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Seeing and Seeing Again: Close Reading in the Gallery

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CHARLOTTE TERRELL

Seeing and Seeing Again: Close Reading in the Gallery

Abstract: This article, taking its title from T. J. Clark's The Sight of Death, *forges connections between Clark's diaristic, close reading of visual artworks and Ali Smith's 2014 novel* How to be both. *Reading their shared interest in the possibilities of re-reading, close reading, or what Clark calls 'seeing and seeing again,' I draw on theories of reading and particularly Paul Ricoeur to argue that Smith not only writes a version of Clark's repeated looking—she also produces the conditions within* How to be both *for her reader to draw out a series of observations which mimic and reward Clark's discourse of detail-orientated and 'ludicrous' close attention. Smith's novel, filled with a playful attention to the unit of the letter and the word, does not just pore over questions of artistic and critical practice but invites its own style of close reading method too.*

Keywords: Ali Smith, T. J. Clark, art, reading, detail, attention, the novel

> *Many of us, maybe all of us, look at some images repeatedly, but it seems we do not write that repetition, or think it, once written, worth reading by others. […] Maybe the actual business of repeated gawping strikes us as embarrassing*
>
> *T. J. Clark, The Sight of Death*
>
> *perhaps it is just that George has spent proper time looking at this one painting and that every single experience of looking at something would be this good if she devoted time to everything she looked at.*
>
> *Ali Smith, How to be both*

In Ali Smith's 2014 novel *How to be both*, the young protagonist George develops something of an obsession with a specific painting in a particular room in London's National Gallery. The room in question, Room 55,

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contains a portrait titled *Saint Vincent Ferrer* by the fifteenth-century Italian painter Francesco del Cossa. It is this painting of Saint Vincent to which George returns eight times in the course of the novel, and to which she owes her hypothesis in the above epigraph—that perhaps all artworks (and maybe even all *things*) could be as rewarding as *Saint Vincent* if only she were to devote 'proper time' to all acts of looking. The effect of spending proper time can be charted across her visits: on her first, George finds that the other paintings in the room 'look more interesting than this one, which just looks like another religious picture,' (Smith 2014: 154) but by her seventh, she has begun to note how 'you start to see that the picture is full of things you'd not expect.' (Smith 2014: 155) In this article, I investigate why the novel contains such direct readings of artworks, and argue that when you read and look at *How to be both* a few times, you might also start to see things that you did not expect.

If eight visits to one gallery room sound like a lot, but not altogether implausible for a character in a novel, T. J. Clark's real life, self-described 'experiment' in art writing dwarfs George's eight with its dozens. This experiment takes the form of a diary kept during an intensive gallery stint where Clark looks at two works by the seventeenth-century French painter Nicolas Poussin. Published in 2006 as *The Sight of Death*, Clark frames his book—which focuses in on Poussin's brushwork, the composition, the painted light and the gallery's light—as an exercise in documenting the repetition that underwrites the end product of criticism. In both its own incremental accumulation of detail and in its attention to the detail of Poussin, it is a book which partakes in practicing and investigating the role of that detail in creating an interpretation and creating an end product; it is a 'record of looking taking place and changing over time.' (Clark 2006: 5) This book is known anecdotally to have been of interest to Smith because of its unabashed commitment to repeated viewing.[1] (Indeed, readers familiar with Smith's work will know that she has always been an advocate of re-watchings, re-viewings, and re-readings. The lectures gathered together as *Artful* in 2012 wonders why 'we tend to believe we've read a book after reading it just once' when in fact 'books need time to dawn on us, it takes time to understand what makes them, structurally, in thematic resonance, in afterthought.' (Smith, 2013: 31) Clark's is not the first gallery diary to have resonated in Smith's work. In 1907, Rainer Maria Rilke visited a Paul Cézanne retrospective nearly every day for a month, writing tens of letters to his then-wife Clara Westhoff. These letters are an explicit subject of Smith's creative critical essay 'Green,' in which she finds that they chart a gallery experience where 'the paintings made you part of them.' (Smith 2014b: 253) This notion of the dissolved boundary between artwork and viewer is carried into *How to be both*, but it is Clark's

Q1

1 As told by the author to my PhD supervisor, Peter Boxall. Thank you to Peter for passing this onto me in conversation, and for all the discussion of *How to be both* back in 2016.

recursive attention to detail which speaks to Smith's novelistic project most closely.

