Queering Thatcher:
whatever happened to politics and culture
in the 1980s?

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Abstract

Thatcherism was an incoherent form of governmentality which marked the end of both the traditional left and the traditional conservative right. It also contributed to literary culture's loss of authority. A loss of authority which also, however, meant an increase of literature's truth-telling power. Alan Hollingshurst's *The Line of Beauty* was such a powerful truth-telling novel about the Thatcherite period in part because it critiqued Thatcherism by appealing to death's blind finality as uncovered in the HIV epidemic of the period.

Contributor Note

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When Margaret Thatcher died I felt nothing. So when I was asked whether I'd like to contribute to this issue I was nonplussed. Perhaps, I thought, it would help if I figured out why I felt nothing. So I did.

In her prime (when I lived in London), I hated Thatcher: a visceral hatred, an intensity, which covered everything about her: not just her values, not just her policies, not just her friends and fans, not just what she and her kind (or, at any rate, the forces of history they enact) did to the country, but her hair, her teeth, her clothes, her voice. Most of all her voice. So: not just what she stood for, and did, but what she was. Nonetheless, and this was a problem, at some point I also came to feel ashamed of my hatred. Wasn't it, in its excessiveness, in the grip of a prejudice, a commonplace, nasty, prejudice at that? The prejudice of a highly-educated leftish literary intellect-tual for an aspiring, try-hard, respectable, lower-middle class, suburban, older woman. A prejudice that, one way or another, fuels hundreds of twentieth-century novels, most of all in the fifties. And in this case my hatred may have been attached to a fear: the fear of a strong woman, a woman who reminded me, despite everything, of my mother. My nightmare mother, cleansed of everything that made me part of her, and her part of me.

So I reckon that's why I felt nothing when it came to Thatcher's end. It's as if, thirty years on, in another country, the shame and the hatred had cancelled each other out.

But it is not as though, as an academic, I hadn't thought about Thatcher and Thatcherism over the years. Quite dispassionately even. So instead of not offering anything to this issue, I offer this, a talk given five or so years ago at the

National University of Singapore and put away in a drawer (that's a metaphor obviously) since then, which is, it is about literary fiction, also about Thatcherism and death, if not yet, then, *her* death.

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In 1983, four years into Margaret Thatcher's Prime Ministership, the British Conservative party won an election which, like the 1906 and 1945 elections before it, signalled an unexpected and consequential realignment within British politics and society. It was not so much that the Tories took power again despite historically high unemployment and despite Mrs Thatcher's extreme unpopularity among articulate and powerful sectors of the community, but that the Labour Party was decimated. Of those first-time voters who bothered to vote (just over half), only 17% chose Labour. And the working class abandoned Labour too: less than half of all Trade Unionists voted for the party. Old anxieties, dating at least to the era of 1950s 'Butskellite' consensus politics, over whether the working class's always rather precarious support for the socialist project would come unstuck, were now realized. As far as practical politics were concerned, British socialism was dead.

Labour's debacle sparked lively, not to say bitter, debate among left-wing intellectuals. Eric Hobsbawm, whose years in the Communist Party had no doubt acclimatized him to the politics of defeat, led those who put the case for a new Labour direction based on Dimitrov's Popular Front strategies of the thirties. This strategy was aimed at establishing a broad-based alliance of anti-Thatcherite or (as we would now also say anti-neoliberal) forces, which

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would join the left to the social democrats, so as to allow the Party to accommodate the electorate's new orientation without wholly abandoning socialist policies. In this opening up of the space that would, nonetheless, later see New Labour's emergence, Hobsbawm was opposed not just by left-wing unionists (some of whom went on to direct the politically disastrous 1984 Miner's Strike) but by new left intellectuals led by Raymond Williams, who found himself arguing for a recommitment to old-style socialism even in the face of profound defeat (Hobsbawm 1989: 63-77, 77-87; Williams 1984). By the decade's end, however, the old political left had all but been evacuated. The 'militant movement was as resounding a failure as any in British politics. Identity-politics, which from the point of view of the history of political thought can be thought of as synthesizing liberalism and conservatism, largely colonized left radicalism, whose attempts to reinvent itself in more traditional socialist terms seemed to peter out into questions and utopian gestures, as is nowhere more apparent in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques's widely-read 1988 *Manifesto for New Times* (Hall and Jacques 1988: 23-38, 448-453. The Manifesto was first published in *Marxism Today*).

