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## Zadie Smith's Aesthetics

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ZADIE SMITH'S AESTHETICS

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Christina Suzanne Cook  
May 2011

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Cameron Bushnell, Committee Chair  
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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that Zadie Smith builds guidelines for reading within her novels *On Beauty* and *White Teeth*. These guidelines suggest that it is through reading aesthetically that we can fuse the neutral and the personal in order to come to a method of analysis that is critically fair. I suggest that Smith's desire for such methods is a result of her reductive critical reception in the wake of *White Teeth*'s publication and that her texts provide interpretational cues that clarify her aesthetic approach; these cues are, more specifically, references to Elaine Scarry's "On Beauty and Being Just" and E. M. Forster's *Howards End*. From these cues, I conclude that Smith defines the aesthetic object experientially rather than by physical characteristics; in other words, we can identify the aesthetic object or experience primarily by what it does, or by how it affects us. Furthermore, the aesthetic experience as characterized by Smith is socially useful in that critical fairness results in interpersonal fairness, and this conception of the aesthetic is one also derived in part from Scarry. However, unlike Scarry, Smith does not suggest that the beautiful and the aesthetic are one and the same but rather seems to argue that they sometimes, but not always, coincide.

Smith demonstrates her aesthetic model through the aesthetic experiences of her characters. In *On Beauty* we see how successful encounters with the aesthetic require vulnerability, or willingness to be wounded; this vulnerability then yields to more "disinterested" discussion of how and why the aesthetic experience wounds. Thus, there is emotiveness followed by its suspension in order to assess the aesthetic experience. This kind of interaction with the aesthetic leads to fairer interactions generally; a man who

treats a painting fairly by appreciating its aesthetic value, is likely to likewise treat people fairly by considering the importance of their aesthetic defenses of identity (such as clothing). In *White Teeth*, Smith demonstrates that the aesthetic experience is not limited to the experience of canonical art but can rather be extended to include the everyday performances of identity. Through this novel, Smith suggests that the accidental elements of presentation space (or context) often disturb the relationship between the form and content of performance, so that it is necessary to be aware of presentation at all times in order to avoid misreading of identity. Smith also suggests that by situating performances of identity in neutral or imagined spaces, we can mitigate the negative impact of presentational space by reducing the incidence of accident.

Finally, I propose that Smith's balancing of the personal and the neutral is a thematic kernel borrowed from Forster, and that this balancing furthermore situates Smith between two historically dominant aesthetic trends: the Kantian and the Romantic. Fittingly, Smith's effort to strike a balance between competing aesthetic claims is, in itself, an attempt to treat each of those claims with fairness.

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## INTRODUCTION

Zadie Smith officially emerged onto the literary scene in 2000 with the publication of *White Teeth*, which garnered her almost instantaneous international prestige. Early reviews tend to present Smith as a sort of literary prodigy, calling her, variously, "audaciously assured" (Phillips par. 24), "preternaturally gifted" (Kakutani, "Quirky" par. 1), and "a fine writer . . . with the confidence of someone far older than her 24 years" (O'Connell par. 8). *White Teeth* also earned Smith numerous comparisons to iconic writers like Charles Dickens, Salman Rushdie, and Kingsley Amis, among others. Of course, Salman Rushdie himself played a crucial part in the marketing of *White Teeth*, since his endorsement appeared as a cover blurb even at the proof stage (Renton par. 12). Later, Smith's first novel received a seemingly endless stream of prizes: "the Whitbread First Novel Award, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction, the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, the *Guardian* First Book Award, and two EMMAs (Ethnic and Multicultural Media Awards)" (Walters par. 21). In addition, *White Teeth* was short-listed for the Booker Prize, Orange Award, and the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, which former winner A. N. Wilson suggests Smith would have won if not for the jealousy of the judges (par. 13). In 2002, *White Teeth* was made into a mini-series for the *BBC* (Walters par. 23), and as of 2009, *White Teeth* had sold more than 1.3 million copies in twenty languages (par. 21). To say that Smith's debut novel became a sort of phenomenon would perhaps be an understatement.

As Simon Hattenstone explains in his interview with the author, however, the hype surrounding Zadie Smith *herself* has often outweighed the very substantial

appreciation of her work: "She has become so much more famous than her celebrated first novel [*White Teeth*] because she had the fortune, or misfortune, to be the perfect demographic" (par. 1, brackets mine). Indeed, as Philip Tew recounts, before Smith had even completed her first novel, she was being "celebrated . . . for her youth, ethnicity, intelligence, and ironically even the suddenness of her emergence from obscurity"; as a result, Smith soon became a "symbol of multicultural hope and positivity" largely due to her "youth and hybrid origins"; Smith's mother and father were Jamaican and English respectively (21). Smith has attempted, in various interviews, to make corrections to her public persona: "I was expected to be some expert on multicultural affairs, as if multiculturalism is a genre of fiction or something, whereas it's just a fact of life . . . I don't intend to be a spokesman for anything or anybody" (qtd. in Hattenstone par. 9-14). As Deepika Bahri notes, this view of authors of postcolonial novels is symptomatic of the desire to see the postcolonial text as "representative" rather than "representational" (123), and while Bahri stresses this tendency only in the realist text, it is clear, from Smith's difficulties, that the same kind of confusion surrounds novels that are labeled "hyper-real."

It is important, here, to outline the problems with the concept of multiculturalism—why would Smith object to being its spokeswoman? One answer is that such a label inhibits her "artistic freedom" (qtd. in Hattenstone par. 15). Another possibility is that the very term "multiculturalism" is contentious. As Bentley has pointed out, the problem is that in "one model," the concept of multiculturalism depends upon the very essentialism it purports to reject. This model "represents a series of monoethnic

individuals who combine to produce a multicultural nation" (496); and even though hybridity, a closely allied concept, might seem to subvert the idea of monoethnicity, it too depends upon the idea that "discrete races or identities exist" (496). Despite Smith's efforts to challenge her problematic multiculturalist label, as Tew also points out, criticism of her work, especially of *White Teeth*, tends to view Smith's fiction as an extension of this faulty spokesperson persona (16); and while Smith's writing undeniably deals with traditional multicultural themes like identity, hybridity, etc., focusing on these exclusively tends to paint Smith, falsely, as an essentialist, narrowing the applicability of her work.

While Walters has discussed how the barrage of media attention after *White Teeth* may have inspired the exploration of fame and its discontents in *The Autograph Man* (par 27), Smith's sophomore novel, few have commented on how the structure of Smith's third novel, *On Beauty*, speaks to the issue of spokespersonship as created by such fame. *On Beauty*, with its explicit indebtedness to Elaine Scarry for theme and on E. M. Forster's *Howards End* for plot structure, seems to be, in part, a very calculated attempt to guide criticism towards specific interpretations; in other words, the novel announces its inspirations and influences so that the kind of assumptions populating criticism of *White Teeth* might not recur. To quote Smith's "Acknowledgments," "Thank you to Eliane Scarry for her wonderful essay 'On Beauty and Being Just,' from which I borrowed a title, a chapter heading and a good deal of inspiration. It should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love of E. M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted . . ." (xiii). This formulation speaks volumes, as Smith's wording suggests that though

Forster's influence *should* be clear, she still feels the need to make the influence clearer by spelling it out. Here, Smith is possibly attempting to get out from under the onus of being perceived as the second coming of Salman Rushdie—critics like Benita Singh have made comments like, "Zadie Smith was supposed to be the next Salman Rushdie" (par 8)—implying that *if* she is going to be viewed as derivative, then she is derivative of Forster. This need to separate herself from Rushdie and to point out Forster's influence stems, I would argue, from a fear that the domestic concerns of Smith's novels might be weakened by the kind of allegorical readings Rushdie's novels encourage. A Forsterian reading, in contrast, would be more attentive to the role of the domestic sphere.

With *On Beauty*, then, Smith attempts to break free of the atmosphere of her first novel. As Tew argues, "By the time of this novel's [*On Beauty*]'s publication Smith seemed irritated by stereotypical views of her work, annoyed by the anticipation on the part of readers and critics alike that she ought to produce something in the vein of the two preceding novels" (141, brackets mine). Smith's attitude is justifiable since some critics have evinced disappointment in *On Beauty*'s evasion of labeling. William Dersiewicz, for example, writes, ". . . to put it simply, this is a book that seems to have no idea what it wants to be about: Beauty? Religion? Family dynamics? Racial identity? Political ideology?" (3). Walters echoes this sentiment: "The title *On Beauty* blazons that the novel is about beauty . . . but at various points what the novel is about can seem uncertain" (par 41). Nonetheless, other critics continue to affix the multicultural label despite *On Beauty*'s clear preoccupation with other themes: Michiko Kakutani's review "A Modern, Multicultural Makeover for Forster's Bourgeois Edwardians" and Catherine

Lanone's "Mediating multi-cultural muddle: E. M. Forster meets Zadie Smith" exemplify this impulse.

In "Their Eyes Were Watching God: What Does *Soulful* Mean?," Smith describes the damage that arises when such pigeon-holing of authors—in this case Zora Neale Hurston—occurs:

Zora Neale Hurston has gone from being a well-kept, well-loved secret among black women of my mother's generation to an entire literary industry—biographies and films and Oprah and African American literature departments all pay homage to her life and work as avatars of black woman-ness. In the process, a different kind of critical disservice is being done to her, an overcompensation in the opposite direction . . . . She [Hurston] is like Janie set on her porch-pedestal . . . far from the people and things she really cared about, representing only the ideas and beliefs of her admirers, distorted by their gaze. (8)

Replace "black-woman-ness" with "multiculturalism" and Hurston's predicament is Smith's own, though on an admittedly larger scale. Despite the unfavorable implications for Smith's own body of work within this analysis of Hurston, Smith is ultimately positive, suggesting that these "critical disservice[s]" are not in fact irreversible. Smith suggests that "to make a neutral and solid case for her [Huston's] greatness" (10) would be a step toward such a reversal. Although though Smith's "neutrality" seems to have much in common with Kantian "disinterest"—she later speaks of it as a "'neutral universal' of literary criticism" (11)—her approach to analysis is neither Kantian nor New Critical, for she clearly feels it is necessary to include those responses which derive from

personal circumstances within such a critique: "And though it is, to me, a mistake to say 'Unless, you are a black woman, you will never fully comprehend this novel,' it is also disingenuous to claim that many black women do not respond to this book [*Their Eyes Were Watching God*] in a particularly powerful manner that would seem 'extraliterary'" (12). Smith's difficulty here is in finding a critical approach that is neutral without being impersonal.

That Smith fails to outline such an approach in her essay on Hurston is not due to an incapacity to devise such a technique but is rather symptomatic of her discomfort with a prose form that is, compared to the novel form, relatively brief. Indeed, in her introduction to *Martha and Hanwell*, her only collection of short stories to date, Smith admits, "Everything about my mind is baggy, inconclusive, garrulous, and broad" (vii). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Smith has more success in addressing what I will call the problem of personal neutrality in her novels *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*. Through building guidelines for reading her novels within the novels themselves, guidelines extending beyond those explicitly mentioned in *On Beauty's* "Acknowledgments," Smith demonstrates that it is through the consideration of the aesthetic dimension that a fusion of the personal and the neutral is possible, and that, more importantly, such a fusion leads to critical and interpersonal fairness. Put simply, Zadie Smith's novels offer a system of aesthetics through which to understand her work. However, because Smith's development of this aesthetic theory is based upon her characters' aesthetic experiences with aesthetic objects *other* than literature, it is clear that Smith intends her system to have a wider applicability—a life outside of her novels.

Before moving on to my discussion of the novels themselves, there are several contentious issues I need to confront. First is the fact that the foundational argument I am making—that Smith uses her novels to tell us how to read them, thus privileging aesthetically-fueled interpretations over others—is heavily dependent upon the idea that authorial *intention* is relevant, and in fact critical, to understanding Smith's novels. This is, more generally, an unpopular position, and one that might seem to conflict with what I have thus far said about Zadie Smith's biography becoming a hindrance to readings of her work. One reason, however, that the biographically-influenced criticism of Zadie Smith's novels has been problematic is that it has relied on a version of the author's biography that features Smith's physical characteristics more prominently than her actual work. Such biographical detail is clearly not an appropriate source for deriving intention. As David Mikics has noted, Monroe C. Beardsley and William K. Wimsatt, in their original articulation of the concept of the "intentional fallacy," were primarily concerned with the "dangerous potential for the reader's knowledge of a work's context . . . to overwhelm his sense of the work itself"; however, this concern did not manifest itself, as generally believed, as a disavowal of the usefulness of biography (157). From Beardsley and Wimsatt's account, it seems clear that the usage of biographical detail is acceptable when that detail has some direct bearing on the work itself, as in cases where there are "private or semi-private meanings attached to words or topics by an author" that can only be found outside the text itself (478). It is my contention, then, that using the history of Smith's works themselves—and Zadie Smith's frustration with her reception is certainly a part of that history—to derive intention is a legitimate move, differing substantially from

the sort of criticism that might take private events of her life, unrelated to her work as an author, to establish authorial intent.

