

# A CELEBRATION OF OUR EXISTENCE

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The reception of two  
novels by Ali Smith as  
“modernist”

Abstract with keywords

**Abstract**

Reviews of various contemporary British novels contain distinctive characteristics associated with modernism as well as direct references to the literary movement or the historical period. The reception of Ali Smith's two latest novels proves that modernism is anything but outmoded. What aspects of Ali Smith's *There but for the* (2011) and *How to be both* (2014) are emphasised when reviews of these novels contain references to modernism? Five reviews published by the established press are analysed per novel to find out why exactly these novels are received as modernist fiction. The results of the analyses reveal how the reviewers shape their definition of modernism in their reception of these novels. The choice for the label "modernism" suggests that it is a generic term for a number of characteristics rather than a movement, and that it adds cultural value to a text. Connecting contemporary fiction with modernism, this thesis brings together two seemingly unrelated fields of study very relevant to our times.

**Keywords**

reviews, contemporary British novel, modernist, modernism, Ali Smith, received, reception, fiction, aspects, references, established press, definition, labels

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## Introduction

Once upon a time, a long time ago, the future was modern, or at least modernist. Big bold ideas in the arts with fresh ways of looking at the world and thinking about the world, and these are effective still, but not perhaps with the seriousness, the edge, that they once brought. The writer Ali Smith is one of those who still push the boundaries of art and literary criticism.

(Marr)

“I’m kind of married to modernism,” (Marr) Ali Smith admitted when Andrew Marr interviewed her on *BBC Radio Four* in 2012. Regarding her as a twentieth-century modernist writer through and through, he asked her whether she felt the pressure to produce traditional and easy to categorise forms of fiction, or whether she thought a more challenging view on writing was coming back. “Well,” she answered, “the exciting thing about modernism is, though it’s been canonised, it’s never going to be mainstream” (Marr). She went on to explain how James Joyce’s 1922 novel *Ulysses*, T.S. Eliot’s 1922 poem *The Waste Land*, and writers such as Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf changed the possibilities of literature. When all is said and done, however, historical fiction will win the Man Booker Prize, and modernist fiction will not, in her view, though “it’s great and it’s really important” that contemporary modernist fiction is there (Marr). She was optimistic about the possibility for writers to begin to challenge form again. Smith, who carried out doctoral work in the 1980s on the importance of the ordinary in modernist literature, was clearly delighted about all that is modernist, but why exactly? “People tend to see modernism as the opposite of a celebration. They see it as a fracturing and an art built round an absence; but it’s really a celebration of our existence,” (Clark, par. 6) she remarked in *The Guardian* in 2014 when she talked about *How to be both* (2014). Smith’s work is often thought to reflect several modernist characteristics, “particularly in its concern for formal consciousness and experiment” (Germanà and Horton 5). It is true that a blend of modernist and postmodernist influences and identifications has been observed throughout her work (6), but since the adjective “postmodernist” is so pregnant with meaning that it has become all but empty of meaning, it might be more fruitful to look at how her work is positioned in some ways as an extension of modernism: as a true celebration of our existence.

Reviews of various contemporary British novels contain distinctive characteristics associated with modernism as well as direct references to the literary movement or the

historical period. *There but for the* (2011) and *How to be both* (2014) by Ali Smith are two of many twenty-first-century British novels which are received as “modernist” fiction and which consequently prove that modernism as a movement is anything but outmoded. This thesis seeks to understand for what reasons these novels are received as modernist fiction: are they received as such for similar or different reasons? Aspects which reviewers might emphasise could include the worldview, portrayal of mankind, view on language, narration, metafiction, time, intertextuality, etcetera. So the research question is: What aspects of Ali Smith’s *There but for the* and *How to be both* are emphasised when reviews of these novels contain references to modernism?

The study of the reception of contemporary British fiction as “modernist” fits in the field of reception theory as well as of institutional literature research. Scholars such as David James and Marjorie Perloff have done research in the area of contemporary modernist literature. On the basis of ten novels, Dennis Kersten and Usha Wilbers of Radboud University in Nijmegen are currently researching the afterlife of modernism in the contemporary British novel. The case study of *There but for the* and *How to be both* will add to the research of the aforementioned scholars in that it zooms in on two novels and looks at how reviewers of *There but for the* on the one hand and of *How to be both* on the other hand shape their definition of modernism in their reception of these novels. The research of Perloff focuses on poetry rather than prose, and the research of Kersten and Wilbers is still in the mill, so their work will not be cited.

### **When art stops making sense**

It is neither possible nor desirable to say *when* modernism was and *what* modernism was or still is, partly because it simply is beyond the research question and the limited scope of this thesis, partly because the concept of modernism is so slippery. Virginia Woolf asserted that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed” (qtd. in Childs 87), but 1922 was the year which began with the publication of *Ulysses* and ended with the publication of *The Waste Land*. Ninety years after 1922, that year became the point of departure for Kevin Jackson’s *Constellation of Genius: 1922: Modernism Year One* (2012), which he calls a journey through the beginning of a new era. In *Beginning Modernism* (2010), Jeff Wallace proposes that modernism covered very broadly the period 1880-1939 (Wallace 1), and he presents a provisional definition of the meaning of modernism as an opening gambit for an understanding of it: “modernism is the moment at which art stops making sense” (3), though this perhaps says more about high modernism, which covered the period 1910-1930. Wallace

supplements his introduction with a list of characteristics of modernist artefacts which Eugene Lunn compiled in *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukàcs, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (1982). The list is reproduced in a concise form below (15):

1. Aesthetic self-consciousness or reflexivity
2. Simultaneity, juxtaposition or “montage”
3. Paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty
4. “Dehumanisation”, or the demise of the integrated humanist self

Wallace correctly argues that such lists of characteristics are far from exhaustive and should therefore not be used as checklists to determine whether or not or to what extent an artefact can be called modernist. He argues in favour of an approach which regards modernism as “an orientation or approach towards the nature and potentialities of art within the modern world” (290), and presents a subjective list of eight key features of the modernist outlook. As a consequence, modernity and modernism should be seen as a collection of orientations or aspirations, or even as an incomplete project. Prudence is called for, however, because it would be relatively simplistic to say that modernism survived the century untouched: “modernism could not be *the same* today as it was a century ago” (292). Periodising and defining modernism of a century ago is notoriously difficult, but identifying the continuities of literary modernism belongs in a largely different field of study, one which brings together contemporary fiction and modernist studies.

### **Making the new new again**

*Darkmans* (2007) by Nicola Barker, *C* (2010) by Tom McCarthy, *Umbrella* (2012) by Will Self, and several works by Zadie Smith and Ali Smith: all are instances of contemporary British fiction widely received as modernist. What scholars of modernist studies seem to have in common is the view that “the modernism of now” cannot possibly be the same as “the modernism of then”, obviously because of the innovative nature of modernist art, but also because of a rapidly changing world.

Derek Attridge, whom David James quotes in the introduction of *The Legacies of Modernism* (2012), puts it very aptly when he says that “[t]his modernism after modernism necessarily involves a reworking of modernism’s methods, since nothing could be less modernist than a repetition of previous modes, however disruptive they were in their time” (qtd. in James 6). The modernist methods to which he refers are innovatively redeployed, re-

engaged with, or – tautological though it might sound – renewed by contemporary writers such as the ones mentioned above.

Such writers have recourse to these modes when, for example, they try to grasp their elusive and intractable self and the complex world around them. Choosing such modernist methods or modes can therefore be seen as a way of responding to “the pressing demands of their immediate cultural moment” (James 6), which is another reason why “modernism now” cannot be the same as “modernism then”. Logic and history forbid this, and at the same time they challenge the view that the modernist project is over.

David James undertakes to explore *how* as well as *why* a group of contemporary novelists draws on the legacies of modernism in *Modernist Futures* (2012). As was established earlier on, this entails an interaction between innovation and inheritance (James 2), between paying homage to modernist writers of the past and seeing and saying what they have not seen and said. He presents modernism as “the scene of an unfinished argument about the novel’s critical and formal potentiality,” (3) proposing that novelists recalibrate modernist strategies “in order to meet fresh expectations about the purposes of literary experiment” (4): the “promise” of modernism has yet to be fully realised, as it were. As regards modernist form now, present-day modernist novelists not only seek to examine (the representation of) consciousness, but also to connect these internal mental experiences to external material circumstances (9). James repeatedly asserts that it is on the interface between narrative self-reflexivity and involvement of the reader where contemporary novelists can strive to fulfil the promise of modernist fiction (25).

### **Topic, previous research, and hypothesis**

The key question for many of these scholars is apparently what the status of modernism is in contemporary literary culture, but this is of course a very broad question which cannot be answered satisfactorily by means of a relatively limited case study like this one. One individual novel could function as a point of departure, so that the specific serves as an illustration and explanation for the general, but many different aspects of its presentation and reception by many different actors in the literary field would have to be examined. Still, one such case study would not be representative of the apparent resurgence of modernism. This thesis focuses on a selection of reviews by the established press of the two latest novels by one author. What aspects do reviewers exactly emphasise in their reception of these novels as modernist fiction? Comparing and contrasting this selection of reviews will at least reveal the

status that the reviewers of these two particular twenty-first-century British novels ascribe to modernism in contemporary literary culture.

