The Question of the Jamesian Presence in Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*

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Abstract:
Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* explores the social spectrum of 1980s Britain, with a focused account on the gay life in London. The novel is a coming out story, which observes the social milieu and psychological nuances under Thatcherism. The paper explores the presence of James as a figure in the fictional world of the book because of Nick's studies. Hollinghurst uses Henry James as a literary agent in order to bring about the moral ambiguities of the characters. This paper examines how Hollinghurst employs the Jamesian presence through the literary techniques of ironies and implications. Alan Hollinghurst has seemingly built a bridge between a contemporary novel and a canonical figure, Henry James, who is growingly recognized as the author of "the gender confusion". This paper, therefore, contributes to gender issues and the Jamesian legacy in contemporary fiction, which enriches the literary heritage.

1 Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) is a portrait of a privileged gay life in the 1980s. The general perception is that the early years of 1980s were a time of great change, socially and politically, in which a large number of young people were carefree and enjoyed excessive lifestyles. Casual sex and drug use were prevalent and the affluent class of society hosted excessive parties. However, as the 1980s came to an end, the discovery of AIDS, to a large extent, closed the door on sexual freedom and self-indulgence. By exploring the implementation of ironies and implications, this paper argues that Hollinghurst draws on the queer Henry James, as a literary presence, to comment on the lifestyle and the anxieties of a decade of moral decadence in Thatcher's England. Principally, the author utilizes the literary tropes of ironies and implications to explore Nick Guest's homosexuality and penetrate into the secret lives of the other characters as they live in an amoral, high class society, which reflects the troubled status quo of the whole country.

2 In response to an interview question by Charles Kaiser (2010) about his own view of Mrs. Thatcher, Hollinghurst's reply was in complete denunciation:

> It was a terrible time on almost all fronts. I suppose her main antigay action was Clause 28, which was passed in 1988. Local authorities were prohibited [by that law] from spending money on anything which 'promoted homosexuality', which is actually an amazingly Thatcherite view of sexuality.

In view of that comment, "the discriminatory politics and double morality of Thatcherism are overly denounced" in the novel (Yebra 178). In this sense, the personal correlates with the political as sexuality and politics overlap. Hollinghurst's novel addresses this political view

by introducing the London gay scene, which is not as celebratory as Hollinghurst's earlier novel, *The Swimming Library* (1988), where partying pervaded. As the ominous clouds of AIDS encroach, the narrative is mystified by its sense of predictable, tragic inevitability and therefore the question of moral ambiguity comes to the surface.

3 Nick's is a sort of coming out story, which resists the familiar Bildungsroman trope of a triumphant outcome in favour of something darker and more complex. The author's propensity to subvert the readers' expectations, as the novel moves from romance to impending tragedy, complicates the question of morality in the novel:

> Encountering the romance of a London life in all its tantalizing beauty, Nicholas lives as much in denial of AIDS as he does in denial of the corruption and greed and other unsavoury elements of the decade. That it all catches up with him, that all the high figures come tumbling down like the stock market on Black Monday, makes the novel a bit of a morality play. (Rivkin 288)

In a sense, Hollinghurst confronts gay lifestyle through the elegiac; indeed through a deep sense of something that has been lost or gone tragically wrong, which invokes a question of moral ambiguity. Does loss in this novel, whether the loss of life itself, opportunity or reputation, represent the inevitable consequence of moral decadence? Does the novel really function as a morality play assuming that the characters, having led indulgent lives, deserved what they got in the end even if it is public scandal or death? The answers to these inquiries are related to the way Hollinghurst stylistically deals with the question of morality in the novel and how that question is intricately related to the Jamesian presence.

4 In his response to an interview with Stephen Moss (2010) in *The Guardian*, when asked about the moral nature of the novel, Hollinghurst remarked that Nick is as morally compromised as the rest who were tempted by the affluence of the 1980s:

> 'I don't make moral judgments,' he says. 'I prefer to let things reverberate with their own ironies and implications. That was one of the interests of writing this book from the inside and not just writing something that broadly satirised or bashed up the 80s. To tell it from the point of view of someone who was very seduced by it.

