

On Beauty and Doing Justice to Art: Aesthetics and Ethics in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty**

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The truth is, surely, that every variety of literary style attempts to enact in us a way of seeing, of reading, and this is never less than an ethical strategy: 'We have to find meters whose scales are unknown in the world, draw our own schematics, getting feedback, making connections, reducing the error, trying to learn the real function ... zeroing in on what incalculable plot?' (Smith, "Love Actually" 4; ellipsis original)¹

In her essay entitled "Love, Actually" (2003), a revised version of her Orange World Lecture, Zadie Smith expresses her two major concerns, aesthetics and ethics, and accords priority to literary or artistic "style" over politics. Yet her concerns have been too frequently reframed by critics to comply both with the trend in literary criticism today and with her public image, be it the "Bard of Willesden," a new voice of the vibrant multicultural Britain (see Merritt, "She's Young, Black, British"; Soar), or a "hysterical realist" in the line of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo (Wood 41). The "Bard of Willesden" image has been often preferred in the academic discourse, largely due to the recent institutionalization of "Black British" studies and the topicality of the debate over multiculturalism, cultural hybridity, and/or globalization. *White Teeth* (2000), for instance, is so heavily politicized by this type of exegesis that one might be forgiven for thinking that these issues were her only preoccupations or the only areas of her contribution to contemporary writing in English.² Even such a significant theme as the prosthetic body has eluded most critics, with the exceptions of Head and Itakura. In this climate it is rather hard to see Smith's pursuit of such untrendy subjects as aesthetics or ethics in its own right. Her third novel, *On Beauty* (2005), despite the obviousness of its title, is being forced into this pre-

determined framework. Many reviewers treat it as if it were, to borrow expressions from review and monograph titles, a “modern, multicultural makeover for Forster’s bourgeois Edwardians” (Kakutani) or a treatise in disguise entitled “On Beauty and Being Postcolonial” (Anjaria).³ One reviewer even goes further to assert that it is “not really a novel about beauty” (Preston par. 10).

This article, then, seeks to analyze the ways Smith relates her aesthetic concerns—her conceptions of beauty in particular—to her ethical concerns in *On Beauty*. As in “Love Actually,” she explores these two “untrendy” subjects in a “trendy” context and thereby attempts to bring them back into a serious discussion. The novel probes the use and the abuse of beauty at various levels. By this, I am not merely suggesting that Smith borrows ideas from Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999)—the fact unambiguously stated by Smith herself in the acknowledgements (*On Beauty* n.pag.)⁴ and thoroughly discussed in Tolan’s essay. Instead of being a fictional application of Scarry’s thesis on the ethical dimensions of art, *On Beauty* appropriates and places rather old-fashioned ideas of art and morality in a rather “trendy” context, to make them over afresh for contemporary readers. In the first section of the article, I will chart in detail the ways in which the abuse of beauty, characterizing the upper as well as lower strata of postmodern, postcolonial, “post-9/11” Anglo-American society (Merritt, “A Thing of Beauty” 15), is associated with moral depravity and intellectual poverty. Interestingly, Smith’s indictment of philistinism and moral degradation today is not only suggested in her hilarious portrayal of professors, but it is also intensified by her creative use of intertexts, especially Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) and E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910). In the second section, I will turn to the very opposite: the appreciation of beauty and moral uplift. Although it is mostly an academic satire, *On Beauty* is sprinkled with fine moments of discovery of beauty, or of new “meters” with which to appreciate a kind of beauty that would otherwise be left unnoticed. Throughout the article, I would like to suggest that her apparently unfashionable pursuit of beauty, both aesthetic and moral, could be read as her constructive critique of current academic trends, which are ridiculed in the fictional Wellington College students’

slang as the “post-colonial tomato as eaten by Naipaul” (*On Beauty* 312).

I.

