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THE ETHICS OF FRAGMENTATION IN

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

To increase the readability of this dissertation, the primary sources will be referred to with the following abbreviations:

- *TRS*, for *The Return of the Soldier* by Rebecca West
- *SR*, for *South Riding* by Winifred Holtby
- *TH*, for *The Holiday* by Stevie Smith
- *NLM*, for *No Laughing Matter* by Angus Wilson
- *WCU*, for *What a Carve Up!* by Jonathan Coe
- *C*, for *Capital* by John Lanchester.

The MLA format has been preferred, and page references will be in parentheses. The use of the pronoun "they" has been chosen when referred to conceptual entities such as "the precarious" or "the individual." When available, edited translations of French works have been used. When official translations have not yet been made, I took the liberty of translating the passages from French to English and of mentioning the original text in the footnotes.

In an effort to facilitate the system of references and to avoid debatable thematisation, the bibliography follows an alphabetical order.

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INTRODUCTION

> The problem with the English novel is that there's
> no tradition of political engagement.
>
> (*WCU* 276)

The sweeping statement of Graham Packard, Jonathan Coe's committed filmmaker in *What a Carve Up!* (1994), stands as an indictment of English novelists. Political commitment and fiction (for Coe's character never implies that other literary genres are different) transpire as historical antagonists that cannot be reconciled. His declaration belies Coe's penchant for irony, as *What a Carve Up!* is the epitome of committed fiction, through the exposure of a corrupted and corrosive Thatcherite society. Graham's remark is Coe's invitation to reconsider English fiction in the light of its political context – a debate that has surged among the most high-profile novelists of the twentieth century.

In "Inside the Whale" (1940), George Orwell sees Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1935) as an "accepting the thing as-it-is" (222) work of fiction: he invites writers to embrace being "in the whale" (255), and to distinguish their writing personas from their position as citizens[1]. Orwell does not suggest that authors should ignore the context but rather adopt and accept a non-committed passivity towards historical and political events when it comes to writing. This impermeability of writing appears as a privileged position of the novelist who can choose to sit by while "Rome is burning" (242) – which is exactly Graham Packard's contention. The novels of the present corpus, which span a period extending from 1918 to 2012, and which will be presented more thoroughly in the following pages, contradict this view. Orwell denounces the pessimism of the 1920s and its "exceptionally comfortable epoch" (235) and indicts the 1930s' leaning towards Communism and their obliviousness of the First World War. Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) and Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936), on top of being written by women (ignored in Orwell's essay), both reveal Orwell's totalising criticism, as they address the impact of the First World War on the English population. His prediction that novels following the second World War and the rise of fascism will have no choice but to be passive observations of English political life contrasts with the emergence of

[1] "Inside the Whale" is, in this regard, a continuation of the views Orwell expressed in the 1948 essay "Writers and Leviathan".

novels like Stevie Smith's *The Holiday* (1949) and Angus Wilson's *No Laughing Matter* (1967), which question society's disintegration. More recent novels like Coe's *What a Carve Up!* and John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012) also clearly object to "the opinion that a writer does well to keep out of politics" (Orwell 245) and underscore the "genuine need for political fiction" (100), as Salman Rushdie advocated in his mirror essay "Outside the Whale" (1984). Shedding light on the idiosyncrasy of neoliberalism, Coe and Lanchester challenge uniformizing political discourses. These novels show how works of fiction are embedded in and committed to their political and social contexts: they are part of the Condition-of-England literary tradition denied by Orwell – one that needs to be zealously reasserted here, before diving into the specific commitment of the writers of the corpus.

1. "Signs of the Times"

Historian and literary critic Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) opens his pamphlet *Chartism* (1839) with the "Condition of England question": the implementation of the First Reform Act of 1832, along with New Poor Law of 1834, drew attention to the living and working conditions of the most deprived classes of the English society. The status of the working class meant that laissez-faire policies were ineffective and that change should be on its way – a belief that Carlyle developed further in *Past and Present* (1843), where he underlined England's contradictions: "England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition." (5) Carlyle's work and commitment are not only fundamental to understand the political and social climate of the nineteenth century, but they also represent a pivotal moment in English literature[2]. Carlyle's influence on *A Tale of Two Cities* (1857)[3] is testament to the intrinsic relationship between literature and politics, as Charles Dickens (1812-1870) addresses social justice through his depiction of London and Paris. Dickens (in the image of Carlyle and the Chartist movement) spearheaded a genre of novels which started to emerge as soon as 1832[4] and whose name echoes Carlyle's work: Condition-of-England novels. Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil or The Two*

[2] George B. Tennyson's introduction to his selection of Carlyle's works emphasises the essayist's importance throughout the 19th century: "No one who hopes to understand the nineteenth century in England can dispense with Carlyle. We meet him everywhere." (xvi)
[3] Elliot L. Gilbert devoted an entire article to the intertextual connections between Carlyle's and Thackeray's works and Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1983, 252).
[4] I am here referring the reader to John R. Reed's paper in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (2002). Reed draws a detailed progression of the genre, from its early stages to its end, which it is not necessary to reproduce here.

Nations (1845) or Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854) can be considered as "novels which sought to articulate and interpret, in the mode of fiction, the changing nature of English society in an era of economic, political, religious and philosophical revolution." (Lodge 212) Their influence on the contemporary climate, as new laws and reforms were implemented towards the end of the century, led to the loss of impetus of the genre, which "became a victim of its own success" (Elliot 350). Nevertheless, the Edwardian age saw a revival of interest for novels devoted to the political and social *zeitgeist*. The genre evolved towards "state-of-the-nation" novels, like E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910), expanding beyond the industrial world in which the nineteenth-century novels were set. The transformation of the genre accounts for its intertwinement with contemporary politics, as Margaret Schlegel's call to "Only connect!" (133) echoes the more egalitarian and more democratic society of "the Peacemaker" King Edward VII. *Howards End*'s utopian ending (through the birth of Leonard Bast's and Helen Schlegel's child) is emblematic of the hopes brought about by the Edwardian era and the need for the country's unification. In *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction* (2015), Jean-Michel Ganteau sees

> in such an invitation [to connect] the essence of the contemporary state-of-the-nation novel: it has moved away from its originally industrial context and provides a broader ethical and political vision, adapting to the various milieus and contexts to which its authors are confronted. (162)

The primary opposition between the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels is indeed reminiscent of the Victorian Condition-of-England novels; yet *Howards End*'s tension between unity and "the evolutionary 'struggle for existence'" (Parrinder 294) reveals, as Ganteau contends, a turn towards new ethical and ontological issues, brought about by "fears of species death and infertility" (Parrinder 294) and by "cosmopolitanism and globalization" (292). Forster's novel weaves indissoluble links between the individual and the national, which expand beyond class categorisation while drawing on the political dimension of earlier Condition-of-England novels. However, as the families of *Howards End* find refuge in the birth of Helen's son, both ontological and national *angst* are assuaged – a sense of relief and comfort that post-World War One novels denied. As argued by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), "In the main, though, the nineteenth-century European novel is a cultural form consolidating but also refining and articulating the authority of the status quo." (77) As will be seen throughout this study, it is precisely this stability – both in politics and aesthetics – that the novels of the corpus seek to challenge.

The First World War undeniably changed the perception of literature and ethics. Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) best captures this evolution through her criticism of Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day* (1919):

> There's a trifling scene in [Virginia]'s book where a charming young creature in a light fantastic attitude plays the flute: it positively frightens me – to realise this utter coldness and indifference. But I will be very careful and do my best to be dignified and sober. Inwardly I despise them all for a set of cowards. We have to face our war. They won't. I believe our whole strength depends upon our facing things. (203)

Mansfield's private letter to her husband John Middleton Murry reveals her contempt for her contemporaries who "pick[ed] up the old threads as though it had never been" (209). Even if Mansfield's accusation is highly debatable, her first-hand account of the bombardment of Paris profoundly changed her perspective on politics, ethics and literature. She condemned the British government and their rationalisation of the conflict, while advocating writers' ethical responsibility towards society. Mansfield's literary ethics and aesthetics were rooted in the political and the historical landscape of the First World War: literary form was to bear and to display the marks of the conflict in an attempt to do away with the three-decker novels and nineteenth-century social realism. In *Modernism* (2000), Peter Childs underlines that "realism had proposed a shared world perceived in largely the same way by all members of society; by contrast the Modernists argued that reality was as varied as the individuals who perceived it." (46) The modernists' celebration of multiplicity (to which Mansfield was particularly attached) settled against monologic discourses on the experience of the war and on society at large. As the first novel of this corpus is contemporary of Mansfield and of the modernist movement, the present thesis will not dwell on the relationship between the novels of the corpus and literary realism. While it is indisputable that state-of-the-nation novels draw from social realism, a further analysis of the latter would not only infringe upon the multiplicity of experiences offered by the six novels under study but would also undermine each writer's own rejection of realism. The necessary interaction between literary form and political context meant a necessary commitment which, for Mansfield, could not be avoided. The dialogical approach of this thesis is meant to further understand and analyse how this interaction has played out throughout the last century and a half, during which literary debates on form and conventions have coincided with political upheavals.

2. Modern tales of England

Rebecca West's (1892-1983) praise of the "insolent artist" (201) in her essay "Uncle Bennett" (1928) is reminiscent of Katherine Mansfield's call for a "new word" (169). West, like Mansfield, admired novelists who dared challenge the *status quo* – a defiance she already carried out ten years earlier with her debut novel *The Return of the Soldier*. The first war novel written by a woman during the conflict, *The Return of the Soldier* is also one of the first works of fiction "to exploit psychoanalytical theory as a narrative device" (Childs, 180).[5] This exceptional work represents a new kind of state-of-the-nation novel, which is testament to the genre's intertwinement of political and social conditions with contemporary literary aesthetic concerns. Jenny Baldry – West's unreliable narrator – invites the reader into the disrupted atmosphere of Baldry Court, where her cousin Chris returns from the front with shell-shock. Addressing class conflict away from the industrial setting of nineteenth-century Condition-of-England novels, West offers a more intimate experience of social divisions as she depicts the tensions between Kitty Baldry, Chris's genteel wife, and Margaret Grey, Chris's former lower-class lover, with whom Chris has again become infatuated since he has forgotten the last fifteen years of his life. Kitty is left stranded, almost erased, as his past lover Margaret becomes once again the centre of his desire. Her experience and feelings have always had to play second fiddle to her husband's, both when he went to the front and when he came back wounded: West's portrait of women's experience raises political, social and ethical concerns which emerged in the 1890s with the figure of the 'New Woman', but were put aside as the war broke out. 'New Woman' literature marked a departure from Condition-of-England novels, as feminist issues progressively replaced economic concerns at the end of the nineteenth century. James R. Jr Simmons sees in this development the end of Condition-of-England novels, rather than a different facet of the genre. Yet, Rebecca West's work addresses class conflict back-to-back with women's condition, suggesting that the post-war state-of-the-nation novel needn't focus on a sole social and ethical issue, but can rather emphasise multifaceted experiences of life. West draws from the economic and social aspect of the condition-of-England novel coming close to New Women writers who "[in] rebelling against high Victorian realism […] also revolted against the norms of narrative structure. They ignored conventions about introducing

[5] Paul Edwards briefly addresses this matter in his chapter devoted to the Great War in English fiction in Robert Casario's *Cambridge Companion to the 20th century English Novel* (2009). However, West's achievement is rather quickly dismissed, as Edwards mainly focuses on her contemporary male writers such as Arnold Bennett, Richard Aldington or Henry Williamson, which ultimately contradicts West's legacy towards feminist writing.

characters, they flouted the normal marriage plot, and they violated closure." (Schaffer 735) West depicts a destabilised marriage whose reliance on societal conventions is questioned by the unmourned loss of a son and furthermore shattered by Chris's amnesia. The novel's use of stream of consciousness and its inconclusive ending (which will be addressed at length later on in this thesis) are significant of West's deliberate use of form as a symptom of political, social and ethical issues – an aesthetic relationship which finds its roots in New Women fiction and reaches its paroxysm with modernism[6]. The use of form to express feminist concerns ties in with the first three novels of the corpus respectively written by West, Winifred Holtby and Stevie Smith, who all address the position of women in English society by revealing just how much the latter constrict them into gendered roles.

West's fellow female writer Winifred Holtby (1898-1935)[7] grappled with being either "a reformer-sort-of-person or a writer-sort-of-person"[8]: member of the feminist Six Point Group set to reform English law, Holtby was a socialist journalist who devoted her life to both the fight for equality and writing. In her 1933 letter to friend and novelist Phyllis Bentley, she confesses that she could not draw away from contemporary politics while writing fiction:

> I feel the whole world is on the brink of another catastrophic war, and to go and shut oneself up in a cottage writing an arcadian novel, when one might be trying to shove it one infinitesimal fraction of an inch in the other direction—seems to me a kind of betrayal. That's the worst of being 50% a politician. I can't get out of my head my responsibility for contemporary affairs. (in Shaw 2012, 233)

Her posthumously-published *South Riding* appears as the conflation of these two personalities. Set in the interwar period, the novel is inspired by the real East Riding in Yorkshire. Holtby's prefatory letter to her mother Alice, Alderman of the East Riding County Council, reveals her involvement with local issues. If she insists on its fictional tenets, *South Riding* does indeed deal with "contemporary affairs" which make up the eight "books" of the novel: Education, Highways and Bridges, Agricultural and Small-Holdings, Public Health, Public Assistance, Mental Deficiency, Finance, as well as Housing and Town Planning. The formal division of

[6] Schaffer rightly points out that "New Women writers pioneered many of the stylistic experiments we associate with modernism. Working with fragmentation, dream sequences, non-realist narrative, streams of consciousness, shifting and multiple points of view, and narratives without conventional plot or closure, the New Women writers were trying out some very new ideas about literature indeed." (733)

[7] Detailed accounts of their several interactions can be found in Vera Brittain's *Testament of Friendship: the Story of Winifred Holtby* (1940,141, 259,280, 365), as well as in Jean E. Kennard's *Vera Brittain & Winifred Holtby: a Working Partnership* (1989, 12,23,129,141, 155).

[8] Winifred Holtby to Lady Rhondda, "Some Letters from Winifred Holtby, arranged by Lady Rhondda," *Time and Tide*, 4 April 1936, 470. Quoted in Regan 2009 (2).

South Riding allows Holtby to address the care of the ill and of the poor, to shed light on women's condition and consideration, while navigating the effects of the Great Depression on the rural (or "arcadian") community. Holtby's 168 characters offer a panoramic vision of economic, social and political distress, in the wake of the Local Government Act of 1929 which transferred poor relief to local government and of the global economic crisis that defined the 1930s. Sarah Burton, Holtby's main protagonist, stands both as a disruptive and structuring force: her arrival in the South Riding causes local authority figures, such as Alderman Snaith, Robert Carne and Mrs Beddows, to question their position, while she appears as the guiding thread of Holtby's novel. Sarah's socialist ideas contrast with corrosive capitalist ideas and her egalitarian and feminist agenda with old patriarchal structures[9] – a tension which eventually trickles down on all the inhabitants of the South Riding, as evidenced by the structure of the novel: each book contains several chapters or vignettes devoted to a set of characters and their struggle to improve both their lives and their community. The wind of change Sarah embodies can be seen as Holtby's hopeful effusion; yet, the community's unresolved trauma of the First World War and the looming threat of a second one (which Sarah fears as much as Holtby) convey a sense of urgency which is reminiscent of West's work, suggesting that the post-war state-of-the-nation novel is necessarily and committedly infused with conflicting contemporary politics, rendering a one-sided account of life in England undesirable. As Matthew Hart shows in his study of regionalism, "the regional chronotope does not simply mingle time and place so as to assert or isolate regional difference; instead the spatial axis disrupts the nation-state's assumption that all its components share a progressive and uniform historical time." (Casario 94) Hart's remark shares common ground with Peter Child's comment on the modernists' rejection of nineteenth-century realism. It must be noted, however, that Holtby was seldom associated with modernism. Catherine Clay, for instance, has thoroughly shown how Holtby differed from her modernist contemporaries through her defence of journalism "in the modernist ferment" (in Regan 2009, 65-88). Nevertheless, Christine Reynier comes back on the defining features of *South Riding* in her article "Exploring the Modernist State of England Novel by Women Novelists: Rebecca West, Radclyffe Hall and Winifred Holtby" (2015), and points out that

[9] The Representation of the People Act of 1928, which gave women the right to vote, and the first two Labour governments (under Prime Minister MacDonald) surely influenced the development of the novel, as Holtby was both a suffragist and a member of the Labour party.

> Holtby also repeatedly confronts various points of view, compelling the reader to construct her own version of the characters or the events at stake. For instance, is Robert Carne, the farmer, a copy and caricature of Mussolini, whom he is repeatedly said to look like, a man who was so aggressive with his wife that she went mad or a man who was desperately in love with a woman who has deeply wounded him? The author obviously learnt a lot from Virginia Woolf whose work she knew very well as her sensitive appraisal in *Virginia Woolf. A Critical Memoir* (1932), the first monograph published in England on Woolf, shows. In her witty, now satirical now humorous account of South Riding, Holtby thus resorts to an indirect method and devices usually recognised as typical of modernist writing and intertwines them with a mimetic approach, renewing the State of England novel. (n.p.)

Aesthetics and politics intersect in Holtby's microcosm, as her focus on the South Riding therefore does not only stand against monological depictions of England, but also reasserts plurality as a defining feature of a nation on the verge of the most devastating and annihilating conflicts in history.

In *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and 'Peace'* (2013), Gill Plain explains that

> [The] Britain that emerged from the 1940s was different from the nation of the 1930s. The world beyond Britain had been similarly transformed. […] [The] 1940s as a whole changed the limits of imaginative possibility. The decade opened with a heightened awareness of self and society, with Britain and everything it stood for facing an unparalleled threat. It ended in exhaustion, facing the possibility that winning the war had been achieved at the cost not only of imperial power and international authority, but also of any coherent sense of national identity. (17-18)

Sarah's foreboding in *South Riding* is indeed mixed with the hope that the community's unity and sense of belonging will prevail over the political upheavals to come. Yet, as Plain demonstrates, the Second World War thwarted the individual's relationship with the nation: the horror of the conflict led to the reconsideration of religious beliefs and became synonymous with dehumanisation, as new mass-destruction methods of warfare came to light. If the Blitz myth helped re-shape the nation through a "shared burden" (Bronstein and Harris 220), the war instilled an unshakable instability that is best represented in Stevie Smith's *The Holiday*. It stages a highly dysfunctional Celia, whose impossible love for her cousin Caz serves as a backdrop to British political indeterminacy at the end of the war, and interestingly shares similarities with *South Riding*'s temporal tension, as its characters move between nostalgic past and fearful future. Political discussions on the future of the British Empire and on the independence of India are synchronous with the psychological ramifications of the main protagonist, who cannot cope with her country's ethical corruption. Mixing prose and poetry,

Smith's novel is symptomatic of the evolution of state-of-England writing. As Malcolm Bradbury contends in *The Modern British Novel*:

> The Modernism that developed after the Great War was itself an endeavour to capture the new and changed reality, a search for pared-down fragmentary language of new authenticity, its Revolution of the Word matching the Revolution of the World. After 1945, the situation seemed to be exactly reversed. Language had been a weapon of War, and had been corrupted by it. […] (273)

Since the novel was initially written during the conflict, it took Stevie Smith several years to find a publisher. Janet Wanetts, who wrote the introduction to the 1978 edition of the novel, explained that it led her to change her manuscript: "when it was finally published in 1949, she was obliged to alter all its references to the current war to a more topical phenomenon she called 'the post-war.'" (x) The interchangeability of the two expressions embodies Smith's rejection of a post-war consensus or of a uniform English identity, which is represented by Celia's repetitive yet unfinished thoughts. Her implacable and unfulfilled desire to determine her identity echoes the reconfiguration of the Empire, as her Aunt Lion, her military cousin and her uncle Herbert progressively become fallen idols of a crumbling power. Smith's play on language both reflects and deflects the influence of history and politics over writing, therefore denying claims that the 1950s novel was nostalgic (Dyx) or purely realist. Andrzej Gasiorek has shown that

> Novels unfolded in an orderly manner, moral issues were handled pragmatically, and the prevailing tone was not given to metaphysics or meta-reflection. But although such characteristics were an important feature of postwar fiction, writers continued to draw upon modernist experiment. In the 1940s and 1950s Samuel Beckett, Henry Green, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Philip Toynbee, Rayner Heppenstall, Iris Murdoch, William Golding, and Muriel Spark all departed from realist conventions. Finnegans Wake and Samuel Beckett's fiction set a standard for a group of overtly anti-realist novelists that includes Brigid Brophy, Christine Brooke-Rose, B. S. Johnson, Ann Quin, and Alan Burns. Hostile to the empiricist tradition of the social novel, they rejected it in favor of extreme linguistic and narrative innovation. And there were others: writers who became dissatisfied with realism's limitations (John Berger, Doris Lessing, Angus Wilson); realists who, influenced by (post)modernism, both practiced realism and unmasked realism's illusions via intertextual and metafictional devices (David Lodge, Malcolm Bradbury, Anthony Burgess, John Fowles, Iris Murdoch) […] satirists who dissected contemporary Britain, using techniques of comic exaggeration, gothic excess, and outrageous grotesquerie (Martin Amis, Alasdair Gray, Iain Sinclair). […] (Casario, 193)

Gasiorek's aim is to show the diversity of the literary works that came after the Second World War and to reject the label "postmodernism" which has been, according to him, too vaguely

attributed to post-war writers. The title of his chapter for the *Cambridge Companion to the 20th Century Novel*, "Postmodernisms of English Fiction", highlights the different literary approaches to the novel. He rightly points out the general continuity between modernist innovation and post-1945 experimentation. Comparing B.S. Johnson's *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs* (1973) and Mansfield's review of Joseph Conrad's *Arrow of Gold* (1919) offers hindsight on a common desire to do away with linear realist narratives – a tendency which runs across the entire corpus and blurs the lines, in light of Gasiorek's work, between modernism and postmodernism. While Johnson claimed that

> Present-day reality is markedly different from say nineteenth-century reality. Then it was possible to believe in pattern and eternity, but today what characterises our reality is the probability that chaos is the most likely explanation; while at the same time recognising that even to seek an explanation represents a denial of chaos. (17)

Mansfield declared that "[the spirit of the age] is an uneasy, disintegrating, experimental spirit."[10] Gasiorek here echoes Derek Attridge in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004), where he argues that "Much of the dispute about the relationship between modernism and postmodernism would disappear if there were less compulsion to define, in a totalizing and positivistic spirit, diverse contemporaneous cultural practices." (4) Without undermining novelistic originality or experimentation throughout the decades, both critics emphasise the need to move beyond such labels so as to attend to each novel's relationship with form and reality. While modernists and experimentalists (the 'radicals' and the other groups presented by Gasiorek) used different techniques – stream of consciousness on the one hand, collage on the other to quote two obvious examples – their doing away with realism and with nineteenth-century fiction is essential when studying state-of-the-nation novels.

Angus Wilson (1913-1991) has been considered as the heir of Charles Dickens (by B.S. Johnson himself for one[11]) and of E.M. Forster (Bradbury in Halio). Yet, if Wilson did proclaim

[10] "A Backward Glance", *Athenaeum,* 8th August 1919, quoted in Katherine Mansfield, *The Critical Writings of Katherine Mansfield,* edited by Clare Hanson. St. Martin's Press, 1987: 55.

[11] "It's silly to pretend that one can solve the problems of writing in the middle twentieth century with the methods of Henry James, and even less with the methods of Dickens. One thinks of a very good writer like Angus Wilson who, I think, is a marvellous observer of twentieth century *mores*, and I'm sure social historians in the future will look to Angus Wilson and say, 'Yes, that's what it must have been like to live then.' But the actual methods he uses are those of Dickens, which seem to me to conflict what he's writing about, a conflict, in fact, between form and content." B.S. Johnson, "Novelists of the Sixties", *BBC recording*, 1967, quoted in Bernard Bergonzi, "Angus Wilson: Between Nostalgia and Nightmare", in Jay Halio, *Critical Essays on Angus Wilson*. Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1985: 123.

his love for Dickens (and his hatred for Forster), he did not see himself as a realist, a social realist or even a "neorealist", as his 1980 interview with Betsy Draine shows:

> I have never been wholly the realist writer that the public has seen me to be. I have a very good ear, though I say it myself, for dialogue. And dialogue in my short stories and later, but particularly in the short stories, is very exact. People felt this was a sign of neorealism, and also I have a strong sense of the social structure in England, so that was all there. […] I don't think I am a social realist. […] I used to admire Forster's work much more than I do now. Forster has receded from me as a figure. 1 find *Howard's End* intolerable now. (13)

He recognises that "the Dickensian thing" in him (13) was his ability to mix "laughter and tears" (13) and to depict his characters doing "little 'bits'" (4) aside the main narrative. Rather than wrongly defining him as Dickensian or a neorealist, Wilson is to be seen here as a state-of-the-nation writer who plays with words, images and especially genres. *No Laughing Matter* evidences Wilson's mastery of societal and literary codes, as it blends prose, satire, parody and theatrical incursions. The novel covers most of the twentieth century and can be defined as a story of abuse: Clara and William Matthews (respectively nicknamed the Countess and Billy Pop), are forever aspiring to be part of the upper middle class, when they are indeed "lumpen middle class" (157), leading them to neglect their six children throughout their lives. The latter then try to navigate adult life (still suffering from their parents' pluralistic abuse) in a very disturbed 20th century: they witness the two World Wars, the Suez Crisis and the Cold War. Private and public spheres are deeply intertwined in *No Laughing Matter*, as the children necessarily become involved in politics, from Quentin's communist affiliations to Marcus's stance against fascism and his commitment to the homosexual community. The division of the novel into five books (from "Before the War" to 1967, the year the book was published) gives way to chronological gaps which mirror the family's progressive estrangement – itself a reflection of the progressive erosion of a cohesive English society. Wilson defined himself as an "aesthete" and an "old moralist" (Wilson 1980, 11), while condemning novelists turned towards the past rather than towards contemporary issues[12], suggesting therefore a necessary correlation between form and content: *No Laughing Matter*'s review of the past is an indictment of nostalgia and stands as a generational chronicle on the development of social and political

[12] In a letter to the magazine *American Mercury* entitled "The Revolution in English Reading" (1951), Wilson condemns some modernist writers and their obsession with the past, like Forster and Woolf, and advocates for writers who are "intent on living" (49).

issues in England, which aims at showing, through the realm of the personal, that "society and civilization rest on a very thin ice." (Wilson in MacDowell 80)

The fragility feared by Wilson was to take on a new meaning with the development of neoliberalism under the government of Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), from 1979 to 1990. Increasing privatisation, high unemployment rate, reconfiguration of the welfare state, the Thatcher government "polarized the electorate" (Bronstein and Harris 293) and was responsible for "growing income inequality." (283) The reconfiguration of society brought about new economic policies which inspired a "new vein in the 'state of Britain novel'", initiated by Martin Amis's *Money* (1984) which focused on "the havoc wreaked by the financial turn of capitalism with its attendant cult of easy money, easy sex and the concurrent dematerialization of affects." (Bernard 2015a, 144) While Amis's novel surely captures the *zeitgeist* of a corruptive society, it fails to address the nation itself by leaving aside the wholesome impact of politics on the individual. Published ten years later with hindsight on the Thatcher government, Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!* draws a satirical portrait of English society through the eyes of Michael Owen, who was hired by the mysterious Peacock Press to write the chronicles of the ever-powerful Winshaw family. Banking, foreign trade, healthcare, art, the food industry and the media are all submitted to the iron hand of the six Winshaw siblings, set to represent the inner workings of the Thatcher era and their influence on the lives of ordinary British people, like Michael and his fragile neighbour Fiona. Presented as a "postmodern whodunnit" (Guignery, Alexandre), *What a Carve Up!* blends genres[13] in a manner reminiscent of Wilson's. While Coe has been seen, just like Wilson, as Dickens's heir (Trimm), he has nonetheless expressed his discontent with nineteenth-century literary forms in an article for the *Newstateman* in 2012:

> All storytelling is political, being an attempt to control and influence the imaginative life of another person for a period of time. If there is a problem with the 19th-century model, it's not so much that it is invalid or irrelevant but that, paradoxically, it is too formally satisfying to suit our current state of mind. It induces the stolid consolations of closure and catharsis and I'm beginning to think that these are not what our present difficulties require.

Coe's argument is twofold: he not only links literature with politics, but contends that form is intrinsically linked with political storytelling. *What a Carve Up!*'s chronological disorder,

[13] "including tabloid newspaper articles, the minutes of a board meeting, interview transcripts, a diary, autobiography, letters, parodies of horror stories and gothic tales" as Vanessa Guignery points out (2011, 431).

oscillating between 1942 and 1991, exposes the systemic privilege of class: Michael Owen serves as both guide and victim of the Winshaws as "he provides the link between odd and even chapters, between the public and the private, the political and the personal." (Guignery 2015a, 65) This encompassing yet uneasy navigation through the Thatcherite government offers a first glimpse of the dissension between neoliberalist economics and the welfare of the British population, which has reached its paroxysm with the 2008 subprime crisis.

The post-war welfare state and the government's determination to improve the population's living conditions suffered another blow, when the 2008 credit crunch shed light on the imperious, yet immaterial, power of banks, and society's complete submission to the law of the market. In *Whoops! Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay* (2010), John Lanchester breaks down the crisis to "understand what's happened" to "give us a sense of agency" (xv) when so little seems to be in people's control. He explains that

> Capitalism isn't inherently fair: it does not, in and of itself, distribute the rewards of economic growth equitably. Instead, it runs on the bases of winner takes all and to them that hath shall be given. For several decades after the second world war the western liberal democracies devoted themselves to the question of how to harness capitalism's potential for economic growth to the political imperative to provide better lives for ordinary people. The jet engine of capitalism was harnessed to the ox cart of social justice. […] Then the Wall came down, and to various extents the governments of the west began to abandon the social-justice aspect of the general post-war project. The jet engine was unhooked from the ox cart and allowed to roar off at its own speed. The result was an unprecedented boom, which had two big things wrong with it: it wasn't fair and it wasn't sustainable. (15-16)

Lanchester points out to major imbricated divides, which were sown at the beginning of the 20th century and came to full bloom with the crunch: the power of the rich over the poor and the discrepancy between the law of the market and ordinary lives. He draws attention to the fact that those at the top of the money chain – and who broke free from governments' rule – get to gamble and to decide who's to live decently and who's to fall off the chain completely. Lanchester denounces this neoliberal anomaly in his novel *Capital* (2012), where the omniscient narrator states that "Britain had become a country of winners and losers." (7) The novel is divided into four parts, from December 2007 (the almost delightful bliss of the pre-crash era) to November 2008 and focuses on the gentrified Pepys Road in Clapham. Composed of 107 chapters, *Capital* goes back and forth between different individuals, each making their way in the competitive-market-driven London. Lanchester's state-of-the-nation novel is part of what has been called "Crunch Lit" by Sathnam Sanghera in an article for *The Times*. In her

study devoted to the genre, Katy Shaw suggests that "Crunch Lit" is "encouraging readers to reflect on contemporary society and the role of finance in the modern world" and "offers the crisis as an opportunity to rethink the relationship between the state and the markets, and between individuals and finance in the twenty-first century." (15) From a political refugee to an egocentric banker, Lanchester's characters offer hindsight on the multiscale effects of the economic crisis and on the hindrances imposed by neoliberalism – both phenomena being reflected in the form of *Capital* itself. State-of-the-nation novels of the 21st century therefore take a new turn with the events that followed the stock market crash of 2008, giving a new impetus to political and ethical literary commitment in the face of dehumanising and annihilating neoliberal policies and values.

The corpus at hand reveals the necessary evolution of the English state-of-the-nation genre with "the signs of the times": the novels chosen for this thesis allow for a diachronic approach of 20th and 21st century state-of-the-nation fiction, which aims at showing how writers of the genre associate form and ethical concerns, through impossible closure and denied catharsis – setting these novels apart from 19th century realist Condition-of-England novels, as Jonathan Coe rightly claims. One of the ambitions behind this thesis is to also try and break down the barriers between modernism and postmodernism, as Gasiorek and Attridge incite to do. While there are undeniable differences in their formal approach due to their respective contexts, the tendency to focus on either one of these periods seems, for the purpose of this study, too reductive and schematic. While shedding light on each novel's specificities, this thesis will hopefully offer a comprehensive reflection on the genre and its ethical enterprise.

3. Reconsidering Ethics

The six state-of-the-nation novels at hand span the 20th and 21st centuries and were published almost every thirty years. Rooted in their "empirical reality" (Adorno 1979, 190), they were written in moments of crisis (World Wars, the Great Depression, the Suez Crisis and the Swinging Sixties, the Thatcher government and the rise of neoliberalism, the credit crash) which all profoundly destabilised the social and political organisation of Britain during the last hundred years. They attest to the intrinsic relationship between form and politics, which has been thoroughly discussed by German philosopher and critic Theodor W. Adorno in his essay "Commitment" (1979): "Even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden 'it should be otherwise'. […] As eminently constructed and produced objects, works of art, even literary

ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life." (194) Adorno here rejects the idea of autonomous forms of art, as they are necessarily influenced by the social and political context in which they are produced. He also contends that artistic creations tend to offer a different vision of their empirical reality: this "should be otherwise" reveals an ethical disposition of the artist towards society and towards what Adorno names "a just life". However, as Corina Stan points out in *The Art of Distances: Ethical Thinking in the 21st Century* (2018), Adorno tends to reject any form of representational art (17) so as to avoid falling prey to the larger oppressive bourgeois system. Stan recalls that it is for this reason that for the German philosopher, only form, and especially the fragment, can be a "formal strategy of resisting systemic totality. […]" (19) The predominance of Adorno's thought in his 1979 essay yet invites to try and reconcile the representational and the formal, in order to understand the ethical impetus of state-of-the-nation novels. In fact, they offer a "not-so-hidden otherwise" as they seem to strive towards "a just life", rather than "abstain" from it. This propensity is both political and ethical. In *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (1963), Adorno asserts that "the quest for the good life is the quest for the right form of politics" (176), therefore binding politics and ethics together[14]. My analysis will therefore necessarily dwell on the political constitution of the societies depicted in the corpus, so as to further understand the ethical project of each state-of-the-nation novel. Their respective authors having also written or adamantly spoken about their political views, I will make references to their personal stances, when adequate, to shed light on their artistic productions.

Ethical studies have often been synonymous with moral philosophy, and Adorno himself uses both ethics and morality alternatively – though he refers at times to "ethics" as a "would-be harmonious concept" (1963, 16)[15]. He rightly points out that the categories used by moral philosophy and criticism result from "faded theological ideas" (1963, 15) of good and evil. Wayne C. Booth and Martha Nussbaum, two eminent figures in ethical studies, have also made clear the need to reassert the importance of moral philosophy when studying literary

[14] In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1999), Wayne C. Booth recalls that "When we talk about changing persons we are also talking about changing societies. As most philosophers from Plato and Aristotle on have insisted, ethics and politics depend on each other. We might, then, broaden the term "ethical" even further, making it carry the weight of all political criticism as a rough synonym for what many people would call ideological criticism." (12)

[15] Corina Stan emphasises how Adorno deals more often with morality rather than ethics, as does Roland Barthes, whose writings on literature are mainly excluded from the present study for this particular reason. Adorno's own ambiguity towards ethics and morality, on the contrary, offer a compelling challenge when bringing ethics and fragmentary writing together.

works[16]. However, these categories seem too restrictive and too abstract, and are not associated with a rigorous study of form. In the words of Vera Nünning,

> During the last few decades, ethical considerations once again entered the domain of literary criticism as well as philosophical works, and many critical approaches to literature – like gender studies, ecological criticism or postcolonial criticism – focus on questions which involve ethical dimensions. Mostly, however, these works do not consider formal aspects of literary works, their structure and narrative techniques by means of which the topics are conveyed. Even scholars like Wayne C. Booth, whose *The Rhetoric of Fiction* was a landmark in the study of the novel, shy away from any formal considerations when concerned with the ethics of a given work. (in Erll, Grabes and Nünning, 370)

This lack of formal inquiry and the moralist orientation of this criticism make it essential to rely on a different definition of ethics, so as to better understand the formal and ethical dimensions of the novels of the corpus. In this regard, I will rather rely on Judith Butler's and Athena Athanasiou's definition of ethics in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013): "The question of ethics is always a question of an ethical relation, that is the question of what binds me to another and in what way this obligation suggests that the 'I' is invariably implicated in the 'we'." (107) By shifting the focus from abstract moral categories to the primary relationship between the individual and others, Butler and Athanasiou not only infuse ethics with politics (here embodied by the communal pronoun "we") but also strip down the concept of all moral compass, so as to reinstate this relationship as the primary ethical foundation. Their definition of ethics stems from Emmanuel Levinas's seminal work, especially in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974) where he contends that ethics is first and foremost the responsible relationship to the other. In his discussion with Philippe Nemo in *Ethics and Infinity* (1982), Levinas comes back on his definition and explains:

> In [*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*] I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility. (95)

Ethics is therefore the foundation for all relationships and for the constitution of society. Levinas does not consider ethics as the quest for morality but rather as the inescapable condition of the individual and its encounter with the other. He contends that if the injunction of responsibility that spurs from the face of the other can either be "accepted or refused" (97), it

[16] Respectively in *The Company We Keep* and in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1999).

nevertheless necessarily exists and defines the individual. The notion of responsibility is the one I propose to explore in relation to state-of-the-nation novels: in fact, for Derek Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), "although responsibility is a concept we employ for our dealings with a wide range of entities, including persons, cultures, and the natural environment, it is not one generally used of artistic creations." (124) Attridge reinstates the necessity to link the ethics of responsibility with creativity and works of art, emphasising the fact that the act of creation – like the creative individual – cannot escape the relationship with the other. This is why this study aims at studying and analysing the relationship between ethics and literature through the prism of literary, ethics and cultural studies[17]. Butler's and Athanasiou's work, *inter alia*, will allow to examine the representation of responsibility in state-of-the-nation novels.

It should thus be noted that the term responsibility is contemporary of both the emergence of nation-state (political responsibility) and the development of the genre (moral responsibility). While Richard McKeon[18] points out that the term responsibility was first used in English and French in 1787 (21), revealing that "in a significant sense, the idea of political responsibility takes precedence in the evolution of the idea of responsibility" (23), Bruce Robbins explains in "Telescopic Philanthropy: Professionalism and Responsibility in *Bleak House*" that

> In the eighteenth century, to be "responsible" was not to possess a trait of character but to occupy a position within a system of social relations, where one could be made to answer for oneself. […] According to the *OED*, the first use of the word in the sense of "morally accountable for one's action", that is, as an inherent moral quality, comes as late as 1836. In short, it was in Dickens' lifetime (the *OED* in fact cites *Bleak House*) that the meaning of the word came to inhere not in relations of accountability but in the individual character. (In Bhabha 1990, 224)

Both critics underline the precedency of political responsibility over moral responsibility: in this regard, it will be essential to look at the institutions depicted in the corpus so as to

[17] In their introduction to *Cultural Studies. Theory and Practice* (2016), Chris Barker and Emma A. Jane define the field as such: "Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field in which perspectives from different disciplines can be selectively drawn to examine the relations of culture and power. [It] seeks to explore the connections between these forms of power and to develop ways of thinking about culture and power than can be utilized by agents in the pursuit for change. […] Culture is concerned with questions of shared social meanings, that is, the various ways we make sense of the world. However, meanings are not simply floating 'out there'; rather, they are generated through signs most notably those of language." (7-9)

[18] Richard McKeon. "The Development and the Significance of the Concept of Responsibility". *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 11, no. 39.1 (1957): 3-32.

understand the different layers of the concept within state-of-the-nation novels. However, the chronology of responsibility defined by both McKeon and Robbins leaves out ethical responsibility altogether: they either refer to governments' and officials' responsibility or to the individual character – and here it is worth noting Robbins's choice of words, "to answer for oneself". Yet Levinas refutes this very idea: "[usually], one is responsible for what one does oneself. I say, in *Otherwise Than Being*, that responsibility is initially *for the Other*." (1982, 96) McKeon's and Robbins's arguments both seem to have internalised institutional norms (here implied by the entity of either the nation-state or society) into their analysis. In keeping with the Foucauldian thinking, I suggest that political responsibility implies a social hierarchy that needs to be analysed when apprehending ethical responsibility. The power dynamics at the heart of our corpus seem indeed to influence the primary ethical relationship described by Levinas, Butler and Athanasiou. If this thesis will not address questions of good and evil, it will nonetheless try to understand how political and social norms influence and even subvert ethics: from patriarchal systems to xenophobia, from socialism to neoliberalism, the six novels of the corpus explore how responsibility towards the other is submitted to dominant ideologies and how behaviour is modified to comply with their tenets – leaving us to wonder what determines the individual's bond with the other.

If the ethical seems to disappear in studies devoted to the notion of responsibility, Martha Nussbaum deplores the same phenomenon in literary studies. She discusses, in a part of *Love's Knowledge* deftly entitled "The Absence of the Ethical", this reticence to associate ethics and form:

> Literary criticism dealing with particular texts and authors continues, of course, to speak about the ethical and social concerns that are central to those authors. But even this sort of concern has been constrained by pressure of the current thought that to discuss a text's ethical or social content is somehow to neglect "textuality", the complex relationships of that text with other texts; and of the related, though more extreme, thought that texts do not refer to human life at all, but only to other texts and to themselves. And if one turns from criticism to more general and theoretical writing about literature, the ethical vanishes more or less altogether. (170)

Leaving ethics out of the analysis of state-of-the-nation novels would imply that the genre is nonrepresentational: it would mean, as Nussbaum argues, that human social, political and ethical concerns are not taken into account by state-of-the-nation writers – therefore denying the very genesis of the genre. The diachronic approach of this thesis aims at establishing a dialogue between novels written throughout an entire century (1918-2012) and to explore their

"complex relationships" with one another along with their formal structure. I wish to reinstate and reconsider the relationship between ethics and form and especially between the notion of responsibility and what I called, in the title of this thesis, the aesthetics of fragmentation.

4. Fracture and Fragmentation

The challenge of this corpus lies within the association of modernist and postmodernist novels. Literary criticism has, if not opposed, schematically distinguished the two. In "Postmodernisms of English Fiction", Andrzej Gasiorek comes back on this vague and often unsettling division:

> Postmodernism is hard to define. Is it a period term, a social diagnosis, a cultural dominant, an anti-aesthetic posture, a philosophical endgame, a hollowing out of time and a new substantiation of space, a sign of political defeat? Postmodernism is all of those, its vagueness as a concept matched by its voracity as a category. The all-embracing prefix is part of the problem. Does (post)modernism, coming after modernism in the 1950s, extend or negate the earlier movement? Or does it paradoxically precede modernism conceptually, bearing witness to what modernism could not represent? These unsettled questions suggest that postmodernism is both an overdetermined heir of modernist influences and an open-ended set of practices and theories whose relationship to modernism remains vexed. (Casario, 192)

Gasiorek highlights the continuity between the two categories and invites readers and critics to go beyond such arbitrary classification when confronted with British literature. He emphasises the need to celebrate the diversity and "the numerous fictional trajectories and aesthetic political allegiances in play in the postwar period" (208), without necessarily opposing them to modernism. The choice of my corpus answers Gasiorek's call: the six novels under study suggest, *a priori*, the continuity of the genre. I will not oppose modernism and postmodernism as two separate periods, but rather show how the latter intersects with the former when it comes to the specific genre of state-of-the-nation novels. As Jacques Rancière contends in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2000), "At a given point in time, several regimes coexist and intermingle in the works themselves" (47): it is precisely this intertwinement of artistic movements that makes up the density and richness of state-of-the-nation novels. In fact, it is essential to recall that continuity does not mean uniformity, for "state-of-the-nation writing can come in many different forms," as Jonathan Coe observes in his article for *The Newstateman* (2012). The plurality of the novels of the corpus, in terms of technique, form, and contentions, is part and parcel of their ethical dimension and will be addressed thoroughly throughout this study.

I will not dwell on the definition or history of the fragment *per se*, which entails a rather different account from fragmentation, from Greek philosophers to German Romantics, with very different implications: Camelia Elias' *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre* (2005) gives a perfectly detailed picture of the fragment, one which does not need to be reproduced here. However, Elias underlines a crucial element in the theorisation of the fragment:

> Most definitions drawing upon the [etymology], presuppose, formally speaking, that a relation between part and whole is constitutive of the notion of fragment. The consequence of defining the fragment in terms of a part/whole relation is that the fragment is always seen as derived from and subordinate to an original whole text. This has marked the entire research tradition on the fragment which has tended to focus on the fragment's (ruined) form and (incomplete) content. (1)

Elias recalls the negative connotation associated with the fragment, embodying rupture, dislocation, separation. The fragment comes from unity – unity of thought, of text or of social bodies (Elias herself sees in such definitions the problematic notion of the idea of belonging linked with the fragment). Pierre Garrigues's *Poétiques du fragment* (1994) exemplifies Elias's assessment, arguing that the fragment evidences a "loss of unity", a form of "nostalgia." (34) For Garrigues, only the "short form" ("forme brève" in the original French) can convey this feeling of loss and lack. This, when focusing on state-of-the-nation novels, cannot stand: the novels of the corpus as objects evince the paradoxical proliferation of fragmentation – hence confirming the necessity to deal with fragmentation, rather than "the fragment". While the fragment can be separate, fragmentation is both a literary, ethical and political *process* that does not mourn unity but instead embodies the hazardous and arduous construction of the text and of the individual as an ethical and social being.

While Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drąg underline, in *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction* (2019), that "since fragmentary writing is not a widely established category, the list of its distinctive features has not been authoritatively codified" (xx), they nonetheless point out two distinctive features of literary fragmentation:

> in order for a text to be regarded as fragmentary, it certainly needs to *appear* that way to the reader. That subjective impression is often evoked by the division of the text into single paragraphs or sentences which are separated by space. […] One alternative are works composed of blocks of continuous text. […] where fragmentation is only apparent at the level of the narrative, which frequently intersperses various elements and stories in a non-linear manner. (xx)

The four post-1945 novels of this corpus seem to coincide best with the first element described above. The visual fragmentation of *The Holiday*, *No Laughing Matter* and *What a Carve Up!* mostly relies on a blending of styles and genres: topography becomes a visual evidence of what Merritt Moseley, in his chapter "What is fragmentary fiction?" included in Guignery and Drag, defines as "bricolage", i.e. "novels made up of fragments of very disparate materials."(11) Where Celia, in *The Holiday*, shares her poems, the Matthew children mock their parents in the "Russian Vine" play, which fragments the narration and the family at the same time. In a more extensive manner, Coe mixes different types of police characters to reproduce, for instance, news headlines about the Winshaws. Though Moseley's criticism focuses solely on postmodernist fiction, the structural reproduction of the city council's archives in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* can also be considered as a form of visual fragmentation. The introductory pages of the novel consist in Holtby's drawing of the South Riding and a list of the characters. Each book starts with an extract from the South Riding archives: though not as distinct as in its later counterparts, *South Riding* also plays with "fragments of disparate materials". While the division of the novel also recalls Lanchester's – both authors dedicating one chapter to one set of characters – Holtby's differs from the post-1945 narratives, which seem both structured and incomplete. The division in non-consecutive chapters provides a deceptive organisation of the novels, which are interspersed with blanks and gaps. Coe, on the other hand, plays ostentatiously with the timeline of his characters, going back and forth throughout the second half of the 20th century.

The second distinctive feature evoked by Guignery and Drąg seems to be more adequate for the first three novels of the corpus. *The Return of the Soldier* follows the erratic thoughts of Jenny about her cousin Chris, as she reminisces about the past while attempting to grapple with Chris's amnesia. Throughout the novel, Jenny becomes the refracting mirror of four contingent stories, therefore interspersing "various elements and stories in a non-linear manner" and making of West's novel a token of modernist writing. Holtby follows her contemporary fellow writers by using the successive stories of the South Riding's inhabitants as both a structural and fragmenting device: they show how individual lives are directly and indirectly influenced by

their intertwinement with history, a trait Holtby's characters share with those in *The Holiday*. Celia's longing for the stability of colonial Britain is deeply intertwined with her sentimental musings about her cousin Caz, himself emblematic of the Empire. West, Holtby and Smith use narrative fragmentation to encapsulate the individual's embeddedness with the past, as well as with other characters. *What a Carve Up!* seems to take this aesthetic challenge to its paroxysm, as it offers a combination of two major stories – that of the horrible Winshaw family and that of their biographer, Michael Owen. The different narrative threads not only recall Holtby but Lanchester as well: an investigation is also underway in *Capital*, as the characters of Pepys Road try to figure out who is behind the campaign "We Want What You Have". The postcards act as both a connecting and fragmenting device. The chapters, and the characters' lives, are developed successively and intermittently, as if the reader were passing through Pepys Road. The same pattern is reproduced in *No Laughing Matter*, as the "books" follow one Matthew at a time. The siblings' connection progressively erodes throughout the novel: the family reunions which makeup the first two books of Wilson's state-of-the-nation are replaced by consecutive fragments on each of them, which embody how disparate their lives become.

Literary fragmentation is henceforth diverse and un-totalising. The timeline of the corpus illustrates the evolution, or at least, the multiplicity of the aesthetics of fragmentation. The study of the latter through the lens of Guignery and Drąg, as well as the writers' different approach to this aesthetics, reveal that fragmentation is an active process of creation. In this regard, I will dwell on Alexander Regier's definition of fracture and fragmentation to explore how narrative fragmentation seems to shed light on the individual's intertwinement with society and history, leading up to her own self-fragmentation:

> Fracture describes a break that is located on the structural level. It is not a process, it does not encompass a temporal element in that sense. […] Fragmentation, differently from fracture, is a process. Even though it can be final, it is defined by a series of changes. It is the unfolding of a break that happens either once or over and over again. (7)

The political and historical events that transpire throughout the novels – and which have influenced their writing – profoundly modified the body politic and can be defined as "fractures". From modern warfare and its consequences, to the fall of the British Empire and the progressive dismantling of the welfare state, the events at hand have led to a destabilisation of the structure of British society. It will therefore be necessary to address fracture together with fragmentation, whose process is not only literary, but also social, political and most of all,

ethical. The corpus will allow for a comprehensive analysis of the "series of changes" undergone by both the genre and British society, as Guignery and Drąg suggest:

> among the most common characteristics of fragmentary literature, regardless of which of the above categories they may fit into, are incompleteness, discontinuity and heterogeneity. The defiance of completeness, cohesion and continuity in the syntactic structure and the arrangement of text on the page appears suited to convey content that challenges the status quo. [...] Related to fragmentary writing's propensity for critique and contestation is its frequently adopted position of skepticism and resistance to ideology. (xxi)

The ethical choice behind literary fragmentation needs to be thoroughly analysed, especially in the case of state-of-the-nation novels, which are political in essence. These fragmentary novels seem to defy the expectations set by former Condition-of-England and social realist novels by staging fragile body politics[19] and going against uniformising discourses which are, in the scope of our corpus, male-dominated, class-ruled and Western-centred.

5. Challenging the status quo

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Judith Butler comes back to Adorno's definition of ethics and contends that "[ethics], we might say, gives rise to critique or, rather, cannot proceed without it." (110) She undermines that critique implies reconsidering social norms and political constructs: it invites the individual to pay attention to the socio-historical forces determining their place in society. It seems to especially emerge at times of political and social turmoil, where previous foundations no longer have a hold. While "the 'woman question' was a struggle that will only be diffused by the onset of war in Europe" (Bronstein and Harris, 151) and gave way to important legislative changes during the interwar period, the aftermath of the First World War also shattered the blind patriotism of the pre-war years, as the massive

[19] Few mentions of the word/concept "community" will appear in the present thesis. Though it is present in Hotlby's state-of-the-nation to some extent, and in one instance in *What a Carve Up!* (discussed in Chapter 2), the concept of community does not tie-in with ethical responsibility. Studying Levinas's work, Andrew Gibson rightly underlines that "The assumption of the sphere of the common is humanist and, by the same token, its dissolution is crucial to a post-humanist ethics. Novels have so frequently been (or put themselves forward to be) read as if the existence within them of such a foundation were self-evident that it's worth risking a polemical generalization: the specific ethical significance and value of a novel today is likely to lie in the profundity and complexity with which it calls 'the sphere of the common' in question (which is not a simple or singular activity)." (1999, 103) Similarly, in *Communitas* (1998), Robert Esposito questions the totalising power of such a concept: its predominance in philosophy, for instance, has contributed to the construction of a "mythology of origin" (16) that needs to be put into perspective. The present study will therefore refrain from dwelling on community, in an effort to avoid both conceptual totalisation and nationalistic tendencies associated with the word (Esposito 16), as evidenced by Benjamin Anderson's well-known "imagined communities" (see below).

number of deaths raised the question of the necessity of the conflict. If that sense of togetherness was renewed with the Second World War, the latter nonetheless brought about "many domestic demands for social change" (220), crystallised by the 1942 Beveridge Report which gave birth to the British welfare state. However, the apparent national unity at the end of the war was to erode again, as the British Empire was starting to crumble and as the economic prosperity of the 1950s started to weaken. Bronstein and Harris explain that between 1950 and 1979, "there was a social consensus that profits were less important than people" (253), as economic divides between urban and rural areas widened. This started to set the tone for the emergence of neoliberalism, embodied by Margaret Thatcher in her 1987 interview for the magazine *Woman's Own*[20]: "There is no such thing [as society]! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first." (30) Thatcher's transfer of responsibility for the other to responsibility for oneself reveals a new shift of social and political foundations, which lay emphasis on individualism and economic gain and that would gain momentum in the following decades, up till the 2008 credit crash. The destabilisation of society entailed by these crucial events can be seen as opportunities to re-think its ethical construction.

In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno argues that ethical consideration does not mean ethical unity, quite the contrary: he contends that advocating a collective *ethos* would be brushing off the ethical challenges and ethical difficulties that come with the *zeitgeist*, which in turn would lead to ethical violence. He claims that

> in all likelihood nothing is more degenerate than the kind of ethics or morality that survives in the shape of collective ideas even after the World Spirit has ceased to inhabit them. […] Once the state of human consciousness and the state of the social forces of production have abandoned these collective ideas, these ideas acquire repressive and violent qualities. (17)

Adorno here rejects the idea of consensus and calls for critique to ensure the possibility for ethics. His concern for ethical violence reveals the necessity for a constant evaluation of "the ways in which our actions are taken up by the already-constituted social world." (Butler 2005, 110). Adorno's remarks shed light on the intrinsic relationship between ethics and the social and political context in which it emerges. Ethical consideration entails a critical analysis of

[20] Douglas Keay. "Aids, education and the year 2000" Interview with Margaret Thatcher. *Woman's Own*, 23rd September 1987. Web transcript.

social, political and historical discourses, insofar as for Foucault, "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it." (1976, 101) It is because these diverse discursive systems both inform and condition one another that their deciphering becomes essential to analyse the ethical propension of state-of-the-nation literature.

In this regard, it must be noted that novels of the genre refute any kind of nationalism which would gloss over the internal divides of the nation and get away with what Adorno regards as ethical violence. In *National Identity* (1991), Anthony D. Smith defines nationalism as "an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential "nation"." (73) Smith underlines the fact that *some* members get to decide what is part of the nation and what is not, what defines its social and ethical norms, here pointing at asymmetrical relationships within a given society which should ensure "common legal rights and duties for all members." (14) The very genesis of state-of-the-nation novels hints at their incompatibility with nationalist discourse: the purpose of this thesis is therefore not to see how "imagined communities" – to use the expression coined by Benedict Anderson in 1991 – are constructed through common myths and common values, but rather to see how the novels of the corpus emphasise multiplicity and question such totalising discourses.

The six novels at hand all focus on British society and the transformations brought by the historical events of the 20th and 21st centuries upon both fictional and real societies, a connection that probes the link between form, fiction, historical and political contexts. In his article "Modernist Ethics, Critique, and Utopia" (2013), Stephen Ross contends that modernist writings are the locus of "a direct correlation between formal experimentation, critique as a fundamental dissatisfaction with the status quo, and an ethical impulse to improve upon the status quo." (55) Drawing on this observation, I argue that state-of-the-nation novels are a token of ethical and political criticism, illustrated by the fragmentation of the societies depicted by and anchored in the fragmentary form of the novels. The existing criticism on the corpus does not offer an investigation of the relationship between form and ethics, which would echo Adorno's work on the links between form and politics and that would further our understanding of the genre. While Marion Shaw (2012) clearly defines Holtby "as a successful condition-of-England [novelist]" (237), Pamela Thurschwell (2006) has likened *What a Carve Up!* to

Dickens' *Bleak House* and J. Russell Perkins (2017) has studied *Capital*'s relationship with *A Christmas Carol* – suggesting the novels' affiliation with their nineteenth-century counterparts. However, few have defined the other novels of the corpus as such. As the latter focus on "the reality of here and now" (Bernard 2015b), *The Return of the Soldier, The Holiday* and *No Laughing Matter* should be included in the genre. Numerous studies have shed light on Angus Wilson's liberalism and social realism (Conradi, Faulkner) but Malcolm Bradbury and Jean-Christophe Murat are the only critics to underline the common characteristics between *No Laughing Matter* and Condition-of-England novels (146; 77). Stevie Smith's political acumen has been thoroughly analysed – especially when it comes to her commitment to feminist issues (Sternlicht, Light). The political and social themes of *The Holiday* are nonetheless barely touched upon, even discarded when compared to the extensive analysis of her poems. Romana Huk's *Between the Lines* (2005) is the only exception in the literary spectrum, though Gill Plain, in *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and 'Peace'* (2013), certainly highlights Celia's experience of the post-war. Although Huk does not associate *The Holiday* to state-of-the-nation novels, she insists on the determining and shaping role of the nation upon the individual (5, 36, 206). Christine Reynier sees West's novel as a "state-of-the-nation novel" of a new kind, which exposes class conflict and poverty through Chris's trauma, itself emblematic of a new-born national fragility. The latter is assuredly the topic of several papers on West's first novel (Kavka, Pinkerton, Pulsifer…) and offers a first glimpse into the analysis of the characters' vulnerability, though leaving little room for the metonymic construction of *The Return of the Soldier*, in which the Baldrys refract a deeply wounded nation.

When it comes to the corpus's aesthetics, the formal fragmentation of *The Return of the Soldier* has not been thoroughly analysed, as only the final ellipsis has been evoked by critics. *South Riding*'s aesthetics suffer from the same lack of formal inquiry: the structure of the novel has not yet been considered as revelatory of the novel's take on social and political divides, though Reynier's article does reassess *South Riding*'s social and economic fragmentation in light of national history. Lisa Regan's monograph, *Winifred Holtby's Social Vision* (2012), also studies the novel's depiction of inequalities (137), while shedding light on Holtby's political outlook and apprehension of the notion of community. A detailed analysis of West's and Holtby's novels – which this thesis aims at developing – will certainly further the investigations proposed by Reynier, Regan, and by Romana Hulk as regards Stevie Smith's *The Holiday*, which does not benefit from a study of the novel's non-linear narration. Huk, like Reynier and

Regan respectively, mentions the political and psychological fragmentation of the British post-war society, yet without taking into account the ethical dimension of the novel rooted in its form. Malcolm Bradbury initiated, in his article "The Fiction of Pastiche: the Comic Mode of Angus Wilson" (1985), a dialogue between ethics and literary aesthetics in *No Laughing Matter* through an analysis of Wilson's use of irony. Bradbury is the only one, in Halio's collection of essays on the novelist, to address this relationship: Jean Sundrann and Margaret Drabble briefly mention Wilson's blending of genres, without demonstrating its role in the construction (or rather deconstruction) of the ethical relationships that exist between the characters. Bradbury deftly shows that Wilson purposely left out key historical moments, therefore implying that *No Laughing Matter* engages with "one of [Wilson's] recurrent concerns, which is the theme of evasion" (147) – a theory that will need to be further developed when examining fragmentation. In this regard, *What a Carve Up!* is undoubtedly the most studied novel of the corpus, as suggests Philip Tew's most recent *Jonathan Coe: Contemporary British Satire* (2018) which multiplies references to the novel. If the enigmas animating Coe's whodunnit have been shrewdly analysed (Guignery, 2002; Alexandre), this thesis will rather focus on the novel's "postmodern legacy" (Guignery 2011). Guignery's excellent monograph, *Jonathan Coe* (2015), allows for a deep appreciation of the author's bricolage technique, as well as for an acute formal inquiry of the novel (65,73) which will be included in this thesis. Ryan Trimm, like Guignery, argues that *What a Carve Up!*'s textual fragmentation acts as a protest against "the homogeneity stressed by Thatcher" (160) – henceforth linking, in Adorno's manner, form and politics. However, if Trimm also focuses on the political and social fragmentation of the 1980s and 1990s presented by Coe, he fails to address the ethical concerns raised by the primary correlation existing between form and politics: Véronique Pauly (2007) is one of the only critics to touch upon the ethical perspective of Coe's novel, as she mentions "fiction's responsibility" in *What a Carve Up!* In a slightly different approach, Jean-Michel Ganteau (2016) considers satire (a point further developed in Tew's recent edition on Coe) and comedy as catalysts for the characters' vulnerability. The existing criticism on *What a Carve Up!* is symptomatic of two (if not opposed, very distant) academic tendencies – one devoted to form, the other to politics or ethics – which this thesis aims at reconciling for the whole corpus. Barbara Korte has delivered a first moral apprehension of Lanchester's *Capital* (2017), which led her to believe in the novel's "deficit in moralisation" (502) by denouncing Lanchester's failure to depict white working classes and to address the "resentment [migrants] face in contemporary Britain" (502). Korte's criticism will be further addressed throughout this thesis, notably in light

of the studies devoted to precarity and vulnerability. While Katy Shaw's analysis of the City's representation in the novel offers crucial insight into London's power of fragmentation, the recent article of Ingo Berensmeyer and Catharina Löffler (2018) gives false hopes as to a possible unity between Lanchester's characters – an element that this study will thoroughly discuss as part of its formal and ethical inquiry on state-of-the-nation novels, which Catherine Bernard briefly explores through Lanchester's use of metonymy (147, 2015a), therefore recalling West's *The Return of the Soldier*.

6. Responsible fiction?

Though studied on their own, the novels of the corpus are not the object of a specific and detailed analysis as part of the state-of-the-nation genre. Similarly, their diverse use of the fragmentary form has not yet been fully associated with an ethical "impulse" destined to both reinstate the importance of the primary relationship with the other and to question the foundation of the English body politic. If fragmentation has been seen as a disruptive literary aesthetics of the Bloomsbury group or of the experimentalists of the 1960s, it is essential to investigate this literary technique and social concept as part of a larger ethical and political agenda when it comes to state-of-the-nation novels – one that seems to set the corpus in dissensus with the socio-political climate of England.

Since the novels under study seem to stand against unbridled nationalism and unheeded divisions, the first part of this thesis will dwell on their subversive use of metonymy. As will be seen, this device is a key element in nationalist rhetoric, bound to symbolically and culturally link individuals of a same country together *à la Anderson*. In the book of the same name, Jeanette Littlemore defines metonymy as a "cognitive and linguistic process whereby one thing is used to refer to something else, to which it is closely related in some way" (2015, 5) and is quick to point out that it can also be used "to highlight some features of a phenomenon and leave others in the shade." (6) This ambiguous rhetoric is particularly prominent when comparing nationalist discourses with state-of-the-nation novels. The first three chapters will evidence how the corpus both uses and subverts metonymy as a foundational technique, by thwarting almost-mythical notions of family and genealogy, of geographic belonging, and of historical experience. Through fragmentation, the six novels of the corpus set to erode these three pillars of nationalism, epitomising the fragmentation of English society through the fragility and vulnerability of their characters.

This dismantling of nationalist rhetoric is a first step in the ethical agenda of state-of-the-nation novels. Lifting this discursive veil allows, in a second part, to dive further into the normative components of the English body politic. The behavioural strictures imposed on the characters aim to show and denounce how ethical responsibility is hindered by such restrictive discourses, especially when it comes to social class (Chapter 4). This inherited system necessarily comes in a way of ethical recognition and, as the fifth chapter indexes, has found new momentum in successive development of capitalism and neoliberalism. Fragmentation takes here on a new perspective, as the ethical ties weaved in the novels are challenged by their socio-economic context, offering a grim portrait of England. Asymmetrical relationships and restrictive norms pervade fictional body politics, leading to the corruption of the very institutions meant to safeguard individuals from oppression, inequality and precarity. The women of the corpus are particularly vulnerable to these thwarted frameworks of recognition: the analysis of their status, on which the sixth chapter focuses, informs on the gendered divisions that paralyse these not-so-fictional societies.

As this bias can also invade writing, the third and last part can be seen as an inquiry into the resilience and resistance of state-of-the-nation novels in the face of the normative, corruptive and annihilating processes analysed in the previous chapters, which are well underway in both fiction and contemporary England. “Exploring the cracks” means searching for the ethical remnants of the body politic, which the novels of the corpus safely hide within their own fragmentary tokens, as the ethical interstices discovered in the seventh chapter suggest. This reassertion of ethics finds its paroxysm in the novels’ rejection of totalisation, which mainly expresses itself through dialogism and discursive suspicion. While the writers’ play with language gives prominence to academic criticism on form and on the power of literature, the very last chapter will question the actual performativity of state-of-the-nation novels when it comes to the ethics of responsibility and the imperative of recognition they entail.

PART I

For an Ethical (De)Construction of the Nation

> [There] does exist an emotional relation comparable to love on the part of the political individual toward the community whose destiny he wishes to guide the best, for it is "his" in a much deeper sense than that of a mere community of interests: he is (in the normal case) descended from it and through it has become what he is; he is thus, indeed, not the father, but a "son" of his people and country. […] and thereby in a kind of sibling-relation to all the others – present, future, even past – with whom he shares this bond.
>
> (Jonas 104)

In *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1985), Hans Jonas asserts that the relationship between parents and children constitutes the only natural type of responsibility, making it the least free relationship, as opposed to political responsibility which he considers to be the result of the "freest choice" (97). He nonetheless draws an essential parallel between genealogical and national filiation, through which political responsibility emerges from a feeling of "solidarity". This is reminiscent of and is made possible by the initial love animating the family structure (104). Jonas's concept of political filiation calls for an analysis of this undeniable connection between the individual and the national, one which indicates that even though parental responsibility is not to be defined as "solidarity", it is nonetheless the condition which makes political filiation and responsibility possible. Yet what happens to this connection, when the family is no longer a reliable entity for the construction of political responsibility? If the latter can be denied, as both Levinas and Butler suggest, what happens to the supposed filiation between the political individual and the rest of the body politic? Jonas's claim finds its echo in Benedict Anderson's vision of the novel and its role in the formation of the nation: "The argument is not simply that the novel emulates the imagined community amongst strangers, upon which the modern nation depends, but that it may have played a significant role in establishing the terms of the nation. […]" (6-7) The metonymic construction of state-of-the-nation novels therefore appears as necessarily subversive, for their genealogical, geographical and historical concerns debunk this apparent continuity between the individual and the national, which would be, for Anderson, supported by the development of the novel.

CHAPTER 1.
A Failed Genealogy

As “the timeless archetype of all responsibility” (130), parental responsibility is profoundly dual according to Hans Jonas:

> In parental responsibility, which is focused with such utmost concentration in every instance upon the singular individual, the horizons of responsibility are doubled. The first, and narrower, horizon enfolds the individual becoming of the child, who has his own personal historicity and gains his identity "historically," that is, by way of his own, individual history. […] But beyond this, and inseparably linked to it, is the communication of the collective tradition, from the first phoneme, and the readying for life in the society. Herewith the horizon of continuity expands into that of the historical world: the one passes into the other, and so educational responsibility cannot help being, even in its most private form, also a "political" responsibility. (106)

For Jonas, parental responsibility first unfolds at the level of the individuality of the child and secondly at the level of the larger society he is a part of. The role of the child’s parents is to ensure his self-development so that he can later participate in the elaboration of a political community, itself defined by a “collective tradition”. Parental responsibility is to be understood as both universal and particular, both ontological and cultural: Jonas sees parental responsibility as inescapable and socially-conditioned. In this particular case, familial ties are the bedrock of a viable society, which relies on the transmission of cultural and historical values. Jonas establishes an undeniable dialogue between the private and the public, between the individual and the collective spheres, which undoubtedly recalls the metonymic purport of fictional family structures. Jonas’s philosophical and sociological inquiry into responsibility is essential in understanding how the familial construction bears consequences on the establishment of society. However, Anthony D. Smith’s *National Identity* (1991) sheds light on how the process of the nationalist discourse almost uses the same process, with the nation as a starting point instead of the other way around:

> the metaphor of family is indispensable to nationalism. The nation is depicted as one great family, the members as brothers and sisters of the motherland or fatherland, speaking their mother tongue. In this way the family of the nation overrides and replaces the individual's family but evokes similarly strong loyalties and vivid attachments. (79)

Smith, like Jonas, points out the constant back and forth between the nation and the family, making narrative and cultural discourses the locus of an unbreakable connection between the two entities. Smith nonetheless claims that family is both used and overpowered by the nation. The renegotiation of family ties for the sake of national unity therefore questions the relationship between the two entities and its representation in English fiction. Bearing this in mind, I contend that state-of-the-nation novels are in fact a form of nationalism in reverse: their focus on particular families highlights the discrepancies and tensions within the nation, as they seem to disavow the "strong loyalties" of genetic and national relatives.

1. Narratives of Descent

Zadie Smith's recent homage to E.M. Forster in *On Beauty* (2005) is testament to the legacy of the family saga in British literature. If Forster's Helen Schlegel details her stay at the Wilcoxes' country house to her sister, Smith's novel opens on Jerome's unanswered emails to his father Howard. The respective intertwinements of the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes in 1923 and of the Belseys and Kipps in 2005, attempt at brushing a comprehensive portrait of life in England by giving voice to very distinctive, if not always opposed, social and political positions which are embodied by different sets of families. According to Patrick Parrinder,

> Family genealogies in the English novel are often loaded with cultural meaning, conveying a hint – and sometimes far more than a hint – on national allegory through their links to the Civil War and other traumatic episodes of English history. This sense of dynastic succession […] forms a background to the trials and divisions of the novel's protagonists. In general, the more prominently the genealogy is stated at the outset, the more clearly is family identity linked to national identity. (33)

Fictional genealogy blends with national history: not only does the family reflect the English *zeitgeist*, it also accounts for the influence of historical events on the construction of the individual. Parrinder sees the English family as an extension of the national, making genetic filiation the result of historical lineage. The genetic code of the nation seems therefore to be inscribed in the characters of the English novel, which stand as a metonymy for England itself. Parrinder distinguishes two subsequent phenomena: the symbolical significance of the familial institution as mirror of the nation, and "the sense of dynastic succession" which emerges from both the depiction of such an entity over several years, as well as the long-lasting reliance on this trope to reflect the changing nation. Such narratives of descent call for an analysis of their

respective structures, as well as an investigation of the (de)construction of filial links which supposedly provide the foundation of the English body politic.

A. Narrative structures

In "What is fragmentary fiction?" (2019), Merritt Moseley defines the braid as one of three types of fragmentary narratives[21]:

> the fragments can be called the braid, as they function like discrete narrative projects which are presented interwoven rather than in strict sequence. These may be, among other possibilities, different plot developments with different characters; or plot developments which illustrate the same characters in action in different times; or a story and the story of how it was discovered. (in Guignery and Drąg, 9)

Moseley sees the braid as structural fragmentation – one which seems contradictory with the metonymic concept of family as used by nationalist discourse. However, the novels of the corpus heavily rely on the intertwinement of narratives, so as to complicate the traditional family novel exampled by the likes of E.M. Forster or John Galsworthy. In *Capital*, for instance, the characters' lives are developed successively and intermittently, as if the reader were passing through Pepys Road. Each door number hides a generational tale which spreads out through several months, scattered through the different chapters of the novel. Petunia Howe is the first resident to be introduced and is also the only one who has always been living on Pepys Road:

> Petunia was the oldest person living in Pepys Road, and the last person to have been born in the street and still be resident there. But her connection with the place went back further than that, because her grandfather had bought their house 'off the plan', before it was even built. He was a barrister's clerk who worked at a set of chambers in Lincoln's Inn, a man who was both conservative and Conservative, and in the way of barristers' clerks he passed on the job to his son, and then, when his son had only daughters, to his grandson-in-law. That was Petunia's husband, Albert, who had died five years before. (11)

Petunia is the embodiment of life in Pepys Road: born and raised there, she evolved with the street, only leaving the place during the Blitz. Petunia's story is one of legacy and inheritance: her presence not only mirrors the evolution of the street, it also suggests a tradition of

[21] He distinguishes three types of fragmentary writing: the braid, the bricolage and the mosaic. While the first two categories will be dwelled upon throughout this dissertation, the mosaic does not coincide with any of the novels of the corpus. He defines the mosaic as such: "For the third category, I used the term "mosaic" to describe a novel composed of fragments each of which is a narrative effectively complete in itself. Clearly, the dividing line between the mosaic novel and the collection of short stories is a blurred one, and the right of such mosaic novels to be considered novels at all is sometimes challenged." (13)

transmission of wealth, property and values. The passing down of n°42 Pepys Road weaves a connection between the members of the family, which is corroborated by the bequest of the clerk's chambers. The novel's opening on Petunia's history contrasts with the prologue of *Capital*, which briefly tells the history of Pepys Road and points out the progressive gentrification of the road which slowly erased any trace of its former history as an area destined to "lower-middle-class families" (2). Her difference from the rest of the families living in Pepys Road betrays the waning of the road's tale of upward mobility[22] and family connection[23]. The braid structure of the novel is corollary to the fragmentation of the Howe family, as the reader slowly works out that the disruptive artist Smitty is actually her grandson (who defines himself as a "rubbish grandson" (85)), while her daughter Mary only becomes an active character of the novel when Petunia is diagnosed with cancer. Petunia's isolation from the rest of the family and the sale of the house both illustrate the final erosion of tradition and inheritance, which are, as will be discussed later, replaced by ostentatious consumption.

The fragmentary narrative of *Capital* finds similarities with Holtby's *South Riding*, written almost eighty years earlier. The fictional archives of the County Council divide the lives of several families according to eight different headlines. The Carnes of Maythorpe make up one of the most prominent families in the South Riding: Robert Carne, "a sporting farmer", navigates single parenthood (his wife, Muriel, being in a mental hospital) and faces the new challenges brought about by the Great Slump, especially the reconsideration of his privileged status as a landowner. He comes back on his decision to be the head of the board of education:

> He had accepted the governship of the High School, not because he was especially interested in problems of female education, but because Kiplington was in the South Riding, and [the Carnes of Maythorpe] were the South Riding, and aristocracy dictated a rule of life, and nobility must oblige. (28)

The metonymic construction of the family goes further here: far from being a symbol of civic commitment, the position is meant to reassert the status of the Carnes in the South Riding. Set on restoring the glory of the landowning family, Robert Carne believes that the fate of the

[22] Petunia's grandfather was part of the first generation of Pepys Road inhabitants: "For the first years they were lived in not by solicitors or barristers or doctors, but by the people who worked and clerked for them: the respectable, aspirational no-longer-poor." (2)

[23] The unknown narrator highlights how the family entity of the beginning of the century was slowly replaced by "families in which both parents worked and the children were in childcare either in the home or out of it." (3)

county rests within his name's legacy, as the etymology of Maythorpe [24] implies. The entanglement of the family name with the development of South Riding reveals the necessity to preserve the family line, and by extension, the nation. Carne's new position is therefore a way to secure old structures of interactions in the face of progress (i.e., more women in positions of authority, the democratisation of education, the progressive industrialisation of the countryside). In this regard, the Carnes of Maythorpe are reminiscent of the eighteenth and nineteenth century family, as Sophie Gilmartin explains in *Ancestry and Narrative in Nineteenth Century Literature* (1998):

> Often the intricacies of the family tree reveal or become the crises of plot and subplot; problems of inheritance, younger brothers, arranged marriage, adoption, illegitimacy, misalliance, the need for an heir – these become the driving force of plot, and are centered in the family tree and the will to keep the family line going. (12)

The gossip around Midge Carne's real father, the rejection of his noble family-in-law and the progressive decay of the farming economy are all elements which contribute to construct Carne as a symbol of a past he is struggling to keep afloat. The fragmentary structure of *South Riding* reflects Carne's progressive dismay which threatens the viability of the family tree.

The reproduction of the Winshaw family tree at the beginning of *What a Carve Up!* hides a completely different (hi)story. The chronological disorder of Coe's whodunnit intertwines the lives of Michael Owen and the Thatcherite family, as he is lured into writing their biography. In the words of Ryan Trimm,

> By breaking the family history into sections devoted to one Winshaw at a go, a carving up of the family formally mirroring the brutality of the murders at novel's end, Coe's novel produces a more thoroughgoing presentation of how Thatcher transformed Britain. The stress on connections between the sections, though, also points to the role of Michael Owen, the fictive narrator who writes and arranges these fragments. (2010, 175)

[24] From the Gothic words *magan*, meaning "to have power" and *þaurp, meaning "estate, land". See The Oxford Dictionary Online for more details on the genealogy of the two terms.*

Coe's use of the braid[25] highlights the influence of the Winshaw family on the fate of Britain, as Michael attempts to uncover their darkest deeds – an investigation which uncovers genetic impropriety when he realises that

> it was quite obvious to me, from the very beginning, that I was essentially dealing with a family of criminals, whose wealth and prestige were founded upon every manner of swindling, forgery, larceny, robbery, thievery, trickery, jiggery-pokery, hanky-panky, plundering, looting, sacking, misappropriation, spoliation and embezzlement. (88)

Michael's accumulation mirrors the Winshaws' pervasion and corruption of British society: each synonym adds another layer of ethical and financial deviousness, which suggests how deeply it runs through their genes. Descending from Alexander Winshaw, who "first made it his business to corner a lucrative portion of the burgeoning slave trade" (90) and Joshua Winshaw, famous convicted burglar, the Winshaw offspring have inherited the business of "the shameless exploitation of persons weaker than themselves." (89) Michael's *Chronicles* are set to expose the crooked branches of the family tree, nourished by their illegitimate profit. In Philip Tew's recent *Jonathan Coe: Contemporary British Satire* (2018), Emma Parker underlines that

> The fate of Michael's book points to the pervasiveness of Thatcherism and the difficulty of resistance. Indeed, despite the murders, missing dates of death for Dorothy, Thomas, Henry, Mark, Roddy and Hilary in the family tree at the start of the novel suggest that the Thatcherite values they embody live on. The continuation of all that the Winshaws represent is underlined by the title of Michael's book: *The Winshaw Legacy*. (72)

Coe's *Number 11* of course actualises the tenacity of the Winshaw familial and political ethics denounced by Michael and hinted at at the end of *What a Carve Up!*. Coe superbly parodies the genre of the family saga, both through Michael's own book and through the lack of moralism that ensued its publication. Linda Hutcheon explains that parody "signals, [through a double process of installing and ironizing], how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference. (1989, 93) Through the braid, Coe therefore calls for a questioning of moralism through a reorganisation of the family trope.

[25] Moseley sees Coe's novel as both a braid and a bricolage, as illustrated by the various types of writings present in the text.

Though subversive in many ways (as will be seen later on), Coe's rewriting of the family saga recalls Wilson's earlier state-of-the-nation and his own take on the trope and its ties to realist fiction. In conversation with Margaret Matthews, fictional German writer Matthias Birnbaum claims in *No Laughing Matter* that "the English novel is not an aesthetic novel, it is a social novel. *The Forsyte Saga* has great importance as the mirror of the British high bourgeoisie." (384) Margaret's disagreement ("He wasn't a very good novelist, you know.") hints at Wilson's rejection of John Galsworthy's family tale as a paragon of English literature, for his depiction of bourgeois life trumps his lack of aesthetic concerns. The Matthews' household brilliantly thwarts the Forsytes': *The Man of Property* (1906) – the first of Galsworthy's novels – starts with the celebration of June Forsyte's engagement with Philip Bosinney and emphasises both the metonymic value of the family and the "efflorescence" around family unity.

> Those privileged to be present at a family festival of the Forsytes have seen that charming and instructive sight—an upper middle-class family in full plumage. But whosoever of these favoured persons has possessed the gift of psychological analysis (a talent without monetary value and properly ignored by the Forsytes), has witnessed a spectacle, not only delightful in itself, but illustrative of an obscure human problem. In plainer words, he has gleaned from a gathering of this family—no branch of which had a liking for the other, between no three members of whom existed anything worthy of the name of sympathy—evidence of that mysterious concrete tenacity which renders a family so formidable a unit of society, so clear a reproduction of society in miniature. (n.p.)

If one can perceive Galsworthy's own indictment of social hypocrisy – one reprised by Wilson as well –, his ending moralism is in fact no longer viable in *No Laughing Matter*. The opening lines of *The Man of Property* present the novel as a social, almost anthropological inquiry into the Forsytes, who despite their raging indifference to others, still constitute a well-knit entity. If the Matthews' kinema experience at the beginning of Book One allows for the same kind of effervescence[26], the narrator is quick to underline that: "what no recording machine yet invented could have preserved was the pioneer happiness, the primitive dream that for some minutes

[26] The hypotyposis of the first page of *No Laughing Matter* reads as such: "Audiences caught quick jerky glimpses of huge cartwheel hats wreathed in ostrich feathers, of trains dragging in the dust, of bowlers and toppers and peaked cloth caps and little round caps set with their tassels upon the back of thickly brilliantined heads, of parasols and button boots, of sailor suits and knickerbockers, of pearly waistcoats and choker scarves, of bad teeth and no teeth, of princess petticoats, squirrel skin, sable and beaver, Neapolitan ices (Oh, oh Antonio) and of hot potatoes for the muff, each in its season, of a sari or two, of the kaffir' chief's headdress, of a guardsman's busby [….]" The accumulation is set to recreate the children's joy and merriment around the festival, one which heavily contrasts with their feeling of deprivation throughout the novel.

gave to that volatile, edged and edgy family a union of happy carefree intimacy that it had scarcely known before and was never to know again." (8) Wilson's yet-unborn video camera of the pre-war era offers a critical tracking shot of the Matthews, which exposes more than the inner divisions of the family: in an almost baroque approach, their experience at the festival is but a distraction from their inability to connect as a family, which in turns hints at the fact (if we too consider family as "a reproduction of society in miniature") that family unity can only be short-lived. The emphasis on the tribal nature of the family implies the inadequacy of such an entity in the face of cultural and historical context: the structure of *No Laughing Matter* mirrors this sentiment, as the gaps between the five books grow larger and larger (from pre-war to 1919 to 1925-1938 to 1946 to 1967) and mirror Galsworthy's five-book saga published between 1906 and 1921. The temporal frame of the novel suggests the artificiality of family unity which is bound to erode throughout the twentieth century: keeping the family together – and therefore the nation – appears as a tedious and vain task, which Wilson calls out through his parody of the family saga. Like Coe, Wilson questions the stability of a nation relying on the family unit, which proves to be ethically dubious. The parody of *The Forsyte Saga*, which is read by Sukey's husband in *No Laughing Matter*, proposes a reinvestigation of fictional and ideological narratives which are deemed unsuitable to the realities of the time. Celia's many references to *The History of the Fairchild Family*, written in 1818 by Mary Martha Sherwood, echoes Wilson's parody of Galsworthy: this three-part-narrative details the lives of both parents and children, heavily guided by their Christian faith. Celia drifts, as is her habit, from her conversation with her uncle Heber to narrate the Fairchild's story: she especially refers to the episode where M. Fairchild takes his children to see the nearby gallows to teach them a lesson after a boisterous moment in the children's nursery. As Celia sarcastically condemns the punishment[27], she ridicules the idea that it could be the responsible thing to do: "for all its harshness, better a child be brought up like this than some of the children I know who are bludgeoned by grown-up chat [….] like the little boy who was always being instructed, who said, 'Mother's all right, but she will talk sex.'" (196) M. Nancy Cutt, in her review of Sherwood's books, indeed asserts that "dreadful or not, these punishments are related to a

[27] "And, then, in case they might miss the point of what a grand thing it is to be a Christian child instead of dumb beasts, he took the little ones for a nice pic-nic. So where did they go, where did they go for their nice treat, eh? Why, he took them a walk through the dark wood until they came to the common, and on that common stood the grey gallows tree, and hanging on the gallows tree in chains was the decaying body of the malefactor. […] So down below the gallows tree with its pretty swinging fruit sat the stern papa and his little children, that was now rather sobered up, you may guess. […]" (195-196)

second point often overlooked. [The little Fairchilds] had at all times their parents' undivided attention." (67) Celia actually satirises this free-pass given to the Fairchild parents: while she thinks it is commendable that they instilled clear notions of good and bad, as "explanations are given if necessary" (Cutt 67), Celia points out the lack of moral relativism of parental care. She condemns the fact that there are only two ends to the spectrum, without any possible middle ground between harsh punishment and overt leniency, therefore criticising the praise offered to the Victorian family as well as contemporary education. The fact that she sees "the slant of a look of the Fairchild-père" in her uncle's eyes reveals the perpetuation of these values which he hopes to see in his own sons, Caz and Tom, as well as in his niece.

Stevie Smith's use of the braid is much more intricate than the other novelists of the corpus. The reference to the Fairchild Family indeed functions as a "discrete narrative project" which closes the novel on itself as Tom, Heber's son, is reading *The History of the Fairchild Family* at the beginning of *The Holiday*, while Celia's comment on Sherwood's series comes in the very last pages, "both incorporat[ing] and challeng[ing] that which [she] parodies" (Hutcheon 1989, 11). The narrative project of *The Holiday* both establishes and thwarts the clout of Uncle Heber's values of "discipline, control, sobriety and intelligence" (*TH* 196), whose assertion is met with irremediable laughter. Jenny's use of tunnelling in *The Return of the Soldier* has the same impact as Celia's constant interruptions: by diving into Chris's past, she tries to make sense of his separation from Margaret and from his unhappiness at Baldry Court. She explains to Margaret that, fifteen years before, Chris had to earn his place in the family's business:

> At last there came a morning when [old Mr. Baldry] said to Mrs. Baldry across the breakfast-table: "I've sent for Chris. If the boy's worth his salt –" […] That night he talked till late with his father, and in the morning he had started for Mexico to keep the mines going, to keep the firm's head above water and Baldry court sleek and hospitable – to keep everything bright and splendid save only his youth, which ever after that was dulled by care. (47)

Close to the braid, "tunnelling" is attributed to Virginia Woolf who described it in 1923, as "tell[ing]" the past by instalments"[28] and is identified by Peter Childs as one of Modernism's "attempts to render human subjectivity in ways more real than realism." (3) It is used to uncover

[28] Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, ed. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume 2: 1920-1924.* San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1978. Diary entry of 15th October 1923.

the layers of the characters' story, and to render the effect of social parameters[29] on the development of family and of the parent-child relationship: in the case of Chris, tunnelling reveals how the laws of inheritance rely on the perpetuation of the family business and of the family tradition (which itself recalls Petunia's grandfather's transmission of his clerk position), which both depend on the upholding of the values of the Victorian family – these are hinted at by old Mr. Baldry and his insistence on his son's *worth*[30] and duty. The necessity to provide for his family trumps Chris's own interest and development, illustrating the weight of the family tree on the individual described by Gilmartin. Worth supplants ethics and betrays a thwarted inheritance, as Chris's future insensibility to his wife's and cousin's attention implies. Jenny's glimpse into the past allows for a deconstruction of Chris's life which aims at exposing the idiosyncrasies of familial ties, whose intricacies influence the construction of the collective and question the very notion of responsibility as conceived by Jonas.

B. Filial attachments

Jonas' conceptualisation of responsibility is close to Levinas's, as they both emphasise its inescapability. Jonas differs from Levinas when making parental responsibility the first instance of and model for both ethical and political responsibility. State-of-the-nation novels offer a new perspective to this analogy between a primary ethical relation and political construction, as they engage with both private and public spheres of interaction. To understand the ethical (de)construction of the nation, it is necessary to focus on the familial relationships at the heart of such works of fiction, as we take into consideration Jonas' definition of parental responsibility:

[29] Childs contends that "Realism, according to many critics, is characterised by its attempt objectively to offer up a mirror to the world, thus disavowing its own culturally conditioned processes and ideological stylistic assumptions." (3) Jenny's fragmentary narration, especially through tunnelling, offers to see how Chris has been conditioned to take care of the family business, rather than of his relationships, as his last row with Margaret suggests.