The relevant literature for this research can be broken down into three categories, from general to specific: literature about modernism or modernist fiction, literature about the afterlife of modernism, and literature about Ali Smith's work. Peter Childs' *Modernism* (2007) contains a short section on the modernist novel. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (2011) edited by Michael Levenson contains a longer chapter on the same subject, written by David Trotter. Wallace's *Beginning Modernism* (2010) offers an introduction to modernism and also contains a chapter about modernist fiction. Bringing together scholarship on contemporary fiction and modernist studies, James examines how writers working today draw on the legacies of modernist literature in *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* (2012) and *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction* (2012). He does not deal with the reception of novels of such writers. The first results of the research being conducted by Kersten and Wilbers show that critics tend to avoid making the connection to postmodernism in their reviews. Finally, *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (2013) is a guide written by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton which provides a companion to reading and studying Ali Smith.

Hypothesizing what aspects of her two latest novels are emphasised when reviews contain references to modernism is next to impossible. Because *How to be both* tells the tales of an Italian renaissance artist of the 1460s and the child of someone born in the 1960s (500 years after the artist was born), it is expected that reviewers of this novel will emphasise aspects such as narration, time, and views on the world, mankind, and art. Setting up an unassailable hypothesis about aspects like these, however, is neither possible nor desirable: having read the two novels should not be a requirement for both reading and writing a thesis like this one. What can be expected is that the label "modernism" is used because modernism has often heavily influenced such major aspects. But above all, this investigation will show that modernism should not be seen as a movement, but as a generic term for a number of characteristics ascribed to particular literary texts by literary critics: *the* modernist novel does not exist; no novel is ever modernist as a whole. Moreover, the use of the label in the present time suggests that it adds cultural value to a text, placing it within a favourable cultural tradition, and it suggests that modernism is more than a period in history and anything but outmoded.

## Method

This introductory chapter has already provided a contextualisation of (twenty-first-century) modernism and will provide a specification of what elements to focus on in the reviews. With this end in view, the short section on the modernist novel in Childs' *Modernism* (2007), Trotter's chapter "The modernist novel" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (2011), edited by Levenson, and the chapter "Modernist fiction" in Wallace's *Beginning Modernism* will serve as a starting point from which a list of modernist features will be distilled: adjectives and concepts such as "avant-garde", "experimental", and "stream of consciousness", but also names like "(James) Joyce" and "(Virginia) Woolf". So a list of major modernist characteristics and modernist writers will be the thread in the analysis of the reviews of *There but for the* and *How to be both*. The three books from which the sixty-five items were picked were chosen because all of them consider modernist fiction separately. The list here differs from the "tick-box list" which Wallace discourages the reader of modernist literature (or any experiencer of any modernist art) from using, because the objective is not to say whether or to what extent the two novels can be called modernist, but to find out what aspects of them are emphasised when reviews contain modernist associations.

A corpus consisting of forty reviews of the established press is at the basis of Chapter One: Reviews of *There but for the* and Chapter Two: Reviews of *How to be both*. Of each novel, twenty reviews will be read; and of each collection of twenty reviews, five reviews will be examined in detail. The ten reviews at the heart of this thesis should all be at least 500 words long (because they must have certain depth), and they should contain modernist associations which can be linked to at least one aspect of the novel. Reviews of the non-established press were excluded because of the limited scope of this thesis. The reviews will be subjected to an analysis of what aspects reviewers exactly emphasise in their reception of these novels as modernist fiction. The aspects which are emphasised will of course not be determined in advance, but will naturally flow from the analysis. Both chapters begin with an overview of where the reviews come from. Every analysis begins with the name of the reviewer, his or her profile, the title of the review, the medium, and the date of publication. The introduction of the reviews will be scrutinised first, since these usually communicate the main idea or direction of the article, for example by a quotation, question or personal anecdote. Whenever a direct or indirect reference to modernism from the list of characteristics and writers below appears in a review, it will be linked to an aspect of the novel. The concluding sections will not only list the items from the list which were mentioned most often and the aspects which were treated most often or thoroughly, but will also present all items

and aspects in an easy-reference table. Similarities and differences between the aspects in the reviews of *There but for the* and *How to be both* will be outlined in the conclusion.

### **Interpretations and implications of results**

The label “modernism” is in all probability used in connection with aspects of form and content such as the worldview, portrayal of mankind, view on language, narration, metafiction, time, intertextuality, etcetera, because modernism has often heavily influenced such major aspects. The aspects listed here are of course only random examples. What will ultimately be tested is if and what differences come to the surface when reviews of two novels written by one contemporary British author and widely received as modernist fiction are contrasted and compared.

With regard to an alternative interpretation of the connection between distinct aspects of the novel and the use of the label “modernism”, it is certainly not unlikely that critics prefer the label “modernism” over “postmodernism”. This could be the case because the label “postmodernism” is used to denote so many characteristics that it has lost much of its meaning, but also because the label “modernism” adds cultural value to a text by virtue of it being a label which is associated with the early twentieth century (or even late nineteenth century) rather than with the twenty-first century. What might happen is that an individual review does not seem to contribute much to the definition of modernism, but that all reviews together do, and that it is in the way that they communicate that our understanding of modernism continues to change.

This thesis will contribute to multiple fields of study in literature in multiple ways. It deals with a topic of the day in that it is concerned with reception studies and institutional literature research, and because it brings together contemporary fiction and modernism. It contributes to the changing meaning of modernism, and to our understanding of what role literary criticism plays in this process.

**List of characteristics and writers** (underlined items denote “anti-modernist” associations)

- A** alienation; anti-realism; apocalypse; avant-garde
- B**
- C** Conrad, Joseph; (centre of) consciousness; crisis
- D** disillusionment; Dos Passos, John
- E** Edwardians; Eliot, T.S.; epiphany (Joyce); experimental
- F** Faulkner, William; Fitzgerald, F. Scott; Ford, Ford Madox; formlessness; fragmentation; Freud, Sigmund; futurism
- G** Georgians
- H** Hemingway, Ernest
- I** impersonality; impressionism; initial style (Joyce); innovative; interior monologue; irony
- J** James, Henry; James, William; Joyce, James
- K** Kafka, Franz
- L** Lawrence, D.H.; Lewis, Wyndham; linguistic play
- M** Mann, Thomas; Mansfield, Katherine; materialism; *mémoire involuntaire* (Proust); metafiction; mobility of viewpoint; modernism; myth
- N**
- O**
- P** parody; Proust, Marcel; psychoanalysis
- Q**
- R** “readerly” text; realism; Richardson, Dorothy
- S** satire; scepticism; self-conscious; Sinclair, May; spatial form; Stein, Gertrude; stream of consciousness; subjectivity; symbolism
- T** *The Waste Land*; time-space compression
- U** *Ulysses*; unstable or unreliable (centre of consciousness); urban
- V**
- W** Woolf, Virginia; “writerly” text
- X**
- Y**
- Z**

## Chapter One

### Reviews of *There but for the*

This chapter focuses on reviews of *There but for the*. Twenty reviews of this novel were read, and five of them were examined in detail. These five reviews were selected on the basis of their length and content: they are at least 500 words long and contain references to modernism which can be linked to an aspect of the novel. The reviews that were analysed are the reviews by Alex Clark for *The Guardian*, Sarah Churchwell for *The Observer*, Arifa Akbar for *The Independent*, Charles McGrath for *The New York Times*, and Nicholas Lezard for *The Guardian*. They were analysed in the order in which they were published. Some of the fifteen reviews which are outside the scope of each selection criterion – for example because they are too short or the quantity and/or quality of the references to modernism makes the reviews unfit for a thorough examination – are discussed very briefly in a separate section after the analyses of the other reviews (in section 1.6).

#### 1.1 Alex Clark for *The Guardian*

Alex Clark reviewed *There but for the* for *The Guardian*. Her review, “*There But For The* by Ali Smith – review,” appeared on 1 June 2011. Clark formerly wrote for the *Observer Magazine*, a weekly supplement of the newspaper.

Clark begins by painting a picture of a miserable dinner party, assuming that readers know exactly what she is talking about, and then goes into a summary of the plot. After touching on the subject of the uninvited guest, a theme which Smith also extensively explores in *The Accidental* (2005), Clark asserts that the “particular linguistic obsession” of the novel is puns (Clark, par. 3). She observes that “Smith is repeatedly drawn to explorations of language games, to the moment in which what we say slips free from what we think we mean, where the generic becomes the particular, where the identity of the speaker comes under scrutiny” (par. 3). This review mentions the playful nature of Smith’s language as well, and it may be fruitful to zoom in on the effects that such games have for Clark on the perception of people in general or on characters in a novel in particular. Language games cause Clark to adopt a critical attitude towards the character who produces a pun. She does not clarify her “discomfort”, if that is what it is, but at this point all the signs are that slippery language reflects the modernist feature of a slippery, unstable, or unreliable centre of consciousness. This matter will be returned to in the next paragraph.

