MISSION AND OMISSION IN ALAN HOLLINGHURST'S "THE LINE OF BEAUTY"

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Abstract: Alan Hollinghurst's three major 'missions' in "The Line of Beauty"- the political and economic environment in the 1980s and Thatcherism, difficult family relationships, and, most importantly, the LGBTQ+ community's arising consciousness and, implicitly, the serious consequences of careless homosexual interactions and drug addiction (among which the catastrophic emergence of AIDS).While telling his and the Feddens' story, and being the only narrator too, Nick Guest, the Jamesian scholar subtly chooses to omit events and statements – in a true Jamesian manner. The gaps he leaves behind paradoxically enrich and embellish the narrative and, at the same time, keep the reader constantly and eagerly connected, just like in Henry James' novels. Thus, ambiguity and a faithful depiction of reality go hand in hand.

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The line of beauty originates in William Hogarth's (1697-1764,) - painter and aesthetician - 1753 book "The Analysis of Beauty", in which he depicted seven waving lines and declared line number four as the most beautiful. It consists of an S-shaped curved line which signifies, in Hogarth's view, liveliness, energy, movement and beauty and awakens the attention of the viewer. Consequently, he called it *the line of beauty*, whereas the serpentine one he named *the line of grace.* In contrast, the straight, parallel, right-angled lines he deemed to signify inactivity, even death or inanimate objects. Even today *the line of beauty* has a considerably strong influence in many areas such as design, landscape, calligraphy, architecture. Though not literally, *the line of beauty* is applied in literature too. Thus, Alan Hollinghurst transposed it as a leitmotif in his novel bearing the same title; first published in 1988, it received the Man Booker Prize in 2004.

The plot is told by Nick Guest, the protagonist, in the third person but filtered only through his own consciousness, in a true Jamesian manner. Nick is a shallow provincial young man, who is invited to live in Toby Fedden's luxurious home in Notting Hill, and ends up staying for more than four years. He is in love with a multitude of *lines of beauty*: the handsome boys, the lines of white powder (cocaine), luxurious apparels, elegant dinners, the prose of Henry James. His close observation of the rich and powerful ruling class, his experience with drugs, sex and art change him into a cosmopolitan, nevertheless disappointed, unhappy person.

The book is divided into three sections dated 1983, 1986 and 1987. When the novel starts Nick Guest and his friend, Toby have just left Oxford. When called a snob, Nick partly denies it; in exchange, he admits: *I just love beautiful things. (Hollinghurst 2022, 171)* Coming from a low middle-class family, he is mesmerized by the extravagant way of living of the Fedden family and their wealthy entourage; aristocrats and 'nouveaux riches' - Lord Kessler, Rachel's brother, Maurice Tippet and Bertrand Ouradi, the Lebanese businessman – mingle at parties and unite in their greed for money and

power. Conversely, Nick Guest's *line of beauty* represents and ideal aesthetic which he perceives in art, architecture, music or the shape of the male body.

Gerald Fedden is an ambitious and striving Conservative MP, and his wife, Rachel comes from a very rich Jewish family. This first part of the novel covers three years, from the glorious years of Thatcherism, and the aftermath of the Falkland campaign to the election victory of 1983. It is a time of economic boom and enthusiasm in Tory circles; the Lady is often invited at the Fedden house, and she actually appears at Rachel and Gerald's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary party. Ironically, Nick, extremely high on cocaine, dances with the Prime Minister, only to disappear soon after and have a brief, unsafe sexual encounter with a stranger at a close by metro station.

Later on in the plot, Gerald proves to have been involved in a financial fraud and embezzlement and has to resign; by far the vilest Tory MP is Barry Groom, the man who never says 'hello'. *There was something so irksome about Barry Groom that he had a fascination: you longed for him to annoy you again. (Hollinghurst 2022, 189)* Politics and connections with powerful people, as always, proves to be a mere pretext to gain wealth and influence.