The second potential objection I would like to address is that I have decided, in the following chapters, to omit discussion of *The Autograph Man*. I would like to stress that my omission is not due to any tacit agreement with the generally poor reviews of Smith's second novel but is rather based on my perception that *The Autograph Man* does not provide clear guidelines for its reading. On the surface, this statement would appear to be false. After all, *The Autograph Man* is divided into two books, one entitled "The Kabbalah of Alex-Li Tandem" and the other entitled, "The Zen of Alex-Li Tandem." However, Smith's own labelings are not confined to these two; there are epigraphs quoting Lenny Bruce, Franz Kafka, Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, Walter Benjamin, *Sunset Boulevard*, and Peter Handke. What I am getting at here is that the sheer number of interpretative cues makes any single interpretation impossible. It is almost as if Smith was so frustrated with being labeled by others that she pre-labeled *The Autograph Man* with a sort of wild abandon that rendered the labels meaningless. And similarly, within the novel itself, the protagonist Alex-Li Tandem practices his own labeling with a similarly reductive abandon. The labels of "Jewishness" and "goyishness" are the lenses through which Alex reads the "text" of his world, and thus would seem to offer a sort of system of aesthetics; a "Jewish" aesthetic and a "goyish" aesthetic. The system never coheres, however, because Alex bases his affixation of labels on nothing but instinct and intuition. Jewish people and "goyish" people do not figure into his process at all: "Not them, not as people—there was no fun to be had out of that. Only wars. No, other things.

A movement of an arm. A type of shoe. A yawn. A dress. A whistled tune" (75). Without people, there is no source from which to draw sets of criteria for the labels themselves. It is possible that exposing the reductive nature of labeling is Smith's point, but because she offers no alternate system in *The Autograph Man*, this sophomore novel does not share, with *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*, a wider applicability. In other words, while *The Autograph Man* shows what *not* to do in interpretation, it offers nothing to show us how best to read.

Finally, there is the problem of defining aesthetics for the purposes of this project. If it is through the aesthetic dimension that we can come to the seeming paradox of personal neutrality, then it is essential to know what constitutes that dimension. The very term "aesthetic" puts us, at the start, on extraordinarily difficult footing, for it is a semantically unstable—optimists might say "dynamic"—adjective at best. Because many of the objects under discussion in *On Beauty* are pieces of canonical art—works by Rembrandt and Mozart—it might be tempting to say that for Smith the aesthetic object is equivalent to the art object. Such a view would, however, stunt the wider applicability of aesthetics and would exclude discussion of what I will call "the everyday performances" depicted in *White Teeth*. However, Smith's repeated references to musical encounters suggest that Smith's definition of aesthetics is, rather than being object-oriented, *experience*-oriented. For music, unlike paintings or other pieces of canonical art, is not reducible to object status. As Roger Scruton has argued, because "music is so dependent upon metaphor"—metaphors "of movement, of space, of chords as objects, of melodies as advancing and retreating, as moving up and down"—"we might go on to conclude that

music is not, strictly speaking, a part of the material world" (452-3). In literature, the situation is similar. Though a book in and of itself *could* be an aesthetic object, when we refer to literature, we are generally not referring to *a* specific physical book but rather to the experience created by interacting with the book. As David E. W. Fenner points out, in such instances, the "physical object is thus generally considered the *vehicle* of the aesthetic object, but the aesthetic object itself is only the perceptual object" (35). Locating the aesthetic object is only possible, in this theory, after having had an aesthetic experience and having tracked that experience back to its catalyst.

Smith's expropriation of Elaine Scarry's title in *On Beauty* reinforces the experiential definition of aesthetics suggested by Smith's repeated references to music. Indeed, Scarry defines beauty more by its effects than by its physical properties: beauty inspires "replication" (3), "acquaints us with the mental event of conviction" (31), and inspires "distributive justice" (97). Though beauty results in such justice, or fairness, in part because its symmetry inspires what Stuart Hampshire related to Scarry as "'a symmetry of everyone's relation to one another'" (95); this does not mean that symmetry is necessarily always a characteristic of beauty—as Scarry notes, the preference for symmetry varies from era to era (96). Instead, the beautiful object is identifiable by its tendency to make us realize the value of other objects in the "same category"; this is what Scarry calls the "pressure toward the distributional" (67). Implicitly, the recognizance of this value would result in fairer treatment of all objects, or persons, within this "category." Thus, it is clear that Scarry's concern is primarily not with the beautiful object

in itself but with the experience of beauty and the value of what that experience engenders.

It is this view of aesthetics as socially useful that Smith expropriates from Scarry, though Smith does not equate the aesthetic with the beautiful. Rather, in Smith's novels it seems that beauty and the aesthetic often coincide but are not necessarily equivalent to one another. When, for instance, Howard's son Levi agrees that wearing a head stocking is an "aesthetic" choice (22), he is not saying that the head stocking is itself beautiful but rather that it adds to his own perceived beauty. Similarly, in *White Teeth*, Archie's carefully orchestrated suicide is not so much a thing of beauty (the place he chooses, Cricklewood, is grimy and run-down) as it is a demonstration of Archie's own awareness of formal relationships; and though some might argue that Cricklewood is beautiful, it is perhaps more accurate to say that Cricklewood has its own particular aesthetic.

This identification of the aesthetic by its effects is more applicable to *On Beauty* than to *White Teeth*, which is unsurprising considering the more direct references to Scarry in *On Beauty*. Nonetheless, there are some aesthetic encounters in *White Teeth* where Scarry's criteria function, such as in the scene where Archie meets Clara, decides she is "the most beautiful thing he had ever seen" (20), and then proceeds to marry her, thereby replicating his initial encounter with her. Indeed, Scarry might call this desire for marriage Archie's "willingness continually to revise [his] own location in order to place [himself] in the path of beauty" (7, brackets mine). However, in other cases, like Archie's suicide, there is no audience within the text, and yet the attempt is unmistakably a kind of performance. What is crucial, once again, is the artist's intent; *White Teeth*

provides us with a privileged view of inner-workings of the creation of performance, a view of art not only from the audience's perspective but also from the artist's perspective. This perspective is unique also in that, instead of recollected intent, *White Teeth* provides access to intent in "real time" so that the formation of the aesthetic can be seen as the manifestation of intent. The focus on the artist and the inner-world of creation points, instead of to Scarry, to Smith's other stated influence, E.M. Forster.

In an essay misleadingly entitled "Art for Art's Sake" (for Forster's argument goes beyond the easy tautology), Forster defines art as that which "has internal order" and "may have external form" (26, italics mine). In Forster's definition, as in Scarry's, physical characteristics are not the primary hallmarks of the aesthetic: "internal order" is. Although Forster does not explain how it is possible to identify the aesthetic when internal order does not express itself as form, it is clear that he is more concerned with arguing that all art possesses such order apart from our ability or inability to identify any given object as art. While order exists in society, in astronomy, and in religion, Forster argues that these areas are merely "pressed into shape from outside" so that "when their mould is removed, they collapse." Art's order, in contrast, evolves from within (27). What Forster means by "order" itself is clear from his juxtaposing the idea of order to the disintegration of society (27); order is quite simply the opposite of chaos—it is the balance preventing entropy. In Smith's novels, this idea of "internal order" coincides with intentionality, for even if "internal order" does not make itself apparent through form; an organizing, stabilizing effort is apparent in Smith's characters' intentions, since these

characters perform primarily as a means of establishing identity. And identity, to be lasting, must also be stable.

In sum, my intent in the following chapters is to explain how Smith has embedded within her novels guidelines for reading. These guidelines ultimately suggest that it is through aesthetic experience that we can come to a critical approach that is neutral, personal, and fair. Smith proves this via the aesthetic experiences of her characters. As Smith's appropriation of Scarry's essay suggests, we can identify these experiences, at least in part, by their effects: the desire for "replication" (3), the possession of "mental conviction" (31), and the impulse towards "distribution" (97). In instances where the artist's intent is accessible to us, we can identify the aesthetic by the artist's intent to create order, which can be described as "internal order." Both novels I am discussing are essential to understanding Zadie Smith's aesthetic stance, for while *On Beauty* posits certain preconditions for aesthetic experience, *White Teeth* illustrates the types of error that can occur, or be actively prevented, even when such preconditions are met.

## CHAPTER I:

### THE "AESTHETICS OF WOUNDING" AND WOUNDING THE AESTHETIC:

#### WRAPPING AND IDENTITY IN *ON BEAUTY*

Though Elaine Scarry's "On Beauty and Being Just" tends to highlight beauty's exertion of "pressure toward the distributional" (67) as the primary means by which the aesthetic leads to fairness, her discussion of the way beauty occurs in the particular is just as key to understanding Smith's appropriation of the essay. In a passage describing Proust's reaction to a man who finds the idea of a "good book" boring because he "imagines a sort of composite of all the good books he has read," Scarry writes,

Beauty always takes place in the particular, and if there are no particulars, the chances of seeing it go down. . . . Here the error arises not from cultural difference—the man is steeped in books (and steeped in life)—but from making a composite of particulars, and so erasing the particulars as successfully as if he lived in a hemisphere or on a coast that grew no books or life. (18-19).

This description of how engagement with beauty takes as its prerequisite a recognition of the particular explains why Smith gravitates toward the aesthetic as a means to critical reading: first and foremost, the aesthetic prohibits the kind of gross generalizations Smith herself has suffered, having often been pegged as an "expert on multicultural affairs" (Smith, qtd. in Hattenstone 2) due to her bi-racial background and her cross-cultural debut novel (*White Teeth*). As far as *On Beauty* is concerned, the compositor described by Proust could very well be the model upon which Howard Belsley, *On Beauty*'s central patriarch, is based; Howard, like Proust's man, has espoused a critical methodology that

is founded upon the kinds of generalizations Smith hopes to expose as harmful—generalizations that ultimately lead to what Ulka Anjara has called Howard's "deconstructive anti-aesthetic" (32). It is important to note that Howard's "anti-aesthetic" is an attitude towards canonical art, and though this attitude extends itself towards other types of aesthetic encounters, Howard is not conscious of the latter applications of his critical stance.

Our introduction to Howard's attitude toward art is in Howard's Rembrandt class at Wellington University. Here, Howard creates a hopelessly cynical environment within his classes on Rembrandt. It is an environment in which the rhetoric of neutrality completely replaces the personal response. It is within this environment, however, that Smith introduces one possible mode of critical reading that allows for both the personal and the neutral by starting from the particular and moving outward. The "exemplary" character here, as Kathleen Wall has suggested (767), is Katie Armstrong, a sixteen-year-old who has come to Wellington because she "loves the arts" (249). Though Wall does not develop the reasons for Katie's exemplary nature, it seems clear that Katie demonstrates, in her analysis of Rembrandt's etching, *Seated Nude*, how a critic can bring an neutral theoretical stance *to* the work of art while allowing himself to take something personal *from* it:

The second picture, on the other hand, makes Katie cry . . . Katie is moved by the crenulated marks of absent stockings on her legs, the muscles in her arms suggestive of manual labour. . . 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 all this from cross-hatching (Katie makes her own comics and knows something of cross-hatching); all these intimations of mortality from an inkpot! (252)

All of Katie's insights stem from her initial receptivity to the particular, her willingness to be moved and then to analyze *why* the image moves her. As Kathleen Wall has argued, the aesthetic object, and by extension the aesthetic experience, engages us in a kind of "conversation," making us "attempt to say what enthralls us" (763). However, this conversation is only the second step in the aesthetic experience. As Katie's experience shows, to engage in this conversation, it is first necessary to experience and acknowledge one's physical and psychological reaction to the work—for Katie, this means crying and admitting the work "makes her cry."

Katie's personal approach to art is also reminiscent of Barthes's approach to works that presented him with "'obtuse' meaning" (qtd. in McHugh 246). As Kathleen McHugh explains in her article, "The Aesthetics of Wounding: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the critical Voice," Barthes, when "[w]orking with those aspects of his subject which found undiscussable . . . shifted his critical approach from semiotic ideological analyses to a very personal aesthetic inquiry" (248). In other words, when Barthes was unable to understand a work through strictly "disinterested" criticism, he relied upon his own personal response to the work to guide him. As McHugh explains, Barthes experienced this personal connection to the work as a "wound," which is made by what he terms the "*punctum*" of the work: "this element. . .which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like

an arrow, and pierces me" (qtd. in McHugh 247). Significantly, in Katie's experience, it seems to be the cross-hatching which communicates the force of the *punctum*: the ink-pen, resembling a small spear, becomes the object which facilitates piercing. Because Katie is attempting to organize her thoughts about this etching to discuss it with others, she is engaging with an imagined audience. As Wall writes, the "conversation with the work of art then turns to one with those around us as we attempt to articulate and explain the way we are moved" (763). Wall's formulation here is implicit in Scarry's essay and her notion of "replication"; such conversation with others is a repetition of the aesthetic experience. I would argue that it is this engagement with an audience, whether real or imagined, that allows Katie to come to terms with how and *why* the etching makes her feel as it does—her classmates make it *important* that she discovers what has happened to her. When she realizes what wounds her, what "makes her cry" and proceeds to share that wounding, she is able to trace her feelings to come to a personal, and yet still critical, interpretation of the etching. Significantly, it is Katie's technical knowledge of cross-hatching from her own work as a comic book artist that informs her personal reaction and gives it critical legitimacy. Katie is, because of her own technical expertise, able to articulate not only what in the etching moves her but is also able to articulate how such effects are achieved.

*On Beauty* thus establishes a paradigm for critical fairness that requires vulnerability: the work of art as a particular aesthetic object necessitates the experience of psychological wounding, which is equivalent to the personal experience of the work. This experience coexists with neutrality when its causes are discussed in order to derive

meaning from the aesthetic encounter. Howard, like Katie, is exemplary, as his character demonstrates what happens with the avoidance of aesthetic wounding. Howard's determination to avoid such wounding results in a critical methodology in which Howard attempts to somehow *wound* the art object before it can wound him; he, in a sense, preempts the *punctum*. This critical practice eventually establishes itself in his relation to people as well as in his relation to art. In response, each member of Howard's family in one way or another develops an aesthetic of wrapping, or bandaging, to protect their developing identities from Howard's one-way wounding. Howard, seeing beauty as being nothing more than the "mask that power wears" (155), cannot understand the significance of this wrapping, and attempts, through "interrogation," to strip away the bandaging just as he would strip any Rembrandt painting of its aesthetic power. Despite these ingrained tendencies in Howard, Smith's rendering of Howard's ultimate transformation seems to suggest that this resistance to the aesthetic, harmful to self and others, is reversible.