It does not come as a surprise then that Clark next shifts her focus from language to identity: “[a]lso peppering her studiously fragmented narrative,” she continues, “is a series of knock-knock jokes, with the existentially problematic question ‘Who’s there?’ Who indeed?” (par. 3). This is evidence of the assumption that unstable language mirrors an unstable identity for Clark. On first thoughts, what happens on the page is playfulness. On second thoughts, however, this playfulness turns out to hide a seriousness that can no longer be ignored by Clark. The instability of identity is the modernist label which stands out so far, and it is used in the context of wordplay.

Another label in this sentence which attracts attention is “studiously fragmented narrative”. Two paragraphs further down, Clark mentions “the spirit in which Smith intends her jigsaw puzzle of stories to be read” (par. 5), and in the same vein the teaser under the title of the review describes the novel as “a seriously playful puzzle of a novel”. All three sayings convey a sense of breaking or separation into fragments. Fragmentation was identified in the introduction as a modernist feature, and in this review it is associated with the way in which the story is told, a way which gives the reader “a more demanding but empowering role” (Childs 82). As a matter of fact, Childs explains that such an active role for the reader characterises a “writerly” text, which is a typically modernist feature according to Childs (who simply treats “modernist” and “writerly” as one and the same thing).

Clark goes on to sketch the characters who are most closely involved in what she calls “the central locked-room mystery” of the novel (par. 4). What catches the eye of the reader who looks for modernist labels is the fact that Clark mentions Franz Kafka. Building on her previous discussion of the instability of language/identity/names, she mentions Anna Hardie, “who also figures as Anna K, in echo of Kafka, and Anna Key, in echo of the Sex Pistols” (par. 4). The review does not specify whether this instance of intertextuality was discovered by Clark or whether Smith made it explicit.

Clark concludes her review with an enumeration of precisely those items that bring modernist associations to mind:

In a novel filled with time-slips (it is no accident that most of its action takes place in Greenwich, or that Brooke amuses herself by running up the hill to the observatory as quickly as she can, as if to outwit time itself), identity shifts and language gaps, its most empathetic and sympathetic characters are all attempting to find ways in which to experience and express sincerity. (par. 7)

Only the concept of “time-slips” had not been mentioned yet. She puts her explanation between brackets behind it, but strikingly her observation does not naturally flow from the

word “time-slips”. In fact, the word raises questions: what does it mean and how does the sentence between brackets illustrate its meaning? She seems to illustrate the relevance of “time” as a theme of the novel between the brackets, but she does not explain what she means by the word “slips”.

The fact that Clark mentions “time-slips” incidentally in her conclusion raises the question whether or not she could have been thinking about a modernist feature. Much less ambiguous is her discussion of identity in connection with language, and how these become unstable, uncertain, and insecure in the hands of Smith. Another clear instance of a modernist label is “fragmentation” in connection with the way in which the narrative is structured. What connects the modernist labels and the aspects of the novel is the interaction or tension between playfulness and seriousness.

*Labels and aspects: “fragmentation” with narrative; “unstable or unreliable (centre of consciousness)” with linguistic play (or the other way round).*

## **1.2 Sarah Churchwell for *The Observer***

Four days after the publication of Clark’s review, on 5 June 2011, a review called “*There but for the*, by Ali Smith – review” appeared on the website of *The Observer*. It was written by Sarah Churchwell, Professor of American Literature and Public Understanding of the Humanities at the University of East Anglia. She is the author of *Careless People: Murder, Mayhem and The Invention of The Great Gatsby* (2014) and *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe* (2003), and co-editor of *Must Read: Rediscovering American Bestsellers* (2012). She has been a judge for several literary prizes, notably for the Man Booker Prize 2014, for which *How to be both* was shortlisted.

Churchwell starts her review by contextualising the novel and its central conceit, “the idea of the house guest who overstays his welcome” (Churchwell, par. 1). Via Molière’s play *Tartuffe* (produced in 1664; published in French in 1669) and George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart’s Broadway hit *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (written in 1939), she arrives at the main idea or direction of her article: unlike these plays, this novel does not lend itself to being categorised as comedy. The conceit in the novel is not deployed to amuse, Churchwell argues, but “to satirise contemporary culture – and to ask difficult questions about history, time, epistemology and narrative” (par. 1).

Several modernist labels immediately stand out in this part of the sentence. Firstly, the label “satire” is conspicuous. It is a mode of writing which often surfaces in modernist fiction,

but it is not identified as a typically modernist feature in the review. Churchwell does not connect the label to any particular aspect of the novel: she does not specify the failings of “contemporary culture” which she believes to be exposed to ridicule and scorn. Neither does she spell out the tone of the satire: is it “tolerant amusement” or “bitter indignation” (Baldick) or somewhere in between? Secondly, the observation that Smith asks difficult questions about grand topics (such as the theory of knowledge) is remarkable. It shows awareness of complexity and scepticism. As for the idea of complexity, it is certainly not uncommon for modernist texts to demand that the reader work hard. The idea of scepticism is what actually brings Churchwell’s discussion round to modernism. She connects doubt or incredulity to human knowledge and its boundaries. Finally, the fact that the novel asks questions about narrative suggests that it is self-conscious or self-reflexive, which is another modernist feature.

Churchwell winds up the introductory paragraph with the remark that “[t]he result is a playfully serious, or seriously playful, novel full of wit and pleasure, with some premeditated frustrations thrown in for good measure” (Churchwell, par. 1). For one thing, this sentence elucidates her opinion on the tone of the satire: a tone of bitter indignation is out of the question. For another thing, it characterises the novel as a whole as playful. She comes back to this in the teaser under the title of the review, where she writes that “[t]he story of a dinner guest who refuses to leave develops into a satire on the way we live now in Ali Smith’s enjoyably playful new novel”. This playfulness is the main occupation of Churchwell from the introduction onwards. The end of the fourth paragraph harks back to the subject of satire, or the “premeditated frustrations thrown in for good measure”. Churchwell describes Smith’s description of the dinner party as “a burlesque set-piece at the novel’s centre, sending up middle-class philistinism, complacency and cruelty” (par. 4). The shortcomings of the middle class are perceived as the object of derision.

The focus shifts to Miles’s and Brooke’s enjoyment of puns. Churchwell observes that “pleasure in wordplay becomes a touchstone” to such an extent that “sympathetic characters like games with words, and unsympathetic characters don’t” (par. 6). This possibly modernist feature of linguistic play is therefore inextricably bound up with the characters. The point is made again that this playfulness is also a layer which can be peeled off to reveal seriousness. Churchwell treats “[t]emporary permanence” and “absent presence”, two gags in the novel, as “the novel’s two philosophical leitmotifs, linking its disparate characters, dissipating plot, and dispersing reflections on the way we are now” (par. 8). She finds the characters of the novel so dissimilar that they do not seem to have a common ground; she is of the opinion that the

plot drives off in all directions; and, finally, she extends this formlessness and fragmentation to the way in which the novel reflects on humanity. The alliteration of the words “disparate”, “dissipating”, and “dispersing” reinforces the sense of formlessness and fragmentation, and these modernist features are successively connected to character, plot, and the way in which the novel portrays mankind.

On the face of it, Churchwell does not read the novel as distinctly modernist fiction, but still her review contains highly suggestive terms in plenty. In her view, the novel satirises the shortcomings of the middle class, is sceptical about the reach of human knowledge, reflects on its own narrative, and deploys linguistic play in giving a particular rendition of a character. She also points to formlessness and fragmentation, and connects these features to character, plot, and portrayal of mankind. A careful examination rather than a cursory reading, this analysis shows that a critic can easily discuss five modernist features of a novel without explicitly labelling that novel as modernist fiction.

*Labels and aspects: “satire” with the shortcomings of the middle class; “scepticism” with human knowledge; “self-conscious or self-reflexive” with narrative; “linguistic play” with characters; “formlessness” and “fragmentation” with character, plot, and portrayal of mankind.*

### **1.3 Arifa Akbar for *The Independent***

Five days after the publication of Clark’s review, on 10 June 2011, a review called “*There But For The, By Ali Smith*” appeared on the website of *The Independent*. It was written by Arifa Akbar, literary editor of *The Independent* and *i* newspapers. She was a judge for the Orwell Prize for books 2013, and the Fiction Uncovered Prize 2014.

It does not come as a surprise that it is Smith’s fascination with language and its possibilities which attracts the attention of the author of another review of Smith’s *There but for the*. Akbar observes that Smith lets Brooke use a kind of language characterised by “playfulness”, “punning”, and “tomfoolery” (Akbar, par. 4). For Akbar, too, the striking language is more than wordplay: she remarks that “[t]he semantic and structural disruption, starting with the novel’s unfinished title, reflects its anarchic intent” (par. 4). Smith’s language is not innocent, but sarcastic; it is not there for a decorative effect, but serves “to disrupt the comfortably smug, middle-class sensibility personified by Genevieve and her dinner party set, with their stultifying prejudice and snobbery” (par. 4). Akbar in that way

connects the modernist feature of linguistic play to disappointment and disruption, and just as Churchwell did, Akbar identifies the middle class as the object of derision.

