

## Palimpsestuous fragmentation in James Cahill's *Tiepolo Blue*

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**Abstract:** This paper delves into James Cahill's debut novel, *Tiepolo Blue* (2022), as an updating of postmodern gay novels like Alan Hollinghurst's Booker-Prize winner *The Line of Beauty* (2004). To prove the postness of *Tiepolo Blue*, some aspects will be addressed. First of all, the novel revises the relation between ethics and aesthetics, for Don, the protagonist, is able to overcome the aporia that blocks many of Hollinghurst's main characters. In this sense, Kristeva's concept of the abject is meaningful because Don shifts from the horror of encountering an "abject" piece of art to embracing the Dionysian. Likewise, the article moves from postmodernist intertextuality. For Dillon, the palimpsest is a relational event that conjures up former and new texts on a palimpsestuous surface. *Pentimenti*, a similar concept referring to the different layers on canvas, are also addressed as long as *Tiepolo Blue* is set in the world of art. In this conflict between the surface and the subterranean of palimpsests and *pentimenti*, the protagonist eventually chooses the underworld. This he does by rearranging his aesthetic assumptions and welcoming a fragmented version of art. In this process of middle-age awakening, he loiters London and its layers in a Felliniesque fashion.

**Keywords:** Cahill; palimpsestuous; *pentimenti*; fragmentation; underworld; abject.

### 1. Introduction

In "A Terrible Beauty: Ethics, Aesthetics and the Trauma of Gayness in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*" (2011), Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753) stands for the first of Todorov's theories on ethics and aesthetics, "whereby art is in the service of ethics" (2011: 207). The protagonist of the novel, Nick Guest, represents romantic theory "since he favours poetry over ethics" (207). Finally, the novel opts for the third, "which sees ethics and aesthetics as complementary phenomena" (208). The tension between both ethics and aesthetics, and, especially, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, goes as follows:

Nick is obsessed with a delusive idea of beauty, which coincides with Nietzsche's revision of classic Apollonian beauty. However, as the narration progresses, the Romantic hero is confronted with the dark side of beauty. The sublime and, especially, the Dionysian and the abject re-inscribe the factuality of the homosexual bodies of Nick and his peers. (208)

James Cahill's *Tiepolo Blue* (2022) resumes the conflict two decades later. Hence, this article explores to what extent *Tiepolo Blue* takes forward the postmodernist discourse of Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*. It is my contention that Cahill's novel updates the meticulous postmodernist structure of Hollinghurst's novels by focusing on the fragmentary in art through the metaphors of palimpsests and *pentimenti*. As for the relation of both protagonists

to ethics and aesthetics, it is quite dissimilar. Unlike Nick Guest, who always favours poetry over ethics, in *Tiepolo Blue* Don Lamb tries to balance ethics and aesthetics. Nick's aestheticism collapses when he is expelled from the fantasy world he has built up around his lodgers, the conservative Feddens, once his gay lifestyle is on the tabloids (2004). His anagnorisis puts an end to the novel when presumably he is about to die of AIDS, but he remains loyal to his aesthetic principles. Don sees how his life as a Cambridge academic first and a museum curator later also comes to an end. Hence, the balance between ethics and aesthetics crumbles and, after his own anagnorisis, he challenges himself by choosing "hell" in disregarding rationality and normativity. In other words, whereas Nick maintains an Apollonian conception of aestheticism despite circumstances, Don eventually accepts his shift from the Apollonian to the Dionysian.

Hollinghurst's fiction constitutes a compendium of gay literary and cultural referents, especially the structural determinism of Gregory Woods's "the tragic queer." For Woods, gay culture and literature have always been marked by tragedy since Wilde's iconic imprisonment for Gross Indecency. With the outburst of AIDS in the nineteen eighties, the tragic queer acquired traumatic undertones. *The Line of Beauty* belongs to this trend of AIDS postmodernist novels. Although published in 2004, it revisits the early years of the AIDS crisis, which was previously addressed in his debut novel, *The Swimming-pool Library* (1988). Other queer texts by writers like Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*, 1993), Edmund White (*The Farewell Symphony*, 1997), Neil Bartlett (*Ready to Catch him Should he Fall* (1990) and Adam Mars-Jones (*The Waters of Thirst*, 1993) set the basis of AIDS literature. They all explored narratives and genres to respond to the problematic context of homophobia and conservatism provoked by the disease. Although *Tiepolo Blue* was published in 2022, it also returns to the traumatic late twentieth-century. To analyse how Cahill's novel updates gay postmodernist texts such as Hollinghurst's, this paper will make use of Kristeva's *intertextualité* and the abject. *Intertextualité*, as the relationship within and between texts in *The Line of Beauty*, is updated by Sarah Dillon's metaphor of the palimpsest in postpostmodern *Tiepolo Blue*. As for the abject, as will be shown, it is suitable to convey Don's internal homophobia and downfall and address the tricky circles of contemporary art.

