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Mediating multi-cultural muddle: E. M. Forster meets Zadie Smith

Zadie Smith’s 2005 novel *On Beauty* transposes E. M. Forster’s 1910 novel, *Howards End*, to contemporary England, the United States and the context of academia. Although postmodern intertextuality tends to rely on pastiche and parody, Smith strays from irony and chooses to quote snippets of dialogue (albeit highly modernized) while entire scenes (like the concert) are drawn from the hypotext. The reader may recognize the main plotline (the secret gift of a house, or rather, in this case, of a painting). The effect is mainly comic, as the Condition-of-England novel is turned into a Transatlantic campus novel, complete with extra-marital affairs, theoretical seminars and the inevitable botched lecture—the wretched lecturer who has forgotten his notes watches his own “Pah point” display in silence. But for all its zest the novel raises more serious multicultural questions, and uses pictorial intertextuality (mingling classical references such as Rembrandt with Haitian black culture as exemplified by Hector Hyppolite) to update Forster’s exploration of sorority.


Heralded as the post-post-colonial heir of Salman Rushdie and as the millenium literary sensation for her novel *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith has

chosen to place her latest novel, *On Beauty*, under the unexpected aegis of
the Edwardian novelist E. M. Forster, whose influence she repeatedly
acknowledges in interviews, besides paying an explicit tribute to his work
in the preface to her 2005 novel:

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, one way or the other.
This time I wanted to repay the debt with hommage. (Smith 2006, acknowled-
gements)

Although she is well aware that Forster is not the most fashionable of
intellectual references, Smith always lists him among her favourite writers,
like Rushdie, Nabokov or Zora Neale Hurston (hence presumably Zora’s
name in *On Beauty*). She chose an extract from *Where Angels Fear to
Tread*, Forster’s first novel, as the epigraph for the opening chapter of her
own first novel, *White Teeth*, adding echoes such as Forster’s statement
that one should betray one’s country rather than one’s friend, a sentence
which is loosely and anonymously picked up by one of the characters. In
*On Beauty*, Smith switches to what she calls “literary update” (in the man-
er of Graham Swift updating *As I Lay Dying*), *i.e.* being in “a kind of echo
tunnel with the writers who came before you.” In order to both “admit
influence and shake off influence” (*RW*), Smith explores Forster’s themes
and methods through explicit transposition, playing on textual, but also
musical and pictorial intertextuality in order to redefine the concept of
modern muddle.

Intertextual games

The novel’s title comes from an essay entitled *On Beauty and Being
Just*, published by Elaine Scarry, the Walter Cabot Professor of Aesthetics
at Harvard University. Scarry begins her essay by claiming that beauty calls
for imitation: “Beauty brings copies of itself into being” (Scarry 3). In
Smith’s case, replicating beauty means transposing E. M. Forster’s 1910
novel, *Howards End*, to the context of academia and contemporary Eng-
land and to the United States. Smith is fond of literary games, and the
reader feels the tingling pleasure of recognition as Smith lightly shuffles the
cards. The great divide between London, the metropolis, and Howards
End, the nostalgic country shrine, becomes the dichotomy between Eng-
land and America, as the Kipps first live in England then come to the United
States, where the Belseys live, settling down as neighbours, just as the Wil-
coxes leave Howards End to rent a flat in London, just opposite Wickham
Place where the Schlegel sisters live. The remarkable coincidence is justified
by the fact that both Monty Kipps (who roughly plays the part of Henry
Wilcox) and Howard Belsey (whose name recalls of course *Howards End*)
are rival academics who end up teaching at the same university, Wellington,
modelled on Harvard. *On Beauty* playfully foregrounds its intertext-
tual dimension, for instance, when a couple named Wilcox make a cameo
appearance at the Belsey’s party. But, as we are bluntly reminded, “this isn’t 1910” (On Beauty 15), and the plot is upgraded a bit. Apart from Howard and Claire, the cast is black, and the modern-day version of Leonard Bast—the 1910 unemployed clerk on the verge of the abyss—is a handsome hip hop artist renamed Carl; in the concert scene, the young lady sitting next to him no longer takes an umbrella by mistake, but a discman. The shattering short-lived connection between Helen Schlegel and Paul Wilcox, the kiss under the wych-elm, becomes full sexual intercourse, crossing gender lines as the seduced virgin is male and the seducer a female, dashing conqueror called Victoria, totally deprived of Victorian inhibitions.

