Ali Smith's *How to be Both* and the *Nachleben* of Aby Warburg: "Neither here nor there"

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"Beneath the manifold traces of their wanderings from age to age and from nation to nation, the Indian decans of Abū Ma'šar, rulers of the middle register in the Palazzo Schifanoia, reveal on careful auscultation that a Grecian heart still beats within them." (Aby Warburg, "Italian Art" 584)

"[I]t's not like we live in mythical times." (Ali Smith, *How to Be Both* 284)

"Never hope to say farewell
For our lethargy is such
Heaven's kindness cannot touch
Nor earth's frankly brutal drum;
This was long ago decided.
Both of us know why,
Can, alas, foretell,
When our falsehoods are divided,
What we shall become,
One evaporating sigh
. . . I." (W. H. Auden, "The Sea and the Mirror" 179)

I.

At the turn of 1910 and 1911, Aby Warburg, German-Jewish art historian, went on a trip to Italy, which took him to Venice, Bologna, and Ravenna, but his real destination was Ferrara. Warburg was accompanied by Wilhelm Waetzoldt, his assistant, and Carl Georg Heise, his friend (Kultermann 203-04). By no means was this his first Italian journey, as he had been peregrinating to Italy—Florence in particular—since 1888 when he first travelled there as a student of art history, archaeology, and philosophy at the University of Bonn. While Warburg's first trip to Italy had some serious consequences for his private life—during the stay in Florence he met his future wife, the Hamburg-based artist Mary Hertz (Gombrich 44) —the 1910-1911 journey was about to bring a major revolution to art history as an academic discipline and to the methods of "reading" pictures. As a matter of fact, at the turn of 1910 and 1911, Warburg did not discover some new painting previously unknown to art historians, hidden under the layers of

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plaster or in the nooks and crannies of an antique shop. He achieved something else, however: he did shed a *new* light on existing and well-known images. The images in question were the frescoes in the Hall of the Months (*Salone dei Mesi*) in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara—a series of twelve mural paintings out of which only seven survived until Warburg's times.

Warburg announced this new way of seeing images—although only tentatively—in September 1912, in Hamburg. A month later, he delivered an unabridged version of the Hamburg lecture during the 10th International Congress of Art History, which was held in Rome. Titled "Italienische Kunst und Internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara" [Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara], the lecture was finally published as an academic paper in 1922,[1] only ten years after the Congress (Hellwig 11), and became an inspiration and impulse for research in art history to be carried out in line with Warburg's method, which he himself described as iconology (Holly 105).

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara and the monumental frescoes it contains—the ones that inspired Warburg's 1912 lecture and, consequently, were thoroughly discussed in his paper ten years later—were surrounded by the aura of mystery and abstruseness, not to mention the genuine fascination and allure that they provoked. Their appeal was due to several factors: their artistic quality and scale could only be compared to the Quattrocento frescoes in Arezzo, Mantua, Rome and, of course, Florence,[2] and that very few Renaissance paintings which could be put on a par with the Schifanoia frescoes survived in Ferrara. A great deal of the Renaissance mural paintings created in Ferrara in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were destroyed in 1570 during a major earthquake, and after 1598, when the d'Este family, who ruled the city for centuries, surrendered Ferrara to Pope Clement VIII, thus making the city part of the Papal States. It was then that, on the pretexts of clearing the grounds for a new fortress, a number of magnificent palaces and houses that belonged to the dukes of Ferrara and were richly adorned with frescoes were demolished (Blair MacDougall 98). Kazimierz Chłędowski, Warburg's contemporary, describes this catastrophe as:

> And so the legate ordered to overturn the Castello Tebaldo . . . as well as the Belvedere, a summer residence of the d'Este family, all plentiful with invaluable frescoes. He also commanded to bring down the Palazzo Constabili . . . and the part of the city called Borgo e colle di San Giacomo,

> which was inhabited by over six thousand souls. . . . Of all the riches of the Ferrarese art only the remains survived. (408)[3]

Factors responsible for the above-mentioned aura of mystery surrounding the Schifanoia pictures include scarce information about the paintings' origin—especially when compared with analogous works of the Italian Renaissance, a puzzling iconographic program—at least until Warburg's revolutionary interpretation of the frescoes, and the circumstances of the paintings' late discovery.

Fascination with the Palazzo Schifanoia and its interior, which house the valuable frescoes, began relatively late, in the second half of the nineteenth century. The very building which, by that time, had been so famous that Gabriel D'Annunzio himself praised its beauty,[4] was then merely a shade of its former glory. It was only by serendipity that in the second half of the nineteenth century it became an inspiration for artists and a subject of interest to art historians.

The edifice, erected towards the end of the fourteenth century for Alberto V d'Este, the lord of Ferrara and Modena, was, together with its garden, modeled on the so-called *villa suburban*, the suburban Roman villa. Its function was clearly defined by its name: "schivar la noia," an escape from boredom into entertainment/delight (*delizie*) and plenteous dinner parties. Refurbished and extended to become a palace in the second half of the fifteenth century by Borso d'Este, the Duke of Ferrara, the edifice was decorated with magnificent frescoes. This suburban residence lost its function after 1598, the year decried by Chłędowski as "finis Ferrariae," the end of Ferrara (395-409), when the d'Este family was forced to abandon the city. Its owners repeatedly changed in the next few decades until, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the building was purchased by the Tassoni family and subjected to a major refurbishment. The walls in the grand room on the first floor displaying the Renaissance frescoes were painted white. Thus, for centuries to come, the images disappeared not only from the walls but also from collective memory.[5] Sold by the Tassonis in 1736, the edifice was transformed into a tobacco factory. It was as late as the first half of the nineteenth century that the frescoes were uncovered and praised for their value.[6] Consequently, in the times which manifested an unparalleled interest in the birth of the Italian Renaissance, the frescoes were re-born and their second life was about to begin—their life after life (*Nachleben*), to employ the term introduced by Warburg himself.

