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Alan Hollinghurst's *The Folding Star*: A Tale of Psychopathology in a Neo-Romantic Setting

Abstract

Alan Hollinghurst's 1994 novel *The Folding Star* tells the story of a gay man who develops an obsessive fascination with his seventeen-year-old student. The first-person narrative focuses on the protagonist's emotional suffering: he gradually succumbs to masochistic and sadistic impulses and nurtures a melancholic condition which eventually leads to his failure and the permanent loss of his object of desire. The aim of this article is to read Hollinghurst's novel as a study of an emotional disorder, using the conceptual tools provided by psychoanalysis, a method born at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. *The Folding Star* recreates a *Fin de siècle* aura, and exploits the then established links between homosexuality, psychopathology, oversensitivity and aestheticism. With this novel, Hollinghurst investigates and mocks conventions and stereotypes related both to modernism and to homosexuality.

Over the last twenty-five years Alan Hollinghurst has established himself as the most prominent contemporary British gay novelist. His fourth novel, *The Line of Beauty* won him the Man Booker Prize in 2004, and following the release of *The Stranger's Child* in 2011 he received the Bill Whitehead Award for Lifetime Achievement. Throughout his career Hollinghurst has been carrying out a consistent literary project: to give an account of the gay presence in Britain in the 20th and the 21st century. Through their setting and themes, Hollinghurst's novels have a distinctly English character, but at the same time they are peopled mainly with homosexual characters of various ages, whose stories, lifestyles, mores, and appearance add up to create a multifaceted gay universe which thrives in the background, as if underneath official British history. Often on the verge of stereotype, the author's portrayals of members of the gay community reveal regularities which suggest the existence of a collective identity. The characters represent different ways of living the homosexual experience, nevertheless they fall into distinguishable types, and often share similar fascinations, disappointments, or traumas.

While Hollinghurst's debut *The Swimming-Pool Library* revolved around sex, carnality and promiscuity, the second novel, *The Folding Star* focuses on psychology and emotions. It tells the story of Edward Manners, a disaffected thirty-

three-year-old gay man who leaves England to earn his living as a language tutor in a Flemish city. The first-person narrative concentrates on Edward's emotional suffering and his tormented inner life, while contrasting it with his relative lack of action and satisfaction in his actual life. Almost immediately after his arrival in Flanders, Edward falls in love, or rather, develops an obsessive fascination with his seventeen-years-old student, Luc Altidore. As the narrative progresses, Edward succumbs to masochistic and sadistic impulses and nurtures a melancholic condition which eventually leads to his failure and the permanent loss of his object of desire.

This paper focuses on Edward's emotional disorder as the organizing axis of the plot. The protagonist's errant behaviour can be best interpreted within the framework of psychoanalysis, as a neurosis which takes on various forms that range from violence to withdrawal, accompanied by instances of masochism, sadism, and melancholia. Hollinghurst creates a neurotic protagonist in order to explore a set of aesthetic, ideological and behavioural patterns traditionally associated on the one hand with homosexuality and on the other, with a *Fin de siècle* hypersensitivity. It is crucial to remember that "homosexuality" is a term created at the end of the 19th century to denote a sexual disorder which was supposed to be treated by psychiatrists. Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and later Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* are the two founding works that link homosexuality to pathology. Hollinghurst makes clear references both to psychoanalysis, and to symbolist art and literature, in order to recreate an aura in which Edward functions as a melodramatic figure, a caricature of the Neo-Romantic, pathologized homosexual. In this way, the author tackles a repository of traditions and clichés which have built up around the figure of "the homosexual," both psychological and aesthetic.

1. The Neurotic

German psychoanalyst Karen Horney, who devoted her life to the study of neurosis, defines it as "a psychic disturbance brought about by fears and defences against these fears, and by attempts to find compromise solutions for conflicting tendencies" (26). It manifests itself through disturbed patterns of behaviours which fall into categories: "first, attitudes concerning giving and getting affections; second, attitudes concerning evaluation of the self; third, attitudes concerning self-assertion; forth, aggression; fifth, sexuality" (31). Hollinghurst's character displays symptoms related to all of these attitudes.

