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Neo Lines: Alan Hollinghurst and the Apogee of the Eighties

Joseph Brooker

When Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* won the Booker Prize in October 2004, it sealed the arrival in fiction of a retrospective exploration of the 1980s which had already been unmistakable in British culture. While the political continuities from Margaret Thatcher's social revolution have been a central topic in the analysis of Tony Blair's administrations, the return of the 1980s in popular culture has also been evident for years. Literature has not been insulated from this climate. Since the turn of the millennium Nicola Barker's *Five Miles From Outer Hope* (2001), Tim Lott's *Rumours of a Hurricane* (2002) and David Peace's *GB84* (2004) have been prominent examples of the 'neo-1980s' novel in Britain. It is on Hollinghurst's book, however, that this essay will focus. To whose 1980s does *The Line of Beauty* return us? What is at stake?

Hollinghurst's book avoids the social milieux in which Lott and Peace locate Thatcherism's prime battlefields. The novel takes place among the rich and influential: few of its characters have encountered a dole queue or picket line. Much preoccupied with Thatcherism, the book depicts scant opposition to its political triumph; the miners' strike of 1984-5 is simply flown over by the narrative's abrupt leap from 1983 to 1986. Alfred Hickling correctly notes that the book places gay experience in an insistent social and historical context – 'Hollinghurst has extended his powers to create a universe rather than a clique' – but his claim that 'the novel has sufficient breadth to evoke the full spectrum of 1980s Britain – gay and straight, rich and poor' is excessive.¹ The aristocrats and Oxford graduates who make up much of the book's cast seem removed from the struggles of the period. Yet in another sense Hollinghurst's characters are socially central. Unlike Lott's and Peace's tales of the dispossessed and repossessed, this novel heads for the pivot of power, spending its time unashamedly amid the wealth and complacent consumption which are indeed among the central popular images of the 1980s. While the protagonist Nick Guest wields little influence of his own over current events, the book details his dealings with more politically central figures – most extensively the rising Conservative MP Gerald Fedden, in whose house he lodges – and with potent operators in business. If the social stratum it depicts is anything but average, then, *The Line of Beauty* does in its way offer a historically significant field of character and action.

The book's temporal setting also places it at the centre of the period: it runs from 1983 to 1987, the years of Margaret Thatcher's second term in office and the period of her pomp. The book's very first sentence refers to Thatcher's first landslide²; as her third victory emerges in 1987, Nick explains to the Feddens' daughter Catherine that the land "looks very much as though it's going to stay slidden" (419). Indeed, though Gerald Fedden is finally brought down by a cocktail of financial and sexual scandal, the novel does not portray the government under significant threat. Instead it examines the new

¹ Alfred Hickling, 'Between The Lines', *Guardian, Review*, 10 April 2004, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,,1189089,00.html>, accessed 17 January 2005.

² Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (London: Picador, 2004), p.3. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.

nexus of commerce and culture during Nigel Lawson's credit boom of 1983-1988. The rising emphases of the moment were on the consumption of more enticingly designed and marketed consumer goods than ever before, investment in property, and the individual freedoms of a frequently proclaimed 'enterprise culture'.³

The novel tracks these increasingly hegemonic attitudes and practices. Nick and his wealthy, glamorous lover Wani Ouradi share a designer flat and a vaguely-defined creative company. They produce little, but consume copiously, not least large amounts of cocaine. When Wani casually hands Nick a cheque for £5,000, Nick takes it to a City friend to invest, and observes that 'Kesslers had just rebuilt their City premises, with a steel and glass atrium and high-tech dealing-floors fitted in behind the old palazzo façade' (203). The mood in the City is dominated by 'ferocious youngsters who already had their hands on a new kind of success' (204). Elsewhere in the novel money seems almost to multiply itself. When Catherine Fedden, the black cat of the family, wonders why Sir Maurice Tipper must turn £40 million into £80 million, her brother Toby vaguely explains: "It sort of turns itself, actually" (331). The novel deliberately presents Thatcherism from the inside, cleaving to the insularity of the moneyed, Conservative centre of power. Whole conversations are devoted to admiration of Margaret Thatcher herself (318-9). The limits of the book's world are, for the most part, the limits of a certain Tory imagination: Hollinghurst stages the self-congratulatory myopia which made Thatcherism all the easier to implement.

