

*On Beauty* by Zadie Smith (Hamish Hamilton)

8 January 2006

In her acknowledgements Zadie Smith pays tribute to E M Forster “to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or another” This is at first sight a surprising connection. Forster, who spent his last years as honoured guest of King’s College Cambridge, was very much a product of middle-class England; his novels are genteel and sedate, for all their anger at gentility and sedateness. Smith, on the other hand, is the daughter of a Jamaican mother and a British father and grew up in a working-class area of London. She also has two younger brothers who are passionate about hip-hop. But in spite of these unForsterian strains, Smith in fact read for a degree in English literature at King’s College, Cambridge; her novels thus have the advantage of being informed by one of the richest literary legacies on earth without being blinded or bullied by it.

*On Beauty* in fact borrows quite a few situations and character types from Forster’s novel *Howards End*. Forster structured his novel around the interaction between two families, the high-minded, intellectual Schlegels and the practical, materialistic Wilcoxes. Forster’s famous epigraph, “Only connect ...” would seem to be a plea for reconciliation between the apparently mutually antagonistic value systems represented by the two families. That reconciliation is achieved, if anywhere, in the somewhat whimsical, other-worldly Mrs Wilcox, who dies relatively early on in the novel, but lingers on in unexpected ways. Smith has adapted her two families to more modern concerns. On the one hand there is the Belsey family: Howard, the father, is a liberal Englishman who has married an African\_American wife, Kiki, and is now teaching Art History at a college in New England. His three teen-aged children negotiate in their different ways the Anglo-American cultural divide.

Against the Belseys are set Howard Kipps and his family: Howard, too, is an art historian; he is also a Trinidadian and a high-profile ultra-conservative opponent of everything Howard believes in.

As in Forster’s novel, the offspring of one family (in this case the young and rather priggish Jerome Belsey) falls in love (very briefly) with the offspring of the other family (here the beautiful, wilful, really rather awful Victoria Kipps). The role of the ethereal Mrs Wilcox is here taken by Mrs Kipps, who forms a strange but close friendship with Kiki Belsey before her death. Like Mrs Wilcox, she leaves her friend a valuable bequest

...

Thus Zadie Smith sets up her characters in two camps very similar to Forster’s, though the parallels are not close enough to be mechanical. She also includes some set-pieces that are obviously affectionate parodies of their equivalents in Forster: Forster’s famous description of the Beethoven Fifth Symphony is here paralleled by an equally fanciful description of the Mozart Requiem (“Mozart’s requiem begins with you walking towards a huge pit.”). In Forster, one of the Schlegel women inadvertently steals the umbrella of the young man sitting next to her; here Zora Belsey, Howard’s daughter, walks off with the Discman of her next-door neighbour.

As this example will suggest, Smith's Forsterian parallels are playful rather than profound. *On Beauty* is too substantial a novel to rely for its impact on its parasitic relationship to another novel. Smith has her own fish to fry, and they are different from Forster's.

In *On Beauty* the conflict between liberal secularism and conservative Christianity is exacerbated by the opposing Kipps-Belsey approaches to art. Howard Belsey is an avid anti-representationist, who has for years been working on a book debunking Rembrandt, as "a merely competent artisan who painted whatever his wealthy patrons requested." In his lectures, "Howard asked his students to imagine prettiness as the mask that power wears. To recast Aesthetics as a rarefied language of exclusion."

Monty Kipps, on the other hand, is deeply traditional in his view of art, as of society, and as conservative Black intellectual has gained for himself considerable "public power" from an establishment only too eager to reward Black "merit", which is to say conformity to establishment values.

The battle ground, then, is, as the novel's title indicates, that of aesthetics, but as more than a matter of academic debate. The idea of beauty as power is skilfully woven through all the tangled relations in the novel. The hapless Zora Belsey, avid follower of all the latest aesthetic theories propounded by her father, suspecting but not accepting that she's not as pretty as she's clever, finds that the dashing young man she "rescues" from the ghetto falls for the shallow but beautiful Victoria Kipps rather than for her; as Jerome, himself a recent victim of Victoria's beauty says, "It's a powerful thing, you know, to look like that."

But beauty, notoriously residing in the eye of the beholder, is of course not an absolute power. Kiki Belsey, in her youth apparently a ravishing beauty, and still formidable despite her 250 lbs, comments trenchantly on the fickleness of human aesthetics when she discovers her husband has been having an affair with a diminutive white colleague: "You married a big black bitch and you run off with a fucking leprechaun?"

When her husband, ever the theoretician, attempts to rationalise "this concern with beauty as a physical actuality in the world"; Kiki scornfully brings him back to basics: "You think there's some great philosophical I-don't-fucking-know-what because you can't keep your dick in your pants?"

The novel doesn't seem to take sides in the aesthetic debate: Smith is more interested in her characters' actions than their theories. If the book has a moral, it is that pronounced by Mrs Kipps, in her version of Forster's "only connect": "I don't care what the doctors say," she says to Kiki, "the eyes and the heart are directly connected."

Tracing with rare skill and humour the connections between the eyes and hearts of her characters, Zadie Smith has produced, a funny, affecting, erudite, assured novel. By any standards, it's quite a feat; for a thirty-year old author it's astonishing.