

Reading Scotland: Artful Connections: Ways of Looking at/in Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*

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Outline

Introductions

- Ali Smith
- *How to Be Both*: The Basics (Genre, Plotlines, Settings...)

Aspects for Analysis

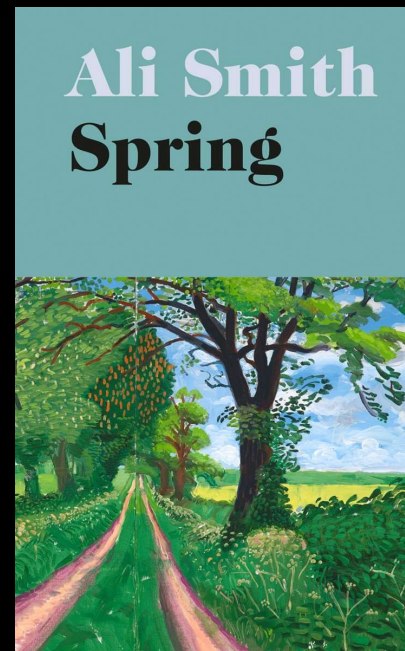
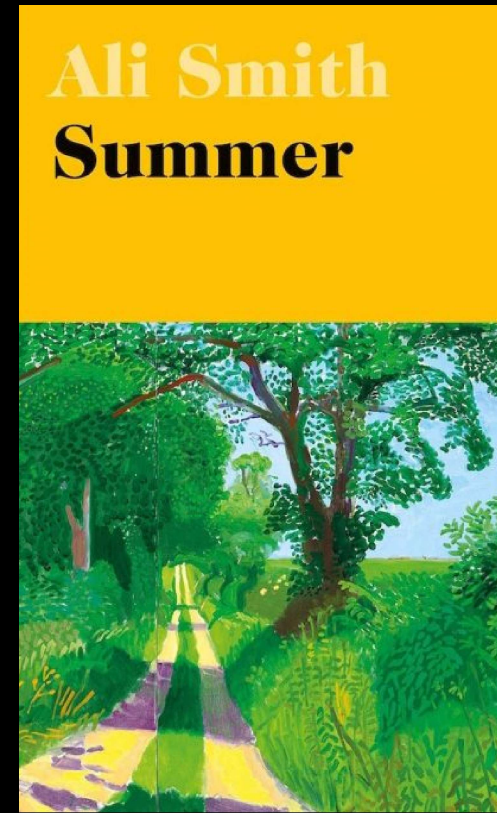
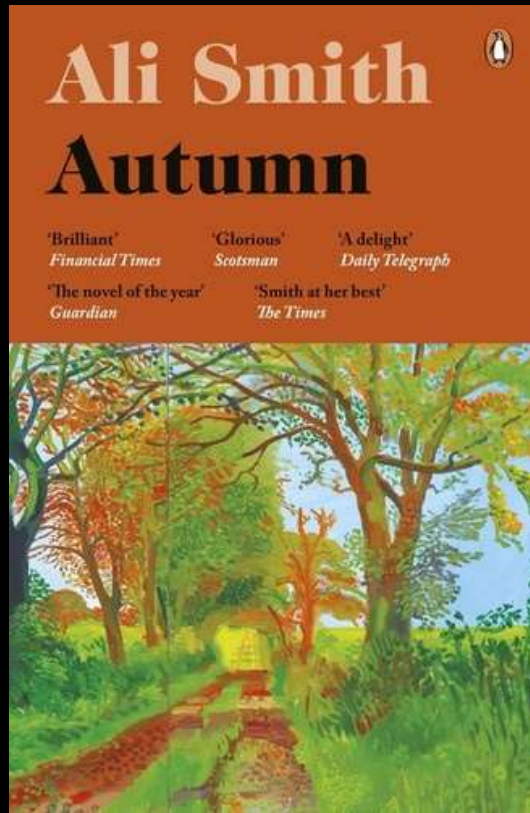
- Both What?
- Connections
- Ekphrasis and Post(?)-Postmodernism

Questions and Discussion

Ali Smith

- Born in Inverness 1962
- “Scotland’s Nobel laureate-in-waiting” (Sebastian Barry)
- Important Works
 - *The Accidental* (2005)
 - *There But For The* (2011)
 - *Artful* (2012)
 - ‘4-Seasons Tetralogy’ (2016-20)



