American Journal of
HUMANITIES
and
SOCIAL SCIENCES

Article

# ‘“I Like Her Parrots”’: Accessibility, Aesthetics, Zadie Smith’s On Beauty and the Women’s Prize for Fiction

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## Abstract
One of the key criteria given to the judges of the Women’s Prize for Fiction is ‘accessibility’. Accessibility, readability and more recently ‘relatability’, have gained traction in recent years over other indices of literary value, such as quasi-modernist notions of difficulty and alterity. This article questions the gendering of accessibility as well as its relationship to neoliberalism. Its specific focus is on the 2006 winner of the Women’s Prize for Fiction, Zadie Smith’s On Beauty, a book that foregrounds questions of aesthetics and aesthetic value and attempts in its form and content to negotiate between the popular and the literary. Simultaneously problematising and simplifying ideas of beauty and artistic worth, the novel’s success was arguably due, in part, to the way that it at once tapped into and resolved insecurities surrounding judgements of aesthetic value. Controversies over literary awards are routine, but this article argues that they were especially rife in the 2000s. This article also sets these controversies over literary value and the novel’s own various engagements with the aesthetic in the context of recent, postcritical backlashes against the hermeneutics of suspicion that came to influence literary and critical theory in the 1980s and 1990s.

**Keywords:** accessibility; gender; aesthetic; judgment; neoliberalism; critique; postcritique; suspicion; time

## Introduction
The routine controversies that surround literary prizes appear to confirm two ready- made pieces of conventional wisdom: one is that judgements about aesthetic value are subjective and partial; the other is that they should aspire not to be. A judging panel would be instantly discredited if it openly stated that it had awarded a prize to a book on the basis of its author’s already-proven track record. Established reputation may be suspected as the source of unacknowledged subjective bias but such a bias could not, by definition, stand as an official, objective criterion of value. Likewise, for a person from a traditionally excluded minority to receive an award on the basis of their exclusion alone would be a shocking condescension that deprived the artwork itself of any ‘objective’ value independent of its author’s marginalised status. This would be the worst kind of positive discrimination.

Therefore, what, if any, are the aesthetic values that transcend not only the politics of inclusion and exclusion, but the recognition of different aesthetic traditions, the vagaries of taste, the individualisation of evaluation, the seemingly incommensurable varieties of writing both across and within different literary genres, and the changing vocabularies of literary and aesthetic value affected, not least, by the marketisation of literature and concepts of literary value? Can aesthetic values ever be so robust as to withstand the open accusation or unstated suspicion that appeals to objectivity are merely ways of legitimating and universalising subjective, historically circumscribed, socially contingent judgments, whether those judgements are made in the interests of the enfranchised or disenfranchised? If the elusiveness of aesthetic values makes them unamenable to checklists, then appeals to them will always be, at best, debatable, and at worst, subject to the charge of subjectivism or time-bound faddishness. This is especially true of the ever-renewing field of ‘contemporary fiction’. ‘It is not so long ago’, wrote Mary Eagleton in 2008, ‘that university literature courses ended at World War II on the grounds that one could not possibly make a credible assessment on anything more recent.’ ‘Now’, she continues, ‘partly through commercial pressure within publishing, partly through the introduction of a wider clientele into higher education, partly through theoretical developments, especially in cultural studies, “newness”, the talisman of the marketplace, has extended into other fields.’ (Eagleton 2008, 13)

The marketplace may not only enable ‘contemporary fiction’ to become an endlessly renewable category by means of which ostensibly significant works of literature appear and disappear at unprecedented speed, but it may also have the effect, paradoxically, of homogenising the field. According to Amit Chaudhuri, ‘market activism’ has become the key determinant of literary value with the result that ‘since the mid-1990s onwards we have witnessed a convergence between literary language and the language of publishing, for it was the publishers, increasingly, who told us about the

