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Framing the Object of Desire: The Politics of Art in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Folding Star*

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If Alan Hollinghurst's first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library* published in 1988, is often viewed as helping to shape a new social and political terrain of queer fiction around the time of the Section 28 controversy, his second novel, published six years later, is oddly often all but ignored. For critical analysis of *The Folding Star* (1994) is comparatively sparse and tends to follow one of two approaches: either the novel is briskly dealt with, almost as if it were some kind of cul-de-sac in Hollinghurst's body of work; or, perhaps even more perplexingly, it is bound up with *The Swimming-Pool Library* as if the two texts are of a piece as representative of Hollinghurst's 'early' fiction.¹ Perhaps the often-discussed difficulties of producing a second, follow-up novel come into play here as expectations are raised, continuities with the first novel are sought, and hierarchical judgements begin to be invoked. Certainly the extensive critical attention awarded to *The Swimming Pool-Library* from its initial publication onwards has been dominated by praise for its exuberance, energy and perceived challenging subject matter. Indeed, this debut work clearly set the tone for the uncompromising and forceful interrogation of gay male sexualities and cultures of the kind that Hollinghurst would return to with his third novel, *The Spell* (1998). *The Folding Star*, however, offers a quite different narrative experience. From the metropolitan London milieu of Will Beckwith's exploitative and hedonistic sexual playground, in that 'last summer of its kind' (*SPL*, p.3), we are taken to an unspecified city in Belgium which is predominantly characterised by a sense of claustrophobia, entrapping decay and disturbing surreality. The generally über-confident Beckwith is replaced by the more anxious Edward Manners, a thirty-three-year-old English teacher who becomes obsessed with his seventeen-year-old student in a narrative at times reminiscent, reviewers often noted, of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) or Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). And the unashamedly direct, quick-paced, episodic prose of the first novel – characterised, as Bart Eeckhout notes (2008), by 'freshness and provocative flamboyance' – modulates into a style which is far more leisurely and exploratory and which more obviously draws upon the literary traditions of elegy, pastoral and urban gothic. These are bold aesthetic choices which enabled Hollinghurst to

expand and intensify his range, to build upon concerns which his first novel had begun to explore (albeit often in a very different manner), and to look forward to the later, more expansive and socially diverse texts, *The Line of Beauty* (2004) and *The Stranger's Child* (2011). Published the year after Hollinghurst was named one of Granta's best young novelists, and nominated for the 1994 Man Booker Prize alongside texts like Jill Paton Walsh's *Knowledge of Angels*, Romesh Gunesequera's *Reef*, and James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (the winner), *The Folding Star* certainly deserves more sustained critical attention than it has received to date.

In this chapter I am particularly concerned with the ways in which *The Folding Star* considers ideas to do with art, artistic production and what I term the 'artistic gaze', and how these ideas are intricately bound up with the protagonist's developing sexual identity and attempts to assert independence – from his family, from his own past, and from dominant social mores. Hollinghurst's corpus of work has repeatedly examined artistic practice to some degree – Julie Rivkin (2005) has drawn attention to the multiple signifiers of visual and bodily art in *The Line of Beauty*, for example – but it is arguably in *The Folding Star* that these concerns are explored most explicitly and most extensively. For the novel is replete with references to the creation of art – most obviously painting, but also photography, film, music and literature. Moreover, it raises a whole range of key philosophical and political questions regarding the perceived function of art in society; art's moral, pedagogical and economic value; the ways in which art is interpreted for specific ideological ends; its placement and treatment in cultural institutions; and the attendant shifting significances of the artist, the model, the archivist, and the critic. Certainly issues of art, identity and sexuality repeatedly coalesce in *The Folding Star* in intriguing and telling ways.

Within this framework, I focus on three key areas. Firstly, I consider the significance of the Belgian city to which Edward travels as a place of both artistic and sexual potential, and how this potential becomes increasingly complicated as the urban matrix repeatedly shifts into something more illusory and disturbing. The city space in *The Folding Star* is never quite what it appears to be and consequently it acts as a telling locus for Edward's psychosexual explorations. Next, I examine the subsequent transfer of Edward's artistic gaze onto Luc as sexualised object and the ways in which Edward insistently constructs him as an artwork – indeed, at times almost a religious relic – in order both to idealise him and attempt to

