

UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA IN HOMOEROTIC TERRITORY IN ALAN HOLLINGHURST'S *THE SWIMMING-POOL LIBRARY, THE FOLDING STAR AND THE SPELL*^{1 2}

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Abstract: This essay aims at exploring the use of pastoral Arcadia as a privileged territory for English homoerotic literature to unfold, putting special emphasis on Alan Hollinghurst's first three novels so far. With this purpose, I think particularly worth noting Terry Gifford's *Pastoral* (1999), where he points out the main characteristics of classic pastoral –a utopian genre deeply embedded in English landscape culture and writing–, as well as the dystopian anti-pastoral and post-pastoral. With this in mind, the essay delves into Hollinghurst's novels to determine whether and, if so, how they make use, update or re-negotiate pastoral traditions to meet the needs of gay writing at the turn of the millennium.

Keywords: Arcadia, Utopia, Dystopia, Homoerotic Literature, Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, Post-Pastoral.

Título en español: Utopía y distopía en el territorio homoerótico de *The Swimming-pool Library, The Folding Star and The Spell* de Alan Hollinghurst.

Resumen: Este artículo pretende explorar el uso de la Arcadia pastoril como un terrero privilegiado para el desarrollo de la literatura homoerótica inglesa, haciendo especial énfasis en las tres novelas que Alan Hollinghurst ha publicado hasta la fecha. Con este fin, me parece relevante hacer referencia a *Pastoral* (1999), donde Terry Gifford explica las principales características de la literatura pastoril clásica –un género utópico firmemente arraigado en la literatura paisajística inglesa–, así como del anti-pastoralismo y el post-pastoralismo distópicos. Así, este ensayo ahonda en las novelas de Hollinghurst para determinar si, y si es así, cómo éstas utilizan, actualizan o renegocian las diferentes tradiciones pastoriles para satisfacer las necesidades de la literatura gay en el cambio de milenio.

Palabras Clave: Arcadia, Utopía, Distopia, Literatura Homoerótica, Literaturas Pastoril, Anti-Pastoril, Post-Pastoril.

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Although nature, its representation and human interaction with it have been common issues in both literature and culture, it has been in the last decades that criticism has tackled them more systematically. Since the classics, nature has been fabricated as a cultural concept and/or site in the form of landscape³ where literature has placed and sublimated cultural anxieties. Already Theocritus and Virgil re-created nature into a stereotyped literary landscape that has reached our days. As Lawrence Buell has argued: “Pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that Western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without” (BUELL, 1995: 32). The scenario that classic pastoral poets devised was soon known as Arcadia, originally an alpine setting where shepherds enjoyed a carefree existence surrounded and in communion with nature. From its very inception, this bucolic idealisation of nature aimed to provide the city dwellers with a metaphysical retreat. In other words, the reader of these poems could fantasise with a lost rural scenario, and thus escape from the tensions associated with urban (i.e. real) life. Due to its nostalgic undertones and escapism, pastoral literature has been frequently labelled as conservative (SALES, 1983: 17; LUCAS, 1990: 118). Instead of confronting present conflicts, these texts allegedly long for a primordial stage. However, if it is only a delusive dream, why and how has the myth of Arcadia survived criticism and the pass of time? And, more specifically, why has this tradition been particularly related to English and homoerotic literatures? Is it because English and homoerotic cultures are especially prone to the delusive, nostalgic, metaphysical nature of Arcadia? I would answer both yes and no. On the one hand, Englishness has been traditionally considered a pragmatic, Empiricist identity. However, it is also deeply embedded in a millenarian tradition of magic and legends, as Peter Ackroyd has widely demonstrated in *Albion. The Origins of the English Imagination* (2002). On the other hand, as Rictor Norton points out, pastoralism has always been a privileged vehicle for homoerotic culture to express itself (NORTON, 1997: 1). Yet, the pastoral can also help the Establishment to invisibilise gayness and its political agenda. Briefly stated, Arcadia puts forward the ambiguous character and precarious status of homosexuality, though it paradoxically allows homosexuals the opportunity of a (usually forbidden) Edenic reappraisal; hence the perennial success of the genre among gay writers.