“masterpieces” they were publishing’ (Chaudhuri 2016, 11). While it is not an easy task to read off market values from literary texts, and to show how market values shape their production and consumption, I shall aim in this article to suggest some connections between commerce, neoliberalism, women’s writing, prize culture and contemporary judgements about literary value.
The official judging criteria for the Women’s Prize for Fiction play out a variation on the predicaments of contemporary evaluation, even as they breezily assume the existence of certain objective or objective-sounding literary virtues:
‘The judges are given the key criteria for the Prize—accessibility, originality and excellence in writing by women. They are asked to forget about reviews, publicity spends, an author’s previous reputation, the sense of ‘who deserves it’ and choose simply on the basis of novels that inspire them, move them, make them think—and that they admire and enjoy!’ (Women’s Prize for Fiction 2022)
Most of these criteria—excellence, originality, the capacity to move, inspire and pro- voke thought—are presented as though they are uncontentious. They are treated as norma- tive for what we take to be creativity, but they are not so precisely defined as to deprive writers, readers and judges of significant latitude in how they might play out or be inter- preted. Moreover, judging is not positioned in this blurb as a particularly specialist activity, requiring, say, an understanding of current histories and theories of the novel or philoso- phies of the aesthetic. The judge is positioned as an ordinary reader, and the ordinary reader is presumed to read for enjoyment specific to them. Not everyone will equally find pleasure in the same books. Validation of the personal is what reading for enjoyment is, amongst other things, taken to be about. It is my enjoyment in all its potential subjective complexity and depth, or, alternatively, lightness, which means that one book rather than another might temporarily or more permanently gratify me. Enjoyment, however, may be put into some degree of jeopardy by the other stated criteria. A reader may not enjoy a novel, or at least not straightaway, but it may ‘make them think’ about what habitually gives them enjoyment or non-enjoyment and whether enjoyment may sometimes be, if not beside the point, then not the whole point. The subjectivity of reading is nevertheless enthusiastically embraced in the phrase, ‘choose simply on the basis of novels that inspire them, move them, make them think—and that they admire and enjoy!’, even as the first part of the sentence—‘They are asked to forget about reviews, publicity spends, an author’s previous reputation, the sense of ”who deserves it”’—is an encouragement to lay aside considerations, like the halo effect of reputation, that may impair objective evaluation on the one hand, or authentically personalised responses on the other. Such responses may well be modified, revised or even discarded in the light of the responses of the other judges, in a process that we may think of, in idealistic terms, as moving from subjectivity to intersubjectivity to something approximating objectivity. The notion of approximation is key because while the discourse of evaluation in prize culture must avoid obvious partiality, it must also try to preserve a sense of the difficulty of the process of evaluation due to the presumed singularity of the artwork. In a piece in The Irish Times on the experience of being a judge of the 2017 Man Booker, the writer Helen Mort quotes the chair of judges, Nick Barley’s, observation that: ‘”We started out hoping that we might have criteria . . . but we realised quickly that each book is a bit like a human being . . . an individual and we had to really begin by just describing what the book was like. In describing the book, we started to realise what its qualities were.”’ Mort agrees: ‘How do you compare those individuals? How would you choose a favourite child?’ (Mort 2017). In order to maintain belief in the uniqueness of the work of art, thoughts about any possible homogenisation that may occur as a product or by-product of prize culture and commercial pressures are subordinated to the affirmation of an ‘apples and oranges’ incommensurability.

The difficult negotiations between the subjective, intersubjective and objective/quasi- objective are not reflected on in the description of the brief given to the judges of the Women’s Prize for Fiction. The description is relaxed and does not entwine itself in complication. This ties in with another criterion, not yet mentioned: ‘accessibility’. Unlike the other, more predictable criteria, this one is perhaps less expected, less what one might immediately think of when thinking ‘literature’. However, the term, like the others, is not elaborated on. This means that it too is open to interpretation.
I want to suggest three possible angles on accessibility. One is to do with range, with the idea that a literary work might resonate with as many readers, and different kinds of reader, as possible. A second is that accessibility indicates a dilution of the demand or challenge placed upon readers—I will dwell more on this later. A third, more overtly as well as contentiously gendered perspective, is that accessibility is elevated to the status of a criterion as an implicit challenge to a masculinist association of value with difficulty. The lightweight versus the heavyweight can play out in gendered terms, with, say, ‘chick lit’ being cast as frivolous, feminine and undemanding as compared with the rigours of ‘serious’, masculine literature. This kind of perspective may be a useful way of cautioning against the

possible knee-jerk instinct of the professional academic reader or highbrow guardian of literary value, to make an instant critique of accessibility. Then again, to identify women's fiction with accessibility—or such neighbouring notions as relatability or readability—to the extent of taking it to be a specific measure for determining the value of women's writing, is itself deeply questionable. Women writers, so one stereotyping implication might play out, write with their hearts, directly from personal experience, with little regard for literary effect, technique or difficulty. That this is a stereotype not borne out by the diverse reality of women's fiction does not mean that some women's fiction might not fit into it or be fitted into it.
I have chosen to focus on the Women's Prize for Fiction competition of 2006. This is for several reasons. One of them is that the shortlist includes several stellar performers, both before and after 2006, in literary prize culture. Hilary Mantel, Ali Smith, Sarah Waters and the winner, Zadie Smith, have frequently appeared on shortlists with outright success on a number of occasions. It would be rash to claim that they thereby collectively represent 'literature' as that category has been (variously) constructed and reconstructed in literary prize culture, but it may be that between them they represent at least some trajectories and counter-trajectories within it. One of these, perennial to some extent but particularly contentious in the 2000s, is the conflict, or perception of conflict, between accessibility and its various real or perceived antagonists. In a piece in The Guardian in 2002, following the
award of the Man Booker prize (to Yann Martel's Life of Pi), Robert McCrum quoted one of
the judges, writer, comedian and English Literature graduate David Badiel's comment that:
'"There are far too many [books] with an obvious gravitas—heavyweight books that are written with the clear agenda of "this is going to win a prize". It's like a formula. They attempt to grab big themes, and have a vulgar, obvious seriousness, yes, even a kind of pompous pretentiousness about them."' (McCrum 2002) As McCrum suggests, Badiel's remark connects with the chair of the jury, academic Lisa Jardine's observation that the 2002 shortlist heralded '"the beginning of a new era"' (McCrum 2002). That perceived '"new era"' was arguably also exemplified in the US National Book Foundation's decision in 2003 to award its Medal for Distinguished Contri- bution to American Letters to the popular fiction writer Stephen King. In his acceptance speech, King, aware of the controversy sparked by the award, urged that: 'Bridges can be built between the so-called popular fiction and the so-called literary fiction', adding that 'I believe the time comes when you must be inclusive rather than exclusive.' (King 2003).