control him. Finally, I explore the novel's intriguing historical parallels between Edward's own *fin-de-siècle* artistic and sexual fantasies in the 1990s, and those created by the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century artist, Edgard Orst, a figure fabricated by Hollinghurst partly in order to explore the radicalism of the sexually and morally transgressive Belgian Symbolist school. As Nick Bentley has noted (2005, p.2), British fiction writers of the 1990s – such as Pat Barker, Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro and Ian McEwan – often worked with historical narratives in order to examine political, social and moral connections between the past and the present, and to question the very nature of historical interpretation more generally. Hollinghurst had already demonstrated his concern with these issues in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, with that text's long historical sweep across the twentieth century and its purposeful rewriting (and reinvigoration) of dominant narratives regarding the relations between sexuality and the law. In *The Folding Star* he then continues this historical interrogation in the novel's reflections on the ways in which histories – both personal and political – are constructed and contested, and the ways in which ideas concerning art, desire and obsession are replayed in different socio-political circumstances. As I argue, however, *The Folding Star's* key concern with art, both contemporary and historical, eventually works to undercut the established ideals of artistic practice and interpretation as enabling or potentially transformative. Rather, Hollinghurst's major fictional examination of the power of art, and its relationship to sexuality, ultimately emphasises an interconnectedness with isolation, withdrawal, impotence and disillusion.

In the middle section of this three-section novel – a structure that in many ways parallels the Orst triptych which Paul Echevin is attempting to reassemble – Hollinghurst depicts Edward reflecting upon his childhood and development into an artistically aware and emotionally alert individual. Growing up in the seeming pastoral environment of Rough Common, he spends his time reading poetry and listening to his father, a professional singer, as he practices. As Edward later recalls, the emotional power engendered in him by hearing his father sing Bach for the first time made him 'sit down with a bump and start to cry' (p.15). This is a fictional world partly informed, as David Alderson notes (2000, p.40), by the late-Victorian and Edwardian works of A.E. Housman and E.M. Forster, and which evidently replicates the political ideas of pastoral as an 'idealised', non-metropolitan space offering greater opportunities for liberty and a greater sense of connectedness with the past (this latter idea is clearly embodied in the figure of the elderly Georgian poet, Perry Dawlish,

whom Edward visits as a child). Moreover, it is a world which enables Hollinghurst to show Edward developing in two key ways. Firstly, Edward himself demonstrates signs of wanting to be a writer, thus giving this section something of the flavour of the *künstlerroman* as we follow Edward's growing artistic aspirations. And secondly – and, the text suggests, interconnectedly – it is also here that Edward attempts to come to terms with his developing sexuality as he uses the wood and the common for sexual experimentation with other men. This means, therefore, that a complex nexus of associations between the pastoral, art, and queer sexualities is established by Hollinghurst (as, of course, it is by Housman and Forster), making *Rough Common* a space of potential transformation in multiple ways.

As the novel progresses, however, this notion of the benevolent, 'naïve' pastoral becomes overlaid by, and intertwined with, a sense of the elegiac as Edward recalls both the lingering death of his father and – in the present moment of the text's narrative – the death of Dawn, his former lover. Significantly, Dawn appears to have contracted HIV in 1983, the year in which the narrative of *The Swimming-Pool Library* ends, and Hollinghurst's treatment of his family's reaction to his death – relief that Dawn died in a road traffic accident rather than from the possible public 'embarrassment' of AIDS-related complications – obviously points to the limitations of the empathetic mindset of much of Middle England.² The traditional association of pastoral with security is therefore firmly undercut here, opening up a wider set of concerns regarding the lost or alternative father figure and the fear of the transient body which subsequently resonates throughout the text overall. Indeed, the novel's title reference to the star which indicates the time for the shepherd to secure his sheep safely into the fold – drawn from John Milton's *Comus* (1634) and refigured in William Collins' proto-Romantic 'Ode to Evening' (1746) – takes on a particularly ironic significance at this point.

