# The Joy of Subversion - Myth and Narrative Economies in Ali Smith's Novella *Girl meets boy* (2007)

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*Abstract*
*If Caledonian polysyzygy concerns the embracing of pluralities and contradictions in contemporary Scottish literature, then Ali Smith's novella Girl meets boy is surely a joyous reminder of this tendency. Translating Ovidian myth into lived experience, Smith's work rejects categories of gender, time and place, while celebrating the transformative power of language. Composed with characteristic wit and insight, Girl meets boy is a textual space which transcends the binaries of past and present; male and female; local and global, inviting the reader to step into the liminal territory beyond. This article will draw on theories of myth to explore the way it feeds into narrative economies - the exchange of those stories which shape our patterns of cultural identity.*

*Key words: Ali Smith, Girl meets boy, myth, polysyzygy, Scotland, identity, narrative*

## Introduction: Caledonian Polysyzygy in *Girl meets boy*

If polysyzygy implies a conceptual web - the meeting and parting of disparate thematic threads – then Ali Smith's 2007 novella *Girl meets boy* encapsulates this dynamic. It is a text in constant flux, a work which deflects categorisation and a story comprised, hydra-like, of many competing, intersecting narratives. *Girl meets boy* is the product of shifting textual currents which drag the reader into potentially treacherous waters. The possibility of anything which might be termed a stable identity is contested – whether that pertains to gender and sexuality, or to nation and locality. Girl ultimately meets boy in the creation of "a whole new gender, no gender at all" (Smith 2007: 104), while binaries such as borders and margins, geographical peripheries and metropolitan centres are displaced entirely, revealing the process through which culture shifts; is made and remade.

Throughout this, Scotland emerges as a testing ground for the narrative forces at work in the novella: a product of its own linguistic and literary heritage, and of the global forces which have always shaped it. Those global forces can be detected in the homogenising tendencies of consumerism, which threaten to transform signifiers of Scottish culture into mere marketing ploys. They can also be seen, however, in the narrative economy of myth which carries tales to Scottish shores – stories which bear the subversive potential to disturb, to provoke and to change. These include narratives which stretch well beyond British frames of historical reference to ancient Greece and Rome. Identity then becomes a product of a broader referential economy: unsettled and unstable, continually rewritten in relation to a boundless and ever-changing set of narrative coordinates.

One of the myths which thus intrudes into the lives of the characters in *Girl meets boy* is that of Ovid's tale of Iphis and Ianthe from *The Metamorphoses*: female lovers inhabiting a world defined in part by strict codes pertaining to gender and the devaluation of women. Lacking conceptual space for sexual relationships which differ from this norm, Ovid's tale sees Iphis metamorphosed into a boy, and therefore capable of conforming to cultural expectations. Smith's reworking of the myth acknowledges Ovid's adherence to received narratives of sexuality and gender. As one of her characters explains when retelling the story,

"He (Ovid) can't help being the Roman that he is, he can't help fixating on what it is that girls don't have under their togas, and it's him who can't imagine what girls would ever do without one" (Smith 2007: 97). Yet, *Girl meets boy* harnesses the radical potential of metamorphosis to suggest that change is possible, vital and indeed inevitable; that narratives may always be challenged; and that we all bear responsibility for the creation and dissemination of those myths which inform culture and identity.

This paper will consider the ways in which *Girl meets boy* encourages the interrogation and re-inscription of socially and culturally ordained myths. Such a process encourages a new vision of Scotland as the locus of interplaying mythologies: physical territory re-imagined or re-shaped in the minds of the novella's characters as an arena of competing stories. Both product of the subjective conscious and of globalised systems of representation, the country is reconstructed as a third space – liminal territory in which girl meets boy, global meets local, borders cross and blur, and the potential for radical and meaningful change is opened up. Myth as a conceptual area will be explored in order to examine how that potential is achieved and the subsequent implications it carries for our awareness and understanding of Scottish identities.

## Reiterations of the Iphis and Ianthe Myth

Myths themselves are polysyzygic in terms of the way they stretch beyond cultural boundaries yet remain firmly rooted in locality. While proclaiming timeless truths, they are ultimately subject to change with each re-telling. These are stories which intersect on a range of levels, whether in terms of the given mythology from which they spring or through interaction with the oral and literary heritage of the cultures into which they seep. As Lyndon Davies has observed:

> Myth […] is an endless temptation, but it is also woven into the fabric of the languages we use. Every time a poet sits down to write, a painter to paint, a musician to play, they find themselves enmeshed in a discourse that is already speaking through them and for them, nudged by an intention that relentlessly insists on the primacy of the structures of meaning that support it.
>
> (Davies 2013: 215)

Davies alludes here to the paradox which rests at the heart of myth. On the one hand its currents are so deeply embedded in our cultural circuitry that avoidance of myth is impossible. On the other hand, each successive iteration carries with it the potential for transformation and genuine change. This tension between change and continuity both structures *Girl meets boy* and functions as the novella's core dynamic. As Kaye Mitchell argues of the text,

> […] it is change that facilitates continuity; we are transformed and yet elements of the pre-transformation self-persist and develop; to be is simply to be changeable, transient. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is comprised of such stories and, in taking up this conception of metamorphosis, Smith edges towards such a 'labile' sense of identity.
>
> (Mitchell 2013: 67)

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Building on Mitchell's observation, this paper will argue that three iterations of the myth of Iphis and Ianthe function concurrently within the text itself, and each refers to this change/continuity paradox.