Now that they had been returned to the world, to consumers and experts on art equally, the frescoes became not only a source of inspiration for writers and poets—such as D'Annunzio and Ezra Pound[7]—but also for art history, a relatively new academic discipline which in the second half of the nineteenth century became at home at universities and which was highly interested in the Italian Renaissance. The fact that the authorship of the Schifanoia frescoes had been known prior to Warburg's lecture was exactly due to the formalist method employed by art history—this approach made it possible to identify the images' origins and individual painters as their creators—as well as to some painstaking archival research.

Nonetheless, the frescoes' attribution was neither easy nor unequivocal. The "first aid" source which was typically inestimable in such circumstances, *The Lives of the Artists* by Giorgio Vasari, remained silent about the Schifanoia mural paintings, as if the biographer of the artists had never heard about the Palazzo Schifanoia. It could be argued that Vasari deliberately neglected the fifteenth-century Ferrarese paintings, since his study failed to include the lives of three major artists from the Ferrarese school: Cosimo Tura, Francesco del Cossa, and Ercole de' Roberti, all of whom could have been suspected of being the authors of the frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia.

Initially, it was assumed that the author of the frescoes was Tura, the oldest of the three and a chief painter at the court of Duke Borso d'Este (Milanesi 138). Such a supposition appeared to be the most obvious since Tura was a versatile and much favored artist. He received his salary not only for painting pictures but also for painting furniture, gilding caskets and horse trappings, designing chair-backs, curtains, bed quilts, table services, tournament costumes, and many other items (Burke 94). This belief was, however, challenged and undermined towards the end of the nineteenth century. Awareness of workshop-based, that is collective, production of art in the early Renaissance period was accompanied by a discovery in the local archives. Indeed, until this very day Tura is believed to have provided a composition sketch for the entire series of twelve murals (Campbell and Cole 209), but it is other artists—"a number of artists of widely varying abilities" (Warburg, "Italian Art" 572)—who emerged as the authors of the paintings. Among them, del Cossa proved to be the most outstanding and original contributor.

The archival discovery which testified to the involvement of del Cossa in the creation of the murals was made by Adolfo Venturi, an Italian art historian, who found a letter dated 25 March, 1470, written by del Cossa (Warburg, "Italian Art" 572; Chłędowski 496). The missive not only confirms

del Cossa's work in the Palazzo Schifanoia but, most importantly, also stipulates which parts of the frescoes were painted by him: the months of March, April, and May, that is, three out of an overall number of twelve paintings commissioned by the Duke. The letter is particularly valuable to art history as it serves as a major source of information about del Cossa—especially in the face of the inaccessibility and scarcity of other written documents. It is also an invaluable and extraordinary source of information since it was written by del Cossa himself and, as such, speaks volumes about the artist's personality and character. Chłędowski writes about this letter:

> del Cossa painted the frescoes from 1467 to 1470 and in his written plea to the Duke he bitterly complained about his poor salary. He was paid for this great work as little as ten Bolognese *lire* for a square foot of frescoes and only as much as other artists employed. He was deeply insulted not only by this unusually low salary but also by being put on a par with other artists—common, minor, and, as such, unequal to him in talent or fame. (496)

The missive did not have the effect del Cossa hoped for. The Duke of Ferrara did not award the painter a better salary, which resulted in del Cossa leaving Ferrara and moving to Bologna for good—not too far away but out of reach of the d'Este family.

II.

"One day in April 2013, I saw a picture"—Ali Smith opens her essay dedicated to the inspiration for her Booker-, Folio-, Costa-, Baileys-, and Goldsmiths-nominated novel, *How to Be Both* ("He looked like the finest man"). "The picture was in the art magazine *Frieze*," she continues, "and I was flicking through it having my breakfast coffee. I took a mouthful of coffee and opened it at a full-page reproduction of a painting so beautiful that it did something to my breathing and I nearly choked." The picture in question—"old, but modern too" (Smith, "He looked like the finest man")—was the middle panel of *Mese di Marzo* [the *Month of March*] painted by del Cossa for the Hall of the Months. The editors of *Frieze* described it as:

> In March, a pensive Athena hovers over a vigorous Aries flanked by two figures: a black man in rags with a majestic air, who looks like he could spring into action at any moment yet desists in order to prophesy the future; and an androgynous young man, who critically eyes a ring, or perhaps an embroidery hoop, in his left hand like it's a foe he is contemplating attacking with the giant arrow or needle in his right. ("Picture Piece")

It was the black man that particularly caught the attention of Smith who, by that time, had been trying to explore some new ideas for the structure of her novel and who, having discovered a book on Renaissance frescoes and the unavailability—unless damaged—of the original underpaintings hidden under the wall surface, had been wondering "if it might be possible to write a book consisting of something like this structure of layer and underlayer, something that could do both" ("He looked like the finest man"). Not being familiar with the painter or his work, Smith decided to travel to Ferrara—the city she had been first introduced to by Giorgio Bassani's novels—and visit its palace of "escaping from boredom" (*schivar la noia*), as well as learn more about del Cossa and his frescoes—the process which ultimately led to completing *How to be Both* in August 2014.

The frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia that attracted Smith's interest and feature prominently in her novel were created in the second half of the 1460s. Like most Quattrocento works, they were the product of a collaborative endeavor—the effort of many persons and the corollary of a specific social order and its system of an artistic production of meanings. As Michael Baxandall aptly notices,

> [a] fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of a social relationship. On one side there was a painter who made the picture, or at least supervised its making. On the other side there was somebody else who asked him to make it, provided funds for him to make it and, after he had made it, reckoned on using it in some way or other. Both parties worked within institutions and conventions—commercial, religious, perceptual, in the widest sense social—that were different from ours and influenced the forms of what they together made. (1)

A fifteenth-century painting in early-Renaissance Italy was then (both) the manifestation of aesthetic preferences, expectations and taste of a commissioner, as well as an expression of skills and artistic predilections of the workshop in which it was created. In the case of the Palazzo Schifanoia frescoes painted by del Cossa, however, the duplexity of the Quattrocento painting remains a far more complex and intriguing issue. If they were to be described by means of the relationship postulated by Baxandall, one would, indeed, identify, on the one hand, del Cossa, the proud author of a painting who demands better pay, and, on the other, Duke Borso d'Este, the commissioner "who makes a point of paying for his paintings by the square

foot" (1). Yet, the model of dual relationship needs to be reexamined in order to accommodate other agents (apart from the painter and his commissioner). For one is entitled to and, in fact, should pose the following questions: Who was the author of the complex iconographic program of the images—the task that exceeded the abilities and competences of both the painter and the duke? Who designed (sketched) the overall composition of the Hall of the Months, not only the panels del Cossa was commissioned to do?

These questions inevitably lead to the recognition of the duality of the Schifanoia frescoes—a duality different from the one described by Smith which was to be based on the existence of two layers of *buon fresco*: bottom and top, the latter being available to the human eye.[8] Doubleness (bothness) of the image understood as a concatenation of del Cossa's and Borso d'Este's intentions needs to be supplemented by yet another bilaterality dependent on the pair of a painter who gives a concrete shape and representation (*Darstellung*) to an idea and a philosopher who conceives and presents it (*Vorstellung*). The philosopher in question, who conceived an iconographic and ideological program of the Schifanoia frescoes, and approved and supervised its proper execution, was Pellegrino Prisciani, a Ferrara-based man of letters, professor of astronomy at the University of Ferrara, librarian and courtly chronicler of the d'Este family (Warburg, "Italian Art" 581).[9]

This duality and bothness of the image—image understood as in dialectics, an essentially Hegelian interlocking of *Darstellung* and *Vorstellung* (imagination and presentation) (Sallis 66)—was the source of some grave concern to del Cossa, as testified by his letter to Duke Borso. He did not only address the commissioner with a request for additional payment but, first and above all, addressed Borso directly brushing off Prisciani, the Duke's superintendent, whom del Cossa considered ignorant in the matters of art and whom he tried to avoid at all cost (Warburg, "Italian Art" 582).

An iconographic program conceived by Pellegrino was subsequently arranged and furnished by Tura. It was probably Tura who invented the tripartite arrangement and striped composition of the paintings that would represent the twelve months of the year. In this sense, even though del Cossa designed the three mural paintings all by himself, he was forced to inscribe them into the overall compositional scheme and organization of the room. This is yet another duality, that is, double authorship, which can be identified in the ambiguous paintings this paper explores.

The twelve frescoes, which correspond to the twelve months, were divided into three parallel sections (or spheres) each. Every sphere has a different objective. As Warburg observes:

> Each month is represented by three parallel registers, one above the other, each with its own independent pictorial space and approximately half-life-size figures. In the highest zone, the Olympian deities ride past in triumphal chariots; the lowest shows the worldly activities of the court of Duke Borso, who can be seen attending to official business or cheerfully riding out to hunt. The intervening zone belongs to the astral world, as would in any case be apparent from the zodiac sign that appears in the center of each field, attended by three mysterious figures. ("Italian Art" 565)

III.

Following an overwhelmingly enthusiastic reception of *How to Be Both* by critics and readers alike,[10] in a September 2014 interview for *The Guardian*, Smith explained her decision to publish the book in two editions: one opens with the story of del Cossa, a type of narrative that, using Edmund White's term, could be labeled "biographical fantasia" (223),[11] and is followed by the fictional story of an English teenage girl called George. The other edition offers the reverse section arrangement; the novel starts with a narrative about George only to be succeeded by a fictional autobiographical account of Francesco.[12] Responding to Alex Clark's question about the novel's unusual structure, Smith, once again, re-emphasized the inspiration provided by visual art, in particular the technique of *buon fresco*:

> It's about fresco form. You have the very first version of the fresco underneath the skin, as it were, of the real fresco. There's a fresco on the wall: there it is, you and I look at it, we see it right in front of us; underneath that there's another version of the story and it may or may not be connected to the surface. And they're both in front of our eyes, but you can only see one, or you see one first. So it's about the understory. I have the feeling that all stories travel with an understory. (Clark)

So as to further problematize and contextualize the novel's (titular) theme of simultaneity vs. sequentiality, singularity vs. doubleness, sameness and difference, both parts of the novel were titled "One"—the only (visible) difference between the opening pages of the two sections being the drawings which accompany them: a pair of eyes from del Cossa's painting of Santa Lucia in the del Cossa part and a security camera in the George part.[13] "There are two ways to read this novel," Smith says in the interview with Clark when elaborating on the effect the editorial concoction has on readers—two ways, one might be tempted to add, that correspond to two images (an

underpainting and a wall painting) created when a fresco is being sketched. Furthermore, one will inevitably "end up reading one of them" (Clark), just as only one drawing can be seen first by an onlooker. Smith's preoccupation with the idea of "bothness," however, does not only limit itself to the paratextual, that is, chapter labeling, and graphic/typeset solutions—the double edition with alternate section arrangements—but is also the novel's foremost thematic concern.[14]