Thus On Beauty is peppered with allusions to the hypotext, quoted verbatim or thinly veiled by blatant modernization; for instance, when Carlene writes down Kiki’s name at the top of her list of Christmas presents (as Mrs Wilcox once wrote Meg’s), the register has somewhat changed:

I should like to give you something worth your acquaintance, Miss Schlegel, in memory of your kindness to me during this lonely fortnight. It has so happened that I have been left alone, and you have stopped me from brooding. I am too apt to brood. (Forster 90)

I would like to give you a gift, as a thank you. I’ve been rather lonely. And you’ve thought to visit me and spend a little time with me . . . even though I’m not much fun at the moment. (Smith 265)

Such laidback transpositions deliberately flatten the initial hypotext, as if ironically recalling Leonard’s Bast attempt to turn Ruskin’s flowing Venetian sentences into a description of his “dark and stuffy” flat—“Something told him that the modifications would not do” (Forster 62).

Besides, Smith draws entire episodes from Howards End; in an essay, she points out that though he may stray from Joycean or Woolfian experimentation, Forster does push the bounds of plots in his own idiosyncratic way: “his was a study of the emotional, erratic and unreasonable in human life. But what interests me is that his narrative structure is muddled also; impulsive, meandering, irrational” (LA). Smith maintains a number of erratic elements, beginning with the hint of randomness prefacing Forster’s brief pastiche of epistolary novels—“One may as well begin with Helen’s letters to her sister” (Forster 19)—she simply switches to up-to-date emails: “One may as well begin with Jerome’s e-mails to his father” (Smith 3). In both cases, the visitor is seduced, led astray by a family rather than by a person, establishing a similar (mutatis mutandis) dichotomy between liberalism and conservatism. Glad to be told off by the lively businessman Henry Wilcox, the vibrant Helen Schlegel quickly dismisses the movement for female suffrage as “cant,” she wishes to be silenced (“Meg, shall we ever learn to talk less?” [Forster 21]). Jerome yields to a similarly “blissful unselﬁng,” relishing discourse on power and money, considering Multiculturalism as “a fatuous dream” (Smith 44) and equality as a myth. Seduction
becomes a short-lived conversion to conservatism, leading to a small comic “muddle,” a case of mistaken identity as a blundering rescue is attempted by Helen’s aunt and Jerome’s father. Smith expands on Margaret’s dismay with modern zest, in the manner of David Lodge or Don DeLillo:

But Aunt Juley was gone—gone irrevocably, and no power on earth could stop her. (Forster 27)

. . . it was too late to stop him and there was no way to contact him. Howard had a profound fear of carcinogens: checked food labels for Diethylstilbestrol; abhorred microwaves; had never owned a cellphone. (Smith 26)

Borrowing her beginning from Forster, Smith also conserves the main plotline, the spontaneous friendship which unexpectedly connects the silent, dying Ruth Wilcox with the articulate, dashing Margaret Schlegel. The pattern of calls and growing intimacy is closely modelled on the original, complete with Christmas shopping, a spur-of-the-moment trip to the country which is cut short by the unexpected irruption of Ruth’s/Carlene’s husband on the train platform, and the mysterious legacy which bequeaths the old lady’s favourite thing (a house/a painting) to the younger woman, a legacy which is ignored by Ruth’s/Carlene’s children and husband, but which a series of coincidences reveals to the protagonist. In both cases, a short note establishes the legacy.