In a recent interview, Hollinghurst admitted that the opening page of his novels is always crucial to the whole structure of the book: "I've always had the feeling that the first page should somehow contain the whole book in nuce, that it should symbolize important things about the book" (Hollinghurst 2011). Indeed,

the first scene of *The Folding Star* foreshadows the driving theme of the novel, namely – the protagonist's neurosis – as it accumulates pathological patterns that recur throughout the narrative. In the scene Edward has just arrived to the Belgian town where he is going to teach and he is waiting for a tram. He notices another man at the tram-stop and asks him about the routes. The man smiles and answers politely, and this is enough for Edward to lose touch with reality and set off on a fantasy ride of desire and disappointment. Edward is overwhelmed by the man's smile and his dark-blond hair, and he decides to secretly follow him. On the tram, the man sits behind Edward, and the protagonist concentrates on the sensation of feeling the man's breath stirring the hair on the back of his neck. Edward fantasises about this moment as a beginning of a series of romantic or erotic adventures, but when he finally turns to the man to ask him a further question that he had been nurturing, the tram stops and the man jumps off to meet a woman waiting for him on the tram stop. They go away and the doors of the tram "fold with a sigh" (Hollinghurst 1998, 3).

It is striking how the mundane exchange with a stranger on the tram-stop becomes a dramatic narrative of an instantaneous infatuation, a secret following, courtship at the ticket validator, future plans, ecstatic sensations connected with his breathing, and finally – an abrupt disappointment. Moreover, the fellow passenger is totally unaware of being the object of such extreme emotional agitation. The whole plot follows a similar pattern of Edward's romantic turmoil, accompanied by feeble or non-existent events to back those states in real life, and a relative lack of awareness of the object of desire that he is the trigger for Edward's suffering. However, Edward's rich emotionality turns out not to be the effect of a spontaneous romantic disposition but a product of self-fashioning, an effort of imagination.

When a few days later Edward develops his passion for his young student Luc, it is worth noticing that this is not 'love at first sight' but at 'the second sight.' At his first visit at the Altidores, Edward catches a glimpse of Luc with a towel around his neck skidding through the kitchen behind his mother's back. During the class, Edward scrutinises his physical appearance and asks him a series of personal questions including "what kind of trunks did he wear to swim during the holidays and whether he could keep them on since they were borrowed from a friend and too big" (Hollinghurst 1998, 30). It is only later, when Edward alone in his little rented room plunges into endless fantasies about Luc, that the emotional work is done and the ground is made ready for a real romantic pitfall. Edward then sees Luc with a group of friends in the street and describes it:

It was a turning-point in my life, this second sighting of Luc. I knew at once how the shape of him lingered in me: there was a kind of miserable excitement, a lurch of the heart. At the moment I recognized him, and laid a hopeless claim to him, [...] I had the clearest sense of his indifference, as he stood there with his back to me. (43)

Edward starts secretly observing the group, and only when he eventually loses their sight, he realises: “my sudden burst of feeling had wrongfooted me. I had lost the chance of an easy greeting, a display of the amiable equality of our dealings. I could have put my arm around that broad suede back and claimed the beginning of a friendship” (44).

This is one of Edward’s many outbursts of feelings which hinder his possibility of entering into a meaningful relationship with other people. This condition can be described in terms of an emotional disorder which Horney calls “the neurotic need for affection.” Horney points to the fact that “The first characteristic that strikes us in the neurotic need for affection is its compulsiveness [...] a loss of spontaneity and flexibility. [...] [T]o a neurotic the gaining of affection is not primarily a source of additional strength or pleasure, or a luxury, but a vital necessity” (99). Indeed, Edward seeks affection everywhere. Despite his emotional devotion to Luc, he fantasises about any attractive boy or man that he encounters, and considers every one of them to be a potential partner. In fact, Edward has a lot of sex, within a few months of his stay in Belgium he knows everyone in the local gay club, and has had several lovers. Nevertheless, he is unhappy because his sexual exploits are actually a means of compensating for the lack of affection. Horney mentions, that there are some neurotics “whose contacts with others assume immediately, almost compulsively, a sexual colouring” (130). The most striking characteristics of this disposition are “a definite lack of discrimination in the choice of partners” and “the discrepancy between their readiness to have sexual relations, factual or imaginary, and the profound disturbance in their emotional relations to others” (131).

