Notes on Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

Misunderstanding the Relation between Literary Modernism and Gender, Identity, and other Contemporary Concerns

What is brilliant dialogue? For some years sharply written direct narration (reported speech), using quotation marks and minimal contexts, has been associated with publications like McSweeney's and the New Yorker, and also with writers who also work for television, like Richard Price. I don't know if there's been a study of this style, but it is taught in hundreds of MFA programs. Zadie Smith excels at it.

Her dialogue is honed and alert. She's always listening to what's happening around her characters—they might be interrupted at any moment by an alarm, or a dog barking, or a neighbor. She's attentive to what doesn't need to be said. She describes contexts as minimally, telegraphically, evocatively, unexpectedly.

Much of this book, and also the novel "NW," is dialogue, and it seldom flags. There are vanishingly few false notes. Every sentence has to be read, nothing can be skimmed. The writing is taut, scintillating, resourceful, articulate, consistently engaging. Sentences ring true to the characters who speak them, their times, ages, places, desires.

I dislike all of that. Why try so hard to keep your reader's interest, page after page? Why demonstrate brilliance, line after line? Why keep the energy fizzing, the quality topped up, the language razor-sharp? Why not let things go at different paces, go slack, run off track, wander? Why not rant for a few dozen pages, like Bernhard? Or mull indecisively, like Beckett? Or pause to describe, like Flaubert? There's a desire, in writing like Smith's, to keep the reader's admiration and attention at all costs. As if writing is a high-wire act and the crowd is incipiently bored: there has to be a high wind at all times or the reader spectators will yawn.

I find myself both entertained and exhausted by Smith. As the books go on, it becomes increasingly difficult to care about her skill: I take note only when she does something especially spectacular, as in the scene in this book in which the narrator's infidelity is revealed to his wife with an exceptionally subtle expression, exceptionally subtly described. The philosopher Karsten Harries called this the "kitsch economy": the necessity to continuously up the voltage, to outdo previous effects, because audiences have become numb. After fifty pages, I begin to feel I have been devalued as a reader: the author apparently thinks I need to be entertained at every moment, that I have no way of taking in longueurs, no interest in diversions, little capacity for meditation. It's as if brilliance is style, rather than an ornament or strategy within a style.

Smith has said, in an interview with the Paris Review, that she thinks there are more ways to be an innovative writer than carrying on the modernist experiment in writing, which she associates mainly with Joyce. She remarked that it's also innovative to bring new social configurations into
novels, like the poor Londoners in "NW" or the mixed, transatlantic Afro-Caribbean characters in "On Beauty." Much of her appeal to reviewers and readers is her explorations of identity and ethnicity, and it is true that she finds subjects that have not yet been part of the discourse of novels. But she is wrong, I think, to equate that kind of innovation with the modernist experimentation with language. It's a category error: Joyce also had unusual ethnic content, and Smith's new content still has to be expressed using the languages of the novel. The two sources of innovation are entwined, but one does not lead to the other. If you pretend that linguistic innovation is a thing of the past, you become oblivious to the indebtedness, possibilities, and obligations of your own linguistic practices.

And there is a blind spot in her sense of her own project as a novelist, because her writing is deeply indebted to Joyce, especially the Joyce of "Ulysses." She uses a number of his innovations, for instance the device of having a character speak before he or she has been introduced, compelling the reader to keep going a while before the speaker's context and meaning become clear. She is, in fact, in the line that leads from Joyce to more recent writing, but she chooses, or needs, not to see her work in that way.

Personally, I am not interested in Afro-Caribbean identities, or in campus novels (and I'm especially not interested in depictions of my own field, art history), and so much of this book's content isn't engaging. That leaves the writing. It is breathless in its desire to capture my attention at every moment, and I find that it shrinks my sense of myself as a reader, giving me less scope to imagine or experience as I might hope. And I am baffled by the author's own idea that she isn't in the modernist tradition, that she isn't engaging possibilities of writing that began, for her, with Joyce. Surely it doesn't make sense to imagine the kind of dialogue in this book as being simply true to life, or merely beautiful, brilliant, or articulate dialogue: her style of writing has a specific history, and it echoes with the achievements of novelists of the past. But she does not imagine her work that way: apparently she thinks her skills as a writer serve her interests in politics, race, class, and identity, the way faceless servants once attended to Europeans who remained unconscious of their presence.