"A whole spectrum of colours new to the eye": Gender Metamorphoses and Identity Frescoes in *Girl Meets Boy* and *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith

Maria Micaela Coppola

Abstract
In *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) and *How to Be Both* (2014) Ali Smith explores gender mutability and identity metamorphoses. Whether she rewrites Ovid's myth of Iphis (*Girl Meets Boy*), or tells the parallel yet convergent stories of a Renaissance fresco painter who was born a girl and of a twentieth-century girl initially mistaken for a boy (*How to Be Both*), Smith seems to employ the fresco technique, in which water, pigment and plaster merge together into an allegorical picture: she investigates the fluidity of gender identity by intermingling dimensions of space and time, literal and allegorical meanings, and genders. In Smith's composite narrative frescoes different binary oppositions coexist, clash, and ceaselessly stand for something else, revealing new patterns underneath and, ultimately, the ever-changing metamorphoses of gender identity and of storytelling – "a whole […] spectrum of colours new to the eye" (2007: 84).

Key-words: metamorphoses; gender; Ali Smith, *Girls Meets Boy*, *How to Be Both*.

1. Introduction

Ali Smith's writing could be defined using different critical descriptors, such as late-modernist, postmodernist, performative, intertextual, multivocal, playful, or ironic. Her fictional selves are equally elusive when it comes to providing stable definitions: gender fluid, lesbian, queer, multiple, ghostly are just some of the interpretative markers with which we could tag Smith's protagonists, and in particular the main characters of *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) and *How to Be Both* (2014).

Smith has indirectly provided another interpretative key to access her work and her fictional selves: in *The Book Lover* (2006), a collection of her favourite readings, the author includes an

extract from Italo Calvino's *Six Memos from the Next Millennium* (2006). The chosen passage is taken from Calvino's last lecture on "Multiplicity" (1988: 101ff), where the Italian writer depicts the self as "a combination of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined", and each life as "an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles". Thus, the self is described as the combination of different elements, pertaining to inner and outer worlds, and to past-present-future dimensions. In this account of subjectivity, a key role is attributed not only to the multiple factors that construe the self, but also to their combination: "everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable". In Calvino's perspective, then, the self is no longer seen from "the limited perspective of the individual ego", and is, in turn, ever-evolving and metamorphic in nature. Besides, by restoring the transformative communication between the self and what is outside the self, it is possible to give speech "to that which has no language, to the bird perching on the edge of the gutter, to the tree in spring and the tree in fall, to stone, to cement, to plastic…" (p. 124).

In the previous lecture, "On Visibility" (pp. 81ff), Calvino also claims that the boundaries between inside and outside, self and world, experience and reality are blurred, and can take on form by means of writing: by combining letters, words, literatures, and signs, "packed as closely together as grains of sand", it is possible to represent "the many-colored spectacle of the world on a surface that is always the same and always different, like dunes shifted by the desert wind" (p. 98). Notably, this description of the function of writing, which makes visible and transforms a multi-coloured world, is quoted by Ali Smith in her own collection of lectures, *Artful*, and in particular in a chapter dealing with form and multiplicity (Smith 2012: 85f).

The combinatory relations among multiple and sometimes opposing concepts (self/world, individuality/multiplicity, sameness/metamorphosis) are pivotal in Smith's work. The many colours of the spectacle of the world and its ever-changing forms can be observed in two novels in particular – *Girl Meets Boy* and *How to Be Both*. As we will see, whether she rewrites Ovid's myth of Iphis, or tells the two parallel yet convergent stories of a Renaissance fresco painter who was born a girl and of a twentieth-century girl initially mistaken for a boy, Ali Smith seems to employ the fresco technique,

in which pigment, plaster, and water merge together into a whole and multi-coloured allegorical picture, which can be looked at and interpreted from more than one perspective.