The Women's Prize for Fiction appears to have anticipated by several years the embrace of a form of populism, or if not populism then middle ground in literary prize culture. As far as I have been able to tell, accessibility has been a published criterion for the award since its inception as the Orange Prize in 1996, won by Helen Dunmore's part-gothic, part-period novel A Spell of Winter. The title of the 2006 winner, On Beauty, however, does not immediately presage accessibility. It seems less likely as a title for a novel than for an essayistic or philosophical exploration in the manner of one of Smith's acknowledged inspirations for her book, On Beauty and Being Just (Scarry 1999), by the academic Elaine Scarry (currently Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and General Theory of Value at Harvard University). Despite its title, though, On Beauty is not a work of philosophy or theory, but a readable work of fiction in which the conventionally staple ingredients of the novel—story and character—are the bearers of the philosophical, sociological and psychological issues and themes that the novel seeks to explore. These issues and themes are many and varied: gender, race, class and age, and the way that these intersect and are lived out in complex and often contradictory ways; multiculturalism; beauty, art and poetry; connection and disconnection; love and infidelity; academia and the relationship between 'academic' and 'ordinary' understandings of the world. The book touches many culturally, socially and humanly significant bases, which may be one of the reasons for its literary success alongside its conscious self-insertion—as 'hommage' to E. M. Forster's Howards End—into an established literary lineage (Smith 2006: acknowledgements). It is at the
same time, however, a page turner—'a rollicking good read' according to one endorsement (Smith 2006: inside back cover)—with an intricately worked-out plot featuring secrets and betrayals eventually laid bare, as well as lust, graphic sex, love and friendship, family tensions and a full gamut of emotions that often run high. From this brief outline, then, Smith's novel seems to answer the perceived need for the building of bridges between so-called popular and so-called literary fiction.
None of the above reasons, however, is the main reason for my speculation about why On Beauty won the 2006 award, which is that because On Beauty is, amongst other things, about a renewed sense of the importance as well as precarity of aesthetic judgement, it implicates itself in the insecurities of the chosen arbiters of aesthetic value, insecurities no doubt fuelled by an award culture of imminent deadlines, pressured reading and media attention. At the same time—and this speaks to its alliance with a market-driven, neoliberal culture of accessibility—the book seems on one level

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simply to accept the personalisation of value in a world of diverse and proliferating candidates for the status of 'art'. Smith's novel—one section of which is called 'On Beauty and Being Wrong'—is inclusive of many different expressions of beauty and/or artistic endeavour, from Rembrandt to rap, while also including characters' varied responses to them. If the possibility of 'being wrong' about beauty suggests the presence, even the desirability, of a struggle, if not for some absolute objective truth, then at least for the need for prolonged and self-reflexive judgement, then the book leavens this philosophically taxing project by simply accepting misjudgement as an all too human comedy of errors or else falling behind the conventional wisdom that beauty is, after all, in the eye of the beholder. This, at any rate, is the perspective I will initially pursue, before attending to the novel's subdued recognition of the complexities of aesthetic judgement.

Smith's book clears the way to a form of demotic subjectivism in matters of aesthetic value by successfully disarming intellectual expertise. Such expertise in the field of aesthet- ics is of course no guarantor of incontestable truth about value. It would nevertheless be reductive to cast aside academic framings—inevitably plural—of the aesthetic. In On Beauty, however, instead of any such framing—and despite the stated importance of Scarry's book (Scarry 1999)—there is an absence, called Howard Belsey, whose job title at the book's fictive University, Wellington College, is, paradoxically enough, 'Empson Lecturer in Aesthetics' (Smith 2006, 19). Howard is Zadie Smith's caricatured embodiment of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that emerged as an integral part of critical and literary theory in the 1970s/80s. Whether any actual professional academic embraced this hermeneutics quite as unreflexively as Howard is unlikely. Also questionable is the extent to which critique and suspicion were ever quite so morosely negative and disenchanted as Howard is often depicted as being: the critique of ideology was frequently seen as the key to liberation from it and there- fore exhilarating. Rather than being coolly disenchanted, critique was often emotionally charged, 'contaminated with affirmative moments', as Ronan McDonald argues in 'Critique and Anti-Critique' (McDonald 2018, 368). But then On Beauty is a campus novel, amongst other things, a genre which, according to John Mullen in his review of On Beauty, 'delights in clashes between intellectual pretension and human reality' (Mullen 2006). The satire of intellectual pretension is particularly acute because Howard professes disbelief in 'human reality', insightful depiction of the human in canonical works of art being a key target of his scepticism. The point of his class on Rembrandt, he suggests to his students, one of whom, Katie, is in complete awe of the humanity of the artist's work, is to '"interrogate . . . the mytheme of artist as autonomous individual with privileged insight into the human"' (Smith 2006, 252). For Howard, '"Art is the Western myth . . . with which we both console ourselves and make ourselves"' and 'Aesthetics', he encourages his students to understand, 'as a rarefied language of exclusion' (155). Howard also 'hates all representational painting' (18) and as Kiki, Howard's wife, complains: '"We do not have any paintings in our house. At least, none of human beings."' (175). During a heated argument with Kiki about his affair with a colleague of his, the poet and creative writing tutor Claire Malcolm, Howard stops underneath 'an abstract painting on the wall' whose 'main feature was a piece of thick white plastic, made to look like linen, crumpled up like a rag someone had thrown away' (206). Where Howard is thus identified, pejoratively, with the unintelligibility and inhumanity of abstract art and/or 'Theory', the novel through Kiki but also sometimes through its own narrative voice, translates Howard back into human flesh and the world of embodied, knowable desires and motivations. '"We're not in your class now"', says Kiki, '"Are you able to talk to me in a way that means anything?"' (204). In the absence of any meaningful explanation from Howard, Kiki provides one, and one surely with an intended meta-textual joke, about 'Howard's end':