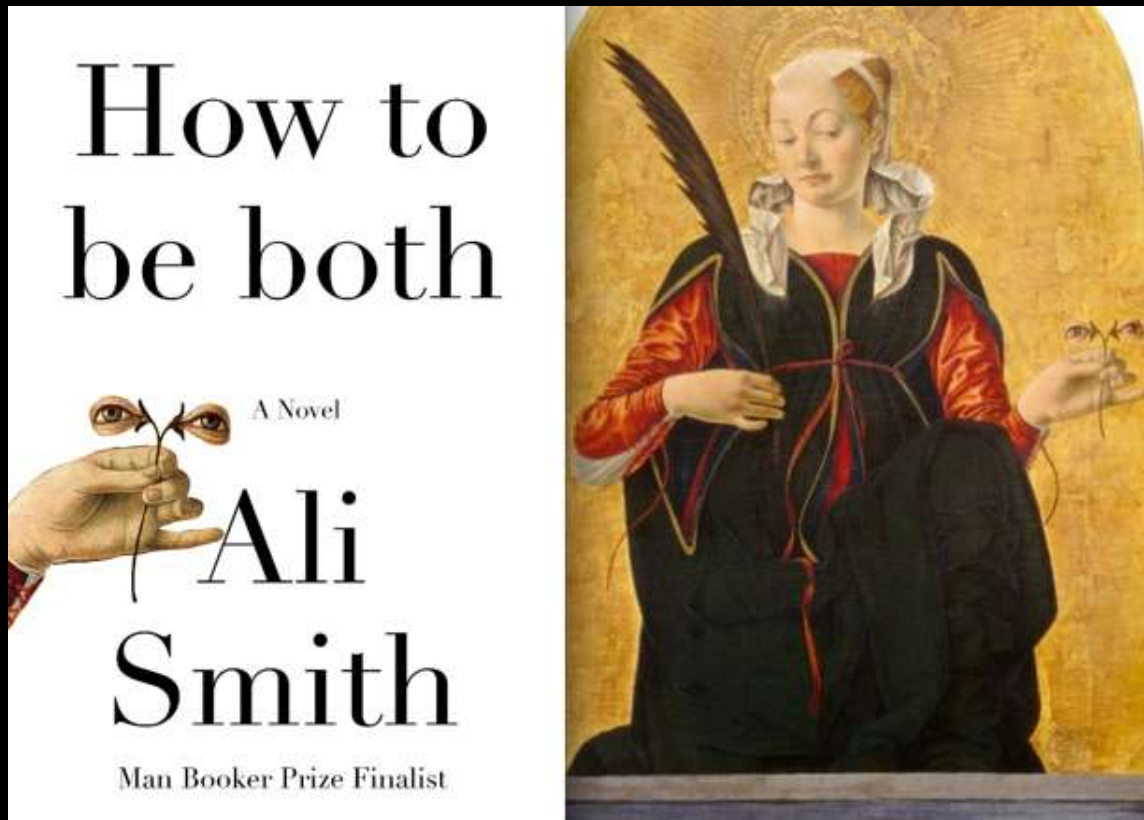


Ali Smith

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How to Be Both (2014)



Winner of
Goldsmiths Prize
Baileys Women's Prize
Costa Book Award (Novel)

Shortlisted
Man Booker
Folio Prize

Reviews

- “The **sheer inventive power** of her new novel pulls you through, gasping, to the final page.” (*The Observer*)
- “*How to be Both* shows us that the arrangement of a story, even when it's the same story, can change our understanding of it and define our emotional attachments. We may have known this, but to see it enacted with **such imagination is dazzling** indeed.” (*The Independent*)
- “*How to be Both* brims with **palpable joy, not only at language, literature, and art’s transformative power** [...]. With great subtlety and inventiveness, Smith continues to **expand the boundaries of the novel**.” (*The Daily Telegraph*)

The Basics

- Inspiration/Reception
- Genre/Publication
- Plots and Settings
- Characters



One day in April 2013, I saw a picture. The picture was in the art magazine *Frieze* 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.

It was of a man in clothes that were nothing but dirty white torn rags. At the same time, it looked like the richest, most gorgeous thing anyone could ever and himself or herself wearing. His tunic was frayed at the wrists and at the same time sort of kilted, ribboned, elegant, billowing richly round the tops of his thighs, which were showing through the piecemeal tied-together threadbareness of legwear ripped open at the knees too so the knees came through.

[...]

I'd liked the notion that those first drawings had been there, unseen all along under the wall surface, which is, after all, what fresco is, an actual physical part of the wall. **I'd 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.**

(Smith, "He looked like the finest man who ever lived", *The Guardian* 24 Aug 2014)

Genres

- Postmodern Novel
- Female Coming-of-Age Novel
- (Counterfactual) Historical Novel
- Ekphrasis
- ...

Genre: Postmodern

Different narrative styles; inclusion of poetry, images...

Meta-Reference:

This is the point in this story at which, according to its structure so far, a friend enters or a door opens or some kind of plot surfaces [...]; this is the place in this book where a spirit of twist in the tale has tended, in the past, to provide a friendly nudge to whatever's coming next. (182)

look, here, here and here – her habit of putting these 2 dots between clauses where a breath should come. It's my habit too, I said (337)

Two published versions

Main Characters/Settings

George/Georgia
(contemporary England)



"How to Be Both is unforgettable. I can never know what it would be like to meet George before knowing Del Cossa, so that version of the novel is forever lost to me. It's a bit sad. But it was worth it." (The Guardian)

Francescho/Francesca del Cossa
(Renaissance Italy)



Characters

George

(contemporary England)