What seems to have created this avoidance of wounding in Howard is his extreme susceptibility to *deep* wounding. This susceptibility, as we find when Howard discusses his marital problems with his father, is inherited from his family: "And now Howard succumbed to his heritage—easy, quick-flowing tears" (301). However quickly Howard might cry in front of his father, it is the *unexpected* experience of the aesthetic that actually palpably wounds him. The first occasion in the novel in which canonical art catches Howard off guard, during Carlene Kipps's funeral service, is illustrative of Howard's deep-seated vulnerability:

Howard . . . found himself—in a manner both sudden and horrible—mortally affected by it. He did not even get the opportunity to check the booklet in his hand; never discovered that this was Mozart's *Ave Verum*, and that this choir, Cambridge singers; no time to remind himself that he hated Mozart, nor to laugh at the expensive pretension of bussing down Kingsmen to sing at a Willesden funeral. It was too late for all that. The song had him. . . . he was tasting salt, watery salt, a lot of it, and feeling it in chambers of his nose; it ran in rivulets down his neck and pooled in the dainty triangular well at the base of his throat. . . . He had the feeling that there was a second, gaping mouth in the centre of his stomach and this was screaming. (287)

This passage catalogs several of Howard's methods for wounding art: one is to wound the artist, in this case Mozart, with closed-minded rancor; the second option, here represented by the "expensive pretension of bussing down Kingsmen," is to consider how the *presentation* of the artwork is flawed or ridiculous. Earlier in the novel, Howard uses these exact devices to prepare himself for and shield himself against a performance of Mozart's *Requiem*. Howard implies, for example, before this earlier performance, that Mozart must be inferior because of his popularity: "Poor bastard needs all the support he can get, as far as I'm concerned. One of the great unappreciated composers of the last millennium..." (61). As for the presentation of the work, he finds more than a few items to laugh about: "every male musician was wearing a tie with a 'musical notes' design upon it," a poster of Mozart shows "Mozart's miserable, pouchey hamster face," and the stage design resembles "Mozart on ice" (62).

During Carlene's funeral, however, since Howard is unable to employ either of these methods because of the unexpectedness of the performance, he finds himself violently responsive to the aesthetic experience of Mozart's music. The words "mortally" and "gaping" within this passage conjure up the very idea of wounding; more importantly, Smith's choice of the *Ave Verum* within this passage seems to be an invocation of Barthes's idea of the *punctum* as that which "shoots out and pierces" (qtd. in McHugh 246): "Hail, true flesh, born of the Virgin Mary, who has truly suffered, broken on the cross for man; from whose pierced side flowed water and blood. Be for us a foretaste of the trial of death" ("Ave Verum Corpus"). In light of the text of the *Ave Verum*, it is clear that this passage exemplifies the way in which, as Elaine Scarry argues, "beauty brings copies of itself into being" (3). The "pierc[ing]" of Christ's side within the *Ave Verum* repeats itself in Howard's reaction. The "rivulets" of tears that stream down Howard's throat mirror the "water" that "flow[s]" from Christ's wound as depicted in text of the motet. Similarly, Howard's deepest wound, the "screaming mouth" is located on the trunk of his body, the "center of his stomach," paralleling the spear wound in Christ's side. While the water of the motet is repeated in the water of Howard's tears, the blood described in the motet seems to be refigured in Howard's experience as sound: instead of bleeding, this mouth-as-wound screams. Although the screaming of his wound is mute, it translates itself into the "embarrassing noises" Howard is "quite certain he [is] making" (287-8).

As Cathy Caruth's work suggests, Howard's almost literal repetition of the experience exhibited by the aesthetic is a typical response to trauma: "It is this literality

and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points towards its enigmatic core: the delay or incompleteness in knowing or even seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains. . .absolutely true to the event" (qtd. in McHugh 242). Unpleasant as Howard's repetition of the aesthetic may be, Howard's wounds enable him, as Katie's wounds enabled her, to experience a "foretaste. . .of death" or of human mortality; he is able, as he watches the funeral proceedings, to glimpse the "oblivion" to which all people will be "dispatched" (287). Unlike Katie, however, Howard is unable to grasp what it is about the aesthetic that gives him this glimpse; in short, he experiences Caruth's "delay or incompleteness in knowing." His very thoughts become additional wounds to be interpreted: "His thoughts fled from him and rushed down their dark holes. Zora's gravestone. Levi's. Jerome's. Everybody's. His own. Kiki's. Kiki's. Kiki's. Kiki's" (287-8). This description of "thoughts rush[ing] down their dark holes" re-enacts rather than clarifies Howard's initial wounding; the "thoughts" are further manifestations of the *punctum* while the "holes" they rush into are wounds. The description of the "holes" as "dark" only reiterates how very little Howard can see of his wounding.

Howard cannot make sense of his experience because he refuses to expose his wounding, or to engage with an audience to investigate his experience. Significantly, Howard, though embarrassed by the "noises" he makes as he is wounded, does not leave until his son Levi tries to share in Howard's experience: "'Dad—you OK, man?' whispered Levi and brought his strong, massaging hand to the cleft between his father's shoulders. But Howard ducked this touch, stood up and left the church through the doors Carlene had entered" (288). The "cleft" between Howard's shoulders here suggests

another wound, and Levi's action—bringing his "massaging hand" to it—suggests that Levi means to somehow heal Howard. This unrealized exchange reinforces the notion that it is through the sharing of wounding that the person wounded by the aesthetic might be able to heal, to make sense of what he has been through in his engagement with the aesthetic. Howard completes his avoidance of this sharing by fleeing from the church.

Through Howard's second unanticipated engagement with the art, Smith proves that it is not only tragic beauty which can wound us; in fact, *any* type of beauty has this property. When Howard takes Victoria Kipps to the formal at Emerson Hall, it is in fact a glee club performance that surprises him and will wound him. Again, Smith emphasizes Howard's unpreparedness: "Of course, Howard had known it was coming. But he had not known it would come so soon. He felt he had not had the chance to compose himself properly. It was too late now to leave again" (346). Once the glee club begins singing, Howard's reaction to their humorous routine is quite similar, in its intensity and involuntariness, to his reaction to the tragic message of Mozart's *Ave Verum*. As at Carlene's funeral, Howard seems to be almost spewing water as he watches the glee club: "And now Howard could hold out no longer. He began to shudder, and, making a choice between tears and noise, he chose tears. In a few seconds his face was soaked" (346). Once again, sound, though more subtly than before, becomes a figure for blood; as Howard attempts to keep from letting his laughter escape, his face becomes flushed with the effort to prevent eruption: "The effort of not making noise was turning his face purple. One of the boys stepped out of his formation to do the moonwalk. Howard held a thick cotton serviette to his face" (347). Within this passage, this "cotton serviette" seems

to serve as a bandage to stem the flow of sound as blood, and indeed, when he removes it, it has "the effect of releasing the noise" (347). This bandaging demonstrates that Howard has, at least subconsciously, learned something about the aesthetic of wrapping his family adopts in relation to him. Indeed, it is the *image* of Howard, wrapped in his napkin, that Victoria finds embarrassing. Howard "apologetically" removes the napkin (347), exposing his wounding. She, like Howard, does not comprehend the function of the aesthetic of wrapping. Howard, still unwilling to discuss his wounding, at least with Victoria, "escape[s]" (348) from the auditorium.

Although the more recent examples of how Howard has been wounded by the aesthetic are by far the most graphic, Smith implies that there was, in fact, an initial encounter that started Howard on his twisted path to preempt the *punctum*. While Howard is looking over a power-point presentation on Rembrandt he is planning to give, he comes across the painting *The Sampling Officials of the Drapers' Guild (The Staalmeesters)*. According to art history, Howard tells us, this painting is a representation of "what *judgment* looks like: considered, rational, benign judgment" (383). And, indeed, Howard seems to have been judged, in a wounding way, by these Staalmeesters:

The first time [Howard looked at the men] he was fourteen, being shown a print of the painting in an art class. He had been alarmed and amazed by the way the Staalmeesters seemed to look directly at him, their eyes (as his schoolmaster put it) 'following you around the room,' and yet, when Howard tried to stare back at the men, he was unable to meet any of their eyes directly. Howard looked at the men. The men looked at Howard. On that day, forty-three years ago, he was an

uncultured, fiercely bright, dirty-kneed, enraged, beautiful, inspired, bloody minded schoolboy who came from nowhere and nothing and yet was determined not to stay that way. . . . (385, brackets mine).

From the start, this passage suggests itself as Howard's initial wounding by the aesthetic. Even the phrase "the first time" suggest this experience a sort of deflowering which "alarm[s] and amaze[s]" Howard. Despite the implicit violence, Howard is clearly engaging with the painting, as he tries to "meet" the eyes of the Staalmeesters "directly." This attempt results, for Howard, in more wounding: the Staalmeesters judge, and determine that Howard "came from nowhere and nothing." That Howard is "unable to meet any of their eyes directly" reinforces the notion that Howard is somehow ashamed by what he sees of himself. Implicitly, it is this particular interaction, this wounding judgment, that has motivated Howard's entire career, causing him to leave his family and later his country to get away from the image of himself he gleans from this encounter with art.

Despite Howard's engagement, he has still never taken the final step: he has never admitted his wounding and never discussed it with anyone else. Instead, he has written everything he can possibly think of to undermine the painting's power to wound. His argument is similar to that Elaine Scarry considers one of the typical political objections to beauty: "The first [argument] urges that beauty, by preoccupying our attention, distracts from wrong social arrangements. It makes us inattentive and therefore eventually indifferent, to the project of bringing about arrangements that are just" (58). Howard's argument runs thus:

We want to believe these Staalmeesters are sages, wisely judging this imaginary audience, implicitly judging us. But none of this is truly *in* the picture. All we really see there are six rich men sitting for their portrait, expecting—*demanding*—to be collectively portrayed as wealthy, successful, and morally sound. . . The Staalmeesters are not looking at anyone; there is no one to look at. The painting is an exercise in the depiction of economic power. . . So goes Howard's spiel. (384)

In attributing an unjust economic advantage to the subjects of the painting, Howard strips the work of its aesthetic power, and in claiming that "there is no one" for the Staalmeesters "to look at," he is attempting to remove the audience of the painting so that there will be no one for it to wound. Of course, Howard is not successful, because the painting still has power over him, if only obliquely. He may be able to successfully shield himself from the painting—in fact, when he finds himself inadvertently in a staring contest with the Staalmeesters, he presses the "'zoom' option on his screen" (385), an action which would blur and distort the image to the point of abstraction—but he is *still* literally acting out the initial trauma: he has "repeated and written about" the painting "so many times that he has now forgotten from which research he drew his original evidence" (385). The irony of his relationship to the painting is that, in some respects, he's right: the judgment of the Staalmeesters *isn't* "in the picture." The invitation to subject oneself to judgment, however, is.

Howard's power to wound the aesthetic has grown as he has become more practiced in his own strategies of wounding. He has developed for his Wellington "shopping day students" (144) a "long shtick" about "Rembrandt's *Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*"

that "never failed to captivate" them, "their new eyes boring holes into the old photocopy" (144). As Howard demonstrates before the performance of Mozart's *Requiem*, one of these strategies is to see the presentation of the work as somehow ridiculous. Howard *creates* this condition of ridiculousness for his class by using an "old photocopy," which, one would presume, is a belittling representation of the actual work (This belittling dimension of the photocopy may, incidentally, be the reason Howard is so resistant to using power-point presentations). Howard's argument will further wound the work by attacking the artist, another strategy he employs to great effect at the *Requiem* performance. His argument, interestingly enough, is a "long schtick," which phonically suggests a "long stick," a spear, in effect, with which to wound the painting. This lecture, which Katie Armstrong bravely sits through, involves exposing Rembrandt, as I have mentioned, "as a competent artisan who painted whatever his wealthy patrons requested" (155). This lecture has the desired effect, for the students eyes do not *see* the painting but rather begin "boring holes into the old photocopy." Howard thus not only wounds the painting himself but enlists other students to carry out the process of wounding.

Howard's own daughter, Zora, is among those he enlists to wound the aesthetic, but she is also among the family members who suffer from the slippage between Howard's professional and domestic lives. As Ulka Anjara has explained, *On Beauty* poses the "question of how an individual life can unfold if theory, however well-intentioned, is allowed to overdetermine the domestic setting . . ." (48). The wound Howard has inflicted, upon all of his family members, derives from his theoretical framework; as Anjara has noted, "Howard has banned representational art in his home" in

"a clearly overblown response to the power of aesthetics over daily life" (45). In his determination to avoid the aesthetic experience in his own home, Howard preempts the *punctum* by removing it at the source. What Kiki terms his "representational art ban" (102) has made it nearly impossible for the family's "individual live[s] to unfold" in any meaningful way, however. The distrust of representation that has permeated the household has made it exceedingly difficult for Howard's family to represent themselves *to* themselves, so that each family member is left with a gaping wound where his or her identity ought to be. The outer wrapping of *clothing* becomes the only viable defense, for clothes, being utilitarian, can *sometimes* squeeze beneath Howard's anti-aesthetic radar. Clothing simultaneously becomes the bandaging meant to protect the identities Kiki and the children begin to develop as Howard's authority crumbles after his affair with Claire Malcom.