Yet if the conventional associations of the pastoral in *Rough Common* are undercut in order to emphasise loss and lack – a process which fits with Dominic Head's notion of the frequent revisioning of the pastoral in late-twentieth-century fiction (2002, pp.188-94) – it is not obvious that the Flemish city to which Edward travels as teacher necessarily offers a more positive substitute. Significantly unnamed in a way which suggests its lack of clear (self-)identity – a point reinforced by the interchangeable use of the terms 'city' and 'town' throughout – this urban space is initially one to which Edward is drawn because of its artistic

connections: its medieval architecture and paintings, its museums, and the work of its most famous resident, Edgard Orst. From the start, however, Hollinghurst emphasises Edward's experiences in the city in terms of displacement and disorientation in a poignant enactment of his perceived status as alien 'foreigner' – nationally, linguistically, socially and sexually. Indeed, the novel's opening scene which depicts Edward, map in hand, seeking directions, mistaking affability for a sexual advance, and subsequently getting lost in a 'featureless district' on the outskirts of the town, emphasises this directly. 'I had arrived in a strange city, in another country,' he reflects; 'Part of me shrank from the simple change of place' (pp.3-4).

As the remainder of the text emphasises, however, this change of place is anything but 'simple' as the city into which Edward tries to integrate himself constantly shifts, oscillating between scenes of stark realism and scenes of more disturbing, gothic or dream-like depictions. As with Charlotte Brontë's final novel, *Villette* (1853) – a text which interestingly also portrays the experiences of an English 'outsider' in a disorientating Belgian town – or, indeed, like any number of late-Victorian urban gothic texts, the surface of the seemingly civilised city in *The Folding Star* repeatedly cracks open to reveal that which is potentially threatening to corporeal and psychological integrity lying just below the surface. At the centre of this new environment as Hollinghurst constructs it is 'the still religious heart of the old town – the Cathedral, the Bishop's Palace, the low dormered quadrangle of the Hospital' (p.41), which has driven, and continues to drive, the socio-political structures of the area including, it seems, the modes of artistic production. Certainly, the atmosphere of stifling claustrophobia and stagnancy associated with this central powerbase is everywhere felt, generating for Edward a deep disquiet at the city's 'deadness, its air of a locked museum, the recognition that what had happened [in terms of any notable events] had all been centuries ago' (p.7). Given Edward's desire to come to the city, at least in part, for its artistic heritage, it is highly significant that Hollinghurst shows him feeling trapped in it like a curated piece in a museum, with the title of this section of the novel, 'Museum Days', thereby becoming particularly resonant.

In an interview for *Paris Review* (2011), Hollinghurst said that after *The Swimming-Pool Library* he wanted to 'write about somewhere completely different and, to some extent, outside time.' This sense of being almost 'outside time' is certainly caught in parts of *The Folding Star*, where much of the description and imagery, as Hollinghurst acknowledges in

the same interview, draws upon that which suffuses Georges Rodenbach's 1892 Symbolist novel, *Bruges-la-Morte*. The narrative of a widower who finds in the streets and buildings of Bruges the perfect corollary for his overwhelming despair at the death of his wife, *Bruges-la-Morte* examines those complex relations between the individual and the urban space which contemporaneous *fin-de-siècle* writers like Arthur Symons and Oscar Wilde were also exploring. As Rodenbach wrote in his prefatory note to *Bruges-la-Morte*, the 'principal aim has been to evoke a Town, the Town as an essential character, associated with states of mind, counselling, dissuading, inducing the hero to act' (2005, p.21). Certainly this idea is central to Hollinghurst's semi-pastiche in *The Folding Star*. For the images of ghost-like haunting and disembodiment which Edward repeatedly deploys to describe the city also threaten to engulf Edward himself as he becomes increasingly aware of his marginal status on multiple levels. Accompanying this, too, is an overriding sense of being observed and subject to systems of surveillance and judgement as he learns that even some of the houses have mirrors in the bedrooms by which the residents can watch what is happening in the street without themselves being seen. Quickly recognising the complexities and ambiguities of what he initially termed his 'capricious little exile' (p.7), Edward comes to realise that the city of art to which he has been drawn is something that has to be carefully negotiated. Moreover, the practical and psychological difficulties of this negotiation are exacerbated, the text demonstrates, by the additional pressures surrounding Edward's sexuality. Indeed, as with many LGBTQ fictional works (such as those by Sarah Waters, Edmund White and Jonathan Kemp), the urban space in *The Folding Star* is used in part to examine the highly complex relations between queer identities and the attendant politics of assimilation, displacement and exclusion.