A somewhat neglected feature of the 1983 realignment needs to be emphasised. Socialism's terminus and the attrition of post-war social democracy under Thatcher's neoliberalism constituted a crisis not just for the left but for the right too. It marked a break within conservatism itself. To spell this out it is useful to make a rough and ready distinction between three modes of intellectual conservativism:

1) Burkean conservatism;

2) Hobbesian conservatism and

3) anti-democratic corporatism.[1]

Burkean conservatism insists upon the preservation of those inherited social and cultural institutions that maintain and legitimate supposedly traditional (and largely pre-modern) standards and aspirations of cultivation and civilization against modern, post-revolutionary rationalism, materialism and egalitarianism. It can take several forms, but at least in its culturalist modes – namely where it appeals not to established institutions but to artistic, philosophical and literary heritages – it has been intertwined not just with genteel and oligarchic cultures of deference and emulation but also, at least in Europe, with the will for education and self-improvement from below. Cultural Burkeanism has inspired many who, as Henry James once put it, aimed 'to rise above the common'.[2] In part, that is because Burkeanism quickly became deeply intertwined with Western aestheticism, largely via Schiller's *Aesthetic Lectures* (1795), also written in 1789's counter-revolutionary aftermath. For Schiller, art, in its requirement for harmony and form, provides a realm of freedom, of ordered play that is safer and less prone to democratic risk and social chaos than political liberty. One

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[1] My understanding of the history of intellectual conservatism owes much to Anthony Quinton's *The Politics of Imperfection: the religious and secular tradition of conservative thought in England from Hooker to Oakeshott* (Quinton 1978), a book whose final pages can be regarded as an elegy to old conservatism.

[2] Another relevant form of Burkeanism as here defined, is that associated with Alistair Macintyre and his communitarian mode of virtue ethics, and which was taken up by intellectuals in support of Tony Blair's New Labour. See Macintyre (1986). For the Henry James citation, see *The Princess Casamassima* (James 1977: 116).

can argue further that, after Schiller and via Coleridge, Arnold and Leavis, a grafting of aesthetics onto cultural Burkeanism provided the philosophical basis of the modern British academic humanities in their emergent phase. Indeed, in the broadest terms this formation has been by no means confined to the right: it haunts Western Marxism's critique of capitalism until the very end, and even Raymond William's own major work, *Culture and Society* can be read as an attempt to negotiate a truce between an aestheticised cultural Burkeanism and a socialism that affirms secular, progressive, 'ordinary' lifeways.

Hobbesian conservatism does not require our detailed attention here: it argues for a strong, state-based sovereignty, albeit, these days, one that is conceived of as a popular sovereignty, based on representative democracy. Hobbesian sovereignty knows no state of exception since the sovereign will is law. In the Oakeshottian form, in which, via the LSE, Hobbesianism filtered down into some (admittedly rather marginal) sectors of English conservatism, it sanctioned maximal sovereignty joined to a minimal state, in which the state is managed by bold, cultured elites practiced in the technical arts of politics and government. Only a state figured like this, it was thought, could maintain social cohesion against inherent and insuperable tendencies towards frag-mentation, pluralism and civilization's levelling

Corporatism, which as a viable political philosophy has not survived Mussolini and the Second World War, conceives of politics as a meeting place between separate blocs and interests, whose power and function are not to be measured quantitatively (as they must be once representative democracy is in place) but qualitatively. Here, for instance, minority groups like the landed interest and the established Church may maintain a political agency that no social-democratic or liberal-individualist constitution can guarantee them. There is a sense in which modern conservative corporatism is tied to cultural Burk-eanism even if the first emphasises the preservation of traditional interests and values through constitutional change, while the second insists, less forensically and functionally, on mere cultural and institutional preservation. At any rate, corporatism will retain a place in conservatism's memory so long as the possibility of any kind of alliance between Burkeanism and the state endures. There also exists a corporatism of the left, which is to be found in that pluralism theorized between about 1900 and 1920 by Harold Laski and G.D.H. Cole and others, and which was revivified at least for academic theorists by Paul Hirst and others precisely against Thatcherism in the 1980s.[3] This left corporatism argues for a diminution of state sovereignty by figuring the state as a stripped-down institution whose primary purpose is to provide the security within which associations now detached from the oligarchy or from the Church (e.g., trade unions, local governments, universities) may interact on the social terrain while retaining their autonomy.