Despite its postmodern, postcolonial outlook, *On Beauty* follows a rather classical formula concerning aesthetics and ethics: the abuse of beauty leads to ethical deterioration. Set mostly on a fictional campus in New England, the novel ostensibly juxtaposes various forms of disrespect towards beauty, outlining the common claim that beauty has long been banished from intellectual conversations on campus. This alleged state of the academic humanities is deplored by many, including Elaine Scarry, one of Smith's influences.⁵ In *On Beauty*, these disrespectful professors are portrayed not only as inattentive to art but also as morally corrupt.

Howard Belsey is portrayed as an aesthetics lecturer who sticks to a particular academic fad but never truly appreciates beauty. Being a belated Angry Young Man, Howard cannot suppress his class-consciousness and unwittingly channels it into the most irrelevant parts of life.⁶ Such is his class-consciousness that even a glimpse of “two chained-up, frozen bikes” buried in typically New England snow reminds him of his family's place in the social spectrum in England and excites intense, mixed emotions—mostly negative—towards the Belsey family and the predominantly working-class community of the “filthy East End slum” into which he was born (25, 28; cf. 292). Most of his academic efforts are predicated on his misplaced vengeance towards either canonical artists or simply his academic nemeses—or towards both—while anger is, as Carl Thomas knows instinctively, quite remote from artistic qualities such as “proportion” (388). Like Kingsley Amis's Jim Dixon, perhaps the original Angry Young Man in the British novel, Howard dislikes any conservative view or sentimental nostalgia for the glorious past, and feels dissatisfied with the staleness of the present.⁷ Yet unlike Jim, Howard tries to format his personal “anger” into a fashionably neo-Marxist thesis as if he were truly motivated by greater political ends. His critique of Rembrandt follows a hopelessly clichéd liberal-left formula with textbook precision: Rembrandt is “neither a rule breaker nor an

original but rather a conformist,” and therefore “no good” (155, 5). Seen from the viewpoint of a naïve student, Katie Armstrong, his lecture not only sounds irrelevant to the Rembrandt oeuvre but also terribly overbearing, complete with his “mysterious vocab” (250). Howard begins his seventeenth-century Art class this way:

“What we’re trying to ... *interrogate* here,” he says, “is the mytheme of artist as autonomous individual with privileged insight into the human. What is it about these texts—these images as narration—that is implicitly applying for the quasi-mythical notion of genius?”

An awful long silence follows this. Katie bites at the skin around her cuticles.

“To reframe: is what we see here really a *rebellion*, a turning away? We’re told that this constitutes a rejection of the classical nude. OK. But. Is this nude not a *confirmation* of the ideality of the vulgar? As it is already inscribed in the idea of a specifically gendered, class debasement?” (252)

Beneath this thin veneer of pompous poststructuralist, neo-Marxist rhetoric lies his personal resentment against the establishment. The thesis he cites here is widely known, and an aesthetics professor may well start his seminar with it—of course, much less bombastically than Howard does. Kenneth Clark famously maintains that Rembrandt’s *Seated Nude* (British Museum, c. 1631), the very etching Howard shows to his students, along with *Diana* (British Museum, c. 1631), is proof of the painter’s rebellion against the convention of the classical nude (*The Nude* 325–27; *Looking at Pictures* 192–93; *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance* 12; *An Introduction to Rembrandt* 44). On the other hand, Simon Schama, to whom Smith openly acknowledges her indebtedness (*On Beauty* n. pag.), presents a strong objection to Clark, suggesting in his Rembrandt biography that the Dutchman’s depiction of flabby belly is not aesthetically remote from “the ample Rubensian bodies of the mid-1630s,” and therefore that these Rembrandt nudes are neither “figures of fun” nor “standard-bearers of revolt against the classical tradition” (Schama 391–92). Howard differs from these two, however,

in that he too quickly moves away from the realm of art to a jargon-fuelled, ideological combat zone that the Anglo-American Humanities have now allegedly become. His ostensibly anti-establishment attitude ironically demonstrates that he is a mere follower of the *au courant*. Such a politically charged “interrogation” of the canon as his is now nothing but a “set of routines for showing that there is nothing in poetry or art that can be dreamt of outside our ideologies of power and theories of historicity” (Soderholm 2), since “resistance” has already become a “commodity” among academics (Huggan 83).