The del Cossa part opens in Room 55 of the National Gallery in London, where the painter is "shot back into being" (Smith, *How to Be Both* 39) in front of one of his pieces (*Saint Vincent Ferrer*) and next to a boy who sits and admires the image of the saint. Having commented on other Renaissance works housed in Room 55 (by Tura and de' Roberti, among others), the ghost reveals himself to be one of the painters who were called for adorning "the palace of not being bored" (10) in Ferrara and starts narrating the story of his life—from childhood, through being commissioned to contribute to the Hall of the Months, till death from plague in Bologna. The ghost of a fifteenth-century Italian painter is, however, not allowed to freely roam the streets of London since, as if magically, he is tied to a teenage stranger from Room 55 he needs to follow[15]: "Look all you like, since I cannot, cause it is as if a rope attached to the boy is attached to me and has circled me and cannot be unknotted and where the boy goes I must go whether I want it or don't, through a threshold, through another room"[16] (38).

Throughout his narrative of the self, Francesco constantly makes references to the book's titular concern. Upon his arrival in "picture palace" (40), that is, the National Gallery, the Italian painter immediately recognizes his condition as "neither here nor there" (5). When he starts drawing images and discovers the uses of perspective, he is fully amazed that "things far away and close could be held together, in the same picture" (33). "I like a figure to shift into that realm between the picture and the world," he confesses about his art and using the features of real persons for the figures he draws on the walls, wood panels, and canvasses (121). He also says: "Pictures can be both life and death at once and cross like border between the two" (158). When he analyzes Leon Battista Alberti's notion of beauty, he admits that "[beauty] in its most completeness is never found in a single body but is sometimes shared instead between more than one body" (90). When pondering over art- and love-making, and the similarities between the two, Francesco declares: "In the making of pictures and love—both—time itself changes its shape: the hours pass without being hours, they become something else, they become

their own opposite, they become timelessness, they become *no time at all*" (88). In addition, God is always referred to as "Fathermother Motherfather" (39), Francesco's pieces are characterized by "freshness and maturity both" (119), while s/he is described as "more than one thing" (98). Finally, he openly voices the preoccupations of Smith, his creator: "[h]ow to tell a story, but tell it more than one way at once, and tell another underneath it up-rising through the skin of it" (51).

The most ostensible manifestation of embracing the principle of "bothness" by Smith's narrative, however, is the very figure of Francesco, as he has become fictionalized, and thus imagined by the writer. The contemporary bio-novel—once hailed by Irving Stone as "a true and documented story of one human being's journey across the face of the years, transmuted from the raw material of life into the delight and purity of an authentic art form" (12), and criticized by the likes of Georg Lukács for abandoning the search for "a great historical truth" (319), "social and human motives" (42), and "historical peculiarities" (19) in favor of focalization on a particular person—remains, in the words of Michael Lackey, its most accomplished scholar today, a "hybrid aesthetic form" (10). For Lackey, an uncontested marker of biofiction is the writer's determination "to invent stories that never occurred in order to answer perplexing questions, fill in cultural lacunae, or signify human interiors" (8). But in her desire "to invent" the story of del Cossa, Smith has joined the likes of J. M. Coetzee, who, in *The Master of Petersburg* refuses to "sail as close as [he could]" to "the shoreline of events"[17] (Parini 371) and, instead, manipulates and distorts Dostoevsky's life story to the point of violating the "vital statistics" of this historical figure.[18] Despite preserving a number of "facts"—such as del Cossa's involvement in the Hall of the Months project, his complaint to Borso d'Este, his death in Bologna, and his collaboration with de' Roberti—and historical figures (Tura, Bartolomeo Garganelli, to name just a few), Smith does not only conceive most of the incidents from del Cossa's life but also—crucially for the book's thematic concern—imagines that Francesco was, in fact, a woman: the talented daughter of a brick maker who, dressed as a boy, becomes her father's apprentice. In order to "train in colour and pictures" and, consequently, live "a life beyond walls" (Smith, *How to Be Both* 31), she assumes the name after her prematurely dead mother: "Francescho, I said. My father held his frown: then he smiled in his beard a grave smile down at me and he nodded. On that day with that blessing and that new name I died and was reborn" (35-36).

The mother's premature death and gender shifts are two of the most recognizable thematic links between the two sections of Smith's novel.[19] George is initially identified by the ghost of Francesco as a boy, her "true" identity becomes evident only almost halfway through Francesco's narrative.[20] Francesco is also aware of the fact that she is in grief—"Most I see that around his eyes is the blackness of sadness (burnt peachstone smudged in the curve of the bone at both sides of the top of the nose" (49)—the premonition confirmed by one of the opening sentences of the George section of *How to Be Both*: "George's mother is dead" (189).

The George section of Smith's novel is, one could argue, certainly much more conventional than the "fantastical" narrated by Francesco. Yet, apart from being more overtly thanatographic, it remains as "hauntological" as the del Cossa section, not only because George obsessively reminisces about her deceased mother (her "spectre"), but, first and above all, the narrative itself is temporarily disjointed with the narrator simultaneously occupying both the present and the past. Similarly to the del Cossa part, the reader is thus neither fully here (in the narrative present, with George trying to make sense of her loss, attending therapy sessions with Mrs. Rock, taking care of her brother, befriending and falling for a fellow schoolmate, and, finally, working on a project dedicated to del Cossa), nor there (in the past, with George and her mother spending time together, talking, and, most importantly, taking a trip to Ferrara to visit the Palazzo Schifanoia and the frescoes by del Cossa). The sense that the book is "twisting time" (Smith, *How to Be Both* 191), that "time is out of joint" and "dislocated, dislodged, . . . run down, on the run and run down [*traqué et détraqué*], *deranged*, both out of order and mad, . . . off its hinges, . . . off course, beside itself, disadjusted" (Derrida 20) is predominantly achieved by shifts in grammar: from present to past tense, for example, "Consider this moral conundrum for a moment, George's mother says to George who's sitting in the front passenger seat. Not says. Said" (Smith, *How to Be Both* 189); "Shock of the new and the old both at once, her mother says. Said" (211); "(George's mother is a feminist). (Was.)" (279).