For Zora, the wound Howard has inflicted is particularly pronounced because, of all the children, she has been the most thoroughly indoctrinated in Howard's theoretical system. Zora will not, in fact, even allow aesthetic experience via art into her peripheral vision or hearing. When she goes with her family to listen to Mozart's *Requiem*, she, like Howard, who sleeps during the concert as a form of psychological disengagement, pays no attention whatsoever. Instead, Zora listens to "Professor N.R.A. Gould" as he "carefully guide[s] her through each movement" (70, brackets mine), effectively replacing Mozart's music with commentary on Mozart and thus blocking the possibility of emotional response. Zora's own lack of identity manifests itself in what Kiki calls her

living "through footnotes," for Zora does not know what she thinks of anything and relies almost exclusively on others' interpretations:

She prepared a face—as her favourite poet had it—to meet the faces that she met, and it was a procedure that required time and forewarning to function correctly. In fact, when she was not in company it didn't seem she had a face at all . . . And yet in college, she was famed for being opinionated . . . the truth was she didn't take these public passions home, or even out of the room in any serious way. She didn't feel that she *had* any real opinions, or at least not in the way other people seemed to have them. (209)

Zora's preparation here signals an important point Smith seems to make throughout the novel about the human face. It is necessary to note that Smith's philosophy of the face differs from that famously created by Immanuel Levinas; for Smith, the face is not the "unheard command . . . of God" requiring responsibility for the Other (Levinas 129) but is rather an invitation encouraging, but not *requiring*, interaction. Zora intuits this function of the face but is unable to absorb her representation of herself, seeing it merely as a mask, much in the way Howard might ("prettiness" is the "face power wears" 155). She does not feel, after all, that she has a face "at all," nor does she have any "real opinions." Although it seems to be a declaration contradictory to her claim that she has no opinions, that Zora cites her "favourite poet[s]" "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" seems to suggest a hyper-awareness of her identity's insubstantiality. Her life, like Prufrock's, is full of outer actions that do not necessarily point to any certain identity: her living "through footnotes" bears a striking resemblance to Prufrock's "measure[ing]

out [his] life in coffee spoons" (Eliot 51, brackets mine); she does not "take" her "public passions home." Her citation of a poem whose epigraph situates its reader in Dante's hell also ascribes an enormous depth and intensity to Zora's wounding.

The way in which Zora "prepare[s]" her face for the world parallels the way in which she prepares her body for the world. On her first day as a sophomore, Zora particularly feels her lack of identity. As Smith tells us, Zora has an expectation that, upon becoming a sophomore, she will understand who she is. After this "transformation" has failed to come "in the night," Zora relies on clothing to hide her lack: "she dress[es]" the "part. . .instead" (129). Her choice of clothing suggests what Zora would like to be but cannot be yet: "She had been gunning for something like 'bohemian intellectual: fearless; graceful; brave and bold'" (129). This relationship between Zora and her clothing suggests that her clothes do not *only* cover her wounding. As Carlene Kipps, points out in reference to her bougainvillea, appearance is half of the battle: ". . . I don't know if they will survive. But right now they have the *appearance* of survival, which is almost the same thing" (96-7). Carlene's statement implies that it is possible to achieve survival, which would be identity formation for Zora, through the constant *appearance* of that survival. Zora's clothing then, is a way to protect and grow that which she wants to be. Howard, viewing Zora from his office window strips this aesthetic from Zora by seeing it as yet another case of her imitation of him, asking himself, "Why was she wearing his old hat?" (145).

Unlike Zora's wounding, which is highly amorphous, Levi's wounding takes a specific shape—he experiences a need to feel what Tynan calls "'authentic' blackness"

(86). While Catherine Lanone has cited "Levi's attempt to become more black" as a "mistaken quest" and a "'comic tautology'" (192), I would suggest that Levi uses the aesthetic aspect of himself that cannot be taken away from him (without flaying) as a starting point for his identity and that this move is one of the few open to Levi in his anti-aesthetic household. It is this stifling atmosphere that causes Levi to feel a certain desperation when he is compelled to quit his job at the record store and will no longer get a thirty-five dollar a week paycheck: ". . . then there was no money to escape Wellington on a Saturday night, no chance to dance with all those kids . . . who didn't give a fuck who the hell Gram-ski was . . . he felt that those thirty-five dollars were the only thing that kept him half normal, half sane, half *black*" (193). Significantly, Levi feels that he is only "half" anything, and sometimes, like Zora, he sees himself as being entirely devoid of identity. When looking at the statue of the Virgin Mary near the bus stop, for example, Levi describes this emptiness as his rationale for never putting anything in Mary's hands: "Levi had never put anything in her hands. He didn't feel that it was his place to do so, not being a Catholic. Not being anything" (354). As with Zora, Levi's lack of identity leads him to "try on" identities but without being able to entirely attach himself to them. Although, for example, he becomes impassioned about the plight of Haitians when reading about them, it does not take much to knock this piece of developing identity away: "But Levi was also a fair-weather friend when it came to books of this kind. He need only leave the book on Haiti in a forgotten knapsack in his closet for a week, and the whole island and its history grew obscure to him once more" (355).

It is through both wrapping and *rap* that Levi covers his lack and protects his nascent identity, and it is Levi who introduces the aesthetics of both kinds of [w]rapping. In one of Jerome's e-mails to Howard, Jerome explains, "Mom mailed me to tell me that Levi has upped the headwear to FOUR (skullcap, baseball cap, hoodie, duffel hood) *with* earphones on—so that you can only see a tiny, tiny bit of his face around the eyes" (6). Levi's wrapping clearly gives him a defensive advantage, for he can see out—his eyes are showing—but those around him cannot see in, and thus have no way of seeing Levi's lack. Anything even remotely wound-like is obstructed: mouth, nostrils, ears, etc. The headphones wrap his ears, but also wrap him aesthetically in rap music. As Victoria later hints, while she is playing Levi's music at Howard and Kiki's anniversary party, this music is not only defensive but is also potentially offensive, though not to those, like Levi and Victoria, who have become accustomed to rap's musical and lyrical vocabulary. When Howard goes to ask her to change the music because Kiki thinks it is motivating people to leave, Victoria says, "It's only hip-hop. It won't kill them. . . .Yet" (125). Because of its defensive/offensive doubling, Levi's music becomes such an effective coping mechanism that he literally does not know what to do without his headphones. When he accidentally visits Carl at the Music Library after helping with the Haitian protest march, for example, Levi proves that he does not know how to *be* in the world without his music around him: "He was still restless. He hadn't brought his iPod with him today, and he had no personal resources to cope with being alone without music" (406). Levi's restlessness almost seems to suggest that he fears that, without his iPod, he is going to be wounded. Like Zora's bohemian costume, Levi's [w]rapping also functions to

protect and promote the identity he is forging. It is through rapping with the Haitians and through wearing the "uniform" of "cap, hood, jeans" (268) that Levi finds acceptance in Felix's group, and Felix is for Levi the "*essence* of blackness" (242). Levi is able to achieve, therefore, what he sees as authenticity.

Levi's ability to defend himself against his father with his aesthetics of [w]rapping as shield is most evident before the *Requiem* concert. As Howard makes fun of Levi's desire to be "street," Levi uses "his hoodie to cover the side of his vision in which Howard was persisting" (63-4). It is perhaps Levi's success in this utilization that drives Howard to deconstruct Levi's aesthetic—Levi's defense is too noticeable for even Howard to miss. When Howard first notices Levi's "head stocking," for instance, he approaches Levi as he approaches Rembrandt, through "interrogation." In Howard's classroom, one of the ways in which Howard preempts the wounding apparatuses of Rembrandt's art is to "*interrogate* . . . the mytheme of the artist as autonomous individual with privileged insight into the human" (252). Similarly, when encountered with Levi's aesthetic, Howard rejects the human meaning *behind* the clothing—he rejects, in other words, Levi's developing identity:

'What's the deal with *this*?' asked Howard, flipping the interrogation round and touching Levi's head. 'Is it a political thing?'. . . 'Nothin,' Dad. It's just what it *is*,' he said gnomically. He bit his thumb. ' So then...' said Howard, trying to translate, 'it's an aesthetic thing. For looks only.' (22)

Levi's self-wounding here suggests that his father has successfully broken through his aesthetic shield to the wound underneath. By reducing Levi's aesthetic of wrapping to

something "for looks only," Howard undercuts the importance of the "head stocking," categorizing what Levi has done to build his identity as empty. Howard's use of the classroom process of "interrogation" furthermore implies that Howard feels threatened by Levi in much the same way that he feels threatened by Rembrandt. Howard's earlier description of Levi as "leonine" (21) functions as Howard's unconscious realization of Levi's threatening aesthetic.

Of the three children, Jerome perhaps has the most stable identity, but even he shows evidence of Howard's wounding. Jerome's ability to "give himself up to the Kippes" (44) in the action before the beginning of the novel suggests a sort of emptiness waiting to be filled. By the time Jerome returns home, however, he realizes that "Considering things too much, all the time, was he definition of who he was" (45). Jerome's faith is also a cornerstone of his stabilizing identity; as he tells Levi, "I'm on my knees to God every day. And it's amazing, Lee . . . it really is" (237). The reason Jerome has been able to successfully represent himself to himself is, Smith seems to imply, because he has been able to get out of the house that so stifles Levi, thus firmly dissociating himself from his father's influence: "It's only when I'm away from home and I'm talking to non-family people that I can see how psychotic he is . . . Because of some deranged theory in his head, everybody else has to suffer" (236). Significantly, at this point, Jerome seems to understand Howard's method of wounding and can *see through* Howard's theories to the psychosis, or the trauma, underneath. Though Jerome does not slip into and out of identities like his siblings, his identity as a Christian has wavered; as Zora notices, "they worrying accessory that used to come and go with Jerome, but now

seemed to be here to stay: a little gold cross around his neck" (239). The smallness of this accessory parallels the extent to which Jerome's wounds have healed. He does not seem to need, like his other family members, to bandage himself quite as thoroughly.

Kiki's wounding, unlike Jerome's, is complex, as it is a wounding exacerbated by Howard's affairs with Claire Malcom and Victoria Kipps. Although these affairs also wound the children, Kiki is the most directly affected. Howard's affairs seem to be like his other unexpected encounters with the aesthetic; as Claire, at least, makes clear, Howard is "surprised by" his "desire" for her because it represents "an aspect of himself with which he was unfamiliar" (224). That Howard and Claire "never even met with a bedroom" (224) only logically fits with Howard's limited engagement with the aesthetic, for any premeditation would necessarily result in his preempting the *punctum*; in his affairs, obviously, this wounding instrument is his own phallus. Unsurprisingly, then, when Victoria prepares Howard for a sexual encounter with her by sending him a "series of e-mails . . . liberally illustrated with the kind of home-made digital camera pornography that every teenage girl now seems so expert at" (379), Howard is unable to go through with the intersubjective engagement with Victoria as aesthetic object. Although we never find out Kiki's exact reaction to Howard's affair with Victoria, her reaction to his affair with Claire is based, importantly, upon the image of Claire, and how Howard's treatment of Claire's image wounds Kiki's image: "Could you have found anybody less like me if you'd *scoured* the *earth*? . . . What have you made me *look like* in front of everybody in this town?" (206). That Smith leaves out Kiki's reaction to Howard's affair with Veronica suggests that Kiki's wounding is perhaps what Arlene

Croce might term "'undiscussable'" (qtd. in McHugh 245). Indeed, Smith does not even describe the actual revelation as carried to Kiki by Zora. The gap between the implicit revelation and its legal results (separation) is a wound in the very text itself.

Despite these complications to Kiki's wounding, her wound, like her children's, manifests itself as a lack of identity. Kiki's lack is evident in that she takes on the identities others impose upon her rather than adopting any identity of her own free will. As Tracy Walters has argued, one of these identities is the "mammy stereotype" (132): "They find you funny. But then, thought Kiki, they were brought up that way, these white American boys: I'm the Aunt Jemima on the cookie boxes of their childhoods, the pair of thick ankles Tom and Jerry played around" (51). This particular stereotypical identity points to the fact that it is Kiki's body that determines how she is viewed, and in turn, how she views herself. As Tynan argues, "In a process of reverse interpellation, Kiki's chest always precedes her, as it were. It directs her personality, denying her the possibility of shyness or meekness" (85). In denying her "shyness and meekness," Kiki's chest also forces upon her a host of identities she must assume at any given time, depending upon who is viewing her: "And so her chest gave off a mass of signals beyond her direct control: sassy, sisterly, predatory, motherly, threatening, comforting—it was a mirror-world she had stepped into in her mid forties, a strange fabulation of the person she believed she was" (47). Although Smith never explains the exact reasons for Kiki's weight gain, I would argue that she has gained weight, on a subconscious level, to protect herself from Howard's preemptive wounding. We first learn of Kiki's weight, after all, in tandem with learning how Howard treated her like a carpet when she was thin: "Kiki—

whom Howard had once, twenty-eight years ago, thrown over his shoulder like a light roll of carpet, to be laid down, and laid upon . . . was nowadays a solid two hundred and fifty pounds" (14). This particular treatment reduces Kiki to a utilitarian object, perhaps in Howard's effort to prevent her from wounding him in their first sexual encounter.

Kiki, like Zora, Levi, and Jerome, relies upon clothing for protection from Howard's wounding and for protection for her developing identity. The first instance of Kiki's wrapping occurs, significantly, just after Levi has asked his parents to stop fighting, reinforcing the notion that wrapping—or in this case re-wrapping—is a strategy to bandage wounding: "'We're not arguing, honey,' said Kiki . . . Without looking up she evened out each side of the material, threw her head back once more, spun the material twice round and retied it in exactly the same manner but tighter" (14). Just as one would tighten bandages to stem the flow of blood, Kiki tightens her head wrap to stem her own metaphorical bleeding. Her discussion with Howard about Jerome has, in a sense, widened the wound caused by Howard's infidelity, as she connects Howard's impulsive desire to stop Jerome's engagement with his impulsive extramarital desires: "'Whatever – either way it's me who's going to be dealing with it, with the consequences of your actions, as usual'" (14). Kiki's wrapping also provides her with a "new, authoritative face"; like Zora, she is "prepar[ing] her face to meet the obstacles she expects to encounter.