Initially these complex relations are seemingly negotiated by Edward's attempting to adopt a role reminiscent of the late-nineteenth-century *flâneur*, anonymously walking through the streets with a particular eye for objects of artistic and sexual interest. Like a modern-day Baudelarian figure, Edward seeks to lay claim to the urban matrix through journeys which, as much travel writing theory suggests (Blanton 2002, pp.2-3), are often as much psychological as they are physical. Significantly, however, Hollinghurst structures these journeys in such a way that they push Edward increasingly towards the margins of the city, both literally and ideologically. His experience of the animal market, for example, an underground version of the mainstream capitalist activity of the Grote Markt, is one of

Bakhtian grotesque and gothic-like encounter which brings together a world of covert economic exchange, a menagerie of threatening creatures, and the anarchic interventions of Old Gus shouting at children about ‘cocks and cunts’ (p.43). This focus on potentially disruptive and destabilising behaviours is then replayed in kind, if not in degree, both in the Cassette and Biff Bar, where the distortion emphasised by the mirrors and the fractured conversations reinforces the attendant performance of queer identities, and, later, in the walled park of the Hermitage, where the daytime picnics of young heterosexual families are replaced at night by unabashed gay cruising and sexual encounter. The Hermitage is constructed by Hollinghurst as a particularly powerful locus of transgression and challenge to heteronormativity as the men climb over the locked gate and engage in anonymous pleasures amidst the wooded areas, the statues of classical gods, and the illusory half-light of torch flashes. Certainly, this space offers possibilities of new, potentially transformative experiences, which effectively challenge the propriety, the established social order and the dominant sense of control associated with the city. Indeed, it is scenes like this one which might modify Hugh Stevens’ argument that cruising and sex in Hollinghurst’s novels ‘are forms of entertainment, pleasurable diversions rather than acts of resistance’ (2013, p.86). And yet this activity still takes place right at the city limits and, like many alternative activities associated with potential subversion – for example, those embodied in the world of the circus in Dickens’ major critique of industrialisation, *Hard Times* (1854) – it remains on the margins and consequently has little impact on the status quo at the centre.

Given the city’s key associations with art, it is highly significant that the one public space that offers opportunity for sexual subversion is the Town Museum. For it is here that Edward first encounters Cherif in a scene reminiscent of the cruising episode in the British Museum in E.M. Forster’s *Maurice* (written 1913-14; published 1971). Evidently both Edward and Cherif are very much aware of what Edward terms ‘the deeper drift of museum days, the art compulsion of the single man, reflections in the glass that screens some dark old martyrdom, the licence to loiter and appraise, the tempo of pursuit from room to room’ (p.9). This cataloguing of potentially disruptive behaviours is fascinating for its suggestion of underground activity (‘deeper drift’), the concept of illusory reflection which resonates through the text’s depictions of gay culture generally, and the gesturing towards a history of sacrificial martyrdom which recalls that major icon of gay sacrifice, Saint Sebastian. As aesthetic appreciation and sexual appreciation collapse together, with the framed historical

picture enabling a means of gazing at the live, sexualised male body, the dynamics of cruising as they are depicted here become part of what Kaye Mitchell has defined as ‘a defiant “queering” of the public realm’ (2006, p.47-8). It is particularly interesting, then, that Hollinghurst has Edward and Cherif come together whilst looking at a version of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c.1500) by the Renaissance Dutch painter, Hieronymus Bosch. This famous triptych, which is most frequently read as a warning about succumbing to sexual temptation and the dangers of ignoring the consequences of our actions (Jacobs 2000, p.1016), juxtaposes images of possible paradise in the central section, where naked humans celebrate sensual pleasure amid engorged fruits and strange, seductive shapes, with images of damnation and torment in the right-hand section, where distorted bodies, fear, torture, mutilation and the abject are dominant. Within this context, then, it is significant that Edward and Cherif are particularly drawn to ‘the viler mutations in the Garden of Delights’ (p.9) as if purposely defying the conservative moral reading that the triptych overall might be seen to embody. Importantly, too, it is a painting that Edward believes speaks to him and offers some communication across history in a way that the ‘chaste northern saints and inward-looking Virgins’ (p.9) are unable to. Indeed, this is part of a much wider image pattern in the novel concerning (often wilful) acts of miscommunication, where even the church bells of St Narcissus have a note missing, meaning that a discord literally provides the backdrop to much of Edward’s experiences in the city. It is, of course, particularly ironic that Edward has been hired specifically to teach the skills of effective communication when so much of the text emphasises its impossibility.