[30] One can of course think of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1898) and his pun on his main character's last name, Jack Worthing, who is urged by Lady Bracknell to "try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over." (38) *Worth* therefore underlines the association of morality with money, a dyad that heavily determines the stability of genealogy in upper-classes families.

> The child as a whole and in all its possibilities, not only in its immediate needs, is its object. The bodily aspect comes first, of course, in the beginning perhaps solely; but then more and more is added, all that which falls under 'education' in the broadest sense: faculties, conduct, relation, character, knowledge, which have to be stimulated and guided in their development; and together with these also, if possible, happiness. In brief: the pure being as such, and then the best being of the child, is what parental care is about. (101)

Parental responsibility determines, shapes and fashions children so as to ensure their physical (firstly), social (secondly) and psychological (lastly) viability. The hierarchy within children's development as described by Jonas suggests that the primary ethical relationship between parents and children – evidenced in the physical frailty and vulnerability of the latter – is promptly taken over by societal implications, making psychological well-being the last and not-so-consequential goal of parental responsibility. Robert Carne's reflections on the well-being of his daughter Midge in *South Riding* perfectly details Jonas' contention, as he wonders about her physical and social development in light of her mother's potentially hereditary mental illness:

> as a father he must not fail. That fragile chalice of blue blood in his keeping must be treasured wisely. He must do his best for Midge, who was small *and* frail *and* plain *and* short-sighted *and* subject to terrifying outbursts of hysteria. He had engaged nurses for her and governesses; he had tried to preserve her from contact with rough boys and epidemics. Now Campbell urged that she should be sent to school – to 'make her more like other children – to keep her normal.' (*SR* 28; my emphasis)

As he sacralises his daughter and her lineage – for Midge's grandparents are the notable Sedgmires – Carne insists on her physical and mental brittleness. The polysyndeton (see italics) at the heart of his thoughts not only exposes the extent of Midge's predicament but also induces the magnitude of his responsibility. The accumulation of tension between her value and her frailty adds to his "burden of responsibility" (425), leaving him no respite as he navigates single parenthood. The final zeugma ("from contact with rough boys and epidemics") suggests the wide range of "threats" parental responsibility has to face so as to guarantee the viability of the child's two beings. The necessity to relinquish his responsibility to educators therefore reflects personal failure and personal loss, both of which transpire through Carne's other societal roles as farmer and councilman. *South Riding* recounts Carne's dissolution through responsibility, as his inability to properly look after his daughter mirrors the demise of his position within society: Midge can only properly grow with surrogate responsibility figures, like Sarah Burton (South Riding's new headmistress) or her grandparents – leaving him little say in his daughter's

upbringing. Campbell's advice adds to Carne's burden, reminding him – even nagging him, as indicates the direct quotation – the necessity for his daughter's compliance and observance of societal attitudes. Carne is successively overwhelmed by the multiple components and implications of parental responsibility, an overdetermination shared by Patrick Kamo in Lanchester's *Capital*:

> He was a man who had always worked, but here his job was Being Freddy's Father, which wasn't a job at all. A man should be a father, but a man should be a worker too. Here, because his job was nothing but to be with Freddy, he felt as if both things were being taken away from him. […] He kept all these feelings to himself. Freddy was a good boy whose strongest motivation in life was to please his father. He should not have to deal with the fact that his happiness was bringing his father misery. (227-228)

Parental responsibility reaches its paroxysm in the figure of Patrick Kamo: having moved to London to support his recently-turned-professional-footballer son Freddy, Patrick faces a self-dissolution which is reminiscent of Robert Carne's. Patrick's secretive seclusion reveals that his personal development is overshadowed by parental responsibility, as the capitalisation of his relationship with Freddy shows. The ethical ties Carne and Patrick share with their children are highly contentious, for their devotion to the well-being of their respective child is to some extent synonymous with personal loss: Freddy's upward mobility[31] leads to his father spiralling down, losing sense of himself and of his son as "he had no reliable idea about Freddy's state of mind." (106) Carne's and Patrick's elusive yet unescapable relationship to their children shows that if parental responsibility is indeed the model for other forms of responsibility, as well as the least free relationship there is, it is also the paragon of ontological dispossession. For Butler and Athanasiou, dispossession is defined by one's "exposure and disposition to others, experience of loss and grief, or susceptibility to norms and violences that remain indifferent to us" (104). While the novels' relationship to norms will be addressed in more detail later on, it seems that parental responsibility necessarily entails loss and dispossession, as both Carne and Patrick are progressively out of their depth, simultaneously dreading their failure to cater for their children and their self-dissolution.

[31] Like in *South Riding*, a polysyndeton is used to described Freddy's feelings towards his new career: "Freddy had been smiling and cheerful throughout all the extraordinary sights and experiences, the size *and* noise *and* richness *and* the meetings *and* the medical tests and the people. […]" (105, my emphasis) While the accumulation of novelties is synonymous with personal growth for Freddy, Patrick has instead "found the experience overwhelming". (105)

As a matter of fact, *The Return of the Soldier* actualises such parental fears. The inability to properly care for one's children leads to unsufferable grief in West's novel: Chris, Kitty and Margaret have five-year-old sons who die from a cold. At the beginning of the novel, Jenny describes Oliver Baldry's former nursery: "And along the mantelpiece, under the loved print of the snarling tiger […] sat the Teddy Bear *and* the chimpanzee *and* the woolly white dog *and* the black cat with eyes that roll. Everything was there except Oliver." (4, my emphasis) Jenny's own polysyndeton puts the lavish toys in stark contrast with Oliver's absence: while Carne's enumeration of Midge's ailments exposes his fear of parental impotence, Jenny's accumulation of material objects betrays unfulfilled parenthood. As Margaret discovers the abandoned room filled with toys, she is confronted to her own loss and parental guilt: "I thought perhaps my baby had left me because I had so little to give. But if a baby could leave all this!" (76) Margaret's anacoluthon reveals indiscriminate grief, as financial security did not protect the Baldrys' son from illness. The dissonance of her status with the Baldrys' conspicuous wealth paradoxically relieves her from failed material responsibility: the death of the two boys bridges the gap between the two families, who are unilaterally left mourning. Margaret's experience corroborates Robert Carne's and Patrick Kamo's, as they come to grips with the multiple layers of parental responsibility as described by Jonas. Their ontological propensity to look after their children is coupled with material and societal implications which contravene their children's wellbeing.

Parental responsibility is deeply ambivalent, as "such profundities of feeling as the awful agony" (59) which overcomes Margaret in *The Return of the Soldier* is the necessary counterpart to a "life in colour" (402), according to Rohinka Kamal in *Capital*. However, wilful devotion to one's children remains exceptional, as most of the parents in the corpus renege on parental care. Lanchester's Arabella Yount, for instance, is terribly aware and yet terribly unconcerned by the clout of parental responsibility. As she reconnects with an old acquaintance, she admits she is not cut out to be a parent, despite having two children: "Her boys were lovely, but they were all-consuming, and Arabella did not want to be all-consumed." (514) Arabella and Polly are on the two opposite ends of the parental spectrum: while Polly pours heart and soul into the development of her children – leaving behind her job, like Patrick Kamo – Arabella delegates every ounce of responsibility to external help. Parental care resembles self-disappearance: while Arabella cannot imagine being a full-time mother, Roger is terrified of "being dragged into having to be with the children". (238) While Midge Carne and Freddy

Kamo have their own storyline in *South Riding* and *Capital,* Conrad and Joshua Yount are almost erased from the novel: their parents' reluctance to care for them is transcribed by a fragmented characterisation of the two boys, who become mere subordinates to broader adult-centred storylines. Their father's inability to take care of them alone on Christmas (from potty-training to lunch and dinner) not only reveals their disconnection as a family but also mocks Roger's lack of responsibility – a lesson set up by Arabella who sees herself as the paramount of love and care, while buying out her absence for the holidays: "basically, as long as she made a really huge deal about presents – it would be alright. It would be fine. It was all about the presents." (93) The couple's feud denies their children any actual attention or education, leaving them in the care of multiple nannies before sending them off to boarding school. The charade put up by the Younts weakens parental care, as they fight against the necessary dispossession that goes together with being a parent.

Arabella could be seen as a Hilary Winshaw in the making: Hilary not only sees her daughter as hindrance for her career and her self-development, but she also utterly dehumanises Josephine. Moseley sees *What a Carve Up!* as an intersection between the braid and the bricolage, the latter "appl[ying] to novels made up of fragments of very disparate materials" (11). This mix between the two categories leads to the intertwining of private and public spheres in Coe's novel, and exposes Hilary Winshaw's equivocal attitudes towards her child. In fact, the extract from her interview for *Hello!* magazine sees her revelling in the birth of her daughter ("I don't think I could be parted from her for a moment!" (80)), while the following fragment starts off with Hilary dismissing her daughter with the pronoun "it", asking her nanny: "*Now* what's the matter with it?" ; or: "can't you take it outside for a while? It's showing us up in front of everybody." (80) Hilary's disregard for Josephine deprives her daughter of actual human pronouns and relegates her to the status of object – one which doesn't need to be looked after or cared for. Coe's bricolage pinpoints Hilary's private lack of responsibility, which in turn highlights her disregard for the population reading her column and her lust for personal gain. The dismissal of Josephine embodies a rejection of parental care and responsibility, with which the nanny is now endowed – a surrogate figure the Younts cannot do without and which questions the validity of the parent-child relationship as the model for political responsibility.

As she takes a stroll through Kensington Gardens in *The Holiday*, Celia encounters a group of young children who look as if they were at "boarding-school" rather than "home-cared for." (109) She notices this exchange between a young boy and his schoolmistress:

> 'Did you and Bobby enjoy staying with Mummy?' asked the naïve schoolmistress. 'Did we enjoy staying with Lois?' poses the bored and shattered child, 'perhaps rather, she drinks a bit you know and Paul's cheque didn't come, but perhaps rather, yes; we aren't supposed to particularly.' Bobby dissociates himself from the conversation. (109)

The family home becomes the locus of children's displacement: the young boy's discourse is that of an adult, who knows about the financial woes and the ambiguous habits of his parents. Calling them by their first names, Bobby actually "dissociates" himself from the family sphere. As he repeats his schoolmistress's question, Bobby's epanorthosis ("but perhaps rather, yes; we aren't supposed to particularly") suggests he cannot quite make sense of this inquiry and processes it rather robotically before dismissing it altogether. Bobby implies that if going back to the family home is expected of him, it does not entail enjoyment or satisfaction. The absence of parental responsibility leads to an over-responsibilisation of the child, who becomes "shattered", almost numb and indifferent. Bobby's experience relates to that of the Matthews children in *No Laughing Matter*, where Young Sukey Matthews complains to Regan, their "Cockney cook" (5), that Clara (referred to as the Countess in Wilson's novel) and William (Billy Pop) "had no intentions of being real parents at all." (80) The communal atmosphere of the opening pages of the novel is soon suffocated by the corrosive atmosphere of n°52 – the Matthews family home where the Countess insists on keeping her children's bedrooms' doors ajar (denying them of refuge and privacy)[32] and where Billy Pop molests his daughter Gladys while still managing to borrow money from her. In her article "Shackled by Past and Parents: The Child in British Children's Literature after 1970" (2012), Karen Sands-O'Connor recalls that "[After 1970] parental authority is questioned and questionable, and children are often required to assume decision-making power that their parents have abandoned." (in Gavin, 227) Wilson certainly prefigured this trend in literary fiction, for financial responsibility and parental duty are often discussed within the parents and their children, often through theatrical incursions. The "family Sunday play" sees Billy Pop and the Countess be held accountable for

[32] Peter Conradi explains: "This theme of the vulnerability of privacy is introduced early on when we learn that the Countess insists that the doors of her children's rooms be kept ajar, depriving them of any space in which they can escape from her manipulativeness. She further invades their privacy by going through their belonging 'just in case'". (42)

their lack of financial and parental responsibility by the children, supported by Mouse, the Countess' sister, and Mrs. Matthews, Billy Pop's mother. The play perfectly enacts Jonas' definition of parental responsibility, as the Countess retorts "We've clothed and fed and educated you. What more do you want?" (99) to Quentin's indictment of his parents' lack of care. His parents' denial leads Quentin to re-assert the children's need for self-responsibility, when their parents are clearly failing to take care of them: "We know you and Moher find it difficult to live on your income. How you deal with that is, of course, entirely your own affair. But we have a right to defend ourselves, to consider our own lives." Quentin's delimitation of his parents' lives from his siblings' is an attempt to repossess their own lives. As they lack parental care, the children have no choice but to become more responsible in turn. Wilson satirises the parents' lack of self-consciousness and thwarted morals, as the primary family Sunday play turns into "Parents at play" in the third book and stages the persistent self-congratulatory denial of Clara and William:

> WILLIAM MATTHEWS: A very sound point, my dear. You're all doing so well now, you can't afford shabby genteel parents. It only proves what I've always said, that the more you neglect your children the better they'll fare later on.
>
> CLARA MATTHEWS: Don't be absurd, Billy. We've never neglected the children. We taught them early to be adult and responsible and as a result they're responsible adults. (212)

While Billy Pop justifies their behaviour as a form of parental responsibility, the Countess still exempts herself from the abuse she inflicted upon her children and confuses inconsideration with responsibilisation. The twisting (and twisted) rhetoric of the Matthews' is corroborated by the play's subtitle, "A Lesson in Lamarckian survival": Wilson mocks the parents' ability to adapt their behaviour to the evolution of the Matthews family. As the children progressively manage to escape from n°52 throughout the novel, Clara and William indeed find new ways of clawing back into their lives to ensure their survival as a bourgeois couple. Through the parody of the comedy of manners, he offers a critique of parental abuse and of narrative devices used to comment on society's woes. The fragmentation of the text offered by the theatrical instalments challenges the inherited structures of thoughts and behaviour, through which Wilson criticises Victorian hypocritical mores and their evolutive consequences in the development of family and relationships in the later twentieth-century.

Wilson's handling of the past echoes Jonas' contention on the historicity and historicality of responsibility: the novels of the corpus, while portraying the fragility of parental ties to their children, seem to draw from the tradition of the family saga so as to illustrate how lineage and inheritance create the transmissive pattern that lies behind political structures. Yet, their fragmentary structures debunk any potential stability of the family sphere: the exploration of familial ties through the narrative structures calls for a deeper understanding of the dynamics animating the metonymic familial construction, which oscillate between novelty and sterility.

2. Logic of Dissent

In *The World, The Text and the Critic* (1983), Edward Said analyses relationships of filiation and argues

> that narrative fiction during the European eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is based on the filial device of handing on a story through narrative telling; moreover that the generic plot situation of the novel is to repeat through variation the family scene by which human beings engender human duration in their action. If a novelistic heroine or hero has one task set above all the others it is to be different, so heavily do paternity and routine weigh upon them. (117)

Said contends that former novels rely heavily on the reproduction of the family scene as a token of biological reproduction. He locates the novelistic character at the crossroads between its primal instinct to further the family line and the desire to break away from this inherited pattern, to sever family connections. This tension between reproduction and novelty creates a logic of dissent within the corpus: the characters of state-of-the-nation novels seem to indeed strive for change by rejecting figures of the past, while still being hindered by the latter. However, while Said concedes that despite a desire for disruption, marriage eventually shuts down the character's spur of novelty, as "offspring and parents become bound by it" (118), more recent fictional narratives tend to imply that there is no way out of conflict: the families of the corpus seem to both indict the past and condemn the future, therefore suggesting that novelistic characters paradoxically stand for a sclerosed nation.

A. Strategies of novelty

In 1919, the Matthews children initiate the satirical "Game", where they each incarnate a member of the household: resembling another theatrical play, the Game actually turns into a trial of the adults (the Countess and Billy Pop, as well as Granny Matthews, the children's aunt

and Regan) who are likened to the "embodiment of accumulated history" (*NLM* 142). Quentin, the eldest, incarnates Mr Justice Scales and charges them "with deceit, with bad faith, with cruelty and negligence." (136) While he is certainly tempted to indict "two generations" for their responsibility in the First World War and the state of the Empire, he sees the failure of his elders as an opportunity for renewal and for unity:

> '[The] quicker we make up our minds to depend on ourselves the better.'
>
> 'Self reliance,' said MISS MARGARET MOUSE. 'Can I hear aright?'
>
> 'You can call it what you choose. But it's not the old cut-throat selfishness. Cooperation.' (144)

Margaret chooses to deride her brother's plea for cooperation in the words of their Aunt Mouse (who thrives on the past expansion of the Empire by spending her time in British colonies), as a way to call out any potential repetition of the past. Her embodiment of Aunt Mouse is the last instance of the 1919 Game: the play stopped as soon as Quentin started reflecting on the political and social system in which they were all interacting, rather than continuing the mockery of the older Matthews. His indictment of "the old cut-throat selfishness" draws the final act of the Game and calls for some brotherly unity that would trump the effects of their parents' abuse. The break from drama and the return to prose underline the importance of the matter at hand, as "the pitch of Quentin's voice suggests that they had all failed him." (144) The "relaxing intimacy" (215) of the Game provides a quick interlude between 1925 and 1935, before briefly reappearing right before 1937: each act emerges after a row between parents and children and always comes at the end of a section. The last instance of the play appears at the beginning of book four (1946) and sees Quentin interrupting his siblings reviving the Game without him after their parents' death: while Margaret praises her mother for keeping her marriage afloat, Rupert, Gladys and Marcus eventually reappraise their elders' words as truthful – a reversal Quentin is quick to remark and mock ("What a quick getaway our parents made. […] Give them all harps and haloes." 438-439) Through Quentin, Wilson insists on the importance of having a "sense of the Past" (215) and warns against nostalgia as a hindrance to change. The constant repetition of the Game defeats its original purpose: designed as an escape from abuse through mockery, the play turns into a soothing routine which thwarts the evolution of the children outside of the family sphere. Wilson explains this process in his interview with Betsy Draine:

> In my life I have seen people whose creative powers were thwarted. They either become apathetic or they become marionettish-mimetic, with a kind of jiggling, continuous liveliness that really doesn't create anything. That's perhaps the kind of feeling I wanted to give in *No Laughing Matter* with all six of the children. One asks oneself about those children, What are they doing there even after the parents are dead? They're still playing the childhood game when they're re-ordering the house in London. […] They long to recreate that happiness which had been there, but which was never expressed, because although the characters of Billy Pop and the Countess in their own way attracted people, they themselves were totally childish and thus prevented any of the real happiness that could have been made for the children. So the children are forever trying to reenact that past. Even right through to the end there they are, not totally fulfilled, not totally taken up into their own careers, because their creative energies have all been withered away in this continual reenactment of the past. (5)

The dispersion of the Game's fragments draws attention to the children's inability to change the past – which weighs so heavily on their adult life – and betrays their unproductive "continuous liveliness". Their lack of fulfilment coerces them into repetitive reenactment, which instead of providing comfort and unity, further divides them and prevents them from achieving novelty. The family scene acts as a burden on the children, who cannot find a way out of it, even after their parents' passing: their forgiveness is itself a reenactment of the past, as they take pleasure in directly quoting each of their elders. The last embodiment of the Countess, Billy Pop, Aunt Mouse, Granny Matthews and Stoker, revives the past and its tenets, which are condemned by Quentin in a "marionettish-mimetic" manner destined to encapsulate the paradoxicality of novelty, as both spurred and conditioned by the past. The parents' abuse leads to a failed strategy of difference, which results in their ironical absolution.

The rejection of parental care subverts the children's potential – a system that West also explores in *The Return of the Soldier*. Answering to Dr. Anderson's questions about Chris's past, Jenny reveals his strained relationship with his parents: "His father was old when he was born, and always was a little jealous of him. His mother was not his sort. She wanted a stupid son who would have been satisfied with shooting." (72) The fragmentation of family life and the clout of unwanted filial duty led to Chris's progressive annihilation, creating a deadening "lack of free adventure." (8) Dr. Anderson's dive into Chris's past actually sheds light on Chris' return to childhood in the arms of Margaret:

> She had run her hands over the rug so that it lay quite smooth and comfortable under him when at last he felt drowsy and turned on his side to sleep. He lay there in the confiding relaxation of a sleeping child; his hands unclenched, and his head thrown back of that the bare throat showed defencelessly. Now he was asleep and his face undarkened by thought. […] (61)

As it "was so apparent that she was a mother" (74), Margaret acts as such for Chris: his return to childhood leads her to reprise her lost role after the death of her own child and to care for Chris, who only knew his parents' indifference. Margaret allows Chris to reach what the Matthews children hopelessly try to create with the Game, a "confiding relaxation" which he couldn't have before in the midst of his "crowded life." (8) The appeasement of his body contrasts sharply with Jenny's last remark on Chris, who comes back "every inch a soldier" (82), suggesting a recovered physical and emotional rigidity. Steve Pinkerton addresses Chris's childlike attitude and the fact that

> Margaret's maternalism is the trait that Chris emphasizes when first describing her to Jenny: 'when she picks up facts she kind of gives them a motherly hug. […]' Margaret's maternal function allows him to play the role of a child. It is a role that Chris […] may never have been allowed to play, and a role which in any case became incompatible with the demands of adulthood and the exigencies of war. When Margaret confronts him with the evidence of his dead son, she also confronts him as the Mother who engages in a drama with Chris the Child. All that Jenny can see of the scene is, at its conclusion, 'a figure mothering something in her arms.' (9)

Chris's amnesia leads him to unearth a could-have-been happiness, that was made impossible by both his parents and the historical conditions in which he is living. Chris's past is erased and made anew, as his memory loss brings him back to a time when he hadn't yet succumbed to his parents' obligations and was still with Margaret – therefore unconsciously defying the parental authority which led him to join the family business in the first place. Margaret's motherly attitude towards Chris is in fact a token of the parental care he never received and, through tragic irony, reinstates the familial pattern Chris's amnesia which enabled him to escape, denying him – and indirectly herself – the possibility to be different.

The failure of novelty strategies is most prominent with the writer figures of the corpus: Coe's Michael Owen and Smith's Celia see their creative process heavily rely on the steadiness of family ties. Their writing personas are indeed both made possible and hindered by their filial relationships. Michael's writing begins to bud as a child thanks to his parents, who help him set up his office in the abandoned shed of the Nuttall farm. While knowing ups and downs, Michael points out that the Winshaws' chronicles led to "the rebirth of [his] literary personality" (*WCU* 90), only to be interrupted by familial tragedies like the loss of his father and his isolation from his mother. The inherent link between the familial and the literary hints at the fact that Michael's strategy of novelty is actually determined by a biological pattern: the reproduction of his father's letters – which he received as a child and which encouraged his development as a writer

– is as double attempt at recapturing the essence of his flickering literary personality, as well as recapturing the image of his father as a catalyst of Michael's persona. In fact, Michael mentions his father's letters when his mother confronts him about the identity of his genitor: "He used to write me these letters when I was little. Made-up letters, full of these silly jokes. They were the first letters I ever got." (417) Michael's anagnorisis not only causes a reassessment of his identity as a man, but also of his identity as a writer. The reproduction of the letters holds an investigative value for Michael, who is forced to uncover the story of his origins and of his originality as a writer. This partakes in the fact that "the book is both a postmodernist Condition-of-England novel and a sensitive *Bildungsroman*¸ as well as a *Künstlerroman* (with the reader witnessing the development of a writer)." (Guignery 2015, 73) Ironically enough, Michael's fathers are both killed by the Winshaws: if Ted Owen was a victim of Dorothy's processed food, Jim Fenchurch died at the hands of Lawrence the night of Mortimer Winshaw's birthday. Michael's destiny and creative impulse are therefore intrinsically linked to the Winshaw family. He is destined to expose their responsibility in the death of Ted Owen, as a result of Tabitha's guilt who hired him as writer so that she could "make financial reparation for what [her] family had done to [him]" (476). Yet, he is also bound to fail like his biological father, dying like him at the hands of a Winshaw. The discontinuity of Michael's origins thwarts his capacity for novelty, as his chronicles are left unfinished and the Winshaws unscathed: the corruption of the family scene weighs heavily on Michael, whose *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* is annihilated by the Winshaws' corrosive power. His novelty strategy is therefore twice denied by the burden of family ties – both his own and the Winshaws' – emphatically illustrating the imbrication of the national and the individual in the process.

The Holiday also sees the development of a writer in its protagonist Celia, who writes book reviews in parallel with her work at the Ministry, and finds in her family members an audience to whom she can read her diverse poems and sermons. Celia, like Michael, is determined to unearth the past as a means to understand her current situation. Feeling devastatingly sad, Celia asks her Aunt Lion if her deceased mother also encountered the same issue: "The next day I am talking to my Aunt at breakfast time. For I want to know about this sadness deficiency feeling. And I believe that some other people have it, but not my Aunt, I should say not. But I believe other people have it. […]" (36) As Aunt Lion assumes that her sister was surely "not as happy as she should have been" (37), she retraces a family history of discontent which resonates within Celia. The hereditary "sadness deficiency feeling" indeed

transpires throughout the novel and halts Celia's development as a woman and as a writer. She indeed complains "But oh, oh, this sadness stops everything, it stops writing, for it comes out so much in that. […]" (49) Yet, *The Holiday* shocks by its proliferation of words, thoughts and styles: the *hybris* of writing attempts at counteracting Celia's spiritual and psychological deficiency. Striving for her clerical Uncler Heber's attention ("Speak to me, Uncle, I say, do not talk to Caz, it is sad for me, speak to me." (195)), Celia actually tries to erase her disbelief in the traditional Christianism of her family, which is the real source of her "sadness deficiency feeling": negating her Christian values means negating her family ties, and therefore negating her relationships with her love-interest and cousin Caz. However, as she tries to deliver an original sermon to Heber, she destroys her production:

> I tear the papers of my own sermon into pieces and let the pieces fall on the floor. […] Uncle, I detest your Christianity that will be so positive. Unknown, unknown, unknown, let that be the life to come and the world that lies beyond. Uncle, if I were the Virgin Mary, I would say: No, no, I will have no part in it, no saviour, no world to come, nothing. (199)

Celia's blasphemous outburst leads to actual and spiritual fragmentation, one which tries to come to terms with the weight of Christianity in the seemingly godless post-Second-World-War. The repetition of "nothing" and of "unknown" refracts, at the very end of the novel, the dissension Celia has been fighting since the beginning when she "turned to exasperation" when reviewing Father d'Arcy's *Grey Eminence, Screwtape Letters and Death and Life* and its potent Christian system of "rewards and punishments." (42) The destruction of her own work creates a temporary scission with her family, as writing acts as a *pharmakon*: "both the medicine and/or the poison" (Derrida 1972, 71), writing confronts her with her disbelief which, as staggering as it may be, does result in her rebellion against the tradition her family stands for. Through her attempt at reproducing a sermon, Celia – who is obsessed with being a "sensible" (repeated five times pp.175-176) writer – tries to comply with the Christian family pattern. Nevertheless, her outburst only allows for a temporary escape: the novel ends on the mechanic "God bless you"[33] of Caz and his father Heber, to which Celia instantly replies "Amen." (202) Her short-lived rebellion is ironically tamed down by the family ritual as the novel deftly concludes on Celia's aporetic religious answer, suggesting that she will not, in fact, "ever be rid of this misery." (42)

[33] Romana Huk also sees in Caz's "God bless us all" a parody of Tiny Tim's final words in *A Christmas Carol* (1843): "Caz's response, so like *A Christmas Carol's* 'God bless us every one', is too innocent – and we know these characters are not innocent; we have been told so too many times in Celia's desperate lines." (209)

Celia's strategy of novelty is therefore, like Michael's, doomed from the start and "hobbled by past centuries" (194) of Christian tradition and family sanctity. The irresolution of the novel echoes Celia's and negates her efforts towards originality, trapping her into old family patterns. The characters' strategies of novelty result in failed dissent, as they are caught up by their families' past. The Matthews children and Chris long for a past that never was, leading them to ironically reproduce what they are trying to escape, whereas Michael's and Celia's creative instincts are shut down by the weight of family history. The family scene does "weigh heavily" on them, leaving little room for actual dissension or novelty. Two exceptions seem however to arise in the corpus: Lydia Holly in *South Riding* and Quentin Mkfesi in *Capital* – even though their strategies of novelty do not appear entirely successful.

Living in the derelict Shacks, the Holly family – who had "no such pretensions" (32) as being part of the middle-class – is initially composed of six children and their parents, Barnabas and Annie, who are trying to make ends meet. The news of a coming sixth child comes as a hammer blow on Annie who has "taken stuff to stop it" (120), dreading going into labour once again and raising yet another baby. She breaks the news to Lydia and warns her about what it means for her daughter:

> "Maybe it will finish me. Then that'll finish you too. You'll have to quit your grand school and come home to look after the kids."
>
> It was as though she took a grim pleasure in breaking her daughter's dreams. Yet even then Lydia knew, by the understanding which ran between them, that if by dying her mother could have saved her, she would have died. It was her own failure which she was lashing-jeering at the fate which was forcing her to fail her beloved daughter. (120)

Annie sees her pregnancy as a failure of parental responsibility: the new child, who will – as she predicts it – lead to her death, will force Lydia to give up any possibility for upward mobility. Instead, Annie's failure to provide a better future for her children comes out as a blow of irremediable social determinism dealt to responsibility and to Lydia's potential for novelty. The continuity inferred by Jonas in his description of educational responsibility takes another meaning under the Holly household: for the tenants of the Shack, "the communication of tradition" is that of renunciation and poverty, while responsibility becomes synonymous with survival. "Human duration" constrains Lydia into her social role as a poor individual and as a woman. When being confronted by Sarah Burton about Lydia's situation, Mrs Beddows (the

country Alderman) sees no way out of this: "Hundreds of other women die. Hundreds of other girls have to give up their scholarships." (196) For Mrs Beddows, Lydia is but another poor girl who has to take on her mother's burden of responsibility, regardless of its collateral hindrance on her future. Even as Sarah Burton manages to get Lydia a scholarship, which echoes the fact that "Holtby believes in the empowerment of the poor" (Reynier 2015), the headmistress cannot help but feel that:

> Yet something was lost, Sarah knew. Some spring of confidence, some ease of temper, had been stolen for ever by premature adversity from that big, heavy, sullen, gifted girl who had encountered too early the irony and bitterness of fate. (511)

Cruel "fate" is indeed another word for social determinism and its consequences. Lydia Holly's "salvation"[34] comes at the price of her self-fragmentation, which implies that, as Sarah Burton hammers throughout *South Riding*, one must "pay" for what they want. Lydia's strategy of novelty finally sees the day but, as Said contends, "Originality in one primal sense, then, has to be loss, or else it would be repetition. […]" (1983, 133) This "loss of the self" paradoxically allows Lydia to reach beyond the horizon of responsibility that was carved out for her: in breaking with the traditional status of the poor, the scholarship – as well as her father's remarriage to the wealthy widow Mrs Brimsley – frees Lydia from social determinism and ensures the viability of her originality.

In *Capital*, Quentina Mkfesi's social status actually has the reverse effect of Lydia's. Fatefully born "in the year Zimbabwe gained its independence" (144)[35], Quentina's future is intimately bound to her country's. Her father had fought in the civil war before becoming a senior member of Mugabe's party, and though "there was no sense of entitlement anywhere about her family's life", "she was in her way secure, comfortable, a member of the established order." (146) Determined to fight the authoritarian regime, she "became a kind of secret outlaw, risking her family's status in the process." (146) Her father's ties with the history and politics of the country make Quentina a direct product of a system she abhors: her dissent from the family (and political) line aims at disavowing the weight of repetition and pattern. By opposing

[34] Sarah eventually concedes that "Still, she was saved from complete disappointment. If we have done nothing else, thought Sarah, falling into line in the procession behind the girls, we have saved Lydia Holly." (511)

[35] Quentina's birth story is reminiscent of Saleem Sinai in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), who was born "at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence" (3) Though no trace of magical realism can be found in *Capital*, Quentina's intertwinement with Zimbabwe's fate surely recalls Saleem's political and emotional ties to India, as they both attempt at navigating their countries' inbetweeness under the weight of power-driven politicians.

the regime, Quentin develops two strategies of novelty – a political one, destined to end Mugabe's authoritarianism, and a genealogical one, by trying to annihilate her former revolutionary father's legacy. But if Lydia's social status was hindering her upward mobility, Quentina's is ironically what prevents her from death, for "at her final beating, she was told that the only thing being raped to death was the status her father had once had; the protection offered by that was now void. So here she was, three years later, in a church in London. […]" (147) In this regard, Quentina both draws and derives from her father as a dissident to the regime. She both perpetuates his legacy as a fighter of oppression while negating the "established order" he helped create. She paradoxically succeeds in being novel by becoming an outlaw, by drifting into "limbo" (132) in a foreign country. The irony goes further as she enters a "legal state of semi-existence" (132) in the United Kingdom: the oppression of the British Crown, which her father had fought two decades earlier, comes in full force against her, as she becomes a political refugee turned persona-non-grata and a fearsome (illegal) traffic warden, whose serial ticketing infuriates the inhabitants of Pepys Road.

Quentina's ramble between originality and dispossession raises questions about the viability of filiation and the families' relationship to history, which seem to leave little room for successful novelty. The characters' failed attempts at originality lift the veil on historical and social determinism and its hindrance on the trajectory of the individual who struggles to live anew, as Quentina muses "Humans make their own history, but not under circumstances of their choosing." (147) In this respect, the novels of the corpus differ from their nineteenth-century counterparts in which, as in Gaskell's *North and South*, "the ideological opposition between self and society in the novel is smoothed over aesthetically, by means of metonymy" (Shires, 71): quite contrarily, the use of metonymy in contemporary state-of-the-nation novels cracks open the apparent stability of the family trope and counters tales of national and familial continuity.

B. Novels of England sterility

Parrinder defines state-of-the-nation novels of the turn of the twentieth century, like Forster's *Howards End* or H.G. Wells' *Love and Mr Lewisham*, as "novels of England destiny", in which

> The need to counteract fears of species death and infertility may also underline a cluster of well-known English social novels of the turn of the twentieth century, novels that conclude not with a marriage but with the achievement of parenthood. The child's arrival suggests the renewal of the evolutionary 'struggle for existence' in which the novel's protagonist has manifestly failed. (294)

The new-born child always already bears the burden of evolutionary selection and development: the child is a token of social survival, destined to mend the divisions with which his/her parents were unable to cope. Helen Schlegel's and Leonard Bast's son indeed provides "an uneasy reconciliation between the two families" (Su, 124) that counteracts the social drama which unfolded throughout the novel – here recalling Shire's criticism towards *North and South* and its propensity to gloss over ideological and social tensions. However, West's *The Return of the Soldier* exposes the unviability of this attempt at social cohesion through biological reproduction, setting a new precedent for the state-of-the-nation novels to come after hers. The concomitant deaths of Chris's and Margaret's respective sons indicate the sterility of the private home. This takes part in West's feminist project to counteract nationalist discourse, which idealises the mother as a nurturing and fertile figure for the people: neither Kitty nor Margaret is able to provide their husband a son, neither woman is able to ensure the genealogic stability of the nation. The death of Annie Holly in *South Riding* bears a similar message, since, as Lisa Regan argues, "By drawing readers' attentions to the working-class mother, Holtby achieves for motherhood what she also achieves for the rural community as a whole: she subverts motherhood's appropriation to, and idealization within, the narrative of nation". (2012, 166) Through Annie, Holtby advances her feminist and socialist agenda: continuing the family line does not equate serving or reinforcing the nation, but favours instead the unnecessary reproduction of inequalities and weakens collective responsibility. In state-of-the-nation novels, sterility and death take centre stage. In fact, they run even deeper when Margaret laments the death of the two children: "it's as if [they] each had a life." (*TRS* 69) Empathically mourning the two sons, she muses about the child who could have been: hers and Chris. The two hypothetic halves are reminiscent of Disareli's "two nations": Chris's and Margaret's son would have been, like Helen Schlegel's and Leonard Bast's, a token of class reconciliation – but West terminates each and every possibility for futurity, as Nicole Rizzuto points out:

> The working-class woman and the upper-middle-class male become sutured […] through their failure to secure through social and biological reproduction what is now imputed as England's former stability. Both Chris and Margaret have sons who die, and represent the fragmentation of life in the Edwardian age, the disruption of national continuity and genealogical futurity. (27)

West subverts the metonymic gloss of Gaskell and Forster by opening domestic wounds through textual fragmentation: Kitty's and Chris's marriage is left fractured – Chris returning "every inch a soldier" rather than as a husband – and the novel's couple are left mourning what was and what could have been, leaving no room for a "renewal" or a resolution of the characters' "struggle for existence" – an impasse shared by the characters of *The Holiday*.

Celia is enamoured of her cousin Caz but also has feelings for her other cousin, Tom, whom her Aunt Lion and her Uncle Heber wish her to marry:

> And what should my dear Uncle Heber and my Aunt wish more than this, *that* I should fall in love with this cousin, and forget the other, draw Tom's madness off, draw him back to Heber, to his father who weeps for him, *that* I should marry Tom and bring him home?
> But it is Caz I love. (29, my emphasis)

By marrying him, Celia would enable Tom – according to her relatives – to recover his sanity and to potentially further the family line. However, Celia's lapidary epanadiplosis severs her relationship with Tom before it begins, reinstating instead her forbidden love for Caz. In fact, Celia's father is said to have had an affair with Caz's mother, possibly making them siblings: while Celia argues that "there is no proof at all", Caz regards "their silence" on the matter as "enough." (30) The taboo around the true nature of their bond creates an impasse for the two cousins, about which Caz is quick to remind Celia: "You must not be romantic about Tom, you must not suppose there is a solution there, there is no solution for us, and no answer." (155) His almost sermonic statement prevents Celia from developing further relationship with either of them, stranding her in limbo. Celia therefore appears as a defective Faerie Queene, who cannot bear "Tom a Lincoln" a child (Smith cleverly sets her "holiday" in Lincolnshire to further the reference to Richard Johnson's 1607 romance), and cannot help him recover his strength either, in a rewriting of Spenser's Redcross Knight and Caelia. Unable to marry either the bearer of Saint George's emblem, the patron saint of England, nor Caz the imperial soldier, Celia's love dilemma is in fact a story about England's past and future: Smith instils in Celia's relationship with Tom and Caz her rejection of the post-war "petty nationalismus idea" (16) supposed to

mend the ideological wounds opened by the conflict, as well as England's colonial history, which the characters' of *The Holiday* witness through India's independence. Celia's "struggle for existence" has, as in *The Return of the Soldier,* openly and excruciatingly failed but offers "no solution" as she is confronted with England's fragmented faith, empire and national unity at the end of the war[36]. The sterility of the characters' relationships mirrors the ideological quagmire of the nation which, according to Smith, threatens the viability of the country. The two immediate-post-war novels of the country reach a biological impasse which exposes, rather than covers up, the nation's fragmentation by both re-using and subverting former, inadequate metonymic narratives. The characters' inability to renew their elders' "struggle for existence" creates a generational divide with the past, inasmuch as they can no longer rely on its relational structures.

Parrinder sees in Forster and Galsworthy a "crisis of inheritance coinciding with the passage from the Victorian era to the 20th century" (301), one that each World War could have triggered again when first reading West and Smith. However, the very nature of this "crisis of inheritance" seems to have shifted during the course of the 20th century, for Parrinder explains that what pre-war Edwardian novelists feared was that "The younger generation lacks its predecessors' 'unconscious soundness' and 'balance', threatening to wreck the nation's harmony." (301) In fact, West's and Smith's novels disclose the fragility of such "balance" and even imply that the "nation's harmony" is but a hypocritical concept that the war helped tear open.

Holtby also denounced the duplicity behind the sanctity of marriage and family as the founding structure of society. One of her main characters, Councillor Huggins, is a married man and father to three daughters, defined in the list of South Riding's inhabitants as a "lay preacher" (xxiii). He's introduced for the first time under the chapter "Councillor Huggins Incurs an

[36] Smith's work appears at a crossroads with three tendencies Max Jones and John Wolffe respectively study in *20th Century Britain. Economic, Cultural and Social Change*. Wolffe argues that "Experience of the Western Front in the First World War tested to the limit belief in the providence and care of God; the horror of the Nazi concentration camps in the Second World War again led many to doubt either God's omnipotence or His goodness. It is certainly observable that the 1940s saw rather sharper falls in denominational memberships than the interwar period had done, although the situation stabilized again in the 1950s." (in Carnevali and Strange, 326) Celia's spiritual irresolution, part of Smith's reinterpretation of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590), certainly illustrates the country's wavering faith in the immediate aftermath of the war. Moreover, Jones explains that "the war also encouraged colonial nationalism and exposed the fragility of Britain's global pretensions, ultimately hastening Indian independence in 1947," while "The populist rhetoric of the 'People's War' contributed to Labour's landslide election victory in 1945." (in Carnevali and Strange 86-89) Smith's disoriented characters come to grips with the intertwinement of colonialism and populism: Celia's inability to fully connect and consume her relationship with either Tom or Caz suggests the inherent nullity and sterility of such discourse that each male character represents.

Obligation" (2), already confronting him to ethical responsibility. Huggins has indeed been unfaithful to his wife with Bessy Warbuckle, who prostitutes herself and vainly tries to excuse his adultery:

> [He] had not been unfaithful to his wife, for Nell was no wife to him these days and he was tolerably certain that the child which Bessy was trying to father on to him was another man's. […] After all, life had not been easy for him. Since the birth of his third daughter his wife had lived with him as though she were his sister. That was hard on a man of normal instincts, a kind man, who would not force himself where he was not wanted, a God-fearing man, who preferred to take his pleasure within the law. (88)

Huggins tries to reject the fault on his unaffectionate wife, as he holds himself up to the high moral standards of religion and law. His technique of evasion only sheds light on his hypocritical behaviour and on the relativism with which he defines such standards. He subverts the very moral code he set up for himself, while accusing both his wife and Bessy Warbuckle of deceiving him. Huggins' denial of his potential child only further negates his responsibility towards the young girl from Spunlington, who is quick, later in the novel, to turn the child into a bargaining chip for her self-interest. His apocryphal orthodoxy is triply corruptive, for his adultery perverts marriage, filiation and legislation at the same time – three institutions which relied, in 1936, on the figure of "men of normal instincts." Huggins indeed becomes a foil to Holtby's feminist project in *South Riding*, as his departure from the law and from responsibility sublimates Sarah Burton's celibacy and involvement in the Riding. The new headmistress is proud to be unmarried: "I was born to be a spinster, and by God, I'm going to spin." (51) Sarah's polyptoton mirrors both her marital status and her relationship to the South Riding, as her arrival in the county signals change and progress – a source of inconvenience and misunderstanding for her fellow teachers, since Dolores Jameson had coveted the headmistress position: "These spinster school-marms," she thought. "No wonder they stick to their job." (62) Her scorn emerges from her position as a soon-to-be-married woman: her marriage to Philip Bankhurst will end her teaching career, and participates in the enduring prejudices against "spinsters", which are shared by Alderman Beddows later on in the novel, who cannot come to terms with her daughter's celibacy ("[Sybil] should have married. How have I failed there? She was cut out to be a wife and a mother." (382)) While Dolores Jameson sees her marriage as a triumph over the devoted Sarah Burton, Mrs. Beddows lives Sybil's spinsterhood as a genealogical and social failure. In this regard, Sarah stands out in the South Riding community both as a single

woman and as a new comer, and embodies Winifred Holtby's feminist ideals, which she defended in a 1935 essay on King George V's Jubilee celebrations:

> Today there is a far worse crime than promiscuity: it is chastity. On all sides the unmarried woman today is surrounded by doubts cast not only upon her attractiveness or her common sense, but upon her decency, her normality, even her sanity. (1935, 91)

Dolores and Mrs. Beddows' see Sarah Burton's social status as flawed and unnatural, for it defies traditional gender roles and the female duty to ensure the viability of the nation. Sarah Burton appears as a fictional Holtby[37]: the novel concludes on her thoughts while attending the very same Silver Jubilee, where Sarah reflects on her role in society and the sacrifices the fight for progress entails. Through Sarah, Holtby proposes to replace biological sterility with ethical fecundity, as the headmistress muses: "[We] are members of one another" (513), which reprises Holtby's own words to her prefatory letter to her mother, Alderman Mrs. Holtby (xvii). The closure provided by the expression is meant to fight against Sarah's – and therefore Holtby's – foreboding about a Second World War, and to hint at the strength of social harmony over prejudiced gender roles and irresponsible biological reproduction[38]. Holtby's final plea against both social and formal fragmentation stands out in the corpus, as she is the only writer reinstating the inevitability of an ethical bond, henceforth renewing with Modernist writers like T.S. Eliot, according to whom "[the] only other alternatives seemed to be provided by institutions, associations, and communities whose social existence was not in fact guaranteed by biology, but by affiliation." (Said 1983, 17) West, Holtby and Smith indeed suggest that biological failure betrays societal dysfunctions – a statement that Holtby simultaneously upholds, through her criticism of gender roles, and moves past, proposing that progress cannot happen without loss. However, the study of West and Smith leads us to see Holtby's work as a-never-to-be-seen-again hopeful interlude between the two wars, one which contrasted with

[37] In a letter entitled "Spinsters versus Spouses" written in 1928, Holtby considers "I am myself a spinster who finds her own life as full, as stimulating, and as socially entertaining as that of any of her married friends. […] it is not so, as a rule, those women are mothers who develop the 'maternity complex' which 'V.M.' deprecates." (292) Sarah's feelings towards the children of the South Riding certainly echo this sentiment, for she wishes to protect "these unsuspecting children" from "the greed and arrogance and intellectual lethargy, the departmental pride and wanton folly of an adult world" (*SR* 74) when she sees the inappropriate show Mrs. Hubbard (herself a mother) has the children perform.

[38] Marion Shaw indeed underlines that "The novel is also a mature embodiment of all Winifred's most fundamental beliefs: her pacifism, her equalitarian feminism, her belief in social democracy and in the value of education, in the importance of the individual human being and of the individual's obligations towards society." (242)

"the fictional Thirties" which ended "in dismay, disorder, lost causes and weary apostasies" according to Malcolm Bradbury (221). The more recent state-of-the-nation novels rather see the extinction Holtby's opening and the extension of both biological and ethical sterility.

At the very beginning of *What a Carve Up!,* Michael notices a striking difference between his parents' generation and his:

> (In common with all of their generation, my parents had the gift of getting into conversation with strangers without apparent difficulty. It was a gift I assumed I would one day grow into – once the shynesses of childhood and adolescence were behind me, perhaps – but it never happened, and I realize now that the easy sociability which they seemed to enjoy wherever they went had more to do with the times that with any special maturity of temperament.) (32)

Michael's aside interrupts the recollection of his childhood memories to comment on his generation's ethical disconnection with others. Allowing for a retrospective observation which ties Michael to his past and for a grim assessment of contemporary relationships, the parenthesis reflects ethical and biological sterility. Michael is indeed unable to inherit his parents' "easy sociability", which would at the same time perpetrate the family genes (which he saw as a "gift", a natural disposition that should be passed on) and ensure the connection with the rest of society. Alexander Regier argues that

> Better than other grammatical entities, or marks of punctuation, [the figure of parenthesis] illustrates fracture, both visually on the page in its conceptual-linguistic form, and in the phenomenology of reading (we always feel a break when we read a parenthesis). (96)

Michael's metatextual comment creates two fractures, from one generation to the other, from one hopeful Michael to a disillusioned, older Michael. This self-reflexive and splintering exercise illustrates the "importance and inevitability of rupture" (Regier 96): the fracture of the text mirrors the disengagement of the individual from the other but also of Michael with his younger self and with his parents. Estranged from his mother at the time of narration and unable to connect with others (notably his neighbour Fiona), the parenthesis further isolates Michael from his past and his present, as he withdraws within its enclosing space – nothing connects him to others, not even genes or blood. This biological and ethical disconnection is, for Iliou Raluca, symptomatic of the Thatcherite government which denies intimacy and spreads sterility:

> For both the Winshaws and Michael, sex becomes a mechanical act meant to validate and sustain a reality lacking any positive visceral substance. […] Michael's refusal to embrace physicality is a form of withdrawal from a world that the novel makes evident had become a social construct of the Winshaws. His rejection of Fiona's genuine affection is a manifestation of the effects the Winshaws' influence on the common spirit: a cancerous tumour that affected not only the bodies of the consumers of the enhanced frozen foods sold by Dorothy (as in Fiona's case), but also of their souls, a social sterility. Sterility affects both the Winshaw family and the others involved in its fate. (in Tew 2018, 58-59)

Unlike West and Smith, Coe seems to suggest, through Michael's parenthetical comment, that the previous generation knew "balance" and "soundness". The "easy sociability" of his parents starkly contrasts with Michael's and the Winshaws' inability to physically, and therefore, ethically connect. The inherent corruption of bodies and souls, as Raluca contends, then necessarily means the destruction of a former biological and ethical inheritance: if Michael can still, for the time of the parenthesis, revisit his parents' ability to connect, baby Josephine Winshaw – marking the generation succeeding Michael's – will certainly not be able to do the same. Under Thatcherism, the family unit – if still very much metonymic – is no longer what enables and ensures the longevity of the nation, but rather accelerates its ethical deconstruction. The clout of the Winshaws implies that neither filiation or affiliation can sustain the country: as Michael's fragmented and fragmenting chronicles indicate, all that is possible is "to live in fragments" – making Margaret Schelegel's call to "only connect" biologically and ethically impractical.

Petunia's death in *Capital* certainly creates a similar fracture within the text and within the history of Pepys road. As the last standing token of the street's tale of upward mobility, her passing and the consequential sale of her house by her daughter Mary erase past generation altogether. When Zbigniew, the Polish worker contracted to refurbish the house, finally leaves N°42, he sees Petunia's garden being destroyed by the new owners' landscaper:

> At number 42, the garden which had been Petunia Howe's great joy in life, her hobby and her solace, was being dug up and replaced. […] It had been bought by a City banker and his American wife, a childless couple in their early thirties who had paid £1,550,000 for it. […] The new owners wanted a more modern look. The crowded, profuse, overgrown, over-living plant beds of old Mrs Howe were to be replaced by a geometric pattern of decking and gravel and pavings, with a water feature at the end, and four small square formal beds of low shrubs. So now four men from the garden design company were ripping out Petunia's garden. […] (549)

N°42, which had seen several generations of Howes since its construction, is now being bought by a foreign couple with no children – as if each number of the ostentatious seven-figure price were erasing one Howe after another. Luxuriant plants are taken over by prosperous owners and "solace" is replaced by financial comfort, embodying a shift in allegiance of the new generation of inhabitants, from ethics to money. As in *What a Carve Up!*, liveliness is replaced by sterility: rigid decorative structures tear down Petunia's English garden, – herself (symbolically named after a flower) the last remnant of an ethically connected London, who deplored feeling like "an alien" (*C* 61) at the GP's office. The destruction of her garden stands as a metonymy of London's ethical deconstruction, where the neighbours are "neighbours in spatial terms only." (Shaw 2014, 49) The new lack of greenery at n°42 and the erasure of Petunia's history fatefully negates any possibility for a fecund future: no child or living organism that has been properly tamed and trimmed is to blossom there, and Petunia's daughter's house is bound to know the same fate, as "there was something creepy about Mary's house […] something cold and sterile and unwelcoming and not-right." (180) Sterility pervades the households of *Capital* while they paradoxically become richer and richer. If Michael Owen saw the depth of the Winshaws' corruption, the inhabitants of Pepys Road certainly witness the corrosive expansion of banking and finance. The new owner of n°42 comes to replace the main protagonist of Lanchester's novel, Roger Yount, himself a banker, forced to leave London after the 2008 credit crunch. Sterility invades once again ethics, by denying past modes of living and their "unconscious soundness" – which in turn implies that Lanchester and Coe both stem and depart from Forster's "crisis of inheritance", by exposing corrupt ethical bounds in contrast with past relationships, while leaving no hopeful ground for improvement.

The family pattern heavily weighs on the characters of state-of-the-nation novels. Adapting and subverting the genre of the family saga, they untangle the ethics of responsibility which tie parents and children together throughout several generations. The historical quagmire in which they were written complicates Jonas' definition of responsibility, insofar as they stage irresponsible parents and sterile offspring. The weight of the "collective tradition" appears either too heavy or too light: while Celia, the Baldrys or the Matthews struggle to get out of inherited patterns, Michael Owen and Petunia Howe are victims of a society that easily got rid of its ethical foundation – which Holtby strives to uphold amid fears of another world conflict. The corpus at hand exposes how "the readying for life in the society" is far from linear and

suggests that Jonas' "horizon of continuity" cannot be but an absolutism: the rigid structures it implies denies the possibility of "narratives of dissent" which aim – however successful they might be – at debunking oppressive familial (and therefore historical) structures. The negation of filial attachment at work in these novels questions the foundations of political responsibility, which is, for Jonas, the result of family and domestic love. The deconstruction of the metonymic discourse around the family unit is but the first step in the subversion of nationalist discourse in the novels of the corpus, as the genre seeks to undo ties to the (home)land.

CHAPTER 2.
A Crumbling Geography

In *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (1993), Thomas Hylland Erikson connects the rise of nationalism with industrialisation, which "entailed great geographic mobility" (125) and spurred a globalising economic system. The simultaneous economic homogenisation[39] and social dislocation of nation-states created a vacuum for nationalism, which

> offers security and perceived stability at a time when lifeworlds are fragmented and people uprooted. An important aim of nationalist ideology is thus to re-create a sentiment of wholeness and continuity with the past; to transcend that alienation or rupture between the individual and society that modernity has brought about. (126)

Erikson points out the tension between geographic mobility and national stability: nationalism irons out the consequential fragmentation of the political and social "rupture" and of the shift from one economic model to another. Nationalist discourse artificially mends historical and geographical fractures by acting as a safeguard against change. However, this process actually denies the very nature of both time and space, and reveals the paradoxicality of nationalism, since, according to Doreen Massey,

> Neither space nor place can provide a haven from the world. If time presents us with the opportunities of change and (as some would see it) the terror of death, then space presents us with the social in the widest sense: the challenge of our constitutive interrelatedness – and thus our collective implication in the outcomes of that interrelatedness, the radical contemporaneity of an ongoing multiplicity of others […]; and the ongoing and ever-specific project of the practices through which that sociability is to be configured. (2005, 195)

Massey sees space and place as inherently social and dynamic: they are the "product" (9) of social practices, rather than their igniter, and are necessarily submitted to change. By reasserting the ethical value of space and place through "interconnectedness", Massey indirectly negates the viability and sustainability of nationalist discourse, whose manufactured continuity offers a vain escape from social and political reality. Nationalism therefore appears as a false ethical enterprise: if its discourse denies geographical experiences (such as the rural exodus mentioned by Erikson) and artificially draws connections with the past to resist fragmentation, it

[39] Erikson underlines that industrialisation entailed the "standardization of skills", as "a vast number of people became participants in the same economic (and later political) system." (125)

paradoxically annihilates the authenticity of the ethical bonds of the very society it tries to bring together.

Massey's argument is of course reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's "chronotope", which refers to the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relations that are artistically expressed in literature." (1975, 84) If his contention relies heavily on the heterogeneity of chronotopic narrations which differ according to the time and place they are written and set in, Bakhtin also underlines that "the primary category in the chronotope is time." (84) The inherent hierarchy of the chronotope furthers the relegation of space and place, as disputed by Massey ("Space is as much a challenge as is time." (195)) While Bakhtin's theory will certainly inform this chapter – especially the fact that narrative time is made "palpable" – I aim at exploring how state-of-the-nation novels negotiate space and place as a metonymy for the nation, which *a priori* embraces the fragmentation which is eschewed by nationalism. In light of Massey's work, I intend to see how the novels of the corpus raise the question of "our relationship to and responsibility for [the politics of geographies]; and [conversely] the potential geographies of our social responsibility." (2005, 10) After discussing their ties to the family saga, it is necessary to analyse how state-of-the-nation novels also draw from well-established tropes – from the opposition between the country and the city to the metonymy of the house – which challenge their ethical dimension.

1. The Geopoethics of England

The spatial conception of England follows a synecdochic construction, as Rebecca Scutt demonstrates in her *Search of England* (1996):

> in English the word 'country' can be used to describe both a nation and a specific landscape. It can be the whole of society or just its rural area. However, it would seem that in England at least, the English countryside has become the image of the nation. (1)

Scutt's analysis is part of a long line of research devoted to the analysis of Englishness and its ties with landscape and space, which has been the subject of a collection of essays, *Landscape and Englishness*, edited by Robert Burden and Stephan Khol in 2006. The same year saw the publication of *The Handbook of Rural Studies* (edited by Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden and Patrick Mooney). Scholars like Barbara Bender, Brian Short, David Haigron and even more recently, Esther Peeren and Calvin Duggan, have undertaken to explore the relationality of space and

cultural practices, especially regarding the countryside. In England's case, critics both stem and differ from Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973), where he retraces the long history of the opposition between the two entities, from the establishment of the landowning class in the 16th century to contemporary globalisation.

It is no coincidence that studies on landscape and Englishness on the one hand and rural studies on the other are simultaneously being developed: as evidenced by Williams, Scutt and Short, the metonymic construction of the English nation is the result of a long-lived idealisation of the countryside, which is meant to represent "World Tragedy in embryo." (*SR* 3) As Scutt's observation shows, references to the "country" are both microcosmic and macrocosmic, suggesting a constant back and forth between the regional (often rural) and the national. While this thesis does not propose a study of Englishness[40] *per se*, this spatial imbrication offers a fruitful ground to investigate state-of-the-nation novels' "geopoethics", i.e their spatialisation of both politics and ethics. This dichotomous relation to space will allow to further understand the construction of the rural idyll within the novels of the corpus, which would entail to see space "as a flat immobilized surface." (Massey 1994, 4) Following the chronology of William's argument, I will analyse how the novels of the corpus subvert the literary tradition of the pastoral, which circumscribes the rural as a nostalgic and redemptive place: the "escapist sentiment" (Cannadine 1989, 258) associated with the pastoral needs to be addressed so as to shed light on the simultaneous instrumentalization and fragmentation of ethics, before considering whether the novels of the corpus challenge the rural idyll by politically investing the spatial delimitation between the country and the city.

A. Sterile pastoral

The pastoral in English literature borrows from "the golden age of Mediterranean antiquity", as Brian Short explains in his fundamental essay, "Idyllic ruralities" (in Paul Cloke et.al, 133), where he retraces the history of the literary tradition, from Varro (116-29 BC) to the "apogee of the rural idyll" (140) in the years between 1860 and 1930, which itself relied on the 16th century poetry of Ben Jonson and Thomas Carew. The neo-pastoral poets[41] participated in

[40] This notion is thoroughly dealt with in *Landscape and Englishness* but also in Krishan Kumar's *The Idea of Englishness* (2015).

[41] I am using Williams's terminology, so as to make a clear distinction between the literary tradition which emerged in the 16th century and the *classical* Greek poets, whose aesthetics are clearly defined in Short's article and in Terry Gifford's *Pastoral* (1999).

creating the "oldest rural ideal" (Williams 1973, 23), which reflected "the quiet, the innocence, the simple plenty of the countryside: the metaphorical but also the actual retreat" (24) from the city. Roger's hunting trip to the countryside in *Capital* certainly recalls pastoral musings, where "in this break away from work", "he realised that he was free. He was on his own and in the open air and he was still young enough, strong enough, to do anything he wanted." (99) The open air of the Norfolk countryside triggers Roger's desire to lead a more ethical life, where he could connect with his children and would "come smelling of the outside." (99) His pastoral awakening hinges on a dialectics of inside and outside, which supposedly reflects the opposition between the city and the country's respective ethics: the former relying on consumption and greed, the other on familial bonds and interaction with nature. The "retreat" to the English open spaces brings the promise of renewed ethical living, where Roger dreams of seeing "a different man" (99) when looking in the mirror. Brian Short sees in this outward movement away from the city, a way to "opt out of the urban social structure into 'country life' into a more authentic, intense and rooted existence." (144) The Matthews parents operate the same movement in *No Laughing Matter* where they spend their last days in a hotel in the West country as part of their "last and pastoral phase." (429) The countryside becomes a space of ethical redemption for Billy Pop and Clara – who suddenly boast about their children's merits – and Roger. However, while the rural constitutes the last experience of the Matthews parents (hinting indeed at an ultimate ethical opening), Roger's trip to the countryside occurs before he loses his end-of-year bonus and before the credit crunch: his desire to live more ethically (i.e., mindful of his family and surroundings) is buried under his own greed and desire for consumption. When forced to move out of the city and to live in his only remaining house in the countryside, the pastoral aperture and its ethical promise become thwarted and replaced by cyclical consumption, as Roger repeats the last words of the novel: "I can change, I can change, I promise I can change change change." (577) The novelty associated with nature and with the pastoral setting is replaced by an ultimate asyndeton, which acts as an empty signifier that counteracts any possibility for actual evolution, exposing instead Roger's hypocrisy. Coupled with a deft polyptoton, "change" also embodies (like the metonymic name of the novel also points to) the hegemony of money and cash, which overthrows Roger's new motto "stuff is not enough." (575) Roger falls prey to the "escapist sentiment" of the pastoral: in his study of the genre, Terry Gifford contends that "Pastoral's celebration of retreat is its strength and its inherent weakness. When retreat is an end in itself, pastoral is merely escapist." (47) Roger's final thoughts convey both his entrapment in consumerism and his self-deceit: the flight to the rural

is determined by a desire of "difference" which cannot be fulfilled. If the idealisation of the countryside can provoke ethical awakening, it also hides repressive mechanisms where the pastoral acts as a "selective, self-protective filter" (135) in the face of historical disruption.

The pastoral offers possibility, opportunity, escape – if Roger dreams of a new life while in the countryside, Williams and Short underline how the pastoral is often linked with the depiction of a "happier past" (Williams 1973, 79) and the "loss of a bucolic childhood." (Short 139) Both Michael Owen and Chris Baldry revert to the greeneries of their youth, through flashbacks which sever the narration: while Michael's memories make up most of the second part of the October 1990 section, Chris's recollection of Monkey Island[42] – the country inn where he met Margaret – becomes a second-hand narrative, since Jenny is "barred from that day" (34) at Monkey Island and has to put back together the pieces of Chris's and Margaret's respective memories. While Michael sees Mr Nuttall's farm as a "vision of heaven" with an "impossible charm" (159), Monkey Island is "not a place, but a magic state." (44) The farm and the inn are both enveloped in a mystical veil which creates a fracture between the past and the present. The idealisation of the rural creates a nostalgic, almost supernatural, "self-protective filter" which allows Michael and Chris to escape from the loss of their relatives. According to John Su in *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (2005), "To view one's surroundings nostalgically means to interpret the present in relation to an inaccessible or lost past" (4): if Chris's idealisation of Monkey Island is symptomatic of his amnesia and partakes in his unconscious desire to reclaim his lost love for Margaret, Michael's memories of the Nuttall farm is a repressive, comforting mechanism in the face of his traumatic *anagnorisis*. The characters' nostalgia transforms the rural into a space of impossible recovery and participates in the paralysis of the countryside, where "green silence" (*TRS* 44) or "enchanted silence" (*WCU* 61) reign. Paradoxically, the temporal and geographical fracture created by the nostalgic rural is at the same time an attempt at reconnection: only Margaret shares Chris's memories of Monkey Island, turning the inn and its green surroundings into a land of renewed ethical bond. Michael's adventures in the countryside hold the same ethical promise, for the

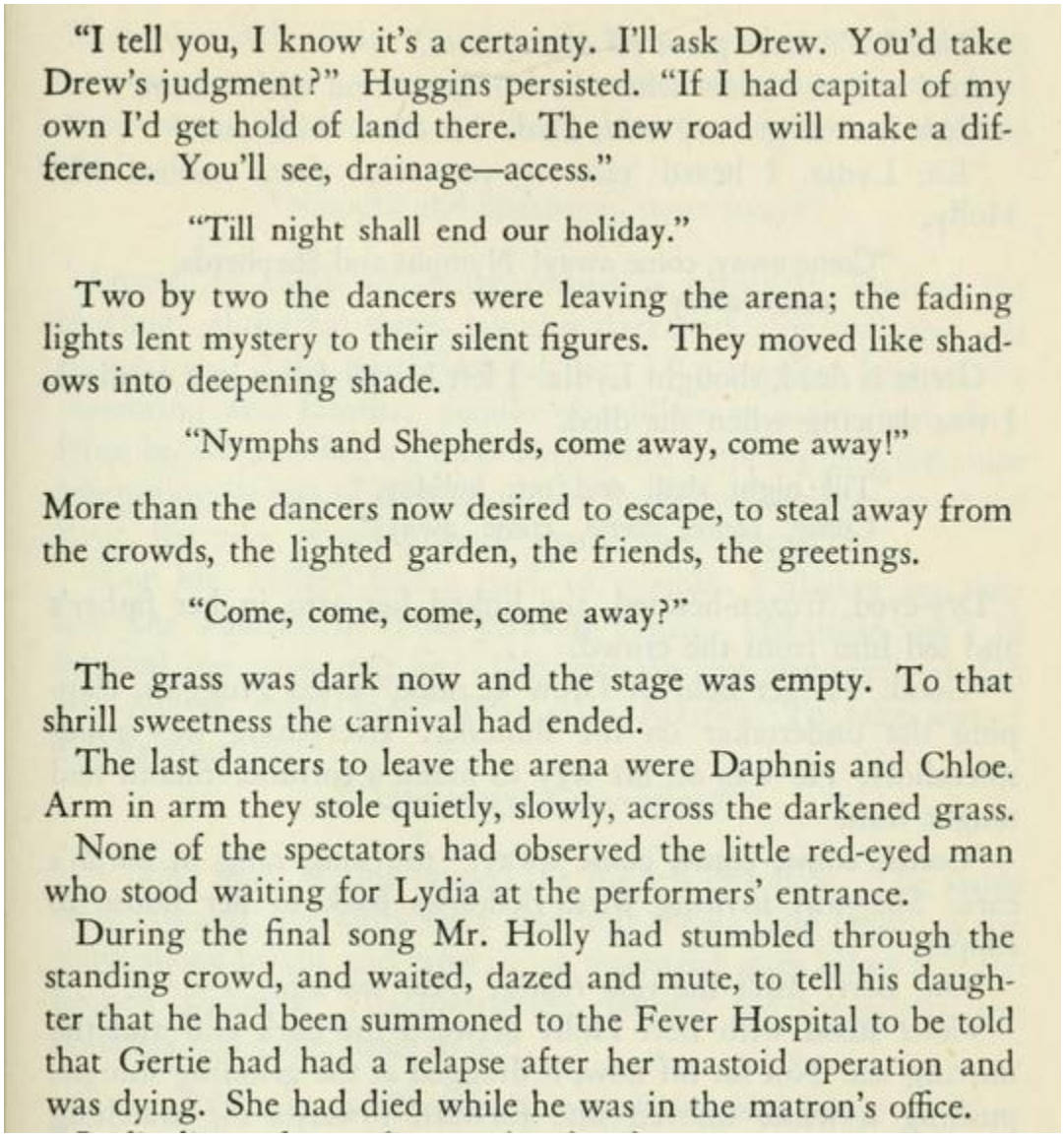
[42] For Debra Rae Cohen, Chris's depiction of Monkey Island "links Chris specifically with the aesthetics of the Georgian poets." (78) She draws an extensive parallel between Chris's likening to "a happy swimmer breaking through a wave that has swept him far inshore" (29) with Rupert Brooke's sonnet "Peace" (1914). This parallel expands further West's use of the escapist pastoral, for according to Gifford, "When the pastoral is merely escapist, as in the anthologies of the Georgian poets after the First World War, there is an implicit attempt on the part of the writer to resist return, to stay out there in the safely comforting location of retreat, in their case in the countryside of a mythic Old England where stability and traditional values were located." (81)

episode at the Nuttall farm reminds him of his friendship with Joan and of his father's dedication to him. His other experiences outside of the city, especially on the seaside, enclose his connection to others[43]: his trip with Fiona to Eastbourne in 1990 recalls his childhood outing to Weston-super-Mare in 1969 with his parents, and contrasts with Michael's transfixing isolation throughout the novel. In *What a Carve Up!* and *The Return of the Soldier*, the pastoral stands as "an innocent alternative to ambition, disturbance and war" (Williams 1973, 24): the rural shelters Michael and Chris from psychological torment, and acts as a safeguard against the political turmoil of the 1990s and the 1910s. In this outward movement to the countryside, the use of the pastoral is, according to Gifford, "a retreat from politics into an apparently aesthetic landscape that is devoid of conflict and tension" (11) However, the escapist pastoral of Coe and West indirectly sheds light on the fragmentation brought about by political decisions (war in the case of Chris, Thatcherite pervasion for Michael) and adverts for a reappraisal of ethics in a society which disrupts experience and precludes ethical bonds. In the words of Nicole Rizzuto, "[the] portrayal of Monkey Island illustrates the modern novel's struggle to consolidate fragments of space, as landscape, into a unified whole called the nation" (11) – the inn and the farm act as a form of *mirage* destined to fade in the face of war or social inequalities.

According to Gifford, the pastoral is a protean mode of representation, which can "be a mode of political critique of present society." (11) If Lanchester, Coe and West highlight, to a certain extent, "the nation's present discontent" (Berberich 2006, 209) by "celebrating the countryside", they nonetheless partake in its idealisation. Interestingly enough, the only regional novel of the corpus, *South Riding*, actually subverts the code of the pastoral by pointing out its diverting technique. Coming back to the classical Greek pastoral which was "conceived rather more poetically as one with nymphs, fauns and satyrs of an older world," (Short 136) Holtby stages the mythical creatures at the occasion of the annual carnival organised to raise money for Kingsport Hospital, where the children choir call on "Nymphs and Shepherds" to "come away" and to "frolic with laughter" (279). If the first chorus of the song is rendered entirely and proposes the audience to momentarily escape their mundane existence, the rest of the song is quickly interrupted by the citizens' thoughts, making the "piercing, disturbing" (279) pastoral invitation unanswered. The lyrics of the song are indeed interspersed with sexual

[43] In "Beauty and the Beastly Prime Minister" (2014), John Su underlines that "These [childhood] memories, combined with the brief seaside excursion with his neighbor and burgeoning love interest Fiona, are all explicitly cast as fragments of a lost past. [...] The beauty associated with both Fiona and rural England is guaranteed by their unambiguous separation from the beastly world of the Winshaws and current events. […]" (1088)

concerns ("Vi Alock remembers last night's lovemaking. […] Councillor Huggins reels from Bessy Warbuckle's threat of blackmail." Stoneman 145) and financial woes (Sarah Burton dreams about what she could do with her school if she had more money). Holtby's rewriting of the pastoral transforms the rural into "a resonant space", one where "dissonance is rendered all the more audible since green spaces are […] often praised for their supposed harmony." (Haigron 8) The pastoral moment is a deceitful one in Holtby's novel: the chorus is an adaptation of Henry Purcell's "Nymphs and Shepherds", written in 1692 for Thomas Shadwell's play *The Libertine* (1675). As Ian Spink explains in his analysis of the song (2000), the play is a rewriting of Don Juan and stages "so much rape and murder in it that it is difficult to take seriously." (522) Another of Mrs Hubbard's "indecent" (70) productions, the execution of "Nymphs and Shepherds" subverts the pastoral invitation on several occasions: not only is the appeal to diversion declined, but it also sheds light on the sprawling corruption of the South Riding, which goes so far as to affect the innocent children, who are left performing dubious plays –questioning in turn the responsibility of the adults. Holtby goes one step further when the pastoral moment is interrupted by the death of Gertie Holly:



"I tell you, I know it's a certainty. I'll ask Drew. You'd take Drew's judgment?" Huggins persisted. "If I had capital of my own I'd get hold of land there. The new road will make a difference. You'll see, drainage—access."

"Till night shall end our holiday."

Two by two the dancers were leaving the arena; the fading lights lent mystery to their silent figures. They moved like shadows into deepening shade.

"Nymphs and Shepherds, come away, come away!"

More than the dancers now desired to escape, to steal away from the crowds, the lighted garden, the friends, the greetings.

"Come, come, come, come away?"

The grass was dark now and the stage was empty. To that shrill sweetness the carnival had ended.

The last dancers to leave the arena were Daphnis and Chloe. Arm in arm they stole quietly, slowly, across the darkened grass.

None of the spectators had observed the little red-eyed man who stood waiting for Lydia at the performers' entrance.

During the final song Mr. Holly had stumbled through the standing crowd, and waited, dazed and mute, to tell his daughter that he had been summoned to the Fever Hospital to be told that Gertie had had a relapse after her mastoid operation and was dying. She had died while he was in the matron's office.

Figure 1: "Nymphs and Shepherds, Come Away," p.280 (*SR*)

Far from the metaphorical retreat mentioned by Williams, the pastoral actually drives people back to reality. The fragmentation of the lyrics goes together with the darkening stage, which provides a proper setting to Mr Holly's announcement. The fragmented and fragmenting intertextuality exposes the deceit of the pastoral through resonance and suggests that there is no place for innocence or escape: by breaking up the lyrics of the song, Holtby blasts the harmony of the South Riding and introduces greed, lust and death into the idealised rural, themes which resonate throughout the entire novel and which she shares with Stevie Smith's *The Holiday*, where Celia and Caz's adventure on the shores of the North Sea reinstates dissonance in the pastoral moment as well.

Celia finds "Grecian peace" (151) when visiting the seaside with her cousin Casmilus:

> I say: The sunlight is like the sunlight of Homer, it is eternal.
> After a while I look at the flowers again. I say: 'Or that fair field of Enna, where Proserpine gathering flowers, Herself a fairer flower by gloomy Dis was gathered, Which cost Ceres all that pain.' I look aslant at Casmilus and see what I expect to see, the old-fashioned look I remember so well from childhood, the old-fashioned look slatting through his eyes.
> Casmilus, I say, you need not look so furious, I dare not pluck the flowers. (150)

The "absolutely classical" (149) scenery of the seaside allows Celia to muse about the myth of Proserpine, "the maiden" who was abducted and taken to the underworld by Hades (or "Dis"), while she was picking flowers in the meadows of Enna, in Sicily. Through the words of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), Celia and Casmilus's pastoral stroll on the seaside cliffs of Lincolnshire allows for a rewriting of Prosperine's fate: Casmilus[44] forbids Celia to pick the flowers, asking her if she wants to "raise the devil" (149) by doing so. The intertextuality of *The Holiday* with both Greek mythology and Milton's epic fragments the pastoral moment, as Celia is denied the possibility to find "quiet" and "innocence": by reminding Celia of current corruptive politics and of the "devil of a middle situation" (54) that is the post-war, Caz prevents his cousin from knowing the same fate as Eve and Proserpine, whose betrayed innocence caused their respective fall from Heaven and descent to Hell. Through a real palimpsest of the pastoral tradition, Smith not only contests the idealisation of the rural but also questions the sustainability of Christian imagery in the post-war society: the resonant space of *The Holiday* conveys the incoherence of ideological discourses with the political realities of 1949, while hinting at the unviability of such manufactured harmony. Intertextuality and fragmentation allow Holtby and Smith to subvert pastoral codes and the ethics they propose. In this regard, *South Riding* and *The Holiday* can be defined as "anti-pastoral" novels, which are – following Gifford's work – designed to reveal the "self-deceiving constructs" (135) that are enclosed by the tradition, such as merriment (*SR)* and contemplation (*TH*). The aborted retreat in both *South Riding* and *The Holiday* exposes the inevitability of the political climate and confirms that "neither space nor place can provide a haven from the world." The pastoral scene becomes one of sterile distraction, devoid of ethical connection and political concerns. The multifaceted approach of the pastoral evidenced by the novels of the corpus highlights how the rural can be characterised as an "apolitical space" where "nothing happens" (Haigron 5): once the escapist

[44] Romana Huk reminds us that "Casmilus" was the Phoenician name for the God Hermes, messenger of the gods who was charged to conduct souls to the underworld (81). She also sees in this rewriting of the myth a "twentieth century psychomachia" in which "spirit and intellect remain split by desires for delivery *and* self-destruction." (184)

veil is lifted, and following Massey's work, it seems that state-of-the-nation novels endeavour to negotiate the "geometry of social/power relations" (Massey 2005, 4) when depicting the country and the city together.

B. Sclerotic idyll?

In "Rethinking the Rural Idyll" (2011), Jeremy Burchardt explains the time-space[45] logic behind the concept:

> The distinction between an organic, cohesive form of society once found in the countryside and the separated, disordered character of modern towns and cities was therefore well established in English culture by the early twentieth century. However, following Burke the contrast between town and country had been formulated historically rather than sociologically– as a contrast between past and present rather than between two forms of society potentially existing alongside each other in the present. 76

Burchardt sees in the construction of the rural idyll a dissociation between city and country, between past and present. The rural idyll creates a temporal and spatial fracture which weaves its way into state-of-the-nation novels. If the analysis of the pastoral in the novels of the corpus gave perspective on its nostalgic purport, Burchardt's analysis of the rural idyll calls for an investigation of the sociological reality of the countryside in its opposition to the city: it is essential to reinsert the political and the sociological into this dual configuration of English society for, as Massey argues, "the spatial organization of society, in other words, is integral to the production of the social, and not merely its result. It is fully implicated in both history and politics." (2005, 4)

The division between the country and the city is well anchored in the novels of the corpus, especially in *The Return of the Soldier*, where the country town of Harrowweald is compared to the suburban area of Wealdstone. While the Baldry residence "lies on the crest of Harrowweald, and from its windows, the eye drops to miles of emerald pastureland lying wet and brilliant under a westward line of sleek hills […]" (4), Wealdstone is "the name of the red suburban stain which fouls the fields three miles nearer London than Harrowweald." (9) The contrast established by Jenny's descriptions betrays the sociological reality of the country and

[45] In keeping with Massey's research, the expression will be used throughout the chapter. It stems from Massey's contention that "space must be conceptualized integrally with time; indeed that the aim should be to think always in terms of space-time." (1994, 2)

the city: while the picturesque landscape of Harrowweald is home to the gentry, the cityscape of Wealdstone is associated with industrial squalor. Almost renewing with the condition-of-England novel, the topography of West's fiction demonstrates how the spatial conditions the social and the ethical. Indeed, when first hearing from Margaret, Kitty rejects the name of the city as unworthy of her attention: "'Mrs. William Grey, Mariposa, Ladysmith Road, Wealdstone,' I don't know anybody in *Wealdstone*." (9) The italics circumscribe the city as an undesirable object, whose "stain" – of which Margaret is the embodiment – cannot be tolerated within the bounds of the countryside[46]. The relationship with the other becomes geographically determined and fragmented, for it follows the ideological lines of the city and the country. As Duggan and Peeren argue, "dominant narratives of the rural" entail "social exclusion" (351): the rural idyll is in fact, contrary to Burke's observations, formulated sociologically. It is because Harrowweald and Wealdstone exist "alongside each other in the present" that Jenny and Kitty are able to make such a distinction between the two, and that Sukey, in *No Laughing Matter*, contemplates the countryside as her key to social mobility.

On the very first outing of the Matthews family "before the war", the young Sukey sees in the countryside the opportunity to live a better life:

> [Sukey] had known things would never be right until they got away from the fog *and* the smoke *and* the chimneys. […] All that fighting *and* bitterness *and* the dirty kitchen *and* unmade beds had been just because they had felt caged, their wild spirits bottled up, their wings clipped. (15, my emphasis)

Sukey's condemnation of the promiscuous and industrial London recalls that of Kitty and Jenny. Through a symmetrical accumulation, she associates her family's behaviour with the urban atmosphere she so despises and attributes their disconnection to the restrictive bounds of the city. According to her, the animalistic Matthews ("caged", "wild spirits" with "wings") can only hope to move to the countryside to improve their condition – a goal which Sukey, later referred to as "the country one" by her brother Marcus (434), achieves when she marries a

[46] John Batchelor perfectly summarises the dichotomy between country and city in Edwardian fiction, and the rejection of the emerging "hybrid" suburban man by contemporary writers: "Forster on the whole deplores the suburbs. […] Wells in *Tono-Bungay* (1909) sees them as a form of morbid, diseased growth. […] Forster, Kenneth Grahame, Saki, Edward Thomas, W.H. Hudson and Kipling, subscribes to the myth of England as a golden rural world, a place where right feeling is still to be found." (130-131) By making Margaret in charge of Chris's cure, West not only rejects the national myth of the rural but also places herself in direct opposition to Edwardian male writers, as the suburban woman comes and exposes the falsities of the rural idyll.

school teacher and moves to the West country[47]. Her personal rural idyll is one which smooths over her relatives' eccentricity. If her depiction of the countryside corroborates Jenny and Kitty's vision of Harrowweald as a green sanctuary, their overt contempt for the city actually challenges the construction of the rural idyll as "an idealisation of actual English country life and its social and economic relations." (Williams 1973, 26) As a matter of fact, Kitty, Jenny and Sukey's prejudice erase the fantasy of an "organic and cohesive" form of society, as they discursively delineate the country from the city, the proper from the improper. The women's attitude towards the city and the country is, in this regard, reminiscent of H.G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay* (1909) which, according to Williams, laid bare the reality of the countryside as a "closed and complete social system" (Wells 10) dominated by the gentry. Williams argues that

> If the ugliness and meanness of industrialism and urbanism were the cancerous results of an outgrown but still rigid and stupid system, there was a new way of opposing the city which not only did not depend on an idealised version of a rural order but saw just that order as part of the disease. (1973, 230)

Like Wells, West and Wilson shed light on the geopoethics of the nation, and show how the city first developed as an extension of the agrarian capitalist order dominating the countryside (Williams 1973, 146), which still remains powerful at the turn of the twentieth century. The ethical promise of the idyll no longer holds, since the countryside becomes a space of exclusion, which is actually mirrored by the divisive London (which is "only a greater country town" for Wells (10)). The rural idyll functions around an illusory ethical superiority of the country over the city, which actually disguises the economic and political reality of both places, ruled by the élite. The force of the rural idyll resides in its capacity to gloss over the tensions between the country and the city: the ideological strictures of this opposition through West and Wilson's novels raise the question of the economic disparities between the country and the city, especially in the face of the contemporary urban sprawl.

The novels of the corpus allow the reader to follow the expansion of the city of London and the development of economic tensions with the country. If West and Wilson' works show how the rural idyll is constructed along past ideological lines which can be traced back to the dominating gentry and landowning aristocracy, they also depict the industrialisation of England

[47] Towards the end of the novel, she reflects on her past as she comes back to her parents' house for the last time: "She'd been determined to get away and she had. Here in this kitchen she'd fought smells, and dirt and grease, and *won*." (427, my emphasis) The country and the city represent two opposite fates for Sukey, who sees the countryside as the only viable option.

(with "railway arches" (*TRS* 39) for instance) which redefined the interaction between the country and the city. In fact, Williams explains that because of the expansion of London, "the country was transformed to supply the city. [...] It was a case of a capital city drawing the character of an economy and a society into its extraordinary centre", which created an "unequal interaction between country and city." (1973, 147) *South Riding* offers a first look at this discrepancy by staging an encounter between the bankrupt Robert Carne and his town-bound brother William. While Robert is astonished by his brother's luxurious house in Harrogate, William expresses envy for Robert's country life:

> 'It's all very well for you, Bob,' wailed Will Carne. 'Open air, good country food, your own farm, no worries, plenty of exercise, regular food. You look marvellous, marvellous. Jove, I'd give a lot to feel really fit again." […]
>
> 'You know, I often think I wouldn't mind being back at Maythorpe. Peace Fresh air.' […]' (290-291)

Will's countryside fantasy contrasts with Robert's own experience of the rural: the dereliction of Maythorpe Hall and the ongoing post-war economic depression ((Mrs Beddows underlines that "It's not been a good time for farmers since the War" (475)) led him to go to his brother in the first place to borrow money. By imposing the rural idyll onto his brother, William actually reverses the situation and ends up asking Robert for money, so that he can afford to go on holiday to France. Lisa Regan considers this interaction to be emblematic of the country's subjection to the city:

> *South Riding* can be read as Holtby's attempt to assume what she saw as the novelist's responsibility to reveal and interpret the realities of rural life for the benefit of those in the town. When the county squire Robert Carne is forced to venture into urban Harrogate to beg a loan from his architect brother, he ends up being the lender, despite being on the verge of bankruptcy. (2009, 143)

Holtby indeed mocks William Carne's arguments when his brother reveals he is bankrupt, for "Will had immediately devised a dozen ways in which he could procure [money] […] It appeared that [Robert] was simply smothered by his great possessions." (291) Holtby's use of indirect speech illustrates William's monopoly of the conversation: the two pages devoted to the interaction between the two brothers are in fact a succession of William's comments, musings and other lamentations, leaving no room for Robert's own words, if not for two nominal sentences ("Foreman." (290); "No." (291). William's plethora shows how the rural is simultaneously absorbed and determined by the rule of the city, which in turn metonymically

exposes the fragmentation of ethical ties at a familial and national level. Holtby discredits the rural idyll by raising questions of ethical and economic responsibility in light of the asymmetrical relationships between the country and the city. Furthermore, William's association of the country with exercise and "fresh air" undermines his brother's reliance on the land. Short explains that this contrast was part of the growing "social gulf between those who consumed landscapes for pleasure and those whose very livelihoods were threatened by the landscape changes" (139) at the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This divide was surely exacerbated throughout the twentieth century as well, as evidenced by the tensions between the two Carnes during the Great Slump and by the later novels of the corpus.

This opposition between leisure and livelihood takes indeed another turn in the twenty-first century, especially since from the 1970s on, "Prosperity remained concentrated in London and the new towns located within hailing distance of London." (Bronstein and Harris, 256) The growing polarisation between centre and periphery amplifies the concomitant idealisation and subjugation of the rural by the city. In *Capital*, Roger's trip to Norfolk is a striking twenty-first-century example of the divide evoked by Short:

> Shooting was very much in fashion in the City and this weekend brought bragging rights. The beaters, who had gone out in advance, were waiting in the next field. The idea was to stand around near the copse and kill the pheasants which the beaters would drive up into the air. The pheasants were tame for the most part, and it was some work getting them to take off in order for them to be shot; so many of them would then be killed that there was no market for their meat. The majority of the pheasants were simply buried. A tractor would come and plough them under the earth. Roger felt it was hard to feel that was anything other than a slightly revolting sign of excess, of waste. But the shooting itself was good fun. (98)

Hunting, now devoid of its primary alimentary goal, becomes an unnecessary urban extravaganza. The rural idyll is now flourishing, as leisure overcomes former means of livelihood: the domestication of the pheasants and their needless deaths let Lanchester's cynicism towards excessive consumption transpire. Their "bragging rights" are turned into ridicule, at least for the reader: Roger, if briefly concerned by such ridiculous waste, remains oblivious to the urban idealisation and appropriation of the rural and sees it, like William Carne, as a space for "good fun." The lavishness of the trip subjugates the countryside to the new economic order of (the) Capital, where bankers can "impersonate a country squire" (97) for a day, making their trip a rural performance rather than an authentic experience. Wearing expensive "gear" (94) and hiring beaters to present them with tamed pheasants, Roger and his

colleagues instrumentalise the rural for and at leisure. The progressive evolution of the economic ties between country and city creates another fracture, one which suggests that the rural is a sclerotic space which only becomes alive at the city's will. The subjugation of the countryside calls for a further investigation of its political reality, one that looks beyond the rural idyll and dives into its actual social and political system.

