The Ethics of Ali Smith's *Artful*

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Abstract

In this paper, I spring from Fredric Jameson's seminal account of pastiche in Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, which portrays postmodern pastiche as the mere cannibalization of existing styles, such that stylistic innovation and critical intervention are precluded. To problematize Jameson's assertion of the impotence of pastiche, I look at Scottish author Ali Smith's 2012 work *Artful*, which is comprised of four lectures on European comparative literature interspersed with fictional, at times fantastical, narrative. *Artful* is, according to my reading, a pastiche in which Smith unconventionally intertwines literary criticism and fantastical fiction, defies citational conventions, and disorientingly manipulates the paratext in order to at once acknowledge the rules laid out by the Anglo-American academy that formed her, and to provocatively break them. I argue that *Artful* performs that which Idelber Avelar calls for in "The Ethics of Interpretation and the International Division of Intellectual Labor": that is, the dismantling of the notion that there is a split between those capable of producing thought and those capable of producing objects for thought, and the resultant formulation of a pedagogical ethics that asks students to bear in mind their own positionality relative to their objects of study, even if doing so has a radically destabilizing effect on the academy that is the condition of possibility of said study. Smith's *Artful* fragments the lecture form in a way that makes us consider the possibility that the coherent literary criticism we expect from academia may have an oppressive quality, if it doesn't self-problematize in the way that Avelar asks it to and in the way that Smith demonstrates that it can.

Ali Smith is a Scottish author who received her undergraduate degree from the University of Aberdeen and pursued a PhD at Newnham College, Cambridge, which she never finished. She worked as a lecturer at the University of Strathclyde before becoming a full-time writer. Smith's 2012 work *Artful* is comprised of a series of four

lectures on literature interspersed with fictional, at times fantastical, narrative. Following from this description of *Artful*, and keeping in mind Fredric Jameson's seminal account of pastiche in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, it would be easy to chalk up the formal hybridity of *Artful* to the postmodernist proclivity for pastiche. It combines literary criticism, essay, and fiction in a way that could be said to adhere largely to Jameson's depiction of the postmodern novel, of which he tells us that pastiche is a "significant feature" (Jameson 15), and which is characterized by "the effacement... of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (14). In the case of *Artful*, literary criticism (typically associated with academia and, therefore, high culture) and fantastical fiction (generally considered a baser form) entangle. According to Jameson, the postmodern moment is one that precludes stylistic innovation, such that an artist's only recourse is to cannibalize existing styles and thereby engender pastiche. Jameson describes pastiche as a neutral practice, as a practice that mimics, and as one that lacks the critical potential of parody. In fact, he remains dubious that postmodern art has any critical value whatsoever, as can be seen in the closing remarks of his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society": "Modernism functioned against its society in ways which are variously described as critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional and the

like. Can anything of the sort be affirmed about postmodernism and its social moment?" (28-29).

If according to Jameson's foundational account, postmodern art (and therefore the postmodern novel) reinforces rather than problematizes the status quo, then I refuse to relegate *Artful* to *this* limiting status of pastiche. *Artful's* pastiche-like tendency – and here I refer to its reluctance to adhere to a formal genre vis a vis the eccentric manner in which it intertwines essayistic and fictional forms - seems to have become the predominant theme of its critical treatment. Its back cover calls *Artful* a "magical hybrid form." According to *Booklist,* "These most unlecture-like of lectures deliver the thrill of perilous border crossings" (Smith, "Praise for *Artful*"). It is evident that its critics do not see it functioning as a pointless, cannibalizing pastiche that precludes originality, in the Jamesonian sense. Rather, it *does* something. What is it, I ask, that makes Smith's border crossings perilous, rather than impotent pastiche? Wherein lies their danger?