In an interview for Carlos Museum, James Cahill argues that *Tiepolo Blue* is a "middle-life coming-of-age novel" (2022), or, as Michael Donkor points out, a *Bildungsroman* showing Don's "psychosexual awakening" (2022). His nemesis, Valentine Black (aka Val), controls Don, eventually dragging him into the underworld. The protagonist is a brilliant middle-class academic who, unlike Val and others, has worked hard to get into the elitist circles of Cambridge. From the beginning, Val's schemes are obvious to everyone except for Don. Like Nick Guest in Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, Don considers himself an outsider and, as such, is obsessed with proving his value as an aesthete. This constitutes his Achilles' heel,

which Val does not hesitate to exploit. Drawing on Thomas Mann's Gustav Von Aschenbach via Nick Guest, Don argues for an Apollonian conception of life and art. In fact, he first rejects any intromission of the Dionysian: "Cutting himself off from the messiness of emotion and desire [... h]is magnum opus is a monograph on Tiepolo, which argues that the artist's skyscapes are composed in accordance with the "higher forms" – the strict abstract rules of classical proportion and Euclidian geometry" (Miller, 2022). The problematic relationship between the main character and his "Mephistophelean mentor Valentine Black" (Donkor) stages the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, which are connected respectively with the rational and the romantic. Thus, both *The Line of Beauty* and *Tiepolo Blue* can be labelled as "gay" novels whose protagonists struggle with their identity in a context of aestheticism and abjection. Yet, they draw apart in some significant aspects. *The Line of Beauty* addresses AIDS directly, updating the traumatic treatment of the disease in *The Swimming-pool Library*. The abjectness of the disease is resolutely material and corporeal. For example, when Leo, Nick Guest's boyfriend, contracts AIDS, the narrator focuses on its bodily effects: "His face was hard to read, since AIDS had taken it and written its message of terror and exhaustion on it. [...] His vanity had become a kind of fear, that he would frighten the people he smiled at" (410). In *Tiepolo Blue*, the abject is reflected on art instead. In particular, as will be addressed later, the abject is first articulated in Angela Cannon's installation SICK BED, a parodic reference to Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998) and its disruption of limits between the normative and the non-normative. Eventually, Don embraces abjectness as a way of life.

Postmodernist texts like *The Line of Beauty* entailed a turn to ethics (and to the body) to deal with the trauma of AIDS. Although *Tiepolo Blue* shares a great deal with Hollinghurst's fiction, it re-turns to the nineteen nineties from the second decade of the twenty-first century. Hollinghurst's novels used intertextuality to sublimate the AIDS crisis and recall twentieth-century homoerotic, homosexual and gay sensibilities. Lines, like the line of beauty of the title, traverse Hollinghurst's texts and draw back on their textual referents. However, the line metaphor, which both recalls and contests Bloom's Oedipal anxiety of influence, transmutes into the fragmentary and molecular in *Tiepolo Blue*, especially in updating Tiepolo's Euclidian infinite. Drawing on the Venetian master, Don tries to explain everything in aesthetic terms. Yet, Cahill himself has conceded in an interview that the protagonist finally experiences "the dark side of epiphany" (2022); from then on, he starts to integrate the Dionysian in his life. After the logic of Ovid's metamorphosis, Cahill continues, Don shifts from Tiepolo's classicism to Caravaggio's excess and eroticism. As the article will show, his descent to the underworld, being betrayed by Val and seduced by would-be artist Ben, is a brilliant updating of myths (Ovidian and Dionysian) to modern London. In the last pages of the novel, Don wanders the streets, like flâneurs in modernist literature, as Cahill has pointed out, in a rather Felliniesque fashion (2022). Thus, unlike Hollinghurst's protagonists, such as Nick Guest, who loses track

when Apollonian aesthetics no longer hold, Don becomes especially lucid when he circulates the underworld. The physical layers Don traverses in his descent are related to textual relationality, especially intertextuality and the palimpsest.