George, unlike Clark, is not the recipient of an academic fellowship. And unlike Rilke or Smith she is not a published writer. The process of becoming closer to an artwork is, for her, levied in the expectation that it might bring nuance to her memories and knowledge of her recently passed mother, an ex-art history and gender studies academic turned activist and think tank researcher who had an intense fascination with the animated style and reputed arrogance of del Cossa, a mother whose affair with a woman who may have been a double agent has set George into motion as something of a detective.[2] Nevertheless, this gallery scene is an example of how Smith details not just an idea or ideology of reading but breaks down the process of attachment, what Clark above calls the 'actual business,' of writing. It exemplifies the way that looking and interpretation change, how different aspects of the studied object burst into sight and draw new lines of connection, over time. In addition to articulating these enchanted *bursts* in the language of fiction, *How to be both* formalizes this unpredictable aspect of reading by first conjuring del Cossa to narrate its other half and then printing it in two runs, half with George's first and half in the reverse order.[3] What seems to echo and what originate is predicated on this formal play with foreground and background, primary and secondary.

By entering into the imagined world of the artist in fiction, Smith is able to reflect on the discourse of aesthetic production and consumption in a way that Clark as a descriptive critic cannot. There is, then, a question here about fiction, about the utility—or, more sympathetically put, about the *possibility*—that a novelist sees in having one of her characters engaged in this level of attention to detail. As is frequently the case in Smith's work, *How to be both*'s characters are in some way model readers whose 'journeys' contain an autocritical discourse, which is to say that these readers parse a mode of aesthetic engagement which can be enacted on Smith's writing itself. This article locates that autocriticism in the novel's animation of textual and literary detail.

Contemporary Art Novels

It is not uncommon for contemporary novels to draw on gallery visits and the visual arts, as a growing body of literary criticism about 'contemporary art novels' attests. Unsurprisingly, literary critics tend to suggest that novelists employ intermediality and the visual as a means of thinking through the particularities of contemporary aesthetic experience, negating or reifying

2 The National Gallery is the second location in which George has seen del Cossa's work in the flesh. Her mother had previously taken George and her brother to Ferrara, Italy to see del Cossa's frescos in the Palazzo Schifanoia after seeing them in a magazine—an event borrowed almost exactly from Smith's own life (see Smith, 'He Looked Like').

3 Smith has imagined as Francescho rather than Francesco, a painter born female but who, at the suggestion of their father, dresses in men's clothing and binds their chest in order to present as male and work as a painter. Because Smith does not assign any particular pronouns to Francescho in this section I am using they/their to reflect Francescho's embodiment of the novel's both-ness. In references to Francesco del Cossa in George's section I will follow the characters' use of he/his.

the possibilities of the literary. Alexandra Kingston-Reese argues that contemporary art novels are likely to reflect not only on 'critical attachments' but also 'aesthetic detachments,' further suggesting that they are united in their concern with 'comprehending how aesthetic experiences have been radically reshaped by the hyperaestheticized, hypercommodified, and hypermediated nature of contemporary life.' (Kingston-Reese 2020: xv) Cara L. Lewis identifies *How to be both* in a grouping of art novels which do not just reiterate a theoretical relation between art and literature but which put that relation into a practice that goes beyond theoretical or academic discussions: the contemporary art novel 'repeatedly asks what art is—and by extension, what literature is—and what they can do.' (Lewis 2019: 131) Alice Bennett agrees that by 'describing attention to visual art works, writers are implicitly identifying those things which their own art form does differently.' (Bennett 2018: 154) Taking this visual function of the literary for granted, this article instead thinks through the meaningful interaction between Clark's queries about the unpredictable outcomes of repeated looking and Smith's enchantment of novelistic detail which relies on an economy of attention and noticing.

Beginning with a reading of Clark's diaries, I read his 'experiment' alongside the tension between suspicion and recollection that Paul Ricoeur identifies as the inherent experience of interpretation, reprised and the subject of much debate in literary studies around the mid-2010s. These narratives—about postcritical reading, surface reading, reading with the grain, reading close but not deep, and so on—have been repeated so frequently in literary criticism that they do not need to be fully rehearsed again here.[4] But their shared investment in conceiving of a critical modality which does *not* rely on undoing the concealed, deep-laid or latent forces of textuality, vouching instead for modes of 'postcritical' engagement which can move between positive and negative affects, speaks to Clark's repetition and to Smith's tricks of the textual surface for close readers. Rita Felski, who proposed the term 'postcritical' via Paul Ricoeur, imagines it as a critical practice that can 'do justice to [texts'] singularity and their sociability, their distinctiveness and their worldliness.' (Felski 2015: 153) In postcriticism, reading becomes a form of composition which 'binds' the interpreter and object together in 'creative remaking.' (Felski 2015: 182) This is not an article that traces *How to be both*'s staging of the possibilities of postcriticism—Lewis and Elizabeth Anker have already done that. Rather, I invoke aspects of these debates because it highlights how the labour of the literary unit in Smith's novel partakes in a fictional enquiry, or creative remaking, into the outcomes of close attention.