Although Edward claims that he “falls in love,” the reader can clearly see that this is not “love.” Horney explains that “the difference between love and the neurotic need for affection lies in the fact that in love the feeling of affection is primary, whereas in the case of a neurotic, the primary feeling is the need for reassurance, and the illusion of loving is only secondary” (94). The need for reassurance is triggered by the fact that the underpinning element of neurosis is anxiety. This applies to Edward who, despite his multiple sexual adventures, remains chronically anxious about his alleged unattractiveness. Neurosis is connected with an unstable self-esteem and this is also the reason why the neurotic craving for affection is by definition insatiable. In fact, a neurotic is unable to genuinely accept affection. Deep down it either meets with his disbelief or stirs up distrust and fear. He does not believe in it, because he is firmly convinced that no one can possibly love him.

The illusion of love is also a device to conceal a more unpleasant aspect of a neurotic’s personality:

a neurotic person does not recognize how much his sensitivities, his latent hostilities, his demands interfere with his own relationships; nor is he able to judge the

impression he makes on others or their reaction to him. Consequently he is at a loss to understand why his friendships, marriages, love affairs [...] are so often dissatisfactory. He tends to conclude that the others are at fault or that for some inexplicable reason he lacks the gift of being popular. Thus he keeps chasing the phantom of love. (Horney 91–92)

Neurotic anxiety is generated by repressed hostility and it generates more hostility in a recurrent feedback loop. Edward is hostile to virtually every stranger whom he sees as a potential rival. Two most striking examples include a couple of Spanish girls renting a room next to his, and an Englishman Rodney Young, who happens to be doing research in the same town.

Edward is constantly upset about the noise that the Spanish girls make or the hot water that they use up. However, it turns out later that the girls are scared of Edward because he is the one to come back late and drunk every evening, making all kinds of disturbing and awkward sounds. As for the noises that Edward gets so frustrated with, it is about the sound of the girls laughing and playing the guitar which exacerbates Edward's feeling of solitude (although the first-person narrative conceals this fact), but also bursts his bubble of the fantasy world in which he likes to remain. Another issue is that the girls receive an extremely handsome Spanish visitor, and Edward bitterly fantasises about the pleasures that they might be having (he even eavesdrops on what is happening in their room, and hears a rhythmic, thumping sound, only to realise that it is the sound of his own blood pumping). Edward's paranoid visions are compromised when it turns out that the boy is the Spanish girls' brother, and one evening drunk Edward makes a pass on the man which is an embarrassing and terrifying experience for the victim.

As for Rodney Young, the first time Edward meets him is when Young, standing with a city map in the middle of the street is asking Luc (who just happened to be passing by) about the way to a chapel. Edward's possessiveness and neurotic jealousy makes it unacceptable for him to see Luc being the attention of another man. Edward immediately develops a very negative disposition towards the Englishman, especially because certain parallels between them (nationality, age, academic interest in arts) strengthen the protagonist's impression of Rodney being a rival. Edward spitefully never refers to the man using his real name (he claims to never remember it) and instead calls him names like Rex Stout, Rodney Strong (which emphasise the man's physical threat and fearful sexuality). Edward's malice is revealing, as it touches on the kernel of his neurosis, avoiding Rodney's actual name – Young – hints directly at Edward's most inner painful secret: the inability to deal with his passing youth, a topic which will be discussed later in this paper.

2. Narcissism

Edward's unstable self-esteem is characteristic of another neurotic disposition, namely – the narcissistic personality disorder. According to Sam Vaknin's definition:

Pathological narcissism is a life-long pattern of traits and behaviours which signify infatuation and obsession with one's self to the exclusion of all others and the egotistic and ruthless pursuit of one's gratification, dominance and ambition. As distinct from healthy narcissism which we all possess, pathological narcissism is maladaptive, rigid, persisting, and causes significant distress, and functional impairment. (7)