Like her children, Kiki must also encounter Howard's attempt to strip away her aesthetics of wrapping. Howard attacks that part of her aesthetic that cannot, like her clothing, be removed: he belittles her for her weight, classifying it as *outside* of the

aesthetic realm. When Kiki accuses him of marrying " a big black bitch" and "run[n]g off with a fucking leprechaun" (206, brackets mine), Howard explains that he "married a slim black woman, actually" (207). To further justify himself once this remark makes Kiki begin crying, he says, "It's true that men—they respond to beauty. . .it doesn't end for them, this. . .this *concern* with beauty as a physical actuality in the world . . ." (207). In more forthright terms, Howard's excuse for having an affair is that Kiki, because of her protective aesthetic, is no longer beautiful, no longer actually *within* the realm of the aesthetic. It seems significant, at this point, that when Howard leaves, a certain abstract painting resembling a bandage falls to the floor: the abstract painting's "main feature was a piece of thick white plaster, made to look like linen, crumpled up like a rag someone had thrown away" (206). The falling of this painting mirrors the falling away of Kiki's bandaging.

Eventually, Kiki, like Jerome, is able to cope without her aesthetics of wrapping. At the end of the novel, we find her attending Howard's lecture on Rembrandt with a "scarlet ribbon threaded through her plait" and "bare shoulders" instead of a head wrap (442). Because Howard is late to his own lecture and because he has forgotten his notes, Howard is once again unprepared for and thus wounded by the artwork he is showing. He is rendered, in fact, speechless, his experience having become, in Croce's terms, "undiscussable." He simply goes through the slides without saying anything. However, because Kiki is there, Howard does not flee. Although he cannot speak initially, he shares his wounding with the audience by "croak[ing]" (442) the title of the last painting in the series, *Hendrickje Bathing*. Howard also takes the next step toward understanding his

experience; finally allowing himself to discuss, through a series of exchanged glances with his wife, his initial wounding, the wounding he experienced in his interaction with *The Staalmeesters*. Indeed, his series of glances shared with Kiki seems to be a reenactment of the series of exchanged glances he has experienced with *The Staalmeesters*, except that this time, he allows his personal feelings to come into play: "Howard looked at Kiki. In her face, his life. Kiki looked up suddenly at Howard—not, he thought, unkindly" (442). Howard's ability to willingly engage with the painting *Hendrickje Bathing*—he looks from the painting to his wife and back, as if linking "Rembrandt's love" for Henrickje to his own love for Kiki—suggests that Howard is finally free, through the process of wounding and discussion, from the trauma *The Staalmeesters* caused him so long ago. The continuity of Hendrickje's skin, as Smith describes it, seems to suggest, in fact, that all wounds have been healed.

Thus, though *On Beauty* initially offers Katie as the exemplary reader of the aesthetic, Howard, by the end of the novel, becomes such a reader himself. *On Beauty's* project seems to be, consequently, to express how appreciation for the aesthetic and the critical fairness which results from such appreciation might be retrieved, even in instances where beauty might seem altogether lost. More particularly, this novel offers an alternate model for criticism within academia. Smith, like Elaine Scarry, seems to believe that "A University . . . can be destroyed" (Scarry 8) by its refusal of the aesthetic. While Elaine Scarry's project is to point this problem out, Smith's is to offer a corrective.

## CHAPTER II:

### MISREADINGS OF THE AESTHETIC: PERFORMANCE AND PRESENTATION IN

#### *WHITE TEETH*

While *On Beauty* is concerned primarily with analysis of the social and ethical value of canonical art (paintings by Rembrandt, compositions by Mozart, etc.), *White Teeth* is much more concerned with everyday aesthetic encounters. Aesthetics, in this everyday sense, is not limited to the consideration of objects or performances that have been legitimized as art through tradition. Instead, the aesthetic is identifiable by the intent to create an experience that is "ordered." Forster calls this intent to order "internal order" (26). In *White Teeth*, such aesthetic encounters primarily involve performances rather than objects; I use *performance* here to mean a grouping of human gestures, as Smith, like R. G. Collingwood, seems to suggest that "every gesture that each one of us makes is a work of art" (qtd. In Graham 34). This is not to say that every bodily movement constitutes performance; the word "gesture" presupposes intention, fabrication—in other words, *artifice*. Indeed, in early usage, the word "gesture" is defined as "the employment of bodily movements, attitudes, expression of countenance, etc., as a means of giving effect to oratory" ("gesture," def. 3a). The gesture as segment of performance thus contains a formal beauty which functions not only to signify content but also to make that content more palatable, as is suggested by the gesture's original function to increase the effectiveness (e.g. convincingness) of oratory.

As Johnathan P. A. Sell implies with his statement, "identity is never more than a particular configuration of gestures at a given moment in time" (38), what these

groupings of gesture signify is identity content. While I would not agree that identity is limited *only* to its manifestations in gesture, Sell's linking gesture to identity is an important insight, though he fails to consider gesture as performance. When identity as gesture is considered as part of a performance, what arises is the concept of *performative identity*, a term I have gleaned in part from Judith Butler's identification of "performative" gender (136). Butler's initial use of the term "performative" has, as Elin Diamond's *Performance and Cultural Politics* seems to suggest, inspired critics to expand the concept of performativity to include any number of identities. For the purposes of this discussion, I am using the term *performative identity* in this expanded sense. With this definition in mind, it is clear that *White Teeth*, like *On Beauty*, construes the importance of the aesthetic as in its social function—it is a means of constructing identity.

However, while *On Beauty* focuses almost exclusively on how our attitudes towards art shape our attitudes towards our families, our communities, etc.—so that a man who "wounds" art is likely to "wound" people too—*White Teeth* is more so a novel about how misreadings of performance tend to proliferate because of the accidental elements of the presentation space, which, though technically separate from the performance itself, nonetheless affects content. The complex relationships among presentation, form, and content are very clearly illustrated by much postmodern art, which has increasingly veered away from form alone as a means of signification. When Arthur Danto investigated, for example, how it was that Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes became art, his answer was ultimately that the Brillo box becomes art when it is

presented as such by being placed in an art gallery (32). The work of art as such becomes highly dependent upon the space surrounding it, and while Warhol was quite conscious of his presentation space, it is clear that a performance seeking to communicate identity content through gesture is likely to accrue additional or contradictory messages because of the unpremeditated effects of such presentation. In other words, presentation, unlike performance, cannot be fully calculated; as the contextual backdrop of performance, presentation will either contain accidental elements or will be entirely accidental. Even the carefully-controlled gallery space is subject to such accidents, though it is impossible to know, in Warhol's case, what those accidents might have been. With any performance, therefore, there will always be a part of the presentation that exceeds the intentions of the performance itself. Thus, while many aesthetic theorists, like Benjamin and Adorno, operate on the assumption that form *expresses* content (Bahri 90), Smith's novel questions the stability of that relationship.

*White Teeth*, then, is a novel about how presentation—which I define as a work's context, whether spatial or otherwise—is a destabilizing influence upon the aesthetic, separating form from the content it expresses without any obvious signaling of this destabilization. Thus, while *On Beauty* functions to warn us about the dangers of reading the aesthetic without allowing it to touch us personally, or “wound” us, *White Teeth* enacts the dangers associated with the failure to analyze the relationships among performance, identity, and context. Put another way, there is always the accidental element to presentation, it always skews performative intent, and it is only by keeping this disruptive element of presentation in mind that misreadings can be diminished in

magnitude. This scaling back of error is of course necessary in order to understand others on their own terms—not doing so constitutes a kind of social unfairness conducive to unsatisfactory human relationships.

*White Teeth* opens with a dramatic illustration of the way presentation disrupts the connection between form and content. Archie Jones, one of the two primary patriarchs of the novel, decides, as a New Year's resolution, to commit suicide. His motivation is, ironically, that the form and content of his marriage did not coincide, a fact which resulted in divorce: "Archie's marriage felt rather like buying a pair of shoes, taking them home, and finding they don't fit. For the sake of appearances, he put up with it" (7). Archie's theory of aesthetics thus might be said to coincide with the medieval view, held by Thomas Aquinas among others, that beauty, even the relative beauty of a marriage, is dependent upon fittingness. As Umberto Eco elegantly explains, "The principle is that things must be suited to the purpose for which they are intended, and so Aquinas would not have hesitated to define a crystal hammer as ugly. . . ." (88). As if to rectify this lack of fittingness, Archie attempts to control all aspects of his suicide including the context in which its performance occurs. He chooses the grimy, run-down Cricklewood as the site for his death because "It made sense that Archibald should die in this nasty urban street where he had ended up, living alone at the age of forty-seven, in a one-bedroom shop above a chip shop" (4). And indeed, the form of the performance, Archie's final articulation of identity, is initially entirely supported by the selection of this site. We see Archie lying "in a prostrate cross" with his "army service medals" and "his marriage license," all formal elements which acknowledge his "mistakes," i.e., the lack of

fittingness in his life; Archie's military medals function in this way because, just like Archie's marriage, they are tokens of a performance that Archie never actually fully enacted. Archie's crucified gesture lends a beauty and a pathos to these failures, reminding us that they are not entirely Archie's fault: Archie is innocent—life has crucified him. The instruments of death seem to be yet another attempt to rectify the lack of fittingness in his life: in the capacity to which Archie puts it, his idling car is not performing the function for which it is designed and thus is a fitting mode of death for a man whose life has been characterized by a lack of fittingness. Similarly, that the hose hooked to the exhaust is from a broken vacuum that spewed out dust instead of sucking it in indicates a desire to find the proper function for such a defective vacuum—the hose as synecdoche restores the vacuum's fittingness, since, as suicide instrument it must discharge rather than intake. As if all of these correspondences were not enough to convince us, Smith further emphasizes the coincidence of form, content, and presentation with Archie's appropriation of the cliché, "*In death as he was in life*" (4). As Forster might argue, Archie's performance is aesthetic precisely because it contains an "internal order," and this order is, furthermore, demonstrated through "external form" (26).

Despite this careful orchestration of performance, the accidental elements of the presentation interrupt, and thus drastically alter, the content of Archie's performance. Our first hint of this interruption occurs when Archie notices pigeons defecating on a white wall. This incident is not only inappropriately humorous but it also has the added effect of breaking Archie out of character, since he watches them "with a warm internal smile" (4). The pigeon incident also tends to disrupt the grimy modernist aesthetic of the

performance's backdrop; the "streaking" of "white walls" with "purple" brings a shot of bright color into an otherwise dreary monotone environment.

Another part of setting that Archie did not and could not have considered completely is one of timing. Though he calculates his suicide attempt so that it will occur before the shops open in Cricklewood, he does not consider the variable of deliveries. Mo Hussein-Ishmael, the owner of the halal butcher shop in front of which Archie has parked, interrupts Archie's performance so that the delivery van will have a place to unload. This particularly disruptive moment not only ends the performance prematurely but also changes its nature from one of fittingness to one of ridiculousness, as Mo's joke—"If you're going to die around here, my friend, I'm afraid you've got to be thoroughly bled first" (6)—makes clear. Mo sees Archie as a fool and misses entirely the pathos of the situation. Form no longer expresses content, as the text encourages us as readers to re-envision the whole episode as yet another of Archie's mistakes. While this disruption gives Archie the "freedom to reinvent the self," as Jonathan Sell might argue (39), it also sets up a dangerous precedent in Archie's reading of performance. Rather than viewing the disruption as accidental, Archie reads it as a sign that "Life wanted [him]" (7). Though Archie was from the first a fatalist, this incident sharpens this aspect of Archie's make-up so that it is disproportionately prominent. This distortion carries over into Archie's misreading of Clara Bowden, whom he meets shortly after he leaves Mo-Ishmael's establishment.

Clara, though a Jehovah's Witness by upbringing, is gradually led away from her faith by her affair with Ryan Topps. Ryan is significant because he functions as Clara's

gateway to the possibility of other identities: his own clothing, music, and laconic behavior are all enactments of his identity as a “mod”; furthermore, Ryan introduces Clara to the free-floating identities of his commune friends and to the altered identity states possible through the use of marijuana. And although Ryan is converted to Clara’s bygone religion by Hortense, Clara’s mother, Clara has already learned that identity is a choice, rather than being, as Emily Apter might put it, a “stereotype” that is externally “*imprint[ed]*” (17, brackets mine) upon her. Clara thus chooses, against the reformed Ryan’s wishes, to enact an identity independent of that “imprinting” originating from Hortense’s version of the Jehovah’s Witness faith. Just as it was for Zora and Levi in *On Beauty*, for Clara identity is enacted partially through clothing; in the section concerning Clara’s New Year’s Eve party, Smith describes Clara as wearing “yellow flares and a red halter-neck top” (37), an ensemble which is quite the opposite of the uniform of her religious leaflet-toting days: “a white shirt complete with throat-ruffle, [a] plaid knee-length skirt, and [a] sash that proudly stated NEARER MY GOD TO THEE” (30). However, Clara goes much further than this with her performativity by appropriating the theme of the aforementioned New Year’s Eve party from her cast-off religion. As a Jehovah’s Witness, she had believed that the New Year, 1975, was to be the date of the apocalypse and, as a way of departing from her old identity, Clara intentionally takes this idea from its original context and places it in a much more permissive one—that of the commune she and Ryan used to frequent together. This “END OF THE WORLD PARTY” (16) thus functions simultaneously as presentation and performance—it is both the context for Clara’s liberation from her old self and the performance of that liberation.

