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1. Introduction

1 In the acknowledgements in *On Beauty* (2005), Smith expresses her love for Forster, to whom she thinks all her fiction is indebted: "This time I wanted to repay the debt with *hommage*" (n. pag.). The novel begins with a parody of the opening lines of *Howards End* (1910), Helen's letters to her sister: "One may as well begin with Jerome's e-mails to his father" (*OB* 3).[1] In this pronounced influence of *Howards End* on Smith's third novel, Tynan sees a new trend of postcolonial literature. Postcolonial hypertext usually aims to enable the subaltern to speak (as Bertha in *Jane Eyre* is given voice by Jean Rhys in *The Wide Sargasso Sea*) and defamiliarizes the social and cultural norm in

the colonial hypotext. *On Beauty* marks a point of departure from this typical postcolonial rewriting, the relationship between the two texts now being "nonconfrontational" (2006: 77).

2 This seemingly new stage in postcolonial fiction accompanies another phenomenon, the resurrection of the aesthetic (Anjaria 2008). Postcolonial literature questions all sorts of authoritative literary forms for their implicit and explicit associations with imperialism and other privileged discourses. The result has been heightened attention to the problem of representation, so that no aesthetic act or utterance can be seen any longer as politically or ideologically neutral. Novels from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) to Smith's own *White Teeth* (2000), therefore, celebrate the excess of form to uncover the ideological restraint in Western notions of aesthetics. In contrast, *On Beauty* fully revives the aesthetic issue. Not only postcolonial literature, but the whole critical trend over the past couple of decades points to such fierce ideological deconstruction that it seems hardly possible to take it up as a topic again. However, Smith decidedly does so: imitating the domestic plot of *Howards End*, *On Beauty* explores the moral possibility of the taste for beauty in contemporary multicultural society.

3 How, then, does *On Beauty* manage to revive an "untrendy" subject in a "trendy" context (Itakura 2011: 3)? From the 1990s onwards, a movement has emerged to reconsider the aesthetic in the postmodern context, and this article will examine *On Beauty* in relation to this aesthetic turn in criticism, focusing on one significant departure that Smith has taken from *Howards End*: it is not a house (a three-dimensional space to live in) but a painting (a two-dimensional item with a more purely aesthetic purpose) that needs a spiritual heir. Given the novel's preoccupation with the act of seeing (especially seeing the painting), Smith seems to probe ethical values that can be found by seeing things in a more deliberate, sincere way. In other words, though it may sound quite oxymoronic, she invites us to acknowledge how much depth is latent on the surface of the world, not behind it.

2. A House behind the Curtain: *Howards End*

4 Before going on to analyse Smith's text, we should first reconsider the aesthetic problem that Forster faced at the start of the twentieth century and grasp how Howards End, the country house, stands at the crux of it. Whether one's possession of aesthetic sensibility is ethically beneficial is one of the central issues around which Forster's world of fiction has evolved. To those who can truly enjoy beauty, the author offers a chance of spiritual salvation, whereas the possibility is firmly closed to the characters without genuine love for beauty.[2] But it is not until *Howards End* that the novelist grapples with the more practical sides of the problem: how the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility is affected by one's social and economic status. Particularly, through the tragi-comic ordeal of Leonard Bast, Forster tests the nineteenth-century ideals of culture and equality, which he associates mainly with John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold (Hoy Π 1985). Leonard, who aspires to acquire culture, attempts to use a passage from Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* to depict his dark, squalid flat:

> 'Let us consider a little each of these characters in succession; and first (for of the absence of ventilation enough has been said already), what is very peculiar to this flat, its obscurity.'
> Something told him that the modifications would not do; and that something, had he known it, was the spirit of English Prose. 'My flat is dark as well as stuffy.' Those were the words for him.
> And the voice in the gondola rolled on, piping melodiously of Effort and Self-Sacrifice, full of high purpose, full of beauty, full even of sympathy and the love of men, yet somehow eluding all that was actual and insistent in Leonard's life. For it was the voice of one who had never been dirty or hungry, and had not guessed successfully what dirt and hunger are. (*HE* 62) [3]

5 This passage highlights not only Leonard's inadequate grasp of Ruskin but social critic Ruskin's inability to understand men like Leonard (Born 1992: 149-50). The elegance of Ruskin's style is not a pure product of his innate taste, but an outcome of his wealth. Although Forster undoubtedly shares the well-intentioned nineteenth-century

intellectual schemes, through the description of the Basts, he seems to realize the gap between those ideals and the social reality of early twentieth-century England and refrains from unreservedly upholding the belief that love of beauty is ethically inspiring. Such love, when held by those who cannot afford to feed it, can be destructive, as symbolically represented by Leonard's death at Howards End, with the Schlegels' books pouring onto him from the bookshelf.