Just as readers become diegetically challenged by the narrative's temporal conjunction of sequentiality and simultaneity, they are equally confronted with the issue of "bothness" by means of the story's thematic preoccupations. Francesco's concern with "how to be both" is now reflected by George and her mother, and their multiple discussions on the nature of *ὄν*: "Past or present? George says. Male or female? It can't be both. It must be one or the other. Who says? Why must it her mother says" (194). When

they visit the Palazzo Schifanoia, the room is described as "warm and dark. No, not dark, it's light. Both" (235), while one of the figures on the blue strip, "the playful rather dilettante richly dressed" (238) in the March section of the Hall of the Months, as "[m]ale, female, both."[21] The man in rags, on the other hand, is simultaneously seen as an allegory of "laziness" and "activity" (326-27). Helena, George's paramour, is—due to her multicultural background—to be "from the north and the south and the east and the west all at once" (274), and the picture of Saint Vincent Ferrer, which George visits in the National Gallery, speaks of "brokenness" and "wholeness" at the same time (344). George's mother also echoes the ideas of Francesco (and, as already exemplified, of Smith,) about the art of *buon fresco*: "It is like everything is in layers. Things happen right at the front of the pictures and at the same time they continue happening, both separately and connectedly, behind, and behind that, and again behind that, like you can see, in perspective, for miles. . . . The picture makes you look at both—the close-up happenings and the bigger picture" (239).[22]

Apart from mourning over the dead mother and gender confusion, there are, indeed, other, more or less ostensible links between the two parts of Smith's novel. In her obituary, George's mother is called a "renaissance woman" due to her multidisciplinarity (206). When in Ferrara,[23] George and her mother visit the house which once belonged to Prisciani—in itself a re-enactment of the scene from the other "Part One," when Francesco visits Pellegrino (and the very house) to accept the commission of the d'Estes. Just like del Cossa, George is described as an artist (189); she does not only surround herself with and exposes herself to works of art,[24] but she creates them as well. In a manner similar to the Hall of the Months, she adorns the walls of her room: the images she uses are the pictures of the female icons of the 1960s (Monica Vitti, among others), and a series of photographs of a house she takes "in honour of her mother's eyes" (371).[25] In this way, she creates her own "palace"—not a palace of escaping from boredom but of banishing grief and sorrow. Just like the Schifanoia was responsible for "the literal cheering-up of her mother" (233), now it is her own Cambridge room that saves her from despair—the process the reader is tempted to recognize as successful.[26]

"Nothing is not connected" (291), George's mother says when, having supper next to the castle of the d'Estes, she teaches her daughter about "the presence of the past" (291), as well as the relevance of historic thinking, and tries to identify the link between the Estense court, Shakespeare, World War I, and themselves. As the above discussion demonstrates, the two

sections are, indeed, mutually connected by means of themes, characters, and places. One might be tempted to ask, however, what the reason is for bringing together the story of a fifteenth-century Ferrarese painter and a twenty-first-century Cambridge girl? What is the meaning of this juxtaposition? To answer these questions, we turn to Warburg and his analysis of the frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia.

IV.

In his astrological interpretation of the Schifanoia frescoes, Warburg addressed and, subsequently, solved two issues crucial for their understanding. Firstly, he conclusively elucidated on the paintings and their iconographic program, which had been previously deemed "strange" (Podro 168), "confusing," or "obscure" (Chlędowski 495), and, in an erudite and highly scrupulous manner, he correctly identified the intentions of their creators, Prisciani in particular. Secondly, by offering a new theory of images and forms that travel through times and cultures, he explained, in his own, highly idiosyncratic way, how the past exists in the present, how pagan Antiquity arrived in the Renaissance court in Ferrara.

As already mentioned, prior to Warburg, the tripartite composition of the Schifanoia frescoes was problematic for the interpreters of the paintings. Of course, it was evident and incontestable that the bottom panels show the images of the courtly life in Ferrara and, as a matter of fact, Borso d'Este, and narrate a story about a good and just ruler. The top panels, which featured Olympian gods, had also been accurately recognized and read. Nevertheless, the real challenge was posed by the middle sections, in which the signs of the zodiac could be identified but one remained illiterate as far as the figures that surrounded them were concerned, including the man in rags and the androgynous self-portrait (as Smith would have it) of del Cossa. The failure to interpret the middle sections made it impossible to understand the whole composition, which comprised *three* types of panels. "The complicated and fantastic symbolism of these figures has hitherto resisted all attempts at interpretation," Warburg declared ("Italian Art" 565). By this argument, the art historian rejected the popular understanding of the Renaissance as a period of the emancipation of the rational worldview (Kasperowicz 38), which heavily drew from a repertoire of Greek and Roman forms. In his iconographic explorations, Warburg, who, as Ryszard Kasperowicz notes, wanted to turn the Renaissance into a key to the modern world (38), moved beyond European culture. He wrote: "By extending the purview of the investigation to the East, I shall show them [figures in the middle panels] to

be survivals of the astral images of the Greek pantheon. They are, in fact, symbols for the fixed stars—although over the centuries, in their wanderings through Asia Minor, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Arabia, and Spain, they have lost their Grecian clarity of outline" (Warburg, "Italian Art" 565).