Howard's inattentiveness to beauty in his academic practice reflects his selfishness in everyday life. He does not appreciate the beauty of his wife, Kiki, as is suggested by Victoria Kipps, his nemesis' daughter and now one of his students (Smith, *On Beauty* 313), nor does he even notice his wife's emotional plight (see 15-16). He is inattentive not only to beauty but to the feelings of others, which makes him a very “weak solution” of Humbert Humbert, the villain-narrator of *Lolita*, one of the most important intertexts to *On Beauty*.⁸ Both of the self-expressed connoisseurs turn out to be much more vulgar and despicable than sophisticated. In *Lolita*, Humbert dismisses whatever he thinks is “vulgar” and “philistine,” although it is doubtful whether he understands art as Nabokov does. In the notorious “Lolita safely solipsized” sequence, Humbert employs a wide repertoire of literary techniques to disguise the most sordid form of the consummation of his paedophilic desire (Nabokov, *Lolita* 57–61). The effect is ironic: the more we understand Nabokov's art, the more Humbert's boast of literary talent alienates us. Howard also uses his intellect to disguise his meanness. When Kiki finds out about his infidelity, he employs academic jargon and hollow rhetoric to ward off the accusation, only to reveal his lack of intelligence and sensibilities (see Smith, *On Beauty* 207–8). Despite his knowledgeable attitude, he is unable to distinguish between sensuality and beauty (29–30) or cope with someone else's tender emotions such as love. Furthermore, Humbert's and Howard's selfishness is indeed harmful. Totally ignorant of “universal emotions,” Humbert turns an innocent girl's life into a “parody of incest” (287). Likewise, the equally insensitive Howard ruins his family life by his extramarital affairs—first with his colleague Claire

Malcolm, whom his wife knows well, and second with Victoria, with the full knowledge that she is the first woman his eldest son Jerome, to borrow Howard's expression, has "got his end away with" (37). Both Humbert and Howard take liberties with a precocious girl who does not know what to do with her sudden awareness of her sex appeal (see Pifer 80–86). Their misconduct strikes one as all the more repellent because they seduce the girl just after her mother's death. Smith reminds the reader that Howard is performing a grotesque parody of *Lolita*, when he is—or lets himself be—seduced by Victoria.

His erection was blatant, but first she coolly drank the rest of his wine, pressing down on him as Lolita did on Humbert, as if he were just a chair she happened to sit on. No doubt she had read *Lolita*. And then her arm went round the back of his neck and Lolita turned into a temptress (maybe she had learned from Mrs. Robinson too), lasciviously sucking his ear, and then from temptress she moved to affectionate high-school girlfriend, sweetly kissing the corner of his mouth. But what kind of sweetheart was this? He had barely started to return her kiss when she commenced groaning in a disconcertingly enthusiastic manner, and this was followed by a strange fluting business with her tongue, catching Howard off guard. (315)

This sequence underlines the strange theatricality of the sexual intercourse and Howard's passivity. Victoria moves too quickly through her inconsistent dream scenarios, including two separate scenes from *Lolita* (the Haze living room and the Enchanted Hunters) and a scene from the film *The Graduate* (1967), while she is, as Howard finds out, "completely dry" (316). Yet this theatricality also points to Howard's awareness of it. He even notices her failure to synchronize groaning with action (316–17), as Nabokov's Humbert is well aware that his "life" is "handled by Lo in an energetic, matter-of-fact manner as if it were an insensate gadget unconnected with [him]" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 133–34). Their awareness suggests that these middle-aged men could stop the precocious girls but choose not to.⁹ The result is horrid: Victoria really becomes what Howard reduces her to, as Dolores Haze becomes tempo-

rarily a pornographic actress. As she finds out later, Victoria is nothing but an object of his lust (Smith, *On Beauty* 390), and she makes herself an object of men's lust. She ends up sending pornographic images of herself first to Howard and then to Carl (379, 407).