'"Oh, I'm so sorry your dick offends your intellectual sensibilities. It must be terrible. There's your subtle, wonderful, intricate brain and all the time it turns out your dick is a vulgar, stupid little prick. That must be a real bitch for you"' (205) The satire directed at Howard, together with the marital infidelities which render him 'all too human', makes it difficult to take seriously his anti-human/anti-humanist views and the disenchanted stance towards the aesthetic that accompanies them. As represented by Howard, specialised intellectual discourse on the aesthetic and aesthetic value is so much pretentious, abstract guff that also hypocritically conceals the male, ego-driven academic rivalry that exists between Howard and his counterpart, Monty Kipps, also, we later find out, an adulterer.

Monty fares little better than Howard in terms of the novel's disarmament of in- tellectual credibility. As the binary opposite of white, atheistic, canon-bashing Howard, Monty is an ultra-conservative black Christian who is also a Rembrandt scholar but with a stereotypically 'old-school', reverential attitude towards art. He is less of a presence in the novel than Howard, and so less the object of narrative irony, but even so he is hardly a viable intellectual alternative to Howard. He does not, for example, advance in any meaningful way the perspectives offered in Scarry's On Beauty and Being Just which

is alluded to in chapter headings and by implication in some characters' reactions to beauty, but, rather than forming readily identifiable positions such as Howard and Monty occupy, these reactions are momentary and sporadic. Scarry's book (Scarry 1999) is at one and the same time a lyrical and systematic ex- ploration of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Outside of the (discredited) academic context that lends itself to a degree of systematic exposition through the pon- tifications of Howard and Monty, On Beauty—unsurprisingly, given the novel's broad adherence to conventional novelistic procedures—puts narrative and the particularising complications of character, including the intricate interplay between class, race and gender in the lives of its characters, ahead of generalisable philosophical concepts. That is not to say that such concepts cannot be extricated from the book, but it takes critical labour to do so, and not only because of the book's novelistic privileging of plot, character and the messiness of sensuous particulars over the systematic exposition of ideas, but also because of the heterogeneous nature of its aestheticism.

On one level—a level not dismissive of the 'rollicking good read' but not reducible to it either—Smith's novel can be seen as an attempt to rehabilitate aesthetics and ethics in a way that, as Ray Horton has suggested, 'anticipates the "postsecular" and "postcritical" turns in literary studies' associated, respectively, with the work of John McClure and Rita Felski, amongst others (Horton 2021, 43). Kiki's complaint to Howard that, '"everything's ironic, nothing's serious—everyone's scared to speak in case you think it's clichéd or dull—you're like the thought police."' (Smith 2006, 393) is an expression of her exasperation with the life of sceptical disenchantment and dis-connection, which Kiki and the Belsey's mixed- race children, Jerome, Zora and Levi, seek to alleviate by embracing the 'Only connect . . . ' epigraph and ethos of Howards End, either in the relationships they forge or in their enthusiastic attachments to art, music, poetry or religion. Some of these attachments are also driven by a desire for some form of resolution to their intensely conflicted, hybridised senses of identity. Such conflict, which in Kiki's case implicates class, race, gender and age simultaneously, is painfully and acutely summed up by her in another of her confrontations with Howard: '"Everywhere we go, I'm alone in this . . . this sea of white. I barely know any black folk anymore, Howie. My whole life is white. I don't see any black folk unless they be cleaning under my feet in the fucking café in your fucking college. Or pushing a fucking hospital bed through a corridor. I staked my whole life on you. And I have no idea any more why I did that."' (206) Adrift in a world she increasingly sees as white, middle-class, aridly intellectual and lacking in belief, Kiki and the Belsey children form sometimes polarised responses to Howard's hermeneutics of suspicion. Horton rightly argues that these responses are far from uniform, suggesting that 'despite their frequent invocation as stable, homogeneous outposts in criticism's contemporary method wars, neither postsecularism nor postcritique should be understood as a monolith'. Through the younger generation represented in the novel, On Beauty, according to Horton, presents 'a partial index of the many different paths signalled by the "post" in postsecularism and postcritique' (Horton 2021, 43). These 'paths', as Horton implies, are neither well-established nor permanent. If they do represent postsecular and/or postcritical tendencies then they are emergent, tentative and in some cases reversible tendencies that have not been worked on and worked out in the way that Howard's and Monty's positions have been over a length of time. Horton sees these varied and unstable indices of postcritique/postsecularism in largely positive terms, which I do too, except for this thought: that what is unformed or only semi-formed may easily be co-opted by, or allied to, other, more dominant social and cultural forces. One of these is the commodity-oriented drive towards accessibility. Recent disruptions in the supply chain to capitalist countries not usually affected by shortages only show how available commodities have become since the drift of capital eastwards towards cheap labour markets. Accessibility of commodities and speed of consumption translate in the cultural realm into immediacy, which has been identified as one of the distinguishing features of neoliberalism. As Mathias Nilges writes:

'Neoliberalism requires . . . a structural literalisation of temporal immediacy, that is, for instance, connected to the speed of trade and communication in the context of which we witness the contraction of time into instantaneity. Franco Berardi associates neoliberalism's temporal immediacy with what he calls the "hypercomplexity" of neoliberalism that emerges from the "chaotic flows of the overcrowded infosphere and [from] the chaotic flows of financial microtrading". Here hypercomplexity denotes the immediacy that forecloses the possibility for thought and critical evaluation due to the "disproportion between the arrival rate of new information and the limited time available for conscious processing."' (Nilges 2005, 368)

In relation to contemporary literary culture, it is possible to identify a number of instances of the 'contraction of time into instantaneity' and the foreclosure of the 'possibility for thought and critical evaluation' said to accompany this contraction: the rapid turnover rate of 'contemporary fiction' and

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works instantly heralded as masterpieces, aided and abetted by a literary prize culture that helps to bring work to public attention at speed; the repudiation of some of the often-cited and critically distancing features of postmodern fiction, such as irony, playfulness and the questioning of the relationship between the real and the constructed, in favour of the 'new sincerity' of writers such as David Foster Wallace (Wallace 1993); some versions of the postcritical and affective turns in literary studies seeking to reaffirm the capacity of literature to appeal immediately to the human and human condition, or else to the 'personal', understood as pure sovereign individuality, beyond and above its social mediation; and last not but not least, the elevation of accessibility as a criterion for judging the literary value of women's fiction.

The above list is admittedly a catch-all list that constructs neoliberalism as a master- narrative that subsumes diverse levels of economic, cultural and intellectual production into a single entity with immediacy as its core principle. While some disaggregation of these phenomena is no doubt desirable, so that, accessibility, in the case of On Beauty, for example, might not—and not least because of the paradox involved—be instantly apprehended as a neoliberal bogeyman, my previous point still holds: that relatively unformed tendencies may be easier to co-opt into a master-narrative than those more fully formed and worked-out. There are several instances in Smith's novel of a postcritical or post-ironic embrace of the aesthetic, or of the idea of belief, that take on the appeal of the immediate and the instantaneous. Examples include: Kiki's effusive reaction to hearing of a private collection of some Edward Hopper paintings: 'Kiki gasped and clapped her hands. "Oh my God—I love Edward Hopper. I can't believe that! He floors me. Imagine having things like that in your private home"' (Smith 2006, 266); Jerome, the Belseys' eldest son's, tearful response to a public recital of Mozart's Requiem on Boston Common, with Howard, meanwhile, asleep (70); Levi, the youngest son's, love of rap—'Levi loved rap music; its beauty, ingenuity and humanity were neither obscure nor unlikely to him' (181); Claire Malcolm's memory of the younger Kiki's 'beauty' as 'awesome, almost unspeakable' and radiating 'an essential female nature Claire imagined in her poetry—natural, honest, powerful, unmediated . . . ' (227). A strongly felt spontaneity of connection with art, music, literature, physical and/or spiritual beauty no doubt predates the neoliberal era, but when individualistic emotional response—'"Oh my God—I love Edward Hopper"'—looks as though it might become the presiding way of experiencing and talking about beauty and art in a way which correlates with neoliberalism's 'contraction of time into instantaneity' and foreclosure of the 'possibility for thought and critical evaluation', then it may be that such market-friendly literary values as accessibility, immediacy, relatability and identification could do with some (better) version of Howard Belsey to shake them up a bit.