When analyzing the middle section of the March painting, Warburg turns to the notion of decans, a basic unit of the ecliptic. According to Greek astrology, every month comprised three individual decans. This was the first interpretative step undertaken by Warburg, which made it possible for him to explain the fact that in March Aries is surrounded by three figures. But how did the decans assume their given form? Why were they not represented differently? By choosing the example of the black man in rags that Smith found particularly intriguing, Warburg shows the travelling of forms and ideas, as well as modes of recollection (*Erinnerungsvermögen*) over the centuries ("Italienische Kunst" 181).

Warburg starts the investigation into the travelling of figures/decans with Teukros's *Sphaera barbarica*, "the system of fixed stars . . . devised probably in Asia Minor" (566). Warburg describes those peregrinations as:

> Having travelled from Asia Minor by way of Egypt to India, the Sphaera found its way, probably via Persia, into Abū Ma'šar's *Introductorium majus*. This, in turn, was translated into Hebrew, in Spain, by a Spanish Jew, Ibn Ezra (died 1167). His translation was retranslated into French by one Hagins, a Jewish scholar, at the behest of an Englishman, Henry Bates, at Malines in 1273. This French text, in its turn, formed the basis of the Latin version made in 1293 by none other than Pietro d'Abano. This [*Astrolabium*] was printed several times. ("Italian Art" 567)

Next, he explains that the notion of decans formulated by Abū Ma'šar in his *Introductorium majus* "brings us at last to the mysterious figures in the intermediate zone in the Palazzo Schifanoia. In the relevant chapter of his *Introductorium majus*, Abū Ma'šar gives a synopsis of three different codifications of the fixed stars: the current, Arabian system; the Ptolemaic system; and finally the Indian system" ("Italian Art" 569).

Who, then, is this "finest man who ever lived," the first decan of Aries? Whose clothes is he wearing? Warburg's answer to those questions is: "In the lower part of the page [of *Astrolabium* by d'Abano] we see two small figures. . . . The man with the sickle and a crossbow, who is said to appear at the first degree of Aries, is none other than Perseus, whose constellation does indeed rise with Aries" ("Italian Art" 569). The Ferrarese fresco, however,

depicts neither a sickle nor a crossbow. Instead, we have a black man in rags tied with a rope. By tracing subsequent incarnations of the black Perseus, or the first decan of Aries, in Egyptian, Indian, and Arab astrology, Warburg carefully reconstructs the history of his guises and costumes, always referring to the specific iconographic examples. Next, he turns to the pieces by Varāmihir and Abū Ma'šar:

> The sixth-century Indian author Varāmihira—whose *Brihat jātaka* was Abū Ma'šar's unacknowledged source—quite correctly lists, under the first decan of Aries, a man . . .: "The first Drekkana of Aries is a man with a white cloth tied round his loins, black, facing a person as if able to protect him, of fearful appearance and of red eyes and holding an ax in his hand. This Drekkana is of the shape of a man and is armed. Mars [Bhauma] is its lord." . . . Abū Ma'šar . . . writes: "The Indians say that in this decan a black man arises with red eyes, a man of powerful stature, courage, and greatness of mind; he wears a voluminous white garment, tied around with a cord; he is wrathful, stands erect, guards, and observes." The figures thus agree with tradition, except that for the Arab writer this decan has lost his ax and retains only the garment tied in a cord. (Warburg, "Italian Art" 569)

It is, we are bound to conclude, the very figure that can be seen on the fresco by del Cossa in the Palazzo Schifanoia.

The appearance of the decans—those travellers through time and history—on the walls of the Renaissance palace testifies to an irrational, superstitious vision of life dependent on astrological interpretations. Putting the scenes from the life of Duke Borso under the signs of the zodiac and symbols of the stars implies a belief in a close connection between earthly life and heavenly sphere, as well as the former's dependence on the topologies of stars. However, what one should keep in mind is that "what was crucial for Warburg was not the unriddling of the imaginary but something humanly disturbing about its presence" (Podro 168). To paint the figures of the decans is tantamount to giving them life after life, that is, *Nachleben*. They emerge from the past into the present, and thus become figures of an individual (though, at the same time, repeated) life.

We have argued that as it was impossible to understand the meaning of the Schifanoia frescoes had it not been for Warburg's interpretation, it is equally impossible to identify the meaning of Smith's juxtaposition of the del Cossa and George parts of the novel without referring to the estimable art historian and his musings on the travelling of forms. If Smith appears to repeat the gesture of del Cossa (but also of Prisciani, Tura, and others) by

means of bringing together two stories: the fantastical/hauntological (del Cossa's, which corresponds to the Olympian gods section) and the realistic/present-day (George's, which matches the depictions of the courtly life of the Duke of Ferrara), then we, readers, clearly need to repeat the gesture of Warburg. Only with his assistance and guidance is it possible to see *How to Be Both* not only as an experimental novel which pays an ostensible tribute to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*,[27] plays with the form, and problematizes the issue of sequentiality/simultaneity of the narrative, but as a novel which, by its very form, talks about the travelling (through time and space) of the third decan of March: a (fe)male figure from the Palazzo Schifanoia,[28] "the effeminate boy, the boyish girl, to balance the powerful masculine effect of the worker [black man in rags], . . . [who] holds both an arrow and a hoop, male and female symbols one in each hand" (Smith, *How to Be Both* 297). In short, the travelling of the figure of androgyny, Hermaphroditus, the son of Aphrodite and Hermes who, upon his prayers, has been merged with his lover, the water nymph Salmacis, into one and whose *Nachleben* comes into being in the characters of del Cossa and George.