Howard's ignorance of beauty, which matches his moral depravity, is also compared to that of Monty Kipps, his academic nemesis, who is represents the other side of the coin.¹⁰ At first glance, he is what Howard is not: a celebrity scholar, always successful in acquiring "populist" support (Smith, *On Beauty* 29), openly attacking liberals in a manner quite reminiscent of V. S. Naipaul.¹¹ He is also fanatically Christian and traditionalist. Like Howard, however, he often uses beauty as a vehicle of his own political ideology, and spends more time on criticizing an ideological camp he dislikes than on explaining art and beauty. The only time Monty is caught talking about Rembrandt is in an excerpt of his open letter to Howard, which is, though written in an elaborate style, more an exposé of Howard's blunder than an elucidation of Rembrandt's self-portraits (28). Howard's mistake is not as insignificant as he describes, and it demonstrates his essential indifference to art (29). Yet Monty's deliberately offensive sarcasm, as is later repeated in the faculty meeting, is just as inconsiderate and childish as "removing his friend's shorts in front of the opposing team" (325–31, 29). He is no more a defender of art and beauty than Howard. Moreover, he is just as inconsiderate to others and as prone to greed and lust as Howard. His intense desire to expand his art collection culminates in his wrongful appropriation of the painting of *Erzulie* that his wife Carlene has bequeathed to Kiki—an episode apparently parodic of *Howards End* (426–31). Like Howard, Monty also betrays his wife with his extramarital affair with his student.

Through this academic satire, the abuse of or inattentiveness to beauty is associated with moral atrophy as well as intellectual poverty in a manner reminiscent of traditional Western—or more specifically, British—literary humanism. Throughout the novel, neither Howard nor Monty is truly touched or moved by art or beauty; they only appropriate it for their own selfish purposes. Whatever they say about art in their books and articles, they are most likely motivated by their academic ambition. Outside their academic work, they are only at-

tracted to beauty when it ignites their lust or greed. Smith's implicit indictment here takes on rather archaic overtones, which could be better understood by comparison to British literary humanism of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Indeed, the recognition of aesthetic pleasures superior to biological pleasures can be traced back to Aristotle's thoughts on humanity and animality, which Thomas Aquinas famously re-formulates in *Summa Theologica* (qtd in Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics* 250, 259). But it particularly echoes the British liberal humanist tradition from which Smith's intertext, *Howards End*, sprang. In *Howards End*, culture—which includes art and ethics—is conceived, almost in an Arnoldian manner, in terms of totality and perfection of human nature, as opposed to “whatever comes easy” (52). Forster's irony is evident here: he is rather sympathetic with the Schlegel sisters' egalitarian idealism and Matthew Arnold's hope that culture, the triumph of human virtues over “the obvious faults of our animality,” will be extended to “the raw and unkindled masses of humanity” (Arnold 41, 52), but nevertheless, in *Howards End*, culture ends up cruelly kindling unachievable ambition within the lower-class Leonard Bast, who never truly appreciates art, being always distracted from “the pursuit of beauty” by the stresses of everyday life (Forster 37; Medalie 45–46). While those British liberal humanists deplore the state of the populace and criticize the rampancy of “Hebraism”—a style of thought that privileges religious fervour and spontaneity of action, instead of art and free thought—on the one hand (Arnold 9, 15–17), and pitfalls of the “business mind” portrayed in *Howards End* on the other (Forster 178), Smith targets her criticism at university lecturers, the very people who are supposed to promote aesthetics and ethics instead of being criticized for lacking them. Despite the apparent differences of the socio-historical contexts, Smith's satiric portrayal of university lecturers can be considered as a conflation of British liberal humanist tradition and a response to the poor condition of the academic humanities torn between an overload of theory and a “post-theory” cry for empirical grounding. In this sense *On Beauty* is really a “post-theory”—rather than “multicultural”—makeover for Forster's novel.

II.