According to Matthew Hart[48], the Great Depression allowed for the development of the regional novel, with the emergence of J.B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934) and Dorothy L. Sayers's *The Five Red Herrings* (1931). "Designated until 2003 by the Royal Society of Literature as a signal example of the royal novel" (99), *South Riding* dives into the complexities of the rural at a time of economic and technologic disruption, for the development of road and railway constructions contrasted with the ongoing Great Slump. Mrs Beddows points out the particular status of Kiplington, as Sarah Burton undergoes an interview with the Board of Education:

> 'Now then, Miss Burton, you've had a very interesting life and met very interesting people. I wonder if you know what you'll be in for, in a little-out-of-the-way town like this? Some people call Kiplington the last town in England, though of course *we* don't think so. But it's not pretending it's the hub of the universe. […] Now, the point is, can you throw yourself into the kind of world you'll have to face here?' (25-26)

The geographical lines of England in *South Riding* follow the polarising pattern of centre and periphery: the vibrant heart of the country, London, is opposed to the marginal Kiplington, whose rural life is deemed dull in comparison. But if Mrs Beddows pictures London as a place of opportunity and stimulation, she does not, however, see Kiplington as an "apolitical space". Her first encounter with Sarah is mirrored at the end of Holtby's novel, when the headmistress wonders whether she belongs to the South Riding (i.e., to the italicised "we" of Mrs Beddows). The county alderman is quick to dismiss her fears and underlines their responsibility to the inhabitants of the South Riding: "all this local government, it's just working together – us ordinary people, against the troubles that afflict all of us – poverty, ignorance, sickness, isolation – madness." (495) Emma Beddows transgresses the rural idyll by reinserting social and political problems to the countryside: far from depicting an ideal society where "experience and community [are] essentially transparent" (Williams 1973, 165), her comments expose the

[48] in Casario, "Regionalism in English fiction between the wars", pp. 89-10.

strictures of local government, as well as the social and political fragmentation of the countryside. With *South Riding*, Holtby manages to demonstrate how the challenges of the nation resonate through the rural, despite the geographic delineation of England. Her oscillation between particularism and universalism enables her to transcend the idealisation of the rural, by mixing the diverse personal experiences of the South Riding inhabitants with ongoing political matters such as "rural poverty, disease, unwanted pregnancy, council plans for road and house construction, council corruption and bankruptcy", offering a real "piece of social investigation" (Regan 2009,144) which reasserts the need for ethical commitment in an unescapable political, giving way to "a regional tale perhaps but also a social problem novel of wider significance. (Shaw 2012, 243) *South Riding* embraces fragmentation (as evidenced by its archival construction) as a positive force for action, change and progress, resulting in the unification of the inhabitants. The countryside is no longer an empty idyll determined by "the absence of pride and greed and calculation" (Williams 1973, 28), but rather a true counterpart to the city where politics and ethics influence one another, as evidenced in both *South Riding* and *What a Carve Up!*, when Michael travels to Sheffield:

> I'm not sure whether this difference lay in the architecture, or in the faces of the people surrounding me, or the clothes which they wore, or even in the knowledge that only a few miles away stretched vast and lovely tracts of moorland: but perhaps it went deeper than any of these things. Joan told me about Sheffield's nickname – 'the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire' – and sang the praises of David Blunkett who at this time led the city's Labour Council. Coming from London, where opposition to Mrs Thatcher was virulent but fatally dispersed and fragmented. I was immediately filled with envy at the thought of a community which could so closely unite itself around a common cause. (273)

Michael's dislocation from London to Sheffield prompts an ethical renewal that differs from the ones he experienced on the seaside or at Mr Nuttall's farm: devoid of nostalgia, his trip to the North of England is met with the political realities of Thatcherism, which bring together Sheffielders. Like Holtby, Coe suggests that the ethical ties of the countryside run "deeper" than green landscapes: Sheffield illustrates how history, politics and ethics are intertwined within a single locus. The smaller-scale city is seen as a solution to the frantic and fragmented social and political composition of London. As Massey argues, "The labour-movement tradition of Sheffield, for instance, has been a strength in many ways, a resource to be drawn upon" (2005, 140). Sheffield both mirrors and refracts the political reality of Thatcherism, while proposing an alternative to the wrongful depoliticisation of areas outside the capital. The union

of Sheffielders around the attack of HMS Sheffield during the Falklands War in 1982 shows how the loss of others reactivate ethical responsibility towards the other, for Joan laments "it was as if we'd all lost relatives on that ship." (274) The June 1982 episode in Sheffield reveals how individuals are inevitably, according to Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*, "from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being", "implicated in lives that are not our own." (28) The re-politicisation of the rural and of the periphery reasserts the need for an ethical connection. The novels' pastoral evocations allow for a deeper understanding of their metonymic geography: by reverting to the long-established rural idyll, they expose processes of diversion in the face of political turmoil. The universalising words of Mrs Beddows and Joan, in light of Butler's remark, reaffirm the undeniability and inescapability of an ethics of responsibility which transcends time and space. However, the diachronic analysis of state-of-the-nation novels discloses the fragility of such ethics: the opposition between universal responsibility on the one hand and particularistic geopoethics on the other prompts the aperture of a dialogue between the national and the global, so as to identify and understand the conditions of possibility of ethical responsibility.

2. "Places in flux"

In keeping with Massey's research, Christopher Tilley argues that

> Places are both spatial and temporal. They are intimately connected to history, the past, and hold out the promise of a desired future. As such they are in flux rather than static nodes or points in a landscape, and their qualities and character can only be understood relationally with reference to other places, and on different scales like a series of Chinese boxes. To understand the powers of place today one needs to work back and forth between the local and the global. (21)

Aiming at reinstating spatial dynamism, Tilley contends that space and time move along the same horizontal axis. In this regard, places become imbricated in one another, rather than being islands unto themselves: national territory is composed a multitude of places ("the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace" as Massey points out [1994, 4]) which, much like the individuals that inhabit them, are interrelated. This intertwinement surely contrasts with the homogenisation proposed by nationalist discourse and raises the question of the depiction of places in state-of-the-nation novels, for their apparent reliance on spatial metonymy seems to open a dialogue between "the local and the global" while also relying on fixed tropes of English literature, which tend to suggest an artificial permanence of place in the face of elusive history.

The primary analysis of the country and the city offered a glimpse into the metonymic construction of the nation, as argued by Scutt. In light of Tilley's argument, I aim at exploring how ethical responsibility is made (im)possible through the metonymic configuration of the house (the local) and of the Empire (the global).

A. English *ēthos*

As "dwelling, abode, residence" make up the first definition of *ēthos*[49], the house is a trope with historical significance in English literature. From Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" (1616) to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1841), from *Howards End* to *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) to Darlington Hall in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), the house – and especially, as will be seen in this chapter, the country house – is an ambivalent entity where time both passes and freezes. The novelistic tradition of the English house is, like the rural, mainly concerned with nostalgia. The phantasmagoric perception of the past is, as John Su demonstrates, ethically problematic: it heavily relies "on relationships and communities that could have been" (12) rather than focuses on the connections which are actually being woven or broken. This tradition certainly partakes in what both Massey and Tilley reject: a static vision of place, where the passing of time is seen as hazardous. The novels of the corpus address this ambiguous relationship to space-time: like their use of the metonymy of family and of the countryside, state-of-the-nation novels also exploit the trope of the house as a standing image of the nation. In "Habitations of the Past: of Shrines and Haunted Houses" (2005), Catherine Bernard highlights the predominance of the house in the history of the English novel and defines

> the metonymy of the house, great or humble, as a trope standing for society. […] In it, collective time and a powerful sense of the local, family history and national history merge and are subsumed under a common political economy. The law of the house becomes the law of the country. (161-162)

Bernard sees the house as the conflation of space and time: the metonymy of the house allows for an imbricated construction of individual story with national history within a single locus. This intertwinement with history becomes contentious in light of the novelistic tendency to nostalgia as analysed by critics[50]: it suggests, if not an erasure, a poetics of conservation (which

[49] See the definition of "ἦθος" in Franco Montanari, ed. *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*. Consulted online on 09/02/2021 https://dictionaries-brillonline-com.acces.bibliotheque-diderot.fr/search#dictionary=montanari&id=51487 First published online: July 2015.

[50] Three references are particularly helpful here: John Su's *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (2005) addresses the English literary tradition of nostalgia, while David Cannadine's chapter "Nostalgia" in *The Pleasures*

transforms places into "static nodes") rather than one of reflective fragmentation (exposing "places in flux"). Yet, this predominance seems to be questioned in state-of-the-nation novels, which *a priori* subvert the trope and, rather than lament the "relationships that could have been", depict houses which betray derelict ethics.

Capital and *No Laughing Matter* both enter the London house (respectively in Clapham and in South Kensington) and take opposite roads: if the residences on Pepys Road are conspicuously valuable, n°52 Gillbrooke Street (SW1) "ponged a bit […] of mice and mould and general decay." (*NLM* 431) While Lanchester's and Wilson's fictional dwellings certainly stand on the two ends of the housing spectrum, they nonetheless reflect the same ethical fragmentation. The recent gentrification of Clapham turned houses into "actors in their own right" (*C* 5) with "wishes and needs of their own." (6) There is almost no place for nostalgia in *Capital*, for the residents – except Petunia – are oblivious of and foreign to the history of the road. The materialistic will of the houses scoffs the original aspirational lower-middle-class and erases its trace. Houses become alive on Pepys Road, while the neighbourhood goes dormant: the personification of the houses contrasts with the absence of human life, as "you saw fewer people in the street in the daytime." (6) As life recedes inside, the houses absorb and dissolve ethical bonds, for the street turns into an endless scenery of constructions and deliveries – leading Katy Shaw to conclude that "The inhabitants of Pepys Road are 'neighbours' in spatial terms only; in reality, their lives barely brush against one another." (2014, 49) If a dialogue between the local and the global exists through the telescopic system of the metonymy, it is but a partitioned one: the prologue of *Capital* asserts the power of money over ethics before the different vignettes, which surely complements Shaw's argument, deal individually with the inhabitants. Lanchester does not mourn possible relationships but rather sees the very absence of relationships as a consequence of gentrification: the plethora of services delivered to the houses[51] in 2008 contrasts with the previous *ethos* of the road, where people had "experienced

of the Past (1989) highlights its political resonance. Christine Berberich devoted an entire article to the construction of Englishness, where she analyses pre-war nostalgia in poems by Wilfried Sassoon, for instance ("This Green and Pleasant Land: Cultural Constructions of Englishness." in Robert Burden and Stephan Khol, eds. *Landscape and Englishness*. Rodopi, 2006. 207-224).

[51] The list reads as such: "Vans from Berry Brothers and Rudd brought wine; there were two or three different vans of dog-walkers; there were florists, Amazon parcels, personal trainers, cleaners, plumbers, yoga teachers, and all day long, all of them going up to the houses like supplicants and then being swallowed up by them. There was laundry; there was dry-cleaning, there were FedEx and UPS, there were dog beds, printer ribbons, garden chairs, vintage film posters, same-day DVD purchases, eBay coups, eBay whims and impulse buys, mail-order bicycles." (6) More than conspicuous consumption, this enumeration exposes the rise of convenience-based relationships (trainers, cleaners, etc.) which are essentially transactional. Chapter 5 further addresses the transformation of ethics into commodity under the rule of capitalism and neoliberalism.

everything that can happen in the run of life, birth and death and love and hate and happiness and sadness and complex feelings and simple feeling and every shade of emotion in between." (4) A reversal takes place within the first pages of *Capital*: ethics become a static node, while the houses themselves are "in flux", constantly being "serviced" (6) and renovated. The houses are only spatially interconnected, suggesting that life inside barely differs from what happens – or rather does not happen – in the neighbourhood. The inside/outside dialectic finds new meaning under the clout of capitalism, since the title of the novel implies that "Pepys Road stands for the capital city which itself stands for the capitalist system at large." (Bernard 2015a, 147)

Wilson uses the same telescopic device in *No Laughing Matter*, as the Matthews' residence, n°52 Gillbrook Street, is solely referred to as "n°52" or "52" by its inhabitants. The metonymic number hides the abusive "ethos of the house" (*NLM* 120), from which the children "[have] all suffered." The scattered references to 52 unite the Matthews children throughout Wilson's novel. In fact, at Gladys' trial in 1937, Margaret and Rupert hold hands as their parents refused to come to the magistrates' court, while their respective spouses show relative support: "[Margaret] let her hand remain in Rupert's, for this belonged to their childhood, this was part of the nightmare of 52." (407) 52 is simultaneously traumatic and bonding, and stands as a paradoxical *ēthos*: it connects the siblings to one another while dividing them further apart, as each tries to do away with their past life and consequently drifts away from the others. The SW1 house is both a "static node" and a "place in flux": it grants the children escape and welcome evolution, while constantly reminding them of their parents' abuse. Book Four of *No Laughing Matter* marks this duality: in 1946, the children navigate post-war society without the nagging presence of their parents, whose countryside hotel was bombed during the Blitz, and go back to 52 to sort their parents' possessions. Family and global histories merge within the walls of 52, as Peter Conradi rightly points out that

> The children, now middle-aged, return home to dispose of it in two senses, both materially, and also to judge and assess their childhood, what it has made of them and what they have made of it. It is – no accident, this – the year of the Nuremberg trials, which Quentin will attend. Margaret judges their communal childhood as a "life of desolation" (p.428); indeed the fearful recollection of it makes Sukey weep. (49)

52 is a deeply ambivalent space, which allows for both interconnectedness and isolation. Far from providing security and comfort, the progressive dissolution of the house throughout the

years mirrors the fragmentation of ethical bonds and the blasting impact of years of abuse. The cataclysmic world events witnessed by the children conflate with the children's personal stories. Wilson puts in perspective the microcosm of 52 with the global trauma of gas chambers twice, through an anachronistic reference to "the ovens" (125) when the Countess wants to get rid of the children's newly-rescued kittens. As Conradi shows, references to the First World War during the first occurrence of the Game and to the post-Blitz/pre-Nuremberg trial periods during the last instalment, "relativize questions of guilt and responsibility." (39) The Nuremberg trials do not offer a simple backdrop to the middle-aged Matthews' ponderations but deride the political economy of 52 and indirectly calls for ethical questioning in light of world events. The metonymical value of the SW1 dwelling, like the houses on Pepys Road, certainly leads to "work back and forth between the local and the global" to grasp the ramifications of ethical responsibility on individual and collective levels, which are – both in 1946 and 2008 – prone to fragmentation. Through the trope of the house, Wilson and Lanchester indubitably open a dialogue on the law of the country: rather than offering place as a securing device against fragmentation, the house becomes a space where ethical relationships are submitted to tensions and discomfort. The antithetical approaches of the two authors – one making the house sturdier, the other weaker – both reveal the fragility of ethics in the face of history. By entering the intimacy of the home – or lack thereof – Wilson and Lanchester both engage with corruptive individualism and materialism. *No Laughing Matter* and *Capital* challenge Gill Richard's contention that the house "is the chosen emblem of what the author considers humane order and enduring values" (7) and "antithetical to the dislocation and isolation [writers and readers] actually know." (17) The writers of the corpus certainly deny the viability of the values: Gillbrooke Street and Pepys Road actually showcase their inhabitants' disconnection, which is concomitant with the respective *zeitgeist* of the post-war and of capitalist London. If Richard sees the house trope as a token of "continuity", I contend that this metonymy no longer stands after 1918 and that the house is very much a token of fragmentation of the historical and literary past.

Symbol of the landowning aristocracy of the 17th and 18th century, the country-house encloses national glory and prosperity which, if it cannot be protected from the passing of time, must constantly be celebrated. Although "After World War I, the continuing economic difficulties Great Britain suffered, if nothing else, guaranteed that the rate of estate closures would increase for decades to come," (Su 2005, 124) David Cannadine (writing in 1989) notes

that "the plague of the country-house nostalgia rages with ferocious, uncritical and seemingly incurable vigour." (100) The decline of the English estate causes its symbolic and nostalgic permanence: Cannadine underlines that times of crisis during the 20th century triggered a political "shift to the right" (257) and a "[conservative] version of the past" (258), which found its *raison d'être* in the celebration and preservation of the country-house. Su focuses on *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Remains of the Day*, arguing that while the latter certainly engages with the ethical problems a nostalgic vision of England entails (121-122), the former is a surprising addition to Evelyn Waugh's fiction, as the novelist previously mocked the tradition of the estate novel in *Handful of Dust* in 1934 (120). In light of Cannadine's observations, it is essential to note that both Ishiguro and Waugh address the nostalgic ethos of the country-house at a time of political unrest (in the postwar climate for Waugh in 1945 and in the midst of Thatcherite policies in 1989 for Ishiguro) – an agenda also taken up by Winifred Holtby in 1936 during the Great Slump and Jonathan Coe in 1994 after Thatcher's two mandates. Once "one of the show places in the South Riding," (473) Maythorpe Hall is, in 1936, "crumbling to pieces" (8) over its residents' heads. The degradation of this landmark symptomatically reflects its owner's destitution: if "the Carnes owned Maythorpe for five hundred years" and "their name was power" (474), Robert Carne has to mortgage the country-house to keep providing for his daughter and his committed wife. Carne progressively sells his properties, from portraits to the estate itself, which will become, at the end of *South Riding*, an institution for mental health patients. The fragmentation of Maythorpe Hall not only mirrors farmers' living conditions during the Depression, but also suggests the necessary erosion of tradition for progress to emerge. The fragmentation of Maythorpe Hall sees the destruction of the country-house trope as a static node: Carne's opposition to Sarah Burton's progressive ideas[52] partakes in his fight to "hold the South Riding in its old likeness, to preserve tradition, to dam the tide of change" (507), yet, as Lisa Regan contends, "it is therefore especially poignant that Carne dies by falling off that eastern edge to bring about the end of a traditional way of life and pave the way for new innovations to take place within the community." (2009, 138) Through Carne's death and Maythorpe Hall's reconversion, Holtby instils movement and advocates for progress. By destroying the country-house, she refutes any conservative version of the past and sees fragmentation as a force for evolution – but if change is welcome, it is also

[52] In the epilogue to *South Riding*, Sarah wistfully comes to the conclusion that "her success must be his failure. All this transformation of the country, these new villages, this school of glass and chromium and cement, all these were witnesses to his defeat." (507)

questioned, for Carne represents one of the last standing obstacles to the corruption of councilman Snaith. His scheme to convert Maythorpe Hall into an institution for mentally-ill children sadistically contrasts with Carne's ethical responsibility towards his wife: far from an ethical spur towards the ill, the transformation of Maythorpe Hall into a care facility is but another way for Snaith to "set his mark upon Yorkshire." (460) The renovation of Maythorpe Hall paradoxically stands for both progress and corruption, and suggests that the country-house is irrevocably the locus of power – the political and economic climate only shifting the nature of this power. As Raymond Williams argues in *The Country and the City*,

> [The] point is that the country-house, in the twentieth century, has just this quality of abstract disposability and indifference of function. The real houses can be anything from schools and colleges and hospitals to business retreats, estate offices and subsidised museums. In the same way, […] they can be the centres of isolated power, graft or intrigue, or what are called the 'status symbols' - meaning the abstractions - of success, power and money which are founded elsewhere but left conveniently out of sight. (250)

Power can dispose at will of the country-house while needing its symbolic clout: while *South Riding* accounts for such expendability, *What a Carve Up!* sees the final stages of the evolution of the trope. An example of the "true fate of the country-house novel" (Williams 1973, 249), Coe's whodunnit is partly staged at Winshaw Towers – the sombre country residence of the Thatcherite siblings. As she arrives on the grounds for the first time, Phoebe – the artist who agrees to become Mortimer Winshaw's personal nurse – notices the mansion's dereliction:

> their windscreen and roof were under constant attack from vines, ivy, creepers and overhanging branches of every description. And when they finally emerged into what was left of the daylight, the same neglect was evident on every side: the lawns were overgrown and choked with weeds, the location of paths and flowerbeds would only be guessed at, and most of the outbuildings seemed in a state of near-collapse, with cracked windows, crumbling masonry and doors hanging off rusty hinges. (187)

The overrun greenery mirrors the corruptive ethos of the mansion's lodgers. The carelessness of the garden matches the crumbling aspect of the building, which infuse the scenery with a Gothic atmosphere[53] – a macabre impression reinforced by Hilary's ominous welcome address ("Is it your first time at the house of horrors, my dear?" 192). Coe's Gothic take on the country-

[53] In his introduction to *Gothic Literature*, Andrew Smith points out recurrent features in novels of the genre: "Representations of ruins, castles, monasteries, and forms of monstrosity, and images of insanity, transgression, the supernatural, and excess, all typically characterise the form." (4)

house superbly corroborates Williams's observation on the trope, as the oxymoronic "squat, forbidding mansion" (430) is a remote token of the Thatcherite fragmenting power. However, Coe takes the metonymy one step further: if in the detective story, according to Williams, "all real questions of social and personal relationship are left aside except in their capacity to instigate an instrumental deciphering" (1973, 250), Coe certainly addresses these issues. While true that the Winshaw siblings, like Michael and Phoebe, have no clue about the perpetrator of the murders (therefore only being united in their deciphering quest), the very nature of Mortimer's "carve up" is deeply social and personal. For Mortimer, his killing spree is a way to find redemption[54]: each murder matches the victim's corruptive behaviour and is a re-enactment of what the siblings did to the nation. Both a personal vendetta and a last act of justice, Mortimer considers his gesture to be the counterpoint to his relatives' irresponsibility. Nonetheless, Mortimer is actually as unethical as his family, for, as Paul Ricœur argues, "Each face is a Sinai that prohibits murder." (1996, 336) The ethos of the house is therefore not contradicted, but rather reinforced: through a magistral *tour de force*, Coe subverts the trope of the country-house by implying that the values it embodies are corrosive and unviable, while warning against their impermeability and persistence through humour[55]. John Su notes that Thatcherite discourse included a return to Victorian values, which heavily relied on the symbolism behind the country-house (2005, 119). His account corroborates Cannadine's observations on the rise of right-wing conservation movements at times of crisis, especially "in the long, lean years after 1974." (1989, 257) Coe's use of the trope certainly subverts such discourse: the final carve-up contrasts with the nationalistic stability described by Erikson while also showing the "uncritical" mist surrounding such symbols. Holtby and Coe both show the limits of the country-house trope, allowing them to address the ethical concerns which come with its perduring symbolism. Both writers use fragmentation as an ethical catalyst to shed light

[54] His confession to Michael reads as such: "I was born into money and like the rest of my family I was too selfish to want to do any good with it. Unlike them, at least, I never did anyone such harm. I thought I might redeem myself, slightly, by doing mankind a small favour before I died. Ridding the world of a handful of vermin." (484)

[55] Emma Parker also argues that "Since Thatcher's brutal social and economic policies were often justified as an inevitable response to a changing order, the novel implicitly likens Thatcherism to a slaughterhouse. In Part One, Dorothy literally slaughters the animals on her farm, Thomas and Mark are complicit in the slaughter of Iraqis by Saddam Hussein, Hilary cuts jobs and Henry slashes the NHS budget. In Part Two, poetic justice is meted out when the slaughterers become the slaughtered. However, in Part Two horror's subversive potential is diluted by humour. The 'horrific murders' at Winshaw Towers are described not in the manner of Franju's disturbing documentary but in the vein of classic post-war British comedies that lend their titles to all but the final chapter (498). Though the deaths are gruesome, they are presented as a 'macabre joke' (450), and the cartoonish, slapstick tone discourages sympathy for the selfish Winshaws and even permits pleasure to be taken in their demise." (in Tew 2018, 71-72)

on the notion of responsibility: the derelict ethos and ethics they depict pinpoints the necessity for change. "Whilst change is accepted" in Holtby's *South Riding* "its motives are questioned" (Gifford 74); Coe warns against repetition and false evolution. The ethos of Winshaw Towers far from ends with its inhabitants' death: its problematic permanence requires to look beyond the walls of the country-house so as to ponder what ethical responsibility truly implies, like Sarah Burton flying over the South Riding and watching Mayhorpe Hall's transformation.

South Riding and *What a Carve Up!* function around fragmentation as a driving ethical force, which suggests that Carne's confinement within Maythorpe Hall and Michael's untimely death within the grounds of Winshaw Towers are the results of a paralysing dogma, which contrives ethics. According to John Su,

> Because space is associated with stasis, individuals who define themselves in terms of particular places are perceived to lack the dynamism necessary to reject dogmatic beliefs and codes of behavior. Indeed, metaphorical and even literal dislocation is seen to be the necessary first step toward genuine ethical consciousness. (2005, 25)

Chris's amnesia in *The Return of the Soldier* actually allows him to uncover such a practice: his unfamiliarity with "all but the outer walls" (38) transforms Baldry Court into an inhospitable home, which only bears "the marks of Kitty's genius" and has no resemblance to the house he knew fifteen years before. Kitty's imprint on the house both denatures Chris's memory from the place and turns him into a stranger within his own home – letting him perceive its restrictive atmosphere. Jenny laments that "It was as though he were an outcast, and we who love him stout policemen. Was Baldry Court so sleek a place that the unhappy felt offenders there?" (25) Kitty's lavish *décor* segments space: Baldry Court becomes a liminal space whose ethos is restrictive and vain. Chris's shell-shock exposes his wife's cult of appearances, which Jenny – a sedentary resident of Baldry Court – sees as the epitome of happiness. However, Chris's physical and mental dislocation blasts the women's conception of responsibility: Jenny admits that "it had been our pretence that by wearing costly clothes and organizing a costly life we had been the servants of his desire." (50) Chris's amnesia nullifies the women's attempts to provide for him – here unveiling West's criticism of asymmetrical gender relations as unviable. The ethical question of Chris's recovery challenges all notions of comfort (both material and psychological): as "[strangeness] had come into the house" (23) *The Return of the Soldier* prefigures Freud's definition of the uncanny as "nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed." (148) The

return of the soldier injects dynamism to a polished and policed ethos. It forces the household to come to grips with its past and to take a "first step toward ethical consciousness", even though the ending – and Kitty's oblivious rejoicing at Chris's ambivalent recovery – hints at, as in *What a Carve Up!*, the persistence of Baldry Court's repressive ways. *The Return of the Soldier* oscillates between dynamism and paralysis by reuniting the home front with the battlefield: the grounds of Baldry Court become the locus of an ethical struggle, where the encounter with the familiar other traumatically happens anew.

If West's novel confronts class and gender conventions through the trope of the house, Stevie Smith certainly addresses lingering structures of power as well. Celia's eponymous holiday transports her from the suburbs of London to Lincolnshire. Like Wilson's 52, her Aunt Lion's house (where Celia resides as well) has resisted the Blitz: "Now the war is over my Aunt feels that the house must not be left; during the war it has stood so much so now it must not be left." (81) If the Matthews' residence in *No Laughing Matter* erodes through time, the house in *The Holiday* is, like its main inhabitant, profoundly static. Aunt Lion – as her name, reminiscent of England's national emblem, evidences – represents the country's "colonial rule" (Huk 183): the fragmentation of the city has left the house, and the Empire, apparently intact – oddly recalling Tilley's observation on the stability provided by nationalist discourse. The macrocosm of the house is once more a reflection of/on the state of the nation, as it exposes the lingering symbolism of an Empire on the brink of destruction. It takes a holiday, a journey to the heart of Lincolnshire to see signs of its actual decay:

> It was a truly desolate scene, such as I am partial to. […] The parkland, sunlit and remote, fell away from the river on the other side, and the grass growing on the gravel paths, and the untidy rhododendron bushes gave the whole thing an air of ramshackle aristocracy. A sarcophagus in the distance pointed to the tale of decay and put me in mind of Henry James's heroine, privately bred and fallen on hard times. (102)

The paralysis of the London house is contrasted by the deteriorating parkland of Heber's residence. Celia's mobility fosters a dialogue between the local and the global, by removing her from the microcosm of the house and enabling her to experience the world outside, to step into ethical consciousness: this opening of experience betrays the crumbling power of the Empire, as India's independence looms. The expanding garden progressively erases signs of a domestication (such as the gravel paths) which no longer holds. Celia attempts at re-apprehending England without its Empire and navigates between statis and "flux", henceforth

exploring the liminal state of the country at the end of the war and at the beginning of decolonisation. The immovable London house and the untended garden reveal both the permanence and the impracticality of the Empire: like Flora in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Chris's return to Baldry Court, Celia's walk in her uncle's estate opens up a dialogue with ghosts of the past and raises questions of good and evil, which lead Smith's protagonist to declare that "we are not innocent." (103) Like the other novels of the corpus, space and place grant Celia perspective and unmask personal and national interconnectedness when she – a child of the very same aristocracy she sees crumbling – ponders over the population's implication in the political decisions both at home and abroad. Throughout the corpus, continuity with the past is unsustainable: if the house still metonymically represents "the law of the country", it has been stripped from its static and conservationist appeal. Rather than staging "relationships that could have been", state-of-the-nation novels investigate the ones already existing at home and embrace fragmentation as an ethical catalyst – at least in local matters.

B. (Dis)connected land

At the time of writing, the English National Trust has recently launched the Colonial Countryside project. Dr Corinne Fowler, the lead expert of the investigation, seeks to study English country-houses and their ties to British colonial history, focusing on "the African, Caribbean and Indian connections"[56] of properties registered in the National Trust. The investigation has led to political backlash and threats from British tabloids, which Dr. Fowler recently addressed in an interview for *The Guardian*[57]. The tensions that arise from such a key project reflect the necessity to address, in a chapter on space and place in the English state-of-the-nation novel, the relationship with the Empire. Though the novels of the corpus all take place within the bounds of England and do not pretend to paint the state-of-the-Empire, they nonetheless refer, more or less obviously, to the outer reaches of the nation. As Edward Said contends in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993),

[56] See the webpage dedicated to the project: https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/colonial-countryside-project.
[57] Jessica Murray, "Politicians should not 'weaponise' UK history, says colonialism researcher." *The Guardian*, 22 February 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/feb/22/politicians-should-not-weaponise-uk-history-says-colonialism-researcher Accessed 3 March 2021.

> Without empire, I would go so far as saying, there is no European novel[58] as we know it, and indeed if we study the impulses giving rise to it, we shall see the far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism. Every novelist and every critic or theorist of the European novel notes its institutional character. (70)

Though Said focuses on eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, his study of the imbricated discursive patterns of literature and imperialism certainly needs to be transferred to the analysis of more contemporary state-of-the-nation novels and their evocation of the Empire. As he rides the plains of the South Riding one last time, Carne cannot help but think:

> He worshipped the Creator of earth and heaven, the Lord of Harvest, the Ancient of Days and Seasons, who had in his beneficent providence ordained that Yorkshire should be the greatest county in England, which was the grandest country in the world, the motherland of the widest empire, the undoubted moral leader of civilisation, the mistress of the globe. (424)

Carne's hyperbolic thoughts are British exceptionalism "in embryo": imperialist expansion is endowed with a messianic mission[59] which graciously imposes its (morally superior) law on the colonies. Yorkshire metonymically reflects the greatness of the Empire, while enabling an ideological dialogue between the global and the local. Carne's view is shared by other members of the South Riding, who also discursively segment space. The rector of Kiplington salutes Sarah Burton's teaching experience in South Africa[60], for he "was a great believer in the psychological influence of the great open spaces – especially those within the British Empire." (23) Peckover's reasoning follows an ambivalent dialectic of closing and opening: only the bounds of the vast Empire can "broaden the mind." (23) If the Empire could represent, in Carne's and Peckover's thoughts, an aperture of the country upon the rest of the world, their

[58] By "European novel", Said includes the English novel and especially works by George Eliot, Samuel Richardson and Charles Dickens.

[59] In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said explains the construction of imperialist discourse: "Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest *mission civilisatrice*." (xvi)

[60] The circumscribing words of Carne and Peckover certainly reveal Holtby's own vision of imperialist ideology, which she satirised in *Mandoa, Mandoa!* (subtly subtitled "A Comedy of Irrelevance"), published three years before *South Riding*, in 1933. Holtby, like Sarah Burton, travelled to South Africa, a journey which brought about an innovative apprehension of the colonies, as Lisa Regan argues: "what Holtby brings back with her from her adventure is actually a new mode of seeing which in fact counters the imperialist separation of metropole and its distant territories by deliberately merging and connecting Britain and Africa. […]" (2012, 8)

discourse nonetheless betrays the enclosing power which lies behind it. While Carne insists on the moral and geographical domination of England, Peckover both expands and restricts the mind to the confines of the Empire, therefore reasserting the power of the Crown in the process. As Massey contends, "All attempts to institute horizons, to establish boundaries, to secure the identity of places, can in this sense therefore be seen to be attempts to stabilise the meaning of particular envelopes of space-time." (1994, 5) In this regard, by circumscribing the Empire, Carne and Peckover seek to assert its dominance at a time of national impasse. Margaret Matthews operates in a similar way, as the Suez Crisis threatens her life in "*her* Cairo" (*NLM* 446): not only do the italics "break the text" (Regier 7), but they also encapsulate England's imperious presence on Egyptian soil. Margaret, like Carne and Peckover, attempts at "securing" an English-occupied Egypt which was under threat in 1956. The domineering italics become all the more absurd, as Margaret mentions that she never went to the desert or the city: she has stayed within the limits of Zamalek, a district of Gezira Island in Cairo – oddly reminiscent of her native insular England. *Her* Cairo therefore designates a phantasmagorical vision of the place, whose "envelope of space-time" is associated with the fate of England's colonial power. The Empire becomes a Foucauldian heterotopia, which "[juxtaposes] in a single real place several spaces" (1986, 25) and operates a back-and-forth movement between the local and the global. More importantly, Foucault considers that

> Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time-which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time. (26)

The heterotopia of the Empire emerges in *South Riding* and *No Laughing Matter* precisely when its future was compromised: the 1931 Statute of Westminster, giving Dominions the right to self-government, the 1935 Government of India Act and the demobilisation of British troops on the Suez Canal in 1956, partook – as can be seen through the characters' discourse – in the consolidation and performativity of the imperialist heterotopia/heterochrony, which reasserts the domination of the English over the colonies. The heterotopia therefore becomes an attempt at resisting political fragmentation, by crystallising spatial references to (former) colonies which stand as "realms of possibility" (Said 1993, 64) for the Westerner. Empire and country collide through synecdoche but never connect: the segmentarity of the characters' discourse

reflects the need to re-assert spatial dominance through language at a time of uncertainty, while claiming it as an ethical enterprise.

The concomitance of nationalism and imperialism creates an ambivalent relationship to space, where the Orient and the West – to borrow from Edward Said's lexicon in *Orientalism* – are "two geographical entities" which "support and to an extent reflect each other" (5) while feeding off oppressive ethics. It is this very dualistic process which allows Margaret Matthews to assimilate Zamalek to "her Cotswold village or Sussex hamlet, but so much warmer. […]" (*NLM* 445) The spatial transposition of England to Egypt acts as an appropriation of the landscape by Margaret: once one of her Aunt Mouse's detractors, who accused her of benefitting from the Empire's domination to travel the world, Margaret subjugates Egypt to the gaze of the coloniser. If she praises the warmth and "every smell and colour of it" (446), she actually turns Egypt into an ersatz homeland: though disliking "power and riches" (446), Margaret certainly takes part in orientalist discourse, as she is certain that her husband Douglas and her will certainly help Colonel Nasser to "give a decent life" to Egyptians. Margaret's false ethics of responsibility try to contravene the dissolution of imperialist power. According to Said, "[in] a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand." (1978, 7) Both history and geography are subsumed to the power relationship denounced by Said, as ethics become instrumentalised under the Westerner's gaze and political fragmentation becomes confrontational. The intertwinement of Cairo with the Cotswolds hides the "positional superiority" of Margaret and Stevie Smith's Celia, who sees in her uncle's garden a relic of India: "In the moonlight Lincolnshire garden in the dark shadows below the cedar tree, it is like India, I have the feeling it is India before me and not England. […]" (93) The intertwinement of England and India, which Celia pictures in the garden, contrasts with India's ongoing independence from the Crown. The cedar tree, "native to the West Indies", as Jamaica Kincaid points out in *My Garden (Book)*[61] (1999, 29), stands for the domination of the Empire and its subversion of nature.

[61] Kincaid's book retraces the genealogy of botanical gardens and their ties to colonial history, through her own personal experience. She distinguishes the natural from the artificial, the native from the imported: "This ignorance of the botany of the place I am from (and am of) really only reflects the fact that when I lived there, I was of the conquered class and living in a conquered place; a principle of this condition is that nothing about you is of any interest unless the conqueror deems it so. For instance, there was a botanical garden not far from where I lived, and in it were plants from various parts of the then British Empire, places that had the same climate as my own; but as I remember, none of the plants were native to Antigua." (120)

Similarly, Margaret notices "the bougainvillea" (445) of her neighbour in Cairo, a constant and eponymous reminder of the country's submission to colonial power. The appropriation of landscape participates in the subjugation of the Orient by the Westerner: vegetal and human species are dislocated alike according to the coloniser's will. The symbolical ramification of the Empire negates the actual fragmentation brought about by imperialist crusades, whose ethics are grounded in the landscape.

As in Celia's Lincolnshire, Baldry Court's garden also welcomes a "Lebanon cedar, the branches of which are like darkness made palpable." (*TRS* 4) Imperial power looms over the grounds of the household in *The Return of the Soldier*, where the controlled profusion of the garden mimics the extent of an imperial destructive wave:

> [Margaret] looks out at the strip of turf, so bright that one would think it wet, and lighted here and there with snowdrops, and scillas and crocuses, that runs between the drive and the tangle of silver birch and bramble and fern. There is no aesthetic reason for that border; […] Its use is purely philosophic; it proclaims that here we esteem only controlled beauty; that the wild will not have its way within our gates. […] (49)

The invasive bramble cohabits with several plants from the liliales order[62] , which are native to both Europe and Asia, just like the silver birch[63], suggesting a conflation between the Empire and its colonies. Debra Rae Cohen, in *Remapping the home front* (2002), explains that this coexistence is only made possible by the coercive power of the Crown:

> The estate is the British Empire in miniature, the ethos of Baldry Court pushing outward from the house to subdue rebellious natives; and just as "natives" becomes a term of opprobrium, the natural is demonized as "wild." The "controlled beauty" of Baldry Court, like the "civilising mission" of the empire, becomes naturalized. […] (73)

West opens a dialogue between the microcosm of Baldry Court's garden and the macrocosm of the Empire, between the intimate experience of Chris's repression and the public experience of "imperial policies" (Rizzuto 10) at a time of unrest. Although she does not directly address the condition of the colonised, West both uses and subverts the heterotopia of the garden: for Foucault, the garden is "the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world"

[62] http://www.universalis-edu.com.acces.bibliotheque-diderot.fr/encyclopedie/liliales/ (Accessed 9 March 2021).
[63] http://www.universalis-edu.com.acces.bibliotheque-diderot.fr/encyclopedie/bouleau/ (Accessed 9 March 2021).

and "has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia." (1986, 26) Yet, if the diversity of vegetal species asserts the garden's metonymic value, it negates any possibility for happiness – as Chris's final return suggests – and betrays the coercive power that lies behind its very existence, by associating Chris to "the wild" and exposing a constrictive and destructive imperial power which fragments ethics. The heterotopia of the garden appears as one of "compensation" (Foucault 1986, 27) destined to create a "meticulous" space to counterbalance the "jumbled" (27) world of the First World War. Furthermore, Cohen's argument leads to assess the consequences of the "naturalisation" of the civilising mission of the Empire: it indeed points to an internalisation, and therefore a banalisation, of asymmetrical ethics where, as Said remarks, the Westerner always already has the upper hand. But as the sun finally set on the British Empire, one may wonder what becomes of the imperialist heterotopia and, more importantly, what happens to the ethics of responsibility through the banalisation of imperialist ideology.

What a Carve Up! and *Capital* do not address the state of the Empire, but rather refer to the United Kingdom's foreign policy. These novels mark the end of the heterotopia of the Empire: far from presenting foreign lands as "realms of possibilities", which result from the articulation of the local and the global, they reflect the banalisation of the country's involvement in foreign affairs, which is paradoxically concomitant with "the shrinking" (Etsy) of the British Isles. In January 1991, Michael is confronted with the consequences of his country's presence in Iraq, as he tries to make sense of his friend Fiona's death. Dr. Gillam explains that some hospital wards were closed to prepare for casualties of the Gulf War, leading Michael in a state of complete disbelief:

> There was no option but to believe her, however incredible it might seem. But I hated the way we were now expected to take this for granted: where had it come from, this breezy assumption of inevitability? In any case, it was supposed to be nothing to do with me – something that was happening thousands of miles away, on the other side of the world. […] (411)

While deploring the government's lack of transparency, Michael paradoxically claims his disinterest and detachment from world events involving his own country: while Carne's segmentation of space enclosed colonies and opened up the Empire in *South Riding*, Michael closes off the country onto itself and refutes the imbrication of England with foreign territories. The connection with the other seems forever severed in the face of geographic distance. The

United Kingdom and the Middle East become intertwined, like "Chinese boxes", without being connected. Michael's indifference finds a paroxysmal echo in Roger Yount, who, in December 2007, describes the atmosphere of Pinker Lloyd after the staff learnt that they won't get the end-of-year bonuses:

> They looked like refugees or something. Sad, so sad. It was like… Roger stretched to find some metaphor for the scale of the grief, the comprehensiveness of the disaster. Being in some shithole in Iraq or somewhere, where some Yank pilot has dropped a bomb on you by mistake. Everybody's blown into pieces, bits everywhere, limbs, blood, everything. (153)

Roger's use of simile betrays Lanchester's cynicism, as it darkly contrasts with Quentin Mkfesi's own story as a political refugee. The repetition of the adjective "sad", coupled with his hyperbole on the "disaster" he now faces, satirically recalls the collective feeling of loss towards HMS Sheffield described by Joan in *What a Carve Up!*. His version of trauma hijacks the reality of the Iraq War, which becomes a discursive *topos* in the mouth of the banking elite. The actual fragmentation of the Middle Eastern country and the decimation of its population is thwarted to answer to the *ethos* of capital, where money trumps the consideration for the other. The discursive submission of foreign territories to the economy of the country and to the realm of the personal exposes the paradoxical magnetism of the metonymic London, which erases the foreign while attracting it, as evidenced by the immigrants of *Capital* who "all pursue the London Dream." (Berensmeyer and Löffler, 173) The heterotopia no longer functions, as the "social and semiotic fabric" is no longer "fraying" (West-Pavlov 138) but disappears altogether, as indifference and prejudice prevail.

State-of-the-nation novels sharply contrast with the nationalist discourse described by Erikson: they embrace, use and display the fragmentation of the nation. Space becomes a multi-layered metonymy for England, which reveals novelistic and discursive tendencies to crystallisation: the diachronic approach of these novels shows how such metonymies shrink, as the Empire recedes and as London expands. The imbricated construction of the country illustrates the fragility of the ethics of responsibility, whose survival heavily depends on the very fraught politics and ideologies which segment national space in the first place. The corpus highlights the necessity to reexamine the "geographies of our social responsibility", which are often defined by dominant and oppressive discourses, as depictions of the countryside and

foreign territories suggest. State-of-the-nation authors both indulge in and resist nostalgia, in an attempt to present alternatives to the hegemony of the city but most of all, to dive into their characters' traumatic confrontation with history, which the next chapter proposes to further explore.

Chapter 3.
A Disjunct Nation

In *National Identity,* Anthony D. Smith underlines that "Nationalism provides perhaps the most compelling identity myth in the modern world, but it comes in various forms. Myths of national identity typically refer to territory or ancestry (or both) as the basis of political community. […]" (1991, viii) Nationalism tentatively weaves a connection between individuals through lineage and geography, which would smooth over internal differences and divisions to create identity[64] and sameness. This temporal and geographical analogy between self and nation is destined to fuel what Smith identifies as a "sense of continuity" (2003, 25) throughout generations across a given territory, whose aim is to create and sustain the unified nation. The historical links between the creation of nations and the notion of responsibility mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation certainly suggest that nationalism is closely related to the construction of responsibility, insofar as the political individual is the "son of his people and his country." (Jonas, 104) Though it is undeniable that "we are born into a place and time that is not of our own making" (Burkitt 2008, 3) and which influences the construction of the self[65], the first two chapters of the present thesis have evidenced that state-of-the-nation novels defy such a fabricated analogy, through their deconstruction of familial and spatial ties, therefore challenging the notion of responsibility defined by Jonas.

[64] The expression "national identity" or "English identity" has driven particular interest in recent years, especially with the 2016 Brexit referendum and the subsequent nationalist movements that have gained traction. Though these questions are of high importance, this chapter does not aim at discussing what defines Englishness *per se* but rather focuses on the etymology of the term "identity" (from the Latin *idem* meaning same) and what the *OED* refers to as "continual sameness", between the nation as entity and the individual. For a detailed overview of the development of English identity and Englishness, the current research led by Susan Condor in sociological and cultural theory is particularly relevant. See for instance her chapter "Unimagined Community? Some Social Psychological Issues Concerning English National Identity." In Glynis M. Breakwall and Evanthia Lyons, eds. *Changing European Identities. Social Psychological Analyses of Social Change*. Butterworth-Heinemann, 1996: 41-67, as well as Susan Condor et al. "English Identity and Ethnic Diversity in the Context of UK Constitutional Change." *Ethnicities*, vol. 6, no. 2, June 2006, pp. 123–158, doi:10.1177/1468796806063748. David Mcrone and Frank Bechhofer have also dedicated a book to this issue, entitled *Understanding National Identity*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2015.

[65] This correlation between social and cultural context with the development of the self has firstly been theorised by George Herbert Mead in *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviourist* (1929). Recent studies have contributed to the development of his thought and have shed light on the necessary interaction between self and society, such as Anthony Giddens's *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991), Richard Jenkins's *Social Identity* (1994) and Ian Burkitt's *Social Selves. Theories of Self and Society* (2008). The influence of social and cultural modes, on which most of these theses are based, will be more thoroughly developed in the second part of the present study.

However, in continuing the reading of the novels of the corpus in opposition to nationalist discourse, the latter relies on a third ideological and metonymic pillar which consists in the selection and idealisation of historical events (Smith 2003, 127). Smith points out that "some cases of disruptive culture change [nevertheless] renewed, rather than destroyed, the sense of common ethnicity and its identity. […] Typical events that generate profound changes in the cultural contents of such identity include war and conquest. […]" (1991, 25-26), while Eric Hobsbawm (criticised to some extent by Smith) also claims that the historical events of the 1918-1950 period led to the "apogee of nationalism." (131) Paul Ricœur outlines three main criteria to better distinguish the nature of a historical event:

> Firstly: humans are the ones who either produce or endure [the historical event]. Humans either make something happen or are either affected by the events which occur or that other humans trigger. Second minimal requirement: these events must be deemed interesting or important enough by contemporaries in order to record the reports made by credible eyewitnesses. With this second condition, the role of narrative emerges: the third condition of the historical event stems from the former, i.e. the selection, the ordering, or what I call the emplotment, which creates a first epistemological discrepancy between the event as it happened and the event as it is being told, registered, passed on. (1992a, 29)[66]

It is precisely the third condition and its inherent discrepancy that will inform this chapter. The narrativization of historical events challenges the experience of the event, which becomes overshadowed by the need for discursive cohesion. Two paradoxes emerge from Ricœur's reading when investigating state-of-the-nation novels and their ties to nationalist discourse. Firstly, if state-of-the-nation novels attempt to debunk nationalist metonymies, they are nonetheless constructed around those same historical events which make and mark national history. Just like nationalism, they seem to revolve around the emplotment of the event. Secondly, the event is a "*rupture*" (Derrida 1967, 278) which "tears the established order apart" (Ricœur 1991, 9)[67] – *a priori* making it an unstable structure for a metonymic construction of

[66] "On entre dans le domaine de l'événement historique lorsque trois conditions sont remplies. Premièrement : ce sont des humains qui les produisent ou les subissent. Les humains font arriver quelque chose ou sont affectés par les événements qui simplement arrivent ou que d'autres humains font arriver. Deuxième condition minimale : ces événements doivent être jugés suffisamment intéressants ou importants par les contemporains pour que les rapports qu'en font des témoins oculaires crédibles soient enregistrés. Avec cette deuxième condition on voit apparaître le rôle du récit : de celui-ci découle la troisième condition de l'événement historique, à savoir la sélection, la mise en ordre, ou ce que j'appelle la mise en intrigue, qui introduit un premier décalage épistémique entre l'événement tel qu'il est survenu et l'événement tel qu'il est raconté, enregistré, communiqué." To translate the expression "mise en intrigue", I chose the lexicon used in Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer's translation of Ricœur's *Time and Narrative I*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1984.

[67] "D'abord quelque chose arrive, éclate, déchire un ordre déjà établi. […]"

the realms of the individual and the national. It is this very eventful destabilisation which nationalism seeks to erase, and which makes literature unable to "produce time as event, as irrecuperable singularity or difference" (Gibson 1999, 138) in Levinasian ethics. State-of-the-nation novels almost seem to reach an impasse, caught between the impossibility to do away with national(ist) history and the necessarily belated expression of the event[68].

1. Unframing the Event

Following Ricœur, history comes to be defined as a narrative. Dominick LaCapra, both in *History and Criticism* (1985) and *History, Politics and the Novel* (1987), recalls that the late nineteenth century saw the professionalisation of history (1987, 8), at around the same time as the development of Condition-of-England novels, for Thomas Carlyle himself was "a great narrator" (1985, 122). In fact, the definition of narrative in the works of Gérard Genette, or more recently Mieke Bal, leaves little room to distinguish between literature and history: for Genette, narrative is "the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse." (25)[69] Genette's central apposition is key to identify the possible overlapping of fiction and history, especially when it comes to state-of-the-nation novels, the events of which actually took place and were experienced by their respective authors.[70] Strangely enough,

[68] I am referring here to Derrida's Montreal lecture, "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event", given in 1997, in which he says: "this saying of the event is always somewhat problematical because the structure of saying is such that it always comes after the event." (2007, 445) Derrida comes to the same conclusion as Levinas, in the sense that saying the event necessarily entails the loss of its immediate experience.

[69] This translation is taken from *Narrative Discourse: An Esssay in Method* (1980), which is a selection of Genette's study in *Figures III* (Seuil, 1972). The original French reads as such: "*récit* désigne la succession d'événements, réels ou fictifs, qui font l'objet de ce discours, et leurs diverses relations d'enchaînement, d'opposition, de répétition, etc. " (71)

[70] To understand how state-of-the-nation novels confront the paradoxes of the event, it is essential to make a clear generic distinction. Novels of the genre are not to be confused with the genre of the historical novel: from Walter Scot's *Waverley* (1814) to Naomi Mitchison's *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* (1991 – 1995), to cite only the most obvious examples across twentieth-century literature, focus on events far from their authors' own time. Though their political and social insights are undeniable, as evidenced by George Lukács in *The Historical Novel* (1962), historical novels stem from an "experience of writing, reading and understanding [which is] markedly different from that of a novel sent in the contemporary world." (De Groot 4) The narrative setting of state-of-the-nation novels, on the contrary, match precisely their writers' contemporary society: the stories of *The Return of the Soldier*, *South Riding* and *The Holiday* are respectively set in 1918, 1936 and 1949. Coe's novel, while using flashbacks, mainly takes place in the years 1990 and 1991, whereas Lanchester's novel was published only four years after the credit crisis that inspired *Capital*. It could be argued that Wilson's novel differs from the rest of the corpus, since the storyline spans from "Before the War" to 1967. Yet, in her biography of Wilson, Margaret Drabble is quick to remind us of the similarities between the fictional Matthews and the author's own family: "it covers a little more than the whole lifespan of Angus Johnstone-Wilson. […] The Matthews family, like the Johnstone-Wilson family, consisted of two feckless parents and six children." (1995, 369) The biographical tendencies of *No Laughing Matter* surely suggest the contemporariness of the events witnessed by the fictional children and Angus Wilson himself.

Genette's definition of the narrative echoes the lexicon used by critics to outline the power of manufacture wielded by nationalism: Hobsbawn coined the term "*invention* of tradition" in 1983, Anderson famously talked of "*imagined* community" and Smith of *idealisation* (2003, 127)[71]. In this regard, nationalism and fiction seem to stand on similar ground, for the etymology of the latter (*fingĕre*, used by Genette in its adjectival form) means "to fashion" (*OED*). History, nationalism and state-of-the-nation novels therefore conflate in their narrativization of the event, whose fracturing experience is paradoxically submitted to a structuralising discourse.

A. Mythical linearity

Ricœur derives his notion of emplotment from his study of Aristotle's *Poetics* (ca. 350 BC): the Aristotelian *muthos* is indeed the "active sense of organizing the events into a system" (1984, 33). Ricœur insists on the fact that emplotment refers to the act of composition, of assemblage rather than to the notion of *peripeteia*, which designates the actions of the plot. The strictures of intelligibility already impose themselves on the event, for arranging and organising are synonyms of order and continuity. A "tool to describe life events" (Andrews 169), chronology certainly reflects historicism's conception of linear time – a rationalising feature that wove its way into literature as well, for in *Capital*, four months separate each of the four parts constituting the novel: December 2007, April 2008, August 2008 and November 2008. This rhythmic division gives a distinctive structure to the novel, one similar to Sebastian Faulks's crunch fiction, *A Week in December* (2009), which follows the lives of seven characters everyday for a single week.[72] The emplotment of these novels follows the well-oiled machinery of linear time, almost like a history book on the experience of the credit crisis. The succession of events and the composition of the narrative surely recalls Lanchester's and Faulks's "debt to realism" (Bernard 2015a), since Peter Childs reminds us that "a Newtonian universe found its reflection in the realist novel. […] Time was linear and narrative moved

[71] Emphasis mine. It should be noted that in *Nationalism and Modernism*, A.D. Smith discusses at length the respective works of Hobsbawm and Anderson. He especially warns against their use of words such as "imagination" and "invention" which often "[carry] connotations of fabrication and/or creation *ex nihilo*. […] In arguing against social constructionism and invention as valid categories of explanation, I do not mean to deny the many instances of attempted 'construction' and 'fabrication'. My point is only that, to be successful, these attempts need to base themselves on relevant pre-existing social and cultural networks." (2003, 130) Smith's critical framework will be preferred throughout this study.

[72] While Lanchester devotes one chapter, or vignette, to each of his characters (creating narrative barriers between them), each day of Faulks's novel sees the characters' lives clearly brushing against each other as, for instance, "In the rear carriage of Jenni Fortune's Circle Line train Hassan al-Rashid sat staring straight ahead" (14).

along chronological lines. […]" (67) In fact, LaCapra also contends that the use of diachrony, i.e. "movement over time involving change" (1985, 204), is "related to the trope of metonymy": Lanchester's use of a defined timeline goes together with the microcosm-turned-macrocosm world of Pepys Road. The temporal regularity of *Capital* therefore almost seems to dilute the singularity of the credit crunch in an attempt to contain the explosion of the housing bubble within the bounds of the novel. However, the metonymic construction of the novel and the circumscription of the 2008 crisis actually make way for the intelligibility of the event, for in the words of Michel De Certeau, "the event is what must *delimit*, if there is to be intelligibility; the historical fact is that which must *fill*, if there is to be meaningful statement. […] The event is the means thanks to which disorder is turned into order" (1975, 96). Lanchester therefore negotiates the nature of the crisis, as both event and historical fact, yet without offering insight onto "*the systems* which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts'" – which as Lindea Hutcheon claims, is one of the characteristics of postmodernism (1988, 89).

The nature of the event is highly paradoxical, for the event both constitutes and resists structure (Derrida 1967, 279). To use Ilan Rowner's words, "the historical instauration of order simply means the cancellation of the event's irregularity, unpredictability, and contingency" (2015, 11), even though the emergence of the event "demands organising" (Ricœur 1991, 9). Caught between the intelligible necessity for order and the disturbing experience of the event, novelists from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have taken upon themselves to disrupt the regular discursive frames of history. In her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon considers that "modernism's 'nightmare of history' is precisely what postmodernism has chosen to face straight on" (1988, 88). Though she certainly acknowledges the experimental nature of modernist writing regarding the notion of time, she rather quickly dismisses their propensity to "face history straight on" and especially their ability to scrutinise history as discourse. The opening pages of *The Return of the Soldier* are playfully and painfully discontinuous: the *in medias res* incipit (starting with Kitty's interjection to Jenny "Ah, don't begin to fuss!" 3) allows Jenny to express their despair following Chris's absence, the evocation of which triggers a flashback to "one morning just a year ago when he went to the front" (7). The recollection is again interrupted by the women's exclamative lament: "If he could come back!" (7). This oscillation between past and present is symptomatic of modernist writing, as Peter Childs underlines that "Modernism expressed time moving in arcs, flashbacks, jumps, repetitions and, above all, subjective leaps and swerves." (67) Not only is time disrupted to better serve the

subjective experience of the event (evidenced by Jenny's restlessness, "fuss"), but history is itself re-written through Jenny's discontinuous narration. In fact, throughout the novel, the experience of the front is only seen by proxy, either through Jenny's or Franck Baldry's eyes (who "never realised the horror of warfare until [he] saw [his] cousin" 20). Jenny becomes the narrator and the writer of the history of the War, therefore subverting the male/soldier-focused accounts of the conflict.[73] She even sees herself – and the rest of the female population – as national dissidents: "like most Englishwomen of my time, I was wishing for the return of a soldier. Disregarding the national interest […] I wanted to snatch my Cousin Christopher from the wars. […]" (6) Jenny operates a disjunction between self and nation, one which simultaneously contradicts national history (since the event is seen from a woman's perspective) and nationalist discourse (the sacrifice for the nation is here utterly rejected). Form and ethics become indissociable, for the discontinuous text "fissures […] the plausible assurances of the ideological regimes of plenitude, which have the answer to everything and where everything finds its predetermined place" (Heyndels 14)[74]. *The Return of the Soldier*[75] therefore suggests West's desire to face history and to challenge its male-dominated writing, by fracturing the "basic patterning of the cultural elements that make up the sense of continuity" (Smith 2003, 25) – well ahead of novels like *What a Carve Up!*, which also use discontinuity to disrupt the nationalist *muthos* of the event.

"Detailed and continuous register of events in order of time" (*OED*), the chronicle seems to be the epitome of historicity. Yet the organisation of events in Michael Owen's supposed *chronicle* of the Winshaw family is all but linear, for if the dated sections follow one another

[73] Françoise Thébaud retraces the gendered historiography of the First World War in "Understanding Twentieth-Century Wars through Women and Gender: Forty Years of Historiography" (2014, online). She explains that: "War has traditionally been viewed as a phenomenon which concerns only men, since it is usually only men who bear arms and fight. Hence its history has principally been concerned with its diplomatic and military aspects. However, in Europe and North America in the 1970s, a critical look was taken at this traditional historiography, with its adoption of an elite and male viewpoint. This period was characterized both by the emergence of women's history, which aimed to reveal the women of the past and take their experiences into account, and by the strengthening of social history, concerned with society and social groups." Françoise Thébaud has dedicated her entire research to the female historiography of the war and has written several monographs on the topic, including *Écrire l'histoire des femmes et du genre* (ENS editions, 2007) and *La place des femmes dans l'histoire. Une histoire mixte.* (Belin, 2010).

[74] "le texte discontinue fissure […] les assurances vraisemblables des régimes idéologiques de la plénitude qui a réponse à tout et où tout trouve sa place prédéterminée."

[75] It must be underlined that West's novel, though the focus of this study, is not an exception. Christopher Isherwood's *The Memorial* (1932) similarly discusses the nationalistic sacrifice for the nation and the experience of the war itself, while addressing the issue of homosexuality in a time dominated by (war-engendered) myths of virility. Isherwood also uses a discontinuous timeline, with four "books" successively dated 1928, 1920, 1925, 1929.

(with the exception of June 1982), they are interspersed with first-name sections devoted to one Winshaw sibling at a time. This separation goes together with a shift of focalisation, perfectly analysed by Emma Parker:

> Initially, chapters that relate Michael's story from a first-person point of view are interspersed with chapters that relate the story of the Winshaws through a third-person narrator, suggesting a division between the personal and political or private and public realms. Michael's increasing awareness of his entanglement with a family that once seemed separate and remote is conveyed when his voice begins to interrupt the narrative about Dorothy and Thomas (246; 324). (in Tew 2018, 73)

While dated sections see Michael's *anagnorisis* unravel, the first-name sections come back on each sibling's life. Dorothy's chapter compellingly begins with her inability to hug her husband, right after Michael's and Fiona's body form a "knot" (237) at the end of the "November 1990" chapter. Coe here creates a subtle connection through discrepancy: Michael and Fiona's embrace enables ethical connection and strikingly contrasts with Dorothy's emotional apathy. The subsequent shift in focalisation in Dorothy's section allows for the emergence of italics, which encapsulate Michael's thoughts. As Andrew Gibson contends, "distinctions between modes of narration are also crucial ethical distinctions" (1999, 26): Michael's interfering italics create a stark contrast destined to reveal the siblings' conceitedness and ethical obliviousness, as he sets out to uncover the effects of their Thatcherite policies on his own life. To use Walter Benjamin's words, the chronological disorder of *What a Carve Up!* "blast[s] open the continuum of history" (262): by naming the Winshaws' sections and dating Michael's, Coe not only fractures linear time but also breaks away from the (fabricated) continuity of the nation by severing the supposed fraternal connection between political individuals identified by Jonas. Though West's and Coe's literary techniques of discontinuity undeniably differ, the two writers nonetheless propose a de-structuration of the event's frame of intelligibility, which in turn exposes the disjunction of self and nation. Both hailed as respective representatives of modernism and postmodernism, the concomitant reading of these two state-of-the-nation novels accentuates their sociocultural "system" (to borrow Hutcheon's phrasing): under the guise of national history, the *muthos* as emplotment progressively reveals itself as a "myth of identity".

Though Ricœur carefully insists on Aristotle's definition of *muthos* so as to differentiate from the popular meaning of the term myth, which is a "synonym for "illusion", "legend", or false propaganda" (Douglas 232) and seems to resonate with A.D. Smith's criticism of

nationalism. Myths are in fact "historical compounds" (Warner ch.6, n.p.) which are determined by the very sociocultural context that "the myth of national identity desires to forget" (*ibid*): though this chapter does not aim at discussing processes of remembrance, the nationalist idealisation of the event as a shared experience forces a coincidence between self and nation which no longer seems to hold in state-of-the-nation novels. In *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (1990), E.J. Hobsbawm underlines that the interwar period saw the development of a new aspect of nationalism, which relied on the accessibility and relatability of the royal family: events such as the 1932 Christmas televised broadcast helped breach the gap between the private and the public, which turned "the British royal family into a domestic as well as a public icon of national identification" (142). This new-found source of national unification was certainly fuelled by the very first Silver Jubilee celebrated in the United Kingdom in 1935, which is depicted at the very end of *South Riding.* In fact, the "Epilogue at a Silver Jubilee" takes place during the local celebration of King George V's twenty-five-year reign, on May 6th 1935 – which also happens to be the only date given throughout the whole novel. The epilogue questions the viability of the nation's collective symbols through the reproduction of Alderman Astell's letter to Sarah Burton, which is quick to remind her that the festivities are far from "a demonstration of national unity" and rather an example of "mass hysteria and empty shouting" (504). Astell's dissidence sheds light on the cosmetic and hypocritical aspect of the national celebration: the King's celebration, despite the elation it creates, cannot be considered as an event, for "Obviously, if there is an event, it must never be something that's predicted or planned, or even really decided upon." (Derrida 1997, 441) The Silver Jubilee instead stands as a *trompe-l'oeil*, disguising fears of a second world conflict. The celebration covers up the fracture within the nation caused by the First World War, which Astell is intent on keeping open: he cannot help but agree with the chalk writings opposite his office which say "flags to-day, gas-masks tomorrow." (504) Astell takes upon himself to uncover the masquerade of the nationalist myth of identity, which bends the significance of the event and creates a false cohesion between the public and the private. By selecting only one precise date, Holtby subverts the significance of the Jubilee and shifts focus to the authentic event of the Great War. The event therefore recovers its discontinuous properties through Astell's questioning of ideological coverups, which in turns challenges the ethical foundation of the body politic. Holtby hence exposes nationalism's "simulacrum" of "reappropriation" (Derrida 1997, 460) of the event: state-of-the-nation novels carry out an investigation of the nation, which evidences how the event can be fashioned by the political.

In an attempt to look beyond the bounds of national history, Wilson voluntarily obscures some of the main historical events that occurred during the timeframe of *No Laughing Matter*. As Malcolm Bradbury argues,

> A number of significant years (for example, 1926, the General Strike) are avoided, and the two World Wars are shown only at a distance; only in the 1930s and in 1956 do we come close to compelling events and see characters directly encountering, or evading, them. […] Indeed evasion is a compelling matter for analysis. Thus Sukey's gentility, Marcus's narcissism, Rupert's and Margaret's artistry, Gladys's female evasion of full financial responsibility, and even Quentin's politics with their strange underlying sexuality, are figures for a certain sort of escape from history – which in turn *makes* a history. (in Halio, 147)

In fact, the visual organisation of the novel bears the marks of this escape, as each forgotten national date seems to forge a hole within the plot. Yet, the fragmented timeline of *No Laughing Matter* is an active questioning of historical and national determinism: the Matthews' forms of escape are all, to some degree, reminiscent of the woes they experienced as children (money deprivation, lack of attention, Billy Pop's artistic failure, need for intimacy) and point to their inability to connect with others[76]. Historical events are always looming, while the national is not entirely dismissed. But what shows through Wilson's novel is how the myth of national identity (through shared historical events) cannot possibly hold, for identity already fails to emerge in the intimate sphere. The children's escape therefore becomes a metonymy for an "atomized society" (Head 8) that no myth can conglomerate: escape, as Levinas astutely demonstrates, "is not only a word a la mode; it is world-weariness, the disorder of our time [*mal du siècle*]" (1982, 52). The "cultural and political bond" (Smith 1991, 14) of the nation, set to discursively replace ethical responsibility, erodes under the genre of the state-of-the-nation novel. By shifting focus to the realm of the personal, the novels of the corpus come to display the full force of the event, whose "impact" (Derrida 2003, 86) leaves significant and observable traces.

B- Disoriented selves

The disjunction of the national and the individual in state-of-the-nation novels is inscribed in the very genesis of the genre in the nineteenth century. Carlyle laments in "Sign of

[76] The words of Clifford, Margaret's lover in 1925, ring true for all the Matthew children: "I apologize for thinking that your upbringing had any advantages, it has clearly left you without the confidence to make any deep and sustained relationship in life" (199).

the Times" that "the time is sick and out of joint" (1829, 53), recalling the ominous words of Shakespeare's Hamlet (1603, 744) and foreshadowing Celia's words in *The Holiday* ("times are wrong" 53). The organic metaphor of dislocation stands opposed to the nationalist effort of coincidence. It is in fact symptomatic of contemporariness, for according to Giorgio Agamben,

> Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. […] Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect. are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it. (40, 41)

In the novels of the corpus, the demand for national unity is rejected, through the questioning of a collective experience: Wilson, for instance, mocks such an idea when Marcus, desperate to find a conversation topic to connect with his siblings, asks his sister Margaret: "how was your war?" (430). If the interrogation *a priori* points to a shared experience of the event, the latter nonetheless becomes banal and even mundane, making for idle conversation and denying the nationalist glorified recuperation of the "People's War".[77] The dissection of the nation allows the singular and intimate experience of the event to dissolve nationalistic veneer. Winifred Holtby and Stevie Smith both challenge the notion of collective sacrifice for the nation in the wake of the two World Wars. As Tom Sawdon (former soldier turned innkeeper of the Nag's Head) and Bill Hayer unite to praise "the King's uniform" (*SR* 107) and claim that "you do know where you are in the Army", Astell cannot but dispute their unwavering defence of the Crown, remembering the fallen and the mutilated bodies of the Great War: "You know where you are in the Army – do you?" Astell's attempt to resist idealisation and identification recalls, among others, Robert Graves's disillusioned plea in *Goodbye to All That* (1929) and Siegfried Sassoon's 1917 rejection of the conflict, as he could "no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which [he believed] to be evil and unjust." (in Graves 270) Dis-location becomes psychological in the wake of the conflict: the reality of the event disavows the unquestioned service to the nation. The repetition of ex-serviceman Heyer's words is destabilised by Astell's epanorthosis, which embodies the population's experience of disorientation.

[77] Carnevali and Strange underline that "The Second World War was, for example, a 'People's War', founded on an ethos of 'fair shares' and 'equality of sacrifice'. Such rhetoric went against the grain of an unequal and divided society." (48)

However, as Astell points out in his letter to Sarah Burton, the war is deeply paradoxical, for if it led to the destruction of society, it also provided employment and instilled purpose: "the tragic sickening fact is that their only chance of re-employment lies in this arms race. They can return to life only by preparing for death. It's a mad farce. […]" (504) Soldiers get mired into the limbo of the post-war, doomed to repeat a form of meaningless pantomime as they absurdly prepare and wait for death, like Hamm and Clov in Beckett's *Endgame* (1957). For Gibson, dislocation and disorientation are what constitutes the singularity of the event as "an intimate if fleeting experience of the absence of all foundation or ground" (2007, 5), one which is expressed by Caz at the beginning of *The Holiday*: "And he went on to say that there was a lot of the war left over from the fighting times, I do not know he said, that we can bear not to be at war." (8) Like the ghost of *Hamlet*, the war haunts the characters and triggers questions of identity, as it both unsettles and structures experience. In the words of Gill Plain,

> This counter-intuitive assertion from Stevie Smith's *The Holiday* (1949) forms the keynote of the 'other' postwar, the one that finds no escape and which is abjectly bound to the destructive force of war. In this formulation, the postwar is a paradoxical space in which the absence of war proves stranger, and more disorientating, than its presence. For the nation, war's end signifies loss of structure. The goal has been achieved, the war is, or is about to be, won, and the social, cultural and emotional energies that have for so long been directed towards one purpose must find alternative outlets. (177)

Smith's disillusion certainly resonates with Astell's in *South Riding*, and suggests that the dissolution of war-time nationalist discourse, as the conflict slowly dissipates, entails the fragmentation of the national and the individual *psyche*, which no longer have common ground. The postwar is not an event itself (since it was "a goal" to be "achieved', it does not fit Derrida's definition of the event), but rather puts an end – as Astell aims to do throughout Holtby's novel – to the ritual of the war without which nationalist discourse has difficulty in surviving, disclosing the full force of the conflict and its consequences in the process. Holtby and Smith are therefore true contemporaries, who exploit their "noncoincidence" (Agamben 2006, 41) with the national to reveal the country's fragmentation. This destructuralisation of the public/private, this new "absence of foundation", creates a vacuum through which meaning and language eventually escape.

For Ilai Rowner, "It may be that at the heart of every event there is a hiatus of ignorance that makes for the terrifying and beautiful gift of literature" (3). Literature invests the disruption caused by the event and sets to explore the disorientation of the subject experiencing it. The

text then becomes the locus of a "spasmodic, interrupted temporality, a poetic temporality if any, which follows the inquisitive process" (Chol 20)[78]. The emergence of the event causes the self to come under scrutiny, as "mythic self-wholeness" (Brown 1989, 2) erodes. Sarah Burton's own uncertainty in *South Riding* accounts for the dissociation of the self from the epoch, as theorised by Agamben:

> She thought of her own dreams for the world. In her desk lay notes, neatly clipped and arranged in coloured folders, of her talks on current affairs – The growth of world unity – The task of an international Labour organisation – The League grows up – Disarmament. Beyond her personal troubles lay the deep fatigue of one whose impersonal hopes do not march with history. Am I doing any good here? she asked herself. […] She ought somehow to have found a way to keep that girl at school. She ought to have saved Miss Sigglesthwaite's dignity. She ought… (265)

The haunting presence of the First World War, the subsequent Great Slump and the emergence of the Nazi movement in Germany (mentioned right before this passage), crystallise Sarah's fears for the future of her country. The carefully arranged labels of her "dreams" and "hopes" collide with the reality of 1936 Britain: order collapses and inevitably leads to Sarah's self-doubt. The introspective interrogation is followed by the nagging repetition of the modal verb "ought", which simultaneously signals the imperative of responsibility and Sarah's failure to fulfil it. The final aposiopesis ("She ought…") embodies Sarah's "hiatus of ignorance" and fragments both speech and psyche: the schoolmistress cannot come to grips with the events she is witnessing. For Jean-Michel Ganteau, the aposiopesis is the "figure of syntactical break and silence used when emotion becomes too heavy to spell out, when it is impossible to give voice to painful desperation or remorse" (in Ganteau and Onega 2014, 91). Private and public spheres conflate within Sarah's persona, which in turn results in a disheartening loss of meaning and an inescapable ethical dissolution in the face of historical events. For Louis Roux,

> The notion of crisis of meaning is related to that of fragmentation, the idea of a loss of meaning to that of the rupture, the crumbling, the loss of the uniting link which generates coherence, a legible and stable totality that seems protective and thus likely to lull and to numb our senses. (13)[79]

[78] "une temporalité […] spasmodique, interrompue, temporalité poétique s'il en est, répondant à l'activité de questionnement. [...]"

[79] "La notion de crise du sens est liée à celle de la fragmentation, l'idée de perte de sens à celle d'éclatement, d'émiettement, de perte du lien qui fait l'unité, qui fonde une cohérence, une totalité lisible, stable et de ce fait au moins apparemment protectrice, de ce fait susceptible de nous endormir le sentir, de nous anesthésier."

The strict yet comforting dashes separating her idea(l)s give way to the full force of the event, embodied by the final mark of interruption. The historical event wreaks havoc on the delineated plans of Sarah Burton, who is left gasping for meaning, coherence and unity, not only between herself and the members of the South Riding, but between her and the nation as a whole.

Sarah's struggle for meaning resonates with Celia's experience of the postwar, as she loses all marks and points of references:

> It is a year or so after the war. It cannot be said that it is war, it cannot be said that it is peace, it can be said that it is post-war; this probably will go on for ten years. […] How long will the post-war last, Caz, shall we win the post-war, how does it go?" (*TH* 13, 90).

The accumulative negations and interrogations bear witness to the destabilisation of Smith's characters, who blindly navigate the lingering peace process[80], which eventually distorts time ("it will go on for ten years"). The protagonist's inability to properly identify the period in which she lives places the novel at the heart of the fracture created by the event. As Gill Plain rightly demonstrates, "the ironic interchangeability of war and peace has disturbing implications, and underlines the extent to which the Second World War cannot be contained within the temporal limits of 1939-45." (185) Not only does the singularity of the event escape language, but it also points to the artificiality, to the "lullaby" of nationalism, which was used to justify the conflict and no longer holds in the "bewilderment of a postwar consequence." (*TH* 184) In an exceptional *tour de force*, Smith's reworking of her novel[81] actually gives way to a deft comment on the state of the nation. If the "Second World War is remembered for moments of social unity and communal triumph clothed in references to the spirit of Dunkirk and the Blitz" (Carnevali and Strange 48), Smith suggests instead that the definition of the nation *by* the event is not sustainable. Celia's use of the pronoun "we" is devoid of its metonymic purport, and reveals that "the [1940s] […] ended in exhaustion, facing the possibility that winning the war had been achieved at the cost not only of imperial power and international authority, but also of any coherent sense of national identity" (Plain 17-18). Holtby and Smith hence account for the fragmentation brought about by the war: the crisis of meaning at the heart of these novels

[80] Peace negotiations and reconstruction talks stretched from the August 1945 Potsdam Conference to the ratification of the Paris Peace Treaties in February 1947.

[81] This reshuffle is addressed in the introduction to this thesis: Smith, failing to find a publisher during the conflict, had to change every mention of the conflict and use the expression "post-war", to better suit the time of publication (1949).

and the awakening of Sarah's and Celia's senses from the comforting spirit of national unity show how the event turns the text into a "void", a "gap, a chasm" (Plain 185), which disintegrates language altogether.

Stevie Smith explores the event's inarticulateness, as Celia struggles to decide whether to talk and to write or to retreat into silence: she declares that "there are too many words, there is too much about it and about, one has this horror of words […]" (53) and at the same time urges that "there must be no silence" (89). Oscillating between silence and proliferation, *The Holiday* explores the individual's struggle to express their experience of the event: the atrocities of the Second World War and their attempted coverups by the political class turned language into an inappropriate, ineffective and ignominious tool to relate one's experience. Romana Huk indeed underlines that "Smith's characters seem to be plunged into what has been called 'the linguistic turn': that post-ideology-wars moment when fears of language itself as the coercive bearer of either violent forces or weakened consciousness in culture began to clearly emerge. […]" (188) Simultaneously unable to articulate the exceptionality of what they witnessed and afraid of being as deceiving as nationalist discourse, the characters of the post-war state-of-the-nation novel embody the "profound perplexity of living" (Benjamin 1955, 87).

Novels of the genre therefore become a soundbox for the full force of the event which annihilates language, recalling what Benjamin saw as modernity's tragic experience: "With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?" (84) He correlates the experience of the war with the rise of the novel, which sounded the death knell of storytelling, since it focused on "the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself" (87). The passage from the oral tradition of storytelling to the written word imparts the novel with a particular sense of isolation and mutedness. In fact, for Derrida, the event cannot "be reduced to any saying" (Derrida 2003, 460) – which is perfectly evidenced by *The Holiday* and *The Return of the Soldier*. As Kitty and Chris become acquainted with each other once again, Jenny notices that "something as impassable as death lay between them. Thereafter his proceedings evoked no comment but suffering. There was nothing to say. […]" (*TRS* 54) The navigation of Chris's shell-shock reaches an intimate and linguistic deadlock, as husband and wife become "solitary individuals", whose inability to speak exposes the fracturing effect of the event, for both fail to communicate and to connect with one another. As they stand on the threshold of existence (both living yet

missing their former lives[82], as the expression "impassable as death" suggests), Kitty and Chris are actually confronted to the imperative of responsibility. As Levinas argues, "The tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility, this moreover, whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or not knowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something concrete for the Other" (1985, 97). Kitty and Chris enter a paradoxical state, where their inability to *recognise* each other (in keeping with Levinas's terminology) is confronted with the inescapability of responsibility. Language precisely fails when the event severs ties with the other, yet does not erase but rather reinstates the urgency of ethical responsibility. In the words of Andrew Gibson, "the ethical condition is an interminable oscillation or complex poising between composition and fission, the resumption and repeated loss of frames" (1999, 9): it is because novels of the genre use historical events that they manage to subvert their nationalist recuperation and return to the disruptive quality of the event, succeeding in return to represent the subsequent fragmentation of the individual and their disjunction with the nation. Their constant play "between composition and fission" seems indeed, as the failure of language in postwar novels evinces, to ask whether ethics still have a place at the heart of the nation in the cataclysmic wake of the event.

2. The Advent of Responsibility?

Considered by Derrida as a rupture and by Gibson as "an aleatory fragment" (2007, 3), conceptualisations of the event rely on similar etymologies: *rumpere* and *frangere* both mean to "break" (*OED*). For Alain Montandon,

> The fragment is defined as a piece of something broken, splintered, and by extension the term designates an incomplete fractured work. There is, as the etymological origin attests, a break, and one could speak of the shattering of a text's closure. Fragmentation is first and foremost an experience of violence, of an intolerable disintegration. It has often been said that the Latin words *fragmen*, *fragmentum*, come from *frango*: to break, to split, to shatter, to smash, to shred, to obliterate, to crush, to annihilate. In Greek, it is the *klasma*, *apoklasma*, *apospasma*. […] *Spasmos* comes from there: a convulsion, a nervous attack, which dislocates. (1992, 77)[83]

[82] After Chris comes to terms with the fact that Kitty is indeed his wife (thanks to Margaret), Kitty scornfully remarks: "You mean, I suppose, that you know I am your wife. I'm pleased that you describe that as knowing 'it's alright', and grateful that you have accepted it at last – on Margaret's authority. This is an occasion that would make any wife proud." (54)

[83] "Le fragment est défini comme le morceau d'une chose brisée, en éclats, et par extension le terme désigne une œuvre incomplète morcelée. Il y a, comme l'origine étymologique le confirme, brisure, et l'on pourrait parler de bris de clôture de texte. La fragmentation est d'abord une violence subie, une désagrégation intolérable. On a

Montandon's definition highlights the corporeality of the event: through an organic metaphor that recalls once again Shakespeare and Carlyle, the event becomes a bodily experience that leaves its marks on both the text and the individual. To borrow the words of Ilai Rowner, "the work of literature must penetrate into the living corporeality of the event, spreading its unpredictable violence, its infinite movement and senseless inscription" (41). Perhaps one of the most pregnant and recent examples of such "apoklasmic inscription" of the event can be found in Harry Parker's *Anatomy of a Soldier* (2016), where Captain Tom Barnes's war experience is narrated through the manifold objects populating his memories and his path to recovery, after surviving an antipersonnel bomb blast. The simultaneous fragmentation of narrative, body and mind signposts the corporeality of the event as a fashioning, shaping (or rather un-shaping) force: the literal and figurative dislocation of Tom Barne's eponymous anatomy points to the psychosomatic experience of the event, which recalls that of Wilson's Quentin Matthews or Stevie Smith's Celia[84], inviting reader and critic to explore the spasmodic tremors of the corpus as an ethical, and most importantly non-nationalist, outlet.

A. Historical trauma

Retracing the history of trauma studies, Nicole A. Sütterlin comes back on Hermann Oppenheim's (1858-1919) contribution to nervous diseases, when he coined the term "traumatic neurosis" in 1889, a condition

> in which victims of shock-like impact seemed physically unharmed, yet reported motor and sensory deficits such as paralysis and convulsions (Figley 2012: 455). In doing so, he introduced into psychiatry the Greek word for 'wound', 'injury', which until then had been exclusive to surgery, thus paving the way for the notion that a shattering life experience can cause neurological and indeed psychological wounds analogous to physical wounds. (Davis and Meretoja 2020, 12)

souvent répété que les mots latins de *fragmen*, de *fragmentum* viennent de *frango*: briser, rompre, fracasser, mettre en pièce, en poudre, en miettes, anéantir. En grec, c'est le *klasma*, l'*apoklasma*, l'*apospasma*. […] Le spasmos vient de là : convulsion, attaque nerveuse, qui disloque."

[84] Both Quentin and Celia experience spasmodic episodes. While Quentin suffers from a war-related trauma ("he was overcome with one of his rages – fits that came more easily since he'd been back from Spain – so that tension brought on cramp in the muscles of his calves and he writhed on the narrow lumpy mattress, grimacing and groaning" *NLM* 372), Celia's postwar disorientation leads her "to cry and scream, for there was such a pain in [her] heart as twisted [her] heart and muscles. […]" (*TH* 171).

Trauma, which was of course to be later and further studied by Sigmund Freud who dwelt on "war neuroses"[85] in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), simultaneously tears body and mind open. *The Return of the Soldier* – contemporary to the emerging field of psychoanalysis – accounts for the difficult terminology of the new forms of injuries brought by modern warfare. In fact, when Margaret informs the Baldry women of Chris's shell-shock, she struggles to define his condition:

> 'Captain Baldry,' supplied Kitty, wonderingly.
> 'What is it that I don't know?' […]
> 'Why, that he's hurt', she gently said.
> '*Wounded*, you mean?' asked Kitty. […]
> 'Yes,' she said, 'he's *wounded*.' […]
> 'How is he *wounded*?' she asked.
> The caller traced a pattern on the carpet with her blunt toe.
> 'I don't know how to put it; he's not exactly *wounded*. A shell burst –'
> 'Concussion?' suggested Kitty. […]
> 'Shell-shock.'[86] (11-12, my emphasis)

The word "wounded" here stands as an empty signifier, as Margaret's news takes the form of a painful epanorthosis which fails to circumscribe the reality of Chris's illness. The ultimate diagnosis, "shell-shock", opens up a new type of wound whose psychological ramifications cannot be fully grasped by the women of West's novel. If the materialisation of trauma in the Baldry household causes incomprehension, Angus Wilson satirically delves into physical and psychological wounds, as his war-veteran Quentin Matthews is regularly falling into the "black chasm of his own thoughts" (*NLM* 37): this abyss opens in the 1919 book and progressively widens throughout the novel, as Quentin is also enrolled in the 1936-1939 Spanish War and later covers world conflicts as a journalist – each event triggering his traumatic experience as a soldier and leading him to "[fall] away" (37) from his siblings. Quentin's trauma severs family

[85] The expression "war neuroses" was first coined and used by "the German physician Honigman […] *[Kriegsneurose]* in 1907 for what was previously called 'combat hysteria' and "combat neurasthenia'" (Marc Antoine and Louis Crocq 2000, 49) after the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05.
[86] Harold Merskey points out that "The term was first used in early 1915 to describe three soldiers suffering from among other things sleeplessness, reduced visual fields, and amnesia. His use of that term was apt considering the profound negative atmospheric pressure following artillery shell explosions had knocked one off a wall, buried another in a trench and trapped the third one in barbed wire" (505). More recent studies have now shown the prominence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), see for instance Paul Lerner and Mark Micale's introduction to their edition of *Traumatic Pasts* (2001) for a complete overview of the term.

ties and surreptitiously engulfs the eldest son of the Matthews, as this conversation about the youngest siblings' future, led by Quentin himself, suggests:

> MOUSE [half rising, angrily]: Be quiet, Clara. Control your temper. We want to hear what the boy has to say.
>
> MRS MATTHEWS junior: We! I have no intention of listening to another word on his priggish conceit.
>
> GRANNY MATTHEWS: How can you talk of your own son like that? When he's been *wounded* too.
>
> MRS MATTHEWS junior: And haven't his words *wounded* me? His own parents cheats and liars. Those are the sort of *wounds* that don't heal. (98, my emphasis)

Wilson deliberately plays with the antanaclasis on the word "wounds", illustrating the close correlation between the surgical notion of the word and its reference to psychological trauma. The latter is here hijacked by the Countess, whose hyperbolic lamentation almost appears as a parody of one of the "poetic traits" of trauma fiction, "intensification", which works through "hyperbolical soliciting of affects" (Ganteau and Onega 20011, 17): in fact, for LaCapra, "Hyperbole enacts stylistically the fact that one is affected by excess and trauma, but one can be excessive in many ways, prominently including a penchant for blandly generalized, unearned judiciousness that harmonizes problems and may even signal a numbing insensitivity to their import and implications." (2001, 35) By drawing attention to her own suffering and blaming the victim, Clara's indictment of her own son actually points to her own egotism, which in turn leads her to dismiss the traumatic experience of the conflict altogether. The irony of her words ("wounds that don't heal") simultaneously foreshadows and eclipses Quentin's psychological struggle throughout *No Laughing Matter*, while also alluding to the dissonance between national discourse and personal experience in the face of the event. When Quentin dismisses his grandmother's compassion for being "wounded", her reply indicates how "the Great War stoked British nationalism" (Bronstein and Harris 166): "But we're so proud of you, Quintus" (99). The glorification of the war hero[87] through the evidence of physical injury supersedes Quentin's psychological distress, which is now replaced by Clara Matthews' misplaced

[87] This is also evidenced p.145 as the siblings "sat listening now as [Quentin] spoke of the trenches and the War. Everyone knew it was his or her duty to do so." However, their solemn silence is not met with an account of her brother's experience, as Quentin rather emphasises the role the previous generation played in the outbreak of the conflict: "… but ghastly although the whole thing was – something I can't and never shall be able to speak about – it didn't happen out of nowhere." The absence of testimony proves more deafening than an actual recollection, as Quentin's trauma is circumscribed – yet unaddressed – by the use of dashes. None of his siblings pay attention to this mention and their "solemn" attention is cut short by their childish musings ("Only just audible at moments was the hum of Rupert's 'Any Time's Kissing Time'" 145), denying once again the existence of trauma itself.

vexation, therefore denying the "historical awareness" that "the phenomenon of trauma […] urgently demands" (Caruth 1995, 151). In creating derision, Wilson addresses the need to go back to a primary experience of the front that might be too quickly dismissed when peace prevails. His satirical twist on the war story highlights nationalist hypocrisy while allowing, just like West before him, for "literary verbalization" to "[make] the wound perceivable" (Hartman 259). The dissection, the dislocation, of language showcases the wound, while questioning its nature, its origin: the Baldrys' failure to comprehend Chris's condition or the Matthews' selfish blindness as regards their son's trauma expose the experience of the traumatic event as a fragmentary and internal one, which corrodes the individual: if the surgical origin of the wound conjures apparent injuries, trauma moves invisibly and secretly within the self.

Cathy Caruth, one of the pioneers of contemporary trauma studies, argues that

> The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge. [...] The trauma thus seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence. (1995, 153)

The elusive yet violent traumatic nature of the event results in the subject's inability to account for the event: trauma is unfathomable and ungraspable. Caruth's definition further circumscribes trauma as an organic experience, for cognitive processes are disrupted. The incomprehensibility of the traumatic event is better evidenced by Shahid Kamal's arrest in *Capital*, as he fails to understand what is happening to him. Successively comparing his situation to a "thriller gone wrong" (406), to Hannibal Lecter's capture (409) or to "police dramas" (410), Shahid inevitably mixes reality and fiction. Unable to process history, Shahid is left to resort to the recursive intertext of crime fiction, which creates a cognitive – yet imaginary – framework destined to help him[88]. However, rather than providing him with answers, this interpretation of the event draws him further away from the traumatic site and leads to a disorientation of the self, which is deprived of its bearings for each reference proves incomparable to his own predicament. His delayed cerebral response and its successive self-splintering effects are emblematic of the clinical symptoms of trauma (identified by Caruth as

[88] According to Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, "heavy resort to intertextuality" is part of the poetics of realist trauma fiction, along with repetition, fragmentation and "the representation of psychological de-doubling" (2011, 17).

"unassimibility" and "afterwardness"[89]), as Lanchester drives the organic trope further: "the earliness of the morning and the horror of what was happening had slowed Shahid's brain" (411), leading him to feel "the sense that things inside him were breaking up, like an iceberg cracking or a huge sheet of glass shattering into fragments" (453). From interruption to fragmentation, the depiction of trauma in *Capital* not only points to the disruptive quality of the event but to its pervasive and debilitating power, which "disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" (LaCapra 2001, 41).