## **2. From textual images to the palimpsest. Art as liberation and liberation from art**

Drawing on W. J. T. Mitchell, Allan Johnson addresses the different categories of literary images depending on how explicit they are, from graphic pictures or sculptures to verbal ones such as metaphors and descriptions (2014: 13-14). In his view, textual images have been a recurrent feature that has established an imaginary pervading literature and, more specifically, gay texts. He defines textual image as “the smallest unit of textual feature that enables readers to visualize an otherwise unstable graphic or optical image” (14). Johnson connects the concept of textual image with Julia Kristeva’s *intertextualité* which, in his view, has been misidentified as intertextuality. For Kristeva, it is “a semiotic model concerned, firstly, with the transpositioning of linguistic utterances rather than literary patterns” (15). That is, she focuses on the text as a self-containing entity, which only means as long as it is relational. Thus, the text “is defined as a trans-linguistic apparatus that redistributes the order of language by relating communicative speech, which aims to inform directly, to different kinds of anterior or synchronic utterances” (Kristeva 1980: 36). This idea of transness and relationality between the text and other (previous or simultaneous) utterances explains why many critics have (mis)appropriated intertextuality in the transition from linguistics to literature. For Kristeva, intertextuality entails a permutation of texts since “in the space of a given text, several utterances [...] intersect and neutralize one another” (36). Johnson draws on Kristeva’s transpositioning to explore the genealogy of textual images and how they challenge the romantic conception of authorship, genius and originality. In his view, these images “have been absorbed and processed over the span of many years, stretching themselves out atop one another to create beguiling layers of *pentimenti*” (150). Using *pentimenti* and palimpsests is very significant, as will be shown, in *Tiepolo Blue* because they outdo textual images. Both *pentimenti* and palimpsests make reference to “physical traces of historic processes left on parchment and canvas, the reworking and adding to a new piece that reflects what was before” (Hannaway 2019: 3). That is, a previous version of the art on canvas or the writing on parchment struggles to survive, haunting the most superficial layer/version. In this sense, both terms comply with queer temporalities, transpositioning different layers of words and images. Although they are similar, palimpsests refer to rewriting or reusing the parchment because it was originally too expensive a good. However, *pentimenti* are traces of brushes on the canvas because “the artists changed their mind. Coming from the Italian word for repentance, it shows where the artist improved upon the composition or a detail; building upon the former layer to create a more appropriate new form” (10). Although *pentimenti* are

addressed by Johnson in reading Hollinghurst's textual images, the concept (together with the palimpsest) is even more meaningful to explore the limits between the textual and the visual in a novel about art and artists such as *Tiepolo Blue*.

In Don's story, the textual/visual iconography is systematically related to his classic conception of art and is arranged like palimpsests and *pentimenti*. First, Apollonian aesthetics makes up a prison and eventually, as the protagonist is led to (and chooses) the underworld, this strict sense of aesthetics vanishes and a process of liberation commences. The protagonist's choice of Tiepolo as his tutelary spirit is very significant since his frescoes are timeless (Cahill, 24) and make up "a compendium of classical rules" (22). His discourse clashes with new schools of thought, like "Marxist credos" (9), "new art" (17) and "cultural theory" (24). The conflict between old and new schools climaxes when Don spots Angela Cannon's installation SICK BED at the Quadrangle. First of all, he thinks it is rubbish, but, as he approaches, he notices it is a purposeful "iron frame packed with coil springs" (4). Drawing on "Tracey Emin's groundbreaking *My Bed*," (Donkor), SICK BED stands for new art forms that break with classic schools, "the latest iteration of the avant-garde spirit" (Cahill, 53) that Don abhors. Both Emin's installation and Cannon's parody feature their beds scattered with body fluids, used underwear, condoms and tampons to represent and vindicate the abject as that which is socially repressed. In this sense, they break with the limits of the normative (hence, representable), mesmerizing and provoking repulsion in viewers.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Don originally considers that art "translates life into higher forms [...]. Art [...] is a sequence of confirmations [...] of what is good and true" (29). His platonic discourse addresses the sequence, i.e. the palimpsestic layers that have made up the dialectics of art through generations. Yet, he seems to ignore the underside of Apollonian "reason, truth and scholarship" (52), namely the Dionysian. Don sublimates his whole life in art so that his existence "is one of sexual abdication" (122). He feels art to be self-cathartic because he escapes his mediocre middle-class background, but also carceral because he can only experience life and sexuality through a very constraining conception of art and beauty.

