explorations

Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

The *Stranger's Child:* Alan Hollinghurst's dialogues with the past

Marcin Sroczyński (*University of Warsaw*)

Abstract. In *The Stranger's Child*, Alan Hollinghurst retraces the changes that marked English culture and attitudes over the 20th century, especially regarding homosexuals. The author also describes the mechanisms governing the process of creating and re-writing versions of English history. Hollinghurst reveals the multiplicity of contradictory voices with which the historian/biographer has to deal, as well as the apparent historicity of the researcher whose "present" interferes with the investigated "past." Although the novel gives evidence of the progressing democratization and polyphony of historical writing, it focuses on the factors responsible for misrepresenting history: the fallibility of human memory, the unintentional or deliberate annihilation of heritage, the personal agenda of both witnesses who conceal or falsify certain facts, and researchers whose primary goal is to prove their point.

Key words: Hollinghurst, biography, homosexuality, memory, history, *Stranger's Child.*

1. Introduction

The story told in Alan Hollinghurst's latest novel, *The Stranger's Child,* spans a period of 100 years. It retraces the evolution of the social structure in Britain, and of its LGBT rights. Moreover, it provides interesting insights concerning the process of creating and re-writing history. The aim of this article is to discover how the mechanisms responsible for creating different versions of history and biographies are represented in the novel. In the first part of the article, I will focus on the inevitably elusive and volatile nature of historian's/biographer's resources, i.e. witnesses' accounts and so-called authentic documents. In the second part, I will concentrate on the historian/biographer as an investigator, commentator, and forger. This concerns one of the major characters, Paul Bryant, but also Hollinghurst as an author. He uses an actual historical figure, the poet Rupert Brooke, to construct his plot, and in a way the author becomes a historian pursuing his own agenda, which is to discuss the issue of "outing" homosexuality and the history of homosexuality in 20th-century Britain. Through this analysis, it becomes apparent that Hollinghurst considers history in terms of a dialogue *with* and *within* the

past, where a number of conflicting voices need to be made heard by a historian who himself adds yet another voice to this discursive spectrum[1]. Finally, I will show how Hollinghurst becomes a victim of biographical voyeurism by journalists who also want to represent him as a quasi-historical figure.

2. FRIABLE HISTORICAL RESOURCES

One of the major topics of *The Stranger's Child* is the nature of human memory. It is obvious that historians depend largely on the memory of those who have witnessed the events constituting the subject of their research. However, Hollinghurst points to the fact that memory is fallible and unreliable. At the center of Hollinghurst's story lies a short poem written in 1913 by Cecil Valance, a minor Edwardian poet, whose character has been modeled on a genuine poet, Rupert Brooke. Cecil's premature death in the Great War opens space for endless speculation regarding the content of the poem and the life of its author. Over sixty years later, another protagonist, a bank clerk called Paul Bryant, decides to write Valance's biography. His efforts to gather pieces of information about Cecil reveal numerous obstacles which a historian has to face. In Part 4 of the novel we follow Bryant paying two visits to Daphne Sawle, for whom, it is alleged, the poem in question was written upon Cecil's visit to the Sawles' house, Two Acres, before the 1914 war. Daphne is now eighty-three years old and has already written one book of her memoirs, but Paul hopes to learn some more intimate details about Cecil's relationship with her and her brother, George. However, in between Paul's visits, we read Daphne's introspection:

> Daphne was supposed to have a good memory, and this reputation sustained her uneasily in face of the thousands of things she couldn't remember. ... The fact was that all the interesting and decisive things in her adult life had happened when she was more or less tight; she had little recall of anything that occurred after about 6:45... Her first problem, in doing her book, had been to recall what anyone said; in fact she had made up all the conversations. ... She felt something similar, but worse in a way, about hundreds and hundreds of books she'd read... – she could remember nothing about them at all, so that it seemed rather pointless even to say that she had read them; such claims were a thing people set great store by but she hardly supposed they recalled any more than she did. (497-8)