Above all, Smith bows to Forster’s use of musical intertextuality. After the failure of Helen’s romance, a new phase opens for the Schlegels when they listen to Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* at Queen’s Hall. Rather than the performance itself, what matters is the characters’ response to music: the German cousin feels patriotic, technical Tibby, partition in hand, only cares for the “transitional passage on the drums” (Forster 46), Aunt Juley is lost, Margaret is listening quietly while Helen has visions of shipwrecks and “a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end” (46). Her deep musical emotion fits her sense of disaster; below the surface of the Wilcoxes’ power and materialism, she senses void, “[p]anic and emptiness” (47), a phrase which becomes the novel’s leitmotif, the antithesis of the epigraph “*Only connect* . . .” Smith lightens the concert scene, switching from Beethoven to an outdoor performance of Mozart’s *Requiem*. Howard sleeps through it, Zora fiercely listens to a running commentary on her discman, Jerome cries while Kiki has a glimpse of mermaids, apes and a pit but mostly muses about her son with pride. Smith’s purely comic world seems to stray from the condition-of-England novel haunted by the goblin footfall of ruthless capitalism. But she does play on the music theme—for instance, when Howard, who makes a point of remaining impervious to aesthetic emotion, is moved by music at Carlene’s funeral (Smith picks up the Forsterian motif of sudden death, but expands on the funeral). As a Cambridge choir sings Mozart, an astonished Howard is forced to identify the salt on his own face as tears. But Smith also blends a different kind of rhythm within her novel. Carl replaces Leonard Bast as the lower-class
character unexpectedly drawn into the intellectual circle of the protagonists during the concert scene. A hip hop fan, Carl is a street poet, who goes to the concert because he has seen *Amadeus*. He goes on to read a book about Mozart, and is deeply moved by the *Requiem*—whereas Zora, a couple of weeks after the concert, can barely remember a thing about it, a contrast which stresses the opposition between genuine sensitivity and sterile *habitus*. Just as highbrow culture may be transmitted, orality and black culture must seep into the written text. Smith is actually very fond of “gangsta rap”. Her brother Doc Brown is a hip hop artist (as an inside joke she gives his name to a character in the Bus Stop scene). Whereas *Howards End* ends with Helen’s baby, the inheritor of the shrine of Englishness, babies vanish from Smith’s novel, and Carl’s song deals with abortion. Smith inserts lyrics (which were actually written by her brother), complete with slashes mimicking the flat, fast, witty delivery of rap singers. The literally underground music (“the ethnography of the basement,” Smith 220) is part of Smith’s tribute to black culture, as the hybrid novel bridges the gap between Forster and rap—only connect.

**A campus novel**

The title of the novel mimics theoretical or philosophical essays, and it descends indeed from Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just*, an essay which provocatively challenges academic standards, making a rather old-fashioned Keatsian claim that beauty may be equated with truth. Scarry feels that the notion of beauty has been disparaged and banished from the humanities, on the politically correct grounds that to deem something beautiful means to fetichize it, to dehistoricize and depoliticize both art and perception. Scarry’s vagueness and deliberately subjective stance (she includes pictures of her own reproductions of Matisse, enthusing on them) have drawn scathing criticism. Her claim that beauty naturally leads to fairness and justice has been countered with the obvious reference to music and Nazism. She has been blamed (by Denis Dutton for instance) for imagining and addressing disembodied critics, rather than actual existing arguments. Satirizing academic life and politically correct jargon, Smith’s novel aims to side with Scarry and to show that the disembodied voices dismissing beauty do exist in the flesh—and in academia.

Smith’s humorous satire of academic life belongs to a tradition of campus novels, from Nabokov’s *Pnin* (to which Smith refers in interviews) to David Lodge’s *Changing Places*: just as Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp once swapped places, Howard has to negotiate the arrival from England of an arch-rival who invades his familiar American campus. Academic satire plays on the small world of campuses, an enclosed place foregrounding power games and a discrepancy between the ideals of the life of the mind and the actual life of academics. Comedy, of course, is linked to extramarital affairs. In a world of global gloom, budget cuts and racial divisions, of insecure yearnings for stability and tenure, seduction provides compen-
sation for professional discontent and sublimates ambitions, as Womack points out: “the role of erotic love in university fiction [is] an emotional transaction that provides its consumers with a diversion from the intellectual rigors of the academy and its inability to satisfy their desires for human interconnection” (Womack 78). Just as in Lodge’s novel Philip Swallow sleeps with Morris Zapp’s wife and daughter, Kipps’s daughter Victoria Kipps seduces both Jerome and his father Howard Belsey (a small world indeed), not to mention Howard’s affair with his white colleague aptly named Claire.

