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Helena Gurfinkel Dr.

*Southern Illinois University Edwardsville*, hgurfin@siue.edu

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Resisting Readability: Dyslexia and Sexuality in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Sparsholt Affair*

HELENA GURFINKEL

In *The New Yorker* review of Hollinghurst's latest novel, *The Sparsholt Affair* (2017), Alexandra Schwartz scrambles to list what she considers the author's psychological and narrative oversights. In relation to the novel's portrayal of Jonathan "Johnny" Sparsholt, the son of David Sparsholt, of the scandalous titular affair, she writes,

Hollinghurst has further handicapped himself by limiting Johnny's ability with words. He is dyslexic, and not much of a talker, though in place of verbal gifts he has visual ones. He becomes a portrait painter, devoting his life, as Hollinghurst has, to the difficult art of verisimilitude, while himself remaining something of a blank canvas. (Schwartz 2018, n.p.)

Even if one understands the ironic use of the word "handicapped" in the context, its use in relation to a learning disability raises a red flag, as does Schwartz's contention that Hollinghurst seeks verisimilitude above all else. The two concerns are related. Hollinghurst has a longstanding but virtually unnoticed interest in disability, particularly dyslexia. In his 1997 novel *The Spell*, a secondary character, Justin, the partner of the protagonist, Robin Woodfield, has dyslexia, which, in fairness to Schwartz, does not develop much beyond contributing to Justin's characterization as a childlike, dependent character, a charming but perpetually struggling actor. Queerness and disability problematically collide, in other words, to signify a lack of development, an inability to

reach adulthood. Hollinghurst returns to his fascination with dyslexia in his latest novel, which links dyslexia and queerness in ways that are, at once, empowering and epistemologically destabilizing.

Upon the publication of the novel in the UK and then in the US, Hollinghurst went on a book tour and gave several public readings and talks in 2017 and 2018. The themes that he covers and questions that he answers are similar in many ways. In a number of interviews, the writer notes that the novel's narrative structure encompasses multiple points of view, which makes it not particularly easy to follow. He also underscores the theme of reading threaded through and mentions the difficulty of reading, both of texts and of people, as one of the underlying ideas of his latest work. Hollinghurst notes that the novel reveals our frequent inability to know, or to read, well those with whom we think we are intimate or familiar. He also states that he "makes fun" of people who cannot read. In the course of the interview blitz, he does mention Jonathan Sparsholt's dyslexia, but he humorously lumps the differently abled character with all those who cannot "read" others metaphorically.<sup>i</sup>

Without unduly elevating authorial intent, one wonders whether Hollinghurst (or his text) dismisses, or makes fun of, dyslexia, or uses it as merely a metaphor for misreading as an epistemological practice. In both cases, the approach is seemingly able-ist. I do not believe that we can dismiss the novel quite so easily, however. Hollinghurst does deploy dyslexia metaphorically inasmuch as, like queerness, it forecloses the possibilities of legibility and reading, both of which, if unchecked, can lead to the traditionalist taxonomies of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness. Simultaneously, Hollinghurst strategically accords Jonathan Sparsholt legible identities (gay and dyslexic), in order to empower his alternative means of reading, living, and representation.

### ***“Wordblindness”***

The first scientific definition of dyslexia belongs to the R. Berlin. In 1887, he published a monograph, in which he defined it as a loss, or impairment of reading ability. Ten years prior, A. Kussmaul had coined the term “wordblindness.” Since the nineteenth century, dyslexia has been divided into acquired and congenital; it has been determined that its origin is in the occipital lobe (Smythe 2011, 39). Ian Smythe additionally cites the following recent definition produced by the Health Council of the Netherlands in his 2011 article in *The British Journal of Hospital Medicine*: “Dyslexia is present when the automatization of word identification (reading) and/or spelling does not develop or does so very incompletely or with great difficulty” (43). In an earlier article in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Sally E. Shaywitz defines dyslexia similarly, focusing specifically on the dimension of reading relevant to the novel:

Basically, reading comprises two main processes — decoding and comprehension. In dyslexia, a deficit at the level of the phonologic module impairs the ability to segment the written word into its underlying phonologic elements. As a result, the reader experiences difficulty, first in decoding the word and then in identifying it. The phonologic deficit is domain-specific; that is, it is independent of other, nonphonologic, abilities. (1998, n.p.)

Further, Shaywitz notes a lack of connection between the intellectual ability of a child with dyslexia and their inability to read in a conventional manner. In her introduction to the special issue on dyslexia in a journal titled *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Kristin L. Sayeski notes that the pedagogical and accommodation-related issues arise because dyslexia is often too complex to

fit into the definitions provided by the 2006 Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (2019, 170-171). In their 2003 article, Sally and Bennett Shaywitz note that developmental dyslexia occurs on a continuum and reflects the dyslexic subject's socioeconomic status and quality of education, as well as, occasionally, their native language. What is significant to my discussion of dyslexia in *The Sparsholt Affair* is that it is constructed and complicated, rather than a strictly medical term, and it often requires a flexibility of definition. In some respects, dyslexia itself, the presumed inability to read well, defies attempts to read it and to taxonomize it. Likewise, it can be described in terms of reading, as well as in terms of visual representation. Accordingly, unable to read well, Jonathan Sparsholt, a visual artist, deploys painting as an alternative language.