Both plots and subjects in these stories are composed of different layers of meaning, and give rise to multiple combinatory possibilities of interpretation. Referring to Marina Warner's definition, we could read *Girl Meets Boy* and *How to Be Both* as "fantastic metamorphoses", *i.e.* tales, such as fairy tales and myths, that are characterised by unstable, shape-shifting personae and plots (Warner 2002b: 2). Processes of metamorphosis and transmutation inform Smith's personae (who embody the disruption of the male-female binary), and also inflect the way in which their life stories are told, by intermingling multiple dimensions of time and space, literary genres, and literal and allegorical interpretations.

2. Gender metamorphoses in *Girl Meets Boy*

Ali Smith's intertextual dialogue with Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* can be traced not only in *The Book Lover* and *Artful*, but also in *Girl Meets Boy*, Smith's re-writing of Ovid's myth of Iphis, from Book IX of his *Metamorphoses*.

In Calvino's view, Ovid is one of the masters of the transformative combination between the self and what is outside of it, and one of the most gifted writers of the "continuity of passage from one form to another" (2006: 9). We should also note that, as Marina Warner indicates, 'metamorphosis' is the keyword in late-modernist and postmodernist practices of rewriting, which imply adopting and transforming texts and which are, as a consequence, metamorphic in nature. Given that in postmodern literature the concept of metamorphosis is pivotal both as subject matter and in the process of rewriting (Warner 2002a: 12), we could say that transformations and metamorphoses are core elements in Smith's contemporary revision of Ovid's text, both as subject matter and as practices of writing/reading.

As Smith claims in her lecture on Time, "great books are adaptable; they alter with us as we alter in life, they renew themselves as we change and re-read them at different times in our lives" (2012: 31). With this transformative approach, she takes Ovid's story of an impossible marriage between a girl raised as a boy and the girl she

loves[1], sets it in contemporary Scotland, and shapes it into a tale of multiple possible impossibilities.

Smith's adaptation of Ovid's story focuses on two sisters, Anthea and Midge/Imogen Gunn, and on life-changing encounters. Anthea falls in love with a woman, Robin. The marriage of this modern-day Iphis and Ianthe (Doloughan, 2010) turns upside down and transforms their inner and outer worlds. Similarly, Imogen struggles to come to terms with the idea that her sister is "weird", "different", in a word, lesbian (Smith 2007: 51) and nonetheless "laughing with outrageous happiness" (p. 57). As Imogen grapples with the changes occurring in her outer world (*i.e.* her sister's sexual orientation), she goes through a parallel process of inner revolution.

Smith indicates desire and change as core elements in Ovid's story, which she describes as "one of the cheeriest metamorphoses in the whole work, one of the most happily resolved of its stories about desire for and ramifications of change" (p. 163). It has been noted that in her tale Smith "explores various types of transformation, including the transformative power of love" (Štruncová 2013: 16). Iphis and Ianthe's marriage becomes possible because desire provides the stamina to ignite a deeper process of metamorphosis, involving the individual subjects, their inner world, as well as the world surrounding them.

Girl Meets Boy epitomises Smith's "ingenuity […] with markers of gender" (Warner 2013: ix). This tale has been read as "a lesbian re-telling of a classical myth", and as a "fictional account of Butler's *Gender Trouble*" (Ranger 2012: 27). To make just one example, Anthea and Robin embody Butler's critique of gender as performative, ironic, and ever-changing (1988, 2010). Nonetheless, it is important to point out that in this tale gender metamorphoses and identity transformations are not limited to the individual self, but rather involve the self and what surrounds it. Moreover, the gender metamorphoses and identity transformations that characterise this narrative also exemplify Butler's perception of self as constructed in time: the boundaries between the self and the other are transcended, both across space and time. The idea of gender and of identity that emerges from *Girl Meets Boy* is

[1] The marriage becomes possible only when the goddess Isis transforms Iphis into a man.

summarised in the epigraph, which reports Judith Butler's words: "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity… rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time" (Smith 2007: viii). In Butler's words, time and "social temporality" play a crucial role in the constitutive acts of gender identity, as "gender […] must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 1988: 519).