The fundamental reiteration of this myth functions as the base narrative of the story. Anthea, the younger of two sisters, falls in love with local rebel and provocateur Robin, whom Anthea initially mistakes for a boy. In Ovid's myth, Iphis – a girl disguised as a boy – falls in love with Ianthe, another woman. Following a timely act of divine intervention, Iphis is transformed into "...the boy that she and her girl needed her to be. And the boy their two families needed. And everyone in the village needed" (Smith 2007: 99). Consequently, Ovid narrates his way around the issue of same sex love which would defy cultural norms, for "...nature, stronger than them all, consenteth not thereto" (Ovid 2002: 893-6). While the impetus of Ovid's tale is ultimately towards compliance with social expectations, Smith has her characters subvert, challenge or reject such limitations. Metamorphosis thus carries the radical potential for upsetting predetermined roles, and gender is reconceived as mutable, fluid and plural rather than binary: "I was a she was a he was a we were a girl and a girl and a boy and a boy, we were blades, were a knife that could cut through myth" (Smith 2007: 103). The myth is thus taken apart: 'cut through' even as it is retold, made to function in an entirely new context in which its revolutionary dynamic for change can be exploited.

That potential for transformation is extended in a parallel narrative in which Anthea's sister Imogen, weighted down by social expectations as family breadwinner and career woman, ultimately finds her own voice: "I'm tired of feeling things I never get to express, things that I always have to hold inside, I'm fed up not knowing whether I'm saying the right thing when I do speak" (Smith 2007: 131). Imogen's joy in finally being able to express herself – to face down the myths which have confined her – is rooted in a realisation and celebration of difference: "I come from a country that's the opposite of a, what was it, dominant narrative. I'm all Highland adrenalin. I'm all teuchter laughter and I'm all teuchter anger" (Smith 2007: 129). Scotland, its history and cultural status, are rendered here as narrative – as minor narrative, carrying the potential to disturb and upset received cultural models. The minor narrative, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty, celebrates the "non-rational" (Chakrabarty 2000: 101), undermining the homogenising tendencies of the major narrative and its essentialist rhetoric. Imogen's laughter is 'teuchter'[i] laughter – a laughter which springs from her renewed sense of identity as Scottish, as Gaelic, as Highlander. As will later be discussed, the impetus of myth is towards the global and the homogeneous – the compression of time and place – whether as Ovidian tale of metamorphosis, or as function of capitalist ideology.[ii] Myth posits belief or assumption as timeless, universal truth – whether that truth is the impossibility of same sex relationships, or the "prevailing myth that thinness is more beautiful" (Smith 2007: 90). Contextualisation – whether geographical or historic – appears to offer a point of resistance to all myths, emphasising difference, alternatives and facts which undermine any pretensions towards universality. Thus Imogen's celebration of her own identity as located in difference – as minor narrative – carries with it the potential to upset dominant frames of reference and to serve as a base point for genuine change.

A second iteration of Ovid's myth occurs in Robin's narration of the story in the midst of her love-making with Anthea. Reframed by Robin, who admits to "imposing far too modern a reading on it" (Smith 2007: 91), this version is marked by digression and subversion: a new rendition or reworking of the myth through the ancient medium of oral tradition. A collaborative effort, the story is continually challenged or altered by Anthea's

interruptions and interrogations, which serve to reframe and rewrite the myth anew. Here, for example, is Robin's attempt to relay Iphis' mother's prayers to Isis:

> The woman went off to do some praying of her own. And as she knelt down in the temple, and prayed to the nothing that was there, the goddess Isis appeared right in front of her.
> Like the Virgin Mary at Lourdes, I said.
> Except much, much earlier, culturally and historically, than the Virgin Mary, Robin said, and also the woman wasn't sick, though certainly there was something pretty rotten in the state of Knossos […]
>
> (Smith 2007: 92)

Isis finds her immediate counterpart in the Virgin Mary: a subtle echo of ancient acts of goddess worship. Robin's nod to *Hamlet* invokes a further level of intertextuality; grounding the myth in alternative literary traditions. Furthermore, Anthea's interjections serve to highlight the referential nature of myth-telling, for in participating in the act of story-telling she refers back to oral-based traditions of narration which were performative and dependent on audience collaboration. Thus, while Robin claims to impose a modern 'reading' on the story, the method of storytelling itself is rooted in ancient forms of narration which stretch back to the Gaelic bardic tradition and beyond. In her study of *The Scottish Legendary* (2016), Eva von Contzen asserts that narrative intrusion is a feature of Scottish medieval literature, carried over from its reworking as oral narrative: "Indebted to patterns of oral storytelling, the narrator and his narratives form a collaborative unity in which the story level relies on narratorial comments. This, in turn, may help to explain why metanarrative is so frequent in medieval literature" (Von Contzen 2016: 67). Thus, the narratorial crosscurrents of *Girl meets boy* might be understood in terms of oral systems of story-telling; systems which have been unwittingly absorbed by the written text. Smith's story succeeds in functioning through both systems of relation simultaneously: in Robin's digressive narrative, and in its representation on the written page.