### ***Reading, Queering***

Since at least the dawn of the twenty-first century, disability and queer studies have found a way to enter into a conversation and to find commonalities, both philosophical and political. In a 2000 article, Shelley Tremain argues that disabled queer subjects are “incoherent” because “...exclude[ed] from full consideration” (298) by queer theorists. Robert McRuer and Abby Wilkerson, in the Introduction to their co-edited special issue *Desiring Disability*, published in *GLQ* in 2003, make their starting point a post-2001 consolidation of the nation that had resulted in the marginalization of both queer and disabled citizens. They also note that the first signs of solidarity between queerness and disability emerged (or were forced to emerge by dint of relentless discrimination) in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis. In particular, describing one of the ways in which the title of their special issue, “Desiring Disability,” unites the two political movements, they write:

We might, however, "desire disability" in a...resistant sense, according to which a politicized disability rights movement would continue to position itself to expose ...the illogic on which...oppressive systems are founded...and to engage in "practices of freedom"... [R]ewriting the audacious gay liberationist announcement that "in a free society everyone will be gay"...and suggesting that "in a free society everyone will be disabled," is... a recognition that another world can exist in which an incredible variety of bodies and minds are valued and identities are shaped... (McRuer and Wilkerson 2003, 14)

Ending discrimination and fighting for a more just world in which identities are not prisons, are the goals that unite queerness and disability. Heteronormativity and able-ism are the two forces that stand in the way of such changes and attempt, simultaneously, to absorb and to other the queer and the disabled. One of the contributors to the special issue, Patrick White, shows this process fascinatingly in "Sex Education; Or, How the Blind Became Heterosexual."

In his own contribution to the special issue, Robert McRuer deploys Lee Edelman's *Homographesis* and its central thesis of queerness as the principal tool of (mis)reading: "...The more flexible gay or lesbian body, in turn, enables what I call 'heteronormative epiphanies,' continually making available, to the out heterosexual, a sense of subjective wholeness, however illusory. As I flesh out and critique the contours of that epiphanic process, my central argument is that people with disabilities are also caught up in it" ( McRuer and Wilkerson 2003, 82). Three years later, McRuer published *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, which, to this day, remains the single most important theorization of the link between the two. Crip

theory, he writes, "...similarly has something to do with studying (in this case) how bodies and disabilities have been conceived and materialized in multicultural locations, and how they might be understood and imaged as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization..." (McRuer 2006, 33).

In "Queer/Fear: Disability, Sexuality, and the Other," Nancy J. Hirschmann likewise enumerates similarities between queerness and disability: struggles with "naming" and recuperating the formerly offensive terms; the gendering (usually the feminization) of the queer and disabled body; and the representation of otherness. She also, however, contends that the heteronormative and the able-bodied fear their Other, the queer and the disabled. She adds that fear also spreads into the disabled community broadly defined: at times, the disabled fear their own disability. Hirschmann ponders political strategies that may empower the disabled community and rid it of the terror of self-hatred. Formulating political identities is one, but Hirschmann also "suggest[s] that voluntary invisibility also offers a political strategy of ambiguity and uncertainty as a way to unsettle the ability of the nondisabled to police the boundaries of 'their' community" (2013, 146).

Hirschmann's idea of strategic invisibility, again, echoes Edelman's *Homographesis*, as well as the ways in which queerness and disability work in Hollinghurst's novel to disempower the hegemonic discourses of heterosexuality and ability. Specifically, Edelman argues that gay male bodies themselves become the crucibles of representation: "The legibility of gay sexuality as the site at which the unrepresentable finds representation as a resistance to the *logic* of representation thus effectively, if counter-intuitively, *secures* the order of representation and renders gay sexuality central to any enterprise of legibility, of identity-determination..." (1994, xv). As Edelman—in relation to gay male sexuality--, and Hirschmann—in relation to

disability—would argue, identitarian legibility afforded by the political efforts of the LGBTQ and disabled communities (and the intersecting communities) at times assists the hegemonic discourses of normalcy in taxonomizing the queer and/or disabled bodies. In Hollinghurst’s novel, dyslexia as an “inability” to read coalesces with queerness as a strategic misreading of identity to avoid discriminatory stereotypes. Just as the queerness of David Sparsholt stubbornly refuses to make sexuality comprehensible and easily categorized, so, too, the dyslexia of his son, Jonathan Sparsholt, is not merely an empowering identity (though it is that, as well), but a condition that we, as readers, share with him. Our reading of all characters, and especially their sexuality, is always a misreading.

A number of critics have noticed Hollinghurst’s trademark career-spanning insistence on an intersection between textuality and sexuality. Allan Johnson looks at this connection from various angles in his pioneering 2014 monograph *Alan Hollinghurst and the Vitality of Influence*. Angus Brown, in an essay published in another influential collection, *Alan Hollinghurst: Writing under the Influence* (2016), links queer sexuality both to the process of reading and to the materiality of the book. In his chapter on Hollinghurst and Ronald Firbank in *Sex and Sensibility in the Novels of Alan Hollinghurst* (2017), Paul Vlitos dissects the ways in which Firbank, one of the subjects of Hollinghurst’s graduate thesis, as well as one of his biggest literary influences, links sexuality to literary form, something that Hollinghurst has also done throughout his career. In other words, when it comes to Hollinghurst’s *oeuvre*, connecting sexuality, textuality, and reading is not new, but no research has related these subjects to dyslexia.