Despite its apparently satiric elements, *On Beauty* provides an almost unashamedly celebratory view of art and beauty and, to return to her favourite quote from Pynchon, a new “way of seeing” that could elevate her protagonists and her readers intellectually and ethically. Unlike typically satiric Anglo-American campus novels such as James Hynes’s *The Lecturer’s Tale* (2001), Smith underlines the link between philistinism and moral degeneracy and thereby the link between the very opposites: appreciation of beauty and moral uplift. Her interest in the connection between the pursuit of beauty and moral improvement is most likely inspired by Elaine Scarry’s book, but it also evokes Matthew Arnold’s “sweetness and light,” the ideal combination of the sensibilities of beauty and intelligence that guides humans towards “perfection” (Arnold 52, 40–41).¹² Arnold’s phrase contains wide implications and does not exclusively refer to the cultivation of artistic tastes or the ability to “see life steadily and see it whole”—the recurrent theme of *Howards End* (Forster 52), whereas Smith’s focus here is narrowed down to our experience of discovering a kind of beauty that has hitherto been hidden from uninitiated eyes. Smith often moves away from a satiric mode to explore the moments of discovery of beauty that could potentially enrich the discoverer’s life, and thereby encourages the reader to relive these moments. Like Pynchon and John Berger, the author of the influential book and TV documentary *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Smith initiates the good reader into new “ways of seeing” or new “scales” with new “meters” with which to appreciate beauty.

The power of beauty to enlighten us is first exemplified in the impact of a Rembrandt work on the starry-eyed Katie Armstrong. Here the beauty of Rembrandt’s etching sensitizes her to a new dimension of reality that would be otherwise unavailable. Preparing for Howard’s class, Katie examines the photocopy of the notorious *Seated Nude*, which, as we have seen, Howard would use only as a vehicle for his misplaced vengeance.

Is she really so grotesque? She was a shock, to Katie, at first—like a starkly lit, unforgiving photograph of oneself. But then

Katie began to notice all the exterior, human information, not explicitly *in* the frame but implied by what we see there. Katie is moved by the crenulated marks of absent stockings on her legs, the muscles in her arms suggestive of manual labour. That loose belly that has known many babies, that still fresh face that has lured men in the past and may yet lure more. Katie—a stringbean, physically—can even see her own body contained in this body, as if Rembrandt were saying to her, and to all women: “For you are of the earth, as my nude is, and you will come to this point too, and be blessed if you feel as little shame, as much joy, as she!” This is what a woman *is*: unadorned, after children and work and age, and experience—*these are the marks of living*. (Smith, *On Beauty* 251–52)

This scene constitutes what might be called one of the novel’s “most tender” moments (Ratcliffe 10). Despite her tendency to over-generalize, Katie is at least not so much misguided as Howard and Victoria: the latter simply panders to the former with a parade of mastery of “post-structuralist” critical idioms (Smith, *On Beauty* 252–53).¹³ Instead of using the “mysterious vocab,” Katie looks closer at Rembrandt’s *Nude* in order to find out why she was initially shocked. As a result, she is given a new “way of seeing,” which makes the etching look completely different. The sitter’s “beauty,” as well as her subjectivity, is recovered by Katie’s discovery of the “marks of living” from the clutches of the conventional academic discourse that has been governed so exclusively by the male gaze—as Berger points out in his famous attempt at a feminist reading or “seeing” of the nude, including Rubens’s unconventional “Hélène Fourment in a Fur Coat” (Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1630) (Berger 45–64)—as if there were no other “ways of seeing” Rembrandt’s *Nude*.¹⁴ Katie’s new, life-affirming interpretation of the etching gives her intellectual excitement and moral edification (252). In this respect, her life is changed by Rembrandt’s *Nude*, as the meaning of the etching is changed by her “seeing”. Just as Scarry maintains that beauty keeps the beholder and the beheld alive (89–90), Katie demonstrates that the beauty of a work of art still has the power to

broaden the viewer's perspective and thus to make his or her life anew, while Katie is, though in her immature way, making it over afresh for the reader. It is this reciprocity between the beholder and the beheld from which Monty and Howard are barred.