These anti-bourgeois sentiments are further explored in the next paragraph. Akbar briefly makes a comparison between this subtext in *The Accidental* and in the present novel, and draws the conclusion that in the latter “Smith sends up the same slice of self-regarding society and interrogates its value system” (par. 5). The word “satire” is not long in coming: Akbar takes the view that “[t]he dinner party conversation makes for brilliant satire” (par. 5). “At points,” she writes in the concluding paragraph, “the book veers into out-and-out social satire, but then Smith steers it back to serious drama” (par. 6). The possibly modernist feature of satire is connected to the middle class and its failings: prejudice, snobbery, and a corrupted value system. This is essentially what makes Smith’s “cleverness”, “wordy wit” (par. 6), and her novel as a whole slightly more serious than playful for Akbar.

The essence of Akbar’s review is that the middle class is exposed to ridicule and scorn in *There but for the*. Linguistic play is the first modernist feature on which she zooms in, and it is to this that she connects the idea of social satire. Satire later becomes the main matter itself. With regard to the playfulness and seriousness that virtually every critic addresses, seriousness tips the balance in Akbar’s review of the novel.

*Labels and aspects: “linguistic play” with disappointment with and disruption of middle-class sensibility; “satire” with middle-class values.*

#### **1.4 Charles McGrath for *The New York Times***

Charles McGrath reviewed *There but for the* for *The New York Times*. His review, “After Hiding, He Becomes a Celebrity”, appeared on 18 October 2011. He was the editor of the “Sunday Book Review” of *The Times* from 1995 to 2004, and is now a contributing writer for *The Times*.

McGrath begins with a description of the symbol at the beginning of Smith’s novel, then offers an overview of the plot and main characters, and halfway his review his attention is drawn to linguistic play. “Brooke, delighted with language and exploring all its possibilities, is a helpless punster,” he writes. “So is Ms. Smith” (McGrath, par. 9). Where Churchwell believes that pleasure in wordplay is inextricably bound up with sympathetic characters, McGrath crosses the boundary of the text and also attributes this delight to the very creator of the text. He continues: “the whole book is shot through with wordplay – rhymes, puns, literary references, snatches of poetry and pop songs (...) – in a way that almost

seems tic-like, as if Ms. Smith couldn't quite help herself" (par. 9). He thinks of Brooke's cleverness as "cutesy and annoying", and of Smith's wordplay as bragging (par. 10), yet he does not dilate on the subject of wordplay.

Both Churchwell and McGrath identify temporary permanence – or "permanent temporariness" (par. 11) – as a theme of the novel. This connecting thread is explored in what McGrath calls the "intricate cross-weaving" and "careful ellipses" (par. 11) in the novel. The idea of gags, which also surfaces in several other reviews (remember Clark's brief discussion of "time-slips" (Clark, par. 7), is connected in this review to the "writerly" text: "Ms. Smith is brilliant at leaving things out and forcing the reader to make connections" (McGrath, par. 11). The concept of the "writerly" text – not originally a modernist concept, but applicable to many typically modernist texts – is connected to omission in this review.

Before he concludes his review, McGrath returns to the subject of language and the effects it can have on people:

The main web we have for holding experience together, the novel suggests – for recreating a past in the present – is language itself, which in Ms. Smith's hands seems at times to be arbitrary and insubstantial: the stuff of jokes and puns, the airy lightness that keeps her little construct aloft. Yet language here also proves itself to be dense and referential, capable of making unexpected connections and of imprinting itself feelingly on the mind in a phrase, a rhyme, a snatch of song lyric. (par. 12)

Yet again, language receives most attention from the critic, and yet again the critic distinguishes between two sides of the novel: a playful one, and a serious or complex one. Whereas McGrath initially passed over language without giving it much attention, he now designates it as the vehicle of human experience. He sees language as a structure through which people perceive their environment, a structure without which experience and identity cannot take shape. Seriousness and playfulness thus counterbalance each other.

Paying attention to the modernist feature of linguistic play, then, is also McGrath's main preoccupation. He connects it to the portrayal of human experience in the novel, and, like other critics, notes a playful and a serious side to the novel as a whole and to its language in particular. He also notes the "writerly" character of the text, and connects this to ellipses which the reader is expected to fill in, based on what cultural baggage they bring along.

*Labels and aspects: "linguistic play" with human experience; "'writerly' text" with ellipses.*

### 1.5 Nicholas Lezard for *The Guardian*

Nicholas Lezard reviewed *There but for the* for *The Guardian*. His review, “*There but for the* by Ali Smith – review” appeared on 17 July 2012. Lezard has a weekly column in *The Guardian* called “Nicholas Lezard’s choice” in which he reviews paperback books. He also writes for *The Independent*, and writes the weekly “Down and Out in London” column for the *New Statesman*. Nicholas Lezard is also the author of two books: *The Nolympics: One Man’s Struggle Against Sporting Hysteria* (2012) and *Bitter Experience Has Taught Me* (2013).

The opening words of Lezard’s review convey his unconcealed admiration for the opening words of Smith’s novel: “The fact is, imagine a man...” (qtd. in Lezard, par. 2). “I loved that glaring disjunction,” he writes enthusiastically, “that violent yoking together of fact and imagination, seemingly artless, casually knowing” (par. 2). On the one hand, Smith’s words draw Lezard’s attention to the distinction between fact and imagination; on the other hand, they signal for him the attention that the novel pays to language, and its capacity to bring about attraction rather than repulsion between opposite meanings. It was this stroke of wit that caught his eye and told him that the book was worth reading, as he explains in the introduction of the review (par. 1).

This in itself is not a typical feature of modernism, but Lezard goes on to say that “[t]his is a writer who has inhaled the masters of what was once called the avant garde in a way that writers from Britain rarely do” (par. 2). The use of the word “avant-garde” is significant here, because it is sometimes used as a synonym for modernism, however misleading this may be (Buchanan). Originally a French military term, it has come to be used as a metaphor for artists and writers who are dedicated to the idea of art as experiment and whose work challenges artistic conventions (Buchanan). It is this label, closely allied to modernism, to which Lezard connects the playfulness of the language of the novel.

It would be a shame to pass over the content of the rest of the paragraph without comment, because this sentence introduces the subject of the British avant-garde writer today. According to Lezard, the Scots are the avant-garde of the British avant-garde, as it were, as he believes them to be ahead of their time more than the English are:

Of course, Ali Smith is Scottish, and when it comes to stylistic daring or formal complexity in fiction, the Scots, or some of them at least – James Kelman, Candia McWilliam, AL Kennedy and Alasdair Gray are names that come immediately to mind – are about 60 years ahead of most English writers. Maybe all English, with the possible exception of Jeanette Winterson. And Nicola Barker. If I have made any glaring omissions about the English, do write in. (par. 2).

In describing this situation, Lezard also hints at “stylistic daring” as well as “formal complexity”. Concerning the former, it is certainly true that this is not an item on the list that is the foundation on which this analysis rests. For all that, it does seem to cover the overtones of “experimental” or “innovative”, which are items on the list. This experimentation or innovation Lezard connects to the style of the novel, but he does not elaborate on this subject. Regarding the latter, it might be worthwhile to think back to and reflect on Wallace’s opening proposition that “modernism is the moment at which art stops making sense” (Wallace 3). Having taught undergraduate courses in modernism for a long time, Wallace knows from experience that modernism can be a slippery concept or daunting area (3). In seeking to “*demystify* modernism” (12), he acknowledges that modernist artefacts may have an aura of difficulty or even incomprehensibility. The use of the word “complexity” in the review might invite the reader to think of the novel as a “writerly” rather than “readerly” text. Lezard does not, however, make his remark more explicit, so this analysis will not go into this in more detail.

As a link to what he calls “the central conceit” of the novel (Lezard, par. 3), Lezard raises the subject of strategies used by writers. He presupposes a distinction between strategies which seek to convince the reader of the veracity of what they are reading, and strategies which make no secret of the fact that it is fiction, a concocted story, that they are reading:

One interesting thing about unconventional narration is that it neatly sidesteps the “oh-no-he-didn’t” problem, whereby an inept author (who is often, to the boundless vexation of readers such as myself, a raging bestseller) cannot convince us of the veracity of even the most banal thing, so heavy-handed and familiar is the style that describes it. (par. 3)

This can easily be extrapolated: the traditional or realist novel creates an illusion of genuineness, and the unconventional novel – modernist or postmodernist – shatters this illusion. It sounds paradoxical, but the effect is often that the unconventional novel comes across to the reader as more sincere. As was the case with “stylistic daring”, “unconventional narration” is not an item on the list. The sense of the term does match “experimental” or “innovative” or even, as was briefly explained above, “anti-realist” well. It is used in the context of style and narration.

Lezard closes his review with a comment on technique, saying that “Smith is a master of what one reviewer has felicitously called “dropped stitches”, deliberate gaps in the story, little scootings-off to the side, connections that don’t quite connect and apparent non-

connections that do” (par. 6). He seems to be talking about formlessness, which is on the list, but since it is not quite clear what exactly he means, this remark will not be elaborated on.

The term “avant-garde” is the modernist label which stands out in this review. Lezard uses it to comment on the language used in the novel. A sense of experimentation or innovation is conveyed in the phrases “stylistic daring” and “unconventional narration”. This first analysis shows that the list proves most useful when the items are also used as synonyms or near-synonyms for labels in the review. In other words: the list is not exhaustive and reviews will contain modernist labels which are not on the list, but which do look like items on the list.