Thatcherite neoliberalism's victory in the 1983 election dealt a hard, perhaps a death, blow to Burkeanism. And it marked a twist both in the history of Hobbesian conservatism and of corp-oratism too. As many commentators

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[3] The most convenient entry point into this work is Hirst (1989). Even Raymond Williams turned more affirmatively to the concept of 'self-management' in his efforts to imagine a viable socialism. See Williams (1989: 293).

have noted, Thatcherism was a contradictory formation.[4] It appealed both to classical laissez-faire, private-property-based liberalism and to patriotic (not to say xenophobic, homophobic and implicitly racist) national-populism. It drew upon old forms of English family-based, petit-bourgeois morality, invoking a discourse of 'ordinariness' which countered the common sense of the secular labourist tradition embraced by Raymond Williams for instance. Arguably, Thatcherite morality's historical roots lay deeper than those of the socialist left's common sense, since they were embedded in English religious dissent which was a seedbed of English liberalism between 1688 and about 1918. (Famously Thatcher herself was born a Methodist; her pious father owned a provincial grocery shop). But Thatcherism drew upon this dissenting ethical heritage in the interests of metropolitan finance capital and to the benefit of a new oligarchy. Furthermore, Thatcherism reduced the role of inter-party debate in the formation of policy while inveighing against consensus politics. And it deployed state machinery with a new level of intensity for its fundamentally anti-statist, anti-Keynesian project. It was because of its individualism, because of its emphasis on work, self-reliance and morality and because of its fear that old-style gentlemanly capitalism threatened British global competitiveness, that it had almost no room for Burkeanism, except in more or less symbolic gestures against multiculturalism and sixties-style cultural egalitarianism as, for instance, in the legislation which mandated the study of Shakespeare in schools. Bizarrely, by virtue of this law, reading Shakespeare became one of the very few things that

British citizens were legally required to do.

As to Hobbesian conservatism: Thatcherism was of course committed to minimizing state involvement in the economy, and did indeed restructure and reduce the public service as well as alter the balance between state and market by, for instance, decreasing direct in favour of indirect taxes and privatizing state assets. But Thatcherite anti-statism did not stand in the way of its insistence on parliamentary sovereignty (which allowed it to banish metropolitan authorities) or to maintain those structures of governmentality through which, in fact, the state had taken responsibility for, and control over, the population's security and welfare to an extent unimaginable before World War 2. It reformed against reformism, we might say – but only slowly. This is not the place to describe the degree to which the state's various welfare, disciplinary, and legal agencies practically underpinned British capitalism or to show the degree to which Thatcher's rejection of Keynesianism was as much a matter of rhetoric as of policy. It's enough to say that, within left theory itself, Foucauldian accounts of governmentality, along with the Althusserian analysis of state apparatuses, which themselves resonated with a long tradition of Trotskyite and Western Marxist denunciations of bureaucracy and government-by-experts, were more finely tuned to long-term actual state functions than the arguments over socialism and social democracy inside the demoralized British left itself. And indeed Foucault himself had condoned that form of Hayekean ordoliberalism which was to underpin neoliberalism in his lectures at

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[4] For Thatcher and Thatcherism, see in particular, Hall (1988), Green (2006), and Jenkins (1987).

the College de France the year that Thatcher was first elected.[5]

Thatcherism's Hobbesian vanishing of Hobbesianism meant that Thatcherism was itself something of a mirage. If we accept the evidence for post-war stability of state functionality and reach as indicated for instance by the Thatcher government's failure to reduce tax receipts and public sector outlays, we can posit that the British electorate turned away from socialism and labourism towards neo-liberalism partly just because its welfare had by then been secured by the state for a generation, and was not now under serious threat despite Thatcherite pro-market, anti-statist polemic and propaganda. This also helps explain the electorate's relative insensitivity to the increase of unemployment in the mid eighties. In this light, Thatcherism can be viewed not so much as a radical reorientation of political and social values but as a successful seconding of politics to an increasingly unassailably powerful governmental structure in which policy debates were confined to historically narrow borders. That structure, which has become all but indifferent to changes of party-political government, tightly connected state administrative capacities, parliamentary politics, the market and the media. Let's call it simply the democratic, state-capitalist machine. Under its command, the old ideals of corporatism lost whatever practicality they had possessed. This is true even if Thatcher herself sometimes flirted with the notion of encouraging a weakly corporate concept of social participation as activated through spontaneously generated assoc-

iations in order to propose a *via media* between sheer individualism on the one side and state welfarism on the other.[6] In reality, institutional autonomy from the system was all but banished; that autonomy was available only to what we can call institutions of the imagination like the Churches and the art and literary 'worlds'.