In her seminal *Trauma Fiction* (2004), Anne Whitehead considers that "[the] effects of the inherent latency of trauma can be discerned in the broken or fragmented quality of testimonial narratives" (7). Quentin's and Shahid's traumatic experiences are scattered throughout Wilson's and Lanchester's novels and seem to correspond with Whitehead's analysis. Chris's shellshock in *The Return of the Soldier* differs, if not accentuates this pattern. Given the returned soldier's amnesia, the Baldry women and the reader alike cannot access the traumatic testimony of the battlefield: this narrative omission places characters, reader and critic at the same level of knowledge as the injured protagonist. To use the words of Fiona Reid, "the voice of the ordinary shell-shocked soldier is largely silent." (5) The memory of the front is even replaced by Jenny's apocalyptic dreams, described through a flashback at the beginning of the novel:

> By nights I saw Chris running across the brown rottenness of No-Man's Land, starting back here because he trod upon a hand, not even looking there because of the awfulness of an unburied head, and not till my dream was packed full of horror did I see him pitch forward on his knees as he reached safety, if it was that. (6)

Jenny's oneiric representation of the front answers to the codes of the "War Gothic" (Slotysik Monnet and Hantke 2016) aesthetics, relying heavily on "devastated landscapes and huge casualties […] battlefield scenes and images of wounded and dead" (xv). The depletion of landscape ("No-Man's Land") and the dismemberment of the corpses spark a spasmodic surrogate account of the First World War, for Jenny's dreams are indeed a conflation of "the on the war-film" she has seen and the "stories [she] had heard" (*TRS* 6). The narrator's

[89] In Meretoja and Davis 2020, p.79. Caruth relies heavily on Freud's "Nachträglichkeit". She indeed explains that "in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness." (1995, 6) Shahid's difficulty to process the event is shown by his impaired cognitive function, as well as his belated realisation of what happened when he tells himself: "It's all got to me […] it's all got to me much more than I realised." (*C* 453)

subconscious becomes a sound box of war testimonies, destined to refract the experience of her yet-to-return cousin, while expressing her own distress. The fragmentation of this substitute testimony finds a sole echo at the end of the novel, as Chris is apparently cured: "he would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders[90], under that sky more full of flying death than clouds, to that No-Man's land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the dead." (81) The two evocations almost form an epiphora as they rely on the same traumatic imagery, sealing Jenny's fears as regards her cousin. Jenny's gothic aestheticization of the First World War signposts the conflict's singularity as threatening, horrific and destructive, in lieu of a national glorification of the soldier, which she shares with Holtby's Councilman Astell, who "looked at Heyer's mutilated body; he thought of the millions dead in the Great War." (*SR* 107) Astell strips down national symbols of their purport so as to lay bare the impact of the event. As Laurie Laufer contends, "where the official narrative crowns heroes, values glory, speaks about honour and fierce defenders of the homeland, reality exposes horrific fields, cries of despair, death, corpses, putrefaction abjection." (2002, 119)[91] This dissension negates the possibility to see Jenny's double substitution of the traumatic testimony as an appropriation of Chris's trauma. In fact, far from "succumb[ing] to a secondary trauma" (Whitehead 9) that would render Chris's trauma "too familiar" (7), Jenny's horrific depiction of the war, her own *spasmos*, is rather a symptomatic case of what LaCapra coined "empathic unsettlement" (2001, 41): it is because she is "responsive" (LaCapra 2001, 41) to the multiplicity of testimonies from the battlefield that she feels the need to "snatch [her] Cousin Christopher from the wars" (*TRS* 6). Jenny's empathy, "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" (Keen 4), recalls the ethical imperative of responsibility that overshadows the national interest of the event and reinstates instead the injunction of the other's wound as the subject's primary calling: by making the wound visible, the writers of the corpus call attention to clinical affliction as a trigger of the subject's inherent "exposure to affection" (Levinas 1974, 50). To use Susan Onega and Jean-Michel's Ganteau's words:

[90] This certainly recalls John McCrae's 1915 poem "In Flanders Field": "We are the Dead. Short days ago / We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, / Loved and were loved, and now we lie, / In Flanders fields." (27)
[91] "le discours officiel auréole les héros, valorise la gloire, parle d'honneur, de défenseurs courageux de la patrie, là où le réel révèle champs d'horreur, cri de désespoir, mort, cadavre, putréfaction, abjection".

> the spectacle of the Other's pain and vulnerability is a reminder of some form of community of suffering that defines a common denominator of humanity and solicits responsibility for the others that depend on us (Held 10). In other terms, trauma narratives privilege an ethics that defines humanity as inherently relational. […] (2014, 12)

The historical event tears open the subject, as it exerts its violence on them and lays bear their intrinsic vulnerability, i.e. their "capacity for damage, a liability to harm, an exposure to risk, aggression, or attack." (Ganteau 2015, 5) In state-of-the-nation novels, the open wound "cries out" (Caruth 1996, 4) and the Other beckons, suggesting in turn that the event is, in fact, an ethical catalyst.

B. Of a dis-membered nation: the wounding event

In *Alterity and Transcendence* (1995), Levinas contends that "*the Human* consists precisely in opening oneself to the death of the other, in being preoccupied with his or her death" (157). Mortality constitutes the ontological vulnerability of the subject (from the Latin *vulnus*, meaning, like the Greek etymon *τραῦμα*, "wound") and triggers responsibility. However, the novels of the corpus rather illustrate the characters' reluctance to "open themselves" to the death of the other. They instead resort to circumventions which draw them away from this human preoccupation, as death becomes the paragon of the event: as Gibson argues, the event "is or involves an encounter with or a manifestation of the void in all its mundanity. [It is marked] as moment of radical loss." (2007, 5) It is precisely this painful vacuum that Michael and his mother try to avoid when watching the quiz show *Countdown*[92]:

> The letters were O,Y,R,LT,T,I,M and A, and I could see it straight away, but neither of the contestants got it and my mother was struggling, too – all that she found, in the end, was a feeble five-letter word, 'trail'. At least, that's what she said at the time, and it's only now that I wonder if she saw it as well, the word 'mortality' spelled out by those nine random letters, but couldn't bring herself to write down the truth of it on the back of her scribbled afternoon shopping list. (328)

The ironic fragmentation of the word "mortality' points to the Owens' quasi-baroque "ritual" (327), which they would enact after each visit to the hospital when Michael's father was in a

[92] According to Michael, "there were two simple elements to this programme, a game involving numbers, where the contestants had to perform some basic mental arithmetic […] and a lexical game, in which they vied with each other to see who could make the longer word out of nine randomly selected letters of the alphabet." (327) Though the show is never clearly named, its rules certainly resemble *Countdown*, the British adaptation of "Des Chiffres et des Lettres" (respectively aired since 1982 and 1965).

critical condition. Michael realises, as he writes, that this ritual was "designed […] to keep the dread and the grief at a tolerable distance" (326), recalling Blaise Pascal's *Thoughts* (1669):

> *Diversion* – Death is easier to bear without the thought of it, than is the thought of death without danger. […] Men, unable to remedy death, sorrow, and ignorance, determine, in order to make themselves happy, not to think of these things. Notwithstanding these miseries, man wishes to be happy, and wishes for happiness only; unable to wish otherwise, he knows not how to gain happiness, For this he must needs make himself immortal; but unable to effect this, he sets himself to avoid the thought of death. [sic] (39)

Diversion, from the Latin *divertere*, exemplifies the need to "turn away from" (*OED*) the very condition that makes the subject human. The repetitive, almost mechanic, viewing of the gameshow allows for the "avoidance", the erasure of mortality, which has paradoxically become too present. Unable (and unwilling) to open themselves "to the death of the other", Michael and his mother surrender to immediate and ignorant relief. Her oblivious answer to the game show exposes the conflation of diversion and reality into an unwanted, unrequired, and most importantly, unsufferable, *pharmakon*. Josephine Brooker sees there an

> unreadiness, between two family members who spend each day together, to register the reality of death that they are living alongside. Or, even more specifically, an unwillingness to register it together in this unasked-for, frivolous context which has caught them off guard and would be no way to start talking about their imminent loss. What Michael surely feels – his mother's emotions are unknown – is awkwardness. This obstructs or interferes with the sadness of the scenario, while ultimately being sad in itself. (in Tew 2018, 45)

Michael and his mother's necessity to counteract fears of loss encapsulates the fundamental conundrum of responsibility, as the spectacle of the other's mortality is precisely what "orders and ordains me" (Levinas 1982, 97), while also creating the need for diversion. While Michael finds refuge in television and movies, Sukey Pascoe (née Matthews) finds solace in her faith: she indeed attempts to negotiate her son's fate with God days before the Second World War: "'You'll be safe in our lovely combes, you'll like that won't you?' She smiled at her son's perplexed face. But she wasn't talking to him. God knew what the bargain was." (*NLM* 378) By conceding to move to the countryside with her husband, Sukey enters an implicit contract with God to protect her youngest son, not only from the impending conflict[93], but from death

[93] Her two other sons, Senior and Middleman, will necessarily be enrolled. Sukey points out to her husband Hugh that "for the two boys there is real danger." (378)

altogether. When this bargain proves to be void, circumvolutions shatter in the face of death as event. P.S.'s death during the 1947-1949 Palestine War[94] conflates once more the national and the individual, leading Sukey to break down when asked about the political situation of the country: "Suddenly Mrs Pascoe, so sensible, so reliable […] began to shout at them […] She began to cry […] and ran from the room." (452-453) The actualisation of death as a possibility terminates the ethical imperative, as only loss and absence remain. The historical event and death as event merge and 'annihilate' – to return to Montandon's lexicon – self and other, as suffering takes over. Death as event circumscribes responsibility as a perilous imperative, where our inescapable interdependence equates our ineluctable suffering. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler underlines that "Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies attached to others at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure." (20) Death as event severs these attachments and causes the emergence of "split subject[s]" (Huk 179), who are unable to bear the disappearance of the determining other.

For Butler, vulnerability and interdependence are intrinsically interwoven. Mortality and death therefore necessarily reconfigure our ties with others, but also shape our own constitution. In fact, Butler argues:

> It is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who 'am' I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. (2004, 22)

[94] The introduction to Alon Kadish's *The British Army in Palestine and the 1948 War* (2019) best summarises the development of the Palestine situation and the involvement of the British Army: "The main mission of the British Army in Palestine during the last years of the Second World War and until the end of 1947 was fighting Jewish insurgency. […] The Army's role was to assist the civil authorities and primarily the Palestine Police to maintain law and order by means of what were known as Internal Security (IS) duties. The mission changed following the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 of 29th November 1947 to accept its Special Committee on Palestine's (UNSCOP) recommendation that the British Mandate on Palestine be terminated and the country partitioned into two states – Jewish and Arab. […] The inter-communal fighting only intensified and spread beyond the anticipated flashpoints and the Army soon ran into considerable difficulties in its attempts to fulfil its mission without unduly endangering the troops, and while ensuring a clean and bloodless evacuation." (1) This mention in *No Laughing Matter* broadens even further the scope of the state-of-the-nation novel, as Wilson stages key imperial policies and events as part of his criticism of imperialism and nationalism. As Sukey mourns her son and excoriates the British government, the reader can perceive Wilson's own political commentary through other parents' thoughts: "But, though they dispersed with expressed solicitude the parents felt that the present crisis* was no time for such ghosts, perhaps, in fact, it was just that sort of living in the past that had brought England to her present humiliations." (*NLM* 453)
* The Suez Crisis of 1956.

In the face of death as event, self-determination is shattered as our attachment with the other ceases to exist *hic et nunc*. The ethical reconfiguration that ensues cannot but be prone to fragmentation, as the 'I' struggles to identify its conditions of existence as a now-bereaved subject. This decomposition leads Michael Owen to witness his own self-splitting, as Fiona passes away. Oscillating between dream and reality, Michael pictures the hospital nurse guiding him into a cinema, with a screening of Fiona on her bed. A dissociation occurs between narrator-Michael and bereft-Michael, where the former narrates the scene from a spectator's point of view, as he watches the latter say goodbye to a dying Fiona. Michael's self splits into two, resulting in a destabilising shift of pronouns and focalisation (I/he) that accentuates his experience of loss:

> Then the nurse stepped forward and put her hand on his shoulder. She whispered, 'She's gone I'm afraid', and Michael nodded, and bowed his head, curling in upon himself. He might have been crying, but I think he was just very very tired. He was like that for about five minutes. Then the nurse made him let go of Fiona's hand. […] He stood up slowly and took her arm, and they walked off the screen together, to the left of the frame. And that was the last I ever saw of him. As for me, I stayed right there in my seat. I wasn't going to move until Fiona did. There seemed no point in leaving the cinema this time. (*WCU* 419)

Resorting to diversion reaches its paroxysm as Michael becomes a spectator of his own grief. The split pronouns give way to a de-realisation of the self: bereft-Michael turns into a fictitious entity on which narrator-Michael can freely comment or pass judgement ("I hoped this wasn't going to be too boring." 416), not only epitomising Butler's notion of 'inscrutability' but also converging loss into trauma, since "Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel." (LaCapra 2001, 42)[95] The disintegration of the ties with Fiona indeed generates a cinematic haze where Michael's self-fragmentation comes in full swing, as his two personalities almost physically diverge from one another ("off the screen"; "to the left of the frame"). Body and mind separate in the face of loss, creating a traumatic liminality that shuts narrator-Michael away and scleroses his split, dis-membered, personality. While the movie

[95] This very scene is also a re-enactment of Michael's mother's confession about his biological father, which "split [him] in two" (355), according to her. The shock of Fiona's death causes Michael's personality to break while simultaneously triggering him to tell her about this first traumatic event: narrator-Michael becomes the witness of his own painful testimony, which he dismisses as part of the cinematic scene. The evocation of this painful memory does not lead him to "work-through" his traumatic past, but instead causes his identity to further disintegrate.

theatre provides him with refuge from loss and suffering, West's *The Return of the Soldier* explores the other side of the harrowing threshold.

At the very beginning of the novel, Jenny finds Kitty in Oliver's bedroom, "revisiting her dead". (4) By entering and leaving the nursery to enjoy the sunlight as she dries her hair, Kitty physically activates the memory of her son, which inevitably triggers her suffering as she re-lives and re-enacts the trauma of losing him. As Cathy Caruth contends that "the trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site" (1995, 10). The traumatic liminality of the room emerges in her speech, as she confesses to Jenny: 'I wish Chris wouldn't have kept it as a nursery when there's no chance—' (4). Language falters over loss and conveys the depth of Kitty's trauma, who faces both the irremediability of her son's death as well as the impossibility to have another child: the dash exposes both traumatic omission and unfathomable revelation, since "in the dash, thought becomes aware of its fragmentary character." (Adorno 1990, 302) Kitty's confrontation with her loss is quickly dismissed when she asks Jenny to brush her hair – leaving trauma unresolved – but deftly finds its echo in Margaret's own suffering when she mentions her own dead son to Chris's cousin: "We thought he would be up and about the next day, he just—" (69). The dash is the only element connecting Kitty and Margaret, who are otherwise antagonists. The ambivalence of the dash, which is a cypher for both fragmentation and connection, enables an intimate recuperation of death as event: the loss of the two children superimposes itself on the ongoing conflict and national mourning. Class division is paradoxically overridden by psychological and textual fragmentation as both women grieve their respective son, leading West to shed light on feminine and domestic trauma. The loss endured by the characters of the corpus – Michael, Kitty and Margaret, but also Sukey – therefore triggers the emergence of "an intuition of the event that otherwise threatens to seem increasingly unavailable" (Gibson 1999, 140), which informs readers and critics on the state of the nation.

It is because state-of-the-nation novels complicate, trouble, upset the "emplotment" of the event with intimate and traumatic narratives that responsibility and vulnerability are reinstated as singularity and inevitability. This destabilisation of emplotment not only allows novels of the genre to thwart nationalistic discourse by focusing on individual experience but also to use the latter as an ethical catalyst, which draws attention to the (de)composition of the nation. In fact, when Sukey breaks down after P.S.'s death, she desperately asks her fellow parents: "Damn the government! Haven't they done enough to us, taking everything that gave

life meaning?" (*NLM* 453) Similarly, Fiona's illness and death forces Michael to run a diagnostic of the United Kingdom:

> Our business failing, our jobs disappearing, our countryside choking, our hospitals crumbling, our homes being repossessed, our bodies being poisoned, our minds shutting down, the whole bloody spirit of the country crushed and fighting for breath. I hate the Winshaws, Fiona. Just look what they've done to us. Look what they've done to you. (*WCU* 413)

Mortality and vulnerability allow Sukey and Michael to wonder about the context of the event: the wounded and wounding Other is indeed an ethical catalyst, whose unsufferable loss raises questions as to what enables or hinders responsibility. The corporeality of the event here takes the form of corruptive policies, whose underlying and corrosive effects only come to light as the Other fades away. As Ryan Trimm explains,

> it is the family, through their participation in the Tory policies of the 1980s, who are responsible for a prolonged attack, a carve up, on the national core. The callous actions of the Winshaws lead to any number of hardships, privations, and deaths. In terms of carving up the nation, it is the Winshaws – and the Thatcherism they espouse – who are responsible in this whodunit. (163-164)

Ethical responsibility is crippled by the political: in the intimate sphere, death as event is the cataclysmic result of the political and economic decisions, whose *telos* becomes incompatible with the subject's ability to care for the other. The cultural context of death as event erodes responsibility, as evidenced in *The Return of the Soldier,* pointing in turn to ethical frailty. Kitty's double loss, as a mother and a wife who wishes to "regain the husband with whom she has lost a child" (Pulsifer 52), actually embodies the essence of the state-of-the-nation novel as a counter-narrative to nationalistic discourse. The vulnerable layers of *The Return of the Soldier* mirror the hidden cultural and political imbrications of the event, which in turn allows for the reconfiguration of our modes of apprehension of the Other. Unrecognised by her husband and still mourning the death of her son, Kitty's identity is reduced to a "sad mask" that "meant nothing to [Chris]" (22), while Oliver's death is barely spoken of. The dissolution of both marriage and motherhood – social roles that enable her self-construction – makes her as destitute as Chris, yet without being recognised as such: one can perceive West's criticism of asymmetrical gender relations[96], for Chris's trauma simultaneously denies her identity and

[96] Pulsifer particularly insists on this point: "*The Return of the Soldier* illustrates how Kitty's traumatic symptoms, which result from a particular, domestic incident, are overshadowed by Chris's experience of trauma in war. In

supersedes her own loss as a mother and as a wife, confining her "into the shadows." (22) The dual rhetoric of loss at the heart of West's state-of-the-nation novel is what enables, according to Nicole Rizzuto,

> a reassessment of English historical narratives of loss by inviting readers to respond to the rhetorical and formal dimensions of testimony […] in a climate of national anxiety, vulnerability, and retrenchment coincident with war, masculinist and metropolitan focalizations of national violence become highly guarded and resolute. Consequently, other modes of violence become impossible to witness and archive. […] the novel's rhetoric of testimony elaborates a crisis of memory and mourning that challenges the interpretations of trauma offered by the plot and its narrative of historical rupture. By attending to this troubling of plot, readers can glimpse a counter-representation of British history. This counter-representation suggests that in the midst of its contemporaneous moment of international conflict, the nation is in danger of producing and perpetuating historical amnesia. (9-10)

West's narrative of loss and vulnerability not only demonstrates how the feminine voices of the war are subsumed to male belligerent accounts of the conflict, but also reveals the necessity to look beyond the scope of the historical event itself: Kitty's unaddressed and unresolved trauma is symptomatic of the uneven gender structures that New Women writers strived to expose before the War. By failing to answer the question "Who am I without you?", Kitty's dual and intimate wounds invisibly fragment the novel as a First World War account. The historical event and death as event violently collide and unmask the structural societal traumas hindering the ethics of responsibility: if *The Return of the Soldier* first appears as a moral dilemma on the restauration of Chris's memory, it hides in fact deeper social and political conundrums that remain to be resolved.

By scanning the cultural and political conditions of emergence of the event, state-of-the-nation novels therefore draw attention to both the symptoms and the causes of the disjunct nation: contrary to Jonas's claim, shared vulnerability reveals the imperative of responsibility, rather than the fact of being a "son" of his people and country. What determines responsibility is not rooted in land or ancestry but is rather determined by the common propensity to be hurt: the dissolution of the "emplotment" of the event and the return to its more intimate expressions

fact, most previous critical approaches have approached Kitty's traumatic symptoms in a similar way, by subordinating their narrative importance in comparison to Chris's shell shock. But such readings replicate patriarchal discourses that respect war experiences while belittling domestic tragedy. In presenting a parallel traumatic representation in Kitty, the novel offers a feminist statement about traumatic experience that is in keeping with West's early journalism." (38)

suggest that an ethics of responsibility void of any nationalist recuperation could indeed be possible. However, the intuition developed by novels of the corpus hints at the fact that the fragmentation of the nation is not solely due to nationalist discourse but is also a result of "norms of recognition" (Butler 2003, 43) that thwart the initial, responsible relationship to the Other – it is this very system of norms and codes of conduct that the second part of this dissertation proposes to address.

PART II
THE POLITICS OF (DIS)INTEGRATION

> [In] the domain of dispossession, ethics and politics are not (or should not be) mutually exclusive. Ethical responsibility to others passes through critical engagement with the social norms and resources that render us, or do not render us, joyfully and/or painfully available to each other.
>
> (Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: the Performative in the Political*, 108).

For Athanasiou and Butler, ethical responsibility cannot be understood outside of norms and power dynamics. Since they rely on the Foucauldian lexicon[97], I understand the term "norm" in the way Stéphane Legrand defines it in his study *Les Normes chez Foucault* (2007):

> A statement is never a norm per se: it becomes one because of the function assigned to it in a practical and discursive context. […] A social fact is easily recognisable by its normative nature, insofar as it is not only a norm associated with a particular imperative but rather a phenomenon generating – or prone to generate – a behaviour destined to comply with this imperative. (3-4)[98]

If responsibility is necessarily relational, it is also deeply contextual: the social and political environment of individuals divert the imperative of responsibility as the primary relationship with the other, through the discursive construction of the body politic. The implementation of normativity and conformity entails a restrictive framework for responsibility to emerge: the call of the other runs the risk of being unanswered, unheard – or worse yet – ignored. This points to the fragility of the body politic which threatens to disintegrate. State-of-the-nation novels seem, in light of Athanasiou's statement, to engage with this constrictive framework, as their 19th century legacy suggests. The aim of the following chapters is to see how the novels of the corpus expose a rigid system of norms and codes of conduct that cause the social tissue to

[97] In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler comes back on the French origin of the normative lexicon: "In French, the term *normalité* appears in 1834, *normatif* in 1868, and in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, we get the normative sciences (which, I gather, gets carried forward in the name of the division at the contemporary American Political Science Association meetings called "normative political theory"); the term "*normalization*" appears in 1920. For Foucault as well as Ewald, it corresponds to the normalizing operation of bureaucratic and disciplinary powers." (49) This genesis is particularly relevant, as it corresponds to the same period as Condition-of-England novels.

[98] "Un énoncé n'est jamais par lui-même une norme, seulement en vertu de la fonction qui lui est attribué dans une conjoncture discursive et pratique. […] Le fait social est bien reconnaissable à son caractère normatif, c'est-à-dire à cela qu'il n'est pas seulement une norme signifiant une certaine exigence, mais entraînant, ou tendant à entraîner le comportement conforme à cette exigence."

disintegrate, leading to the fragmentation of the ethics of responsibility under the weight of prejudice and extreme precarisation.

CHAPTER 4.

Status and Stratification

Studying Condition-of-England novels, James Richard Jr Simmons underlines that

> [to] understand how and why the condition of England novel originated, it is important to understand the laws that by the 1830s compelled the public to feel there were many victims in a society in which Benjamin Disraeli's concept of "The Two Nations," rich and poor, was a reality. (336)

Disraeli's novel *Sybil* (1845) famously outlined the economic, geographic and social distinction between the rich and the poor, who were "as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws. […]" (67). Fuelled by the Chartist movement and the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, class consciousness expanded in the 19th century. As Raymond Williams recalls, "by the 1840s, then, middle classes and working classes were common terms." (1976, 30) If the Condition-of-England novels seems indissociable from the political climate of the 19th century, remnants and revivals of this class criticism have been widely discussed when it comes to 20th and 21st century state-of-the-nation novels. Far from offering a perilous periodisation, any mention of class in the context of British culture and literature must retrace the long-standing history that such a notion entails.

While Virginia Woolf considered in 1916 that "the war is breaking down barriers between the classes which seemed adamant" (1987, 112), the novels published during and after the conflict negate such an affirmation, as evidenced for instance by Aldous Huxley's satirical *Antic Hay* (1923) and *Those Barren Leaves* (1925)[99]. Disareli's words indeed continued to find an echo in the interwar period, as Walter Greenwood conflates both Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Sibyl's* subtitle for his own novel, *Love on the Dole. A tale of the two cities*. (1933). The first half of the 20th century was particularly marked by Orwell's sociological

[99] Christine Reynier discusses Woolf's assertion in her article "Exploring the Modernist State of England Novel by Women Novelists: Rebecca West, Radclyffe Hall and Winifred Holtby" (2015), where the three novels under study expose the persistence of class and national divisions, despite the common experience of the war. She underlines that: "In various ways, the 'community of suffering' is shown to be deeply fragmented. What seemed to be communal to Woolf in 1916 is exposed as being but a myth by West, Hall and Holtby. The war, in spite of the suffering it generated for all, has not united the nation in 'a community of suffering'." (Online)

essays and inquiries, which gave birth to *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1937 and *The Lion and the Unicorn* in 1941, where he vehemently claims that "England is the most class-ridden country under the sun. It is a land of snobbery and privilege, ruled largely by the old and the silly." (52) Perhaps one of the most interesting comments on the survivance of class criticism can be found in Richard Hoggart's introduction to *The Road to Wigan Pier*, originally written in 1989, thirty years after the publication of his own *Uses of Literacy* (1957):

> Orwell notes with contempt how in 1937 it was fashionable to say that class divisions were fading in Britain. Twenty years later I published a book which made similar points, and was told by some reviewers that I was grievously mistaken, that class feeling was virtually dead. Thirty more years on and the same things are being said. Class distinctions do not die; they merely find new ways of expressing themselves. […] Each decade we shiftily declare we have buried class; each decade the coffin stays empty. (in Orwell 2001, vii)[100]

From the First World War on, the inner divisions of the British body politic have been attracted to two opposite poles, one where social classes wither and one where they regiment the life of the country. While the postwar consensus and the subsequent construction of the Welfare state through the implementation of the Beveridge Report (1942) aimed to flatten out social divisions, Marina Mackay and Lyndsey Stonebridge nonetheless point out that a "mid-century preoccupation with social class" (11) persisted[101], finding its way in the fiction of the Angry Young Men Kingsley Amis, Alan Sillitoe or John Baine. Interestingly enough, this renewal of class consideration in fiction went together with a theorisation of class through the development of Cultural Studies – Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* and Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) being the landmarks of this new movement in criticism. Margaret Thatcher's rise to power in the late 1970s marked the end of the 1950s Welfare state and state-of-the-nation novels gained

[100] Hoggarth's words also recall those of Tom Nairn in *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neonationalism* (1982): "the contradiction between the form of the United Kingdom state and any would-be English nationalism can be resumed in a word: class. This is a state which has intimately depended upon a hierarchical and élite social formation: as many recent studies have demonstrated, that dependence has been modified but never abolished." (298)

[101] Dominic Head underlines that the rise of the Labour government at the end of the First World War polarised Britain, for party's focus on improving the living conditions of the working class triggered a clash with the Conservative party. The election of Clement Atlee's Labour government in 1945 was paradoxical, as its intent for social prosperity meant a redefinition of class lines, a destabilisation of the social structure which was not particularly smooth: "It is often argued that the Second World War marked a watershed in British class relations. Obvious class distinctions were set aside in the face of a common crisis, and this pragmatism can be seen to have accelerated a process of change in the perception of class status. This is not to deny the existence of inequality, or the persistence of class struggle in the post-war era. What the change in perception instigated is a popular demand for a wider share in the new prosperity that emerged in the 1950s, after the years of austerity. If the egalitarian social reconstruction proposed during the war did not materialize […] the broad trend since then has been towards greater prosperity for working people, a process that undermines the economic basis of class affiliation." (49)

new momentum in the 1980s and 1990s, especially under the pen of Jonathan Coe and Martin Amis, as pointed out in the introduction to this dissertation. If their work still seems to offer a counterpoint to the development of John Major's "classless society" (in Carradine 1998, 174), Lawrence Driscoll recalls that novelists like Coe, Amis, John Lanchester and several other state-of-the-nation writers have attended the prestigious universities of Oxbridge (16), raising questions as to their ability to portray class struggles in the first place[102]. Driscoll also underlines that recent literary criticism, such as Malcolm Bradbury's *The Modern British Novel 1878–2001* (2001), has either tended, like John Major's and Tony Blair's governments, to erase the issue of class or to encompass (read undermine) it in the larger field of Cultural Studies and their concomitant analysis of gender and race. Fiction of the 2000s and 2010s certainly contradicts the eradication of class struggle, as John McGregor's *Even the Dogs* (2010) or Ross Raisin's *Waterline* (2011) show.

Recent literary criticism has thoroughly addressed issues of class in English fiction, and a similar study in 20th and 21st century state-of-the-nation novels could appear as a bland pastiche of the works of Dominic Head (2002), Philip Tew (2004), Nick Bentley (2005), Lawrence Driscoll (2009) and more recently, Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard (2014). Drawing from these critics, I nonetheless offer to dwell on the notions of status and stratification, which encompass that of class, while pertaining more clearly to the study of fragmentation[103]. In fact, for Williams, status is "a more precise and measurable term, in preference to class (q.v.). [Its] real significance is that *it is a new and modernizing term for rank.* […] Where *rank* had titles and ribbons, status has *symbols.*" (1976, 235-236) Status therefore implies a hierarchisation of society itself defined by several strata, as sociologist G.D. Mitchell underlines: "[social stratification] is a particular kind of social differentiation and

[102] Interestingly enough, in "The Leaning Tower" (1940), Woolf has similar complaints about the Auden generation, and advocated for a classless society. This triggered the publication of three responding essays in 1941, including one by B.L. Coombes entitled "Below the Tower" and one by Louis MacNeice, "The Tower That Once". Benjamin Kohlmann comes back on this episode and draws this conclusion: "When it is read in light of the responses by Upward, Coombes, and MacNeice, Woolf's essay is best described as a complex opening move in an ongoing debate about the value of politicised writing that extended well into the post-war years. […] Taken together, Coombes's and MacNeice's essays offer a critique of modernism that points towards a revisionist historiography of the 1930s. This alternative account describes the writing of the decade not as a form of late modernism but as a corrective to the class limitations of modernist writing itself." (in James Smith, 232-233)

[103] In *The Precariat. The New Dangerous Class* (2011), Guy Standing retraces a useful distinction between class and status, first established by Marx Weber in *Economy and Society* (1928) , where "class refers to social relations of production and a person's position in the labour process" while the idea of status has been associated with a person's occupation. […]" (8) This difference will be especially helpful in the last section of this chapter, as migrants workers of the corpus generally have precarious, menial jobs which are meant to serve their rich employers, causing them to disappear behind their occupation.

necessarily conveys the notion of hierarchical ranking" in which "there are recognized and sanctioned differences which place one higher, or lower, than another in the admitted social order." (194)[104] The lexicon used by both Williams and Mitchell ("symbols", "recognized", "admitted") point to the discursivity of status and stratification, as formulated, internalised norms that codify society. Derrida sees status as "the essence considered as stable, established, and legitimated by a social or symbolic order in an institutionalizable code, discourse, or text. The moment proper to status is social and discursive. […] (1987, 26) The intrinsic link between status and stratification with language casts the depiction of social classes under a new light in state-of-the-nation novels, by exposing the normative and fragmenting constructs of status and stratification as a hindrance to ethical responsibility.

1. Hierarchical Stigma

In *History in Our Time* (1998), David Cannadine retraces the origin of "class obsession" in British society:

> despite the best efforts of many of today's historians to take class out of the 19th century, the fact remains that the Victorians were obsessed with it – or at least, with something very like it. Read any contemporary novel, newspaper, or parliamentary debate, and the preoccupation is immediately apparent – not with class in the Marxist sense of collective and conflicting relations to the means of production, but with those finely graded distinctions of prestige ranking to which sociologists give the name status. […] Here, surely, is the origin of the British obsession, not so much with collective class, but with such individual matters as titles, honours, accent, deportment and dress, which does so much to determine how one person is regarded and categorised by another. […] (186)

Tracing back the prominence of class to the 19th century once again, Cannadine lays emphasis on the outward signs of status ("titles, honours, accent, deportment and dress") and stratification ("distinction", "ranking", "categorised") which define a politics and ethics of visuality based on asymmetrical relations. For Erving Goffman, these signs are part of what constitutes social stigma:

[104] For a comprehensive understanding of social stratification in sociology, see David B. Grusky's *Social Stratification. Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective.* Westview Press, 2008.

> an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him. […] He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated. We and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue I shall call the normals. (5)

Stigma and sign share a similar origin: while stigma initially refers to "a mark made by an instrument", signs are a "remarkable thing" (*OED*). Between attraction and repulsion, signs and stigma are a cipher for both physical and social distinction: for what is "remarkable" is in fact what is "worthy of remark or attention" (*OED*). The visual prevalence of status and stratification turns signs and stigma into a social parameter, where conspicuous differences in "deportment and dress" are the foundation of social and economic norms of intelligibility. This hierarchical display seems to disclose the dis-integration of English society: the body politic becomes fissured along these stratifying lines, which define who can be (dis)regarded as a proper individual.

A. Signs of distinction

The title of this analysis certainly recalls Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979). For Bourdieu, distinction is "a form of differentiation, more precisely a vertical differentiation. […] It is not based on the identification of the dominants' conscious search for distinction but on their "objective" social position." (Glevarec) [105] The internalised superiority of the upper classes leads to their necessary distinction, a process with which the lower portions of society cannot engage in the hope to differentiate themselves from other individuals. Distinction is, in Bourdieu's view, only the prerogative of the dominant class[106]. Perhaps one of the most significant examples in the novels of the corpus is in Lanchester's *Capital*, when Roger strolls through Wandsworth Common with his children on Boxing Day: "he walked past a young woman pushing a pram – middle class, she was, as Roger registered without bothering to examine how he decoded that fact: something about her scarf, or her pram, or her hair. […]" (172) Modes of dress establish an (apparently unconscious) interpretative framework, in which clothing allows to identify class

[105] "la distinction n'est pas une différenciation, elle est une domination. En cela, la distinction est une forme de différenciation, à savoir une différenciation verticale. [Elle] est objective, à savoir qu'elle ne se fonde pas sur l'identification de la recherche consciente de la distinction de la part des dits dominants mais sur leur position sociale dite "objective.""

[106] While the second part of this dissertation deals with the invisibilisation of precarious populations and their lack of agency, Chapter 7 will offer an analysis of the ethical impulse of these populations, which could account for a "distinctive" attitude.

belonging. Clothes become signs of stratification, which locate individuals on the scale of vertical differentiation[107]. However, when it comes to state-of-the-nation novels, this frame of reference is not presented as entirely unconscious. For if Roger manages to naturally determine the socio-economic background of his fellow Londoners, he also chooses his clothes as a tool for distinction, i.e., to make himself stand out so that others can distinguish him: "he was very adroit at signalling his status […] – even his clothes, beautifully made suits from a wide-boy, Flash Harry tailor just off Savile Row, showed that he understood." (16) Roger's characterisation shows how clothing, fashion (and the *OED* reminds us of the original meaning of the word, "to shape") is a constructed norm of perception and recognition, with which the upper classes deliberately and purposefully play. The reference to Savile Row, home to the "Master Tailors of the British Bespoke" (Sherwood), sheds light on the 19th century legacy of fashion as a discriminating cipher that persists to this day.

Studying dandyism after the French revolution in *The Language of Fashion* (1967), Roland Barthes uses a vocabulary prefiguring Bourdieu's and sees in clothing a way for the upper classes to distinguish themselves (a notion that Bourdieu will set aside): "the superiority of status, which for democratic reasons could no longer be advertised, was hidden and sublimated beneath a new value: *taste*, or better still, as the word is appropriately ambiguous, *distinction*." (61) As evidenced by Roger Yount, fashion becomes a factor of social and economic differentiation – one which Celia despises in *The Holiday*: "Lopez was looking rather comical – which one shall I put on? You know, Tiny, I hate fashion girl with her famous old fashion slant. It is fashion, fashion, fashion all the way. Evidently a person of discrimination, ahem. […] The fashion slant is smug, careful, sly, furtive and withholding." (123) Celia delivers a scathing parody of her friend, whom she accuses of enabling social divisions. The final adjectives (all similar in meaning) point to the condescending rigidity that fashion codes imply. The attention paid to one's clothing betrays a dual desire to stand out and to cast out: the adjectives used by Celia reflect the insidious influence of status on the structure of society and the subsequent demarcations it creates.

The prominence of fashion as a means for distinction is one particularly mastered by Kitty Baldry in West's novel. In fact, "a failure of physical adjustment is the worst indignity

[107] Wilson pointed out in an interview with Betsy Draine that this vertical hierarchy was something he admired about Dickens's *Bleak House*: "For example, for me the wonderful thing about *Bleak House* is that you have this vertical line right through society from Sir Leicester Dedlock right down to the little boy who 'don't know nothink,' which is Jo." (3)

she can conceive." (*TRS* 24) Appearance coalesces with moral standing and draws a line between propriety and deviance. When Margaret first comes to Baldry Court, Kitty chooses her attire accordingly: "'I'll come down.' As the girl went, Kitty took up the amber hair-pins from her lap and began swathing her hair about her head. "Last year's fashion," she commented; "but I fancy it'll do for a person with that sort of address. She stood up, and threw her little silk dressing-jacket over the rocking horse." (9) Kitty's pomp ("amber hair-pins", "silk dressing-jacket") is an active dismissal of Margaret, who does not deserve to be welcomed with the latest fashion items. The obsolescence of the pins actually rejects Margaret beyond the limits of propriety and tolerance. The use of the scornful determinant "that" further establishes Kitty's social dominance over the lower classes and draws strict lines of separation between her and Chris's former love interest. Like Roger Yount, her choice of garments and accessories reveals her complete control and use of social codes. Yet her mastery goes even further, for she sees her deliberate outdated choice as a clear indication of her lack of regard for Margaret – recalling Bourdieu's argument on the privilege of the upper classes, as individuals from more popular backgrounds cannot even acknowledge such difference. Though Barthes underlines in 1967 that fashion has become "everybody's business" (63) due to mass production, *The Return of the Soldier* actually opens up a new dimension to clothing: though the first novel of the corpus is set in a context which had not yet seen the effects of mass production in fashion, the class-oriented fashion codes of West's state-of-the-nation actually expose how the novels of the corpus have made clothing a persistent sign of distinction, a "social value" (101), whose codification and internalisation leads to the stigmatised categorisation of individuals in English society, as evidenced by *Capital*.

It is no coincidence that Aldous Huxley chose a tailor to mock the British intelligentsia's fears in the wake of the Russian revolution of 1917. In *Antic Hay*, Mr. Bojanus is having a conversation with Huxley's protagonist Theodore Gumbril, Jr:

> "When the revolution comes, Mr. Gumbril, the great and necessary revolution, as Alderman Beckford called it, it won't be the owning of a little money that'll get a man in trouble. It'll be 'is class habits, Mr. Gumbril, 'is class speech, 'is class education. […] The Red Guards will stop people in the street and ask them to say some such word as 'towel.' If they call it 'towel,' like you and your friends, Mr. Gumbril, why then…" Mr. Bojanus went through the gestures of pointing a rifle and pulling the trigger; he clicked his tongue against his teeth to symbolize the report… "that'll be the end of them. But if they say 'teaul,' like the rest of us, Mr. Gumbril, it'll be: 'Pass Friend and Long Live the Proletariat.' Long live Teaul." (22)

Mr. Bojanus fears for the future of his upper-class clients as the Russian Empire is overthrown by the Bolsheviks. Like clothing, pronunciation effectively differentiates the upper and lower classes and the prominence of this distinction threatens to become a political tool. Language varieties become synonymous with social categorisation – a mode of distinction that is brilliantly parodied by Huxley in his second novel. In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams explains that while this textual differentiation can be traced back to Shakespeare (with Audrey's character in *As You Like It* among others), it became more common in the 19th century: "[The] systematic convention of class modes of speech belongs, effectively, to the late nineteenth century, in a period of obviously increasing class consciousness which was extending to just these parts of behaviour." (226) The reproduction of accents and dialects in Condition-of-England and state-of-the-nation novels participates in the identification of signs of distinction. Drawing once again from Dickens, Angus Wilson reproduces class modes of speech in *No Laughing Matter* through Regan, the Matthews' Cockney housemaid:

> 'I never knew *er*. And we never seed so much of im. Not when we was little. E was at sea. E paid this woman sometimes. And when e dident, we knew it all right. Then years later when Em was married and I was working along that that Monser Jules at Queen Anne's Mansions – that the one that learned me my fancy dishes – e comes back from sea. "I'm finished with it," e says, "I can't keep me victuals down." And e couldn't neither. Well e goes to live with Em. Barnum and Bailey's it was. E ad a bloomin parrot and a concertina and there was this little Chinee that come regular to play with im, a sort of chequers they played. I ad me own room in those days. […]' (31)

The elision of the initial "h" in the pronouns "her" and "his" and in the verb "have", as well the mis-conjugation of the auxiliary be ("we was little") makes Regan stand out on the page, in comparison with the Countess and Billy Pop's desperate attempt to resemble the aristocracy. Regan's accent stands as a visual stumbling block which follows a staccato rhythm, differentiating her from her employers. In *The Stuff of Literature* (1992), Edward Levenston identifies this literary process as "eye-dialect":

> Such nonstandard spellings of standard pronunciations are sometimes referred to as *eye dialect*; the eye perceives them as nonstandard forms, though the ear recognizes their normality. […] Eye dialect as a device for revealing a character's social status has a recognized place in the history of narrative fiction. (55-56)

The visual fragmentation of the text is therefore a deliberate sign of distinction chosen by the author to signal status and education level (Levenston in fact warns against the lack of accuracy

of some literary transcriptions). In the case of Regan, her Cockney dialect is also a way to generate laughter: her answer to the question "What were your parents like, Stoker?" turns into a farcical logorrhea of her father's tribulations, reinforcing her family's dissonance with the Matthews'. However, Williams warns against the related claims of naturalism that emerged in the 19th century, which created a supposed "whole way of seeing, at a sociological distance" (1973, 226) that actually favoured further stigmatisation. Wilson was "temperamentally and ideologically unwilling to believe ill of anybody with a Cockney accent" (Drabble 1995, 133) and his depiction of Regan looks like it meant to draw attention to her employer's lack of consideration. Nevertheless, Urszula Clark argues that "in using non-standard spellings to represent either non-standardness in general or a specific dialect, many readers will read stigma regardless of writers' conscious or unconscious motivations or intentions." (104) The performativity of literary language is thus called into question, when dialects and modes of speech are reproduced by a writer coming from a different geographical area or social background[108].

Clarke also underlines that modes of speech are an indication of "cultural and social normativity" (103) which codifies interactions between members of the same society. Winifred Holtby portrays the versality of the English language with the character of Elsie, Robert Carne's housemaid: "Like most of her generation and locality, Elsie was trilingual. She talked BBC English to her employer, Cinema American to her companions, and Yorkshire dialect to old milkmen like Eli Dickson." (17) Accent is distributed along class lines, and allows Elsie to adapt to almost any social context. Subtly deriding the association of speech and class – much more so than Huxley – Holtby's social comments aim at showing the artificiality of status and stratification. Elsie's multilingualism could also be seen as a prefiguration of the post-war's broadcast of accents and dialects. In fact, for James Gindin, the radio and television – we can also add cinema – "have [widely] publicized accents." (88) However, this is as far as Gindin's arguments hold. He contends that "accents, once the distinct marks of class, [have] become, for many people, the means of playful and dramatic pose rather than a single identifying mark." (88) The dismissal of accent stigmatisation in the post-war world is all too simplistic and

[108] Clark righlty points out that if "non-standardness is conventionally linked to stigma", it "doesn't mean, however, that non-standard forms cannot simultaneously be used to represent linguistic pride or regional identity." (104)

actively denies the reality of the "sociolinguist polarities" (Montini and Ranzato 1) that results from accent differentiation.

More recent state-of-the-nation novels further contradict such a statement: for instance, when Phoebe, the artist-nurse of *What a Carve Up!*, enters Roddy Winshaw's gallery, her accent is a factor of distinction: "'I've come down from Leeds,' said Phoebe. 'Ah.' The woman nodded. 'Yes, of course. That accent.'" (176) The assistant's use of "that" is in many ways reminiscent of Kitty's. Phoebe's accent is not only an indication of her geographical origin, but also becomes a social stigma that recalls the historic fracture between the North and the South of England. If Elizabeth Gaskell's novel certainly comes to mind, Alan R.H. Baker and Mark Billinge insist on the fact this division has "both contemporary importance and historical significance." (4) But more than an historical cultural difference hidden in this short interaction between Phoebe and the assistant, one could see a brief comment on the economic situation of the North under Thatcherism. Ronald L. Martin[109] underlines: "Rather than being a 'single nation' project, in practice Thacherism was a more divisive 'two-nation' one (Jessop et al., 1988), favouring the rich over the poor, services over manufacturing, and the commercial and financial economy of the South over the industrial economy of the North." (in Baker and Billinge, 27) Though Leeds was a prosperous exception in the deindustrialisation of the North, as Martin thoroughly shows, the social judgement expressed in the expression "that accent" shows how deep the stigmatisation of the North is rooted. Exposing the stigma associated with accents without actively resorting to controversial eye-dialect, Coe manages to reveal how differences in modes of speech can lead to generalisation, reification and hierarchisation.

Lanchester develops this further when the inhabitants of Pepys Road witness a reversal of social hierarchy during a community meeting following the "We Want What You Have" campaign, where they meet Detective Inspector Mill and his Chief Superintendent:

> He was a well-groomed young man and as soon as he began speaking it was clear that there was some strange class reversal taking place, since while the Chief Superintendent spoke in broad cockney, the Detective Inspector was impeccably middle-class, verging on outright posh. It was as if the enlisted man had mistakenly been put in charge of the officer. (375)

[109] Ronald L. Martin, "The contemporary debate over the North–South divide: images and realities of regional inequality in late-twentieth-century Britain," in Alan H. Baker and Mike Billinge, eds. *Geographies of England. The North-South Divide, Material and Imagined*. Cambridge University Press, 2004: 15-43.

This passage clearly delineates the social and economic hierarchy associated with accent stigmatisation. Solely looking at the adjectives used to describe Detective Inspector Mill ("well-groomed", "impeccably") reveal how "accent, deportment and dress" influence the relationship with the other, while defining an ethics and a politics of perception that negates the very basis of Levinas's ethical impulse towards the other. The repartition of society along a vertical axis of wealth determines one's social standing, not only in terms of occupation but in terms of consideration as well. The examples taken out of *Capital* and *What a Carve Up!* show the horizon of expectation associated with status and stratification. In *Class and Contemporary Culture in Britain* (2013), Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn underline that "the language of social class continues to be drawn on to label and judge others. [C]lass in Britain has become part of the architecture of self-evaluation and social judgement since at least the nineteenth century and shows little promise of entirely crumbling away." (18) Signs of distinction are in this regard highly paradoxical, for they help build a robust "architecture" whose foundation relies on dis-integration, on the fragmentation of the body politic. Modes of speech and dress display the active embodiment, the actual incorporation of norms of perception which weakens the lower layers of society.

B. "Spectacle of disqualification"

The incorporation of norms shows, for Guillaume Le Blanc, the "psychological centrality of norms." (2007, 35) [110] The simultaneous implication of body and mind in norms generates a "descent into precarity"[111], i.e., "a negative career which is the flipside of social normality" (14)[112]: because norms of perception are internalised, society is regimented by

[110] "la centralité psychique des normes."

[111] In *State of Insecurity. Government of the Precarious*, Isabell Lorey makes a three-fold distinction between precariousness, precarity and precarisation. She understands precariousness in the Butlerian sense of our shared vulnerability. She then considers that "the second dimension of the precarious, *precarity,* is to be understood as a category of order, which designates the effects of different political, social and legal compensations of a general precariousness. Precarity denotes the striation and distribution of precariousness in relations of inequality, the hierarchization of being with that accompanies the processes of *othering*. This dimension of the precarious covers naturalized relations of domination, through which belonging to a group is attributed or denied to individuals. Precarity involves social positionings of insecurity, yet it implies neither modes of subjectivation nor the power of agency of those positioned. [*Governmental precarisation*] relates to modes of governing since the formation of industrial capitalist conditions, and in modern Western societies cannot be separated historically from the ideologeme of bourgeois sovereignty." (12-13) However, for Le Blanc, precarisation is "the social process at the origin of the experience of precarity." (2007, 79) It must be noted that if the present study will follow Le Blanc's terminology, Lorey's arguments will inform the second part of this chapter. If the term "precarisation" will not be used in Lorey's sense, the analysis of the institutionalisation of precarity certainly dwells on and echoes her seminal work.

[112] "La plongée dans la précarité […] désigne une carrière négative qui est le revers de la normalité sociale."

binary conceptions of the individual who is caught up in "the game of norms" (2007, 36). According to Le Blanc, "being precarised means always attending the spectacle of disqualification of someone by another." (23)[113] Status and stratification are therefore the theatre of a disequilibrium, an imbalance of power, where the impossibility to comply with economic, political, behavioural norms entails the "relegation" (Le Blanc 2009, 14) of the unfitting other.

The embeddedness of norms within the social fabric is such that the interaction between the different layers of society is driven by what Isabell Lorey calls a "hierarchisation of being" which "covers naturalised relations of domination." (12) Midge Carne, at the beginning of *South Riding*, is quick to remind herself that "The Carnes, she knew, were not Poor People. […] She remained conscious of this foundation of grandeur sustaining her." (15) The capitalisation of "Poor People" circumscribes the less fortunate fringe of the population and shields Midge from this undesirable layer of society. The differentiation established by the young girl indexes a hierarchised social system, where the "flip side" of "grandeur" is insignificance at best, deviance at worst. Poor People are entirely dismissed as an unsuitable social category, while "Best People" (to use Huxley's terminology), albeit on the brink of bankruptcy like the Carnes, are always to be revered. The spectacle of disqualification follows a discursive pattern, whose language segments the different strata of the body politic: the precarisation of Poor People negates the very possibility of a unified nation, as each group should not interact with the other for fear of contamination. Biressi and Nunn recall that such designations of the lower classes have "often (but not always) been deployed to suggest that some element of 'choice' and low morals had to be accounted for when explaining how poor people remain poor, especially across the generations." (54) Class is endowed with moral (dis)qualifications that further fragments responsibility: the recognition of the other is no longer an ethical imperative calling upon the individual but is rather a factor of dissociation. In fact, in *No Laughing Matter*, Regan is the first to advise the young Marcus Matthews "don't mix yourself up with the muck" (113), a recommendation later satirised by the young siblings in their theatrical enactments. Wilson goes one step further than Holtby in the discursive precarisation of the poor, for they appear as a repulsive residue which could very well stain the aspiring young Matthews – an impression shared by Roddy Winshaw who fears for his beloved Mercedes Sports in the presence of

[113] "Être précarisé, c'est toujours assister au spectacle de la disqualification de l'un par l'autre."

"thugs" (*WCU* 181; from the Sanskrit *sthaga*, meaning "dishonest" according to the *OED)*. Le Blanc underlines that the use of such

> negative identity […] does not only mean reiterating the process of social precarisation via a process of precarious designation […] but also means accepting that the social construction of the psyche is entirely reliant on the sole designation of a life by the social logic in which it is inscribed. (2007, 34)[114]

The social lexicon of status actively reproduces and reinforces the stratification of society, up to the point where the identity of the precarious cannot be constructed or expressed outside of its social codification. The amalgam of poverty with moral dubiousness shows that discursive disqualification "brands" ("marque au fer rouge" Le Blanc 2007, 14) the other as poor, unreliable, repulsive – leaving little room for other modes of determination.

The Matthews' mistreatment of Regan or Roddy's haughty comments about Phoebe's residence ironically reveal in turn what Raymond Williams calls the "hypocrisy of a double moral standard - that of a class society." (1973, 94) If the poor are deemed responsible for their own misfortunes and are seen as deviant from moral norms, the attitude and behaviour of the upper layers of society in state-of-the-nation novels expose the dissonance of this moralising discourse. Roddy feels Phoebe's neighbourhood is in fact "evil-smelling" (*WCU* 181), her building "gloomy" and the lift "gruesome" – a surprising Gothic vocabulary that will find its echo towards the end of the novel, as Michael and Phoebe are the witnesses of the siblings' murders at Winshaw Towers. The irony of Roddy's disgust sheds light on the paradoxical stratification of society, where "amorality" can be either left unchecked or purposefully despised, depending on one's position on the axis of wealth. Similarly, in *South Riding*, Councillor Huggins professes that the "little alleys of East Kingsport" are "filthy, verminous, crawling with sin – *sin*!" (56) – an unbearable condition that he and his City Council colleagues must fight against. Yet, the italics of the second occurrence of *sin* point to the very relativity of such a notion, for Higgins did get Bessy Warbuckle pregnant, despite being himself married. Defining himself as "a man of normal instinct" (88), Huggins circumvents moral norms, which now only depend on status, rather than on a strict code of conduct. Though Holtby and Coe have chosen privileged members of their fictional society to highlight the irony of its

[114] "Qualifier une vie par [une] identité négative […] c'est non seulement réitérer le processus de précarisation social par un processus de désignation précaire […] mais c'est aussi accepter que la construction sociale de la *psyché* soit intégralement assignée à la seule désignation d'une vie par la logique sociale dans laquelle elle s'inscrit. "

stratification, Wilson uses Regan to refract the Matthews' moral obliviousness. When Regan relates that after too many antics, she could no longer tolerate her father in her home, the young Matthews remark:

> 'It wasn't very kind,' Gladys said.
>
> 'Didn't people blame you?' Sukey asked.
>
> 'Kind! Blame! We was too poor for notions!'
>
> They were all silent, then Marcus said, 'I expect that's why *they're* so awful. Being so poor.'
>
> […] Stoker said, 'Poor! You're the gentry.' (*NLM* 31-32)

This short interaction uncovers several layers of the disqualification of the precarious. First, the reality of Regan's poverty thwarts pre-conceived norms of behaviour (kindness and blame): as her father's relationships would cause her to lose her job, pragmatism, rather than idealism, takes hold over relationships. This realisation is seconded by a tentative reversal of precarisation, where Marcus tries to explain his parents' misconduct (references to Billy Pop and Clara often consist in italicised pronouns) by their lack of money – a recurring complaint in the N°52 household. Marcus's statement reflects the internalisation of social and economic norms, for potential poverty would almost allow immoral behaviour. Nevertheless, Regan's last statement thwarts any attempt to victimise the Matthew household: she refracts the family's lack of consideration for lower classes and points to the "double moral standard" of English society. In fact, if she and her family were "too poor for notions", it is certainly not the case of the Matthews, whose abusive and prejudiced behaviour remains unjustified, if not for their too-deeply-rooted privilege (otherwise referred to by Quentin Matthews as their "rotten gentility" 181). Social norms are therefore either extremely flexible or extremely rigid: the disqualification of the lower classes gives way to a dichotomic construction of society, which further annihilates and dehumanises the precarious.

Dehumanisation is the final stage in the discursive disqualification of the precarious, who is not solely negatively categorised and ironically made amoral but ends up being entirely discarded as an individual. Sukey Matthews, in her days at N°52, dreams of climbing the social ladder, leading her to picture Regan as the epitome of social failure: "The physical sense of being Regan disgusted her. It was this that she couldn't stand any longer in this sordid home, this terrible pity to no purpose, pity for people who were on the scrapheap, in the dustbins, the

drunken, dirty old Regan. […]" (*WCU* 45) The alliterations in plosives and dentals transcribe and heighten Sukey's scorn, up to the point where her aversion for the maid echoes Le Blanc's definition of the precarious, whose existence is submitted to "social scorn" ("disgusted her"; "pity to no purpose"), "poverty" (embodied by the dustbins) and "marginality" (symbolised by the "scrapheap", Regan being compared to refuse that needs to be discarded)[115]. Regan is therefore a concatenation of physical, social and moral impropriety which Sukey seeks to escape. Her dehumanisation is complete when Sukey refers to her several times as a "creature" ("dirty old creature" 44, "drunken creature" 111, "wretched creature" 111), forever negating her human attributes. The predominance of status and stratification reaches a new stage, as the precarious is disregarded and loses their human quality, making ethical responsibility a distant, if not non-existent, paradigm – at least as far as the poorest sections of society are concerned. Sukey's relationship with Regan is therefore symptomatic of what Isabell Lorey calls "processes of *othering*" (12) which result in "segmented relations of violence and inequality." (43) The precarious is animalised, made "non-human" through discriminating discursive strategies which both enclose and dismiss her.

The (mis)treatment of the precarious goes even further in *The Holiday*, where Celia utterly rejects the presence of her maid in the same room as her: "How dare you come in and touch the window when I am in here without asking my permission?" (115) Coming in to do the very job Celia is hiring for, the maid is seen as an intruder into the sphere of privilege (as the preposition "in" suggests). The asymmetrical relationship between the maid and Celia perfectly illustrates Lorey's segmented relation of violence, for the former requires the permission of the latter. Status defines the relationship between the different strata of society, with a clear dominating/dominated framework of interaction. Furthermore, the very action for which the maid is employed (which is in that case to close the window when it's raining) is seen as an act of defiance: the maid's duty becomes sacrilegious in the presence of Celia, who uses and abuses her status to reassert her power over the employee. A passage from Vita Sackville West's *The Edwardians* (1930) further exemplifies this unspoken rule: "Such small fry as under-housemaids and scullery-maids and the like were not supposed to have any feelings: they were only supposed to do as they were told." (12) In this regard, Celia's maid

[115] In *Vies ordinaires, vies précaires*, 2007, p. 79.

breaks the unspoken contract between masters and servants, identified by Esther Peeren in *The Spectral Metaphor* (2014) when studying the British TV show *Upstairs, Downstairs*:

> the ability to be present while seeming absent is the main characteristic that marks the servants' lives as ghostly. They are, however, not avisual but translucent; simultaneously noticeable and unobtrusive, they are seen through rather than overlooked. In fact, because their presence and skill act as important status markers for their employers, they are not supposed to go entirely unnoticed. (79)

The conspicuous movement towards the window[116] not only is an affront to Celia's social dominance but it also draws attention to what – or rather who – should not be seen. Individuals in the lower strata of society are therefore paradoxically defined as both "markers" and "marked": signs of distinction become a way for the dominant group to reassert themselves and to reify the stigmatised other. As Quentin points out in *No Laughing Matter*, servants are "a pitiful victim of the system, but not so pitiful that it's hard to imagine the system without [them]." (143) The stigmatising discourse of status weaves its way into the very structure of the body politic, where lower classes are defined and ruled by the privileged few, to the extent where the precarious enters a liminal space, where she is both tolerated and rejected.

2. Institutionalised Precarity

"The English law cannot be bought […] at least not by the poor." (*TH*, 130) The sweeping judgement of Caz in Stevie Smith's state-of-the-nation exposes how status and stratification influence the construction of the body politic, up to the point where they contaminate its public organs. Status and stratification create and define asymmetrical relations of power, and Caz's remark underscores the role institutions play in maintaining precarity and privilege in their assigned positions. For Derrida, if status is fundamentally discursive, he also insists on the fact that it is "essentially institutional. It defines while prescribing […] it determines what is stabilizable in institutional form, within a system an order that are those of a human society, culture, and law." (26) More than a tool for distinction, status necessarily implies a political and judicial framework, which in turn underlies the institutions (schools,

[116] The physicality of the relationship between masters and servants is also evoked by Axel Honneth in his article "Recognition", written together with Avishai Margalit: "Cultural history offers numerous examples of situations in which the dominant express their social superiority by not perceiving those they dominate. Most notorious perhaps, is the fact that the nobility were permitted to undress in front of their servants because the latter were simply not there in a sense." (112) The "double standard" of morality identified by Williams extends to the body itself, where the servants almost move in the shadows while their masters' presence literally and metaphorically takes centre stage.

governmental bodies among others) required to legitimise this very status. But if status and stratification find their way into institutions, such crystallisations are problematic when it comes to the precarious. In fact, "Precarity has a social status: inexistence. The precarious do not live outside of society. They are not excluded but are dispossessed from themselves by the very society which produces them by keeping them afloat with one foot inside, one foot outside. […]" (Le Blanc 2007, 19)[117] Lines of paradoxical seclusion form and leave the precarious in an in-between space, where they depend on a society which both defines and rejects them. Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser perfectly explain this tension:

> To say that a society has a class structure is to say that it institutionalizes economics that systematically deny some of its members the means and opportunities they need in order to participate on a par with others in social life. To say, likewise, that a society has a status hierarchy is to say that it institutionalizes patterns of cultural value that pervasively deny some members the recognition they need in order to be full, participating partners in social interaction. The existence of either a class structure or a status hierarchy constitutes an obstacle to parity of participation and thus an injustice. (48-49)

In this regard, the political imbalance observed by Caz in *The Holiday* reveals the unsettling trajectory of the precarious, whose marginalisation eventually induces their social and political erasure. It is precisely this next step in the process of precarisation that the following pages seek to uncover in the novels of the corpus: institutions, supposed to be erected by the people for the people, actively reject fringes of the population. State-of-the-nation novels seem to expose the institutionalisation of precarity as a factor of social fragmentation, which reduces the ethics of responsibility to oblivion.

A. Legitimising fragmentation

In *The Year 2000* (1983), Raymond Williams contends that "all class distinction in Britain is downward, under the mellow dusk from the very top. And it seems very doubtful if it will simply wither away, for the confusion [between] social and economic descriptions, has [been] built into the system." (49) Signs of distinction indeed, as I have demonstrated, reflect the fabricated cohesion of economic status (the poor, servants) with an undesirable social identity. But Williams's argument goes one step further and highlights how hierarchical stigma

[117] "il existe bien un statut social de la précarité : l'inexistence. Les précaires ne vivent pas hors de la société. Ils ne sont pas exclus, mais ils sont dépossédés d'eux-mêmes par la société qui les fabrique, en les maintenant à flot, un pied dedans un pied dehors. […] "

penetrates the foundations of the body politic. The novels of the corpus point to such systemisation of social and economic fragmentation, by dissecting the political components of status and stratification.

The microcosms of Lanchester and Holtby enclose the two extremities of the social ladder. In the posh neighbourhood of Roger Yount, "Having a house in Pepys Road was like being in a casino in which you were guaranteed to be a winner. If you already moved there, you were rich. If you wanted to move there, you had to be rich." (*C* 7) Wealth not only determines who has a right of residence, but also creates a ratio of social value which defines who is worthy or not. The gambling vocabulary of the omniscient narrator exposes a rigged game, where only one category of the population can aspire becoming a resident of this exclusive Clapham area. Money therefore confers status, leading in turn to the inescapable stratification of the territory. Where Lanchester depicts Pepys Road as an attractive pole, Holtby takes the opposite direction by focusing, at the beginning of her novel, on the derelict Shacks:

> Two miles south of Kiplington, between the cliffs and the road to Maythorpe, stood a group of dwellings known locally as the Shacks. […] Around these human habitations leaned, drooped and squatted other minor structures, pig-sties, hen-runs, a goat-house, and, near the hedge, half a dozen tall narrow cupboard like up-ended coffins, cause of unending indignation to the sanitary inspectors. A war raged between Kiplington Urban District Council and the South Riding County Council over the tolerated existence of the Shacks. (*SR* 30)

Toponymy follows class lines: the "Shacks" become a metonymy for both poverty and impropriety[118], whose very existence proves problematic for the local authorities. The proximity with animals participates in the squalid living conditions of their inhabitants[119], recalling the stigmatisation of Regan in *No Laughing Matter*. The dwellers of the Shack stand in clear opposition against the County Council and any form of governmental body: their geographic exclusion goes together with a legal state of in-betweenness, where councillors and aldermen simultaneously "tolerate" and reject the precarious. Holtby's antithesis aestheticises the institutionalisation of precarity as a necessary yet discriminating system. This division is made even more visible by the presence of the South Riding map at the beginning of the novel.

[118] If a shack is a poorly built cabin, the *OED* also mentions that it can refer to "An idle disreputable fellow" (shortened form of "shake-rag").
[119] "The respectable villagers" of the South Riding even go so far as to liken the inhabitants of the Shacks to "pigs." (389)

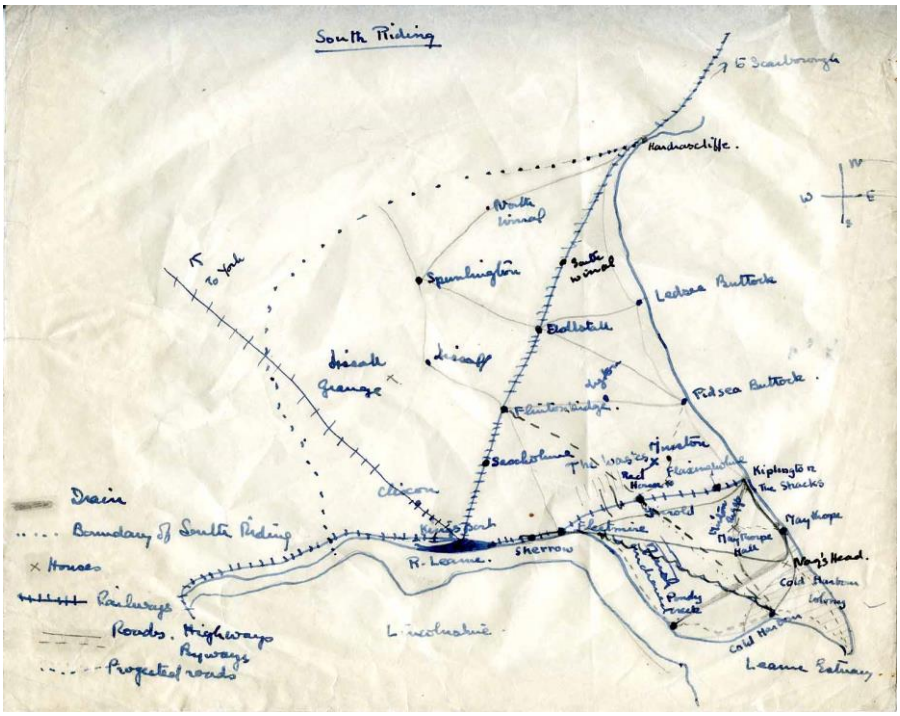


Figure 2: Winifred's Map of the South Riding (xx)

The topography of the South Riding gives little distinction to this part of the Riding, which is barely connected to Kiplington yet almost indissociable from it on the map. The cartographic and toponymic circumscription of the Shacks embodies the indefinite character of the precarious as theorised by Le Blanc. The archival dimension of Holtby's state-of-the-nation reveals a rationality of segmentation which goes together with a permeabilization of class lines which reaches its paroxysm forty years later in Lanchester's urban metonymy. Defining the geography of the precarious allows for a fixation of their identity, a delimitation of their behaviour, which becomes easier to differentiate and, as such, easier to control. The spatial configuration of status is but the first step in the structural confinement of the precarious, for the novels of the corpus draw attention to the pervasion of privilege into elected bodies.

Though *South Riding* does illustrate Holtby's "belief in social democracy and in the value of education" (Shaw 2012, 242), the ascension of Lydia Holly remains an exception in the novel and Holtby points out how class beliefs hinder the very possibility of education. In fact, when hearing for the first time about Robert Carne, Sarah learns that he is "interested in seeing that the children of the working classes aren't educated above their station." (64) A member of the board of governors, Carne's prejudice reveals the further institutionalisation of

precarity, for education is accessible yet restrictive. This paradox is better accounted for by Williams's concept of "differential mobility", where "educational mobility isn't quite social mobility; […] however far we've gone we still find an older system." (1961, 321) Education bears the marks of a class system in disguise: the supposed social mobility of individuals suffers another systemic blow, where the precarious is left stranded at the bottom of the social ladder, for even education cannot offer a proper social ascension that would blur the lines of status. Sarah Burton is by far the only hopeful figure of the novels of the genre under study, who unremittingly believes in and fights for progress while other characters, like Astell, are much more doubtful as to the representative and reformative power of institutions. As a matter of fact, education stands as a foil for the perpetual domination of the privileged few – an issue close to Henry Winshaw's Thatcherite heart:

> 'Put it this way: did you know that over the next five years we were planning to scrap free school meals for more than half a million children?'
>
> 'Not calculated to be a popular move, I wouldn't have thought.'
>
> 'Well, there'll be an outcry, of course, but then it'll die down and something else will come along for people to get annoyed about. The important thing is that we save ourselves a lot of money, and meanwhile a whole generation of children from working-class or low-income families will be eating nothing but crisps and chocolate everyday. Which means, in the end, that they'll grow up physically weaker and mentally slower.' Dorothy raised an eyebrow at this assertion. 'Oh, yes,' he assured her. 'A diet high in sugars leads to retarded brain growth. Our chaps have proved it.' He smiled. 'As every general knows, the secret of winning any war is to demoralize the enemy.' (*WCU* 254)[120]

Discussing new policies with Dorothy (the food-industry magnate), Henry outlines his cabinet's plan to disintegrate the British *demos* ("not calculated to be a popular move"). The planned obsolescence of British children reveals the progressive destruction of the body politic. To use Catherine Bernard's words, Henry's Machiavellian plan suggests that the "implacable degradation of the body magnifies the logic of the (a)moral tale" and exposes the "collapse of the body politic, its irreversible corruption." (2018, 153) Precariousness and precarity intertwine in Coe's state-of-the-nation, as the fragility of the children's body is used to ensure unethical practices: responsibility is not simply ignored, but thwarted, corrupted, submitted to the law of privilege. This short passage uncovers how deeply ingrained stratification is: the power dynamics at play in Thatcherite Britain not only see the precarious ("working-class or

[120] The reader learns p.255 that Michael was part of the very families affected by this reform, leading to Michael's father's consumption of Dorothy's processed food and henceforth, causing his death.

low-income families") deprived of political agency[121] but also constitute an unending circle of domination that they are made unable to escape[122]. Lee Eliot Major and Stephen Machin have shown that this system goes even deeper since

> Today as many as 50% of leading people across a range of professions – from politics, media and law, to film, the arts, music and elite sports – attended private schools, despite comprising only 7% of the population. These startling statistics have been sustained for at least half a century. The problem is that the schools are only accessible to a minority able to afford their fees. They are a glue fixing the top of British society in place. (2018b)

The Winshaw siblings' positions at the top of several different industries and governmental bodies coincide with Major and Machin's account of class[123]. Stratification goes together with a certain permanence at both ends of the economic spectrum, enabled by unequal educational and social policies. This "trickle-down" institutionalisation of precarity is perfectly staged in *Capital*, whose fragmented construction allows for a glimpse into the country's education and immigration systems. After several chapters devoted to Quentina Mkfesi, chapter 87 focuses on the identity of the judge in charge of her future in Britain. Alison Tite and Peter McAllister, the two contenders, are very different. If Alison Tite considers that "immigration work felt more connected to the larger currents of history" (*C* 484) and therefore was "more satisfying", Peter McAllister is the epitome of privilege:

[121] In *Excitable Speech* (1997), Judith Butler underlines that agency "is not a property of the subject, an inherent will or freedom, but an affect of power. […]" (139)

[122] This intricate system of precarity and privilege is best accounted for by Stanley Dollan, a candidate for the County Council in *South Riding*, who "talked grandly about local government, about the people's rights and real Democracy. It appeared from his speeches that the landowners had ground the faces of the poor for their own advantages. The unrepaired cottages, the inadequate water supply, the disgrace of rural slums like the Shacks […] were due to the iron hand of obstruction." (*SR* 405) For Dollan, maintaining the precarious in their position is a crucial advantage for the upper classes, whose superiority becomes almost "justified" in light of the (constructed) inadequacy of the poorest sections of the society.

[123] Though their study was conducted in 2018, the import of their findings rings true with most of the novels of the corpus, and especially with *What a Carve Up!* and *Capital.* The renewed stratification of British society that followed Thatcher's mandates well into the 2010s echoes Coe's own account of the 1980s in *The Guardian*: "I buy a copy with the banner headline "Thatcher Resigns" and walk proudly around the desks, flashing the front page at everyone and loving the astonished reaction on their faces. The end of an era? We thought so at the time: but all it meant, in retrospect, was that one especially vivid and swaggering personality was leaving the stage. The Age of Self has barely started, and successive governments will continue to pour "the milk of monetarism" down our throats. Under Tony Blair, I suppose, it will at least be organic and semi-skimmed: but the taste is much the same." (2007)

> [Alison's] first impression of him, two years earlier, was that he looked like a privileged man passing into early middle age with his early assumptions and prejudices entirely intact. That impression was accurate: that was exactly who Peter McAllister was. He had been to Radley and St Andrews, had been a pupil under an old friend of his father's, had gone into commercial law but had disliked using his brain quite so ferociously, so had ended up here […] he was fighting the good fight by injecting the traditional values of Englishness into an immigration system which was always in danger of 'producer capture'. The people who worked with immigrants always ran the risk of coming to believe that they worked for the immigrants. That was a mistake Peter never made. He remembered who paid his salary." (484)

Having attended the top schools in the Union, having benefited from his father's connections to develop his career, Peter's status is one of fixed consistency: his academic path not only shows how access to education follows social stratification, but also reveals how such systemic privilege can influence the daily lives of the precarious. Peter's birth and status as an adult, through his anchored position at the top of British society necessarily influences his actions as an immigration judge. Class lines fuse with race in *Capital,* as the paradigm of responsibility shifts from the vulnerable other to the government. In fact, Peter Peter McAllister illustrates Bourdieu's concept of *habitus,* developed in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972):

> The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations. (72)

Peter's steady position on the social ladder is representative of the inherited system of class and stratification, which is itself mirrored by the institutions he serves. His structured and structuring agency overshadows ethical responsibility, which is replaced by a form of political responsibility that stifles the imperative of the vulnerable other. The end of chapter confirms such diagnosis, since Peter will be the one ruling over Quentina's case, eventually ordering her deportation. Far from answering the other's call, Peter actually deals another "[blow] of historical violence" (Ricœur 1995, 15) to the precarious, who, in Quentina's case, is left stranded in an immigration centre outside of London. The *habitus* at the basis of English society paradoxically structures and fragments the body politic, forcing the precarious to wander at the margins of society. The diachronic analysis of state-of-the-nation novels discloses the institutionalised strictures of the precarious, whose capability becomes increasingly restricted and whose presence becomes increasingly phantomatic.

B. Frames of perception

In *Frames of War*, Butler defines how norms of perception are shaped, and explains that:

> The frame that seeks to contain, convey, and determine what is seen […] depends upon the conditions of reproducibility in order to succeed. […] Some power manipulates the terms of appearance and one cannot break out of the frame; one is framed, which means one is accused, but also judged in advance, without valid evidence and without any obvious means of redress. (11-12)

Three characteristics of the social frame emerge: domination, iterability and constriction. The institutionalisation of precarity shows how norms of distinction are internalised up to the point where they define the *modus operandi* of the body politic, therefore creating a constant repetition and reproduction of precarity and privilege. As a result, status is the primary perceptive frame of English society, which determines how one is perceived. In fact, the political and judicial framework of status takes the distinctiveness of hierarchical stigma to another level: the precarised other is so differentialised that they are phased out of frames of recognition[124]. When meeting Phoebe for the first time, Hilary Winshaw operates a linguistic dismissal of the young painter, whom she alternatively addresses directly and indirectly:

> Phoebe could not contain her astonishment. 'You *own* a Matisse?'
>
> Hilary looked up sharply, and said, 'Good God, she talks.' Then turning back to brother: 'The trouble is that it clashes horribly with the green in the music room. We're going to have to redecorate the whole bloody thing again.' […]
>
> 'Do you own many famous paintings?' Phoebe asked.
>
> 'She has something of a one-track mind, doesn't she?' […]
>
> 'Forthright little thing, isn't she?' […]
>
> 'I wonder how long she's been working on that little speech?'" (*WCU* 195-197)

Phoebe almost appears as a parasite, preventing Hilary from conversing with her brother. If the Thatcherite columnist ultimately answers the painter's interrogations, she starts each dialogue by a dismissive rhetorical question using the third person. By switching between different modes of address, Hilary minimises Phoebe's presence by "looking through" (Honneth 2001) the young painter. For Honneth, this frame of perception "has a performative aspect because it

[124] Honneth's epistemological study offers hindsight on the signification of "recognition" as a metaphorical phenomenon: "In contrast to cognizing, which is a non-public, cognitive act, recognizing is dependent on media that express the fact that the other person is supposed to possess social 'validity'." (2001, 115)

demands gestures or ways of behaving that make clear that the other is not seen not merely accidentally, but rather intentionally." (115) The social discrepancy between the two women's status leads to the linguistic erasure of Phoebe: the dominant actively chooses to ignore the other, hence defining and controlling the modalities of speech and recognition. The erasure of the "you" pronoun annihilates the very possibility of an ethics of responsibility, for the connection to the other is severed. The reification entailed by the use of the third person shows how this thwarted frame of perception forces the precarious to enter a process of "depersonalisation" (Le Blanc 2009, 70) that progressively dispossesses her of her attributes.

Depersonalisation is particularly predominant in the dialectics of status and stratification, for the definition of the other's identity through their occupation leaves little room for alternative frames of perception. The disappearance of houseworkers' names[125] in the corpus partakes in this form of erasure. The Matthews' housemaid, for instance, complains about her forced change of identity: "Treated like dirt by the lot of them. Regan do this, Regan do that. Lend us a quid, Regan. Regan, darling, have you got a pound handy? My name's Henrietta, I'll thank you." (*NLM* 44) The transformation of her first name goes together with a sadistic economic relationship, where the precarious maid is asked to provide money for her employers. The cynicism underlying this asymmetrical relationship reaches its paroxysm with the chosen nickname, which draws from an old form of the verb "to reign" according to the *OED*: far from ruling over n°52, Henrietta is in fact the victim of the Matthews' constant abuse, from low wages to mockery to physical ill-treatment[126]. Ethical responsibility is but a distant ideal in the shadow of status: depersonalisation points indeed to a "set of contradictions" (Le Blanc 2009, 70), where individual characteristics are progressively erased and replaced by an occupation-based identity that benefits the dominant group. The precarious is stripped of her personal attributes and can only be seen through a social framework which "threatens to cancel all of her individual potential" (70) which would allow her to redefine the way she is perceived. Depersonalisation is a strategy of confinement that works through invisibilisation.

In *Capital*, this phenomenon is amplified by the multiplication of migrant characters working menial jobs. Seen as "commodities" (Berensmeyer and Löffler 173), their services transform them into stock characters that their employers can replace at will. Arabella Yount

[125] Hilary Winshaw also fails to remember the name of her daughter's nanny in Coe's novel (p.81)
[126] After a car accident, Regan is taken out of her convalescence by Billy Pop and the Countess and brought back to 52 to cook for them, despite the children's objection.

'got' her nanny at an agency, as if she were in a convenience store (*C* 41), and sorts her employees per occupation: Pilar the nanny, Maria the cleaner and Bogdan the builder. As Estheer Peeren points out, this system "makes workers converge with their labor, so that they can no longer claim a separate existence" (2014, 21): migrant workers become constrained by their status – often hoped to be temporary – and their "lifestyles" (to borrow from Le Blanc's lexicon) is reduced to their jobs. In the case of "Bogdan the builder", depersonalisation resembles that of Henrietta in *No Laughing Matter*, for we learn that his real name is fact Zbigniew Tomascewski:

> [There] was a Bogdan on the crew and the man in Pepys Road had got the names mixed up, and Zbigniew never corrected him. He quite liked being called Bogdan because it left no doubt in his mind that he did not really live in London, that his life here was a temporary interlude: he was there to work and make money before going home to his real life in Poland. Zbigniew did not know whether that would be in a year's time or five years or ten, but he knew it was going to happen. (*C* 71)

The identities of migrant workers seem interchangeable to the Younts, creating a distorted frame of perception. However, Zbigniew's case could be seen as a literary example of what Peeren calls the "spectral agency" (2014). In fact, she argues that "a certain spectral agency is discerned on the part of domestic workers in relation to their home countries, where they can exert influence through the money they send and may achieve upward mobility for themselves or their relatives." (104) Invisibility is both imposed on and chosen by Zbigniew: the prejudiced vision of his employers – which "blends" identities to the extent of dissolution – enables him to split his life into two and to differentiate his "real" life from his temporary one. Depersonalisation is here reclaimed and reinvested in the hope of moving upward. However, if social status can to some extent be circumvented[127], the import of *legal* status in the configuration of the body politic redefines the very possibility of such agency.

Examining status instead of class allows for a more thorough understanding of the power dynamics at play within state-of-the-nation novels, and for a discussion on the representation to the "living ghosts" (Peeren 2014) who "all are frequently – sometimes to the point of cliché – likened to ghosts or related figures, on the basis of their lack of social visibility,

[127] Zbigniew's "London Dream" (Berensmeyer and Löffler 173) is in fact short-lived: having purchased stock on the stock market with his savings, he becomes a direct victim of the credit crunch which sets his project back. The attribution of the crash to a revenge scheme planned by one of Roger Yount's colleague actively reinforces the pervasiveness of status, and points to the persistence of asymmetrical power dynamics, as the crash unequally affects the characters of the novel.

unobtrusiveness, enigmatic abilities or uncertain status between life and death" (5) For if status is to some extent correlated to the evolution of the landed gentry (Williams 1973) and therefore to financial welfare and its attributes, it also draws attention to those who are "expelled out of sight." (Le Blanc 2010, 2)[128] The analysis of such notions runs the risk of putting to the side those who do not belong on the vertical axis identified by Bourdieu or Williams. The presence of illegal immigrants like Quentina in *Capital* indeed shows how frames of perception can be restricted to a national scope. Her phantomatic presence raises questions as to the national shroud that could cloak an apprehension of status and stratification:

> To make a long story short, she had overstayed [her student visa] on purpose, applied for asylum, been rejected, been arrested and sentenced to deportation, but the judge at the final appeal had ruled that she could not be sent back to Zimbabwe because there were grounds for thinking that if she was she would be killed. At that point Quentina had entered a legal state of semi-existence. She had no right to work and could claim only subsistence-level benefits, but she couldn't be imprisoned and deported. She was not a citizen of the UK but she could not go anywhere else. She was a non-person. (131-132)

Trapped within the bounds of the legal systems, Quentina walks in limbo: her particular case shows the double standard of recognition, as the risks for her life in Zimbabwe are acknowledged yet do not lead to any regularisation. This passage echoes Le Blanc's conceptualisation of the precarious as an individual neither "in" nor "out" of society, and Quentina's job as an illegal traffic warden – feared by the inhabitants of Pepys Road – mirrors her forced inadequacy with the body politic. Furthermore, the absence of any proper legal status enacts Quentina's invisibilisation as a foreign national, who is left stranded outside of frames of perception. Her deportation into a detention centre outside of London at the end of the novel redoubles her invisibility, for she is "a non-person in a non-place waiting her way through non-time." (565) The detention centre is a result of a "division of social spaces" (Le Blanc 2009, 14) into which the invisible subject is "relegated": in this alternate dimension, time and space are, like the individual, annihilated. The fragmentation of the spatiotemporal framework participates in the dis-integration of the illegal migrant, who is not only refused "access to sites of visibility" (Král 7) but who is also destined to disappear altogether. The comparison with the inhabitants of the Shacks in *South Riding*, for instance, gives way to a gradient of visibility and agency, which shows how status becomes a way to distinguish who *belongs* within the nation.

[128] "expulsés dans le Hors-Champ."

While the distinction between the rich and the poor appears like an endemic division which is profitable to maintain (for both economic and ideological reasons, as has been seen), the determination of status though national lines reveals "a reluctance to include [invisible citizens] in the sphere of visibility" (Král 27), which in turn weakens any notion of ethical responsibility.

In *L'Invisbilité sociale,* Le Blanc indicates that "the different forms of invisibility find their origins in a monopoly of voice whose narrative effects strongly contribute to invisibilise certain lives. Invisibility is amplified by the increasing scarcity of narratives which contributes to dehumanisation." (41)[129] The braid construction of *Capital* leads to consider the political decisions behind such relegation. The arbitrariness of the judicial system and the relics of privilege that animates it certainly illustrate the constrictive echo chamber analysed by Le Blanc. However, several critics have pointed out that both Coe and Lanchester fail to give a voice to the lower classes of British society – a criticism that is mainly supported by the links drawn between the state-of-the-nation novel genre with the Dickensian Condition of England novel of the 19th century. Where Driscoll accuses Coe of perpetrating the "very old tradition of épater le bourgeois that can be traced back to Dickens" (158), Barbara Korte sees in *Capital* an apparent "deficit in its moralisation" (2017, 502):

> Capital fails to address the fact that the financial crisis and its aftermath of 'austerity Britain' had consequences for people in all sectors of British society, causing significant loss of work and homes as well as cuts in social services for people in the lower-middle and working classes, and widening the gap between rich and poor. It seems almost cynical that Lanchester personalises the lived consequences of the crash primarily through Roger Yount, a man who takes a sentimental leave of his former property in Pepys Road in the last pages of the novel but whose experience of 'austerity' consists in losing only one of his houses and cutting down on a few luxuries. (501)

If it is undeniable that the working-classes are mostly absent of these two novels and that such oversight raises questions as to the performativity of the state-of-the-nation genre[130], the narrative strategies of both Coe and Lanchester can also be seen as a way to avoid reification. In fact, for Vanessa Guignery: "Cases of interest in the underclass and down-trodden are relatively rare in Coe's work, possibly because he recognizes the dangers inherent in successful middle-class writers attempting to ventriloquize those below them in an apparent economic-

[129] "Les différentes formes d'invisibilité ont pour origine un monopole de la voix dont les effets de narration contribuent davantage à rendre certaines vies invisibles. L'invisibilité se creuse dans la raréfaction des récits, qui contribue à la déshumanisation."
[130] See chapter 9.

social order." (2015, 20) The prominence of Jonathan Coe as "'the' political writer of the current generation" (Driscoll 157) runs the risk of taking part in the rarefaction of narratives that overshadows invisible lives: the status of the author needs to be acknowledged when taking into account the ethical propensity of novels of the genre to represent invisibilised lives. Lanchester takes on a different method, by making Roger Yount the centre of his metonymic novel. This is in fact the most cynical choice there is, as Lanchester is well-aware of the appropriation of the social narrative by the upper layers of society. In his economics popularization book**,** *Whoops! Why everyone owes everyone and no one can pay* (2010), he points out that "The rich are always listened to more than the poor. [...]" (13) By defying the expectations surrounding state-of-the-nation novels as heirs to the 19th century social novel which put the precarious at the centre of political and ethical concerns – which other novels of the corpus, like Holtby's, do – Lanchester goes in the opposite direction, mirroring, through Roger, how the invisible hand of the market actively modifies the tissue of the body politic and therefore redistributes speech and visibility in our seemingly democratic society[131]. This narrative strategy of omission echoes the City's obliviousness and destabilises the organic and ethical viability of the body politic when ethical responsibility is obliterated.

Status and stratification fragment the microcosms of state-of-the-nation novels. Hierarchical stigma makes up a discriminatory pattern that segments the different portions of society, leaving little room for alternative modes of expression. The institutionalisation of discriminatory practices shows how the precarious is constrained within a system which works through forced definition and ineluctable erasure. Social distinction severs the ethical ties between individuals of the same nation: the encounter with the Other is conditioned by normative frames of perception that thwart the very possibility of an ethics of responsibility. If the Other is made unrecognisable, how can an "imagined community" – let alone a viable and ethical society – be established? By reflecting and refracting the normative system of status, state-of-the-nation novels set to explore the spectrum of social visibility without falling prey to

[131] As a counterpoint, John McGregor's *Even the Dogs* (2010) offers a similar polarising experience by making the precarious the sole protagonists of the narrative. The fragmented timeline of this state-of-the-nation novel "undermines the reader's possibly stereotyped ideas about the homeless through its use of pronouns and specifically inverts expectations readers might have regarding the orientation of 'we' and 'they'. McGregor's novel uses the first-person plural provocatively and disconcertingly. Here the homeless are "we", while representatives of the establishment appear as a distanced 'they'. […]" (Korte and Zipp, 75) McGregor's takes the opposite direction of Lanchester, by redefining the lines of status and agency.

the very same idiosyncrasies. The development of what Guy Debord has called “the society of the spectacle” draws attention to the way modes of appearances are redefined and redistributed, further distancing the fictional societies of the corpus from ethical responsibility.