Despite the classic predominance of pastoralism, as Terry Gifford demonstrates through his monograph of the genre (1999), anti-pastoral and post-pastoral literatures have emerged throughout, gaining especial significance in the last decades. Thus, against the classic idealisation of a bucolic space and/in a Golden Age, anti-pastoral literature points out the actual precariousness of country life. As Gifford points out:

The natural world can no longer be constructed as “a land of dreams”, but is in fact a bleak battle for survival without divine purpose, is a position which places Matthew Arnold in a tradition of anti-pastoral poets which includes Goldsmith and Crabbe in the eighteenth century, and from Blake to Patrick Kavanaugh in the twentieth century, and from Blake to Ted Hughes in contemporary poetry (GIFFORD, 1999: 120).

³ As Denis Cosgrove points out, landscape is an “ideologically-charged and very complex cultural product” (COSGROVE, 1998: 11).

That is, the anti-pastoral fosters a demythologising satiric outlook with respect to classic Arcadia. The post-pastoral constitutes a step further, denouncing the indifference of Arcadian conventions to the actual problems of the environment. In this light, post-pastoral literature has replaced former anthropocentrism with ecocentrism (GIFFORD, 1999: 152) or, rather, it fosters a re-negotiation of our relation with nature in view of an increasing social concern about environmental issues. In other words, the complex interaction between nature and culture takes the centre of the stage, as, for example, when ecofeminism compares the exploitation of women and other minorities to the abuses against nature (165). The retreat to Arcadia is still part of contemporary literature and culture, particularly when it comes to our impending need to return and explore the “lack of separation between the urban and rural existence” (174). With this in mind, this essay aims at analysing how Alan Hollinghurst’s first three novels come to terms with the myth of Arcadia as an ephemeral utopia –even a dystopia– in a homoerotic context, particularly in the middle of the AIDS crisis. I will also explore what the outlook of the novels is with respect to Gifford’s three-staged theory on pastoral literature. Out of Hollinghurst’s four novels so far, *The Line of Beauty* has been deliberately left out, especially because its discourse on the subject under analysis is, as a whole, redundant with that of its predecessors.

As mentioned above, gazing at and representing nature as idyllic landscape constitutes a characteristic feature in English culture, a political gesture. In fact, Englishness has frequently been built out of the romantic idealization of nature with a number of identitarian purposes. Thus, the English landscape has worked as a political, aesthetic, nostalgic, imperialistic and psychic strategy and scenario of national emotional contention and pride. Since landscape is fundamentally “a way of seeing, a scopic regime” (BURDEN, 2006: 21), it can be considered as a gendered act whereby the viewer projects his/her wishes; hence, feminist and gay revisions of landscape writing and representation.

The winner of the Booker Prize in 2004 with *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst’s whole production deals with the representation of same-sex desire and Englishness as identitarian and aesthetic issues. Throughout Hollinghurst’s fiction, Englishness and gayness are chiefly cultural artefacts which rely (among others) on the concepts of landscape and Arcadia for articulation. Throughout *Albion* (2002), Peter Ackroyd attempts to establish a connection between the specificity of English culture and its nature. Thus, he considers “the poetry of England as striated with the shade that the ancient trees cast” (ACKROYD, 2002: 3), or recalls Hippolyte Taine’s claim that “the first music of England is the fine patter of rain on the oak trees” (3). It is not surprise that, according to John Fowles, “the first hints of a rebellious swing from nature-fearing to nature-liking” took place in England (FOWLES, 1979: 68). The predominant fear of uncontrollable nature that had characterised Western culture for centuries was not questioned until the Elizabethan era, when “the pastoral settings and themes of some of Shakespeare’s plays –the depiction of not totally unrewarding exiles from the safe garden of civilization in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *As You Like It*, *The Tempest* and the rest– are not examples of the foresight of genius, but skilful pandering to a growing vogue” (FOWLES, 1979: 68). In other words, the atavistic fear of nature was solved with a cultural turn in England. Nature could be tamed as a utopian Arcadia, an apparently artless garden. Apart from symbolic trees and forests, like Arden and Sherwood, also rolling hills and the weather constitute essential features of English pastoral writing