What follows is, in essence, a close reading of Smith's novel which tries to do justice to the fact that if you treat *How to be both* as Clark treats

4 See, for example, Anker and Felski, *Critique and Postcritique*; Best and Marcus, 'Surface Reading'; Marcus, Love, and Best, 'Building a Better Description'; Bewes, 'Reading with the Grain'; Chow, 'When Reflexivity Becomes Porn'; Felski, *The Uses of Literature* and *The Limits of Critique*; Kelly, 'New Sincerity'; Love, 'Close but not Deep'; Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading'; and the 'We, Reading, Now' cluster at *ARCADE*.

Poussin, you might begin to see a proliferation of intentionally-laid detail. But in the case of Smith it is she—the author—who has planted a number of these details, rather than the unavailable Poussin. Animating the parts that make the whole, the question for Clark as it becomes for Smith, is what can insignificance *do* in the artwork? In Roland Barthes's 'The Reality Effect' he wonders whether 'everything in narrative is significant, and if not, if insignificant stretches subsist in the narrative syntagm, what is ultimately, so to speak, the significance of this insignificance?' (Barthes 1989: 143) Smith, as we will see, populates *How to be both* with significant details which bear insignificant results, insignificant inasmuch as they don't lead their reader to an *ur*-reading, bringing instead narrative's hierarchy of significance into question.

T. J. Clark's Experiment

Arriving at the Getty Center in Los Angeles, California for a six-month fellowship, Clark was met with an exhibition containing a work which he knew had been recently acquired: *Landscape with a Calm* by the seventeenth-century French painter Nicolas Poussin. Also contained in that exhibition was Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, on loan from London's National Gallery. Clark was familiar with *Snake*—it was a work that had, in his own words, 'stood as one epitome of painting for me.' (Clark 2006: 2) He admits that '[i]f someone had challenged me to put my feelings about the Poussin on paper, or even suggested that I do some work on it, I think I would have told them that certain paintings are best left alone.' (Clark 2006: 3) This honouring of Poussin's sanctity, however, was soon left behind and 2006 saw the publication of *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*, a series of diary entries which span the three months in which *Calm* and *Snake* were exhibited together (January–April 2000), as well as a handful of entries across the next few years as Clark crossed paths again with *Snake* back in London.

Sight of Death comprises around 250 pages of detail-orientated art writing —observations, for example, about where the brightest white is placed on the canvas, or how the lighting conditions of the gallery affect their appearance: 'what the full-blaze artificial light exaggerated' on one particular day was 'the yellowness of the afternoon atmosphere in *Calm*. (Clark 2006: 31) On another day, Clark realizes that two birch trees which appear, at first glance, to be enmeshed in one another in *Calm* have, in fact, been painted painstakingly separate from one another. Poussin has 'put a lot of effort' into 'having the leaves of the right-hand [tree] be closer to us, overlapping and partly obscuring the others, and certainly catching the light

differently.' (Clark 2006: 24) One of the ways that Clark accounts for this painstaking attention to detail is, in a language that characterizes Smith's animation of del Cossa, to call Poussin a 'painter of the unnoticeable:'

> the ethics of this has to do with his precisely not using the unnoticeable as a place in the picture where mere illusionism can stop and a demonstration of power or facility take over. […] The hillside [in *Calm*] is insignificant, and *that*'s what has to be painted. (Clark 2006: 39)

As these moves from brushstroke to treatise, from painterly precision to a painterly ethics, show, these diaries are not altogether free of broader extrapolations about Poussin's significance to what Clark knows of seventeenth-century art history (it is not mere description to ascribe a theory of the unnoticeable). But Clark presents *Sight of Death* as a mode of criticism which resists making any 'discoveries,' claiming any 'findings,' or constructing any 'grand theories' either about Poussin, his work, or art criticism in general.[5] Rather, it is the removal of an expected topic of study or anticipated thesis, and instead the enhanced familiarity and closeness with Poussin's work and technique which is the ultimate reward of the project as far as Clark sees it. Countering criticism's elision of the repetitions which form it, Clark forges a self-professed experimental criticism which brings the real-time development of a critical interpretation into view; his diary is a place in which description, repetition and mistakes are all permitted, when the realization of insignificant details is laid bare for his readers to 'gawp' at.