Thatcherism, then, disavowed certain of its own conditions of possibility. Despite its willingness to target unionism, welfarism, the public service and socialism as political enemies in a quasi-Schmittean sense, Thatcherism was in fact a moment at which the possibilities for a politics outside of the democratic state-capitalist machine, whether socialist or Burkean corporatist, disap-peared. That is what neoliberalism finally involves. If not a local form of a larger 'end of history', or to use a more accurately Hegelian formulation, if not a historical 'emancipation from history', it was at least 'an end of hope', since it showed that politics could offer no large social vision beyond the currently existing fusion of capitalism and the democratic state, enduring and impassable dissatisfactions which continued to motivate political activity nonetheless.[7] For all the continuing passion of the contest between the left and the right under neo-liberalism, their opposition had become conceptually diminished since the left could no longer articulate a strong alternative vision of the future while the right could no longer effectively appeal to the civil past.

Thatcherism's squeezing of both the Burkean right and the social democratic

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[5] For Foucault on governmentality, see Burchell et al (1991). For Althusser on ideology see Althusser (1971: 127-188).

[6] See E.H.H. Green (2006: 44-46) on Thatcherism and associationalism.

[7] My understanding of Hegel's conceptualization of the overcoming of history owes much to Joachim Ritter (1982: 46-50).

and radical left produced an unprecedented unanimity among intellectuals, both from the left and the right, and in particular among literary intellectuals, based on a shared antipathy to the Conservative government.[8] And out of this left-right unanimity as well as out of a sense that the new political formation had consequences for society and culture as a whole, a new literary sub-genre developed, which I will simply call the anti-Thatcherite novel. Examples include Barry Unsworth's *Sugar and Rum* (1988), David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988), Jonathan Coe's *What a carve up!* (1994), Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998), Allan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) and David Peace's *GB84* (2005). It's worth noting that this sub-genre also belonged to a particular moment in literature's history, a moment in which, to draw on an old distinction and to put the case in a summary manner, literature was losing authority but gaining power, that is, its status and effectiveness was in decline, but its capacities for critical truth-telling were on the rise. We don't here have to rehearse the evidence that since about 1968, in Anglophone countries generally, literature's prestige and dissemination has been diminishing, if not absolutely then in relation to the culture as a whole. So too literary and cultural critics: it is hard to imagine history offering another occasion when intellectuals like Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, both trained in English departments, will be able to make a major, widely-reported-and-read political statement, aimed at drawing mass acceptance, as they did (with their co-author Edward Thompson) in their *May Day Manifesto* of 1967 and

1968. Nonetheless, in the anti-Thatcher moment, literature's loss of cultural authority was countered by its increase in power. By this I mean that literature, as a domain where imagination runs relatively free and where censorship is now all but non-existent, was able to stand at a certain distance from the functionally-fused domains of politics, the academy, state administration, the media and capital. Because the media and the academy were increasingly drawn into the democratic state capitalist machine, literature, which stood at one side from them, could make uniquely strong claims to truth-telling. It remained a zone of freedom, distanced from hegemony, and for that reason was able to explore the impact of Thatcherism upon private lives and individuals' interiorities without at least formal restraint. It is in this sense, then, that it had less authority than it possessed up until about 1960, but, arguably at least, more power. It is in this sense too that literature can be viewed as something like a corporation in the classical anti-democratic sense, at least insofar as we can recognize it, following Bourdieu and Casanova, as an institution with its own loose and decentralized hierarchies and regulating structures with also with a certain autonomy from state sovereignty. At the same stroke, I'd argue, the old division between the avant-garde and realism lost whatever cultural and political force it had retained by the neoliberal epoch so that, to take two London writers as examples, Alan Hollinghurst and Iain Sinclair, shared the anti-Thatcherite ethos despite the one being committed traditional generic forms and the other being an experimental late modernist.

It was against this background that the anti-Thatcher fiction sub-genre produced its masterpiece – Alan Hollinghurst's *The*

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[8] The most symbolically resonant public expression of this hatred of Thatcher was the Oxford dons' refusal to grant Thatcher an honorary degree in 1986.

Line of Beauty, to which the rest of this paper is devoted.