Hollingurst makes deliberate allusions to narcissism throughout the novel. It is evoked at the very beginning of the book by the name of the school, St Narcissus, which Luc used to attend before getting expelled, and which Edward can see every day from the window of his rented room. Narcissism is sometimes wrongly interpreted as pure self-love when, in fact, narcissistic self-absorption can be more accurately described as excessive self-consciousness. In a number of scenes Edward contemplates his face in mirrors and this provokes a torrent of conflicting thoughts, he also mediates the vision of himself through fantasies of how others may see him, since he is unable to develop a stable, positive self-image on his own. For instance, upon Edward's first visit to a local gay bar he establishes eye-contact with a sexy teenager and follows him to the lavatory but the boy ignores Edward and locks himself in a cabin. Edward, discouraged, has to retreat and this immediately makes him self-conscious: "I hung back and looked in the mirror at Edward Manners, the pudging, bespectacled English teacher twice his age" (22). In another scene towards the beginning of the novel, Edward admires his reflection in a tiny mirror:

my cropped face looked good in it – like the features of any biker in the classic frame of his helmet. I swept my thick black hair around – my best feature, which people sometimes thought was dyed [...] I imagined Luc might quite admire it, and see the claim it made for my being romantic and young. *He ought to see it in this mirror, which left out all the rest of me.* I thought of [...] my steady disappointment at how I'd turned out and was likely to stay – never having looked fabulous in a swimsuit, caught in other people's photographs with a certain undeniable burliness. While my hair was still wet I combed it back, and it lay appealingly where I left it. It appealed to me, that is to say, though perhaps to other people it was the tell-tale feature of my self-delusion. (40; emphasis mine)

The passage shows how any self-appreciation is immediately countered with self-dissatisfaction. In fact, narcissists seek attention, admiration, and support from their

environment because it is essential to their unstable self-esteem. Their hunger for constant approval from others results from a deflated, inadequate self-perception. According to Dave Kelly:

[a narcissist] strives for recognition and prestige to compensate for the lack of a feeling of self-worth [...], is prone to feel shamed and humiliated and especially hyper-anxious and vulnerable to the judgements of others [...], is self-conscious, due to a dependence on approval from others. (“Compensatory Narcissistic Personality Disorder”)

Narcissists suffer as they are excessively preoccupied with themselves and with their personal adequacy, and unable to concentrate on another human being. Thus, their own self becomes the object not only of their libido (which accounts for undivided attention and interest, self-love, the desire to remain in constant contact with one's self), but also the destrudo (in Freudian psychoanalysis, it is the energy of the death instinct, or the destructive impulse, which accounts for aggressiveness, or sadism). This is why a narcissist will experience strong mood swings – from love and self-admiration, to self-abasement, suicidal thoughts, inferiority complex, and narcissistic depression.

Since the narcissist is pathologically focused on him or herself, he or she loses touch with reality, and may experience the world as if it were behind a thick pane of glass. Narcissists may feel as if they were deprived of agency in the outside world, and the objects from the outside world – including people as their objects of desire – are perceived as not fully real. For Edward, the thick pane of glass that separates him from the real world is art and literature. Edward presents himself from the beginning of the novel as a man equipped with an excessive erudition of the pastoral idealist (and later we actually learn that he is an unaccomplished poet and novelist). He carries with himself a time-worn edition of a collection called *The Poets of Our Time*, from which he quotes compulsively, and he clings to the illusion of mastering his life through literature which does not turn out to be translatable into real-life experience. In an analysis of *The Folding Star*, critic Christian Lassen claims that “this reveals Edward's tendency – throughout the novel – to misread the world around him, his tendency to confuse the literal and the literary, reality and fiction, and, consequently, his tendency to narcissistically and myopically interblend art and life” (153). Hollinghurst cunningly emphasises this feature of the protagonist: as a matter of fact Edward is myopic and his having a blurred vision of the surrounding world is mentioned several times throughout the novel. The metaphoric emotional myopia is thus doubled by a literal physical condition.

Edward's connection to literature is also expressed in the fact the he perceives himself as a kind of literary character, and he models his life according to literary traditions. For example, because he is homosexual, he sees himself as an aesthete and a decadent. The link between decadence, aestheticism and homo-

sexuality has been analysed by Kaye Mitchell: “At the end of the 19th century, the emergent figure of the male homosexual is closely identified with Aestheticism and with a certain philosophy and practice of decadence which was a fin-de-siècle euphemism for homosexuality” (43). Alan Sinfield further explains how the Aesthetician

fits the model of the queer man – dandified, effeminate, leisured, flamboyant – personified by Oscar Wilde. Aestheticism fits the model because high culture is regarded, implicitly and perhaps residually, as a leisured preserve, and as feminine in comparison with the (supposedly) real world of business and public affairs. (150)