Within the novel’s overall trajectory concerning the possibilities and problems of art, it is interesting that Hollinghurst chooses to set the narrative at a time of seeming trans-European anxiety about the role of the arts in society more generally. For as Edward notes, ‘the British Conservatives were “desperate for the return of Mrs Thatcher”, [whilst] the Flemish Minister of Culture looked for “a new morality in the arts”’ (p.32). The novel therefore foregrounds a complex set of concerns regarding the relations between aesthetics and ethics, which is certainly played out in Edward’s developing relations with his student, Luc. From the point of his arrival in the Flemish city, and even before he meets Luc, Edward constructs him as a work of art to be admired and idealised. Significantly, in his seemingly dominant pederastic mindset, Edward repeatedly visualises the young men he observes in terms of painting or sculpture. When watching a group of youths in the market square, for

example, he notes the way in which they appear like 'red-nosed Brueghel boys' (p.12), and he often describes the clientele at Cassette and Biff Bar as mobile aesthetic forms. Such appreciation of the young man is, he considers, perfectly acceptable as part of 'the classical, commonplace good sense of Europe' (p.22) – a Europe which is purposefully set up in opposition to the England of Edward's upbringing. Within this dynamics of aesthetic observation and framing, then, it is significant that Edward's first description of Luc is through a photograph, which he deploys in the gay bar as part of a wider routine to pick up a casual lover for the night. However, just as the city constantly shifts between illusion and 'reality', so Edward's construction of Luc through the photograph constantly shifts as he is variously framed as potential student, contact and lover, oscillating between object of pedagogical concern and object of sexual desire. Such multiplicity suggests Luc's essential 'unknowability' at this stage – an unknowability which is crucial to the text overall – and is reinforced by the use of that imagery of disembodiment and the ghostly to which Edward repeatedly has recourse in describing his experiences in this alien urban environment. For as he asserts, in an evident attempt to reassure himself about his arousal, "[s]urely no one could forget that pale mask, with the large dry lips and the hair falling forward and a mutinous blankness to the eyes [...] I recalled distantly having taught him already in dreams' (p.8). Constructed from the start through the language of masking, illusion and dream, Luc is reduced, as Mitchell suggests (2006, p.45), to a kind of *tabula rasa*, an empty space onto which Edward is able to project his desires and fantasies. In this respect, then, the photograph becomes a site of conflict between identity, agency and desire, and seemingly enacts a power struggle between the subject, the photographer, and the subsequent owner of the image. Indeed, the photograph as artwork is often an embodiment of potential transgression or threat in Hollinghurst's writings, as witnessed, for example, in Will Beckwith's reflections on the changing social-sexual climate of the early 1980s: 'I was riding high on sex and self-esteem [...] but all the while with a faint flicker of calamity, *like flames around a photograph*, something seen out of the corner of the eye' (*SPL*, p.3; my italics). Certainly, in *The Folding Star* the photograph becomes one of the key art forms which has the power to threaten the integrity and identity of the individual.

Such a threat to Luc's integrity and identity is repeated on multiple occasions across the novel through Edward's insistent aestheticisation of him. From their initial lesson onwards, Edward is fascinated by elements of Luc's body – particularly his hair, eyes, nose and mouth

– which he lingers over and eroticises in the style of the traditional *blason* in (heterosexual) Renaissance poetry. This practice of effectively de-humanising and reducing identity to a series of bodily parts for re-appropriation as artefacts – even, at times, a form of queered religious relic as Edward’s sometimes more spiritual language suggests – is repeatedly enacted in the text and is central to Edward’s increasingly problematic engagement with his student. Indeed, it is significant that it is in the aesthetically offensive Altidore house, crammed with excessive, suffocating, old-fashioned tapestries created by Luc’s mother on the one hand, and the oppressive, forbidding family portraits on the other, that Edward comes to view Luc as being like ‘a slightly kitsch piece of work from an artist who carved in alabaster like flushed hard honey’ (p.58). In contrast to the perceived deadness of the older Altidore family and the wider restrictive and claustrophobic city of which they are both the product and symbol, Luc’s body becomes the expression of a sense of vitality that Edward, on one level at least, seeks for himself, sexually and psychologically. Whilst Marcel quickly comes to be associated with the diseased body of the Bakhtinian grotesque, with his severe asthma, psychological anxiety and tendency to obesity (he is first seen sitting ‘pink and wheezing’, p.19), Luc becomes associated with the classical, statuesque body to be displayed, admired, and hence, in Edward’s mindset, controlled. Indeed, in the scene at St Ernest-aux-Salbonnières where Edward spies on Luc sunbathing from the upstairs room of the next-door property, the language of artistic appreciation shifts more disturbingly into the language of scientific observation and documentation as the binoculars Edward employs become a form of microscope: ‘I studied his naked brown back more closely than I had ever studied anything – the white plates of his shoulderblades, the slight boyish dip between as he leant on his elbows, traces of pink scratches on the shoulders’ (p.115). Here, then, the aesthetic *blason* changes into a kind of visual dissection as Edward becomes increasingly excited by the combined dynamics of power and eroticism embedded in the act of voyeurism. Indeed, the systems of control and ‘discipline’ which Foucault (1975) locates at the heart of surveillance come to characterise Edward’s infatuation with Luc as he repeatedly objectifies him as a (silenced) piece of art. Moreover, whilst Edward’s teaching emphasises the power of art and writing to persuade (he particularly deploys Wordsworth to this end), at the same time he purposely skews Luc’s studies by making him read *Poets of Our Time* (or ‘Our Fathers’ Time’, as Edward acknowledges) in order to ‘keep him back with me in a shared childhood of unfashionable lyrics and discredited rhetoric’ (p.115). In a novel