The ethical problem of teaching goes beyond the farcical sexual scenes. Much of the novel’s appeal comes from its third intertextual layer, not simply text and music but also, last but not least, painting. Visual arts become the touchstone testing academic discourse. The second section of the novel borrows its title from Rembrandt’s painting *The Anatomy Lesson* and pays lip service to universities as shrines of knowledge, borrowing its tongue-and-cheek epigraph from Elaine Scarry’s essay: “To misstate, or even merely understate, the relation of the universities to beauty is one kind of error that can be made. A university is among the precious things that can be destroyed” (Smith 127). Yet all is not well in Wellington University, and teaching is no thing of beauty. Smith dissects poststructuralism’s theoretical hegemony. It is not so much deconstruction *per se* which is at stake, but its second-hand dissemination as a politically correct *doxa* which admits no contradiction and bans feelings and personal response, not to mention visual interpretation. Howard’s seminar is a case in point. His ready-made speech is drawn from canonized criticism, from Barthes’ concept of mythology (“Art is the western myth” [155]), the opening catch phrase of a presentation which he has delivered for five years, complete with a ready-made systematic emphasis on key terms conveyed by italics) to the Derridean deconstruction of logocentrism. In order to channel the reader’s sympathy, Smith constructs a mouthpiece, a character called Katie Armstrong who only appears in the ludicrous seminar chapter. Deconstruction is supposed to free perception and provide freedom. But in Smith’s brilliant parody, Armstrong is an alienated outsider whose genuine love for Rembrandt is matched by her bewilderment in class, as other students confidently play the hackneyed game and utter abstract (ready-made) sentences which she fails to grasp. The chapter begins with *ekphrasis* and internal focalization, as Katie, the odd girl out, probes into the “vigorous” yet “dreamy” (250) atmosphere of *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* and the pathos of *Seated Nude*, the shock of cross-hatching highlighting the marks on an elderly woman’s body to turn skin into the very text of life. Yet for students and teacher, the image vanishes, erased by the echoing tautology of holy self-referentiality: “It’s a painting of its own interior,” “Its subject is painting itself. It’s a painting about painting” (253). As “Dr Belsey raps on his desk in an interested way, as if to say, now we’re getting to it” (253), as mytheme, desire and logos are thrown in for good measure, Katie sinks in her chair, overwhelmed by the tide of words.
Similarly, Victoria’s gleeful catachresis sums up the academic syllabus by substituting “tomato” for content, exposing the weary similarity between apparently radically different discourses: one class becomes “To properly understand the tomato you must first uncover the tomato’s suppressed Herstory,” another “The tomato’s nature versus the tomato’s nurture,” or “The post-colonial tomato as eaten by Naipaul,” while Howard’s class, the best of them all for Victoria, “is all about never ever saying I like the tomato” (312). Although Victoria is dazzled, like Zora, by the trendy passwords, in Smith’s mind it is time to skip tomatoes and look at art again.

Art is what Lakoff calls a contested concept, implying a structure with a given core of values, whose interpretations, however, vary. The novel opposes two kinds of failures, pitting a conservative against a liberal view of art. Smith clearly condemns Monty Kipps, the opaque charismatic conservative; unlike Howard, he has managed to write a book on Rembrandt, but he argues passionately against affirmative action. Although Monty’s approach to art is presumably closer to that of Simon Schama (to whom Smith pays tribute in her acknowledgements) than Howard’s is, Smith stresses his prejudices and growing tendency to minimize or deny racial problems. Monty has been mentally whitewashed, drawn to the myth of a color-blind society (like other collaborators who are briefly hinted at, Colin and Condoleezza); for all his collection of Haitian paintings, he has been led to betray his roots, and we are given no inner view of a character who has been hollowed by social success.