Edward’s life is heavily influenced by the Neo-Romantic atmosphere that he attributes to the Flemish city where he is staying, and – as I have already mentioned – Edward fancies seeing himself and experiencing his life as if he were the protagonist of a Neo-Romantic story. Indeed, the novel abounds with references to Modernism and Symbolism, and Hollinghurst playfully exploits these conventions to simultaneously justify and mock Edward’s illusions with a series of intertextual references.¹ One prominent intertext is *Death in Venice*: in chapter 8 Luc and his friends go to the sea-side for the week-end, and Edward, together with a friend, Matt, secretly follows them. They break into an abandoned house (which is Matt’s initiative) and from there Edward spies on Luc lying on the beach, just like Gustav Aschenbach spied on Tadzio. There are several other parallels, including both Luc and Tadzio described as stunningly beautiful youths, the fact that both Edward and Gustav are drawn deep into devastating, inward passion and develop an obsession, the secret followings, the compulsive need to whisper the words “I love you!” secretly, and references to Narcissus: one evening, when Tadzio directs a charming smile at him, Gustav compares this to Narcissus smiling at his own reflection. Hollinghurst’s character compulsively reliving a Modernist story may be interpreted as another manifestation of Edward’s narcissistic tendency to entertain fantasies of being unique and special, to build up an image of high self-worth.

3. Masochism and Sadism

The link between sadism and masochism was first made by Sigmund Freud in his 1905 *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. According to Freud, “masochism is nothing more than an extension of sadism” because “[e]very active perversion is [...] accompanied by its passive counterpart” (26, 34).² Hollinghurst’s inspiration to include sadomasochism in his novel is also rooted in a Modernist intertext: *The Folding Star* is in part a transposition of the Flemish Symbolist short novel *Bruges-la-Morte* by Georges Rodenbach, and the story of the main character of the

Flemish novel is very similar to the story of the painter Edgar Orst who becomes a background character in *The Folding Star*. Paul Echevin, who is the father of Edward's second pupil, Marcel, and also the curator of the local art museum, introduces Edward to the twilight world of Edgar Orst when he asks Edward to help him write a monograph on Orst. Edward slowly discovers the secret biography of the reclusive artist whose life was overshadowed by the loss of his wife and muse, actress Jane Byron. She has gone missing during a swim in the sea off the coast of Ostend and Orst's life becomes fixated on the effort to get over that loss. Eventually Orst meets a laundry girl called Martha who strikingly resembles Jane, and he starts a morbid relationship with her. The relationship largely revolves around Orst's attempts to immortalise his lover by means of photography, taking pictures of Martha which are on the verge of pornography and sadomasochism. Edward gradually starts identifying with Edgar Orst, and "his longings and his melancholic disposition finally results in a death-driven fixation with Luc" (Lassen 148). This death drive that becomes Edward's driving force results in masochistic and sadistic impulses.

In an analysis comparing Freud's and Deleuze's approach to masochism, Thanem and Wallenberg point to the fact that the script structuring the masochistic performance is first shaped by fantasy. Hence, the masochist "slave" is the hero of the masochist "drama." The drama is narrativized and structured by the masochist before the actual performance can take place, thus ascribing agency and power to the masochist victim. The masochist is an agent who, via the masochistic contract, actively chooses to locate himself in a passive and inferior position. The masochistic world is coloured by dramatic suspense and intimacy wherein the masochist hero is a supersensual hero, as masochism involves exaggerated love for the other. In masochism, pain remains within the realm of possibility, it is the fear of pain and retribution and humiliation which drives the masochist. "Hence, the masochist slave's infatuation, worship, and submission before his master is more important than physical pain or actual sex" (Thanem and Wallenberg 7).