CHAPTER 5.
Undoing the Body Politic

While John Su reminds the reader of his *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel* (2011) that already "Friedrich Schiller and Samuel Taylor Coleridge both argued that the rise of capitalism and the modern nation-state dissolved an essential bond of human nature" (1), the very origin of the Condition-of-England novel informs us on the genre's inclination towards the economic situation of the country. In *Past and Present,* Thomas Carlyle admonishes against the effects of mammonism[132] and laments that his contemporaries "have profoundly forgotten that *Cash-payment* is not the sole relation of human beings." (1843, 143) Carlyle not only narrates the struggles of the working-class as factories and mass production take over the economy, but also underlines the subsequent ethical fragmentation of the body politic[133]. The English capitalist system seems in fact to hinder the connection to the other, creating a dissonance between private interests and public cohesion. Though the economic policies of the United Kingdom have changed throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, the overwhelming literary response to the dominance of capital form an echo chamber, in which ethical bonds are progressively dissolved in the name of profit and consumerism.

While for Andrzej Gąsiorek Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* (1904) "[shows] how precarious civic order is when a society's citizens are enthralled by material interests" (2015, 81), that Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) stages how "the British nation and its accompanying class, gender and racial definitions are manifest in consumer institutions and practices," (2013, 14) according to Alissa G. Karl. If Modernist writers' relationship with new modes of production is a crucial element of the literary period (Childs 2005[134], Commentale), this chapter will rather follow Gąsiorek's and Karl's lines in the analysis of West's novel: the consumerist

[132] The *OED* defines "mammonism" as the "Devotion to the pursuit of riches."
[133] Carlyle's indictment of the capitalist mode of production is of course reminiscent of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's. As a matter of fact, both extensively reviewed Carlyle's work (especially his essay *Chartism*) and praised his views, though they apparently differed from his later propositions. Parallels between their "Manifesto for the Communist Party" (1848) and the passage from *Past and Present* quoted at the beginning of this chapter have been drawn. For more information on the discussions between the three men, see Mark Cumming, ed. *The Carlyle Encyclopaedia,* Fairleigh Dickison University Press, 2004: pp. 150-151; p. 310.
[134] If Peter Childs concedes in *Modernism* that Modernist writers "celebrated the new conditions of production, circulation and consumption engendered by technological change" (17), he also argues that they were concerned by the social inequalities that a capitalist system entailed. Alissa G. Karl's *Modernism and the Marketplace* (2009) offers enlightening analyses of Modernist women writers' fiction and their relationship with the emerging consumer culture.

characterisation of Kitty and Jenny is testament to a growing discomfort with capitalist values that overshadow, if not deny, human connections. Following the war[135], Britain entered a "paradox of depression, unemployment and industrial decline alongside a rising standard of living and rising prices that are in many aspects a function of the new prominence in consumer capital." (Karl 12) If this economic situation fostered the development of the regional novel, the 1930s are also seen by many critics as a polarised literary period, where high Modernists were being opposed to politically-engaged poets[136]. Far from engaging with this debate, this chapter will instead aim at "[tracing] cultural genealogies that extend well into the post-war period" – to borrow Benjamin Kohlmann's words (in James Smith 236) – by analysing how the fight against "entrenched and armoured Capital" (*SR* 3) transposes itself well into the second part of the 20th century. Though Holtby's hopeful socialism is unmatched by the other authors of the corpus, *South Riding* nonetheless betrays an acerbic disdain for corruption that finds its echo in Stevie Smith's and Angus Wilson's novels. The post-war era was marked by a "disjuncture between welfare state and capitalist process" (Connor 47) which found its way in the fiction of the 1950s. While *The Holiday* voices concern towards the fact that "profits are the devil" (70) in the first years of the Cold War, Wilson's novels have been known for their discussion around "liberal humanism"[137] and the moral progress of man it advocated (Head 19, Conradi 14). If *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956) especially focuses on the "inadequacy of humanistic values to historical reality" (McKay in Casario, 158), *No Laughing Matter* deals more blatantly with the excesses of capitalist culture through Quentin Matthews' political activism and communist ideals. If Smith's and Wilson's state-of-the-nation novels point to their authors' disbelief in national unity in light of the historical, economic and political climate, "The election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979 signalled the definite end of the post-war consensus." (Head 30) Her neoliberalist[138] policies and the progressive dismantlement

[135] On the consumerist value of the conflict, see Commentale p.153.

[136] In this regard, see James Smith's introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the 1930s* (2019): Smith explains that "much of the literature composed in the period engaged with distinctive ideas and concerns, such as how writing could best grapple with these new social issues, whether writing should be propaganda or art, and whether an author could remain detached or needed to commit to a firm political cause." (1) The opposition between the Auden Group and the "high modernist" such as Woolf and Joyce are particularly well retraced in Benjamin Kohlmann's chapter "Fashioning the 1930s." (224-238)

[137] Conradi defines liberal humanism as such: "Liberal humanism, a disparate bundle of belief and unbelief, was momentarily forced into illusory coherence after the last war. The space it defended was anti-Marxist, post-Christian, anti-capitalist, socially progressive. It proposed a political alternative to cold war extremes, and, in the teeth of the experience of Hitler, tested belief in goodness and progress." (14)

[138] "Neoliberalism" has had various definitions among scholars. While Foucault sees its birth in the 1930s, it came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s under the respective governments of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Regan in the United States. David Harvey and Wendy Brown concur on the fact that

of the welfare state fostered a new literary response, which aimed at exposing the pervasive power of untethered capital[139]. *What a Carve Up!* sets to illustrate the destructuring and disconnecting power of neoliberalist policies, which have come into full force with the 2008 subprime crisis and the development of crunch lit, as exampled by *Capital*.

If examples of state-of-the-nation novels dealing with capitalism abound, it is also necessary to mention that the role of the literary form in addressing these questions has been the source of two major debates in literary criticism. The influence of consumerist culture on modernist writing triggered, in the 1930s, a debate between Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács. Lukács condemns Modernism's "representation of capitalist reality" as "inadequate, diluted and constrained" (1936, 147) and believes that, in opposition to Bloch, Joyce's fragmentary writing is an example of capitalist reification[140]. Drawing from Lukács, Fredric Jameson argued against postmodernism, in his essay "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984), afraid that the literary form threatened to fall prey to commodification[141] and reification as well[142]. Terry Eagleton famously responded to Jameson's claims in "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism" in 1985, stating that the postmodern was but a "dark parody of [the] anti-representationalism [of the early twentieth-century avant-garde." (1985, 385) The fragmentary, for Lukács, Jameson and Eaglestone, is seen as highly anti-Marxist and profoundly pro-capitalist[143]. In the edited volume of Lukács, Brecht, Adorno and Benjamin's conversations,

"neoliberalism has meant, in short, the financialization of everything. This deepened the hold of finance over all other areas of the economy, as well as over the state apparatus and, as Randy Martin points out, daily life." (Harvey 33) Brown, drawing from Foucault insists on the fact that "Within neoliberal rationality, human capital is both our "is" and our "ought"— what we are said to be, what we should be, and what the rationality makes us into through its norms and construction of environments." (2015, 36)

[139] See Colin Hutchinson's *Reaganism, Thatcherism and the Social Novel* (2008) for a detailed account of this influence on British and American literature.

[140] The debates on the development of a Marxist aesthetics are all reproduced in the edited volume *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977). For Lukács, reification is based on the dominance and multiplication of the commodity form, as theorised by Marx: Titus Stahl explains that for Lukács, "reification entails a fragmentation of human experience, leading to an attitude of "contemplation" where one passively adapts to a law-like system of social "second nature" and to an objectifying stance towards one's own mental states and capacities. […] It is a process which affects four dimensions of social relations: the socially created features of objects (primarily their features as commodities), the relations between persons, their relations to themselves and, finally, the relations between individuals and society as a whole. […] The objective and subjective dimensions of the dominance of the commodity form constitute a complex of reification because the properties of objects, subjects and social relations become "thinglike" in a particular way." (2018, n.p.) Modernist fragmentary writing is then for Lukács a way to contemplate reification rather than countering it.

[141] The *OED* defines commodification as such: "The action or process of treating a person or thing as property which can be traded or whose value is purely monetary; the treatment of a person or thing as a commodity; commercialization."

[142] Linda Huctheon details the influence of Lukács on Jameson in the 12th chapter of her *Poetics of Postmodernism*.

[143] In *Marxism and Form* (1971), Jameson considered that form and context were indissociable if one wished to analyse literature. He later argued in *The Political Unconscious* (1983) that "increasing abstraction of visual art

Jameson provides a problematic conclusion, as he calls for the necessity for literature "to resist the power of reification in consumer society and to reinvent that category of totality which systematically undermined by existential fragmentation on all levels of life and social organization today." (in Taylor, 212) If the fragmenting aspect of consumerism – as theorised by the three critics – can hardly be denied, their perception of "totality" as a long lost token of social unity seems paradoxically nostalgic[144], rather than antagonistic. If this chapter intends to see how the novels of the corpus portray the nation's relationship with money and capital, it does so by thinking this relationship and this socio-political model in ethical terms. Borrowing from Wendy Brown's book title, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015), the following pages propose to discuss how the body politic becomes ethically undone and how the profoundly fragmented state-of-the-nation novels of the corpus can account for the covert hegemony of capital.

1. Erasing the Social

The defects of capitalism identified by Carlyle were to fuel sociological, historical and philosophical discussions well into the 20th and 21st centuries. Guy Debord's seminal essay *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and later on Michel Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978-79)[145] draw attention to the domination of capital in our contemporary societies, arguing that

thus proves not only to express the abstraction of daily life and to presuppose fragmentation and reification; it also constitutes a Utopian compensation for everything lost in the process of the development of capitalism." (225) Jameson concedes the "descriptive value of the poststructuralist critique of the 'subject'", he also rejects the "schizophrenic ideal it has tended to project." (111) Jameson emphasises the need for narratives to represent the collective, the "emergence of a post-individualistic social world." (111) Narratives of late capitalism seem to be located in an in-between space for Jameson: they must long for the lost unity of the pre-industrial society and must, at the same time, advocate for a move beyond the fragmenting and individualistic late capitalist world. Fragmentation for Jameson therefore seems either compliant (postmodernism) or nostalgic (modernism), which seems to contradict the elements evidenced in the introduction and the first part of the present thesis. Chapter 3 particularly shows that focusing on the individual psyche does not necessarily entails a renunciation of the collective.

[144] Hutcheon recalls that both Jameson and Eaglestone argue against postmodernist parody and pastiche, stating that the latter entails a nostalgic look on the past. However, the present thesis concurs with Hutcheon on the fact that "the postmodernist ironic rethinking of history is definitely not nostalgic. It critically confronts the past with the present, and vice versa. In a direct reaction against the tendency of our times to value only the new and novel, it returns us to a re-thought past to see what, if anything, is of value in that past experience. But the critique of its irony is double-edged: the past and the present are judged in each other's light. […] it can and does lead to a vision of interconnectedness." (1988, 24; 39)

[145] The two philosophers offer criticism on the development of the Chicago School of the 1960s, which is said to be at the roots of the neoliberal rationality of the 1980s – 1990s. Johanna Oksala's chapter on "From Biopower to Governmentality" in *A Companion to Foucault* (2013, 320-336) explores Michel Foucault's take on the matter, while David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) retraces the birth of the movement and its influence on the Anglo-Saxon policies of the end of the 20th centuries and beginning of the 21st centuries.

its political and social infiltration can be traced back to the 18th century[146]. Drawing from Marx's description of money as "the figure of appearance or simulacrum, more exactly of the ghost" (Derrida 1994, 55), Debord insists on the immateriality of capital and its pervasion of every layer of society. He identifies two stages in the construction of the society of the spectacle:

> The first stage of the economy's domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into *having.* […] The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from *having* to *appearing* - all "having" must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances[147]. (1967, 11)

Debord in fact argues that the sole aim of the spectacle is to reproduce itself, leaving no room for any social interaction. Society, no longer founded on the interaction between different subjects, is instead ruled by consumer capitalism. The spectacle seems indeed to modify the individual's social and ethical trajectory: the characters of the corpus show how their attention is no longer directed towards the other, but rather towards possession.

A. Rhetorics of hegemoney

In the eponymous suicide note of Martin Amis's *Money*, John Self reflects upon the pervasion of capital:

> If we all downed tools and joined hands for ten minutes and stopped believing in money, then money would no longer exist. We never will, of course. Maybe money is the great conspiracy, the great fiction. The great addiction, too: we're all addicted and we can't break the habit now. (384)

Self delineates two major characteristics of a system running on the dominance of money: it is a stealth, immaterial agent, whose influence entails an organic modification of society, resulting in the isolation and atomisation of the self. For Amis's aptly named protagonist, the insidiousness of money is such that it transmogrifies the individual's relationship with the other – undoubtedly recalling Carlyle's and Debord's words. The hegemony of capital pervades the

[146] Debord insists on the fact that the society of spectacle emerged in the Industrial Revolution (1967, 20), while Foucault starts his investigation of capitalist systems with an inquiry on the English philosophers such as Adam Smith (Falzon et al. 327).

[147] For Debord, "The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point that it becomes images" (1967, 17), suggesting that the second stage of the hegemony of capital evoked in this quotation is in fact the moment when the spectacle comes into full force.

ethical bonds of the body politic, as the collective "we" is submitted to economic law. For Katy Shaw in *Crunch Lit*, "Since both money and literature are representations, literature seems well suited to staging the contradictions of the pursuit of capital gain that creates financial crises. Nineteenth-century fictions in particular link social mobility to solvency through characters who are rich, ruined or obsessed with finance." (4) If her interest lies primarily with novels dealing with the subprime crisis, her reflection draws attention to the inherited habit of 19th century fiction, which already focused on the transformation brought about by industrial capitalism. The analysis of state-of-the-nation novels can therefore shed light on the evolution of the money/ethics dyad throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, as economics have stealthily and progressively been replacing intersubjectivity as the ethical socle of society.

While economic models and policies assuredly differ throughout this period – from agrarian to industrial to consumer capitalism for instance – the characters' relationship to money and capital illustrate both the collective and private behavioural modification brought about by those very systems. Perhaps one of the most striking examples can be found at the very beginning of *Capital*, where the interaction with the other is replaced by the discussion of the housing market: "It began to be all right for people to talk about house prices all the time; the topic came up in conversation within the first minutes of people speaking to each other." (5) The call of the other as a vulnerable being is replaced by the overwhelming desire to talk about real estate prices. The law of the housing market quickly transforms ethical bonds and monopolises discourse, as money infiltrates the daily life of the body politic. In fact, for Wendy Brown, "neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with human themselves, according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct [..] In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus.*" (2015, 10) The individual is no longer primarily ethical or political (as Aristotle would have it) but rather determined and driven by the economy. If *Capital* is a perfect illustration of the predominance of the *homo oeconomicus* in a neoliberal climate, hints of its ascension can be seen in earlier state-of-the-nation novels. In fact, the dreary circumstances of the Great Slump cause Robert Carne to embrace the *homo oeconomicus* as *modus operandi*. The omniscient focalisation of *South Riding* allows the reader to perceive the owner of Maythorpe Hall through the eyes of his groom, who witnesses Carne's transformation:

> Carne eyed [the mare] affectionately. "I could get a hundred and fifty for her if she does anything like she should in the Rimsey Point to Point." Hicks frowned. This preoccupation with money jarred him. […] It was alien to Carne's nature to regard them as so many potential pounds, shillings and pence. […] Carne, who made so handsome and proper a figure in his pink on the well-groomed horse, was no longer a gentleman out to enjoy himself, but a salesman exhibiting merchandise. (79)

While Hicks's point of view on pastoral leisure is certainly reminiscent of the issues of the rural idyll analysed in Chapter 2, his observations showcase how Carne's behaviour has shifted: the relationship to the animal is in fact no longer synonymous with personal fulfilment but rather with a necessity for profit. The eventual economic gain from the sale of the mare would in fact mean both partial solvency and social reinstatement for the sporting farmer. However, the organic transformation of the subject ("alien to Carne's nature") is indeed evidenced by the commodification of his gaze, which turns the mare into a mere saleable object. The farmer's "affectionate" look is followed by a material appreciation of the animal, therefore blurring the boundaries between economics and ethics. Money is not only a key to physical viability (i.e., providing for oneself / one's family), it also rewrites ethical and biological codes – Clara Matthews, for instance, declares that she "ache[s] with money worries" (*NLM* 110) – and rewires modes of perception.

The very etymology of *solvency* informs us on the ambivalent purport of money. Absolute *pharmakon*, solvency means both a capacity to solve financial matters ("resolve, answer" *OED*) and some corrosive proprieties ("to loosen, to break"). The psychosomatic effects of economic ruin, as felt by Carne and Clara, corroborate Shaw's comment on literary representation of capital since the 19th century, as both characters' need for money (though highly mocked by Wilson in the case of Clara) points to the fragility of their high social standing. If Holtby's and Wilson's novels portray riches-to-rags stories which illustrate a new (and necessary) found obsession for money, *The Return of the Soldier* urges to see how economic wealth can also hinder responsibility. When confronted to Dr. Anderson who sees in Chris's amnesia a "suppressed wish" (71) dating back from before the war, Kitty dismisses the idea entirely: "'He wished for nothing," said Kitty. "He was fond of us, and he had a lot of money.'" By juxtaposing Chris's fulfilling relationships with the Baldry women and his wealth, Kitty seemingly levels out social and financial status, leaving little room for want or need. Yet, her discursive strategy actually points to the dominance of money over ethical concerns. Because Kitty does not acknowledge the death of their child as a personal and domestic trauma, wealth becomes a stable point of reference to evaluate one's psychological fulfilment. As

Debord argues, in the first stage of the society of the spectacle, "human fulfilment [is] no longer equated with what one [is], but with what one possesse[s]" (1967, 11). Through a rhetoric of omission, Kitty participates in the dissolution of marital bonds by failing to recognise her husband's – and ultimately her own – unaddressed suffering. Financial abundance weaves its way into the traumatic gap left by Oliver, as material comfort replaces meaningful interaction. Kitty's resort to the normative framework of money as ethical expedient makes her "painfully [un]available" – to paraphrase Butler and Athanasiou's words – to her husband.

This absence for the other, generated by the monopoly of possession, reaches its paroxysm in Lanchester's *Capital*. When Mary eventually loses her mother Petunia to cancer, her relationship with her is clouded by the predominance of capital: "In the debit column, she lost her mother; in the credit column, she now had a gigantic pile of cash. It felt as if her remaining parent had been taken away and in return she'd been given lots of money." (540) Grief takes the vocabulary of profit, resembling a balance sheet, and ethics are bought out by capital: Mary's mourning process is invaded by an ostentatious sum of money, leaving no place for actual healing nor ethical thinking. If wealth provides an illusory solace to Kitty as she mourns her son, finance becomes an undesired intruder in a neoliberal context. The novels of the corpus allow therefore to appreciate how money progressively invades and erodes the private sphere: though written almost a century apart, *The Return of the Soldier* and *Capital* illustrate how finance imposes itself as a norm, through a "practical and discursive context." (Legrand 4)

What these novels suggest is that finance imposes a new familial pattern, that necessarily negates the possibility for ethical responsibility. At the very beginning of *No Laughing Matter*, Clara Matthews loses patience with her boisterous children after a family outing:

> '[…] Horrible little creatures all of you. What a way to repay us for giving you the afternoon of your lives.'
>
> 'We didn't know we were meant to repay you,' Margaret made comment.
>
> 'I'm afraid the gel's made an excellent point, Clara. Repayment of kindness. What a sordid idea, worthier of a stockbroker than an artist.' Miss Rickard met a silence. 'I suppose we should welcome any idea of repayment really.' (24)

The syllepsis on "repay" and "repayment"[148] hints at the alteration of familial bonds that will unfold throughout the novel. The Countess's dehumanisation of her own children ("creatures") is concomitant with the instauration of an asymmetrical relationship, in which paternal love is conditional rather than ontological – a point that the young Margaret fails to understand. Clara's use of the verb "repay" suggests moral bargaining and defines her relationship to her children according to a sort of market-logic. In this regard, Miss Rickard's comment sheds light on the true nature of her sister's behaviour. Likening Clara (and her husband William, the "artist") to a stockbroker, Mouse underlines her paradoxical relationship with money: if the Countess expects her children to repay her for her presence – and later on to actually pay for her lifestyle – she does not hold herself to such high standard. Miss Rickard's last sarcastic remark refers to Clara and Billy Pop's unpaid loan, an observation that leads the Countess to criticise her sister's lack of "generosity." (25) The tension around money in the first pages of the novel sets the tone for the rest of the plot, and illustrates how family interactions are reduced to the "money talks" (119) which, ironically, Billy Pop seems to resent so much. Children, parents and siblings are all reduced to their financial value[149].

If *No Laughing Matter* shows how the private sphere can be solely guided by economic interest, *What a Carve Up!* stages the extreme developments of such a process, as finance reshapes and redefines the very notion of family. In the early 1980s, right after the election of Margaret Thatcher, Thomas Winshaw wonders at the restructuration of society:

> Watching his foreign exchange dealers as they stared feverishly at their flickering screens, Thomas came as close as he would ever come to feeling paternal love. They were the sons he had never had. This was during the happiest time of his life, the early to mid 1980s, when Mrs Thatcher had transformed the image of the City and turned the currency speculators into national heroes. […] (310)

Not only does Thomas Winshaw praise the immateriality and fictional nature of capital, he also underlines how the conflation of family and nation takes a new turn under neoliberalist policy. Families are not solely influenced by the law of the market: finance itself becomes the new model for family. The threatening sterility of Thatcherite Britain – as analysed in Chapter 1 –

[148] Bernard Marie Dupriez defines semantic syllepsis as such: "A figure by which a word or expression is used simultaneously in its literal and figurative senses." (438) The *OED* defines repayment in its literal sense as "the action of repaying money, or its equivalent" and its figurative one as "return, recompense, the action of giving anything due or deserved, as a reward for service, kindness, effort, etc."

[149] So much so that Marcus reveals in Book Two that he had to "sell [his] bum" (202) as a teenager if he wanted to eat.

finds in bankers and traders a surrogate solution to ensure the future of the nation. Thomas's thoughts are certainly reminiscent of Milton Friedman's comments in *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962): "The ultimate operative unit in our society is the family, not the individual." (quoted in Brown 2015, 100) Yet, by assimilating bankers to children, Coe shows how neoliberalist politics have in fact undermined the very idea of family and have replaced it with financial avatars. For Wendy Brown,

> the norms and principles of neoliberal rationality[150] do not dictate precise economic policy, but rather set out novel ways of conceiving and relating state, society, economy, and subject and also inaugurate a new "economization" of heretofore noneconomic spheres and endeavours. (2015, 50)

Brown insists on the fact that neoliberalism pervades all spheres of interaction between individuals, who cannot exist differently from the laws of the market. If Brown's study helps further understand the political and economic dynamics of *What a Carve Up!* and *Capital*, the other state-of-the-nation novels of the corpus shed light on the progressive "ascent of money" (Fergusson) in British society throughout the 20th century. It is precisely because of that process that the "spectacle" can flourish: according to Debord, "the spectacle is able to subject human beings to itself because the economy has already totally subjugated them." (1967, 10) The discursive invasion of money in the novels of the corpus reflects how finance becomes a normative force within the body politic, up to the point of transforming its very nature. The "subjugation" of the characters to the rhetoric of hegemoney therefore sets the second and final stage of the spectacle in motion, where meaningless consumerism and appearances reign.

B. Entering the spectacle

Debord considers that "the spectacle is an *affirmation* of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances." (1967, 9) Opposing appearances and reality, Debord insists on the fact that the spectacle is "the visual reflection of the ruling economic order" (10) and prevents individuals from "[being] recognised by others" (118): appearances generate distance between individuals, up to the point where capital and its images

[150] Brown follows Foucault's definition of rationality and normative order of reason: "In contrast with an understanding of neoliberalism as a set of state policies, a phase of capitalism, or an ideology that set loose the market to restore profitability for a capitalist class, I join Michel Foucault and others in conceiving neoliberalism as an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life." (2015, 30) It is precisely the normative capacity of capitalism and neoliberalism that this chapter aims to analyse.

are all that can be seen (21). Appearing before the other is now a far cry from a Levinasian or Butlerian ethics and is instead an artificial mode of interaction where one's aim is "To seem, as distinguished from *to be*; to be in outward show," (*OED*) so as to comply with the norms of the spectacle. In *No Laughing Matter*, Clara Matthews revels so much in the realm of appearances that she sees no problem in extorting money from her own children, as she "[needs] beauty so much and beauty needs money." (83) *Having* and *appearing* conflate within the walls of N°52, giving the spectacle its full force, leading Gladys (the eldest daughter) to feel compelled to indulge her parents' lifestyle:

> 'You *lent* to Billy Pop?'
> 'Only a couple of quid.'
> 'You lent to HIM?'
> 'Well only to keep up appearances.'
> 'That's just it Gladys, to help *them* keep up *their* appearances.' (56)

If the italics and capital letters first help underline Margaret's incomprehension and dismay as to her sister's behaviour, the emphasis on "them" and "their" actually delineates the boundaries of the spectacle. Though the latter is in fact constructed and (strenuously) maintained by the parents, the italics convey a sense of entrapment, to which Gladys – and to some extent the other children – fall prey. The spectacle indiscriminately engulfs each and every member of the Matthew family, actively disintegrating filial ties in its wake. Debord argues that "Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle. [...] In the course of this development, all community and all critical awareness have disintegrated. […]" (13-14) Entering and sustaining the spectacle can therefore only be done at the cost of ethics. While the Matthew children are aware of its fragmenting power, the characters of *The Return of the Soldier* are victims of its deeply ingrained normative (even "banalised", according to Debord) character. Kitty and Jenny certainly partake in the "spectaclist" (Debord 1967, 10) construction of the Baldry household: "It had been our pretence that by wearing costly clothes and organising a costly life we had been the servants of his desire." (50) Jenny's depiction of their way of life not only betrays its artificiality but also reveals the women's misguided behaviour towards Chris. In fact, the *OED* underlines that if the common meaning of "pretence" refers to a claim or a right, its etymology (*praetensa*) designates a "false show". The splendour of Baldry Court reflects back the lack of ethical and emotional connection between its inhabitants: as Jenny and Kitty aimed at "putting up a good show before the neighbours" (71), they engendered an inappropriate response to

Chris's actual desire and needs – as evidenced by Dr Anderson later in the novel. The expensiveness of the Baldrys' lifestyle ("costly") exposes the restrictive and polishing boundaries of the spectacle, as *being* is indeed reduced to *appearing*. The death of Oliver – and the familial trauma it caused – is literally covered up by the women's emphasis on pomp and decorum. This ethical overlook finds an echo in Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Garden Party" (1922), where the death of a neighbour needs to go unnoticed if the Sheridans want their event to go as planned. Laura, the main character, rebukes such an idea until her mother offers her a hat which dismisses all of her counterarguments:

> There, quite by chance, the first thing she saw was this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies, and a long black velvet ribbon. Never had she imagined she could look like that. Is mother right? she thought. And now she hoped her mother was right. Am I being extravagant? Perhaps it was extravagant. Just for a moment she had another glimpse of that poor woman and those little children, and the body being carried into the house. But it all seemed blurred, unreal, like a picture in the newspaper. (2007, 256-257)

"Extravagance" no longer means excess and luxury but instead becomes synonymous with ethics, instead of pointing to the Sheridans' lack of empathy: in fact, Laura's enthrallment with her reflection in the mirror overrides her concern for her dead neighbour's family. Reality is replaced by appearances, and ethics become a mere frivolous fiction. *The Return of the Soldier* and Mansfield's short story highlight how the spectacle transposes itself to reality and becomes a default mode of perception and behaviour. David Harvey explains that

> For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit. If successful, this conceptual apparatus becomes so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question. (5)

If in *The Return of the Soldier* and *No Laughing Matter* sustaining the spectacle seems to be the prerogative of the upper echelons of society – West's Margaret and Wilson's Regan are indeed well aware of their counterpart's spectaclist obsession – John Lanchester's *Capital* shows how this "embeddedness" of the spectacle not only negates the possibility of ethics but also creates asymmetrical relationships, between its active participants and those on the outside.

For Zygmunt Bauman in *Consuming Life* (2007), "The 'society of consumers' is a kind of society which (to recall the once popular term coined by Louis Althusser)[151] 'interpellates' its members (that is, addresses them, hails, calls out to, appeals to, questions, but also interrupts and 'breaks in upon' them) primarily in their capacity of consumers." (52) The subject is no longer called out by the other and their vulnerability, but rather by capital and consumer goods. Both Bauman and Debord point to the fact that in consumer capitalism, the individual is first and foremost a consumer, rather than a subject. In *Capital*, while Freddy Kamo is fascinated by the fact that "it seemed too as if many people were on display, behaving as if they were expecting to be looked at" (277), his father's feeling of displacement in the novel is testament to the pervasion of consumer culture and its effects on both the individual psyche and the social mesh:

> He walked along this famous road, looking in the windows of the expensive shops selling things which he could not imagine anyone wanting or needing or using: lamps which did not look as if they would emit any light, shoes no woman could stand in, coats which would not keep anyone warm, chairs which had no obvious way to sit on them. People wanted these things, they must do, or the shops wouldn't be selling them – and yet Patrick was so far from wanting any of them for himself that he felt that it wasn't the things for sale which were useless but he himself. (233)

Patrick's inner monologue betrays the absurdity of consumerism. The list of items available in the shops on King's Road defy any sense of practicality and pragmatism, as Patrick's reflection sheds light on a paradox between the lack of purpose of each product and consumerist desire. If his remarks corroborate Bauman's statement on interpellation, they also contradict his assumption that "Life organized around consumption, on the other hand, must do without norms: it is guided by seduction, ever rising desires and volatile wishes – no longer by normative regulation." (2000, 76) While there is no denying – and Bauman shares this with Harvey – that consumerist culture relies on desires, the normative aspect of the spectacle is well delineated by Patrick. In fact, rather than criticising the unpractical aspect of the products on display, Patrick is overwhelmed by a feeling of inadequacy with Western culture that deflect

[151] In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)" (1970), Louis Althusser states that "The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing" (49) and that "the duplicate mirror-structure of ideology ensures" (55) this very interpellation. According to him, when an individual is hailed on the street by another, he "becomes a subject" (48): to properly function as such, ideology hails the subject in order to "[insert him] into practices governed by the rituals of the [Ideological State Apparatuses]." (55) Though this chapter will not deal with Althusser's philosophy, Bauman's transposition of the notion of interpellation into the creation and fortification of consumerist society raises questions as to the place left for an ethics of responsibility in this ideological transmogrification of the subject.

this lack of purpose onto him. It is because he cannot comply with the normative assumptions of consumer capitalism (i.e., a deep desire to buy these "things") that he is left feeling out of place. Similarly, Matya (the Younts' nanny) is relegated outside of the spectacle:

> Matya had an ambivalent relationship with the currents of money on which much of London seemed to float. […] She wasn't sure how to make money, exactly, but anyone with eyes could see that it was everywhere in London, in the cars, the clothes, the shops, the talk, the very air. […] Things were happening, but not to her. If the city was one huge shop window, she was outside on the pavement, looking in. (337)

Part of the "immigrant characters [who] pursue the 'London Dream'" (Berensmeyer and Löffler 173), Matya is split between her "dream of expensiveness" (240) and the polarising reality of the capital. By reflecting images of wealth and consumerism, the spectacle seeks to attract the subject, yet without guaranteeing its accessibility. The city of London forms a sort of virtual reality in which one can aspire to social mobility[152] and wealth – but this can only remain on the oneiric, fictitious plane. In fact, like Patrick Kamo, Matya experiences first-hand the liminality of the spectacle: deprived of actual agency within its circumscription, she is forced into the role of a subjugated observer – unconsciously and indirectly fuelling this impenetrable sphere. The threshold of the spectacle is, in *Capital* and *What a Carve Up!*, delineated by finance. In Coe's novel, bankers and traders are described as "alchemists who could conjure unimaginable futures out of thin air." (310) It is precisely these unattainable and unrealistic futures that drive immigrants to Lanchester's London. The fictitious quality of the spectacle is therefore both created and sustained by social and economic asymmetry, wherein immigrant characters like Patrick, Matya or Quentina are confronted to the "fast and complex mutations exerted on the body politic by the twin development of capitalism and imperialism." (Bernard 2015a, 145)

The spectacle is therefore a *locus* of power, one which fragments the social and political mesh. This is already evidenced in Smith's *The Holiday*, where the depiction of the imperial ruling order resonates with the oppressive levels of wealth and "cash flow" circulating through London:

[152] It is precisely this hopeful yet unanswered aspiration that makes what Guy Standing calls the "precariat": he explains that "youth precarity traps" (73) are created by a discrepancy between the aspirations of young qualified workers (like Matya, who has a degree in mechanical engineering) and their need for income – which is taken advantage of in a capitalist system.

> [Raji] says that one of the most oppressive things the English have brought in India is that sense of secret opulence in a land of poverty, and this opulence shows itself in close-curtained bungalows with plain outsides, and the luxury going on within a secret way […] just plain comfort, unindictable, untouchable, invisible and foreign. (97-98)

The colonised land encapsulates the stealth of the spectacle, as Raji is a witness to the presence/absence duality of colonial rule. The almost sacred seclusion of wealth on colonised land participates in the delimitation of the spectacle – the very same one experienced sixty years later by Patrick and Matya who can only be "looking in". The inside and outside of the spectacle follow the pattern of modes of domination of the other (shown by Matya's lack of agency) and lack of accountability (as evidenced by Raji's almost legal lexicon "undictable", "untouchable"). This creates a push-pull effect within the body politic, where the most precarious (and the most different from the norm) are not only called out by the spectacle but are also made unable to answer. In the words of Romana Huk,

> 'England' or 'home' has always been an imposed state of mind and a mindset of imperial ownership, inherited from military Aunt Lions in cahoots with spiritual Uncle Hebert – though it is also one now set into disintegrative mode. The idea that colonial rule functions without colonials is key to the novel. It illustrates [..] that the strategies of colonisation have simply *shifted* from crude conquering to more sophisticated modes of global domination through deployment of developing capitalism's 'supply and demand' rhetoric. Even more importantly, it indicates Smith's interest in developing new views of how power structures work, which in turn suggests why Celia continually feels frightened by the 'secret' forces that have conspired to construct her. (199)

The spectacle is therefore indeed a secretive apparatus: if "secret" is in fact synonymous with "to be kept from knowledge" (*OED*, a meaning already reminiscent of Foucauldian power dynamics), its etymology *secre* means "to separate, to divide" – a *Latin* root shared with the word "screen", which suggests both partition and display. The spectacle therefore aims at dividing the body politic while also offering a false, alternate reality, whose corrosive and alienating effects can only result in the fragmentation of ethics.

2. Towards Ethical Atrophy?[153]

Twenty years after *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord published an addendum entitled *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988) in which he explained that:

> The integration of state and economy is the most evident trend of the century; it is at the very least the motor of all recent economic developments. The defensive and offensive pact concluded between these two powers, economy and state, has provided them with the greatest common advantages in every field: each may be said to own the other; at any rate, it is absurd to oppose them, or to distinguish between their reasons and follies. This union, too, has proved to be highly favorable to the development of spectacular domination – indeed, the two have been indistinguishable from the very start. (1988, 12)

Debord denounces a crucial development in the constitution of society: the indivisibility of state and economy[154] entails the modification of the social contract. Institutions – i.e., the corporate bodies of society – therefore no longer respond to the interests of individuals, but rather to that of the economy. The correlation between "these two powers" entails a dissociation between the individuals that compose society and the institutions put in place to maintain society. Åke Petzäll considers in fact that

> The question of institutions lies in the fact that they represent the interests of individuals, here and now. […] Since the individual cannot act responsibly without the influence of institutions, we are dealing with a community of responsibility which encloses the whole issue of actual responsibility. (89)[155]

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[153] The title of this section is inspired from Malcolm Bradbury's analysis of *No Laughing Matter*, in his chapter "The Fiction of Pastiche: the Comic Mode of Angus Wilson" (in Halio, 139-155). The critic explains that "one of the functions of irony and comedy in his work is to be directed, as it is in Forster's novels, towards a centre, showing up moral and emotional atrophy. [...]" (143) Rather than commenting on moral notions, this section proposes to see how the relationship between state and economy, between government and capitalism hinders ethical relationships within the body politic.

[154] In Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998), Sir Jack Pitman buys the Isle of Wight to create a gigantic amusement park that will (re)produce a second England (from Robin Hood and his merry men to Buckingham Palace). As "The Project" unfolds, analysts and commentators praise its scope and defiance to the original country. One of them lauds the fact that: "It's a pure market state. There's no interference from government because there is no government. So there's no foreign or domestic policy, only economic policy. It's a pure interface between buyers and sellers without the market being skewed by central government with its complex agendas and election promises. […] What's happening on the Island is a recognition that man is a market-driven animal, that he swims in the market like a fish in the sea." (183-184) The state is here seen as a hindrance to the development of both the market and the individual. Similarly in *Capital*, Mark, one of Roger Yount's colleagues, believes that state regulation of the market is a way to "tie down the giant", while making "the City safe for the timid and the frightened and the conventional and the weak." (347)

[155] "La problématique des institutions consiste dans le fait qu'elles représentent les intérêts des individus, ici et maintenant. […] Étant donné qu'il n'existe pas d'acte responsable de l'individu sans qu'il y ait influence de la part des institutions, nous avons affaire à une communauté de responsabilité qui enferme toute la problématique de la responsabilité réelle." (89)

At the political level, responsibility works in two directions: institutions are implemented to safeguard individuals from their shared vulnerability, and individuals must act *responsibly* to guarantee the permanence of the said institutions. However, if state and economy become indissociable, the possibility for an ethics of responsibility to emerge is actually restricted, since *shared vulnerability* is replaced by *spectacular domination* as the core foundation of society. Rather than "representing the interests of individuals", institutions instead serve the economy, therefore eroding the "community of responsibility" delineated by Petzäll. It is in this particular context that the novels of the corpus seem to actively denounce the compliance of the British state with the dominance of the economy, as they shed light on the corruption of Whitehall and the consequent decorporation of the body politic.

A. Something is rotten in the Kingdom of England

In *South Riding,* Alderman Snaith contemplates the extent of his power over the county:

> From Hardra's Head to the Leam he would set his mark upon Yorkshire. […] I am the South Riding; *L'état, c'est moi,* he told himself. He had the field to himself now; Astell was retiring, Carne was dead. There was no other man on the Council with power enough to thwart him. (460)

Supposed to focus on the development and wellbeing of the community, Snaith's thoughts betray his individualistic scheme: the repetition of the personal and possessive pronouns ("he"/"him"/"himself") in fact reveals the domineering attitude of the Alderman towards his fellow councilmen, whom he sees as competitors. This power dynamics points to the priority of individual interests over collective thought. It is therefore no coincidence that Snaith quotes the alleged words of Louis XIV, aimed at restating the position of the absolute monarch on top of the Parisian parliament. In this regard, Snaith's perception of the body politic is deeply Hobbesian, as evidenced by the frontispiece of Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651).

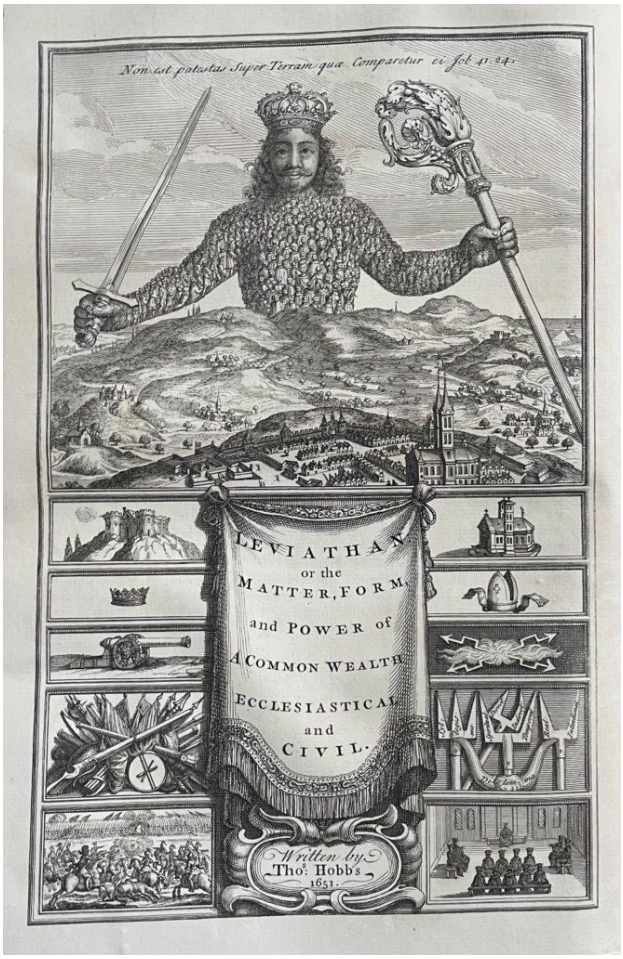

Figure 3: Frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* by Abraham Bosse, 1651

Overlooking his kingdom, the King stands here as a uniting figure. His body is here composed of individuals looking up to him, representing the social contract *à la* Hobbes: for Hobbes, the King is the sole human being capable of ensuring the safety and viability of the country. The body politic is therefore incarnated by the sovereign and his subjects through a relationship of wilful subordination. The dominating figure of the King in the frontispiece echoes Snaith's own power-driven position. Yet, Snaith – as opposed to an absolute monarch – is part of an *elected* political organ, supposed to answer to the will of the people and to the collective interest. His power plays in fact reveal that something is rotten in the Kingdom of England: Snaith is indeed intent on "gambling with human nature" (464) and "reaping profits for himself" (442). By buying land before selling it to the Council he works for, Snaith is the embodiment of the "Corruption" (3) with a capital C, denounced in the Prologue of the novel. If the South Riding's County Council is in fact "World Tragedy in embryo" (3), one can perceive how money and self-interest interfere with the political system.

In fact, one could see in Thomas Winshaw, MP, a neoliberal version of Snaith. In an interview with the BBC, broadcaster Alan Beamish asks Henry if he has been following the debates in the Commons on the Iraq war:

> BEAMISH: You must have been following the debates with interests.
>
> WINSHAW: Ah. Well I haven't been in the House this week, nearly as much – erm – nearly as much as one would wish. Business commitments have – I mean *constituency* business, of course – have been very – erm – very pressing… (126)

Thomas Winshaw's embarrassed epanorthosis illustrates the clash of state and economy, as he puts personal profits ahead of governmental issues. Furthermore, his lapsus between "business commitments" and "constituency business" almost creates a chiasm which encapsulates how the Thatcherite government runs the country as it would a firm. This transmogrification of the body politic therefore resonates with Snaith's absolutism, where the collective is erased under the appeal of profit. Snaith's "triumph" over Carne (the traditionalist) and Astell (the socialist) and the Winshaws' unindictable hold over the country suggest that corruption has taken the upper hand on any possible social progress, despite the hopeful musings of Sarah Burton at the end of *South Riding* and Michael's denunciative chronicle in *What a Carve Up!*.

The pitfalls of state capitalism lead the characters of *No Laughing Matter* and *The Holiday* to contemplate the communist USSR as a more viable option than the capitalistic Western countries. In a visit to the USSR in 1935, Quentin Matthews is invited to the opening conference of the World International Federation of Social and Allied Scientists. Asked to sign the organisation's charter, Quentin is confronted with the hypocrisy of the operation. After hearing a speech condemning "the self interest, the vacillation, the stupidity and the treachery of our own capitalist governments" (*NLM* 264), the charter praises "the peace-loving democracies of the West" (266) and the "freedom-loving country" (267) that is the Soviet Union. However, Quentin is quick to underline that "a good number of the members of the English and French governments have no concern with peace whatsoever, except the peace that will allow them to continue their exploitation of the working classes." (266) His defiance epitomises a split within language, as spoken and written words point to different realities. The accumulation of pejorative adjectives in Kelvin Douglas's speech is in fact replaced by a dissonant parallelism ("peace-loving" / "freedom-loving") which erases the political climates

of each block – social inequality on one hand, and ideological censorship[156] on the other. The so-called socialism of the invited academics is therefore prone to the very same "treachery" they are denouncing. Furthermore, Quentin's indictment of the French and British governments gives the word "peace" a polysemic function that encapsulates power dynamics: while "peace" takes a particular meaning as the fascist threats looms in 1935, Quentin's accusation suggests that the current political system thwarts this very definition, by creating a form of peace through social repression.

In this regard, *No Laughing Matter* shares similarities with *The Holiday*: Smith's distrust for any "-isms which she found unsavoury" (Huk 208) led her to acknowledge that the political tendencies of the late 1930s were "being produced by *similar* forces locked in hypocritical battle for dominance." (56) Wilson and Smith seem to share a wariness for extremisms, highlighted by Quentin's confrontation with his fellow academics' dishonesty and Celia's distrust of the very government she works for. In the midst of the Cold War, Smith's protagonist ponders over the schism between the West and the USSR. Though suspicious of any depiction of Russia as free from corruption, she nonetheless condemns the behaviour of Whitehall: "Government sees to it that the majority of the people shall have a stake in our civilisation, they shall have a qualifying Judas one-pound share." (*TH* 54) Celia's observation concatenates the transformation of the body politic into a state-wide firm observed in the other novels of the corpus, especially through the marketisation of her vocabulary ("stake", "share"). The reference to Judas Iscariot furthers her claims of state corruption and of her fellow Britons, who become literal stake-holders – rather than constituents or *homines politicus*. As Huk underlines, Smith cleverly uses the polysemy of the word "pound" which both refers to "currency in sterling, and [to] flesh." (206) In this regard, Celia not only indicts the fact her compatriots are bought out by a government facing threats of collapse in the midst of the polarising Cold War, but she also argues that the matter pertains to organic corruption, making the body politic sick at its core. Yet Celia's condemnation does not stop here: if she in fact plays on the meaning of "pound", she also points – and she here would find an ally in Quentin Matthews – to the ridiculous amount of such corruptive methods. In fact, the "one-pound" share conveys the impression that this "person-by-person, consumer-by-consumer selling-of-soul" (Huk 206) is but a frivolous affair which allows the firm-government to control its shareholders-population for little investment.

[156] In this particular passage of the novel, Quentin is alarmed to see that many academics who criticised the Stalinist regime have suddenly disappeared.

Like Quentin (and Astell in *South Riding*), Celia is well-aware of the wedge drawn within the body politic by the capitalisation of government and public bodies.

The novels of the corpus therefore excoriate an imbalance of power within the social contract, as patterns of public domination emerge. During an evening at the Nag's Head (the local pub of the South Riding), a few men discuss the current economic situation of the country. A stranger explains that "Someone has to lose. […] That's economics. The question is – *who* loses? That's progress." (*SR* 100) Though the men are set on discussing the status of farmers and the subsidies they are getting at a time of economic downfall, the stigmatisation of the lower classes (analysed in the previous chapter) and Snaith's storyline do suggest that the answer to this question barely changes throughout the novel (making it Sarah's mission to improve the conditions in the county). Interestingly enough, this distinction is reprised in the prologue of *Capital*, as the omniscient narrator declares that "Britain had become a country of winners and losers." (7) This game-like rhetoric turns the body politic into a locus of confrontation and competition, that pits its members against one another[157]. If each "category" is mainly defined by property rights (reviving here Williams's analysis of class segmentation) in both novels – having a house on Pepys Road is in fact synonymous with being rich (7), the utmost symbol of social victory, while living anywhere else but in the Shacks is a sign of property – this separation within the body politic actually goes even further, as it determines who gets to live properly and who doesn't.

In *Capital*, Lanchester cleverly disperses references to checks respectively received by Roger Yount and Quentina Mkfesi. Aside from the four parts, very few specific dates (six to be precise) are given in the novel, but three are of particular interest: December 21st 2007, September 15th and 22nd 2008. On Friday 21st December 2007, Quentina Mkfesi and Roger Yount both receive a check – respectively for £227 (which become £150 after her illegal handler cashes in the check for her) and £30,000 (far from the 2.5 million pounds expected by Roger). On September 15th 2008, Roger gets fired from his job at Pinker Lloyd following his deputy's tentative of embezzlement right before the crash, while on the 22nd, Quentina's fate in the United Kingdom is being decided by immigration judges. The coordinated events emerging in Quentina's and Roger's lives reveal their disjunction and expose the construction of a two-tier

[157] In *Whoops! Why everyone owes everyone and no one can pay* (2010), Lanchester recalls that "Capitalism isn't inherently fair: it does not, in and of itself, distribute the rewards of economic growth equitably. Instead, it runs on the bases of winner takes all and to them that hath shall be given." (8)

society. Furthermore, each of the character's story hints at the role played by the government: deregulation leaves Roger with a bonus and one house instead of two[158], while Quentina isn't recognised as a human being and cannot live properly. These structural signs hide a fracture within the body politic which unevenly distributes justice and equality. This is precisely what Graham Packard denounces in his documentary against the Falklands War in *What a Carve Up!*, where he opposes Emily Thatcher, a pensioner, and the Prime Minister:

> In a disjointed voice-over commentary, the old woman spoke of the difficulties of getting on her pension and wondered what had become of all the money she paid in taxes throughout her working life: this was usually the cue for a rapid cut to some brutal and expensive-looking piece of military hardware. The film ended with the Prime Minister's famous speech to the Scottish Conservative Party, in which she described the war as a battle between good and evil and declared that 'It must be finished', followed by a lingering shot of the other Mrs Thatcher carrying a heavy bag of groceries up a steep, forbidding street. Then the screen faded to black and two captions appeared: 'Mrs Emily Thatcher supports herself on a weekly income of £43.37': 'The cost of the Falklands War has already been estimated at £700,000,000.' (281)

Pointing to the ironical purport of the Prime Minister's speech on morality, Graham's commentary lays emphasis on the precarity and vulnerability of Mrs Emily Thatcher: the contrast between the politician's "battle between good and evil" and the pensioner's difficulties to eat properly truly show how such "faded" notions (and I am here borrowing from Adorno's words, quoted in the introduction to this thesis) can easily be used to justify the overlooking of ethics. The dissonance of Margaret Thatcher's words with the reality of the pensioner is reinforced by the implied misappropriation of the citizens' taxes to finance the war and the opposition between the two sums allocated to the two women – unmasking once again the corrupted mechanisms of the British government, referred to several times in the Winshaw siblings' chapters. In fact, the step-by-step dissection of the documentary reproduces the delimitation between "winner" and "loser" and exposes the dissolution of the social contract and the deterioration of the body politic. In *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown considers indeed that "a democracy composed of human capital features winners and losers, not equal treatment or equal protection. In this regard, too, the social contract is turning inside out." (2015, 38) By becoming the guarantor of the domination of the economy, the state can no longer act

[158] Of course, one can also think of the government bailouts that occurred in October 2008 (of which Lloyds TSB, perhaps the inspiration behind Roger's Pinker Lloyd, was a beneficiary). While not mentioned in the novel, the opposition between Roger's and Quentina's storyline and his indifference towards others in general suggests a metonymic depiction of the priority given to the economy by the state over political refugees.

as a safeguard for society. It instead actively participates in the vulnerable exposure of its precarious members – its 'losers' to keep with an economic rhetoric – proceeding in the creation of experiences of decorporation.

B. Decorporation

In *Frames of War* (2009), Butler recalls that "the very persistence [of the body] depends upon social conditions and institutions, which means that in order to "be," in the sense of "persist," it must rely on what is outside itself." (33) Like Petzäll, Butler insists on the interconnectedness of the public and private spheres and the role played by institutions in the viability of the body politic and its members. However, the domination of a market-like governmentality [159] and the assimilation of the state with the economy preclude this embeddedness. Brown in fact underlines that "when market competition becomes generalized as a social and political principle, some will triumph and some will die . . . as a matter of social and political principle." (2015, 65) The patterns of domination analysed in the last section of this chapter show how greed and corruption hinder ethical responsibility for the other. But what Butler's and Brown's remarks imply is that these power dynamics necessarily result in the physical annihilation of the individuals that make up the body politic. Neoliberal rationality therefore seems to generate experiences of decorporation. While the Oxford English Dictionary lists the term as obsolete, the socio-economic context of the novels calls for its reassertion as a critical concept. From the Latin *corpus* (meaning body) and the prefix *de* (meaning undoing, depriving), decorporation points to the dehumanising power of neoliberalism: not only are public organs transformed into corporation, but individuals are dispossessed of their own bodies as well. The whole societal corpus – institutions, communities, individuals – becomes undone, disembodied, dismembered. In a context of increased financialisation, decorporation invisibilises the other's vulnerability, which ultimately causes the disintegration of ethical bonds and of the body politic. This has been particularly prominent in the decades that followed

[159] The vocabulary used here follows in Foucault's lexicon. In *A Companion to Foucault*, Johanna Oksala explains: "From a Foucauldian perspective, the emergence of neoliberal governmentality in the 1930s and its spectacular rise in the last three decades must be understood as the culmination of a historical development that redrew the ontological boundary between economy and politics. […] The key aim of neoliberal governmentality is to create social conditions that not only encourage and necessitate natural competitiveness and self-interest, but that produce them. It advocates competition as the dominant principle for guiding human behavior in society: competitiveness at all levels and at various scales of human activity – from the individual to the household, the nation, and the world economy – is paramount. It constructs a social order that safeguards competition in free markets in the knowledge that such an order is superior, not only economically but also morally and politically – the most conducive to securing its members' freedom and happiness." (331-333)

the 1980s and the rise of Thatcherism: the urgency of such impediments needing to be addressed, this section will especially focus on Coe's and Lanchester's state-of-the-nation novels, where the depiction of a crumbling National Health Service encloses the entire issue of decorporation as a risk for the survival of the body politic.

The first step towards decorporation is certainly the transformation of public institutions into firms, or corporations. These organs of the body politics are in this case seen as a way to capitalise on vulnerability in order to make a profit. In *South Riding*, Snaith's justification of the growing rates in the county hints at the future corporatisation of public infrastructures under neoliberalism:

> The rates will go up again a little. […] But that won't matter so much. These new people will stand it. […] They *want* good motor roads, because they dream of one day of driving their own cars. They *want* libraries and schools and clinics and cheap secondary education. (439)

Echoing Graham's indictment on the misappropriation of taxes under Thatcher, Snaith's rule of the Council will mean increased rates based on the growing needs for public institutions: the Alderman actually levels out pure consumerism ("dream of driving their own cars") and the necessity for reliable infrastructures that guarantee the "persistence" of the body politic, notably through the ambivalent semantics of "want", which means both "desiring" (on the side of consumerism in that case) and "lacking" (pointing to one's precarity). This transmogrification of public bodies is even more prominent in *What a Carve Up!*, whose chronological disorder leaves the reader to appreciate the progressive privatisation of the NHS. As a matter of fact, Henry Winshaw's diary reveals the fragility of the British healthcare system, right after the publication and implementation of the Beveridge Report[160]. The latter is actively and

[160] Bronstein and Harris underline that "The wartime government produced a study culminating in the groundbreaking Beveridge Report (1942), which confirmed that all people had a right to a guaranteed basic income, and argued that all people should have protection against unemployment, sickness, and lack of educational opportunity: "Social insurance fully developed may provide income security; it is an attack upon Want. But Want is one only of five giants on the road of reconstruction and in some ways the easiest to attack. The others are Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness." The Beveridge Report articulated both the values and corresponding policies that later guided postwar reconstruction." (216) The Beveridge Report was drafted and published in 1942 during the Second World War and gave way to three major pieces of legislation: the National Insurance Act of 1946 (creating social security in the United Kingdom), the National Health Service Act of 1946 (creating the NHS) and the National Assistance Act of 1948 (abolishing the Elizabeth Poor Law that was still in use until then, as evidenced in *South Riding* with the County Council's ruling of the Means Test). Writing in his diary in 1948, Henry Winshaw actually misspells the Report: "something called the Beaveredge (?) Report" (119). The spelling mistake and the interrogation mark between parentheses foreshadows the role Henry will play as MP in the dismantling and privatisation of the NHS.

generationally undermined by the Winshaws. In 1948, Lawrence Winshaw – Dorothy's father and Henry's uncle – sees in the NHS an incredible business opportunity:

> [He] thought the idea of having a centralised Health Service made a lot of sense, because ultimately it could be run as a business, with shareholders and a board of directors and a chief executive, and that was the way to make sure it was efficient, to run it along business lines, i.e. with a view to making a profit. […] he started saying that in fact the Health Service, if properly managed, could turn out to be the most profitable business of all time, because health care was like prostitution, it was something for which the demand could never dry up: it was inexhaustible. (123)

The ontological vulnerability and precariousness of British citizens is here commodified: far from the "cradle-to-grave safety net" (Bronstein and Harris 219) promoted by the Beveridge Report, health is seen as a source of profit on which one must capitalise. The call of the other, as theorised by Levinas and later on Butler, is now defined as a market "demand" that justifies corporatisation. Furthermore, Lawrence's case for the "centralisation" of the NHS in 1948 actually foreshadows the actual partial privatisation of the British healthcare system under Thatcherism. It is indeed "managers" (410) who decide to "close wards" in the hospitals of the country in 1991, highly unaware of (or unconcerned by?) the growing *need* (rather than demand) for healthcare. The fragmentary nature of Coe's state-of-the-nation novel confronts Henry's diary with extracts from other material, such as the memoirs of BBC Alan Beamish. While Henry recalls in an entry dated from October 29th 1985 that he managed to "put [some pig-ugly female doctor with NHS specs and bleeding heart] in her place by quoting a few simple facts" (136), the reproduction of the actual interview in Beamish's book exposes the absurd reality of the dismantling of the healthcare system:

> [Consulting] a transcript of that discussion, I find that when Dr Gillam[161] first raised the subject of deliberate underfunding as a prelude to privatization, his answer was:
>
> '17,000,000 over 5 years 12.3% of GDP 4% more than the EEC 35% up on the USSR 34,000 GPs for every HAS X 19.24 in real terms 9,586 for every FHSA seasonally adjusted 12,900,000 + 54.67 @ 19% incl VAT rising to 47% depending on IPR by the IHSM £4.52p NHS safe in our hands."
>
> In response to which, Dr Gillam said:
>
> 'I don't dispute the truth of your figures, but neither do I dispute the truth of what I see everyday with my own eyes. And the problem is that these truths contradict each

[161] The novel lets transpire another transgenerational tale, that of the Gillam family, which also serves a metonymic purpose. While old Gillam was one of Henry's schoolmates in Oxford, defending "Quality of life" (123) against the corporate talks of Lawrence, his daughter, Dr Gillam, comes back twice in the rest of the novel: once to defend the NHS against Henry Winshaw, and another time to explain to Michael why Fiona could not be taken care of as she should have been.

> other. Everyday I see staff working longer hours, under greater stress, for less reward, and I see patients waiting a longer time, for worse treatment, under worse conditions. These are facts, I'm afraid. They can't be argued away.' (138)

As the interview goes on, Henry keeps on overflowing the discussion with inconsequential numbers, whose absurdity – contradicting his definition of "a few simple facts" – is emphasised by the use of undefined acronyms, erratic marks of topography and mathematical signs such as square roots, fractions and countless percentages (138-139). Henry's lack of tangible arguments is set to expose the discrepancy between neoliberal rationality and the ethical considerations put forward by Dr Gillam. By defending cuts through an incomprehensible list of mathematical operations, Henry sustains the fictionality of capital analysed in the first part of this chapter. His parataxis betrays the senseless corporatisation of the NHS: the immateriality of the numbers contrasts with the lived experience of the healthcare workers represented by Dr Gillam. "Truth" even becomes a relative concept under neoliberalism, wherein the multiplication of numbers is used as rhetorical manipulation while the precariousness of both patients and medical staff becomes literally overwhelmed by budget cuts.

In *Capital*, Mary is also confronted to the shortage of medical staff when looking after her mother:

> The truth was that Petunia's GP surgery had been useless. […] It was hard to tell who regarded themselves as being in charge of her mother's care, and combined with the fact that the district nurses were clearly overwhelmed, this made it seem like there simply wasn't any help. (272)

Though they are "a cornerstone of NHS care" (*The Guardian*, 2014), the number of district nurses in the UK has been substantially decreasing[162], while the emphasis on the role of local authorities has been a pillar of NHS reform for the last 30 years[163] – creating a paradox between

[162] See https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jun/17/district-nurses-disappear-2025 for more information on the topic, as well as Mark Dayan ad al. *How good is the NHS?* Report done with the support of The Health Foundation, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, The King's Fund and the Nuffield Trust, 2018. While the report shows that the number of nurses in the NHS is considerably low compared to other countries with similar systems (and also underlines that their salaries are much lower), *The Guardian* notes a "47% drop" in the number of nurses from 2003 to 2013 ("from 12,620 in 2003 to 6,656 last year") – a timeline that corresponds to the setting of *Capital*.

[163] In "The National Health Service (NHS) at 70: Bevan's double-edged legacy" (2018), Rudolf Klein recalls that this "localisation" of healthcare was set in motion during the late 1980s': "In 1989 Kenneth Clarke, unveiling his plans for the introduction of a mimic market in the NHS, promised "To make the Health Service more responsive to the needs of patients, as much power and responsibility will be delegated to local level" (Secretary of State for Health, 1989); his Labour successor, Frank Dobson, stressed that "Local doctors and nurses…will be in the driving seat shaping services" (Secretary of State for Health, 1997). Despite these good intentions only five years later another Labour Secretary of State, Alan Milburn, was deploring the fact that "For fifty years the NHS has been subject to day to day running from Whitehall. A million strong service cannot be run in this way" and declaring

shortage of staff and increased responsibilities, as already underlined in *What a Carve Up!* in 1994. In both Coe's and Lanchester's novels, this tension results in the neglect of the care provided. Mary and her mother Petunia are in fact on the receiving end of the deplorable conditions mentioned by Dr Gillam, which leave the patient unattended. The "uselessness" of the surgery in *Capital* sombrely echoes the "*negligence*" (410) felt by Michael as Fiona's condition was made fatal by the overwhelmed medical team at the hospital. As Raluca Iliou argues,

> Fiona's confirmation of her diagnosis, lymphoma, was delayed by a professional error. Hence she is not prescribed the course of antibiotics in time to save her, and so, finally and ironically, a treatable condition claims her life. Coe implies that such acts are an embodiment of the acute sickness that society experienced in the 1980s, a malaise brought about by senseless political decisions implemented by people like Mark and Dorothy Mortimer for mercantile gain, evoking the privatizations that typified the Thatcher era and beyond. (in Tew 2018, 59)

Fiona's illness and subsequent death metonymically portrays the dislocation of the body politic. Neoliberalist governments are seen as a political and social gangrene that infects each and every individual. In *Matière à réflexion. Du corps politique dans la littérature et les arts britanniques contemporains* (2018), Catherine Bernard, analysing Martin Amis's *London Fields* (1989), astutely reflects on this corrupted imbrication of the private and the public bodies:

> The implacable degradation of bodies […] seems to intensify the logic of the (a)moral tale. In it, one can perceive the collapse of the body politic, its irremediable corruption. […] The individual tragedy reaches a collective status. The narrator of *London Fields* is carried off by an untreatable disease which seems consubstantial with the degradation of the world. Contemporary British fiction is inhabited by these sick bodies, which makes the fragility of a collective visible.(153)[164]

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that "power needs to be devolved to locally run services" (Secretary of State for Health, 2002). But in 2010 a Conservative Secretary of State, Andrew Lansley, returned yet again to the same theme. "The Government's reforms", he promised, "will liberate professionals and providers from top-down control". The notion of putting local doctors in the driving seat – as promised by Dobson in 1997 – was to be pushed to its logical conclusion by devolving "power and responsibility for commissioning services to local consortia of GP practices" (Secretary of State for Health, 2010)." (6) Of course, this emphasis on the local could be seen as a way to reinforce the need for local government, but Klein rightly insists on the fact that this form of devolved power was a gateway to more privatisation, as managers have partly taken control of surgeries for instance.

[164] "La dégradation implacable des corps [...] semble redoubler la logique du conte (a)moral. En elle se lit la faillite du corps politique, sa corruption irrémédiable. […] La tragédie individuelle accède à un statut collectif. On se souvient que le narrateur de London Fields est emporté par une maladie incurable qui semble consubstantielle de la dégradation du monde. La fiction contemporaine britannique est peuplée de ces corps malades, dans lesquels se lit la fragilité d'un collectif. "

Decorporation comes now into full force: the concomitant vulnerability of health provider and patient under neoliberalist rationality leads to an inevitable disincarnation of public healthcare, which erases suffering. In fact, Mary's inability to identify the medical staff responsible for her mother's treatment ("it was hard to tell who regarded themselves as being in charge of her mother's care"; "there simply wasn't any help") betrays the undifferentiation of a crumbling system. She even goes so far as to compare this lack of attention to that of "one of those people on the phone, on helplines or complaints lines, who are following set scripts and won't listen to you unless you tick specific boxes in the dialogue." (272) Further evidence of senseless corporatisation, this mechanisation of healthcare entails the invisibilisation and silencing of suffering.

In *What a Carve Up!*, Michael actually experiences such a disincarnated and dehumanising phone call when Fiona's symptoms worsen. After calling Dr Campion, Fiona's GP, and reaching his answering machine, he finally gets hold of a deputizing doctor:

> I started to tell the doctor what was wrong. I wanted to be as quick and as clear as possible, so I could get back to Fiona, but it wasn't that easy. Because he'd never heard of her before, never examined her, never seen any notes, never been told about the case, I had to explain everything from the beginning. Then he asked me if I thought it was serious. I told him I thought it was very serious, but I could tell that he didn't really believe me. He thought I was talking about someone with a bad cold. (361)

The minimisation of Fiona's symptoms heavily contrasts with the description of her condition on the previous page, which reveals the extent of the carelessness she is experiencing. The diagnosis is left in the hands of Michael before being undermined again by the doctor on the phone – exposing the transposability of responsibility when it comes to healthcare, as the two men operate an ineffective back-and-forth whose only result is the delay of Fiona's treatment. Furthermore, the anaphora of the adverb "never" circumscribes the refraction of care, as both *What a Carve Up!* and *Capital* underline the paradoxical multiplication of GPs and the rise of medical indifference. While in Coe's state-of-the-nation this is mainly shown by the numerous names of doctors that are more or less related to Fiona's case (Dr Campion, Dr Searl, Dr Bishop, Dr Gillam), it is expressly denounced in *Capital* by Petunia, who has witnessed both the birth and the collapse of the NHS:

> It wasn't really her doctor at all – there wasn't such a person as "her" GP. In the last twenty years, though she had at one time or another seen more or less every doctor at the practice, she had never seen the same doctor twice in a row. There was something diminishing and impersonal about that. […] (61)

This dispersion of healthcare affects the individual, to the extent that it generates more vulnerability than it eases. As a matter of fact, the unreliability and unpredictability of the healthcare system becomes a process of othering. According to Joan Tronto in *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993), "'Otherness' arises out of a failure to recognize care in several ways. […] Those 'others' who need care are reduced to an object: 'the fracture in bed c' is no longer a person to the care-giver." (123) Petunia, "one of the dozens of people" (120) seen by the doctor that day, is invisibilised, while care itself is devoid of any ethical consideration. The impersonality of care – which is supposed to be corollary to responsibility[165] – and the unattendance of suffering point to the ethical failure of the body politic: the individual can no longer "persist" in order "to be", to paraphrase Butler, because the institutions put in place to curtail their vulnerability are made unavailable and unreliable. According to Corina Stan, this has been "diagnosed" by Adorno himself, as she shrewdly underlines that

> The diagnosis of late modernity that Adorno spells out— and in this *Minima Moralia* appears as a companion to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*— suggests that, because institutions have espoused the logic of rationalization and capitalist reproduction, they are no longer available sites of practice and transmission of ethical values, therefore private life has to bear the burden of remaining the sole medium where ethical practices— themselves contaminated by the pervasive logic of rationalization, reification, and exchange— remain thinkable. Adorno identifies a conflict between the universal (society) and the particular (the individual), otherwise formulated in the paradox that the very institutions that should provide the conditions of possibility for individual existence and self-realization are now at odds with. (16-17)

It is this breach of contract between members of society and political bodies that decorporation encapsulates. This is in fact directly experienced by both Fiona and Petunia. While Fiona feels like she "[doesn't] really trust [her] GP" (*WCU* 143), Petunia's lack of interaction with the GP causes the "basic contract" between the two to be "broken" (*C* 64), in Mrs Howe's words: the doctor's failure "to make the worry go away" (64) is further evidence of the disintegration of ethical bonds within the body politic. Fiona and Petunia are both left more vulnerable and

[165] In *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (2006)**,** Virginia Held defines the ethics of care as the act of "attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility." (10)

precarious than before consulting medical professionals. Care henceforth recovers its original meaning of "trouble, anxiety" (*OED*), as its ethical propensity is left unanswered. Both care and cure fall apart in the post-Thatcherite NHS, pointing at the growing in-organicity and ethical atrophy of the body politic.

The construction of the society of the spectacle in state-of-the-nation novels illustrates how "mammonism" still permeates the body politic, almost two centuries after Carlyle's admonition. The hegemony of capital as a norm modifies the very essence of the societies depicted in the corpus: from individual to lawmakers and elected officials, the rule of profit progressively supersedes and eventually erases the primary, ethical relationship to the other. Responsibility is either bought out or completely dissolved. The fragmented storylines and relationships of the corpus show how capitalistic rationality affects and infects the body politic, up to the point where its public organs can no longer respond to the political and ethical demand of individuals. If the experiences of decorporation analysed in the last two novels of the corpus expose the dismantling of public institutions and its effects, they also suggest that responsibility is in fact being replaced by "responsibilisation": viability and security seem to be discarded by the state and individuals are in turn "tasked with being responsible for [themselves]" (Brown 2015, 37). As the burden of care is delegated to the private sphere, this new paradigm implies a modification of the body politic and its mechanics: the next chapter further explores the way this political asymmetry leads to an ethical one, as the private sphere is mostly taken care of by women in the corpus.

Chapter 6.
Reified Subjects

In *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown underlines that

> Historically, even when its masculinity was not explicitly asserted and women's exclusion from the category was not overt, *homo politicus* from Aristotle through Kant and Hegel assumed a masculinist comportment and sphere of activity. Whether stipulated as participating in rule of the common (Aristotle), as paralleling military virtu (Machiavelli), as manly measure and fortitude (Weber), or simply as autonomy, rationality, and self-sovereignty (the moderns), *homo politicus* was almost always and expressly male. Thus, as Joan Scott reminds us, French revolutionary feminists were decried as monstrous not just for their demands, but for the very fact of acting politically, just as nineteenth-century and twentieth-century bids for female suffrage were widely reviled as unnatural, as well as unnecessary. (99)

The conceptualisation and construction of the body politic is discriminatory: the *homo politicus* is envisaged as solely male, creating an imbalance within society. The brief philosophical history drawn up by Brown reveals how the empowerment of the white male bourgeois subject inevitably led to the dismissal of women as viable political subjects, while the vocabulary used by prominent male philosophers points to the normative aspects of such a circumscription of the body politic. The fact that demands for the right to vote were seen as "unnatural" suggests, as Brown argues, a conflation of biological, political and social norms: because of their biological sex, women have been seen as unfit for the life of the *polis*. Eighty years before Brown's study, Six Point Group-member Winifred Holtby lamented the depiction of women by her male contemporaries[166] in *Women and a Changing Civilization* (1934), published two years before *South Riding*:

> The historians of woman take it for granted that she is primarily concerned, not with geography, but with biology, not with philosophy, but with personal morality and ideal character. Man's problem is his relationship to the universe, woman's they suggest, her relationship to man. […] So widespread and dominating is that notion, that only by a strong effort of will can we remember that women also may seek some answer to the ultimate questions of the good, the true or the beautiful; that they also are affected by climate, wealth and government; that pleasure may attract or pain

[166] She especially mentions John Langdon Davies's *A Short History of Women*, published in 1927, and G.W. Johnson's *The Evolution of Woman* published in 1926.

> afflict them; that in short, the only adequate history of women would be a history of humanity and its adventure upon a changing globe. (4)

Holtby's concerns towards the male vision of women highlight their crystallisation as vessels of reproduction ("concerned with biology"), epitomes of decency ("personal morality and ideal character") and paragons of domestic devotion ("her relationship to man"). Holtby and Brown both show how women are involuntarily endowed with characteristics that place political, social and ethical expectations upon them[167]. They expose the violence of such reductive and normative apprehensions that actively reify women. If, as has been mentioned in the introduction to Chapter 5, reification is a Marxist concept developed by Georg Lukács, Holtby and Brown's criticism of patriarchal society becomes particular significant when put in parallel with the work of German philosopher Axel Honneth. In *Reification. A New Look at and Old Idea* (2008), Honneth explains that for Lukács, reification entails a loss of agency: the subject becomes passive, contemplative, and unable to "take over the perspective of another person." (Honneth 2008, 34) However, Honneth underlines that Lukács's concept is a limited one: his criticism only concerns relationships linked to economic exchanges, while overlooking other forms of social reification. Honneth argues instead that reification is in fact "the forgetfulness of recognition", that is the forgetfulness of the individual's primary ethical relationship to the other.

Holtby's statement hints at the fact that both moral and ethical responsibility[168] are in fact placed solely upon women ("man's problem" being "his relationship to the universe" rather than to the other), while they are categorised, curtailed and "forgotten". Her emphasis on women's experience ("affected", "afflict" …) points to their dehumanisation, as their vulnerability is discarded and deemed irrelevant. In this regard, the 1930s writer reveals how any male account of women's history is necessarily incomplete, fragmented, since it overlooks the place of women in the life of the body politic. The fact that she insists on the pervasiveness of this vision ("widespread and dominating") shows how reification works through what Axel

[167] In *Twentieth Century Britain. A Political History* (2003), William D. Rubinstein also underlines that "opponents of women's suffrage made the familiar 'separate spheres' argument: women were simply unsuitable to pass judgement on the deadly serious business of warfare, national finance, and the Empire. They were 'emotional', and would either be swayed by demagogues, or would simply vote as directed by their husbands or fathers. There was also a fear that a women's lobby would attempt to 'purify' British life, acting against drink and other amusements. Frequently whispered, but seldom stated overtly, were fears that, during menstruation and the menopause, women were 'irrational' and 'hysterical'." (59)

[168] For references on the difference between the two, see the third section of the Introduction. While moral responsibility is turned towards oneself, ethical responsibility is directed towards the other.

Honneth defines as a "series of thought schemata that influence our practices by leading to a selective interpretation of social facts." (2008, 59) It is precisely this limited perception that Holtby argues against, by reasserting the complexity and relatability of the female character as ethical recognition is erased.

The proximity of Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilization* with events depicted in *South Riding*, as well as the fight for women's suffrage and the development of successive waves of feminist thinking throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, necessarily invite us to study female reification in the fictional societies of the corpus. Holtby's plea for reconsideration indeed highlights a gendered double-bind which gives way to the paradoxical position of women within the body politic: the concomitant demand for moral conduct and ethical responsibility associated with reification seems to create an unparalleled state of hyper-vigilance affecting the female characters of state-of-the-nation novels. This chapter endeavours to see how the authors of the corpus expose the "regulatory practices" (Butler 1990, 23) at the origin of female ethical reification, so as to reassess the politics of dis-position at work in state-of-the-nation novels.

1. Regulatory Practices

As the Matthew family breaks into song during the Exhibition in the opening pages of *No Laughing Matter*, the omniscient narrator observes: "[…] Mr Matthew began to sing joyfully. And soon all the others joined in chorus. It was the ladies who first stopped singing. Men are the egoists of life, of course; women are the conformists." (17) The sweeping maxim delineates gender roles along moral and ethical lines: while men are mainly concerned with their own persona, women are left dealing with the gaze of others. This not only suggests that men are above any type of responsibility, but that normative strictures also do not apply to them. This generalisation hints at a categorisation of identity depending on sex and gender – a process that Judith Butler analyses in her seminal *Gender Trouble* (1990):

> To what extent do *regulatory practices* of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person? To what extent is "identity" a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? (23)

Butler is concerned with the extent to which the normalisation of behaviours affects the construction of identity. Her line of inquiry alludes to the constrictive power of such codification of conduct, up to the point where it comes to define how a person sees themselves. While the use of the gendered maxim in *No Laughing Matter* pokes fun at these definitive frames – as this chapter will evidence – their predominance in the circumscription of the body politic and the toll they seem to take on female selves (if they are indeed "conformists") raise questions as to whether the need for social validity transforms ethical responsibility into an extreme form of dispossession.

A. Confining women

In *The Biopolitics of Gender* (2015), Jemima Repo explains:

> The emergence of the idea of two sexes, the separation by species of man from woman, was accompanied by a corresponding split of public from private, domesticity from industry, market from family, man from woman. The cult of domesticity that began to form delegated bourgeois women to the realm of the de-politicized home where their duties were to reproduce and rear the next generation of labor power. (14)

Repo's criticism of gendered relations finds its root in the development of capitalism in the 18th century, as studied in the previous chapter of the present thesis. Such mores are of course embodied in Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem "The Angel in the House"[169], which praises women's devotion to their husbands. Patmore's paragon of female virtue was so prominent that it haunted Woolf when she started writing literary reviews. In her lecture "Professions for Women", given to the National Society for Women's Service in January 1931, she recalls

> And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. […] She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily […] in short she was so constituted that never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathise always with the minds and wishes of others. (1995, 3)

[169] Perhaps some of the most famous lines from the poem are the following: "Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf / Of his consoled necessities / She casts herself, she flings herself." Canto X, Sahara, Preludes, "The Wife's Tragedy". https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4099/4099-h/4099-h.htm

Woolf's depiction of the angelic Victorian woman illustrates how social norms of behaviour are transformed into a biological one, as they are only incumbent to women. Woolf's comments underline female self-abandonment to the profit of others ("utterly unselfish"), as well as a form of self-effacement ("never had a mind or a wish of her own"). Frau Garmisch – a German lady having dinner with Gladys Matthews and her lover Alfred at the Trocadero in 1935 – echoes Woolf's take on Patmore's poem:

> "Alfred tells me you have an absolutely beautiful home, Frau Garmisch."
>
> "My husband is happy there. That I have tried to make. And the children too. I don't know what else a woman should do."
>
> She smiled, and although her face lost none of its frumpiness, it seemed less sour. But Hr. Anderson was not softened. He appeared to aim his cigar smoke at her as he exhaled.
>
> "Nevertheless, for many women the choice of a career is a great social achievement, I suppose."
>
> "What kind of women are they, wishing for such choices, Hr. Andersen. Poor things! One can easily tell that you are a bachelor. You know so very little about us. Would you like your Danish women to have the choice of working on the roads and the railways? That's the choice the Bolsheviks give their women. The *Berliner Tageblatt* showed recently some pictures of them. More like animals than women." (*NLM* 245)

Frau Garmisch's answer to Gladys certainly recalls the "difficult arts of family life" mentioned by Woolf. The fact that she insists on the moral responsibility which goes together with such occupation not only points to the normativity of her conduct but also entails judgement towards non-conformists, which actively precludes ethical responsibility. As a matter of fact, the conversation which ensues with Herr Andersen allows Frau Garmisch to take aim at the Russian regime – reminding us not only of Stalinism but also of the climate of the Cold War during which Wilson was writing – and at women who choose to deviate from the norm. Assimilating them to animals and questioning their very nature ("what kind of women are they"), Frau Garmisch denies them the possibility for personhood: there is no such thing as the "internal coherence of the subject" if women do not comply with this domestic ideal. The very idea of a "career" – developed during the First World War as women had replaced men gone to the front[170] – would extract women from the delineated sphere of the home, transforming them into

[170] Rubinstein argues that "after the war many women who had temporarily entered an all-male trade left it (or were compelled to leave), and most, one assumes, eventually married and became housewives, despite the numerical excess of women over men among the age-cohorts affected by the war. It has been widely observed that pre-war feminism declined greatly in visibility and drive after 1918, although some historians have seen it as

trespassers. Frau Garmisch's moral imperative resonates throughout the corpus, as several characters underline the necessity for women to support their husbands. Jenny Baldry, for instance, laments the fact that Chris cannot remember Kitty for "all that a wife should be she's been to [him]." (*TRS* 29) Similarly, Celia's Aunt Lion in *The Holiday* insists on the fact that her late sister was "a good wife […] everything a woman should be" (37). The shared emphasis of Jenny, Frau Garmisch and Aunt Lion on the expression "what a woman should be/do" becomes a metonymy for normative codes of conduct and "culturally intelligible notions of identity", to use Butler's words. In fact, the expression encloses both what behaviour is expected from women and along which lines they should define themselves. The normative strictures it creates allows the haunting presence of the Angel in the House to come into full force. This "phantom" finds its literal incarnation in West's novel, contemporary of Woolf. On the evening of Chris's (physical) return, Kitty wears satin garments similar to those she wore on their wedding day (*TRS* 23). In this particular passage, Jenny describes her as an angelic figure:

> She looked as cold as moonlight, as virginity, but precious; the falling candle-light struck her hair to bright, pure gold. So she waited for him. […] She was controlling her face into harmony with the appearance of serene virginity upon which his eyes would fall when he entered the room. (24)

Kitty is here transformed into a paragon of beauty and purity. The association of light and virginity almost seems like a direct reference to Patmore's own verse: "In the transparent starry dark, / That splendid brow of chastity, /That soft and yet subduing light, /At which, as at the

changing direction rather than disappearing." (124) Bronstein and Harris go on to explain that: "Women occupied almost every kind of position once occupied by men: they worked in munitions factories, served as conductors in transportation, and worked in the skilled trades and in construction. They took up these jobs despite some opposition from male workers, who with legitimacy saw women's participation as a trend that could marginalize men and decrease their pay; and in fact, women were paid only 50 to 70 percent of what men had received for the same jobs. A few women, arguing that they were performing what had been previously defined as "men's work," held demonstrations or walked off the job in pursuit of equal pay, but Parliament delayed serious consideration of the issue until many of the women employed in the war had departed from the workforce. Other women, especially those from depressed areas, were glad for the opportunity of war work, whether for extra spending money or to save for the future. As one woman from the poor mining area of Blaina in Wales noted, "I'd like to keep working after the war, in spite of all of the travelling. I'm getting used to it, and it's interesting. People are all very bright about the War. They say 'We'll be lost when it is over' though in the same breath they say 'we'd like to see it over"' (Roberts 1995). This is not to claim that the war made traditional ideas of the family obsolete; wartime uncertainty made women long for marriage and family, and the outbreak of war saw a surge in marriages as well. […] In the immediate postwar period, many women reverted to their prewar roles as consumers, wives, and mothers. The first generation of female university graduates, before the war, had felt that they had to choose between career and family; but in the post-1945 period, it was much more common for career women to also choose marriage and children. Marriage and motherhood were still firmly entrenched as social expectations, even in a time of relative sexual freedom." (213; 248)

sudden moon, /I held my breath, and thought 'how bright!'"[171] (Canto III, The County Ball, 3). The simile simultaneously turns the female body into a metonymy of moral value and a token of visual attraction, which is the sole prerogative of the male gazer ("upon which his eyes would fall" in *TRS*; "subduing light" in Patmore). The scene depicted by Jenny shows how Kitty masters the ceremonial associated with her status, as she composes her face to catch Chris's eyes. Nevertheless, this form of agency remains an illusion: the validity of Kitty's identity is dependent on Chris's recognition. Kitty's expectancy as Chris tries to find his bearings actually echoes a remark made by Jenny at the beginning of the novel: "Nothing could ever be part of our life until it had been referred to Chris's attention." (8) Though this refers to their pre-war habits, the rest of the novel informs on the uninterrupted subjugation of the Baldry women's lives to Chris's (ghostly) presence. The male head of the household is responsible for the scope of Jenny and Kitty's agency: recognition, rather than an ethical impulse towards the other, becomes a way to delimit positions of power. "Chris's attention" therefore creates a paradigm of (in)visibility and (in)determinacy. The Angel in the House can only survive as long as "eyes fall upon" her and recognise the moral paragon that she represents. She becomes a different ghost from that of Woolf's when this requirement is unavailable. In fact, Jenny uses a parallel structure later in the novel, once Chris is settled at Baldry Court: "nothing could mitigate the harshness of our dejection." (57) This mirror statement illustrates the women's self-fragmentation in face of the soldier's amnesia. As their effort to sustain the Angel of the House myth is left unrecognised, their very identity is questioned. The use of the word "dejection" – simultaneously meaning to be "cast off" and to be "weakened" (in spirits, as explained in the *OED* – points to the dispossession of the Baldry women, for the regulatory practices associated with their gender are instead likened to that of police work (Jenny suggesting that Chris now sees them as "stout policemen" 25). Norms of conduct are erased and replaced, leading the self to be both unrecognised by the other and unrecognisable to itself. Through Chris's shell shock, the ethics of responsibility are suspended, interrupted: by drawing attention to the limitations that gendered practices impose on individuals, West highlights the necessity to reconfigure the way one defines and perceives others in order to properly respond to their vulnerability.

In her commentary to Honneth's *Reification*, "Taking Another's View: Ambivalent Implications" (in Honneth 2008, 97-119), Butler expresses concerns towards the German

[171] Kitty's portrait also recalls Christina Rossetti's poem "In an Artist's Studio" (1856) in which she describes the artist's model as "Fair as the moon and joyful as the light". Source: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/146804/in-an-artist39s-studio, accessed 18 October 2022.

philosopher's desire to recover "the genuine bond" (108) which unites individuals that is, according to him, erased in the process of reification. She argues in fact that no such bond exists:

> [it] functions as an Arcadian myth, a "before" to the social that is at once the foundation of the social and a guide that might restore us to a more genuine sense of relationality from which, under social conditions of reification, we have become estranged. I understand this as a wish, a hope, but like many wishes of the Arcadian variety, it is based on a certain refusal to see that matters cannot be stipulated so optimistically "at the start." (108)

For Butler, if the relational, ethical relationship to the other is indeed the basis of socially dependent selves, its development and persistence is dependent on people's ability to take into account and evaluate how norms influence responsibility. The shattered habits of Baldry court leave its inhabitants to grapple with ethical redistribution: by being deprived of their roles as "servants of [Chris's] desires" (50), Jenny and Kitty can no longer identify what "binds" them – in keeping with Butler's lexicon – to him. The women are therefore dispossessed[172] of their main social attribute, which used to give trajectory to their responsibility. It is precisely this process which is feared by Mrs Ford in Holtby's *South Riding*, when speaking about the committed Muriel Carne: "No more use to her husband. What's a woman for if she's no use to her husband? Better be dead, I say. Better be dead." (337) Several layers of dispossession are exposed: as women are expected to lose themselves in looking after their husbands, they are time and again deprived of agency and identity when this role is impossible to fulfil. As responsibility reaches an impasse, the women's dispossession is equated with a form of social demise, which would be so unbearable that actual death would be preferable. Mrs Ford's statement puts into words Kitty's destitution as both a wife and a woman. West and Holtby's novels point to the extreme consequences of reification, as recognition is not only forgotten but made impossible altogether.