*Labels and aspects: “avant-garde” with language; “experimental” or “innovative” with style and narration.*

## **1.6 Other reviews in the corpus**

Lucy Daniel, writing for *The Telegraph*, addresses the topic of the self-reflexive questions in the novel (Daniel, par. 16). Writing for *The Financial Times*, Lionel Shriver broaches a new subject when he notes the use of the stream of consciousness technique (Shriver, par. 8) and social satire (par. 9). Lucy Beresford, like Daniel writing for *The Telegraph*, writes that Smith’s prose provides “crisp realism” as well as “a hypnotic stream-of-consciousness” (Beresford, par. 6). Simon Baker characterises Brooke’s wordplay as “Joycean” (Baker, par. 6) in *The Spectator*. Sam Sacks suspects that Kafka could well have been the inspiration for Smith’s novel (Sacks, par. 5), and he notes the presence of witty stream-of-consciousness voices (par. 7) and internal monologue (par. 7). He concludes his review for *The Wall Street Journal* by saying that readers of the novel can expect a delightfully unclassifiable reading experience (par. 8). Nina Sankovitch readily calls the novel “a kind of postmodern ode to life” (Sankovitch, par. 2) in *The Huffington Post*. Sylvia Brownrigg concludes her review for *The New York Times* by summarising the ubiquitous “puns”, “verbal game”, and “playing with language” (Brownrigg, par. 13) in the novel. Writing for *A.V. Club*, Rowan Kaiser observes that “Smith uses a constant internal monologue to depict her characters” (Kaiser, par. 4). Heller McAlpin mentions multiple points of view and shifts in perspective in *The Washington Post* (McAlpin, par. 8), and she does this again a year later in her review for *Barnes and Noble* (McAlpin, par. 5). Writing for *About.com*, Jeff Alford remarks that Smith keeps her novel “far from the edge of heady post-modernism” (Alford, par. 9). Rachel Beale, finally, touches on “the Joycean concept of absence as the ‘highest form of presence’” (Beale, par. 2)

and an internal monologue which reminds her of the character Winnie in the play *Happy Days* (1961) by Samuel Beckett (par. 6).

When all modernist characteristics and matching aspects present in the five reviews are listed, one item catches the eye on account of the number of “hits”: four out of five reviews have something to say about linguistic play in Ali Smith’s *There but for the*. Clark, Churchwell, Akbar, and McGrath talk about this in relation to characters in the novel. Akbar specifically connects it to the failings of middle-class characters. It is this section of society that is perceived as the object of derision, and two reviews explicitly mention social satire, the modernist characteristic mentioned most often after linguistic play. All other modernist characteristics are mentioned only once. Not one critic uses the word “modernism” or its derivatives in his or her review of the novel. All of them use labels associated with modernism, but they do not come to the conclusion that these characteristics are modernist and modernist only. The next step is to find out what modernist characteristics are emphasised in reviews of *How to be both*, to what aspects of the novel they are connected, and if reviewers of that novel do reach the conclusion that the novel can be labelled “modernist fiction”.

Please turn over (for an overview of all modernist characteristics and matching aspects).

<b>Modernist characteristic/writer</b>	<b>Aspect of novel</b>
<b>Avant-garde (1.5)</b>	Language (1.5)
<b>Experimental (1.5)</b>	Style (1.5); narration (1.5)
<b>Formlessness (1.2)</b>	Character (1.2); plot (1.2); portrayal of mankind (1.2)
<b>Fragmentation (1.1)</b>	Narrative (1.1); character (1.2); plot (1.2); portrayal of mankind (1.2)
<b>Innovative (1.5)</b>	Style (1.5); narration (1.5)
<b>Linguistic play (1.1; 1.2; 1.3; 1.4)</b>	Unstable or unreliable (centre of con.) (1.1); characters (1.2); human experience (1.4); middle-class sensibility/values (1.3)
<b>Satire (1.2; 1.3)</b>	The shortcomings of the middle class (1.2); middle-class sensibility/values (1.3)
<b>Scepticism (1.2)</b>	Human knowledge (1.2)
<b>Self-conscious or self-reflexive (1.2)</b>	Narrative (1.2)
<b>Unstable or unreliable (centre of con.) (1.1)</b>	Linguistic play (1.1)
<b>“Writerly” text (1.4)</b>	Ellipses (1.4)

## Chapter Two

### Reviews of *How to be both*

This chapter focuses on reviews of *How to be both*. Twenty reviews of this novel were read, and five of them were examined in detail. These five reviews were selected on the basis of the same selection criteria as those of *There but for the* in Chapter One. The reviews that were analysed are the reviews by Arifa Akbar for *The Independent*, Elizabeth Day for *The Observer*, Laura Miller for *The Guardian*, Patrick Flanery for *The Telegraph*, and Amy Gentry for *Chicago Tribune*. They were analysed in the order in which they were published. Some of the fifteen reviews which are outside the scope of the selection criteria are discussed very briefly in a separate section after the analyses of the other reviews.

#### 2.1 Arifa Akbar for *The Independent*

Arifa Akbar not only reviewed Ali Smith's *There but for the* for *The Independent*, but also *How to be both*. "How To Be Both by Ali Smith, book review" was published on 14 August 2014. It is accompanied with a photograph of Ali Smith in her Cambridge home. The caption below the photograph reads: "A Man Booker longlisted novelist who continues to surprise and innovate".

She begins her review in the same vein, writing that her reviewer's edition of the novel had a postcard tucked inside it, which bore the curious message: "This is not a mistake" (Akbar, par. 1). This referred to the fact that two versions of the novel are in circulation (one with George's narrative first, the other with Francesco's narrative first), but for Akbar the message seems like "an appropriate addendum for Smith's oeuvre", simply because Smith's "textual innovations could be mistaken for mistakes" (par. 2). The idea of textual innovation immediately draws attention, and Akbar explains the range of these witty innovations which may look like mistakes at first sight:

from the microcosmic – non-chronological narration, anarchic sentences, grammar and word games – to the bigger structural "disturbances" that affect the telling of the story as has been the case with her last three books, including – most radically – this one.

Except that they are too clever and well executed to be mistakes (...). (par. 2)

The label "innovative" which is "activated" here is thus connected with chronology, language, and narration. Also eye-catching is "word games", but the idea of linguistic play is not interpreted as being a typically modernist feature, just as in the reviews of *There but for the*.

After her discussion of the effects of the peculiar form in which the novel circulates, Akbar goes on to write that “[t]o add to the innovations around form, Smith throws in a further kinking of the fiction genre in which a non-fictive tone intercepts the story at times – with a sometimes distancing effect” (par. 6). Firstly, it is clear now that Akbar believes Smith to be pushing the boundaries of a genre: the fiction genre. Secondly, Akbar claims that this is achieved through the use of a marked tone: a non-fictive tone. Lastly, the result of this strategy is an alienation effect or estrangement effect, which puts the reader in two minds about what he or she is reading: readers are prevented from trusting what is happening in the text.

Akbar concludes her review by remarking that “Smith has written a radical novel” (par. 7). While modernism does usually imply radicalism, radicalism does not necessarily imply modernism. The word “radical” nevertheless dovetails with the phrase “anarchic sentences” in paragraph two, and it elucidates Akbar’s belief that Smith strives for drastic changes in readers’ perceptions of the possibilities of the novel. This is underscored in the concluding sentence of the review, where Akbar observes that “[t]hose writers making doomy predictions about the death of the novel should read Smith’s re-imagined novel/s, and take note of the life it contains” (par. 7). This sounds like Ezra Pound’s aim to “make it new” and Smith’s view that modernism is a celebration of human existence, as she said in an interview in *The Guardian* in 2014 (Clark, par. 6).

Arifa Akbar does not ascribe many characteristics to the novel which can be thought of as modernist with unfailing certainty. Without trying to force her review into a modernist straitjacket, however, it can be said that she thinks of the novel as innovative, especially when it comes to chronology, language, and narration. Reviewing *There but for the*, Nicholas Lezard connects innovation to narration too, but also to the style of the novel. Akbar furthermore touches on a distancing effect in connection to tone. This effect can be interpreted as alienation or estrangement, and it was not mentioned in any other review of either novel. A strong sense of innovation, finally, is also conveyed in the phrases “a radical novel” and “Smith’s re-imagined novel/s” (par. 7).

*Labels and aspects: “innovative” with chronology, language and linguistic play, and narration; “alienation effect” with tone.*

## 2.2 Elizabeth Day for *The Observer*

Elizabeth Day reviewed *How to be both* for *The Observer*. Her review, “*How to Be Both* review – Ali Smith’s dazzling dual-narrative novel”, appeared on 7 September 2014. Day is a writer for the “Observer Review”. Between the title of the review and a photograph of Ali Smith is a link to an interview with Smith, in which she talks about the painting by Italian Renaissance artist Francesco del Cossa that was the source of inspiration.

Day is highly enthusiastic about the element of chance on which the textual order of the novel depends, and by way of illustration she begins her review by telling the reader how she used to love the Choose Your Own Adventure books as a child. In *How to be both*, too, the reader supposedly gets a different reading experience according to which choice he or she – intentionally or unintentionally – makes. The two narratives and their order are at the centre of the first three paragraphs.