There are several scenes in the book demonstrating that Edward's suffering is self-inflicted, and that Luc is only an element in the protagonist's self-drama. Indeed, Edward's propensity for self-torturing longings goes back to his early teenage years, which will be discussed in the following part of this paper. However, Edward's death-drive also finds expression in sadism. He is sadistic towards the less attractive pupil Marcel, and clearly enjoys making him suffer and fear his teacher. But the most obvious and shocking evidence of sadism is when, after an unexpected encounter in a gay bar, Edward takes Luc home and finally has sex with him. It turns out that Luc is gay; it has actually become quite obvious much earlier in the novel, but again – Edward is too myopic and too much absorbed in his fears and delusions to read it. The sex scene is brutal, narrated by Edward in the following way:

I fucked him across the armchair [...] I had to see his face and read what I was doing in his wincing and gasps, his violent blush as I forced my cock in [...] I saw tears slide from the corners of his eyes, his upper lip curled back in a gesture like anguish or goaded aggression. [...] I was [...] only half-aware [...] of a deaf desire to hurt him, to watch a punishment inflicted and pay him back for what he had done to me, the expense and humiliations of so many weeks. I saw the pleasure start up inside for him [...] but I made him flinch with steeper little thrusts. (337; emphasis mine)

Again, in this scene Edward is fixated on himself, and the pleasure he takes is obviously not from the longed-for encounter with his beloved, but from taking revenge for his narcissistic injury. The lover is distant and, as if, absent. Edward craves Luc's gaze, however, the boy's eyes were, as Edward puts it, "oddly veiled, fluttering and colourless like some Orst temptress's" (337). Even in this intimate and landmark moment Edward stays within his mind-frame, mediated through Orst's morbid and decadent art.

Although Edward's darker, violent side becomes evident in the sex scene with Luc, it is foreshadowed much earlier in the novel by the appearance of another character, Matt. Hollinghurst introduces the character of Matt as an apparent opposition to Edward: an unemotional sexual predator who easily succeeds in seducing those who Edward only dreams about. However, Matt's promiscuity represents what Edward himself represses and secretly admires, what he denies in his obsession with Luc, that it is purely sexual. Edward also secretly admires Matt's falsity, superficiality and his double-faced, criminal nature (for example his shabby, dingy apartment from which he emerges elegant and spotless). The two men start a bizarre relationship and Edward becomes Matt's regular lover, despite his emotional engagement with Luc and a more or less stable relationship he has formed in the meantime with yet another man, Cherif, a local inhabitant of Moroccan descent who had fallen in love with Edward. Hollinghurst oddly suggests a mysterious mind-bondage between Edward and Matt: when the former is away in England, he has a nightmarish dream of Matt having sex with Luc several times in a row. This dream is very meaningful – Edward relives his fantasies (to have vehement and multiple sexual intercourses with Luc); however, he cannot picture himself in this scene, but the more attractive counterpart, Matt. The scene is a simultaneous realisation of what Edward dreams of (to have sex with Luc), aspires to (to become like Matt, who is his better, more successful alter-ego), and dreads (his prey being snatched up from him by a rival). At the end of the novel it turns out that Matt indeed had sessions of repetitive sex with Luc while Edward was away, and Edward's dream thus appears as premonitory, adding to the mysterious, Neo-Gothic atmosphere of the novel, but also hinting at Freud's interpretation of dreams as forms of wish fulfilment – the satisfaction of a desire through an involuntary thought process.

Similarly to Orst, Matt is Edward's exteriorized alter-ego. By introducing these characters Hollinghurst reveals multiple layers of Edward's irreconcilable

inner conflicts: his antithetical and schizoid visions of the self and his contradictory aspirations. A bolder interpretation of the eerie similitude between Edward's fantasises and Matt's actions may be that Matt is nothing more than the creation of Edward's schizophrenic mind, and that in fact Edward himself committed all the deeds he admires or loathes Matt for (a narrative device which can be found in contemporary psychedelic horror fiction such as Jonathan Carroll's or Chuck Palahniuk's).

4. Melancholia

The binding element to understand Edward's disturbed psyche is melancholia. Sigmund Freud makes the following link between melancholia, narcissism and sadism:

In melancholia, the occasions which give rise to the illness [...] include all those situations of being slighted, neglected or disappointed, which can import opposed feelings of love and hate into the relationship. [...] If the love for the object – a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up – takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering. The self-tormenting in melancholia, which is without doubt enjoyable, signifies, just like the corresponding phenomenon in obsessional neurosis, a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject's own self. (1985, 56)³