The transposition of linguistic and literary patterns in *intertextualité* and intertextuality recalls respectively the superimposition of layers in "multi-linearity, nodes, links and networks" (Chicago School Media Theory, n.d.: par. 7) in palimpsests. For Sarah Dillon, the palimpsest "is an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other" (2005: 245). She makes a difference between two types or categories of palimpsests, namely the palimpsestic and the palimpsestuous. The first refers to the process of layering textual traces that can be mapped out in an archaeological fashion (2005: 245). That is, the reader digs into textual traces vertically, trying to reach the truest level of meaning at the bottom. By contrast, the palimpsestuous refers

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<sup>1</sup> Authors like Rachel Robson (2012) and Kirsti Ringger (2014) have analysed the abject in Emin's installation.

to “a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation” (Dillon 2007: 3). It is a relational event that, echoing Kristeva’s *intertextualité*, focuses on the horizontal transposition of textual layers as the “reappearance of the underlying script” (4) occurs on the surface. Indeed, contrary to what could be expected, palimpsests “do not actually arrive in neat layers that can be peeled down to their ever delayed core like the skins of an onion: they are by definition a single surface inhabited by multiple dissociated discourses, each of which is its own irreducible moment” (De Groote, 124). Yet, although they are irreducible, there is an underlying connection “allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence” (Dillon 2007: 3). This is, as will be shown, the aesthetic result of Don’s materials for his book *The Skies of Tiepolo* when they are manipulated and rearranged by Ben.

Don spends the whole novel trying to write *The Skies of Tiepolo*. However, as happens with some of Hollinghurst’s protagonists, he cannot conclude his project (Cahill, 173). There is an essential difference, though. In Don’s case, there is a transition from regret to acceptance and liberation in leaving the task unfulfilled, which never happens with Will Beckwith in *The Swimming-pool Library* (1988) and Edward Manners and Edgard Orst in *The Folding Star* (1994). At first, Don feels infatuated with Tiepolo’s skies. He describes the mythical scenes but also their liminal relation with their off-limits: “Around the edge of the scene there is usually a ledge [...]. It is a hard reminder of the realm beyond the world of the picture” (106). He aims to transmit the liminality he is analysing in his book to a young artist, Ben, who seems not interested enough. Yet, the youth notices how Tiepolo’s paintings and Don’s own traces mix up on the paper reproduction of the original: “Looks like you’ve added some touches of your own” (Cahill, 151), he says. As happens in palimpsests, layers contend for meaning making up a palimpsestuous surface where they meet and contest one another. This juxtaposition, complementariness and denial of Don’s traces on Tiepolo’s skies are on canvas, echoing the layers of painting of *pentimenti*. There is, however, a significant difference because *pentimenti* refer to changes on the painting out of the artist’s repentance. In this case, Tiepolo’s original is not modified by himself out of repentance but by Don, who dissects the painting to make sense of it in rational terms. Therefore, repentance is not direct but circuitous because Don regrets in the name of the other, Tiepolo, and modifies the original belatedly.

Repentance, from Latin *re-* (very much) and *penitire* (regret), entails coming back to some wrongdoing. In this sense, Jewish Teshuvah, often translated as repentance, is very graphic. It is a returning when one has gone astray, an ethical coming back. In returning obsessively to Tiepolo’s skies as mythic, quasi-religious and aesthetic frescoes, Don is performing a belated repentance of another to solve an ethical and aesthetic problem. He justifies his “amending”/coming back to Tiepolo’s art because, in his view, “it conceals a precise and beautiful geometry” (152). When Ben wonders about Tiepolo’s obsession with representing the sky in numerous frescoes, Don explains it results from the combination of the

sky of Venice and the mist of the lagoon. Like the palimpsestuous and “pentimentuous” layers in parchments and on canvas, Tiepolo’s skies are transpositioned with the real skies of Venice and Don’s interpretation and manipulation of the paintings. He directs Ben’s attention to the blue contours that make up the works (153). In returning to Tiepolo and focusing on the often neglected parts of his artworks, Cahill’s novel is ethically committed. Don pays attention to what is good and true, no matter how modest because, through art, he feels everything is dignified. Yet, his ethics of attention is restricted to a straight-jacketed classic conception of art (220) that progressively changes as the novel advances. As will be shown in the following section, film director Derek Jarman is a tutelary spirit in Don’s individuation process, the new artistic panorama and the outburst of AIDS.