Yet the novel's political symphony is not utterly without dissonance. The one major character to exist altogether outside it is Nick's lover Leo, a black council worker who eventually dies of AIDS. But the most conspicuous outsider to the Fedden milieu is also an insider: Nick himself. Nick's origins are in Barwick, a small Northamptonshire town, and the book repeatedly insists on his seduction and bedazzlement by the glamour of the Feddens' semi-aristocratic world. When he returns to his parents' more modest home in an expensive car, he becomes conscious of their discomfort at its extravagance (266-7). From any less exalted point of view, in fact, Nick is hardly a poor boy: having attended public school before Oxford, he belongs to a tiny minority of the British population. But the novel, and certainly its characters, are keenly interested in the minor gradations of wealth and status, just as Peter York and Anne Barr had noted in *The Official Sloane Ranger Handbook* (1982), a popular analysis of affluent Britain which now reads as a useful account of the world of *The Line of Beauty*.⁴ As a parvenu from the provincial bourgeoisie, installed at the heart of Tory London, Nick forms an ironic parallel with Margaret Thatcher herself. This strange proximity is surely one of the effects with which Hollinghurst plays when a drunken, drug-enhanced and supremely confident Nick does what none of the sycophants

³ For a provocative and informative portrait of the era see Peter York and Charles Jennings, *Peter York's Eighties* (London: BBC, 1995). For City salaries see Nicholas Coleridge, 'The New Club of Rich Young Men', *Spectator*, 15 March 1986, reprinted in *Britain in the Eighties: The 'Spectator's View of the Thatcher Decade* (London: Grafton, 1989), pp.101-106. On ideology and shifting public attitudes during the Thatcher years, see Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1986).

⁴ On nuances of distinction see Peter York and Anne Barr, *The Official Sloane Ranger Handbook: The First Guide to What Really Matters in Life* (London: Ebury, 1982), p.10.

have been able to do and asks Thatcher to dance at the Feddens' silver wedding anniversary party (384).

Yet that irony is matched by a more obvious one: that Thatcher is unaware that her dancing partner is gay. Revelation of this fact would likely lessen her enthusiasm: her government, after all, instituted the aggressive legislation of Clause 28, banning the 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools. Yet to what extent *does* Nick's sexuality put him at odds with the world he inhabits? The book frequently shows gay life to be quite compatible with high Conservatism. Nick emerges from the Oxford which historically nurtured not only Wilde, but Evelyn Waugh and his iconic, teddy-bearing creation Sebastian Flyte. Among the old Oxonians among whom Nick lounges at Toby Fedden's 21st birthday party, Nick detects sexual ambiguity and permissiveness (86-7). Camp does not seem forbidden in this world, exemplified by the bitchy future Tory MP Paul Tompkins (61-2). At the Feddens' anniversary party Nick and Catherine's commentary turns the swell of Tory courtiers into a gaudy parade: "Actually what amazes me", Nick observes, "is the fantastic queenery of the men. The heterosexual queenery" (382). Commerce appears possible between two kinds of camp; at least, the gay observer seems a tolerated eccentric, an acceptably marginal part of the furniture. Nor does Nick's sexuality exclude him from the spheres of media and business: the two potential film financiers who arrive from the USA are a gay couple intent on meeting as much of British aristocracy as possible during their visit (427). As Thomas Jones notes, the contrast between Nick's dance with Thatcher and his subsequent coke-sniffing with Wani and a waiter upstairs is not necessarily so stark: 'Wani is the rawest embodiment of Thatcherism in the novel: brutally rich, peerlessly selfish, with a rapacious, insatiable appetite – for cocaine, sex, pornography, power, money'.⁵

Yet Nick's status has been marginal – questionable, and accidentally unquestioned – throughout. In the Feddens' house he is repeatedly stranded between intimacy and formality. When Gerald insists that Nick is 'part of the... part of the household' (121), 'family' is the word he pauses before not using: the ellipsis here signals Nick's uncertain status just as does Rachel's treatment of his rent as an unnecessary gift (118). Nick's honorary membership of the family seems secured by time, yet is denied at the novel's climax, when he is inadvertently implicated in the uncovering of Gerald's affair with his secretary. With paparazzi surrounding the house, he finds himself splashed over the front page of the *Standard*: a minor character suddenly, artificially made into the main story. What had seemed acceptable throughout the book becomes abruptly abject when framed as 'Gay Sex Link To Minister's House' (468): and with the meaning of his sexuality redefined in the terms of public homophobia, the family begin to disown him. Gerald takes up the vocabulary and manufactured outrage of his fellow MP Barry Groom, and suddenly presents Nick's ambiguous position, 'attaching yourself to a family like this', as part of a 'homo trick' (481). Nick's sexuality, hitherto unproblematic to the Feddens, finally becomes central to his perceived offence. Homophobia is unleashed, as if from nowhere, as the Tory establishment ejects the scapegoat and closes ranks. Perhaps the break with

⁵ Thomas Jones, 'Welly-Whanging', *London Review of Books*, Vol 26 no 9, 6 May 2004, <http://lrb.co.uk/v26/n09/jone01.html>, accessed 13 January 2005.

the Feddens marks a more general political disjuncture, as Nick belatedly learns the ultimate incompatibility of his sexual identity with their politics.