and, therefore, of a national character and/or identity. For Ackroyd, there seems to be a total symbiosis between the country and its people, so that artistic manifestations derive from and blend into the earth. The natural world gives voice to –or, rather, is given voice by– the spires of medieval parish churches, the novels by Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë or Thomas Hardy,⁴ or Edgar Elgar’s and Vaughan Williams’ music (ACKROYD, 2002: 64-8). English nature finds a correlate, as well as a vehicle for representation, in classic (Tudor, Victorian and Edwardian) buildings as described by Nikolaus Pevner.⁵ However, it is perhaps Hogarth’s “line of beauty” that best represents the symbolic bond between Englishness and the country as a physical space. In this light, Georges Letissier recalls Peter Ackroyd’s reference to Garrick and Colman’s *The Clandestine Marriage* (1766), where a character says about a garden he is admiring: “Here’s none of your straight lines here – but all taste–zigzag–crinkum crankum– in and out–right and left–to and again–twisting and turning like a worm, my Lord” (LETISSIER, 2007: 207). His words are highly significant as they reveal the English preference for a studied naturalness of the landscape, whose variety of forms Hogarth conceptualises in a few lines, particularly the serpentine. This aesthetic conception of nature as reduced to the lines of rolling hills and church spires alike, as a constant feature in English culture and literature, is also a basic ingredient of Peter Greenaway’s film *The Draughtsman’s Contract* (1983). The hero –the draughtsman of the title– is commissioned by a marchioness to produce twelve drawings of her manor. Throughout the film, the painter tries to catch the essence of the English landscape with the help of an optical device constructed as a frame,⁶ which seventeenth-century draftsmen used to reduce nature into a pattern they could easily transfer to the canvas: the manufacturing of beauty is clearly artificial, though the effect should be perfectly natural. This links with Robert Burden’s claim that landscape, “originally a genre of painting [...] and then also of gardening” (BURDEN, 2006: 23), is synonymous with Englishness. It seems mandatory to mention the clash between the English and French conceptions of landscape. While French rationalism is reflected in its geometrical gardens –the regularity of *bosquets* is particularly paradigmatic–, the English have opted, as mentioned above, for apparently wild gardens. Therefore, the utopian landscape constitutes an ideological effect of a whole culture, one that literature has explored once and again. For Patrick Parrinder, the shift from classic landscape to an increasing concern for the actual environment runs parallel to a swing from “character” to “identity” to render the main traits of a nation and its people (PARRINDER, 2006: 100). Thus, in the critic’s view, while the old English novel “was thought to display national character, contemporary English fiction questions [our] experiences of national identity” (100). Likewise, the environmental discourse of anti-pastoral, and particularly post-pastoral literature, is virtually replacing the anthropocentrism of classic pastorals.

⁴ It is not by chance that *The Spell* is set in Hardy’s Dorset and that the novelist is occasionally mentioned (61). Likewise, the postmodernist writer John Fowles –who also lived in Dorset– placed there *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969).

⁵ A German-born architect, Pevner produced a whole series of guidebooks to English buildings for travellers. Moreover, he also wrote treatises on the specificity of English architecture as a defining feature of the country.

⁶ As Greenaway himself argues, recalling recent publications by David Hockney: “Artists after and during the Renaissance resorted to all sorts of optical equipment in order to improve the artificiality of their medium” (GREENAWAY, 2003).

In my view, Hollinghurst's fiction sticks to the postmodernist ethos as concerns identity: his characters lead complex individuation processes which put forward the precariousness of (gay) identity under the contemporary ontological crisis and, especially, under the devastating effect of AIDS. However, what is here at stake is whether this discourse can be transferred to the novels' treatment of Arcadia. What is the actual role of utopian pastoralism in homoerotic representation at the turn of the millennium? Does it still constitute an escapist retreat—in Hollinghurst's fiction—or do these novels foster a serious debate on the concept of utopia as the site of otherness?