By means of borrowing Warburg's concept of *Nachleben*, that is, life after life of forms, and a figure of androgyny, Smith does deconstruct the traditional European novel—the kind which, even if it narrates events separated from each other in time and space, it insists on the very events being diegetically organized around an individual who helps readers understand them as logically and coherently linked. The radicalism of Smith's novel is, thus, due to the fact that the reader is confronted with two, seemingly unrelated stories, two novels published in one volume, which, in fact, are one. However, she also makes a claim about the Western metaphysics of identity, based on the principle "A is A."[29] The identities of del Cossa and George—those queer lives after lives of Hermaphroditus and other androgynous figures—are not only different, but also the same, both. In this sense, Smith might be seen as following Martin Heidegger's understanding of identity who famously noticed that the principle "A is A" (that is, A=A) requires, at least, two elements: "The more fitting formulation of the principle of identity 'A = A' would accordingly mean not only that every A is itself the same; but rather that every A is itself the same with itself. Sameness implies the relation of 'with,' that is, a mediation, a connection, a synthesis: the unification into a unity" (24-25).

The characters of *How to Be Both* might *violate* the ontological law of identity but, at the same time, "unified into a unity," they *testify* to the fact that "a Grecian heart still beats" (Warburg, "Italian Art" 584). We conclude that

Smith's novel is a proof of not only the critical/artistic potential of Warburg's concept of *Nachleben*, but also of the validity of the critic's theoretical and interpretative model, the kind that allows our "meaningful pasts that should be remembered" (Macdonald 1), to be transgressed, re-performed, and re-assessed.

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Notes

[1] In a collection of essays entitled *L'Italia e l'arte straniera. Atti del X Congresso Internezionale di Storia dell'Arte in Roma* [Italy and Foreign Art: Papers from the 10th International Congress of Art History, Rome].

[2] For example, the frescoes in the Basilica of St. Francis in Arezzo by Piero della Francesca, in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua by Andrea Mantegna, in the Carafa Chapel in the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome by Filippino Lippi, in the Sistine Chapel in Rome by Domenico Ghirlandaio, Sandro Botticelli, Pietro Perugino, and Cosimo Rosselli, among others, as well as numerous paintings in Florence, just to mention the frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine by Massaccio and Masolino, or in the Tornabuoni Chapel in the church of Santa Maria Novella by Domenico Ghirlandaio.

[3] Unless indicated otherwise, all the translations are by the essay's authors.

[4] In his 1889 novel, *Il Piacere* [The Pleasure], he memorably called the Palazzo Schifanoia the "gloria d'Este" and used it as a source for the Villa Schifanoia where the plot of his novel is primarily set (Chlędowski 53).

[5] We deliberately use collective memory, since the frescoes did survive in individual memory and were described by, for example, Girolamo Baruffaldi, an *homme de lettres*, clergyman, and poet, born in Ferrara in 1675, the author of *Dell'istoria di Ferrara* [A History of Ferrara] and *Vite dei pittori e scultori ferraresi* [The Lives of Painters and Sculptors of Ferrara], published in 1700 and posthumously in 1844-1846, respectively.

[6] According to Gaetano Milanesi, a nineteenth-century publisher and commentator of *The Lives of the Artists* by Vasari, "the frescoes in the grand room of the Palazzo Schifanoia which were covered with lime in the previous century [were] discovered in 1840 by Alessandro Comagnoni, a resourceful craftsman from Bologna" (138). It appears, however, that the first uncoverings and preservation works were carried out a bit earlier, in the 1820s, under the supervision of the painter Giuseppo Saroli (Saroli 5).

[7] According to W.B. Yeats and Guy Davenport, the structure of *The Cantos* was supposed to be based on the structure of the frescoes in the Hall of the Months. A three-layered composition of the paintings was to be reflected by a tripartite arrangement of *The Cantos* (Davenport 56-58). Needless to say, the Palazzo Schifanoia is ostensibly referenced in Pound's masterpiece. In "Canto XXIV," written at the turn of 1925 and 1926—only four years after the publication of Warburg's essay—a story of the d'Este family, Ferrara, and the Palazzo itself is recounted. Pound's work heavily relies on the books dedicated to the history of the city and its best-known family (Terrell 95-99). Furthermore, the closing line of the

poem, "Albert made me, Tura painted my wall, / And Julia the Countess sold to a tannery" (Pound 114), is voiced by the Palazzo itself (Miyake 128). References to the building and creators of the frescoes also appear in Cantos LXXVII, LXXVIII, and LXXIX.

[8] This kind of "duality" is not only characteristic of the technique of *buon fresco*. An underlayer invisible to the human eye, which typically contains a compositional sketch, also exists under the layer of paint in many panels and canvases of thousands of images.

[9] In the English translation of Warburg's essay by David Britt, Pellegrino is described as a professor of mathematics, which is not congruent with the original German text which calls him a professor of astronomy: "Professor der Astronomie an der Universität Ferrara" (Warburg, "Italienishe Kunst" 188).

[10] See, for example, Christopher Benfey, "*How to Be Both*, by Ali Smith"; Clerk, "Ali Smith's *How to be Both*: warm, funny, subtle, intelligent—and baffling"; Day, "Ali Smith's dazzling dual-narrative novel"; Ulin, "Ali Smith has double vision in *How to Be Both.*" The book won the 2014 Goldsmiths Prize, the Novel Award in the 2014 Costa Book Awards, and the 2015 Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction.