As this phenomenon only touches the women of the corpus, it seems that the "social conditions of reification" create a paradoxical form of ethics, which is no longer relational but asymmetrical. This is in fact implied by Clara Matthews in the second act of the Family Sunday Play, when she says to her daughters: "Girls! As if boys and girls have the same life in front of them. Whatever cranks like your Aunt may say, I'll tell you girls what growing up should mean

[172] In *Precarious Life*, Butler underlines that: "As a mode of relation, neither gender nor sexuality is precisely a possession, but, rather, is a mode of being dispossessed." (24)

for you, what life is for women – marrying, and if they're wise, marrying well." (*NLM* 103) More than being dutiful and morally irreproachable, "what a woman should be" is, above all, to be married. While her sister, Aunt Mouse, is dismissed as an eccentric ("cranks") because she is unmarried, the Countess insists on women's lack of alternative besides marriage. As Clara passively suggests that she made a mistake by marrying Billy Pop (a penniless writer), the use of the dash actively circumscribes the importance of marital status for her daughters, if they want to be granted social validity, and therefore, to be recognised[173]. In this regard, a subversion of ethics takes place: when it comes to gender, the basis for ethical responsibility is no longer rooted in shared vulnerability, but rather on the moral imperative laid upon the "constitutive other" (Braidotti 2006, 32)[174] who *must* reach a certain social status – here marriage – and adopt a particular mode of action – in the case of women, that of the Angel in the House. The fact that men and women don't "have the same life in front of them" implies the uneven nature of gender: while the male trajectory is outside of marriage, the latter is the only possible one for a woman. This difference is put into words by Lily Sawdon in *South Riding*, when she compares her existence to her husband's: "He'd seen a bit of the world, had Tom, while Lily lived on quietly in the house at Westwood." (94) The discrepancy between the male macrocosm and the female microcosm points to imbalanced ethics, one which "materialises" the "confinement of women into a highly coded domestic sphere" (97), to quote Fabienne Brugère in *L'Éthique du « care »* (2021)[175]. This absence of alternative only reinforces the combined processes of ethical reification and dispossession, as is exemplified by Celia in *The Holiday* when she contemplates her married female friends' lives:

[173] Clara's emphasis on "marrying well" refers to her own marriage and financial status but is also to be seen as a comment on class. Marrying well not only implies social mobility but also further social and ethical recognition, as discussed in chapter 4 and 5 of the present study.

[174] In *Transpositions. On Nomadic Ethics*, Braidotti's work sheds light on the fact that the delineation of otherness simultaneously includes and excludes. The very fact that there is an "other" participates in the definition of the norm and in its internalisation: "The emancipatory project of modernity entails a view of 'the knowing subject' (Lloyd 1985) which excludes several 'boundary markers' also known as 'constitutive others'. These are: the sexualized other, also known as women, the ethnic or racialized others and the natural environment. They constitute the three interconnected facets of structural otherness or difference as pejoration, which simultaneously construct and are excluded in modernity (Beauvoir 1949; Irigaray 1974; Deleuze and Guattari 1980). As such they play an important - albeit specular - role in the definition of the norm, the norm-al, the norm-ative view of the subject. More specifically, they have been instrumental in the institution of masculine self-assertion (Woolf 1938), or the 'Logic of the Same' (Irigaray 1974)." (32)

[175] "matérialiser l'assignation des femmes à une sphère domestique très codée."

> How can you keep it up, Maria? I ask the women friends, I think you are absolutely marvellous to keep on thinking about them and listening to them and having the children and keeping the house going on turning around the men. […] And they are at first immensely pleased about this that I have been saying, but then they begin to wish not to stress how martyr-like wonderful it is, and they begin to say how much one is missing if one does not have it. […] But I can see that they have to do it, if they are going to have a darling husband and a darling home of their own and darling children, they have to do it, there is no other way, and if you do not then you will live lonely and grow up to old solitude. Amen. (28)

Celia's musings on married life underline the heightened responsibility of women towards their husbands and children ("keep on thinking… listening…having… keeping…"). Though Celia recognises the sacrifice that entails such domestic devotion and therefore the inherent dispossession of her friends, the latter's reaction shows the normative strictures of gender relations. In fact, dispossession paradoxically becomes almost desirable and even vital.

The original vulnerability of the self – which allows ethical responsibility in the first place – is superseded by a normative, "painfully imposed" (Butler and Athanasiou 2) one. The repetition of "there is no other way" and of the imperative "they have to do it" illustrates the vicious circle of the norm, which becomes indispensable if one is to survive in society. The Angel in the House is therefore turned into a "martyr" (which is also how Lily Sawdon defines herself, "as a martyr, a sacrificial priestess of wifely love" *SR* 311): it is preferable to sustain these "imposed injuries" and "painful interpellations" (Butler and Athanasiou 2) so as to be partially recognised, than to be excluded ("you will live lonely and grow up to old solitude") – something which Celia (herself single, like her Aunt Lion) finds both commendable and absurd, as the final "Amen" suggests. It thus seems that the "Angel of the House" proves difficult to kill, even though Woolf commands to do so in her lecture. The novels of the corpus show how deeply this normalising figure is rooted within the social tissue, up to the point where it seems to rewire the ethics of vulnerability and responsibility, leading to their disproportionate and imbalanced "distribution" (Butler and Athanasiou 2) within the body politic.

B. <u>Burdened women</u>

In *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (2006), Virginia Held underlines that

> Traditionally, women have been expected to do most of the caring work that needs to be done. […] "Femininity" constructs women as carers, contributing to the constraints by which women are pressed into accepting the sexual division of labor.

> […] Given how care is a value with the widest possible social implications, it is unfortunate that many who look at the ethics of care continue to suppose it is a "family ethics" confined to the "private" sphere. (16-18)

Held argues that being female equates with being *caring* but also with being *in charge* of all caring attitudes. The normative imbalance associated with care – Joan Tronto indeed stresses in *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993) that care has come to "[delineate] positions of power and powerlessness" (122) – is essential in understanding the fragmentation of ethics within state-of-the-nation novels. As Fabienne Brugère contends, "Ethics is connected to care, care for oneself and for others – the two being essential to the development of a form of welfare as greater wellbeing, or as preservation of being." (37)[176] The ethics of responsibility are therefore entangled with the ethics of care, for they entail "attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility." (Held 10) Tronto, Held and Brugère all urge to acknowledge how the confinement of women to the private sphere led to their circumscription as figures of care. The neoliberal rationality of the last three decades has progressively put them in a position where they are expected to take upon themselves the role of dismantled public institutions[177], while still being associated with the private sphere and still being denied full access to the public one.

Sarah Burton's thoughts evidence the gendered division of labour and care, prophesising the late 20th century "responsibilisation" of women:

> She thought of the lives of women in little houses – adding accounts and writing grocery lists, carrying trays to invalids, washing babies, nursing the very young, the

[176] "L'éthique est associée au souci, souci de soi et souci des autres, les deux étant nécessaires au déploiement d'un bien qui doit prendre la forme d'un mieux-être ou d'un maintien dans l'être."

[177] Wendy Brown also provides a detailed account of the "responsibilisation" of women within neoliberalism: "As provisioners of care for others in households, neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, women disproportionately remain the invisible infrastructure for all developing, mature, and worn-out human capital — children, adults, disabled, and elderly. Generally uncoerced, yet essential, this provision and responsibility get theoretically and ideologically tucked into what are assumed as preferences issuing naturally from sexual difference, especially from women's distinct contribution to biological reproduction. It is formulated, in short, as an effect of nature, not of power. […] Does the ascendency of *homo oeconomicus* and its specific formulation as human capital gender contemporary social arrangements more intensively or differently than its liberal democratic capitalist predecessor? I think the answer is that gender subordination is both intensified and fundamentally altered. […] When these public provisions are eliminated or privatized, the work and/or the cost of supplying them is returned to individuals, disproportionately to women. Put another way, "responsibilization" in the context of privatizing public goods uniquely penalizes women to the extent that they remain disproportionately responsible for those who cannot be responsible for themselves. In this respect, familialism is an essential requirement, rather than an incidental feature of the neoliberal privatization of public goods and services." (2015, 105-106) Brown analyses this phenomenon in the Anglo-Saxon world, focusing at times on the United Kingdom and the United States.

> very sick, the helpless, waiting for letters, reading school reports, mourning besides the bodies of the dead. (*SR* 124)

The list of tasks described by the headmistress reveals how the female persona is restricted to modes of caring, such as maintaining the household, looking after the young, the elderly and the ill alike. If the "*femina domestica*" (Brown 2015, 104) is to find a way outside the home, it can hardly do so by taking on "the burdens of caring" (Held 16), through teaching or nursing for instance. While housewives are numerous in the corpus (Kitty Baldry in West, most of the women in *South Riding*, Celia's mother in Smith, the Countess and Sukey Matthews in Wilson, Arabella Yount and Petunia Howe in *Capital*), women often have positions in public institutions in the state-of-the-nation novels under study: Sarah Burton is herself a headmistress and Emma Beddows a county alderman, Celia works at the Ministry, Michael Owen's mother is a teacher and Phoebe a nurse (*WCU*). Though the diversity and complexity of the female characters of the corpus is to be underlined – and further discussed in the second part of this chapter – this not only shows that public institutions destined to sustain and improve society heavily rely on the sexual division of labour, but it also points to the construction of normative frameworks, where "the value attributed to care and to educational attention is feminine", creating an "archetype which immobilises and essentialises women", to use Fabienne Brugère's criticism of Nel Noddings *Caring* (1984) in *L'Éthique du « care »* (11)[178]. This gendered sclerosis therefore enforces an added, insidious layer of ethical responsibility which violently fragments the female psyche. In fact, Stevie Smith's Celia remarks a sort of ethical "push pull effect" when it comes to her married female friends: "I see how much they think about their husbands even if they hate 'em like hell there is this thought, this attention." (27) Attachment and responsibility are in conflict here: if the emotional link to their husbands seems to be severed, care and responsibility still very much dictates the women's behaviour. As Celia lays emphasis on "this thought" and "this attention", one can see how femininity is ontologically rewired to constantly look after the other. Care for the other leads to a gendered imbalance which, instead of being based on shared vulnerability, intrinsically weakens the female character.

As expressed by Mary in Lanchester's *Capital*, the women of the corpus are the ones doing "the family's caring and worrying and asking and noticing and minding." (250) The

[178] "La valeur attribuée au soin et à l'attention éducative est féminine. […] La femme est alors circonscrite dans un portrait-robot qui la fige [et] l'essentialise. […]"

nominalisation of the different verbs encapsulates the internalisation of modes of caring, while the accumulation reveals the ethical burden carried by women. Mary's relationship to her mother is therefore symptomatic of the invisibilisation of care, as her mother's illness lays bare her own vulnerability:

> My mother is dying horribly, I'm more tired than I've ever been, more tired than I was when the children were small, she is in pain, she doesn't know who or where she is, *and* there's no end in sight, because it's dragging on and on, *and* the only release is for Mum to die, so I want Mum to die, which is a terrible thing to want, *and* it will happen to me too, one day, I will die too, *and* I'm stuck here in London *and* I'm lonely and frightened *and* I have to lift my mum to the bedpan to have a shit *and* then have to wipe her bottom *and* put her back in bed *and* go to the toilet to empty her shit down it *and* then flush it *and* wash my hands *and* go back to bed *and* sit there staring at the ceiling waiting for sleep which I know will never come, *and* it won't end until my mum dies, *and* then I'll have to sell the house *and* it'll be worth a million pounds *and* it will come to me *and* everything will be different, but if I think about that I'm a bad person so I mustn't think about anything other than today, right now, the things I have to do right here and right now. (269, emphases mine)

This restless hypotaxis reveals Mary's psychological dispossession, as she is unable to cope with the illness of her mother and her responsibility as sole carer. The anaphora (*and*) and the successive use of conjunctions (so, then, but, because) participate in conveying Mary's distress, which weakens her. Every conjunction deals another blow to her already splintering self: Mary's suffering becomes so unbearable that she wishes for her mother to die, causing her to come to grips with inner conflicts ("which is a terrible thing to want"; "if I think about that I'm a bad person"). Furthermore, her incessant anxious thoughts suggest that the displacement of medical care upon the private sphere leaves little room for the affective act of caring. The negation of interdependence (for Mary can barely rely on anyone else but herself, as she feels "invisible" (272) in the face of lack of public help[179]) therefore annihilates the conditions of emergence of ethics, while confronting the female character with the inescapability of her responsibility. This glimpse into Mary's disturbed thoughts exposes the inner depths of burdened responsibility and their fragmenting effect on women.

[179] Mary explains to her husband Alan: "There's the GP. I mean the GPs. It's difficult for them, they don't know me, I'm just some woman ringing up, the district nurses are nice, they say they'll come, they mean it when they say it, I don't know, it's just sometimes that you feel you've fallen down a crack, you're sort of invisible. […]" (272) Mary's experience of the English healthcare system exposes the strains imposed by neoliberal governmentality upon the NHS. The nurses and GPs necessarily fail to meet the numerous demands of individuals in need of care, for the depletion of public funding and the subsequent lack of medical staff contravene proper response. Care practices, as shown by Tronto, Held and Brugère, are therefore undermined and devalued: as the law of the market pervades both public institutions and private spheres, "social relations such as trust and caring are invisible" (112), in the words of Virginia Held.

Winifred Holtby uses similar devices to represent the quantity of overwhelming tasks assigned to female characters who cannot rely on public institutions. If, in *Capital*, Mary is confronted to the crumbling NHS, Holtby uses the Holly family to underline the importance of birth control and poor relief (Shaw 2015, 243). As she learns that Mrs Holly's pregnancy will inevitably lead to her death, her young daughter Lydia runs her future daily scenario as sole carer of the household:

> Quarter to five, wake Father. Put on the kettle, get his breakfast, the cocoa, the margarine, the bread. Tidy the living-room; go and wake the children; get their breakfast. (Why isn't there no bacon? Lydie, can't we have treacle?) See them off to school; look after Lennie and baby; tidy the bedroom, peel the potatoes, get the dinner ready, feed the hens, the pig – if they could keep one; give the children their dinner when they came home from school, noisy and ravenous. […] And throughout this day of servitude there would be no mother to applaud or scold. […] Only her father's maudlin misery or facile optimism would punctuate the days. And all the time the High School would be there. […] (186)

Lydia's list – which is shortened here – gives way to a paratactic and robotic nightmare, only interrupted by the unthoughtful comments of her family in parentheses. The succession of actions mimes the future dehumanisation of Lydia, as she is forced to stay home after her mother's death. The stark imperatives contrast with the modal "would", which here embodies the fantasy of Lydia ever going back to school and getting out of the Shacks. The sexual division of labour comes here into full force, as Lydia's father is exempt of any of the responsibilities listed above. Furthermore, the little girl's considerations come after realising that her aunts, "both busy harassed married women with families of their own" (185), cannot come to her rescue. While Lydia's subsequent reintegration in the school system – a symbol of Holtby's beliefs in progress, as analysed in chapter 1 of the present study – undeniably offers hope outside of the *femina domestica* trope, Natasha Periyan rightly argues that such class and gender mobility is still limited:

> Lydia Holly is kept at school not through the intervention of the state, but through the private solution offered to the Holly problem, in a fortuitous plot twist whereby Mrs Burnham [sic][180] agrees to take on the Holly children as a surrogate mother. *The Labour Woman* found this plot twist to be 'artistically indefensible, […] characteristic of an excessive optimism which is the artistic defect of Miss Holtby's novel.' The resolution to the problem of Lydia Holly signals the limitations of Sarah's emphasis on the transformational potential of education. (84)

[180] It is actually Mrs. Brimsley who marries Mr. Holly.

It is therefore paradoxically thanks to another female caring figure that Lydia can emancipate from her condition. The same need for caring surrogacy is exposed in *No Laughing Matter*, when the young Matthews girls are trying to decide who among them should be "the little mother" in order to make up "for the Countess's failure"[181] (36). In this regard, though some of the novels of the corpus offer alternative options to the *femina domestica*, they still seem to fall prey to the same expectations. At first glance, it appears that the only option for women to emancipate from this burdened responsibility is a lack of care.

From Clara Matthew's abuse to Hilary Winshaw's lack of maternal feeling towards her daughter in *What a Carve Up!*, uncaring women are the object of satire within the corpus. If Clara and Hilary's characters are meant to put into perspective the ethical behaviour of their counterparts (the Matthews children for one, Michael and Fiona for the other), perhaps the most problematic figure is that of Arabella Yount in *Capital*. In fact, Roger comes to the conclusion that "they didn't need any more help that Arabella couldn't provide herself" (237) as he fears the "risk of being dragged back into having to be with the children again" (238) – proving that responsibility is the sole burden of the female persona. Furthermore, Arabella's relationship with other mothers leaves little room outside of the caring/uncaring binary, as evidenced by the end of the 92th section:

> There was something of an ideological difference, or at least a certain human stickiness, about the fact that Polly had chosen to give up work while her children were young, whereas Arabella didn't work but also had full-time childcare. The thing about looking after young children was, you had to be cut out for it, and Arabella quite simply and quite frankly – she said so herself – wasn't. (514)

The "ideological difference" between Polly and Arabella illustrates the only two possible moral and ethical inclinations for women. Though Arabella's self-realisation as regards her uncaring nature can be seen as a welcome subversion of the motherly trope, the fact that one has "to be cut out" for looking after young children actively reaffirms the normative dichotomy between caring and uncaring women without proposing an actual third way. The expression "human stickiness" actually points to this almost ontological division of the female character, as the

[181] The chapter where Lydia imagines her future in the household is unsurprisingly called "Mrs. Holly fails her family"(*SR*): more than the transmission of the duty of care and responsibility, as mentioned in chapter 1, the title also irremediably points to the normative burden carried by female characters. Not being able to look after others is seen as a failure of character and a moral violation, rather than the result of socio-economic conditions – something that Holtby definitely exposes in *South Riding*, despite Periyan's persuasive caveat.

OED underlines. "Stickiness" can either mean "unpleasantness", "recalcitrance" or "excessive sweetness or sentimentality", suggesting two antithetic and restrictive ethical poles. If a female character does not comply with the ideal of the *femina domestica*, she can only be considered as a failure of nature rather than a need for other modes of caring[182]. Most of the women of the corpus therefore seem to be reified, as they either become shadows of internalised archetypes or unrecognised as vulnerable subjects. This overlooking of female figures within the household shows, as Fabienne Brugère contends, that there is little room left for women who do not comply with gendered norms – therefore putting into question the survival of the ethics of responsibility in the public sphere.

2. Dis-positions

In *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992), French feminist Monique Wittig views the delineations of gender as an "imposition of being different" laid upon women. She argues that "the imposition of gender, acting as a denial at the very moment one speaks, is to deprive women of the authority of speech. […] The result is to deny them any claim to the abstract, philosophical, political discourses that give shape to the social body." (81). Wittig describes a process of othering, which denies women the possibility to act fully in society. Through Wittig, one can perceive how the ethics of responsibility are in peril: rather than being recognised as full-fledged individuals, women are controlled and restricted in their actions. The ethics of responsibility would therefore be limited to male counterparts, rather than extended to any other living subject, leading in turn to the annihilation of ethical responsibility itself through the negation of their very premisses. If the first part of the chapter has analysed the extent of this "imposition" through the seclusion of women within the private sphere, it is essential to examine this gender framework through the female "dis-positions" of the corpus, as well as their ethical implications. This concept, referring to the "situation" (*OED*) of women in the state-of-the-nation novels, will not only allow to understand how female characters are "disposed of" or "managed" by the patriarchal societies of the corpus, but will also allow to see

[182] Furthermore, Arabella Yount enjoys little freedom outside of the home, except from lavish lunches with her married friends (at some point referred to as the "other wives" p.91) which are paid for with her husband's money. Similarly, her "revenge" on Roger when she deserts the house on Christmas consists in going on a spa retreat paid with his credit card and having an expensive couch delivered to their home. Her agency or subversive potential is a limited one, which barely makes a dent in the binarism analysed in this chapter.

if and how state-of-the-nation novels manage to shed the normative manacles of gender in their fictive construction of the body politic.

A. Body politics

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains that

> The identification of women with "sex," for Beauvoir as for Wittig, is a conflation of the category of women with the ostensibly sexualized features of their bodies and, hence, a refusal to grant freedom and autonomy to women as it is purportedly enjoyed by men. (27)

Rather than restricting the female body to the private sphere, Butler and her feminist predecessors have pointed out its paradoxical position within society. In fact, if the *femina domestica* can be part and parcel of biopolitics[183] and of the instrumentalization of gender as a means for national reproduction[184], the spectacularisation - or "ostensibilisation" if we are to keep Butler's words – of the female body pushes women onto the public scene, while still depriving them of their political power. Women are simultaneously unrecognised and over-visibilised as sexual objects, as implied by the words of Celia's friend Basil in *The Holiday*:

> [he] said that eventually England would have to choose between money and kids, because under capitalism people would not have kids […] he said that the more gadgets women had and the more they thought about their faces and their figures, the less they wanted children, he said that he happened to see a magazine about scanty panties, he said women who thought about scanty panties never had a comfortable fire burning in the fire-place, or a baby in the house, or a dog or cat or a parrot… Or a canary, I said. Or a canary, went on Basil, and he said that this was the end of the moral order. (69)

According to him, objects of consumption thwart the moral trajectory of a society that would have women think about family before focusing on their physical appearance. Though Celia seems to mock her friend's remark, Basil's statement warns against this "corruption" of the patriarchal moral order. The absence of dialogue punctuation in Smith's novel is testament to

[183] Biopower is defined in the first volume *The Will to Knowledge* as a power "that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply [life], subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations." (137)

[184] In his *History of Sexuality* (1978), Michel Foucault introduces the notion of biopolitics as a political and legal framework which marked a passage from a system based on "blood" to one based on "sex" (147), aimed at ensuring the prosperity of the nation by the reproduction of its labour force. For the French philosopher, the place of women (or lack thereof) within the body politic is an essential pillar in the development of biopower. He insists on the fact that "the hysterization of women" was "carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society." (147)

the ironic confusion of speech repartition: if Basil does not seem to notice Celia's mockery, the protagonist's interruption of her friend draws attention to its anti-capitalistic and misogynistic character.

Basil's concern is shared by Quentin Matthews in *No Laughing Matter* when he visits the USSR in 1935: "none of that cash display which made bourgeois women into profit charts, none of that superfluous display which choked life out of sexual desire, making women whore without the harlot's honesty." (259) Quentin's constant paradox between his fight against social oppression and his relentless reification of women shows how the latter are excluded from the construction of body politic altogether, for their only agency resides in their capacity to sexually please men. Respectively written at the very beginnings and at the heart of second-wave feminism[185], these two passages reveal the intertwinement of politics, economics and gender. Both men see capitalism as responsible for the unwanted emancipation of women from male provision. Brown (1988) and Repo (12-15) both highlight how the development of capitalism has participated in the reification of women. They are seen as a vehicle for the reproduction of the labour force, as well as a driving yet invisible force thanks to their domestic work. Smith and Wilson's novels thus illustrate one of the "loopholes" of patriarchal capitalism, insofar as "the material side of developments [has rendered] women's traditional roles, activities and identities increasingly superfluous. […]" (Brown 1988, 2) A paradox emerges: while capitalism necessarily relies on the invisible work done by women, it has also indirectly fractured the cloistered walls of the private sphere.

[185] *The Holiday* was indeed published the same year as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex,* while the pill was made available to married women in the UK in 1961, and to all women in 1968 – one year after the publication of Wilson's novel (For a detailed timeline of British women's access to the pill see https://www.theguardian.com/society/2007/sep/12/health.medicineandhealth) While Wilson addresses the social debate around the pill in *No Laughing Matter* (see chapter 1 p. 31 of the present study), Smith's position towards feminism is ambivalent. Stanford Sternlicht argues that "The ultimate subject of her novels is not male-female conflict, sexual politics, or self-pitying angst; it is the nature of womanhood in a time of transition, as women moved somewhat disbelievingly towards the beginnings of economic freedom and legal equality. Yet the great theme of Stevie's prose fiction is the concept that mid-twentieth-century Western women are paralyzed by the conflict between their sense of gender and their ambivalent, vacillating role in modern society." (13-14) Romana Huk also underlines that "Smith's views on feminism were messy and contradictory, and that her own gendered politics evolved primarily out of her broader critiques of – and infiltration by – culture, rather than vice versa. She remained stalwartly vulnerable to the era's stereotypical view of feminism. […] Her complicated attitude towards feminism is perhaps the best example of how interwoven she was by the crisscrossing threads of imagery and discursive mayhem that surrounded radical thought at mid-century." (11) Much like Celia in *The Holiday*, it seems that Smith was characterised by socio-political in-betweenness, both refusing extremes and fumbling through the mid-century troubled waters.

This incursion of the female persona into the public world – as feared by the male characters of Smith and Wilson – seems to follow two main developments in the construction of gender: when it comes to the public sphere, the novels of the corpus show how women can be part of it either as objects of desire (submitted to the public eye through advertisement for instance), or objects of contempt, who dared enter the male public sphere and assume positions of power. Usman – the original perpetrator of the 'We Want What You Have Campaign' in *Capital* – notices the Western tendency to use the female body for capitalist purposes:

> On Friday evening, after doing a shift in the shop, Usman set out across the Common on his bike, to go to the mosque for evening prayers. This is what he saw.
>
> An advertising poster with a woman lying naked on purple sheets, her hindquarters on full display, with the slogan 'Does my bum look big in this?' A poster with a woman eating a chocolate as if she were fellating it. […] A poster with a woman bending over and looking back at the camera through her legs, advertising tampons. […] sex was everywhere. It was never real sex, as Usman understood it to be, an ecstatic state such as that enjoyed in paradise, a transcendent experience; instead it was naked women, coupled with an attempt to sell something. Sex was fundamentally linked with money. (258-260)

In the metonymic *Capital*, sex is used as a selling technique. If the *femina domestica* underlined the sexual division of labour, the dis-position of women within the public sphere highlights the conflation of sex and gender as asymmetrical foundations for the body politic. The lucrative dimension of sex developed under capitalism erases ethics, for women are no longer recognised as human beings, but rather as a objects of desire and money. By particularising and dissecting the female body ("hindquarters", "bum", "legs"), gender reification participates in the dissolution of responsibility. As Sandra Lee Bartky argues in *Femininity and Domination* (1990),

> Sexual objectification occurs when a woman's sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her. To be dealt with in this way is to have one's entire being identified with the body. […] Clearly, sexual objectification is a form of fragmentation and thus an impoverishment of the objectified individual. […] (37-38)

The succession of posters noticed by Usman evidences the dissemination of the female body as a sexual object. This multiplication of images mirrors Bartky's contention, insofar as women almost appear dis-membered, only recognisable by their over-sexualised physical attributes. What Usman sees as a deviation from the "transcendent experience" of sexual intercourse

echoes the instrumentalization of the female body as a gendered deprivation of human attributes. From sleeping to eating to menstruating, every instance of the female body on the London adverts is sexualised and deprived of its organic function. By reducing women to their body parts, the posters are simultaneously depriving them of agency and of their own sexuality, for Bartky underlines that

> Most avenues of cultural expression […] are instruments of male supremacy. […] The images of ourselves we see reflected in the dominant culture are often truncated or demeaning. […] The historic suppression and distortion of the erotic requirements of women are clearly an instance of sexual *alienation*, for just as workers can be alienated from their labor, so can women be estranged from their own sexuality. (35)

Fragmentation and distortion overwhelm the female body, leaving little room for women to relate to these representations without doing away with a non-masculinist vision of themselves. Self-definition is indeed "truncated" and "impoverished", while responsibility is replaced by a social organisation which denies the very conditions for ethics to emerge.

In *The Return of the Soldier*, for instance, Kitty – who struggles to define herself outside of her marriage – is compared to a magazine model: "She looked so like a girl on a magazine cover that one expected to find a large "15 cents" somewhere attached to her person." (4) Later on, Jenny comments on higher-class women and their relationship with men, explaining that "It is their civilizing mission to flash the jewel of their beauty before all men, so that they shall desire it and work to get the wealth to buy it. […]" (67) Much like the women on the posters in *Capital*, Kitty becomes an object of desire, who can only exist through the other's gaze[186]. The simile used at the beginning of the novel betrays the paradoxical definition of the female character, as the use of the word "person" – defined as a "human being" by the *OED* – is linked to a price tag. The potential monetization of the female image reflects the reification of women: both agency and recognition are limited to physical appearance, up to the point where women become objects to purchase. As John Berger argues in *Ways of Seeing*,

> One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women must watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.

[186] While acknowledging the existence of Freudian and Lacanian theories around scopophilia, as well as Laura Mulvey's subsequent psychoanalytic theorisation of the "male gaze" in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Other Pleasures" (1973), the present study relies rather on John Berger's use of the terminology in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), in an effort to distance itself with psychoanalysis when it comes to contemporary criticism.

> The surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (47)

The class generalisation made by Jenny later on in the novel reinforces the fragmentation of women in a patriarchal society identified by both Berger and Bartky[187], insofar as their reification conflates with a moral imperative ("civilizing mission") imposed *on* and carried *by* women *for* men. The female "person" is indeed split into several (dis)positions – at once deeply passive, at once unconditionally available, at once ontologically alluring. Furthermore, the parallels between Berger's analysis of the gaze and Jenny's vocabulary – "act" (Berger) / "desire", "work" (*TRS*); "appear" (Berger) / "flash" (*TRS*) – highlight the delineation of society "into institutionalized conceptions and practices of 'masculine' and 'feminine'." (Brown 1988, 4) If the fears of the 1950s-1960s – linked with the development of female work during World War II and the permissive sex culture of the 1960s – suggested an erosion of these gendered delineations, the inclusion of women in the public sphere nonetheless seems limited and even thwarted. Constantly and repeatedly submitted to a patriarchal public gaze, the female character is simultaneously disembodied and reified. The active/passive dyad represented in state-of-the-nation novels associated with these masculine/feminine "practices" seems furthermore to entail a dehumanisation of women in political and public roles.

As John Berger contends, it seems that "women are there to feed an appetite, not have any of their own." (55) While Berger focuses on the gaze and the male pleasure driven by it, his analysis is also relevant when it comes to gendered relations in the political realm. Gerald Middleton, one of Angus Wilson's *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956), perfectly illustrates Berger's theory, as he "disliked pretty girls who showed hysteria, particularly in the form of strong opinions." (61) This is further evidenced by the female characters of the corpus, who come close to power are shown indifference at best, disgust or contempt at worst. For instance, when Mark Winshaw's wife, Lady Frances, is murdered because of his ties with both Iranian and Iraqis military forces at the height of their war (1980-1988), he laments her death because of the asset her family would have been:

> Mark's formal expressions of gratitude concealed his genuine annoyance at this incident. Marriage to Lady Frances would have been useful. He had been rather looking forward to the sexual aspect – although, to be honest, in terms of imagination and athleticism she could not really compare with the prostitutes whose services he was usually offered on his trips to Baghdad – but, more importantly, her father had a number of influential contacts in the South American market, which he was

[187] Bartky makes a similar analysis to Berger's: "The sexual objectification of women produces a duality in feminine consciousness. The gaze of the Other is internalized so that I myself become at once seer and seen, appraiser and the thing appraised." (38)

> anxious to infiltrate. In all probability he would still be able to use them, but it would have been easier if his young and glamorous wife had been there to help. (*WCU* 384)

Not only is Lady Franes sexually reified, but she also becomes a political and economic tool. Mark's lack of emotion goes together with a reification of femininity, as only her relationship with her father would have proven "useful". Rather than being considered as a political agent, Lady Frances is but a pawn to showcase in an overwhelmingly utilitarian male game. If Mark Winshaw's case certainly represents one of the most extreme examples of sexual and political reification, his brother Henry's relationships with women also suggest that female characters in high-paying jobs are villainised. Dr Gillam – a devoted civil servant and prominent figure of the NHS – is at once "pig-ugly" (136) when refuting Henry's arguments in their discussion on *Newsnight*. He also names her "dyke-ish" (137) after she refuses to have intercourse with him. Dr Gillam's rejection, coupled with her occupation, casts her outside of the normative frame of reference: because she refuses to be sexually objectified and because her profession is synonymous with intellect, she becomes the object of contempt. As Bartky underlines, "in our society, for example, the cultivation of intellect has made a woman not more but less sexually alluring." (42)

In *No Laughing Matter*, for instance, the mother of Doreen – the student with whom Quentin Matthews had a relationship while refusing to help her with the subsequent pregnancy, leading to her suicide – contemplates the fact that "[Doreen] paid the temperamental price that most clever girls still pay in our society. […] Whatever it [university] may be for men […] I'm certain it is no atmosphere for girls." (163) The sexual division of labour analysed in the first part of this chapter takes on a new form, insofar as positions of intellect supposedly require "male" characteristics such as "physical prowess, muscular strength, intellectual brilliance, worldly position, or the kind of money that buys respect." (Bartky 47) This asymmetrical division of societal – and to some extent physiological – power is also briefly implied in *Capital*, when Roger, about to be fired from his job, is wondering why he is being summoned by his superior: "It couldn't be about Roger discriminating against female colleagues, he hardly had any." (466) The banker's thoughts showcase the reification of women as inferior to men: in a male-dominated world such as finance, there is little to no room for women in high-end jobs. A new binary weaves its way into the corpus, for "in Roger's experience, [female traders] either went super-girly and manipulative or were more alpha males than the alpha males." (282) Women become both "surveyed" and "surveyor", to use Berger's words, or "objectified" and

"objectifier" (Bartky), for they can only either embody the normative vision of femininity projected onto them and their bodies, or try and appropriate the male characteristics that make them successful. In either case, as Bartky contends, it seems that "woman has lost control of the production of her own image, lost control to those whose production of these images is neither innocent nor benevolent, but obedient to imperatives which are both capitalist and phallocentric." (42) Ethical reification comes into full force, for the disposition (i.e., the nature) of women must be adjustable to the dominant norms, leading them to become dispossessed of both body and mind.

The body politics of the corpus are also reinforced in a more defined political context, when female characters attempt at improving women's conditions within the society of each state-of-the-nation novels. Carne is the first one to reify Sarah Burton, when she interviews for the headmistress position in the South Riding:

> As for the blacksmith's daughter, there was absolutely nothing to be said for her. Clever she might be; but Carne wanted affection, he wanted experience and sympathy and a big motherly bosom on which a little girl could cry comfortably. […] Miss Burton was neither gentle nor a lady, and her bosom was flat and bony as a boy's. (29)

If Carne's prejudice on intelligence certainly prefigures Bartky's comments, his view on Sarah Burton also further evidences the fragmentation of the female figure into a "number of personae" (Bartky 42), each of which should answer a patriarchal demand. Sarah becomes deprived of all of her attributes, physical ("flat and bony"), ethical (for she is not "gentle") and social ("nor a lady"). The emphasis laid upon Sarah's body shows how physical appearance is associated with capability and (imp)propriety, adding to the list of requirements expected from women. This distances once more women from assuming positions that could have a durable effect on the body politic[188]. A socialist and a spinster, Sarah Burton defies the gendered codes imposed on her because of her sex, leading her main adversary (and later on lover) to portray her as "unfit". Similarly, the suffragettes in *No Laughing Matter* are described as "godless" (135), as "one expects no better than brawling from Mrs Pankhurst's crew." While Emmeline Pankhurst and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) have been known for their

[188] As Holtby underlines a few pages earlier when describing the educational system of *South Riding*, "The school owed its independent existence to masculine pride rather than to educational necessity. […] Girls were delicate. Life imperilled them." (21-22)

disruptive militantism[189], the concomitant use of the terms "godless" and "brawling"[190] reinforces the association of female political implication with impropriety and violent behaviour unfit for a woman. As women are unrecognised political agents, they are "barred from the public realm" (Brown 1988, 10): while the first part of this chapter showed women's confinement to the private home, the examples analysed in this section have shown that the female characters who make it into the public sphere actually enter a paradoxical liminal space which splinter the self. They are both an essential (for they help fulfil capitalist purposes) yet disposable and objectifiable element of the body politic. The corpus shows that their presence is conditioned by their male counterparts, significantly reifying and fragmenting them. As state-of-the-nation novels shed light on inherited structures of seeing (to paraphrase Raymond Williams), it seems that they attempt to offer a parallel vision of female characters by rewriting the fictional and social gendered discourses that stigmatise the female sex.

B. Re-writing the norm

"Since the medical men had pronounced her mad she had, of course, been shut up" (1847, 308): the condemning words of *Jane Eyre*'s Mr. Rochester betray the conflation of the female sex with hysteria[191]. His explanation reveals an imbalance between powerful male doctors on one hand and the isolated Bertha on the other. The adverbial phrase "of course"

[189] Bronstein and Harris explain that "The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia, advocated show-stopping acts that were impossible to ignore. "They blew up mailboxes, vandalized paintings and golf courses, and broke windows of politicians' country houses. […] The government responded to these provocations by jailing female demonstrators and law-breakers. When women protested their confinement by going on hunger strikes, they were forcibly fed to keep them alive during their confinement. Forcible feeding produced nothing but negative publicity for the government, as propaganda from the time shows imprisoned British women with arms and legs pinned by matrons and doctors, fed with formula passed down a nasal feeding tube into the stomach. Thinking better of the idea, the government in 1913 passed a piece of legislation nicknamed the Cat and Mouse Act, which enabled the police to arrest women, free them once they were weakened by their hunger strikes, and rearrest them once they had gained their physical strength back." (150-151)

[190] The first definition of the *OED* refers to Johnson: "'To quarrel noisily and indecently' (Johnson); to wrangle; to squabble."

[191] In the first volume of *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault explains this phenomenon as such "It is worth remembering that the first figure to be invested by the deployment of sexuality, one of the first to be 'sexualized,' was the 'idle'woman. She inhabited the outer edge of the 'world,' in which she always had to appear as a value, and of the family, where she was assigned a new destiny charged with conjugal and parental obligations. Thus there emerged the 'nervous' woman, the woman afflicted with 'vapors'; in this figure, the hysterization of woman found its anchorage point. […] In the process of hysterization of women, 'sex' was defined in three ways: as that which belongs in common to men and women; as that which belongs, par excellence, to men, and hence is lacking in women; but at the same time, as that which by itself constitutes woman's body, ordering it wholly in terms of the functions of reproduction and keeping it in constant agitation through the effects of that very function. Hysteria was interpreted in this strategy as the movement of sex insofar as it was the 'one' and the 'other,' whole and part, principle and lack." (121; 153)

points to the internalisation of gendered norms of perception, insofar as Bertha's seclusion and alienation are almost seen as "customary, natural" (*OED*). Brontë's *oeuvre* has been notoriously analysed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who have shown how *Jane Eyre* was at the origin of the "Mad Woman in the Attic" trope – in opposition to Patmore's Angel in the House – as evidenced by the title of their book (1979). Arguing that nineteenth-century female writers had to answer to this binary between angelic housewife and monstruous lunatic, they underline the socio-cultural "connection between femaleness and madness, or at least mental deformity." (Gilbert and Gubar 62)[192] Elaine Showalter also devoted a monograph to this normative association, entitled *The Female Malady* (1987), exposing once more how "women […] are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature and the body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture and mind" (4) – a parallel which sharply resonates with Bertha Mason's confrontation with nineteenth century "medical men". If the state-of-the-nation novels of the corpus have shown as well how the societal emphasis on the female body deprives women of political agency, they also attempt to offer alternative narratives to the gendered reification of mad individuals.

Two characters in the corpus seem in fact to be close to the madwoman trope: Muriel Carne in *South Riding* and Tabitha Winshaw in *What a Carve Up!*. Both women are committed to asylums in the countryside, close to the main settings of the novels, but far enough to be *a priori* confined to the margins of the main storylines (Tabitha even being referred to as "the outcast" (*WCU* 9)). On the one hand, Muriel's portrait is drawn *in absentia*: the reader learns early on that "she is an asylum" (*SR* 8) and she is only mentioned by her family and the townspeople, rather than an actual character[193] taking part in the life of the South Riding. On the other hand, Coe's novel opens and closes with Tabitha's disturbing presence. *What a Carve Up!* almost directly references the madwoman trope in the characterisation of Tabitha Winshaw, the siblings' aunt. On September 20th 1961, Henry Winshaw writes about the call he received from the Whip inquiring about "Tabitha and her illness and whether [they] had any

[192] Gilbert and Gubar's work, now forty years old, has been re-examined in light of the successive feminine waves that have occurred since then. It has notably seen as taking part in women's reification and essentialisation: Margaret Homans's review offers a detailed account of this criticism, as well as Lisa Appignanesi's introduction to the 2020 edition of Gilbert and Gubar's monograph. Though the present study concurs with the criticism mentioned above, it is essential to resituate the two authors' legacy to women studies. Furthermore, the "woman in the attic" trope seems to be used quite thoroughly in the corpus, despite its evident limitations.

[193] Muriel only appears through flashbacks and always through the lens of her husband's memories. She briefly makes an appearance p.286 when Robert Carne visits her at "the Laurels (Private Nursing Home for Nervous and Mental Cases)" (283). The Matron in charge of Mrs Carne insists on the fact that "she knows no one" and that "there's nothing [they] can do for Mrs Carne now except keep her warm and clean and kindly treated." (285)

other mental cases locked away in the attic at all." (129) As a matter of fact, Tabitha's madness is explained at the very beginning of the novel, when she seems to lose her mind at the news of her brother Godfrey's death and attacks Lawrence in 1942: "as soon as she heard the news, she threw herself into a frenzy. […] The very next day, Dr Quince signed the papers which authorised her immediate confinement in a nearby asylum. She was not to step outside the walls of the establishment for another nineteen years." (7) Much like Brontë's Bertha, both women are committed by men and are either the source of pity (Muriel is seen as "ill-fated" and "unfortunate" (*SR* 8)) or contempt (Lawrence describes his sister as "flighty, over-sensitive, neurotic and […] a bit soft in the head" – characteristics which he attributes to "the realm of feminine softness and delicate feeling" *WCU* 4). In the words of Ussher, "[the] diagnosis of madness thus functioned very effectively to rid society – or husbands – of women who were 'difficult', or who were no longer wanted." (2011, 70)

If these two characters point to the way the "widespread and dominating" association of women and madness can take over the ethical construction of the body politic, the respective dis-positions of the two women call for a reconsideration of this forgetfulness of recognition as an ethical catalyst. In fact, in *What a Carve Up!*, not only is Tabitha the person commissioning Michael's chronicles on her family, she is also – in Michael's own words – "playing a very clever game" (473) throughout the novel. The braid construction of the novel seems, at first glance, quite unrelated to Tabitha's storyline. Yet, her fragmentary presence is in fact behind Michael's *anagnorisis*, behind Mortimer's vengeance on his family and, most of all, behind the murder of her brother Lawrence for his own role in the assassination of Godfrey during World War II – a fact that Tabitha was the only one to know and which led to her being committed in the first place. More than a mere "madwoman in the attic", Tabitha is a true cipher: dismissed as an "old biddy" (461) by Hilary when Tabitha insists she just saw the supposedly-dead Mortimer, Tabitha remains ungraspable and yet provides all the answer to Coe's whodunit. By rewriting the gendered trope, Coe's draws attention to the margins of madness and reason. In fact, if 19th century society was adamant in "patrolling the boundaries between sanity and madness and protecting society from dangerous infiltration by those of tainted stock" (Showalter 18), Coe's last missing piece of the puzzle blurs such arbitrary lines. If Tabitha happens to be truly mad[194] and takes down (or rather up) Michael with her in a helicopter crash,

[194] Towards the end of the novel, the vengeful Mortimer does ask Michael: "But you do know, of course, that she's mad?" (485)

her sinuous agency throughout the novel suggests, as her brother Mortimer would have it, that "there comes a point, where greed and madness become practically indistinguishable" (485) – therefore establishing the absurdity and unreliability of normative frames of perception that make individuals tolerate some more than others. As Jane Ussher underlines in *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience* (2011): "social norms and subjective judgement are central to the diagnosis of disorders of the mind." (4) Though Tabitha's madness slowly but surely wreaks havoc in the other characters' lives, she questions the soundness of the ethical foundations of neoliberal Britain.

If Coe's take on the "madwoman in the attic" does not necessarily rewrite gendered societal codes, Muriel Carne's case destabilises the trope by drawing attention to vulnerable masculinity. While Holtby's focus on "the care of the insane" (Shaw 2012, 243) is part of her plea for the necessity of public institutions, the relationship she establishes between Muriel and her husband is also significant in rethinking gender roles. As she insists on Muriel's confinement and on the incomprehensible cost of mental health facilities, she turns Mrs Carne into a looming presence in Robert's life:

> A phantom rode with him to hounds, sat with him at table, shared with him his bed, a voice accused him, "You ride. You hunt. You take your pleasures, while I am for ever cut off from life and freedom. I am here, trapped in a living grave. Because I violated my own instincts and traditions; I married you; I bore your daughter; I am doomed and damned eternally." (*SR* 83)

Those haunting accusations, embodying Carne's guilt, are the only instances of Muriel "speaking" throughout the novel. Rather than solely delineating the realms of sanity and madness, the opposition of the first and second persons expose the discrepancies between the dead and the living, between lower and upper classes, between men and women. This imbalance between the two spouses is reinforced by the physical ("cut off", "trapped") and mental fractures (shown by the final dental alliteration "*d*oomed and *d*amned") suffered by Muriel. Her invisibility throughout the novel as a committed patient is replaced by a nagging spectrality, while Carne's self-indictment betrays his own fragility. In fact, Muriel's phantomatic presence is almost contagious, as Robert is himself described as "the ghost of Muriel's lover" (132): this redefinition of the madwoman trope and this transposition of spectrality destabilise the established boundaries between men and women. The squire's guilt and feeling of failure lays bare a vulnerability that adds to his inability to cope: "He had loved her so much. He had always

failed her. He had muddled the interview with her parents. Muddled his war leave. Muddled that child business." (45) The accumulation of missteps uncovers several layers of remorse, which in turn fragment Carne's psyche – partly leading him to suicide at the end of the novel, after his heart-disease diagnosis. Furthermore, the repetition of the verb "muddle" points to his failure to comply with expected behaviour, from courting someone outside of his class, to being a soldier and a father.

These layers of guilt let transpire another type of gender normative barrier, one which denies men the possibility to express vulnerability. In her dissertation entitled *Explorer la frontière : folie et genre(s) dans la littérature anglophone contemporaine* (2019), Diane Gagneret explains:

> This paradoxical invisibility of men, or rather, their invisibilisation by numerous theoretical discourses, is almost all-encompassing when it comes to mental illness or, worse still, madness. Vulnerability being traditionally forbidden to men (but supposedly intrinsic to women), madness – i.e. vulnerability at its peak – would be the ultimate antithesis of masculinity. (24)[195]

Carne becomes a shadow of himself: a destitute gentle-farmer with a committed wife and a difficult child struggling to leave his mark in a changing South Riding, he comes to grips with his own frailty and failure. Though Carne's vulnerable thoughts remain mostly private, Tom Fox, Celia's cousin in *The Holiday*, suffers more distinctly from this male "abnormality" and is disowned by his father Herber:

> Tom was once mad for six months, and for six months was shut away in a fine mansion in Clapton where they have cures for these nervous disorders. […] he was a brave patient who wished only to find again his Tom-identity. […] My cousin Caz thinks that Tom is an abject character, a weak cruel creature, no good at all. (24)

Recalling once more Tabitha Winshaw or Muriel Carne, Tom represents a male version of the madwoman. Not only is mental illness again confined to the geographical edges of society[196] but it also leads Tom to be deprived of his human attributes by other male characters. Celia's empathy towards her cousin ("I have a warm feeling of friendship and pity for Tom" 24) indeed

[195] In Gagneret's own words: "Cette invisibilité paradoxale des hommes, ou plus exactement, leur invisibilisation par de nombreux discours théoriques, est presque totale lorsqu'il s'agit d'évoquer la maladie mentale ou, pire encore, la folie. La vulnérabilité étant traditionnellement interdite aux hommes (mais dite intrinsèque à la féminité), la folie, vulnérabilité à son acmé, serait l'antithèse par excellence de la masculinité."

[196] Clapton, though considered part of the Greater London, remains far from the city centre or from the noble countryhouse of his father in Lincolnshire.

contrasts with Caz's reification of Tom, as the alliteration in [k] ("*ch*aracter, wea*k* *c*ruel *c*reature") conveys his disgust.

In *The Female Malady*, Showalter argues that "shell-shock" (now PTSD) emphasised the normative pressure laid upon men during and after the First World War, arguing that it embodied "the refusal to continue the bluff of stoic male behavior" and was "the body language of masculine complaint." (172) However, more recent criticism has questioned the prominence psycho-somatic link between traumatic neurosis and coming to grips with one's masculinity (Lerner in Micale and Lerner 155; Leese 183). Instead, they choose to focus on the medical history of the disease. The fact, for instance, that Dr. Charcot's diagnosis of "male hysteria" was massively dismissed because of "age-old prejudices regarding the exclusively feminine nature of the disease" (Caplan in Micale and Lerner, 66) shows how deeply rooted gendered norms can be. In fact, several implications come into play here: madness affects only women; a man diagnosed with mental illness is likened to a woman, and therefore is not fit for society; both men and women psychological affections are – though disproportionately – both overlooked by the body politic. If Celia's cousin managed to reclaim his "Tom-identity", *The Return of the Soldier* suggests that such complete recovery is impossible. For instance, Kitty – unable to cope with her husband's illness – mistakes amnesia for madness: "He was not discontented till he went mad." (72) While this amalgam certainly reflects Kitty's incomprehension, it also exposes how mental illness establishes boundaries between genders and between sanity and illness. Dr Anderson, who is at last in charge of curing Chris, notes the societal impetus for conformity: "It's my profession to bring people from various outlying districts of the mind to the normal. There seems to be a general feeling it's the place where they ought to be." (72) By mapping out the mind in such a way, Dr. Anderson's words highlight the performative power of norms: the opposition between the adjectives "outlying" and "general" reveal societal delimitations which almost neurologically rewires the individual's brain. The verb "ought to" further underlines the strictures of gendered norms of behaviour, which cannot fathom irregular social patterns like shell-shock or male vulnerability. This cartography of the mind, as laid out by Dr. Anderson, recalls what Showalter sees as "[t]he most characteristic and revealing metaphor of Darwinian psychiatry […] that of the 'borderland', the shadowy territory between sanity and madness. […]" (105) As a matter of fact, Jenny is the first one to acknowledge Chris's amnesia as a deliverance:

> It was our peculiar shame that he had rejected us when he had attained something saner than sanity. His very loss of memory was a triumph over the limitations of language which prevent the mass of men from making explicit statements about their spiritual relationships. (58)

Shell-shock has allowed Chris to reach an upper plane of cognition that frees him from his disposition as a bourgeois married man. The fact that Kitty and Jenny are confronted to this painful reconfiguration and that, in *The Holiday*, Celia particularly relates to Tom's disposition ("So Tom's madness stretched out and me in me something that was also mad" 25) show that, far from negating women's experience, the concomitant representation of female and male vulnerabilities could be a way to rethink gender delineations and to reassert the predominance of ethics in the face of restrictive norms and their consequent "forgetfulness of recognition." However, Both Smith and West have been said to have ambivalent relationships to feminism: while Smith "quite often critiqued feminism to the extent that she critiqued all the many '-isms' established in both art and politics by the time she entered her formative years as a writer (in the 'Red' Thirties)" (Light, 11), West's "struggle" (Gibb 5) between her rejection of domestic alienation and her "steadfast [belief] that marriage was necessary" (4) has led critics such as Ann V. Norton (2000) to define her feminism as "paradoxical." Thess fluctuations are certainly reflected in their respective novels. As West endows Kitty, Jenny and Margaret with the task of "curing" Chris, and as Herber and Aunt Lion hope for Celia to marry Tom in a bid to "draw [his] madness off" (29), one might wonder if here doesn't lay their ultimate reification as women. Fabienne Brugère argues, "women experience conflicts of responsibility rather than conflicts of rights. They solve them in order to restore and reinforce relationships with others."[197] (2021, 27) Brugère sees here another instance of how the gendered and sexual division of society supposedly leads women and men to approach social problems differently. (3) In this regard, though the fragmentation of gendered spheres of behaviour is prominent in the novels of the corpus, it seems that some ambivalences remain as to whether a true ethics of responsibility can emerge without reasserting the very social dis-positions that prevent the female characters of the corpus from truly forming part of the public sphere.

[197] "les femmes font l'expérience de conflits de responsabilité plutôt que de droits et les résolvent de manière à restaurer et à renforcer les relations avec autrui"

Though state-of-the-nation novels seem predisposed to subvert gender binaries and offer some emancipatory strategies for female characters given their criticism of social norms, they seem unable to completely avoid reverting to the "series of thought schemata" which fuel contemporary societies and that lead to reification. Their slight tendency to revert to this imbalance, even when pushing the boundaries of gender definitions and relations, reveals a paradox clearly set out by Joan Tronto in *Moral Boundaries*: "we need to stop talking about 'women's morality' and start talking instead about a care ethic that includes the values traditionally associated with women [– attentiveness, responsibility, nurturance, compassion, meeting others' needs]." (3) The ability of the novels of the corpus to aspire to such care ethic now seems evident: they expose the fragility of the ethics under the clout of norms and prejudice and the subsequent fragmentation of the body politic. Nevertheless, their own paradoxical position towards some class or gender behaviours asks the question of the performativity of the genre itself when it comes to actively advocating ethical responsibility.

PART III
EXPLORING THE CRACKS

> The creative arrangements with which art intended to bear witness to the contradiction of a world marked by oppression some decades hence, today point to a common ethical belonging. […] Today, it is proclaimed that this same gathering is the positive operation of an art responsible for the functions of archiving and bearing witness to a common world. This gathering, then, is part of an attitude to art that is stamped by the categories of consensus: restore lost meaning to a common world or repair the cracks in the social bond.
>
> (Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics* 2010, 194)

Though there is now no denying that state-of-the-nation novels as an art form "attend to the social bond" (Rancière 2010, 193) in their representation of the English body politic, Rancière's distinction between consensus (now) and catastrophe (then) needs nuance when reappraising the genre. The previous chapters have shown the ambivalence of the corpus when it comes to the ethics of responsibility: their fragmentary form illustrates the disintegration of the nation, but they also advocate vulnerability as a shared characteristic among the characters of the novels. In light of Rancière's remarks, this evinces the in-betweenness of the genre, which oscillates between hopeful connection and inevitable separation. Rather than "restor[ing] lost meaning to a common world or repair[ing] the cracks in the social bond" as the French critic would have it, the novels of the corpus propose to explore these cracks, to examine what hides within or what/who conceitedly attempts to cover them up. While the link between ethics and form has been established in the first two parts of this thesis, this third one will analyse how the fluctuation of the novels under study can be seen as an attempt at reconciling catastrophe and consensus, by underlining the *work* needed to reach ethical reciprocity and responsibility. The multiplication of narratives and voices within the corpus leads to scrutinise the resilience of ethical bonds under the clout of conventional discourses and practices, bringing to the fore the question of the performativity of the genre when it comes to ethical, social and political change.

CHAPTER 7.
The Ethical Interstice

In her twin studies *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), Linda Hutcheon characterises what she calls the "ex-centric" as an essential part of postmodern literature. The ex-centric, Hutcheon argues, "(be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) takes on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middleclass, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed." (1988, 12) If the "ex-centric, the marginal, the borderline" are seen as "threaten[ing] the (illusory but comforting) security of the centered, totalizing, masterly discourses of our culture" (1989, 86), it is also what offers a "decentred perspective" (1988, 12) on the very society which rejects them. She further underlines that this shift from centre to margin is one of the paradoxes of postmodernism, insofar as it "begins by creating and centering a world [and] then contesting it." (1988, 180) In this regard, postmodernist literature allows for a deconstruction of what Raymond Williams has called "structures of feelings." (Williams 1977, 132)

Hutcheon's comments evidently draw from this re-apprehension of cultural discourses, as she sheds light on the propensity of postmodernist literature to expose how ideological constructions and prejudices influence cultural productions, while also creating cultural objects influenced by these very same constructions (1988, 180). In *Matière à réflexion. Du corps politique dans la littérature et les arts britanniques contemporains* (2018), Catherine Bernard explains how Foucault's and Jameson's works, *inter alia*, have led to "understand how representation is always linked to the historical consciousness of our being in the world." (15) If the legacy of such thinkers and the deconstructive propension of postmodernist literature has been thoroughly studied and need not be repeated here, Hutcheon's theorisation of the "ex-centric" itself raises two main concerns when it comes to state-of-the-nation novels. The first one stems from Hutcheon's appreciation of this decentred perspective as a postmodernist prerogative, as she argues that "the self-conscious formalism of modernism in many of the arts led to the isolation of art from the social context." (1988, 35) As the first and second parts of the present study have carefully evidenced the imbrication of form and context in the earlier state-of-the-nation novels of the corpus, this chapter intends to focus on the secondary

implications of Hutcheon's comments when it comes to the "ex-centric" and its literary expressions. While it is undeniable that literature from the 1960s onwards has seen a much-needed redirection in terms of social and political representation, Hutcheon's easy dismissal of the pre-1950s sits uneasy with the works of Stevie Smith, Winifred Holtby and Rebecca West (to quote solely the authors of the corpus). Whereas it is true that West and Holtby indirectly and insufficiently deal with matters of imperial oppression (see chapter 2)[198], Smith, as will be seen later on in this chapter, thoroughly addresses the inherited racist prejudices of late 1940s Britain. Furthermore, questions of class and gender, as seen precedingly, fuel the entire corpus.

The second part of this thesis was indeed focused on showing how cultural norms of perception influence ethical relationships and participate in the oppressive constitution of the body politic. In this regard, this chapter intends to challenge Hutcheon's notion of the ex-centric, drawing on recent studies mainly led by Christine Reynier, Jean-Michel Ganteau and Isabelle Brasme. In their edited volume entitled *The Humble in 19th to 21st Century British Literature and Arts* (2017), they consider the "humble"[199] as "a condition or operator of responsibility" and "a means to be attentive to the other and to modify conditions of perceptions." (19) Encompassing several centuries of literature, Reynier, Ganteau and Brasme show the extent of the relationship between form and ethics, as well as the influence of the literary tradition that hides behind categorisations such as "the ex-centric" or "the humble". In fact, both expressions point to how "the literary history of the novel has been inseparable from that of realism" (Hutcheon 1988, 180): critics of Lanchester's, for instance, have argued that "the novels of Balzac, Dickens or Gaskell might have inspired [him] to include the white working classes in his neo-Victorian panorama" (Korte 2017, 502) or that "just as Dickens's humble characters tend to be his moral touchstones, in Lanchester's novel it is the immigrants who exemplify positive values." (Perkins 110) While there's no disputing Dickens's lack of perception when it comes to the experience of Black people during the Victorian period[200], it seems that the literary ex-centric or humble are endowed, from the start, with a moral and ethical value destined to change the ideological status quo. However, this disruptive characterisation of the so-defined Other seems now too comfortable. Far from suggesting that there are no such things as ethical catalysts in state-of-the-nation novels, this chapter aims at questioning the

[198] As far as *South Riding* is concerned at least. *Mandoa! Mandoa!*, Holtby's 1933 novel, is set in Africa.
[199] Insisting on its etymology, the scholars explain that this expression "refers to those who are low in rank, quality, or station, who are unimportant and obscure." (11)
[200] Hutcheon rightly mentions the essential rewritings of Dickens by Ishmael Reed in this regard.

conditions of possibility of these ethical impulses. In an attempt to discuss previous theorisations consensually, it seems that Homi Bhabha's definition of the "interstice" in *The Location of Culture* (1994) corroborates such literary, social and ethical notions:

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'inbetween' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (2)

Resisting categorisations such as gender and race (whose binarity, as seen in previous chapters, can be limiting), Bhabha focuses on the interstitial spaces generated by the encounter with the other. Rather than being constricted by norms of perception or imposed by our constitution as social and political beings, the ethics of responsibility take on a new form, one that needs to be *engaged with*. Instead of endowing "marginal" characters with an ethical mission, the literary space itself becomes an "innovate site of collaboration and contestation". If the previous part of this thesis allowed to appreciate the normative delineations of the body politics of the corpus, this chapter aims to explore how ethical interstices weave their way into state-of-nation novels and asks whether the transmission of responsibility manages to cut through the noise of prejudice.

1. The Art of Interruption

The analysis of norms of perception in previous chapters informs us on the systemic biases reproduced in the novels of the corpus. This section rather intends to explore "the site of rupture within the horizon of normativity" (Butler 2005, 24): the other not only disrupts normative apprehension, but triggers a destabilisation of this horizon of normativity. Rather than an inherent characteristic which would make them morally superior or more ethically conscious, the other is, by their very presence, an *active* (yet sometimes unintentional) agent of

disruption, who opens up an interstice[201] (a "critical opening" for Butler) and forces to question the foundation of the body politic.

In *Frames of War*, Butler fleshes out the notion of responsibility and contends that

> we could say that 'we' have such obligations to 'others' and presume that we know who 'we' are in such an instance. The social implication of this view, however, is precisely that the 'we' does not, and cannot, recognize itself, that it is riven from the start, interrupted by alterity, as Levinas has said, and the obligations 'we' have are precisely those that disrupt any established notion of the 'we.' (2009, 14)

Drawing once more on the inherent fragmenting power of the other, Butler points out the artificiality of norms of recognition by suggesting that any stabilising collective discourse cannot be sustained if truly ethical. Inherently disruptive, the other confronts any notion of the "we" – or of the self, for that matter. In the novels of the corpus, the other is embodied by marginal figures (recalling here Hutcheon's "ex-centric"), and more precisely by "the Arab, the Black, but also the Homosexual, the Unemployed, all of whom are not inscribed in the authorised frameworks of identity" (Le Blanc 2010, 12)[202]. As a matter of fact, the non-conventional figures of the corpus do interrupt the linearity of the plot and destabilise the accepted frameworks of perception at work in the novels. Margaret Allington (*TRS*), Sarah Burton (*SR*), Raji (*TH*), Marcus Mattews (*NLM*), Fiona (*WCU*), and Usman Kamal (*C*) all stand out from the fictional societies of the corpus, either in terms of characterisation or of plot construction, or both. Lower classes, women, activists, artists, homosexuals, immigrants – all challenge the dominant narratives unfolding in the novels by interrupting pre-established relationships or ingrained behaviours. The ethical interstices of the corpus seem to be defined by three main dynamics: accidental, radical and exceptional. New-comers within the narrative

[201] One can also note Butler's use of the word "crisis", whose etymology points to "speaks to the requirement of judgment. Its etymology originates with the Ancient Greek term *krinô* (to separate, to choose, cut, to decide, to judge), which suggested a definitive decision. With significance in the domains of law, medicine and theology, by the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., the medical signification prevailed. Associated with the Hippocratic school (*Corpus Hippocratum*), as part of a medical grammar, crisis denoted the turning point of a disease, or a critical phase in which life or death was at stake and called for an irrevocable decision. Significantly, crisis was not the disease or illness per se; it was the condition that *called for* decisive judgment between alternatives." (Roitman 2012, n.p.) Though not specifically dealing with crisis, it's worth underlining that the term itself is associated with the creation of an ethical interstice, insofar as the disruptive presence of the other (the one separate from myself) entails a redefinition of norms and judgement. The ethical modification that ensues can be considered a "judgement" or "decision" *per se* as the reception of the other's disruption can make or break the social tissue.

[202] "L'Autre ce peut être l'Arabe, le Noir, mais aussi bien l'Homosexuel, le Chômeur, toutes celles et ceux qui ne sont pas inscrits dans les cadres d'habilitation des identités."

background of the novels, supposedly smooth operators and expressly rejected figures – these three types of interstices all partake in the art of interruption, more or less intentionally.

A. Accidental interstices

Accidental[203] interstices are not only exterior characters entering the world of already introduced protagonists, they also seem to be ethical despite themselves – *apparently* refuting the idea of an intrinsic ethical or moral quality. Margaret Allington and Fiona respectively come into Kitty Baldry's and Michael Owen's lives unexpectedly. Before meeting Margaret in the flesh, the Baldrys' maid interrupts a conversation between Kitty and Jenny about Chris's happiness, as Jenny recalls: "I remember thinking, as the parlour maid with a card on the tray, how little it mattered who had called. […]" (*TRS*, 8) The narrated time and the time of narration conflate here, pointing to Jenny's unreliable discourse. In fact, she indirectly distinguishes the time of the conversation with Kitty and the time of her knowing of Margaret's presence. The circumscription of the maid's entrance between commas almost appears as an attempt to warn the reader of what's about to come, as well as of the irony of Jenny's thoughts given the events that unfold afterwards in the novel. This small reference to the maid's interruption hints at the possibility of an ethical interstice, both by the aperture created by Margaret's very presence and by the implicit comment on the upheaval it is about to generate. Similarly, Fiona appears quite suddenly on Michael's doorstep in *What a Carve Up!*: "It was exciting and unusual to find this person standing on my doorstep, but my pleasure was tempered not only by the awkward timing of the interruption but by an uneasy, insistent sense that I had seen the woman somewhere before. […]" (50) Like Margaret, Fiona is a liminal character: they both enter the house (and the life) of the narrator and unintentionally change the course of the narrative. Fiona's disruption of Michael's habits (i.e., being home alone watching the movie *What a Carve Up!* on repeat) provokes a wave of uncertainty in the protagonist's thoughts, who goes on rambling about the identity of his visitor. As Vanessa Guignery argues,

> In *What a Carve Up!*, if the Winshaws appear particularly ruthless and Owen passive and inefficient at first, living only through the images on his television, as the novel progresses, his encounter with Fiona opens up a new ethical and emotional dimension which culminates on her death bed when Owen finally reveals the identity of his father, a traumatic revelation which had led to his self-imposed isolation and

[203] The theorisation of this type of interstice is informed by the etymology of the word, as the *OED* points to its origin in 13th century French, meaning both "happening by chance" and "not forming part of the substance or essence."

> loss of a sense of self for years. Thanks to Fiona, Owen relinquishes the solipsistic world of simulacra on television to risk a face-to-face encounter with the Other, to borrow Levinas's terminology. (2011, 436)

In this regard, both Fiona and Margaret trigger a fragmentation of the novel: while Margaret's arrival at Baldry Court fractures narrative temporality, Fiona's presence creates two uncomfortable pauses (52) and strenuously manages to extract Michael from his rambling, even catching him up on current events and causing him to feel a "surge of mental and physical energy" (59) the following day. While West uses foreshadowing to underline Margaret's impact on the Baldry household, the division of Coe's novel delays Michael's ethical *anagnorisis*. In fact, it's only at the time of Fiona's death that he realises that "if it had not been for that knock on [his] door, if Fiona had not appeared, to unfreeze the frame", he might have been unable to recover "any sense of life as it ought to be lived" (235). The moral and ethical principle newly rediscovered by Michael surely recalls Adorno's thoughts on art forms practising a "just life", as seen in the introduction to this dissertation (25), and establishes Fiona's ability to reopen Michael to the world outside of his apartment.

The ethical interstice therefore seems paradoxical in nature, for it is both a disrupting and a connecting agent. In *The Return of the Soldier*, Jenny defines Margaret as an "intercessory being" (68), pointing to her mediatory role between the Baldry women and the amnesic Chris. Both Margaret and Fiona seem *indirectly* endowed with this capacity to "come *between*, in time, space, or action" – as shown by their irruption in the novels – and to "pass or exist *betwixt* persons" (*OED*) – Margaret in a particularist manner (for she operates within the microsphere of Baldry House) and Fiona in a more generalist one (for she, on the other hand, opens Michael up to all others). This feature of the accidental interstice partakes in the discontinuous regimes of the corpus, for in the edited volume *Poétiques de la discontinuité de 1870 à nos jours* (2004), Isabelle Chol argues that "[Literary discontinuity] gives space to interruption, to the locus of interruption, and thus to the interval or to the in-between, but also to the diverse nature of these parts."' (20)[204] Chol sees literary instances of interruption as symptoms of heterogeneity: drawing from the art of the mosaic, she insists on the fact that fragmentary and discontinuous writings lead to both singular and generalist readings (recalling the metonymic devices analysed

[204] "Interroger les enjeux de la discontinuité, c'est aussi tenter d'en saisir les limites, dans le champ artistique, et plus précisément littéraire, discontinuité dont on retiendra surtout la part qu'elle accorde à l'interruption, au lieu de l'interruption, et partant à l'intervalle ou à l'entre-deux, mais aussi à la nature diverse de ces parties."

in Part I of the present study) and to the necessity to "do away with any conclusive certainty."[205] (21) Literary interruption – be it stylistic (e.g., through physical blanks) or narrative (through ellipses or time shifts) – therefore seems to participate in the destabilisation of normative regimes of perception. Accidental interstices therefore imply that if their ethical quality is linked to their *otherness*, it is due to the fact that they do not, at first, belong to the narrative premises of the novels and that it is because of this "outwardness" that their social background manages to challenge other characters. Quite contrarily, it seems that radical interstices, such as Sarah Burton or Usman Kamal, operate in a reverse manner, from within their own community.

B. Radical interstices

The term "radical" has been chosen to designate the second type of ethical interstice found in the novels of the corpus: while its etymology, "relating to or forming the root" (*OED*), underlines the fact that such interstices originate from the societies depicted in the novels, its political apprehension ("advocating thorough political or social reform" *OED*) highlights their commitment in changing the nation, or at least their respective societies. While no extreme reformative measures or political actions are advocated by Sarah Burton or Usman Kamal, their discourses throughout *South Riding* and *Capital* do suggest that they apply to the category of the radical ethical interstice. Contrary to accidental interstices which are essentially turned towards relationships with others, radical ones conflate ethics and politics. If Sarah Burton had left the South Riding for personal and professional reasons[206], it is precisely because she is from this community that the governors of the County Council "livened up" (26) for the rest of the interview. Furthermore, when discussing politics with Joe Astell, Sarah advocates a political middle ground:

> 'Well, I think any ideas are better than none for sixth-form girls. They've got to go through their political adolescence, and I'd rather they fell for Ellen Wilkinson than – say – Oswald Mosley.'
>
> 'You're a Socialist, then?'
>
> 'I'm a school-marm. I take no part in politics.'
>
> 'That's evasion. You're either a Socialist or not. There's no half-way house.'

[205] "[La discontinuité] est le signe […] de ce nécessaire abandon de toute certitude définitive."

[206] During her interview with the County Council, Sarah explains that she comes "from these parts" (26), more precisely from Lipton-Hunter: "My mother went in the West Riding. She got work there through the kindness of the schoolmaster in Lipton-Hunter. He was splendid to us. It was through him really that I got scholarships later on to Barnsley High School, then to Leeds and Oxford. I came back from South Africa when my mother's health failed. She died five years ago." (*SR* 26)

> ‘Isn’t there? I should have thought there were a dozen. If you mean – do I vote Labour? Yes, I do. I’m a blacksmith’s daughter, you know. I come from the working-class and I feel with it. There are certain things I hate – muddle, poverty, war and so on – the things most intelligent people hate nowadays, whatever their party. And I hate indifferentism, and lethargy, and the sort of selfishness that shuts itself up into its own shell of personal preoccupations.’ (*SR* 109)

Several elements reveal Sarah’s position as an ethical interstice. The first one is, of course, her contention regarding political positions and the possibility for several “half-way houses”, underlining both her desire for change and her rebuttal of extremisms (recalling, in some way, Stevie Smith’s Celia) and political labels. Secondly, the list of “things” she hates mixes political phenomena and ethical dispositions: the first list (“muddle, poverty, war”) results indeed from social and political decisions – which she fights against throughout the novel – while the second list (“indifferentism, lethargy, selfishness”) highlights how her ethics of responsibility are intertwined with political action (making her initial statement about not “taking part in politics” paradoxical, if not void). Her contempt for unethical and unjust measures leads her to bring about change in the South Riding, as evidenced by Joe Astell, who praises Sarah because “something will have changed, something be made better by the work [she] did there”, “even if another war should come, and gas choke [her] girls and bombs shatter [her] classrooms.” (505) In this regard, Lisa Regan makes a strong case about Sarah’s agency in the novel when examining the character in light of her past experiences and ethical position. She in fact argues that “Characters who have travelled bring their experiences back to this community in ways that disrupt and question its values, while also directing the reader’s mind to disturbing parallels in fascist Europe.” (2012, 138) Sarah’s reference to the founder of the British Union of Fascists (1932) when talking to Astell directly points to the risks entailed by his rise to power. This thought is, in fact, what fuels Sarah’s ethics of responsibility, as she is haunted by “the thought of another war” (507) throughout the novel: this preoccupation is shared at the very end of the novel during the Jubilee Celebrations, but is also mentioned at the beginning (“She was haunted by the menace of another war” 74). By introducing and closing on the main character in this manner, Sarah – and by extension, the novel as a whole – *opens* up an inter-war interstice[207] which seeks to reflect on the changes British society must undergo in light of “those rumours

[207] One must remember that the novel was published in 1936, well before the start of the Second World War. However, the posthumous reading of *South Riding* in a way doubles the interstice in the sense that Holtby’s fictional county almost appears as an ethical parenthesis – one that emphasises responsibility through its echoing motto “We are members of one another” – between the two World Wars.

of Hitler's movement in Germany." (265) References to another world conflict or to the rise of fascism therefore appear as notches, splinters, that covertly fracture both Sarah and the body politic. Radical interstices shatter the status quo of their society not only by bringing a different perspective from within, but by doing so shard by shard, fragment by fragment.

One of the most literal examples of interruption by a radical interstice is to be found in the "We Want What You Have" Campaign in *Capital*. The perpetrator, at first unknown to the reader, is introduced in the Prologue of the novel as "a man in a hooded sweatshirt [moving] softly and slowly" (1) along Pepys Road, sometimes "[creeping] closer to houses", sometimes "[backing] further away." (1) The young man does not appear so clearly again on Lanchester's street, as if secluded within the walls of the prologue. Yet, the recurring irruptions of the postcards in the lives of the inhabitants prompts some of them to wonder about the underlying meaning of the items: if most of the characters choose at first to ignore the ominous pictures (Ahmed, for instance, completely dismisses it (34) while Arabella Yount sees them as another "viral ad thing" 46), Petunia Howe hardly understands "why on earth [anybody] would want what she had" (14) on account of her advanced age, whereas young football star Freddy Kamo isn't surprised at all ("who in the world wouldn't want what he had?" 112). These repetitive interruptions are at first generated by Usman Kamal (who confesses to his brother Shahid in chapter 102) in a bid to "make a point about Western obliviousness" (554). His position as radical interstice is also characterised by the fact that he is a member of the only immigrant family living on Pepys Road: while having "grown up in this country" (259), Usman also spends a susbtantial amount of time in Lahore, Pakistan, with his mother. His "hybridity" – to use Bhabha's own term – allows him to "see" (259) the ethical indifference and moral corruption of his fellow Londoners. Both Sarah's "foreboding" (507) in *South Riding* and Usman's political campaign repeatedly create discontinuities in their respective narrative on three different levels. Each occurrence fragments the storyline, prompting questions on the state of society at a given moment, as well as on one's ethical relationships with others. If accidental interstices involuntarily shake up the ethical framework of other characters, radical ones purposedly do so through political commitment. This overlap between ethics and politics brings to the fore the third type of ethical interstices – exceptional ones – for they also happen to be politically engaged but are not fully integrated in the societies of the corpus, and are often ridiculed, mocked, despite providing insights onto the ethical limitations of their respective societies.

C. Exceptional interstices

In her introduction "Literature's Exception(s)" (2020), Catherine Bernard explains the origins of the term "exception", underlying the fact that it

> suggests that the general rule cannot apply to what is 'excepted'. If, according to the popular phrase, 'the exception confirms the rule', the relation is above all one of radical difference, rather than tension, in which the person or thing 'excepted' is one of his/her/its kind and in fact exceeds all comparisons. Exceptions are necessarily stand-alones. […] Such radical difference is, of course, most prominent in the figure of the eccentric who invents himself/herself in radical contradistinction with the laws—even the revolutionary laws—that define the language of the common, of the tribe or even of the faction. (n.p.)

Bernard's definition of the exception allows to understand that the exceptional – in the case of the ethical interstice – goes one step further than the radical, in the sense that the latter is an integral part of the body politic. Exceptional interstices, in state-of-the-nation novels, are in fact distinct, apart, and resist "comparisons" with other characters. Nevertheless, if they truly are "stand-alones", they do create some modicum of tension by calling out society's inappropriate frameworks of recognition. Echoing Hutcheon's "ex-centric", Bernard underlines the eccentricity of exceptional beings. Marcus Matthews is actually defined as such at the beginning of *No Laughing Matter*: "He has his own originalities, his own special touch on life. […] He's eccentric." (108-109) Raji, in *The Holiday*, is described as "an honest person upon a centre fixed. This is rare, and rare indeed in an Indian." (13) Two characteristics of the exceptional interstice emerge here: they are, as pointed out by Catherine Bernard, absolutely different from the rest of the characters because of their personalities (eccentricity/honesty) and because of their social status (Marcus is revealed to be gay[208], and Raji is the only Indian character of Stevie Smith's novel).

The distance between these two characters and the societies which oppress them[209] enables a reassessment of ethics in light of problematic norms of behaviour, which unfolds differently for the two characters. If Raji is known for his activism in India, Marcus's political

[208] To understand the parallels between Marcus Matthews and Angus Wilson (one of the first openly gay writers in England) see Drabble, 1995: pp. 373-75.

[209] The decriminalisation of homosexuality (between consensual men of more than 21) was only implemented in 1967 (date of publication of Wilson's novel) through the Sexual Offences Act. In *The Holiday*, Celia explains that Raji was "beaten for his opinions when he was agitating in Indian; he was flung from side to side of the prison yard by the Indian police" (93), which exposes the confrontational decolonisation of India and the systemic racism fuelling the Empire in 1947-1949.

awakening is much more fraught with difficulties. While Marcus can easily be dismissed as "[narcissistic]" (Bradbury in Halio, 147), he is the only Matthews sibling to actually stand up against fascism when joining the demonstration against the British Union of Fascists in 1937: though not explicitly mentioned by Wilson, Marcus finds himself walking in Bermondsey, near Long Lane (*NLM* 336), among people carrying a "home-made banner of white canvas [which] said in red letters, "No pasaran. Yiddisher boys know what to do" and among "some young men [who] were singing 'Bye, bye, Black Shirt.'" (336) In *Rebel Footprints* (2015), David Rosenberg details how this counter-march came to be:

> In July 1937 the BUF applied for permission to march through Limehouse but the Home Office refused. When the fascists sought permission to march through the East End in October 1937, exactly a year after the Battle of Cable Street, they were again stymied after local organisations lobbied the new Home Secretary, Samuel Hoare. Undeterred, the *Blackshirt*'s newly appointed editor, A. K. Chesterton (a cousin of the writer G. K. Chesterton) promised to invade 'unconquered' areas with propaganda, insisting that 'On October 3rd we shall march again.' […] The march route had been altered: the starting and finishing points were unchanged, but it would now pass through Marshalsea Road, Long Lane and Abbey Street, taking it through the heart of working-class Bermondsey. This development gave added impetus to those planning to physically prevent the fascists entering the area. […] Just as at Cable Street, thousands of anti-fascists constructed their own barricades with locally available materials. […] The *Daily Worker* reported that, when they finally returned to their planned path and reached Jamaica Road, they 'met another barricade ... of men, women and children from the great flats that Labour has built in Bermondsey'. Banners hanging from these blocks proclaimed: 'Socialism builds. Fascism destroys. Bermondsey against fascism.' (272-75)

A plaque inside John Harvard's library in Southwark also commemorates this event and displays the translation of the "No pasaran" slogan seen by Marcus in Wilson's novel:



Figure 4: Commemorative Plaque of the October 1937 March in Bermondsey[210]

While being caught by accident in the demonstration, Marcus ends up rallying the anti-fascist movement and even finds himself say "Oh, God! They'll bring order alright, if we let them. The order of death. That's why we've got to stop them." (337) If Marcus surprises himself by this act, it is actually a prolongation of what he actually proclaimed in private while defending his partner Jack when their social entourage were being utterly antisemitic and homophobic ("I think you'd better know that I'm a pansy boy. And the man I live with is a Jew." 298) By investing Marcus with a double political cause, Wilson fashions an ethical interstice who defends minorities by small yet impactful incursions in the novel. In fact, Marcus's reaction to his joining the protest provokes the "emergence of these two identities, though irritating to Marcus, released him from his increasingly anxious isolation." (337) Marcus is both self-centred and ethically committed to others through his political awakening, for the paradoxical association of anonymity and connection with the angry crowd results in a mix of "intense excitement" (341) and of the "fear of being cut off from Marcus Matthews." (338) The demonstration acts itself as a political and ethical parenthesis within the novel, which sees Marcus *recognise* and stand up for others. He therefore embodies the ethics of responsibility, as defined by Paul Ricœur in his 1992 talk "Fragility and Responsibility":

[210] Source: https://www.londonremembers.com/memorials/anti-fascists The post and picture were created by a member of plaquesoflondon.co.uk, an organisation which lists all the memorials sites and plaques of the capital.

> We feel […] required or enjoined by the fragile to do something, to help, but even better, to foster growth, to allow for accomplishment and flourishing. The strength of this sentiment initially consists in making us experience a situation which is, but should not be. The imperative is embodied in what we perceive as deplorable, unbearable, inadmissible, unjustifiable. (1995, 15-16)

In speaking against friends and fascists alike, Marcus answers the ethical imperative beckoning from others who are "threatened under the blows of historical violence." (Ricœur 1995, 16) His exceptionality as an ethical interstice not only resides in his eccentricity compared to his siblings, but also in his capacity to set aside the "easy moral rules" (300) that would see Jewish and gay people ostracised or endangered[211]. By questioning norms of recognition Marcus becomes a true agent of disruption. Paradoxically enough, his arrest leads his mother the Countess to accuse him of being "so common" (352) – suggesting in fact Marcus's true ethical commitment to others.

If *No Laughing Matter* stages a form of ethical and political revelation for Marcus, Stevie Smith's *The Holiday* offers a different approach to the exceptional interstice through the character of Raji. The mockery he endures in England and the repression he fled simultaneously circumscribe his forced in-betweenness: while Celia's imperialist cousin Caz tells him that he can indeed either be "a party-pet in London" or "a martyr for his ideas in Bangalore" (93), Celia's retelling of Raji's thoughts on England's "dummy-power idea" (56) shows how his status could enable him to shed light on the fraught politics of the Empire. In her criticism of the novel, Romana Huk underlines Celia's ambivalent reaction to her Indian friend's account of India, for she punctually says "Raji makes us laugh" (13) when speaking about his experience, while praising his book about colonialism in India which she considers to be "so true about India, and so much the book that English people ought to read, and is so much the book that so many of them do not want to read." (*TH* 97) Huk rightly analyses the latter as Celia's "flip side moment of recognition of these dynamics of control" (193) but is quick to remind us that Raji is also described as "controllable, a party phenomenon who elects to entertain the colonisers, and certainly no one to be listened to or taken too seriously." (193) Raji seems stuck in-between two states, which eventually interfere with his political message and nullify his relationships with others, both at home and in England. In this regard, he seems to

[211] This passage indeed reflects Marcus's disposition to shatter the "horizon of normativity", for he "hated not to judge other people by his own rules for himself, especially just because, like Jack, they had circumcised cocks or had worn ridiculous little tassels and caps as small boys. But when 'nice' people revealed the obscenities of their minds and wills, such easy moral rules were no longer possible." (300)

mirror India's state of exception. In his seminal article "Necropolitics" (2003), Achille Mbembe insists on the link between exception and emergency, explaining that "the colonies are the location par excellence where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended — the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of 'civilization.'" (23) In *The Holiday*, Celia refers to the 1942 Emergency Whipping Act, which was itself a revival of an 1864 law (Mcclure) which introduced corporal punishments in the British colony. In *Human Rights and the End of Empire* (2001), A.W. Brian Simpson comes back to the decision to reimplement whipping:

> In August 1942 a decision was taken by the Viceroy to detain Mahatma Gandhi, and other Congress leaders, with a view to exiling Gandhi, and perhaps others, to Aden or East Africa. The ensuing arrests touched off widespread violence. […] The rebellion was effectively put down by the military, which has some fifty-seven battalions available, and there was extensive use of emergency powers, including the revival of the Emergency Whipping Act. […] In 1943 2,562 sentences of whipping were carried out. […] (87)

The violence mentioned by Mbembe comes here into full force. The civilising mission associated with the Empire is mocked by Stevie Smith through Celia's reaction to the Emergency Whipping Act as she declares, "I felt it to be shameful thing. It was a horrible necessity." (126) The latter almost becomes an oxymoron, as Celia oscillates between the repudiation of the Empire and the ingrained idea that the Indians are unable to hold "responsibility" (127). Raji's position as an exceptional interstice sheds light on the paradoxical position of India at the time of its struggle for Independence. By making her protagonist face and discuss the atrocities of colonialism, Smith creates a "critical opening" for her contemporary readership. Celia's ambivalent awakening evidences the intricacies of maintaining ethical relationships, of recognising the other as both a vulnerable being and an ethical interstice, through the interferences created by normative discourses. It is precisely these interferences that Marcus ends up rejecting and criticising and that led to Raji's persecution. The fact that both characters struggle to make their ethical claims heard suggests the fragility of the ethical interstice itself. The exceptionality of Marcus and Raji, as well as the tension created by the accidental and radical interstices, question their adequacy in the fictional societies of the corpus: their ethical message seems indeed to be either too fleeting or too minor to be effective.

2. Interstitial Agency

Catherine Bernard sees in contemporary state-of-the-nation novels the development of what she coins the "ethics of *agon*", i.e. a conflictual relationship between marginal, invisibilised characters and the rest of the body politic: "The ethics of agon is not an ethics of conciliation, but an ethics of conflict, which troubles the ethical potency traditionally embodied by marginal figures."[212] (2018, 281) Quoting examples from Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2007), Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) or even *What a Carve Up!*, Bernard argues that in the postmodern novel, invisible lives are part of a rhetoric of "negative affects" (275) that opposes them to privileged figures. This certainly recalls Usman in *Capital*, who desperately berates Western consumerism, alcohol consumption and sexualised public content, or Michael Owen's awakening anger against the Winshaws in *What a Carve Up!* (107) Bernard's analysis is useful to avoid any reification of invisibilised characters, and needs not to be repeated here. However, the conflictual ethics she proposes lead to question the fragility of the ethical agency of the interstice in both modernist and postmodernist novels. In fact, if Bernard rightly points out that contemporary literary figures of marginality differ from the figure of the modernist *flâneur* (281), the earlier novels of the corpus do reveal a tension between ethical interstices and the rest of the characters. The ability of the interstices of the corpus to – if not transform – offer a new perspective on the ethical framework of the societies of the corpus seems to be precarious, frail and ephemeral. Furthermore, Bernard's own vigilance towards the effects of capitalism on ethics[213] necessarily encourages to scrutinise the legitimacy of some ethical advocates in the novels under study. If the three types of interstices analysed in the first section of this chapter seem indeed to confirm their incidental humility, the social and political tensions at work in state-of-the-nation novels seem to foster the development of a dialectics of appropriation of the ethical interstice.

[212] "L'éthique de l'agon n'est pas ici une éthique de la conciliation, mais bien une éthique du conflit, qui inquiète jusqu'à la visée éthique traditionnellement portée par les figures marginales."

[213] Catherine Bernard argues that "late capitalism seems to leave little room to critical objection. […]" (2018, 275: "Le capitalisme tardif ne semble laisser que peu de place à l'objection critique"). Following Butler's idea of a critical opening and the link between critique and ethics (2005, 110), Bernard seems to suggest that late capitalism is in fact responsible for a corruption of ethics: because capitalism, as has been seen in previous chapters, fragments the body politic, it therefore inevitably alters its ethical foundation by preventing critique.

A. Transient ethics

The punctual interventions of some of the ethical interstices of the corpus hint at their temporary agency. In fact, it seems that the formal, social and ethical fracture that follows their art of interruption is characterised by brevity: the ethical transformation they entail is but a short-lived one, even when the other characters take up on their signal. In *The Return of the Soldier,* while Margaret indirectly reconnects Chris to his past self[214], she also becomes in charge of Chris's cure when Kitty, Jenny, and several doctors fail to revive his memory. When Dr Anderson – the very last doctor to see Chris – is made aware of the Baldrys' lost child, Margaret is the one offering to show him the baby's clothing as a trigger. Her selflessness is underlined by Jenny, who "did not wonder that she was feeling bleak, since in a few moments she was to go out and say the words that would end all her happiness, that would destroy all the gifts her generosity had so difficultly amassed." (74) Interestingly enough, the ethical interstice is here defined by *generosity*: this use is particularly paradoxical, for if the word undoubtedly has a moral and ethical meaning, its etymology means both "graciousness" and "nobility" (*OED*). In this regard, the term suggests that Margaret reverses notions of rank or class, in an almost carnivalesque manner. The fact she is the one finding a solution to Chris's medical problem only reinforces the interstice's agency. Nevertheless, Jenny's words point to the ephemerality of such powers: by reconnecting Chris to his memory, the strictures of class are reestablished. As Christine Reynier rightly demonstrates,

> The tragic irony of the story lies in the fact that Margaret's successful efforts to make Chris recover his memory by working against the double repression of his feelings (his love for her and for his son) end up in sending him back to Kitty—the guardian of the repressive ways of her class— (and to the front). Chris is saved from repression to better go back to a world advocating self-control and repressive feelings. (2015 n.p.)