From a gendered conception of landscape, Burden speaks of a "feminine and a masculine spatial practice" (BURDEN, 2006: 22). He gives the examples of English male explorers who "penetrated the heart of darkness in Victorian Africa, as a space to be conquered" (22). There is still another remarkable aspect of landscape as colonial space in Burden worth noting. Recalling Simon Gikandi, the critic points out the new role that women—and, I would add, gays—could play as colonisers, freed from the (hetero)normative restrictions of the metropolis (in BURDEN, 22). In other words, Africa constitutes a surrogate Arcadia,⁷ a space where Westerners—particularly gay officers—were allowed sexual liberty. This utopian idealization is not simply an aesthetic recreation of the colonies, it also helps contemporary gay writing sublimate new crises, particularly the outburst of AIDS. This is the case of Hollinghurst's first novel, *The Swimming-pool Library* (1988), especially the section narrated by the old aristocrat Charles Nantwich. Although the young Will Beckwith's narration constitutes the main plotline of the novel, it is Nantwich's secondary narrative voice—through his colonial diaries—that we are interested in. Reading his notes simultaneously with Will, we soon notice that the elder's description of the Sudanese savannah represents a (gay) male practice. As part of an imperial project, Nantwich portrays himself as an explorer who symbolically "penetrates" the heart of Africa and its peoples. He considers "the Nuba people enchanting, with an openness and simplicity sadly lacking among the people of the north" (HOLLINGHURST, 1998a: 108). Therefore, he worships and feels attracted to them, "largely or wholly naked, standing round under dead-looking trees, gazing at flocks of goats or herds of cattle" (96). Charles finds Arcadian hints that, in his view, England has largely lost. The primordial, Edenic simplicity may be worshipped and longed for. However, what may be utopian for the hero can be dystopian for the colonised. Charles' is a classical masculine practice of spatial control. However, as an English gay man in Africa, his role is duplicitous and contradictory: he is a second-rank citizen in the metropolis, but an exploiter in the colony; on the one hand, he is incarcerated in London during the homophobic raids of the nineteen fifties, on the other, he is an aesthete-worshipper of blacks. As mentioned above, Africa allows him and his peers a (sexual) freedom unimagined in England (HOLLINGHURST, 1998a: 205). Nevertheless, what is the meaning of freedom in Arcadia? To what extent are free Charles and particularly the black men he idealises? Is not this Arcadian space just a dystopia rather than the utopian mirage hinted at in Charles' narration? In fact, the hero works just as a piece of English imperialism. As concerns the natives, we never have access to their point of view. Therefore, although Charles' relationship with that continent and his

⁷ Already in the eighteenth century, the poet James Thomson celebrated both the British countryside and the African savannah (GIFFORD, 1999: 47).

peoples is apparently disinterested, the interaction between one and the others is totally unbalanced. Despite his scopical pleasure of the savannah and semi-naked male bodies, his desire still relies on English rule for articulation. Nantwich's perspective –which should not be confused with that of the novel– is not exceptional, as it recalls similar examples in English literature. This is, for instance, the case of E. M. Forster's narrator of *Passage to India* (1927). The two male protagonists of Forster's masterwork, the English officer Fielding and the Indian doctor Aziz, establish a homoerotic bond which eventually fails for political reasons. Like Nantwich, Fielding is a utopian who regards himself as a friend of the colonised and a lover of their territory. However, both characters are in love with an idealization of beauty outside the moral restrictions of Europe: they are mere narcissists in love with their own conception of beauty. In fact, the African landscape, its dry trees, open spaces, and isolated villages constitute just the backcloth of Nantwich's first and only love affair, a platonic bond with his servant Taha, an "exotic Tiepolo" (HOLLINGHURST, 1998a: 182). It is exclusively through a "selfish" conception of art that their utopian bond can be represented: Africa works as an aesthetic scenario and the servant is akin to an Italian baroque painting in Charles' imagery. Once back in England, the hero attempts to re-live the spell of African sunsets (HOLLINGHURST, 1998a: 183). Thus, he takes Taha from his country and traditions, disregarding for the youth's feelings and/or desires: i.e., the desire of the colonised is that of the coloniser. It can be argued that Nantwich's narration in *The Swimming-pool Library* is at first glance a pastoral piece. His discourse is one of retreat from "reality" and a subsequent return. However, on his return, he does not bring social solutions from Arcadia as classic pastorals usually do. On the contrary, he is regarded a gay black-worshipper and pervert who deserves to be imprisoned. In view of the hero's tragic fate, the novel presents anti-pastoral undertones akin to those in Matthew Arnold's poems. As Gifford argues, for the Victorian poet, "the natural world can no longer be constructed as "a land of dreams", but is in fact a bleak battle for survival without divine purpose" (GIFFORD, 1999: 120). In other words, pioneering the anti-pastoral stance, Arnold claims for the "breaking of the possibility of the pastoral" (in GIFFORD, 1999: 119). The transience of Charles' African utopia reveals the eventual dystopian, anti-pastoral nature implicit in the classic pastoral discourse when it is re-negotiated by contemporary literature. After idealising an Arcadian territory and frame of mind, the novel destroys it like a house of cards. In Gifford's view, the main difficulty of anti-pastoral writing consists in "finding a voice that can be celebratory whilst corrective, that does not adopt the very vices it is criticising" (134). This is the case of Nantwich's narration: he may find an "authentic" innocence in (his) Africa. However, he is not the detached pastoral "poet" he pretends. Such an ironic discourse is classically anti-pastoral.