Interestingly, Katie's blissful experience is recapitulated, with a significant difference, in Howard's rediscovery of Rembrandt's art at the novel's finale. Having forgotten to bring his lecture notes, Howard finds himself lost for words. This could be as humiliating as Monty's letter exposing his ignorance to the whole academic circle. However, a strange sense of euphoria begins to emerge in Howard when he spots Kiki in the audience. He suddenly starts moving his PowerPoint slides forward quickly to *Hendrickje Bathing* (National Gallery, 1654).

"*Hendrickje Bathing*, 1654," croaked Howard and said no more.

On the wall, a pretty, blousy Dutch woman in a simple white smock paddled in water up to her calves. Howard's audience looked at her and then at Howard and then at the woman once more, awaiting elucidation. The woman, for her part, looked away, coyly, into the water. She seemed to be considering whether to wade deeper. The surface of the water was dark, reflective—a cautious bather could not be certain of what lurked beneath. Howard looked at Kiki. In her face, his life. Kiki looked up suddenly at Howard—not, he thought, unkindly. Howard said nothing. Another silent minute passed. The audience began to mutter perplexedly. Howard made the picture larger on the wall, as Smith had explained to him how to do. The woman's fleshiness filled the wall. He looked out into the audience once more and saw Kiki only. He smiled at her. She smiled. She looked away, but she smiled. Howard looked back at the woman on the wall, Rembrandt's love, Hendrickje. Though her hands were imprecise blurs, paint heaped on paint and roiled with the brush, the rest of her skin had been expertly rendered in all its variety—chalky whites and lively pinks, the underlying blue of her veins and the ever present human hint

of yellow, intimation of what is to come. (Smith, *On Beauty* 442–43)

Deprived of the protective armour of academic jargon, Howard somehow manages to achieve a direct, immediate encounter with the painting, which changes him deeply. He notices the model's posture and movement, as well as Rembrandt's rough but exquisite brushwork that immortalizes the vibrant life within the model. Neither does he "interrogate" the rebelliousness of Rembrandt, nor even try to give a biographical interpretation, that is, attribute this life-affirming aspect of the work which impresses him profoundly, to the fact that Hendrickje Stoffels, famously the painter's maid and "lover" after the death of his wife Saskia, bore a daughter Cornelia in 1654, the very year of the painting. Like Katie's, Howard's experience cannot be fully explained in those sesquipedalian terms with which he is familiar. Their experience, however, differs at least in one respect: while Katie develops a reciprocal relationship with Rembrandt's etching alone, Howard also begins to restore his broken ties with Kiki, who is, according to Claire and Victoria, a "beauty" (227, 313). In the above quotation, Hendrickje's beauty is somehow reflected on to Kiki, as Howard looks at the two women alternately. The similarity of their postures is also striking: they both look away, with a hint of smile (cf. Schama 554–55). By way of analogy, his now better understanding of the beauty of the painting suggests that he has begun to appreciate the beauty, inner and outer, of his wife. Endowed with a new way of seeing, Howard is overwhelmed by an untimely sense of euphoria.

Looked at in this way, *On Beauty* can be read as a story of the (re-)discovery of beauty against the backdrop of a new philistinism. Along with Katie and Howard, the reader also sets out on a quest for beauty and acquires new "ways of seeing," or more precisely, new "ways of appreciating beauty". This is precisely where *On Beauty* differs from her previous works. Smith's inclination towards caricature is so keen in *White Teeth* that she cannot allow anyone or anything beautiful to remain simply beautiful. Millat's alleged "good looks," for instance, are soon eclipsed by the loquacious list of instances of his totally displaced obsession with