In his book *The Secret Life of Stories*, Michael Bérubé links disability to the process of reading in ways unrelated to queer theory: “Representations of disability are ubiquitous, yes, even or especially when you are not looking for them; but narrative *deployments* of disability do

not confine themselves to representation. They can also be narrative strategies, devices for exploring vast domains of human thought, experience, and action” (2018, 3). Bérubé objects to diagnosing fictional characters whom we may perceive as disabled yet insists that, as critics and readers, we should seek out and ponder “textual awareness and self-reflexivity” (138) in texts in which a narrator is not “simply” unreliable but differently abled cognitively. This idea adduces to the already present queer dimension of reading and misreading in Hollinghurst’s novel. With the exception of the first section, the third-person omniscient narrator takes on Jonathan’s point of view, which, because it belongs to a character with dyslexia, provides an insight into different modes of readability, including one afforded by the visual arts. Jonathan diagnoses himself as dyslexic in his own voice, which, without pathologizing or reducing disability either to a mere diagnosis or to a mere metaphor, strategically sanctions his identity.

### ***Sexuality and Representation in The Sparsholt Affair***

Jonathan Sparsholt’s character, who “cannot” read, is the one, who, according to the classic definition, grows and develops, so it is fair to say that *The Sparsholt Affair* is an artist novel about Jonathan. Conversely, David Sparsholt is the thematic sexual and epistemological flashpoint of the novel, because he limns unreadability. Jonathan supplants reading with painting, while David remains incomprehensible. The tension between reading and painting emerges at the reader’s first introduction to Jonathan. Norma Haxby, the wife of Clifford Haxby, David’s “partner in crime” and lover in the Sparsholt Affair, a fictional 1960s sex scandal, either does not read well, or refuses to do so. She asks Jonathan: “Do you get your artistic side from your mother, I suppose” (Hollinghurst 2017, 97). David answers that “Connie’s the arty one...always has been” (97). In response to Norma’s compliment, “Well, I know Connie’s a

great reader, isn't she...', David reveals what we need to know about Jonathan "Oh, well, Jonathan doesn't read...Never quite got the knack, have you, old lad" (97).

Irony permeates the awkward encounter. Neither Norma nor Connie seems to be able to read their husbands' sexuality; Connie, in her youth an avid reader of A. V. Dax, the famous father of her husband's Oxford lover, has a questionable literary taste. Painting and reading abilities cannot, it appears, be inherited together; Johnny's painting is a more reliable way of knowing the world than Connie's reading. At the same time, David's view of his son's inability to read is able-ist: it is a matter of not having a "knack" and not comparable to David's own lack of interest in reading (which he confesses in Oxford, and of which his son accuses him here: "You don't read much yourself, Dad..." [Hollinghurst 2017, 97]). Jonathan is "a terrible reader but he love[s] lettering" (126), a suggestion that the style in which a text is written holds in it more pleasure and reliability than the ever-impenetrable content.

The tension between reading and painting resurfaces when Johnny is first introduced to a group of friends in London, some of whom had known his father at Oxford, and all of whom become his adoptive family: "Ah,' said the first woman, 'you're a picture person. We thought you might be going to read to us.' 'Read to you?' said Johnny with a giggle" (Hollinghurst 2017, 160). Surrounded by literary luminaries and consummate readers, the painter, now about twenty years old, is embarrassed. Reading and painting exist on different plains, as does photography, which Johnny considers more effective. When he visits an exhibit called "Londoners at Home," at the National Gallery, he tries to read sexuality:

Occasionally, there were a couple of figures, two men, friends, or brothers, father and son. Johnny's instinct was for the lurking hint of sex in a photo, the shock of what a

photo could catch. As someone who wanted to paint people he envied it. A picture, unlike a dim labyrinth of the book, could be seen at once, but to bring it all to the front of the mind's eye was impossible. Some quite simple image might house an irreducible mystery; this he seemed always to have known. (Hollinghurst 2017, 200)

The book, requiring conventional reading ability, which Johnny lacks, remains “dim” (here, and throughout the novel, a lack of light symbolizes failure to penetrate the secrets of sexuality) and confusing like a labyrinth; by definition, a picture is more readable because it “could be seen all at once.” To a young painter, the “irreducible mystery” of representation remains intact. Photographs may hint at sexual relationships, but fully reveal “the truth” of desire they cannot. Inspired by photography, Jonathan gives up the abstract expressionism of his art-school years, and hopes “to focus on portraits...*Not* abstract” (Hollinghurst 2017, 244). Realist portraiture is Jonathan's alternative way of reading, his linguistic and epistemological reality. At this point, Jonathan is still “not a big reader,” and the word “dyslexia” does not appear; he defines himself as someone who lacks an ability, rather than someone, whose ability is alternative. Yet when Jonathan makes a decision to stand up for himself after a romantic rejection, he chooses to self-identify more explicitly and confidently.