Hollinghurst here refers to his dealings with the moral theme in terms of style. Since the Jamesian presence itself largely implies moral ambiguity, Hollinghurst resorts to "ironies and implications" as part of the literary machinery in the novel. The Jamesian presence, therefore, stylistically explored through ironies and implications, reveals and questions the characters' moral stance in a rapidly changing and highly affluent decade. Since many of James's characters are known for their abrupt involvement in high class societies in Europe such as Fleda in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), the unnamed public servant in *In the Cage* (1898), the

governess in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) or Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), the Jamesian presence implicitly invokes the notion of someone who is seduced by high class society and is about to give up his or her moral high grounds. The Jamesian presence is utilized in such a way that it may serve as a background commentary on the characters as they confront sexual and worldly allurements.

5 In this context, the nature of the moral tradition in literature should be just briefly clarified in order to see how the work of Henry James himself fits into it. The moral tradition referred to in literature is generally Hellenistic and Judeo-Christian:

> It [the Hellenistic and Judeo-Christian tradition] was and is philosophical, theological, or both, and political, social, and economic in extension. Inevitably its roots are moral and these roots extend to all human endeavor. Since at least the late seventeenth century this tradition has tended to become more secular, individualistic, and ethical, as distinct from sacred, communal, and religious or theological. (Hynes 28)

More broadly, in his article, "Poetry and Morality," Tzvetan Todorov captures how the intricate relationship between aesthetics and ethics has undergone an evolutionary process. He argues that there are three conceptual theories to pin down that relationship. The first is classical in nature, as it was propagated by Plato, which "considers art in the service of moral principles, and argues that aesthetic values should be subjected to ethical values" (68). Todorov explains that novels that fall under the category of "socialist realism" (69) are the best case in point. The second is instated by the European Romantics and extended by the English Victorians in which "art and poetry open the way to a knowledge superior to the abstract and rational knowledge science and philosophy confer" (70). Todorov observes "an increasing autonomy of both ethics and aesthetics as the main characteristics of the third stage" (Yebra 175), which informs most of postmodern novels including Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*.

6 In a society informed by secularism, we are increasingly disinclined to be judgmental about anyone's lifestyle. Hynes responds to this question of modern disinclination to provide an ethical commentary of any nature by giving two reasons: "we wish not to be judged ourselves, but more likely, I suspect, because we've been repeatedly taught that no basis exists on which to ground moral judgments" (29). Part of this disinclination is the preference of modern fiction to employ either the first-person or the limited third-person point in order to avoid the omniscient point of view:

> [Using omniscient point of view] would come closer to committing the author himself to a particular moral stance. Using a character's point of view involves the reader in the act of personally working out where the character stands with respect to right and

> wrong behavior and motives, and of deciding whether the reader agrees or disagrees with the narrating character's choices, morally speaking. (Hynes 30)

To James, however, the question of morality corresponds to our sense of life. In a way, a moral vision of life is not synonymous to virtue or good deeds; instead, living well is the hard task of making ourselves people "on whom nothing is lost" (Nussbaum 169). It is still an ethical task and to James "the novel is itself a moral achievement, and the well-lived life is a work of literary art" (Nussbaum 169). In other words, James defines any sense of moral appeal in terms of the novelist's ability to deliver an earnest picture of reality, which entails emotions, intelligence and consciousness.