which repeatedly emphasises educational authoritarianism in multiple ways, Edward effectively manipulates art in order to control, possess and frame Luc, thus attempting to construct him as the ideal figure that he desires him to be.

If the narrative of Edward's relationship with Luc interrogates a complex set of concerns regarding the manipulation of art for covert ends, then this is forcefully replayed in the parallel narrative of Edgard Orst. Drawing upon a version of the dual narrative which is central to Hollinghurst's previous novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, *The Folding Star* effectively oscillates between, and intriguingly interconnects, Edward's experiences in the 1990s and those of Orst in the 1890s and early 1900s – an interconnection which is caught even in the overlapping of their names, Edward/Edgard. Significantly for the narrative drive of the novel, the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* was both a major period of shifting thought concerning the role of art in society and the moment of the emergence of modern sexual identities, including queer identities. With aestheticism, decadence and symbolism taking prominence in many artistic and literary circles, and Oscar Wilde in the dock in one of the most high-profile trials of nineteenth-century Europe, the relations between aesthetics, ethics and sexuality were being widely and intensely contested. As Gail Marshall notes, it was 'a period of tremendous vitality, in which debate and controversy [were] central' (2007, p.5) – debate and controversy which *The Folding Star* picks up and interrogates in intriguing ways. For in his fabrication of Orst, Hollinghurst is able to examine the notion of *fin-de-siècle* avant-garde art as it was embodied, in part, by the Belgian Symbolist school. In interview (2011), Hollinghurst has spoken of his fascination with the life and work of the Symbolist painter Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921), and there is certainly something of Khnopff's paintings, as well as those of Félicien Rops (1833-98), lying behind the representations of Orst's own. With their vague, mystical atmospheres, their interest in sexual transgression and the perverse, and their concern with that key cultural phenomenon of the *fin de siècle*, the *femme fatale*, Orst's work is iconoclastic and alienating to conservative viewers. As Edward increasingly realises, however, Orst's paintings function as both the embodiment of the Flemish city, with their 'sense of dying life, life hidden, haunted' (p.295), and an embodiment of obsession and monomania which has uncanny parallels with his own obsession with Luc. For Orst's fetishistic painting of his wife for three decades after her death repeatedly serves to contain her within the frame of the canvas where she is figured as any number of larger-than-life mythic characters, 'the seer, the sufferer, the sphinx'.

Indeed, even the more domestic scenes, Edward reflects, possess ‘an air of suspended animation, and [seem] reports from a world of dreams. The face itself was a mask, heavy’ (p.69). As with Edward’s obsession with photographs of Luc, and his insistent aestheticising of the real teenager, Orst’s paintings emphasise the process of capturing the object of desire and projecting an artistic/sexual ideal onto it, as suggested here by the echoed language of the mask. Indeed, as Alistair Stead has argued in his detailed study of the notion of translation in the novel, the depiction of the paintings by the heterosexual artist works effectively to foreground the ‘erotic compulsions of the novel’s contemporary narrative’ (1999, p.362).