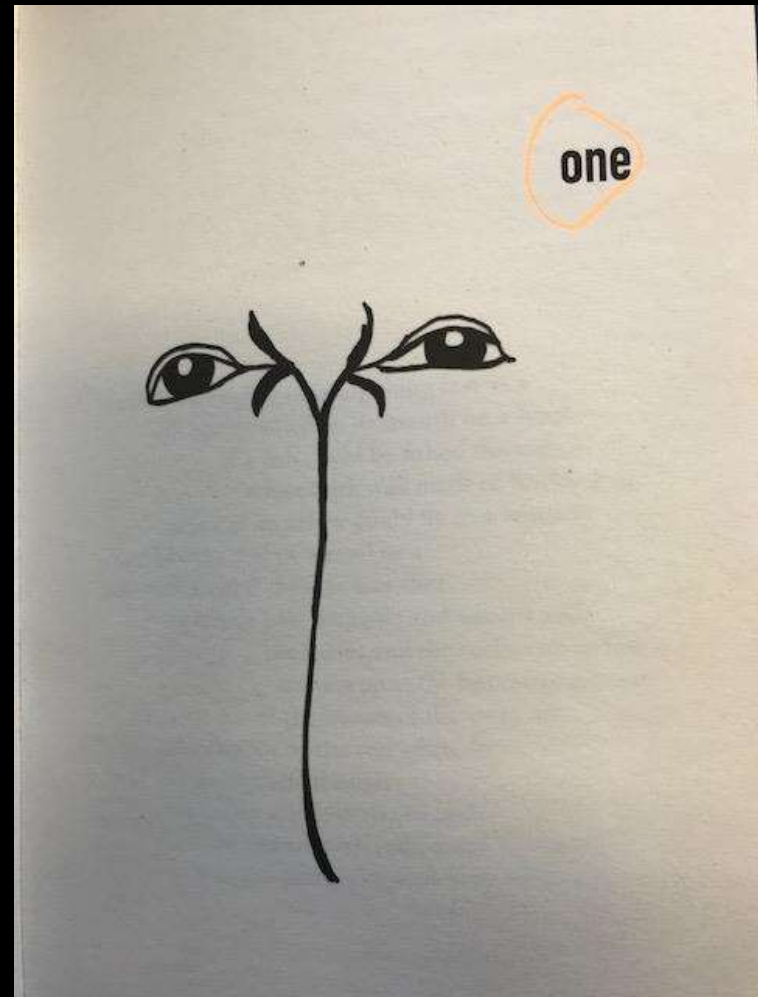
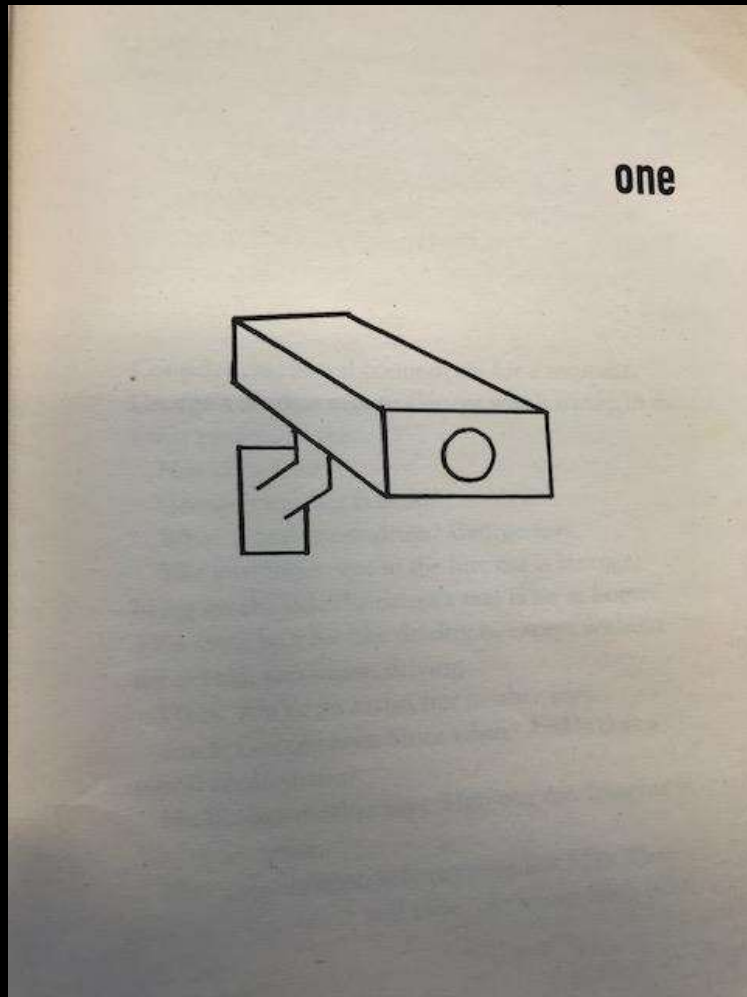
- Carol Martineau, her mother (internet activist, dead at 50 from allergic reaction to antibiotics)
- Nathan King, her father (10 years younger than mother, alcoholic, films insides of chimney for a roofing company, 12)
- Henry, her brother (8)
- Helena Fisker ("ethnic cow", 76), her friend and lover at school
- Lisa Goliard, mum's lover and spy
- Mrs. Rock, the school counsellor

Francesca del Cossa

(Renaissance Italy)

- Fiordelisia, her mother
- her father (wallmaker)
- her two brothers
- Barto, her friend and (would-be) lover
- Cosmo (Mura), her rival
- Pellegrino Prosciano/'the falcon', her impresario
- Ercole (de Roberti)/'the pickpocket', her apprentice
- Borso d'Este, her patron

Narrative Situations





Francesco del
Cossa, *St. Lucy*
(National
Gallery of Art,
Washington)



Francesco del Cossa, *The Annunciation*,
Gemäldegalerie Dresden



(First) Point of Connection



Francesco del Cossa, *Saint Vincent Ferrer* (National Gallery, London)

“She [Lisa Goliard] will walk into this room in this gallery [...] then come and stand in front of George between her and the painting of St Vincent Ferrer.” (183)

“hello :

what’s this?