7 In his "Introduction" to his book *Henry James*, Harold Bloom points out that James's stylistic approach in delineating his characters' moral sense is exceedingly subtle. In his discussion of James's view of Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Bloom discerns a stylistic pattern in which James allows himself to be quite "evasive towards his authentic American predecessor, a pattern he repeated in writing about George Eliot" (9). Judith Woolf, on the other hand, in her *Henry James: The Major Novels*, draws attention to a certain technique that James uses to guide the readers through the complexities of characters: "James must blindfold the reader ... until the moment of vision comes" (47). This method speaks to the way Hollinghurst unravels the complexities of his characters through irony and implication as both methods similarly invite the reader to participate in the act of eliciting meaning and disclosing the characters' consciousness. Moreover, in her book, *Henry James: The Crooked Corridor*, Elizabeth Stevenson identifies a particular image that defines the Jamesian picture of the artist: "There is irony in James' picture of the artist, who is anything and everything in his own mind, attempting anxiously to be something or someone in the social world" (69). This description of the deluded artist, which Stevenson finds in *The Death of the Lion* (1894), *The Author of Beltraffio* (1884) and *The Velvet Glove* (1904), serves as a very appropriate description of the disenchanted life of Hollinghurst's Nick Guest, an artist who struggles to be like the rich Feddens. To Stevenson, for instance, *The Velvet Glove* provides the perfect example of this dilemma of the artist's attempt to blend with the rich: "The story is a good example of one of James' favorite contrasts, between the people who lead rich personal lives and never think, and the writer who is all reflection and who upon occasion envies the shining ones" and ultimately "only deceives himself if he thinks he can live their splendid lives" (70). In Hollinghust's novel, when Nick surveys the Feddens' home, he takes great delight in the opulent furnishings. At this point when he pretends to be the owner showing the house to a new friend, the narrator observes: "Like his hero Henry James, Nick felt he could

'stand a great deal of gilt'" (5). In effect, the "irony" of the image of the artist in some of James' works, which Stevenson explicitly addresses, is exactly what Hollinghurst accentuates through the incongruity of Nick's infatuation with the upper class as he struggles with his sexuality, which also wittingly provides a subtle commentary on the morality of the characters involved.

8 Henry James makes it clear that the artist's task is "a moral task … so much as the world is rendered well by some such artist" (Nussbaum 187). He explains that the moral content of a work is an expression of the artist's sense of life: "The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and the degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to 'grow' with freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly, the projected morality" (James 45). James holds the novelist (morally) accountable to achieve this excellence in portraying his/her sensibilities and impression of life. Moral experience is an interpretation of the seen, "our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures" (James 65). In a sense, as James explains in *The Art of the Novel*, focused attention becomes our "active sense of life," which is our moral faculty. The characters' "emotions, their stirred intelligence, their moral consciousness, become thus, by sufficiently charmed perusal, our own very adventure" (James 70). It is the way we identify ourselves as readers with those fictional characters, learn from them as we observe and share their condition rather than dismiss them as ethically right or wrong, that sums up the moral experience from James's point of view.

9 In a similar line of argument, Hollinghurst has one of his high-living characters, Penny, ask, "What would Henry James have made of us, I wonder?" Nick replies that, "He'd have been very kind to us, he'd have said how wonderful we were and how beautiful we were, he'd have given us incredibly subtle things to say, and we wouldn't have realized until just before the end that he'd seen right through us" (123). That is exactly, to his credit, what Hollinghurst does in this novel following the Jamesian ethical task of apprehension, which invokes awareness of the active sense of life. However, what James seeks to apprehend through gradual, authentic exposure by virtue of "the artist's prime sensibility," Hollinghurst seeks to capture through the schematic employment of implications and ironies in which the Jamesian presence is invoked to comment on the contemporary scene. The conversation between Kessler and Nick is a good case in point. In response to Lord Kessler's question "And what is your chosen field?", this conversation arises after mentioning James's style as a topic:

> "Mm. I want to have a look at style," Nick said (...) "Ah," said Lord Kessler intelligently: "style as an obstacle." Nick smiled. "Exactly … Or perhaps style that hides things and reveals things at the same time." For some reason this seemed rather near the knuckle, as though he were suggesting Lord Kessler had a secret. "James is a great interest of mine, I must say." "Yes, you're a James man, I see now." "Oh, absolutely!" and Nick grinned with pleasure and defiance, it was a kind of coming out, which revealed belatedly why he wasn't and never would be married to Trollope. (49)