When we first encounter the two sisters, they are on the verge of life-changing experiences. Imogen is a rigid, anorexic young woman who is afraid to break social and professional rules. At first, Anthea is depicted as a "rootless" and "fragile" 21-year-old woman who is about to start working for Pure Corporation, a multinational bottled-water company in Inverness, where Imogen is employed too (Smith 2007: 24). Anthea falls for Robin, an anticapitalist and post-feminist artist who uses spray paint to sabotage the advertising messages of Pure Corporation. As their stories unfold, these three women undergo multiple identity metamorphoses. Imogen's homophobic prejudices (which are expressed as thoughts in parentheses at the beginning of the second chapter of the novel, "You") progressively dissipate as she manages to grasp the depth of Anthea and Robin's love. As a consequence, she reaches a better understanding of her own feelings and self too.

The transformative power of (lesbian) love is particularly evident if we follow Anthea as she gains insight into herself and her desire for Robin, and eventually 'merges' with her beloved, both symbolically and literally. Before meeting Robin, Anthea expresses an impossible wish:

> I wished that my own bones were unbound, I wished they were mingling, picked clean by fish, with the bones of another body, a body my bones and heart and soul had loved with unfathomable certainty for decades, and both of us down deep now, lost to everything but the fact of bare bones on a dark seabed. (pp. 24f)

Anthea dreams of body and self transformations, with and through the other: Robin. Unsurprisingly, Anthea expresses her metamorphic wish while contemplating a river, which commonly symbolises change and fluidity. As if mocking Anthea's seemingly

impossible shape-shifting dream, the river replies to the woman's plea by exhibiting its ability to change endlessly: "The river smiled. […] It laughed and it changed as I watched. As it changed, it stayed the same" (p. 28). Like water, time flows. Eventually, when she meets Robin, Anthea is able to accomplish her dream of transformation, and the world around her changes too:

> My head, something happened to its insides. It was as if a storm at sea happened, but only for a moment, and only on the inside of my head. My ribcage, something definitely happened there. It was as if it unknotted itself from itself, like the hull of a ship hitting rock, giving way, and the ship that I was opened wide inside me and in came the ocean. (pp. 44f)

Smith again makes recourse to water imagery and movement to give a form to Anthea's inner metamorphoses: a storm at sea, a hull of a ship hitting rock, the ocean coming in. Water with its transformative power invades the self, and the impossible dream becomes possible.

Then, Anthea starts seeing the outer world, and Robin, differently, and she seizes these changes effortlessly. For instance, Robin's gender identity changes before Anthea's eyes (she sees her as a beautiful boy who looks like a girl), and yet it seems to stay the same. The more Anthea observes Robin, the more male and female characteristics come together, in a whirlwind of paradoxes that nevertheless do not puzzle her:

> The great area, I'd discovered, had been misnamed: really the grey area was a whole other spectrum of colours new to the eye. She had the swagger of a girl. She blushed like a boy. She had a girl's toughness. She had a boy's gentleness. (pp. 83-4)

The phrase "a whole spectrum of colours new to the eye" can be taken to describe Smith's heterogeneous and ever-changing gender identities. The string of gender performances, attitudes, characteristics described above does not conform to traditional definitions of male or female identity. This is just one example of how, in this tale, male and female are caught in transformation through time, always flowing, contrasting and re-uniting with each other. As anticipated in the title, girl meets boy meets girl meets boy. This chain of transformations and apparently impossible encounters reaches its climax at the end of the story, and its effects are not

restricted to gender connotations only: "Because of us, things came together. Everything was possible" (p. 81). Any combination is feasible: "girl meets boy in so many more ways than one" (p. 100).