This short fragment exposes several issues regarding witnesses' accounts in general. On the one hand, over time, people increasingly forget what actually happened; on the other, there is a constant effort to bridge gaps in memory in order to maintain both the coherence of a story, and the status of an informed witness, be they an expert or an intellectual. Over the last 40 years, historians have been increasingly eager to include testimonies and spoken recollections in their revised methodologies within the academic movement referred to as "oral history." (Alexander et al. 1979, I) The advantages of such an approach are undoubtedly a more vivid recreation of historical events and a greater

[1] Following in the steps of Stephen Greenblatt, see Pieters (2000, 25)

scope of interpretations. However, it runs the risk of allowing imaginary details to find their way into historical accounts, and sometimes it may become impossible to distinguish fact from fiction. In an interview, Hollinghurst admits that the complicated nature of biographical writing was an inspiration for writing *The Stranger's Child*:

> Biographies can be absolutely wonderful... but I also think… that biography has such hazards when so much of it depends on the fallibility of human memory. I think it's very hard to remember exactly more than a few words someone said to me last week, much less what someone said to me forty years ago. And if someone keeps a journal they're more likely to be remembered but even that is prone to all kinds of shaping, affectionalizing, and so on. There is something inherently fictional about most human memory and it does bring into question the supposedly scientific nature of a lot of biographical writing. (Champion 2011, 20:21-21:23)

In another interview Hollinghurst admits that Cecil "becomes less and less known in the years, the decades following his death" (Rintoul 2011, 0:44-0:50), and critic Sam Leith accurately notes: "the larger movement of the story is towards entropy. More of the past is always going to be lost than recovered. ... *The Stranger's Child* captures... the particular gravity of time passing, and the irrecoverable losses it brings with it." (Leith 2011)

Hollinghurst's novel reflects on the inevitability of oblivion, which may not simply be caused by old age. During his visit to Daphne's house, Bryant also talks to her son Wilfried, an elderly gentleman taking care of his venerable mother. They look at photos from Two Acres and come across a picture of a certain Mrs Kaalbeck, a German woman who used to live with the Sawles until the 1920s. Wilfried does not recognize her and claims not to have known her but the reader knows that is not true. In fact, Wilfried as a child talked a lot about "Mrs Cow" (as he referred to her) and it was he who, one evening, found her lying dead in her room. To a small child this must have been a great shock, and Hollinghurst seems to suggest that even very important traumatic experiences can become inaccessible to memory because – speaking in psychoanalytical terms – they get pushed away into the unconscious. This aspect of human memory has been thoroughly discussed by writers and historians involved in textualizing massive historical trauma by means of testimonial writing. Questions emerge as to whether testimony can "make the same pretensions to 'truth' that 'history' does. ... The insufficiency of language, the failure of representation, the fallibility of memory, but most important, the very nature of trauma, engender silences that make testimony … the most elliptical of writing." (Cavallo 2000-2001, 1) Such writing may be more akin to psychoanalysis, where a traumatic event becomes real only in the telling, and the value of testimony thus appears more therapeutic than historical.

The human propensity to forget is not the historian's only problem. Concealing certain facts from a historian or a biographer can be intentional, and during his research Bryant encounters several occurrences of the deliberate suppressing of information. One of his interviewees is Jonah Trickett, a former butler in the Sawles' house who also served Cecil during his visit to Two Acres. Bryant hopes to learn much from this meeting because a butler's voice could constitute a valuable contribution. A butler is an insider, someone who has access to the family's private matters, he is also an unofficial voice, one that traditionally has been marginalized and does not find its way into the pages of

family histories. And yet, to his great disappointment, Bryant finds that Trickett is unwilling to share Cecil's secrets. Moreover, the biographer discovers that Trickett is in possession of papers that look like the missing parts of the poem that could reveal its true suppressed nature: Bryant catches a glimpse of "several sheets of paper, in Cecil's writing" and reads one line: "Hearty, lusty, true and bold" (416) suggesting the poem's passionate content which was later deleted. Nevertheless, Bryant is unable to seize the pages; he is a few steps away from resolving the mystery but fails. Another set of valuable documents for Bryant would be Cecil's letters. However, in the second part of the book we learn that Freda Sawle, the mother of Daphne and George, concealed letters that Cecil had sent to her children. It is clear that the letters addressed to George contained explicit homoerotic content which at that time was something not to be spoken of. The letters never got to see the public light, and had probably been destroyed.