A boy in front of a painting.

[...]

but oh God dear Christ and all the saints – that picture he’s – it’s – mine, I did it, who’s it again?” (191f)



(Some) Central Aspects

- How to be Both (What)?
 - Gender
 - Past/Present
 - Presence/Absence
 - ...
- Narrative Connections
 - Between two parts
 - Symbols
- Artful Connections: Ekphrasis
 - The Role of Art and the Artist
 - Ekphrasis as Genre
 - (Post-)Postmodern Ekphrasis

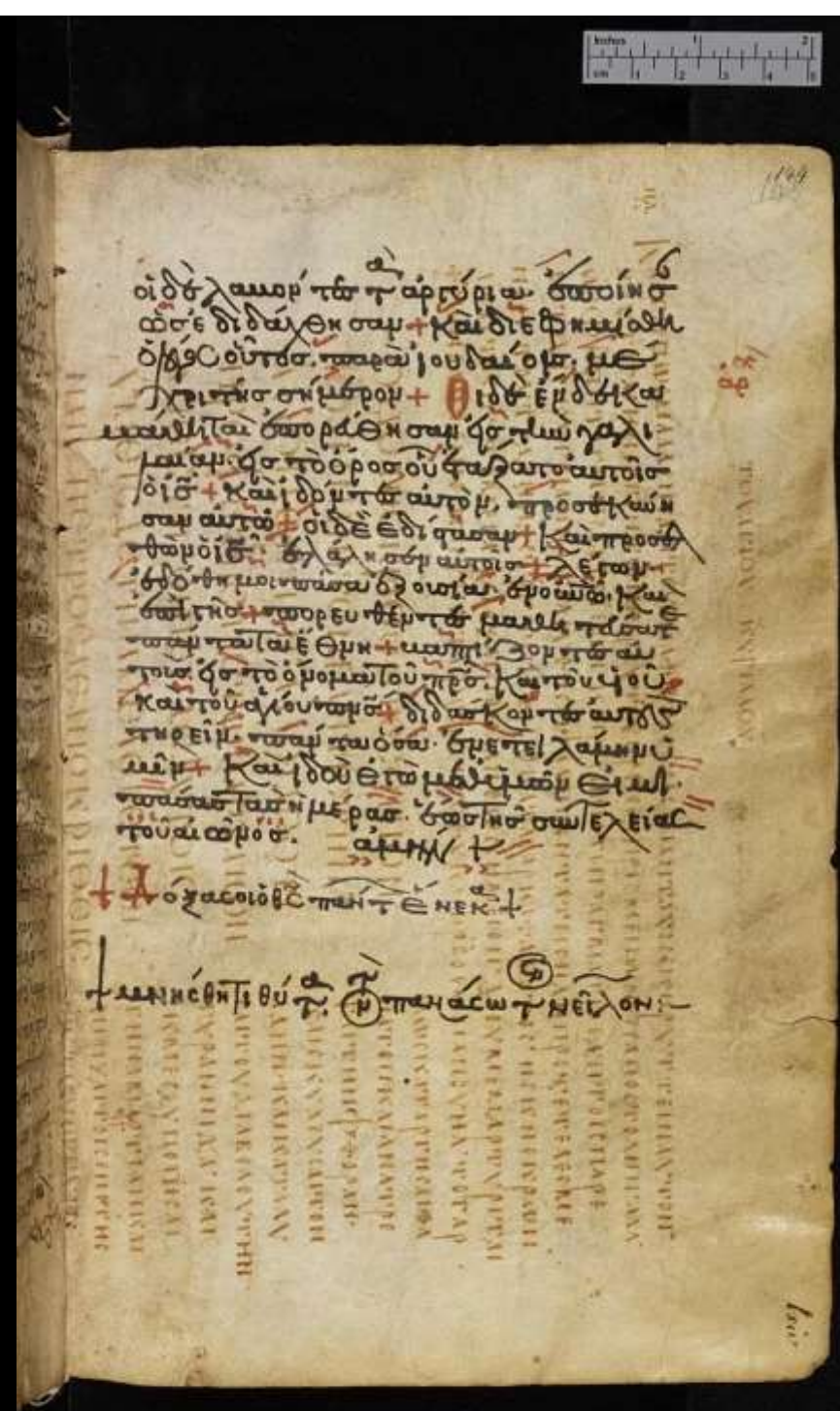
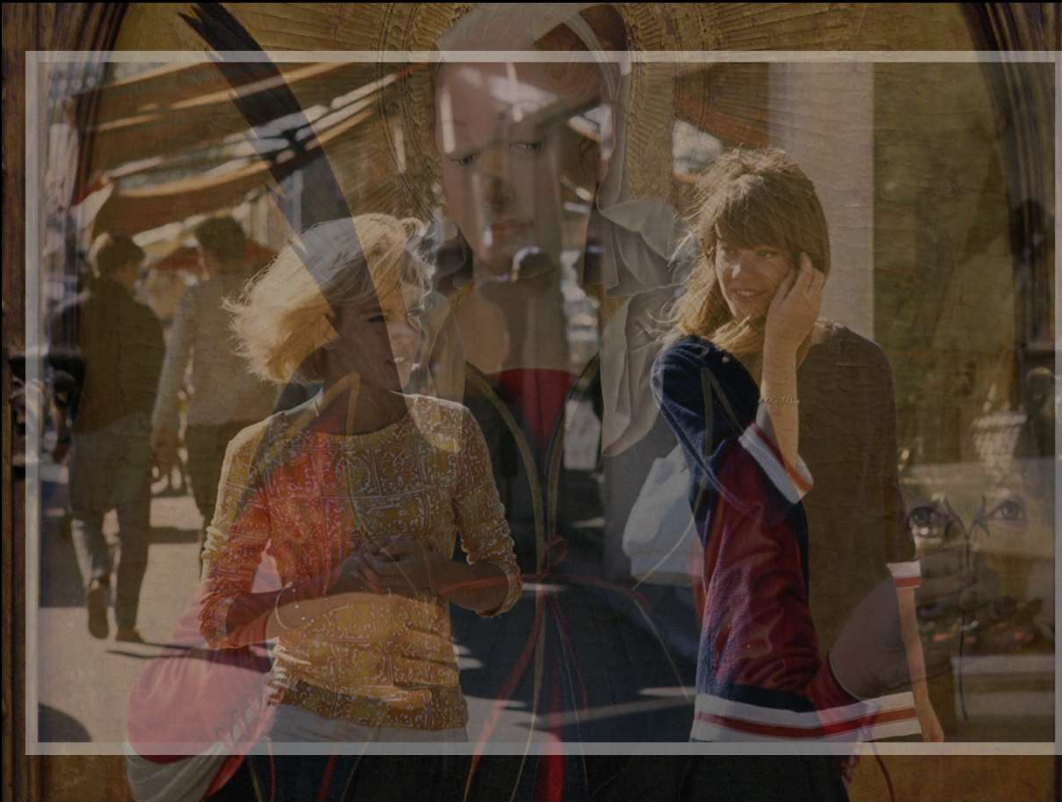
Both what?