Recalling Calvino's lessons, words and storytelling play a pivotal function in making visible the combination process. This is particularly evident in the section where Ovid's original story is told, and then retold, and told again (pp. 86ff and 90ff): a story within a story within a story. At the end of these interlaced re-tellings, Anthea's impossible dream of mingling with Robin and the world becomes true. In Smith's description, love making transcends male-female, self-other, inner-outer binary oppositions:

> and then I was sinew, I was a snake, I changed stone to snake in three simple moves, stoke stake snake, then I was a tree whose branches were all budded knots […]. I was a she was a he was a we were a girl and a girl and a boy and a boy, we were blades, were a knife that could cut through myth, were two knives thrown by a magician, were arrows fired by a god, we heat heart, we heat home, we were the tail of a fish were the reek of a cat were the beak of a bird were the feather that mastered gravity were high above every landscape then down deep in the purple haze of the heather were roamin in a gloamin in a brash unending Scottish piece of perfect jigging reeling reel can we really keep this up? this fast? this high? this happy? (pp. 102f)

Gender metamorphoses ("I was a she was a he was a we were a girl and a girl and a boy and a boy") ignite a multiplicity of inner and outer transformations. The chain reaction involving objects, nature, gods, myths, and a Scottish traditional dance reaches its climax in the concluding chapter, significantly entitled "All Together Now". Here Anthea and Robin's union connects opposite elements:

> Nothing more than what happens when things come together, when hydrogen, say, meets oxygen, or a story from then meets a story from now, or stone meets water meets girl meets boy meets bird meets hand meets wing meets bone meets light meets dark meets eye meets word meets world meets grain of sand meets thirst meets hunger meets need meets dream meets real meets same meets different meets death meets life meets end meets beginning all over again […]. (p. 160)

Arguably, this paragraph (which recalls the title) echoes, reiterates and transforms Gertrude Stein's famous line "a rose is a rose is a

rose", which first appeared in *Geography and Plays* (1922) and was subsequently reiterated and transformed by Stein in various texts. In both cases, the sentences are composed of noun-verb-noun repetitions. This similarity may not be casual since, in her anthology *The Book Lover*, Smith includes not only a short extract from Calvino's above-mentioned lecture on Multiplicity (Calvino 2006: 446), but also Gertrude Stein's "On the Meaning of 'rose is a rose is a rose'" (Stein 2006: 269). In the latter, Stein draws attention to the sentence structure and its function, and claims:

> We all know that it's hard to write poetry in a late age; and we know that you have to put some strangeness, as something unexpected, into the structure of the sentence in order to bring back vitality to the noun. Now, it's not enough to be bizarre, the strangeness in the sentence structure has to come from the poetic gift, too. […] I think that in that line ['rose is a rose is a rose'] the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years. (p. 269)

In Stein's line, then, the circular sentence structure modifies the noun function (subject-object) and consequently adds new connotations to its meaning.

As in Stein's sentence, in *Girl Meets Boy* chain variations are meant to make visible the imagery and emotions associated with a word. However, in Smith's version the stative verb 'to be' is substituted with the verb 'to meet', which is used in the transitive form, thus stressing its active, and transformative, mood. Besides, Smith's subject-object (or object-subject) sequence is not based on sameness but on variation, since the nouns are not identical (unlike in the rose line) but refer to different elements (girl/boy, light/dark, life/death, etc.). The effect of Smith's lines is enchanting. In *Girl Meets Boy* we can find numerous examples of these kinds of repetition and spiralling sentences, ranging from the title to the concluding passages.

As we have seen, Smith's story is about transformations. At the same time, as we can read in the following extract, her storytelling is intrinsically transformative:

> the story of nature itself, ever-inventing, making one thing out of another, and one thing into another, and nothing lasts, and nothing's lost, and nothing ever perishes, and things can always change, because things will

always change, and things will be different, because things can always be different. (2007: 160)

Metamorphic processes occur within the story and through storytelling. Stories and storytelling provide the means through which impossible unions and transformations become feasible. From this point of view, we could apply to Smith's tale Warner's definition of "tales of metamorphoses", that is, stories that "offer a way of imagining alternatives, mapping possibilities, exciting hope" (Warner 2002b: 212).