Equally empty is Howard’s distanced approach to art, although Smith has obvious sympathy for his attempt to challenge the critical Establishment embodied by Monty Kipps. Howard hates representational art with a vengeance; he has been planning for years a book entitled “Against Rembrandt,” which aims to prove that the old master is a materialistic sham. Yet somehow the book never gets written, to Howard’s deep shame. The novel ends with a classic scene. As Howard rushes to the lecture which might at last give him tenure, he gets caught in a traffic jam, leaves his car far away from the faculty, runs, belatedly reaches the lecture hall and begins his powerful “Pah point” presentation. But the point is that he remains helpless, as he suddenly remembers the little yellow folder containing his lecture notes which he has left in his car. The scene recalls a comic tradition of failed lectures or performances, from the Thirty-Nine Steps to The Third Man or Kazuo Ishiguro’s Unconsoled. In a glorious finale, Howard miserable switches from picture to picture, playing with buttons and zooming on details, unable to utter a word, leaving his audience to wonder whether the order of the pictures is the ultimate significant ineffable message. The liberal lecturer is struck dumb.

Although the conflict focuses on artistic interpretation, Smith widens the scope by opposing the University’s ivory tower of discontent to the real world, through the characters of Carl and Levi. Instead of appreciating Carl’s talent as a poet, the university turns him into a hip hop archivist, in
a mock attempt to canonize street art, in fact weakening it by framing it. Smith also challenges all models of political correctness, including the obsession with roots and the desire to define identity entirely by skin colour. Upper-middle-class Levi, Howard and Kiki’s son, indulges in rituals of collective identity: he wears the uniform of hoods and jeans, relishes the ceremony of knocking fists and using passwords (“yo,” “man,” “brother”), speaks with an unnatural Brooklyn accent, hangs out with a group of activists and steals a painting while claiming to be liberating Haiti in the process, to his mother’s angst, anger and dismay. Clearly, for Smith, Levi’s attempt to become more black is a mistaken quest, a “comic tautology”: “The ‘search for identity’ is a pointless, misery-inducing concept” (OB).

According to Laura Moss, Smith belongs to a new generation of postcolonial writers who no longer wish to reinvent an in-between England or America and seem only keen to rediscover the ordinary: “That ordinary includes a recognition of history, a negotiation of a mixing of cultures, races, languages, and the acknowledgement of the politics of everyday life” (Moss 24). *White Teeth* used the motif of teeth to question the notion of roots and debunked myths of historical belonging (like the dubious family appropriation of the Great Mutiny), of a perception of history ritualized by the media (as when the two families watch the fall of the Berlin wall, convinced that it is an event which they cannot grasp properly) or contemporary fundamentalism (the twins with their ironically inverted fates are a case in point). *On Beauty* also questions rituals of identity. There is a fleeting allusion to Howard’s failure to grasp 9/11, as he instantly borrows Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum, but the novel focuses above all on Levi’s progress, from a record megastore (clearly Virgin) to Haitian activism. Just as Alsana retaliated on her son’s fascination with the Fatwa—and his trip to Brighton to burn Rushdie’s book—by burning all his books and T-shirts and records, Kiki is outraged when she finds the stolen painting under Levi’s bed. In both cases, strong mothers act as guardians attempting to ward off rising fundamentalism.

The legacy of femininity

Rewriting the campus novel in a multicultural perspective, Smith ultimately strays from satire to redefine Forster’s concept of “muddle”. Beyond its sit-com format, its zest and playful attention to voice (with the occasional—rather than systematic, as in *White Teeth*—phonetic spelling or play on words, like “Eyeano” [88] or “inellekchewl” [116]) the novel ultimately returns to *Howards End*.