Despite glamour and a seemingly harmonious atmosphere, there is a lot of tension and conflict inside the Fedden family. Catherine, Gerald and Rachel's daughter is diagnosed bipolar, manic depressive and has a history of self-harming. Oftentimes, though, she rather behaves like a spoilt brat. She is aggressive, rude, impulsive; her scorn and intolerance are most of the times directed toward her father and the phoney medium they all live in. Her friendship with Nick is mainly due to their sharing the same hedonistic pleasures - they both indulge in fleeting sexual relationships – but Nick Guest's 'mission' is actually to keep a vigilant eye on her, cheer her up when she is in a dark mood and tone down her ecstatic crises. Eventually, it is Cat who uncovers Gerald's amorous liaison with his assistant Penny which was consumed in Barry Groom's apartment: *It was a fuck-flat, in Barry Groom's hard phrase, not a proper home. He had an image of small hotel-like rooms in which Badger conducted strained affairs with much younger women; of Badger shooting a line as phoney as the prints on the wall and the Chippendale cocktail cabinet (Hollinghurst 2022, 458)* and it is her lover and journalist, Russell who exposes Nick and Wani Ouradi's 'shameful' love relationship. In the last section, *The End of the Street,* after the two 1987 public scandals, Gerald Fedden has to rebuild his career, while Nick Guest will be witnessing Wani's dying of AIDS (Leo has already died of the same disease), waiting for his HIV test rather expecting it to be positive. Here's what the author states in the *Afterword* of the novel: *My whole instinct was to work by irony, and to make the world of money and power the young Nick Guest is drawn to absorb him and then expel him, as if from some phoney paradise. Nick was to be an unpolitical person in an age reconfigured by a political revolution. (Hollinghurst 2022, 505)*

A central 'mission' of the author in *The Line of Beauty* is to raise awareness of the LGBTQ+ community's issues, while being, at the same time, *an intimate and peculiar personal history, of the kind I have always liked to write. (Hollinghurst 2022, 505)* As a gay writer, Hollinghurst not only wrote a novel about homosexuality, drugs, death and AIDS,

but he created the vivid and most interesting protagonist of the novel, Nick Guest, the scholar, lover of Henry James' novels, the aesthete, a faithful friend and passionate lover.

The Line of Beauty starts with Nick Guest still a virgin but eager to indulge in sexual pleasure; he answers an ad in a paper and meets his first lover, Leo, a young man of West Indian parentage. The rather brazenly graphic ensuing love scenes stand proof for the author's determination to make a strong statement. When the love affair with Leo is consumed, Nick enters a new relationship with the wealthy Wani Ouradi, but does not refrain from having sex with complete strangers. Significantly enough and unlike Leo and Wani, Nick is willing to confess to his homosexuality; Catherine, to whom he speaks openly about his love life, proves to be his most faithful 'confidante'. Both Leo and Wani suffer from AIDS and Nick himself is wondering whether he has not caught the disease too: *He was young, without much training in stoicism. What would he do once he left the room? He dawdled on, rather breathless, seeing visions in the middle of the day. He tried to rationalize the fear, but its pull was too strong and original. (Hollinghurst 2022, 500)* Ultimately, it is safe to say that Nick is Hollinghurst's spokesperson, the lover of *lines of beauty* which he perceives in little details, in Jamesian prose, in music, in artistic refinement, in lines of cocaine, in the shape/ ogee of the human body.

The readers' attention is constantly attracted by a constant allusion to Henry James: *Rachel was standing by the mantelpiece, Lionel sitting in an armchair, and for a second Nick thought of the scene in 'The Portrait of A Lady' when Isabel discovers her husband sitting while Mme Merle is standing, and sees at once that they are more intimate than she had realized. (Hollinghurst 2022, 446)* The protagonist is working on his PhD thesis on the novelist. Hollinghurst himself acknowledged his allegiance to James at that stage of his literary career. In keeping with the Jamesian way of writing, Hollinghurst often omits steps in the plot, whole lines in conversations, relying on gestures, grimaces or telling smiles, even long silences. Catherine smiles shrewdly when she suspects her father's adulterous relationship with Penny; Wani is a man of very few words, prefers to keep silent even in key scenes. Bertrand Ouradi too makes a point in his discussion with Nick by smiling ironically: *Bertrand set down his knife and fork, and gave a puncturing smile. He seemed to savour his irony in advance, as well as the uncertainty, the polite smiles of anticipation, on the faces of the others. (Hollinghurst 2022, 225)* Both James and Hollinghurst keep their readers alert and challenge them to think and fill the gaps in the fabric of the narrative. Moreover, the whole London scenery, the aristocratic refined milieu described by Hollinghurst in *the Line of Beauty* is undoubtedly reminiscent of James' prose. The different houses the Feddens live in, Lord Kessler's sumptuous mansion are minutely described, not unlike the Jamesian descriptions.

The Line of Beauty is not just a beautiful book about the beauty of love, of art, of the human body, of drug-induced joy. It is above all about the beauty of a harmonious whole, a complex network of themes, of subtle allusions and human fragility.

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