“At its heart,” Day continues, “*How to Be Both* ... is an eloquent challenge to the binary notions governing our existence” (Day, par. 4). This already shows that she believes a certain scepticism to be the essence of the novel. She explains this point by means of a question: “Why, Smith seems to ask, should we expect a book to run from A to B, by way of a recognisable plot and subplot, peopled by characters who are easily understood to be one thing or another?” (par. 4). When Sarah Churchwell uses the idea of scepticism in her review of *There but for the*, she connects it to human knowledge and its boundaries; Day here connects it to traditional and predictable novels and their equally traditional and predictable plots and characters as well as to the expectations of traditional readers. These aspects are related to reading, and Day does not specify the more general “binary notions governing our existence” here.

The paragraph analysed above functions as a link between Day’s discussion of the form of the novel/narrative(s) on the one hand and her subsequent discussion of the characters in the novel on the other hand. It is here that Day pursues the subject of the binary notions: she goes through male and female, past and present, and dead and alive. She goes on to say that “[t]he joy of Smith’s playful take on conventional fictional form is that the reader understands the poignancy of this [the futility of binary notions] before the characters do” (par. 9). It now becomes clear that the unconventional form of the novel is where its scepticism manifests itself, and that the novel is sceptical about the complex interplay between conventional fictional form and binary notions: the form of the novel/narrative(s) and the characters in the novel constitute a means to discourage people from thinking in binary notions. The title covers this idea.

After having given an enumerative description of some of the tricks that Smith plays upon her readers, Day writes that “[t]he Francesco passages are littered with poetic fragments that pull the chronology forward and back and so out-of-shape that sometimes, it is difficult to know what is happening” (par. 12). The words “poetic fragments” and “out-of-shape” indicate formlessness and fragmentation, and chronology is the aspect of the novel to which these two terms are connected. “But,” she goes on, “sentences like: ‘down to/that thin-looking line/made of nothing/ground and grit and the/gather of dirt and earth and/the grains of stone...’ are undeniably beautiful, so does it matter if you can’t work out what’s happening?” (par. 12). This passage sounds like Akbar’s paragraph about the little “textual innovations” (Akbar, par. 2) which Smith built into her novel. Akbar remarked that such innovations may look like mistakes at first sight, and Day also sees them as both disturbing and enhancing the reading experience. This idea is clearly expressed in the following, penultimate paragraph, in which Day concisely states that “occasionally it felt as if Smith’s ideas were so clever they were in danger of getting in the way of the story” (Day, par. 13). She concludes: “[b]ut there is no doubt that Smith is dazzling in her daring. The sheer inventive power of her new novel pulls you through, gasping, to the final page” (par. 14). In Day’s conclusion, as in Akbar’s, there is the word “dazzling”, optimism, and admiration for Smith’s creative power.

Elizabeth Day pays most attention to the sceptical attitude of the novel towards conventional fictional form, the expectations of traditional readers, and thinking in binary notions. According to Day, Smith explores the last aspect by playing with the first two. A certain formlessness and fragmentation strike Day, and she connects them with chronology, since they sometimes impede her understanding of what happens where, when, and to whom in the novel.

*Labels and aspects: “scepticism” with traditional and predictable fiction, the expectations of traditional readers, and thinking in binary notions; “formlessness” and “fragmentation” with chronology.*

### **2.3 Laura Miller for *The Guardian***

Laura Miller reviewed the novel for *The Guardian*. Her review, “*How to Be Both* by Ali Smith review – playful, tender, unforgettable”, appeared on 13 September 2014. She is a journalist, critic, a co-founder of Salon.com, a contributor to “The New York Times Book Review”, author of *Magician’s Book: Skeptic’s Adventures in Narnia* (2008), and editor of

*Salon Reader's Guide to Contemporary Authors* (2000). Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and many other publications.

She briefly recapitulates a flashback scene of George's narrative in her introduction, and then considers the effects of the order of the narratives in much detail in two thirds of her review, before she remarks that: "[i]t may sound dauntingly experimental, but the hallmark of Smith's fiction is that she approaches her formal adventures with a buoyant, infectious warmth and her feet planted firmly on the ground" (Miller, par. 7). The word "experimental" draws attention, but the word "it" at the beginning of the sentence suggests that "experimental" covers virtually everything that comes before it. The only signpost in the sentence itself is the phrase "formal adventures". Something similar happens in the next paragraph. "Ironically," she continues, "for all its modernist trappings, this novel revolves around a decidedly premodern and underappreciated art form: allegory" (par. 8). This is the first time that the word "modernist" is used in the corpus of reviews of this study, but it is not clear to what it refers. The word "trappings" only suggests that Smith is showing off and that the modernist element is not much more than decoration. What is it that "experimental" and "modernist" can refer to?

A first antecedent could be the section which begins with the second paragraph, where Miller explains that the novel consists of two parts and that half of the copies are printed with George's part first and half with Francesco's part first. She elaborates on this subject in the third paragraph, where she writes that the two parts can be read in either order, which for her confirms "George's mother's point about the layering and simultaneity of experiences that seem to be separated by time" (par. 3). This first antecedent can thus be summarised as the idea that what you experience first (for example what you see or read first) does not efface what you experience later or what you do not experience at all. This thesis will henceforth refer to this as "experiential simultaneity": being both, and Miller relates it to frescoes, time, and sex (androgyny). This experiential simultaneity, on a fictional and metafictional level, is thus one aspect to which "experimental" and "modernist" can refer.

A second antecedent can be found in the fifth paragraph, where Miller elaborates upon the character of Del Cossa. She writes that "[a]rt is all that truly matters to Smith's Del Cossa; her romantic liaisons are fleeting and her untethered ways link her to the liminal trickster figures that often romp through Smith's novels, leaving havoc in their wakes" (par. 5). What catches the eye is the comparison with tricksters. A trickster is a figure "who subverts and satirizes the norms of society, and yet who emerges as a hero" (Bowker). The trickster is a common character in mythology, and is always characterised as a compendium of opposites.

Concerning myth, it is on the list because modernists used and perhaps still use it “to compensate for the dissatisfying fragmentation of the modern world: to create a controlling narrative that could be mapped onto and make sense of the rapid social changes of modernity” (Childs 209). Regarding the internal contradictions, this again relates to being both. Thus the trickster figure forms another aspect to which “experimental” and especially “modernist” can refer.

Miller subsequently discusses the character of Georgia, and concludes it with what looks like a summary of the aspects of the novel which may be interpreted as “experimental” and/or “modernist”:

Androgyny, history, puns (to which George and her family are addicted), sarcasm, Del Cossa’s complex motives for requesting more money (do we make art for itself or for the rewards it brings, or for both?), the twin spiral of a strand of DNA – these are just a few of the multiple-natured and doubling motifs that bubble up in the course of the novel. (par. 6)

This sentence is the last section before the phrases “dauntingly experimental” (par. 7) and “modernist trappings” (par. 8) are used. Miller discussed androgyny, history, and Del Cossa’s motives, but this is the first time that she talks about puns, sarcasm, and the structure of DNA. These three points seem to come out of nowhere. The part of the sentence after the hyphen shows that Miller categorises the six aspects under the state of being both. Androgyny and history were summarised earlier as experiential simultaneity in this analysis, puns clearly belong to the feature of linguistic play, and the other points are too unspecified to include in this analysis. Pun can thus be added to the list of possible antecedents, and since a pun is a joke which exploits the different possible meanings of a word, it again concerns a state of being both.

Miller finds the presence of allegory in the novel odd, given all “modernist trappings” (par. 8), but it might not be so odd after all: symbols are often the vehicles of allegory, and the use of symbolism is an item on the list. She thus touches upon a subject which can easily be interpreted as modernist, and presents it as being at odds with modernism in the same sentence. The explanation for her way of thinking might actually be in the sentence itself, when she observes that “this novel revolves around a decidedly premodern and underappreciated art form” (par. 8). The word “premodern” suggests that Miller thinks of modernism as a period rather than a style, movement, or set of characteristics. This interpretation, however, goes against “the multiple-natured and doubling motifs” (par. 6) in

the rest of her review. The label “symbolism” in connection with the allegorical aspect of the novel will therefore be included in the results of the present study.

Laura Miller sees “modernist trappings” (par. 8) in Smith’s novel, a novel which is “dauntingly experimental” (par. 7) to her. She connects these labels to experiential simultaneity, the trickster figure, and linguistic play; in short, she connects them to the state of being both which the novel explores in detail. She also pays attention to symbolism, which she discusses in connection with Del Cossa’s allegorical work. Because his frescoes are allegories and because they consist of multiple layers, they also explore “being both”. Miller thus sees the duality that is the theme of the book as decidedly modernist.

*Labels and aspects: “experimental” and “modernist” with experiential simultaneity, trickster, and linguistic play; “symbolism” with allegory.*

#### **2.4 Patrick Flanery for *The Telegraph***

Patrick Flanery reviewed *How to be both* for *The Telegraph*. His review, “*How to Be Both* by Ali Smith, review: ‘brimming with pain and joy’”, appeared on 14 October 2014. Patrick Flanery is an American writer based in London. His first novel, *Absolution*, was published in 2012, and has been translated into eleven languages. His second novel, *Fallen Land*, was published in 2013. He is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Reading.