(sequence of stories)

Past and Present? [...] Male or female? **It can't be both. It must be one or the other** (8)

pictures can be both life and death at once and cross the border between the two (344)

Because if things really did happen simultaneously it'd be like reading a book but one in which all **the lines of the text have been overprinted**, like each page is actually two pages but with one superimposed on the other to make it unreadable. (10)





Connections



You know, Georgie, **nothing's not connected**, her mother says. (106)

One of many **symbols of connection**:

Bricks/Walls (being BOTH either-or AND both-and)
(Nathan's job; Francesca's horse Mattone)

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.** (185f.)

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



The Role of the Art(ist)

But which came first? her mother says. [...] The picture underneath or the picture on the surface? (103)

All we are [as painters] is eyes looking for the unbroken or the edges where the broken bit might fit each other. (245)

painting [...] is a kind of opposite to death (343)

Ekphrasis, or, Relations between Word and Image

- Classical Topoi
- Areas of Interest
- Connection to Postmodernism and H2BB



Francesco del Cossa, *Portrait of a Man with a Ring* (Museo Nacional, Madrid)



Francesco del Cossa, *Portrait of a Man with a Ring* (Museo Nacional, Madrid)

Look at that, H says.

She points to the rock formation in the background, behind the man's head, where an outcrop of rock shaped a bit like a penis is pointing directly at a rocky bank opposite [...] which has an open cave set back in it.

Both girls burst out laughing.

It is **both blatant and invisible**. It is subtle and at the same time the most unsubtle thing in the world, so unsubtle it's subtle. **Once you've seen it, you can't not see it**. It makes the handsome man's intention completely clear. But only if you notice. **If you notice, it changes everything about the picture** (142)

"Ekphrasis is where visual object and spectator encounter one another – seeing and being seen, eyes and cameras, walls and works of art." (Hyde)

Classical Topoi of Ekphrasis

Ut pictura poesis (Like a picture, so is a poem)

Phrase from Horace's *Ars Poetica*

Plutarch/Simonides: "painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture" (qtd in Hagstrum 10)

Paragone

(comparison/contest between 'the sister arts')

"In what ways is the materiality of painting an 'other' to language?"

(Cheeke 6)

G.E. Lessing, *Laokoon, oder Über die Grenzen von Malerei und Poesie* (1766)



G.E. Lessing, *Laokoon, oder Über die Grenzen von Malerei und Poesie*

Wenn es wahr ist, daß **die Malerei** zu ihren Nachahmungen ganz andere Mittel, oder Zeichen gebraucht, als **die Poesie**; jene nämlich Figuren und Farben in dem Raume, diese aber artikulierte Töne in der Zeit; wenn unstreitig die Zeichen ein bequemes Verhältnis zu dem Bezeichneten haben müssen: so können **nebeneinander geordnete Zeichen** auch nur Gegenstände, die nebeneinander, oder deren Teile nebeneinander existieren, **aufeinanderfolgende Zeichen** aber auch nur Gegenstände ausdrücken, die aufeinander, oder deren Teile aufeinander folgen.