Hollinghurst's novel is, as I say, not formally experimental or modernist: it belongs to an English tradition established by conservative realist novelists, and in particular, in Anthony Powell's weak Proustianism. But, in a spirit that is quite different from its forbears, it carefully synchronises three different temporal orders: the public-political, the private, and that of epidemiology, in what is, in effect, a narrative solution to the sixties' fusion of the political and the personal. It is organized in three parts, each of which is carefully placed in Thatcherism's chronology. The first part is set in 1983 just after the election which returned Thatcher to power and the very last gasp of pre-Aids sexuality; the second in 1986 after the Miner's Strike and the Falklands War, and the last in 1987 around the election that revealed Thatcherism's diminishing communal support, although, as a result of the split in the opposition between the Labour Party and the Social-Democrat/Liberal Alliance, Thatcher formed a government for a third term. By 1987 too, the AIDs virus's full destructiveness had become apparent.

The novel, however, is primarily concerned with the private life of its central character, the allegorically named Nick Guest, whose point of view dominates it and whose gradual immersion in Thatcher's London is its central interest. Nick, like many a Henry James character, is poor young man who lives off, and has designs upon, the rich. He is a doctoral student just down from Oxford and is now studying – kind of – at University College London. He's attached to the English department, and is working on Henry James. So he is highly educated and trained into the subtleties of professional criticism (at one point he offers, spontaneously, what is in effect a post-structuralist reading of a painting by Holman Hunt). But he's not an academic type. Rather, he's an aesthete in the Schillerian-Burkean mode: passionate about classical music, architecture, art and literature; affronted by philistinism and vulgarity; capable of fine and knowledgeable aesthetic discrimination. His is not the 1980s sub-cultural London of the punks or neo-romantics, nor the vibrant and tense multicultural London coming into literary representation in novels like *The Satanic Verses* or films like *Sammie and Rosie Get Laid*. Nick is a-political, although in a conservative kind of way. When, for instance, he votes in 1987, he, who seems to have not an ecological bone in his body, finds himself opting for the Greens, apparently by chance but more likely out of vague and safe resentment against the Tories who have, he thinks, an 'aesthetic poverty' (104) and because he is confident that they will be re-elected.

He comes from a family not unlike Margaret Thatcher's own – his lower-middle-class parents are also Tory-voting shop-keepers in the Midlands. Charming, intelligent, physically attractive, somewhat snobbish, he's become friendly at Oxford with a set of rich young men, apparently as a tolerated aesthete and wit. He is passionately in love with one of them, Toby Fledden, unbeknownst to Toby himself. Nick is gay then, although at the novel's beginning he's never actually had sex with a man, and is firmly ensconced in the closet.

In 1983, he has just begun to board with Toby's parents in their grand, fine-art-and-furniture-laden Notting Hill house. Toby's father, Gerald Fledden, is a businessman and up-and-coming Tory MP, a philistine Thatcherite who idolizes

and is in awe of his leader. Toby's mother, who cultivates a reserve of slight irony, comes from a rich, partly Jewish family. The family lives in the emulative-aristocratic style, the erstatz chivalric-Burkean style we might say, of the affluent gentlemanly English upper middle class. All this is very, if rather artlessly, appealing to Nick who bears no love for or loyalty to his own provincial family. And he remains attached to the Fleddens as it becomes increasingly clear that they board him not just because he is Toby's friend but because he serves a household function. He minds their daughter Catherine who suffers from bipolar disorder, and who, unlike the rest of her family, has a compulsion for the truth: she continually lets fall devastatingly honest remarks that reveal the falsities and elisions under which her parents and their circle live. Nick himself is closer to Catherine than to the rest of the family, and the first indication that the situation chez Fedden may end in a dramatic collapse comes early on in the novel when Nick fails to tell the elder Fleddens that Catherine has suffered a bout of severe depression and has flirted with suicide while they were on holiday. Indeed the situation carries the seed of disaster in that Nick, the intimate and subservient guest of a Thatcherite family, is, despite his origins and inclinations, exactly a Thatcherite enemy: a gay man, no friend of family values or domesticity, an aesthete, and a literary intellectual.