The final iteration of the myth of Iphis and Ianthe inheres in the way it resonates beyond the pages of Ali Smith's novella. If the book foregrounds the concept of renewal: of continuity in change and change in continuity, then Ovid's story becomes metonymic of that process. Effectively, Smith's text offers a replay of the concept of metamorphosis both at the macro level of narrative structure, and at the micro, atomised level of language. Almost fractal like in its construction, *Girl meets boy* embraces intertextuality at every turn, in order to demonstrate how we recycle the stories we inherit, and in doing so create our own, altered realities. Thus, for Imogen, the radical new potential that she unearths in embracing her identity as Scottish, Highlander and Gaelic enables her to reappraise stories from her own family's past – to 'reread' them in the light of this new perspective. Recalling the legend of a woman from her own clan – the Gunns – who chose death over marriage to a suitor she didn't like, Imogen observes:

> I used to think that story of my far-back ancestor was a morbid story. But tonight, I mean this morning, on this train about to cross the border between there and here, a story like that one becomes all about where we see it from. Where we're lucky enough (or unlucky enough) to see it from.
>
> (Smith 2007: 128)

Imogen undergoes a mental metamorphosis: a change in perspective, enabling her to reconceive her identity in terms of an altered relationship with the past. The story then becomes a defiant act of refusal and self-affirmation, rewritten as resistance or empowerment, rather than as a fetishising of the past. In effect, she has traded a limited vantage point for a much wider one, enabling her to re-claim this personal myth, and in doing so to reposition herself as part of a wider network of narrative threads. These are threads which extend into the oral traditions she takes from her Scottish heritage as well as outwards to those myths which she receives as both European and global citizen. The convergence of these myths gives birth to an intertextual web which is continually exploited, altered and realigned as it becomes contextualised in lived experience and the imagination. On this inherent capacity of myth for revision and renewal, Tudor Balinisteanu has observed:

> […] it is important to emphasise that each reiteration of socialisation scripts, in which social roles and social order are given anew, is also the occasion of glimpsing a realm of disorder and alterity that may be engaged with productively. Narratives thus provide the opportunity to revise the social value of myth. This revision may help to change the material practices in which the social roles and scripts derived from myths are enacted.
>
> (Balinisteanu 2009: 42)

Balinisteanu's insight is helpful in guiding us to the core dynamic of Smith's text. Metamorphosis unfolds everywhere and all the time, and thus continually offers new alignments for the construction of identity – whether in terms of gender, nationality or sexuality. Each fresh iteration inevitably brings us back to the metonymic heart of *Girl meets boy* – the transformative tale of Iphis and Ianthe, and the way in which we read our sense of self as an intertextual maze of conjoining and diverging narratives – the very essence of polysyzygy at work.


## Myth and Cyclical time

The dynamic of reiteration and renewal mentioned above is writ large in the overall structure of *Girl meets boy*, which assumes the cyclical pattern of myth as opposed to chronological or linear development. Myths reach us through a process of narrative sedimentation, which Claude Lévi-Strauss formulates using an appropriately geological metaphor:

> […] a myth exhibits a "slated" structure, which comes to the surface, so to speak, through the process of repetition. However, the slates are not absolutely identical. And since the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real), a theoretically infinite number of slates will be generated, each one slightly different from the others. Thus, myth grows spiral-wise until the intellectual impulse which has produced it is exhausted. Its *growth* is a continuous process, whereas its *structure* remains discontinuous.
>
> (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 229)

This is myth reinvented as cultural DNA: a helix transcending time and space, continually meeting itself coming back, and being altered in the process. Its claims to grand truths are undermined through the act of re-narration: a return to an origin which has always slightly shifted from its impetus. If the internal logic of a myth is, as Lévi-Strauss asserts, to

overcome contradiction – to flatten out and make pliable the lived material from which it springs – then it fails on each (re)turn, since every iteration is in fact a negation of the very possibility of grand truths. Thus the cyclical form of myth disturbs, rippling out across the flow of human history, as opposed to reifying linear models of origin, development and conclusion or closure.

This circuit of parting and meeting can be seen in the imagined return of Anthea and Imogen's grandparents who have apparently been lost at sea, and are thus subsequently transformed into the subjects of Anthea's own private mythology: "They'd been kidnapped by sirens," she claims, "ensnared by Scylla and Charybdis" (Smith 2007: 23). Sailing back up the river Ness to participate in Imogen's fantasy of her marriage to Robin, they are now "...younger than the day they left" (Smith 2007: 159). Chronology, it appears – both here and elsewhere in the book – is an irrelevance when pitted against the time-travelling capabilities of the human imagination. A paradox, myth cuts through its own claims to truth to reveal the subjective interpretations of lived experience which rest beneath.