The agency of the ethical interstice seems to be only open for a limited amount of time: that of the novel, in the case of West. The political agenda of the author is to be mentioned here, for by empowering Margaret in such a way, even temporarily, West seems to take up a stance against the "constant abuse of the working-class mother" (1913, 199) by "capitalists", as she

[214] Chris uses the present tense to describe Margaret to Jenny, though fifteen years have of course elapsed: "She is a little near-sighted; you can't imagine how sweet it makes her look,' Chris explained. (I did not say that I had seen her, for indeed, this Margaret I had never seen)." (31) The discrepancy of tenses in this interaction only reinforces Margaret's status as an ethical interstice, navigating between past and present.

was seen as ignorant and was said to perpetrate child neglect. West goes even so far as to canonise Margaret, as Jenny sees her "as a patron saint must appear to a Catholic" (68) and compares the display of the child's garment to "the wine of truth" (79), in keeping with Christian imagery. By offering a temporary relief from normative frameworks of perception – in which Jenny revels[215] – West therefore decentres notions of class, gender, morality and responsibility. The brevity of the ethical interstice's agency not only helps fragment the narrative thread, but also fractures the predefined perception of the Other. In this context, eventually reinstating the Baldrys' repressive world exposes its hold over the ethics of responsibility as recognition of vulnerability.

Similarly, Michael Owen's death in *What a Carve Up!* embodies the rapid closure of the ethical interstice. After Fiona's passing, Michael's newly ethical inclination materialises through his apartment door: "it had already become his habit […] to leave the front door unlocked and slightly ajar. He had taken a resolve to stay on closer terms with the other residents, and this gesture was intended to express the character of a friendly, approachable neighbour." (423) This movement towards the Other is only initiated by Fiona's death, suggesting not only a form of homage but a form of ethical transmission, which turns Michael himself into an interstice. The fact that the second part of the novel ("An Organisation of Deaths") opens on Michael's decision only reinforces his new disposition. However, if Fiona's legacy (in clear contrast with the Winshaws' which makes up the title of Michael's book) seems to live on through Coe's protagonist, Michael's own death at the end of the novel reveals that there can be no hope for a sustainable ethical transmission. This fate is eventually sealed by the preface to *The Winshaw Legacy*, written by Hortensa Tonks, who supposedly "knew Michael Owen well" (497) despite not being mentioned by Coe's protagonist before. Her subversion of Michael's message squanders his revelations for the sake of sensationalism and implies that society is no more educated on the risk of Thatcherism than before. Not only does she confess that the book was published "soon after the sensational events which have recently aroused keen public interest in the Winshaw family and all its doings" (497), she also asks readers to "ignore the main body of his narrative" (498) if they're not interested in "academic" style and historic references. The ending of Coe's state-of-the-nation novel therefore signs off the possibility for an ethical interstice in the face of political corruption and social inertia. Coe

[215] She indeed confesses that "While [Margaret's] spell endured they could not send him back into the hell of war. This wonderful, kind woman, held his body as safely as she could held his soul." (64)

therefore uses a technique that recalls West's: after offering an ethical and moral escape route through Fiona and later on, Michael, the restrictive and corruptive/corrupted initial setting of the novel is restored. This therefore fragments and restricts the potency of the ethical interstice, as its effects are not only limited to a few characters but are also eventually dismissed at the end of both novels. The ethical interstice is hence defined by a limited and fleeting scope of agency, which finds its source into the characters' obliviousness regarding the norms presiding over society.

If West and Coe do not stage the aftermath of the interstice's closure but rather hint at its implications through irony, Lanchester engages directly with the apathy of his Londonian characters. After the arrest of his brother Shahid, Usman comes clean about the creation of the "We Want What You Have" postcards and the frustration that ensues:

> You make a point about Western obliviousness and they think it's about property prices. You tell them they're in a condition of complete moral unconsciousness and they worry about whether their house is still worth two million quid! Unbelievable. Then they decide you're a terrorist. (554-555)

Referring to the unsuccessful meetings of the inhabitants which were meant to uncover the identity of the campaigner, Usman exposes his neighbours' lack of morality and ethics: the supremacy of the housing market over self-questioning practices renders the essence of the postcards void. Rather than triggering responsibility, the "We Want What You Have" campaign – hijacked and intensified, as will be seen in the last section of this chapter, by Parker French – actually enlarges the inhabitants' self-interest. In their article devoted to *Capital*, Igo Berensmeyer and Catharina Löffler consider that

> postcards with the inscription 'We Want What You Have' turn up time and again in the plot, and momentarily lift the boundaries between the characters. The postcards with the mysterious content draw their recipients together and temporarily dissolve their disparity. (173)

Although the two critics underline the temporal interruption generated by the campaign, the supposed affiliation of the neighbours during these intervals seems rather precarious. The diverse and unclimactic reactions to the disruptive postcards initially suggest the failure of the campaign as a social or ethical solicitation. Though his brother's imprisonment is not linked to the postcards, Usman's indictment mirrors the rapidity with which the richer inhabitants of Pepys Road are making political judgements. Working through parallelisms ("Western

obliviousness"/ "property prices"; "moral unconsciousness" / "two million quid"), Usman vocally denounces his neighbours' exclusive focus on money, which results in the pointlessness of his political endeavour. Furthermore, the use of the "you" and "them" pronouns shifts the political and social paradigm of the novel. In fact, Shahid's traumatic arrest occurs right after the first evocation of the not-too-distant 7/7 bombings (398) and is interspersed with chapters on the MI5 detectives in charge of his file, who cannot agree on his involvement in a potential terrorist scheme. The formal fragmentation of the sections focusing on Shahid's case alternates between internal and external focalisation, between personal experience and national debate, accentuating the dichotomy between the prisoner's 'intolerable disintegration' and polarising political manoeuvres in the wake of recent terrorist attacks on British and American soil. This insight into police practices sheds lights on "an 'us vs them' ontological worldview" (Gkoutzioulis 30) that arose after 9/11 and the 7/7 bombings – one which Usman proposes to challenge and reverse through his campaign. The fashioning of this binarism, usually seen from a Western perspective, evinces the normative relativity of such criteria, as well as the fragility of the ethics of responsibility under political pressure. The fact that the postcards have been labelled as an act of "anti-social behaviour" (185) is deeply ironic, not only in light of the inhabitants' lack of actual sociability but also because it shows the legal double-standard that defines an act meant to make society reflect on its ethical values. Recalling Tony Blair's 2007 *Anti-Social Behaviour Order*[216], the expression metonymically represents the contradictory measures linked to Blair's policy. In fact, criminal law specialist Aurélie Binet-Grosclaude explains that

> The individual who is subject to the ASBO is therefore stigmatised, along with their family who is subsequently targeted. This focus can only have a dissocialising effect which is far from compensated by 'reintegration' measures. […] [*ASBOs*] ultimately tend to increasingly exclude some people from the community – usually social housing tenants; young people (between ten and seventeen) […]; and, recently, drug users and suppliers, inebriated people or beggars on the street, as well as prostitutes – who already were living on the margins. (239)[217]

[216] Martin Amis's novel *Lionel Asbo: State-of-England*, whose protagonist satirically personifies the order itself, was actually published the same year as Lanchester's *Capital* in 2012.

[217] "La personne soumise à un ASBO est donc stigmatisée, ainsi que sa famille qui s'en trouve la plupart du temps subséquemment visée. Ce ciblage ne peut qu'avoir un effet désocialisant qui n'est en rien compensé par des mesures de 'réintégration'. […] [Les *ASBO*] tendent en définitive à accroître l'exclusion de certaines personnes de la communauté – le plus souvent des locataires bénéficiant de logements sociaux ; des jeunes (entre dix et dix-sept ans) […] et, depuis récemment, des consommateurs et des pourvoyeurs de drogue, des personnes ivres ou des personnes mendiant sur la voie publique et des prostituées – alors qu'elles se trouvaient déjà en marge."

By judging the perpetrator of the campaign as a criminal, most of the characters of the novel fail to question their own behaviour. Nevertheless, the failure of the campaign itself allows for a reversal of roles, for Usman's open criticism of his neighbours transforms them into disruptors of the social order from an ethical and moral point of view. As Catherine Bernard rightly recalls, "*ASBO* gives a legal form to the ideology of collective responsibilisation. Under the eye of the law – the technological eye of *CCTV* cameras and the abstract eye of the law – the community and the public space are now highly regulated places of interactions, eventually defined by an indirect negative norm."[218] (2018, 283) Usman's project and its failure thwart the purpose of this regulation: if he takes control of the logic of surveillance by filming Pepys Road at the beginning of the novel, the market-oriented reactions of his neighbours and their lack of personal insight point to the failure of "collective responsibilisation" without inter-relational ethics. His remonstrance paradoxically closes the ethical interstice by lamenting what could have been: his explanation to Shahid does shed light on the reasons behind the project and eventually endows the postcards with an ethical purpose, while the lack of consequences or actions in triggering responsible behaviours annihilates the very possibility of ethics.

The brevity of the ethical interstice puts to the fore the necessity to engage with it: accepting the presence of the Other as a beacon of responsibility requires an active ethical participation that goes against the comfortable and stabilising order of norms. The novels of the corpus open up a possibility for critique but are quick to reinstall the initial, undisrupted setting of these (not so) imaginary societies. The aesthetic of the interstice is part of the fragmentation of the novels, insofar as it creates a temporary "demand"[219] (Ripoll 2002, 361) upon the rest of the characters to answer the call of the other. The fact that this imperative emanates from marginal characters only reinforces its fragility, as conservative figures eventually find their dominant position again. The resistance of normative frameworks therefore raises the risk of a dialectics of appropriation, in which domineering figures hijack the ethical injunction of the interstice in order to reinstate or maintain oppressive discourses and practices.

[218] "[L'*ASBO*] donne une forme légale à l'idéologie de la responsabilité collective. Sous l'œil de la loi – œil technologique des caméras de surveillance et œil abstrait du droit –, la communauté et l'espace public sont désormais le lieu d'échanges étroitement régulés, finalement définis par une norme négative, comme en creux."
[219] The French critic uses the term "exigence".

B. Risks of appropriation

In their introduction to *The Humble in 19th to 21st Century British Literature and Arts*, Brasme, Ganteau and Reynier come back to the etymology of the concept and underline its multiple meanings:

> [The] etymology of 'humble' (*humilis*) points to other shades of meaning and first of all, to a disposition marked by meekness or modesty in behaviour, attitude, or spirit: 'being aware of one's own limitations and weaknesses' posits 'the humble' as a form of 'humility' and classifies it as a psychological feature, an awareness of one's ability to fail, a virtue (lack of false pride) that can at times come close to a disability (as lacking pride where pride might actually be needed). Hence the use of terms such as humbled (whose pride has been curtailed or destroyed), or humbling (as a synonym for humiliating). […] in direct relation to the former definition, 'the humble' and its related terms, 'humility' and 'humiliation,' are redolent of theological associations. Humility is a virtue preached by the church, a profoundly religious notion, particularly connected with Christianity. […] Kristeva has foregrounded self-abjection as a possible strategy for the subject to come to terms with the abject, and given Christian mysticism as an example. As such, 'humility' clarifies the link between the state of humbleness and the process of (self-) humiliation; it is connected with a posture of submission to the divine and a dialectics of domination/submission. (13)

Having previously discussed the potential "psychological feature" of the ethical interstice, Brasme, Ganteau and Reynier invite to consider its related dispositions. Their emphasis on "humility" and "humiliation" as Christian virtues and practices reveals a new, paradoxical dimension of the interstice. In fact, the religious tradition associated with humility and humiliation needs to be apprehended in relation to the ethics of responsibility of the corpus. If Margaret Allington is seen as a godsend in *The Return of the Soldier* and if Sarah Burton believes that individuals have to "play [their] own Providence" (*SR* 197), few interstices seem to be linked with Christianity. However, state-of-the-nation novels seem to challenge the notion of Christian humiliation: while Brasme, Ganteau and Reynier highlight the submission of the devout to the spiritual, it appears that the novels of the corpus reshape this "dialectics of domination/submission", by pointing out how the ethical purpose of the interstice can be taken over by oppressive moral prerogatives.

Remnants of the dialectics mentioned above are most prominent in the narrative construction of the Empire, especially in *The Holiday*. While discussing the fate of the colonies with her cousin Caz, Celia criticises "the rest of the world" who wishes to "point out the path of sainthood for England to follow" (125). She also emphasises the "abysmal childishness of

the Indians" (127) and vilifies their behaviour: "And their own social habits, these Indians, they are so pretty I suppose, and so practical, eh? Burn the widows, rape the kids, up the casts, and hurrah for Indian legal probity." (126) Not only does Stevie Smith's heroine endow imperialism with a divine mission ("sainthood"), but she also patronises and infantilises Indians, as if they were unable to have a lawful government of their own: the discrepancy between the British "path of sainthood" and the immaturity of the Indian subjects creates an uneven and condescending relationship between the two parties, reinforced by the distancing use of the determinant "*these* Indians". Celia's ironic hyperboles ("so pretty", "so practical") reach their paroxysm in her false praise of Indian decency, annihilating the possibility for any morality – one that Celia tears up bit by bit in a disturbing enumeration of crimes. Analysing the historiography of the Empire, Andrew Mycock underlines the "confidence in English exceptionalism" exuding from eighteenth to early twentieth century writings, as well as a "Whiggish belief in the values and morality of England." (51-52) As she argues against India's autonomy, Celia implicitly trumpets British moral and legal responsibility, as well as the Empire's Christian duty to educate and contain its foreign subjects[220]. Kumar comes back on this imperial "mission"[221]:

> compelled to extend their empire by taking formal possession of territories, the English had no difficulty in finding causes with which to identify. Here we find the familiar tropes of "the civilizing mission", the "white man's burden", the carriers of civilization to "lesser breeds without the law" (see e.g. Mehta 1999; Pitts 2005; Schwarz 2013). It is not difficult to see hypocrisy in all this, the disguising of self-advantage under the cover of a benevolent mission. (41)

Kumar's identification of imperialist tenets echoes Celia's own words. The passage quoted from *The Holiday* takes place right before Celia and Caz's discussion of the Emergency Whipping Act and the violence perpetrated by the British Empire. By juxtaposing the two sides of Anglo-Indian tensions, Smith hints at the hypocrisy mentioned by Kumar: debates around India's independence in *The Holiday* therefore show how quickly morality supersedes ethics, how responsibility for the other is replaced by oppressive and paternalising patterns. The fact that Raji's militantism is mocked and buried under imperialist conversations and concerns

[220] In *No Laughing Matter*, Lucy (one of Marcus's acquaintances) hints at the lack of recognition for the Empire's mission. The year of the Suez Crisis (1956), she cannot fathom to lose her property in Egypt, especially "after all we've done for them…" (443)

[221] Kumar explains that "The civilizing mission consisted in the spread of education, science, law, and parliamentary government."

exposes the risk of appropriation of the interstice, by changing its ethical foundation for a moral one. As Celia denies other countries the legitimacy to have a say in such matters, she further thwarts the ethical interstice by putting Britain's exceptionalism above Raji's exceptionality: references to the "elect nation" (Kumar 203) and to the fact that "the English law is above the world" (*TH* 126) contravene Raji's martyrdom in his country. This appropriation of the interstice works through a conflation of ethics and morality: the interstice is submitted to the English law, which ironically erases political and ethical responsibility to the benefit of moral strictures that favour the oppressor, instead of recognising the other's vulnerability.

The influence of the Empire on the ethical regime of England is not really as present in the other novels of the corpus. However, *Capital* does echo *The Holiday* insofar as it stages the same conflation between morality and ethics. In a neoliberalist twist, Lanchester replaces the messianic British Empire with the corrupting Supremacy of Capital, as denounced by Usman. This shift is principally embodied by the neighbourhood meetings about the postcard campaign, which take place in "the big church on the Common" (*C* 372). As Perkin explains,

> Occasionally a vestigial presence of Christianity gives point to the satire, for example when a public meeting of the inhabitants of Pepys Road, who are concerned about the effect of the vandalism of their property on its value, takes place in the church on Clapham Common. From Lanchester's description, the church is most likely Holy Trinity, famous as the center of the Clapham Sect's work for the abolition movement, which adds to the irony of the situation. (111)

The passage from religious worship to property devotion does not only epitomise the cultural modification of the body politic, but also a new kind of (un)ethical appropriation. The website of the Holy Trinity Church gives information on the political history of the building:

> The church is most famously associated with William Wilberforce and the group of friends known to history as 'The Clapham Sect'. They lived around Clapham Common and worshipped in this church as they campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade and the spiritual and moral reformation of the nation.[222]

A leader of the Anti-Slave Trade, William Wilberforce was also, according to the Church's documentation[223], devoted to "spread the Gospel and social reform." This dual role only adds

[222] https://www.holytrinityclapham.org/about-us/history Accessed 12th May 2023.
[223] See the historical outline available on the Church's website: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c092640da02bcaa4f7346c8/t/5ca32b72ec212d250ec52370/1554197367785/htc-history.pdf

to the irony identified by Perkin in *Capital*: fear for the viability of property prices has replaced both religious awe and ethical concerns for the less privileged. Paradoxically enough, this ideological transformation of society also leads, just like in *The Holiday*, to a social logic based on exceptionalism. Mark, Roger Yount's deputy at Pinker Lloyd's who is responsible for the downfall of his superior (467), expresses his disdain for the world outside the City:

> The City of London is one of the few places in which this tyranny of the mediocre, the mean, the average, the banal, the ordinary, the complacent, is challenged. The City is one of the few places in which you are allowed to be extraordinary. No – it was better than that. The City is one of the only places in which you are invited to demonstrate that you are extraordinary. […] Mark had never told anyone else this, but Mark knew that he was extraordinary; he felt this knowledge deep within himself." (192-193)

Mark here redefines the laws of exception: though he sees himself as "out of the ordinary" (*OED*), he differs from either Raji or Marcus, in the sense that his supposed exceptionality grants him privilege, rather than humility. The ideology of the City here replaces the beliefs of the Church: the enumeration of nominalised positions ("the mean, the average…") creates a social and ethical hierarchy, which leaves little room for an authentic ethics of responsibility. His extra-ordinariness almost sanctifies Mark within the walls of the City, sheltering him from the rest of Britain and their mediocrity. Like Celia in *The Holiday*, Mark asserts his superiority over non-City people, which reinforces the metonymic construction of Lanchester's novel: if Celia's prejudice refracts the macrocosm of the Empire, Mark's disdain towards London's microcosm informs on the neoliberal reconfiguration of the English capital, and to some extent on the globalised world revolving around economic capital. Mark's self-confidence also contrasts with Usman's self-consciousness and repentance analysed above, and sheds light on the thin line between humiliation and humility: for if Mark's desire is to "surpass" Roger (448)[224] and shame him by showing off his own superiority, Usman's plan was to raise awareness among his neighbours. The fact that Mark's storyline progressively takes up more space within the novel (taking Roger's chapters to multiply as well) while Usman's own project stops (351) and is later taken over by a white middle-class artist named Parker French goes to show how the dynamics of domination slyly infiltrate the novel and corrode the ethics of responsibility. The ethical interstice is not only reduced to silence but is also hijacked by more

[224] Mark first sees Roger as a "worthwhile antagonist" (448) and eventually thinks that he "deserved a better figure to outwit, surpass and overtake."

privileged characters who advocate false moral behaviour in lieu of ethical recognition or awareness. This appropriation therefore questions the ethical viability of the societies of the corpus, insofar as the irony that underlies this "moral" take-over seems to result in a further annihilation of the body politic.

The risks of appropriation of the interstice run especially high in *No Laughing Matter*, in which the Matthews siblings almost all partake in an ethical simulacrum: if Gladys claims to be a feminist ("We shall be bosses" (40) she declares about women), she participates in scamming an old couple; while Sukey condemns her siblings for not wanting a family, she assimilates a Sudanese captain to a "gorilla." (334) Hence exposing the relativity of moral norms and the persistence of prejudice, Marcu's character almost appears (despite his eccentricities) as an exemplum of discretion, inasmuch as the latter is "no longer a virtue, a permanent force of character, but rather a rare, ambiguous, yet infinitely precious experience."[225] (Zaoui 27) By hiding his actual ethical interstice behind his siblings' loud (and hypocritical) advocacy, Wilson hints at the fault lines of morality. As Bradbury explains,

> Wilson is unmistakable in his tough-minded interest in moral responsibility, and the milieu of extreme strain and tension in which moral acts are conducted; at times he is unsparing in his capacity for satirical exposure. Even as he relishes his world for its style, its social flamboyance, he measures and judges according to a comic and ironic mode. (in Halio, 143)

Like Lanchester after him, Wilson uses satire to uncover the hypocrisy of dominant narratives, especially through Quentin's storyline. In 1925, Quentin is a professor at Oxford and has an affair with one of his students. Through an elliptic dialogue, the reader gathers that Doreen is pregnant, and the news left Quentin struggling with his feelings towards marriage:

> 'When we made the mistake, you couldn't hide your shock from me. You talked about our marrying as though it was some inevitability that you'd learnt from a Victorian novel. […] Your face went white and sickened when I told you. And then came the conventional words. There was no connexion between them.'
>
> 'All right, I was shocked. You don't seem to understand. Of course, I don't believe in it, but the old conventions have their hold on us.' […] (161)

[225] "La discrétion ce serait ceci: non plus une vertu, une forme permanente du caractère, mais une expérience rare, ambigüe et pourtant infiniment précieuse."

It is not clear whether Doreen is actually talking about a potential pregnancy. However, Quentin's uncharacteristic reaction to propose marriage suggests that he has no choice but to revert to "old conventions", since having a child out of wedlock was deemed inappropriate and scandalous. The fragmentation of the scene lets Quentin's ambivalent sense of responsibility transpire: once described as the "objective outsider" exposing "the moral pattern" (131) of his family, the eldest Matthews ends up being as irresponsible as Billy Pop and the Countess. The scene concludes on another ellipsis: while trying to ensure Doreen that he won't "let run any…" (162), Quentin can no longer ignore the erection that has built up while making his case to the student. The omission of the word "risk" for the benefit of a sexual act (ironically depicted as "the proof of safety he had brought with him") reveals Quentin's deviant sexual behaviour which hinders his relationships with women throughout the novel. His impropriety ridicules his advocacy for selflessness, which is ultimately destroyed when he rejoices at Doreen's suicide in the following passage (he had an "incredible vitality that seemed to have possessed him since her suicide." 163) Quentin – Mr. "Justice Scales" (131) – is in fact canting. The ambiguity of the character doesn't stop at dubious sexual behaviour. Though the idea of marrying Doreen as if he were the "hero of a three-decker novel" (162) terrifies him, older Quentin is advocating against the pill in 1967. Wilson here takes the irony further, almost making Quentin a laughing stock: now a renowned journalist, Quentin boasts about advancing the cause of "emerging" countries (470) but cannot see his own hindrance to progress. Denouncing the "sacred pill" (473) that could have probably prevented Doreen's suicide, Quentin's ethics of responsibility crumble under the weight of his own hypocrisy, as he considers the new medication to be responsible for "sterile obligatory promiscuity." (476) Quentin's pretentious "soundness" hides a social and political inadequacy which is denounced by the last generation of Matthews who takes centre stage in the last book of the novel, when Lucilla (Rupert's granddaughter) tells him she doesn't think "there's any way of being funny about the pill that isn't vulgar." (473) Quentin's ambivalent ethics prevent him both from achieving any kind of meaningful relationship and from actively rejecting his parents' irresponsibility. The irony surrounding Quentin's political and social position allows Wilson to comment on the contemporary sanctimonious indictment of the "Swinging Sixties" as an age of "sexual freedom" (Carnevali and Strange, 297) – one which is embraced by his brother Marcus. The implicit clash of values between the eldest and youngest brothers highlights how immoral and irresponsible discourses can posture as ethical dispositions.

The norms analysed in the previous chapters of this study inform on the emergence of ethical interstices as agent of mediation: whether they are accidental, radical or exceptional, they all aim at transforming the already existing frameworks of perception at work in the novels. They differ from 19th century marginal characters or humble figures found in contemporary literature insofar as their belonging to marginal groups is not the primary characteristic of their ethical potency: their interstitial nature is due to their irruption within the narratives, which sometimes happens to coincide with a non-conventional position in society. Their limited agency also uncovers their fragmentary nature, as they punctually raise awareness without managing to permanently erase or even alter the very dominant voices that attempt to hijack their ethical message. This struggle for transmission leads to wonder if and how the novels of the corpus manage to resist "totalizing systems" (Hutcheon 1988, 214) by mixing genres and offering narrative multiplicity.

CHAPTER 8.
Against Totalisation

In his article "Vers une pataphysique de l'écriture fragmentaire" (2006), French critic Ricard Ripoll argues that fragmentary writing is inherently innovative and seditious:

> Fragmentary writing is a counter-power to official literature, to bourgeois histories à la Balzac. One could respond by massively accumulative descriptions, as Robbe-Grillet and Nouveau Roman writers did, or by a more playful, more pataphysical manner, through the fragmentation of the literary space. (18)[226]

If the first chapters of the present research have shown how state-of-the-nation novels seem to subvert nationalist tropes, Ripoll's contention underlines how fragmentation stands against the bourgeois realism of the 19th century. Though the realist heritage of the corpus occasionally permeates the texts, as has been touched upon in previous sections, Ripoll's apprehension of fragmentary writing as a form of "counter-literature", or "counter-discourse" needs to be further analysed when exploring the relationship between form and ethics in state-of-the-nation novels. This is further fuelled by the fact that Ripoll is borrowing the concept of "pataphysics" from French writer Alfred Jarry and his *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician,* written in 1898 and posthumously published in 1911. Known for his avant-garde and absurd play *Ubu Roi* (1895)[227], Jarry offered, with Dr Faustroll, a further critique of universalist scientific discourse. In the introduction to *'Pataphysics Unrolled* (2022), Katie L. Price comes back on the genesis of Jarry's significant work:

> During his time at the Lycée de Rennes from 1881 to 1891, he and his classmates coined the term ''pataphysics' to distinguish physics *as such* from the physics nonsensically taught to them by their notoriously incompetent and buffoonish teacher, Félix-Frédéric Hébert. […] While Jarry had originally planned to publish a treatise on 'pataphysics in order to fully flesh out his jocoserious philosophy of art and life, his decision to ultimately write a "neo-scientific novel" on the topic is revealing – suggesting that the terms of the term itself must reside in fiction. Defining 'pataphysics through a novel allowed Jarry to blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction, literature and science, nonsense and philosophy. The novel situates the 'science' in the realm of the imaginary and speculative while also making

[226] "L'écriture fragmentaire est un contre-pouvoir à la littérature officielle, aux histoires bourgeoises à la façon de Balzac. On pouvait y répondre par l'inflation des descriptions, comme Robbe-Grillet et le Nouveau Roman, de façon massive, ou alors d'une façon plus ludique, plus pataphysique, par la fragmentation de l'espace littéraire." (18)

[227] From which the French adjective "ubuesque", meaning grotesque, is derived, poiting to Jarry's legacy.

> tantalizing use of actual scientific and mathematical theories. *Faustroll* adeptly integrates the real and the imaginary in ways that make us question each: "real science" starts to sound absurd, while Jarry's 'imaginary solutions' start to sound plausible. (3)

Jarry's groundbreaking work points to the literary ability to challenge language itself, which would later on come to full bloom with the formation of the OuLiPo in France or with the experimental novels of B.S. Johnson or Eva Figes. By coming back to Jarry, Ripoll actively reinstates the *fin-de-siècle* and early 20th-century literature as the precursors of the fragmentary works published after the 1950s. While literary fragmentation is certainly more prominent in postmodern fiction, the earlier novels of the corpus do question whether, as Guignery and Drąg argue, "fragmentation in modernist literature needs to be set up against the wish to synthesize what has been taken apart in order to recover some form of unity." (xvi) Before discussing this assessment, it is necessary to recall that West and Holtby blur the lines of modernist writing, insofar as they both use modernist techniques but also resort to "mimetic modes of writing" (Reynier 2015, n.p.) In her analysis of West's and Holtby's novels, Christine Reynier underlines that "they resort to modernist devices but don't belong to mainstream modernism (except, perhaps, for Rebecca West)." (2015 n.p.) The ambivalence of these two writers certainly qualifies Guignery and Drąg's analysis, *a fortiori* since (as will be further developed in this chapter) the concept of unity acts at best as a constricting force upon the characters of the novel.

The words of the authors and critics quoted above therefore call for an inquiry onto the corpus's apprehension of universalising discourses. In fact, fragmentary writing appears to weave a long thread of suspicion towards any type of generalising narrative that would impose one type of knowledge over others. Guignery and Drąg stress how the development of fragmentary writing is most prominent in postmodern literature, recalling Jean-François Lyotard's work on the postmodern condition which is,

> characterized by an 'incredulity towards metanarratives': master narratives that would grant meaning and rationality to events no longer exist and are replaced by a multitude of stories, a polyphony of voices, a plurality of versions. Therefore, as noted by Paul Virilio in 1983, '[w]e're in the age of micro-narrative, the art of the fragment': the unity of continuity has been displaced 'onto the notion of fragment, of disorder.' (xvii)

This contention is also shared by Emily Horton in *Contemporary Crisis Fiction* (2014) when she chooses to focus on post-consensus fiction, i.e., "the specific period in Britain history

following the break-up of post-war governmental consensus and to the body of British fiction that arose against that backdrop." (235) While the immediate period after the Second World War is seen as a moment of "broad agreement regarding the necessity to manage social and economic policy in accordance with welfare state politics" (Horton 6), the decades that followed and the arrival of neoliberal policies have profoundly changed the political and social background of the United Kingdom, resulting in a "postmodern condition" that saw the failure of what Lyotard understood as grand narratives of "emancipation or universal knowledge." (1984, 37) Lyotard further argues that the postmodern condition is one driven by market-based discourses, oriented towards efficiency and profit (Lyotard xxiv), as already seen in the fifth chapter of this study. While on the one hand other philosophers of the 20th century such as Jürgen Habermas and Fredric Jameson see the need to find another discursive unity, Lyotard on the other hand contends that this fragmentation of "language games" was an opportunity to rethink discourse altogether, "as the little narrative [*petit récit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention." (60) Rather than a scientific or economic unitary discourse, these *petits récits* mirror the fragmentary postmodern condition, which in turn would allow the individual to draw hope from the diverse and differential nature of society.

The fruitful discussions that have arisen from analysing the relationship between the narrative form and the perception of reality give perspective to the too-often dismissed dyad of aesthetics and ethics. If it is undeniable that contemporary literature has seen an increasing number of fragmentary writings, earlier state-of-the-nation novels also seem to question such "grand narratives", by choosing polyphonic, parodic and unreliable forms of fiction. Furthermore, Lyotard's emphasis on the richness of multiplicity *a priori* concords with Levinas's ethics. Analysing the links between Levinasian ethics and the novel, Andrew Gibson reminds us that for both Levinas and Lyotard, "ethics is therefore resistance to totalization and closure" (1999, 69) – apparently reasserting the intrinsic link between ethics and narrative. This should indeed put fragmentary writing at the forefront of representing and advocating ethical relationships. Yet, the two thinkers differ in their apprehension of narrative[228]: if Lyotard

[228] Linda Hutcheon brushes a thorough picture of the critical history around the incredulity advocated by Lyotard, underlining his distrust of the crisis of meaning, which has been addressed in the third chapter of this study: "For Lyotard, postmodernism is characterized by exactly this kind of incredulity toward master or metanarratives: those who lament the "loss of meaning" in the world or in art are really mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer primarily narrative knowledge of this kind. This does not mean that knowledge somehow disappears. There is no radically new paradigm here, even if there is change. It is no longer big news that the master narratives of bourgeois liberalism are under attack. There is a long history of many such skeptical sieges to positivism and humanism, and today's footsoldiers of theory—Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, Vattimo, Baudrillard—follow in the footsteps of

welcomes its multiplication, Levinas sees the novel and its characters as "non-dialectic fixities" (1948, 139), part of "the 'totalizing closure' of the Said." (in his dialogue with Kearney 65) A tension therefore arises between the ethics of responsibility and fragmentary works of fiction: belonging to the aesthetic realm, they seem to partake in totalisation, i.e. in the dominance of the same rather than in the recognition of otherness (Levinas 1969, 13). Following Levinas, the novels of the corpus would be, by definition, unethical. They would lead to fixed meaning, to frameworks of perception that prevent a genuine relation to the other. If the previous chapters of the present study have shown how state-of-the-nation novels expose the strictures of norms of recognition, the confrontation of Levinas's thought with Lyotard's– and later on Horton, Guignery and Drąg's – urges to reconsider the fragmentation of the corpus as an ethical mode of representation. As emphasis has already been laid on the diverse and unconventional nature of the characters of the corpus, this chapter will focus on state-of-the-nation novels and their relationship to language as a form of resistance to totalisation, by analysing their use of multiplicity and their rhetoric of inauthenticity.

1. Diving into Multiplicity

In *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English* (2009), Guignery highlights the dichotomy at work between voice and written narrative:

> For all its silent status, writing thus continue to conjure up voices, not only for their orality and musicality, but also for their function as sources of dialogism and epistemological, ethical and political metaphors. Speech and silence are instruments of power, of self-assertion and self-definition: they take part in the constitution not

Nietzsche, Heidegger, Marx, and Freud, to name but a few, in their attempts to challenge the empiricist, rationalist, humanist assumptions of our cultural systems, including those of science (Graham, 1982, 148; Toulmin 1972). Foucault's early rethinking of the history of ideas in terms of an "archaeology" (in *The Order of Things,* 1970; *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* 1972) that might stand outside the universalizing assumptions of humanism is one such attempt, whatever its obvious weaknesses. So is Derrida's more radical contesting of Cartesian and Platonic views of the mind as a system of closed meanings (see B.Harrison 1985, 6). Like Gianni Vattimo's *pensiero debole* (weak thought) (1983; 1985), these challenges characteristically operate in clearly paradoxical terms, knowing that to claim epistemological authority is to be caught up in what they seek to displace. The same applies to Habermas's work, though it often appears somewhat less radical in its determined desire to work from within the system of "Enlightenment" rationality and yet manage to critique it at the same time. This is what Lyotard has attacked as just another totalizing narrative (1984b). And Jameson (1984b) has argued that both Lyotard and Habermas are resting their arguments on different but equally strong legitimizing "narrative archetypes." This game of meta-narrative one-upmanship could go on and on, since arguably Jameson's Marxism leaves him vulnerable too." (1988, 6-7) If Foucault's work will be discussed further in this chapter, the fact that Lyotard dismisses the crisis of meaning associated with the cultural context of the corpus seems in fact ill-adapted to the traumatising socio-political events that have shaped the English nation, as evidenced by the analyses provided in Chapter 3.

> only of an individual and his or her life story, but also a group, a community, a nation and their history. (6-7)[229]

The analysis of norms of recognition in previous chapters certainly resonates with Guignery's assertion, insofar as dominant voices tend to mute more precarious ones. Quentina Mkfesi and Roger Yount in *Capital* perfectly embody the tension between speech and silence, for sections on Roger make up the most part of the novel, while Quentina strives to remain both silent and inconspicuous to avoid being deported. Without coming back to these asymmetrical relationships, it is essential to underline that Guignery's contention raises important theoretical notions that call for an analysis of the corpus's use of multiple voices in the context of ethical responsibility. Her mention of "dialogism" is of course reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept, developed in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963) and *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975). In his work, Bakhtin opposes the language of poetry (univocal), to the pluri-vocality or polyphony[230] of the novel, which stages different voices and different speech types which interact with one another. Studying Bakhtin's theory together with popular cultural objects, Esther Peeren further explains that "Bakhtin distinguishes dialogism as a privileged form of intersubjectivity. […] As a concept, dialogism refers first to the structural, involuntary relations of responsiveness among utterances, voices, and subjects." (2008, 100) Dialogism, polyphony, intersubjectivity – all are concepts that are directly bound up with an ethics of responsibility, that would be most likely to emerge within the bounds of the novelistic form.

The fact that Guignery also chooses to see "epistemological" metaphors in such a diversity further draws attention to the composite nature of the novels of the corpus, as they resort to different genres and materials to depict the life of the nation. Since this generic variety is also part of the dialogic aesthetic mentioned above, Guignery's "conjuration" takes on another dimension. Recalling the lexicon used by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) or in *Power/Knowledge* (1980), epistemological metaphors indeed point to

[229] The use of polyphony in most of the novels of the corpus does seem to evidence the fact that this medium is more adequate in representing the diversity of the body politic and the social constitution of the ethical subject. Yet, it must be reminded that though several voices emerge within the bounds of Wilson, Coe and Lanchester's novels, their characters are, for the most part, completely isolated and/or oblivious to other, more precarious voices. The analyses provided in the chapters of the second section of this study have been dealt with through the prism of norms of conduct within the body politic, but surely rise the question of conflicts of voices as well. However, this dissertation rather chooses to deal with voice on a purely narrative and discursive basis, without undermining the necessity to address the inherent political characteristics of voice and silence.

[230] In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he defines polyphony as such: "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices." (6)

the discursive apprehension of knowledge. Knowledge, for Foucault, is a discursive formation which is made possible by the *episteme,* i.e., the system of thoughts of a given time:

> There is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice. […] The episteme is not a form of knowledge or type of rationality which, crossing the boundaries of the most varied sciences, manifests the sovereign unity of a subject, a spirit, or a period; it is the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities. (1969; 183, 191)

Foucault sees knowledge as the by-product of a network of discourses in a given period of time, which generate unconscious assumptions. His emphasis on the disparate nature of knowledge is of particular significance when analysing fragmentary state-of-the-nation novels, insofar as they seem to use such discursive diversity to question language itself. Foucault further argues in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that

> The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: […] it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. And this network of references is not the same in the case of a mathematical treatise, a textual commentary, a historical account, and an episode in a novel cycle; the unity of the book even in the sense of a group of relations, cannot be regarded as identical in each case. [The book's] unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse. (23)

Foucault invites both reader and critic to reexamine the unity of the book-object by paying attention to its discursive constellation *as a form of relationality*: it is because the book is inherently *different* (as opposed to "identical") that it is prone to offer an ethical perspective on its cultural framework, therefore standing as a contestation of totalisation. By crossing Bakthin, Peeren, Guignery and Foucault's lines of criticism, this section proposes to analyse how multiplicity is used in the corpus to showcase the inner diversity of the individual, who cannot but be embedded in different types of narratives.

A. <u>A network of voices</u>

In "Fragmentary writing and polyphonic narratives in twenty-first century fiction" (2019), Mariano d'Ambrosio studies the ethical and epistemological ramifications of fragmentary novels:

> ++++++++++++++++++The main preoccupation of this kind of novel is epistemological because fragmentary polyphonic writing mainly stems from a reflection on the nature of the self and the world. As a consequence, the novel adopting this viewpoint tries to overcome the classical mimetic model, which is considered inadequate, and suggest new models of representation of the relations between the self and the world. Nevertheless, it should also be stressed that this kind of writing often assumes an ethical dimension, because of its effort to embrace a multitude of lives, to give voice and dignity to a diversity of characters. (in Guignery and Drąg, 31)

D'Ambrosio's criticism echoes that of Ripoll's, as fragmentary fiction opposes realist modes of representation. The state-of-the-nation novels of the corpus seem to correspond to this apprehension of fragmentary writing as ethical *praxis*, insofar as they present different forms of polyphony. It is perhaps mostly obvious in *South Riding*, *No Laughing Matter*, *What a Carve Up!* and *Capital*, where the focalisation shifts from one character to the other. While all of them visually delineate their sections or chapters, West and Smith rather embrace an almost continuous flow of internal focalisation. Though fragmentary in nature, the sectional patterns of Holtby and Coe's novels appear quite clearly, under well-defined parts (Books and chapters for Holtby; dated sections and named ones for Coe). On the other hand, Lanchester jumps from one vignette to another, leaving the reader to learn about the residents one after the other, without any particular order. These dissimilarities nevertheless create a characteristic back-and-forth movement between private and public spheres, destined to show how "an identity which, from beginning to end, is intertwined with other lives – with reciprocal exposures and innumerable gazes – and needs the other's tale." (Cavarero, 88) This is particularly shown in *Capital* and *South Riding*, where the emphasis on a plurality of voices highlights the intricacies of the relationships between the members of the same society.

In *Capital*, the links between the inhabitants of Pepys Road seem to be based on a binary system. Each character finds their counterpoint in another one, usually coming from the same family or forming a couple: Freddy and Patrick Kamo, Mary and Petunia, Roger and Arabella Yount, Daisy and Parker, Zbigniew and Matya. If this only reinforces the impression that the neighbours barely interact with one other, the fact that the third-person narrator juxtaposes the characters' points of view creates a network of voices, as they attempt to navigate their personal and professional lives. The immigrant duo Zbigniew/Matya is particularly evocative of this dynamic: the Polish builder and the Hungarian nanny both work for the Younts, and both expect to make a lot of money while living in London (pursuing what Bernesmeyer and Löffler call the "London Dream" 173). If the comparison of Arabella's and Roger's sections exposes the

dissolution of their couple, Zbigniew's and Matya's dedicated vignettes do not detail their respective hopes for the future (section 11 and 42 respectively[231]) but hide the intersection of voices in the same vignette:

> A typical useless man, she thought. He can't be bothered. Zbigniew thought: that is the most attractive woman I have ever seen. I want to have sex with her.
>
> 'We were playing a game', she said, not liking the fact that she felt herself wanting to explain, but managing at the same time to imply Zbigniew that he was emotionally stunted, frozen, imbecilic, full of himself, and if it were up to her, he wouldn't be allowed in the house.
>
> 'Yes,' he said. 'I am here to see Mrs Yount. I – 'he found that he had temporarily forgotten the English word for painting, so he made an up-and-down motion with an invisible roller brush. (393)

Lanchester's sections usually don't allow for such a mix of perspectives, except for Mary and Petunia's imbricated storylines, when Petunia falls ill. This juxtaposition of thoughts is mirrored by the power play between Matya and Zbigniew, whose conflictive dialogue results in Zbigniew's loss of words. Lanchester chooses to endow Matya with the ability to use several verbose adjectives ("stunted, frozen, imbecilic, full of himself"): interestingly enough, her thoughts almost become performative, as the Polish builder is reduced to use body language to express himself. The first two lines of the passage quoted above is destined, in retrospective, to illustrate the two characters' restrictive thoughts about the other and about the opposite gender in general: if Matya wishes to find a rich man, Zbigniew is determined by his compulsive objectification of women (his friend Piotr accuses him to "use them mainly for sex" 257). Yet, it seems that this breach in successive separate focalisations and narratives is symptomatic of Lanchester's narrative ethics, insofar as both characters end up going above their respective prejudices when starting to date. Lanchester represents this "reciprocal exposure" to the other by juxtaposing two sections on the duo later on in the novel: in section 96, Matya recalls "her memory of the time when she had found him ridiculous" (532) compared to the new reasons why she fancies him (531); section 97, on the other hand, starts with "Zbigniew had no idea that his deadliest rival was Matya's former impression of him." (533) Lanchester therefore insidiously weaves connections between his characters, as sections in which different narrative voices properly intersect generate ethical relationships, wherein the encounter with the other

[231] While Zbigniew dreams of making enough money to go back to Poland, Matya wishes to marry a wealthy London man.

actively modifies the first's identity. In the words of Esther Peeren, "Dialogic intersubjectivity marks dissonance and distance rather than harmony and closeness; it is not about recognizing the other as the same, but about respecting the other as different and taking responsibility for this difference." (2008, 14)

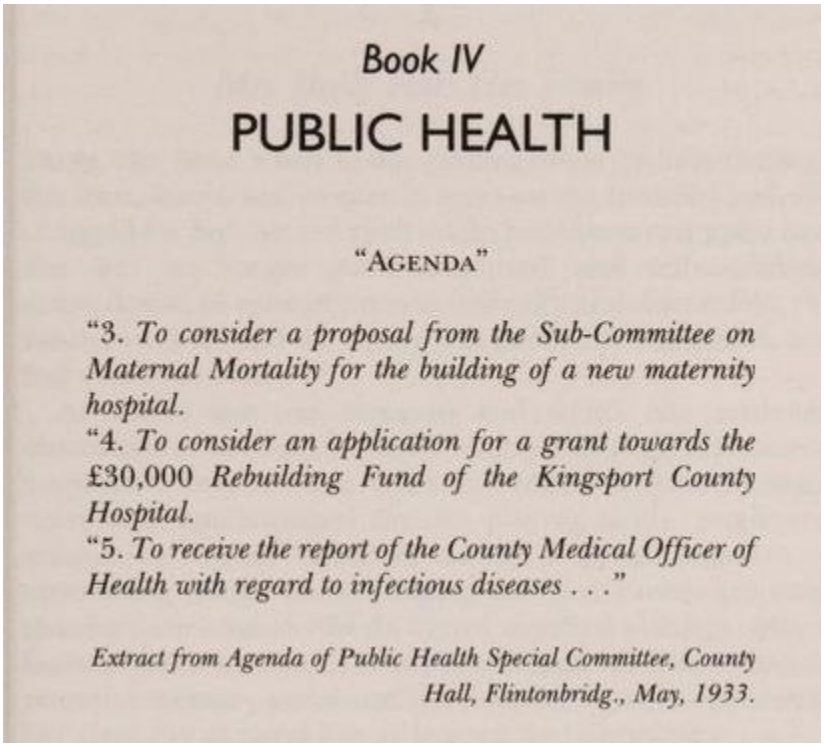
This intricate use of narrative voices is reinforced by another couple of the novel, Daisy and Parker, two young people living outside of Pepys Road: Parker is Smitty the artist's assistant, who ends up being fired and revealed to be the last, darker perpetrator of the postcard campaign. His dismissal leads to his depression and to his decision to use "abusive labels on the site, abusive postcards […], graffiti in the street" and to send "dead blackbirds" through the post (481). Keeping his misdeeds a secret from his girlfriend Daisy, Lanchester dedicates a few vignettes to the detachment of the young couple:

> 'I wish you'd tell me what's the matter, baby,' Daisy said to him one evening in November, when she'd got home knackered from work and had wanted nothing more than to have supper cooked for her, maybe a back rub, and then to watch some junk TV with her boyfriend of long standing. Instead here she was sitting in silence over a ready meal she herself had microwaved, acting as the equivalent of an unpaid psychiatric nurse. She wanted to yell, but that didn't work with Parker; he would retreat further. […] What she didn't know was that Parker was longing to tell her, was desperate to tell her. He wanted nothing more than to confess. […] And yet he couldn't speak, and so the two young people who loved each other stayed stuck and miserable. (524)

The narration can be here cut out in four different stages, which simulate the progressive isolation of Daisy and Parker: Daisy's attempt at communicating, her retrieval into her thoughts, Parker's own internal despair, followed by a short, encompassing narrative voice. This fluctuation not only mimes the degradation of dialogue between the two young people, but also illustrates the ethical consequences of such disappearance. The deafening silence experienced by Daisy and Parker shows the necessary communicative dimension of ethics: the absence of response to the other – vocal in the case of the couple – leads to the seclusion of the self. This is evidenced in the extreme by Michael Owen in *What a Carve Up!* who, after learning his father's real identity from his mother, "didn't go out or talk to anyone for two, perhaps three years." (91) This absence of communication with the other leads to his self-isolation and to his incapacity, thereafter, to pursue a conversation without literally trying to mute the other ("without realising it I had picked up the remote control for the video. It was pointed in her direction and my finger had strayed to the pause button." 58) or without losing focus and being

surprised by the use of his name by another ("And I would have listened at this point, I really would, for my curiosity was aroused […] but my brain was spinning, all my senses were in a whirl, because she had used my name. […] 50) It is only because he *engages with* Fiona that connections – ethical (he starts going out right after this encounter) and narrative (his investigation on the Winshaws starts again as well) – can again be woven. Narrative intertwinement therefore mirrors ethical connections and responses, as well as their interruptions and hindrances. Though the fragmentation of the novels of the corpus significantly evidences the dissolution of the nation, it also allows for the reproduction of the inherent, plural communicative experience of the subject.

As Coe and Lanchester's characters are either secluded from or indifferent to society, Holtby proposes a different use of polyphony – one that shows how voices can fashion identities and thwart the ethics of responsibility as response *to* the other. The decoupage of *South Riding* in "Books" forms a multi-layered perspective on one particular topic. While fragments of the county council's archives inform on what is about to follow, each chapter of Holtby's state-of-the-nation hints at the intersecting lives of the South Riding. The beginning of the fourth book, "Public Health", for instance, appears as such:



Book IV

PUBLIC HEALTH

"AGENDA"

"3. *To consider a proposal from the Sub-Committee on Maternal Mortality for the building of a new maternity hospital.*
"4. *To consider an application for a grant towards the* £30,000 *Rebuilding Fund of the Kingsport County Hospital.*
"5. *To receive the report of the County Medical Officer of Health with regard to infectious diseases . . .*"

Extract from Agenda of Public Health Special Committee, County Hall, Flintonbridg., May, 1933.

Figure 5: Book IV of the South Riding Archives (*SR* 179)

The three items of the Agenda announce how matters of Public Health will influence the life of the Riding: item n°3 in fact foreshadows Mrs. Holly Death (the first chapter of the section is entitled "Mrs. Holly Fails her Family") and her daughter's Lydia subsequent fate (discussed By Sarah Burton and Mrs. Beddows in the second chapter of the Book, "Teacher and Alderman Do Not See Eye to Eye"), the fifth one is characterised by the spread of the measles through town, of which Lydia Holly ends up being accused by the inhabitants. The minutes or agenda of each book are therefore diluted into the several chapters that follow, embodying the intertwinement of each life with another. If the polyphony of Holtby's novel, like Lanchester's, goes to show the "reciprocal exposures" endured by the inhabitants of the South Riding, as well as the effects of public management on private lives, it also reveals how different voices can conflate and fashion alternate and unauthentic identities. This is mainly represented through *South Riding* by the development of gossip, which either dispossesses characters of their own story or distorts reality. Robert Carne, for instance, cannot escape the rumours about his leaving the Riding as this discussion with councillor Huggins evidences:

> 'Maybe it's true you're selling up and clearing out anyway?'
>
> 'Who told you that?'
>
> 'It's all over the Riding' (400)

Unable to tell his own story, Carne's identity is submitted to the voices surrounding him. Sarah Burton experiences a similar situation with Emma Beddows, who confronts her about Midge Carne being slapped with a ruler by a schoolmistress (338):

> 'I wish you'd tell me how you got to hear about Midge,' repeated Sarah, a little pucker of worry about her brows. […]
>
> 'As a matter of fact, I heard to-day at the Mental Hospital through Matron, who'd got it from Dr. Flint, who'd heard from Campbell.'
>
> 'I thought there was such a thing as professional secrecy', said Sarah, a little bitterly.
>
> 'Not in the South Riding. And, after all, you're a public institution.' (342)

News about Midge's incident at school undergoes a refraction of voices, spreading through the South Riding. The chain of gossip delineated by Mrs. Beddows shows the multiple vocal connections at work in the community, shedding light on an impossible distinction between private and public spheres. Mrs. Beddows's remarks on the school as a public institution which cannot escape the Riding's scrutiny seems to hide Holtby's ironical tone: as a matter of fact, the County Council – an *elected* body ruling a *public* institution – is, because of Alderman

Snaith's corrupted scheme, leaving its constituents in the dark about their endeavours. Alderman Beddows' words actually echo an earlier passage in the novel, when children of the Riding perform for charity in favour of the Hospital:

> The news of Gert Holly's death was spreading round town. It added a touch of pathos to the drama of the carnival. That poor little thing, dying while her sister danced. Here was appetising matter for disapproval. Lydia oughtn't to have come! Suppose she spreads the measles? Heartless, with her sister so ill!
>
> 'Nymphs and Shepherds, come away!'
>
> Queer, to think of dying during a carnival! […] Poor Mr. Holly's had a pack of trouble. I always say they live like animals in those caravan places. The little boy's in hospital too, now, isn't he? Did you say two penn'orth of fish and one of chips, love? Peas, Mrs. Marsh? To take away? How's your girl? (281-282)

Holtby's use of narrative fragmentation comes into full force as she brushes through the voices of the South Riding. Typographical marks of dialogue have now been erased, creating a form of direct speech which cannot be attributed to anyone in particular. Holtby deliberately blurs the lines of speech repartition to emphasise how gossip functions through repetitive modes of singular expression (as suggested by the exclamative marks, conveying indignation). The incursion of the song "Nymphs and Shepherds, Come Away" illustrates how, in a reversal of situation, the children's recital becomes the background noise of the town's ebullition. The second paragraph of the passage quoted above then reflects how the different voices mix absurdity ("Queer, to think of dying during a carnival!"), social prejudice ("they live like animals") and banality (the boy's death is discussed on the same level as fish and chips). This episode almost sounds like a jammed radio frequency, where one can barely distinguish between different voices or different radio stations. The South Riding here paradoxically becomes fragmented and unified as one single character, whose undefined voice can make or break one's reputation. Ethical relationships are therefore restricted to the bounds of a deafening echo chamber, whose hubbub leaves little to no room for the other's difference. In this regard, Holtby provides nuance to Sarah Burton's Bible verse (Romans 12:3-5) "we are members of one another", insofar as her use of multiple voices warns against discursive totalisation. If, in the words of Peeren, "dialogism marks the acknowledgement and preservation of alterity" (2008, 101), it seems that the polyphonic novels of the corpus attempt to show just how fragile recognition and conservation are in national and local contexts. The spread of gossip or of prejudice almost overshadows the ethical relationship: state-of-the-nation novels seem to depict

how each subject can become a refractive centre of voices. While not all of them are polyphonic in nature (*The Return of the Soldier* and *The Holiday* are indeed first-person based narratives), they all appear to lay emphasis on the fact that multiple and diverse *discursive formations* can both shape and inform identities.

B. Ethics of in-formation

Couldry insists on the vocal mosaic that help shapes one's identity:

> The inherent internal plurality of each voice encompasses the processes whereby we reflect from one narrative stream on to another, and think about what one strand of our lives mean for other strands. This is especially important in modernity where almost all of us are embedded in multiple narrative settings (family, work, leisure, public display). (9)

The conceptualisation of identity as a narrative arborescence conflates with that of the body politic as living organism. As Couldry's observation resonates with previous chapters of the present study on the dichotomy between private and public behaviours, it also draws attention to the way the novels of the corpus use or refer to different types of material, in order to shed light on the cultural embeddedness of the body politic and its constituents. Furthermore, his socio-political analysis of voice echoes Bakhtin's criticism on the novel and his concept of heteroglossia i.e., "the social and historical voices populating language, all its words and all its forms." (300) More precisely, Bakhtin considers the novel form to be the most appropriate to "incorporate and organize" heteroglossia, especially as "[it] permits the incorporation of various genres, both artistic (inserted short stories, lyrical songs, poems, dramatic scenes, etc.) and extra-artistic (everyday, rhetorical, scholarly, religious genres and others)." (321) The discursive diversity of state-of-the-nation novels seems to answer to this conflation of socio-political and formal criticism, insofar as the entirety of the corpus not only uses different genres, but also reveals how different cultural narratives influence the construction of identity.

The very genesis of *What a Carve Up!*, inspired by the 1961 movie of the same name, indexes this imbrication of different narratives and their influence on identity. On a purely structural level, if the first part of Coe's novel intersects passages focused on Michael and others on the Winshaws, the second part is written in "the vein of classic post-war British comedies that lend their titles to all but the final chapter." (Parker in Tew 2018, 498) The movies

referenced in "An Organization of Deaths" (itself a reference to Raymond Durgnat's *Franju; Movie Edition*, quoted p.252) prefigure the themes with which Coe deals: some of them are set in a country-house (*Carry On Screaming!* (1966) and *A Lady Mislaid* (1958)), others echo the World War II setting of Coe's premisses (*Don't Panic Chaps!* (1959) and *Back-Room Boy* (1942)). This intertwinement of narratives goes even further, as evidenced by the character of Michael. Defined by his unfinished screening of the eponymous movie (seen with his parents when he was 9), Michael's self-narrative is determined by a disengagement from reality and a fragmentation of experience. The movie not only goes on to influence his relationships with women (Phoebe is compared to Shirley Eaton for instance, 471), but is also referred to as "the story of [his] life" (152) by Fiona. Trying to wrap his head around the murders at Winshaw Towers, he himself declares "you're all characters in my film." (462) Heteroglossia, in Coe's novel, not only appears on the visual and structural levels, but also shapes and informs his protagonist's identity. Moreover, Coe uses disseminated clues that hint at Michael's fate. Phoebe, for instance, has painted "six pictures inspired by the Orpheus legend" (290), one of which she unwillingly presents to Michael: failing to see what is represented in front of him, Phoebe informs him that "it shows [Orpheus's] lyre and his disembodied head being carried along by the waters of the Hebrus.'" (290) As several critics[232] have astutely underlined the association of Orpheus and Michael, the mention of his disembodied head seems to seal Michael's own fate towards the end of the novel. Though not carried through a river *per se*, Michael's lethal airplane ride with Tabitha ends in a similar way, as "the coasts of continents, islands, big rivers, big surfaces of water" are "rising up to meet him." (493) The fact that his last conversation with Phoebe ends on the words "Don't look back" (488-489) – recalling the terrible fate of Orpheus who turned back to see Eurydice – only reinforces the assimilation of Orpheus and Michael. Furthermore, in the second part of the book, Tabitha is heard singing two songs: "These Magnificent Men in their Flying Machine", by Ron Goodwin, which was part of the soundtrack of the movie of the same name (1965), mocking the early days of aviation; and "The Dambusters' March" which narrates British attacks on German dams. These two songs in fact foreshadow Michael's fate: first dismissed as further examples of Tabitha's inadequacy, they seem to announce both her fateful plan to pilot the plane and her inability to move past the wrongful death of her brother Godfrey during the Second World War. Through rewriting and

[232] The references to Orpheus in *What a Carve Up* have been thoroughly analysed by critics, see Pauly and Trimm among others for further details.

parody, the discursive layers of Michael's character illustrate how the individual is shaped by others' own narratives[233]. The cultural dimension of *What a Carve Up!* drives us to pay attention to the heterogeneity of discourse and to its moulding effect on both individual and nation. Hence, heteroglossia is part and parcel of the narrative ethics of Coe's novel, and more largely, of state-of-the-nation novels, insofar as it allows to capture "individuality and diversity alike without any attempt to reduce either to the terms of a singular scheme or totality." (Gibson 1999, 8)

Heteroglossia therefore becomes the privileged technique to put to the fore the narrative threads that weave identity. The cultural apprehension of discourses in *What a Carve Up!* is one shared with Stevie Smith in *The Holiday*, who often combines poetry, free indirect speech and direct speech to highlight the discursive irregularities of her characters at a time of political turmoil. While Celia's extracts from her diary most often relate her despair, her poems often show the struggle to take a political stance, like the one entitled "Voices Against England in the Night":

> England, you had better go,
> There is nothing else that you ought to do,
> You lump of survival value, you are too slow.
>
> England, you have been here too long,
> And the songs you sing now are the songs you sung
> On an earlier day, now they are wrong.
>
> And as you sing the sliver slips form your lips
> And the governing garment is still ridiculously on your hips
> It is a pity you are still too cunning to make slips.
>
> Dr. Goebbels, that is the point,
> You are a few years too soon with your jaunt,
> Time and the moment is not yet England's daunt.
>
> Yes, dreaming Germany, with your Urge and Night
> You must go down before English and American might,
> It is well, it is well, cries the peace kite.
>
> Perhaps England our darling will recover her lost thought,
> We must think sensibly about our victory and not be dis-

[233] Findley, the detective, even refers to Michael as "one component which strikes out like the proverbial sore thumb. One player that sites so uneasily with the others that you wonder whether he hasn't wondered in from a different drama altogether." (p.233) Though this will be later explained by Michael's birth story and the indirect ties he has with the Winshaws, Michael here not only becomes a "mystery" (234), in the words of Findley, but becomes a multilayered *narratee* whose identity relies on multiple sources and voices.

traught,
Perhaps America will have an idea, and perhaps not.

But they cried, Could not England, once the world's best
Put off her governing garment and be better dressed
In a shroud, a shroud. Oh, history turn thy pages fast. (128)

Celia's poem is introduced after a discussion with her cousin Caz on the state of the Empire: the third line of the first stanza echoes his earlier expression when the two criticised other countries for suggesting that England should leave India and its other colonies ("they think: That survival lump, it's about time we shift her." 125) In her collection of Smith's writing, Hermione Lee underlines that in the writer's *Collected Poems* "the first three stanzas are in inverted commas, making it clear that this is the voice of Goebbels (the Nazi minister of propaganda, 1933-1945)" and that "Stevie Smith opposes the pacifists and those who say that the empire is outworn." (199-200) Romana Huk concurs with Lee on this section but also argues that "this voice also directly quotes Smith's own characters' in *The Holiday*." (271) Huk also questions

> Lee's latter assessment, which depends upon not only assuming that what follows is Smith speaking sincerely – a common problem, as we have seen, in Smith criticism – but also depends on not actually reading the rest of the poem, or its other 'voices against England in the night'. The responding voice makes only the weakest of cases against the first stanzas' indictments; it suggests only that Germany is 'a few years too soon' in assuming that England is to go, and then reveals itself ironically distraught in victory, afraid that England has no direction and no future, her 'thought' being 'lost'. The voices that finish the poem are a 'they', not Dr Goebbels, but they are saying the same things he does: England must go. Who are 'they'? […] given the popular usage of the idea of 'voices in the night' disturbing one's sleep, my assumption is that 'they' are internal voices. The passage in which this poem arises in *The Holiday* suggests the same. Celia is being overridden by 'voices against England', like her alter ego Caz's as well as her own at crucial moments; this 'muddle of dreaming' leaves her exhausted and distraught as our representative of declining England itself. (271)

If there's indeed no telling Stevie Smith's own position from this poem, the use of different pronouns (they, you) and imperative modes of address actually informs on the *zeitgeist* of the novel. Even though the distinction must be made between Smith and her character Celia, I would argue that an incursion of the author's voice does occur in the poem with the line "You must go down before English and American might". The complicated timeline of *The Holiday*'s writing indeed further amplifies the confusion of voices created by the absence of topographical marks: the inevitability with which the decline of the British Empire is presented in the poem

can surely represent anti-imperial voices, but can also be a hint as to the cultural and historical background emerging at the time of publication (1949), since British interference in India officially ended in 1948. While I agree with Huk on the fact that the poem presents Celia's inner frictions between her "over-the-top patriotic come-back" (271) and her realisation that the sun has eventually set on the Empire, the Christian imagery of the poem seems to have been overlooked as regards Celia's appreciation of England's international role. By mentioning Goebbels, Celia is not only condemning Nazi Germany (here tying in with the recent end of the Second World War) but is also reasserting British exceptionalism – which proves to be deeply ironic, as she fails to see her own submission to this form of propaganda. In fact, the hissing alliterations (with the consonant /s/) in the third stanza liken the British empire to a snake (note the use of the adjective "cunning"), suggesting that its morality is as questionable as that of Nazi Germany, for the metaphor of the snake ties in with Christian imagery and the fall of the garden of Eden. Yet, England's moral predominance is reasserted by the "shroud" mentioned in the last stanza: if the empire can no longer have its political hold over the colonies, moral or religious-like devotion looks like an appropriate solution. Furthermore, the very last sentence ("Oh, history turn thy pages so fast") echoes other passages in the novel, where Celia compares the British Empire to the Roman one (likening India and Gandhi to Rome and Jesus Christ, see p.127 for instance). Though the voices of the last stanzas are unidentified and do clash with the fact that "Time and the moment is not yet England's daunt", the final almost canonisation of the Empire shows that no denial of England's mission is possible: only the *form* (from political to symbolical) of the Empire will change. In fact, as Celia finishes her poem, she tells Caz:

> We are leaving India, you know that we are leaving India. […] it is the first time a great colonising Power, not driven by weakness but in strength choosing to go, has walked out for conscience sake and for the feeling that the time has come. That is the answer to the voices in the night.

Not only is Celia's reasserting the Empire's greatness – emphasising once again its exceptionalism and mission[234] – but she is also twisting reality, insofar as she reduces India's independence to the will of the coloniser. The "answer to the voices of the night" is therefore a manipulation of discourse. Heteroglossia pinpoints the ideological shaping of discourses and the impact of political forces upon the cultural formation of the individual.

[234] Which also finds its echo in Tiny humming the Christian hymn "There is a green hill faraway" right after.

While Coe and Smith's novels use clear visual distinctions to introduce other types of discourse, Wilson and West both choose to reference the historical forces at work in their state-of-the-nation through music (a trait they also share with Holtby, to some extent). In the very first pages of "The Russian Vine" (pp. 273-286: the "English Play" starting in 1935, that makes up the longest theatrical incursion in the novel), William Matthews (a.k.a. Billy Pop) is heard singing: "And we've fought the bear before and we've fought the bare behind, and the Russians shall not take Constantinople. We don't want to fight…" (276) before being interrupted by his wife, who is worried of what the neighbours will say if they hear him sing. He nonetheless resumes later in the play, repeating "And the Russians shall not take Constantinople." (278) The lyrics are seemingly taken from G.W. Hunt's *MacDermott's War Song* (1877), as the chorus reads as such:

> We don't want to fight but by jingo if we do,
> We've got the ships, we've got the men, and got the money too!
> We've fought the Bear before and while we're Britons true
> The Russians shall not have Constantinople.[235]

According to Derek B. Scott,

> There is, from the late 1870s onward, a concern to encourage imperialist enthusiasm among the working class in Britain. The tenor of imperialist songs changes as a consequence. The avoidance of florid metaphor and, instead, the use of vernacular speech, as found, for example, in Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads*, contrasts markedly with earlier songs. Plain, tough-speaking imperialism is found in the music hall, most notoriously with "Macdermott's War Song" (G.W. Hunt), the refrain of which — "we don't want to fight, but by jingo if we do" — gave the new aggression the label "jingoism." John Hobson, in his *Psychology of Jingoism* (1901), accused music hall of stoking up imperialist sentiment, finding this a main reason for the lack of substantial opposition to the Boer War. (2007, n.p.)

In light of Scott's criticism, Billy Pop's casual singing of the music-hall hit suggests how imperialistic discourse becomes culturally ingrained, up to the point where it becomes banalised, despite its inherent violence. However, Wilson's use – or rather misuse – of Hunt's lyrics mocks such blind glorification. Through the use of malapropism ("bear", a common image for Russia, becomes "bare", creating sexual innuendo), Wilson questions the responsibility of the individual by reproducing harmful and violent discourses. Moreover, the

[235] For the full text, see https://victorianweb.org/mt/musichall/macdermott1.html Accessed 26th June 2023.

fact that the Countess interrupts him before he can sing the second part of the first line of the chorus ("but by jingo if we do") lays emphasis on a potential refusal to fight – further thwarting the original message of the song. Though William Matthews' patriotic musings are disregarded by his family, Rebecca West, on the other hand, shows how responsibility becomes intertwined with and influenced by the political context. On the first evening of Chris's return, Jenny plays Beethoven on the piano, much to the dislike of Kitty: "So you like Jenny," sad Kitty, suddenly, "to play Beethoven when it's the war that's caused all this. I could have told that you would have chosen to play German music this night of all nights." (*TRS* 26) While Coe uses songs as a foreshadowing device, West here recalls how in wartime, music takes on a political and ethical stance: not only is Beethoven's origin problematic in the midst of the conflict (becoming a counterpart to Wilson's imperialist songs) but his music becomes an unwelcome reminder of the intimate situation playing out at Baldry's Court. Though West does not resort to parody to inquire about the ethical dimension of cultural objects in times of crisis like Wilson, the fact that Kitty – who fails to understand her husband's condition throughout the novel – doubts Jenny's intentions when playing Beethoven ironically prefigures the tension between the two women when it comes to Chris's cure.

The multiple narrative threads used by the writers under study aim to show the inner diversity of the individual, while the hints deployed by heteroglossia partake in the fragmentation of state-of-the-nation novels, insofar as they disseminate and complicate the ethical significance of the corpus. If the *episteme*, in the Foucauldian sense, is a "totality of relations" between different types of discourses at a given time, then it would seem that the novels of the corpus aim at representing such totality. Yet, the constellation of cultural relations evidenced by state-of-the-nation novels and their play on discourse in fact implies that they contravene this totalisation by casting doubt on the viability of language itself when it comes to the relationship between ethics and the nation.

2. Rhetoric of Inauthenticity

In *Postmodern Ethics*, Andrew Gibson proposes to read Levinas's ethics together with modern works of fiction. The third chapter of his analysis, in particular, challenges notions of unity when it comes to both ethics and literature. He recalls indeed that for Levinas, "the sphere of the common is that foundation or ground that others are deemed to share with us, but the

assumption of which is precisely a betrayal of them, a totality which denies what Levinas calls the radical anarchy of the diverse." (103) If thought as pre-emptive categories, absolutes, or even foundations, unification and commonality, though *possibly* ethical, become totalising forces that deny the singularity of the other. It is precisely this apprehended stability (and Foucault resonates here once again) that needs, for both Levinas and Gibson, to be *dissolved* for ethics to emerge. In the words of Gibson,

> [For] Levinas, 'dissolution' is not to be conceived of as a static condition or final end. It is an active principle and a form of intellectual work, to which there is no conclusion. […] '[D]issolution' appears as a median term between a given form and its annihilation. […] An ethics of the novel which emphasizes multiplicity and the movement of the dissolution of cognitive horizons will tend logically to give a significant place to works in which the form of the novel itself appears to dissolve. [...] (88; 91)

If the concomitant study of Butler's work (on which Gibson also dwells) and of state-of-the-nation novels has allowed to identify frames of perception, Gibson's contention encourages to consider the reflexive use of fragmentary writing in the corpus, *as a dissolution of cognitive horizons*: by destabilising different narratives (including their own) and by exposing the socio-political manipulation of language, the novels under study seem to refute any type of discursive stability, so as to create and foster suspicion.

A. <u>Destabilising discursivity</u>

Gibson studies the narrative ethics of Henry James in *The Golden Bowl* (1904) and of Willa Cather, in *My Antonia* (1918) and *A Lost Lady* (1923) and comes to the conclusion that

> What is ethical, here, is precisely the extent to which narrative is put into question as a kind of 'frame of knowledge' whose conditions are separation, distanciation, structures of opposition. It seems possible to re-imagine narrative in terms of constitutive ambivalences, exchanges and substitutions. (36)

Gibson's comments echo Foucault's notion of the *episteme*. If Foucault rather focuses on scientific discourses, Gibson asks whether literary narratives can be seen as a vector of knowledge when it comes to the relationship with the other. He argues that literature is the *locus par excellence* to give space to the other, to avoid its reification and its reduction to sameness. The "ethical space in narrative" (36), for Gibson, is one which recognises the dissymmetry, dissidence and unknowability of the other (he himself quotes Butler and Levinas in that regard).

This section is therefore interested in expanding on the correlation between Foucault's and Gibson's argument, especially by focusing on the way the novels of the corpus both integrate and thwart scientific discourses in order to counter totalisation when it comes to the other. For instance, the Prologue of Coe's *What a Carve Up!* recounts the events that led to Tabitha's sectioning, laying emphasis on the reliability of Doctor Quince:

> Fortunately the excellent Dr Quince, trusted physician to the Winshaws for several decades, had by that stage made his diagnosis – the effect of which was to determine that no statements made by Tabitha thereafter would be received with anything other than the deepest scepticism. History, incidentally, seems to have vindicated the good doctor's judgement, because when certain of Tabitha's relics recently came into the hands of the present writer, the contended scrap of paper was found to be among them. Now yellowed with age it turned out to contain nothing more remarkable than Lawrence's scribbled note to the butler, asking for a light supper to be sent up to his room. (6)

This passage from the prologue already hints at several narrative encryptions, that are progressively decoded throughout the novel. After reading the novel in its entirety, a discrepancy emerges between Michael's first discovery of the note (which reads "BISCUIT, CHEESE, CELERY" 228), mentioned above, and his deciphering towards the end of the novel:

> [they] had all been the codenames of double agents controlled and supervised by something called the Twenty Committee, established as a collaborative venture by the War Office, GHQ Home Forces, MI5, Mi6 and others in January 1941. Might Lawrence have been a member of this committee? Very likely. Might he also have been in secret radio communication with the Germans, supplying them not only with the names and identities of these double agents, but with information about British military plans – such as the proposed bombing of munitions factories? This would be difficult to establish, fifty years after the event, but the evidence was beginning to suggest that Tabitha's worst accusations about her brother and his wartime treachery were very close to the truth. (426)[236]

The fact that Michael eventually uncovers the truth about Lawrence's note clashes with the prologue of the novel, which reasserts Tabitha's madness ("History, incidentally, seems to have vindicated the good doctor's judgement…"). This alludes to Michael's fate, who seemingly died before being able to edit his manuscript, or at the fact that Hortensia Tonks, the editor who comes back on the genesis of Michael's *Chronicles* in the *Preface*, could have tampered with the original manuscript. She indeed confesses that "[her] intention in the remainder of this

[236] This suspicion is confirmed p.482, when Michael stumbles upon "some sort of address book" in which he not only finds other code names and their related phone numbers and addresses, but also Godfrey Winshaw's plane number which Tabitha accuses her brother Lawrence to have shot down.

Preface" (498) is to depict the Winshaws' family life as vividly as possible, before starting the *Chronicles* with the same sentence on which *What a Carve Up!* opens ("Tragedy had struck the Winshaws twice before but never on such a terrible scale." 3; 498). These indeterminate voices participate in creating a destabilising narrative, one where truth and facts conflate with corruption and disinformation – a running theme in Coe's state-of-the-nation. This takes us back to the mention of "the excellent Dr Quince", whose reliability is presented as unquestionable. However, when working together with Tabitha Winshaw, Detective Onyx Findlay destroys such an early assumption when he recalls his encounter with Tabitha on the night of Lawrence's brawl with James Farringdon:

> [I] had no difficulty bluffing my way past some halfwit of an under-footman. I claimed to be a colleague of Dr Quince's, I seem to remember. […] some quack physician they used to slip a bribe to every three or four years to make sure that Tabitha remained safely under lock and key. […] I said that I'd been asked to give a second opinion. (230)

The medical profession here is repeatedly undermined: while the eccentric detective's easy impersonation of a doctor verges upon the carnivalesque, his designation of Dr Quince as a charlatan and his accusation of bribery erodes the last remnants of the position's credibility. Between incompetence and corruption, the medical profession becomes another tentacle of the Winshaws' attack on the country – a fact evidenced by the very name "Quince", which, according to the *OED* means "to cut, carve." If the rebuttal of the medical profession is used as a foil to denounce the corrosive practices of neoliberal policies, the nature and effects of discourse come into question as well insofar as, for Foucault,

> This status of the doctor is generally a rather special one in all forms of society and civilization: he is hardly ever an undifferentiated or interchangeable person. Medical statements cannot come from anybody; their value, efficacy, even their therapeutic powers, and generally speaking, their existence as medical statements cannot be dissociated from the statutorily defined person who has the right to make them […] in clinical discourse, the doctor is [the] sovereign. […] (1969, 51-53)

Through mockery and impersonation, the figure of the doctor is deposed and the power which comes with the position is largely undermined, casting doubt on Tabitha's actual condition. The interchangeability of roles operated in *What a Carve Up!* aims at challenging the narrative as a potential "frame of knowledge" which conditions relations of power. The dissonances observed between the Prologue and other passages only add to the novel's destabilising discursivity.

While Coe uses scattered hints to achieve this aesthetic, Rebecca West constructs a rhetoric of omission which prefigures Lyotard's "suspicion towards metanarratives."

As in *What a Carve Up!* and *Capital*, the medical corps is defined by failure in *The Return of the Soldier*: the reproduced letter of Frank Baldry, Chris's cousin, says that the first doctor who saw Chris in Boulogne "told [him] that he had known nothing of Chris's delusions." (19) Frank is actually the one who realises that his cousin "evidently lost [his] memory." (19) It is only after a discussion with Frank that the doctor can "[satisfy] himself that Chris is suffering from a loss of memory extending over a period of fifteen years." (20) Frank's letter creates a breach within the main narrative: not only does it disrupt the main timeline – Kitty and Jenny longing for Chris's return – and the main narrative voice (Jenny's, through which the content of the letter is reproduced), but it also initiates a redistribution of power positions within the novel. In fact, Dr Anderson, who visits Chris at Baldry Court towards the end of West's narrative, "[doesn't] know" why confronting Chris with the loss of his son will matter in recovering his memory, but "it does." (73) Margaret is in fact the one to propose this potential cure to the doctor, drawing from her own experience of mourning ("I know how you could bring him back . . ." 73). If *What a Carve Up!* presents a potential falsified diagnosis and *Capital* a dehumanised approach to the doctor/patient relationship, *The Return of the Soldier* actively reconfigures clinical discourse and the positions of power within it. Both diagnosis and cure are found by characters outside of the medical sphere, suggesting the inadequacy of scientific narrative over intimate connections. The knowledgeable and powerful doctor initially described by Foucault is here once again deposed, and his stranglehold on the patient is transferred to the private sphere. The debilitation of the scientific and medical analysis allows West to dismantle alienating discourses and to reassert the purport of ethical responsibility over normalising metanarratives. Her rhetoric of omission starts with this transfer of power/knowledge to the realm of the personal, and more especially, to the realm of the feminine: as a matter of fact, all the doctors encountered throughout the novel are men, when Margaret – a lower class woman – finds the cure. By putting Margaret in charge of Chris's cure – together with Jenny, as they discuss what they ought to do – West not only weakens the medical profession but a dominantly *male* sphere. West's destabilising discursivity reveals the import of women's "subjugated knowledge", i.e. knowledge that has been "disqualified" by the systemic construction of the *episteme* (Foucault 1980, 82). It is only through the re-emergence of these forms of knowledge, Foucault argues, that critique can occur. This rhetoric of omission

of course reaches its paroxysm at the very end of the novel, which leaves out the outcome of Margaret's confrontation with Chris:

> "He's coming back."
> "Jenny! Jenny! How does he look?"
> "Oh," — how could I say it? — "every inch a soldier."
> She crept behind me to the window, peered over my shoulder and saw.
> I heard her suck in her breath with satisfaction.
> "He's cured!" she whispered slowly. "He's cured!" (82)

West's *tour de force* lies in her ability to simultaneously shatter scientific and narrative frameworks. Not only does she omit whether the cure is viable, but she also withholds information as to what this potential (yet literal) "return to normal" implies. Narrative and scientific resolutions are denied, while Jenny's response to Kitty casts doubts on Chris's newly found position: Chris is deprived of speech, leaving no hint as to where his memory or his marriage stands, as he does not return as a man, husband, cousin nor father but "every inch a soldier." According to Elizabeth Reeves Covington,

> The inconclusive resolution to Chris Baldry's amnesia can be viewed as West's deft critique of the incursions of both narrative and science. The novel's resolution provides insight into her attitude toward early twentieth-century conceptions of memory and toward the protocols of medical knowledge that effectively claimed memory as the property of the doctor, not of the patient. […] West's narrative elisions place this text firmly within the parameters of modernist texts emerging during this period. West establishes her literariness by erasing from the narrative the very aspect of the text that is most significant from the perspective of scientific and realist fictional discourse. (57;66)

Through narrative omissions, West disrupts the "age-old continuity of […] medicine" (Foucault 1969, 31) and advocates a more ethical approach, one which recognises the patient's vulnerability. The final destabilisation of the novel acts as an appeal to distrust any totalising narrative, including literary ones. West's novel gives perspective to Lyotard's plea for micro-narratives, which, if definitely emblematic of postmodern writing, finds its source in modernist state-of-the-nation narratives. Both Coe and West engage with "dissolution" *à la* Gibson, as they fragment narrative threads in order to challenge "frames of knowledge" – including the act of narration itself. This constitutes a call to suspicion, to be on the alert for any form of discursive manipulation, which weaves its way onto the whole corpus as it seemingly aims to question the reliability of language itself.

B. Language plasticity[237]

Specifically interested in the relationship between literary narratives and their ethical propensity, Derek Attridge contends in *The Singularity of Literature* (2005) that

> The distinctive ethical demand made by the literary work is not to be identified with its characters or its plot, with the human intercourse and judgments it portrays, with its depictions of virtues and vices or of the difficulty of separating these; all these can be found in other discourses, such as historical writing or journalistic reporting. It is not a question of literature's capacity to provide a moral education; that too is a property it shares with other kinds of writing. Rather, it is to be found in what makes it literature: its staging of the fundamental processes whereby language works upon us and upon the world. (130)

Far from denying literature's power of representation or ability to deal with societal and moral matters, Attridge insists on its likeness with other types of narratives in these matters. The particularity of literary discourse is, for him, based on its confrontation with the complexity of language itself: it is because literature can engage with language that makes it *ethical*. By challenging what is conveyed by language, literature makes space for difference and uncertainty – attributes of the Other in Levinasian and Butlerian thought. In this regard, the question between an ethics of responsibility and fragmentary literature takes on another dimension, as the very act of fragmenting language – outside of new forms of representation, ex-centric characters and so on – would itself constitute a literary ethics of responsibility. For Attridge, if literature can indeed deconstruct frames of perception like other narratives, it also has the specificity to shed light on discursive manipulation. His detection of "the fundamental processes whereby language works upon us and upon the world" not only suggests how norms unconsciously hold sway over societal behaviours but also how language itself can shape, twist, or fracture reality. In the case of state-of-the-nation novels, language seems to be a dis-uniting force which highlights the chaotic yet plastic nature of society. The meeting of the World International Federation of Social and Allied Scientists in the 1935 section of *No Laughing Matter* evidences this malleability of language in a tense political climate. As the Russian government and some delegates try to push for the signature of a condemnatory declaration

[237] In *Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James defines "plasticity" as such: "*Plasticity*, then, in the wide sense of the word, means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once." (68) Drawing from studies in psychology upon brain functions, Fathali M. Moghaddam also coins the term "political plasticity" to refer to "the malleability of individual and collective political behavior." (152)

against the rise of Fascism in Europe, Quentin Matthews and Mary Parr, a literary scholar, go against the grain and refuse to sign the proposed declaration:

> At first Mary Parr also sought evasion; [Quentin] heard her say: "But I don't see Mr. Matthews' signature."
>
> "Matthews? Oh, Quentin Matthews the journalist. But this is only for the social scientists. Imagine the great Kelvin Douglas's name along with a lot of journalists. Or that of the great Mary Parr. That's what we all wait for now."
>
> But now, Mary, too, and more quickly, chose her own direct tactic.
>
> "No, I'm awfully sorry," she said, a little bewildered girl. "I never sign anything political. I don't understand politics well enough."
>
> "But, Miss Parr, there is nothing political here, only the declaration of the undying hostility of progressive people to Fascist aggression. You hate fascism, I suppose.
>
> "Undyingly," came Mary's drawl, "but my hatred is much too well known to need publication in a document that contains so much that I find ambiguous. Peace! Freedom! Do we all of us really mean exactly the same things by those words?" (268)

This passage is worth quoting at length, as it not only evinces how language can be politically manipulated, but also challenges the credibility of journalists. In fact, Quentin's signature is only deemed unworthy after his initial rejection, pointing to the reigning hypocrisy of the Convention, as several Russian scientists are inexplicably missing from the meeting. The Russian host, Sukhanova, attempts at undermining the role of journalists in the fight against fascism, though Quentin is the one questioning these problematic absences. As for Mary Parr, she is quick to point out her own inadequacy ("I don't understand politics well enough"). She nonetheless underlines the ambiguity of the words "Peace" and "Freedom", whose connotations have become versatile in this conjecture. Mary's echoic (and sardonic) repetition of "undying"/ "undyingly" – showing her way with words as a literature specialist – and Sukhanova's antithetic definition of the word "political" create a deeply ironic subtext destined to show how language becomes a malleable political tool destined to subvert reality – a convenience with which Celia, Stevie Smith's narrator, has a hard time conceding.

In her conversation with Tiny and Caz about the Crown's presence in India and the seemingly legal flogging taking place there at the time of the narration, ambiguity remains as to where she stands:

> The Romans said that Medicine Cross was the best remedy for Jewish obstinacy, we see to have heard echoes of this in our own times. It was a perfectly legal sentence, codified, and open, the criminals knew that they stood to be crucified, after the trial the sentence.

> Oh, yes, I said […] The law allows it and the court awards.
> Yes, said Caz, and with the flogging sentence, too there is precedent and trial and the flogging judge has his flogging look. The law allows it and the court awards. (*TH* 129-130)

Caz, the imperialist figure of *The Holiday*, is deeply equivocal here: though he seems to be in favour of the Whipping Emergency Act and reaffirms its legality, his comments on the fate of Jewish people, both under the Roman Empire and the Third Reich, go against such arbitrary and sanguinary law. It is actually Celia's quote from *The Merchant of Venice* (1600) ("The law allows it and the court awards" IV, 1, 301) that sheds light on the absurd nature of her cousin's position – a fact that eludes him, as his blind repetition of the quote evinces. In Shakespeare's play, Portia, disguised as the doctor of law Balthazar, purposely uses the double-entendre of the law that would permit Shylock to take a pound of flesh off Antonio and argues that he is only allowed to do so provided he does not spill blood ("This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood" IV, 1, 304). Celia's quote therefore illustrates the malleability of words (even in the rigid legal framework) and how it can shape reality differently depending on who uses them – much like Mary Parr in Wilson's state-of-the-nation. The fact that Caz seems oblivious to her indirect criticism of the law only reinforces the double-standards at the heart of colonial law, which suggest that while the Roman code could have been abusive, the Emergency Whipping Act has to be seen as a necessity. Celia and Caz's unnoticed disagreement points to the relativity of meaning, from one individual to another. As Romana Huk argues,

> By foregrounding the *incongruence* of discourses in her work. […] Smith engages in the most potent political critique a writer can conduct: the exposition of covert ideologies struggling for dominance through language, and her own subjection to their influences despite her many strategies for resistance. (4)

By using Shakespearian intertext in the colonial setting, Smith showcases the reality behind oppressive systems. Language becomes either a tool for denunciation – in the case of Quentin and Celia – or a way to reassert the validity of the system (as Sukhanova and Caz attempt to do). Even Thomas Winshaw warns his mother that she "shouldn't take notice of anything that Henry tells [her]", since, "After all, he is a politician." (*WCU* 14) The association of politics and language not only hides models of "dominance" but also generates inauthenticity: since language is malleable and since the most heard voices of the body politic are those of dominant groups, state-of-the-nation novels take on exposing how discourse and facts become twisted.

A case in point is Mark Winshaw's "AESOP" membership – an acronym which stands for the "Association of Europeans for Safety in Ordinance and Propellants." (*WCU* 393) As Louis, a man working alongside Mark, explains to Graham Packard, the obscure organisation has "to do with technical matters really. We meet regularly to discuss problems of safety in the manufacture and distribution of our weapons systems." (393) Graham himself, working for Mark to try and gather information about corrupt practices, "wouldn't have thought [Mark would] have time for such concerns." (393) It's only after tricking Louis into drinking and after researching the organisation that Graham is able to discover that "AESOP, it turned out, had nothing at all to do with research into safety measures. It was an informal cartel of European arms dealers. […]" (394) The name of the organisation therefore reveals the diversion of language to serve economic and political purposes: AESOP becomes a front not only for the corrupt arms industry, but also for its ties with the contemporary Iraq War[238]. The meaning of the word "safety" is in fact thwarted, as the only security sought by Mark is the one ensuring his profits from the conflict. Furthermore, the braid construction of Coe's state-of-the-nation novel exposes how far this fabrication trickles down to government. The section on Henry Winshaw, the MP, in fact dwells on the British government's secret trading of arms in favour of Saddam Hussein's government. When Thomas expresses concerns as to whether his and Mark's investment in the arm deal will be sanctioned, Henry confidently replies: "Put it this way: how on earth can we impose sanctions on something, when we're not even selling in the first place. Mm?" (314) The apparent disaffiliation of arm dealers from the government allows for a fabrication of facts which absolves the culprits: if the corruption of the Winshaw family needs not proving again, its members' ability to manipulate language in order to shape reality as they please takes the novel's apprehension of discourse to another level. If the previous sections of the present chapter show how language helps us communicate with one another, as well as understand and rationalise the outside world, the intimate links between politics and language in the novels of the corpus do question the reliability and viability of narrative ethics. In the Winshaws' case, this can only arise thanks to the investigative work of Michael (an author) and Graham (an activist filmmaker).

