

FICTION IN
REVIEW



M A R T A F I G L E R O W I C Z

“It was the first day of my humiliation.” When Zadie Smith’s *Swing Time* (2016) begins, its protagonist-narrator brims with hurt and shame. She has inflicted pain on, and been brutally rejected by, someone she loved. To make things worse, their miscommunications are out in public for everyone to see. What will happen now, she asks herself, as she hesitantly checks her email. In place of an answer, the server yields a hateful, anonymous note that she instantly recognizes as coming from another estranged intimate. “The body of the message,” she tells us, “was a single sentence: *Now everyone knows who you really are.*”

In essays and interviews, Smith derives her writing from a strand of high modernism whose main proponent was E. M. Forster. It is the modernism of what Forster called “muddled” lives: of Zelda rather than F. Scott Fitzgerald, of Catherine Mansfield and Charlotte Perkins Gilman rather than Ernest Hemingway or D. H. Lawrence. With these earlier writers, Smith shares an aesthetic and affective intensity that the literary critic James Wood has

Swing Time, by Zadie Smith (Penguin, 464 pp., \$27)

ungenerously described as hysteria. She also continues these marginal modernists' critique of affectively contained, manicured art as inaccurate for the messy ways human relationships actually work. Smith is an artist of the meltdown. She pursues epiphanies that come not after a long walk by the ocean but after catching a glimpse of oneself in the eyes of others as one is crying in public: "This being Manhattan, nobody paused to watch what must have looked like a staged reenactment: a weeping woman, sat on a step, under that Lazarus plaque, huddled by boxes, far from home." The interpersonal dramas from which these embarrassing epiphanies issue tend to be what the Marxist literary critic Franco Moretti calls middle-class crimes: betrayals of mutual intimacies and agreements that the law does not directly proscribe, but that are not thereby any less devastating to those affected by them. Her protagonists reel from the relationships they lose during such crises but also from their own confusing incapacity to articulate these relationships' exact terms or measure the degree of guilt and resentment they ought to feel about their dissolution.

Such ineffable bonds, clarified to their bearers only in moments of abandon or disappointment, have long been the subject of Smith's writing. She explores them through the unexpectedly deep friendships and shaky marriages of *White Teeth's* Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal (2000); through Alex-Li Tandem's earnest, selfless obsessions with stardom in *The Autograph Man* (2002); through the heady intellectual and affective exchanges of *On Beauty* (2005) and the more sordid marital betrayals of *NW* (2012). She also names them as her personal and aesthetic obsessions in the essays collected in *Changing My Mind* (2010). Like Smith's earlier novels, *Swing Time* depicts fluctuating, long-term bonds for which her characters cannot find appropriate names or rules. It also explores how these confusions are multiplied by incompatibilities or liminalities of race, gender, and class. Compared to these earlier novels, however, *Swing Time* is much darker and more polemical. It is animated by a fascination with the blurring of affective and social categories, as well as by a sharp indictment – which *White Teeth* or even *On Beauty* still curtailed, or blunted with humor – of more individualized notions of self-control and self-fulfillment.

Swing Time is told from the perspective of an unnamed thirty-

something female narrator who grows up in a working-class neighborhood of London with her white father and Jamaican mother. Her best friend until young adulthood is another biracial girl named Tracey, who is raised by a single mom and occasionally visited by an absentee dad. Both girls attend dance classes as children, and they share eclectic obsessions with dancers ranging from Ginger Rogers to Michael Jackson. Imitating other people's dance routines provides them with models of social acceptance and upward mobility. The novel follows the ways in which the two girls, as well as other women around them, do or do not pursue their dreams of greater prosperity and fulfillment. Tracey embarks on a professional dancing career. The narrator's mother divorces her father, finds a lesbian partner, and begins a political career that leads her all the way to Parliament. Meanwhile, the narrator flounders, continuing – as she herself puts it – to hide in the “shadow” of more driven and talented others. She eventually becomes the personal assistant of a Madonna-like Australian pop star named Aimee, with whom she travels to West Africa to manage Aimee's charity initiative for young women's education. Told out of chronological order, the story begins with, and then works its way back to, an initially unexplained crisis in the narrator's relationship with her employer. As we eventually find out, their falling out echoes the dynamic of bad boundaries, projections, and envy that also precipitated an earlier crisis in the narrator's friendship with Tracey, as well as her estrangement from her mother. From the perspective of this new rupture, the narrator thinks back on the earlier fraught friendships and relationships that led her there.