The ending of *The Stranger's Child* emphasizes Hollinghurst's conviction about the fragility of human memory. While the title of the novel has been taken from Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam A.H.H.*[2] the last part of the book, which ironically depicts a memorial service, opens with an epigraph from *In Memoriam Alfred Lord Tennyson* by Mick Imlah. The quotation reads: "No one remembers you at all" (517). Hollinghurst comments on this: "That rather simple Tennysonian thought—that a hundred years after your death no one will be alive who can remember you—is one of the book's central preoccupations: what does remembering someone mean from such a great temporal distance?" (Baron 2012) The novel closes with a symbolic scene: a minor character, Rob, arrives at a house where he hopes to find important documents about the Sawles' neighbor Harry Hewitt who was allegedly in love with Hubert Sawle. He finds there two people throwing things into the fire, and learns that the house has been destined for demolition and the people are burning "old papers, ... rubbish, no use to anyone." (562) One can presume that the most interesting historical items have perished in the flames and are forever lost.

3. THE HISTORIAN/BIOGRAPHER AT WORK

As it has been stated at the beginning of this article, *The Stranger's Child* is a book about the past and history, and about creating history. Although memory plays a crucial role in this process, equally important is the figure of the historian who works with "the raw material" of historical facts. Hollinghurst points out how historians (or – in this case – biographers) are responsible for remodeling the past. They reshape biographies of historic figures posthumously in a way which one of the protagonists calls "not fiction, which one really mustn't do about actual people, but a sort of poetical reconstruction." (497) They usually do this with a pre-planned agenda in mind – in *The Stranger's Child* turning Cecil into a "war poet" or a "gay poet" – labeling people and events in order to organize the past as well as to prove one's point.

Hollinghurst's ideas are in line with the theories fostered by New Historicism. Traditional 19th-century historiography believed in the objectivity and unproblematic

[2] Hollinghurst partly explains this choice by saying: "the book is really about our futuriority, what happens to us way down the line when our fate is in the hands of the children of strangers." (Champion 2011)

representability of the historical past. A historian should therefore understand and teach others how to interpret facts, while staying unprejudiced, impartial, even invisible. New historicists opposed such view, which in their opinion reduces history to "a single, massive monolith that left no room for the dissonant voices new historicists wanted to listen to and converse with." (Pieters 2000, 22) Moreover, "earlier historicists did not take into account their own historicity and the subsequent import on their research of the interference between the past which they tried to investigate and the present from which they were doing so." (Pieters 2000, 21-2) One of the most prominent new historicists, Stephen Greenblatt, therefore proposes a fully dialogical approach to historiography: "one which tries to take into account not only the fullness of the past in all its heterogeneity, but also the historicity of the historian." (Pieters 2000, 25) It discusses history in terms of a dialog between conflicted voices, all of which the researcher needs to make heard, remembering that historians cannot exclude themselves from their investigation: "while speaking about the past, they also talk to it." (Pieters 2000, 25)

In *The Stranger's Child* the historian in question is Paul Bryant, Cecil Valance's self-proclaimed biographer. The ambiguity of Bryant's endeavors are central to the plot. On the one hand, he sets himself on a noble quest – to tell the world the truth about the poet. On the other, his research is tainted by his own agenda – to prove that Cecil was gay and had an affair with Daphne's brother, George Sawle.