In this paper, I analyze sections of *Artful* in order to attempt to answer those questions, placing special emphasis on that which Smith's reviewers and critics have *not* addressed: its paratext. I, like many of Smith's critics, am interested in the formal nonconformity of Smith's text and in all of the border crossings that take place therein, but I draw particular attention to the paratextual peculiarities of *Artful*, ultimately to

argue that what she has done is rely upon the conventions of the academic sphere that shaped her intellectually, in order to break with those conventions. Next, I argue that *Artful* performs that which Idelber Avelar calls for in his article "The Ethics of Interpretation and the International Division of Intellectual Labor": that is, the dismantling of the notion that there is a split between those capable of producing thought and those capable of producing objects for thought and the resultant formulation of "a pedagogical ethics that asks students to experience the vertigo of knowledge about the other, knowing that it may well undermine the very position from which it is possible for them to produce that knowledge" (Avelar 98). Reading Smith's *Artful* through the lens provided by Avelar in "The Ethics of Interpretation" illuminates what I believe to be the ethical gesture of Smith's work, thus suggesting the ethical potential of pastiche in general and problematizing Jameson's assertion of its impotence.

Let us begin with a discussion of *Artful*'s paratextual unconventionality. The text begins with an excerpt from what seems to be a poem about a man who mourns the death of his lover for "'twelvemonth and a day'" (Smith 3). Absent is any indication of its title or author, but it is the vehicle that ushers us into the narrator's story. Her first words are, "The twelvemonth and a day being up, I was still at a loss" (3), so we are left to infer that the narrator, too, has lost her lover, though she does not explicitly say as much. From the onset, then, we as readers experience the simultaneous reliance upon

academic conventions and the breaking of them: many writers choose to begin their works with epigraphs, but, by neglecting to credit the source of her epigraph and by relying on its content to fill in the gaps of her story that immediately ensues, Ali Smith renders this particular employment of the epigraph form more jarring than familiar.

In short order, the narrator demonstrates that she is intimately in touch with, and markedly skeptical of, the very Anglo-American academy that would've been disappointed in her for failing to cite the epigraph as being from the "Song of the Flow of Things" from Bertolt Brecht's *Man Equals Man*. As the narrator sits down to read *Oliver Twist* in the opening scene, we learn that she'd been obliged to read it for university thirty years prior, and that in the present rereading of the novel she chooses to skip the introduction and delve straight into Chapter 1. She adds, "I didn't really want to read someone's introduction, my introduction days were over thank god" (Smith 5); it seems she is just as disillusioned with the convention of beginning a book with an introductory voice as she had been with the notion of conventionally citing her epigraphic voice. From the outset, Smith's narrator paints her experience of the university as confining, as oppressive – as a place where books and their introductions were forced upon her.

Later in the first chapter, she mentions a game that she and her lover used to play when the latter made the narrator accompany her to "those boring conferences"

(Smith 43). The game was a simple one: "Ten points to the first person who hears someone say the words Walter Benjamin" (43-44). Add boring and hackneyed, then, to the list of unflattering adjectives our narrator might assign to the world of academia. That the narrator positions herself in a dialogue with academic structures is unsurprising, considering her dead lover was the fictional academic who authored the four lectures that largely comprise *Artful*, and her brainchild Ali Smith is the real academic who, in actuality, delivered the four Weidenfeld lectures on European comparative literature at Oxford University in the winter of 2012.

What's more, despite its being a playground of intellectual and cultural references, and despite its liberal incorporation of textual passages by other authors, *Artful* lacks foot and endnotes entirely, in favor of an unconventional final chapter entitled "Some sources used in the writing of these talks" that "cites," in prose rather than in bibliographic format, the sources quoted. Additionally, various works of visual art that are mentioned or described in the text are included at the end of the book, but their mentions in the text lack any indication that they can be viewed elsewhere in the book, and the images themselves lack captions entirely – title, author, and any reminder of their location in the preceding text are absent. Both peculiarities of Smith's text place unusual demands on the reader, namely that of remembering and of reentering the text once its initial reading is complete.