It is a paradox which is also evident in Anthea's awareness of the transience of local identities. Sitting beside the river Ness, reluctant to start her new role as a "creative" at the ironically named marketing company 'Pure', she observes:

> The river itself was fast and black. It was comforting. It had been here way before any town with its shops, its churches, its restaurants, its houses, its townspeople with all their comings and goings, its boatbuilding, its fishing, its port, its years of wars over who got the money from these, then its shipping of Highland boy soldiers down south for Queen Victoria's wars, in boats on the brand new canal then all along the lochs in the ice-cut crevasse of the Great Glen.
>
> (Smith 2007: 27-28)

Water carries an analogical function in *Girl meets boy*: its qualities of fluidity and constant flow a perfect pairing for the concept of narratorial metamorphosis. If, as will later be considered, identities function as the result of a narrative economy, then water serves as a natural economy. Its course informs the base of human existence just as stories irrigate culture. In this passage, the same river is imbued with different meanings as human experience alters it. It becomes the living artery of a community: the economy of water supplying the financial economies of the town, the basis of those fishing and shipping industries which come to define what it means to be from the Highlands and Inverness. It is the route out of this locality and into a wider world of war, of geopolitical upheaval, of globalised conflict in which young Scottish men are incorporated into a broader cultural nexus as citizens of the British Empire. And, significantly, Anthea's observation of the river leads us in a circular path from its existence pre-community, pre-nation, pre-Scotland via the technology of boat and canal, and back into the "ice-cut crevasse of the Great Glen". Those glacial realities were always there, running beneath the metamorphosis of the river: a site of departure and return, undermining the concepts of development and progress upon which Queen Victoria's wars were fought. In this apparently very local reference to a very local history, Smith draws attention to the inescapable cycles around which all myths are constructed.

"It is good to be goal-oriented," claims Imogen at one point in the book as she goes for a run. "It makes all the other things go out of your mind" (Smith 2007: 55). The irony is that her internal monologue runs in constant circles, as she fixates (among other issues) on her sister's sexuality. And just a few more paces into her run, she is paralysed: "[…] I just

stand. (I don't know what's the matter with me. I can't get myself to cross from one side to the other.)" (Smith 2007: 61). The human imagination appears parallel in structure to the circularity of myth: unable to move in straight lines. In fact, goals, chronology, development – the act of moving from point A to point B – emerge as a form of life-denial, imposing unwieldy abstractions on human behaviour and thought. Fenced in by such linear narratives, Imogen is unable to genuinely explore, understand or express herself, as she continually fails to measure up to externally imposed standards or patterns of behaviour: "I am standing at the pedestrian crossing like a (normal) person waiting to cross the road. A bus goes past. It is full of (normal-looking) people" (Smith 2007: 60). While Imogen's desperation to be seen as one of these 'normal people' results in a denial of her own self, Anthea opens up space for the subversion of homogeneity through her awareness of time as an endless cycle. Her refusal to perceive time in terms of chronology or linear narrative results, as we have seen, in an engagement with locality which stretches beyond received models and norms: "The river laughed," Anthea claims, observing the flow of the Ness. "I swear it did. It laughed and it changed as I watched. As it changed, it stayed the same. The river was all about time, it was about how little time actually mattered" (Smith 2007: 28). The river's laughter is subversive: a challenge to received perceptions of time as linear, time as progress or time as chronology. Mythical time is a paradox. The same tale transformed, it meets itself on the return. This is locality 'writing back': disproving the grand narratives which have been forced upon it, whether of nineteenth century imperialism, or of twenty-first century capitalism. The circularity of myth subverts its own claims to monolithic, universal truth. With each reiteration it is altered; undermining concomitant claims for civilising missions or the structuring of personal goals.


**Myth and Globalisation**

In *Girl meets boy*, Scotland proves a testing ground for the way in which myth informs identity. This process is effected through what might be termed a narrative economy in which stories are traded, transformed and received. Myth making may be regarded as a form of globalisation, with the stories which wash up on Scottish shores mixing with those the Scots tell about themselves, so that it ultimately becomes impossible to determine the boundaries between Scottish and English; European or global narratives. All are subsumed into a complex awareness of identity which is in a constant state of flux. Indeed, as Homi K. Bhabha has argued, the conceptualisation of any nation as its own intrinsic story, unmarked by the influence of external narratives, can only be achieved through "...the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood" (Bhabha 1994: 7). Thus, while Smith's Highlands birth their own myths, these inevitably find their way into a wider narratorial circuitry, and are perceived through, as it were, a bifurcated lens – a lens which might zoom in on the positioning of a myth within a given location and historical context, but which may also enable the repositioning of that myth within a wider, shifting network of interconnected stories. Stories, then, are not to be taken in isolation, but as a kind of portal or bridge, enabling transition and metamorphosis – psychological, social and cultural. "...it was always the stories that needed the telling that gave us the rope we could cross any river with," Anthea states in the closing pages of the book. "They made us be natural acrobats. They made us be brave. They met us well. They changed us. It was in their nature to" (Smith 2007: 160). Story-telling emerges as

a way of holding a dialogue with the rest of the world – a true act of polysyzygy, in which a narrative exceeds or overspills its origins, taking on new meaning as it encounters fresh models of identity. This is myth as, in effect, 'good globalisation' – respecting difference and contradiction even as it feeds into alternative narrative structures.