Gegenstände, die nebeneinander oder deren Teile nebeneinander existieren, heißen Körper. Folglich sind Körper mit ihren sichtbaren Eigenschaften die eigentlichen Gegenstände der Malerei.

Gegenstände, die aufeinander, oder deren Teile aufeinander folgen, heißen überhaupt Handlungen. Folglich sind Handlungen der eigentliche Gegenstand der Poesie.

Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757)

“In painting we may represent any fine figure we please; but we never can give it **those enlivening touches which it may receive from words.**”

“by words we have it in our power to make **such combinations as we cannot possibly do otherwise**”

Areas of Interest/ (Potential) Critical Dimensions

- Mimesis
 - Language and Representation
- ➔ (Post-)Postmodern Ekphrasis

Mimesis/Realism

Re-presentation, 'about-ness'

'imitation' = "the close relationship of art and reality that validates art; and that relationship is more prominently embodied in painting than in any other form of aesthetic expression. Painting therefore becomes exemplar and guide, possessing a moral force that other arts often lack." (Hagstrum 10)

"Ekphrastic ambition gives to the language art the extraordinary assignment of seeking to represent the literally unrepresentable."
(Krieger 9)

Language

“an **ambivalence** between, on the one hand, the defensive concession that **language, as arbitrary and with a sensuous lack, is a disadvantaged medium in need of emulating the natural and sensible medium of the plastic arts** and, on the other hand, the **prideful confidence in language as a medium privileged by its very intelligibility, which opens the sensible world to the free-ringing imagination without being bound by the limitations of the sensible as revealed in the visual field**”
(Krieger 12)

Three 'Phases' of Ekphrasis (Mitchell, 1994)

- Indifference:
 - “grows out of a commonsense perception that **ekphrasis is impossible.**” (2)
 - “Words can "cite," but never "sight" their objects.” (2)
- Hope:
 - “when the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we **discover a 'sense'** in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do” (3)
- Fear:
 - “when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually” (5)
 - “the moment in aesthetics when **the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative** rather than (as in the first, "indifferent" phase of ekphrasis) a natural fact that can be relied on” (5)

Trust

Connecting Ekphrasis to Postmodernism

Overcoming Postmodernism through Ekphrasis

Ihab Hassan,
“Beyond Postmodernism” (2003)

Beyond postmodernism, beyond the evasions of poststructuralist theories and pieties of postcolonial studies, we need to discover new relations between selves and others, margins and centers, fragments and wholes – indeed, new relations between selves and selves, margins and margins, centers and centers – discover what I call a new, pragmatic and planetary civility. That’s the crux and issue of postmodernity. (307)

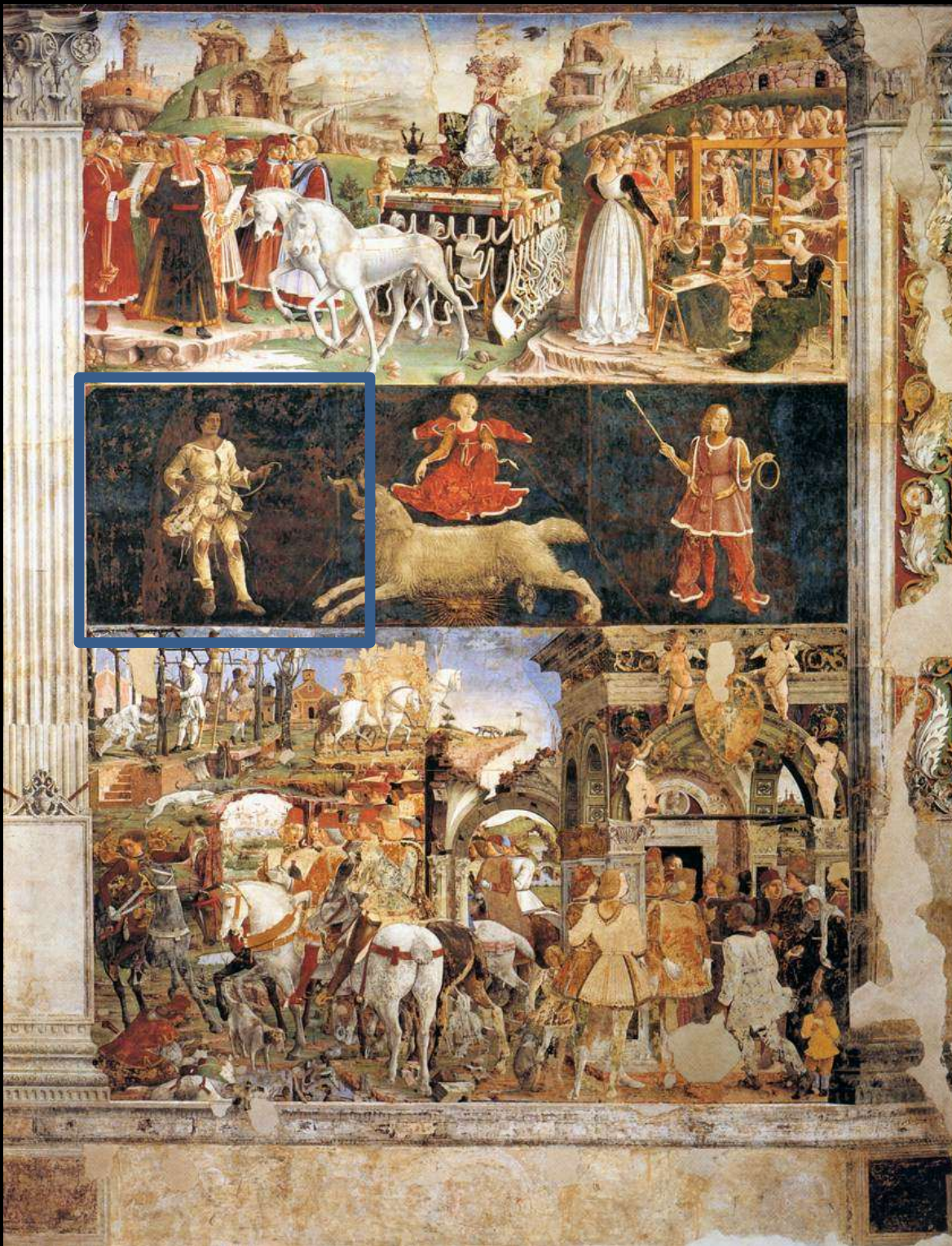
A moment ago, I spoke of **trust as a quality of attention to others, to the created world, to something not in ourself**. Is that not the premise of realism? (310)