The initiative that underwrites the text speaks, then, to the recently reprised tension in the theories of reading gestured to earlier—Paul Ricoeur's work on the twofold motivation that animates the activities of the reader-interpreter. The phrase that has become central to this debate—postcritical—originates from Ricoeur's work on the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and the 'hermeneutics of recollection,' first coined in a 1950s lecture on Freud, later to be published as *Freud and Philosophy* in 1965, translated into English in 1970 and newly popularized alongside Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'paranoid reading' by Felski and a number of others in the second decade of the twenty-first century. For Ricoeur, the symbolic character of the written word crystallizes the way in which language is 'from the outset and for the most part distorted: it means something other than what it says, it has a double meaning, it is equivocal.' (Ricoeur 1970: 7) Ricoeur's typological response to this double meaning denotes two modes of engagement by the reader of the written text: a hermeneutics of suspicion finds *dissimulation* in double meaning and therefore, as a mode of critical or close reading, it comprises reading against the grain in order

5 In one entry, Clark notes with distress that he has arrived to the room 'with an idea what I should try to write about – the first time this has happened, and not a good sign. I want this book to be about what occurs in front of paintings more or less involuntarily, not what I think ought to occur.' (Clark 2006: 133)

to reveal something repressed within the text, or of which the text *speaks* but does not *state* (e.g. the contours of patriarchal oppression, capitalist modes of production, Freudian displacement).

But the propensity of language for double meaning can alternatively be apprehended and experienced as *revelation*. A hermeneutics of recollection (variously referred to as 'postcritical faith,' 'second naïveté' and a 'hermeneutics of trust') is interested not in demystification (casting off illusion, shattering false consciousness) but in the 'restoration' of meaning. (Ricoeur 1970: 28) Recollection is marked by 'care and concern for the *object*,' and arises through opting to 'describe rather than reduce' (Ricoeur 1970: 29)—that is, to describe rather than explain away as a symptom. While the remit of 'description' is not quite spelled out by Ricoeur here, we can glean something of the experience of this postcritical faith: 'In my own research', Ricoeur writes, 'concern for the object consisted in surrender to the movement of meaning which, starting from the literal sense – the spot or contamination – points to something grasped in the region of the sacred.' (Ricoeur 1970: 29) Instead, then, of a suspicious reading which looks to configure this 'spot or contamination' as a symptom of the text's governance, a recollective reading experiences the text as a container of revelatory expansiveness. Crucially, this capacity of the written word to be taken as dissimulation or revelation is not imagined as a binary: in Ricoeur's reading, to interpret is to experience a 'double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience.' (Ricoeur 1970: 27) To interpret, he tells us, is to experience the artwork both as a generous giver and as a trickster.

The Salient, the Incidental: Clark's Close Attention

We see the operation of something like a postcritical impetus, then, in Clark's diary. Rather than viewing the paintings as symptoms of their historical moment, Clark reads the potentially incipient duplicity of the overwrought separation of the birch trees as evidence of painting's capacity to cast its viewers into 'over-eager' and 'passive' (Clark 2006: 131) states wherein the sacred registers both excitement and reverence. Both of these states arise from not being able to master a reading of the artwork but from existing instead *with* the world of the work.[6] The payoff of this removed expectation is high. About halfway through the diaries, when Clark feels he is 'for the time being, almost written out' (Clark 2006: 128) of things to say about *Snake*, tired of laboriously describing the colours of a shaded patch and the trio of minor figures there, he is suddenly

6 While Clark steers clear of premeditated critique, at times he tends toward what Felski calls *genuflection*, as when he pronounces that 'Scholarship – maybe I'm falling into writing this way because at present I am plowing through WB's *Arcades Project* in the afternoons – is always a matter of skirting round a black hole of the unknown, the impenetrable, the centrally mysterious. (Clark 2008: 164). Revelling in the impenetrability of the artwork, too, bears limits as a critical sensibility. Felski concisely expresses the difference: 'If critique is too punitive, this alternative stance seems too pious – genuflecting before the radical alterity and undecidability of texts.' (Felski 2015: 29)

overwhelmed with something totally new. For the first time, he notices the direction in which one of those minor figures is gazing:

> my God! – I finally see what the pivotal figure in this group really *is* and is doing. I mean the rightmost of the trio, who (like his companions) is male. He is […] looking back – this is really what took my breath away when I first saw it – over his raised shoulder, toward the incipient signs of distress. He is part of the vnpantomime.' (Clark 2006: 128–9)

Here, Clark notices a new detail which connects two events or actions in the painting which were previously thought to be discrete. Clark now sees that these events—the man killed by the snake, the man running from the incident, and a man in the trio who lays in the grass, seemingly not aware of the incident—are in fact part of the same narrative event. By taking, in Smith's words, 'proper time,' Clark enters closely enough into the detail of the painting's composition to realize the relationship of its parts and therefore be newly and powerfully overcome (*my God!*) by Poussin's skill.[7]

This propensity of the artwork to enable Clark to 'grasp' something 'in the region of the sacred' is articulated again in the introduction where, after his time in the gallery has concluded, Clark writes that he is wary of criticism which tries to 'pierce the veil' of the artwork by probing too deeply and claiming 'emotional ownership of the image.' He sets this type of erroneously piercing gaze apart from his own engagement, which has been simply to 'see:'

> astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing and seeing again: aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface, what is salient and what incidental alter bewilderingly from day to day, the larger order of the depiction breaks up, recrystallizes, fragments again, persists like an afterimage. And slowly the question arises: What is it, fundamentally, I am returning to in this particular case? (Clark 2006: 5)

Here, Clark's lyricism posits rereading as a multiplicitous entry into the realm of the revelatory or epiphanic. Of course, this is also a basic comment on the plurality of reception; Clark highlights something that most readers will likely have intuited, that the narratives of interpretation emerge from the knowledge that the reader or viewer brings to the art object, the contextual information made available to them, and upon the length of time they can spend with the art object. These things change day to day. And while this is written, by Clark, in an idiom that articulates the mystifying experience of that contingency, what also emerges is

7 This language of breathlessness and awe is also a feature of Smith's writing about and beyond *How to be both*. In an article for *The Guardian*, Smith writes that del Cossa's frescos—which she sees in the pages of a magazine—appeared 'so beautiful that it did something to my breathing and I nearly choked.' (Smith 2014c)

language about details moving between foreground and background, altering between the 'salient' (primary) and the 'incidental' (secondary). In these terms, salient and incidental, we are brought most squarely to Smith's crossover with Clark: to Smith's rendering, in fiction, the process by which the salient and incidental can indeed switch places.

Clark, worried that he seems to have set himself 'the task of recapitulating in words every move in Poussin's process of manufacture, as opposed to describing the main lines of his end product' tells his reader that he knows 'there is something excessive, and maybe ludicrous, to entering this closely into someone else's imagined world. But these diary entries are partly meant as an argument in favor of such entry.' (Clark 2006: 42–3) He thinks he might be—in a language reminiscent of D. A. Miller and Frances Ferguson—getting *too close*.[8] Getting too close is arguably what critics do. But it also, we should note, most certainly what novelists do. And in the case of Smith, it might also be the kind of reception that they sometimes crave. In the next section, I look at how Smith not only writes her own version of a gallery diary, but also produces the conditions within the novel for her reader to draw out a series of observations which mimic Clark's discourse of detail-orientated and 'ludicrous' close reading. In other words, *How to be both* bears the traces of Smith's 'process of manufacture' in its focus on letters and etymologies which connect the novel's halves; to catch these traces is to be confronted with the Ricoeurian symbol—is *How to be both* primarily the story of George and Francescho or is it a puzzle, a mere conceit, masquerading as a novel? Reading through Clark, through the interchangeability of the salient and the incidental, Smith's novel makes the symbol a playful rather than antagonistic 'spot' and suggests each interpretation or narrative to be the adornment of the other.