Countering that concept of 'good globalisation' however, is an exploration of what might be termed 'bad globalisation': of the way in which myths, when shared irresponsibly, may serve to limit or proscribe, rather than to carry liminal or transformative potential. Concerned about this possibility, Anthea asks Robin:

> I mean, do myths spring fully formed from the imagination and the needs of a society [...] as if they emerged from society's subconscious? Or are myths conscious creations by the various money-making forces? For instance, is advertising a new kind of myth-making? Do companies sell their water etc by telling us the right kind of persuasive myth? Is that why people who really don't need to buy something that's practically free still go out and buy bottles of it? Will they soon be thinking up a myth to sell us air? And do people, for instance, want to be thin because of a prevailing myth that thinness is more beautiful?
>
> (Smith 2007: 89-90)

Roland Barthes famously claimed that "...everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse" (Barthes 1972: 107). Anthea's exploration of the concept would appear to reinforce that idea, positing it against a Jungian-style formulation of myth as the end product of social subconscious. Here, she suggests, myth feeds an economy which results not from basic human needs, but from the creation of needs – from the purveyance of unattainable ideals and, effectively, false consciousness. Thus water, the foundation of life becomes an abstraction – "bottled idealism" (Smith 2007: 41) – when framed within a specific form of discourse. "Semiology has taught us," states Barthes, "that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal. Now this process is exactly that of bourgeois ideology" (Barthes 1972: 142). Capitalism inheres in the reconstruction of an utterance delivered at a given historical moment – the idea that water, for example, can be sold – as a universal truth. Locating this concept within a given discursive framework – "[...] Water is history. Water is mystery. Water is nature. Water is life" (Smith 2007: 35) etc. – the message becomes calcified, and apparently admits no space for interrogation of its origins, raised as it is to the level of myth, just as other myths, pertaining to sexuality, gender or nationality also form a seeming bedrock of cultural knowledge, in spite of the fact that they inhere in discourse. "It's easy to think [...] you're a mistake," says Robin at one point in the story. "It's easy, when everything and everyone you know tells you you're the wrong shape, to believe you're the wrong shape" (Smith 2007: 97). Myths, Robin suggests, have always played a role in the encryption of cultural norms – whether as Ovid's negation of same sex love, or through the encoding of water as a commercial product. Yet capitalism adds another dimension to this narrative bond, in which discursive myths feed into a capitalist economy, and purchasing power becomes an intrinsic aspect of cultural identity. This aspect of consumer dynamics is encapsulated by Jean Baudrillard in his seminal text *La Société de Consommation* (1970):

> Consumption is a myth. That is to say, it is *a statement of contemporary society about itself*, the way our society speaks itself. And in a sense, the only objective reality of consumption is the *idea* of consumption; it is this reflexive, discursive configuration,

endlessly repeated in everyday speech and intellectual discourse, which has acquired the form of *common sense*.

(Baudrillard 1998: 210)

Thus, sufficient repetition of the idea that water is a commodity may well lead to its re-encryption as such within a discursive economy. Or, as Robin states more succinctly in defacing the Pure sign, "DON'T BE STUPID. WATER IS A HUMAN RIGHT. SELLING IT IN ANY WAY IS MORALLY WRO" (Smith 2007: 43). The recoding of humans as consumers, and of human rights as needs invented by the marketplace, is bound up in the idea of modern myth encapsulated by Barthes and Baudrillard. Myth, as Barthes asserts, transforms the contingent into the eternal; the marketing ploy into a universal truth. As Kaye Mitchell writes of Anthea's observation that advertising may well be a modern mythology: "'Myth,' here, expands to encompass various kinds of cultural persuasion and manipulation; it intervenes between subject and world; it distorts self-perception; it services the economy" (Mitchell 2013: 63).