But Nick is curiously unreflective about such matters and that's largely because he is preoccupied by sex. At the novel's start is preparing for his first date with Leon, whose personal ad in the gay press he has just answered. As a black man and a minor public servant, Leon lies outside the circle of those whom high London Tories like the Fleddens recognize socially, but Nick quickly falls in love with him nonetheless: their relationship's concealment permitting this exogamous connection. It's unlikely that Leon feels the same way: he remains unflappable and distant, although he does initiate Nick successfully into sexual pleasure and its techniques and manners.

Nick barely works on his dissertation, and his failure to occupy himself with Henry James can be read not just as a sign of his busy life with the Fleddens and sex but as a sign of the crisis of English studies, and more subtly of the decline of cultural Burkeanism *tout court*. For all that, it's not as though he has not worked out an interpretation of James, and one that goes to the novel's heart. For Nick, James is interested in aestheticism's evasiveness. He notes that James's characters admire and aesthet-icize one another roughly to the degree that they are morally ugly: 'the worse they are the more they see beauty in one another' he says (Hollinghurst 2004: 208). And he contends that this Jamesian transmutation of evil into beauty is related to James's own deeply closeted sexuality, although he does not spell out how this transformation works. In the lingo of professional cultural studies, Nick is a proto-queer theorist and the interpretative spark that his dissertation ignites for the novel's readers (although not for Nick himself) concerns the degree to which his reading of James pertains to himself, and then, at a meta-level, whether there's a relation between, on the one side, the Jamesian secreted aesthetics of euphemism, elision and alchemical transmutation of evil into aesthetics and, on the other, the novel's thematization of Thatcherism. Holling-hurst is asking: What's the relation between Thatcherism and a still recognizably Burkean aestheticism as

lived out and experienced in 1980s privileged London?

The novel's second part begins to spell out the answer. In 1986 Nick is still living in the Fleddens' attic. But he's no longer with Leon: now he's in a relationship with a playboy, Wani Ouradi. Wani, from an *arriviste*, hugely rich, flamboyantly vulgar Lebanese family, is even more deeply entombed in the closet than Nick. But he's deeply into threesomes, porn and rough sex. And he is more or less addicted to cocaine. Nick in now working for Wani's film production company, which, on his suggestion, is preparing a costume-drama adaptation of James's novel *The Spoils of Poynton*, for which Nick is writing a script. Nick is also interested in producing a glossy style magazine for the super-rich which in a complex pun he names *Ogee*. (Ogee stands for 'orgy' but also the undulating double curve common in Eastern architecture and an instance of Hogarth's anti-neo-classical line of beauty.) Wani himself has no work ethic, no talent, and no taste: those are exactly what he employs his lover Nick to provide. So Nick is basically a servant here too. And this time a servant to new money precisely without the English gentlemanly style, capable of unnerving coarseness and rudeness. Wani, especially when high, can say things like 'Nick? He's just a slut…. He takes my money' (387). But Nick loves Wani through everything, entranced by what he thinks of as his physical beauty and grace; his mysterious social charm. Nick's loyal adoration of Wani, however compromised by self-interest, however much a sign of an almost masochistic passivity we gradually come to think a characteristic quality of neoliberal subjectivity, is another of the novel's lines of beauty.

Nick's immersion in Thatcher's London of global capital, luxe consumption, and privileged youth, reaches its climax when, coked up, he asks Maggie herself to dance at a party held at the Fleddens' house. The song they dance to is the Stone's 'Get off of my cloud', which hints that that the situation is about to come undone. And it does. Both Leon and Wani contract AIDs: by the novel's end Leon is dead and Wani is dying. And Nick probably has caught the virus too: on the novel's last pages Nick is about to visit his doctor to hear his test results, which he suspects, and for good reason, will be positive. But there are other collapses too: Nick's dream of making a decent film collapses when its American financial backers, who haven't bothered to read the novel upon which it is based, demand idiotic rewrites to make James conform to Hollywood norms. More publicly, Gerald's shaky business deals are revealed in the press and he loses his position in the ministry. Catherine, manically taking her revenge on her family after Gerald's narrow victory in the 1987 election, tells a journalist about her father's affair with his secretary, after which it also comes out in the media that Wani has AIDs and is Nick's lover. This matters not just because it further tarnishes the Fleddens, but because Wani's father is a major financial backer of the Tory Party (and becomes Lord Ouradi during the novel's course.) The scandals of the late Thatcher era through which the contradictions between its dissenting, family-based values and its economic neo-liberalism become apparent are darkly intertwined with the dissolution of Nick's aestheticism and the devastation of the Aids epidemic.