The implication is that Nick is a "James man" which suggests a homosexual behaviour. Hollinghurst here draws on the queer James in order to expose certain characters and negate the seemingly heterosexual mainstream in society: "Nick's academic discipleship appears to function here as code for his own homosexuality" so the phrase "a James man" seems to invoke homosexual connotations (Hannah 85). In another conversation, Leo responds to Nick by saying, "I thought, he's a shy one, a bit stuck-up, but there's something going on inside those corduroy trousers, I'll give him a go. And how right I was, Henry" (91). Denis Flannery draws attention to this episode where "someone called Henry is colloquially, jokingly invoked as a part of the sexual tribute and banter between Nick and Leo on a summer night in 1983 London" (295). Although Flannery interprets the remark as apostrophic, he agrees that the addressed could be "a far-away lover, a dead friend, an urn, the wind, an author" (295). The reference to James here as somewhere else invokes the queer connotations associated with James as the conversation itself is saturated with sexual implications.

10 The emphasis on James's style in the conversation with Kessler comes again in Nick's conversation with Jenny about James where "the style question might lose her completely" and therefore concealed from Jenny because it is either perplexing or deviously ironic (121). There are so many concealments in the private lives of the characters that manifest themselves through homosexual implications and thus we can see more into the hidden thoughts and secrets of the characters involved through the strategy of implied commentaries: When, in the second chapter, Toby brings up the subject of Hector Maltby, a junior minister caught "with a rent boy in his jaguar at Jack Straw's castle," Nick finds himself "blushing as if he'd been caught in a Jaguar himself ": "It was often like this when the homosexual question came up" (24). Nick's life amongst the Feddens involves the constant concealment of his attraction to Toby and, later, of his cocaine-fueled relationship with Wani, who, in public, is engaged to the social heiress, Martine. (Hannah 86) In effect, Nick feels that his homosexual tendency is implicated in the conversation. On another occasion, he tells Monique that he is attracted to *The Spoils of Poynton* and wants to make a film about it: "I think it could be rather marvellous, don't you. You know Ezra Pound said it was just a novel

about furniture, meaning to dismiss it of course, but that was really what made me like the sound of it" (187). Nick perceives and refers to the Jamesian presence through *The Spoils of Poynton* as that of implications; a novel which is aesthetically revealing of high society lifestyle, although it seemed quite blunt and insubstantial to Pound. The irony is that, despite the dismissive general opinion supported by Pound, Nick still believes that James' novel can be a movie hit.

11 In "A Tribute to Henry James," chaired by Deborah Moggach, Hollinghurst has talked about his use of James in *The Line of Beauty* in terms of a structural approach to plot. He is "drawn to James because of his stern precepts about what conditions should govern the novel as a work of art; the relevance of everything in it; the coherence of the point of view." In *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst reasserts this Jamesian structure of relevance and coherence, which transforms itself into some sort of a dominating presence through implications and ironies. Accordingly, the first section of the novel details Nick's first date with a man he meets for sex through a personal ad. Their relationship deepens into something more meaningful, drawing Nick into the working-class life of his lover even while he floats into the lavish lifestyle of his host family, which gives him an opportunity to mingle and get an active sense of life. When the story proceeds again in 1986, the sense of coherence and relevance is still keen and congruent in which ironies prevail.