That process of intervention to which Mitchell refers – the altering of an individual's perception of the world and their place within it – extends beyond the transformation of human right into commodity. It attaches itself to an entire raft of signifiers pertaining to identity; including nationality and national identity. 'Scottishness' is thus reduced to a series of images which extend out of Pure's marketing strategy – "bottled identity," as Imogen terms it (Smith 2007: 41). During one of the Pure "creative sessions", both sisters are forced to sit through a presentation in which images of Scotland are brought up on a projector: "The town. The river I'd just thrown a stone into, running right through the centre of it. The sky, the elegant bridges, the river banks, the buildings on the banks, their shimmering second selves standing on their heads in their reflections" (Smith 2007: 35). This is the calcification of locality: its reincarnation or metamorphosis as "second self," preserved through a camera lens and sealed in by a range of signifiers intended to determine its meaning. Roland Barthes actually terms the photograph a "violent" medium, "[…] not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed […]" (Barthes 1981: 91). This notion of violence as the denial of transformation is particularly apposite with regard to *Girl meets boy*, where life is affirmed through the ability to change. Once a locality - in this case Inverness – is preserved as photographic record, it becomes in some sense fetishised; sealed within a matrix of signification, to be 'read' or categorised according to a culturally determined set of myths about Scotland. The "Tuesday creative lecture" is basically Tartanry in action, exploiting images of castles and lochs, valleys and highland cattle to provide a marketing context for a given product – "Pure water" (Smith 2007: 34-36). Where Imogen finds, in her "Teuchter" heritage, the potential for a transformative sense of self, the reductive discourse of globalised commerce flattens Gaelic culture into a few, easily absorbed symbols which can then be used to control and sell a specific myth of Scotland.

This is yet another example of the way *Girl meets boy* presents myth as paradox. On the one hand, it offers a conduit for the transmission of cultural knowledge. Myths travel, fusing with alternative narratives and identities and serving as a catalyst for change. On the other hand, a failure to engage appropriately with myths – to interrogate their origin or meaning – may lead to their acceptance as universal truths. In exploring the role of social myth in the work of contemporary Scottish and Irish women writers, Tudor Balinisteanu observes: "[…] myths permeate discursive interaction, prescribing and scripting the ways in

which subjects are constituted" (Balinisteanu 2009: xv). Myths, then, may stifle rather than energise; contributing to the categorisation of identity in terms of sexuality, gender or nationality and admitting no apparent space for alternative forms of discourse.

**The Joy of Subversion**

*Girl meets boy*, however, is an exercise in the creation of discursive space even in the midst of what appear to be the most rigid and inflexible of socially prescribed narratives. To explore Smith's subversion of myth as social construct, it is useful to refer to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival as cathartic and transformative force. Bakhtin famously construes the anarchic power of carnival in the works of writers such as Rabelais as follows:

> To permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.
>
> (Bakhtin 1984: 34)

Criticism of Bakhtin's concept has focussed on its role in ultimately reinforcing the social and cultural hierarchies it claims to reject. As Eli Rozik points out, carnival is in a sense licensed freedom: "[…] temporary and officially restricted freedom for the sake of catharsis of functional pressure" (Rozik 2005, 210). Yet Bakhtin's theory offers another way of understanding how change and stasis might co-exist – that one does not necessarily preclude the other, and that in apparent sites of stasis, transformative traces may remain active. Bakhtin refers to this in explaining how the medieval marketplace – location for social cohesion and economic exchange is opened up to misrule and disorder:

> […] the medieval feast had, as it were, the two faces of Janus. Its official, ecclesiastical face was turned to the past and sanctioned the existing order, but the face of the people of the marketplace looked into the future and laughed, attending the funeral of the past and present. The marketplace feast opposed the protective, timeless stability, the unchanging established order and ideology, and stressed the element of change and renewal.
>
> (Bakhtin 1984: 81)

Bakhtin here stresses the potential for subversion located within the actual infrastructure and symbols of authority. Thus, the very ideological constructs on which a given culture rests, and its pretensions to timeless truths are challenged and undermined by the act of riotous joy which the feast or carnival entails. Key here is the concept of laughter: the rupturing of the social fabric through an unguarded, unrestrained, free act of expression. One is immediately reminded of Anthea bearing witness to the river's laughter; her pointed observation that "as it changed, it stayed the same" (Smith 2007: 28). If water, as previously stated, is marked analogically in Smith's novella for its metamorphic properties, then it is also marked by its carnivalesque ability to subvert – to escape, bypass or transform the conduits into which it is poured. "It's raining quite heavily," says Imogen, following a moment of love making and sexual release "[…] afterwards I can hear the rhythmic drip, heavy and steady, from the place above the window where the drainpipe is blocked" (Smith

2007: 139). Water is excess, constantly overflowing its limits, in a state of flux even while it is apparently contained or channelled; just as language, story and laughter offer a way of clearing space for subverting even the most prescriptive of cultural narratives. "I'm tired of feeling things I never get to express, things that I always have to hold inside […]" Imogen tells Paul. "I'm fed up not knowing whether I'm saying the right thing when I do speak […] Words are coming out of me like someone turned on a tap" (Smith 2007: 131). Language, then, like water, cannot be contained, and once released it poses an existential threat to the forms and structures which would seek to contain it.

The carnivalesque, in its unstymied release of language and laughter, carves up these received narratives. It is no accident, for example, that Robin dresses up, masquerade style, to deface the Pure sign: her clothes a kind of visual play on nationality and gender.