As a young man, Jonathan is in love with Ivan Goyle, who spurns him in favor of a much older Evert Dax (David Sparsholt's Oxford admirer). During a pivotal erotic encounter, Jonathan chooses assertiveness:

He was excited, he turned and held Ivan again, his hard-on came and went, his hand lying, barely pressing, on the soft curved strip between his friend's rucket-up T-shirt and

the waistband of his pants. He thought there were countless things he could do nothing about—being gay and dyslexic, and in Ivan’s eyes, far too young. But this was a pure choice, it had the beauty of action, unlike the long compromise of being acted upon.

(Hollinghurst 2017, 279)

Johnny, in a manner characteristic of Hollinghurst, is ambivalent about essential/predetermined vs. chosen/fluid identity. It is clear that Jonathan desires Ivan, even if a bit tentatively (the “hard-on” goes in and out). It is not entirely clear whether Jonathan and Ivan have sex (they most likely do not), but Jonathan makes a conscious choice not to be “acted upon.” Consequently, two identity categories, “gay” and “dyslexic,” appear here as preordained, ones “he could do nothing about.” This is also the first time that the text names Jonathan’s disability.

Disability and sexuality appear together, in order to provide Jonathan with the agency to live a life, to experience - and act upon - desire, and deploy an alternative language for reading and art. That is to say, in a novel generally ambivalent about sexuality as a fixed identity and reading as a skill within reach, Hollinghurst strategically empowers Jonathan. This moment is crucial in dispelling the suspicion that the novel merely uses dyslexia as a metaphor for reading failure and does not portray the challenges that come with it. In his article on identity formation among persons with dyslexia, William Evans finds that his subjects’ self-identification is largely contextual and constructed. It always resists medicalization and prefers a psychology-based self-definition; lack of the subject’s ability to delineate dyslexia on their own terms significantly impairs their ability to function and to seek help when needed (Evans 2013, n.p.). Jonathan Sparsholt gets the opportunity to define himself; the recourse to the visual language as an alternative supports his identity and enables his career and personal life. A compromise of sorts

is reached: Jonathan becomes legible when legibility is needed, but desire as a whole remains murky.

Though the matters of desire remain unsettled on this psychologically trying vacation to Ivan's ancestral Wales, Jonathan's potential for an identity-driven life becomes clear. Jonathan reveals that he is getting ready to become a father to the child of Francesca and Una, his lesbian friends; the two men ponder "radical lesbian imaginings" (Hollinghurst 2017, 278) regarding conception and parenting. "Radical lesbian imaginings" put one in mind of the pre-queer-theory, identity-driven LGBT struggles of the 1970s, certainly having little to do with the novel's conceptualization of desire as non-political and forever ambiguous. Yet the text affords Jonathan the legible possibilities of biological fatherhood and, soon after the disappointment with Ivan, a long-term monogamous relationship with Pat. Just as dyslexia emerges as an at once unchangeable and empowering element of identity, so do the more essentialist politics of gay identity and domesticity make an appearance to ground Jonathan but not to dominate the novel. David remains an alternative to both.

■

Ironically, David Sparsholt, an engineer and businessman who despises reading, becomes the object of constant, obsessive attempts to know, carnally and psychologically, and to read. The novel locates reading, representation, and (usually non-heterosexual) desire invariably together, tied in an inescapable (k)not of error. The novel, then, contributes to a greater visibility of both disability and non-normative desire, but such visibility, paradoxically, is only possible if we acknowledge that both elude any efforts to define and classify.

The first section of the book, set at Oxford during the Blitz, introduces us to a group of undergraduates at St. Hilda's College, who had formed a literary club that sponsors visits of famous writers to the University. The first part is the only one narrated in a first person, by Freddie Green, a writer and presumably the only heterosexual in the group of undergraduates who befriend David Sparsholt in 1940, and his son, Jonathan, in the 1970s-2000s. We know that Freddie's diary is unpublished and unread until his death approximately forty years later. The diary reveals David's transactional sexual relationship with Evert Dax, but makes the narrator himself less reliable. A hidden diary, or a letter, discovered years later, is a familiar (frequently Gothic) fictional device that puts epistemological certainty further out of the reader's reach.

Even as the students decide whether to invite the famous writer A.V. Dax, the father of their friend, Evert, David Sparsholt, appears in the dark courtyard of the college. The initial appearance of the handsome eighteen-year-old engineering student is all ellipsis: "Good grief...did you see this, Dax?... 'Oh, what's that...?...'Freddie, have you seen this man?... 'Who is it?'... 'No, he's gone..." The very first time we see David Sparsholt, he goes in and an out of the reader's "sight," the multiple disjointed posed by the undergraduates desiring to know him in a variety of ways, underscoring the sense of uncertainty. The students' servant, Phil, notes that David "is not one of ours" (Hollinghurst 2017, 7). David Sparsholt is from the Brasenose College, lower-middle-class, science-minded, ostensibly heterosexual; the otherness formulated by Phil contributes to the sense of impossibility when getting to know Sparsholt the elder, even if possessing him sexually becomes possible momentarily for Evert Dax.