What we have seen, then, is that Ali Smith engages intimately with her paratextual elements. Most epigraphs stand alone before a text commences, clearly demarcated as Others to the text by the indication of their author and their source. Likewise, the relationship between most epigraphs and the text at hand is left to be deduced by the reader (or not, if the reader chooses to skip or ignore the epigraph); not so in the case of *Artful*. We saw that by immediately melting her narrator's personal story into that of the epigraph's narrator and by neglecting to separate it off from the text by way of an authorial credit, she refuses to let the epigraph of the first chapter stand alone at the textual margin as a separate entity. In a similar fashion, most appendices containing images mentioned in a text are given a title that deems them as such, and they indicate a systematic way in which the images can be linked to their appearances in the preceding text. As we have seen, *Artful* facilitates no such convenience. The result is that no reader would be capable of flipping to an image upon reading about it, never to return to that image nor its corresponding textual passage again. On the contrary, the reader must figuratively carry with him a mental picture of the image as he retroactively scours the text for its mention. Carrie Watterson, in her discussion of pastiche in the postmodern novel, tells us that "What the text means gives way to what the text does and how the reader experiences it" (Watterson 12), and we have seen that Smith undoubtedly manipulates her text (and her paratext) such that

readers have to experience it uniquely. By refusing to lead us in a conventional and convenient fashion to citations and images in the paratext, she not only makes us, as readers, acutely aware of our expectations regarding those matters, but she also ensures that we, too, will have to engage intimately with – and spend extra time with – her wonky paratext... with an awareness, all the while, that it is not what we expected and likely not what we desire, as it is inconvenient and demands our extra time and effort.

Here's what I believe Smith, herself a former academic, to be doing: she knows the rules, and she knowingly breaks them. In her *New York Times* review of *Artful*, Leah Hager Cohen notes that the book begins with the narrator's rearranging of furniture in her deceased lover's study, so that she may have better light by which to read *Oliver Twist.* As Hager Cohen keenly observes, "This is the gist, the pith of Ali Smith. She does not invent the new so much as rearrange the known" (Hager Cohen). (Which, notably, aligns with Jameson's conception of pastiche as that which perpetually copies pre-existing elements and forms.) I wish to suggest, however, that Smith's rearrangement of the known is subversive in nature. Let us consider the fact that the narrator's rearranging of furniture not only disrupts the status quo, but also destroys it: she says, "I had the feeling I was maybe scuffing the floorboards quite badly with one of its legs, yes I was, look, I could see a gouge appearing beneath me as I pushed. But it

was my floor, I could do what I liked to it, so I kept pushing..." (Smith 6). Being comprised of lectures on comparative literature, this is a book whose existence is unequivocally reliant upon literary criticism/literary theory. Yet, at the same time, its fictional thread grants *Artful* the opportunity to roll its eyes at the theoretical greats and to blatantly defy the rules academia lays out. Smith's narrator finds better light to read by once she ruins her floor, and I suggest that, in a similar fashion, Smith hopes to enlighten the potentiality of reading vis a vis a provocative gouging of academic ground. That is to say, she still stands on the ground of academia – it is her support. (In other words, Smith's veritable lectures intended for the academic arena comprise the majority of this text.) However, her unconventional intertwining of fantastical fiction and austere literary criticism, her laughing in the face of citational convention, and her disorienting manipulation of the paratext are the gouges she incises in that ground. It seems she is also aware that this might be a text capable of shaking things up for others; the narrator hears a noise after having rearranged the study, and she imagines that "it was probably next door: they'd probably heard me moving the chair and decided to do some rivalrous moving-things-about" (8).

What is at stake, then, in Smith's simultaneous standing upon and ruination of academic ground? Hers is a rupture that consists of the fluid intermingling of literary criticism and literature, of thought and objects for thought. In my view it is possible,

through a reading of Idelber Avelar's article "The Ethics of Interpretation and the International Division of Intellectual Labor," to identify an ethical gesture in Smith's ruination of academic ground. Avelar springs from claims that critical theory is to blame for the twentieth century decline of ethical concerns in literary studies. He goes on to map out the relationship between ethics and literary theory in order to show that such claims stem largely from a butting of heads of national traditions, a phenomenon which he terms the international division of intellectual labor. The purpose of his article is to formulate an ethical approach to literary studies that takes into account this hierarchical and asymmetrical distribution of cognitive labor in the international arena. Of the claims that ethically-oriented criticism was eclipsed largely by post-phenomenological thought during the second half of the twentieth century and has recently returned with a vengeance, Avelar points out that moral philosophy has unjustly been granted complete control over the domain of ethics, and the ethical implications of post-phenomenological thought in general and of deconstruction in particular have been completely ignored– what we see, then, is the rift between critical theory stemming from Europe and resistance to critical theory stemming from the United States causing what counts as an ethical inquiry to be determined by national boundaries (Avelar 80). Avelar takes issue with the assertion that "the displacement of the sovereign humanist subject and its inscription in a

textual/ political/ libidinal field that exceeds it... equals the demise of the ethical" in deconstructionist thought (81).