On Beauty at times also models certain kinds of emotionally 'normative' aesthetic
responses by way of guarding against the perceived obscurities that interpretation of art can fall into. An interesting example of this occurs in a conversation between Kiki and her eventual friend Carlene Kipps, the wife of Howard's arch-rival Monty. Kiki is struck by a portrait that hangs in Carlene's house (portraits, as already noted, are infra dig in the Belsey household). The painting, Maîtresse Erzulie, is by the Haitian artist Hector Hyppolite:

'"She's fabulous.", replied Kiki, only now taking the time to look at her properly. 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.' (174-5). The 'only now' of that first sentence signals a movement beyond Kiki's initial, en- thusiastic reaction which may not have developed had it not been for Carlene's prompt: '"Maîtresse Erzulie,"' said Carlene, pointing to the painting. "You were admiring her, I thought"' (174). Kiki begins picking out details that appear to resonate with her personal experience: the black woman is in the centre of the frame where Kiki feels marginalised; she is '"fabulous"' where Kiki feels her beauty, due to perceptions about her size, is diminishing; the '"sea of white"' in which she later tells Howard she feels lost, is transformed in the painting into 'a fantastical white space'; and her description—via the narrator's use of free indirect discourse—of the painterly style as 'primitive, childlike . . . everything flat on the canvas. No perspective, no depth.' perhaps indicates Kiki's desire for an escape from the complications of her own life. These are speculations, based on the thought that Kiki wants to be something like the woman in the painting. At the same time, though, it could be that she is not so much instantly projecting herself into the picture as taking time to observe some of what she sees in it. The painting, that is, has its own painterly being, separate from Kiki, for which time is required to appreciate. Personal and extra-personal responses are perhaps operating in tandem.

Carlene subsequently tells Kiki that the woman in the painting, Erzulie, is in fact a complexly symbolic Voodoo goddess, representing '"love, beauty, purity, the ideal fe- male and the moon . . . and she's the mystère of jealousy, vengeance and discord, and, on the other hand, of love, perpetual help, goodwill, health, beauty and fortune"' (175). After a jokey response—'"Phew. That's a lot of symbolizing"'—Kiki briefly begins to ventriloquise Howard:

'"That's interesting . . . " began Kiki shyly, giving herself a moment to remember a thesis of Howard's, which she now wishes to reproduce as her own for Carlene. "Because . . . we're so binary, of course, in the way we think. We tend to think in opposites, in the Christian world. We're structured like that—Howard always says that's the trouble"' (175)

Carlene straightaway pauses this style of thinking: '"That's a clever way to put it. I like her parrots."', bringing relief to Kiki—'Kiki smiled, relieved she did not need to go further down this uncertain path.' (175)—and the following exchange:

'"Good parrots. So, does she avenge herself on men?" "Yes, I believe so."

"I need to get me some of that," said Kiki, half under her breath, not really meaning for it to be heard.' (175) This is an interesting moment. 'Clever', pretentious talk about art is nipped in the bud by Carlene in favour of something more direct, no-nonsense, personal and accessible. If Kiki momentarily strains towards a language in which habitual, individualised ways of responding to art are suspended, then she seems to welcome their return.

The suspension of subjective reaction instilled by Howard is comically illustrated further on in the novel, when Victoria Kipps, Carlene and Monty's daughter and a student of Howard's with whom he also has a fleeting sexual relationship, shares a schtick with him that circulates around Wellington campus amongst the student body:

'"It's a Wellington thing—it's a student thing . . . It's our shorthand for when we say, like, Professor Simeon's class is 'The tomato's nature versus the tomato's nurture', and Jane Colman's class is 'To properly understand the tomato you must first uncover the tomato's suppressed Herstory' . . . But your class—your class is a cult classic. I love your class. Your class is all about never ever saying I like the tomato. Because that's the worst thing you could ever do in your class, right? Because the tomato's not there to be liked . . . The tomato is just totally revealed as this phony construction that can't lead you to some higher truth—nobody's pretending the tomato will save your life. Or make you happy . . . They're just these pretty pointless tomatoes that people, for totally selfish reasons of their own, have attached cultural—I should say nutritional—weight to . . . It's like you're always saying: let's interrogate these terms. What's so beautiful about this tomato? Who decided on its worth?"' (312)

The tortuous, seemingly counter-intuitive reasons for '"[N]ever ever saying I like the tomato"' is the counterpart to Carlene's '"I like her parrots"', Kiki's '"I love Edward Hopper"' and '"I need to get me some of that"', and, to return explicitly to the stated criteria for the Women's Prize for Fiction, the perceived virtue of accessibility and the encouragement given to the judges to 'choose simply on the basis of novels that inspire them, move them, make them think—and that they admire and enjoy!'. This is not to disparage subjective response and immediacy of attachment, but to guard against their potential monopolisation of aesthetic discourse as part of a backlash against the hermeneutics of suspicion, a backlash that is in danger of playing into the hands of neoliberal discourse.