### **3. Tiepolo Blue revisits Jarman**

When Don realises his job at the museum is in danger because of a new generation of forward-looking ambitious critics, he understands a change is needed. Hence, he challenges himself, proposing an installation where Derek Jarman’s film *Caravaggio* (1986) would be projected “over the tops of the paintings” (255). At this stage, Don assumes an approach to painting which draws on the transpositionality of art forms and messages. It is palimpsestuous because it is the surface of the screen on the wall that conjures up the layers of the artistic event. Indeed, as Tim Lawrence points out: “Blue is particularly concerned with the tyranny of the image – the way in which surface destroys depth” (1997: 253). It is “pentimentuous” because Jarman’s film recasts Caravaggio’s paintings. However, rather than *Caravaggio*, Jarman’s most obvious intertext in the novel is *Blue* (1993). The film is a rarity, “consisting of an uninterrupted aquamarine screen, accompanied by a rhapsodic soundtrack revolving around Jarman’s experience of AIDS” (Moor 2000: 49). For Moor, the monochromatic screen constitutes an act of Puritanism and denial, which contrasts with the corporeality of the disease. In this sense, *Blue* favours spirit over matter, drawing on the politics of “ascetic denial” of Laura Mulvey’s feminist criticism; its “single conceptual image, in so far as it can be called an image, likewise abdicates any authority for fixed subject positioning along the voyeuristic and fetishistic lines which Mulvey so roundly castigates” (49). *Blue* challenges the medicalised and diseased iconography of gay sexuality in the nineteen nineties, focusing on the abstraction of pure colour without immediate references. Thus, it creates “a semiotic void. But it is still a signifier, and its cultural connotations of spirituality or infinity propel the film towards the sublime” (63). Don’s conception of Tiepolo’s blue is, for most of the novel, also a spiritual event which conjures up ethics and aesthetics in Apollonian terms. This quasi-religious approach to art in blue is also related to Yves Klein’s “solid blue screens,” which render his “messianic, deeply mystical view of the sacred function of art” (63). This is the way Don understands his role as an art critic and the role of art itself.

That is why he rejects the transience of new art forms, which triggers his downfall. However, the protagonist learns to appreciate a space beyond the constraining limits of classicism. His downfall also entails a new beginning for him, though outside the academic circles and normative sexuality. When Klein argues that “a usual painting ... is for [him] like a window of a prison whose lines, contours, forms, composition create barriers” (in Sidra Stich 1995: 67), his words recall Don’s rejection of his former self. He recognises the tyranny of the image, of lines as “the concretization of our mortal state, of our sentimentality, of our intellect” (67), which Don welcomes while others, like the protagonist of *The Line of Beauty*, cannot overcome.

Jarman’s response to AIDS goes beyond the spiritual abstraction of *Blue*. As Moor argues, Jarman’s late paintings of “his Queer exhibition of 1992, are the visceral converse of *Blue*” (64). What is remarkable about these “aggressive” paintings is their avant-gardism. The artist:

takes multiple photocopies of homophobic tabloid front pages and almost covers them in paint – mainly reds, browns and yellows. He then scores graffiti-like obscenities into the paint, directly invoking blood, sex and the plague. [...] Connoting carnality and rage, and provocatively suggesting the body’s fluids and the disease of the flesh, this red is a stark antithesis to the cool of *Blue*” (64).

This duality of spirit and matter, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, is also at the core of Don’s metamorphosis from a respected art historian devoted to high art to a flâneur in marginal London. Yet, the most striking feature of Jarman’s *Red* paintings is their palimpsestuousness because different layers merge on the canvas surface to address the horror of AIDS. In *Tiepolo Blue*, the fragments of Tiepolo’s paintings and drafts are re-arranged against Don’s Will. First, they disappear from his workplace, “disturbed, decimated. [...] His entire archive [...] pulled out of the wardrobe” (211). Later, Ben returns the neat archive transformed into a palimpsestuous collage: “Hundreds of shards of painted sky under a sheet of glass. He balances the picture [...], kicking away the swathes of brown paper. [...] He [...] traces the near invisible joins between the parcels of sky. A thousand shades of blue” (302). The collage breaks with Don’s idea of wholeness because it is arranged as a fragmented palimpsestuous surface, which he still tries to reconstruct, though to no avail. In fact, the invisible joins lead nowhere and the composition remains a myriad of bluish fragments contoured in brown.