8 Miller characterizes too-close reading as 'an almost infantile desire to be *close*, period, as one can get, without literal plagiarism, to merging with the mother-text.' (Miller 2003: 58) It is the competing urge to master and to merge with the artwork. Ferguson casts Miller's closeness as a rendering of how art objects are sometimes 'spoken of as friends. The friend doesn't merely recognize a friend at his or her most characteristic. The friend finishes a friend's sentences when he or she trails off.' (Ferguson 2015: 540)

Rubble and Buildings: How to be both's Models of Attention

How, then, does *How to be both* exemplify the experience of the 'actual business' of engaging with art, and how does it highlight the contingency of the salient and the incidental? Let's return to the scene from the introduction, the seventh visit in which George is captivated by the abundance of detail in del Cossa's portrait of Saint Vincent:

> Today what she sees is the way the rockscape on one side of the saint is broken, rubbly, as if not yet developed, and on the other side has transformed into buildings that are rather grand and fancy.
> It is as if just passing from one side of the saint to the other will result if you go one way in wholeness and if you go the other way in brokenness.

Both states are beautiful. (Smith 2014: 156–8)

We are not privy to the preceding six visits, but from the act of interpretation focalized through George on this seventh occasion we see the accumulation of acts of noticing which indicate the unfolding process of George's increasingly intimate knowledge of, and relationship to, an artwork. The figure in the painting has become, through familiarity, 'less severe' to the point that George feels as though 'she is meeting an old friend.' (Smith 2014: 157)

To be sure, this act of looking is not descriptive in a strictly objective sense: here, George describes what she sees, but this description becomes a type of interpretation, developing from objective description into subjective description. George does not just see a pile of bricks on one side and buildings on the other but sequences this composition, imagining a narrative wherein these two states are not final but each is an available version of the other. There is a process taking place behind the figure of Saint Vincent that valorizes both raw material and end product 'as if' there exists no way of knowing which is more valuable or has a more intriguing history. Smith's rendering de-temporalizes the raw and the stylized, the building block and the building, and poses them as emblematic of the novel's own relationship with its process and product. *How to be both* thus suggests to its readers that whether their attention is on the parts or the whole—the 'rubbly' rockscape that comprise the artists' raw material or the 'grand and fancy' buildings that mark the completed work—both of these ways of seeing 'are beautiful' and yield some form of reward.

This discourse of part and whole is further bound up in a narrative about the tricksy artist and artistic intention. In the beginning of the section that Francescho narrates, they become tethered to George in the National Gallery and peer over her shoulder at *Saint Vincent*. In doing so, Francescho recalls a detail—angels' hands transgressing a boundary—which was 'something you'd only see if you really looked.' (Smith 2014: 193) Fluctuating between this image of the artist whose original intention holds key information for the singularity of the work, and an artist whose original intention is negligible and open to the interpretations of its subsequent audiences, Francescho finds themselves, in the same breath, unable to recall why they painted a blasphemously aged image of Christ. They even find that looking at their own paintings gives way to 'surprise' at the 'knowledge' the paintings contain: 'the life of painting and making is a matter of double knowledge so that your own hands will reveal a world to you to which your mind's eye, your conscious eye, is often blind.' (Smith 2014: 313) Exposed to this, the reader of *How to be both* is encouraged to think

of their own *detail noticing* as both authorially-derived *and* self-derived, both planned and contingent.

In fact, if we conceive of Francescho's self-apprehension as Smith's rendering of her own close attention to del Cossa—a reading for which there is ample evidence[9]—we see how Smith guides her reader to a relationship with the novel and the artworks described in its pages which leverages the rewards of visual close attention to bring interest to the material units that make up the overall effect as well as the 'end product.' George's repeated looking, therefore, is put into tension with a fiction that imagines its own reception by the artist in question, a method of looking and engagement which honours the efforts of the artist (which are actualized by this very text) without elevating those efforts beyond all independent engagement by its audience. Smith's novel, in other words, imagines its own reception through the discourse of Francescho ruminating over their reception, and it does this with recourse to a narrative that, like Clark's diary, performs repeated looking.