Hollinghurst draws several parallels between Cecil Valance and Rupert Brooke. First of all, posthumous exploitation concerns not only their biographies but also their poetry. Although Cecil's poem was never intended to deal with war, as it was written as a love verse for Daphne (or George), after Valance's death in France in 1916 it is quoted by Winston Churchill in an obituary of the poet which appears in the *Times.* Cecil becomes an emblem of a lost generation of talented and gilded youth and, as critic James Wood puts it: "(the poem) is quickly taken up and anthologized as the great English war poem, part bombast and part elegy for a lost pastoral innocence." (Wood 2011) Rupert Brooke's poem "The Soldier", beginning with the lines: "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England," shared exactly the same fate.[3] Brooke was brought to the attention of Churchill by his mentor, Edward Marsh, and after the poet's death in 1915, his idealistic war sonnets become symbols of everything that had been fought for and lost.

Another issue is that Cecil Valance's biography was first written by his contemporary, Sebby Stokes, who idealized the late poet (allegedly because he was in love with him) and, as a result, created an indigestible piece of work. Obviously, Stokes did not mention Cecil's homosexual affairs, and simply presented him as a brave young man who died in war. Here again there are parallels between Valance and Rupert Brooke. Edward Marsh, the poet's literary executor:

> had no problem with those who, as the *New Statesman* soon put it, pictured Brooke as a "blend of General Gordon and Lord Tennyson." To the disgust of Brooke's Cambridge and Bloomsbury acquaintances, he promoted him as a clean-cut poet-

[3] Hollinghurst admits that Cecil's poem is modelled on yet another of Rupert Brooke's poems:"The Old Vicarage," "an idyllic poem written about England before the war which after the war comes to seem to symbolize everything that has been fought for & much that has been lost." (Rintoul 2011)

> patriot long after the sell-by date for enthusiastic lines about soldiers pouring out "the red/Sweet wine of youth." (Tayler 2011, 9)

Indeed, Marsh was full of admiration for Brooke's "balanced combination of the athletic and the intellectual types of schoolboy – always with a ball in his hand and a book in his pocket." (Marsh 1918, XII) He idealized the poet, describing him as a young philosopher, generous, always helpful and extremely kind, who loved children, believed in "goodness of all men", and for whom "ethics were exceedingly important." (XXIX-XXXI) However, despite Marsh's devotion to Rupert, the poet's mother, Mary Brooke, was unimpressed. When she died in 1930, her will replaced Marsh with Geoffrey Keynes as chief literary executor. In *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (published in 1992) Ian Hamilton argues that Mary may have felt uneasy about the equivocal aura pervading in the *Memoir* and created by Marsh's veneration of her son's "unmanly physical beauty which was often taken as an indication that he was probably a homosexual."[4]

In his article "The Rupert Trunk," Christopher Tayler retraces the researchers' fight about Rupert Brooke's sexual orientation. There existed different versions of his biography, different letters were published. Tayler describes how "Keynes set out to emphasize Brooke's 'wholly masculine character,' as he put it. An authorized biography appeared in 1964, followed by Keynes's resoundingly heterosexual *Letters of Rupert Brooke* in 1968." It was not until twenty years later that the world discovered another side to the poet. In Paul Delany's book *The Neo-Pagans: Friendship and Love in the Rupert Brooke Circle* published in 1987, an openly homoerotic letter by Brooke to James Strachey was printed in full for the first time.[5] In the letter, dated 10 July 1912, Brooke describes losing his virginity not to a girl, but to a fellow Rugbeian Denham Russell-Smith in 1909. The correspondence features a detailed account of how Brooke had schemed "to copulate" with Denham followed by a very technical description of the lovemaking.