3. Identity frescoes in *How to Be Both*

"[Ali Smith] is a writer who skillfully moves between voices and modes and genres while keeping a picture of the whole story she is telling" (Warner 2013: viii). These words by Warner perfectly describe Smith's novel *How to Be Both* (2014), which oscillates between genders, dimensions of time and space, and literary genres. Male and female voices; Renaissance Italy and contemporary England; tales, poems, art history essays, ghost and spy stories: they all constitute the many layers of this novel, and conjure up in a heterogeneous whole narrative. In *How to Be Both*, identity is accounted for as if employing the fresco technique: various elements are used for painting (pigment, plaster, water), but, at the end of the creative process, the fresco is an integral part of the painted surface. Likewise, the various components of the self and of the narration constitute whole personae and a whole story.

This novel is actually made of two tales: the story of George (née Georgia), a teenager living in twentieth-century Britain; and the story of the Italian early-Renaissance painter Francesco del Cossa (ca. 1436 – ca. 1478). These life stories interconnect continuously: George is haunted by the ghost of Francesco del Cossa, whose frescoes she saw in Ferrara (Italy), when her mother was still alive; in turn, Francesco is haunted by the story of how he painted some allegorical frescoes of the Cycle of the Months in Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, approximately in the years from 1467-8 and 1470. This interlacing of different spatial and temporal domains becomes more evident when we discover that the reading order of George's and Francesco's stories can change: in half of the published copies, the

story of George comes as the first chapter, whereas in the other half the order is reversed.

So two parallel yet convergent tales are told in *How to Be Both*. Similarly, its two protagonists move along two space, time and cultural coordinates (early-Renaissance Italy and twentieth-century Britain), and embody different gender identities, yet all these opposing elements converge. From this point of view, *How to Be Both* shares the characteristics of traditional tales of metamorphoses:

> Tales of metamorphoses often arose in spaces (temporal, geographical, and mental) that were crossroads, cross-cultural zones, points of interchange on the intricate connective tissue of communications between cultures. (Warner 2002b: 17)

Smith's tale of metamorphoses inhabits this kind of liminal space. As suggested in the title, for instance, we can consider the novel as a sort of self-help guide, which promises to teach 'how to' combine simultaneously opposite poles (male/female, dead/alive, past/present, etc.). As we will see shortly, 'both' is also employed at the end of the novel, or better, at the end of Francesco's story.

It is interesting to note that in *How to Be Both* the acts of storytelling and of reading both point towards a land of multiple possibilities, regarding (but not limited to) gender identity. As for the process of telling a life story, Smith's composition (and publication) of *How to Be Both* could be compared to one of the frescoes George and her mother see in Ferrara, in which one picture is superimposed upon another:

> 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, behind that, and again 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. (Smith 2014: 53)

In the painting and in the writing process, multiple pictures/stories converge into a whole picture/story.

Regarding the reading process, the novel seems to reproduce the act of seeing/interpreting of Francesco del Cossa's allegorical paintings: as in allegories, multiple meanings coexist, on the surface

and beyond it – "what appears on the surface and another meaning to which the apparent sense points" (Copeland and Struck 2010: "Introduction", para. 3).

In particular, Francesco's gender identity can be read allegorically, that is, it cannot be attached to a stable definition. On the contrary, as in allegories, its "meaning […] is continuously deferred" (para. 16): what is apparent to the eye (as far as gender is concerned, but not only) is displaced on closer inspection. For instance, the ghost of Francesco del Cossa looks at George (whose real name is Georgia) and sees a boy, or better, an adolescent boy who "looks very girl". But then, he speculates, it is "often like this at this age" (Smith 2014: 235). Also, recounting how he became a painter in fifteenth-century Italy, Francesco discloses what appears to be his 'original' gender identity: he tells the story of how he was born female and started wearing his mother's clothes when she died. As the story unfolds, we see that Francesco's identity is composed of more than two layers of clothes, and that we cannot pin down his 'original' self. Paradoxically, when young Francesco wears a dress that matches his supposedly 'true' gender identity (but not his age), he is perceived as a weird spectacle, like a dwarf "twinkling away in all the corners of the house and the yard, always in the corner of my eye" (p. 215), as his father says. Subsequently, he starts wearing men's (and painters') clothes, in order to have the chance to be taken on as apprentice and train "in the making and using of colours on wood and on walls" (p. 217). So, as an artist, he uncovers another aspect of his self.