But what of On Beauty itself? Its characters may want their art to be accessible and 'relatable' (a term that seems to have migrated from undergraduate student essay into mainstream use), but to what extent does the novel in its own form, style and technique meet—or capitulate to—the gendered criterion of accessibility? If intellectual pretentious- ness, as represented in On Beauty by Howard's penchant for abstract, non-representational art and his contempt for customary attitudes that he would term 'ideology', is one of the satirical targets of the campus novel, then it is perhaps unsurprising that the novel leans in its own formal techniques more towards representational art than experimentalism, and, as part of this, deploys an omniscient narrator able to access and render reassuringly knowable the—more or less complex—hearts, minds and worlds of its characters, as well as to orchestrate the plot in such a way as to maximise the emotional power of its twists, turns and revelations. The painting by Hyppolite, for example, may prompt an exchange between Kiki and Carlene about its symbolism and deconstruction of binary opposites, but this exchange is short-lived, and the painting subsequently used as the means of thickening a plot which leads to the ailing Carlene leaving it to Kiki in her will only for her family to disregard her intentions on the basis that her illness must have detrimentally affected her mind. The painting is later stolen from Monty Kipps's office. Initially, the working-class rapper/poet Carl is (stereotypically) suspected to be the thief, but it is in fact the recently politicised Levi who is found to be responsible. Reacting against his privileged 'white', middle-class upbringing and seeking out what he sees as a more authentically black, urban, counter-cultural identity, Levi becomes involved in a liberation movement aimed at making amends to the people of

Haiti for their economic and cultural exploitation at the hands of people like the wealthy and right-wing Kipps family. At the very same time as Kiki and Jerome discover the stolen painting underneath Levi's bed along with Carlene's note of bequest attached to it, another of the novel's several dramatic reveals is underway upstairs, with Zora making it clear to Howard that she knows about his sexual misadventure with the Kipps' daughter Victoria, with whom Howard's son Jerome also had a brief relationship at the beginning of the novel. Despite its length—over four hundred pages—the novel is pacey and racy. It is clear from the above outline that the intersecting complexities of the characters' experiences of race, class and gender, including the oppressive gendering of beauty, are central to the novel, and embedded into nearly every turn of its plot. From this perspective, accessibility and complexity work together. However, this is not so much the case with the book's preoccupation with the aesthetic value of the arts, the several ramifications of which may go unnoticed (as they mostly did for me, on first reading). From an 'aesthetics-lite' perspective, Howard is simply a pretentious killjoy whose views about art are intended to be dismissed in favour of those enthusiastic subjective responses to beauty—whether in the form of rap or Rembrandt, hip-hop or Hopper, nature or culture—expressed at different times in different places by most of the other characters. The digestible message of the book seems to be to embrace beauty in all its cultural, artistic and human diversity wherever you happen to find it, to go with your gut instinct—and like or dislike the parrots.

The epiphanic ending of the novel seems at first to corroborate this view, as Howard stands speechless before an audience unable to deliver his usual, demythologising lecture on Rembrandt. Instead, he clicks his way silently through one image after another of the artist's work on his PowerPoint. Spotting Kiki in the audience, wearing a 'scarlet ribbon threaded through her plait . . . her shoulders . . . bare and gleaming' (Smith 2006, 442), the two of them briefly exchange smiles before Howard looks 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 tint of yellow, intimation of what is to come.' (p. 443)

This is, in its own way, a beautiful, final sentence—beautiful, perhaps, because final— one that returns Howard to the world of human experience made vivid by art. It seems, on first impression, to support notions of immediacy and accessibility, especially as these are thrown into relief by Howard's previously suspicious and convoluted anti-aesthetics. Here, finally, is some more straightforward, post-ironic and postcritical recognition on Howard's part of art's ability to communicate human truths.

The finale and final sentence are not entirely straightforward, however. There is that uncommon, defamiliarising word (for me, anyway) 'roiled'. There is also the fluid, subtle interplay in the description between the focus on form, colour, texture and meaning, as well as the insight into the painting's simultaneous evocation of life—'lively pinks'—and death—'the ever present human tint of yellow, intimation of what is to come'. And if my first impression was that this final sentence is itself a thing of beauty, then it is an intricate beauty, the linguistic and emotional subtleties of which would take time to unravel.

Time is of the essence of the novel not only because of the experience of becoming captive to a compellingly unfolding story, but also because the duration of time represented in a novel can thicken and complicate perception. As Nilges puts it:

' . . . the novel from its inception is wedded to a form of thought that traces time as a form of thought, subject to historical modification and change, through the history of the relation between subject and world, itself conceived of as a process.' (Nilges 2005, 371)

As perspectives are formed, de-formed and re-formed, so perspective itself is revealed to be contingent. The aesthetic experiences that characters have in On Beauty are not always and everywhere instantaneous and finished, but rather stretched across time in a way that leads to the mutation and development of their aesthetic vocabulary and sensibility. In short, they learn things about their chosen art object previously hidden from view. After years of framing—and judging—Rembrandt's work according to the procedures of his unsentimental, demythologising hermeneutics of suspicion, Howard begins to wonder again about the nature of the Staalmeesters' gaze in Rembrandt's The Sampling Officials of the Drapers' Guild (1662): ' . . . what was their judgment now? Howard looked at the men. The men looked at Howard. Howard looked at the men. The men looked at Howard.' (p. 385). The repetition here suggests a kind of stasis or stalemate, but it is far more dynamic and complex than this because Howard—for the first time in a long time—is looking at the men looking at him looking at them, in a process that implies a genuine open-endedness and temporisation of perception. Howard cannot get the painting into his established frame of reference anymore. If '"I like her parrots"' makes temporal elongation of the process of aesthetic evaluation and understanding seem unnecessary and merely 'clever', then, here, that process seems appealingly estranging.