Smith has defined Forster’s novels as an Aristotelian education of the heart, and *On Beauty* creates its own version of empathy. The comic ending precludes completion, closure, recalling Forster’s plea for an expansion which liberates the notes and tunes of the novel: “Not rounding off but opening out” (Forster 1954, 169). The final moment is a muddle (“you call it concept failure these days,” says Smith, “but he called it muddle” [FS]).
The polysyndeton mocks Howard’s silent panic as he desperately presses the button and glances at the pictures on the screen:

He kept pressing. People appeared: angels and staalmeesters and merchants and surgeons and students and writers and peasants and kings and the artist himself. And the artist himself. And the artist himself. The man from Pomona began to nod appreciatively. Howard pressed the button. (442)

All of Rembrandt’s career files past, as ekphrasis is replaced by allusion, lumping together individual portraits and group portraits, all those paintings displaying the sitters’ wealth or detailing the texture of flesh, but which are here barely hinted at, from the surgeon of the *Anatomy Lesson* to the endless series of self-portraits. Rembrandt’s remarkable self-portraits, old and young, wistful or grinning, with burning or shaded eyes, with youthful energy or deeply-etched wrinkles which tell of time and sorrow, with plain clothes or a lace collar or splendid cloth at the very moment of his downfall, are blurred by the tedious, comical, panicky repetition: “And the artist himself.” It is a delightfully comic moment. But the reader may guess that, beyond comedy, Rembrandt’s self-portraits turn into a mirror held up for Howard’s sake. Deprived of his stream of barren words, for the first time in years, Howard begins to see.

The title of the third part of the novel, “On beauty and being wrong,” is taken from Elaine Scarry’s essay, and all of a sudden the phrase is reactivated by Howard’s parodic, wordless lecture. Howard’s dry approach to art is both exposed, proven wrong by his inability to improvise, and redeemed by his silence. The novel comes full circle with a new kind of “un-selfing,” perhaps even, against all odds, of “blissful un-selfing” (Smith 44). For Scarry, beauty dissolves narcissistic self-centredness: “At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering” (Scarry 77). Her description recalls Barthes’s *punctum*—the sudden unexpected recognition of meaning as a detail pierces the spectator—mingled with a Romantic or Platonic dream of essence: beautiful things “act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space” (Scarry 77). “[A]ll the space formerly in the service of protecting, guarding, advancing the self” is now free to react to the painting. And the painting which strikes Howard is the last one. As the audience frowns and he realizes that there are no more pictures, a desperate Howard begins to enlarge the picture at random:

Howard turned his head and looked at the picture behind him.

‘*Hendrickje Bathing, 1654*’, croaked Howard and said no more. (442)

Howard looks indeed at Hendrickje, as the audience looks at him, “awaiting elucidation.” The verb “look” becomes a key word, systematically repeated throughout the passage. Like Scarry, who refuses to side with the feminist definition of the male gaze as a necessarily aggressive objectification of the female body, Smith turns the painting into an “intimation of what is to come” (443). Hendrickje looks at “the dark, reflexive water” (442), and
Howard gazes at the enlarged texture of paint and skin, at the enmeshed colours, white, pink, with a hint of blue and yellow, at the strikingly blurred, unfinished hands. Rembrandt’s love for Hendrickje, mediated by paint, suddenly allows Howard to discover the hitherto neglected, black, fat flesh of his aging wife, and what lies beneath: “Howard looked at Kiki. In her face, his life” (442).

Thus pictorial intertextuality becomes Smith’s way of reviving Forster’s Edwardian meditation on connection and identity. Painting is the answer to the reader’s sense of intertextual loss. For Forster’s novel revolves around an eponymous place, the core of identity, which solves the central question of the novel: who shall inherit Englishness? Deprived of a polysemic place, On Beauty strikes a lighter note, as Salman Rushdie points out: “I don’t think she’s E. M. Forster; she’s actually closer to Evelyn Waugh. Even though the book is based on Howards End, I think the actual note of the book is more of a Waugh-like comedy, rather than Forsterian stuff, which is rather darker” (DW).