As concerns post-pastoralism, none of Hollinghurst's novels fulfils the six qualities of this subgenre proposed by Gifford in *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (1995). His fiction never crosses completely the boundary from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism; they never endorse an effective approach to environmental issues. In fact, (un)like the American poet Gary Snyder, for whom "culture is nature [since] our art is our natural way of thinking ourselves back into the natural world" (in GIFFORD, 1999: 161), in Hollinghurst's novels it is nature that totally depends on culture for articulation. The Sudanese savannah in *The Swimming-pool Library*, the suburban Rough Common of *The*

Folding Star and the Hardy-inspired Litton Gambrill in *The Spell* are cultural artefacts, which have virtually lost contact (if they ever had) with their natural referents. As mentioned above, post-pastoral writing links the exploitation of nature to that of minorities. Paradoxically, this equation does not always work in the literature produced in the margins. Thus, Hollinghurst's heroes' retreat to Arcadia is somehow owing to their alienation from themselves –as happens in the works by “Drayton, Fletcher and Shakespeare” (GIFFORD, 1999: 169)– rather than to their “anxiety about their alienation from nature” (169). In other words, I do not mean that these characters are not estranged from nature. What I state is that, rather than an environmental outlook, in Hollinghurst's fiction, physical space turns into a cultural artefact where characters move from utopia to dystopia in an aporian swing. Briefly stated, it is the characters' (gay) identity that matters.

The setting of *The Folding Star* is European and urban. However, the hero's memory and nostalgia constitute a new, unreal landscape of the (English) mind: Edward Manners spends most of the narrated time in a fantastic, sleepy Flemish town escaping from himself. Nevertheless, when, in the middle section of the novel “Underwoods”, he must return home for his ex-lover Dawn's funeral, he also returns to an old conception of England inextricably linked to his notion of childhood. His trip back makes Edward recall his early youth and its corresponding idea of England as a pre-industrial/lapsarian space. Like the African savannah in *The Swimming-pool Library*, the suburban London where Edward grew up constitutes *a priori* a utopian Arcadia, a site to retreat. The hero's memories take us back to the nineteen sixties and seventies, when England had already been an industrialised country for a long time:

Rough Common is a common and also a small town, south of London. The town was nothing much until the 1970s, when its principal inn gained importance as a posthouse on the way to fashionable south-coast resorts. A watercolour by David Cox, done in 1812, shows the white weatherboarded cottages with spindly verandahs [...] and in Fore street, with its pollarded limes and Wednesday market, there is still a hint of the Regency sense that a good time might be had there. (HOLLINGHURST, 1998b: 189).

Thus, when Edward recalls the Rough Common as a greenwood, he is evidently projecting his –and a national– conception of the past. With this purpose, the hero and narrator makes intertextual references to pastoral poetry and the romantics, as Hollinghurst himself has confessed (in CANNING, 2001: 353). This can only be read as a strategy of nostalgic reappraisal of a place lost for ever, or simply imagined. This is the main hypothesis of Alun Howkins' “The Discovery of Rural England” (1986). In a country that has been industrial and urban since the eighteen sixties, the rural space and its people have become the essence of England (HOWKINS, 1986: 69). Unlike the “contaminated” London, the country(side) is characterised by “order, stability and naturalness” (69). The aesthetic and moral values associated with Southern England are still idealised by many English people today.⁸ This is the case of Edward, who converts his suburban neighbourhood and the Rough Common

⁸ As Howkins points out, a series of “Vox up” interviews for the programme Country Crisis in 1984 “showed that most people interviewed in London, including two young blacks, identified the country as “better”, and country life as superior to town life” (HOWKINS, 1986: 62).