Such research into private lives of artists and writers has always aroused great controversy and Hollinghurst shows the complex nature of this venture. It is especially delicate with regards to homosexuality, because the present understanding of gay identity has little in common with how sexualities were perceived at the beginning of the century. Constructionist understandings of homosexuality, pioneered by Michel Foucault in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), point to the fact that same-sex sex acts have different cultural meanings in different historical contexts, and that "identity" is not a demonstrably empirical category but rather the product of processes of identification. As a result, projecting a contemporary label of "gay identity" onto a person living in a distinctly different historical context becomes an act of oversimplification, ignorance, or terminological abuse. In this light, rather than being a pioneer who manages to "dig out the truth" about Cecil, Paul Bryant turns out to be doing more harm than good. Indeed, Bryant has been described by critics as "one of the most compelling cases against literary

---

[4] Hamilton is not alone in his observations. Paul Levy in his article on Rupert Brooke refers to Marsh as "his very gay patron Eddie." (Levy 2002).

[5] See: Norton (1998).

biography" (Champion 2011, 14:08-14:13), "a minor literary schemer, relentless, intrusive, and duplicitous" (Wood 2011). Hollinghurst explains:

> I've always been very struck by the way that particularly a biography of a minor figure can be written by completely the wrong person. ... The wonderful early 20th-century novelist Robert Firbank's... first biography was written by somebody quite comically unattuned to the subject who had no understanding of Firbank or his work at all. I'm aware of it happening in a number of occasions so I wanted to make the biography of Cecil, when it finally appears, written by someone who is distinctly dodgy. (Champion 2011, 15:22-16:04)

Bryant's pursuit of obscene details of Cecil Valance's life, the fact that "what he wants is smut, essentially" (499), compromises him in the eyes of other men of letters and arouses anger and contempt among both the Valances and the Sawles. It is worth mentioning at this point that there are several examples of biographies revealing personal and sexual issues, and especially revealing particular people as gay, which have provoked strong reactions from the people directly concerned. The most famous case of this kind was perhaps the publication of Michael Holroyd's *Lytton Strachey* (1967). The book described the lives of the Cambridge Apostles and the Bloomsbury Group members, and it revealed several details of their love affairs and unconventional relationships, since one of the author's motivations had been "to demonstrate that Bloomsbury's belief in 'a great deal of a great many kinds of love'" (Holroyd 1995, XXXIII) Surprisingly enough, despite the loosening of morals that had been ongoing in Great Britain since the early 1960s, the intellectuals connected with Bloomsbury, as well as some prominent homosexuals were unenthusiastic. W. H. Auden for instance stated that the book should have never been written, David Garnett (himself bisexual) was in favor of wholesale suppression. The only Bloomsbury member who was prepared to defend Holroyd's book at a time when others "had not a good word for it," was Frances Partridge. She argued that "Bloomsbury should have the courage to uphold its own standards publicly" and emphasized: "I'm more than faintly surprised at their [the homosexuals'] secretiveness just when their position seems to be about to be legally ratified."[6] Holroyd's case is not the only one. In *Christopher and his Kind* (1976), Christopher Isherwood described a romantic relationship with a streetsweeper, Heinz Neddermayer. When the book was published in 1976, Heinz, appalled at its frankness, never communicated with Isherwood again.[7] More recently, the singer Boy George was sued by Kirk Brandon for malicious falsehood because he had revealed details of his love for Brandon and their romantic and sexual affair in his 1995 autobiography *Take It Like A Man.* Brandon claimed that stories about the gay affair in the early 1980s damaged his career as a musician.[8]

---

[6] Holroyd quotes Francis Partridge's diary *Other People 1963-1966* published in 1993 (Holroyd 1995, XXVI).