Freddie Green befriends David, both youths comically posing as sure-footed heterosexuals: Freddie claims to be the partner of the sexually and emotionally unavailable Jill, a student of art history and archeology, while David is engaged to Connie, who, for years,

presumably remains unaware of his bi-sexuality. Freddie also attempts to get to know David through reading:

It was perfectly easy to find out about him. In the Lodge next day I saw from the Boat Club notices that his initials were D. D, and from a tutorial list that he was an Engineer. These first meagre scraps were somehow discouraging: scientists and rowers moved in their own severe routines, set apart from the rest of us...To me there was something unyielding in his surname, a word like a machine part, as Peter said, or a small hard sample, perhaps, of some mineral ore; but now I was curious about D.D. (Hollinghurst 2017, 13)

D. D. (which, as we find out, stands for “David Drummond,” or “Drum,” as friends and family call him) may as well stand for “double difference”: the pursuit of sport and science makes David more masculine, as the selection of adjectives and nouns suggests: “a machine part,” “a small hard sample,” “something unyielding.” The masculine heterosexual engineer is a subject of reading and fascination, never of certain knowledge.

Peter Coyle, a gifted young gay painter doomed to perish in the war, creates a powerful sketch that nonetheless does little to capture the “real” David:

Had it not been for the penciled note, the heroic torso might just as well have been his gardener from Corpus, or any other of his subjects. In an art so prone to exaggeration, it was hard to tell. What Peter has created was a portrait of a demigod from neck to nee, the

sex suggested by a little slur, conventional as a fig leaf, while the neck opened into nothing, like the calyx of a flower. (Hollinghurst 2017, 35)

Like the three searching gazes in the dark courtyard mere days before, Peter does not capture the likeness, let alone the presence of David Sparsholt. The younger man's otherness in relation to the St. Hilda's intellectuals ("not one of us") seeps through his similarity to a college gardener; Peter's queer Hellenist Oxonian projection makes David a "demigod"; yet the "sex" is merely "suggested" and covered up by a proverbial fig leaf. "Nothing" and "the calyx" are words that create, respectively, a sense of emptiness and mere potential. The brilliance of the drawing is precisely in its ability to show the futility of "reading" and representing the subject. Poor reading or misreading of David Sparsholt, from the outset, are the only possibilities.

Evert Dax has the opportunity to "have" the enigmatic bisexual David for one night, in exchange for a monetary loan (ironically, to pay a fine for David's heterosexual impropriety with his fiancée, Connie). In the course of their encounter, David's physical presence and his desire remain in the dark in every sense of the word:

'Well, we'll have to keep the light out,' he [David] said...He [Evert] did not dare disobey by flicking the light switch, or feeling for the bedside lamp...and watched David get up with the sigh of a strong man who's been called on to help, the nod of almost concealed satisfaction, and come towards him with the whiskey bottle in his hand. (Hollinghurst 2017, 84)

The whiskey bottle that accompanies the encounter makes matters of desire and consent murky, and the constant darkness reflects not only the illegality of the act, or the necessities of the Blitz, but everyone's continued puzzlement at David Sparsholt's identity. Freddie and Evert parse out the note that David sends his smitten partner after the "invisible" encounter: "'Little alpha,' [Freddie] said, 'but upper-case omega'" (Hollinghurst 2017, 71), but David's desire remains enigmatic. The elderly David altogether denies the encounter decades later: "It just didn't happen" (389). He is evasive as well, at the end of the Oxford diary, when Freddie Green sees David "in two successive gaps...first here, then there, then no longer there..." (94). In other words, the first and the last glances the narrator casts at David fail to see him clearly.

If David communicates queerness as unreadability, or misreading (that is, by reading about him, we are all dyslexic, from an able-ist viewpoint), the problem of reading emerges in this chapter in a more literal sense as well. The towering figure of A.V. Dax, Evert's father and famous writer, dominates the beginning of the book as much as David Sparsholt does. While Dax's rambunctious heterosexuality is not in doubt, he also serves to establish the novel's running theme of reading and/as misreading. Preparing for the author's visit, Freddie Green re-reads a Dax classic:

In my first hours below decks I ran quite far through The Wicket gate, ignoring for as long as I could the failure of the magic and the grey dawn of disillusion. It is hard to do justice to old pleasures that cannot be revived—we seem half to disown our youthful selves, who loved and treasured them...in my school dorm the words that had brought a new constriction to my throat...Now they struck me as an awful simulacrum of literature...It was a sham that convinced the author himself. (Hollinghurst 2017, 39)

Dax is a popular and revered writer, but, just as Freddie gradually discovers the unsavoriness of his personal life, the passage also reveals that reading is a multi-layered process that depends on a personal chronology. What we read, moreover, is a “sham” that exists independently of the author. The subjective and unstable process that is reading establishes the absence of a “correct” telos or meaning. Not only do we read differently at various times and in various circumstances, but these changing circumstances and perceptions, like the impossible-to-grasp figure of David Sparsholt, constitute the only existing method of meaning-mining. “Wordblindness” is, accordingly, the only correct way of reading and comprehending.