Observing Francesco del Cossa changing identities as s/he changes clothes is like watching an allegorical painting or reading an allegorical tale, where various identity markers coexist and overlap, so that it is not possible to distinguish between the meaning conveyed by the surface image and the meaning of the greater, whole picture. When his friend Bartolomeo Garganelli literally peels Francesco's clothes away, he unveils the painter's female body underneath, and exposes Francesco's deceitfulness. The latter replies by re-opening the identity enigma – "I have never not been true" (p. 278) – and rebutting his friend's argument – "the fault is with you thinking […], not with me" (p. 279).

Smith's allegorical identity frescoes need to be thoroughly observed and scrutinised in order to see the whole picture. In parallel, readers are spurred to actively respond to and participate in

the narration (Iser 1978) by performing a similar act of observation and interpretation of the two protagonists' stories and identities. Thus, Smith invites her readers to read closely her multifaceted novel, by disseminating visual and narrative clues at the beginning of each chapter that hint at the act of seeing. On the one hand, George obsessively contemplates Francesco del Cossa's paintings (as if looking for her mother in them), and spies on her mother's friend (in order to expose her supposedly treacherous identity). On the other hand, without him knowing why or how, the ghost of Francesco del Cossa finds himself in a museum in a modern-day English city, and there he observes a girl (George) in front of one of his paintings. This act of seeing triggers Francesco's act of telling the story of when, in Renaissance Ferrara, he painted a cycle of frescoes for Duke Borso d'Este. Paradoxically, Francesco is often described as a spectre without eyes – the "no-eyed painter no one can hear" (Smith 2014: 223). Yet he is unlike the contemporary human beings he observes with puzzlement, who "have eyes and choose to see nothing" (p. 229). He continues to keep an eye on George, who, in turn, he believes has "a very strong eye" (p. 253). Paraphrasing the above-mentioned title and lines of *Girl Meets Boy*, girl sees boy sees girl sees boy, in a swirl of gazes and interpretations.

In order to fully comprehend George's and Francesco's identity frescoes, it is necessary for the reader to disentangle the multiple stories they are made of, and to observe closely their mutual interconnections and transformations. However, as in *Girl Meets Boy*, metamorphoses do not involve only male-female oppositions, but also the acts of storytelling and reading.

The transformative power of stories can be seen in particular in the opening and closing passages of George's and Francesco's tales. In the initial paragraph of George's section (entitled "Camera"), past and present intertwine, even in the same line:

> Consider this moral conundrum for a moment,
> George's mother says to George who's sitting in the front passenger seat.
> Not says. Said.
> George's mother is dead. (Smith 2014: 3)

The concomitant employment of simple present, present continuous, and simple past tenses is paradigmatic of the multiple

time dimensions in which George lives. After her mother's death, she feels emotionally "at a distance" (p. 14), detached from her father and little brother and from her school friends. She lives in the past, since she continuously recalls her last journey with her mother to Ferrara, following the tracks of Francesco del Cossa. At the same time, she lives in a repetitive and motionless present, as she obsessively spies on her mother's mysterious friend in order to disclose her 'true' identity. George awakens from her stupor when she dismantles this two-dimensional condition. At the end of her tale, she envisions herself repeating the same actions again and again: she has been sitting on the wall facing the house of her mother's friend, spying on her. The end of her story repeats the opening sentence (in italics in the novel) and completes it:

Consider for a moment this moral conundrum. Imagine it. You're an artist.
Sitting on the wall opposite, George will get her phone out. She will take a picture.
Then she will take another picture.
After that she will sit there and keep her eye on that house for a bit.
The next time she comes here she will do the same. In honour of her mother's eyes she will use her own. She will let whoever's watching know she's watching. (pp. 185ff, emphasis in the text)