6 While Leonard is ruined by a cultural ambition disproportionate to his status, the Wilcoxes show no such aspiration, though they are affluent enough to gratify it. For them, "Art and Literature, except when conductive to strengthening the character, [are] nonsense" (*HE* 38). The view of art as a moral incentive ostensibly echoes the Victorian ideals, but the fact that the Wilcox clan (except Mrs. Wilcox) is totally indifferent to the world of beauty reveals the wane of the nineteenth-century intellectuals' creed: stripped of its original intention and passion, it has become a cliché cited even by people like the Wilcoxes.

7 Margaret, however, admits that the practical mind of the Wilcoxes has sustained culture and, on the Purbeck Hills, explains to Helen the good qualities she has found in a man like Henry:

> If Wilcoxes hadn't worked and died in England for thousands of years, you and I couldn't sit here without having our throats cut. There would be no trains, no ships to carry us literary people about in, no fields even. Just savagery. No—perhaps not even that. Without their spirit life might never have moved out of protoplasm. More and more do I refuse to draw my income and sneer at those who guarantee it. (*HE* 177-78)

8 Such thinking in Margaret, as Born points out, may considerably reflect the author's liberal guilt, and it is "part of what makes Forster's book one of the most insightful and disquieting fictional treatments of the relationship between culture and capital" (1992: 154). Men like the Wilcoxes have enlarged the Empire (Henry is running the Imperial and West African Rubber Company; his son Paul goes off to Nigeria) and given birth to the rentier class, to which the Schlegels and Forster himself belong. This class can act as generous supporters of art and philanthropy by earning their living not by means of work but of

investment, "compromised by its fundamentally parasitic status" (Delany 1988: 68). Margaret's sense of wrongness about despising those who ensure her income can be taken as a faithful reflection of the rentier class's ambiguous mode of being. *Howards End* puts forward nuanced, socially aware views regarding the aesthetic sensibility and social status, but ultimately there seems to be a need to assuage the existential anxiety of the rentier class. The novel achieves this by locating its source of cultural and aesthetic values far from the domain of capital, at the country house called Howards End.

9 In his influential essay "Modernism and Imperialism," Fredric Jameson pins down the emergent modernist style in Forster's use of the word "infinity" during Mrs. Munt's train journey to Howards End (1990: 52). The awareness that a significant structure of the economic system lies elsewhere beyond the metropolis makes the life and experience of the home country incomplete in meaning. The new spatial language (the recognized modernist style) in the image of the Great North Road, suggestive of infinity, is the "substitute" for the unrepresentable totality (1990: 50-58). In line with Jameson's point, it should also be noted that the novel's description of London creates a strange sense of visual fluidity all around, with the frequent use of the sea metaphor. We are told that the Schlegels' Wickham Place would be, in time, swept away and replaced by tall buildings; there, "[o]ne had the sense of a backwater, or rather of an estuary, whose waters flowed in from the invisible sea, and ebbed into a profound silence while the waves without were still beating" (*HE* 23). Such metaphorical expression is prevalent in the novel: the Schlegels are "swimming gracefully on the gray tides of London" (*HE* 115); the city "rose and fell in a continual flux, while her shallows washed more widely against the hills of Surrey and over the fields of Hertfordshire" (*HE* 115); Margaret hates the "continual flux of London. . . . eternal formlessness" (*HE* 184). The city's ceaselessly changing form and the mechanism of imperialist capital in the background conceptually eludes realistic representation, only to be approached by figurative language.

10 In chapter 23, the sense of flux accompanies Margaret throughout her motorcar journey to Howards End. The motorcar offers a key to comprehending the new spaces and spatial experiences of modernity, structured around the novel's dialectic of the spatially disoriented

metropolis versus the fixity of place found in the countryside (Thacker 2003: 62-74). [4] While Margaret is looking at the scenery, it "heaved and merged like porridge" and "she lost all sense of space" (*HE* 199). The fluid metaphor—"porridge"—signifies the paralyzing effect that the motorcar has on Margaret's perception, unaccustomed as she is to moving at such speed. Consequently, the spatial relation between the starting point and the destination is blurred. In nineteenth-century writings, the temporal diminution caused by the railway journey is expressed mostly in terms of a shrinking or annihilation of space (Schivelbusch 1997: 33-44). What Margaret experiences here can be understood as a twentieth-century, motorcar version of such a spatial experience.

11 However, as Thacker has noted, though at some points Forster's narrative shows an ambivalent desire to depict the formless world in a new language, it does not grow into a full modernist description of urban experience (2003). Rather, the novel secures a point where the fluid, amorphous language switches to a more solid one. Once Margaret reaches Howards End, "she recaptured the sense of space which the motor had tried to rob from her" (*HE* 201). The scene of Margaret's first encounter with the house stresses the recovery of her sense perception:

> Then the car turned away, and it was as if a curtain had risen. For the second time that day she saw the appearance of the earth.
> There were the greengage trees that Helen had once described, there the tennis lawn, there the hedge that would be glorious with dog-roses in June, but the vision now was of black and palest green. Down by the dell-hole more vivid colours were awakening, and Lent lilies stood sentinel on its margin, or advanced in battalions over the grass. Tulips were a tray of jewels. She could not see the wych-elm tree, but a branch of the celebrated vine, studded with velvet knobs, had covered the porch. She was struck by the fertility of the soil; she had seldom been in a garden where the flowers looked so well, and even weeds she was idly plucking out of the porch were intensely green. Why had poor Mr Bryce fled from all this beauty? For she had already decided that the place was beautiful. (*HE* 200)