Sexuality in general, like language, is subject to misrepresentation. When Freddie Green dies, his friends are still unable to “read him”:

‘A shame he never had children,’ said Sally.

‘Probably a good thing,’ said the tall man...

‘I sometimes wondered,’ said the short man, ‘if he wasn’t really queer, you know, deep down’

‘Oh...’ Sally gave a worried laugh, and also a quick glance at Lucy, and then her father. ‘I think you have to ask Clover that!’

‘Mm, perhaps later,’ the man said, and they laughed... (Hollinghurst 2017, 370)

The dialogue after the funeral poses a number of problems. Given the novel’s struggle to define David Sparsholt’s queerly transactional bi-sexuality, and sexuality in general, calling Freddy “really queer, deep down” defies both the dead man’s own avowals and the very definition of

queerness, as never “deep,” or “real.” In addition, Freddie’s childlessness triggers a discussion of his possible queerness, but it takes place in the presence of Jonathan Sparsholt, David’s openly gay son, and his biological granddaughter Lucy. Heterosexuality cannot be read as oriented toward procreation, and queerness toward childlessness.

In fact, the novel centers queer parenthood. It is both biological (Jonathan, Francesca and Una conceive and co-parent Lucy; David Sparsholt begets Jonathan in a riff on “this biblical ghost of a joke” [Hollinghurst 2017, 181]) and non-biological (a group of queer London friends “adopt” the young Jonathan; Peter Coyle starts a lineage of queer painters; consensual cross-generational “daddy-son” relationships form between gay men in this circle of friends). As always, the reading of who Freddie is “really,” “deep down” is impossible. Like A. V. Dax, he is a writer and does not create reality; subjective readings create him. The dialogue is characteristically ellipsis-riddled, like the initial descriptions of David Sparsholt at Oxford. The friends delay the knowledge of Freddy, and put off asking his wife, Clover, both because it is an impolite query at a funeral, and because it is unlikely to produce a decisive answer.

Freddie’s first love interest, Jill Darrow, likewise unsettles any assumptions about her life and sexuality. A lifelong independent single woman, who subsequently has a distinguished career at the Victoria and Albert Museum, at Oxford, Jill shares with Freddie a (non-sexual) childhood trauma, abuse, and neglect. She uses the confession to rebuff Freddie’s advances and expresses a bold desire for David Sparsholt’s body (unlike the men who are in love with him, she stresses the casual nature of her attraction). After Jill’s funeral, the same group of friends attempts to decode her sexuality:

‘Was there ever anyone?’ said Margaret...Freddie looked at her. ‘Romance was never exactly Jill’s thing,’ he said, ‘but I pursued her for over a year...’ After this unexpected testimony from a sick man to a dead woman scant further light was shed on the intervening half-century. She went – unrevealed - into a space like the hall of her flat, no windows, fragments of epitaphs on the wall, a beyond now open too...(Hollinghurst 2017, 323)

The evidence of heterosexuality proves as shaky and unreliable as that of queerness. The testimony of the “sick” about the “dead” does not add any credibility to a definitive portrait of a life unconventionally lived. Like most characters in the novel, who start their lives in the dark Oxford of the Blitz and lead them in the poorly lit London of the 1970s, Jill also dies “unrevealed.” “Scant further light” and “no windows” continue the pervasive theme of darkness that surrounds the lives of each impenetrable (in every sense of the word) character.

The culmination of the failure to read sexuality is the eponymous Sparsholt Affair. The middle-aged David Sparsholt is caught in the act with a Tory MP, who has a playfully Virginia-Woolf-adjacent name, Leslie Stevens, and a suggestively named yacht, “Ganymede”; Clifford Haxby, a married friend who is in love with him; and male escorts. A fictional version of a 1960s political and sexual scandal, the event that gives the title to the novel, takes place shortly before the Wolfenden Recommendation and the subsequent parliamentary act that decriminalized sexual acts between men and repealed the Labouchère Amendment of 1885. All involved are therefore criminals, though David Sparsholt manages to revitalize his career and remarry. None of the material and legal history of the gay male body is apparent in possibly the most oblique description of sexuality ever to escape the pen of Alan Hollinghurst, known for his beautifully

explicit descriptions of sex between men. The section assumes the innocent point of view of the teenage “Johnny” Sparsholt, accompanied at the scene of the “crime” by his crush, a worldly French exchange student, Bastien:

“No one here,’ said Johnny...’What, did they see you?’ Johnny said. ‘Nothing to see, my friend,’ said Bastien, ‘nothing to see...’ He reached the edge of the lawn, snatched up the basket, and in the moment that he turned he saw, or thought he saw (the reflections of the sky, cloud and blue in the wide windows), the unfolding ripple, the slow wink of light and shade, of the fine slats of a Venetian blind swiveled upwards and then downwards on their cord and closed. (Hollinghurst 2017, 153)

Not seeing anything, or doubting what one sees, reestablishes queer sexuality as the site of a representational crisis. What Jonathan sees are mere reflections of “real” sky and water. The movement of the Venetian blind, covering up the unspeakable, the unreadable, and the “criminal,” is up and down, side-to-side; it creates a momentary illusion of visibility and instantly destroys it.