The coming of the Internet to the museum constitutes a new step forward in Don’s middle-age awakening and another representation of the palimpsestuous. He soon learns how to type keywords which interweave in the form of light emissions while he “peers intently, waiting as the fragments assemble” (299). As he writes down “The+Sleeping+Hermaphrodite” and “Beautiful+Male+Body” he witnesses how light beams crystallise into images on the screen. Thus, the internet becomes the ultimate palimpsest where light particles are transpositioned in

innumerable combinations to make up words and images. His search shifts from artistic pieces to erotic and finally pornographic images until a group of teenage girls crowd behind his glass door while he hopelessly attempts to turn the computer off. While trying to close the curtains, he grabs a piece of them. It is then when silence returns and Don “studies the particles of light that puncture the unlined fabric” (301). Thus, like the screen, the fabric collects particles which make up images on a palimpsestuous surface. Likewise, the protagonist disintegrates into a new self that embraces the abject.

### **Conclusions**

Tiepolo’s skies are a textual image Don explores in his relentless search for the Apollonian. However, no matter how hard he tries to examine the skies in rational terms, it turns out that Tiepolo’s iconography eventually unfolds layers of make-believe. Don idealises classic aesthetics and rejects the abject underside, but the excess of the Dionysian finally bursts out. Tiepolo’s rightness is not enough and the protagonist’s aesthetic project changes in front of his own eyes. Under his reluctant attachment to Caravaggio, Tiepolo’s blue skies turn into a lurid palimpsest. Like Jarman’s spiritual *Blue*, which counteracts with the corporeality and abjection of his late paintings, Don’s Tiepolo Blue only means when seen through Caravaggio’s sexualised discourse and reread through Ben’s installation. Cahill’s novel plays with layers, which eventually crystallise in a palimpsestuous surface where Tiepolo’s classicism and Caravaggio’s baroque pull coalesce. Likewise, Val’s multiple faces finally fit in a collage of photographs and information that Don gathers. The protagonist himself sees how Michael replaces him at the museum and Val’s house as if one underlying layer came out and merged with the overlying one on a palimpsestuous relation. As for the gay subculture Don embraces in the last part of the novel, it is underneath and hidden from mainstream London. However, like Marcello and Jep in *La Dolce Vita* and *La Grande Belleza*, he learns to loiter the different layers of the city and discern a palimpsestuous landscape.

Following the examples of Jarman and Klein, the protagonist of *Tiepolo Blue* finally rejects the “uniformity and the finite [...] in realist paintings” (Lawrence 1997: 256) and chooses the infinite of the monochrome. It is not the blue of Tiepolo’s frescoes, but a complex stimulus, artistic and experiential, that leads Don’s willing descent to the Dionysian. Lawrence points to the omnipresence of blue in Jarman’s works (and in Klein’s): “It is the shade of Jarman’s depression, of universal love, and of terrestrial paradise” (256). The infiniteness of blue is carceral and liberating in Cahill’s novel. Indeed, Don is a trespasser (after being a conventional Cambridge academic for years) once he undergoes his anagnorisis. The Apollonian is no longer enough, and blueness is far more complex than it may seem. In fact, blue is sad but also infinite and cathartic. Ben’s installation with Don’s former materials on Tiepolo’s skies is a palimpsest

of the protagonist's transformation but also of the "thing" into which his beloved has metamorphosed.

Don Lamb shifts from a position in which ethics and aesthetics are complementary phenomena to one in which aesthetics is free from ethical constraints. The limits of rationality, which he initially relates to ethics, are blurred when he loses his academic and social status. There is thus a fracture in normative (i.e. Apollonian) aesthetics and ethics. This fracture has to do with Don's conception of the abject and the underworld. Caravaggio and everything that destabilises the limits between subject and object, the rational and the irrational, the spiritual and the corporeal, is revalued as the novel progresses. However, unlike Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, where the abject and the outburst of the Dionysian are directly related to AIDS and the end of a community and lifestyle, *Tiepolo Blue* moves forward and its protagonist survives when he fits in the gay subculture(s) of the nineteen nineties. In relation to this, while Hollinghurst's novel plays with formal structures in postmodern terms (the strict lines of the title being very significant), Cahill's rejects any definite structure. *Tiepolo Blue* is a postpostmodern text, valuing the shifting, nodal and fragmented effect of the internet era in a palimpsestuous fashion.

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