The exact nature of Orst’s own ‘erotic compulsions’, and their reflections on those of Edward, subsequently comes to light in a startling scene which pushes the notion of the power of art to control far further. For as Edward opens the box-file of Orst’s photographs given to him by Paul, a layering of history and desire emerges as the past literally re-enters the present: ‘[The photographs] were creased and curled and compressed and when I lifted the restraining spring they rose with a ghostly tremor to the brim’ (p.297). The photographs of Jane reinforce the notion of performance surrounding her status as actress-model and yet to Edward they appear far more fascinating than the paintings and more obviously central to ‘the necromancy of Orst’s art’ (p.299). Here, then, we are brought close to what Edward – and it seems Paul, too – perceives to be the crux of Orst’s artistic concerns. Yet this transformative potential of art is given a disturbing twist when Edward opens the envelope at the bottom of the box to find pictures of the second Jane in nude and semi-nude poses, complete with the soft porn paraphernalia of veils and fans. The second Jane’s images here function as a perverse doubling of those of the first Jane, as if Orst’s desires are starting to filter through into the ‘civilised’ public space in a parallel with Freud’s contemporaneous work on the repression model of the mind. Indeed, in a further symbolic uncovering of layers, this envelope contains another, smaller envelope in which are held pictures of the second Jane in various BDSM poses and acting out more extreme fetish scenarios. This ‘woman of the people’, as Paul euphemistically terms her (p.291), is the figure whom Orst perceives to be the replica of his wife and whom he pursued relentlessly around unknown areas of the city in a psycho-geographic narrative clearly borrowed from Rodenbach’s *Bruges-la-Morte*.³ But here the replica wife is systematically reduced – albeit for money, Edward reflects – into an object for artistic and sexual fantasy, her identity

effectively eliminated and reconstructed by the artist-photographer. The small piece of orange pubic hair at the bottom of this last envelope therefore oddly becomes both another kind of subverted religious relic and a final telling image of the complex set of power games around gender, sexuality, art and economics which the photographs represent.

In terms of what *The Folding Star* suggests about the relations between art, power and social function, it is telling that Hollinghurst subsequently depicts Orst as the type of the increasingly isolated artist. As Alan Sinfield has detailed in his influential study of Alfred Tennyson (1986, pp.11-21), across the nineteenth century the social and political work of art was constantly being debated, with a key crisis occurring in the face of expanding capitalist structures and a deepening commitment in many circles to the philosophy of utilitarianism. By the end of the century, Sinfield suggests, there was an implicit 'feminisation' of art which increasingly pushed the artist from the centre of culture to the margins. Orst clearly becomes a version of this model as he builds his Villa Hermés – the name self-consciously drawn from the Greek messenger god and thus emphasising the idea of intercession between the mortal and the divine – as a self-enclosed palace of art, complete with stained glass windows and a museum-like sense of paintings and sculptures drawn from different styles and periods. Such a seeming artistic sanctuary, however, is once again founded upon dehumanising systems of control, since all the servants are silenced and forced to communicate solely by gesture so that Orst can remain undisturbed in his production of what one rare interviewer-visitor terms 'the art of the criminal or the madman' (p.183). Ironically, Villa Hermés is the place where, Orst tells the interviewer, 'he had worked out to his own satisfaction what it meant to him to be an artist, and what the life of an artist, once so impetuously embarked upon, might in the end demand of him' (p.185). What the life of an artist eventually demands of him is nothing less than total sacrifice. Indeed, the bronze figure of Andromeda chained to her rock which stands at the entrance to Orst's studio might perhaps signify not only one of Orst's key fantasies about the control of women but also a projection of his own situation as artist. Isolated, all but ignored by the artistic world, and increasingly blind from syphilis – that ravaging late-nineteenth-century disease which Ibsen used as an image of society's hypocrisy in *Ghosts* (1881) and which Elaine Showalter (1992, pp.188-208) has read as a significant analogy to the late-twentieth-century AIDS crisis – Orst is finally betrayed both by the anti-Semitic ideology of the occupying Nazis in Belgium and Paul's temporary desire for a German soldier. The final image of Orst's dead body being

wheeled out to a van, lolling around with eyes wide open, mouth in a sneer, and smelling of decay, thus becomes the novel's most disturbing depiction of the consequences of a life dedicated to artistic production.