Bastien, a sexually sophisticated teenager from the land of the Napoleonic Code, observes that there is “nothing to see.” This is Bastien’s gesture of compassion and affection towards a friend, whose family is on the brink of collapse; less obviously, this is a statement that sexuality is nothing to be seen, made legible, and thus, in this context, punishable by law. The more experienced of the two teenagers acts in this way precisely because his relative worldliness tells him what is and is not knowable. The Sparsholt Affair is not an historic event, or an illegal

orgy. Instead, the novel by the same title is a narrative equivalent of swaying Venetian blinds at a summer house ironically dubbed “The Lookout.”

Even later in life, Jonathan is hesitant when attempting to define David’s sexuality: ‘Dad’s not...’-he didn’t know what was best-‘gay, not really.’ Ivan seemed slightly offended. ‘Well, he must be bi-sexual, anyway, mustn’t he.’ ‘No...well, I suppose he must have been, in a way, if he needed to be.’ (Hollinghurst 2017, 282-283). The dialogue in the novel always hedges its bets. Ellipsis, silences, and superfluous words never allow us to label a character’s personhood and desire. Stylistically, all conversation about a character’s “real” sexuality are invariably tentative; in a Jamesian fashion, they make reading tantalizingly difficult. We do not know who David Sparsholt “really” is; what we do know is that the nature of his sexuality is situational (“if he needed to be”). With a hint of class politics, Hollinghurst makes sexuality an object of exchange (it is clear that David Sparsholt benefits materially by having sex with the wealthy Evert Dax and the influential Leslie Stevens).

When the middle-aged Jonathan confronts his aging father about the Oxford fling with Evert Dax, David is, as ever, evasive:

‘Mm, and what did you feel about him?’ It was almost as if in the chill and change of the dusk, in the ambiguous minutes when streetlights came under a high pink sky, a new freedom was possible. That strange ‘Evvie,’ like a girl’s name, with its touch of pathos and nostalgia, seemed to hint at a desire for it. Things had happened, not quite named before; why not name them now?...’ Things were very different then, old lad. But no, you’re right, we were good mates for a while.’ (Hollinghurst 2017, 388)

The light is “ambiguous” and changeable; it’s “dusk,”; there are “chill” and “change” in the air; the changeable light signals to us, almost at the end of the novel, that desire will remain “not quite named,” despite the disappearance of legal barriers to its expression. Yet there remains a “mere” hint of it, and the object’s gender fluidity (“Evvie”), either to render the desire closer to normative, or to add even more ambiguity. The presence of David Sparsholt is itself an interdiction to naming things, because the naming itself freezes them in the identitarian categories that, in turn, had led to legal prohibitions. We also identify with Jonathan who is unable to read (though eventually able to paint) his father. Everything we assume about David is wrong.

Jonathan says to his high-society client Bella (who is familiar with the Sparsholt Affair from Wikipedia, a form of digital knowledge that the novel presents as suspicious, even faintly ludicrous): ““Sadly, no. We had a first seating for a portrait about twenty years ago, but then we had a terrible row, it was impossible... We never really knew each other... what with everything.”” (Hollinghurst 2017, 450). The novel establishes a clear lineage between Peter Coyle, a talented gay artist, who perished in World War II, and had attempted to sketch David, and Jonathan, David’s son, who had managed to accomplish the same. Neither artist captures the essence of David, and Johnny’s explanation for not “really kn[owning]” his father is equivocal (“what with everything”). David and Jonathan represent, respectively, someone who cannot be read, and someone whose reading and representational skills are different.

### ***Disability, Potentiality, Alterity***

Hollinghurst’s interest in dyslexia is consistent, though little noticed. A dyslexic character first appears in his 1998 novel *The Spell*, a standout in Hollinghurst’s *oeuvre*, a short, ostensibly light

comedy of manners, which, unlike other novels, requires virtually no historical research. The themes of this novel, published at the height of the AIDS epidemic are, in fact, more weighty than they appear. The protagonist, Robin Woodfield, his partner Justin, his son Danny, and a host of other characters contend with the contrast between the English country life and a cosmopolitan existence in London and California. The two locations correspond to monogamy and open relationships or infidelity, respectively. The themes that *The Spell* shares with the latest novel are queer chosen families and the continuity of gay and lesbian artistic and intellectual lineages.

The treatment of dyslexia is quite different, however. Justin a failed actor, is a relatively minor character in the novel. Robin, a successful architect and scholar of Frank Lloyd Wright, supports the younger man. Both partners experiment with monogamy and open relationships throughout the novel, settling on/for a more conventional, domesticated existence in the end. Like Johnny Sparsholt, Justin struggles with reading and spelling, and, during a game of scrabble, misreads “master bedroom” as “master boredom” (Hollinghurst 1998, 44).<sup>ii</sup> The choice of dyslexia is ambiguous; on the one hand, in an able-ist fashion, it marginalizes further an already secondary, dependent, childlike character, to whom Robin is both a partner and a parent. Conversely, while *The Spell* seems consciously to advocate monogamy in the age of AIDS and to combine this preference with traditionalist English patriotism, Justin stands in for boredom with monogamy and for the pre-AIDS undomesticated, cosmopolitan queer pleasures. Misreading the “master bedroom” as “master boredom” is a rebellion against the confinement of desire within bedrooms or borders. Justin is helpless, but his dyslexia joins his queerness in his jab at monogamy. An occasional misreading belies the novel’s commitment to reserve and discipline.<sup>iii</sup>