12 In this part of the novel, Nick is still living with his host family, but he has moved on from his first lover to a Lebanese millionaire who is engaged to be married. Ironically, they are movie producers, but mostly they watch pornography, pick up young men, and snort cocaine with the implication of being a different "line of beauty." Nick has a vague sense that this is not a satisfying way to live, but he is mesmerized by the glare of so much money and sensuality and terrified by the prospect of loneliness. At this stage, references to Henry James mirror by implication a sense of decadence in Nick's personal and academic life: "He was reading Henry James's memoir of his childhood, A Small Boy and Others, and feeling crazily horny, after three days without as much as a peck from Wani. It was a hopeless combination. The book showed James at his most elderly and elusive, and demanded a pure commitment unlikely in a reader who was worrying excitedly about his boyfriend" (273). The tragic irony, however, is that when AIDS ravages the gay community and scandal rocks the Feddens household, Nick finds himself as abandoned as he always feared. Thus the tragic end implies a sense of moral judgment:

> Ironically, despite all its graphic sex, a Puritanical piety seems to animate the novel. Rather than challenge any mainstream prejudices about homosexuals, *The Line of*

> *Beauty* confirms them. The most socially conservative reader won't be surprised to see here that gay men are emotionally oversensitive, sexually voracious, desperately lonely, and finally doomed. (Charles)

Moreover, the way Henry James, as a running commentary, coalesces the subplots of the novel also implies a fading moral value at least in relation to Nick's respect to and interest in art. The use of James collapses from a constructive and intellectual commentary into that associated with drug addiction, which betrays a time of decadence. In that respect, the early years of eighties represent a time of promise, and the mid-eighties are the peak of life and prosperity for Nick, the Feddens and politics. The end of the eighties mirrors the end of the carefree decade and reflects the downward turn that threatens Nick with disease and the Feddens with scandal. Similarly, as the book opens, Henry James is a positive reference for Nick. It serves as an indicator of the speaker's intellectual pursuit and interests. In the middle, the Jamesian presence is reduced to a means to an end; Nick uses his knowledge of Henry James to socialize and exhibit his intelligence at parties with the Feddens' wealthy friends and constituents in order to feel that he belongs to their high class. By the end of the 1980s, Henry James's face, on a book cover selected from "the stack of library books ... which had a sleek Mylar sleeve protecting its dark jacket" (222), is now ironically a surface upon which Wani cuts cocaine:

> When Hollinghurst has Nick and his lover use a copy of *Henry James and the Question of Romance* as the surface on which to cut a line of cocaine, one sees how he places James - and Jamesian *romance*, no less - in relation to the elevations and addictions of the decade. Ironic, yes, and yet it's unlikely that James is the target of the irony. Rather, James is invoked as the knowing figure who comprehends all too well what the romance and rapacity of this decade are all about. (Rivkin 289)

By implication, the literary and aesthetic deterioration of the Jamesian presence is now complete. More interesting is the notion that Nick's UCL thesis is concerned with "something about style" in the works of Conrad, Meredith and Henry James. It is a vague topic that is never clear and suspiciously open-ended, which speaks to the kind of dicey life Nick himself was leading. The constant parroting of "the Master" reveals Nick's anxiety to emulate Henry James who is "both the model for Hollinghurst's narrative method and the sign of a peculiar kind of ironic aesthetic sensibility which is central to the novel" (Eastham 509). There is also a subtle humour in order to reveal the moral stance in dealing with Henry James as Nick is reduced from the ostensibly Henry James scholar to a sheer puppeteer who throws gimmicks about James or just quotes James to impress the young men at the Ogee office.