Smith herself describes her use of the hypotext, Howards End, as some kind of “scaffolding” which she might as well have taken out in the end. Perhaps the transposition of a novel revolving around a house is hardly possible in today’s world. How might one convey Mrs Wilcox’s osmosis with a place, how might one translate “she was a wisp of hay, a flower” (Forster 84)? Even the 1991 film adaptation by James Ivory, although a most faithful transposition with a brilliant cast and a lovely house, miserably fails to convey visually the link between Mrs Wilcox and the garden—which Forster expressed with a simple onomatopoeic sentence in Helen’s opening letter—, as a lost Vanessa Redgrave wanders through the garden tugging at the beads of her necklace, glancing right and left as if looking for something to prove the attachment to the garden. Perhaps it is impossible to inhabit Englishness, to shape it as a home, a garden, for as Zora points out, how is one to avoid the “pastoral fallacy” and “depoliticized reification, all this beauty stuff about landscape”? (Smith 218) After Foucault, “where is there to go with that stuff”? (219).

Modern theory has erased the microcosmic, Bachelardian dream of a magic house of Being. But that is precisely where true transposition may begin, for an urban writer like Zadie Smith. Whereas White Teeth and Autograph Man deal mostly with male friendships, On Beauty switches to female friendship. In Forster’s novel, the elusive Ruth Wilcox and the intellectual Margaret Schlegel mysteriously, spontaneously turn into intimate friends. Ruth attempts to bequeath her beloved house to the younger woman, whom she hardly knows in social terms. In Smith’s version, Carlene owns a painting by the Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite, which Kiki first sees when visiting her friend. Or rather, at first, she fails to see it. A window opens in her mind and she begins to remember what Howard used to be like when they first met. (Howard’s anti-representational stance is unnatural, as is suggested by the return of the repressed, his tendency to describe people in terms of paintings. Carl is a Rubens, French a Wyndham Lewis.) Only when Carlene asks her whether she likes the painting she is staring at unawares, does
she focus on the 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” (174). Smith’s ekphrasis describes an actual 1948 painting by Hector Hyppolite, *Maîtresse Erzulie*, which may be seen in a Haitian Museum. A housepainter and shoemaker by trade, self-taught Hyppolite painted with chicken feathers and his fingers as well as brushes. His decorated door drew the attention of the conscientious objector and American watercolourist DeWitt Peters, who founded the *Centre d’Art* in Port-au-Prince and turned Hyppolite into Haiti’s foremost painter. The exotic birds and entwined flowers and fruit are Hyppolite’s trademark. When he visited Haiti in 1943, André Breton—who was to buy five paintings by Hyppolite—was dazzled by his paintings’ bright, luscious, primitive unschooled colours, opening up to a mythical, supernatural—or, for Breton, unconscious—dimension. Such vibrant paintings contained a secret—perhaps because Hyppolite was a *hougan*, or Voodoo priest—which according to Breton might revolutionize Western art. André Malraux was also to enthuse about the colours of Haitian Art, an enigma born out of slavery. In Smith’s case too, Haitian painting allows the rephrasing of a riddle, the enigma of arrival, both in personal and racial terms. The Caribbean Carlene befriends African-American Kiki, who is married to Howard, a white Englishman; using the painting as a metaphor, they are able to mention the unmentionable, Howard’s extra-marital affair which has become common knowledge. While Howard bans representational paintings, Erzulie is presented as a female figure of empowerment:

> She’s a great Voodoo goddess, Erzulie. She’s called the Black Virgin—also, the Violent Venus. . . . She represents love, beauty, purity, the ideal female and the moon. . . . and she’s the mystère of jealousy, vengeance and discord, and, on the other hand, of love, of perpetual help, goodwill, health, beauty and fortune. (175)

