

Artful

By Ali Smith

Hamish Hamilton, 2012

(ISBN: 978-0241145401). 202pp

Katy Hastie (University of Glasgow)

‘Ten points to the first person who hears someone say the words Walter Benjamin’ (P.41) Smith’s narrator teases with meta-fictive glee in the first chapter of *Artful*. In-jokes should probably be expected from the author of such experimental novels as *Hotel World* (2001), *The Accidental* (2005) and *There but for the* (2011). Unlike those books however, *Artful* is Smith’s first ‘critical’ work albeit essays embedded within a fictional premise. Originally delivered as four lectures at St. Anne’s College Oxford as part of the Weidenfeld Visiting Professorship in early 2012, Smith confesses she was uneasy with the authoritative pedagogy of the essay form and ‘wanted to see what happened if the form loosened up, unpeeled itself, put its roots in fiction.’ (Hall 2012). What Smith makes happen is that ‘the Author’ of the essays in *Artful* is not dead, as Roland Barthes so famously asserted in his essay *The Death of the Author*, but has come back to life to haunt the lover left behind, an artless botanist, who reads their unfinished lectures, as well as extracts from *Oliver Twist*, rekindling her imagination and finding her way back to the land of the living in the process. While the ensuing monologue can be read as a plaintive soliloquy by the androgynous and unnamed narrator embarking on an Orphic quest, it can also be read as a meta-fictive Platonic discourse; a philosophical conversation between the text and an absent ‘You’ that could be the ghost, the theoretical ‘Author’, the writer Smith, the narrator’s own delusion, or ‘You’ the reader. Caught within the rich surround-sound of these additional meanings some readers may find themselves mourning the more conventional fixed anchor point of a singular authoritative thesis on the nature of art. However, convincing the reader of the merit of such exponential multiplicity as a method of inquiry is precisely Smith’s argument. For this reason *Artful* demands an alert and adaptive reading stance, one open to the pleasure of reading as much as the cryptic satisfactions of decoding the text.

Each punning chapter ‘On Time’, ‘On Form’, ‘On Edge’, ‘On Offer’ and ‘On Reflection’ opens with a poem accompanied by the narrator’s voice, the lecture notes

themselves and further commentary from the narrator on what we and they have just read. As the book progresses the meta-layers unravel and the narrator takes to finishing the lecture notes themselves. The climactic catharsis of the book appears in 'On Edge' with a scene that could be the removal of the barrier between life and death, the fourth wall separating reader and text, or possibly online footage of a Greek film referenced in a later chapter. If we meet the author's insistent invitation to speculate on the construction of the lectures (such as 'I couldn't believe that what I'd said made it into your writing' (p. 138)) we are rewarded with fictional acknowledgements for the additional meanings we've detected (for example, 'It was like we were reading the same book' (p.138)). Vice versa, if readers pay close attention to the imbedded aesthetic commentary they will find it impacts the fictional action of the book; for example, a Michelangelo sonnet that speaks of 'dark eyes' conjures the ghost with black eyes like 'cut coals' (p.8).

The book is further enhanced by fifteen untitled prints at the back of the hardback edition; holiday snaps and dreamy surrealist works, which are without captions and up to the reader to associate with the main text. Frequent page turning may be the biggest reminder of this book's paratextual games, but also worthwhile to construct the full effect of the oblique references lurking in the lectures and plot. Such games go as far as the narrator searching Google to find media content and the prominent referencing of contemporary events, such as the 2012 London riots. Performative proof of Smith's assertion that the novel is a form 'helplessly interested in society' (p.30) and 'the pleasure in the handshake between sources' (p.201).

Early in *Artful* Smith argues, 'books are produced more by books than by writers' (p.31) hence this is one book not shy about showing off its progenitors both in terms of the kaleidoscopic range of artists discussed (from Katherine Mansfield, Czeslaw Miłoz, Ovid, Gilgamesh, Edwin Morgan and Michelangelo to Beyoncé), and the major figures of the 'Writers on Writing' essay genre (such as E.M Foster, Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf and Italo Calvino). Of these *Artful* owes the greatest debt to Calvino's *Six Memo's for the Next Millennium*. Notwithstanding the exerts included and similar Calvino-esque meta-fictive style, *Artful* could be read as an attempt to complete the memo's left unwritten at his untimely death. Redress is certainly made to the fact Calvino failed to include a single female writer, but it's unclear if Smith has noted Jonathan Coe's warning on 'the perils of attempting to read [Calvino's *Memo's*] as literary theory' (Coe 1992, p.20). Certainly Smith only

makes few serious attempts, for example suggesting Time is the single biggest differentiating factor between the novel and the short story as the latter is ‘an elastic form’ (p.29) concerning ‘the momentousness of the moment’ (p.29). Instead, Smith is venturing into what Coe identified in Calvino as didactic creativity theory: writing about *why* we write and what it *achieves* rather than the *how*; emotive stuff that should be treated ‘not as a humble statement of personal belief, but as a commandment to be engraved on every writer’s heart’(Coe 1992 p.29).

Artful’s ‘commandments’ therefore concern the creative act of both experiencing and making art: a union of creative empathy and imaginary fabrication that battles to last longer than we do yet changes just as much. Art for Smith ‘won’t just record our brevity, but will stand as paradox, beyond transience, for the essential transience’ (p.24). As the narrator moves from reading to writing the essays, it models the double-sided nature of this transience. Art is continual self-constructing on either side of this equation because both involve ‘the human’:

It’s the act of making it up, from the combination of what we’ve got and what we haven’t, that makes the human, makes the art, makes this transformation possible [...] ...art itself is a broken thing if it’s anything, and that the act of remaking, or imaging, or imaginative involvement, is what makes the difference’ (p.23-24).

A point further proven by connecting this statement to the ‘not-seeing’ and ‘remaking’ of the blind ghost’s mysterious kleptomania. Rather than tautological recursion, such meta-enactments of Smith’s argument open up a self-constructing ‘essential transience’ behind the text that artfully demonstrates her point. Hence Smith’s light-footed lyricism belies a bold new meta-fictive method and application of creative theory.

Like the Dickens’s character of the title, *Artful* is a book that brazenly steals devices from both criticism and fiction self-assembling them into a new meta-creative theory for which the primary beneficiary is likely to be a fiction reader with ‘high-brow’ Modernists tastes, or other writers seeking inspiration, rather than serious literary or aesthetic scholars. A vigorous defence of experimentation a century on from the birth of canonical Modernism, Smith appears to prove for meta-fiction that which Thom Gunn is quoted as attributing to poetry, that it is ‘an instrument for exploring the truth of things, as far as human beings can explore it’ (p.66).

Bibliography

Calvino, Italo. 1988. (trans. Creagh, Patrick) *Six Memos For the Next Millenium: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1985-86*, Penguin Classics: London

Coe, Jonathan, 1992, 'Calvinoism' In *The London Review of Books*, Vol. 14 No. 6, 26 March 1992

Hall, Josh, November 18th 2012, The Art Of Conversation: Ali Smith Interviewed. *The Quietus*, <http://thequietus.com/articles/10705-ali-smith-artful-interview> (January 2013)

The Kelvingrove Review

www.gla.ac.uk/tkr