Flanery gives a foretaste below the title when he writes that *How to be both* “subtly but surely reinvents the novel”, and that Ali Smith “challenges writing conventions”. He then immediately brings up Virginia Woolf, saying that “[o]ne might reasonably argue that Ali Smith is among Virginia Woolf’s most gifted inheritors. Attentive to Woolf’s admonition that ‘one must be woman-manly or man-womanly’, Smith’s writing is alive to the power of empathy as much as it is conscious of the importance of form” (Flanery, par. 1). Flanery thus links modernist writer Virginia Woolf to duality or fluidity as regards gender identity. He comes back to this theme towards the end of the review, where he explains how the mutability of gender applies to George and Francesco, and that being human means “wanting to be more than one kind of person at once” (par. 11): “[t]he possibilities unleashed by the desire to be neither one thing nor the other means that one may ever and always strive to be both” (par. 11). Flanery in this way weaves the key issue of *How to be both* into his review, and identifies it as being related to a modernist writer’s (Woolf’s) idea about being human.

As the contentions before the actual review have already shown, Flanery is of the opinion that Smith “has proved with each book that the only thing predictable about her

extraordinary project is the certainty of reinvention” (par. 2). Her writing is innovative: she renews traditional methods or modes of writing; she aims to do what has not been done before, which is a basic principle of modernist fiction in itself. Unfortunately, Flanery does not connect the idea of innovation to a particular aspect of the novel here. The preceding paragraph, however, ended with the assertion that Smith’s writing is “conscious of the importance of form” (par. 1), and the following paragraph is all about the representation of time in fiction through form. The context thus invites the reader of the review to connect the label to the representation of time through form.

“In the best modernist tradition,” Flanery writes in the next paragraph, “Smith’s new novel *How to be Both* shifts, often seamlessly, between present and past, as a way of foregrounding the artfulness in our artificial perceptions of time” (par. 3). This is the second and also last time that the word “modernist” is used in the corpus of reviews, and now it is much clearer to what it refers: the way in which we try to make sense of time. When Smith was interviewed by Claire Armitstead on *The Guardian Books Podcast*, she explained that time is a human thing, and that for her “human” means to be layered and stratified: it means to hold past, present, and future in yourself all at once (Armitstead). *How to be both* is a “meeting place”, as Smith put it, where the past and the present meet. This must also be Flanery’s train of thought on this matter.

“With great subtlety and inventiveness,” Flanery concludes his review, “Smith continues to expand the boundaries of the novel” (Flanery, par. 12). There is no one-to-one correspondence between the second part of this sentence and any item on the list – though the term “experimental” does seem to cover the overtones – but it cannot be brushed aside. The discourse that Flanery uses throughout his review is full of the idea of reinventing the novel, of playfully bending its rules. Setting aside conventions is what modernist writers regard as part of their “responsibilities.”

Patrick Flanery mentions a modernist writer, a modernist characteristic, and also the word “modernist” itself: the first label he connects to the mutability of gender identity, the second to the representation of time through form, and the last to perceptions of time. All aspects have to do with the state of being both at the same time: humans can be male/masculine as well as female/feminine, and stories can take place in the past as well as in the present – simultaneously.

*Labels and aspects: “Virginia Woolf” with the mutability of gender identity; “innovative” with the representation of time through form; “modernist” with perceptions of time.*

## 2.5 Amy Gentry for *Chicago Tribune*

“*How to Be Both*: Ali Smith’s coin-flip” is the title of the review written by Amy Gentry. She reviewed *How to be both* for *Chicago Tribune*, and the article appeared on 12 December 2014. When it was published, Gentry tweeted: “Ali Smith’s coin-flip: *How to be both* offers two versions of the same novel. But does it work?” Gentry has a doctorate degree in English and writes a weekly style column called “The Good Eye”.

Gentry calls the novel “a Wittgensteinian duck-rabbit of a book” (Gentry, par. 1) in the introductory paragraph, because of the form in which it circulates: it can be experienced in two (if not more) ways. Gentry makes such a long, rather complex, and especially striking observation in the next paragraph, that it seems best to copy the paragraph almost in its entirety (comparisons with other narratives have been left out):

Perhaps the most radical thing about Smith’s addition to the genre of “aleatory fiction” – fiction that incorporates an element of chance into its composition – is its investment in traditional, linear storytelling. (...) Smith’s half-narratives (...) are long enough to have plots of their own, and they are seductively familiar ones for readers of novels: a painter with a secret, a teenager mourning her dead mother. If Smith is trying to have it both ways here, providing many of the pleasures of a traditional novel while flattering the reader with an experimental gimmick, the trick is perfectly in keeping with the themes of duality that echo through the book. (par. 2)

Several elements catch the eye. Firstly, the element of chance stands out: Elizabeth Day also touched upon this, when she recalled the Choose Your Own Adventure books. Secondly, the adjective “traditional” is conspicuous. Thirdly, the adjective “experimental” is salient. Finally, the “traditional”/“experimental” paradox is connected to the theme of duality. Gentry thus looks upon the novel as both traditional and experimental – at the same time. The “experimental gimmick” remains unspecified.

Gentry, like Flanery, mentions Virginia Woolf. She describes Del Cossa as “a being whose consciousness of art precedes and perhaps even precludes a consciousness of gender,” and goes on to say that “[a]s in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* or Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, this suspension is by turns dizzying and tautening” (par. 3). The meaning of the word “suspension” in Gentry’s reasoning is obscure, so a closer look at Woolf’s work might elucidate ambiguities. Woolf’s novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) is a fantastical historical biography. It spans almost 400 years in the lifetime of its protagonist, who ages only thirty-six years and changes gender from man to woman. What *How to be both* and *Orlando*

share is their exploration of gender difference and sexual identity, so modernist writer Virginia Woolf is again linked to duality or fluidity as regards gender identity.

It is only towards the end of the review that the label “experiment(al)” is connected to an aspect of the novel. “For Smith’s experiment to work,” Gentry writes cautiously, “both halves of the book should be equally engrossing” (par. 9). It is thus connected to the form of the novel. The same goes for the use of the word “experiment” in the concluding paragraph, where Gentry writes that “[t]he trouble with the experiment at the heart of *How to be both* is that a novel isn’t a fresco” (par. 10). She does not think of *How to be both* as a perfect “Wittgensteinian duck-rabbit of a book”, so to say, because she did not experience the seamless simultaneity or alternation that she had expected to or had hoped to experience. “[I]n language,” she explains, “word follows word, and the order of them matters” (par. 10).

This review is different from the other reviews analysed here, because Gentry brings in a philosopher, three writers who have overturned the concept of plot, and relatively long quotations. She connects the label “experimental” to form. It was connected to narration in Akbar’s review, but this comes down to the same thing: the fact that the novel comes in two versions, in which the order of its two sections are reversed. The name “Virginia Woolf” is connected to the mutability of gender identity, which also happened in Flanery’s review.

*Labels and aspects: “experimental” with form; “Virginia Woolf” with the mutability of gender identity.*

## 2.6 Other reviews in the corpus

Caroline Jowett calls *How to be both* an “inventive and playful” novel (Jowett, par. 8) in the *Daily Express*. Writing for the *New Statesman*, Frances Wilson calls it “a novel novel”, composed of “novelty and novelness”, and full of “puns” and “play” (Wilson, par. 1). Erin Kogler, writing for the *Journal Sentinel*, finds it an “inventive” novel (Kogler, par. 1). In his review for *The Washington Post*, Ron Charles labels the novel “postmodern” when he refers to it as a “gender-blending, genre-blurring story (...) [which] bounces across centuries, tossing off profound reflections on art and grief, without getting tangled in its own postmodern wires” (Charles, par. 1). He also mentions “postmodern gimmicks” (par. 11), and remarks that the part of the novel set in the fifteenth century is written as “a stream-of-consciousness monologue” (par. 3). Liesl Schillinger describes the opening of Del Cossa’s half of the book as “a short, imagistic poem set outside of time and space” (Schillinger, par. 4) in her review for *Barnes and Noble Review*. In her review for *The Atlantic*, Sophie Gilbert

takes the view that the novel pushes “formal invention” (Gilbert, par. 2) to new extremes. Jan Dalley, writing for *The Financial Times*, sees “rich stylistic inventiveness” and “a surrealist touch” (Dalley, par. 9) in it. Heller McAlpin calls it “linguistically playful”, “structurally innovative” (McAlpin, par. 1), and “gloriously inventive” (par. 12) in her review for *NPR*. It is “not a book to be read passively” (Maslin, par. 7), according to Janet Maslin, writing for *The New York Times*. Connie Ogle, writing for the *Miami Herald*, refers to the novel as “a wonderfully slippery, postmodern examination of the perception, gender, loss and the lasting power of art” (Ogle, par. 3), calls Smith’s technique “experimental” (par. 4), and describes the opening of Del Cossa’s part as “a stream-of-consciousness whoosh” (par. 8). Writing for *The New York Times*, Christopher Benfey mentions “Virginia Woolf’s gender-bending ‘Orlando’” (Benfey, par. 4) in connection with Del Cossa’s narrative. John Freeman, finally, writes in his review for *The Boston Globe* that the novel “will one day join Virginia Woolf’s ‘Orlando’ as a key text in understanding the fluidity of human life” (Freeman, par. 5).