[11] To the best of our knowledge, the term "biographical fantasia"—considered a micro-genre of biographical fiction—was first used by the American novelist and memoirist White. In the postscript to his 2007 novel, *Hotel de Dream*, White defines its genre as a "fantasia on real themes provided by history" (223). His work offers a largely imagined story of the last days of Stephen Crane who, suffering from tuberculosis, struggles to dictate his last novella, *Hotel de Dream,* to his wife Cora. White ostensibly and deliberately intertwines facts with purely imaginative components which are, indeed, prioritized—if not quantitatively, but crucial for the story that is narrated, qualitatively. Biographical fantasia is governed by the principle of diegetic unfaithfulness, where diegesis should be read, after Gérard Genette, as "l'univers où advient cette histoire" [the universe where the story takes place] (419). In short, biographical fantasia creates a fantastical universe without breaking the biographical pact, since it still tells the story of a historical figure. Unlike typical biofiction, however, its major desideratum is not to narrate a life story, but to emphasize the fictional nature of historical discourse; its historicity.

[12] The edition quoted by the authors opens with the story of Francesco.

[13] The painting of Santa Lucia by del Cossa, owned by the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., is part of the Griffoni Polyptych, which also includes *San Vincenzo Ferrer*, the picture housed by the National Gallery in London. The del Cossa section opens in Room 55 of the National Gallery, where *San Vincenzo Ferrer* is displayed, with the Renaissance painter being "shot back into being" (Smith, *How to Be Both* 39); it is also the place George repeatedly visits when carrying out her research on del Cossa.

[14] This is yet another ostensible link with the paintings in the Palazzo Schifanoia, which, apart from their *buon fresco* technique identified by Smith as essentially palimpsestous, simultaneously narrate two distinctive stories in two panels: ancient deities on the top panels vs. courtly activities on the bottom panels.

[15] The novel contains several humorous passages that result from Francesco not being familiar with the twenty-first-century world. When George is watching porn on her tablet, Francesco describes the device as "the love window" (Smith, *How to Be Both* 99). When George takes pictures with her tablet, Francesco wonders: "Is it possible then that all the people of this place are painters going about their world with the painting tools of their time?" (44).

[16] In this sense, Francesco becomes a figure of the black man from the *Month of March*, who is also tied in the waist with a rope.

[17] As Jay Parini would expect from a typical specimen of the genre (371).

[18] In Coetzee's own words, *The Master of Petersburg* is a "perversion of the truth" (236). The book offers an account of two months in the life of Fyodor Dostoevsky, October and November of 1869, and his visit to Saint Petersburg. None of the existing biographies of the Russian master confirm such a travel and stay in the Russian capital city. On the contrary, since his marriage to Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina in 1867, Dostoevsky remained abroad, mostly in Germany and Switzerland. In October and November 1869, he lived in Dresden, and his first return to Russia took place as late as July 1871, eighteen months after the events narrated in Coetzee's novel. But Coetzee invites an even more radical modification in the life of historical Dostoevsky, that is, the death of his stepson. Dostoevsky did not need to travel to Saint Petersburg in late autumn of 1869 for the sheer reason that his stepson, Pavel Isaev, did not die in early November 1869. In fact, he survived Dostoevsky, who himself died in Saint Petersburg in 1881.

[19] "That before and after thing is about mourning" (Smith, *How to Be Both* 191).

[20] "This boy is a girl" (65).

[21] This androgynous figure, which the del Cossa part implies is the painter's self-portrait with a ring and an arrow, features on the back cover of *How to Be Both*'s first British edition.

[22] Elsewhere she says: "But which came first? . . . The picture underneath or the picture on the surface? . . . But the first thing we see, her mother said, and most times the only thing we see, is the one on the surface. So does it mean it comes first after all? And does that mean the other picture, if we don't know about it, may as well not exist? . . . And which comes first? . . . What we see or how we see?" (289, 290).

[23] Which is a stage for some further play with the Italian texts of culture, most notably with reference to Bassani's novel, *The Gold Rimmed Glasses*, in which the main protagonist, a doctor, disgraced by the discovery of his homosexuality, is famously accompanied by a dog during his nightly walks around the city. In Ferrara, George and her mother are followed by a dog (75-80).

[24] Especially film, performance, and music from the late 1960s and early 1970s: the works of Jean-Luc Godard (George watches his 1968 *Un film comme les autres* [A Film Like Any Other]); Fabio Mauri and Pier Paolo Pasolini (when browsing the Internet, George encounters a photographic documentation of a 1975 performance of Mauri, who asked Pasolini to sit in the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Bologna, wear a white shirt, and become the live screen for his movie, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, which was projected onto his chest); and Sylvie Vartan and Françoise Hardy (whose music George listens to). At one point in the novel, George and Helena discuss the picture of Vartan and Hardy taken by Jean-Marie Périer, the picture that features on the front cover of the book's first British edition. Furthermore, George is said to look like Vartan, hence, the front cover of *How to Be Both* displays the image of a person who is said to resemble George, while the back features the supposed self-portrait of del Cossa. When George and her mother visit Ferrara, they go to the museum and see an exhibition about Michelangelo Antonioni (275). Subsequently, she adorns one of the walls in her room with the picture of Vitti, one of Antonioni's favorite actresses.

[25] The house is inhabited by Lisa Goliard, a close friend of her mother, whom George believes is a spy. "She will let whoever's watching know she's watching" (371).

[26] Towards the end of the book George writes an email to Helena and, for the first time in the whole narrative, the present tense is used: "Halfway through writing this email George noticed that she'd used, in its first sentence, the future tense, like there might be such a thing as a future" (359).

[27] Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* may also be seen as another source of inspiration.

[28] George's mother, who holds an art history degree, also offers a new reading of the black Perseus: "the open shape at his chest complements the way the painter makes the rope round his waist a piece of simultaneous dangling and erect phallic symbolism" (296).

[29] That is, each thing is the same with itself and different from another.

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