Though not victim of the same level of corruption as Michael and Graham, Smitty, the Banksy-like artist of *Capital*, takes upon a similar deciphering role in Lanchester's novel. As

[238] One can also see a potential reference to the fabulist Aesop: his moralist tales are here subverted and the power of storytelling becomes a dangerous political tool.

he flicks through the pages of the *South London Press*, he comes across a small blurb about the "We Want What You Have Campaign":

> The paper said that a copper called Detective Inspector Mill had promised a 'prompt investigation and decisive action', which sounded to Smitty like rozzer-speak for 'we haven't got a clue.' Smitty still had the folder of cards and the DVD back at his studio. He'd been interested in it, whatever it was. Graffiti, obscenity – it was his kind of thing.
>
> As he had that thought, Smitty had another one. It came unbidden and he couldn't have said how exactly he knew what he knew, but even as he has the idea Smitty felt certain he was right: that he knew who was the person behind We Want What You Have. (391)

Like Celia's decoding work at the Ministry in *The Holiday*, Smitty uncovers the meaning behind the article. His interpretation of the Detective's cant actually informs the reader on the state of the investigation, which has previously reached a dead-end when Mill chose to solely focus on traffic wardens. Though quite unfamiliar with the case, he apparently manages to solve it before the devoted police force – not only hinting at their incompetence in the midst of local politics quagmire but also reaffirming the position of the artist as an agent of disclosure. The dive into Smitty's thoughts as he reads the local paper hints at the importance of this role, for social commentary is allowed to emerge on the page: "The front page was about a stabbing at a bus stop, a black teenager. Smitty had long been of the view that if middle-aged white people were stabbed with the regularity of black teenagers, the army would be on the street." (390) By addressing a rampant societal issue through Smitty's thoughts, Lanchester puts in perspective the whole postcard campaign. If his association between racism and knife crime draws attention to the true state-of-the-nation[239], the inclusion of his comment in the novel as a whole goes to show how discourse can be re-arranged to present a certain reality. In fact, while the stabbing makes up the front page of the newspaper, the postcards are relegated to a "short item" (391) on the fifth page, even though they are the very subject of Lanchester's novel. The discrepancy between the micro-local level of the campaign reflected in the smallness of the blurb and the macro-object of the novel and the various chapters that compose it illustrates how language can

[239] Knife crime in the United Kingdom has been continuously increasing for the last decade. The Home Office has only started gathering specialised data in April 2009 (see https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/knifecrimesfrom2000to2010) but a report has been published by the House of Commons in January 2023, showing the necessary data on knife crimes between 2010 and 2023 in England and Wales (https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04304/SN04304.pdf).

help maximise or minimise certain narratives, depending on the identity and background of its originator. By reversing the hierarchy of narratives in a polyphonic novel, Lanchester shows how micro-narratives can be a way to either contravene or serve totalisation, offering with his novel, a blown-up yet diversion take on the "short item" in the newspaper. Similarly, the other novels of the corpus reveal how the formation of both individual and society depends on discursivity: it is because the plasticity of language reflects the cultural, social and economic context that the conditions of possibility of responsibility can either be met or dissolved.

The inner diversity of the novels of the corpus and their fragmentation are emblematic of a "resistance to totalization and closure", making them ethical by nature. Rather than creating rigid identities – as Levinas would have it – they emphasise the contradictions and ambiguities not only of individuals but of language itself. They do operate in a "pataphysic manner", one which derails conventional forms and established knowledge. Their polyphonic and polysemic nature rebuts any attempt at uniformising the body politic, sparking instead suspicion towards any type of discourses. Either foreshadowing (West, Holtby, Smith) or epitomising (Wilson, Coe, Lanchester) Lyotard's plea for incredulity towards master narratives, state-of-the-nation novels give a voice to the particular. Yet, this focus on the individual and the intimate also exposes rapports of dominance that seek to homogenise the body politic and which can originate from a corrosive particularity. The investigative mission with which some of the artistic characters are endowed and their un/successful attempts at uncovering the truth that belie the respective plots of the novels raise the question of the performativity of the corpus itself when it comes to responsibility. Though they stage diversity and challenge normative behaviours and corrupted discourses, is it enough to make them ethical?

CHAPTER 9.
Towards Ethical Performativity?

Introduced in critical theory through the work of linguist John Langshaw Austin and further developed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies that Matter* (1993) or *Excitable Speech* (1997), the notion of performativity refers to the ability of language to induce particular actions or behaviours. While Austin's own seminal work enquires *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Butler contends that

> Performativity is [not] a singular "act," for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. […] Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names. (2011, xxi)

As evidenced by previous chapters, norms operate through repetition and internalisation. This is precisely, according to Butler, what leads to the performativity of gender as a "*stylised repetition of acts*" (Butler 1990, 191), destined to follow heteronormative codes of behaviour. The critical background of the term is deeply relevant to the imbrication of ethics and state-of-the-nation novels. A famous reader and critic of Austin, Jacques Derrida gives insight into what it can mean for literature to be performative,

> to invent something new in the form of acts of writing which no longer consist in a theoretical knowledge, in new constative statements, to give oneself to a poetico-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language, or which, in changing language, change more than language. (1992, 55)

Delineating the theoretical from the pragmatic, Derrida suggests that writing can be, for instance, as performative as the legislative. The former modifies language, insofar as it does not only enact prohibition or permission – hence inherently reshaping behaviours – but also creates forms of precedence that change how a given society functions. Derrida's contention on a possible "poetico-literary performativity" leads to not only consider the imaginative power (and here Coleridge's "suspension of disbelief" still rings true) of literature but also to question its ethical *effects* in and on the body politic.

In their introduction to *Storytelling and Ethics. Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative* (2018), Hannah Meretoja and Colin Davis take stock of the existing criticism in literary theory, cognitive research and ethics studies, so as to ponder over the tangible impact of the arts on the individual and societal levels, conceding that

> [it] is notoriously difficult to measure the short-term effects of literature, and even more difficult to measure any long-term impact it may have; and even if reading literature does improve our "perspective awareness" or "perspective sensitivity", there is no guarantee that it leads us to ethical action. (6)

Meretoja and Davis point to the ambiguity of the power of literature. If its cognitive and socio-political repercussions are yet to be scientifically proven and measured[240], there is a general consensus on the fact that literature, as a representative medium, expands ethical and social horizons. Given the lack of reliable scientific data and the relativity of each reader's experience when confronted with fiction, the present research will not deal specifically with reader-response theory or affect theory, so as to avoid any form of totalisation or omission. Rather, Derek Attridge's work – himself a fervent reader and friend of Derrida – proves particularly relevant in the apprehension of performative state-of-the-nation novels. At the very beginning of *The Singularity of Literature*, Attridge underlines that "literature, understood in its difference from other kinds of writing (and other kinds of reading), solves no problems and saves no souls; nevertheless, […] it is effective, even if its effects are not predictable enough to serve a political or moral program." (4) Attridge insists on the fact that literature *alone* cannot modify the body politic: because the reading experience is so different from one individual to the other, it cannot be politically or morally effective, though its ethical implications are undeniable. One example from Lanchester's *Capital* perhaps best puts this inner ambiguity of literary performativity in perspective. After being detained in an immigration centre right outside of London, Quentina

[240] Meretoja and Davis refer to David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano's 2013 study "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind", which suggests that reading literature helps develop cognitive functions and feelings such as empathy. They nonetheless recall that "other researchers have been unable to verify the results." (5) In fact, Panero et al. have attempted at replicating the initial study in 2016 and have come to the conclusions that: "The possibility that reading a single brief passage might immediately improve a reader's social skills is exciting and worthy of investigation. However, after a careful study by three independent research groups based on a large number of observations, we are not confident that reading a short text of any kind can reliably improve theory of mind. Any immediate effect of reading on theory-of-mind abilities is likely to be fragile and depend not only on the individual reader and text, but also the relationship between the two. We are thus skeptical about concluding that reading a brief excerpt of literary fiction improves theory of mind in general. We certainly would not recommend any interventions on the basis of the current body of evidence. Nevertheless, given the universality of storytelling, we believe that narrative serves a deep human need and affects our lives in powerful and lasting ways. Rigorous future work should continue to investigate just how narrative exerts its power." (e53)

Mkfesi refuses to follow the advice of another woman on the need to read to bide her time. Right at the end of the novel, she muses on the power of literature itself and comes to this conclusion:

> A book couldn't help you out of the detention centre, or land like a helicopter and carry you off, or magically turn into a UK passport which gave you the right of residency. Escape was very precisely, very specifically what a book couldn't help you do. Not in any literal sense. And the literal sense of escape was the only one that interested Quentina. (566)

Quentina's political limbo is eventually embodied by the centre, as a "non-place" where she waits "through her non-time." (565) The paradoxical dissolution of both time and space within its walls reduces the scope of experience itself, as the pragmatic erases the figurative. Quentina's reflection on the power – or lack thereof – of literature actively questions the performativity of fictional narratives in the event of political turmoil. The closedness with which Quentina welcomes the other detainee's suggestion further weakens the cognitive and ethical development often associated with reading fiction. The fact that Lanchester's only illegal immigrant is the one dismissing reading altogether raises the issue of the responsibility of literature: if Quentina, as a fictional character, is part of the necessary representational diversity of the novel, her rejection of fiction as unpractical does cast doubt on the ethical performativity of literature, as defended by Attridge.

In this regard, if literature does "[open] readers' minds to others" (Keen x) and if there is indeed a plea for literary performativity *à la Derrida* to be made, state-of-the-nation novels and their political background offer an unmatched case study. In light of Lanchester's fictional rejection of novels and of the fragmentation of the reading experience, it is also essential to raise the issue of social and political privilege when weighing the ethical clout of state-of-the-nation novels and its transformative – albeit intangible – effects. As will be seen throughout these pages, the novels of the corpus offer their own take on ethically performative literature, either as a last possible act of resistance or as a distant, almost unreachable artistic ideal in the face of corruptive contexts. It is through this dual perspective that an apprehension of literary pragmatics can arise.

1. Positional ethics

During a conference made of "speakers selected to represent a wide cultural front of opposition to the growing fascist tyrannies" (*NLM* 383) where Margaret Matthews (a writer), Rupert (a comedian) and Quentin (a journalist) are set to speak, their younger brother Marcus meets with Jane Farquhar to listen to their peers. Whereas Marcus wonders whether his siblings will manage to have any impact on the listening crowd, the gallery owner cannot help but think that "It doesn't matter what they say. The arts are always hopeless politically, but it's very important that they should show solidarity." (387) Jane here echoes the earlier distinction between an actual political effect of the arts and a more idealistic one. Though their political performativity seems vain, their commitment against fascism almost sounds like a requirement. According to Jane's statement, while politics have to do with *praxis*, ethics remain purely abstract. If they apparently pertain to different spheres, ethics still appear as a supporting act for political decisions and actions. Jane's statement therefore highlights the ambiguity of the relationship between art, politics and ethics, which are distinct yet intertwined. As Attridge puts it,

> Literature – when it is responded to as literature – is not a political instrument, yet it is deeply implicated in the political. In its blocking of both the conventionally aesthetic and the instrumental, the literary work fails to answer to our habitual needs in processing language; it thus estranges itself, presents itself as simultaneously familiar and other, puts us under a certain obligation (to attend scrupulously, to suspend as far as we can our usual assumptions and practices, to translate the work into our terms while remaining aware of the necessary betrayal that this involves). To respond fully to a literary work is to be responsively and responsibly aware of that otherness, and of the demands it makes upon us. (2004, 18)

Attridge reinstates this peculiar relationship between the three domains, emphasising the ethical imperative that goes with reading literature. "Solidarity" within the arts therefore does not necessarily mean political action, but does suggest a form of ethical performativity which in turn could lead to political commitment. The echoes between Jane Farquhar's statement and Attridge's criticism allow to consider state-of-the-nation novels as embodiments of positional ethics, which *require* some effort against political idleness and compliance.

A. Aesthetics of attentiveness

In *The Poetics and Ethics of Attention in Contemporary British Narrative* (2023), Jean-Michel Ganteau claims that fictional writing is particularly effective when it comes to catching the reader's attention, for "on account of its characteristics like interruption, intensification, openness, the study of attention as both thematised and performed by the narrative of fiction provides for the reader an experiential knowledge of what is to attend and contributes to an ethics of literature." (n.p) The previous chapters of the present study concur with Ganteau's analysis, insofar as the destabilising effects of the novels of the corpus through fragmentation constitute, as has been shown, an ethical *praxis* of their own. Like Attridge, and in light of Yves Citton's study on *The Ecology of Attention* (2014), Ganteau focuses on fiction's ability to captivate its readers. Without denying any of the existing criticism on the compelling power of literary techniques, this section proposes to shift focus from *attention* to *attentiveness*[241]. While "attentiveness" will be used to refer to the responsible intent of the reader, "attention" will instead point to the cognitive span of time allocated to a particular task. Where attentiveness implies an already wilful engagement with the novels, attention is related to the socio-cultural context of the reader which can favour or impede the act of reading itself (see section II below). This distinction between the two phenomena is essential when studying the ethics of state-of-the-nation novels, for if they do use fragmentation as an ethical *praxis* meant to "[shift] ingrained modes of understanding" (Attridge 2004, 123), they also rely on a rather explicit demand on the reader to engage with their own ethical, social, and political context – seemingly contesting Suzanne Keen's contention that "fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers' feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world action." (6)

Keen's criticism – part of recent studies on affect theory in literature – implies that the bounds of the fictional novels do not call for their readers' ethical or political engagement with their own context. What Derrida proposes when likens the power of literature to that of the law are in absolute opposition with such a view. The novels of the corpus do use specific narrative modes which contradict Keen's observation, especially through their intermittent use of the second-person pronouns "you" and "we". Some instances occur in *The Return of the Soldier*, where Jenny Baldry directly addresses the reader. Describing Baldry Court for the first time,

[241] The distinction between *attention* and *attentiveness* comes from the concomitant reading of Attridge's *Singularity of Literature* and Citton's work on *The Ecology of Attention*.

she declares that "you probably know the beauty of that view" (4); relating her conversation with Margaret on Chris's condition, she wards off potential reproach: "You may think we were attaching an altogether fictitious importance to what was merely the delusion of a madman. But. […] (58) According to French linguist Sandrine Sorlin in *The Stylistics of 'You': Second-Person Pronoun and its Pragmatic Effects* (2022), "The use of 'you' establishes a personal relationship between human beings." (2) By opening up dialogue with the reader, the use of the pronoun not only creates a relationship between reader and narrator, but it also generates an ethical demand upon the reader, whose presence is not only acknowledged but made essential to the reception of the narrative. Here, the reader is always already considered familiar with the setting ("you probably know", suggesting the reader knows Harrowgate and its surroundings; "you may think", implies that the reader is as much a witness as Jenny), which further complicates their inclusion in the narrative sphere. This puts in perspective Jenny's own unreliable narrative, which hinges on versatile, contradictory judgements (in the same sentence, for instance, she says that Margaret is "not so bad [….] Yet she was bad enough." (10)), as well as on incomplete stories (she claims she "was barred out of that day" (34) when Chris tells her about his last day with Margaret fifteen years prior to the main narrative, leading her to "[try] to derive the real story.") For Elizabeth Reese Covington,

> Jenny's protean narrative produces the deep uncertainty that pervades the text and questions the possibility of objective reports of memory in any kind of writing. […] Objects, people, and events lack substance or absolute value, and are instead defined at her whim. Her mercurial perceptions demonstrate that subjective bias, the dreaded foe of mechanical observation, is not stable within the subject because it changes over time. This narrative casts doubt on the possibility of an unbiased narrator, not only because Jenny is changingly biased, but also because she portrays every other character, including the medical men, as biased. (69)

The instability of the narrative creates a double ethical imposition on the reader: not only are they occasionally interpellated by Jenny (therefore beckoning the reader in an almost Levinasian manner), but they are tasked with deciphering her fragmented narrative thread. Though the ethical demand of *The Return of the Soldier* could very well stop here and not engage with the reader's place within the "real world", Reese Covington's analysis does hint at the performativity of the novel within its own socio-political context. Though she focuses on post-1990s British narratives, Emily Horton provides a clarifying insight into the necessary intertwinement of unreliable narration, ethics and politics, for "what is paramount in these fictions is an understanding of unreliability not simply as a means of critiquing language but

also of exploring subjectivity, and of positioning this in relation to a larger socio-political context." (43) By using a female unreliable narrator, West forces her (contemporary) reader to reconfigure their thought and behaviour schemata to accommodate an unusual narrator whose speech would otherwise be illegitimate, subsidiary, dismissed. The use of the "you" pronoun therefore does create a particular relationship between reader and narrator – one which does not safeguard the former from the realities that await them at the closing of the book.

Jenny's narrative strategy reaches its climax towards the end of the novel, when she resorts to the following aphorism: "There is, you know, really room for all of us; we each have our peculiar use." (67) Jenny here combines the use of the two pronouns: if the expression "you know" consolidates the narrator/reader relationship through hypothetical sharing, the use of "us" and "we" is the only occurrence in the novel, the referential of which goes beyond the sphere of the novel. Rather employed to speak about the characters of Baldry Court and their interactions, this singular case shatters the narrative boundaries of *The Return of the Novel*, as the collective "we" is unidentified. Occurring after describing the different roles filled by the women of the novel, Jenny's statement therefore expands from the microcosm of Baldry Court to the macrocosm of the nation and its rigid gender structure. Quickly coming back to the use of the plural pronoun in the marketing world, Sandrine Sorlin argues that the "evolution towards a collective 'we-ness' seems to go one step further by transcending the I-you dyad via a more inclusive 'we' (you and I) pronoun, creating a fictitious community of spirit through the product (or the brand)." (3) Although the use of the plural pronoun in *The Return of the Soldier* could argue in favour of the creation of a national "imagined community", *pace* Benedict Anderson, the counter techniques analysed throughout the present study allow to see West's collective "we" as an ethical injunction which seeks to discursively equalise[242] and engage politically: by foregrounding the imbrication of the "you and I" dyad, the narrative reinvests responsibility as inescapable. It is because there is no doing away with this intertwinement that each individual has their "peculiar use."

If West's demand on her reader is rather subtle and dispersed throughout her novel, Winifred Holtby operates in a more obvious yet similar manner through her main character,

[242] I consciously choose not to speak of universalism or universality, which would go against the untotalising aesthetics analysed throughout this study. Furthermore, the pronoun "we", though collectively binding, is followed by the adjective "peculiar": by emphasising both the collective and the singular, ethics as recognition of otherness come into full force here.

Sarah Burton. Speaking to Mrs Beddows after realising the fate which awaits Lydia Holly, her "revelation" (*SR* 197) about the state of the South Riding (and of the country in general) gives way to a series of political parallelisms which almost sounds like an appeal to the reader: "If the law is oppressive, we must change the law. If tradition is obstructive, we must break tradition. If the system is unjust, we must reform the system." (*SR* 197) This ternary structure (oppressive law/change; obstructive tradition/break; unjust system/reform) delineates Sarah's own political engagement and reflects the oppositional stance she has against Carne throughout the novel. The successive anaphors (based on the repetition of the same grammatical structure "if… we must…" and similar adjectives on both ends of each statement) not only make up Sarah's own political agenda but also weave an ethical bond of responsibility through the use of the expression "we must", which endows Holtby's aesthetics of attentiveness with a directive function. This injunction is echoed in Sarah's constant repetition of the Spanish proverb "'Take what you want', says God. 'Take it and pay for it'", which is also the epigraph to the novel. The nagging presence of the proverb throughout the novel evidences Sarah's conviction on the necessity for individuals to "play [their] own Providence – for [themselves] and for future generations." (197) Although the novel stages Sarah's growing flexibility as she navigates the politics of the South Riding, the protagonist's aphoristic rhetoric does condemn society's (and therefore the reader's) idleness in the face of injustice and inequality[243] – therefore directly questioning the reader's own propensity to social and political action. The concomitant analysis of *South Riding* and *The Return of the Soldier* suggests that the aesthetic of attentiveness of the corpus oscillates between conspicuousness and dispersion, while always taking back the reader to their own positions towards ethics and commitment.

Whereas West offers a rather pre-emptive state-of-the-nation novel as regards its ethical demand upon the reader, Winifred Holtby introduces the latter in a more discernible manner, especially through the stark contrast between its two main characters, Sarah Burton and Robert Carne, equally vocal in their contempt for the other's side. As the genre evolves throughout the decades, it seems like the visibility of the authors' aesthetic of attentiveness has been increasing, as exemplified by Stevie Smith's *The Holiday*. Celia's recurrent pleas against the current state of English affairs amidst the post-war, the beginning of the Cold war and the independence of India leads her, like her predecessors, to reflect upon ethical and political idleness. She laments

[243] The omniscient narrator even lets the reader know her indignation towards "a procession of generations submitting patiently to the old evils of the world – to wars, poverty, disease, ugliness and disappointment. […]" (197)

that “we are doing nothing, and so we wring our hands, the talk falls down, we are *activistes manqués*, it is Edwin and Morcar and the Earls of the North.” (14) Like Jenny Baldry and Sarah Burton, Celia uses a telescopic “we” which simultaneously encloses her friends and the country as a whole. This is evinced by the construction of the sentence itself: the expression “we are doing nothing” mirrors Celia’s charge (“we are *activistes manqués*”), which illustrates a possible shift from two types of “we” – the first one designating the party-goers and Celia herself, while the second occurrence could refer to English people in general. Her distinctive staccato rhythm lets her slowly move away from the context of the party she is attending (and notices that “the talk falls down”) to refer to the state of her country by mentioning Edwin and Morcar, respectively Earls of Mercia and Northumbria when William of Orange was threatening King Harold’s position in 1066. Peter Rex gives a detailed account of the Earls’ fate in *The English resistance: the underground war against the Normans* (2004), where he relates how Edwin and Morcar failed twice in resisting the Normans’ expansion: once at the moment of the Battle of Hastings (1066) when “England remained in a state of suppressed rebellion” and when “what was lacking was unity of purpose, determination to resist and any real agreement to unite behind an English king.” (31); a second time in 1068 when Edwin fomented a vain rebellion together with his brother Morcar, the Earls of the North and the Welsh, as King William was progressing towards the North and the Welsh border and denied Edwin “authority over his brother and one third of England. […]” (77) Rex explains that after the start of the rebellion, the two brothers “preferred peace to war and sought the king’s pardon” (77), before fleeing the country sometime between 1070 and 1071 (183). The mention of these two historical figures is not solely used as a symbol for England’s political in-betweenness in 1949, it is also a determinant characteristic of the novel’s call for responsibility and commitment. Almost like a medieval *exemplum*, the association of the 1949 English people and the two failed Earls aims to create a tangible proof in favour of a “real-world action.” Though the nature of the latter remains unclear throughout the novel, Smith’s aesthetic of attentiveness consists in denouncing the idleness (or the “frozenness” in keeping with Celia’s imagery p. 7) of her own people at a critical moment in history. She even goes so far as to indict the English, arguing that “The trouble with this country is that everybody is just bone lazy. England is a country given over to sloth.” (141) Celia’s incrimination highlights their lack of political interest and action, which in turn suggests a deterioration of ethical responsibility.

Astell and Snaith have a similar conversation in *South Riding*, as the socialist councillor cannot tolerate the capitalist, corrupted alderman:

> 'And you would destroy me?'
>
> 'Neck and crop.'
>
> 'You won't, you know. You'll only destroy yourself. The English don't take easily to revolution.'
>
> 'Do you think any revolution's been easy? All revolutions are bloody and barbarous. But so is life bloody and barbarous in present circumstances. As for me, I've tried acting the invalid and taking a cushy job, and I don't like it.' (442)

Astell's threat towards Snaith epitomises the clash between "gallant Labour" and "entrenched and armoured Capital" (3) mentioned at the beginning of the novel. This opposition evolves towards the end of Holtby's state-of-the-nation, where the microcosm of the Riding expands to matters of national interest, as the conversation shifts from the corrupted governance of the County Council to England's historical background. While Snaith foreshadows the unstoppable development of capitalism by counting on English conservatism, Astell hopes for a radical change – echoing not only Sarah's contention but Holtby's own socialism (Shaw 2012, 242; Regan 2012, 21). Through her socialist characters, Holtby not only voices her own concerns but also attempts at shaking up her reader's own perception of England, as Smith will do some thirty years after her. This demand is both cognitive and political, but is also deeply ethical, as in the words of Vera Nünning, "[the] narrative form thus induces us to comprehend contradictory positions, […] moving towards an 'ethics of alterity.'" (in Erll, Grabes and Nünning, 372) Astell's criticism of the state of the count(r)y further intertwines ethics and politics, as he likens the characteristics of revolution to those of life in the 1930s. Furthermore, his resignation from the Council reasserts the necessity for authenticity and uncompromising position ("I've tried acting the invalid and taking a cushy job, and I don't like it."), rejecting any type of compliance with oppressive systems. The socialist's last conversation with the corrupted Snaith, as well as the demand for responsibility exerted on the reader by the other novels of the corpus raises the question of how state-of-the-nation novels condemn unresponsiveness as a risk of collusion to which they can also fall prey.

B. Against complicity

As Dominic Head argues in his criticism of state-of-the-nation novels and more precisely of *What a Carve Up!*, that Jonathan Coe's novels "[acknowledge] that all citizens,

and all aspects of cultural life, have a role to play in fashioning an equitable kind of society." (Head 36) This assertion is emblematic of the state-of-the-nation genre as regards the implication of citizens (and therefore potential readers) in the sound development of the body politic – binding once more the ethical and the political. In Stevie Smith's *The Holiday*¸ Celia – through blanket interrogations – fears for the ethical nature of the country when she asks: "We are among corrupt people, how can we be innocent? How can we have a revolution and make a new world when we are so corrupt?" (131) This risk of degradation is one of Celia's *leitmotivs*, as she both regularly questions and condemns the corruption of the body politic. Not referring to a specific event, her sweeping judgement operates back and forth between her own position towards the government she works for and that of the rest of the population. A gradual annihilation unfolds within Smith's novel, from the desire to act, to a political and ethical paralysis, to a final complicity with a political system deemed inadequate by Celia and her retinue. The political crises at the heart of *The Holiday* are not solely the work of the people in charge, but rather a collective failure to be responsible and to keep politics ethically in check.

Middleman, Sukey Matthews's middle child in *No Laughing Matter*, is particularly insightful in this regard when he opens up a debate on pacifism with his father Hugh:

> Middleman, home for half-term, asked, "Has violence ever settled anything? What sort of people do we make ourselves if we answer force with force?"
>
> Hugh said, "That's all very well. But there comes a point, always has done throughout the history of civilization…"
>
> But civilization seemed especially to annoy Middleman, so that, wriggling on the sofa, he upset a box of chocolates on to the floor, yet he went on talking as he gathered them up.
>
> "Civilization! That seems to me pretty complacent, Dad. Isn't what's happening in Germany our fault as well, isn't the whole of what you call civilization smeared by it? And won't it be, so long as men can't find a non-violent technique?" (356)

Middleman operates one more change of scale (compared to Celia) by shifting the dialogue to the extent of humanity. Aside from his obvious pacifism and praise of non-violence, his plea against his father raises the issue of complicity and corruption on the national and international level. Denouncing his father totalising rhetoric (for Hugh uses the expression "always has done" and the encompassing word "civilisation"), Middleman points to the collective responsibility that lies behind historical events and, like Celia, associates idleness and inaction with, if not complicity, passive enablement. His rejection of violence implies, in this context, an ethical

recognition of the other's suffering which should trump political imbroglios. Celia shares a similar yet more pessimistic vision of the Second World War: "[…] there had to be a war, what else can there be when people are so corrupt? How in government can we keep the simplicity and the innocence, how can we do that? People govern, they are knaves, they are governed, they are simpletons." (*TH* 134) Moving to a more generalising tone, Celia prefigures Middleman's take on the conflict and on the mutual influence of the people and their government. In both Wilson's and Smith's state-of-the-nations, violence is associated with the corruption of the body politic, while the *idea* of government and civilisation should be likened to ethics and recognition. The impasse noticed by both characters is each time expressed by interrogative statements: Celia oscillates between rhetorical questions ("what else…") and actual interrogations which signify her being at a loss, whereas Middleman resorts solely to the former – suggesting that little room is left for doubt when it comes to the complicity of "civilisation". The doomed ethics diagnosed by Celia and Middleman find their paroxysm in Celia's final asyndeton ("People…") which not only illustrates the immutability of the situation (which can only result in corruption or complicity, depending on which side of the public sphere the individuals find themselves) but which also embodies the complete dissolution of ethical bonds between individuals *prior* to politics.

In *What a Carve Up!*, Michael Owen's lack of involvement – aside from the end of the novel – and indifference towards the politics of Thatcherite Britain evidences quite clearly an erasure of responsibility, as his trying to turn off (58) Fiona as he does his VCR exemplifies:

> 'You can't switch me off,' she said.
>
> 'Pardon?'
>
> 'You can't switch me off.'
>
> She nodded at my hands. I had gone back to the armchair opposite her and without realising it I had picked up the remote control for the video. It was pointed in her direction and my finger had strayed to the pause button. (58)

Michael's lack of self-awareness in his very first exchange with Fiona is not exclusively a symptom of his isolation. As Fiona is certainly dehumanised, so is Michael: his mechanical behaviour betrays his passive habit of watching the *What a Carve Up!* movie and exposes his unconscious replacement of human company by inanimate objects, whose proliferation have been enabled by the Winshaws themselves. This quiet disregard for the other's presence shows how deep the implication of the English individual, feared by Middleman and Celia, has gone

under Thatcherism. The fact that one of the Thatcherite siblings, Thomas, is himself a devotee of the VCR (307) and a voyeur (who manages to catch a glimpse of Shirley Eaton filming the movie) only reinforces Michael's own "complicity" (Su 2014, 1090). As John Su underlines:

> Owen's growing awareness of how global events and national economic policies have concrete, everyday consequences is the central trajectory of the second half of the novel. He ultimately recognizes that the responsibility for Fiona's death is not to be laid on the chance misfortune of illness or the underfunded National Health System, but on the totality of Thatcherism as part of a global neoliberal project – a project that he unwittingly supports in everyday activities from food choice to livelihood. (2014, 1090)

Michael's own indifference and late *anagnorisis* is symptomatic of the *zeitgeist* of the nation, the members of which don't "bloody [mind]. They all don't mind." (*WCU* 390) Indifference becomes synonymous with (passive) connivence, as both government and institutions are left unchecked by the population. In an essay entitled "The Paradox of Satire" (2010), Jonathan Coe reflects on the legacy of *What a Carve Up!* and on this problematic intertwinement:

> Of course, I did not expect this novel to change the world. Even I was not that naïve. […] When we write satire, […] we may try to believe that we are doing something that will disrupt the established order: we may try to believe that when they read our words, our political (and personal) enemies will shake in their boots, retreat into a corner to re-examine their own system of values, and emerge as reformed characters. […] Instead, […] it creates a space – a warm, safe, welcoming space – in which like-minded readers can gather together and share in comfortable laughter. The anger, the feelings of injustice which they might have been suffering beforehand, are gathered together, compressed and transformed into bursts of delicious, exhilarating laughter, and after discharging them they feel relieved, content and satisfied. An impulse which might have translated into action is therefore rendered neutral and harmless. It's no wonder that the rich and the powerful have no objection to being mocked. They, at least, understand the paradox of satire. We write it in the hope of changing the world. But in fact, it is one of the most powerful weapons we have for preserving the status quo. (in Coe 2013, n.p)[244]

Coe's retrospective underlines several discrepancies between the author's intent and the actual reception and effects of his novel. First assuming that "mockery was the best weapon" (*NLM* 293) through the development of satire, the sixteen years that separate *What a Carve Up!* from

[244] Coe bases his analysis of satire on a passage extracted from *What a Carve Up*, when Michael writes a literary review and declares: "We stand badly in need of novels, after all, which show an understanding of the ideological hijack which has taken place so recently in this country, which can see its consequences in human terms and show that the appropriate response lies not merely in sorrow and anger but in mad, incredulous laughter." (277) Narrator and author seem to concatenate here, as Coe manifestly tried (as evidenced by his essay) to produce such a novel. The irony of Michael's criticism lies in the fact that he himself fails to see his own implication in the "ideological hijack" that has unravelled in Britain at the time of his writing.

Coe's essay have made him realise how laughter is instead a conservative force in state-of-the-nation writing. The writer also points out a critical difference between the several recipients of his work, which ends up preaching to the converted rather than transforming or threatening the ones in power. Coe's mixed feelings towards his own novel adds complexity to the ethical performativity of state-of-the-nation novels: the ethical and political demand identified in the previous section is immediately dismissed after being answered by a small portion of readers who are already familiar with and undisturbed by the novel's agenda. The ethical responsibility triggered by the novel has thus a limited scope, both in terms of reach and effectiveness, resulting in Coe's final diagnosis on the preservation of the status quo. Stevie Smith's Celia comes to a similar conclusion, when she deplores that writers "are neither influencers nor leaders, they are indeed wholly unattended to." (*TH* 157) Celia's own diagnosis on the state of writers within the body politic highlights a double disintegration of the ethics of responsibility, as, on the one hand, the performativity of the writers' work fails, and as, on the other hand, the writers as *Others* are unrecognised, "unattended to".

These reflections on the power of literature, and more precisely on state-of-the-nation writing, underline society's complicity (mainly through indifference) with oppressive and unjust systems. The failure pinpointed by Coe is further illustrated by his own novel, as the murders perpetrated by Mortimer Winshaw on his family at the end of the novel prove to be more effective than the literary wake-up call initially intended by Michael. Lanchester's also further exemplifies Coe's torments in *Capital*, as characters other than Quentina reflect upon the power of art and evidence the indifference with which political works of art are met. When working on the "We Want You Have" postcards, Inspector Miller's colleague suggests that the campaign could very well be conceived as an artistic message: "'It could be an arty thing," said the DC. "You know, a performance. Something people are supposed to look at. To make them think, you know, stuff.'" (*C* 353) The constable's laborious attempt at reflection on the role of art only weakens the latter. If the repetition of "you know" aims at drawing parallels with the universal value of committed art, his hesitation (as shown by his erratic and short sentences) and his unfamiliarity with the domain (evidenced by the vague "thing" and "stuff") reveal just how widely ineffective such a reflective process can be. The attention-grabbing "you" of *The Return of the Soldier* seems far gone and replaced instead by an all-encompassing yet disincarnated pronoun that highlights the disconnection between the artist and the recipient. The use of the depreciative adjective "arty", along with the theoretical expression "supposed

to", proves the DC's own doubtfulness towards the performativity not only of the campaign itself, but of committed art as a whole.

The concomitant readings of the novels of the corpus let transpire an evolution of the positional ethics of the genre: if all attempt at triggering attentiveness, the post-Second World War novels seem more prone to offer pessimistic insight into the fragmented relationship between the arts and the body politic for one, between individuals and their governments for another. This multi-scale dissolution of ethics weakens the very performativity of state-of-the-nation novels: if the majority of the authors of the corpus reinstate the political necessity to read novels[245], they nonetheless share the same disillusion when it comes to their writings' actual effectiveness. As their call for responsibility remains unanswered, "unattended to", the study of state-of-the-nation novels uncovers the fragmented pragmatics of the relationship between novels, their authors and the reading public.

2. Fragmented Pragmatics?

As he goes to visit his editor friend, Patrick Mills, in order to discuss his book on the Winshaws, Michael Owen is confronted with Patrick's complete disillusion over the power of fiction in the cultural and socio-political climate of September 1990. The editor goes on a rant about the replacement of "*real* fiction" (*WCU* 102) by sensationalism:

> 'It's not enough to be stinking rich, land yourself one of the most powerful jobs in television and have two million readers paying good money every week to find out about the dry rot in you skirting-board: these people want fucking immortality! They want their names in the British Library catalogue, they want their six presentation copies, they want to be able to slot that handsome hardback volume between the Shakespeare and the Tolstoy on their living-room bookshelf. And they're going to get it. They're going to get it because people like me know only too well that even if we decide we found the new Dostoevsky, we're still not going to sell half as many copies as we would of any old crap written by some bloke who reads the weather on the fucking *television*!' (103)

At first specifically referring to Hilary Winshaw and her upcoming book, Patrick's diatribe quickly expands to the discrepancy between rich people and the ordinary Briton. If he initially condemns the former for their greed and hubris, he also indicts contemporary culture as well: the "classics" – Shakespeare and Tolstoy – cohabit with an unnamed weatherman who ends up

[245] See for instance Regan 2009, p.10.

being Patrick's epitome of the degradation of both the book industry and readership. Not only does he oppose "*television*" (the italics clearly echoing his disdain for the medium and its ever-growing clout) to literature in terms of quality, but he also points out how T.V. is gaining traction on books, which end up being submitted to the law of sensationalism. Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998) pushes this overtaking to the extreme, as the magnate of the now-turned-amusement-park country revels in the fact that "[art] had become the entertainment business." (40) Patrick's invective and Barnes's disguised warning are especially resonant when considering the performativity of state-of-the-nation novels, insofar as if they do make a demand upon their reader and challenge the *status quo*, it remains to be seen whether their call is even heard (or read, in that case). This last section hinges on a different angle from the rest of the present study. Since state-of-the-nation novels present such a challenge when it comes to ethical performativity, it is necessary to focus on what reading involves today. While the novels of the corpus still inform this analysis, this section will discuss current criticism in ethics and cultural studies in greater depth, relying on monographs of the aforementioned fields and on statistics based on different surveys conducted on the British people and their reading habits. Last but not least, the very last part of this chapter will attempt, in the form of a short essay, to reflect on academic interpretation and its own ethical performativity.

A. State-of-the-nation novels as cultural objects

In Lanchester's state-of-the-nation, Smitty's assistant Parker believes his famous (yet anonymous) employer does not understand the meaning of art, passionately stating to his girlfriend Daisy that "[Art is] about attention." (*C*, 226) Though he confuses ethical and social recognition (claiming that art should be "making people visible" (226)) and a desire for fame ("[people] wanted their fifteen minutes" 226), Parker's statement hints at the ambiguous relationship between art and attention: while attention can initially refer to "the mental power or faculty of attending" (*OED*) – therefore depending on readers – it can also underline, in the expression "to catch one's attention", i.e. the struggle for a work of art, a state-of-the-nation novel, to stand out as a cultural object. Citton observes a shift in the reading paradigm (i.e., numbers of books/numbers of readers) towards the end of the twentieth century, arguing that

> [The] attention economy seems, from the middle of the 1990s, to have established itself as a great reversal taking the form of a challenge: the new scarcity is no longer to be situated on the side of material goods to be produced, but on the attention necessary to consume them. (8)

Under capitalist economies, the book as a cultural object is being massively produced, along with other media which also come to challenge the very cognitive disposition to *sit with* a book. Reading has never been more accessible, yet it is being more and more difficult to 1) choose reading among "competing forms of attention" (Connor 12); 2) choose what to read in all of the literature available (see MacDonald in Nash et al. 594); 3) be *focused* enough to go through a whole book. The complication brought about by these three factors has certainly been heightened by the successive development of television and of the Internet, but mass production itself in fact finds its origin during the interwar period, when reading became a matter of public interest.

In "Reading and Ownership", Andrew Nash, Claire Squires and Shafquat Towheed come back on this issue, as evidenced in the following passage which is essential to quote at length:

> This growth was abundantly visible to inter-war cultural commentators like Q.D. Leavis. In her book *Fiction and the reading public* (1932), Leavis began with the line: "In twentieth-century England not only everyone can read, but it is safe to add that everyone does read." A dramatic increase in the sale of national daily newspapers – from 3.1 million copies a day in 1918 to 10.6 million twenty years later – was only the most conspicuous indicator of the growth of the reading public. The expansion of library systems brought books to within a wider reach of the population, while in the 1930s the spread of book clubs and sixpenny paperbacks increased book ownership. Periods of depression and unemployment brought greater surplus time for reading. At the height of the Depression in 1931 the *Publishers' Circular* reported an "amazing increase in the amount of reading done by the general public." The inter-war period was also marked by a preoccupation with investigating and measuring the activity of reading. Alongside Leavis's academic study, Mass-Observation surveys, commenced in 1937, attempted to capture information about what, why and how people read. (in Nash et al., 234)

Several factors intersect here: public demand, mass production, historical events and public measures for reading (such as compulsory schooling, increased alphabetisation, development of public libraries). The tremendous expansion of the reading public was not only permitted by the mass industrialisation of printing[246] and therefore by the availability of reading material, but

[246] It must be noted that the publishing industry, in the early decades of the twentieth-century, was marked by heavy censorship and irregular income for writers. Nash and Squires come back on this complicated relationship: "In the inter-war period authors and publishers were constrained by a commercial market that was dominated by circulating libraries which either refused to stock books or forced authors to tailor their work to the perceived demands of readers. […] Along with journalism and the book trade, twentieth-century literary authors typically combined writing with related employment, such as librarianship (e.g. Philip Larkin and Angus Wilson) or teaching (e.g. W. H. Auden, Cecil Day-Lewis and William Golding). The spread of higher education in the 1960s was a significant development. Poets, in particular, benefited from residencies and lectureships for new creative

was also due to the politico-economic context of the Great Depression that provided both time and resources which multiplied the number of readers in England. This helps nuance Citton's contention, as to the ratio between supply and demand. Stephen Connor does recall that in her study, Q.D. Leavis was also weary of the massification of books:

> The result of this might seem to bear out the gloomy prognosis made by Q. D. Leavis in her *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), and repeated at intervals ever since: that the publishing of fiction would not be able to resist the general corruption of modern capitalism. Publishers would come to depend more and more upon low quality formula fiction, designed to produce maximum sales in the shortest possible time, sales maintained by the crass stimulation and manufacture of markets by advertising and promotion. (18)

Connor hints here at the stranglehold publishing houses would have over writers and over the quality of writing – echoing here the lament of Patrick Mills in *What a Carve Up!* What these reviews share is a common sense of threat to the act of reading (both in quality and quantity) by the economic structure. Interestingly enough, the "time" factor, created by the Great Slump, suggests that a slowing-down of the capitalist system also meant more time for reading. Without denying the high unemployment rate of the period (8,4 % in the 1920s; 12,3% in the 1930s; Carnevali and Strange 14), this forced change of economic practices informs on the influence of the economic structure upon reading habits (see II.2 below). Nash, Squires and Towheed recall the influence of the socio-economic structure upon the act of reading, through an analysis of the 1946 Mass-Observation survey:

> The most common reason for not reading books was lack of time, followed by fatigue, lack of interest, bad eye-sight, and an inability to read well. Unsurprisingly, working-class readers were most likely to complain about a lack of time for reading, and long working hours no doubt contributed to the finding that an 'inability' or 'lack of desire' to 'concentrate' was 'a very real reason' for not reading. (Nash et al. 246)

The differences between English classes observed in the novels of the corpus also informs on the place of reading and books as cultural objects in the life of the country. Though Nash, Squires and Towheed do see an improvement in the surveys undertaken in the 1950s and in the 1960s (thanks in part to the expansion of higher education and public libraries, see 246), the later decades that concern the present study have seen a rather progressive decline. If the radio

writing courses. […] What authors craved was a steady income while they wrote. A lucky few secured this through special financial arrangements with publishers." (in Nash et al. 108-110)

– and especially the BBC – and the book make-up a "symbiotic relationship" (Nash et al. 259), the arrival of the television slowly drew away readers from their books[247]. Privatisation, the free-market and questions of accessibility have therefore become part and parcel of the reading paradigm, with the Internet (through the increase targeted algorithms, social media and big-sellers such as Amazon, see McDonal in Nash et al. 594) adding a new dimension to an already fragile relationship.

If there is indeed a cognitive challenge imposed by an increased use of screens and internet-related content[248], recent surveys about reading habits in the United Kingdom tend to suggest that Britons still rank reading in their favourite activities. In a combined 2013 study, DJS Research and the BookTrust have found out that 28% of the 1,400 Britons interviewed were reading daily, while in their June 2023 Press release, the Publishing Association revealed that

> Second only to watching TV (54%), 33% of respondents say that books offer them the best form of escapism when they are having a bad day. This is ahead of streaming TV (32%), looking at social media (27%), listening to radio (24%), going to the pub (21%), going to the cinema (16%) and listening to a podcast (14%). (n.p)

If 33% of the surveyed population still enjoys reading over other types of media, there is a notable discrepancy in the ten years that separate the two studies, for the Booktrust research had shown that not all would have rather watched a movie or would have rather gone on the internet than reading a book: "over a quarter [of respondents] (27%) agreed that they prefer the internet and social media to reading books. Just less than half (45%) admitted to preferring television or DVDs to reading." (n.p) Though the proportion of individuals preferring social

[247] See Nash et al. p.261: the authors do note that though most households had a television in the 1950s, real noticeable change in reading habits occurred in the late 1960s – early 1970s. In "Books and the Mass Market (Nash et al. 593-604, Ronald McDonald argues that this evolution was partly due to the fact that "the culture of Reithianism (the vision of the public section broadcasting propounded by Lord Reith, Director General of the BBC) and its attempts in the mid-twentieth century to resynthesise the public sphere, to bring a wide, enlightened population together under a shared culture, lost its momentum in the closing decades." (594) This is further illustrated in *What a Carve Up!*, as the Winshaws actively work in favour of the privatisation of the BBC (*WCU* 69, 82).

[248] See for instance Adam Gazzaley, Larry D. Rosen, *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World* (2016): respectively a psychologist and a neuroscientist, they dive into behavioural cognitive theory and see how our attention is wired – due to learned behaviours throughout mankind – to perceive and avoid threats. Technology rewrites this behaviour by creating constant attention-catchers that prevent us from focusing, like notifications for instance.

media over books is the same, television seems indeed to have taken the upper hand on reading as an activity.

This quick historical overview of reading habits throughout the period under study reveals how the latter are submitted to the socio-economic framework of their time. The development of production or consumption technologies always modify the reading paradigm, bringing new parameters in the relationship between readers and books. Nash, Squires and Towheed note an evolution from the 1914-1945 to the 1950s and beyond: the two World Wars and the economic Depression of the 1930s were met with a greater interest in reading, since there were "fewer alternative outlets for leisure, reading became an important form of distraction." (Nash et al. 232) Progressively from the 1950s on, reading was seen solely as a pastime that was soon superseded by other forms of media or of entertainment. The researchers also underline a difference in gender reading habits in the 1950s and 1960s, when men were more prone to seek "instructional" reading while women were rather looking for forms of escapism (262).

The latter seems to be a counter-productive force in terms of ethical performativity. The Reading Agency, in their 2015 *Literature Review*, defines escapism as such: "seeking distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy." (39) This conscious withdrawal from "unpleasant realities" seems to discard the genre of state-of-the-nation novels altogether, for if their links with realism are complex and often contested, they are nonetheless based on familiar "structures of feelings" (Williams), aiming at shaking up habits, "[presenting themselves] as simultaneously familiar and other", to come back to Attridge. If there is still a small but significant proportion of readers in the British population, emphasis should therefore be on *what* they are reading. In a 2020 survey on "common reading habits" among Britons, the market research company YouGov found out that though most of the interviewees are keener on fiction compared to non-fiction, "Brits are most tempted by biographies and memoirs (26%) in terms of non-fiction, and fiction readers tend to opt for crime and thriller novels (33%)." (n.p.) In fact, the genres closest to state-of-the-nation novels – Historical Fiction / Comedy and Satire – respectively ranked at the 6th and 8th positions, out of sixteen identified categories. This trend in reading choices schematically evidences the distinction between two tendencies observed by The Reading Agency, which distinguishes "reading for pleasure" and "reading for empowerment" (i.e. "increasing strong beliefs and agency to act on them" 18). While state-of-the-nation novels would fall into the two categories,

it seems that the available data analysed by The Reading Agency reveals a lack of evidence when it comes to pragmatic ethics:

> While there were few retrieved studies that related to a general adult population, those that were found indicated that reading remains a popular leisure activity. Indeed, enjoyment, relaxation and escapism were often cited as key rewards and outcomes of reading. […] Beyond enjoyment, there appears to be an emerging evidence base relating recreational reading to increasing understanding of self and social identities, empathy, and knowledge of other cultures. Survey findings indicate a positive association between recreational reading and relatedness, community cohesion and increasing social capital, although further research is required to extend our understanding of how reading functions to bring people closer together. (12)

The ethical dimension of novels *per se* seems to reach the reading public and have a positive cognitive and emotional impact. The Reading Agency's report corroborates Attridge's contention that literature is indeed *effective*. Yet, the report also echoes Coe's own disillusion with the power of satire: the fact that there is little data available when it comes to reading for empowerment (28-29) and that satires are less popular among the reading public *tend to suggest* that state-of-the-nation novels, though numerous on the book market (Coe 2012), have a limited performative reach. This a priori disjunction of the reading paradigm and the socio-economic evidence presented by critics and researchers calls to further dive into the pragmatics of responsible reading, focusing on reader identity and what it means for ethical performativity.

B. Responsible reading?

Ronald McDonald starts his chronologic criticism of "Books and the mass market" by coming back to E.M. Forster's allegoric Leonard Bast:

> In his 1910 novel *Howard's End*, E.M. Forster kills off the lover-middle-class Leonard Bast by having a bookcase collapse upon him. Like many real working men and autodidacts of the Edwardian period, the hapless Bast craved books and culture. In *The intellectual of the British working classes* Jonathan Rose reads Bast as representative of a whole reading class at the beginning of the twentieth century, one that saw reading books as a path to knowledge and education and a clear opportunity for elevation, social mobility and freedom. His death, then, seems a bitterly ironic image of the relationship between books and class power. Books and high culture are a means for individual self-realisation and self-advancement within existing social structures. They are also, however, constitutive of class difference and

> hierarchy, a sign of privileged knowledge, social status and standing. (Nash et al. 593)[249]

Leonard Bast therefore appears as a cursed agent of social mobility, who strives for elevation but who is metaphorically caught up by the socio-economic realities of his time. MacDonald indexes a persistent dichotomy at the heart of the reading paradigm: if books can help improve one's social, cultural and economic background, their accessibility and the desire to read is limited by these very same conditions. The Reading Agency's *Literary Review* does underline that "Several studies show a positive association between reading for pleasure and the acquisition of transferable skills, (skills which might boost potential for employability and active participation in society)" (26), here hinting at the socio-economic tangible effects of reading. This is corroborated by the think-tank DEMOS's research on the need to create a "society of readers" (2018), as

> Evidence reviews consistently find that being able to read and write well aids inclusion in communities and in society more widely. It leads to better GCSE results, boosting the chances of upward social mobility. To be sure, reading alone does not guarantee positive social mobility. Nevertheless, it seems that without a capacity to read, write and engage in literacy practices necessary to understand and challenge power, that upward mobility is less likely. (24)

Reading, when accessible, creates a virtuous social cycle: not only are cognitive and empathetic abilities increased, but reading also leads to more favourable living conditions. However, DEMOS's warning as to the contextual hindrances towards the activity exposes the link between (not) reading and challenging the status quo: the activity of reading gives more insight (both by exposure to other cultures, ethnicities, etc. (*The Literature Review* 12) and by cognitive development) into ingrained practices and normative behaviours. There could be, thus, a fundamental correlation between the activity of reading and the ethical responsibility aestheticised by state-of-the-nation novels. Jonathan Coe's comment on the effects of satire comes to mind again, as he argues that

> everybody who disliked [*What a Carve Up!*] disliked it because they did not agree with its politics. Everybody who did like the book liked it because they already

[249] It must be noted that MacDonald himself uses the term "high culture" to recall the differences made in the 1920s and 1930s between popular fiction and classics: he underlines the influence of F.R. Leavis (also thoroughly analysed by Gibson, 1999) in distinguishing literature from the developing magazines and movies changing the leisure landscape at the time, though still advocating "education and dissemination." (598) These cultural oppositions will not be dealt with in this section, which will rather focus on how reading and interpreting literature is still very much influenced by class.

> agreed with everything that it said. In other words, my attempt to use laughter as an agent for change had failed completely. (n.p.)

Perhaps the existing and future research on reading habits can create a third way for the reception of satiric modes of writing, where the change sought by Coe (and potentially other writers of state-of-the-nation novels) actually lies in the creation of a *possibility* for challenge. What these reviews and Coe's own comments reveal is that hindrances to the performativity of novels are not to be found directly in the digitisation of culture or lack of attention *per se* but should rather be located in individuals' *habitus*, which in turn favours the use of other forms of entertainment over reading. As suggested by the 2013 BookTrust survey, "In terms of attitudes to digital technology, the lower their social-economic group, the more likely people are to think that the internet and computers will replace books and to prefer TV, DVDs, the internet and social media to reading books." (3) The authors of the report do draw attention to the need for more detailed research on the association between lower socio-economic status and the consumption of digital media: while this phenomenon is a risk to be taken into account, the focus of the present section lies on the socio-economic mechanisms which can turn this detected risk into ingrained experience.

Though the pleasure of reading is not dependent on class (*The Literature Review*, 11), socio-economic status does define how often one reads, as the successive surveys under study here have shown. The BookTrust's report, for instance, comes to the conclusion that "Those who never read books live in areas of greater deprivation and with more children in poverty" (4), and that "frequent book readers live in areas with lower levels of deprivation, […] In turn, respondents who never read books live in the more deprived areas. […]" (39) This evinces the fact that the act of reading itself is highly dependent on one's context: the higher the economic status, the more likely people will take on reading. Accessibility not only to books but to the act of reading itself is highly determined by the accumulation (or lack thereof) of the different types of capital (economic, social and cultural) identified by Bourdieu. Echoing the sociologist's conception of cultural capital, the generational data found by the BookTrust, the Reading Agency and the think-tank DEMOS show how reading habits are *learned* and *transmitted* from parents to children. In fact, DEMOS researchers have revealed that "reading is one of the most important mechanisms through which privileged parents pass on advantage to their children" (22), confirming the results of the BookTrust in 2013 according to which "People who were read to and encouraged to read as children are significantly more likely to

read as adults, both to themselves and to their own children." (4) Reading forms part of a cultural *habitus*, as parents from more comfortable backgrounds have themselves been encouraged to read and are more likely to reproduce this behaviour with their own children. The correlation between socio-economic status and reading partly explains Coe's frustration with the readers of *What a Carve Up!*, whose reactions to the novel make up their own form of *habitus*: as now materialised by the algorithms of Google, Amazon, and other big tech companies, our socio-cultural choices are highly influenced by our entourage. As McDonalds underlines,

> Quite often, tastes in books are already anticipated by our demographic and social position, often laced through with more local or boutique forms of snobbery than the old highbrow distinctions – the idea of 'cool' defined by our friends, peers, social class and generation, the choices which Amazon, Facebook and Google will steer us towards with the algorithms that often define our selection horizons. (604)

Without diving into the political repercussions of such automated selection, the reading context of individuals needs to be taken into account in order to understand the performativity of novels. It must be noted that pointing out how book accessibility is indirectly conditioned by our cultural formations does not signify that reading is reserved to a certain class or that performativity is inherently limited. Quite contrary, this aims to set the baseline for what is *needed* to "unleash [reading's] transformative power." (DEMOS 9)

In "Literature's Versions of Its Own Transmission of Values" (2008), Angela Locatelli focuses on the performativity of novels, and more precisely on what ties literature to ethics, on the fact that

> The experience of literature […] increases our ability to deal with events, norms, and before them, with what gives them meaning and value: i.e. language. [Literature's] value is not utilitarian and pragmatic, but it lies in its criticality, i.e. in the fact that, while representing actions and characters, literature foregrounds the workings of language in the process of subjectivization. In this specific sense literature connects to ethics. (in Erll, Grabes and Nünning, 30)

If I share Locatelli's vision of literature in the psychological malleability and ethical connection that it provides, I remain wary of the dismissive use of the term "pragmatic". Locatelli, given the rest of her analysis, aims at suggesting that literature cannot be reduced to perceivable actions (distinguishing but not opposing social *praxis* and ethical *semiosis*). Limiting literature in such a manner seems indeed counter-productive, but there does exist a certain form, albeit

fragmented, of literary *pragmatics* that lie in reading habits and the accessibility to books. The decrease of regular readership in the UK is a good indicator of this phenomenon, which *does not* stem from a failure of literature but rather of other contextual constituents of the experience of reading. This assessment came to the surface when reading the aforementioned reports on reading habits and Suzanne Keen's preface to her *Empathy and Reading*, where she states:

> [Consider] the commonplace that first-person fiction more readily evokes feeling responsiveness than the whole variety of third-person narrative situations. Even a college sophomore with a few weeks' training in theoretical terms can tell you that within the category of first-person narratives, empathy may be enhanced or impeded by narrative consonance or dissonance, unreliability, discordance, an excess of narrative levels with multiple narrators, extremes of disorder, or an especially convoluted plot. Genre, setting, and time period may help or hinder readers' empathy. Feeling out of sorts with the implied readership, or fitting it exactly, may make the difference between a dutiful reading and an experience of emotional fusion. (ix)

Keen's analysis of the potential dichotomy between the intended readership and the actual semiotics that are derived from a novel is not what needs to be discussed here. Rather, attention needs to be brought to the fact that "*even* a college sophomore" (my emphasis) could come up with her own valid narrative interpretation. Yet, it should be underlined, especially in the context of the United Kingdom, (or that of the United States, in the case of Keen) that being a college sophomore always already entails a certain socio-economic status that conditions not only the experience of reading, but the act of *interpreting*. Attridge directs his criticism in a similar manner when he argues

> A necessary condition for a full response to the literary work therefore includes careful attention to, inter alia, the operation of reference, metaphor, intention, and ethics (prerequisites for the responsible reading of a text of any kind, as one relates it to its numerous contexts, past and present), since only through such attention can the work's staging of these relations be apprehended and shared. But this is not a sufficient condition: to go no further would be to treat the text as history, reportage, confession, sermon, or some other type of nonliterary discourse. Only in working through the performance of these operations can one do justice to the work as a work of literature. (2004, 108)

Both Keen and Attridge insist on the necessity to interpret and to pay attention to form in order to answer ethically to a work of art, to "do justice" to the novel that lies under the reader's eyes. Of course, as academics, we are absolutely and resolutely intent on deciphering the techniques of the writers and stories that lead us to choose this career. We defend, like Keen and Attridge, both the affective, the ethical and the literariness of the works we dissect – the present study

hopefully being a tangible incarnation of this *special* relationship to novels. Yet, when reading the (nonetheless crucial) criticisms quoted above, one cannot help but realise the privilege that lies in the meticulous appreciation of how "empathy may be enhanced or impeded by narrative consonance or dissonance" or of the "operation of reference, metaphor, intention, and ethics" of a specific literary work. If responsible reading depends on these abilities, then it cannot be *ethical*, insofar as access to the performativity of novels will be limited and elitist, for the Higher Education Institutions that allow access to such depth and recognition are themselves made unreachable in the United Kingdom. Diane Reay, a sociologist devoted to analysing the place of the working-class within all levels of education, insists that

> English education is class divided. Of course there are fractions within the upper, middle and working classes, and flickerings and fluctuations at the boundaries of class divisions. But underlying these myriad internal class fractions, and movement at the edges, is a stark hierarchical divide between the upper, middle and working classes that has persisted throughout the history of English education. (2017, 152)

She contends that the class-divide is very much present from early education to university, and though there are a few exceptions who manage to make their way into private schools or Oxbridge, the psychological impact of this difference is noticeable (155). Though researchers concur on the fact that higher education had been made more accessible in the 1960s and during Tony Blair's mandate, the fragmentation of education in the United Kingdom is still blatant, for

> A neoliberal ideology of instrumentalism, corporatization, and free markets now dominates the governance of [Higher Education Institutions] in the US and UK and in many other countries around the world. […] less advantaged groups are more likely to attend less selective [Higher Education Institutions] and to do so with a transactional rather than transformative motivation. This cycle places them at a further disadvantage in relation to those from more advantaged groups who can attend more selective institutions that provide more credentials that are highly esteemed by employers. Consequently, in many cases, the financial costs of entering the white-collar labor force have simply been ratcheted up, at the expense of socially/economically disadvantaged people, who must now achieve higher credentials for essentially the same positions in the status hierarchy. The greater expense of credentialism is less of a problem for those from advantaged backgrounds who have the resources to finance longer educational careers and obtain more prestigious credentials to take the labor market. (Côté and Pickard 4)

The reproduction of class, as theorised by Bourdieu, comes into full force under the neoliberalisation of education and its different institutions: students from higher socio-economic class have better access and better opportunities, but also a better choice when it

comes to their choice of degree. In this configuration, there is little room for literary studies, and therefore for responsible and performative reading. This is when Locatelli's warning against an "utilitarian" vision of literature comes into perspective: in the current neoliberal context and the marketisation of universities, the humanities are being more and more relegated to the background. The performative, transformative, ethical propensity of literary works – one of the cornerstones of the humanities – is being overshadowed by the fabricated necessity to be part of a competitive economy: this phenomenon therefore opposes wealth (Sunak 2023) to "enrichment" (Guill 2023)[250] and is backed by governmental policies that fail to support their most vulnerable students.[251]

Academics therefore have to remain careful with universalist, totalising visions of literature and of interpretation: both experiences are subjected to socio-economic contexts and are at a constant risk of being limited, rendered inaccessible, or dismissed as "unnecessary". It is because "[the] storytelling practices of the arts […] often encourage understanding the specificity of someone's experience in a particular situation" (Meretoja and Davis 2018, 5) that attention needs to be brought out to the raging inequalities of educational systems before appropriately serving the ethical demand of literary works. Fragmentary state-of-the-nation novels have the ability to unsettle, to critique norms, simply by having unfamiliar forms, by challenging "what a novel should be." By attending to the book as an object and challenging its very practical form, state-of-the-nation writers present their novels as always already *other*. Because they are not "mainstream", or "canonical", they are, from the beginning, ethical, as they require a different effort compared to other genres. But as we must be careful not to partake in "armchair slum tourism" (Korte and Zipp 126), it is essential to keep in mind that this identification of literature with ethical purposes remains itself a privileged perception of literature. This would emphasise how being ethically responsible is to recognise how norms and context, as thoroughly demonstrated by Butler and Athanasiou, can hamper one's availability to the other, and therefore to novels which aim at rendering us more sensitive to different experiences. As Stephen Ross points out in the introduction to *Modernism, Theory,*

[250] In a recent op-ed for the conservative newspaper The Telegraph (17th June 2023), Prime Minister Rishi Sunak defended an utilitarian viewpoint of universities, one that transform them into a labour-force-producing machine: see https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2023/07/17/rishi-sunak-too-many-university-students-sold-false-dream/ to read the article in detail. *The Guardian*'s Martha Guill offers an important answer to the PM's claims, backed with current research on the state of Higher Education. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jul/23/why-should-only-wealthy-student-lives-be-enriched-by-university

[251] See DEMOS, p.23.

and Responsible Reading: A Critical Conversation (2021), "[Responsible] reading presupposes an ethical obligation to honor the complexity, dynamism, and even incoherence of the cultural object." (11) In this complexity lies, as far as the present author is concerned, the necessary recognition of the cultural context in which the cultural object is produced, disseminated and interpreted. To paraphrase Jonathan Coe, "we stand badly in need" of education policies that guarantee more accessibility and more means to accommodate both education professionals and students, as well as an (inter)national reframing of the value of the humanities, for their ethical stance is "a principled attitude, a commitment to read in ways that are characteristically humanist and that showcase the value of the humanities." (Ross 2021, 13) The ethics of responsibility, when it comes to reading, rely upon the intertwinement and interdependence of literary works, available readership, public policies and reliable institutions.

State-of-the-nation novels incarnate the possibility for a "poetico-literary performativity", insofar as they *demand* their readers' attention to the ethical and socio-political tensions at the heart of England. They actively condemn both idleness and complicity, and require their readers to *commit* to others through political awareness and social recognition. Nevertheless, this remains but a theoretical wake-up call, as both attentiveness and attention disintegrate and the socio-economic conditions of the reading experience become more and more fragmented. If the effects of such novels are intangible, the development of cognitive studies on the act of reading do offer a glimpse of what they can achieve. Though "the discourse of political and ethical responsibility in scholarly circles has a tendency to overestimate the power of scholarly practice in terms of political effectiveness" (Ross 2021, 15), the humanities remain literature's ethical companion by inviting others to (re)discover literature. We must keep in mind and point out the vulnerability of both the arts and their public in the very contemporary race for profit-making and productivity, which threatens this special relationship.

CONCLUSION

When I started this dissertation, the United Kingdom had, two years before, voted to leave the European Union on a fateful day of June 2016. This forever troubled relationship was to remain in limbo for a while, before the official Brexit on February 1st 2020. Between 2016 and 2023, the murder of MP Joe Cox, the dramatic increase of hate crimes in England and Wales[252], successive resignations of Prime Ministers, a global pandemic and a diluted NHS have marked the years and the fate of the United Kingdom. As Scottish-born Ali Smith beautifully described in an interview for *The Guardian* in 2019,

> Brexit's divisions? They aren't new. Brexit has just made them properly visible to us all. Is blatant political roguery new? Don't be daft, and neither is the handshake between propagandist persuasion and whatever the latest technologies happen to be. And one of the things that has been most interesting about writing books pressed so consciously against the contemporaneous is that nothing is really new in what's happening to us now. It's all there in classical myth, in *Gilgamesh*, in Homer; Dickens's *Hard Times*, considering what happens when a country's people become fodder to the latest industrial technology and the people who control it; Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, all about the fallout from fake news, and his *Pericles*, the fallout from bad governance. The longest piece of Shakespeare's authenticated handwriting left in existence is a brilliant speech from *Sir Thomas More* about the foulness and dangers of anti-foreigner sentiment. […] What's new, to us at least, is that Brexit's particular divides aren't just local, familial, national, international; right now they're also a fracturing of our time, life before the vote, life after the vote. We're still waiting on the faultline to see where that will take us. […] But beyond and above all this, in the end what survives of us are the stories of people's lives, how we live through the history we call the present, through the cycles of another year and another, renewing themselves and us again and again, bringing around the darker days, and the light. Always look to story for the real plot. Look to dialogue, always, for the life.

Smith's brilliant portrait of the United Kingdom highlights the cyclicity with which politics and literature cannot help but intersect – once more rebutting Graham Packard's argument that "[The] problem with the English novel is that there's no tradition of political engagement." (*WCU* 276) I chose, until now, to put aside post-Brexit state-of-the-nation novels – now referred to as "Brexlit" (Day 2017; Eaglestone 2018; Self 2020; Sutherland 2018). This is mainly due

[252] See the infographics on the British government's website for more details: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022

to the fact, as Ali Smith points out, that Brexit has created a "fracture" within the United Kingdom and the genre itself, as will be discussed in the last part of this section.

Aside from her natural poetic prose, Smith's diagnosis is worth quoting at length to understand how critical the interaction between politics, ethics and the novel is in understanding the socio-political fragmentation of the "nation". She shows how troubled the ethical connection to the other can be, interrupted by events, prejudices and ideologies. Her words invite us to see how ethics are not forever destructed or always at the forefront: ethics are a *work in progress*, whose survival depends on our ability to see and listen beyond the static. Smith's reflection on the doomed triad politics/ethics/literature allows to see that the novel, and even more so, the state-of-the-nation novel, embodies the very nature of paradox: it is both a full object and a fragmented storyline; it is both against nationalism and for a better England; it is both hopeful for individual relationships and despondent when it comes to representative politics. In this regard, this dissertation aimed to show how fragmentary writing could simultaneously sublime ethics and demonstrate the *struggle* that necessarily comes with being responsible for the other. It was key to put aside any criticism about morality, for it is part of particular ideologies and has a normative power of its own, which can in turn hinder responsibility. Though their relationship to realism is intricate, state-of-the-nation novels remain close to their empiric reality and are staged within the contemporary epoch of their writers, for, as John Self argues, "they help us view from another angle the world we are too close to see." (2020)

The dissection of the nation in literature is rooted in the performativity of fragmentation. It is because gaps, ellipses, blanks, time shifts, dialogic voices, make reading *challenging* that the state-of-the-nation novels of the corpus manage to transform and subvert other forms of discourses. The three parts of this dissertation have aimed at exploring the different layers of discursivity which hamper the ethics of responsibility. Literary fragmentation is not only a way to mirror that of the body politic, it is also a necessary tool to avoid reification and totalisation – these elements are what binds the novels of the corpus together. Though written decades apart, the six state-of-the-nations under study put the individual's vulnerability to the fore. They do so not only by creating psychologically or socially struggling characters, but by exposing how they can easily fall prey to prejudice and repeat normative – and therefore oppressive – schemata of behaviour. State-of-the-nation novels are also fictional impressions of corrupted

governments and crumbling public institutions, showing how politics are as inherently rooted in relationships as ethics.

As I relied on Judith Butler's and Michel Foucault's work, it has become abundantly clear that defending an ethics of responsibility is intrinsically bound to critique. "Challenging the status quo", as Stephen Ross puts it when studying Modernist writing, is therefore necessarily an ethical enterprise – one that literary fragmentation serves particularly well. When it comes to state-of-the-nation novels, this relationship between form and ethics is first expressed through the active dissolution of nationalism and its symbolic tenets: the family, the land, the history.

Hans Jonas's *The Imperative of Responsibility* is especially significant to understand how the very concept of responsibility can be used to serve nationalist purposes. Jonas's argument conflates the fact of being born in a specific time and place with being responsible to a specific political community. By merging together filial relationships with political/communal ties, Jonas extends the paradigm identified by traditional philosophers, from Aristotle, to Hobbes, to Rousseau: the individual is indeed political from the beginning, but Jonas adds that it is because familial ties are so fundamental that the individual experiences the imperative of responsibility towards their community, which then scales up to the nation as a whole. This is where the first issue appears: quid of unstable, abusive or inexistent family ties? State-of-the-nation novels complicate Jonas's notion of responsibility, for binding together family and responsibility is one of the "Arcadian myths" pinpointed by Butler in her criticism of Axel Honneth's *Reification*:

> the "genuine bond" functions as an Arcadian myth, a "before" to the social that is at once the foundation of the social and a guide that might restore us to a more genuine sense of relationality from which, under social conditions of reification, we have become estranged. I understand this as a wish, a hope, but like many wishes of the Arcadian variety, it is based on a certain refusal to see that matters cannot be stipulated so optimistically "at the start." (in Honneth 2008, 108)

Jonas's emphasis on filial relationships is a precise attempt to create "a before", whose strength would determine an inescapable responsibility towards the other. This is what the novels of the corpus indirectly set to debunk, as the families of the corpus refute any self-evident relationship. By laying emphasis on troubled family spheres – be it through abuse (*NLM*), loss (*TRS*, *SR*,

WCU) or indifference (*C*) – state-of-the-nation novels reassert responsibility *for* the other as both inescapable and painfully answerable. The subversion of nationalist metonymies in the corpus participates in debunking the totalising constructions of "shared values or experiences": without denying the impact of historical events on the population or the possibility for connection, state-of-the-nation novels emphasise the tensions which can arise from the confrontation of various backgrounds and diverse experiences within the same geographical area.

In this regard, novels of the genre set to debunk and de-mythicise the idealisation of the country, especially by showing how space and place can easily be instrumentalised to fixate notions of harmony and belonging. Not only do the novels of the corpus re-politicise the rural landscape, they also draw attention to the Empire and its dismissal by the United Kingdom. Rather than a place of communion, the English landscape is instead the locus of power dynamics that influence and contravene the responsibility to the other. The countryside is no longer a refuge but rather the stage of conflicts between tradition and progress (*SR*), which cannot be impervious to class struggle (*TRS, WCU, C*). The English country house, which has long been considered as a haven, is now a refraction of either privilege or corruption: its significance in the English landscape, rather than pertaining to any encompassing notion of Englishness, is rather symptomatic of a dysfunction at the heart of the nation. Baldry Court, Maythorpe hall and Celia's Lincolnshire home all reflect the inherited pattern of agricultural capitalism, which finds its neoliberal counterpart in the Winshaw Towers of Jonathan Coe. As for Wilson's n°52 and Lanchester's Pepys Road, the emphasis laid on the London home challenges the trope of the English house as a symbol of continuity. State-of-the-nation novels also aim to use the opposition between the countryside and the city as a way to refract the friction between England and the (former) colonies (*TH, NLM, WCU, C*). The asymmetrical relationships at work in these reworkings of classic literary and nationalist tropes shed a first light on the socio-political impediments to ethical responsibility. By swiftly moving along local and global scales, the novels of the corpus condemn fixity in the name of the nation.

Answering to the other's vulnerability requires effort, making any kind of relationship between self and other an *ordeal* rather than a forgotten or broken "genuine bond." We *are* bound by our common vulnerability, but recognising this and drawing from it is not self-evident: it requires questioning and critique. This is principally why fragmentation is particularly well-suited to address such notions: often seen as a medium to represent a splintered

unity, fragmentation is in truth symptomatic of the individual's own connection to the other. It falters, stumbles, and confronts preconceived notions of unity or community. In this regard, the "role" of the novel is not, as Anderson would have it, to stimulate "imagined" relationships with strangers living on the same land or sharing the same history. It is in fact quite the opposite. The traumatic experiences of some of the characters of the corpus deny the possibility for a fully unified country around similar events: for instance, Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* or John Lanchester's *Capital* show how gendered and racial factors necessarily modify one's experience of the event. Even if global events such as World Wars have a wider resonance within the English population, state-of-the-nation novels underline how nationalist discourse uses their impact to serve a political agenda rather than take them as an opportunity to assert and defend vulnerability – and therefore responsibility – as a relational force. The novels' focus on historical events as part of their deconstruction of the "nation" as a discursive object is what enables them to uncover the systemic forms of oppression which annihilate the very possibility for a viable ethics of responsibility.

Once the gloss of nationalist discourse eroded, the novels the corpus offer insight into the different norms which regiment the life of the body politic. Because nationalist metonymies aim at covering up social and political imbalances, state-of-the-nation novels undertake to expose rigid codes of conduct which hinder the ethics of responsibility. If, as Butler and Athanasiou contend, the relationship with the other is necessarily conditioned by norms, it becomes essential to understand and critique these very norms to undertake an ethical gesture towards the other. This is why the *telos* of the novels of the corpus is ethical *per se*: they shed light on the strictures of the body politic and on the prejudicial barriers that exist between the characters of the corpus. Recent criticism and sociological studies on class in Britain have shown that this socio-economic distinction is still very much alive in the body politic, making the storylines of the novels of the corpus fundamental to understand its evolution throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. Status and stratification predetermine how one is perceived, as the servant classes of the corpus evidence (Elsie in Holtby, Celia's maid in Smith, Regan in Wilson, to name a few). Outward signs of wealth come in the way of ethical recognition, as if a veil were cast upon those outside of a particular class: Kitty's scorn towards Margaret (*TRS*) or Hilary Winshaw's disregard for others in *What a Carve Up!* epitomise the liminality of recognition, since belonging to a different class means being cast outside of

cognitive and social frameworks. This delineation is not the sole prerogative of individual relationships. It also stealthily dictates how public organs function and deal with the more precarious strata of the body politic. This imbrication of status and institutions leads to the crystallisation of precarity, creating a vicious circle where the already precarious is kept in such a position, without any hope of moving upward.

The failure of the institutions of these fictional body politics – be it the County Council of the South Riding or the immigration system of *Capital* – questions the very foundations of the social contract and draws attention to the ideology that fuels such organs. The ethics of responsibility seem particularly fragile under capitalist and neoliberalist rationalities, since profit almost rewires the characters' social abilities and transforms them into spectacularist beings, rather than ethical ones (*TRS*, *TH*, *C*). Money replaces ethics in every interaction (*SR*, *NLM*, *C*) and modifies the way governments operate, as *What a Carve Up!* and *South Riding* particularly depict in details. The association of governmental corruption and capitalist/neoliberalist systems in the corpus is destined to show how individual responsibility for the other struggles to persist (or even exist) when institutional responsibility for the members of the body politic is no longer reliable. If in the first part of this dissertation fragmentation was a way to dismantle nationalist discourse, the second part reveals that it is the only medium through which the state of the body politic can be illustrated. Far from being compliant with capitalist and neoliberalist policies or nostalgic of a unified past, literary fragmentation showcases how the long-standing fractures of the body politic, as identified by Ali Smith, can no longer be ignored: they actively define both private and public levels of interactions, slowly but surely eroding any ethical impulse or disposition of the characters. The norms of conduct identified in this second section are magnified by the socio-economic forces at play in the novels: if ethics requires to critique norms, the reign of profit and individualisation, by intensifying precarisation and institutional unreliability, makes it almost impossible to *recognise* the other and to *answer* their call. Normative, economic, and even social barriers are put up to seclude the individual, who is now made responsible *for themselves* and *to society* rather than responsible *for the vulnerable other*.

This phenomenon is particularly significant for the female characters of the corpus, who are left to bear the sole burden of both the private and the public spheres. Not only are their behaviour particularly submitted to public scrutiny (think of Kitty Baldry, Sarah Burton, Celia, Phoebe in *What a Carve Up!*, and Mary in *Capital*), but they are also *expected* to take upon

several layers of responsibility. In fact, they are the sole characters and members of the body politic who have to 1) be caring (emphasising ethical responsibility), 2) care for others (in a blurry conflation of ethics and politics), 3) assume the very care-takers' roles which public institutions have progressively stopped sustaining. The women of the corpus are submitted to a triple-bind of normative conduct, responsibility *for* the other, and responsibilisation. They are therefore extremely prone to dispossession and depersonalisation, as both their public and private personas seem to be no longer theirs, but rather the possession of a precarised and precarising body politic. Furthermore, the way women and precarious individuals are painted in the novels have led me to consider the own bias of the authors of the corpus and their own struggle with norms: while the binarism with which some of the female characters are constructed is at times symptomatic of ingrained perceptions and prejudice, the careful avoidance of reifying precarious beings by not "ventriloquizing" (Guignery 2015, 20) their experience is particularly potent in the novels of the corpus. This tension between more fortunate writers and the depiction of the pulse of the country (which, as evidenced, is rather feeble) is what prompted the third part of my investigation into state-of-the-nation novels, which did not seem, contrary to Rancière's contention, to restore lost meaning or lost unity. Rather, the novels of the genre dive "into the cracks" of their fragmented country.

The last part of this dissertation focuses on the way state-of-the-nation novels attempt at resisting the multiple dichotomies evidenced in the previous chapters. The ethical interstices of the corpus show how novels of the genre refuse to give in to representational extremes: by interrupting the plot, these characters embody the very possibility for an ethics of responsibility to emerge. Rather than reifying the precarious or the humble by endowing them with a moral compass, the writers under study rather construct them in a way that allows for normative disruptions and socio-political interpellations – phenomena which are rooted in ethical experience. In this regard, they partake in the novels' aesthetics and ethics of fragmentation: not only do they dissolve novelistic stereotypes and tropes, their eruptions in the different plots of the corpus incarnate the possibility for change and critique. These interstices are all the more ethical as they are fragile: their temporariness and their risk of being hijacked (*NLM, WCU*) or confused with moralist agendas (*TRS, SR, TH, C*) point to responsibility's own precariousness, and the work needed to ensure its viability. The fragmentariness of the novels of the corpus is destined to splinter expectations and habits, as the authors make characters and readers alike

experience discomfort. The divisive force of historical events (the "life before" and the "life after", as Ali Smith would have it) only becomes a backdrop to the ethical challenges brought about by in-between characters. Like Stevie Smith and her dislike of any "-isms", state-of-the-nation novels embark on a critique of the status quo, as catastrophe no longer means fatality, and consensus rimes with suspicious. Fracture and fragmentation become the only mediums through which critique can emerge precisely because they resist preconceived notions of plot, characters, and narrative itself.

As they navigate the interstices of the body politic, it becomes clear that the novels of the corpus endeavour to render the multiplicity of individuals and lifestyles[253]. This focus on multiplicity defines their ethical agenda, insofar as it prevents them from giving way to totalisation. Challenging Levinas's distinction between the Saying and the Said, state-of-the-nation novels simultaneously unsettle and question language. If Levinas saw the Said as the opposite of dialogue and, therefore, of ethics, the dialogic nature of the novels of the corpus sublimates the ethical propensity of literature. Part of Emilie Horton's contention as regards crisis fiction applies to the genre of state-of-the-nation novels, insofar as "what is paramount in these fictions is an understanding of unreliability not simply as a means of critiquing language but also of exploring subjectivity, and of positioning this in relation to a larger socio-political context." (43) The self-reflexive quality of these works of literature *as narratives* forestalls the creation of literary or ethical comfort: their inconclusive endings (*TRS, TH, WCU, C*) and their awareness of the manipulation of language (*SR, NLM, WCU, C*) are a way to "disrupt, trouble, shatter, […] not just the material culture" of their respective time, but "more significantly the affect of comfort, certainty, optimism, and complacency it produced in consumers." (Ross 2013, 55) Stephen Ross's deft portrait of the Modernist's avant-garde project resonates throughout the corpus, as the novels of the corpus seek cognitive, ethical, and socio-political destabilisation.

Though the "encounter with complex literary texts is [conducive] to an experience of language which is not provided by other forms of knowledge" (Locatelli in Erll, Grabes and

[253] I am here using the term in light of Guillaume Le Blanc's work, who explains: "Each life perseveres in ways of being that are specific to it and which come to define a lifestyle. What does the reference to style mean in this context? It can be understood as the set of ways of acting in which people engage in order to hold firm onto their lives. […] In order to understand style, we must rather analyse the ways in which someone, caught in a set of norms, turns away from them, either to follow them in his or her own way or to contest them. The style of a life then refers to each person's ordinary capacity to move within a set of norms in order to exist in their own way." (2021)

Nünning, 20) and even if the ethical dimension of the novels of the corpus is abundantly clear, an investigation into the relationship between form and ethics could not do away with more tangible reflections on the actual effects of literature. The very last chapter of this dissertation shows how the narratives under study seek to make their readers engage with their own reality. Yet, despite such efforts, it seems that the evolution of reading habits in England throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been rather uneven. If the development of book production and times of crises have simultaneously created more opportunities to read, the asymmetrical relationships that populate the novels of the corpus still play an active part in the access to books, to reading, and to interpreting. These last three elements are indeed key factors of the reading paradigm and of the performativity of literature. The socio-economic background of English individuals still highly determines their inclination towards reading as a chosen activity (vs. competitive forms of entertainment), their ability to enjoy reading (often resulting from a direct reproduction of *habitus*) and last but not least, their access to education and humanities courses. The discrepancies highlighted by the reports studied in the last section of the last chapter appeals to us, as individuals, scholars and teachers, to be aware of and inform on such impediments, as well as to help increase the access to novels that actively challenge the status quo, like the small sample analysed in this dissertation.

The ethical and political agenda of state-of-the-nation novels seems even more potent as the United Kingdom navigates the outcomes of Brexit. As this study shed light on old patterns of social and political behaviours which the referendum only ignited, it is now fundamental to see whether and how these translate into the post-Brexit state-of-the-nation. Ali Smith herself takes delight in playing with the ambivalence between fragmentation and unity, between old tensions and new political structures, in her recently completed seasonal quartet. *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019) and *Summer* (2020) were written successively and simultaneously with the seasons they represent, diving into our contemporary neoliberal world, made of Brexit, global warming and growing individualism. Like Holtby or Wilson before her, Smith offers a kaleidoscopic vision of Britain which "reminds you what life is and how layered and dimensional language and thought and being are. […]" (Smith 2017a) The seasonal quartet perhaps reconciles Horton's crisis fiction with state-of-the-nation novels, which are not solely focused on England (Horton, 3-4) but on more cosmopolitan and globalised issues as well.

The novelty of this corpus (because of its recent publication and because Smith managed to write and publish her novels in a very short period of time) is a chance to explore Ali Smith's literary ethics in the age of Brexit in an unprecedented way. Smith's quartet is, in fact, an invitation to "reconsideration" through form. Smith appears to expand on the state-of-the-nation genre and to maximise its English perspective. If reconsideration is first to be understood through the light of ethics studies, as Smith's quartet reinvests the relationship with the other, the novels also focus on both private and public sphere, as well as on intimacy (or lack thereof), recalling and broadening pre-Brexit state-of-the-nation novels' aperture on what I called the "ethical interstice", i.e. the novels' propension to reassert the need for care (for the other, for equality, for justice) at a time when truth and lies have become synonymous. Secondly, looking at the etymology of consideration (*consideratio:* to contemplate), the cyclical yet fragmentary structure of the quartet informs Smith's commitment to depicting climate change and the individual's relationship to the environment. Smith's writing oscillates between micro-narratives and macro-considerations, from individual stories, to political divisions, to cataclysmic perspectives. This shift of scales therefore differs from the novels of the corpus, or at least increases their scope of diagnosis. As she puts it in an interview with Claire Armistead in *The Guardian* (2019), "[the] UK will disunite, and Ireland will reunite. But all of this will be irrelevant – all our nationalisms are nothing in the face of climate change." Though the novels of the corpus rewrite the rural idyll, the reality of climate change had not yet fully reached the contemporary scene of Coe or Lanchester. It seems now urgent to combine this new event with a diagnosis of the body politic, as it triggers new forms of precarity and vulnerability. Eventually, the study of this seasonal quartet causes to reflect (as consideration comes from the old French "considérer", meaning both to reflect and to turn back to) on Smith's use of intertextuality, as a way to understand her apprehension of time and history. Smith has thoroughly insisted, throughout her different interviews, on her debt to Charles Dickens, Shakespeare, and even Homer – here differing from the writers of the corpus. As she welcomes and celebrates a lineage of storytelling which aims at showing fiction's ability to debunk political lies and reinstate ethical truth, Ali Smith imposes new lines of questioning when it comes to the ethics and aesthetics of fragmentation.

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Alice Borrego

The Ethics and Aesthetics of Fragmentation in State-of-the-Nation Novels of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Abstract: This thesis focuses on the evolution of "state-of-the-nation novels" during the 20th and 21st centuries and more precisely on the relationship between the notion of responsibility (as successively developed by Emmanuel Levinas and Judith Butler) and fragmentation (as a formal device but also as a token of social, political and psychological turmoil). Thirty years separate each novel of the corpus, and a century has passed between the first and the last. The six novels selected for this thesis (*The Return of the Soldier* (1918) by Rebecca West, *South Ridin*g (1936) by Winifred Holtby, *The Holiday* (1949) by Stevie Smith, *No Laughing Matter* (1967) by Angus Wilson, *What a Carve Up!* (1994) by Jonathan Coe and *Capital* (2012), by John Lanchester) appear as literary challenges of the status quo. They question the normative frameworks of social recognition and destabilise the literary canon to better reflect and examine the body politic. This study attempts to demonstrate how form and ethics seem to intertwine in « state-of-the-nation novels », drawing from T.W. Adorno's parallel between form and political commitment. The novels' emphasis on the intricacies of different types of discourses are an invitation to suspicion, which seems to be encapsulated in their fragmentary nature. The correlation of formal, social and ethical fragmentation eventually raises questions as to the actual performativity of the genre at moments of political crises.

Keywords: fragmentation, state-of-the-nation, ethics, discursivity, performativity, Rebecca West, Winifred Holtby, Stevie Smith, Angus Wilson, Jonathan Coe, John Lanchester

Esth-éthique de la fragmentation dans les « state-of-the-nation novels » du XXème et XXIème siècles.

Résumé : Cette thèse s'intéresse à l'évolution du genre des « state-of-the-nation novels » au cours des XXème et XXIème siècles et plus particulièrement aux liens entre responsabilité (comme théorisée par Emmanuel Levinas, puis Judith Butler) et fragmentations (formelle mais aussi sociale, politique ou psychique). Une trentaine d'années sépare chacun des romans du corpus, et environ un siècle s'est écoulé entre le premier et le dernier. Les six romans à l'étude (*The Return of the Soldier* (1918) de Rebecca West, *South Ridin*g (1936) de Winifred Holtby, *The Holiday* (1949) de Stevie Smith, *No Laughing Matter* (1967) d'Angus Wilson, *What a Carve Up!* (1994) de Jonathan Coe and *Capital* (2012), de John Lanchester) se présentent comme une remise en question du statu quo. Ils remettent en cause les cadres normatifs de reconnaissance sociale, tout en déstabilisant le canon littéraire, dans le but de mieux représenter et examiner le corps politique. Il s'agit ici de mettre en exergue une imbrication entre forme et éthique (en s'inspirant du rapprochement entre forme et politique fait par T.W. Adorno). L'emphase que ces romans mettent sur les complexités de différents types de discours invite au soupçon, lui-même incarné par la nature fragmentaire de ces récits fictifs. La corrélation entre fragmentation formelle, sociale et éthique pousse finalement à se demander si le genre peut bel et bien être performatif à des moments de crises politiques.

Mots-clefs : fragmentation, state-of-the-nation, éthique, discursivité, performativité, Rebecca West, Winifred Holtby, Stevie Smith, Angus Wilson, Jonathan Coe, John Lanchester