No wonder Kiki should sigh that “[t]hat’s a lot of symbolizing,” and Carlene add “like all the Catholic saints rolled into one being” (175)! The sentence may recall Forster’s famous paragraph advocating connection between opposites, the prose and the passion, the beast and the monk. Turning her back to the viewer, the ambivalent, somewhat flattened Erzulie is not so much foregrounded as an erotic figure (she is no stunning beauty like Victoria) as integrated into the frieze of birds and flowers which surrounds her, like a Caribbean version of the William Morris motif Howard is fond of doodling. The painting represents the choice offered to Kiki, rebellion or passivity, revenge or love, jealousy or “beauty” (Carlene does point out that Kiki must have been very beautiful in her youth, and still remains so). The painting—and Carlene—force Kiki to confront a dilemma she is evading with her self-help clichés (“Takes a giant to hurt me” [176]). The painting later reappears under Levi’s bed, precisely when Kiki is about to be told, by her own daughter, that her husband has also deceived her with Kipps’s daughter, Victoria, a case of crumbling symmetry. The painting, on the
contrary, foregrounds the naked body of a powerful black woman, challenging the psychological erasure caused by the husband’s betrayal. Thus, though it is no longer possible to inhabit Englishness as a safe haven, the feminine legacy endures. *Howards End* played on double standards, contrasting and connecting the case of the adulterous Henry Wilcox and the case of the pregnant, unmarried Helen Schlegel. Just as Margaret entered *Howards End* precisely as her transgressive sister needed a shelter, choosing to become the mistress of the house, so is Kiki given the painting at the very moment when the second betrayal is about to throw her off balance and compel her to leave. There was magic in the legacy of *Howards End*, which, when she became aware of it at the very end of the novel, shook Margaret’s life “in its inmost recesses” (Forster 332); there is magic in the painting, and magic in the transmission. Although she must still fight the legal battle to prove that it is duly hers, Kiki may, in a way, inhabit the painting, that is to say, the space of female friendship, as the painting offers a territory vindicating the body, an imaginary journey to mythical roots, both in terms of culture and femininity: “There is such a shelter in each other” (Smith 431), says the note bequeathing the painting to Kiki (a sentence which Smith borrowed from one of Nick Laird’s—*i.e.* her husband’s—poems). Besides, the goddess Erzulie is traditionally associated with water. In Hippiolite’s painting, she stands in a puddle of blue which may or may not be water. This may suggest that Smith also uses the painting as the counterpart of Rembrandt’s *Hendrickje*—a woman whose feet lie in water, but whose skin is smoothly black, whose back is turned as she no longer gazes at men but at her parrot. It is the conjunction of *Maîtresse Erzulie* and *Hendrickje Bathing* which potentially allows the reconciliation between a more sensitive Howard and a stronger Kiki. Thus, although Smith’s novel is definitely multi-cultural and comical, one may trace a Forsterian “pattern” or “rhythm” at work (to use the concepts defined in *Aspects of the Novel*). As Levi puts it at Carlene’s funeral, entirely thinking of someone else and unknowingly misquoting *Howards End*, “sometimes it’s like you just meet someone and you know you’re totally connected” (304) . . .

Thus *On Beauty* blends influences to interpret and rewrite E. M. Forster’s 1910 novel *Howards End*. Addressing mainstream white fiction, Smith plays with textual and pictorial intertextuality, using the technical contrasts between Rembrandt’s and Hyppolite’s paintings to create what Lecercle calls a “structure of feeling” (Lecercle 219). Positioned as an ageing black woman ignored by her white husband in a mostly white academic community, Kiki learns through her friendship with Carlene to free herself from clichés, achieving a kind of counter-interpellation. As the daughter of a Jamaican mother and a white English father who felt cut off from her milieu when she entered King’s College, Cambridge (E. M. Forster’s own college), Smith is able to transpose the plight of Leonard Bast—the uprooted boy who longs for culture and loses his identity in the process—in order to convey the complexity of a multicultural world. Thus, like Forster (who expanded on the exquisite, reasonable world of Jane Austen), she attempts
to extend the ethical space of the comic novel. She is well aware that she may be accused of “muddle” too, but she is fond of the phrase “fail better,” and repeatedly insists that neither Forster’s nor her own novels are perfect: “The literature we love amounts to the fractured shards of an attempt, not the monument of fulfilment” (Smith 2007).

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