12 The disappearance of the car allows her to be in direct contact with the earth. Here, special attention should be paid to a phrase: "as if a

curtain had risen." Behind the disturbing experience of modernity, Margaret finds a world where the colour and form are restored. The flowers and plants are described item by item, and one has the impression that visual fluidity is removed from the narrative. To put it in another way, the curtain here (itself a figure) functions as a boundary dividing the figurative language that depicts the urban experience and the older, realist form of narrative, with which Forster might feel more at ease.

13 Behind the flux of modernity, there is still a place like Howards End—it is this sensation of conceptual as well as aesthetic depth that comes to rescue the novel's perturbed contemplation on the relationship between culture and capital. Alone in the house, Margaret wonders if she would lose something by marrying Henry, as her sister had protested on the Purbeck Hills. She is not sure: "For instance, she would double her kingdom by opening the door that concealed the stairs" (*HE* 201-202). With the stairs leading up to bedrooms, the space behind the door indicates the private realm where she will be united with Henry. The union of Margaret's sensibility, which understands the spirit of the house, and Henry's ability, which, while not believing in such invisible values, carries out things necessary to preserve it—this ideal of connection is entrusted to the hidden space behind the door.

14 This imaginary space is fundamentally different in nature from the amorphous infinity or flux of London. In a scene just before Margaret's motorcar ride to Howards End, the inside of Henry's Imperial and West African Rubber Company is described as follows:

> She was glad to go there, for Henry had implied his business rather than described it, and the formlessness and vagueness that one associates with Africa itself had hitherto brooded over the main sources of his wealth. Not that a visit to the office cleared things up. There was just the ordinary surface scum of ledgers and polished counters and brass bars that began and stopped for no possible reason, of electric-light globes blossoming in triplets, of little rabbit-hutches faced with glass or wire, of little rabbits. And even when she penetrated to the inner depths, she found only the ordinary table and Turkey carpet, and though the map over the fireplace did depict a helping of West Africa it was a very ordinary map. (*HE* 196)

15 When one tries to ascertain the source of flux, it is promptly replaced by commodities; that is to say, what has so far seemed an impenetrable depth transforms into material affluence, "the ordinary surface scum" of things that imperialism has brought about. Even though "she penetrated to the inner depths," the result is the same. The ordinariness of the map of West Africa for a brief moment makes a contrast with the "blank space" of the map in *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 1994: 11-12), but they are really the two sides of the same coin. Imperialism as a whole is unrepresentable, and just at the moment one thinks he/she has reached the heart of it, one is met by a cognitive void (such as the one Marlow sees at the end of his voyage), or, when one is geographically removed from the colony, by ordinary-enough commodities. It is in this sense that we find in the scene above an early form of the depthless world that capitalism has spread around the world.

16 In recent years, *Howards End* has been read not so much as a mainstream estate novel but as one that exposes the genre to an open question about the viability of narrowly pastoral solutions to England's dilemmas in the early twentieth century (Kalliney 2007). This does not necessarily lead to a denial of the house's symbolic significance; rather, the novel "simultaneously transforms and is constrained by its use of the country-house genre" (Kalliney 2007: 63). When it describes the sites of modern experience—London, Henry's office, and his motorcar—Forster's narrative shows awareness of the need for a new form to register them. Rather than finding such a form, however, the novel makes use of the cultural value of the country house and assumes the meaning and value behind the outward formlessness and the "surface scum" of the world. When, in the end, the Schlegels are appointed as the righteous successors of Howards End, the existence of the rentier class is justified, with its power to raise the preserver of such hidden open space. The connection that Margaret attempted by marrying Henry proves to be too idealistic and demands sacrifices from all of the characters. Still, the novel manages to close with the view that the world may recover from formlessness: "Life's going to be melted down, all over the world… One's hope was in the weakness of logic" (*HE* 329). Forster depicts England in the early twentieth century, where, he fears, the aesthetic is about to be appropriated by the economic, but not yet fully. With its geographical

distance from the city and its connection with the past, Howards End serves as the novel's depth, and through the spiritual inheritance of the house, the novelist explores the moral possibility of the aesthetic taste. [5]

17 Today, we know too well the fate of the Schlegel sisters' sheer hope. If one accepts the common view that our present world is "depthless," with the whole aesthetic category integrated into the commodity culture (Jameson 1991), and if one then claims, following Eagleton, that the aesthetic should be thoroughly subjugated to ideological analysis (1990), how can one continue to talk about aesthetic sensibility, to say nothing of its ethical value?