As we will see shortly, the wall from which George performs her act of seeing is also the setting of the concluding passages of Francesco del Cossa's story. In a sense, this represents one of those transitional spaces in which, according to Warner, metamorphic writing appears (Warner 2002b: 18). It is a point of interchange, towards which different life trajectories (George's and Francesco's in particular) and different time dimensions converge, as epitomised by the use of verb tenses in the following paragraphs:

But none of the above has happened.
Not yet anyway.
For now, in the present tense, George sits in the gallery and looks at one of the old paintings on the wall.
It's definitely something to do. For the
foreseeable. (pp. 185f)

The present perfect verb is followed by simple present verbs.

Eventually, the future tense weaves into George's narrative and points towards a new dimension of forthcoming possibilities. Within a proleptic temporal frame, these few lines, and Smith's novel as a whole, spin a sort of "temporal loop" (Currie 2012: 29), in which the past is a story to be retold ("But none of this has happened"), and the present is the anticipation of a future memory ("It's definitely something to do. For the foreseeable").

Prolepsis, the anticipation of retrospection (Currie 2012: 29ff), also characterises Francesco del Cossa's tale. In more general terms, past, present and future intersect in the story of Francesco del Cossa: he looks backward and tells how, in Renaissance Ferrara, he painted some allegorical frescoes; and he looks forward, in present-day Britain, and tries to anticipate the motives and actions of a teenage girl (George) he is monitoring.

More specifically, the conclusion of Francesco's chapter (entitled "Eye"), recalls and refers back (and forward) to the ending of George's story we have analysed above. The ghost of Francesco del Cossa is observing George and her girlfriend as they paint two eyes on a wall in front of the house where the woman they are spying on lives. They are ready to leave, but not willing to stop watching. Francesco's attention focuses on the line connecting the wall and the ground. This line is the epitome of the numerous transitional, metamorphic places in the novel. It symbolises the passage from one dimension into another – "the line where / one thing meets another / […] an enchanted line" (Smith 2014: 370f). In parallel, at this point, Smith's narrative crosses the line between literary genres, turning from prose to poetry. Moreover, the verses of this concluding poem unravel, so to say, backwards (from the top-right margin to the bottom-left margin of the page):

look […]
how
the root in the dark makes its
way under the ground
before there's
any sign of the tree
the seed still unbroken
the star still unburnt
the curve of the eyebone
of the not yet born

hello all the new bones
hello all the everything (pp. 371f)

The poem's lines unfold on the page along a continuous trajectory (there is no punctuation to interrupt the flow) but in opposing directions: the lines above move backwards (from right to left), while the words that compose them follow the left-right reading order. The last line above ("hello all the everything") marks the end of the backward movement. Conversely, the following verses proceed forward (from left to right), re-matching with the reading order:

to be
made and
unmade
both (p. 372)

We should not forget that the alternative ending of the novel, in George's section, is a truncated sentence – "For the foreseeable" (p. 186) – in which the verb 'to foresee' is turned into a noun and refers to a world of future possibilities, anticipating stories of what can be seen beforehand. Likewise, in Francesco's conclusion, the presence of the opposite terms "made" and "unmade", followed by "both", leaves the ending open. Also the absence of a full stop at the end of the final poem, and of the tale, suggests that it is possible for the acts of making and unmaking, creation and dissolution, renewal and decay, beginning and ending to be compatible, and to happen simultaneously.

By concluding her tales in this way (or better, in these ways), by foreseeing im/possible endings and beginnings, *How to Be Both* and *Girl Meets Boy* display the metamorphic power of storytelling and reading. In both novels, Ali Smith takes John Lyly's advice (which she quotes at the beginning of *Girl Meets Boy*), and shapes the narrative and reading acts accordingly: "Practice only impossibilities" (Smith 2007: XIII).

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