The Folding Star therefore offers something of a queer return to history in its alignment of the marginalised gay teacher and the increasingly isolated Jewish artist, exemplifying a textual practice which, in Jodie Medd's phrasing, 'demonstrate[s] an attachment to the past as a resource for negotiating the complexities of queer experience in the present' (2013, p.168). Certainly, the idea of Edward and Edgard both being bound up in patterns of exploitation and betrayal is ultimately caught in that moment when Edward, finally having sex with Luc, ejaculates just as he sees in Luc's eyes a mixture of vulnerability and power 'like some Orst temptress's' (p.337). Luc's subsequent disappearance from the text, as he becomes a version of the narrative's absent centre, then serves to re-emphasise Hollinghurst's concern with the problematic afterlife of those involved in some way in the artistic world. For what remains at the end of the novel is a series of failed artistic projects and illusions about the supposedly enabling nature of art. The Orst triptych that Paul is attempting to reconstruct – the sections of which he has had to negotiate for both economically and sexually – remains incomplete due to a significant mismatch between the individual screens and the overall frame. Moreover, Paul is quick to reject Edward's interpretation of the triptych as representing 'a kind of ... spiritual journey' (p.282), thereby reinforcing the closing down of communicative and interpretative possibilities that runs throughout the novel. Similarly, with the exception of Edward's limited copy-editing interventions, the production of the biography of Orst, which Paul has been working on for years, completely stalls, highlighting again the idea of the impotent writer which is central to the text (in Edward, Paul, Perry Dawlish) as well as recalling Beckwith's resistance to the writing of Nantwich's life and his 'pre-Stonewall sexual formation' (Corber 1999, p.132) in *The Swimming-Pool Library*. As the Orst museum becomes increasingly associated with the inability to communicate and connect, then, the significance of its situation on the edges of the city, pushed to the margins, also becomes increasingly clear.

In his review of *The Folding Star* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Peter Kemp has rightly noted that '[e]ven in its sexiest moments, [the novel] never loses its intellectual poise' (1994, p.19). Certainly, this poise is strongly felt across the course of the text in its principal concern with the potentially corrosive and alienating nature of art and artistic practice.

Indeed, the strong connection between art and death which Hollinghurst establishes in the loss of Edward's father, the negative hold of the Flemish city, and the life and work of its key artistic practitioner, is maintained to the very end of the novel. For in the final paragraph, a photograph of Luc on the missing persons' board at Ostend, showing him 'hollow-cheeked, [with] eyes narrowed in hurt and defiance' (p.422), cancels out the earlier two photographs of him as vital and energetic and effectively aligns him with that other sacrifice to both the world of art and the Ostend sea, Jane Byron. In an obvious parallel with Orst, Edward's artistic gaze, the narrative suggests, has seemingly killed the object of desire it most idealises and most wants to control. It is a fitting conclusion to a novel in which Hollinghurst repeatedly denies that potential for positive transformation which art is often thought to embody. *The Folding Star* may not have become that key reference point for critical analysis of contemporary gay men's literature in the way that *The Swimming-Pool Library* surely has, but its subtle and at times shocking interrogation of the politics of art in multiple contexts nevertheless makes it far more central to Hollinghurst's developing body of work than is often acknowledged.

Notes

¹ See, for example, John R. Bradley (1996, esp. pp.4-5) who argues that 'the narrators of these two novels are essentially the same type of person, and [...] are made to play out similar scenarios' (p.5).

² A number of critics have found Hollinghurst's perceived lack of direct treatment of the AIDS crisis problematic, but as Gregory Woods has pointed out (1998, p.368-9), Hollinghurst's strategies of 'evasion' in his early novels are typical of much gay men's fiction of the time and are an equally valid way of dealing with the issues implicitly or covertly. In interview (*Paris Review*, 2011), Hollinghurst himself interestingly reflected: 'I think the gloomy atmosphere and the deaths and disappearances of several of the characters [in *The Folding Star*] were a reaction to the AIDS crisis, which had occurred during the years I was writing *The Swimming-Pool Library* and which I had decided not to include in its story.'

³ In interview, Hollinghurst is quite candid about his use of Rodenbach's narrative: 'I had read Georges Rodenbach's hypnotic symbolist novel, *Bruges-la-Morte*, about a widower who retreats to Bruges and lives his days devoted to the memory of his dead wife. He paces the quays of the deserted city, and then sees a woman who looks exactly like his wife walking down the street. He becomes obsessed with her and makes her dress up in his wife's clothes. I lifted the whole story and put it into *The Folding Star*, fairly confident that not many people read *Bruges-la-Morte*. In fact I

went to Antwerp to launch the book there and confessed this embarrassedly, but nobody in the Belgian audience had read it.' (*Paris Review*, 2011)

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