Plot Twhists

This interest in the technicalities of production and the mystifications of consumption plays out at the level of the novel's discourse, but Smith also embeds her own array of artifice and detail. Indeed, for the reader who looks again and again there is a lexical and structural tricksiness which governs the text. As George says when she and her love interest H sees what looks like genitals in a del Cossa painting, it is 'subtle and at the same time the most unsubtle thing in the world […]. Once you've seen it, you can't not see it.' (Smith 2014: 142) The much alluded-to tricksiness will be spelled out shortly. It is, in part, for this reason—its entwining of artist and audience, production and consumption, surface and depth, cause and effect—that *How to be both* has garnered a critical reception which specifically lauds it as a postcritical novel. Described as both a 'playbook in postcritical reading' (Anker 2017: 19) and a novel that 'recommends itself as a kind of manual for the postcritical reader,' (Lewis 2019: 133) critics see it as a text which honours Felski's description of postcriticism as a reading or composition through 'creative remaking' which attests to the binding or attachment that occurs between subject and object. Lewis, for instance, reads George's creative reimagination of the double helix sculpture near her home as the structure of history—it is a 'shout,' an 'upward spring' (Smith 2014: 172) as opposed to layers under the ground. Lewis calls this a postcritical revisioning of history because it tells

9 See n2 and n7.

us that 'the past need not be unearthed' by critique 'because it is already visually available to us, if we know how to look.' (Lewis 2019: 138)

Part of the reason that critics pitch *How to be both* as a postcritical playbook, then, is in recognition of Smith's tempering of her usual focus on fiction and the novel, and incumbent concerns with the value of reading, with the *materiality* of the visual; Francescho does not just retell the story of their life as a painter but goes into detail regarding the specific material requirements for 'the making of pictures' as a fifteenth-century artist. Paint-making ingredients include 'plants and stones, stonedust and water, fish bones, sheep and goat bones, the bones of hens or other fowls whitened in high heat and ground down fine: […] we need breadcrumbs, willow shoots, fig shoots, fig milk.' (Smith 2014: 244) This animation of the visual 'surface' not only alludes to the amount of work that goes into the production of art before paint is daubed on a surface, but also reifies a frequently recurring sentiment in Smith's oeuvre: that art is alive. Indeed, this fixation on the material stuff of art is not the concern of *How to be both* alone. In 'Green,' a person (I) is with a friend (you) in a gallery, looking at Cézanne's 'L'Etang des Soeurs, Osny.' The friend interprets the painting in a way that the speaker then finds revelatory:

> Look at the way the artifice is the thing that makes it alive. Look at the way it's made out of the flatness of its own surface so we'll know we're not being deceived, so you'll know that it's just a painting. It takes away illusion. It makes it about what's possible.
> No illusion. That's it. The surface opens itself. What I'm looking at ups and arrows right through me like someone just shot me with colour, with the truth about green. (Smith 2014b: 251)

We could see this as a kind of Smithian plot twist—the way that the green has been applied to the canvas announces its artifice, but in a manner that remystifies rather than reduces its impressive effects.[10] There are, in fact, so many twists in *How to be both* that the dominance of its effect is somewhat effaced: to see what Clark calls the 'process of manufacture' is to be enlivened to a logic of the artwork that it is no longer about illusion and the task of demystification but about the open secret of the artwork's artifice.

In Smith's imagining, or at least in her protagonists' imagining, superficiality loses its pejorative connotation and becomes instead a matter of seeing multiple layers at work on the surface. In *How to be both*, objects, characters and anecdotes are transformed, resurface and repurposed into new forms and literal structures that take on additional meaning. Let's pull at one particular thread of this, the lexical play that occurs in the permutations of the letter 'H'—the subheading was not a ham-fisted typo. H, the sound of

10 Smith recycles this engagement with Cézanne almost verbatim in her popular ficto-critical work *Artful*.

an aspirated breath brings together the name of George's love interest (known as 'H') who breathes curiosity back into George's life. H is also the letter that Smith adds to Francescho's name, and in its sounding of the breath is present in the punctuation that litters Francescho's narrative, colons that are said to mark where the 'breaths should come' (Smith 2014: 337) in the narrative. When George and H are revising facts about DNA and the discovery of the double helix structure, H becomes contained within 'helix' and becomes recognizable as the graphic representation of the letter that most closely resembles a segment of its coiled structure. The twisting of the double helix surfaces again in the lineation in which Francescho is conjured into and whisked out of existence at the beginning and end of their narrative. The very first lines of Francescho's narrative, for instance, run in the following undulation:

> Ho this is a mighty twisting thing fast as a
> fish being pulled by its mouth on a hook
> if a fish could be fished through a
> 6 foot thick wall made of bricks or an
> arrow if an arrow could fly in a leisurely
> curl like the coil of a snail or a
> star with a tail if the star was shot
> upwards past maggots and worms. (Smith 2014: 189)

Not only does this shape bring us back again to the web of signifiers contained in and by the letter H, but so too does the first word of Francescho's narrative—Ho—which either recalls, or sets a precedent for, the novel's ensuing Hs and twists. This, of course, echoes the novel's structure—the proximity of Francescho and George whose lives are intimately linked but who cannot directly communicate with one another. Instead of the separated birch, and the sometimes overly yellow palette caused by the artificial light, then, in *How to be both* we have visual and literal permutations of the letter H as an intentionally placed brushstroke which yields material that might appear incidental on one reading and salient on the next.