3. Moral Depth on the Surface: *On Beauty*

18 "As in Forster's original, a house stands at the centre of Smith's novel" (Fischer 2007: 286), one critic says. But is this really the case? Like Howards End, the Belsey residence, 83 Langham Drive, has a historical background, but at the outset we are told that a significant inheritance has already happened. When Kiki's grandmother, a nurse, inherited it from a benevolent white doctor, it immediately rescued her family from its lower-class status: "An inheritance on this scale changes everything for a poor family in America: it makes them middle class" (*OB* 17). Kiki's great-great-grandmother was a house-slave; her great-grandmother, a maid; and now, Kiki is the wife of a white intellectual and works as a hospital administrator. The origin of 83 Langham thus casts light on an issue that does not exist in Forster's 1910 novel set in England: that is, race as the real backbone of the American class system. Nonetheless, from the viewpoint of inheritance, the house has mostly played out its role in the past and at present does not serve as a force to move the plot forward.

19 Rather than functioning as an impetus for the plot, the house is impregnated with the predicaments from which the family is going to suffer. [6] Indeed, 83 Langham Drive is a beautiful New England-style house, but its most precious part is hidden from the eyes of its inhabitants: the mottled green glasses of the windows are "replacements, the originals being too precious to be used as windows. Heavily in-

sured, they are kept in a large safe in the basement. A significant portion of the value of the Belsey house resides in windows that nobody may look through or open" (*OB* 16). This augurs two problems that will be explored in the story. First, the hidden glass implies the Belseys' (in particular, Howard's) blindness to beauty; secondly, its aesthetic value is converted into monetary value (the glass is "heavily insured"). Even the skylight at the top, the only one left untouched, stands for a more practical problem latent in the family. After his thirty-year marriage to a black woman, which has produced three children, Howard still "disliked and feared conversations with his children that concerned race" (*OB* 85). The topic of race as a taboo in the house is symbolically presented by the multi-coloured spot created by the skylight: "Once the spot reaches the floor in mid morning it is a family superstition never to step through it" (*OB* 16). At the spiral staircase is a photo gallery of the Belseys all in black and white, perhaps to indicate that, while on the surface they are indifferent to the racial issue, they are, in fact, unable to see beyond the binary of black and white. The gallery begins with the children's photos followed by Kiki's maternal lines, and toward the bottom, the pictures of Howard multiply, ending with the one of Howard and Kiki in Florida, in which Kiki is "shielding her eyes from either Howard or the sun or the camera" (*OB* 19). This last one suggests that, as years go by, for Kiki, too, it has become increasingly difficult to see where her interracial marriage is leading her.

20 Instead of the house, then, it is more emphatically the painting that *On Beauty* takes up as a key figure. The painting at the centre is, of course, Carlene Kipps' Haitian painting of the Voodoo goddess. After her sudden death, it is moved to Monty's office, and Levi steals it with his street friends from Haiti, seeing it as a symbol of the cultural exploitation of the Third World (again, beauty is considered in terms of money, and here Levi is not an exception). In the end, the painting, which, in fact, Carlene—not her husband—bought in Haiti before their marriage, is bequeathed to Kiki as a token of their friendship. Other paintings are also significantly referred to in the course of the two women's short-term but intimate connection. Here, again, Forster's plot is adapted: one day Carlene and Kiki go out shopping for Christmas, and Carlene is struck by the idea that they can go to her family friends' house that afternoon to see "three Edward Hoppers,

two Singer Sargents and a Miró" (*OB* 266). She implores, "I want you to see the pictures—they should be loved by somebody like you" (*OB* 268-69). Clearly, in Smith's novel, the painting takes up the role of the house in *Howards End*, signifying what the two female characters have in common—their intuitive understanding of beautiful things and human emotion—and forming a spiritual tie between them.[7]

21 Underpinning this focus on visual art is a new movement in aesthetics, and it is partly out of this context that Smith's fiction was written. In the preface to *On Beauty* (no pag.), Smith refers to Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* as another source of influence besides Forster's works. Against the contemporary anti-aesthetic trend in American academia, Scarry (2006, first published in 2000) tries to reanimate discussion of the aesthetic, mainly featuring two effects of beauty: radical decentring (its power to throw us into a kind of trance, in which we temporarily forget about ourselves) and pressure toward the distributional (a strong desire to duplicate it and share the joy with others). Seeing a beautiful object or person can be, therefore, a motive for being fair and promoting equality, turning our thoughts from individual affairs to those of others. Scarry's argument can be placed in the genealogy of Kant,[8] but in claiming the autonomy of beauty without ignoring the historically ingrained particular, it forms an effective counterargument against the Marxist, ideological critiques of Kantian aesthetics. Any talk about beauty, Scarry admits, should not leave behind the physical object; at the same time, the power of beauty that propagates its copy over time and space cannot be fully located in each of the objects thus produced.