At one level, this is straightforwardly anti-Thatcherite novel then, which concentrates its critique of Thatcherism most powerfully though its represent-

ation of the destruction that follows the government's failure to join the undoing of structures that systemically prevented gay men from living their sexuality openly. After all, it does appear that, were Nick's sexuality to be publicly acceptable to his parents, to the Fleddens (privately they don't give a damn of course) or to Leon and Wani's family, then he – and his lovers – would be able to live a more coherent, more ethical, and probably a more healthy life. Yet it's not so much that the closet helps spread Aids but that homophobia and the Thatcherite appeal to the old narrow traditions of dissenting morality is so galling because neo-liberalism has another ethos too: a welcoming of risk, enterprise, independence of inherited values and hedonism which particularly solicits a certain urban gay participation, and certainly secures Nick's participation. For all his dismay at Thatcherism's vulgarity and non-Burkeanism, Nick is not *not* a Thatcherite after all.

But the novel's current of anti-Thatcherite critique which in effect couples the triumph of the democratic state capitalist machine to the Aids epidemic, has to be nuanced, if not quite ambiguated, on at least two grounds. First, and most seriously, the devastation caused by the Aids virus in the final chapter is, of course, not a by-product of Thatcherism. At its source, the virus has nothing to do with culture and government even if policies concerning its prevention and alleviation are deeply social and political. Because Aids has no completely human meaning, it cannot be wholly harnessed to critique. It certainly cannot be understood as a providential revelation or judgment of Thatcherite hypocrisy and corruption, at least within the protocols of modern rationality. The virus belongs to another order than the social, the teleological, the moral: it's a

material force indifferent to the lives of the organisms that host it and whom it regularly destroys. It belongs, we might say in a Lacanian mode, to the Real. Hence the fact that the undoing of Thatcherism partly takes the form of the gay characters' contamination by the virus does not so much further the critique of Thatcherism as frame it: it places it in relation to a more basic, more blind and material order of things. It limits and controls Thatcherism by adjoining it to death.

Second, as I have begun to suggest, the novel is too positively embedded in Thatcherism for it to work simply as critique. Nick passionately enjoys the Thatcher years: he glamorizes them, not just for himself but for others too – both for other characters and for its readers too, for *us*. For all Nick's recoil when confronted with Gerald's crass enjoyment of Richard Strauss, or the Ouradi's appallingly nouveaux riche taste, for instance, he is certainly not one who believes that the Thatcherite moment 'has lost its sense of fineness' to call upon a Jamesian locution once more (James 1977: 131). His own complete lack of interest in politics, his failure to take any kind of line about Thatcherism is a source of the novel's literary vitality and freedom, allowing the fiction to avoid taking the form of open political judgment. And to the degree that he affirms the pleasures and excitements and freedoms available to the metropolitan rich in a London given over to the rule of global capital, those excitements and freedoms constitute part of the text's pleasure. In short, the text is a beneficiary of Thatcherism. This has important hermeneutical implications: it means that the novel affirms those pleasures to the degree that it invites its readers sympathetically to identify with Nick, and it means further

that his characterization, and the techniques upon which it is based, are key to the text's wider meanings and effects.

At this point we need to return to Nick's failure to examine himself and his relationships, except though the lenses of desire and romantic fantasy, the way that he feels, acts, converses, and daydreams before he reflects. This is one of the features that distinguishes Nick from James's own typical central characters, who, it seems, rarely do anything else except ruminate on the precise nature of their relations to one another, the pattern of these meditations constituting the form of James's fictions of course.

Let's take, as an example, of Nick's habit of mind, a moment which begins by describing his view of Wani's expensive London flat and which subtly mutates into a disquisition simultaneously about sex and aesthetics.

> He (i.e. Nick) slept there from time to time, in the fantasy of the canopied bed, with its countless pillows. The ogee curve was repeated in the mirrors and pelmets and in the wardrobes, which looked like Gothick confessionals; but its grandest statement was in the canopy of the bed, made of two transecting ogees crowned by a boss like a huge wooden cabbage. It was as he lay beneath it, in uneasy post-coital vacancy, that the idea of calling Wani's outfit Ogee had come to him: it had a rightness to it, being both English and exotic, like so many things he loved. The ogee curve was pure expression, decorative not structural; a structure could be made from it, but it supported nothing more

than a boss or the cross that topped an onion dome. Wani was distant after sex, as if assessing a slight to his dignity. He turned his head aside in thoughtful grievance. Nick looked for reassurance in remembering social triumphs he had had, clever thing he had said. He expounded the ogee to an appreciative friend, who was briefly the Duchess, and the Catherine, and then a different lover from Wani. The double curve was Hogarth's 'line of beauty', the snakelike flicker of an instinct, of two compusions held in one unfolding movement. He ran his hand down Wani's back. He didn't think Hogarth had illustrated this best example of it, the dip and swell—he had chosen harps and branches, bones rather than flesh. Really it was time for a new *Analysis of Beauty*. (2004: 200)