[7] According to the film's closing titles (*Christopher And His Kind.* 2011. BBC TV, 1:28:58)

[8] At court, Kirk Brandon, who conducted his own case, asked George if he approved of "outing" celebrities; George replied: "I don't think you should be ashamed of what you are" and added "I said in my book that you were very talented and I loved you. Where is the damage in that?" Eventually, Brandon lost the case and was ordered to pay some of the defendants' legal costs. (see: Daly 1997)

4. HOLLINGHURST: HISTORIAN AND BIOGRAPHER DESCRIBED BY BIOGRAPHERS

Despite Hollinghurst's pessimistic and discouraging depiction of Bryant's work, one should keep in mind that the author is not generally opposed to biography as a genre. In an interview concerning *The Stranger's Child*, he mentions Holroyd's work on Strachey as "a legitimate biography which lies in the background of this novel." (Champion 2011) He admits that it was "a very important book (being) the first biography which really wrote fully and openly about the private life of a gay writer," and published in "that crucial year of 1967," the year which saw the passage of the Sexual Offences Act decriminalizing homosexuality. Hollinghurst himself is far from being an innocent chronicler of 20th-century history. *The Stranger's Child* has its own agenda, and Wood compares Bryant's outing of Cecil Valance to:

> Hollinghurst's own project: a similar kind of outing—the retrieval of a buried erotic life… repressed and suppressed gay experience. Behind Valance's official literary renown is another, much more fugitive existence, and both Hollinghurst and Bryant, in their different ways, want to track it down. In this sense, *The Stranger's Child* offers, really, an unofficial history of twentieth-century gay life." (Wood 2011)[9]

The composition of the novel also reflects a series of deliberate inclusions and omissions, in respect to the choice of historical periods. There are meaningful gaps in the narrative which serve as a stylistic tool i.e. "dramatizing the shocks and ironies of time." (Champion 2011) but also "gaps to avoid writing about Great War" since Hollinghurst prefers writing about intimate lives and the book is "domestic in scale." In an interview given to Craig Rintoul, Hollinghurst reveals some of his writing methods and the history behind creating *The Stranger's Child*. Parts 1 and 2 of the novel (set respectively in 1913 and 1926) are based on other books written or set around those years, and the author refers to them as "a literary construct" (Rintoul 2011, 05:22) . He admits that writing Part 3 (set in 1967) was more enjoyable but harder. "I was writing about a period when I was 13 years old, I had an abundance of memories... and the whole process of selection became much more difficult" (Rintoul 2011, 04:13-05:00). Hollinghurst attended a prep school similar to the one described in the novel and his father was a bank clerk, just like Paul Bryant. The author makes use of his memories but also points to the fact that the reader is asked to create meaning and make sense out of the novel: "I like the idea of having more space in the book which will invite the reader to do some work for themselves." (Champion 2011, 06:38-06:46) The choice of periods described in the consecutive sections of the novel may be relevant for another reason: silencing the "officially" important moments in history, such as the two wars, and concentrating on the marginal, may be a parallel to the marginalization of gay issues throughout most of the 20th century. By putting homosexuality in the center of the novel, Hollinghurst reverses

---

[9] Hollinghurst has even been criticised for exaggerating in this respect. Sam Leith notes: "The one question mark over Hollinghurst's fastidious realism is that more or less every male character in the book is presented as either openly, or covertly, or thwartedly homo- sexual. You'd think, in a century-long story of two sprawling families, chance alone would supply the odd stray hetero, but you struggle to find one. There again, nobody's suggesting fiction should adopt a quota system, and Hollinghurst's re-gaying of 20th-century history is nothing so earnest as a corrective." (Leith 2011).

the traditional order of things and this is reflected in the book's temporal frame and domestic character. Hollinghurst admits that his interest in the past

> has partly to do with my continuing interest in writing about gay lives which in most respects become easier to live nowadays, so I'm drawn back to periods when it was all together more challenging and difficult to be gay and there's much more inherent social drama and comedy in the earlier periods. It has got something to do with my own English literariness perhaps, absorption in writers of earlier periods (Champion 2011, 40:50-41:27)