Sexuality, money and class all intersect with the novel's ultimately defining interest: the aesthetic, all the way from the title to the book's closing word, 'beautiful' (501). Visiting Bertrand Ouradi's house, Nick is introduced as his son Wani's hired aesthete and offered a tour of the house's historic attractions: even if they actually retreat to Wani's bedroom to take cocaine, the antique indeed forms one of the novel's predominant models of beauty. Nick's father and Leo's former lover are both antique dealers; and at a more exalted level, we see Nick appreciating the fittings and treasures of Lord Kessler's house Hawkeswood (51-55) and of the Feddens' Notting Hill house itself. The novel's title refers to the 'ogee' or doubly curved line described in William Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753); and indeed much of Nick's conception of beauty belongs more to tradition and art history than to the late-twentieth-century world that the novel depicts. In this sense there is a persistent disjunction between a residual aesthetic and a changing modern society; if the historic houses and eighteenth-century furniture have any special place in the 1980s it is perhaps as part of the burgeoning heritage industry analyzed at the time by Patrick Wright.⁶

Another model of the aesthetic, still more pervasive in the novel, is more recent in origin. This is the work of Henry James, whose style Nick is studying at UCL. Even as this project seems to recede, he integrates James into his professional life: aside from a proposed film of *The Spoils of Poynton*, we see Nick dictating letters to associates in self-consciously Jamesian manner (396-7). But Nick's enthusiasm is really the playful echo of a more tacit and fundamental fact: the entire novel is inflected with the example of James, a barrage of probing discernments and mutable judgements. The notion of a Jamesian treatment of the mid-1980s is explicitly raised in the novel: "What would Henry James have made of us, I wonder?" (140), asks Gerald's future secretary Penny Kent. Nick gives his answer, but we can speculatively add: he would have studied the intimate ambiguities of the dominant class of the age; he would have teased at the relations between money and taste, power and style; he would have used an ostensibly narrow social remit to seek insight into a whole era. Hollinghurst does not mimic James's prolixity: much of his prose is simple. But it is the very chattiness of the precision that is Jamesian in sentences like 'Rosemary didn't answer exactly, but she raised one eyebrow and seemed to cut her food up in a very ironical way' (159) or 'There was a complicated shame-in-triumph which perhaps only Nick could see' (359). Hollinghurst implies a level of perception on which both narrator and reader can share in making and understanding such judgements: the slight awkwardness of these formulations is a signal that we have reached a finer discrimination that supersedes concerns about mere stylistic felicity. (It is almost impossible to imagine Martin Amis publishing such sentences.) The very ordinariness of Hollinghurst's language, as he pinpoints another little equivocation ('Nick thought this was very funny, and then felt almost sorry for her' [141]), is the equivalent of informality between close friends: the gains of intimacy make conventional elegance irrelevant. Yet in its fastidious attention to nuance, this often colloquial idiom

⁶ See Patrick Wright, *On Living In An Old Country* (London: Verso, 1985).

becomes an aestheticism in its own right; in its seeming carelessness (abbreviations such as 'wasn't' and 'hadn't' are frequent), this is among the most carefully watchful of contemporary literary styles.⁷

If *The Line of Beauty* itself is the answer to Penny's question, then it offers a common ground on which the 1980s and the artistic temper can meet. But this would seem a contradictory unity: for not only is 'beauty' in this novel a matter of tradition more than modernity, but Thatcherism frequently seems anti-aesthetic. Gerald Fedden is unappreciative of the art and finery with which he is surrounded, merely genuflecting to it during his energetic scramble for power; when Lord Kessler gives him and Rachel a silver ewer and a Gauguin painting for their anniversary, Gerald's unspoken thoughts are of cost (363) and insurance (361). Pressed by a sceptical Leo about his Tory friends, Nick posits 'a sort of aesthetic poverty about conservatism' (104). If Gerald bears this out, so does his idol, 'The Lady' herself, when she finally visits for the anniversary, in an outfit that Catherine judges makes her look 'like a country and western singer' (381). Gerald's main concern about the Gauguin has swiftly become where to hang it with her visit impending: when Lord Kessler, who sees Thatcher as a destructive philistine, doubts that she will notice, Gerald retorts that "she notices everything" (365). But Nick's perception as he leads the Prime Minister to dance is different: 'she moved in her own accelerated element, her own garlanded perspective, she didn't give a damn about squares on the wallpaper or blue front doors – she noticed nothing, and yet she remembered everything' (385). The description is nuanced, and the book's portrait of Thatcher is by no means merely satirical; but to 'notice nothing' nevertheless makes Thatcher the opposite of the Jamesian standpoint adopted by Nick and the novel itself, to which 'noticing' is fundamental.