The presentation and Clara's performance seem to coincide so perfectly, in fact, that a misreading of Clara's performative identity would seem difficult to achieve.

Nonetheless, in the moment when Archie and Clara meet, the accidental elements of the presentation override those created by Clara herself. The incidental lighting and Clara's accidental whereabouts during this moment create, instead of an effect of liberation, an effect much softer, that of cinematic glamour. While Clara's form does communicate some of its content—Archie sees her bra-lessness as a sign of her independence (19)—most of Clara's content is dramatically occluded by her surroundings so that Archie cannot do otherwise than to misread her:

Now, as Archie understood it, in movies and the like it is common for someone to be so striking that when they walk down the stairs the crowd goes silent. In life, he had never seen this. But it happened with Clara Bowden. She walked down the stairs in slow motion, surrounded by afterglow and fuzzy lighting. And not only was she the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, she was also the most comforting woman he had ever met. Her beauty was not a sharp, cold commodity. (19-20)

That Archie sees her within the accidental presentation as a "thing" suggests that Clara has lost agency in Archie's eyes and has instead become an aesthetic object. This loss of agency is only exacerbated by the fact that Archie, having just survived a suicide attempt, views the meeting as somehow fated, despite Smith's description of Clara as an "accident" that happened to Archie (19). Worse, while Clara's form is not a "sharp, cold commodity" it is nonetheless implicit that she has become a commodity, not only a thing

but a thing to be bought. The cinematic presentation would seem to lead to this kind of commoditization, if only because to enter the cinema, one only need buy a ticket. As Laura Mulvey has explained, the cinematic context makes what Freud has called "the controlling and curious gaze" even more potent as the woman cinematically portrayed is controlled by the gazes of both the male participants within the narrative and the male spectators (172-3). Archie here, aided by the inadvertent cinematic presentation of Clara, is both spectator and, uncharacteristically, leading man.

That Clara's content has been drastically altered and reduced is reinforced by Smith's own authorial intervention. She writes, "And it's about time people told the truth about beautiful women. They do not descend, as was once supposed, from on high, attached to nothing other than wings. Clara was *from* somewhere. She had *roots*" (23). Smith is here demonstrating the type of reading that must occur in order for the damaging effects of accidental presentation of the performance to be diminished. While it may be inevitable that, since the accidental can never be excised, there will always be distortion of content, Smith's intervention suggests that this distortion can nonetheless be minimized. In explaining Clara's roots, she is thoroughly questioning whether the presentation of Clara accurately reflects content. Of course, the conclusion that Smith comes to is that it does not.

While it might seem that Clara's content is only altered superficially by this encounter with Archie, the accidental presentation has graver consequences. Clara's identity is ultimately *permanently* altered by the projection of Archie's fantasy of her as commodity, since, in the end, he does in a sense purchase her love with the promise of

taking "her as far away from Lambeth as a man of his means could manage—Morocco, Belgium, Italy" (39). As Clara admits when she arrives at their home in Willesden, "It was *nice*, not as nice as she had hoped but not as bad as she had feared; it had two small gardens front and back, a doormat, a doorbell, a toilet *inside*...And she had not paid a high price. Only love. Just love" (40). What's worse, Archie's valuation of Clara as beautiful, which seems to be, on Archie's part a total re-evaluation of *what is beautiful*—Archie had never considered "blackness" beautiful before this encounter—cannot survive outside of this accidental presentation, which Clara, not being aware of it, can never recreate. As Smith writes, "One month into their marriage and he already had that funny glazed look men have when they are looking through you" (41). Both Clara and Archie are thus deceived about the very nature of their relationship; she believing that he loves her because of her beauty, he believing that Clara is fate's offering.

The relationships between the members of the Iqbal family, whose patriarch Samad befriended Archie during WWII, are similarly fraught with problems deriving from the accidents of presentation. Nonetheless, Samad, unlike Clara, is hyper-aware of the relationships among presentation, performance, and identity creation. This awareness not only allows Samad to read the aesthetic with greater accuracy but also allows Samad to *correct* others' misinterpretations of his own performative identity.

Samad's explanation of the East to Archie illustrates, almost perfectly, the kind of reading *White Teeth* promotes:

"... if you ever hear anyone speak of the East, and here his voice plummeted a register, and the tone was full and sad, *'hold your judgement*. If you are told 'they

are all this' or 'they do this' or 'their opinions are these,' withhold your judgment until all the facts are upon you. Because that land they call 'India' goes by a thousand names and is populated by millions, and if you think you have found two men the same among that multitude, you are mistaken.” (85)

Clearly, Samad is conscious of the variety inherent in any geographical site of presentation as large as a country. He seems to know, in other words, that as the presentation space expands, the possibilities for error multiply. It is thus necessary to “*hold . . . judgment,*” to doubt, in other words, our initial impressions of identity. The one mistake Samad makes in his reading here is the assumption implied that it is *ever* possible to have access to “all the facts.” This particular error will haunt Samad later in his life.

Given Samad’s intense desire for identity to be understood, implicit in the above passage, it is unsurprising that Samad has an almost unhealthy preoccupation with forging his own identity and controlling presentation. As a young man, Samad’s performative goal is to somehow reach the greatness of his ancestor, Mangal Pande. That Mangal Pande was not in actuality great does not, in any way, disturb Samad's imagining him as the epitome of greatness and is not, thus, the reason Samad's attempts at greatness are foiled. Samad's desire to perform this greatness has been thwarted by the accidental factors, of which Samad is actually aware, of his performative context.

First and foremost among these is, of course, his injured hand. Any greatness Samad might hope to enact is hindered by this aspect of its presentation. Yet, Samad, aware of the effects of his injury, thwarts misreading of his identity content through

careful post-performance explanation. As Samad tells Archie, he was meant to achieve his hoped-for identity by serving in the Royal Air Force, but, by accident, this performance was cut short: "A bastard Sikh, Sapper Jones, a bastard fool. As we stood in a trench, his gun went off and shot me through the wrist" (76). As a consequence of this injury, Samad is forced to serve on a "bridge-builder" tank away from the "real war" (74). The tank's function is rather to clean up after battles, and Samad finds himself with few opportunities for greatness.

When such an opportunity *does* in fact present itself—a unit of Russian soldiers informs Samad and Archie that there is a Nazi doctor in the area—the two future patriarchs find themselves stranded in a small village in Bulgaria whose formal attributes undercut heroic action. As Smith explains, "The strain of having to be continually at war in such a pleasant village began to pull at Archie and Samad, and bit by bit they relaxed more into a kind of civilian life" (81). The town's upstaging of potential heroics is only made worse by the fact that the war is actually *over* in Europe.

Nonetheless, Samad fights the un-heroic atmosphere. He dresses the part, wearing the grand uniforms of the departed Captain Dickinson-Smith, and as the group heads towards the hideout of "Dr. Sick," he dramatically enacts his heroism by standing atop the tank as it advances. This image combined with Samad's previous explanations of himself is enough to convince Archie that Samad is a hero, a conviction Archie will hold for the remainder of their friendship: "But Samad, as he stood up there with his shiny officer buttons glistening in the moonlight like coins in a wishing-well, had struck the seventeen-year-old Archie full-square, an uppercut in the jaw that said: here is a man

for whom no life-path is too steep. . . .here was a friend, here was a *hero* . . . ." (92). Samad's limited success is, in the face of his circumstances, impressive. After making this impression, however, the narrow roads of the Bulgarian town cause the tank driver to brake, and Samad falls backward, becoming ridiculous. Moreover, "Dr. Sick," or Dr. Perret, is in a condition befitting his sobriquet, a condition that also makes Samad's heroic gestures nearly impossible. Smith writes, "The war that twelve men expected to find in the grand old house on the hill, the war that Samad wanted pickled in a jar to hand to his grandchildren as a souvenir of his youth, was not there. Dr. Sick was as good as his name" (96). Though Samad decides that it is necessary to have "blood on [his] hands" (99), he never actually kills Dr. Sick; he leaves it to Archie, ostensibly because Archie's Englishness makes it more his quarrel than Samad's. While Samad seems to be voluntarily relinquishing his chance to become heroic, it seems clear that, by this point, that the stage as set will not support such action, and Samad knows it. Samad has won Dr. Perret from the Russians in a poker contest, and, instead of killing Dr. Perret in full-view, Samad and Archie are reduced to killing him secretly in the dark: there is, in short, no audience aside from Archie, and Archie is already convinced of Samad's greatness.

Samad's mistake here is in his failure to realize the extent of his success. He has become a hero in his friend's eyes, though not in the world's, and it is in part because of his awareness of how presentation affects the content he has performed. He has explained himself to Archie in such a way that the accidental impact is mitigated—for Archie. However, despite this limited success, Samad allows himself to become bitter over what he sees as an absolute performative failure. Like Archie's vacuum hose pre-Clara,

Samad's damaged hand thus becomes a kind of synecdoche for his life. All of his later performative efforts are now distorted and negated by his assumption that accidental presentation will necessarily always make the achievement of a performative identity impossible. Willesden, the district in which the Joneses and the Iqbals live, only exacerbates Samad's now deterministic view of presentation, which boils down to *you are where you live*. Indeed, Willesden's formal qualities make articulating Willesden's content, or the *type* of place it is, exceedingly difficult; thus, as a presentation space Willesden radically disturbs the relationship between form and content in its residents' performances of identity. As Clara reflects upon arriving in Willesden:

What kind of place *was* this? That was the thing, you see, you couldn't be *sure*. Traveling in the front passenger seat of the removal van, she'd seen the high road and it had been ugly and poor and familiar . . . but then at the turn of a corner suddenly the roads had exploded in greenery, beautiful oaks, the houses got taller, wider, and more detached, she could see parks, she could see libraries. And then abruptly the trees would be gone, reverting back into bus stops as if by the strike of some midnight bell . . . . (40)

Like the Bulgarian village, Willesden is unstable, caught between extremes without successfully mediating between them: the transitions between the nice and run-down areas are sudden and seemingly random. Samad eventually reacts to this environment's instability by dismissing *everything* as accidental: ". . . and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an *accident*. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?" Although this completely

hopeless attitude does not set in fully until the latter part of the novel, it is clear that Willesden is a place of accidents, a place not conducive to performing identity. Samad seems to realize this about Willesden early on and adopts a hopeless attitude toward Willesden itself without initially extending this attitude universally. Early manifestations of Samad's eventual hopelessness (the idea that nothing matters) concerning Willesden are evident in Samad's diminished vigilance concerning the effects of presentation upon form and content. His performances become shoddy, ill-conceived, and poorly staged; for instance, Samad aspires to be the ideal Muslim and yet positions himself most frequently within the context of O'Connell's bar.

Samad's mitigated awareness also allows his previously minute mistake—the idea that all the facts can be obtained—to develop into a much larger error. In desperation to be master of something, *anything*, Samad assumes that, while the presentational space of Willesden may be hopeless, the presentational space of his homeland is not. In a blinding nostalgia, he assumes that he really *knows* his homeland fully. This assumption derives from the fact that his performative identity in Bangladesh "took," so to speak, because of the limitedness of the performance space and audience: ". . . he *longed* for the East. . . . and longed for the man he once was: erudite, handsome, light-skinned Samad Miah; so precious his mother kept him in from the sun's rays, sent him to the best tutors, and covered him in linseed oil twice a day" (94). In Bangladesh, Samad was not only able to perform an identity of "preciousness" but was also aided in his performance by his own mother, the oil she lathered upon him becoming a formal manifestation of worth that Samad could count upon. Unable to return to Bangladesh and recapture this identity

himself, Samad determines that he will prevent his own corruption from recurring in his children, Magid and Millat, by sending them instead. It is as if Samad has been convinced that Bangladesh's nature will subvert any and all attempts his sons might make to forge their own identities so that they will each become the perfect Muslim traditionalist Samad has failed in becoming. Despite Samad's hopes, financial constraints make it necessary to send only one son, Magid, to Bangladesh.

Many critics, among them Johnathan Sell, have pointed out the irony in the fact that Magid returns from Bangladesh "a true Englishman" while Millat, who stays in Willesden "is transformed into a militant Muslim" (Sell 30). Similarly, Ashley Dawson has written, that *White Teeth* in this way "satirizes Samad's belief in cultural determinism" (164); for Dawson, Samad's separation of his twin sons is, unintentionally, "an experiment similar to that used by biologists . . . to assess the impact of genetic inheritance" (163). But Samad, upon sending his son to Bangladesh, is already aware that genetics cannot determine identity, and, had Bangladesh been what he believed it to be, his son Magid might have turned out exactly as he wanted him to turn out. Bangladesh, however, is no more knowable than is Willesden. As Smith writes, "It is different for the people of Bangladesh . . . They live under the invisible finger of random disaster, of flood and cyclone, hurricane and mudslide . . . The facts of disaster are the facts of their lives" (176). And indeed, is the physically chaotic nature of Bangladesh that is formative for Magid, as, during a hurricane, a vase falls on Magid's nose, breaking it. Magid's reaction to this occurrence is to fashion himself as a person who will "*eliminate the random*" (309): "It seems to be that a vase should not be in a such a silly place where it can fall and

break a boy's nose . . . When I grow up I think I should like to make sure such vases are not put in such silly places where they can be dangerous . . . " (179). This desire eventually leads Magid to the pro-English writings of Sir R. V. Saraswati, who teaches him that "*The English fight fate to the death*" (240). Magid's seeming "Englishness" is then, a performance meant to assist him in fighting fate, which is, for Magid, simply another term for randomness, or accident. Magid's identity is thus an irony curled in on itself—it is a thing generated by randomness fighting the random. Ultimately, Magid joins forces with Marcus Chalfen, the geneticist, in order to fight the random on a cellular level.