As a writer, Hollinghurst also falls victim to voyeuristic, rather than scientific, attempts of critics to make public some aspect of the author's private life. A good example is Stephen Moss' interview "Alan Hollinghurst: Sex on the brain", where the journalist openly admits that he is acting "in Paul Bryant's mode" when trying to learn from the author "to what degree the characters in his books are based on him" or describing in first person singular his experience of interviewing the novelist: "I ring the bell with trepidation. ... The carpets are beige – I feel an urge to remove my shoes" (qtd in Moss 2011). Although Hollinghurst is not eager to reveal too much of his personal life and often "refuses to play along," the reader learns that, for example, "he lives alone – he generally has, though there have been 'periods of experiment' with live-in partners – and the flat feels monastic. 'I'm not at all easy to live with,' he says." Another interview also describes the "spotless, cream carpets" in his "immaculate, elegant flat overlooking Hampstead Heath," as well as Hollinghurst's appearance, including "expensive denims and a crisp shirt that slowly becomes untucked through the interview, eventually exposing a sliver of soft, white tummy. His spectacles look like they're polished on the hour. His gray beard is short and satisfyingly neat." (Ramaswamy 2011) Reading such interviews, one may ask the following questions: how much do we need to know? What is important for the readers? Are such insights appealing to them? The same questions are fundamental for *The Stranger's Child*, and Hollinghurst admits: "the book is about how little is known about the private lives of others and how much of our knowledge of the sexual lives of others—even close friends—is merely conjectural." (qtd in Baron 2012)

In the novel, Paul Bryant is contrasted with another researcher, Nigel Dupont, who is only interested in Cecil's texts and gets much critical acclaim and respect for his work. In the closing section of *The Stranger's Child*, Hollinghurst also mocks contemporary readers' craving for authentic encounters with their favorite authors. One of the characters, Raymond, runs a website called "Poets Alive! Houndvoice.com" where he posts "eerie little videos of long-dead poets reading, authentic sound recordings emerging from the mouths of digitally animated photographs." (549) Although the pictures look "remotely convincing" but rather spooky and disturbing: "it was clear from the Comments that some viewers thought they were really seeing Alfred Noyes read 'The Highwayman.'" Moreover, the films are "like the evidence of other impostures – the doctored photos of early séances, more creepy and depressing ... than the thought of real communication with the dead." (549) Earlier in the novel, Freda Sawle tried to communicate with her dead sons by means of such séances, which is yet another dramatic human attempt to stay in touch with the past and the people who are gone. However, one must not forget that the hope of hearing the dead speak has also been an inspiration for many historians, including Stephen Greenblatt, who states:

> The dream of an intense, directly personal contact [with the dead] is… what drew us in the first place to the books we chose to read, the subjects we chose to study, the work we chose to pursue, the lives we chose to live… And from this dream, at once unique and shared, flows the energy that courses through our classrooms and our books and our articles. (Greenblatt 2003, 419, 424)

5. Conclusions

Alan Hollinghurst has always been interested in the dialogue between generations and the impossibility to grasp fully the essence of historical characters' lives. His first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, talks about a friendship between a man in his twenties and a man in his eighties, and the author comments:

> I've always been very struck by the thing that when you are young and you meet someone who is already quite old, it is a slow and more exaggerated version of getting to know anybody. When they have got a long past history which you're never really going to know much of but you piece it together from the things they say and suddenly you meet an old friend of theirs who'll give you a completely new light on it. (qtd in Champion 2011, 29:18-29:40)

The Stranger's Child recreates this process by gradually adding new voices to a historical account of the life of Cecil Valance. The book gives evidence of the progressing democratization and polyphony of historical writing, but also focuses on the factors responsible for misrepresenting history: fallibility of human memory, unintentional or deliberate annihilation of heritage, and the personal agenda of both witnesses who conceal or falsify certain facts, and researchers whose primary goal is to prove their point. As a result, Hollinghurst's novel adds a new voice to the discussion about the possibility and potential of recovering the voices of the dead by means of historical and literary writing.