To readers who follow contemporary fiction, this plot will sound familiar. It hits the main chords of Elena Ferrante's acclaimed tetralogy about the parallel lives of Lila and Elena, two childhood friends from Naples. The similarities between Smith's and Ferrante's work are indeed unmistakable: Smith offers us another version of the “Chloe-liked-Olivia” plot that Ferrante recently put on everybody's minds and bookshelves. *Swing Time* is a novel about bonds between women whose many variations and typologies it pursues with a nearly encyclopedic impulse. Its primary focus is the gray zone of intense female friendship whose participants treat each other, alternately and without clear category boundaries, as

mentors, alter egos, competitors, mutual inspirations, and soul-mates. Like Ferrante's novels, *Swing Time* depicts these female bonds as frequently overshadowing its characters' relationships with their heterosexual male partners. The various women its narrator befriends include not only her employer and her childhood friend but also various co-workers and a West African school-teacher who seems more comfortable in her own skin and hometown than the narrator ever was in hers. Like the Ginger Rogers dance videos she obsessively watches, these women offer her models of mutual care and intimacy, as well as a range of alternative versions of herself whom she wants at times to become and at times merely to cheer from the sidelines.

With more of a feminist agenda than was explicit in her earlier novels, Smith uses this setup to plumb the depths of socially induced feminine self-hatred. She also highlights the ways this self-hatred intersects with, and is intensified by, issues of race and class. The novel movingly portrays the crises, self-doubts, and frustrations that assail its working-class black female protagonist when she pursues nonfamily-oriented aesthetic and professional interests within a world that still, implicitly, reserves the right to do so for the rich, the white, and the male. Within this world – the narrator soon realizes – she is inevitably reduced, at best, to some more privileged person's adjuvant. As she puts it in one of her moments of introspective revelation: “I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, . . . I had never had any light of my own. I experienced myself as a kind of shadow.”

In Ferrante's fiction, there is an epic sweep to such revelations. Their grandeur comes from her novels' confidence in their protagonists' genuine, if initially underappreciated, giftedness and potential. Such confidence is markedly absent from Smith's novel. Her characters are disarmingly average, both in the predictable fates to which social structures assign them and in the inner resources they muster to assert themselves. The narrator – who initially seems on her way to being discovered, if not as a dancer, then at least as a budding intellectual – flunks her private school exams, and never looks back. (She “wrote a few words here and there,” as she tells it, “ignored the pages of math and science, flagrantly failed.”) Tracey does make it to Broadway but cannot step out of the chorus line. Once elected to Parliament, the narra-

tor's mother fails to satisfy her constituents. And even the novel's superstar, Aimee, is a hypocritical imitator whose triumphs the narrator belatedly, resentfully attributes to intense, all-consuming selfishness. She is "mother and lover," as the narrator describes her, "big sister, best friend, superstar and diplomat, billionaire and street kid, foolish girl and woman of substance. But why should she get to take everything, have everything, do everything, be everyone, in all places, at all times?"

With uncompromising hardness, Smith refuses to endow the environments her characters inhabit with a version of genius – or, indeed, even talent – that one could trust to bear fruit, and for whose sake her characters could forgive one another's narcissism and imperfections. The world *Swing Time* depicts holds no beauty or achievement that could be more than fleetingly, and locally, redeeming – even though, Smith implies, it is all these characters can do to keep looking for such redemption in their own expression or in the sacrifices they make for the sake of the self-fulfillment of others. As their lofty ambitions come to seem ever less attainable, Smith's characters also become increasingly troubled by the lack of clear rules or checks and balances in what they take from and give to each other. With no "greater good" toward which their talents could lead them, or for whose sake they could sacrifice their egos, they start to wonder who or what could make them feel fulfilled. They alternately blame themselves for giving up too many and too few of their personal ambitions for the sake of supporting other people. Their friendships consequently turn resentful and mercenary; familial ties become by turns codependent and coldly indifferent.