“street” subcultures (Smith, *White Teeth* 188–89). *The Autograph Man* (2003) culminates in Alex’s encounter with his long-time idol, Kitty Alexander, but whether she strikes the reader as beautiful is a moot point. The spell of her professed beauty is broken by Smith’s inappropriate emphasis on the funny yellow-face make-up of the young Kitty, with “her eyes sellotaped into an approximation of [Alex’s] own epicanthic fold,” as well as on the creases of the old Kitty, whose face, “folded over many times, still makes sense” (*The Autograph Man* 63, 273). By contrast, Smith portrays Hendrickje and Kiki as beautiful. The latter case is remarkable, since her being overweight is so frequently mentioned that it challenges one to imagine her as beautiful (see *On Beauty* 14–15, 139, 206). In the “Hendrickje Bathing” sequence, the reader is not only given evidence of Howard’s moral improvement but Smith’s endeavour to make Kiki beautiful and by so doing do justice to her inner beauty—justice being an after-effect of the recognition of beauty, according to *On Beauty and Being Just*, one of Smith’s alleged inspirations (Scarry 77–78). Kiki’s physical description is limited to her expression and movement so that it would not frustrate Smith’s attempt to make Kiki and Hendrickje blend in with each other. This overlapping is particularly hard in visual art, since, no matter how she is portrayed, a woman with a weight of 300–350 pounds would be unlikely recognized as a double for Hendrickje or a beauty. Smith’s art enacts in the reader a new way of appreciating three different types of beauty—Rembrandt’s painting, her fictional character and her own verbal art—and by so doing recapitulates the ethical as well as aesthetic effect of beauty on its perceiver.

III. Conclusion

Set against a postmodern, postcolonial, post-9/11 backdrop, Smith’s critique of the new philistinism and her exploration of beauty offer a salutary lesson to the current, exceedingly politicized academic climate. Far from being a reactionary response to new thoughts or socio-cultural change, *On Beauty* is riddled with Smith’s awareness that “this isn’t 1910” (15)—an observation which is primarily a tongue-in-cheek reference to *Howards End*, but which also invokes a drastic change the world has experienced. Instead of being nostalgic, Smith recapitulates an ongoing

socio-cultural change with mixed yet mostly celebratory overtones on the one hand, and resists orienting herself with any particular “traditionalist” school of aesthetics or politics on the other.¹⁵ She simply criticizes certain aspects of life in postmodern and/or multicultural society: excessive politicization and inattentiveness to art and beauty.

Smith's constructive critique can be best seen in her treatment of the “Maîtresse Erzulie” painting. Without our familiarity with postcolonial studies, Carlene Kipps's appreciation of this Haitian work of art might be regarded as evidence of her yearning for her roots, rather than her artistic sensibilities (*On Beauty* 174–75). Kiki's encounter with Carlene in a New England middle-class suburb, as well as the latter's possession of art works, is made possible partly by postcolonial mass migration and socio-cultural upheavals related to globalization. However, Smith's engagement with these potentially socio-political issues is clearly circumscribed here. She juxtaposes Kiki's and Carlene's responses to the painting and thereby implicitly warns the reader against politicizing its ‘Haitianness’ and reinforcing Orientalist “othering” under the guise of the very opposite. Seen from the absent-minded Kiki's point of view, the painting becomes an inventory of the things painted on the canvas, which ends with her candid observation: “No perspective, no depth” (175). Feeling obliged to impress her friend, she quotes Howard's—again, hopelessly trite—thesis on the categorical opposition between the binary rationalism of the Judeo-Christian Western world and more chaotic paradigms of the non-West, which alienates Carlene (175). Compared with Carlene's simple remark, “I like her parrots,” Kiki's “clever” comment strikes most readers as inauthentic (175). As an application of Howard's thesis fails to recapitulate the beauty of the painting, overemphasis on the presence of non-Western art here would surely misrepresent this sequence, in which the Haitian painting chiefly serves as a narrative catalyst for the deepening of their friendship. Smith is clearly less sympathetic with Kiki's straightforward, typically feminist claims than with Carlene's self-sacrifice or mercifulness (176), which not only leads to her bequeathment to Kiki, but also helps Kiki understand her own sacrifice to Howard and eventually the self-sacrificing nature of love (206, 424). In this pivotal experience, Kiki discovers the inner

beauty of Carlene, not exclusively “black” or “postcolonial” qualities of the painting. *On Beauty*, then, not only demonstrates that beauty still retains its significance for our moral and intellectual life in this highly politicized climate; but it also calls for a shift in academic emphasis from ideological combat to beauty itself.