Thus, Avelar reads Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Ethnographer" to comment on what he views to be the undecidability of the ethical encounter and to argue for the ethical possibilities of the deconstructive idea of undecidability when it is applied pedagogically.

Borges' "The Ethnographer" draws attention to the notion in the academy from which its anthropologist-protagonist Fred Murdock hails that there is a divide between those who are capable of producing thought and those who are capable only of producing objects for that thought (Avelar 95). Therein lies the anthropological assumption. Avelar shows, however, how this short and seemingly simple fiction by Borges actually posits a powerful theorization of the ethical encounter with the Other, and in particular of its undecidable nature. Thus, it *performs* the porosity between fictional literature and theory by serving as both simultaneously. According to Avelar, "The unbridgeable rift between experience and knowledge, is in fact what makes the ethnographer possible. Awareness of such rift, when taken to its ultimate logical consequences, would necessarily have to entail the dynamiting of the ground that sustains the discipline" (96). He proposes that, in order to learn from Borges' performative closing of the rift and to likewise close it in the context of contemporary academia, we must adopt a

pedagogical ethics that compels students to consider their own positionality relative to their objects of study, which very well may have a radically destabilizing effect on said position.

It is my opinion that Ali Smith, with *Artful*, rises to Avelar's call. It is doubtless a pedagogical work, as it is comprised largely of lectures she gave in a university setting. But it is a pedagogy that is fictionalized, haunted, nonconformist, and radically destabilized – and one that, without a doubt, throws into question the academic positionality from which its foundational lectures on literature hail. Recalling the words of Avelar, "dynamiting the ground that sustains a discipline" (Avelar 96) is precisely what I have argued that Smith has done, especially via her unconventional treatment of the paratext, which I have argued constitutes her simultaneous recognition of, and blatant defiance of, academic norms. Recall how Smith's narrator gouged her ground in the rearrangement of her furniture, in order to find better light to read by. I argue that, by figuratively gouging the academic ground on which she stands, Smith provides *us* with an enlightened manner of reading that strongly resembles the model for ethical literary study proposed by Avelar in "The Ethics of Interpretation" – in that it is a pedagogical work that freely blurs the line between thought and objects for thought that the international division of intellectual labor so strives to uphold, and in that it not only embraces but also actively performs the destabilization of the discipline that is its

condition of possibility.

By way of conclusion, I wish to point out, in answer to Jameson's doubt that postmodern art has critical value, my conviction that *Artful* represents a work of postmodern pastiche that is not just critical, but ethically critical. My conviction aligns with that of Carrie Watterson who, in "The Politics of Pastiche in the Postmodern Novel," argues that we must stop thinking of pastiche in terms of what it is incapable of doing (Watterson 3), as Jameson would have had it, and recognize instead what it *can* do. She tells us that the postmodern novel's preoccupation with language does not constitute a retreat from the real, but rather a shift from representing the real by way of narrative content to representing the real by way of form. She describes this shift as an "an urgently ethical endeavor" (22). In its laying bare of the formalization process lies pastiche's ability to evade oppressive structures that impose meaning in favor of a fragmentation that forces the reader to make connections and leaves meaning open. Pastiche is therefore ethical in that it exposes readers to a fragmentary alternative to the coherent narrative structures to which they are accustomed, the result being that they are compelled to make connections themselves and to perhaps even become skeptical of those coherent structures that *don't* require them to make connections (22). *Artful*, according to my reading, is ethical in precisely that way. In it, the (de)formalization process takes center stage. It fragments the lecture form in a way that

disorients us enough to make us, at the very least, consider the possibility that the coherent literary criticism we expect from academia *may* have an oppressive quality, if it doesn't self-problematize in the way that Avelar asks it to and in the way that Smith demonstrates that it can.

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