22 Here, I am not merely attempting to show connections between Scarry and Smith, considering that their revaluation of the aesthetic (with its moral possibility) shows some tendencies that are to be called characteristically postmodern. Scarry emphasizes the immediate, sensuous, and instinctual nature of our aesthetic experience. Though it eventually leads us to a higher moral understanding, it is a body-oriented, pleasurable event in the first place. This may be obvious in her use of the word "begetting," which she takes from the begetting of children to explain beauty's power to prompt a copy of itself (2006: 4-11). Grabes (1996) says that, when the Kantian abstract basis of ethics appears to be unable to survive the post-war epistemological deconstruction, there emerges a tendency to rediscover the

sensual aspects of aesthetic experience as universally implanted in the human body. [9] Hence, the approximation between ethics and aesthetics takes place, with the reversal of the traditional subordination of aesthetics to ethics. Scarry's aim is to revitalize aesthetic talk, and the moral benefit expected from doing so is, strictly speaking, subject to this main purpose (the very order of words in the title demonstrates this: it is first "on beauty" and then "being just"). [10]

23 Written partly as a literary response to Scarry's argument, *On Beauty* adapts Forster's concerns about the aesthetic with much more emphasis on the body-oriented experience and its ethical outcomes. One of the novel's most severe ironies is that it is not art critics Howard or Monty but their wives (though they are far from intellectual in the sense that people use the term in Wellington) who can really appreciate art and the bond of family. In particular, Howard's anti-aestheticism turns out to be harmful for the Belseys when he contradicts his theoretical position in his real life. Howard can be understood as a belated Angry Young Man who tries to turn his personal resentment about his working-class origins into a fashionably neo-Marxist critique of canonical artists; as a result, his critical vocabulary is caught up in "a hopelessly clichéd liberal-left formula with textbook precision" (Itakura 2011: 29). While, as an art historian, he is determined to dismiss the idea of beauty, as an individual, he carries a fairly traditional view of female beauty and has extramarital affairs with women whose beauty is in the familiar mould of fashionable slimness: first with his colleague Claire Malcolm, a petite white woman, and then with Monty's daughter, Victoria, whose "unflinchingly canonical" beauty makes her role that of a caricaturized sex symbol (Anjaria 2008: 47).

24 One painting in the Belseys' house points to this disjunction between Howard's theoretical practice and private tastes. In the scene where Kiki blames her husband for his affair with Claire, an abstract painting hangs behind Howard: "Its main feature was a piece of thick white plaster, made to look like linen, crumpled up like a rag someone had thrown away. This action of throwing had been caught, by the artist, in mid-flight, with the 'linen' frozen in space, framed by a while wooden box that thrust out from the wall" (OB 206). The painting suggests Howard's attitude as an art historian, interrogating the connection between movement and stasis, between the artificial and the

real (Tolan 2006: 133-34). It also seems to stand for the discontinuities between art and life in Howard's own behaviour. The "linen, crumpled up like a rag" may insinuate his infidelity, but just as it is removed from the plane of the ordinary, Howard is insensitive to the real emotional blow he has dealt Kiki. The reader is invited to see the painting from Kiki's point of view, while the narrative offers no description of Howard looking at it, suggesting that he is equally blind to his wife's solitude in "this *sea* of white" (*OB* 206).

25 Indeed, in Wellington, where the majority is the white intellectual, those who are not classified into this category should be constantly aware of how they appear to the eyes of others. For example, Kiki runs into Claire and Warren Crane in town and notices that she is "no longer in the sexual universe" (*OB* 51). This is followed by a recognition that "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. Of course they find me funny" (*OB* 51). As Walters observes (2008: 128-33), people expect of Kiki the role of mammy, the stereotypical image of black women that was cultivated during slavery and has secured a permanent place in today's American culture. Her middle-aged, corpulent body stands at the margins of white America's standards of beauty, and consequently she is viewed as an asexual being like Aunt Jemima, whose figure is characterized above all by the domestic, maternal role she plays in relation to the white family.[11] In Victoria's case, this consciousness about appearance takes a quite different turn. She knows that people see her as a sexy young black female, almost an incarnation of sex, and purposely plays the role of a Lolita-like seducer, particularly in her relationship with Howard. At one point, however, the text calls attention to a gap between her erotic conduct and her real feeling, which perhaps she herself is not aware of: when Howard actually has sex with her, he discovers that she is not aroused at all ("she was . . . completely dry" [316]). As black women, both Kiki and Victoria read in other people's gazes the roles they are expected to play; this awareness on the part of the viewed functions as a satirical device to expose the violence of gaze in white-dominated America, if it does not sufficiently develop into the power to overturn that gaze.

26 In *On Beauty*, not only men look at women in the light of sex appeal (or the lack of it) but women look at men in such a way as well. This

may help us see that beauty has more universal power than the argument about the gaze generally leads us to believe—that is, it is the ideological weapon of the culturally privileged.[12] Almost all the female characters are thrilled by Carl's physical beauty, but in particular Zora, who flatters herself that she has inherited her father's brain more than anybody in the family, has become enthusiastic about him. She falls in love with him at a swimming pool, where she is arrested by the sight of his half-naked body. That she has lost her goggles and cannot continue swimming hints at her loss of control in the face of the overwhelming power of beauty. Zora tries to ignore the real nature of her feelings and instead starts a fervid campaign to raise his social position, until all her efforts miserably end up with her finding Carl kissing Victoria at a party. Zora's intellectualism and insincere attitude toward beauty thus makes her a young, female version of Howard.