> The boy up the ladder at the gate was in a kilt and sporran. The kilt was a bright red tartan; the boy was black-waistcoated and had frilly cuffs, I could see the frills at his wrists as I came closer. I could see the glint of the knife in his sock. I could see the glint of the little diamond spangles on the waistcoat and the glint that came off the chain that held the sporran on.
>
> (Smith 2007: 43)

Duncan Petrie has argued that Scottish identity is too often constructed in terms of its 'otherness' to an England which is "bourgeois, self-interested, stuffy, repressed and effete" (19). Consequently, argues Petrie, "this kind of discourse necessarily privileges an overtly masculine and heterosexual concept of native virtue" (Petrie 2004: 19). It is interesting to note then, that Robin's visual joke in fact points to the gendered ambiguity inherent in Scottish national dress itself. Anthea perceives Robin as male because she is wearing a kilt – a piece of clothing marked by a high degree of multivalency, as Diane Tye attests in considering "the kilt's own ambiguity as a multivalent signifier of ethnicity, gender and sexuality" (Tye 2014: 193). Ali Smith here excavates and exploits the liminality inherent in one of the most salient signifiers of Scottish national identity. Space for the interrogation of cultural frames of reference can actually be created from within those reference points themselves – a kind of performance of nationality which plays on expectations, just as Judith Butler asserts that drag performances allude to "a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary" (Butler 1990: 187) In fact, Robin's role here is of particular significance. She emerges as a truly liminal figure in terms of the way she undermines straightforward binaries of gender and nationality. It is not just her ambiguous choice of clothing which troubles, but also her hybrid, outsider status: "she was a bit different," recalls Imogen, fretting over her sister's relationship with Robin, "and didn't people used to say that her mother was black, Robin Goodman, and her father was white, or was it the other way round, and was that even true?" (Smith 2007: 56). It is the lack of knowledge about Robin's origins which disturbs Imogen so much – her elision of easy modes of identification as white, Scottish, female and heterosexual. Robin's subversion of the norm is not a deliberate rejection of such categorisations, but a kind of slippage between them – a character who embodies all the contradictions and ambiguities of discourse surrounding contemporary Scottish identity. In effect, she is Bhabha's conception of the subaltern figure writ large: the inassimilable element, the minor narrative which disturbs any complacency surrounding the idea of a cohesive national subject:

The aim of cultural difference is to re-articulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying *singularity* of the 'other' that resists totalization – the repetition that will not return as the same, the minus-in-origin that results in political and discursive strategies where adding-*to* does not add-up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification.

(Bhabha 1994: 232, emphasis original)

Robin harnesses a carnivalesque joy in order to savage the safe distinctions between cultural norm and subaltern other through her visual puns on national costume and gender-bending acts of street theatre, which later see her and Anthea engaged in scrawling politically motivated graffiti around Inverness. This is what Bhabha refers to when he speaks of "adding-to" rather than "adding-up": the celebration of difference rather than its absorption: the carving out of subversive terrain from within epistemological, social and economic frameworks in order to shock, to challenge and ultimately to offer alternative forms of cultural performance and narrative.

## Myth and Language

Finally, this article will consider language as a medium for the transmission of myth. Language, it will be argued, carries the same polarised dynamic as myth; as both limiting form of categorisation and as liminal force for change. The former conceptualisation of language and the way it informs cultural norms can be seen in Imogen's narration of a local myth concerning the relationship between English and Gaelic:

We speak the purest English here in the whole country. It is because of the vowel sounds and what happened to them when Gaelic speakers were made to speak English after the 1745 rebellion and the 1746 defeat when Gaelic was stamped out and punishable by death, and then all the local girls married the incoming English-speaking soldiers.

(Smith 2007: 55)

Language offers one of the most potent weapons in the arsenal of cultural imperialism when it is used to inscribe the values and attitudes of the coloniser. This is precisely how the English are construed in Imogen's story.[iii] To cite the Nigerian theorist and novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o:

Language as communication and as culture are […] products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.

(Ngũgĩ 1981: 267)

Postcolonial theory is useful in drawing attention to the polysyzygic elements in Scottish literature: the way such texts are fed by cross-cultural currents which stem from a troubled history, as well as the intertextual (and inter-mythical) elements which are consequently absorbed. In Imogen's allusion to the imposition of English, the reader finds another example of 'bad globalisation' - not the mutual trading of cultural terms or narratives, but the use of cultural signifiers to stifle and repress. Yet, as with all such moments in *Girl*

*meets boy*, Smith hints at the possibility for subversion of the most seemingly immutable and inflexible forms of cultural signification. For even while Imogen celebrates the 'purity' of Inverness English, she refers to acts of intermarriage between Highland women and English soldiers. Some form of communication or exchange therefore took place, undermining the idea that Scottish narratives were simply written over or replaced by English ones. Furthermore, her own celebration of her "Teuchter" identity (Smith 2007: 129) offers a wonderful example of the way linguistic interpolation – to use Bill Ashcroft's term – offers a way of constructing counter-narratives which feed off, or feed back into the dominant narrative. The insertion of a Gaelic word here to stand for an entire strand of identity functions both metonymically and, as Ashcroft asserts, as a form of "counter discursive" strategy which does not, however carry "a unified anti-imperial intention, or a separate oppositional purity" (Ashcroft 2013: 47). Thus, the idea of cultural behaviour and identity as polysyzygic, rooted in varied and competing narratives, and therefore capable both of transformation and of being transformed is preserved.