The Folding Star is a triptych, the first and the third part of the novel are set in Belgium, while the middle part, "Underwoods" describes Edward's sudden trip to England for the funeral of his first lover, Dawn. Under the pretext of Edward's nostalgic and tragic comeback to where he spent his childhood and teenage years, "Underwoods" retells the story of Edward's youth, which was shaped by a difficult relation with his parents, and multiple disappointments. The account is filled with recollections that explain Edward's longings and his melancholic disposition. The reader also discovers that Edward's first sexual experience, a night that he spent with Dawn in a tent on a common, was traumatic partly because of the intrusion of an older man. The "ghoulish" face of the 33-year-old stranger, his too tight jeans and swept-back black hair are "an obviously sinister portent of Edward's own future" (Alderson 39). Although the protagonist distances himself from the man as well as from other figures moving among the trees, the scene haunts him ever since. The middle part of the novel provides the most prominent argument in favour of the psychoanalytical analysis of the novel, and sheds new light on the overall meaning of Edward's suffering. In psychoanalysis, the melancholic condition describes grief for a loss which a person is unable to fully comprehend or identify,

and is the opposite of a healthy mourning. Lassen points to the fact that Edward gradually descends into a state of melancholia because for him “loss takes on an additive dimension that interblends previous moments of traumatic damage with present ones” (Lassen 149). Indeed, Edward excessively ponders on his unrealized passions and romantic failures. However, a more audacious interpretation would be to conclude that Edward develops melancholia because he is actually mourning over his lost youth. This by definition cannot be recovered, and as a result his condition becomes chronic and tragic. In Edward’s own words, since his teenage infatuation, even though it had no future ahead, “nothing [has been] quite the same. Everything in some way melancholy, frantic or foredoomed” (Hollinghurst 1998, 200). Edward thus stays forever suspended in his dissatisfaction, unable to form a positive attitude towards his present self or his multiple lovers.

Conclusion

The Folding Star is a sombre, dream-like work about an annihilating desire. It shows the dangers of self-delusion and narcissism. Hollinghurst’s protagonist is neurotic, tainted with chronic anxiety and hostility, constantly seeking reassurance that he is still attractive. His rich emotionality is actually a set of emotional disorders which hinder his possibility to develop any kind of meaningful relationship with Luc or anyone else. Those emotions are too strong, misplaced, self-directed and have a morbid resonance, as Edward exhibits fetishist, voyeuristic and sadist tendencies. Through the character of Edward, Hollinghurst explores a certain historical stereotype of the homosexual: alienated, immersed in art and literature, sentimental and melodramatic, but at the same time criminal, promiscuous and on a never-ending quest to find the perfect lover. Hollinghurst complicates the stereotypical image as the protagonist exhibits features which remain in sharp contrast: aestheticism and fascination with beauty, with the propensity to fantasize about the ideal of romantic love on the one hand, and the everyday sexual adventures and hedonistic or even nihilistic lifestyle on the other. Hollinghurst uses literary conventions and rewrites the classics to his own ends – queering both psychoanalytical theory and modernist prose. The first person narrative is like the discourse of a patient undergoing a psychoanalytical therapy: a deeply subjective and distorted rendition of actual events mixed with memories, desires, dreams and fantasies. These reveal the character’s phobias, anxieties, hostilities and compulsions which become obvious to the reader but not to the protagonist. The excessive, almost pathetic passion experienced by Edward allowed Lassen to classify *The Folding Star* as a “camp pastoral elegy” (148). This complex mosaic of features constitutes a literary complement to psychological and sociological descriptions of the homosexual identity, historically and socially conditioned. Just like in *The Swimming Pool Library* Hollinghurst creates certain character “types,” his gay protagonists

have distinguishable traits and are contrasted with one another, they are distinct and expressive, to some extent stereotypical, however escaping easy classification or sweeping judgements.

Notes

- 1 Critics emphasise that *The Folding Star* is actually a parody of Symbolist fiction (Stead 361), or that it “knowingly flirts with the ridicule” (Lassen 148).
- 2 Torkild Thanem and Louise Wallenberg further explain Freud’s viewpoint: “Indeed, it is all within the masochist. At any time the masochist can turn into a sadist. But not only are all sadists ex-masochists. Both masochists and sadists are sadomasochists as both desires are embodied within one and the same individual” (5).
- 3 In conclusion, Freud asks the question “whether a loss in the ego irrespectively of the object – a purely narcissistic blow to the ego – may not suffice to produce the picture of melancholia” (1985, 58) thus suggesting that the lost object of desire may be secondary and incidental, a pretext to develop melancholia (see also Clewell 47).

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