I need only repeat that **fiduciary realism** – a postmodern realism, if any – demands **faith and empathy and trust precisely because it rests on Nothingness, the nothingness within all our representations, the final authority of the Void**. (313)

Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara

(Salone dei Mesi)





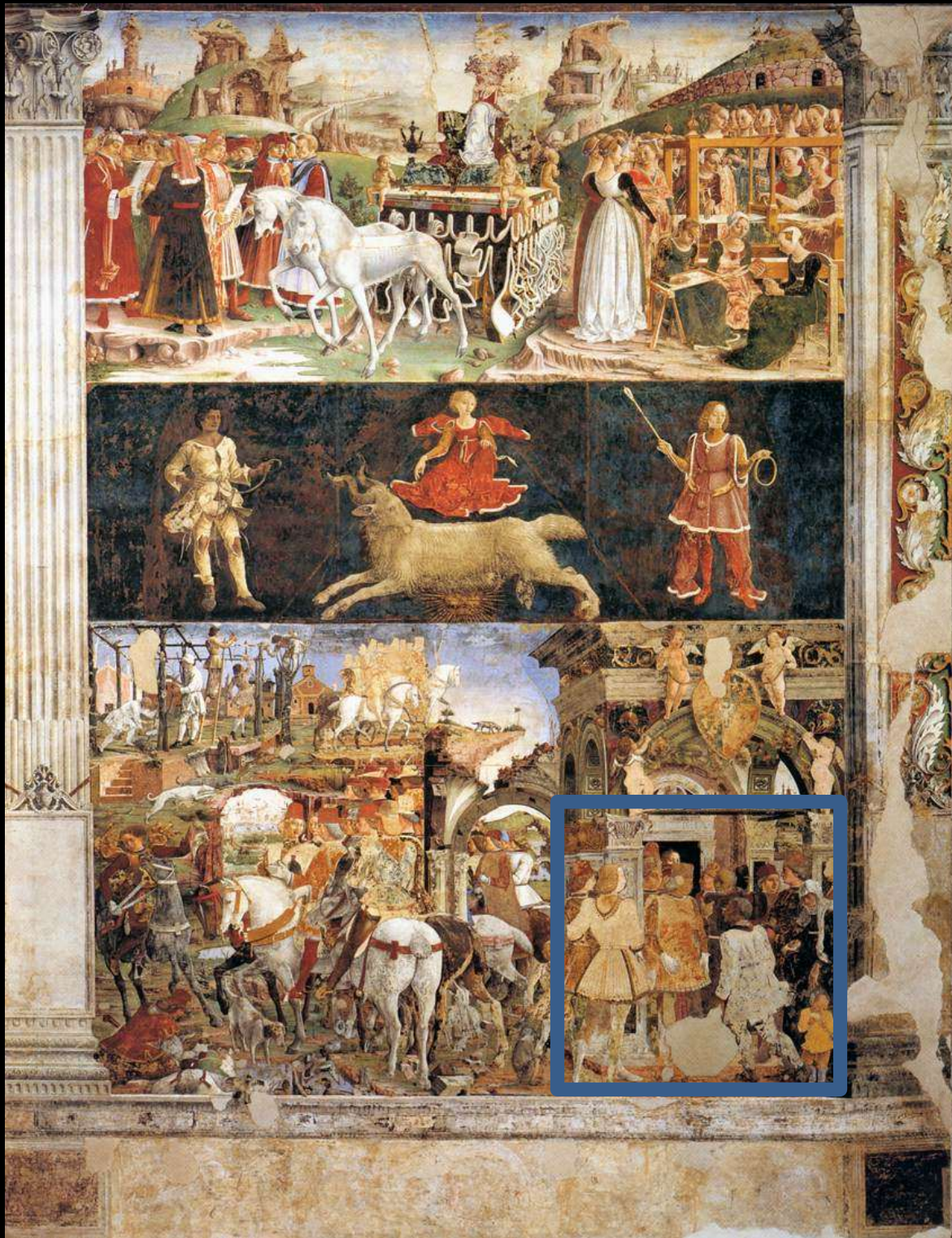
Francesco del Cossa, *The Month of March*