The novel might thus be seen to pit a Jamesian aestheticism against a vulgar *zeitgeist* oblivious to its rarefied perceptions. The incongruous clash of manner and matter would be akin to that between Flaubert's painstaking pursuit of style and the normative Normandy he depicted: art emerges as the remainder that exceeds its society's values, a utopian compensation for bourgeois philistinism. Yet in an important sense this opposition is false, as the novel finally hints. For the 1980s were years in which 'style', the theme of Nick's thesis (54), became insistent in British society. The world had never been more thoroughly designed: appearances and surfaces were lavished with attention, as the texture of the everyday was transformed. This was a commercial, not a disinterested, matter. 'There was a time when it wasn't seen as necessary to use design to sell', explained the design consultant Rodney Fitch in 1985: 'But not any more'.⁸ The aesthete Nick may feel marginal, but others found a new centrality in the design industry and the 'style press' which both embodied and analyzed its object.⁹ (Hollinghurst nods to this formation when the Feddens nervously examine a copy of *The Face* [98-100].) Peter York, who had pioneered such analyses for *Harpers & Queen*, recalls Britain's sudden infatuation with 'the luxury of educated

⁷ A thorough comparative analysis of the styles of *The Line of Beauty* and James himself would be a worthwhile undertaking, perhaps for a graduate student at UCL.

⁸ Quoted in York and Jennings, *Peter York's Eighties*, p.64.

⁹ On 'style culture' in the 1980s see Michael Bracewell, *England is Mine* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), pp.211-218.

senses', in everything from kettles to desk lamps.¹⁰ His own analysis of the Sloane Ranger appeared to place a bluff, English anti-aestheticism at the cultural centre¹¹, but was itself an instance of semiotic sensitivity, and of the off-the-peg availability of codes and images: 'With a how-to book and a little cash, aspirants... could play-act, be someone entirely new'.¹² Style, Flaubert once said, is an absolute way of seeing¹³; for York and his contemporaries it was becoming a way of being, in a revived dandyism of objects and options. If Thatcher indeed 'noticed nothing', she nonetheless presided over a society in which others were noticing more than ever. In 1986 Nick considers that 'Really it was time for a new *Analysis of Beauty*' (200). He is thinking primarily of the male body, but the sentence is also a reminder that a new analysis of beauty – or of style, or design – is underway all around him.

Doubtless 'style' for George Davies or Neville Brody was a different idea from that endorsed by Flaubert or James. But in Nick's one moment of creativity, artistic tradition and modern styling are suggestively united. Late in the book (488-9) he takes delivery of the lone issue of his and Wani's magazine, *Ogee*, and eagerly examines the product: 'And of course what he saw was the wonderland of luxury, for the first three glossy spreads, Bulgari, Dior, BMW'. The title may be drawn from Nick's knowledge of Hogarth – and his own, sumptuously illustrated article is 'about the Line of Beauty' itself – but this is also an exemplary product of 1987, a style magazine that displays consumable treats ('glowing short features on mah-jong sets and toy soldiers of the Raj' [489]) alongside its glossy adverts, and whose cover, with studied minimalism, bears no lettering save 'at the foot of the spine, OGEE, ISSUE 1 in plain Roman caps'. If the aesthete, with all the troubling sexual difference associated with that term since the 1880s, is finally banished from the Feddens' world, it is not before he has made his own contribution to the expensive aestheticism of the 1980s.

Alan Hollinghurst's Thatcher may notice nothing, but one thing that the author himself has noticed is the line of beauty, or story of style, that bridges the moments of the book's setting and publication. The decade, he reflected after winning the Booker, 'seems to have determined so many things about the way we live now'.¹⁴ *The Line of Beauty*, like other recent revisitations of the 1980s in fiction, encourages us to reflect on the political and cultural continuities from that era to ours, the still unfinished business of Thatcherism, as well as the changes that sunder us from it. While that complex relation persists, as the success of the novel suggests, the 1980s remain hard to leave behind, or to leave alone.

¹⁰ York and Jennings, *Peter York's Eighties*, p.65.

¹¹ On Sloane aesthetic sensibilities see York and Barr, *Official Sloane Ranger Handbook*, pp.23-5.

¹² York and Jennings, *Peter York's Eighties*, p.49.

¹³ Gustave Flaubert, letter to Louise Colet, 16 January 1852, in *Selected Letters* ed. Geoffrey Wall (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), p.171.

¹⁴ Alan Hollinghurst quoted in Stephen Moss, 'I Don't Make Moral Judgments', *Guardian*, 21 October 2004, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/bookerprize2004/story/0,14182,1332083,00.html>, accessed 17 January 2005.

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