—a green area where he lived his first love affairs— into the paradigm of ruralism and his own utopian Arcadia. That is why, on returning from Flanders, the hero tries to map his birth place just as it was —or rather as he would like it to have been— twenty years before. He regrets that the Rough Common has practically disappeared, and highways and industries, instead of idyllic grasslands, surround his old neighbourhood (HOLLINGHURST, 1998b: 189). Although deeply inscribed in the overall English pastoral tradition, Edward's nostalgic idealization of retreat also responds to the anxiety that the AIDS crisis provoked in the gay community in the last decades of the twentieth century. Thus, what is at stake is whether Edward's utopia is without danger or it hides a dystopic underside. As the novel advances, the second option prevails. Although the hero attempts to escape the present, the past is not as utopian as could be expected, but frustrating and plenty of lost opportunities. Arcadia thus proves to be once more a tricky territory.

The emotional impact of AIDS is crucial to fully understand Edward's dystopic testimony. Dawn is a victim of the disease, which explains the melancholic tone of Edward's narration and his nostalgic description of the territories of desire. That is, English pastoral tradition —especially Arcadia and its loss— is here at the service of gay love and death, recalling the (frequently homoerotic) elegiac tradition. *A priori*, a utopian Arcadia seems the only space for gays' satisfactory (auto)-representation. However, Edward's discourse apparently breaks with this premise since he paradoxically takes pleasure in melancholia, in the disempowerment he suffered as a gay child and youth, and now as a gay adult. As he recalls, he and Dawn were disenfranchised as outsiders (HOLLINGHURST, 1998b: 250-51). As adults, Edward becomes a frustrated writer and Dawn a *maudit* corpse. Yet, parallel to melancholia, the novel displays ironic undertones which problematise the apparent simplicity of Edward's discourse. In fact, despite the hero's alleged naïveté on sexual and professional matters, we gradually learn about his early promiscuity in the dark corners of Arcadia. He becomes a toy boy, “flamboyant, high on sexual deceit” (HOLLINGHURST, 1998b: 207). Nevertheless, the postmodernist ironic hints do not completely cancel the overall pastoral discourse of Edward. The pastoral descriptions of Rough Common are just part of the hero's fantasies of self-delusion, as pastoralism has served unsatisfied societies, like ancient Rome and early-twentieth-century England, to redeem themselves. After his return to England and his youth there, Edward must return to his present life in Flanders, itself a retreat from England. In short, the hero's quest can be regarded as paradigmatic of the aporia implicit in pastoral literature. He suffers from a narcissistic pulse that he projects in a withdrawal from reality and an idealization of his youth and its scenarios. However, as the novel advances, utopia proves to be ephemeral and eventually cracks, and some anti-pastoral ironic undertones arise.

The pastoral representation of Englishness in Hollinghurst's first two novels is peppered with ironic undertones. However, only *The Spell* (1997) can be argued to assume a resolutely anti-pastoral outlook. In this case, rural England is never a safe retreat, a utopian territory where gay characters can escape the homophobic attacks of a heteronormative society. The urban and the rural are practically indistinguishable; or even worse, since Litton Gambriel —the village where Robin Woodfield, his son, and his lover live, and most of the action takes place— combines the social surveillance and homophobia of small communities with the loss of an authentic green space to retreat from civilization. The village has