27 The painting of the Voodoo goddess in many ways reflects the novel's interests in the aesthetic experience as physical reality. Perhaps one cannot overlook the stark contrast between the all-white, abstract painting hanging in the Belseys' residence and this ornamental one, with an overflow of vivid colours and various tropical flora and fauna:

> In the centre of the frame there was a tall, naked black woman wearing only a red bandanna and standing in a fantastical white space, surrounded all about by tropical branches and kaleidoscopic fruit and flowers. Four pink birds, one green parrot. Three humming birds. Many brown butterflies. It was painted in a primitive, childlike style, everything flat on the canvas. No perspective, no depth. (OB 174-75)

28 The naked goddess standing in the middle shines with substantial actuality, whereas in Howard's abstract painting, the presence of the body (if there is any) is vaguely implied by the crumpled rag. As for this actuality of the body, an earlier conversation between Carlene and Kiki should be consulted. When they first meet and talk about family, Carlene mentions the traditional association between women and the body: "Men move with their minds, and women must move with their bodies, whether we like it or not. That's how God intended it—I have always felt that so strongly" (OB 96). To Kiki, this sounds incredibly anachronistic, but Carlene insists:

> Everything I do I do with my body. Even my soul is made up of raw meat, flesh. Truth is in a face, as much as it is anywhere. We women know that faces are full of meaning, I think. Men have the gift of pretending that's not true. And this is where their power comes from. Monty hardly knows he has a body at all! (*OB* 96)

29 The novel's interrogation of beauty makes us wonder whether this statement by Carlene is simply a reinforcement of the traditional antagonism between male intellect and female body. The events in the novel prompt us to reappraise the effect of appearance: whatever is said officially, the body, as our visible surface, does have great impact on us. A person's skin colour, countenance, and the possession or lack of beauty—all these intensely affect the course of our lives. The latter half of Carlene's statement sounds especially ironic, for, on the conscious level, men ignore this, but they are physically attracted to beauty and betray their wives (Monty, too, started an affair with his assistant, Chantelle, probably even before Carlene's death). With this view of the body in mind, that the painting of Erzulie has neither perspective nor depth is most significant. Abandoning the longstanding cultural consensus, the non-Western painting celebrates the body not as an inferior counterpart of the mind but as a real physical entity interacting with the world. [13]

30 *On Beauty* puts forward a serious re-evaluation of how much ethical truth lies in the appearance of the world; and as the Voodoo goddess epitomizes, this issue is inseparably linked to the physical aspects of aesthetic experience. Kiki's remark at the realization of Howard's affair captures this theme of the novel: "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—and that's clearly imprisoning and it infantilizes . . . but it's *true* and . . . I don't know how else to explain what—" (*OB* 207, ellipses *sic*). The very tentativeness of her words resisters the mysterious attraction of beauty, which cannot be wholly explained or theorized but simply drags us in. Underestimating this fact possibly leads to moral insincerity.

31 Toward the end of the novel, the Belseys gradually shake off their emotional muddle, and the last scene highlights a link forged between the world of art and real life. By now, Howard's affair with Victoria, too, is known to Kiki, and people believe that they are head-

ing for divorce. However, on his invitation, Kiki unexpectedly comes to his lecture. In this scene, she is depicted in a way that reminds us of the Voodoo goddess: "She wore a scarlet ribbon threaded through her plait, and her shoulders were bare and gleaming" (*OB* 442). Her lively, eye-catching features reflect the inner strength she has acquired. With the painting, Kiki inherits the spiritual independence that Carlene, a seemingly most conservative, loving housewife, has maintained throughout her life.[14] At the sight of his wife, Howard falls into silence and keeps pressing the button until the slide of *Hendrickje Bathing* appears.

> On the wall, a pretty, blousy Dutch woman in a simple white smock paddled in water up to her calves. Howard's audience looked at her and then at Howard and then at the woman once more, awaiting elucidation. The woman, for her part, looked away, coyly, into the water. She seemed to be considering whether to wade deeper. The surface of the water was dark, reflective—a cautious bather could not be certain of what lurked beneath. Howard looked at Kiki. In her face, his life. Kiki looked up suddenly at Howard—not, he thought, unkindly. Howard said nothing. Another silent minute passed. The audience began to mutter perplexedly. Howard made the picture larger on the wall, as Smith had explained to him how to do. The woman's fleshiness filled the wall. He looked out into the audience once more and saw Kiki only. He smiled at her. She smiled. She looked away, but she smiled. Howard looked back at the woman on the wall, Rembrandt's love, Hendrickje. Though her hands were imprecise blurs, paint heaped on paint and roiled with the brush, the rest of her skin had been expertly rendered in all its variety—chalky whites and lively pinks, the underlying blue of her veins and the ever present human hint of yellow, intimation of what is to come. (*OB* 442-3)

What is most interesting about this passage is this: it recaptures the sense of depth. Hendrickje is looking into the water and wondering whether to go deeper or not. Its dark, reflective surface is mysterious, and one never knows what lurks beneath. Here, the life of Rembrandt and that of Howard, and the painter's love for Hendrickje—a maid with whom he spent the latter half of his life—and Howard's love for Kiki, overlap and resonate. The story ends with the sign of a new tie just born between them. Howard does not know what Kiki is thinking, and the future course of his life and love is unfathomable

like the stream. Perhaps Kiki herself has not decided, and she looks away just like Hendrickje in the painting. At the very end, *On Beauty* turns to the depth of emotion and the infinite possibility of human relationships.