Smith creates this ambiance of raised but inevitably disappointed hopes of personal fulfillment through a style that constantly hovers on the brink of, but never quite tips over into, enthusiasm and awe. Her chapters frequently start with snappy hooks and end in lyric flourishes. But the narrator's tone is also usually dissociated from these professed excitements. Her rhythms and details are crisp, but purposefully mechanical, as if she were continually trying to whip herself up into an eager credulousness that she lacks: "A banshee wail pierced the civilized scene: I turned back and saw Aimee, naked, running from the changing room

toward me, launching herself in a dive over my head and over the ladder, arms out, back perfectly arched, as if lifted from below by an invisible principal dancer, before hitting the water clean and true.” In a typical chapter ending, the narrator here depicts Aimee’s leap in a way that is both admiring and tired. The leap inspires the narrator to metaphoric, nearly poetic language, but does not break the surface of her detached disbelief. Indeed, the simile she uses suggests how unimaginable her employer’s joyful abandon is to her except as a carefully maintained and rehearsed artifice. If we sympathize with these characters – as Smith often moves us to do – it is because of how vulnerable they seem in their confinement to a worldview they cannot render more plausible and trustworthy.

Smith reflects on her characters’ dissatisfaction with their attempts at self-fulfillment through her novel’s engagements with dance. These characters’ occasional capacity to lose themselves in music brings them their rare moments of happiness. At the same time, most of their interpersonal disappointments and personal flaws come from confusions between the inward sense of freedom, spontaneity, and self-determination dancing occasionally gives them and the much less clear-cut, awkwardly dependent ways they come across and relate to others. Here, midway through the novel, as the narrator watches Aimee’s rehearsal, she wonders if her employer is aware of how inward-looking and effortful her supposedly extroverted and spontaneous movements seem to those around her: “No move of hers flowed instinctively or naturally from the next, each ‘step’ was clearly visible, choreographed . . . it was like witnessing a woman cross the line at the end of a marathon, or working her way toward her own orgasm.” The narrator, her mother, and Tracey all manage to lose themselves in such moments of self-pleasuring effort, and the novel does not blame or criticize them for it. But these characters also cannot fully acknowledge or dispel the privacy and selfishness of such moments. As they try to record and share their supposed experiences of controlled self-abandon, other people’s frequent inability to draw comfort from them becomes ever clearer and more devastating. To use Virginia Woolf’s metaphor from *A Room of One’s Own*, this is a novel over which the “I” casts a long shadow that cannot be

gotten rid of. Smith is critical of the society which does not allow the women she depicts to rise to more comfortable positions of privilege and power. But she also sharply indicts the contradictions inherent in an understanding of the self as ideally autonomous, in control over what she gives to those around her and how she fulfills her own wishes. In the novel's central illustration, and near allegory, of these interpersonal miscomprehensions and impasses, Aimee's efforts to help the inhabitants of an African village bear few signs of actual good; mostly they show an unthinking, destructive interventionism whose caprices leave the inhabitants uprooted and stranded. "It was hard to avoid the suspicion that the village was being punished for its connection with Aimee, or deliberately neglected in the expectation that Aimee's money would flow into the gap," the narrator comments sharply toward the end of the novel – but she does not share any of these thoughts with Aimee, having lost the hope that the latter would do anything about it.

With an ambition that her novel manages to carry to a satisfying, if dark, climax, Smith depicts such personal disappointments as a painful reckoning with "*who you really are*," as Tracey viciously puts it in the email with which the novel begins. Such self-reflections, *Swing Time* stresses further, can never be pursued outside the clouds of positive and negative feeling that indeterminately bind us to others. In earlier novels, Smith conveyed similar points more optimistically, through visions of communities whose members eventually learn to draw their existential sustenance from one another's unpredictable, confusing presence. *Swing Time* merely recoils from conventional individualist aspirations with tired anhedonia, as from a supposedly salubrious set of rules and boundaries that ultimately cannot give them clarity and pleasure. This final sense of recoil could be read as defeatist. But we could also see it as Smith's most extreme, polemical assertion of her novel's aesthetic principles; it conveys the belief that, just as most of us cannot be professional dancers, most of us also cannot sustain a life of effortfully shored-up self-control and self-awareness even in sheer physical terms. We are our messy friendships and relationships at heart, *Swing Time* insists, and self-controlled individuals only en pointe. The confusions it depicts are

not merely blurred, unresolved versions of our social reality: they are reality itself. A reader's enjoyment of Smith's fiction depends, here as elsewhere, on our willingness to be convinced of this thesis – and on par with her other major novels, *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*, *Swing Time* argues its case exceptionally well.