Language, therefore, also emerges as paradox, infused with as much potential for repression and transformation as the myths and tropes it carries. Yet it is this transformative power which Smith ultimately foregrounds, and nowhere can this better be seen than in the challenge Anthea and Robin pose to the received myths which contribute to gender inequality. Taking their language out onto the streets, posing as "Iphis and Ianthe the message girls/boys" (Smith 2007: 133-134), the trail of graffiti they leave around Inverness can be read as a perfect example of writing back' – to borrow another term from postcolonial theory.[iv] Their language explodes across the very physical symbols of those economic and political myths which underpin cultural unity and stability: the local shopping centre, for example, or the Town House:

> Paul leads me round the Town House, where a whole side wall is bright red words inside gold. ALL ACROSS THE WORLD, WHERE WOMEN ARE DOING EXACTLY THE SAME WORK AS MEN, THEY'RE BEING PAID BETWEEN THIRTY TO FORTY PERCENT LESS. THAT'S NOT FAIR. THIS MUST CHANGE. Iphis and Ianthe the message boys 2007
>
> (Smith 2007: 134)

This is counter-discourse at the heart of hegemony itself – a carnivalesque expression of fury, and a refusal to be silenced by those myths which reinforce gender disparities. Simply put, it is language in the wrong place. It is language which cuts through complacency and demands attention: subversive, uncompromising and transformative. Yet, more than that, it is also language which serves as an example of 'good globalisation.' Here, locality – a town in the Scottish Highlands – fuses with the global. Women face the same level of discrimination everywhere, we are informed. This must change. And that change begins precisely at this given place and time, and with a perception of borders as porous and shifting, rather than as fixed and exclusionary. Inverness is as much the product of those myths it has received as those myths of Scottish identity to which it has contributed. Any challenge to those myths comes, therefore, not from outside, but from within – a subversion and rejection of what is perceived and accepted as normal, standard or mainstream. The end product of myriad discursive threads, no culture or locality ever really functions in isolation. Geography, suggest the Message Girls/Boys, poses no barrier to change, and the responsibility for myth-making rests with us.

**Concluding Remarks**

At the end of *Girl meets boy*, as she fantasises about her wedding to Robin, Anthea observes: "things can always change, because things will always change, and things will always be different, because things can always be different" (Smith 2007: 160). It is that possibility, that "can be" which haunts Ali Smith's novella. It is a possibility which is embedded on both a local and a global level: in the language that we use and the myths that we exchange. In this context, Scottish national identity emerges not as a cohesive system of signification, but rather as a network of narratives which feed into global patterns of storytelling and myth-making. Myths themselves are fluid discursive entities, which both inform and are informed by the cultures from which they spring. In this sense, they feed into the polysyzygy of Smith's novella: an inter-textual or inter-mythic terrain in which there are no firm borders between the local and the global, and in which stories are imported and exported as part of a narrative economy. In this fluid, textual arena the subversion of culturally prescribed norms emerges not just as a possibility, but as a necessity.

      This paper has examined the way myth serves as both narrative structure and thematic core in *Girl meets boy*. The fundamental paradox of myth – that it is transformed each time it is re-told – offers potential for the subversion of inhibiting cultural norms. In perceiving myths as part of a narrative economy which surpasses both time and geography, the local may be regarded as the base point for this transformation; its own minor narratives replete with the capacity to destabilise wider mythological frameworks and their concomitant fantasies of imperialism or capitalism, of gender bias or heteronormativity. The perception of that capacity for change is founded on a subversive joy: the realisation that we may use myth against itself to break free from limiting and damaging attitudes and modes of behaviour, and to harness the potential of minor narratives to establish alternative understandings of cultural identities.

[i] Imogen's use of the term Teuchter may also be regarded as an act of linguistic reappropriation or 'reclaiming'. Teuchter carried derogative connotations when used by lowland Scots as a term for Highlanders (Stevenson and Maclead 2000: 14).

[ii] As Jean Baudrillard asserts "Consumption is a myth. That is to say, it is a statement of contemporary society about itself, the way our society speaks about itself" (Baudrillard 1998: 193).

[iii] It is interesting to note that analyses of Scottish literature from a postcolonial perspective reinforce the principle of Caledonian polysyzygy within these texts. As Michael Gardiner asserts, "Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature are less separate trends or two sets of texts, than intricately related and often conjoined critical positionings in relation to a much longer history, which has as one of its main objects a critique of the jurisdiction of the imperial mode of British state culture" (Gardiner 2011, 1). Thus the very fact that texts such as Girl meets boy explore a shared linguistic inheritance, means they cannot avoid being read as an intertextual web of references and narratives.

[iv] "Writing back," explains Mike Hill, "means that insurgent or marginal forces are able to communicate in ways that pit the differences of imperial unity myth against itself" (220)

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