33 Aside from the similarities in plot, this may be where Forster's fiction influenced Smith most: after re-examining the truth that lies on the surface of the world, she opens up the narrative with a Forsterian belief in the infinite power of personal relationships for their uncertainty (Smith explains in "Love, Actually" [2003] that she loves Forster for his undecided way of describing his character: the chaotic structure and the deliberate rejection of a controlled style in his fiction sincerely reflect the complexities of the human heart). This does not mean that Smith ultimately resorted to the depth-surface model, as I argued that Forster did, given that the appearance of the world is not described negatively in any sense in *On Beauty*. The story ends with the macroscopic view of Hendrickje, as if to say that, in the present world, with no stable ethical norms, we can make changes in our lives only by looking at the world more closely with our eyes wide open. Truth may be found in the details that we have overlooked so far and in the emotions incited by such new discoveries. Surface (what we see) and depth (what we feel) are interactive: as Carlene says to Kiki, "the eyes and the heart are directly connected" (*OB* 268). In the final scene, the reader realizes this with Howard: the only thing he can see is the woman he loves. Art and life, his vision and his heart, are now connected to face the "intimation of what is to come."

4. Conclusion

34 This article has examined two novels, *Howards End* and *On Beauty*, both of which seriously take up the connection between aesthetic sensibility and its moral possibility. With the recognition that the nineteenth-century views of culture and equality are too idealistic to face the reality of the early twentieth century, *Howards End* describes the troubled connection between the imperial capital and the aesthetic. The country house, then, comes to serve as the novel's conceptual depth, where ultimately the Schlegelian aesthetic sensibility is assured of its value. On the other hand, written at the dawn of the twenty-first century, *On Beauty* deals with the depthless world and

focuses on the act of seeing, especially seeing the painting. Smith tries to recapture the moral depth on the surface of the world and shows a tendency to explore the sensual aspects of the aesthetic experience, in which we recognize a postmodern symptom.

35 In recent years, not only in the fields of aesthetics or ethics, but also in literature, a tendency to reconsider the aesthetic qualities unique to literature has emerged.[15] With the departure Smith takes from Forster's novel—from the country house to the painting—*On Beauty* augurs a new trend that may acquire more strength from this point forward: it invites us to see the "intimation of what is to come" in literature and criticism.

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1 Hereafter, all citations from *On Beauty* are shown in parentheses with the abbreviation "*OB*."

2 There are a number of examples, but to state a few, Philip Herriton and Caroline Abbott in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* grow out of the moral stiffness of Sawston, thanks to their sense of beauty, which comes into bloom in Italy. The short story "Celestial Omnibus" treats the same problem in a more allegorical way when Mr. Bons, a haughty, self-confident man who claims to love arts and letters dies a horrible death, while his son's pure enthusiasm for beauty is celebrated in heaven.

3 In this article, all citations from *Howards End* are shown in parentheses with the abbreviation "*HE*."

4 For the full theorization of space and place in modern experience, see Thacker 13-45, where he argues broadly from Heidegger's notion of place as a site of dwelling to David Harvey's idea of "time-space compression" in capitalist societies. Such a distinction between space and place is also found in Jameson when he refers to Forster's "ethos of place" in Howards End (1990: 55-56).

5 My discussion of the depth-surface model has taken some key ideas from Wilde's categorization of literary irony into three types (1981): premodern mediative irony and modernist disjunctive irony, which assume depth under the surface of things, and postmodern suspensive irony, which renounces the idea of depth itself and instead negotiates with the surface.

6 Although I do not agree with Fischer's point that the house stands at the centre, my observations below regarding the skylight and the photo gallery greatly benefit from her analysis (2007: 286-87).

7 Perhaps it is important to note that all of these paintings are original and expected to have some "aura" in the sense that Benjamin uses the term (2002). Given the numerous copied products in the novel—CDs, music downloaded to an iPod, fake bland bags, photo images on the PC screen—Smith presumably admits some power that only the original artwork possesses and entrusts to it the sincerity of Carlene and Kiki's friendship.

8 Scarry admits the influence of Iris Murdoch's revaluation of the Kantian sublime in her concept of "decentering" (2006: 112-13). For Murdoch's theory

of the sublime, see Murdoch (1997: 205-20). Actually, "Murdoch" makes an appearance in *On Beauty*, too, as a dog the Belseys are keeping.