Millat, in contrast, is left to the ambiguity of Willesden, where the backdrop to performance is, as in Bangladesh, incalculable. Millat is a master of performative identity creation, much like his father as a young man, but none of the identities he performs adhere because of Millat's complete lack of awareness concerning the competing presentational claims of Willesden. Millat thus becomes an amalgamation of competing identities; Raggastani gang member, the "dark prince" of girls' fantasies (226), and, finally, the militant Islamist member of the organization KEVIN ("Keepers of the Eternal Victorious Islamic Nation") (245). As Millat's Aunt Neena puts it, Millat "doesn't know his arse from his elbow" (237).

Millat's final settling on KEVIN as the backdrop for his performance of identity is perhaps a function of the large, sweeping gestures KEVIN encourages, as if large gestures might overwhelm the indeterminacy of Willesden. Indeed, the profusion of leaflets the organization provides are suggestive of the programs one might receive at

various plays, each one suggesting a new and radical way to perform identity as a member of KEVIN. The uniform itself also appeals to Millat because of its similarity to a gangster's outfit, which might seem to incorporate his previous identity as a Raggastani. However, Millat's lack of awareness concerning the influential role presentation takes soon causes him to begin growing disenchanted with this identity. Millat ends up performing those facets of KEVIN that he does not wish to perform, dumping the one girlfriend with whom he had a substantive relationship simply because she wore clothing that revealed her body in ways that did not meet the approval of the leaflet, "*The Right to Bare: The Naked Truth About Western Sexuality*" (309). Millat thus goes from approving of his girlfriend's appearance to *misreading* it entirely:

There was something welcoming about Karina Cain's little belly . . . He loved it when she wore things that revealed it. But now the leaflets were making things *clearer*. He started noticing what she wore and the way other men looked at her . . . But it seemed to Millat that she was encouraging it; that she positively *wanted* men to look at her, that she was—as *The Right to Bare* suggested—'prostituting herself to the male gaze.' (309)

Clearly, Millat has failed to realize that the presentational milieu he has chosen is manipulating not only his reading of Karina but also his reading of himself. The leaflet, unassuming enough in its appearance, seems to suggest to Millat that he is acting of his own agency. His later regret, which he of course cannot pinpoint, suggests otherwise.

Irie Jones, Clara and Archie's daughter, has a problem that is the diametric opposite of Millat's. While Millat has far too many performative contexts to consider,

Irie, because of her body type, feels she has none: "There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection" (222). The multiplicity of Willesden suggests that there *ought* to be such models in abundance, however, and Irie thus begins to see herself as "*wrong*" (224). Irie longs for "Englishness," in large part because Millat seems to prefer this type. However, despite her wish to enact a "transformation from the Jamaican hourglass" to the "*English Rose*" (222), she is ultimately unable to change her body type, which is, in itself, an accident of genetics. Unfortunately, Irie finds a model for performativity in P. K.'s hair salon, having decided that to become more "English," she should straighten her hair: "the female section of P. K.'s was a deathly thing. Here, the impossible desire for straightness and 'movement' fought daily with the determination of the curved African follicle; here, ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins, and simple fire had all been enlisted" (229). The pain implicit in this process is thus presented as a kind of rite of passage that will lead to the performative moment of straight hair, or "Englishness." However, Irie's painful rite is more painful than most and she loses all but two inches of her own hair due to the causticity of the ammonia.

The answer P. K.'s comes up with is straight hair extensions—not English at all, but rather Indian. Nonetheless the environment of P. K.'s encourages this kind of ironic performativity and Irie ends up with what she thinks of as "beautiful," "straight," and "unkinky" hair (236). Having had, formally, no presentational space in which to perform, Irie is understandably ill-equipped to understand how such spaces function. Of course, in the space of P. K.'s, where straight hair is a commodity traded for money, Irie's performance of identity is accepted. Here the disruption of form and content works a bit

differently; P. K.'s suggests to Irie that her formal transformation now denotes "Englishness," when, in actuality, Irie's performance of "Englishness" is inadequate to suggest the stereotype she wishes to embody. Irie therefore does not consider, when she goes to Millat's house hoping to impress him, the "possibility that she looked anything less than terrific" (236). Neena, who is particularly attuned to the relation between form and content due to her profession as a shoe designer, reads Irie's new form correctly; in saying "'You look like a freak'" (236), Neena is pointing out that the new form does not match Irie's content at all, though P. K.'s may have convinced Irie otherwise. That Irie understands how she has been misled by presentation is clear in her decision, shortly afterward, to tear out all of the extensions.

Joshua Chalfen, who becomes friends with Irie and Millat when they are forced to benefit from Joshua's family as a means of atoning for smoking marijuana in school, is singular in that, unlike any of the other characters (aside from Samad as a young man living with his mother), he has the kind of narrow presentational space that would seem to secure a stable identity: "Like clones of each other, their dinner table was an exercise in mirrored perfection. Chalfenism and all its principles reflecting itself infinitely" (262). However, as Smith shows, through Joshua's storyline, even the claustrophobically uniform atmosphere of the Chalfen home is subject to accidental intrusions. Of course, Irie and Millat (particularly Millat) are the accidental elements of the presentation. Joshua finds that, because of Millat, his home no longer supports the identity he has been accustomed to performing: "He [Joshua] had not bargained on the power of Millat's attractiveness . . . even his own mother seemed sometimes to take Millat as her only

focus; all her energy for her gardening, her children, her husband, streamlined and drawn to this one object like so many iron filings" (275). Millat's beauty functions as a sort of lens that exceeds Millat himself and colors the Chalfen presentational space. Joyce Chalfen's initial reaction to Millat would seem to support this lens function of Millat's beauty: "Puchritude: not just the concept but the whole physical word appeared before her as if someone had typed it onto her retina . . ." (263). Angry and hurt by this situation, Joshua is susceptible, more than ever, to accidental presentations, particularly of beauty, and their distortions of content.

Thus, Joshua is drawn to an animal rights activist group, FATE, by the incidental fact that one of the group's leaders, Joely, is incredibly beautiful. Her beauty seems to confer beauty onto the organization's principles, much in the same way that Millat's beauty glosses over the Chalfen household: "A month later he [Joshua] experienced a 'conversion' after hours of talk with Joely (hours of examining her breasts under those threadbare T-shirts)" (398). Joshua's initial failure to understand the relationships among presentation, performance, and content is clear once FATE's plot to upstage Marcus Chalfen's introduction of his FutureMouse draws near: "All this had distracted Joshua from the fact that FATE were busy plotting his own father's downfall. He had approved it in principle . . . and Joshua had so far failed to question himself in any coherent way . . . regarding the consequences of what was about to happen . . . he had lost the thread of his attention down Joely's T-shirt" (399). Clearly, Joshua has assumed that Joely's beauty denotes goodness and this perceived goodness is, like Millat's beauty, a lens that determines the shape of the presentation space, altering the content of the animal rights

group so that it is unequivocally just in Joshua's mind. Once Joshua can view the organization without Joely's beauty dominating the presentation, Joshua, like Irie, is able to re-evaluate his assumptions.

Indeed, during FATE's own performative attempt to define themselves by publicly vilifying Marcus Chalfen's genetic experiments, Joshua becomes convinced of the ridiculousness of what FATE is attempting to do. Because merely freeing the FutureMouse mouse would not have the performative flair to assert FATE's opposition clearly, Crispin, Joely's husband, decides that everyone will threaten Joshua's father with balaclavas instead. While this plan seems perfectly sound in the space of Joely's beauty, it becomes something else at the Perret Institute, where Marcus presents his research. Here again, the accidentals of presentation intervene; because the performance relied upon there being "some kind of middle aisle in the seating," which is missing, "the whole operation" is slowed down "when speed and shock tactics [were] the whole fucking *point*" (435). Thus, Joshua comes to reinterpret FutureMouse's content; instead of signifying the cruelty of humans to animals, it signifies instead Marcus's greatness:

So looking at Marcus up there with his magnificent mouse, celebrating the great achievement of his life and maybe *of this generation*, Joshua can't stop his own perverse brain from wondering whether it is just possible that he and Crispin and FATE have misjudged *completely*. (435)

Though Joshua's change of heart stems, once again, from accidental presentation, it seems clear that Smith is suggesting that one possible method for evaluating performance more fairly is to see the performance in more than one presentation space.

The Perret Institute itself posits an interesting question: is neutral presentation space possible? Is neutrality the answer to the problematic interference of presentation? Smith's answer to both questions is, ostensibly, "No." However, the novel tests the possibility in two instances. The first, prior to the climax at the Institute, is when Magid and Millat, who have become enemies because of their opposed views of the FutureMouse, attempt to reconcile in a so-called "neutral space." As Smith explains as the brothers dive into the thick of debate, "they make a mockery of that idea, a neutral place; instead they cover the room with history . . . they take what was blank and smear it with the stinking shit of the past like excitable, excremental children" (383). As Millat and Joely's beauty had implied, people are just as much a part of presentation space as the space itself, at least in this instance. So why even bother with investigating the neutrality of the Perret Institute after the brother's have proven that neutrality cannot sustain itself once people enter the space? I would argue that the Perret institute's neutrality is testing the possibility that "neutral space" unlike "regular" space actual becomes less rather than more disruptive to the relationship between form and content as it grows larger; perhaps, in other words, it is possible that a large neutral space cannot be entirely "cover[ed] with history."

And indeed, the Perret Institute, unlike the small neutral room Millat and Magid face off in, is space as *space*: the very architecture of the building is drawn from surveys asking businessmen about what they "want" in corporate space, and "the answer to every questionnaire [was] nothing nothing space please just space nothing please nothing space" (429). The Perret Institute's exhibition room is meant to be space as nothingness,

or, in other words, space without power. Though FATE's seating debacle has already shown that "neutral" non-interfering space is not entirely possible, Millat's transformation in the exhibition room suggests that the attempt at neutrality does somehow contribute to clarity of thought. While it is Millat's original intention to attend the FutureMouse presentation in order to shoot someone—it is not clear, even to Millat, exactly whom—in order to perform KEVIN's resistance to genetic engineering, Millat is able, in this space, to understand that such a performance would result not only in identity creation but also in consequences with effects extending beyond KEVIN and Millat himself: ". . . now he sees the great difference between TV and life, and it kicks him right in the groin. Consequences" (436). In other words, Millat realizes, perhaps because the space is *meant* for performance, that his performance of identity isn't *only* a performance; unlike the presentation space, his performance is not discrete. Though Millat takes the shot despite his doubts about what his performance will *really* mean, it seems clear that the attempt at neutral space does make a difference, for it forces a kind of questioning of presentation, the kind of questioning that is necessary to diminish misreading of the performative act.

A subcategory of "neutral" space is the concept of *imagined* space, which Smith illustrates through Irie. Irie is, ultimately, the only character who is able to perform identity without presentation getting in the way, and this is precisely because she has *internalized* the presentation of her performance. While visiting her grandmother Hortense, Irie finds articles about, pictures of, and letters written in Jamaica. Because Irie

has never been to this island nation, she can imagine Jamaica as the site of her developing identity. As Smith writes,

No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs—this is how Irie imagined her homeland. Because *homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* and *infinity* that have now passed into the language. And the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was what sounded like a beginning. . . . A blank page. (332)

The blankness here functions as a kind of neutrality, for it is a space that is only space, a space in which Irie can “write” herself without disturbance. Clearly Irie herself is not a neutral being, but the imagined space here is entirely under her control and is, as long as she does not visit Jamaica, free of the accidental presentations extant in the *actual* Jamaica. The strength Irie gains from this “Jamaican” identity is clear in her coherent speech against the squabbling of the Joneses and Iqbals as both families ride the bus to the FutureMouse event. Having found quiet within her own mind, she insists upon its inherent usefulness, saying, “Try it. *Silence*. *Ah*. . . Isn’t that something?” (425). Of course the problem with imaginative space, as with all neutral space, is that it is fleeting. Like the room in which Magid and Millat cover with their own histories, Irie’s imagined space can only last as long as she does not force the imagined space into the actual space of Jamaica. And of course, the end of *White Teeth* suggests that Irie will in fact go to Jamaica. So, like “neutral” space, imagined space also requires questioning of presentation. It will be necessary, in other words, to *recognize* the space as imaginary, which, unfortunately, Irie is failing to do.

Though constant questioning of presentation might seem to induce performative and interpretative paralysis, *White Teeth's* concern with the importance of admitting to the possibility of error in any given aesthetic situation is not meant to suggest that either performing identity or interpreting the performative are futile endeavors. Indeed, Samad's degeneration due to such feelings of futility suggests that paralysis is worse than simple error. The questioning of presentation is a means to diminishing error rather than eradicating it. In terms of our reading of Smith's novel, an awareness of the relationships among presentation, form, and content is essential to avoid the misreading of *White Teeth* that proliferated in the wake of the novel's marketing as multicultural novel. Unlike Warhol's Brillo boxes, *White Teeth* is not a multicultural novel because it has been presented as one. Its meaning, or "identity content" is rather more dependent upon its form. In suggesting that a truly neutral space might be located, if only temporarily, within the imagination, Smith is essentially asking for a suspension of external presentation in the reading of her novel. It is within the imaginative space, the space which the novel itself creates in the reader, that the novel can be most fairly read.