Unlike Francescho's lists of items that are required for paintmaking, these units of detail are the mode in which *How to be both* creates the details that Clark finds upon repeated looks, but in this case we know that the author, Smith (and sometimes the artist, Francescho), has planted them intentionally. This is the distinction between part and whole to which I earlier referred, Smith's interest in the enchantment of detail whereby the stuff of the literary—letters, punctuation, typographic settings—is brought into a web of connection that spans the novel, but which does not yield any 'beneficial' secret because the other option—the 'finished

building' as opposed to the rockscape – is 'beautiful' to read too. Rather, these details are imbued with a significance that speaks to their role in the novel's overall effect of finding a comfort in narrative irresolution as well as spatializing its composition.[11] As Lewis frames it, *How to be both* utilizes its encounters with artworks to untether itself from the temporal bind of the novel. Once we begin to notice the resonances between the two halves, in other words, we come to see the novel itself as an 'art object with spatial qualities.' (Lewis 2019: 137) Lewis observes this adornment of the novel but neither she nor Anker finds how far this spatial quality goes, or to what extent it is refracted through the literary unit. To be sure, Smith utilizes a method of *interaction* with visual artworks in order to demarcate the scope of the literary, but this utility is also a wry marker of how conventional plot and plot *twists*, or disclosures, need not be a feature of the novel. Rather, the unit of the letter and the word can invite an attention which finds sustenance in the open secret of the text's artifice, the fact that it bears the traces of its own production without detracting from its effect as a story.

Like the 'no illusions' aesthetic of Cézanne in 'Green,' noticing the proliferation of the double helix in *How to be both* does not become an interpretation-ending 'a-ha!' in the novel. Like Clark's 'my God!,' it is a sign of the closeness forged rather than the mastery and professional distance now instantiated. Smith's attention to the letter posits her writing as both the generous giver and the trickster of Ricoeur's imagining, exploiting the symbol's capacity for double meaning to show how surveillance and scrutiny can be attended by suspicion *and* enchantment. It would be an overstatement to say that *How to be both* de facto makes its insignificant details significant, but the novel does suggest that its ideal mode of attention is one that can imbue these details with their due significance *without* latching onto them as the master key either. And for the reader who doesn't notice, they are provided with a novel that twists, and asks its questions about attention and value in discursive form, nevertheless.

The question that critics have repeatedly asked of the contemporary art novel is *how does it show writers in the act of thinking through the role and the possibilities of the literary*? Critics have suggested that *How to be both* breaks ranks with Smith's previous work because it takes the visual, rather than the codex, as its source. (Lewis 2019: 130) But in this listing of the novel's lexical play I have suggested that Smith's attention to the visual does not necessarily precede or 'teach' the literary—they are two ways of paying attention which coil round one another in sometimes indistinguishable ways. This attention to the literary unit—which manifests in puns, word- and letter-play, etymology, non-conventional typesetting—have been a part of Smith's code-infused style long before 2014.[12] By rehearsing

11 This is not, to be sure, singular to Smith's work in *How to be both*. A version of this reading could be enacted in relation to the names of Smith's characters, how they enjoin in a logic of the overwrought unit, across many of her fictions but there is not room in this essay for that reading. I explore this in an upcoming piece focused on Smith's anagrams and the work of authorship, which builds on Rebecca Pohl's compelling work on Smith's authorial 'enthusiasm.'

12 The protagonist of the 2011 novel *There but for the*, for example, features characters whose names are anagrams and portmanteaus: 'Gen' and 'Eric Lee' aka a Generic middle-class couple.

Clark's repeated physical dedication to *being close* and *looking closely* at Poussin's painting of the unnoticeable, Smith constructs a narrative which gives its reader two options for how it understands its frequent pronouncements on the value of art and the value of detail. Like Poussin's hillside which is by necessity unremarkable, and thus remarkable in its plausibility, Smith imbues the insignificant with a discoverable significance for those who read like Clark and Smith. But this is a significance which tells you: you are now part of the pantomime.

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