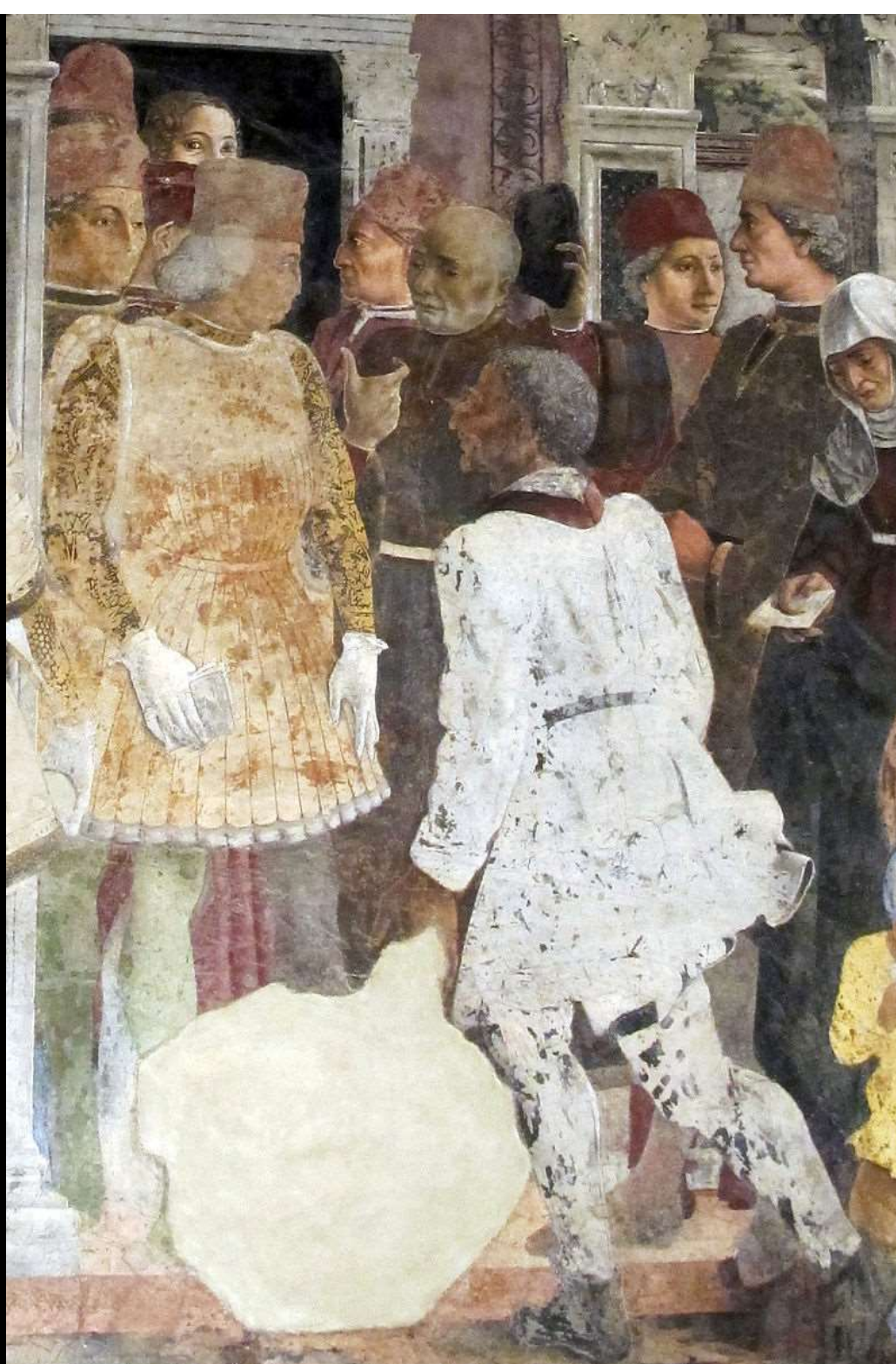


He's why they're here. (51)

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(Smith 2014)









They come especially, his wife told me while she poured stew into my bowl, to see the face you painted in the blackness, the face there's only half of, whose eyes – your eyes, Master Francescho – look straight out at them, as if the eyes can actually see them over the top of Borse's head. (354)



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Now this gang of girls was standing in front of George and filming and squealing at her with no idea that Helena Fisker was standing behind them. Helena Fisker caught George's eye over the tops of their heads. (78)

Thank you very
much for your
attention!



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