## CONCLUSION

### ZADIE SMITH'S AESTHETICS IN CONTEXT

As the previous chapters show, Zadie Smith's system of aesthetics is complex. With *On Beauty*, Smith shows that an engagement with the aesthetic requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to feel deeply, and then to discuss those feelings with others. This approach to reading the aesthetic allows for a balance between personal response and neutrality—an approach resulting in critical fairness. Indeed, Smith shows that a lack of willingness to experience "wounding" by the aesthetic will result in the critical bias, as the only way to prevent such wounding is to "wound" the aesthetic. Smith also shows that our treatment of art proper has social ramifications, as we will tend to treat other aesthetic situations similarly; so if a man treats a painting unfairly by dismissing its aesthetic value, as Howard Belsley does, he is likely to treat people unfairly by dismissing their aesthetic defenses as unimportant. Interestingly, this mistreatment of the aesthetic inspires the creation of new aesthetic systems—in *On Beauty*, that system is the aesthetic of wrapping, which the members of the Belsley family adopt to shield themselves from Howard's reductive "interrogation." Thus, while Smith points out the fragility of the aesthetic, she also seems to argue that it is self-renewing.

In *White Teeth*, Smith demonstrates that while everyday performances of identity may possess what Forster calls "internal order" (26), and thus have a certain form that *ought* to express the intended identity content, the external accidental presentation space or situation of the performance often disjoins content and form. This disjoining will

subsequently lead to misreadings of identity from which the performer will suffer. Thus, Smith's argument is an attempt to make us aware of presentation and its influence upon the aesthetic. She also suggests possible correctives to the problem of presentation. One possible solution is to stage performances of identity in spaces that are as neutral as possible; and though this neutrality will necessarily be imperfect, it may still diminish misreading. The second and more perfect solution is to internalize performance so that the presentation space is an imaginative space not subject to accidental distortion. Both solutions are temporary because both types of space will only last as long as actual, non-neutral space is kept apart. People themselves, being present in neutral space, will necessarily diminish its neutrality, by bringing their own historical content and their own gestural forms to the space. Similarly, once a performer attempts to reconcile imagined space and actual space, the imagined space will lose its purity. *White Teeth's* guidelines for reading thus demand, before all else, an awareness of the influence of presentation upon the aesthetic object or performance. In terms of reading literature, and of reading *White Teeth* itself, Smith's exploration of aesthetics suggests that to situate the literary work in a neutral or imagined space will diminish misreading of the work. Of course, this is not to say that error can be eradicated entirely.

The desire for critical fairness and for reading that is mindful of creative intent both stem from Smith's own reception by the critical community, a community that tended to reduce her work to being representative of multiculturalism, which is itself a reductive concept as it "represents a series of monoethnic individuals who combine to produce a multicultural nation" (Bentley 496). Because much of the publicity for *White*

*Teeth* occurred before the novel was actually complete (Tew 19), it is possible to argue that both novels I have discussed are a reaction to reductionist critiques. However, while *White Teeth* does provide cues for interpretation, such as its opening epigraph from Forster, *On Beauty's* intent to guide its own readings is made more explicit within the novel's "Acknowledgments," in which Elaine Scarry and E. M. Forster feature prominently. Forster's influence is also made explicit in the structure of the text itself, which mimics, at times, the plot structure of *Howard's End*.

The parallels between *On Beauty* and *Howard's End* are, for the most part, blatantly obvious: Smith mimics the epistolary opening of *Howard's End*, as Catherine Lanone points out, by "simply switch[ing] to up-to date emails" (187); converts Helen's ill-conceived romance with Paul Wilcox to an equally ill-conceived romance between Jerome Belsley and Victoria Kipps; replaces the umbrella Helen inadvertently takes from Leonard after a Beethoven concert with a discman Carl inadvertently takes from Zora after a Mozart concert; and has Carlene Kipps befriend Kiki Belsley in much the same way that Ruth Wilcox befriends Margaret Schlegel—i. e., through a Christmas shopping trip. In both story arcs the "Ruth" character also attempts to get the "Margaret" character to go by train to see something dear to her heart; for Ruth Wilcox, it is *Howard's End*, and for Carlene, it is a gallery of Haitian paintings. The clash between conservatism and liberalism central to *Howard's End* is also obviously present in *On Beauty*; though it is not an exact parallel, roughly speaking the Kippses are to the Belsley's what the Wilcoxes are to the Schlegels. Some critics have reacted negatively to Smith's appropriation. Peter Kemp, for example, has written that *On Beauty's* "reworkings" are "[a]ll but daubed with

a highlighter pen," and furthermore, that he fails to see "their purpose" (par. 3). Kemp's conclusion is that Smith's novel is essentially "cannibalising" Forster's (3). I would contend, however, that Smith's obvious parallels are, like her explicit acknowledgment of Forster's influence, an attempt to guide criticism. The plot parallels are there primarily to force us to see the thematic parallels. It is conceivable that Smith simply does not trust her critics to understand more subtle cues to interpretation.

Thematically, *Howards End* is about more than just the clash between conservatism and liberalism. As Perry Meisel has pointed out, "Central among the novel's dualities is the classic modernist antagonism between self and society, private and public . . ." (416). Indeed, Forster's novel is very much about the competing claims of the personal sphere of emotion which recognizes Leonard Bast's impoverished suffering as unjust and the public, more "neutral" sphere of business, where his joblessness is just another unavoidable side-effect of the workings of capitalism. This conflict is the thematic kernel Smith's aesthetics appropriates, and is, I would argue, the reason behind her appropriations of plot. For Smith's aesthetic system, as I have mentioned before, seeks to strike a balance between the personal and the neutral, as well as, in *White Teeth*, between the imagined space and the actual. Smith's balancing of the personal and the neutral (or objective) situates Smith's aesthetics between two historically significant approaches to aesthetics, which are, in some key ways, diametrically opposed: the Kantian and the Romantic.

Though Kant and the Romantics overlap temporally, and Kant's theory of the sublime was incredibly influential in later Romanticism (Eco 294-5), the two approaches

are distinct in their evaluation of the role of emotion in aesthetics. As I will discuss, Kant excludes emotion almost entirely from his system, while the Romantics rely heavily upon it as a means of discussing the value of art. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* outlines three basic types of "delight," which might seem to indicate an exploration of emotion, but Kant's "delight" is not an emotion that is *felt* in the same way that happiness or sadness might be felt—it is an emotion that is only distantly felt. For Kant, there are three categories of this delight: delight in the "agreeable," delight in the "good," and delight in the "beautiful" (646-7). For Kant, the first two types of delight "involve a reference to the faculty to desire" (646), which means that both are delights of "interest" because they are connected "with the representation of the real existence of an object" (644). For our purposes here, it will be necessary to explain in brief the "good" and the "beautiful" delights in more detail. The "good" is that "which by means of reason commends itself by its mere concept" (646, brackets mine). Kant explains further that "[t]o deem something good, I must always know what sort of a thing the object is intended to be, i. e. I must have a concept of it" (646). In other words, to say that a painting is a good painting, it is necessary to consult the concept of "painting" to see if the actual painting lives up to the standards of the concept. Because this sort of judgment is reliant upon the actual existence of the painting, it is interested, and thus such a judgment of a painting would not be an aesthetic judgment despite the nature of the object itself. It is important to note that Kant sees the "good" in two separate ways, however. The example I have just given would fall under the category, "*good in itself*," as it "pleases on its own accord" (646). The second kind of goodness is "*good for something*," which points to an object's

usefulness and is, at least ostensibly, more clearly dependent upon the object's actual physical presence.

In contrast, delight in the "beautiful," which Kant also calls "the judgment of taste" is the only "disinterested and *free* delight" because our attitude towards the object is "simply *contemplative*" and is not concerned "as to the existence of the object" (646-7). Put another way, there is no sensual gratification or conceptual comparison going on in our contemplation of the beautiful—there is, in other words, no ulterior motive, either instinctual or cognitive. Because our delight in the beautiful object is "independent of interest," such an object, Kant says, will be seen as "one containing a ground of delight for all men" (647), so that our subjective judgment becomes, in a sense, simultaneously subjective and objective. While this reliance upon the notion of subjectivity might seem to allow for emotional response, it does not: "A judgment of taste is uninfluenced by charm or emotion" because either of these would disable the "claim" to a "universally valid delight" (655).

While it might seem that Smith's aesthetics are entirely divorced from Kant's, specifically because of Kant's exclusion of emotion, there is much in Kant that Smith seems to adopt. The concept of disinterestedness, as I have mentioned before, is similar to Smith's concept of "neutrality," which puts aside personal bias in the evaluation of an aesthetic object. However, while Kant views neutrality as sufficient unto itself as a method of evaluation, Smith's work suggests that to exclude emotion is to exclude the social usefulness of the aesthetic object or experience. As Howard's interaction with

Rembrandt's paintings show, aesthetic encounters can eventually lead to a sort of emotional education.

Like his concept of disinterest, Kant's separation of the "*good in itself*" from the "beautiful" is also applicable to Smith's work. The "*good in itself*" might be said to function, in Smith's novels, as a means of avoiding generalization. Katie, the exemplary reader of *On Beauty* does not, for example, judge Rembrandt's etching by a preconceived concept of what a Rembrandt should be; and, as a corollary, Smith does not wish us to read her novels based on the concept of what a Zadie Smith novel should be. Similarly, even the *idea* that subjectivity is valid, apart from *how* it is valid, is an idea that Smith's novels seem to insist upon. In other words, the personal response Smith encourages is subjective, though not in the Kantian sense of a subjectivity that is simultaneously disinterested. I will discuss this temporal difference at length shortly.

More importantly, the idea that the appreciation of the aesthetic derives from a lack of concern about the object's actual existence is relevant to Smith because it places identification of the aesthetic object apart from that object's physical characteristics; the aesthetic object is instead identified by our experience of it. For Kant this identifying factor is an attitude of disinterest; for Smith the identifying factors are Scarry's "mental conviction" (31), desire for "replication" (3), and impulse to "distribution" (97), and Forster's "internal order" (26). Of course, as is clear from the previous chapters, not all of these characteristics must be present for an experience to be deemed aesthetic. Each is by itself enough to suggest as much.

However, there are two significant areas where Smith departs from Kantian aesthetics and moves towards Romantic aesthetics: (1) the role of emotion in the aesthetic experience and (2) the concept of "*good for something*." Kant's argument that emotion somehow negates the possibility of universal delight suggests a presupposition that the evaluation of an aesthetic object is instantaneous and unified, indivisible into parts. While Kant allows for subjectivity to an extent, he seems to regard emotion as so adamantly subjective that it can never simultaneously coexist with universality. This may be so, but it would seem that simultaneity and not emotion is the real hindrance to a progression to universality. Smith, as we have seen, breaks the experience of the aesthetic into parts, partially skirting this conflict—though it is important to note that Smith never seems to insist upon universality. For Smith, there is the emotional reaction and then, subsequently, there is the discussion of that reaction, which is, as a public exercise, more "disinterested" than the initial reaction.

This bifurcation of the aesthetic experience resonates with the Romantics' concept of artistic creation. As Wordsworth is famous for putting it, "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (273). While the Romantics generally focus on the creative process more so than on the individual's experience of the aesthetic, this formulation of the creative act is nonetheless applicable to the experience of the aesthetic object. Smith's formulation is Wordsworth's, only inverted: engaging with the aesthetic *begins* with the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" which are then "recollected" in the subsequent "tranquility."

. Like his denial of emotion, Kant's denial of purpose contains an implicit supposition; in ruling out usefulness as a property of an aesthetic object, he cites the concern for the physical object as a marker of interest, implying that purpose is *ipso de facto* reflected in some material good. Thus, while Kant rules out social purpose along with purpose generally, it is clear that social usefulness is not always a matter of the aesthetic object's materiality. Notwithstanding this contradiction, Smith's aesthetics clearly fall closer to Romantic aesthetics in terms of the aesthetic object's purpose. Smith's appropriation of Scarry's argument that the aesthetic object or experience is useful as a means to bettering society is a justification that is quintessentially Romantic. Percy Bysshe Shelley, for example, ends his "A Defence of Poetry" with the assertion that "poets," by which he means all creators—his list includes authors, musicians, choreographers, architects, sculptors, painters (840)—are "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (850). What Shelley means by this is that the artist, because of his imaginative faculties, is able to envision the "before unapprehended relations of things" (839); this envisioning consequently enables him to articulate "those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered" in addition to enabling him to see "the future in the present" (840). In short, artists are able to see what might be—are able, in short, to *imagine* how to better the world. This idea of social betterment through creation is particularly relevant to *White Teeth*, whose characters perform identity in attempts to better *themselves*.

More important, however, is Shelley's concept of the role poetry, or art plays, for those who do not create. Shelley argues,

A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause . . . Poetry strengthens that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. (844)

In other words, poetry is not only an effect of the poet's imagination but also "strengthens" the imagination in the reader or viewer, enlarging his capacity for compassion. In *On Beauty*, the aesthetic functions in a similar way; in learning to appreciate the aesthetic properly, Howard is eventually able to appreciate his wife. In allowing the aesthetic to engage his emotions, he reaches emotional maturity.

Fittingly, Smith's aesthetics represent exactly the kind of imaginative "synthesis" (838) Shelley celebrated in his "Defence of Poetry." Instead of adopting any one established system of aesthetics, she pooled her influences—primarily Elaine Scarry and E. M. Forster—to create her own system of aesthetics that seems to fit, historically speaking, somewhere between Kant and the Romantics. Fusing the personal and the neutral, the imagined and the actual, Smith provides us with a system of aesthetics that is a reconciliation of opposites. While the system itself leads to a greater critical fairness because of its attention to the particular and consequent avoidance of generalizations, it is also clear that Smith's effort to strike a balance between competing aesthetic claims is, in itself, an attempt to treat each of those claims with fairness.

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