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Something similar happens during the time of the novel to the rapper/poet Carl, dubbed '"Keats with a knapsack"' (230) by one of the Wellington students who accompany their tutor Claire to the multicultural venue 'The Bus Stop' on Spoken Word nights, her aim being to show her new students that poetry is a 'broad church' (212). As a result of some controversial campus politics, of which he himself is unaware, Carl ends up being given a job as 'Hip-Hop Archivist' in the Black Studies Department at Wellington (372). Once in post, however, he thrives by developing his understanding of the history of rap and some of its informing motifs:

' . . . Carl leaned back in his own chair and casually explained to [Zora] a little about the image of the crossroads and how frequently rappers use it. Crossroads to represent personal decisions and choices, to represent "going straight", to represent the history of hip-hop itself, the split between "conscious" lyrics and "gangsta". The more he spoke, the more animated and absorbed he became by his subject.' (378) Carl is a keen student not only of hip-hop. As he tells Levi just after the public recital of Mozart on Boston Common early in the novel, '"I get my culture where I can—going to free shit like tonight, for example"', because '"Anything happening that's free in this city and might teach me something, I'm there"' (p. 76). Carl's aesthetic life is not one of instantaneous consumption, formed of likes and dislikes, but a gradual, learning process that takes place over time.

There are, as I have described, a number of aspects of On Beauty whose appeal is obvious and instant, and that corroborate what we think we already know about aesthetic judgement, which is that we either immediately like the parrots or we do not. But there are also obstacles in the novel which make frictionless reading less possible and give us cause to wonder, like Howard, whether something may have escaped the frame we may have imposed upon it. A striking example is another text—a poem, in fact—called On Beauty, that is included in the novel as though written by Claire Malcolm. As Claire explains to Jack French, Dean of the Humanities at Wellington, the poem takes the form of a (broken) pantoum—'"basically interlinked quatrains, usually rhyming a-b-a-b, and the second and fourth line of each stanza go on to be the first and third . . . lines of the next stanza"':

On Beauty No, we could not itemize the list of sins they can't forgive us.
The beautiful don't lack the wound. It is always beginning to snow.
Of sins they can't forgive us speech is beautifully useless.
It is always beginning to snow. The beautiful know this.
Speech is beautifully useless. They are the damned.
The beautiful know this.
They stand around unnatural as statuary. (153)

These are the first three stanzas of the poem, actually written by Zadie Smith's partner, the poet Nick Laird. This adds a layer to a poem that does not lack layers. Formally self-conscious, it creates of beauty a puzzle, one that keeps the meaning and feeling of 'beauty', 'beautifully' and 'The beautiful' fluid and unsettled, as well as somewhat arbitrary as a result of the forced line variations. It is also intriguing that 'The beautiful' are referred to as other people who are not the speaker, and not just, I assume, out of some 'ordinary' sense of modesty, but to create around beauty and 'The beautiful' a quality of strangeness that is near-impossible to communicate. Jack French is himself non-plussed: 'faced with a task he dreaded: saying something after reading a poem. Saying something to the poet', he is only able to muster as his delayed response, the single, adequate/inadequate word, '"Beautiful"', to which Claire replies '"Oh, it's just old crap"'.

It would take time and patience to say anything meaningful about the specific effects of this—what to call it?—poem, crap, thing of beauty/strange beauty/unbeauty. A more general point to make in the context of this discussion, however, is that it defies easy assimilation. The poem is another language, it occupies a different plane, which are not those of the novel. It is nevertheless included, perhaps unnecessarily or as 'beautifully useless'. Its 'point', however, may be to act as some form of (ironic?) comment on the novel itself or as a counterpoint/point of resistance to those other expressions of beauty that can be more immediately possessed. The good news from the point of accessibility is that 'normal' novelistic service is soon resumed as we return to the plot and the controversies unfolded by the plot via Jack whose reason for coming to Claire's office is not to read one of her old poems but to have a '"quick word"' with her about Carl's right (contested by Monty Kipps) to attend her creative writing classes (154).

On Beauty—the novel, not the poem—can be read rapidly and once, or more slowly
more than once. Slower, repeated readings reveal different, previously unnoticed facets of the book—and show aesthetic judgment, therefore, to be a slow, precarious, revisionary process in which the

reader-as-judge may in turn feel judged, as Jack feels he is by the figures in the Rembrandt painting. Vocabularies of aesthetic evaluation are inevitably subject to revision, challenge and development, but the culture of awards in general, and the criterion of accessibility in particular, do not allow adequate time for this. The result is that aesthetic judgment inevitably comes to occupy the default position of '"I like her parrots"'.

Funding: This research received no external funding. Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable. Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.
Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.
Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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