Notes

- * I am deeply indebted to my colleague, Professor Christopher J. Armstrong (Chukyo University, Japan), for advice on the early stages of this study.
- 1 Smith is citing from an oft-quoted passage in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) followed by a well-known realization that the war has been “dictated ... by the needs of technology,” “never political at all” (Pynchon 521; ellipsis added).
 - 2 This does not mean that Smith has been unanimously considered pro-multiculturalism. For instance, Thompson suggests Smith's “ironic” attitude towards the “complacent hope that we inhabit a ‘Happy Multicultural Land’” (123, 137), whereas Moore-Gilbert points to her ambivalence towards “cultural hybridity” (108).
 - 3 Kakutani's review is quite remote from the typical “postcolonial reading” suggested by its title. She succinctly summarizes Smith's achievement and directs our attention to how it differs from Forster's. Anjaria admits the “incomplete applicability” of the framework of postcolonial literary criticism to this novel (31). However, Kakutani's title, as well as Anjaria's, strangely anticipates some academics' possible responses to this novel.
 - 4 Also, Scarry's view of beauty and proportion is reflected in Claire Malcolm's notion of “fittingness” (Smith, *On Beauty* 214).
 - 5 Scarry does mention the banishing of beauty from the campus (Scarry 57), but Danto is at least an equally well-known defender of beauty against an iconoclastic climate in the humanities.
 - 6 Class-consciousness is indeed very important for Smith herself. She admits in one interview that in her childhood she was much more class-conscious than ethnic-conscious (Edemariam 18).
 - 7 In *Lucky Jim* (1954), Jim Dixon finally bursts into rage against the “Merrie England” myth, on which he is expected to deliver a lecture (Amis 209). However, these two fictional scholars from lower-class backgrounds have completely different views on their profession, which result in their eventual choice: Howard stays in, and Jim goes away from the academy.
 - 8 Rorty famously explores Humbert's inattentiveness to the pain of others, but apparently Smith is not much interested in the notion of cruelty (141–68).
 - 9 The emphasis on the girl's seduction, together with the novel's basic premise in which a professor is seduced by his pet student, evokes another *Lolita*-inspired

novel, *Blue Angel* (2000). Francine Prose's Angela Argo, a Creative Writing student who writes a novel "like *Lolita* rewritten from Lolita's point of view" (219), plays the major role in the fall of the novel's anti-hero, Professor Swenson. In this respect, Smith's Victoria and Prose's Angela are more like Magda/Margot of Nabokov's *Kamera Obskura* (1932)/*Laughter in the Dark* (1938), who is, in Nabokov's view, "a common young whore," totally unlike the "unfortunate little Lolita" (*Strong Opinion* 83).

- 10 Most reviewers focus on Smith's scathing view of the left-wing academics, but Rich, among others, concisely sums up her twofold criticism: "[she is] likely to amuse readers on the right as much as those on the left. (Not that they'll necessarily be laughing in the same places.)" (par. 1).
- 11 Naipaul expresses his negative views on Black Power, a 1970s counterpart to the 2000s political correctness, and on modern art (191, 192).
- 12 It is not exclusively Matthew Arnold and British liberal humanists who link aesthetic and ethical perfection. Aristotle, for instance, observes that the perception of beauty presupposes a state of contemplation that helps the perceiver to achieve intellectual and moral perfection (Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics* 257-59, cf. 249-50).
- 13 This is another instance of similarity to Prose's *Blue Angel*, where Angela wins Swenson's favour with her peculiar reading of his novel (60).
- 14 Berger may well be included in the long list of her influences, considering the impact his political reading of visual art had in 1970s Britain.
- 15 Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* is not generally associated with particular political ideologies, as is Sander Gilman's book on beauty, *Making the Body Beautiful* (1999) (Rothstein 9). Besides, Smith only employs Scarry's idea on an *ad hoc* basis.

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