9 The emergence of democratic aesthetics from the 1990s onward may be explained from this perspective. Studies by Shusterman (1992) and Armstrong (2000), for example, try to break down the strong link between the aesthetic and social privilege. Both invoke John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1932) and explore the more sense-oriented, quotidian nature of aesthetic experience, which may be universally experienced by anyone.

10 According to Grabes' classification of the five types of the approximation between ethics and aesthetics, Scarry's argument may be categorized as "approximation via analogy," a Kantian strategy that finds similarities between aesthetics and ethics while leaving the autonomy of each intact. The review of Scarry's book by Benson (2004), too, notices this analogical relationship between the two, though it offers him a reason to criticize her theory: admitting that Scarry succeeds in reviving the aesthetic topic, Benson regrets that "[t]he notion of justice which she invokes, however, is that of a liberal academic in 21st century America, and is less universal than she imagines. . . . Arguments from analogy always allow this leeway. They are dependent on the specific features chosen, the particular connections made. Over time the moral and political aspirations of society change" (2004). Benson's argument here, in showing a relatively straightforward preference of the universal over the particular, seems to miss that Scarry tries to salvage the transhistorical aspects of the aesthetic by discussing it on the plane of the historical and the particular.

11 In her own contribution, "Still Mammies and Hos: Stereotypical Images of Black Women in Zadie Smith's Novels," Walters points out that the highly stereotypical female characters in Smith's fiction reflect the problem of the black community's acceptance of misogynist language, that is, the representation of the black woman as the white woman's Other. Walters adds that Smith shows "how stereotypes in literature can also be used as a satirical device to expose racism, sexism, and other biases" (2008: 127). Smith's novels often call on stereotypical ideas and characters in the interest of satirizing them (her treatment of the gaze, which I am going to take up below, is another example). Apparently, if frequently repeated, this strategy would run the risk of being caught in the discourse she is trying to ridicule; the reader might be interested in seeing whether Smith's future works grow out of this structure.

12 Benson (2004) mentions that Scarry, too, seems to notice the possibility that the talk about the male gaze may impoverish our thoughts about the power of beauty.

13 For the rules of perspective as a representative Renaissance intellectual scheme and its philosophical analogy in Descartes' theory of vision, see Jay (1993: 51-82).

14 This may be the reason that the painting of Erzulie does not make a significant appearance after it is discovered in Levi's room. In the last chapter, based on the conversation between the Belsey children, the reader guesses that Kiki will probably sell the picture and donate the money to a Haitian support group. This implied future of the painting should not be taken as damaging to the novel's focus on the aesthetic. On the contrary, it suggests that Kiki's love for beauty has nothing to do with solipsistic aestheticism: the desire for distribution she seems to feel here would affirm Scarry's theory and strengthen the link between the moral and the aesthetic that the novel has forged.

15 For example, see Levine (1994) and Attridge (2004).

English

This article examines Zadie Smith's third novel, *On Beauty* (2005), alongside E. M. Forster's original, *Howards End* (1910). As *Howards End* did about a century ago, *On Beauty* eagerly explores how the appreciation for beauty can lead to the cultivation of morality. In our contemporary world, where the aesthetic has gone through such severe ideological deconstruction, how can Smith revive the problem of the aesthetic so fully? My argument explores this question by focusing on one significant departure that Smith has taken from *Howards End*: it is not a house (a three-dimensional space that Forster uses to provide physical as well as conceptual depth), but a painting (a two-dimensional item with a more purely aesthetic purpose), that is in need of a spiritual heir. With this change, Smith might signal that she accepts the view that we live in a depthless world, but nonetheless tries to capture some moral depth in it. Given the novel's preoccupation with the act of seeing, Smith seems to invite us to acknowledge—though it may sound quite oxymoronic—how much depth is latent on the surface of the world, not behind it.

Français

Cet article s’intéresse au troisième roman de Zadie Smith, *De la beauté* (2005), ainsi qu’à l’œuvre originale d’E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910). Tout comme *Howards End* l’avait fait presque un siècle plus tôt, *De la beauté* étudie comment la contemplation de la beauté peut conduire au développement de la moralité. Dans notre monde contemporain, où l’esthétique a subi une déconstruction idéologique si draconienne, comment Smith peut-elle raviver la question de l’esthétique si parfaitement ? Mon étude aborde ce point en se focalisant sur une liberté en particulier que Smith a prise vis-à-vis de *Howards End* : ce n’est plus une maison (un espace tridimensionnel que Forster utilise afin d’apporter une profondeur physique autant que conceptuelle), mais une peinture (un objet bidimensionnel dont le but est plus purement esthétique), qui attend un héritier spirituel. À travers ce changement, Smith pourrait signifier qu’elle accepte l’idée que nous vivons dans un monde superficiel, mais tente néanmoins d’en saisir la profondeur morale. Compte tenu de l’obsession du roman pour l’acte de voir, Smith semble nous inviter à reconnaître – bien que cela sonne comme un oxymore – la profondeur latente qui réside à la surface du monde, et non derrière lui.

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