

11 Cited from Nehamas, *On Friendship*, 119.

12 See chapter 3, "A Structure of the Soul: Friendship and the Arts" in Nehamas, *On Friendship*, 64–83.

13 Claus Emmeche, "Dialogic Knowledge in Friendship as Represented by Literature and Research," in *Tempo da Colheita: Homenagem à Lucia Santaella /Harvest Time: Festschrift for Lucia Santaella,* ed. Priscila Monteiro Borges and Juliana Rocha Franco (Editora FiloCzar, 2023), chapter 21, 327–348.

14 In "Friendship in a Time of Neoliberalism," in *Love Etc.: Essays on Contemporary Literature and Culture,* ed. Rita Felski and Camilla Schwartz (University of Virginia Press, 2024). Camilla Schwartz presents a long list of contemporary female novelists focusing on friendship.

15 See e.g. Gregory Jusdanis' *A Tremendous Thing: Friendship from the Iliad to the Internet* (Cornell University Press, 2014). On female friendship in literature, see e.g. Janet Todd: *Women's Friendship in Literature* (Colombia University Press, 1980) and Sharon Marcus: *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

16 Alain Badiou and Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (Serpent's tail, 2012), 29 ff.

17 Claus Emmeche explains "blood brotherhood" as "A form of 'ritual friendship' (*q.v.*) that refers to the ritual commingling or drinking of the blood of the participants, thus creating an alliance of trust between those involved, implying mutual support, loyalty, or affection." See Emmeche, "Dialogic Knowledge in Friendship," 56. This practice has been mentioned by many classical writers, beginning with Herodotus (5th c. BCE). It is also described in sagas from central Europe, Scandinavia, and Asia. The custom has also been documented in Africa.

18 See the chapter "Theory of the Quasi-Object," in Michel Serres's *The Parasite* (The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 224–234. Here, Serres develops a social theory of interaction where an object facilitates social behavior. The quasi-object (Serres uses the example of a rugby ball) is neither quite natural, nor quite social. "This quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject. [...] This quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual." (p. 225)

19 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard Loeb Classical Library, 1926), DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.aristotle-nicomachean_ethics.1926, [NE 1170b11], 565.

20 April Flakne explains that "*nous*" is "[...] the agent intellect responsible for "concept-getting," and hence rationality." See April Flakne, "Embodied and Embedded: Friendship and the Sunaisthetic Self," Époché*: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 41.

21 Flakne, "Embodied and Embedded: Friendship and the Sunaisthetic Self," 39.

22 Giorgio Agamben, "The Friend," in *What is an Apparatus?*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford University Press, 2009), 31–35. (Italian original, "L'amico," 2007.)

23 In the introductory "Translator's Note," Agamben's translators, David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, express their gratitude to the author for his assistance. They specify that "English translations of secondary sources have been amended in order to take into account the author's sometimes distinctive Italian translations. (Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, 2009.)

24 Agamben, "The Friend," 31.

25 Agamben, "The Friend," 36.

26 Flakne, "Embodied and Embedded: Friendship and the Sunaisthetic Self," 49.

27 Flakne, "Embodied and Embedded," 48.
28 Sara Brill, *Aristotle on the Concept of Shared Life* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 39–85.
29 Ali Smith, *Autumn* (Hamish Hamilton 2017), 3. Charles Dickens' opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* (Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993), 3: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times [...]."
30 Smith, *Autumn,* 117.
31 Smith, *Autumn,* 117.
32 Smith, *Autumn,* 119–120.
33 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 78.
34 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 79.
35 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 80.
36 E.g. Smith, *Autumn*, 59–61.
37 Smith, *Autumn*, 157, 258.
38 Emily Hyde writes in "That was now," in *Public Books: A Magazine of Ideas, Arts and Scholarship,* August 3, 2017, that "In the early 1990s, just when Daniel and Elisabeth embark on their friendship, scholars in fact discovered Boty's paintings stored in an outhouse on her brother's farm. It makes sense, then, that in 2003, when Elisabeth is 18, she finds an art catalogue in the bargain section of a London bookstore and opens to *Untitled (Sunflower Woman)*, c. 1963, by Pauline Boty, the very painting Daniel had described to her years before."
39 Smith, *Autumn*, 160.
40 Smith, *Autumn*, 160.
41 Smith, *Autumn*, 160.