nothing to do with the classic English garden and its literary counterpart, the bucolic idyll. Far away from former Arcadia, it is a hostile territory for the characters. The city may be equally harsh, but, at least, it provides them with a space to live their sexual dissidence. In this light, after some time in the country, Justin, the lover of the protagonist, decides to leave the country and return to London. There, gays can live their schizophrenic status with “normalcy”, being visible to their peers in their ghettos, and invisible to the population at large. Thus, the novel problematises a classic genre and demands a re-negotiation of its discourse: What happens when the pastoral is no longer a gay-friendly territory, when the genre stereotypes fail and homophobia prevails instead? Is there still a glimmer of hope for the characters of *The Spell*? As hinted at above, Litton Gambriel is neither the country nor the city proper; it epitomises the urban invasion and “contamination” of the country with none of its advantages. Housing developments have broken the natural space that Hardy evoked in his novels. Only when the characters drive their cars along the serpentine roads of Southern England, do they grasp a glimpse of the literary countryside of Hardy and Austen. Most of the time, however, the village is reduced to a homophobic neighbourhood where gays and other outcasts try in vain to escape social rules and prejudices. Unlike E. M. Forster’s utopian “greenwood” in *Maurice* or the wild nature in Walt Whitman’s poems, these characters have apparently no fantastic space to escape the intolerance of their neighbours. In his 1960 postscript to *Maurice*, Forster explains the genesis of his novel, as well as the socio-political evolution of homosexuality in England. In a rather nostalgic tone, he evokes an England “where it was still possible to get lost [...], the last moment of the greenwood” (FORSTER, 2000: 221). Therefore, *Maurice*’s closure is frozen just when the protagonist and his working-class lover are planning a rather unlikely elopement. Thus, although rather unrealistic, there is some hope of utopian wishfulfilment for same-sex desire outside and before civilization. In *The Spell*, the countryside turns inevitably middle-class and irrespirable; definitely no greenwood seems available any longer, much less for ever.

Hollinghurst’s third novel is split in two on chapter ten, which coincides with the hero’s son’s birthday party. The party constitutes a sort of saturnalia, an initiation ritual after which only a couple of their neighbours –also outcasts– keeps talking to the Woodfields, their lovers and friends. With echoes of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and strategically placed in the middle of the novel, Danny’s birthday party can be regarded as a turning-point in the development of the characters. As Helena, Hermia, Lysander and Demetrius do in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the four heroes in *The Spell* live a sort of dreamlike episode outside space-time parameters. However, unlike its Shakespearean hypotext, the weekend party of a group of gay Londoners does not have a therapeutic effect, or –in case it does– to a very limited extent. After Danny’s birthday, the bourgeois Litton Gambriel returns. The orgiastic atmosphere during the party evaporates as soon as dawn makes its way and the gay guests leave the place they do not belong to. Like the Victorian buildings that Robin Woodfield reconstructs, Litton Gambriel has been occupied by the middle-class and its values. As Tony Bowerchalke tells Robin, he has no option but converting his Victorian house into flats for young bankers and brokers (HOLLINGHURST, 1999: 174). On chapter 5, Robin takes the other three main characters to Tytherbury, the old Victorian house of Bowerchalke. The building –mentioned by Pesvner in *The Buildings of England*, as “an extreme example of a justly neglected type” (HOLLINGHURST, 1999: 56)– forms part,

however, of the English heritage and the classic concept of Englishness. It forms part of the English landscape, “raggedly wooded with yews and rhododendrons, and overspreading cedars. A hidden stream runs through it [...]. The wood had an unusual abundance of lichens and epiphytes [...] and Tony sometimes sent obstructive letters to ecologists who wanted to study it” (HOLLINGHURST, 1999: 56). If we obviate Pesvner’s words on Tytherbury, the narration oozes nostalgia for the classic English landscape. At the present, it only recalls vaguely the spirit of Hardy’s and Austen’s novels and, as Justin points out, it is no longer a place for strangers, particularly gays. In other words, Arcadia proves to be again a fake utopia –i.e. a dystopia– for sexual dissidents, losing any romanticism it may have had. In fact, although *The Spell* runs parallel to its classic hypotexts in some respects, it reverses them in others. Thus, whereas the characters of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* assume their status in a heteronormative patriarchal society after a transitory Carnavalesque in the wood, those in Hollinghurst’s third novel feel even more alienated from themselves and the scenario around them after Danny’s birthday. The young generation is no longer under the control of the elder generation. Father and son, both gays, share initiation experiences just to discover that no utopia is feasible any longer. However, the novel gives a last turn of the screw in the closing lines. Four men are looking at the horizon in a rather romantic scene as if they were catching a glimpse of the sublime:

Justin stopped a prudent distance from the crumbly edge, and Nick and Alex, who had gone on romantically further, came back, with the humorous good conscience of a successful couple, and took hold of him in a slightly awkward embrace, Justin clutching at the pocket of Alex’s denim jacket. Then Robin’s panting could be heard through the bluster of the wind and above the distant crash of the waves. He came up beside them, roaming round with hands on hips to get his breath back, and then decided to join them, and dropped an arm round Nick’s shoulder, at the end of the line. For a minute or two they watched the inky zones of the sea-bed, as the small cloud-shadows sailed across them; the surface of the sea turned quickly grey, and they saw the curling silver roads of the currents over it. (HOLLINGHURST, 1999: 256-257)