The four most salient items are “experimental”, “innovative”, “modernist”, and “Virginia Woolf”. The first two are similar – almost interchangeable – and are mainly used in connection with language and the way in which the novel presents and interweaves its two narratives. Reviewers of *There but for the* connect them to narration too, but also to style. Laura Miller and Patrick Flanery use the word “modernist”, and they connect it to almost the same aspects of the novel to which “experimental” and “innovative” are connected: (perceptions of) time, form, and linguistic play. Patrick Flanery and Amy Gentry mention modernist writer Virginia Woolf, and they do so in connection with the mutability of gender identity in the novel. It was not the case that a modernist characteristic was connected to an aspect of the novel and that this pair was neatly labelled “modernist”; the label “modernist” was on the list of modernist characteristics and writers, as an item in itself, because it is used as such in reviews. Two reviewers find modernist characteristics in the novel, but two reviewers (whose reviews are discussed in section 2.6) find *How to be both* a postmodern novel. The novel can be and has been read as showing modernist characteristics and as showing postmodernist characteristics, but the presence of so many labels associated with modernism contributes to the meaning of modernism today.

Please turn over (for an overview of all modernist characteristics and matching aspects).

<b>Modernist characteristic/writer</b>	<b>Aspect of novel</b>
<b>Alienation effect (2.1)</b>	Tone (2.1)
<b>Experimental (2.3; 2.5)</b>	Experiential simultaneity (2.3); trickster (2.3); linguistic play (2.3); form (2.5)
<b>Formlessness (2.2)</b>	Chronology (2.2)
<b>Fragmentation (2.2)</b>	Chronology (2.2)
<b>Innovative (2.1; 2.4)</b>	Chronology (2.1); language and linguistic play (2.1); narration (2.1); the representation of time through form (2.4)
<b>Modernist (2.3; 2.4)</b>	Experiential simultaneity (2.3); trickster (2.3); linguistic play (2.3); perceptions of time (2.4)
<b>Scepticism (2.2)</b>	Traditional and predictable fiction (2.2); the expectations of traditional readers (2.2); thinking in binary notions (2.2)
<b>Symbolism (2.3)</b>	Allegory (2.3)
<b>Woolf, Virginia (2.4; 2.5)</b>	The mutability of gender identity (2.4; 2.5)

## Conclusion

The previous chapters have analysed how in the reception of Ali Smith's *There but for the* and *How to be both* labels that may be associated with modernism are linked to aspects of these novels. Of each novel, twenty reviews were read; and of each collection of twenty reviews, five reviews were examined in detail. All ten reviews contain distinctive characteristics associated with modernism, and some of them even contain direct references to the literary movement or the historical period. The modernist characteristics "experimental", "fragmentation", "innovative", and "scepticism" appear in the table of *There but for the* as well as in the table of *How to be both*. What also happens is that a concept, such as linguistic play, appears in both the left-hand column and right-hand column of the table: as a modernist characteristic and as an aspect of the novel. The concept of linguistic play is treated as an aspect of the novel in the analysis when it is linked with an adjective such as "innovative", "experimental", or, alternatively, "avant-garde". These observations are of course still very general. The key to understanding how reviewers of *There but for the* on the one hand and of *How to be both* on the other hand shape their definition of modernism in their reception of these novels can be found in the subtle differences and similarities.

What is striking about the reception of *There but for the* is that not one critic uses the word "modernism" in his or her review of the novel, but that all five critics use numerous characteristics distinctly associated with modernism. The list at the end of Chapter One contains eleven modernist characteristics, of which "linguistic play" was mentioned in four reviews, "satire" in two reviews, and the other characteristics were mentioned in only one review. The feature of linguistic play is connected to characters and their experience in three reviews, and to the failings of middle-class characters in one review. The idea of (social) satire therefore appears as a modernist characteristic and as an aspect of *There but for the*. As a modernist characteristic, it appears twice: both times in connection with the middle class. Another question arose at the end of Chapter One: are there any reviewers of the other novel, *How to be both*, who do clearly receive that novel as "modernist fiction?"

The answer is yes. The list at the end of Chapter Two contains nine modernist characteristics, and two critics use the word "modernist". They connect it to linguistic play, form, and how humans try to make sense of time. The theme of time is inextricably bound up with the form of this particular novel, and this is reflected in two other salient items and the aspects to which they are linked. Firstly, "experimental" goes with experiential simultaneity, trickster, linguistic play, and form, the first and last of which are never discussed separately.

Secondly, “innovative” goes with chronology, language and linguistic play, narration, and the representation of time through form, the first, third, and last of which are always discussed together. Linguistic play appears four times as a modernist characteristic in reviews of *There but for the*, and three times as an aspect in reviews of *How to be both*, so this is another element which returns in reviews of both novels. Virginia Woolf was mentioned by two critics: once together with her novel *Orlando* (1928) and once on her own, but always in connection with the mutability of gender identity in *How to be both*. Mainly the presence of the items “modernist” and “Virginia Woolf” leads to the conclusion that *How to be both* is positioned as an extension or reworking of modernism more clearly than *There but for the*.

Considering the above, one expectation articulated at the beginning of this thesis has become reality very clearly: one individual review in the corpus does contribute much to the definition of present-day modernism, but all reviews together do, and it is by bringing the pieces of the puzzle together that a picture of our changing understanding of modernism appears – that is, of Ali Smith’s modernism. Frequently emphasised aspects of *There but for the* are style, language, and characterisation; and frequently emphasised aspects of *How to be both* are form, language, and the human perception and fictional representation of time. The reviews show unmistakable similarities, the most concrete of which is linguistic play.

The present study is most closely related to the research of David James, but a fundamental difference is the fact that James does not consider the reception of novels by literary critics. The generally accepted view that “the modernism of now” is different from “the modernism of then” and James’s personal ideas about how these “modernisms” differ in character were included as starting points in the introduction, but his analyses were not relevant for this thesis. A specific reception oriented approach was chosen with the intention of filling this gap in the field of research.

A corpus consisting of forty reviews may seem rather large when only ten reviews are subjected to a thorough analysis, but it really is invaluable: for example, two reviewers of *There but for the* mentioned postmodernism, one of whom called the novel “a kind of postmodern ode to life” (Sankovitch, par. 2); and two reviewers of *How to be both* referred to postmodernism, one of whom referred to the novel “as a wonderfully slippery, postmodern examination of the perception, gender, loss and the lasting power of art” (Ogle, par. 3). No doubt these two novels can be read to reflect both modernist and postmodernist characteristics, because some preoccupations of modernism and postmodernism overlap, for example the frequent instances of linguistic play (and the aim was not to say which label was used most often in reviews). The two reviewers who used the word “modernist” in their

reviews of *How to be both* used it to talk about a specific aspect of the novel, not to label the novel as a whole. What it is really about is that the saying “you can’t have it both ways” is meaningless when it comes to judging a book: indeed, saying something like “this is a postmodernist novel” shuts the door to a broad view, and it makes a reader blind to the things that are not postmodernist. This is the reason why “modernism” should be seen as a generic term for a number of characteristics ascribed to particular literary texts by literary critics.

The distinction between the “readerly” and the “writerly” text made it to the list of labels associated with modernism, and this entails an insight as well as a point of departure for further research. Roland Barthes introduced this distinction in *S/Z* in 1970, decades after the period of high modernism. It made it to the list because of the short section on the modernist novel in Peter Childs’ *Modernism* (2007), which was used among other texts to compile the list. “For Roland Barthes,” Childs remarks, “there is ... an important distinction to be made between realist and modernist fiction: that between the ‘readerly’ and the ‘writerly’ text” (Childs 82). Childs thus equals “realist” and “readerly”, and “modernist” and “writerly”. This, and the fact that the terms are on the list, can be thought of as a flaw, but some critics do write that Smith’s work requires an active role of the reader in constructing a narrative. Indeed, “writerly” seems to have become a synonym for “experimental” for some literary critics.

Salient features in some of the thirty reviews which are outside the scope of the selection criteria are discussed in section 1.6 and section 2.6 (both labelled “Other reviews in the corpus”). This forms a lead for further research, since it shows that there is a wealth of material to be explored. Through the help of database programmes, a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses of a greater number of reviews can easily cover much more ground. The limited scope of this thesis does not enable such procedures, but it does open the door to close reading. The method of close reading can of course also be expanded, so that more reviews and reviews of other novels can be included, but such research requires a longer period of time and/or more researchers. Another way of building on the present study is to analyse author interviews, as Ali Smith has been interviewed about her books, inspiration for her books, and modernism several times. Always wildly enthusiastic about the power of literature and all things modernist, she makes remarks that could very well be included in a comprehensive study of the role of modernism in her fiction; for example, what fits together with her view that modernism is a celebration of human existence (Clark, par. 6) is her equally optimistic observation that “fiction is about empathy, and the fictive is always after the quiver of truth. The fictive is one of our best ways of getting at the truth. It’s one of our means of understanding what is true” (Armitstead).

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