*The Sparsholt Affair* makes the dyslexic Jonathan a major character and a professional success. Jonathan Sparsholt does not struggle with monogamy; a committed partnership and parenthood are part of his life since youth; most attempts at sexual freedom at nightclubs are completely unsuitable to his habits and temperament. At the same time, Jonathan does not “overcome” his disability but, instead, invents a language of his own.<sup>iv</sup> The latest novel combines the misreading of dyslexia as a symbol of queer sexuality with a politics of disabled visibility. Dyslexia is not a disability but the only available reading skill set.

Robert McRuer’s 2006 book concludes with a meditation on global queer/crip identities that tend to remain excluded from the discussions of white European disability and queerness. In the fifteen years since the publication of the book, both queer theory and disability studies have made some steps towards inclusivity with respect to race, ethnicity, immigration status, and national identity. At the very least, exclusions have been acknowledged. In a recent chapter called “Queer Disability Studies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, Alison Kafer notes that “...disability claims often require adherence to particular articulations of disability, articulations that exclude many conditions, bodies, and minds” (2020, 96). Kafer cites Gloria Anzaldúa’s contention that the disability of people of color, especially women of color, is a sort of permanent, unnoticed condition.

While it is relatively easy to argue for the inclusion of dyslexia in the discussion of other (visible) disabilities, other types of inclusion are rendered difficult, if not impossible, by the novel itself. Encountering the (relative) racial homogeneity in Hollinghurst’s work is not a new experience.<sup>v</sup> I hope that the reference of race does not appear to be an empty gesture; rather, it seeks to reinforce the studied ambiguity of the narrative structure of the novel itself. By the end of the novel, Jonathan Sparsholt looks for a replacement for his longtime partner Pat, who had

died of cancer. Following a typical Hollinghurst fantasy scenario, a handsome twenty-something man makes a perfectly timed appearance in a drug-addled London club, and in Jonathan's life, on the night David Sparsholt dies. The young man, José, or Zé, is Brazilian, attractive, and clearly ready to nurture and console the older painter.

Jonathan's daughter, Lucy, initially takes Zé for a house cleaner. Shortly after, she allows her father to bring the young man to her celebrity heterosexual nuptials in York. In the kind of an ellipsis- and italics-riddled, syntactically hesitant statement that haunts the novel, she allows for a tentative expansion of family ties: "“And, you know...if you want to bring...*José*”" (Hollinghurst 1998, 454). This conclusion to the novel is a nod to both traditional domesticity and racial/national inclusivity; yet it appears to be a mere nod, with nothing in the characterization of Zé's hot body, good heart, and broken English to indicate more than objectification ("“He's rather a find”" [454]). Does a young healthy body serve to heal and visually counterbalance the aging, the sick, and the disabled? Does Zé's imperfect English mirror Jonathan's alternative ability when it comes to reading? Do all these suggest a certain affinity between national and racial otherness and disability? Answering yes to the last question, though not to the other two, is hopeful. Then again, in the spirit of the novel, a definite answer is not queer. What is certain, however, is that the character of Zé, like the character of Justin in *The Spell*, by virtue of its very marginality, urges into being an essential conversation about the intersections of race, sexuality, and disability in Hollinghurst's work.

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**HELENA GURFINKEL** is Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She is the editor of *PLL: Papers on Language and Literature* and author of *Outlaw Fathers in Victorian and Modern British Literature: Queering Patriarchy*. She is currently at work on a monograph on the Soviet-era film and TV adaptations of Oscar Wilde's works.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> See Hollinghurst's "Talks at Google Interview" from May 3, 2018; the reading and signing at the Politics and Prose Bookstore in Washington, DC, from March 28, 2018, as well as the earliest, and most substantive, conversation at the Shakespeare & Company Bookshop in Paris, from November 7, 2017. The phrase "making fun" of those who cannot read appears in the latter. Full recordings of all talks are available on YouTube.

<sup>ii</sup> In the context, the phrase does not carry the racist connotations it would in the U.S.

<sup>iii</sup> For a detailed discussion of *The Spell* and its discontents, see Chapter 3 of *Outlaw Fathers in Victorian and Modern British Literature: Queering Patriarchy*.

<sup>iv</sup> For the problematic implication of "overcoming" disability, see Simi Linton's "Reassigning Meaning."

<sup>v</sup> A number of scholars have noted Hollinghurst's insufficiently critical engagement with the history of British imperialism and colonialism, as well as examples of problematic characterization of racially, ethnically, or nationally marginalized characters. His first novel, *The Swimming Pool Library* (1988), has received the most criticism, though others have as well. The work of Ed Dodson and Luisa Juárez Hervás illustrates such critique. For the more recent controversy involving possible anti-Semitism in *The Stranger's Child* (2011), see Daniel Mendelsohn's analysis in *The New York Review of Books*.