Obviously, the ironic undertones of the scene are undeniable, since, as happened with Forster’s postscript in *Maurice*, no hope is conceivable for these characters in practical terms. Although, the quartet of sea-looking men may look a hopeful lot, theirs is just a final, implausible pantomime that simply confirms the dystopia they inhabit. Arcadia fails and the anti-pastoral definitely takes its place.

As I hope to have proved, the three novels by Hollinghurst analysed are rather ambiguous as concerns their use of Arcadian literary tradition. All the heroes are gay men who take for granted their sexual orientation. However, despite their overt discourse, they still have to confront a precarious status. Although AIDS either remains unmentioned or scarcely talked about, its shadow is frequently present and partly a reason for their dystopias. Like many of their predecessors, these gay men search for a utopian Arcadia where they can come to terms, live, and put into words their experiences. If literary Arcadia has always been a privileged territory for social outcasts, particularly gays, Hollinghurst’s first three novels confirm and contest tradition. They (ab)use the canon, though not as a mere pastiche, but as a space of conflict. In other words, these novels recall the formulations of

bucolic landscape in English literature and culture and adapt them to a new identity politics. The English landscape and the English versions of “other” landscapes –particularly in the colonies– are both used and recast in this light. That is, Hollinghurst’s heroes interact with landscape as a cultural concept related to different identitarian issues concerning gender, nationality, race, and class. Thus, his heroes feel nostalgic about former idealizations of nature to articulate their own identities and the world around them. However, the imagery associated with the stereotypical English landscape or utopia –with rolling hills, streams, woods and cottages– eventually proves to be deceiving: hence the dystopian, anti-pastoral outlook of most of the narrative voices. To what extent can they still rely on the classic concept of Arcadia *stricto sensu*? To a very limited one, I would say. Neither James Thomson’s African savannah, the Romantics’ descriptions of English nature, or Shakespeare’s and Hardy’s imagined landscapes can be transferred literally to the literature produced at the turn of the millennium; not even if, as Gifford points out along *Pastoral*, the boundaries between pastoral, anti-pastoral and post-pastoral are not always easy to spot, and they do not follow a chronological order. In fact, they are occasionally mixed up in a single text. In any case, as we have seen in Hollinghurst’s novels, Arcadia can no longer be naïvely regarded as a safe retreat for anxious, post-industrial English society in general, and for sexual dissidents in particular. Charles Nantwich, Edward Manners and Robin Woodfield attempt to hide themselves in self-constructed Arcadian scenarios. However, the delusion soon fades away, and they must finally confront the inexorability of “reality”: escapism is ephemeral, and the marginalised know it pretty well.

According to my analysis, *The Swimming-pool Library* and *The Folding Star* assume a particularly melancholic pastoral outlook. The heroes seem unable to overcome the fake utopia which they have built around themselves and which only traumatic episodes such as Nantwich’s imprisonment, Dawn’s death, and the irony of both novels manage to wipe out. *The Spell* is more openly anti-pastoral. In fact, any trace of the nostalgia implicit in classic pastoral is almost immediately torpedoed. The English landscape turns to be no longer a safe and desirable retreat, from a physical or a metaphysical perspective. As concerns gay identity, it can only rely on tradition if the latter is fully revised. Taking into account that gay culture is deeply embedded in pastoral Arcadia, the genre cannot be simply erased from the agenda. However, the new generation of gay writers demands a new outlook. For them, the boundaries between utopia and dystopia are increasingly blurred. Moreover, they assume an actively ironic stance, which simultaneously resorts to and questions tradition. Finally, it is worth noting that against the widespread environment-concerned attitude of contemporary culture, Hollinghurst’s novels very rarely adopt a committed post-pastoral discourse. Instead of focusing on the actual environment, they still have (gay) identity as their primary concern and parameter. In my view, this position should not be automatically censored. It is only that in these novels culture prevails over nature, and any ethical consequence derived from this premise is not the target of this essay.

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