Wani's consumerist interior decoration is under obvious and not so obvious attack here: there's a whole history, for instance, dating back to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, of the desecration of sacred forms in oligarchic secular architecture, which is repeated in that seemingly casual comparison of Wani's wardrobes to Catholic confessionals. But Nick does not quite inhabit the novel's attack: he's enamoured of the vulgar ogee line after all. That line becomes allegorical here: it represents not being straight of course as well as preferring (or being compelled to prefer) divagations to directness. But more subtly and suggestively, that the ogee is decorative not structural is an emblem of Nick and Wani's social functionality – the way in which they are hangers-on of those who actually command Britain's government and economy. The idea that the ogee, and

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the line of beauty, signifies the aesthetic's loss of social authority and utility, and that the Burkean alliance of the aesthetic to the state has been dissolved, is, however, there for the novel's readers rather than for Nick himself. Nick, instead of making that kind of reflection, or considering (to take another instance) how his love for things 'English and exotic' applies not just to taste but to his choice of sexual partners, who are often men of colour, and what that love might mean in Thatcher's xenophobic England, instead of pursuing that track Nick follows the non-straight path, a line of beauty, by remembering Wani after sex. And then deploying a complex, rather Proustian narrative tense in which the past and the present fuse, he recalls how, in the post coital moment as Wani retreats from him, he fantasizes dreamily about the imaginary 'clever things he had said' about the ogee, comparing it to Hogarth's line of beauty which he formulates with the brilliance that is often at his call, as 'the snakelike flicker of an instinct, of two compulsions held in one unfolding movement', and then enacts this insight by caressing Wani's back which, he thinks, is a better example of a beautiful line than those chosen by Hogarth himself, which, in a sinister premonition, include bones. Those bones, with their intimation of mortality will come back to Nick at the novel's end so as to prove him wrong in thinking flesh is where Hogarth's line now lies and leads. But the point is that Nick's profoundly suggestive brilliance, half academic, half essayistic, is directed neither to his personal life and relationships a la James, nor to the political and economic. The 'two compulsions' are precisely the sexual and the aesthetic, the shameful compromises he has to make in his relationship with Wani (and, for that matter, the Fleddens) on the one side

and the sensuous richness and enticing risk it affords him on the other. And the 'snakelike flicker', like the Hogarthian bones that he dismisses, in its Judeo-Christian overtones, suggests that the temptations to which he has succumbed in living out the aesthetic life may become, instead, a path to death.

At this point, let's return to the question: whatever happened to culture in the eighties? I have been arguing 1) that Thatcherism represented not so much a radical overturning of post-war social-democratic consensus as the moment when the contemporary social-political apparatus becomes hegemonic to the degree that no alternative could be imagined or hoped for; and 2) that this involved a loss of authority but an increase of power for literary fiction, of which *The Line of Beauty* is my example. What that novel helps reveal, by thematising the Aids epidemic, is that the democratic state-capitalism machine has no dominion over nature itself and that the relation between nature and society remains contingent even at the moment of hope's end. But more than that: it marks a continuation of aesetheticism's history (even if not quite a continuation of Burkeanism) by drawing aesthetic effects from the interface between natural death and what I will now call endgame global capitalism. It does so by having Nick bravely realize that he is indeed likely to have caught the virus. At this point the barriers between him and his readers, created by the superficiality and passivity of wit, charm and intelligence begin to come down. He becomes an object of sympathetic charity and pity rather than a vehicle of satire and critique. By the same stroke the novel is aestheticised, since, in its relation to death, it attracts to itself the kind of seriousness and weight required by the Burkean heritage.

So, through an imagined, fictional encounter between nature's indifference and neo-liberalism, culture, in its traditional sense, is able to endure. From this very particular point of view and location at least, we might say, what happens in eighties culture is, despite everything, nothing very new.

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