References

Alexander, Sally, editor, and Susan Bullock, Jane Caplan, Anna Davm, Eve Hostettler, Alun Howkins, Andrew Lincoln, Tim Mason, Raphael Samuel, Stan Shipley, Gareth Stedman Jones, Anne Summers, Jerry White. 1979. "Editorial: Oral History." *History Workshop* 8:i-iii. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288255.

Baron, Scarlett. 2012. "An Interview with Alan Hollinghurst." *The Oxonian Review.* June 4. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/an-interview-with-alan-hollinghurst-draft/.

Cavallo, Susana. 2000-2001. "Witness: The Real, the Unspeakable, and the Construction of Narrative Author(s)" *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 33(3)/34(1):1-3. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1315336.

Champion, Edward. 2011. "The Bat Segundo Show: Alan Hollinghurst." *Reluctant Habits*. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.edrants.com/the-bat-segundo-show-alan-hollinghurst/.

Christopher and His Kind. 2011. Directed by Geoffrey Sax. BBC TV. Film. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hjidIaTYiE.

Daly, Emma. 1997. "Sad about the Boy." *The Independent,* April 30. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/sad-about-the-boy-1270092.html.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.

Greenblatt, Stephen. 2003. "Presidential Address 2002: 'Stay, Illusion' – On Receiving Messages from the Dead," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 118(3):417-426. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.mlajournals.org/doi/abs/10.1632/003081203X47732.

Hamilton, Ian. 1994. *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography*. London: Faber&Faber.

Hollinghurst, Alan. 2011. *The Stranger's Child*. London: Picador.

Holroyd, Michael. 1995. *Lytton Strachey: The New Biography*. London: Vintage.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Christopher and His Kind*. 1987. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux.

Leith, Sam. 2011. "Golden Lads and Girls." *The Spectator,* July 2. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/7059588/golden-lads-and-girls/.

Levy, Paul. 2002. "A String Quartet in Four Movements." *The Guardian*, 20 July. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/ jul/20/ featuresreviews.guardianreview22.

Marsh, Edward. 1918. "Memoir." In *Rupert Brooke: The Collected Poems*. 3rd Edition, 1942, XI-CLVI. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.

Moss, Stephen. 2011. "Alan Hollinghurst: Sex on the Brain." *The Guardian,* June 18. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/18/alan-hollinghurst-interview.

Norton, Rictor. 1998. "The Beginning. The Gay Love Letters of Rupert Brooke" My Dear Boy: Gay Love Letters through the Centuries. Accessed April 26, 2014. *http://rictornorton.co.uk/brooke.htm.*

Pieters, Jürgen. 2000. "New Historicism: Postmodern Historiography between Narrativism and Heterology." *History and Theory* 39(1):21-38. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2677996.

Rintoul, Craig. 2011. "Alan Hollinghurst-The Stranger's Child - Bookbits Author Interview." *Bookbits,* December 17. Accessed April 26, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEjr-QpxXic.

Ramaswamy, Chitra. 2011. "Interview: Alan Hollinghurst – In Splendid Isolation." *The Scotsman*, August 20. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-29440338.html.

Tayler, Christopher. 2011. "The Rupert Trunk." *London Review of Books* 33(15):9-10. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n15/christopher-tayler/the-rupert-trunk.

Wood, James. 2011. "Sons and Lovers." *The New Yorker,* October 17. Accessed April 26, 2014.

http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2011/10/17/111017crbo_books_wood?currentPage=all.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License.
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/

AUTHOR'S BIO: Marcin Sroczyński graduated from the Institute of Applied Linguistics (University of Warsaw) in 2005, and in 2012 completed his second MA at the Faculty of English Philology (University of Warsaw). Currently a third year PhD student in British Literature and Culture, his research project focuses on the processes of formation and fragmentation of identity in Alan Hollinghurst's prose. His academic interests include gender and queer studies, and psychoanalytical criticism. He has authored articles on the works of A. Holleran, A. Hollinghurst, T. Pynchon and J. Winterson.

E-MAIL: msroczyn(at)o2.pl