13 What is characteristically Jamesian about Hollinghurst's narrative style is the way he proposes that a character should not be defined "by sharp ethical distinctions but by a shared condition: the susceptibility to being 'seen right through' is, he insists, universally distributed, and thus the morality tale he sketches seems haunted by a vision of a collectivity where moral distinctions are strangely irrelevant" (Kurnick 214). This "shared condition" is largely Jamesian in nature, as the readers partake in the life of the characters. Hollinghurst shares this vision of collectivity as his characters, marching towards the end, carve up a shared condition of scandal and exposure regardless of whether they survive it or not. As the novel moves to the end, everything comes tumbling down. Leo dies of AIDS, and Wani now look ghastly; his parents continue their concealment plan by saying that he caught AIDS from a lavatory seat. Gerald Feddens has difficulty keeping his parliamentary position in 1987 as he is already being investigated for financial wrongdoings. Moreover, word reaches the press, already gathered outside his Notting Hill mansion, that Gerald's tenant is the lover of Wani Ouradi, the son of a millionaire. Again ironically enough, as things start falling apart for the Feddens, they lash out at Nick. Clearly enough, Nick's homosexuality is tolerated by the Feddens household as long as it is not threatening. Gerald and Rachel do not really mind keeping Nick in their house as long as they can turn a blind eye about his sexual activity. The novel ends with Nick's ejection from the house and family. It is a moment of self-fulfilling prophesy. When Nick answers the question of how James would have treated them, by saying "we wouldn't have realized until just before the end that he'd seen right through us" (123), it becomes sheer premonition as all these characters are exposed, whether justifiably or not, to public scandals. Standing outside, homeless and probably sick, Nick is terrified by a surge of "emotions from every stage of his short life, weaning, homesickness, envy and self-pity" (438). Together with James, Nick has now seen right through himself.

14 The Jamesian presence in the novel, as sustained by ironies and implications, projects a conscious commentary that demoralizes characters. In a conversation with Howard and Simon, Nick feels that "he was prostituting the Master, but then there was an element of self-mockery ... He was at the height of a youthful affair with his writer, in love with his rhythms, his ironies, and his idiosyncrasies, and loving his most idiosyncratic moments best of all" (182-183). Again the reference to ironies as a Jamesian approach is stressed in relation to the moral sense as Sam comments that it "sounds like Henry James called everyone beautiful and marvellous" (183). In response to that, Nick asserts the moral sense as part of the James's moments: "Oh, *beautiful, magnificent ... wonderful.* I suppose it's really more what the characters call each other, especially when they're being wicked. In the later books, you

know, they do it more and more, when actually they're more and more ugly – in a moral sense" (183). The use of irony and implications is unequivocal here. James has his characters say something, such as "*beautiful, magnificent ... wonderful*" when they actually mean the opposite as they know how wicked they have become. By using this technique James implies that characters describe each other pleasantly although they are conscious of their moral deterioration. What they describe becomes an ironic comment on who they really are. To James, the aesthetic sense and moral awareness are tantamount: "The consciousness most sensitive to impressions is liable to be the most moral. So in James there is an equation between the aesthetic and the moral sense, and the individual who most appreciates the beauty of a Renaissance painting is also the most moral" (Raleigh 111). In other words, Nick's failure to maintain an aesthetic and academic interest in James accentuates by implication his inability to speak from a moral high ground as he swings between his homosexual private life and the heterosexual household where he believes he wants to belong. Consequently, Hollinghurst puts the gay experience at the centre of a panorama of British society in that decade, with sexual freedom and AIDS symbolising the transformation of society and the concomitant sense of moral uncertainty. The notion of culture and beauty in relation to the economic and political status "remains both in and beyond Nickolas' fate and it is Alan Hollinghurst's preoccupation with this relation that marks his common ground with Henry James" (Rivkin 289). James and Hollinghurst are both inclined to see morality as the playground of culture and beauty. Both James and Hollinghurst introduce characters who are vividly alive and yet are struggling in their imperfect ways to realize their destinies in a world that lacks moral clarity. Henry James's presence in *The Line of Beauty* translates itself through the lives and acts of pretentious characters who fail to come to terms with who they really are. They are the product of a world in which what seems is not always what is real. The final exposure that the novel brings at the end is not a moral tragedy as much as a dramatic representation of the inevitable consequence of living a self-lie. The attempt to actualize Henry James as a literary vehicle exposes the characters' collective and excessive indulgence and questions their sense of identity, which is largely torn between the illogical and the incoherent and, therefore, is rendered morally susceptible.

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